**“Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.” —*1 Corinthians 8:1–3 (NASB)***

Forty years ago, R. C. Sproul wrote an article for *Christianity Today* entitled “Burning Hearts Are Not Nourished by Empty Heads.” In it he made a bold assertion:

We live in what may be the most anti-intellectual period in the history of Western civilization. We are not necessarily anti-academic, anti-technological, or anti-scientific. The accent is against the intellect itself. Secular culture has embraced a kind of impressionism that threatens to turn our brains into mush, and the evangelical world has followed suit, developing an allergy to all things intellectual. (“Burning Hearts Are Not Nourished by Empty Heads,” *CT* [Sept 3, 1982], 100).

Sproul pointed to an ideology known as ***anti-intellectualism*.** As its name suggests, this ideology **opposes the intellectual approach to truth**. For anti-intellectuals, truth is not known through reason or the mind, but through experience. Truth is not *objective* (existing outside of and apart from the learner) but *subjective* (inseparable from and dependent on the learner); truth is not *rational* and *consistent* (consisting of claims and arguments) but *irrational* and *mystical* (devoid of logical consistency and even contradictory); truth is not something to be *discerned* (through the appeal to an authority outside of self), but something to be *felt* (through the appeal to personal intuition and impulses); truth is not a matter of the *head*, but of the *heart*.

Although Sproul’s depiction of Western culture is over forty years old, it is more relevant today than when it first appeared in that 1982 issue of *Christianity Today.* Postmodernism’s influence on all sectors of society has made it even more *anti-intellectual* than what Sproul recognized at the time. For example, take this statement published recently on the Healthline website under the heading of “parenthood / pregnancy”:

Can Men Get Pregnant? Is it possible? Yes, it’s possible for men to become pregnant and give birth to children of their own. In fact, it’s probably a lot more common than you might think. In order to explain, we’ll need to break down some common misconceptions about how we understand the term “man.” . . .

Such a statement, supported today by major medical and scientific communities, did not arise from any scientific investigation. It is a position based solely on the claims of subjective feelings. It is an ideological hypothesis forced upon others as truth—with the threat of punishment for failure to assent. It arose precisely from the kind of “impressionism” Sproul described—the kind that “turns brains into mush.”

**Christian Anti-Intellectualism**

We expect this mush from a world that is destined to live out the description of the Apostle Paul in Romans 1:18–32. But as Sproul noted forty years ago, the evangelical world—which should have a diametrically opposite approach to truth—is not far behind in its understanding of the intellect. Writing more recently, Don Haddleton states, “In Evangelicalism there is a growing trend toward frivolity and superficiality, affecting Christian life, prayer, witness, evangelism and worship. ‘Easy-believism,’ ‘user friendly-ism’ and ‘feel-goodism’ are taking over the church’s life and witness” (“Evangelical Superficiality,” *Evangelical Times*, April 2006). Indeed, this is what can be diagnosed as ***Christian* *anti-intellectualism,*** an approach to life that “discounts the importance of truth and the life of the mind” (Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*, 9). This Christian anti-intellectualism is particularly **dismissive of doctrine.** It defines the Christian life in terms of feelings and experiences; it prioritizes social activism and ridicules theological precision; it prizes unity and cooperation regardless of religion; it emphasizes “spirituality” and promotes “mystery”; it demands that the church’s message always be “practical”; and it scorns anyone who dares to point out error.

**Anti-intellectualism is an approach to life that “discounts the importance of truth and the life of the mind.”**

Those who promote this vision of Christianity do attempt to base their views at least partly in Scripture. Commonly cited proof texts include Ecclesiastes 1:17–18; Luke 10:21; 1 Corinthians 1:20; and Revelation 2:1–4. But by far the most frequently cited text to justify Christian anti-intellectualism comes from Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 8:1, **“Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.”** These words have served as a punchy motto for many throughout the centuries who have sought to downplay the use of the mind in the Christian life.

But is the apostle’s statement in 1 Corinthians 8:1 truly an indictment against the use of the mind in Christian life? A careful study shows otherwise. As will be seen, Paul does indeed identify the dangers of knowledge when wrongly defined and wrongly applied. This admonition must be understood and heeded. But his warning against arrogance as it relates to knowledge is not what anti-intellectualists assume it to be.

