

Jason Upchurch - 1 Corinthians 4:6 - A Good Christian Slogan

This morning as we look to the Word of God I want us to slow way way down and focus in on just one phrase here in 1 Corinthians. It's almost a passing comment in the entire flow of thought here but I think it's worth drilling into. And it's a slogan, really: Do not go beyond what is written.

And what what I want you to walk away from this morning is that this needs to be the motto of your life as you walk with Jesus. Christianity is full of all kinds of slogans that range from helpful to filled with error.

"Let go and let God" - I honestly don't even know what that means.

"God will never give you more than you can handle" - that's just not even true.

You can just hit the bumper sticker section at any Christian bookstore to get an idea of how bad some of these are. The problem with most slogans is that they are lazy theology. A slogan is short so there's not enough space to get any sort of nuance or say anything substantial.

But what we have here in **Vs. 6** is honestly the best Christian slogan possible. It's true, it's pithy, and reminds us what our sole source of truth is: that's the Bible.

We refer to this truth affectionately in reformed theology as sola Scriptura. Scripture alone. Scripture alone is our sole authority. Scripture alone is all that guides our choices.

2 Tim. 3:16-17: All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness - listen - that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

All we need to be complete in life is the Word of God. And all we need to do any and every possible good work that God would have us do is the Bible.

This doesn't mean that the Bible is a magic 8 ball that will give you the answer to every possible question. Should I buy this car or that car? But it will will guide you by principles to narrow down the options.

So what I want to do is just spend some time this morning working through this idea of "do not go beyond what is written."

Now, first of all, why is Paul even talking about this? What's the context here?

We saw last week that the context is that church leaders are just servants - rowers in a galley boat - in God's church. And leaders will stand before God on the last day and give an account for all they've done. So we don't divide over them or exalt them to a place of unbiblical importance.

Scripture does call leaders to have a place in the life of Christians. Elders/pastors specifically are to lead the church, oversee the church, teach and guide. Christians are commanded to submit to their leaders in the church.

But there is a limit. We don't idolize them and exalt them and divide over them. Our leaders are not sinless. Only Jesus is sinless, all the rest of us are in need of grace.

So Paul says don't go beyond this understanding of your leaders. If you get too carried away what happens is a cult where people mindlessly do whatever their flawed leader wants them to do.

Now, how do we know this is a slogan? Well, to be honest we're not 100% sure but that theory seems to fit the best.

Here's what going on in the passage. First of all any time you see the phrase "has been written" that is a very specific word format in the original language. And what it typically indicates is a reference to the OT. It's

gegraptai: literally what has been written down. And that's how the NT writers often signaled to their readers that they were referencing the OT.

Paul uses that word here. The problem, though, is that there is no specific passage in the OT that says do not go beyond what is written. So what's going on? Well, there's a lot of theories here.

But what seems to be going on is that Paul has created a slogan not based on a specific passage, but based on the whole of what the OT says. Throughout the OT there is constant reminder to not take away from or add to Scripture and Paul seems to have summarized that as "do not go beyond what is written."

"We can almost hear him saying over and over as he disputed with the Jews, "Let's not let our Jewish traditions determine our understanding of the Scriptures. Don't go beyond what is written!" He must have used that "maxim" repeatedly" (EBC, note on 1 Cor. 4:6) Here he seems to use this same phrase to address the issue of exalting leaders. It's a summary of the OT.

So look back for a minute at **Deut. 4:2** for a minute. Deuteronomy literally means the second law - it's the second giving of the Law to Israel just before they enter into the Promised Land after wandering around in the wilderness for 40 years after being delivered out of Egypt. And they have this Law and here's what God says.

Read 1-2

So when someone takes an oath in a court room setting they swear to tell "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth." This is do the Word, the whole Word, and nothing but the Word."

When it comes to our attitude about the Word of God these are the 3 basic problems we run into. The first is that we don't actually do the Word.

