

"The Church in the World:
Studies in 1 Corinthians" No. 8

"Knowledge and Love"

1 Cor. 8:1-13

--CEFC 5/30/21 3/22/98

"Knowledge is power"--

In our culture, that's a truism, a settled fact, a foundation for living--

"knowledge is power."

The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations attributes this saying to Francis Bacon,
in the early 17th century,
who was the father of modern science,
and in the scientific realm it has certainly proved true.

The more knowledge we have of the natural world,
the more power we have over it—
to control it and to manipulate it,
and to make it work for us through technological advances of all sorts.

Yes, knowledge is power.

And it's true in other areas, too.

Knowledge of markets and manufacturing techniques and of management principles--
that kind of knowledge can lead to economic power.

And then knowledge of voter preferences and cultural trends and sources of money--
that kind of knowledge can lead to *political* power.

And then knowledge of the law and its applications and its ambiguities can be useful--
that kind of knowledge can lead to *legal* power.

And in the academic community knowledge of almost any kind can be beneficial--
leading to prestigious appointments and all kinds of privileges.

There, too, knowledge is power.

But what about *religious* knowledge?

Does that give you power?

The Corinthian Christians thought so.

“Knowledge,” like the “wisdom” Paul addressed earlier in this letter,
was important to the Christians in this Greek city.

And in our passage this morning the Apostle Paul wants to help them to see
what knowledge ought to mean for the Christian.

We will see that for the follower of Christ,
knowledge is not the means to power and privilege.

No, for the Christian, knowledge must be put in the service of love.

That's our theme as we consider Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 8 this morning--

a passage we'll divide into three parts,

looking at

- I. The *way* of knowledge in vv. 1-3;
 - II. The *content* of knowledge in vv. 4-6
 - and III. The *application* of knowledge in vv. 7-13.
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1 Cor. 8:1--"Now about food sacrificed to idols:

With the words, "**Now about**," Paul signals that he is picking up a theme that had appeared in the Corinthians' previous letter to him--
They had written something about "**food sacrificed to idols**" and had apparently expressed their opinions on the matter.
Paul is here taking up what they had said, as he did back in chap. 7 on the issue of marriage.

But before we look at what Paul says,
let's consider the social and religious situation in ancient Corinth.

As we've said before, the city of Corinth was full of pagan temples of all sorts, temples dedicated to the worship of various gods of the Greco-Roman pantheon. These temples were the social centers of the city-- they had spaces for meetings and dining rooms, and functions of all sorts would be held within them-- from official state dinners to trade guild meetings to weddings to private birthday parties.

These temples were the restaurants of antiquity.

One temple that has been excavated had a dining room

with couches along the four walls and a table and a grill in the center.
Another had several dining rooms that opened onto a public courtyard.

And when held within these temples,

these events assumed a certain religious character.

In fact, the main entrée at the dinners associated with these events
would have been meat that had been sacrificed to the temple's god.

Modern archaeologists working in Corinth

have found a letter dating from this period

inviting people to the birthday party of a man's daughter—

It reads:

*"Chaeremon requests your company at the table of the lord Sarapis
at the Sarapeum [temple] tomorrow, the 15th at 9 o'clock"* (POxy 1.110)

Lord Sarapis was the god in whose honor this birthday party was held,

and to whom the meat of the party would have been sacrificed.

Meat was relatively rare in those days,

and for the poorer members of the community,

meat eaten in the temple at some public celebration

may have been the only meat they ever had.

And for the wealthy, these temple gatherings

were where business deals were made and social contacts were secured.

This is the situation Paul is addressing when he speaks of the meat sacrificed to idols--

he calls it "idol food."

The word he uses here can also refer to meat that is left over from these affairs

and is then sold in the city's public marketplace,
but Paul is going to deal with that more specifically in chap. 10.

Here his focus is on what is referred to in v. 10--

the eating within the pagan temple meat that had been sacrificed to an idol.

