

“DO NOT GO BEYOND WHAT IS WRITTEN” (1 COR 4:6)

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The little saying “do not go beyond what is written,” is found in Paul’s argument to convince the Corinthians to be one in Christ (1 Cor 1:10–4:21). Somewhat like contemporary Christians who divide around their favourite theologians or into denominations, the Corinthians have fragmented, breaking into factions grouped around their favourite Christian preachers. The preachers do not appear to be involved in this. The syncretistic Corinthians are doing this themselves – living out of their culture, obsessed as it was with one-upmanship, bragging, shame and honour, love of rhetoric and more. Their division is thus connected with things like the missionaries preaching style, who baptised them and who they financially support (patronage). Whatever the precise reasons, the Corinthians are a divided church.

Paul is vehement in his critique, using a wide range of complex theological arguments and literary techniques to challenge them. Such disunity is not consistent with Christ, who has come to bring people together not divide them (cf. 1:12–13). It is a violation of the work of the Spirit, who draws people together as one Temple in Christ (3:16–17). Their quarrelling and fighting is immature behaviour (3:1–2). Their love of one preacher over the other involves an implicit judging of the others (4:1–5). Their using the preachers as a basis for their contention is a violation of relationship with them and fails to recognise their role – they are fellow-servants of Christ working to build his church.

In 1 Corinthians 4 Paul draws toward the end of his argument. In vv. 1–6 he reminds the Corinthians that he, Apollos and other preachers, are not to be venerated in such a way and pitted against each other. Rather, they are servants entrusted with the gospel. Only God and Jesus are to be glorified. Christ is their foundation and everything. Yes the preachers must be faithful and give account. However, this should not happen in the “court of the Corinthians.” Rather, this will happen in God’s court, where all God’s workers will face judgement, their work tested and each will receive God’s commendation (cf. 3:12–15).

In v. 6, using a rare Greek word *metaschēmatō* in an otherwise utterly unique way,¹ Paul speaks of how he has applied “all these things” to himself and Apollos for the benefit of the Corinthians. “These things” likely refers particularly to his whole argument from 3:1 in which he has used a wide range of metaphors to describe their role as servants united in Christ.² These include motifs drawn from family life, meals, service, farming, building, the Temple, the day of the Lord, holiness, wisdom, household managers and judicial images. He has applied this wide range of images and arguments for the Corinthians.

In the second part of 1 Cor 4:6, like two bullet points, he uses two successive *hina* clauses which indicate the purpose of the applications he has made;³ “so that ...” The second purpose is reasonably clear; to paraphrase: “so that you none of you are puffed up over one of us against the other.”

The first purpose clause is less clear. Literally it reads: “so that in us you may learn the not beyond things written.” The meaning is discussed widely with six basic solutions.⁴ First, some see it as

¹ The term is rare and means literally to change form (*meta*, change + *schēma*, form). Otherwise, it is found of things like the shifting form of a river (Diodorus Siculus, *Hist.* 1.81.2), of hair colour shifting with age (Diodorus Siculus, *Hist.* 5.32.2), of the gods transforming things like fire into water, disguise (Plato, *Leg.* 903e; Philo, *Legat.* 80), of a shift of language to define something like a sin as injustice (Plato, *Leg.* 906c), a change in the body after a bath (Plutarch, *Quaest. Conv.* 6.2.2), the transformation of a mortal human into immortality (4 Macc 9:22; Phil 3:21), Satan or demonic beings transformed into human form (*T. Reu.* 5.6; *T. Job* 6.4; 17.2; 23.1; *T. Sol.* 20.13), or into an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14), Satan’s false teaching servants disguising themselves as righteous teachers or apostles of Christ (2 Cor 11:13, 15), a change of habit (Josephus, *Ant.* 7.256; 8.267) or remodelled wax (Philo, *Aet.* 79). Here Paul uses it uniquely meaning to transfer to another meaning, i.e. use something figuratively. He has shifted the “form” of these ideas to a figurative meaning—applied (cf. BDAG, 641; M. D. Hooker, “Beyond the Things Which Are Written? An Examination of 1 Corinthians 4.6,” *NTS* 10 (1963–64): 129–32.).

