

Title: Swelling or Growth

Text: 1 Corinthians 8.1-6

Theme: We live for one God

Series: 1 Cor #31

Prop Stmt. Living for God puts our “rights” into their proper place.

Have you seen that cell-phone commercial that shows a guy attempting to sing along with his ring tone? As the phone closes, the caption says, “my life is in there.” That poor guy needs a bigger life. In one of the major cities of the Roman empire, there was a church. Many of the people in the church needed to get a bigger life too. They thought that life revolved around them. Relationships do not work when everyone views themselves as having rights. Churches, in particular end up in their actions, denying the very message and doctrine they claim to believe.

The church at **Corinth** (map) was probably 4-5 years old when Paul, who was at **Ephesus** now, received a report from Chloe’s people (and it was not a good report), then a report from Stephanus, Fortunatus and Achaicus as well as a letter about the same time that was asking him to help resolve some problems. He had already written one letter to them (5.9) and now in addition to the messengers, Paul had received a letter from them. It is obvious that in spite of founding the church, the church does not agree with him on many issues. Their letter to Paul is full of all sorts of questions and challenges to the apostle. So, basically, here is what happened.

1. Chloe’s people bring a report to Paul at Ephesus and
2. Paul sets about writing a letter.
3. Timothy is preparing to take the letter to Corinth when Stephanus, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrive with more news (not good) and a letter. (4.17)
4. Paul immediately writes chapters 5-6, in response to the news and then writes 7-16 in reply to the letter.
5. Timothy takes the completed letter to Corinth.

Paul wrote this letter to this church that he loved so much, but was in danger of being consumed by its problems. The church was facing disintegration from the inside out (10.11-13) and Paul knew that a long visit was necessary to sort things out, but since he could not get there right away, he wrote this letter to address some things until he could make it. The church at Corinth was probably of a substantial size. Full of cliques, some snobbish, little or no church discipline, laxity in morals and doctrine abounded because no one would submit to authority and even Paul’s authority was constantly questioned. There was a lack of humility and consideration for others, while the worship times were chaotic and some were celebrating their freedom in Christ without any thought for their brothers and sisters. They were big on image and very short on consistency. They were big on knowledge and short on love. They were big on pride and short on humility. But are these problems unique to the believers at Corinth? No! This book, perhaps the 3rd earliest book written in the NT after the book of James and Galatians was providentially preserved by God to help all of His followers learn how the gospel affects everything we do in the church. This book is for every person who embraces Christ as Lord.

Intro. "What is a church?" 1 Cor. 1.1-9

1. We Deal with Divisions through the Gospel - 1Cor1.10-4.21
(a divided church cannot deal with problems) Our unity is based on the gospel.
2. We Deal with Immorality in view of the gospel and the church. 1 Cor 5.1-13
3. We Deal with Lawsuits in view of the gospel and the church. 1 Cor 6.1-8
4. We Deal with Sin in general in view of the gospel and the church 1 Cor 6.9-20
5. We Deal with Relationships in view of the gospel and the church. 1 Cor 7.1-40
6. We Deal with Debatable issues in view of the gospel and church 1 Cor 8.1-11.1

As we go through this text and particularly as we plow through chapters 12-14, I am going to seek to demonstrate that there is a consistent theme of loving and respecting each other that is championed in this entire section. Ironically, chapters 12-14 have been the battleground chapters for some of the gifts debate. Sometimes, the spirit with which that debate has occurred has been in violation of the very point of loving and respecting each other that stands as the dominant theme in the text. Loving and respecting each other is a necessary outgrowth of the gospel. This is why before we talk about these debatable issues, we have to remind ourselves of what affect the gospel has on our lives, our church, our relationships, and our very personalities.

What does the gospel do? It exalts Christ and humbles the sinner. The good news, the exciting news, the exalting news of the gospel is only truly understood and embraced in the tough and humbling news of the law of God. The law of God sets the stage for the gospel of God. God's law reveals that I am a sinner and I need a Savior and that I cannot save myself. God's law is a mirror that appears to magnify the pathetic condition of my heart. In reality, the law does not magnify my heart; it simply reveals my heart for what it is. It just seems to magnify my heart because my tendency and your tendency is to minimize our sin.

