

**Concord Presbyterian Church**  
**It's Not What You Know...**  
**1 Corinthians 8:1-13**  
**January 29, 2012**  
**Fritz Ackerman**

**8:1 Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. 8:2 Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; 8:3 but anyone who loves God is known by him. 8:4 Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." 8:5 Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth--as in fact there are many gods and many lords-- 8:6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. 8:7 It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 8:8 "Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. 8:9 But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 8:10 For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? 8:11 So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. 8:12 But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 8:13 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.**

In my long business career I received countless memos. The emergence of e-mail seemed to increase the amount of incoming correspondence exponentially (yes, for you young people, there was a time when e-mail didn't exist). I'm sure many of you have the same experience of being inundated with this mail. I admit that I made great use of the subject line to prioritize my reading of messages, and to make use of the "delete" button. Of course, I don't do that here at Concord; all of your messages are equally precious to me.

If I were using my "subject line" filter on today's message from Paul, I might be tempted to use that delete button. He begins, "Now concerning food sacrificed to idols." I don't know about you, but "food sacrificed to idols" doesn't show up on my list of concerns.

As we read on, of course, we discover that Paul's message is about much more than food—it's about how to live a truly Christian life. Paul accomplishes his instruction here by creating a dialogue with the Corinthians. Essentially, he quotes what he has heard some of the Corinthians say in the debate concerning food sacrificed to idols, and responds with theological reasoning that has much broader application for Christian living. The central focus of this discourse is what directs or determines true Christian

behavior; and within this context Paul also addresses the question of individualism versus community.

Apparently, some Corinthians have defended their eating of food sacrificed to idols by calling on what they have learned in pursuing their Christian faith. “Look,” they say, “We know there is only one God, and no idol in the world really exists, so God doesn’t care one way or the other whether we eat this food.” I frankly find it hard to argue with this logic. But it’s not this knowledge or its use in logical argument that concerns Paul. It’s the claim that, first of all, our knowledge is without flaws, and secondly, that it alone can be the basis of Christian living.

Paul isn’t suggesting that this knowledge is, in and of itself, bad. Paul is worried about our being “puffed up,” claiming some superior status and freedom, because of the knowledge that is part of our Christian identity.

If this is what directs our behavior, Paul says, we miss the point. For example, if we quote chapter and verse from the Bible to bludgeon those who disagree with us; if we run roughshod over our neighbors in pursuit of our perceived “higher” calling; if we ignore the consequences our behavior may have on those at a different place on their faith journey than we are, we miss the point of our calling altogether.

In other words, Paul is telling us that it’s not what you know; it’s Who knows you that’s important. What really matters is to be known by God. The message of the gospel is that we are known by God and we are called to be God’s children; and we believers are given the knowledge that is purely a gift from God, and this gift we call “grace.” If we allow ourselves to be truly open to the gift of God’s grace, the love of God will flow through us, leading to selfless, rather than selfish, living.

Aside from this message that love, not knowledge, directs Christian living, it should be evident that Paul is also telling us that Christian living takes place in community. The church, too, is a gift from God, and it is in this community that God has promised the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit. In fact, Theologian Shirley Guthrie says that “the gift of the Spirit *is* the gift of community.”<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to say that “according to the New Testament, the ‘fellowship of the Holy Spirit’ is a fellowship of people who are different from each other, not one of congenial people whose religious experience, interests, and goals are exactly the same. In the early church it was a community of Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, male and female—people who were united in Jesus Christ by the Spirit of Christ despite all the religious, social, and political differences that in the surrounding world separated them from each other, and made them hostile to each other.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., *Christian Doctrine, Revised Edition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) 309.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

I am particularly troubled by the recent decision by a pastor of a church in our presbytery to leave the denomination along with a majority of its members over differences in scriptural interpretation. I am also concerned about an effort by another church to create what they are calling an “overlay presbytery” to accommodate, in part, their conscientious objection to recent changes in our denomination’s stance on ordaining gay and lesbian people.

I am troubled and concerned about these and similar developments in the church, not because I disagree with the interpretations that direct those who advance them, although I do disagree with them. Relying heavily on the words of theologian Guthrie once again, I am troubled because the true community that is the gift of the Holy Spirit calls us to unity, not uniformity.

We are called to listen “very carefully to fellow Christians and others who criticize the church. In fact, precisely because we yearn for the true fellowship of the Spirit, we will ourselves be the church’s most severe critics.”<sup>3</sup>

“But we must criticize it as its ‘loyal opposition’ who seek to correct and build up rather than to reject and tear down.”<sup>4</sup> I would submit that many of us who objected to our denomination’s stance on ordination stayed in dialogue within the church for over thirty years leading up to the recent change. I believe that the Spirit continues to reveal the nature of God, and God’s will for us in our conversations and debates.

And so I believe that we are called to continue these conversations and debates as insiders who love the church rather than as outsiders who leave it altogether; or who split up into groups having the same spiritual experiences, or the same liberal or conservative convictions.<sup>5</sup>

Approaching our life in the church from the standpoints of certitude and self-assurance, the attitude that somehow our knowledge is flawless, does not empower reflective, committed, compassionate lives.<sup>6</sup> If we subdivide into groups of likeminded people, seeing those “others” as not real Christians at all, we risk having a faith that serves only to justify what we already think; religious code language to support whatever social, economic, or political theory we hold.<sup>7</sup>

In our lesson this morning Paul tells us that “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by God.”

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 311

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Patricia O’Connell Killen and John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994) 14.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 15

It's not what we know, but who knows us. God knows us even in the messiness of our disagreements; and God's Spirit is at work, perhaps especially so, in the mess.

I understand that those who wish to create an overlay presbytery do so to find relief from their sincere and heartfelt crisis of conscience over the direction of our denomination. It would be easier on my psyche, and less trying on my patience to support them. But I will oppose their request at the March meeting because I believe affirming the creation of a separate theological chamber within our presbytery diminishes all of us, and separates us from the very Spirit of God we seek.