

## 1 Corinthians 8 – Living for the weak

There can be few cities in the world which owe more to the knowledge industry than Oxford. So there are few cities in the world where 1 Corinthians 8:1 is more potent.



V1

Imagine Paul arriving in Oxford and announcing this as his sermon text in St Mary the Virgin Church. It would go down like a pork chop at a bar mitzvah. But effectively that is what Paul is doing in Corinth. He knows he is tossing a lighted theological match into this Corinthian haystack, and two thousand years later it has the same incendiary power in Oxford.

So this morning I want to unpack this potent affirmation. Long term regulars here will know that we have slowly and sporadically over the last few years, been working through Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Corinth was an absolutely fascinating city. It was a young vibrant Roman port, on the isthmus which joins the Peloponnese with the mainland of Greece.

### *Map*

It was multi-ethnic, rich and poor, full of artistic glory, and sordid prostitution.

And probably most importantly for us this morning, it also was a centre of learning. Corinth regularly staged the Isthmian Games, which were one down from the ancient Olympic Games but still pretty special. And unlike our modern games, the events combined not only running, jumping, throwing and fighting, but also poetry and music competitions. So the intelligentsia gathered here too. Corinth was the place to strut your intellectual stuff.

So in this, the second most multi-ethnic city in the south east, with the one of the greatest gaps between rich and poor, with the joint most prestigious university in the world outside America (the other one is Cambridge) - In our church which has its building on the street which prostitutes frequent - Paul's letter to the Corinthians is likely to have something to say to us.

Over the next few weeks we are going to look at what 1 Corinthians 8-10. This morning in particular I want to home in on this statement that Paul makes right at the beginning of the chapter

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up

Firstly though we need to understand the precise situation in Corinth which elicited this statement

☞ *The situation in Corinth – loveless use of “knowledge”*

The circumstance was relatively simple, if at first it seems relatively distant from today’s world. In Corinth there were lots of pagan temples, most of which sacrificed animals or offered food of other kinds, as part of their worship. That food sometimes found its way into the markets.

The question was, how did you deal with this. A proportion of the church - mainly it seems the well educated and wealthy people – were entirely relaxed about their contact with pagan practices. They reasoned, as Paul quotes them in verse 4

An idol is nothing at all

So they bought food in the market place which had been associated with pagan worship. More than that many business deals were done at meals held in the pagan temples, and these Christian businessmen were happy to go to there and eat too. It was necessary for business and anyway Jesus is Lord even over those pagan temples.

Paul’s argument follows three clear steps. First of all, in vv4-6 he says that these people are right

☞ *Their knowledge is right: Idols are nothing*



Vv5-6

But then in verses 7-8 he warns them that there is something else to think about.

☞ *But not everyone knows this*

Not everyone knows this. Some people – whether they are former pagans who are still in fear of these other gods, or perhaps Jews whose whole history was built on

careful separation from idols – some people were worried about this. They didn't have the sophisticated knowledge of the first group.



**V7**

Paul acknowledges that their conscience is weaker than it should be, but that doesn't remove the fact that in their hearts they feel defiled by association with idols.

So then there is the third step in Paul's argument.

Therefore those with knowledge should be careful.

☞ *Therefore those with knowledge should be careful*



**V9**

They might tempt someone to act against their conscience.



**V10**

And acting against our conscience – even if the action itself is OK from a scriptural point of view – violating our conscience destroys us.



**V11**

Paul uses a massively strong word – he is talking about someone actually being led away from faith in Christ to destruction. This is a great sin. A sin against Christ – v12. So we should be very careful how we exercise legitimate freedoms.



**V13**

Today, of course, Tesco's is not in the habit of selling meat from pagan temples. In our multicultural society we do sometimes have to deal with delicate issues associated with non-Christian places of worship.

The principles in this chapter have also been important as we have thought about some inter-church issues. Some years ago, for instance, we deliberated about being involved in the national Alpha initiative. The Alpha course is a great course, and I would happily run it in Magdalen Road. But the national initiative involved signing up to common publicity for a whole range of different churches.

Now if you know me you will know that I have wide friendships across different denominations, and I know born again believers in all kinds of churches. But with the best will in the world, some churches simply do not teach the gospel as the bible

understands it. I took the view that I could not advertise our church alongside for instance a Catholic church – which is institutionally committed to teaching things which are directly and dangerously contrary to scripture - or a liberal church – which denies the great central miraculous truths about Jesus. We could not give the impression to someone that it didn't matter where they went for their Alpha Course. It matters!!! It matters that you are saved simply through personal faith in Christ. It matters that you believe that Jesus was God incarnate, that he was born of a virgin, that he died on the cross for our sins, that he rose bodily on the third day, that he ascended into heaven, that he will come again to judge the living and dead. It matters!!!