**The Corinthian Confidence**

**“Now concerning things sacrificed to idols . . .” (1 Cor 8:1a).** With these words Paul begins to respond to a question posed to him by the Corinthians. Idol sacrifices were a regular part of life in ancient Corinth. As part of their religious duty, residents of the city would bring an animal to their priest who would in turn slaughter it and burn its meat upon an altar. Some of the cooked meat would be kept by the priest for consumption by the temple workers. The rest was given back to the worshiper who would either sell it in the marketplace, share it with the needy, or bring it home for a feast. The question posed by the Corinthians did not focus on whether to participate in such sacrificial offerings. The answer to that question was clear. Rather, their inquiry focused on how to relate to the eating of such meat *after it had been consecrated to an idol*. From the tone of 1 Corinthians 8, it appears that many of the members of the church believed that there was no problem eating such meat either in a neighbor’s home or after purchasing it from the marketplace. In other words, their question probably went something like this: **“Cannot Christians liberally partake of food sacrificed to the gods, without hindrance?”**

Instead of providing a direct “yes” or “no” response, Paul focuses on the more fundamental issue causing problems among the Corinthians—their use of *knowledge*. The concept of **knowledge**(γνῶσις , *gnōsis*) was dear to the Corinthians; the term was used by Paul ten times in the letter; five times in this chapter alone. In response to their question, Paul states, **“We know that we all have *knowledge*” (1 Cor 8:1b).** As the Corinthians compared their present understanding of reality as Christians with the understanding they had previously when they were pagans, they knew they now possessed *true* *knowledge*.A distinct part of that knowledge was their newfound awareness that idols are vain and so-called “gods” do not exist. Paul summarizes this a little later in the chapter:

we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is *but* one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we *exist* for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we *exist* through Him. (1 Cor 8:4–6; cf. Deut 6:4)

Where was the problem? The Corinthians prided themselves in that theyhad come to acquire such knowledge. They reveled in the fact that *they* were now “in the know.” Their knowledge had given them confidence—but as Paul will indicate, they didn’t know how to use knowledge appropriately. Their knowledge was lacking.

**The Corinthian Conceit**

To settle the question about eating food sacrificed to idols, the Corinthians believed that the appeal to their newfound knowledge *alone* was enough. They did not need to consider any other factor. They believed their knowledge of the doctrine of God by itself established the basis for their ethics. Since God alone exists and idols are nothing, they could freely and openly eat the meat that had been sacrificed to those idols. Nothing else mattered. It is in response to this use of “knowledge” that Paul famously states, **“Knowledge makes arrogant”** (1 Cor 8:1c). The verb “makes arrogant” literally means “to inflate” or “puff up.” He uses it figuratively here in the sense of “to cause to have an exaggerated self-conception” (BDAG, 1069). It is a term used in the NT only by Paul and found six of its seven times in 1 Corinthians (see 1 Cor 4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4; and Col 2:18).

In contrast to the Corinthian use of knowledge and the outcome it produced (self-promotion), Paul states, **“but love edifies.”** The word he uses for **“love”—**ἀγάπη (*agapē*)—is a word that emphasizes “the quality of warm regard for and interest in another” (BDAG, 6). It describes “other-oriented behavior.” At its center is the concept of giving of self for the benefit of another. By this statement Paul emphasizes the indispensable need for love in the process of establishing ethics. Knowledge alone is not enough. If the Corinthians had been guided by selfless love when deciding whether it was appropriate to consume meat sacrificed to idols, the outcome would have been different. Instead of increasing *oneself* and *one’s own rights and liberties*, they would have built up *others.*

“When [knowledge] is without love it lifts men up to absolute arrogance.” —John Chrysostom

The problem was that the Corinthians were making decisions solely according to knowledge, without considering their decisions from the standpoint love. They had the basic doctrine correct, namely, that the idols meant nothing for there is no other God but Yahweh and no other Lord but Jesus (8:4–6). But there is more to making ethical decisions than just exercising knowledge. They needed to consider love. The self-centeredness of their actions were having disastrous consequences: “For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ” (8:11–12).

**The Corinthian Confusion**

Although the Corinthians were conceited over their supposed attainment of knowledge, they were actually self-deceived. Paul highlights this confusion in two conditional statements in 8:2–3.

First, Paul writes, **“If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know” (v. 2).** Paul’s focus is not on *quantity* of knowledge but on *quality* of knowledge. The Corinthians “supposed”they had achieved knowledge. But such knowledge resulted in *personal* *pride* rather than the *edification* of others. This outcome proved their “knowledge” missed the mark. They thought they arrived at enlightenment, but in reality remained quite foolish. In all their knowing they failed to know as God requires—to know in a *loving way*.

