

Beyond what is written

God warns us in both the Old and the New Testaments not to add to or take away from his instruction (Deuteronomy 4:2, 12:32, Revelation 22:18-19). Deviation from God's Word causes (among other things) division. This is contrary to God's nature, God is one (Deuteronomy 6:4). Let me give you an illustration from the early church.

There was division in the church at Corinth. The apostle Paul strongly urged unity (1 Corinthians 1:10). There were a number of things going on there causing this division. One was partisan squabbling over who baptized who. Paul uses the example of Apollos and himself to illustrate the foolishness of their division (read 1 Corinthians 3:1-6). In his summary of this point he says:

"I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another." (1 Corinthians 4:6).

This is another way of saying "don't add to...". Also take a look at the way the apostle John states the concept in 2 John 9. Being very careful to follow and teach exactly what God says is a well established Biblical principle. One of the major side effects of disobeying His instruction on this is disagreement and division. All this is not pleasing to God. With this groundwork being laid let's look at some contemporary examples including some of what we discussed last Sunday. Hopefully the connection between adding to God's instructions and division will be made clearer after we look at these examples.

I have been in churches where it was taught that drinking alcohol is a sin. We are familiar with the instruction "*Do not get drunk with wine...*" (Ephesians 5:18). I can say getting drunk is a sin but if I say drinking any alcohol at all is a sin I am adding to God's instruction. I am going beyond what is written. How would this cause division? What if someone who has been taught correctly comes across someone who has been taught that any alcoholic consumption is a sin? These two will disagree. This is not to say, for example, that a parent could not tell his child "I don't want you drinking alcohol at all". A parent has the right to instruct his children as he or she sees fit. But saying drinking is a sin or that this instruction comes from God is going beyond what is written. Paul was always careful to clearly distinguish his personal judgments from what was handed down to him from God (read 1 Corinthians 7:12 and compare it with verse 11).

Another example is gambling. Some still teach that gambling is a sin. Sin is transgression (1 John 3:4). In other words crossing a line by violating a clearly stated command. God chose not to include a command about gambling in His Word. Some associate gambling with certain sinful activities. One might go to a

casino and get drunk or be tempted to engage in sexual immorality. Getting drunk and sexual immorality are sins. But just because something can sometimes be associated with a sinful act does not mean that you can label that something sin (ex: gambling). We can only call sin what God has called sin. We cannot go beyond what is written. Doing so is presumptuous, it is high handed. It violates God's instruction. It is sin.

My final contemporary example is abortion. This is a highly emotionally charged issue to many. I understand and am sympathetic to these strong feelings. I am also in agreement that the cultural norm of using abortion as a form of birth control is a serious problem for modern society. All that being said, we find no command in God's word concerning abortion. The same principle applies as in the example above. Just because something can sometimes be associated with a sinful act does not mean that you can label that something sin. We can only call sin what God has called sin. The overemphasis of abortion in gospel teaching is going beyond what is written. It is also a harmful distraction from the true gospel.

Saying abortion is sin is like saying firing a gun is sin. Let's be clear in our reasoning and teaching. I have the right to fire my gun on a safe shooting range but if I fire my gun to kill someone with malice in my heart, that is sin (Exodus 20:13). I can state my opinion that rampant abortion is an evil of society and we must do something about it. But I cannot take even my most heartfelt convictions and say God has spoken when he has not. Saying abortion is a morally transcendent issue is coming very close to presumption. We all need to clearly separate our personal opinions from the commands we have received from God. We need to be very careful in our thinking and our teaching like the apostle Paul.

I want to append here some comments about the article from The National Review that Jeremy posted. These comments include a number of my judgments and so I did not want to include them with a discussion aimed at clarifying Biblical principles. I was a fan of William F. Buckley Jr. when he was alive. He was a towering intellect and a true conservative. Even though I did not agree with all his positions they were always well considered and stated. The article that Jeremy posted was also well written and stated some good points but it is a political discussion, not a theological or spiritual discussion. The opinions stated are completely reasonable but have nothing to do with God's instruction or what pleases God. It is important for us to be clear in our thinking and teaching and clearly separate the two. One of the reasons the Pharisees

could not see Jesus is because they were mainly concerned with their political reality and not the bigger spiritual picture. Let's not make that same mistake.

Also when I state my concerns that God will view support of Donald Trump as a violation of his instruction to "*Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.*" (Ephesians 5:11), don't think I'm indicating that you should then vote for the democrat (I belong to neither party). The sinfulness of Trump stands on it's own, don't look at it politically. Don't look at it as a Republican versus Democrat issue. My concern is what God's judgment will be. The response that all elected officials are corrupt is not fair to those who are not corrupt and is not a defense for supporting Trump. I agree there is far too much corruption in government we should expose their works and vote them out.

There was a similar painting with a broad brush error in the article: the author implied that all Democrats were in favor of late term abortions. There is a great deal of variety and nuance in both parties on abortion opinions. Viewing either side as a monolith is demagoguery and scapegoating.

And just a quick note about private repentance. Tawnya stated it well repentance needs to be as publicly expressed as the sin. John the baptist told the Pharisees and Sadducees to "*produce fruit in keeping with repentance*" (Matthew 3:8). I have heard this teaching that someone could privately make their peace with God and not inform the one or ones they sinned against. This teaching is not consistent with the teachings of Christ (Matthew 5:23-24).

I hope this discussion has been helpful in clearing up some issues. We can use both the article Jeremy posted and these comments as a jumping off point for spirited BDF discussion.