Now, it seems that Paul had urged the Corinthian believers to avoid such a practice,
but in their letter back to him,

some objected to his counsel, and sought to argue their case.

They contended that "**We all possess knowledge**" in v. 1--

here, I think, Paul is again quoting their own words.

And the ESV and NIV11 translations put these words in quotation marks

to signify that.

"We all possess knowledge"—that was their slogan.

By becoming Christians, they had become enlightened and wise--

they had gained a new understanding of pagan religion.

Paul quotes them again in v. 4--

"we all know that an idol is nothing in the world."

False gods are no gods at all, they said.

They are just lifeless statues, with no power to help or to harm anyone.

In addition,

they had come to see, in v. 8, that food has no real religious significance--

"food does not bring us near to God;

we are no worse if we do not eat,

and no better if we do."

And with all of this, Paul would most heartily agree.

So on this basis, they conclude--

"Since idols are really nonentities;

and since food is a matter of indifference to God--

What difference does it make if we go to the temple

and eat the meat sacrificed to idols, Paul?

What the big deal?"

In fact, in their mind, to go to such events was a way of demonstrating

their own spiritual freedom and maturity.

Their knowledge had given them power--

the power and freedom to act however they liked.

They may have even tried to get some of their "weaker" brothers and sisters—

those uneducated believers

who didn't have such sophisticated theological knowledge—

they may have even tried to get them to go along with them to the temple feasts

to build up the strength of their weak consciences

by eating this idol meat.

In their letter they may have tried to persuade Paul to side with them on this issue

and to encourage the "weak" to put aside their scruples

and to enjoy their freedom in Christ,

and to become just as enlightened as they were.

That seems to be the situation here.

So how does Paul respond?

He will take three full chapters to deal with this issue,

and in the end, he will finally forbid their going to the temples,
but here at the beginning, he takes on their argument as they give it
and attacks its fundamental premise.

They think their superior knowledge,
their new Christian insight,
gives them a new authority and freedom
to do whatever they want in this matter.

Paul says they are wrong.
They haven't rightly understood the gospel.
Real Christian knowledge must always lead to love.

In the first three verses he focusses on their false view
of the place of knowledge in the Christian life.

The Corinthians believed that knowledge is power,
and that power gives freedom and rights,
but Paul had a slogan of his own:
**"Knowledge puffs up,
but love builds up."**

The basis of Christian behavior--
the determining factor in Christian ethics—
is not knowledge, but love,
for that is what knowledge of the gospel is about.

Now we mustn't misunderstand what Paul is saying here--
Becoming a Christian does involve knowledge--

there is the knowledge of who God is and what he has done in the world,
and what God expects of us,
and how we can know him through Christ.

We are called to think carefully about these things--

though as one skeptic cynically put it:

"Most Christians would rather die than think--

in fact, they do."

We are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

We are to love God with our hearts, souls, strength, and our minds.

Many people reject Christianity without really knowing what it is they are rejecting.

Maybe you know people like that—maybe you are a person like that—

These people need to be encouraged to think,

to understand,

to know what this gospel message is all about.

Reading one of the Gospels of the New Testament is a good place to begin.

But let me tell you, as one who spent over seven years

studying biblical and theological subjects in an academic setting,

the pursuit of knowledge apart from love can be deadly to the spirit.

I'll always remember a time when I was in Oxford,

and at the time, Os Guinness, a very well known Christian writer and speaker,

was also studying there,

and he had a Bible study group that met in his flat on Friday nights.

And one night after the study

some of us theology students started joking around,

as theology students sometimes do,
and one of us made some flippant comment
about certain people roasting in hell.
And I noticed that Os walked out of the room
as we continued our banter.

In a few moments he returned
with an expression of anger and anguish on his face.
"I can't believe what I'm hearing," he said.

"You are toying with sacred subjects as if they were playthings in your hands."

And he was right.

