

PREFACE

Ever since the first chapter of this letter, the apostle Paul has been bobbing and weaving like a holy boxer, moving about, occasionally landing a blow, employing first one metaphor then another (e.g., first field, then building, then house), sometimes naming names but at other times leaving things general. Now, beginning with v6, he throws out allusions and metaphors; Paul takes a breath, rears back, then moves in for the knockout punch.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:6-7.

J. B. Phillips paraphrase:

I have used myself and Apollos above as an illustration, so that you might learn from what I have said about us not to assess man above his value in God's sight, and may thus avoid the friction that comes from exalting one teacher against another. For who makes you different from somebody else, and what have you got that was not given to you? And if anything has been given to you, why boast of it as if it were something you had achieved yourself?

v6

Now these things, brethren...

Depending on who you ask, the “these things” that opens v6 could refer to just the previous five verses, everything stated so far from the beginning of the letter, or verses 3:5 through 4:5—which is probably the preferred reference.

- In 3:5 to 3:8 he likens he and Apollos to field hands working together in “God’s field.”
- Then at the end of v8 Paul segues from the metaphor of field to the metaphor of a building through v15.
- From v16 to v23 he uses the imagery of each believer being a spiritual house or sanctuary.
- Still using himself and Apollos—and, by extension, all church leaders—Chapter Four opens with Paul moving from the sanctuary to the courtroom, in a discussion of who is qualified to examine his stewardship, and then pass judgment on it.

So it makes sense that v6 refers back to that extended passage, but probably not all the way back to the beginning of the letter.

I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes,

The NASB and KJVs help us understand here that what Paul is saying is that he has been varying (changing the outward appearance) his “figures” or metaphors, inserting himself and Apollos as Guinea pigs, as it were, to illustrate his points.

so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written,

Sadly you may have grown accustomed to this teacher occasionally declaring that he is stumped by a particularly difficult passage. I am not comfortable doing it, and I try to avoid such conclusions, but it happens from time to time nonetheless.

What can be especially unnerving is when *every commentator* expounds on the difficulty of a passage to the extent that regarding *this* phrase—translated in the NASB, “so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written,”—even the venerable Gordon Fee declares, “Some see [this] as so obscure that they despair of finding its meaning.” Then after citing several options for interpretation, Fee uncharacteristically concludes, “On this matter we must finally plead ignorance. Here is a case where the apostle and his readers were on a wavelength that will probably be forever beyond our ability to pick up.”

This problem with the original Greek is illustrated by the different translations at our disposal—each of which says something slightly different from the others. The Greek is, literally, “in order that you may learn in us the not beyond what is written.”

Both Garland and Fee point to the evidence that the phrase begins with the standard designation for referring to a quotation, so let us settle on their conclusion that with this phrase Paul refers to his earlier OT citations (most of which are drawn from his copy of the Septuagint)—especially those that speak to arrogance and pride. So, as the NIV has it, “Do not go beyond what is written,” essentially means, *Live according to the Scripture I have quoted for you earlier.* And what would that be?

1:19 — For it is written, “I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE.” (Isaiah 29:14)

1:31 — so that, just as it is written, “LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD.” (Jeremiah 9:22-23 LXX)

2:9 — but just as it is written, “THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.” (Isaiah 64:4 LXX)

3:19-20 — For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, “He is THE ONE WHO CATCHES THE WISE IN THEIR CRAFTINESS”; and again, “THE LORD KNOWS THE REASONINGS of the wise, THAT THEY ARE USELESS.” (Job 5:13 and Psalm 93:11 LXX)

Although not all of these speak directly to the argument that follows in Chapter Four, as R. B. Hays writes, “The witness of Scripture places a strict limit on human pride and calls for trust in God alone.” This was the primary problem in Corinth: their pride and arrogance, and in their vaulted opinion of themselves and the eloquent “wise” in their region they were stepping outside and beyond the dictates of God’s word.

so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other.