² As G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 166 puts it, “the various preceding analogies about himself and Apollos.”

³ See the analysis of Paul’s use of *hina* in P. Lampe, “*hina*,” in *EDNT*, 2.190.

⁴ Using the summaries of D. E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 133–36 and A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGCT (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 352. Another possibility is that it is a play on the “childishness” of the Corinthians who can’t read properly (M. Ebner, *Leidenslisten und Apostelbrief*, FB 66 (Würzburg: Echter, 1991), 33–36.

something unintelligible, a mistake; a marginal gloss which has crept in.⁵ However, there is no evidence of this. A second approach sees this as reference to a foundational document or legal contract held by the Corinthians, i.e. don't go beyond the rules.⁶ This is unlikely, as there is no evidence something like this existed. Third, some see "what is written" as referencing "the boundaries;" don't go beyond the boundaries of moderateness into arrogance.⁷ While possible, there are better solutions below.

A fourth perspective is that this is a proverbial idiom, a known saying, meaning something like the NIV which reads, "Do not go beyond what is written." Welborn takes this way seeing it as a "well-known maxim, with broad cultural currency." He cites examples using *ta gegrammena*. He is followed by a range of others.⁸

A fifth and dominant view is that this refers to the Old Testament, and especially the citations in the letter to this point.⁹ Aside from this use, Paul uses the verb *gegraptai* thirty times, including always to introduce citations from Old Testament Scripture. To this point in the letter, he has used *gegraptai* four times (1 Cor 1:19, 31; 2:9; 3:19). He will subsequently use it to introduce other OT texts as the letter develops (1 Cor 9:9; 10:7, 15; 14:21; 15:45, 54, cf. 9:10; 10:11).

5 E.g. J. Héring, *The First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (London: Epworth, 1962), 28.

6 E.g. J. C. Hanges, "1 Corinthians 4:6 and the Possibility of Written Bylaws in the Corinthian Church," *JBL* 117 (1998): 275–98; R. St. J. Parry, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, 2nd edition; Cambridge Greek Testament (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 78).

7 P. Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul's Relation with the Corinthians*, WUNT 2/23 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987), 190–95; R. Pickett, *The Cross in Corinth: The Social Significance of the Death of Jesus*, JSNTSup 143 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 57–58.

8 E.g. L. L. Welborn, *Politics and Rhetoric in the Corinthian Epistles* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997), 56; J. T. Fitzgerald, *Cracks in an Earthen Vessel: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence*, SBLDS 99 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 124–27; D. W. Kuck, *Judgment and Community Conflict: Paul's Use of Apocalyptic Judgment Language in 1 Corinthians 3:5–4:5*, NovTSup 66 (Leiden: Brill, 1992a), 213; R. L. Tyler, "First Corinthians 4:6 and Hellenistic Pedagogy," *CBQ* 60 (1998): 97–103.

9 E.g. A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, 2nd Ed., ICC (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1911), 81; C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, BNTC (London: Hendrickson, 1968), 106–7; F. F. Bruce, *I and II Corinthians*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 48; S. J. Kistemaker and W. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 135. A variation of this is the specific citations in this letter to this point, see e.g. Hooker, "Beyond," 129–32; Fee, *The First Epistle*, 168. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 135 sees the citation of Jer 9:23–24 in 1:31 as crucial. R. B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox), 269 suggests it refers especially to the first two OT citations which emphasise no boasting in human beings linked with 3:21: "Let no one boast in human beings."

