

# It Is More Important to Be Loving Than “Right”

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**January 28, 2018**

## **1 Corinthians 8:1-13**

By my second year in college, I had learned just enough about the Bible to be dangerous. Let's just say I was in the deconstructionist phase of my theological education.

I was learning that much of what I inherited from my home and church could not bear the weight of serious intellectual scrutiny. But I didn't yet realize that much of that spiritual inheritance was sound, once I did the work to make it my own.

In short, I knew the Humpty Dumpty of my childhood faith had fallen off a wall. But like “All the king's horses and all the king's men,” I didn't know how to put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

During this period, it was my custom to go home some weekends and horrify my God-fearing mother with what I was learning. I would quote whatever theologian I was reading at the time and proceed to lasso and roast one sacred cow after another.

At first, my mom was pretty easy pickings. She would raise her eyebrows, suck in a long breath, and maybe fire back a Bible verse or two.

But pretty soon, with a true mother's heart, she recognized this was just a phase I was going through. So when I waxed eloquent on one provocative idea or another, she would nod and

say, “Um, hum, Um, hum . . . Now here, honey, would you like some more mashed potatoes?” In other words, instead of trying to argue me out of my intellectual snobbery, she loved me though it.

During this period, I went to talk with one of my Bible professors about all this. He proceeded to explain the origin of the term “sophomore,” which is what I was at the time. A devilish grin sliding across his face, he told me the word “sophomore” comes from two Greek words, *sophia* and *moros*, meaning a “wise fool.”

I got his point.

The New Testament church at Corinth was running over with spiritual sophomores, people with just enough theological smarts to be dangerous, both to themselves and others. From reading Paul’s letter to this congregation, it appears the intellectually elite in the congregation were running roughshod over others.

Corinth, a port city, was a melting pot of Greek and Jewish influences running together. Many of the Gentiles in the congregation came to faith in Christ from paganism. They remembered with sadness and shame their participation in feasts offered in celebration of false gods. For them, eating meat from the market--much of which came from animals sacrificed in such idolatrous feasts--tasted of compromise and contamination. It felt like they were being disloyal to Christ.

Others in the congregation at Corinth grew up with a strongly Jewish faith. They easily dismissed idols as nonsense. The prophets of Israel had long parodied idols and the great Shema Deuteronomy 6 boldly proclaimed, “Hear, o Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is *one!* And you shall love the lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Thus, for Jewish believers in Corinth--or for Greek “God-fearers” who grew up in the Jewish faith--the idea of turning down a sizzling T-bone because it had first been offered to an idol was just plain ridiculous.

As Paul weighs into this controversy, he argues that often being loving is more important than being “right.” Yes, those who argue it is ok to eat meat offered to idols win on debating points. Technically, they are correct.

But when it comes to practicing the consideration and kindness that build Christian community, or *any* kind of community, they are seriously in error. Paul challenges their attitude with the searing phrase, “Knowledge puffs up but love builds up.” It’s as though he says to them, what my Bible professor said to me, “By the way. Do you know what the word *sophomore* means? It means “wise fool.”

Now lest you think this hot-button issue at Corinth meat offered to idols is so remote and distant as to be irrelevant, let me open a window on my world. And really, not so much *my* world, as that of others at KBC who work hard to plan Wednesday night supper menus, pleasing to all.

This is challenging because some of our folk expect that supper to be a meat and two vegetables, like you’d get at any down-home restaurant. Others prefer vegetarian and even vegan entrees. Still others need gluten-free and/or lactose-free options. And then there are parents who want only healthy choices for their children. While others lobby for pizza or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches because that is something their children will actually eat.

Now the fact is, none of those choices are wrong or inappropriate. Further, all these choices matter because the people who make them matter; they are precious to God and precious to us. And that’s why, amid all those competing preferences, we strive to offer a varied menu at our church suppers. But anyone who thinks deciding on the best menu for such a meal is a simple matter, has not spent much time in the KBC kitchen!

Or what about preferred music and worship styles? When Brother Wilson leaves us in a few short weeks, our congregation will embark on a series of conversations about music and worship. I expect we’ll learn there is a high level of consensus about the sort of worship that best

helps this congregation give voice to its love and praise of God. Thankfully, Knollwood has not faced the so-called “worship wars” that have distracted and even divided many congregations.

Nonetheless, with every transition comes change. At the very least, I don’t expect us to pull off the second coming of Ken Wilson! No, we’ll have to navigate our way into a new future and welcome a new leader. And I believe we’ll do so with Knollwood’s usual grace and courage, not reveling in change for change’s sake, but being willing to embrace and celebrate a new chapter in our life with God.

