

# Christian beware: going beyond what is written

I want to draw the attention of Christians to the danger of going beyond what is written. Paul wanted the Christians in Corinth to learn the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written” (1 Corinthians 4). He wrote this in a context of church disunity identifiable as partisan groups who apparently traced their distinctive views back to different leaders. These views obviously extended to matters not directly addressed by revelation, at least to that point.

Paul’s point was that whenever Christians go “beyond what is written” their human fallibility puts them on dangerous ground. On the other hand, what God has revealed and we have received gives us a common denominator that should encourage humility (“What do you have that you did not receive?”) and promote greater unity by providing a sure basis for common ground and avoiding unnecessary conflict over disputable matters.

Today we have another saying: “A little knowledge is dangerous”. While God “has given us everything we need for life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3) and Scripture is sufficient for us to “be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17), the Bible does not speak directly to every issue that arises. While some specific issues are dealt with in their context, for the most part Scripture reveals principles and examples that provide guidance, but not always clear-cut answers. But Christians want clear-cut answers. After all, is it not the truth that sets us apart? So rather than humbly confine ourselves to the word (John 17:17) and accept the tentative nature of any conclusions we derive from that word, we boldly make unwarranted conclusions from limited evidence and claim this evidence is sufficient for the truth status of our conclusions. To quote another saying, we “make a mountain out of a molehill”.

This was the error of the Pharisees and teachers of the law in Jesus’ day. For example, their Scriptures contained the commandment that no work was to be done on the Sabbath and although the Old Testament as a whole provided some insight into what it meant to do no work, it hardly covered every situation that could arise. So these learned men had developed a detailed list of definitions of what was and was not considered “work”. The definitions were probably well intentioned, even if overly demanding, (indeed Jesus encouraged people to practice their teaching, but not follow their hypocritical practices – Matthew 23:2-4), but in the process they make a fundamental error. In going beyond what was written, and treating their conclusions as having equal status to the revealed law (and so binding them on the people), they in fact lost sight of the principle that the law intended. This is legalism. It is particularly evident in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and the seven woes (Matthew 23). Their legalism bred a hypocrisy that provoked Jesus more than anything else. So ironically, Jesus most opposed those who in his day considered themselves, and were generally considered by the people, to be the most holy among them.

Here then is our dilemma today. Truth can make us holy. God’s word is truth. God’s word does not specifically address every situation that may arise. Yet we want to know how to act righteously (according to God’s will) in every situation. But if we go beyond what is written we are likely to fall into the trap of legalism leading to hypocrisy. So what are we to do?

First it is helpful to appreciate that the tendency to go beyond what has been revealed is a fundamental human weakness that goes right back to the very first sin. Adam and Eve were

tempted by the prospect of the knowledge of good and evil beyond that which God had revealed to them. The serpent suggested that with this knowledge they “would be like God” (Genesis 3). Ever since, humans have effectively wanted to be like God by knowing all the answers. We are therefore inclined to “make a mountain out of a molehill” of limited information that we have to hand in a complex universe. This makes us feel good (especially when nobody opposes us) because in reality we feel a little more like God. “Knowledge puffs up” (1 Corinthians 1:8), but an all-knowing God sees this as arrogance and foolishness.

Science has been modern man’s main vehicle for knowledge beyond what is written. This quest for greater knowledge is not fundamentally bad, but the danger lies in how we go about it. Anyone familiar with the process knows how ego and the tendency to jump to conclusions pervade the reality of scientific “knowledge”. The philosopher Karl Popper (1902-94) suggested a more humble approach to science that regards all conclusions as tentative and awaiting disproof. His view was that it was more productive of truth to focus on attempts to falsify current understandings than to seek more evidence to support them. In his book *Conjectures and Refutations* (1963), Popper noted the tendency to want theories to explain everything. Indeed their apparent power to do so is interpreted as verifying evidence. His interest was to distinguish between pseudoscience and “real” science, but in practice the distinction is blurred because “real” scientists are human, become attached to their preferred theories and interpret any new evidence through the lens of those theories. The theory of Evolution is a classic example. Although reality is enormously complex and difficult to fathom, armed with a few ‘principles’ and scientific jargon, scientists are prone to confident assertions without showing the smallest indication of hesitancy or doubt. In recent years some physicists have even been working on a “Theory of Everything”! What is behind such presumption and arrogance? The human desire to be more like God!