If we are to keep this in context, and respect the original text, Paul here refers to himself and Apollos—Paul wrote, literally, “*the one over against the other,*” and note how the verse begins. So this could be rendered, as Fee does, “Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one *of us* over against the other.” (emphasis added)

As Paul’s citation from Jeremiah states, if we are going to boast, let us boast in the Lord. Not men. And this is a deliciously wry choice of words by Paul, considering the recipients of this letter.

arrogant^{nasb}, **puffed up**^{kjvs, esv}, **take pride in**^{niv} = *physioo* (foo-see-ah’-o) = from <G5449> (phusis) in the primary sense of blowing; to inflate, i.e. (figurative) make proud (haughty) :- puff up; **full of hot air**.

The Corinthians consider themselves to be *pneumatikoi*, spiritual ones, which derives from *pneuma*, which also means wind. It is as if Paul is saying, *You think you are so wise, so spiritual, but in your arrogance and pride you are just blowhards full of hot air.*

v7

Now, in v7, the apostle launches into one of his most direct, dramatic and accusative soliloquies in the form of three rhetorical questions put to the church that will effectively reveal their self-centered behavior. In v7 one can clearly see his bony finger punching holes in their corporate chest (and, by the way, letting out some of that hot air).

For who regards you as superior?

Every other version than the NASB translates the Greek *diakrinei* as “different” or “differ”—which is not necessarily wrong; that is what the word means, in one manner or another.

different, superior = *diakrinei* = from <G1223> (dia) and <G2919> (krino); **to separate thoroughly** i.e. (literal and reflexive) to withdraw from, or (by implication) **oppose**; figurative **to discriminate** (by implication decide), or (reflexive) hesitate :- contend, make (to) differ (-ence), discern, doubt, judge, be partial, stagger, waver.

But the context makes it reasonably obvious that the apostle is not just saying that the vain and prideful Corinthians are “different.” And they do not just think they are better than other Christian communities: every one of them thinks he is better than his pew mate! Why? Because they are becoming arrogant toward each other as they, each in his or her profound “wisdom,” chooses between their teachers, Paul and Apollos (v6). So the context, in my opinion, validates the NASB “superior.”

This first question points to their arrogant *presumptuousness*. Remember, the Corinthians are examining, judging, and choosing between—favoring one over the other—“servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (v1). So a good paraphrase of this first question of v7 would be, *Who in the world do you think you are, anyway? What kind of self-delusion is it that allows you to put yourself in a position to judge another person’s servant?* (Fee)

What do you have that you did not receive?

The second question points to the Corinthians’ *ingratitude*. And Paul follows it immediately with a third question that drives home his point.

And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

The best translations for this question’s opening phrase—“And if you did receive it”—are the NKJV and ESV, which best capture the intent of the original: “but if indeed,” because the third question assumes that the answer to the second is “nothing.”

NKJV: Now if you did indeed receive it...

ESV: If then you received it...

My thoughts take me back to moments of national or personal tragedy: a devastating flood or hurricane, collapse of a building killing many, an innocent child brutally murdered, an entire family killed in an accident. Invariably at such times there will be those who shake their fists at God, demanding to know why He did or permitted such a thing. There will be those who loudly proclaim, “A loving God would not permit such a thing to happen.” Thus their point is, God is either *responsible* for such tragedies, or is complicit in allowing it to take place—that is, he has the power to stop it, but didn’t.

But then these same people who blame a “loving God” for every tragedy, never seem to give Him the credit when things go well! Which is it? Is God in control, or no? If He is not responsible for the pleasant things in your life, then He cannot be responsible for the unpleasant things.

The truth is, He *is* in control of everything; what we are, who we are, and what we have is all from Father God. And one of those gifts is *grace*, of which the Corinthians were sorely lacking. They were full of themselves, and instead of being humbly grateful for what God had given them, they boasted in what they had done for themselves.

Let’s close by reading the Lord’s words to Cyrus, king of Babylon, when He called upon this unbeliever to release Israel to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and the city’s walls.

Read Isaiah 45:5-7.