The first prior citation, Isa 29:14, speaks of God destroying the false wisdom of the wise; in context, the foolish wisdom of those who refute Christ crucified as "the power of God" (1:18–20). In the second, Paul cites Jer 9:23–24 where the prophet states that the wise, mighty, and rich must boast in Yahweh alone, for he practices steadfast love, justice and righteousness (1:31). The third is from Isa 64:4 where Isaiah speaks of the complete inability of Israel to know beforehand what God had in store for Israel. The final reference introduces two texts. In Job 5:13, Eliphaz reminds Job that God outwits the arrogantly wise. This is quickly followed by Ps 94:11 where the thoughts of a man before God are merely a breath. These texts all focus in the same direction; the futility of human wisdom and so, the vanity of human arrogance. Only God is worthy of our boasting and he will bring down the arrogant. "Thus Corinthians, stop what you are doing in dividing over favoured preachers!"

A sixth idea is that the text refers to 1 Corinthians itself, and possibly also his earlier letter. Paul uses *graphō* of the writing of the material in this letter (1 Cor 4:14; 9:15; 14:37).¹⁰ He also uses it of the earlier letter he wrote (1 Cor 5:9, 11).¹¹

My read on the text is that ideas four to six are all in mind. The use of *gegraptai*, clearly indicates that the Old Testament is in mind. Specifically, those references Paul has made thus far in this letter stand out. These emphasise boasting in God and God's wisdom alone. In 1 Corinthians, this is the wisdom of a crucified Messiah. Cruciformity should mark the social relationships of the Corinthians, rather than self-arrogation.

However, these texts are also found within the writing of Paul, this letter. Thus, "what is written" includes his own letter(s). Throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul is asserting his unique apostolic authority, drawn from his call by God (1:1), his seeing the risen Christ (9:1; 15:9) and his role as the Corinthians "father" who founded the church (3:5–9, 11; 4:14–15). His writings should be adhered to. For his congregations, his letters are effectively Scripture.¹² Further, this may well be a slogan drawn from his earlier rabbinic experience.¹³ Alternatively,

10 It is also used of the Corinthians letter written to Paul (1 Cor 7:1).

11 J. Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*. Calvin's New Testament Commentaries 9 (trans. J. W. Fraser; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 90 who takes if of what Paul has written to this point of the letter.

12 Paul here is tacitly approaching the sense of 2 Pet 3:16.

13 Robertson and Plummer, *A Critical*, 81; J. M. Ross, "Not above What Is Written: A Note on 1 Cor 4:6," *ExpT* 82 (1970–71): 217.

it may be a maxim Paul has coined.¹⁴ Whatever its origin, Paul has adopted it here as his own.

In sum then, Paul is citing a Pauline maxim which may have wider currency and is known to the Corinthians. He is urging them not to live out of a gospel syncretized to culture, but one that is founded on the Old Testament Scriptures and the writings of their father and apostle, Paul.

We live in a world where the church is increasingly challenged by shifting values. In many instances we are seeing the society in which we are embedded move away from the Judeo-Christian ethic. As we see this occur we are faced with the question, how do we as God's people respond? I find this short maxim of Paul highly helpful. In the wisdom of the church who grappled with which writings were Scripture, "what is written" is now more than the Old Testament corpus. It includes the apostolic writings of the New Testament including those of Paul. As we ponder the questions of our age and how to respond to them, "do not go beyond what is written" remains a good starting point.

Of course, when are we going "beyond what is written"? is the next question. The Corinthians from Paul's point of view, were going doing so in abundance. Our challenge is equally hermeneutics: how to interpret and apply Scripture in a world that is very different. This is in fact what Paul is doing in 1 Corinthians, interpreting Scripture in the light of Christ's coming for the Corinthians. Yet, as one explores the patterns of the Greco-Roman world of 1 Corinthians, one finds that many of the questions remain the same. Our purpose at Laidlaw is to journey together as we work toward a world shaped by love and informed by the gospel. Then, we together can work to renew our communities with a faith as intelligent as it is courageous.

So, entrenched deeply in our world, let us who name Jesus as Lord dig deep into Scripture, consider our context through the gospel, determine what God is saying in and through his Word and then apply and live it with holiness and grace. Paul's injunction to the Corinthians who are compromising the gospel in all sorts of directions under the pressure of her culture, "do not go beyond what is written," remains as important as it was then.

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¹⁴ Hooker, "Beyond," 132.

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