It should come as no surprise that Christians are far from immune from this tendency. Indeed, I would suggest we are the most vulnerable. We are convinced about the truth claims of Scripture and despite its limited scope, armed with the jargon of theology we only too ready to use it to explain everything. Job’s friends suffered from this problem and wrongly tried to link his suffering to sin. The Churchmen of Galileo’s day were convinced that the creation account put the earth at the centre of the universe and this seemed to have been verified by their observations of the stars. For them this became a matter of “truth”. So when Galileo interpreted some contrary observations to suggest that the earth moved around the sun, this threatened their whole understanding of “truth”, Galileo was labelled a heretic and was tortured into recanting.

Today Christians are still inclined to develop a worldview that goes beyond what is written. Often we are obliged to form a view about a practical issue that arises in such realms as morality, politics or even church practice. It is not fundamentally wrong to form views when called upon to do so and to seek a biblical basis for our views, but sometimes we have a firmer Scriptural basis for these views than we do at other times. The dangers lie in the assumptions we bring to our understanding of Scripture, the attachment we develop to the views we form, and the tendency to equate the truth claims of our conclusions with the truth claims of revelation. Proof-texting (quoting one or more verses, often out of context, that seem to support a point) flourishes in this environment, but when little or no biblical support can be found some Christians may even seek to enhance the status of their views with the claim, “God showed me”.

We need to be more humble about our views. Of course when they are directly based on what is written, then they need to be defended as truth. This is what we believe because God has revealed it. But we might be surprised how many of our views and practices are in fact derived rather than directly revealed. The process of derivation (the jargon for this is hermeneutics) is necessary because Scripture does not address every situation, but the more we have to go beyond what it written, the more tentatively we should hold our conclusions.

Some have developed a systematised method of hermeneutics as a framework for determining a “biblical position” on issues. There are some logical principles that should be considered in the process, but the danger is that a systematised method is used to elevate the status of the conclusions reached (i.e. the implication is that because this “right” method of interpretation or application was used, the conclusions are assumed to have equal truth status with that which is written). Just a little reflection on the difficulty we sometimes have even in verbal communication should, however, make us more humble about the limitations of even a systematised hermeneutic. Otherwise, disunity is inevitable because we will give too much weight to different interpretations by regarding them as a “battle for the truth”.

I am not saying that there are no disagreements that are indeed a “battle for the truth”. I am, however, suggesting that we will err when we equate some of our theological conclusions with the truth claims of revelation. We can similarly err when we seek a “biblical basis” to ethics, science and other quests for wisdom and understanding. I am not saying that we should not seek a biblical basis for our conclusions. I am saying that when we go beyond what is written will inevitably make mistakes in this endeavour. Paul warned Timothy about the inevitable controversies that come from “meaningless talk” by those “who want to be teachers” but in reality “do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm” (1 Timothy 1:3-7).

Just a few examples will serve to clarify my point.