Jas. 1:22: Be doers of the Word, not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

So that's problem number 1. God's Word isn't just an interesting philosophy book where we gather round and speculate about things and talk shop forever. It's not something we just argue about. It's actually designed by God as a way to live in a manner consistent with his holy character. So we are to do it. Do the Word.

Second, we don't get to take away from God's Word. Now, I don't think most of us would actually say out loud "Hey, I don't like this thing in the Bible so I'm not going to do it." Or "I don't like what God says here so I'm not going to talk about it." But practically speaking I think there are commands in the Bible we wish weren't there. Commands we know we should be obeying but we don't want to, or we drag our feet obeying them. That frankly, if they weren't in there we'd be just fine.

Or maybe there are topics in the Bible we just don't want to talk about. We don't want to talk about preaching the gospel to other people because that makes us uncomfortable. Or we don't want to talk about taking care of our older family members because they're a pain. Or we don't want to talk about predestination or submission or money.

Whatever it is you hope I don't preach about on a Sunday morning, it's that thing that we are functionally wishing were cut from the Bible. Don't do that.

And this is pervasive among people who call themselves Christians. There are many sects of Christianity who say we don't need the OT. Since we're on this side of the cross we can just cut out the OT. Popular preacher Andy Stanley said several years ago what we need to unhitch the OT from the NT. That's 100% not true. We need the OT.

1 Cor. 10 says those things are written down for our instruction.

Romans 15:4: whatever was written in the former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

You need the OT to even understand why the NT is relevant to your life. We say that Jesus is our Messiah, our Christ. What does that even mean if we don't have the OT?

Other people want to cut out the gospels or Paul's writings or the book of Revelation - we don't get to subtract the Word that we don't like.

And let me just say a little devotional point: if there's a part of Scripture that confuses you or you don't like or don't understand - I would encourage you to go study that all the more. Master that part of Scripture. You don't like the minor prophets? Pick one and study it until you've mastered it praying the whole time "Lord this is just as much your Word as John and Romans and Genesis."

So we do the Word and we don't subtract from the Word of God.

The last thing is what Paul seems to specifically be touching on. We don't add to the Word of God. **Read 2**

If there's a problem with most conservative evangelicals - whatever that term even means - but you get the idea. If there's a problem in our camp it's that we often add to the Word of God.

We add rules. We add practices. We add doctrinal purity requirements. We add our favorite theologians. We add all kinds of stuff. The conservative evangelical movement, whose roots are in old school fundamentalism tends to add things to God's Word in the name of protecting God's Word.

We'll spend a lot of time on that in a bit. But just know that adding to the Word of God is usually the problem we face.

But I still want to show you that this slogan of Paul's is probably a summary of what we see throughout the OT. So **turn** over to **12:32**. Same kind of things. **Read 12:29-32**

So, Moses's biggest fear is that Israel will get into the Promised Land, they'll take the land and then they'll get fat and happy and begin to ignore God's Word. They'll start doing what all the pagan nations do. And do you know what happened to Israel? They did just that. To the point that several hundred years after this, the Temple in Jerusalem actually became pagan temple filled with all kinds of idols to every other god under the sun.

But I love what Moses says in 32. **Read**

Be careful to do these words. It's not just do them. It's be careful to do them. Be careful to do all of them. And be careful to not do more than what there are.

Look at Joshua 1:7. So Moses is now dead. Joshua is in charge. If there's one command Joshua needs to remember, one thing he has to hold on to in order to be a good leader, what would it be? **Read 1:7-10**

Be careful to do all of the Law. Don't turn too the right or the left. That's just another way of saying don't add or subtract. Keep it between the ditches. And part of the way that they will be sure to stay on track is that they are meditating on the Word day and night.

I'll be honest with you guys it is always amazing to me how much of the Bible I forget. I think part of God's good grace to me is that I get to study the Bible all the time because I am prone to forget things easily. But I think we all are. Maybe you've experienced this too, but there are times when I listen to a sermon and the pastor just reads the passage and I'm like - yep that's all I need right there. I'm set to go thank you very much.