We had absorbed the atmosphere of Oxford
where knowledge was cut off from love.
And Os told us about how Francis Schaeffer, with whom he had studied,
never talked to people about hell without tears in his eyes.

You see, knowledge without love is not Christian knowledge.

C. S. Lewis said, "One is sometimes (not often) glad not to be a great theologian;
[for] one might so easily mistake it for being a good Christian."

The temptations to which a great [linguist] philologist or a great chemist is exposed
are trivial by comparison."

Knowledge can easily puff us up--
especially knowledge of a theological sort--
and we can begin to boast in our knowledge
and presume that our knowledge bestows upon us
certain powers and privileges.

We see ourselves as a cut above all those ordinary Christians
who don't share our advanced biblical and theological expertise.
Education in our world is easily translated into economic power,
or academic power,
or political power.

But, Paul says, education in theological matters in itself
gives you *no spiritual* power--
none at all.

**"If I can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, but have not love,
I am nothing,"** Paul will say in chap. 13 (v. 1).

John Wesley echoes Paul here when he says,

"An ounce of love is worth a pound of knowledge."

There is such a thing as a false knowledge--

v. 2--**"The man who thinks he knows something**

does not yet know as he ought to know."

For true knowledge issues in love--

particularly love for God.

**"Knowledge puffs up;
love builds up."**

There is a saying go around that is popular in progressive circles that goes like this—

"You interpret love in the light of the Bible;

we interpret the Bible in light of love."

In my view that is a false dichotomy—for both are right.

For the message of the Bible is a message of love—

the Bible helps us understand what love is and what love demands

for it reveals the God of the gospel—

The love revealed in the gospel is a message of grace and truth—

The gospel reveals the truth of God—

the truth of the holiness of God and our own sinfulness

in that it shows us the lengths God must go to atone for our sin—

God's own Son dying on a Roman cross.

It reveals the truth of the holiness of the life to which we are called.

And the gospel also reveals the grace of God

and our need of his forgiveness and transformation—

in that in the gospel, God does for us what we could never do for ourselves.

Jesus in his resurrection conquers sin and death

and sends his Spirit to live within us to change us from the inside.

The Bible is a message of God's love—a love that is both gracious and truthful.

Biblical scholars without love are deceived,

for they haven't rightly understood the Bible.

But those who think they love apart from the knowledge

that comes from the Bible

are deceived also,

for they haven't understood the love of God.

For God's love is not a sentimental sappy love

that just wants everyone to have a good time.

God's love is holy, and it wants everyone to share in his holiness.

"The man who thinks he knows something
does not yet know as he ought to know.
But the man who loves God is known by God."

The knowledge we are to seek is never to be an end in itself--
it is always something that draws us to God.

And real Christian knowledge begins with the priority of God's knowledge of us.

We know him only because he knows us first--
he knows us with his gracious, electing love.

True theology, according to Thomas Aquinas,
comes from God, teaches about God, and leads to God.

For all true knowledge ultimately reveals the goodness and loveliness of God.

The way of Christian knowledge is always the way of love.

The kind of knowledge the Corinthians had, and in which they boasted,
was not this kind of knowledge.

This kind of knowledge recognizes that knowledge without love is not knowledge at all--
whereas knowledge puffs up,
love builds up.

Paul attacks the argument of the Corinthians at its root--
a faulty view of knowledge,
a knowledge divorced from love,
which is ultimately a deficient view of the gospel itself.

Sure, they may be free to do something,
but will it be the best thing to do, the loving thing to do?
In their decision about whether to participate in the temple feasts,
were they considering
what would build up their fellow brothers and sisters,
or only what would be to their own advantage?

This is Paul's first word to the Corinthians--

Knowledge puffs up,
love builds up.
Knowledge alone is not necessarily Christian.