Sadly, at Corinth, there was not much hope of that. Those who thought they knew the truth about meat offered to idols, were looking down long noses at those who had qualms about the matter. Paul concedes the rightness of their position while challenging the wrongness of their attitude. “Take care,” he counsels, “that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.” In short, he argues that keeping a thriving Christian community intact is more important than having filet mignon for dinner. “If my eating meat causes another believer to stumble,” Paul fumes, “I’ll gladly forego meat to start chowing down with my vegetarian friends!”

Years ago, a member of my congregation was in the final stages of a terminal disease. During the course of her many hospitalizations, she grew disenchanted with the quality of her medical care. To her, it seemed the science of medicine had greatly advanced while much of the tenderness and compassion were gone.

One day, while I was visiting her at the hospital, she motioned me near. Not wanting to offend, she whispered her truth: “These young doctors have a lot of knowledge but not much compassion. And knowledge without compassion is a dangerous thing.”

Now I know a lot of young docs--some of whom are members of this congregation--who have tons of compassion. And I know a few older docs who are sorely lacking in that department.

Nonetheless, the truth of my friend's pointed remark stands: "Knowledge without compassion is a dangerous thing"

There was a lot of sophisticated knowledge at Corinth but precious little compassion. And for Paul, that revealed a serious deficit in those boasting of their "knowledge." For ultimately the knowledge that matters most in a Christian community is learning to live and love like Jesus. And this is not just a head thing, but a heart thing, and a hand thing, too. As Paul later sings in the great hymn of 1 Corinthians 13:, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I . . . understand all mysteries and have all knowledge . . . but do not have love, I am nothing."

Yes, as followers of Jesus, it is often more important to be loving than to be right.

This is a truth I often see lived out at Knollwood. Here people from different ends of the political and theological spectrum often put Edward Markum's little ditty into practice:

He drew a circle that shut me out.  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win.  
We drew a circle that took him in!

That said, here I must offer an important, "Yes, but." None of this is to suggest that being right is unimportant. Notice that in the midst of this heated controversy, Paul takes the time to correct a theological misunderstanding. To those timid about eating meat slaughtered in a pagan sacrifice, he offers a gentle corrective by way of an early Christian confession: "For us there is *one* God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ." In other words, idols are small, petty things of no real consequence.

Further, there are times when matters of such principle arise, there can be no compromise. The church that would be the church cannot countenance racial injustice, for example, or try to rationalize it away. In a situation like that, when the very heart of the Gospel--namely, God's welcoming, liberating love for all is at stake--a painful division is

preferable to a cowardly peace. As Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, “I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the (black man’s) greatest stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the . . . Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice, who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”

Yes, there are times when moderation is a vice and not a virtue.

But matters of such consequence are not under review in 1 Corinthians chapter 8. No, here Paul is talking about run-of-the-mill disagreements that turn ugly and mean. Here Paul is confronting intellectual snobbery that is contemptuous of those who do not measure up. Here Paul is addressing believers then, and believers now, who have forgotten that in *most* circumstances, being loving is more important than being right.

Fred Craddock, tells a touching story from his childhood. His mother was an active member of his rural childhood church but his father was a burned out cynic. Every time a pastor or visiting evangelist came to call, Craddock’s dad railed about how they were only after his money.

Years later, when Craddock was teaching at a seminary far away, his dad suffered a stroke. Craddock was called home to his father’s bedside. When Craddock walked into the hospital room, he was surprised to see floral arrangements and get well cards spread all around. Virtually all of them were from the church Mrs. Craddock loved and Mr. Craddock despised.

Craddock’s dad, unable to speak, motioned his son to the bedside. Glancing at all the cards and flowers, a tear formed in the old man’s eye. He took a pen from his son’s pocket. And on the side of a Kleenex box, he wrote, “I was wrong.”

Yes, sometimes it’s more important to be loving than right.

For: “If I understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and have the faith to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”

“For love is patient and kind; it is not envious or boastful or arrogant rude. It does not insist on its own way.”

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (1 Corinthians 13)

This is the Agape love of God, showered upon us in Jesus Christ. And what makes this love so powerful is that it doesn’t just change your mind. it changes your heart too.

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*Eternal God, teach us to live the truth our Moravians friends taught us: “In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, love.” In the name of your love made flesh, even Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray, Amen.”*

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