We need continual input from the Word of God. By the way, this is just a sampling of these types of passages. You can look up **Deut. 5:32, 17:20, 28:14, 1 Kings 15:5, Proverbs 4:27, 30:6**

So all that to say, there might not be one passage that says "Do not go beyond what is written" that phrase seems to summarize all of what the OT says about our attitude toward the Word of God.

Let me show you one more passage that I think applies to our situation. **Turn to Mark 7.** Mark 7 recounts this interesting interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees were sort of like pastors to the synagogues throughout Israel. They were the theological conservatives in Israel but the problem was that they often added to the Word of God. They went beyond what was written. Here they did that by trying to set one part of the Word of God against another part. **Read 1-8**

So the religious leaders want the disciples to wash their hands before they eat. Now this wasn't a sanitary washing to get rid of germs. This was a religious ritual that they had invented. It was a sign. It was ancient virtue signaling of their religious devotion. And they had a whole slew of these virtue signals. They'd wash hands, wash their cups a certain way, and couches and all sorts of weird things.

There was nothing intrinsically wrong with doing these things. They weren't in the Bible, they had been invented by these guys. The problem was that the Pharisees actually looked at these practices as so important that they basically viewed them as equal to God's Laws.

That's why Jesus slams them for teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. They were equating these dumb rituals with God's Law. They were adding. They were going beyond what was written.

And actually it proved that they weren't godly. This devotion to their own teaching proved that they just worshipped God with their lips, but not in their heart.

They did something else too. **Read 9-13**

The Bible makes it clear that children are to care for their aging parents. This means financially. Paul makes the same argument in **1 Tim 5** and he says it is the way to show them godliness.

But here they were trying to short circuit that. They were trying to somehow pit God's Word against itself. "You don't have to take care of your parents as long as you give the money to God." That'd be like me saying "You don't have to take care of your aging parents as long as you write a big check to the church." Well, that's awfully convenient.

Sometimes going beyond what is written is trying to pit God against himself. That's what they're doing here.

It's like asking: Can God make a rock so big he can't lift it? Can God make a square circle? Can God sin? Those kinds of questions are wrong on their face because what they're trying to do is pit God against himself. That doesn't make any sense. God never contradicts himself. He wants us to take care of our parents and be give to the Kingdom.

This is a trick as old as the gospel. But it doesn't fool God. We never go beyond what is written.

So what I want to do with the rest of our time is basically just take this biblical slogan and step on everyone's toes for a while. I can't hit every issue, but I want to hit some major issues that tend to affect conservative Christians. It's easy to take pot shots at those outside of our camp. Liberals are an easy target. Charismatics are an easy target. Unbelievers are an easy target. But what about us? What's in our backyard? Where do we go beyond what is written? This is not comprehensive and are not in any order of importance but here's a few ways.

1) We embrace worldly philosophies. One of the most worldly philosophies invading the church right now is Critical Race Theory. CRT. Critical Race Theory basically says that white supremacy is baked into our way of life. If you're white, you're racist even if you don't know it. And because you're racist you can't be trusted and you should give advantage to people of color. The only way to understand the world around us and the Bible in front of us is to adopt CRT.

What critical race theory tries to do is fight racism with...get this...racism. This is the leading issue at every university. This is the underlying ideology behind Black Lives Matter. This is the ideology that is now influencing government policy from Dept. of Education mandates to economic subsidies.

And it's infecting the church. Pastors and church leaders are becoming "woke" which means they are "waking up to this realization that they've lived a life of racism when they didn't even know it." People like Matt Chandler, Ligon Duncan, JD Grear, are all embracing this idea that white people have had and maintain power because of their skin color. And white people can't even have a voice in the discussion because we are white and can't see our own sinfulness. But we're guilty for sins committed generations ago and our only hope to help is to aid people who have never experienced true racism.