But then Paul returns to the subject at hand

and moves in vv. 4-6 to **the content of Christian knowledge.**

"So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols:

**We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world"
and that "There is no God but one."**

For even if there are so-called gods,

whether in heaven or on earth

(as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"),

yet for us there is but one God, the Father,

from whom all things came and for whom we live;

and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ,

through whom all things came and through whom we live."

The fundamental creed of Israel—

a creed which every male Jew of Paul's time

was required to recite twice a day--

comes from the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy,

and is called the *Shema*, from the first word in the Hebrew original,

which means "Hear."

"Hear, O Israel:

The LORD our God,

the LORD is one" (Deut. 6:4).

In a world full of idols,

the Jews affirmed that there is one God,

who is lord over all.

Paul echoes that creed here,

but with a significant difference--

in contrast to the many "gods" and "lords" still alive

in the minds of many deceived worshipers--

(here he is referring to the traditional "gods" of the Greco-Roman world

and the "lords" of the mystery cults more recently imported from the eastern empire)--

in contrast to the many "gods" and "lords"

there is one God, the Father,

and one Lord, Jesus Christ.

Notice, the "Lord" and "God" of the *Shema* has been split in two,

to accommodate the Christian revelation of the one God

as both Father and Son.

Here we have very early evidence

of what later theologians will call the “trinitarian” understanding of God.

There is one God--

but he is now known as Father--

as through Jesus Christ the Lord we can now draw near to him

as "Abba, Father"

There is one God,

who is the ultimate source of all things and the Creator of all things,

but now we see that that creation is through Jesus Christ the Lord--

that is, it is designed with him in mind as its perfect architect and inhabitant.

And there is one God,

and it is for him that we live--

he is the purpose for everything we do and everything we are.

It is not to please ourselves, but him that we are brought into being.

and now it is through Jesus Christ the Lord

that we can come know that purpose and fulfill that purpose.

The Corinthian Christians may have knowledge,

and Paul basically agrees with what they say,

but theirs is still only a partial knowledge.

They must remember that we weren't created by God to do what we want to do,

no, we are created, we live, for him.

These will make a difference in the way you will choose to act.

So Paul moves in vv. 7-13 to **the application of Christian knowledge**
to the specific situation at hand.

You say that we all possess knowledge--

the knowledge that an idol is nothing at all in the world,

but, in fact, Paul says in v. 7,

"not everybody possesses this knowledge.

Some people are still so accustomed to idols

that when they eat sacrificial food

they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god,

and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled."

Here Paul is talking about new converts in Corinth

whose newly discovered knowledge that there is truly only one God

has not yet eradicated the idolatrous beliefs and practices of a lifetime.

To them, eating meat in a temple would be so filled with religious significance

that to do so would cast them right back into the grip

of the idolatry they had forsaken when they came to Christ.

Yes, in v. 8 Paul agrees with the knowledgeable Corinthians

that **"food does not bring us near to God;**

we are no worse if we do not eat,

and no better if we do."

but that doesn't settle the question

as to whether they should eat meat sacrificed in the temple.

v. 9--**"Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights**

does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

For if someone with a weak conscience

sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple,

won't that person be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols?

So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died,

is destroyed by your knowledge.

When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience,

you sin against Christ."

Paul is not talking here about simply offending a mature Christian

by doing something that that Christian may not approve of.

This is much more serious than that.

He is talking about causing a weaker brother to do something against his conscience

that ends up drawing him away from Christ and back into idolatry.

It is a serious matter to violate your conscience, even if your conscience is ill-informed.

Paul says in Rom. 14—"Whatever is not of faith is sin."

If you encourage people to act in violation of their own conscience, Paul says,

then you are sinning against Christ.

For to sin against a member of Christ's body is to sin against Christ himself.

This is a very serious matter--

What did Jesus say?

"But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin,

it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck

and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."

(Matt. 18:6)

Don't do it.