Some Christians are passionately opposed to organ transplantation on the basis that the inability to diagnose death with absolute certainty makes removal of viable organs tantamount to murder and therefore contrary to God’s commandments. Medical technology and the increasing capacity we have to “play God” with life is throwing up an increasing number of ethical challenges like this. The difficulty is that “murder” can be more difficult to define than “death” and specific cases such as this are simply not addressed in Scripture. We do know that specific cases in the Old Testament such as killing another person on the battlefield of war, or stoning a disobedient child, were not apparently considered “murder” by God. What about those who were “buried alive” because the older measure of death, no pulse or breathing, was also a fallible determinant of death? Were such mistakes “murder”? Now that our capacity to resuscitate or artificially maintain the heart and lungs has required a new definition of death, “brain death”, is misdiagnosis tantamount to murder? When organ transplants from those diagnosed “brain dead” can sometimes save the lives of several other people, is organ removal for this purpose “murder” because of the possibility of misdiagnosis? Notwithstanding your response to these questions, my point is that even if you develop a personal conviction that organ transplantation should be opposed because diagnosis of death cannot be done with absolute certainty, can you really say with absolute certainty that this is God’s will? Surely you are going beyond what is written, even when you try to validate your stance by quoting the commandment “you shall not murder”, when context clearly determines the application of this commandment and this specific context of organ transplantation is simply not addressed in Scripture. Obviously this specific example could be debated at length and many Scriptures could be brought to bear to justify various positions. If we were just a little more humble about whatever position we have on issues like this, we might be less inclined to destructive “biting and devouring each other” (Galatians 5:15).

Because science is an alternative quest for truth to revelation, understandings from each can sometimes conflict. Some Christians can get very involved in either trying to reconcile the conflicts or defend against apparent attacks on revealed truth. The Galileo incident should have been instructive about the dangers involved. Today the media has replaced the inquisition, and the biggest area of conflict surrounds the creation/evolution debate. Despite my geology degree, I appreciate the way creationists have pointed to major weaknesses in evolutionary theory and have proposed alternative explanations for observed phenomena such

as the fossil record. But they are working in an area that for the most part goes beyond what is written. I become concerned when they become as confident of their explanations as the evolutionists are of theirs. Just how God created is secondary to the fact that he did, and for us today it has little more theological significance than does the position of the earth in the universe. Now I admit that my scientific curiosity motivates some personal interest in the never ending debate, but from a Christian perspective all that really needs to be said is that there is more than enough contrary evidence to suggest that the theory of evolution is an inadequate reason to reject faith in the creator God revealed in the bible or doubt its inspiration.

The final example comes from theological debate. How the sovereignty of God interacts with the activities of Satan and human free will is surely a mystery. The insights provided by Scripture really only serve to confirm that the interplay involves a tension of forces that cannot be sufficiently understood by humans to enable us to explain why things happen the way they do unless it is revealed in “what is written”. When we lack the humility to accept this we inevitably get pushed to extremes. And so rather than hold the interplay of God’s sovereignty and human free will in tension, we have the great debate between Calvinists and Arminians. Sadly, the extremes that the debate has generated have some profound theological consequences that extend to man’s salvation. It is not my purpose to explore this here, but I do want to note the sometimes tragic outcome of theological debate that goes beyond what is written. Insistence that man has no part in his salvation has, among other things, distorted New Testament teaching on baptism. On the other hand, over-emphasis of man’s role led to a predominantly works-based religion prior to the Reformation. Today we see unwillingness to hold the tension, but willingness to go beyond what is written by too readily explaining perceived good things as the work of God and bad things as the work of Satan. But the Hebrew writer urged his readers to, “Endure hardship as discipline” from God. Note that he does not provide us with an invariant explanation of hardships. He does say that because “the Lord disciplines those he loves”, as sons of God we should regard hardship as coming from God, not Satan. Our problem is of course that in reality and without specific revelation, we don’t only know for sure the source of our suffering any more than Job did, but we really don’t know what is good or bad for us so we mistakenly blame Satan for our woes when God is the one acting in our best interests. (In Job’s case, both Satan and God were involved!)

These are just a few examples of the consequences of going beyond what is written. The warning is intended to make us more circumspect about what we confidently assert, more humble in our conversation about disputable matters, and more united around those things that have been revealed.

Warren Holyoak  
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warrenh@thepoint.org.au