

# Balancing Knowledge with Love

1 Corinthians 8:1-13  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
January 31, 2021

As you know, a huge issue in our country at the moment is a discussion about unity, particularly political unity. And yes, I think this is a discussion that should include the wider church, as well. Just two weeks ago I preached an entire sermon about seeking unity, yet in tandem with demanding accountability and justice, which has already become a sticking point. That sermon just days before the inauguration of Joe Biden as our new president, with his message and plea for national unity as our way forward.

While all this is being hotly debated, especially in light of the upcoming impeachment trial of our former president, and proposed legislation targeting the ongoing health and economic issues connected with the pandemic, I don't want to jump into the middle of that again quite yet. Well, just a little. Author and progressive activist **John Pavlovitz** posted an article this week entitled, "**The Unity America Doesn't Need.**" He agrees with seeking unity in the following way. "We can and should work to find common ground across the sometimes vast chasms of politics and religion, in the turbulent trenches of immigration, healthcare, climate change, poverty." And, "Unity between compassionate, truthful, human beings burdened to a collaborative effort at restoring our nation is essential." But then he adds, "Unity with unrepentant darkness is not." "Unity that requires us to abide terrorism or perpetuate inequity or ratify violence, isn't unity, it's coddling evil." Therefore, **Pavlovitz draws the line by stating, "Decent Americans don't need unity with willful liars ...with domestic terrorists ...with people disconnected from reality ...with unrepentant racists"**. Coming from the same Christian perspective, I basically agree. Yet, I continue to share the Jesus' command to love and pray for our enemies. And, yet again, **any sense of unity must be grounded in truth, not partisan hype – on either side.**

But enough of that for now. Let's talk about something really relevant - how to find unity between those who think eating meat sacrificed to pagan gods is sinful, and those that do not. In today's Epistle Reading, the apostle Paul's first letter to the Christian community of faith he founded in Corinth, Greece, uses their specific questions to respond to a larger issue. In this case, that issue involves pride. In particular, **the pride of knowledge**. Though Paul was a very strong proponent of celebrating the gifts that come with diversity, he was also conscious of the way our human nature constantly tries to use our differences to cause division and disruption.

Granted, spending time discussing the issue of eating meat dedicated to an idol doesn't make a whole lot of sense in our day in age. But pride can enter the picture when it leads to vanity, arrogance, egotism, conceit, and just a general sense of superiority over others. In a broad brushstroke sort of way, **if Presbyterians tended toward one particular sin of pride it might indeed be our love of knowledge. That can lead, however, to a disdain or contempt toward those we consider to be ignorant or willfully uninformed.** Our thinking often goes like this. **Other people simply wouldn't**

**believe the things they do if they just had the information and knowledge that we have.** That's the all-too-common attitude that can and does often lead to a prideful sense of superiority. And yes, it affects progressives just as much or more so than conservatives.

As a generally educated and intelligent group of folks, then, the words of the Apostle Paul in verse 1 of chapter 8 are not easy for many of us to hear and accept when he declares, "knowledge puffs up." Or, as **Eugene Peterson** paraphrases it in his version of the Bible, *The Message*, "...**sometimes our humble hearts can help us more than our proud minds.**"

As with all of Paul's letters, we must look at his words in the context in which they were written. So, let's look at that now. In the pluralistic society and culture of ancient Corinth it was very common for meat to be offered to a pagan god before it was sold in the city's marketplaces. Today's biblical text addresses this ancient dilemma of whether or not it is appropriate for Christians to eat such meat that had been offered to a Greek or Roman or some other deity. Paul's answer teaches us one of the most important lessons of how to live together in unity in the midst of our diversity. He answers not with a binary black/white, right/wrong, either/or kind of solution. Instead, **Paul asks the Corinthians (and by extension us as well) to address any potentially problematic situation by first asking: In this situation, what is the most appropriate thing to do? An appropriate response, we learn, is to be based not only on our knowledge, even if it is correct. Rather, we must be guided by whether or not it will build up the community or the other person.** That is what Paul means when he states, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

Paul addresses the particular situation in Corinth the following way. Mature Christians, which he calls "strong" in the faith, have the knowledge to understand that there is one and only one God. Therefore, it *doesn't matter* if Christians eat meat that pagans have offered up to non-existent gods. Paul goes on to recognize, however, that there are many new converts to Christianity within their faith community. These new Christians (which Paul describes as "weak" in the faith) do not yet have the knowledge to understand that it is okay to eat such meat. So, Paul instructs the "strong" Christians to not use their knowledge in a way that would hurt the fellowship and unity of their faith community.