**“So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died,
is destroyed by your knowledge.”**

There may be some biting irony here—

Christ died for this person,
but you would destroy their faith
simply because you won't even change your diet?!¹

Can't you see it--

Your authority, your freedom, to act in a certain way
doesn't mean that you have a right to behave however you like.
No, as a Christian you have a responsibility to act in a way
that builds up your brother or sister.
Our freedom is to be used for the benefit of others,
to build them up in love.²

v. 13-- **“Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin,
I will never eat meat again,
so that I will not cause them to fall.”**

Here Paul says not only that he would give up eating meat sacrificed to idols,
but he would not eat any kind of meat, and become a vegetarian,
if his eating caused a brother or sister to fall into sin.

¹ So Hayes

²cf. Gal. 5:13 You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.

Though the situation addressed in Romans 14 is quite different,

Paul's attitude in each case is the same--

There he says, "Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food" (Rm. 14:20.)

"If your brother is distressed because of what you eat,

you are no longer acting in love.

Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died" (Rom. 14:15).

This is what it all comes down to, doesn't it--

letting your life be shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ--

the gospel, the good news, that Jesus Christ, that one Lord,

through whom all things came and through whom we live--

the gospel that this Jesus,

in the supreme knowledge

of who he was and where he had come from and where he was going,

this Jesus gave up his *rights*

and in love gave up his *life* for us and our sin.

While we were still powerless, while we were still weak,

Paul writes in Rom. 5:6, Christ died for the ungodly.

This is the knowledge that counts,

this is the knowledge that ought to rule our hearts and our minds,

for this is the way of the cross.

So how ought we to apply this word of God to our situation?

Any of you grapple with eating meat sacrificed to idols in a pagan temple lately?

In some parts of the world this very issue, or one just like it, is very real.

I remember hearing from Dave Lanham,

when he was a missionary in Senegal, West Africa,
talking about the new Christians who played on the village soccer team,
who had to decide whether to forgo a special pre-game meal
because of its idolatrous connotations.

Some Asian Christians have to struggle with whether to participate
in traditional meals venerating ancestors.

Is it the harmless honoring of the memory of family members
or is it a form of idolatry?

So these are not dead issues.

What about certain clubs and fraternal orders--
like the Masons, for example--
what kind of religious or quasi-religious commitments
are required or implied by one's participation?

Don't forget the social and even the economic dimension to all of this--

in ancient Corinth these temple meals were an integral part of community life--
the place where friendships were made and business deals were struck.

It would not be easy to forgo involvement there.

Perhaps these enlightened Corinthian Christians had an economic interest

in establishing their freedom in such actions.

And maybe we who are relatively wealthy or comfortable
have a vested interest in discounting any moral or religious dimensions
to certain business interests, or ways that we entertain ourselves.

What about attending a same-sex wedding,
or an office party celebrating someone's gender transition?
Or what about using someone's preferred pronouns?

It is not always easy to establish boundaries between the church and the culture,
between what is acceptable accommodation to the realities of the culture we live in
and what is unacceptable moral and spiritual compromise.

And often our decision will depend on how our action will be perceived by others.

We need great wisdom in these matters.

Christian may differ where those boundaries belong.
But at least in this passage,
Paul's interest is not in setting those boundaries,
but in the nature of true Christian knowledge
and the importance of real Christian love.

His primary message is that the knowledge that counts
is the knowledge that is shaped by the cross of Christ
and which issues in concern for the brother or sister
in the family of the church.

Are you using knowledge as a weapon of power

or as an instrument of love.

Do you take pride in being the "heresy-hunter"--

looking for what is wrong in somebody else's theology

on in their ethical standards--

Are you banging people over the head with the Bible,

instead of using it to point people to the love of the Savior?

Or do you use your "knowledge" of things biblical and theological

to tear down the simple faith of others,

rather than to build them up?

Or do you flaunt your freedom in Christ in ways

that might be destructive for the immature Christian?

You know, as a pastor, I have to be concerned about the way I live.

