

Date Preached	31-Jan-2021	Date Initiated	21-Jan-2021
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Epiph 4, Yr B

" Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. "



Back when I was in law school, I recall spending a lot of time talking about *intent*. The common law places a good deal of emphasis on one's frame-of-mind at the time she or he commits a potentially illegal act. For example, there are several categories or degrees of homicide, but murder—the most serious—requires at least some modicum of an intent to kill.* My first-year torts professor used to diagram causes-of-action on the board like an electrical circuit: If there is no intent to harm, the circuit is not 'complete,' and thus no liability for, say, battery or ordinary fraud. Even in contracts and property law, questions of who owes whom what may be settled by asking whether one party actually *intended* to make an enforceable promise or a gift.

There is, however, *another* law of intent that my legal training never covered: the law of unintended consequences—the unforeseen outcomes of purposeful actions.† This is the law St Paul cites in today's Epistle reading: When you try to teach a correct idea in a way that ends up harming others ... even though you didn't intend to ... you fail to love them ... and to love Christ.

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Strange though it may seem to us, in the earliest days of the Church, a highly contentious topic of debate was whether believers could attend meals in pagan temples and eat the flesh of animals that had been sacrificed to, say, Mars or Aphrodite. On the one hand, both Judaism and its close Christian cousin were (and are) strongly monotheistic religions that countenance no worship of deities or divine forces other than the One True God. Thus, one might argue, Christians should *not* dine in pagan temples because that is, perforce, to participate in the idol worship that takes place there. On the other hand, if, as Christians, we already *know* that all idols are false and "there is no God but one," then merely going to the temple to dine with friends—and in those days, attending temple meals was akin to making an appearance at the club, for temples were hubs of upper-class society—posed no harm to one's faith. "The prime rib was delicious, but I paid no mind to the show," as it were.

This is the point Paul's interlocutors try to make, but he rebuffs them. The Corinthian faction insists that by attending temple meals, they are underscoring for other, less well-to-do church members the falsity of pagan idols: "Come on! We can have a laugh at the pagans' expense by eating up their meat without believing one iota in their gods!" Paul doesn't **disagree** on *theological* grounds, but he invokes the law of unintended consequences. When you go to the temples and feast at their banquets, the less sophisticated believers you're trying to instruct are likely to be misled. They aren't aware of your internal rationales and justifications. Instead, they'll

* There are exceptions, such as capital murder (criminal liability for a death that occurs during the commission of another felony, such as robbery or kidnapping).

† OK, technically, this is what the whole legal concept of *negligence*—being responsible for harm even though you didn't intend to harm—is about ... but let's not quibble!

observe your behavior and ... whether in emulation or envy of you ... end up consuming meat sacrificed to idols while fully participating in pagan rites. And when that happens, Paul says, they "are destroyed" in their faith.

Paul is teaching his stubborn converts that the way of Jesus isn't knowledge ... but *love*. We can cite principles and precedents; we can assemble airtight arguments as to the morality of our acts and beliefs. But in the end, what matters is neither the orthodoxy nor the logic of what we think, but the effect our actions have upon others. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up," says Paul. You sophisticated Corinthians may have constructed a sound theological argument to justify your behavior. But because you don't ... or perhaps *can't* ... explain it to others, your justification is lost upon others, who then misunderstand your acts. When the unintended consequences of your personal ethics do harm to others, says Paul, you fail to love them ... and you fail Christ.

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The ultimate failing of the temple-meat-eaters in Corinth is hidden knowledge[‡]: *holding* a truth without ever *asserting* it. They are convinced of their own rightness, but do not explain themselves to others in the community. Paul doesn't go into it, but it's worth asking: *Why* don't they? Perhaps they feel morally or intellectually superior—feel no compunction to explain themselves to those less gifted than they. Or perhaps they are convinced that theirs is the only tenable position: There is no cause for discussion or debate because the only correct opinion—theirs—is *patently* obvious. Or could it be they secretly fear being *wrong*? If they try explaining themselves and are forced to listen to differing perspectives, their certitude might waver; their righteousness (*self-righteousness* ??) might crumble.

Over the last twenty or thirty years, societal trends in this country have been toward an increasingly dangerous disunity. We consume information from sources we're inclined to agree with. We cultivate relationships with those who only amplify, rather than question, our opinions. We dismiss those who have opposing viewpoints: as cowards or crazy; as squishy or stone-hearted. This, too, is a form of hidden knowledge. Whether from superiority ... or a failure to imagine any other possibilities ... or a deep-seated, if unspoken, fear we may be wrong ... we tend not to engage with 'the other.' We cling to the puffery of our own secret knowledge, and shirk Christ's calls to build up, in love.

COVID: a pandemic or a hoax. Climate change: an existential threat or an overblown myth. Abortion: a right or an abomination. Racism: an ongoing scourge or a relic of history. A presidential election: won fairly or stolen corruptly. I'll bet every one of us can articulate exactly what she or he *knows* about each of these issues. But until we, both meat-eaters and meat-abstainers alike, start sitting down together to share what we know ... *whatever* the cost to our personal sense of righteousness ... the unintended consequence of our hidden knowledge is the diminishment of love ... and the diminishment of Christ. And while we can never exhaust Christ's love, our clinging to knowledge we keep hidden runs the very real risk of exhausting the love that binds us together as a people.

[‡] Although Paul uses *gnosis*, the Greek word for knowledge, in this pericope, the Corinthians were not Gnostics. Gnosticism—essentially, a heresy of secret 'better' knowledge—was a somewhat later development in the history of Christianity.



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