I will go to these churches. My faith is strong enough to filter out the dross, and rejoice in the good things. But woe to me if I give the impression to a spiritual searcher that all churches teach the same thing and it does not matter what you believe about Jesus in the end. They do not and it matters!! How terrible to meet Christ on the last day and for him to say “you destroyed that person by your reckless exercise of freedom.” I will not do it.

We could consider other more personal issues. The films we watch. You may be unaffected but might your behaviour lead others astray?

Women, especially as we approach summer – what about the clothes you wear. It's great to look pretty. But do you consider the effect that you have on young men? It is your right to wear pretty clothes.



**V9**

I am not advocating looking dowdy. Just a little modesty for those poor weak brothers!

But actually now I want to home in on the fundamental issue in this chapter which is found in verses 1-3.

☞ *The underlying issue*

It is the relationship between knowledge and love.



**V1**

His description of knowledge is very visual. The NIV has done well in using “puffs up”. The English language has a variety of idioms drawing on the same theme. “knowledge makes you full of hot air”, “knowledge creates windbags”, “knowledge produces stuffed shirts”.

Paul is not intrinsically anti-knowledge. He explicitly approves of the theological knowledge of the stronger Corinthians, and is quietly critical of those who are ignorant – it is not a compliment to call them weak.

John Calvin, in commenting on this text points out that there is a dangerous pride in those who rail against all learning. He says that they:

burst with pride, to such an extent as to verify the old proverb—“Nothing is so arrogant as ignorance.”

But knowledge has this dark tendency that is absolutely the opposite of love. It is opposite in what it does. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. And it is opposite in who it does it to – knowledge is all about me “*I am puffed up*” whereas love is all about the other person “*They are built up.*”

I think verses 2 & 3 are best understood as describing the roots of those two attitudes.

At bottom a “knowledge person” at the end of the day thinks to themselves “I know”.



### V2

Knowledge was not meant simply to make me feel good about what I know. It was meant to help us to live better.

The “love person”, at the end of the day sits down and thinks something quite different.



### V3

There is no self-congratulation at all, indeed their acts of love towards other people are not central in their mind. At the end of the day their deepest joy is that they love God. And the knowledge they care about most deeply is not their knowledge – it is God’s. The truth that God knows them.

So finally lets think more deeply about our heart attitudes. What about our attitude to our experience?

You see there is a proportion of people here who read “knowledge puffs up” and they think “Too right Paul. All those bright graduates in this church need to hear this. I on the other hand have learned my lessons in the university of life.” It is not just academic knowledge that puffs up. Anyone who thinks to themselves “They don’t know, I know”

Does not yet know as they ought to know

Older Christians here, do you look at these bright young things here and puff yourself up like that? Or do you think “how can I build them up?”

Then there is that attitude to our skills. How often have I heard people with leadership skills, or specific skills of another kind speaking disparagingly of how the church runs itself, or how other Christians conduct themselves.... “They don’t know, I know”. If you do why not use that knowledge to build rather than destroy!

And then of course most obviously, and therefore I have left it to last, our attitude to academic knowledge. This church is full of academically able people. And you can use your knowledge in two distinct ways. You can tell yourself “it is for me”. It is for my promotion, for my satisfaction, for my prestige, for my inner contentment, my well-being. Or you can use it for others – for their joy, for their strengthening, for them to be built up. We can be builders or we can be windbags.

Many years ago I read the auto-biography of Bertrand Russell, a famous atheist philosopher of a previous age. In his introduction Russell wrote this

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind.

Russell was a windbag par excellence. His so called “longing for love” led him to multiple sexual infidelities. He destroyed some of those women. Or you could add the twentieth century philosopher A.J. Ayer whose philosophical ideas ruled Oxford University at one point, but as the sordid details of his private life have slowly leaked out, his philosophy has come increasingly to look like a vast justification for personal depravity. Some years ago the journalist Paul Johnson wrote a book entitled “*The Intellectuals*” he said “my simple message is this: beware intellectuals.”

But the Apostle Paul doesn't say that. He says to those massively able people in Corinth, and he says to you massively able people here, "Will you use your gifts to puff up or build up? Will you be obsessed with knowing or loving? Will you use your knowledge to bless or destroy?"

At the end of my life I don't want to lie on my death bed and think to myself "I know things". And puff myself up for the last time before I am eternally deflated. I want to be lying there in the presence of my God whom I love, secure in the knowledge that he loves me, that he knows me. And I want to be able to look back on my life and be able to say for all its imperfections, I used the knowledge that God gave me to build up.