I know that others are watching,

and that the choices I make may have an impact on other people,

and Paul is going to talk about that in the next chapter.

But Paul wants you to see that that applies to every one of us--not just to the pastors.

As we said before,

No man is an island--

no one can live to himself alone.

Our choices affect other people--every one of us.

Choices of all kinds--

whether you come to worship on Sunday can affect some people;

the way you spend your money,
the way you raise your children,
the way you invest your time--
all of these are affecting the life of this church community in some way.
Other people's lives are influenced by your decisions about such things.

Some people hate the thought of that--

they are repulsed by the idea that their freedom should be in any way
impinged by what other people may think of what they do.
Just be true to yourself, they say.

And I can sympathize--

we can't always be looking over our shoulder
at the person who might stand in judgment over us
because we did something that they disagree with.

The stumbling block principle is wrongly applied

if it is simply used to place limits on the behavior of some Christians
whose conduct offends other Christians with stricter behavioral standards.

All that does is to hold the entire Christian community hostage

to the standards of the most conservative or legalistic members of the church.

Paul's concern in applying this stumbling block principle,

is the concern of Christ--

it is for the "little ones"--the weak, those most vulnerable.

Jesus would offend the Pharisees all he wanted,

it was the tax gatherers and the prostitutes he sought to reach.

Would you be willing to set aside some of your freedom
for the well-being of others--
those for whom Christ laid down his very life?

Would you give up your "rights"
--even when you were in the right--
out of love for another?

If not, then I don't think you've quite understood the gospel,
or at least, it hasn't quite gripped your heart.

The knowledge of the gospel that counts is not a matter of mere intellectual assent
to certain propositions about God and Jesus.

The knowledge of the gospel that counts,
the knowledge that saves,
is the knowledge that issues in love for God the Father
and his Son Jesus Christ--
and loving Christ must mean a love for the members of his body.

It isn't a knowledge that pursues power,
but a knowledge that has a concern for the weak in love.

Do you have that kind of knowledge?

If so, then you can be assured that you are known by God.

Prayer—

Closing song: *By Our Love*

Benediction:

“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more

in knowledge and depth of insight,

so that you may be able to discern what is best

and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,

filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—

to the glory and praise of God.

**“The Church in the World:
Studies in 1 Corinthians” #8
May 30, 2021**

"Knowledge and Love"

1 Cor. 8:1-13

The Corinthian Christians took great pride in their knowledge and felt that this gave them great freedom. But the knowledge they had was the not the right kind of knowledge, Paul argues, for godly knowledge is always guided by love.

I. The Way of Knowledge (vv. 1-3)

II. The Content of Knowledge (vv. 4-6)

III. The Application of Knowledge (vv. 7-13)

*"Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom
does not become a stumbling block to the weak."*

--1 Cor. 8:9

Sermon Response:

"Knowledge and Love"

1 Cor. 8:1-13

- Read 1 Cor. 1:5; 12:8; 13:1-3. "Knowledge" was an "in" word in Corinth, suggesting an understanding of Christianity as some form of intellectual or spiritual "enlightenment." Note the similarities to what Paul says about "wisdom" in chaps. 1-4. Both lead to pride (3:18-21); they both are deceptive and destructive (3:16-18); and he attacks them both with similar irony (3:18; 8:2). What kinds of "knowledge" lead to such pride? Have you seen it in yourself?
- "Love builds up"--read Rom. 14:13-15. How can this principle help to guide you in decisions you have to make? What can you do in love to "build up" another brother or sister?
- What are the "many gods" and "many lords" that still hold a subjective grip on people in our culture? Are you free from their power?
- Use v. 6 for meditation and worship. Where have you come from? What are you made for? How can you be what you are called to be?
- As you consider Paul's words in v. 9, meditate on Matt. 18:6,7. Are your decisions guided by this consideration? Ask the Lord to protect you from such a dangerous course.