

WHEN KNOWLEDGE IS NOT ENOUGH

by D. A. Carson

Despite the dawn of postmodernism, certain modern presuppositions are alive and well in our culture. One is that the sciences and technology are about facts and knowledge, while religion is about feeling and faith. In an understandable defense against such nonsense, thinking Christians stress, again and again, that in the Bible faith is not grounded in feeling but in truth; that critical points of the Christian creed are merely facts, facts about things that have occurred in the arena of history (e.g. Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate; He rose from the dead the third day); that Christian growth in holiness turns on an increasing *knowledge* of what God has actually said, which is true (“Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” [John 17:17]). Thus, precisely because we hunger to disabuse the Western world of its fundamentally flawed conceptions about religion and faith, conservative Christians may join the chorus of people who praise knowledge, and unwittingly give the impression that Christian religion is merely a matter of knowing things.

But if there are contexts when Christians must firmly insist that there can be no genuine faith apart from knowledge of what is true (and of Him who is true), there are other contexts when Christians must insist, with equal vigor, that knowledge is not enough.

One of those contexts is found in 1 Corinthians 8. Paul is replying to a question the Corinthians have raised about whether it is appropriate for believers to eat meat that has been offered as sacrifice on a pagan altar. Although Paul says that knowledge is crucial to sorting out this subject, he insists that knowledge *by itself* may lead Christians astray into thoroughly improper and unchristian conduct. Paul recognizes that “we all have knowledge (8:1).

In the context, this is knowledge that there is but one God; that He is the Creator of everything and therefore that everything He has made is good (10:26); that idols have no power in themselves to contaminate meat (8:4); that Christians have the right to eat anything sold in the market, for “The earth is the LORD’S, and all its fullness” (10:25-26; Ps. 24:1). In the tenth chapter, Paul forbids believers from actually participating in pagan services (10:14-22), but quite clearly they have every warrant, *if we consider only what they know about the true God*, to eat meat that has passed through pagan rituals, provided that they do not participate in the rituals.

Paul hastens to qualify this freedom based on knowledge, first of all by a biting aphorism, “Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies” (8:1). That is a damning indictment of the human race since Babel. Even among believers, knowledge can never legitimately become a source of pride. “And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know” (8:2). Besides, it is more important to be known by God than to know truths – and in this context the one who is known by God is distinguishable by love: “But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him” (8:3).

The apostle insists that even Christians who have sure knowledge of who God is must take into account what effect their actions will have on others who have a “weak” conscience and who may be led into sin. Those with a “weak” conscience think something is wrong that is not objectively wrong. But if they indulge in what they think is wrong they will damage their conscience-faculty – and that would be tragic, even though what they are indulging in may not be wrong in itself (8:7-12). Christians with a more robust conscience (i.e., tender with respect to things that God has truly commanded or prohibited, but largely free apart from such constraints) will happily curtail their liberty because they love those whose consciences are weak, and would be loath to injure them by serving as an example that might entice the weak to act against their conscience. Paul’s own example in this regard brings the chapter to a close (8:13), and the large principles of self-denial on which his example is based largely occupy the next chapter.

Probably the Corinthians were prone to be proud of their knowledge: these Christians were too much influenced by the culture that surrounded them. But Paul insists that knowledge, even Christian knowledge, is not enough. In this case, conduct based on knowledge alone, however accurate that knowledge, would prove harmful: knowledgeable Corinthians were called to love the “weak brother... for whom Christ died” (8:11). Only a few chapters later, Paul will memorably insist that if he can fathom all knowledge but remains unloving, he is nothing (13:2).

In our salutary emphasis on truth and knowledge, we must never succumb to an intellectual arrogance that assigns small importance to self-denying love for those who do not know as much. What shall it profit a man if he learns as much truth as the devil knows, and loses humility, brokenness, and a joyful, self-denying love that perpetually seeks the good of the least of Christ’s brothers?

Dr. Carson has authored numerous commentaries including “Matthew” in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol. 8 (Zondervan).