This ideology has infected the Southern Baptist Convention as well as most mainline denominations: Methodist, Presbyterian, Nazarene, Lutheran. The SBC went so far as to pass a resolution saying that this secular ideology is **helpful** for us in understanding the gospel.

But Critical race theory is antithetical to the gospel. The big problem with CRT is that there is no reconciliation, there is no atonement, no redemption. Jesus's sacrifice is not enough to reconcile all people to one another.

But many theologically conservative people are beginning to soak this in and it is dangerous because it is going beyond what is written. Either the gospel is enough to reconcile us to God and us to one another or it's not. CRT - fundamentally - says that the gospel is not enough to transform hearts.

2) How else do we go beyond what is written? We often go beyond what is written when we, like the Corinthians, embrace our favorite teachers as a means of identifying ourselves or how we understand things. Let me throw some names out.

I am of Dave Ramsey. I have to tell you I love me some financial baby steps. When Jodee and I first got married I had no idea how to manage our money or create a budget. There is probably no one who has influenced my understanding of money more than Ramsey. We've done Financial Peace University several times over the years here and I love it. I think it's a wonderful tool to help manage finances.

But Dave is not the Bible. You don't need to have 6 months savings in order to be faithful. You don't have to pay off debt smallest to largest to be in God's will. And you certainly shouldn't wait until baby step 7 to be generous. Dave's not Jesus. In fact, some of what Dave says is really bad Bible interpretation. And Dave's demeanor is often very unChristlike; he's kind of a jerk.

Do not go beyond what is written in equating Dave with faithfulness.

Same thing with Calvin and Luther. I love me some John Calvin. If you've never read Calvin you're missing out. He's very devotional and pastoral. He's not the nerd that everyone thinks him to be. But he's a flawed man. And his life story is complicated. When people ask me if I'm a Calvinist I cringe just a little because everyone means something different by that. So I'll often respond with "Well, it depends on what you mean by that."

I don't like being identified with any man. I'll say I'm reformed or I like reformed theology because the theology of the collective reformers is good because they returned to Scripture and they highlighted the singular work of God to impart saving faith to us apart from any effort or work on our part. But I don't like being identified with one man. I think that's going beyond what is written.

Same with Luther or MacArthur or Voddie or Piper or Tozer or CS Lewis.

3) I think we go beyond what is written when we view good causes as essential causes. So let me just name a few causes and then elaborate. There are some Christian who think that every Christian needs to be involved in pro-life ministry. That every church and every Christian needs to be doing something tangible to bring abortion and Planned Parenthood and Roe V. Wade to an end.

Same thing with adoption ministry. There are people who think if you're not adopting or have an adoption ministry in your church or doing short term missions in orphanages that you don't really care about the poor and orphans and therefore you have no true religion according to James.

Or you have to be a missional church. Your church has to give a certain amount to missions and you have to go on missions trips all the time. If you don't go on mission trips how can you say you love the lost. Do you get where I'm going with this?

Do we want abortion to end? Of course. It's the murder of children. And do we want to facilitate adoption in our church and in our culture? Of course. But not everyone is called to the exact same ministry. We should be eager to support and be involved.

4) Here's a little closer to home: I think saying Christians must homeschool to be faithful is going beyond what is written. And we homeschool. There are a lot of schooling options available and we need to be careful in how we view the decisions of other people.

I will say I have a lot of concerns about the public school system but I think we need to be very careful drawing lines in the sand that Scripture doesn't draw. I love Voddie Baucham - I use some of his material when I do pre-marital counseling and I'm reading a book by him right now. And while I appreciate his view, I don't appreciate most of his attitude about homeschooling. I think he's arrogant and condescending to anyone that either doesn't agree with him. It's almost like he has Christian amnesia and forgets there are people covered by the blood of Jesus who take a different approach or maybe have never even thought about this area.

The way we are called to uphold the power of the gospel is to make sure we're not adding to it in any way. To never go beyond what is written. Not even with things that might be good.

Scripture gives us all we need. We don't need less, and we don't need more to live a faithful life bringing God glory.

Pray