

Congregational Church of the Messiah

Annual Meeting Sunday

January 25, 2009

Let Love Control Knowledge

I Corinthians 8:1-13

Dr. David L. Gray

“We sometimes tend to think we know all we need to know to answer questions—but sometimes our humble hearts can help us more than our proud minds. We never really know enough until we recognize that God alone knows it all.”¹

(I Corinthians 8:1-3)

There is a certain arrogance that comes to some Christians who have taken upon themselves to decide what social behaviors are allowed in the Christian faith and which are prohibited. In some Christian churches drinking alcoholic beverages is considered a sin, so is smoking and dancing. Rigid, righteous attitudes started among Christians in Paul’s day are with us still.

Some early Christians, once they converted from following pagan gods to following Christ, developed a certain arrogance that gave them status over others. Once they believed in Jesus Christ, they knew they were free from the rules governing ordinary people in their society. They considered themselves better than others and made sure other Christians were expected to live up to whatever behavior some people had decided was right.

In his first letter to the Christians at Corinth, Paul focused on the difference of opinion on eating meat that had been offered to pagan idols in the temple. Was that a sin or not? What was allowable for Christians without weakening their faith in Jesus Christ and not giving honor to idols?

Paul tried to make it clear that while their knowledge of Christ and vow to follow Him released them from any power from an idol, they were not free to do something that would potentially harm the faith of a brother or sister in Christ.

Christ’s love for each person was to be expressed in understanding and encouragement in the faith—not in careless or selfish actions. Believers were to use their knowledge to determine their actions so while eating meat offered to idols would not harm the spiritual. If their example might weaken other believers’ faith and cause them to stumble, then they were sinning because they had not responded in love for their neighbor.

¹ Peterson, Eugene H. *The Message—With Psalms and Proverbs*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1995, page 415.

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None of us knows for sure which religious experiences have a deep impact on someone else. We need to be careful when we assume that some particular action will mean the same thing to everyone around us. Unknown associations can influence how some seemingly innocent thing might impact someone else.

Tom was attending a School of Evangelism in Las Vegas. Before joining a Christian church, he had been employed by the gambling industry where he had been a very successful dealer at the blackjack table in one of the casinos. As a new Christian, he was anxious to grow in his faith. He had enrolled as a layman in the School of Evangelism to learn how to apply his newfound faith to his choices in life.

During one of the breaks between sessions, Tom cornered one of the speakers and asked for help in what he considered a very big problem. Apparently, the previous weekend he and his wife had attended a marriage enrichment retreat sponsored by his church. During the recreation periods, couples participated in various free-time activities available at the lodge: swimming, hiking, tennis, and just sitting around visiting.

What really had upset him was that one time when he went back to the lodge, he noticed two of the couples sitting at a table playing cards.

“So much of my life,” he explained, “has been involved in playing cards as a part of the gambling industry that I not only could not bring myself to play anymore but I really wonder if it is wise for any serious Christian to play cards at all.”²

Paul’s answer is that Christians need to let love, not information, guide one’s actions. Information by itself does not make us considerate of others. On the contrary, it often has a tendency to make us proud of ourselves as if we know it all.

You know, even what we think we know about God can be used in way that comes across as judgment rather than compassion and love. “Didn’t you know that was in the Bible? Of course you did! That is not the way to keep friends or get yourself included in any future get-together.

Probably all of us have applied our own ideas of what is proper social behavior and what is not, which often seems to change. Perhaps you can remember when bowling alleys were not respectable places to be in because they allowed smoking and drinking. No respectable church member would want to be caught there any day of the week.

Our knowledge is always incomplete, but our wanting to encourage each other in building up one another in faith always is welcome. We each try to follow Christ in our own way and often that means walking together along some part of life’s path.

² Ogilvie, Lloyd J. and Kenneth L. Chafin. *Communicator’s Commentary, 1 & 2 Corinthians*, Waco: Word Books Publisher, 1985, page 103-104.

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We are free to discover and create new ways to build up one another's faith, not to be satisfied with the amount of knowledge of God or the Bible that we already have. We can be eager to learn more about what God is doing in the world and what part we have in transforming it to being a better place to live, play and pray.

Our understanding of the world is far different than when we graduated from high school. Can you remember when having one black and white TV was a real luxury? Can you remember when gas was 21 cents and houses in Westchester were selling for \$19,000, which is what the church paid for the parsonage?

How times have changed in this area. Now those bowling alleys which once allowed smoking, by city law, they are smoke free today.

Has your knowledge of God kept pace with the changing of the world around you? How much more will the world and this community change in the next five or ten years? We need to be aware and expand our knowledge of how God speaks to us and what God's people are doing to help direct the change that is going to happen.

How can we do that? There are many ways. Here's just one.

At Yale University, Kenneth Chafin tells that one of the students told his professor that the lectures were simply too hard to understand; he was speaking way over their heads.

Without apology the professor replied, "Lift up your head."

This is a good time for us to lift up our heads as a church and feel the fresh breeze of God's Holy Spirit at work in our midst. There is so much to learn beyond what we already know. There is so much more love to receive from God and to share with others in creative practical ways that are not "over our heads."

Our knowledge of God can never be complete, for God is perfect and everlasting. We are temporal, imperfect.

Wisdom is more than just knowledge. It is knowledge informed by love. Some knowledge passes away, just as the day and the night. Love found in Christ continues through the light of day and the darkness of night.

Jesus knew how to combine love and knowledge so well that every action was knowingly done as an expression of understanding and caring.

He showed us that in His actions and in so many parables as well as. The successful farmer had no place to store an over abundant harvest. He decided to build bigger barns instead of giving the surplus to the poor. God said to the farmer: "You fool! This very

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night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared? So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.” (from Luke 12:16-21)

At His Last Supper with His disciples in the Upper Room, Jesus laid aside his outer coat, took up a towel and basin of water and washed His disciples’ feet to demonstrate that their Master and Teacher was also one who came not to be served but to serve others.

Let us not assume the little knowledge we already have about God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is sufficient for this new world in which we are living. God has yet more light to shine forth from His Holy Word. Each time we become aware with our minds and hearts that God is with us and that where ever we are can become “holy land.” God’s Presence is wherever there is unconditional love.

Let us continue to express our love of God through increasing our knowledge of and experience of His love in our own lives and in the life of the Congregational Church of the Messiah. Love controlled how Jesus used his incredible knowledge of God. God’s love can do the same for us.

Amen.