Second, Paul writes, **“but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him” (v. 3).** Paul again elevates love over mere knowledge. He does not say “if anyone *knows* God” but “if anyone *loves* God,” putting the emphasis on *relationship with* more than on *information about*. It is far more important to love God than merely to know facts about Him. Moreover, when such love for God truly exists and is not merely supposed, it proves a more profound reality: such a person is *known by God.* To claim to have knowledge from God, one must be first known by Him. And if one is known by God, he will love Him. Love is the proof of walking with God.

This last statement was the death knell to the boasting of the Corinthians in their knowledge. God is the one who possesses knowledge—who is truly “in the know”—and that is what is most important. As Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner state, “The knowledge that really counts is not one we possess” (*First Corinthians*, 377). Richard Hays states it similarly, “what counts is not so much our knowledge of God as God’s knowledge of us. That is the syntax of salvation” (*First Corinthians*, 138). The Corinthians needed to embrace this humbling reality.

“Knowledge that permits one to steamroll over the scruples of others or to harm them or the church in any way is not Christian knowledge. . . . Paul is an enemy not of knowledge per se but of knowledge that is not informed by faith or directed by love, that inflates egos and wants to put itself on display and receive acclaim.”

—David Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 368–69

**How must we respond?**

1. **Knowledge without love is tyranny.** Indeed, the critique of knowledge by anti-intellectuals is not groundless. Loveless knowledge can be exceedingly harmful. It was this kind of knowledge that was destroying the weaker members of the Corinthian church:“For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ” (8:11–12). Consequently, the Christian use of the mind must always operate with the two great commandments in view: love for God (Matt 22:37–38) *and* love for neighbor (Matt 22:39). Love must always be the goal of the intellectual pursuit (1 Tim 1:5). Apart from love, the Christian mind will not function *Christianly.*

“Knowledge without love inflates the ego and deceives the mind. It can lead to intellectual snobbery, an attitude of mockery and making fun of other’s views, a spirit of contempt for those with lesser knowledge, and a demeaning way of dealing with people who disagree.” —Alexander Strauch, *Leading with Love*, 11

1. **Abuse does not cancel use.** The misuse of knowledge—when it is employed apart from love—is not an argument for the rejection of knowledge. In confronting the grave error of the Corinthians, Paul never calls upon them to abandon doctrine. He calls upon them to add love—and he does so by *instructing* them. Knowledge remains indispensable for the Christian life. The obedient expression of love will not be possible without knowledge of the truth.
2. **Ignorance never saved anyone.** An old proverb states, “Nothing is as arrogant as ignorance.” Cotton Mather similarly remarked, “Ignorance is the mother not of devotion but of heresy.” No one can be saved apart from knowledge. The gospel must be preached and believed, and it is a *message* of *truth* about God and his promise of redemption through Jesus’ achievement on the cross (Rom 10:8–17). We cannot be saved apart from this *knowledge*. To remain in ignorance is to consign oneself to destruction (e.g., Hos 4:6).

“The Christian religion flourishes not in the darkness but in the light. Intellectual slothfulness is but a quack remedy for unbelief; the true remedy is consecration of intellectual power to the service of the Lord Jesus Christ.” —J. Gresham Machen, *Education, Christianity, and the State*, 34

1. **It’s ultimately not about what *you* know.** A. W. Tozer once stated, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us” (*Knowledge of the Holy*, 1). While we understand Tozer’s emphasis, ultimately, the most important thing is not what we know, but *who knows us*. As Paul states in 1 Corinthians 8:3, “but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.” In response, Findlay writes, “Paul would ascribe nothing to human acquisition; religion is a bestowment, not an achievement; our love or knowledge is a reflex of the divine love and knowledge directed toward us” (“1 Corinthians,” *EGT*, 840).

**For Further Study**

1. Memorize 1 Corinthians 8:1b–3.
2. In your own words, define “anti-intellectualism.” Give several reasons why this approach to life is inconsistent with biblical Christianity.
3. Spend time over the next week reading through 1 Corinthians 8. Answer these questions: (a) What was the key problem the Corinthians were facing? (b) How were they wrongly using their knowledge in response to that situation? (c) What was the consequence of their incorrect use of knowledge? (d) What does Paul instruct them to do instead?
4. Prayerfully evaluate your own use of knowledge. What role does love play in your pursuit and application of knowledge—both theological knowledge and practical knowledge? How does your knowledge contribute to the edification of others?
5. List several concrete ways you need to change in order to combine your knowledge better with the supreme virtue of love.
6. Meditate upon 1 Cor 8:3 – “But if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.” How do you answer the question, “Are you known by God?” Explain.

Submit a question through this QR code

**Audio, video, and handouts for this session:** gracechurch.org/motw

**Next meeting:**December 1, 6:30pm – Fall Fellowship (Family Center)