Paul warns us not to be recklessly insensitive to the impact our actions will have on those who cannot in good conscience participate without believing they are sinning. **One of the most important lessons I've learned in racial justice work is to not simply defend our good intentions, but to first reflect upon the impact our words and actions might have on others.** We must take seriously, then, the needs of others so that what we think or do does not become a stumbling block to them, breaking relationships in the process.

So, while Paul does not consider his actions, in this case eating meat sacrificed to an idol, to be a sin, he does believe that would be a sin to cause members of the community to act against their conscience. That's why he states, "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" (vs. 13). Paul, who by no means could be considered an anti-intellectual, warns that **knowledge can lead to a sense of moral and spiritual superiority.** In that regard, some things never change. For example, it can be an element involved today in what's called **being woke.** That refers to those who have a new awareness and understanding of the deep issues primarily concerned with social and racial justice. This awareness, which comes primarily through a good bit of reading, studying, personal reflection, and

interaction with others is in and of itself a very good and necessary element in our own ministry efforts. But, as a pastor colleague here in Tulsa warns, **we must not get wrapped up in the “Wokelympics” where we try to one-up each other in just how informed we are, for example, in issues involving racial equity, white privilege, and the like.** Again, that’s what Paul warns about in his statement that “knowledge puffs up.”

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we no longer argue about whether it’s appropriate or not to eat meat offered to pagan gods. Yet, we argue over a lot of other things, many of which can be lumped into that broad category we call the “culture wars”. It’s still possible, in fact, to find someone to have an argument over the moral merits of dancing, playing cards, or having a drink. Using Paul’s line of thinking, for example, we know that having an alcoholic drink (in moderation, of course) is not sinful. Yet, in the presence of someone who does we should consider abstaining in that situation so we don’t become a stumbling block that might lead to the fall of that person.

Yes, people of good faith often have very polarized views and opinions on a variety of societal and theological issues. But perhaps we, as followers of Jesus, and certainly as Presbyterians, can apply Paul’s standard of “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” to help us to live better together in unity in a way that builds true community. **The biblical text, however, never hints that conflict itself is to be avoided.** Paul’s letters, in fact, consistently urge the church to jump right into the middle of the forum of moral and ethical and theological discussions. Paul also urges that **every member of the community be taken seriously, for complete knowledge does not belong to any one segment of the church.** While the scriptures call us to hold our convictions deeply and with passion, we must always do so with humility. You have probably heard the following statements. It is more important to be loving than to be right. And, what good does it do to win an argument only to lose a friend? A sticky note on my desk here at the church, which has been there since the day I arrived at College Hill, states, **“Never let a problem to be solved become more important than the person to be loved.”**

So, when push comes to shove, **love overrides knowledge.** Therefore, before you or I act or speak in exercising our own God-given freedom, it is important that we ask ourselves first:

- Will what I am about to say or do help or hinder the building up of the community or another person?
- How will my words and actions impact and affect the life and spiritual growth of another person?

I believe that most of the things we say or do are not so much a matter of right or wrong, good or evil, but rather of what is appropriate or inappropriate under any given circumstance. Paul’s basic message is that **knowledge without compassion is dangerous. For in the church, knowledge must coexist with love.** Yes, knowledge is very important, but not more than love.

And while I strongly advocate that we should keep ourselves as informed as possible, and learn as much as we can, “sometimes our humble hearts can help us more than our proud minds.” Knowing this and putting it into practice should serve you and I, and this community of faith, very well.

Amen.

