

## Knowledge and Love

*1 Corinthians 8:1-13*

*Mark 1:21-28*

**The church at Corinth looks like a bunch of battling Baptists. One day, while Paul is out of town preaching a revival, he gets a letter from Corinth riddled with complaints. "Pastor some members think they are more spiritual than others. Some think they are smarter than others. Pastor, what do we do?" Slice and dice it any way you like, the church at Corinth was a war zone.**

**The battle du jour in chapter 8 was a food fight over meat offered to idols.**

Leave the church to its own devices and we will divide everyone into the "strong" and the "weak," "the right" and the "wrong." Since we all read the same Bible, claim the same Savior, and pray to the same God, it is not easy to tell strong from weak.

There's a sour spirit in the country and in the church, and I can't tell if the church started the fight or saw it and asked, "Is this a private fight or can anyone join?" We need a different spirit toward one another in our necessary disagreements.

When my Aunt Helen converted from Baptist to Mormon, she came to see my dad, her brother, and tried to convert him to the Mormon faith. My dad listened patiently to a history of Joseph Smith and the beliefs of the Mormon Church based on the *Book of Mormon*. He didn't argue or ask any questions. When Helen finally asked my dad if he would like to accept Joseph Smith's teachings, he said, "Long ago, I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior and I'm going to stick with him all the way." Then my dad got down on his knees in the middle of our living room and prayed for his sister. He poured out his heart in love and understanding and asked God to bless Helen and to be good to her. That's the spirit missing in church today. Mitt Romney would like my Southern Baptist Dad.

**The nest of know-it-alls in Corinth claim to be the strong. To them the weak have scruples that open the door for sarcasm. They make fun of the so-called weak for believing in idols as some today make fun of Christians who believe in demons. The strong know there is no God but one. So eating meat sacrificed to a non-existent god is harmless.**

**There are really smart people today who take sadistic delight in pulling the biblical rug out from under the feet of sincere believers. They never bother to get inside the heart of others to understand why a certain view of Scripture matters so much to them.**

Paul takes on these really smart members of the Corinthian Church. Paul picks up one of the slogans of the strong: **All of us possess knowledge**, and turns it against them. Paul reminds us that everyone does possess knowledge. In Clyde Edgerton's *Raney*, Raney asks Charles why he

has to be friends with these college professors and such – why he can't be friends with her friends, Charles says, "These people think." "Think?" Raney asks. Who don't think? Everybody thinks."

**Of all things, Paul says** "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." **Who among us is not convicted to some degree by "knowledge puffs up?"** Like the five year old in Dr. Seuss' *On Beyond Zebra*, who said after learning the alphabet, "Now I know everything there is to know from A to Z."

**Yet Paul says that anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge.** Paul is not talking academic knowledge here. He is talking about knowing that we are known by and loved by God. If inspiration means anything, it means God sharing necessary knowledge with us and we are not the originators of knowledge. Knowledge originated in the mind of God not in science labs. Truth be told we have been slow to grasp the primal possibilities of a universe so richly endowed by our Creator.

**Paul reminds us,** "For now we see in a mirror, dimly,\* but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."

**The elites in Corinth have allowed their knowledge to negate concern for the weak. They have knowledge but no love; they are smart but lack sympathy. All the knowledge in the world without love gives us a zero balance. Love without knowledge makes us dangerous to one another.**

So Paul asks the strong to take responsibility for the weak. **"But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling-block to the weak."** "Take care" is bible speak for a caution sign. Go slow. Look both ways. In the Broadway musical, "Jersey Boys," one of the band members says, "I don't get this song: Walk Like a Man. That mean we walk like boys? Like girls? The producer shouts, "It's a meta – phor!" Take care! Don't be a stumbling-block! Consider the feelings of others. The church needs to produce more saints and fewer scribes and Pharisees. "To produce [saints] in our day, we will need the gifts of scholars, but we will equally need people who do not need to attend the university to live lives faithful to their baptism" (Stanley Hauerwas, *Working with Words*).

**Unlike us, Paul refuses to take sides. Frustrating isn't it? "What do you actually believe?" "Come on pastor just tell me what to believe." Well, I'm not going to do it. No struggle, no gain. Paul, places his own knowledge aside: "Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall."**

**Almost half of young adults say they are repulsed by how Christians fight over their faith. Here are two contrasting stories. A Christian high school girls basketball team, in Texas, was leading 59 – 0 at halftime. In the second half, the coach sent his first team back into the game and in the fourth quarter was using a full court press and still shooting 3 pointers. The final score was 100 – 0. A school in Florida, Grapevine Faith High School, played a home game against a team from a maximum security prison school. This team had no fans. Security**

guards not parents traveled with them. The principal of Grapevine Faith arranged for half of his fans and half the cheerleaders to sit on the visitor's side and cheer for the team from the prison. Grapevine students made a banner and provided a spirit line for the visiting team to run through. In the second half, the Grapevine Faith coach played his third team and the prison team scored two touchdowns, the first two all year. After the game, the coach of the prison team told the other coach, "You will never know how much this meant to these kids."

Sure the Bible is called a sword, but it's a metaphor. It is also called a lamp: "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." I'd rather light lamps in the house of the Lord than be a sword-wielding Christian soldier marching as to war.

Paul makes this astonishing theological move in verses 5-6. He agrees there are so-called gods and many lords. Then he calls us back to primary doctrine: "There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we all exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." Paul moves from food offered to idols to the Father, to almighty God, in whom we trust and to Jesus Christ. Primary doctrine trumps tangential knowledge.

This is good knowledge. There's no anti-intellectual spirit in Scripture. Jesus commands us to love God with our minds. Yet there's something in American religion that has always mistrusted the mind. Sign on the Church of All Nations on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. **PLEASE: NO EXPLANATIONS INSIDE THE CHURCH. It's a metaphor.**

In the *Wizard of Oz*, Scarecrow said, "I haven't got a brain . . . only straw." "How can you talk," Dorothy asked, "if you haven't got a brain?" "I don't know," said Scarecrow. "But some people without brains do an awful lot of talking . . . don't they?" Wisdom and knowledge are the first gifts of the Holy Spirit to the church. "To one is given through the Spirit wisdom, and to another knowledge."

The church needs sharp minds in a critical world. Too often we settle for the easy answers, swallow the clichés, depend on what we learned in Sunday School forty years ago. The church suffers from mediocrity and settles for being average. When I give my preaching students at the seminary a reading list and try to teach them why reading is one of their most important tasks as pastors, they are dubious. They tell me they are too busy to read. Even in our own graduate schools of theology, there is a demeaning of the gifts of the mind. No matter how inadequate preaching is, church members tolerate it. One church member told me, "I suffer through bad preaching because I figure enduring one bad sermon covers a lot of sins." Churches will get better preaching when they expect it and demand it.

Well, as David Brooks, in a NY Times op ed points out, "In the past, workers with average skills, doing an average job, could earn an average lifestyle.

But, today, average is officially over. Being average just won't earn you what it used to. *Average is over.* *Average is over and the church has to be excellent. Strive for excellence. In fact, Paul points the church to a more excellent way and that way is love.*

Here then are two kinds of knowledge; two ways of knowing: Good knowledge leads us to the mind of Christ; bad knowledge to arrogance and pride. Good knowledge leads to the imitation of Christ; bad knowledge to thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought. Good knowledge leads us to acknowledge that Jesus is the Savior; bad knowledge to showing how smart we are. Good knowledge is a gift of the Holy Spirit to build up the church; bad knowledge a weapon used to destroy others. Good knowledge loves God with the whole mind; bad knowledge lords it over those assumed less than intelligent.

**What are we going to do? We are going to behave as those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. We can be of two or more minds, if we are of one heart. Let us promise not to retreat from one another or from any issue. Let us pursue truth everywhere in all circumstances and love God with all our minds. May the day dawn in the city when people will say of First Baptist, "My Lord, look how much they have learned." And even more to the point, "See how they love one another."**

## **Rodney Wallace Kennedy**

Lead Pastor

First Baptist Church Dayton

111 West Monument Avenue

Dayton, OH 45402

937-222-4691