Illustrations – copies on a copy machine

The law humbles us because it tells us the truth about ourselves. The gospel rescues us through Christ alone. Since we cannot rescue ourselves, we are not the heroes. Christ is the hero. Christ is the champion. Your goal in life changes when you come to faith in Christ. You now exist to advance His cause. A good thing for you to pray everyday is, "God, help me make you famous today. Through sickness or health, through life or death, through need or abundance, through strength or weakness – it is your call God. I just want to make you famous." That is what the gospel does. It provides the foundation for your view of yourself and your view of your world to change from the inside out. Everything in your life is related to that. That is exactly what Paul is trying to get across to these believers in Corinth.

1. **Little issues are tied to big ideas.** 8.1-3

Before Paul deals with issue at hand (food sacrificed to idols), he launches into this discussion about the relationship or the disconnect between knowledge and love. It is as if he is saying, “Alright class, before I deal with your question, I need to help you connect a few dots.” He, then begins v.4 by saying, “So then, about food sacrificed to idols...” What on earth is that?

I love this! I hope that you see what is going on in this text. Here is a problem in the church. The assumption that some have is that in the church at Corinth there were some people who were purchasing food that, before it was being sold in the public market, had first been offered to idols in the pagan temples there in Corinth. The theory was that other people in the church were saying, “You can’t buy that – it’s contaminated because it was offered to idols.” Others were saying, “Idol – shmidol – who cares, this chicken is on sale for .29 a pound! C’mon, get real, just because I take a bite of ribs doesn’t make me want to worship a pig!” That view may be part of the situation, but I think there are other factors as well that we have to keep in mind in order to see how complex this situation could get.

- Wealthy people could afford to purchase meat and the poor could not.
- About the only time meat was for sale in the market was after some of the pagan festivals, where the meat had been sacrificed (offered) to the gods (acknowledging the role of the gods in the harvest or growth of the flocks)
- Some of the pagan temples had dining halls built with them which were used for both religious and social events. And...
- The temples also sold the meat. Temples were central to life functioning as banks, butcher shops, restaurants, etc.

The church at Corinth was comprised of both wealthy people and poor people. Wealthy people could afford to eat meat. Poor people could not. If a person had been invited to a party (social gatherings tend to take place within similar social levels – the church is to be the great exception), and meat was served at the party, it was easy for a wealthy person to justify the eating of meat that that had been purchased from one of the temple outlets. Or, what if a poor person, who rarely had the opportunity to eat meat was invited to a birthday party in the family that was being held at the temple where he used to worship before he became a follower of Christ and the food being served was purchased from the temple, or associated with offerings to pagan deities? The ones who viewed themselves as being strong were the ones in the “know” and were more than likely the wealthy as well. We need to keep all of this in view, because this issue, like many others that arise in the church today, are not simple matters, but are complex and can get really entangled.

Now, this is a great illustration because this issue is not always a clear cut moral issue. The problem that Paul addressed back in chapter 5 was a clear cut moral issue and therefore, it demanded a very clear response on the part of the church. Some issues are clear-cut and there is no need to discuss them in great detail. This is different. This is a debatable issue, but it was obviously a serious problem because they included it in their letter to Paul. Now, in the three sermons that I am bringing from chapter 8, we will see how we are to handle debatable issues in the church. But, I also want to point out how

we don't handle them. I want to point out, what Paul did not do. The tendency of many is to react to these sorts of things by making a rule. Do you know what I mean? That happens in homes, that happens in corporations, and that certainly happens in churches. "We need the board to make a ruling on this!" Or, "We need to form a committee to investigate this and to bring back a recommendation to the church on this." Or, (my favorite) "Pastor, what is your position on this matter?"

Listen, I don't mind making rules – ask my kids. But, reacting to every problem by making a rule is short-sighted. I went to a Christian college like that. Through the years, instead of teaching the students to think like believers, it generally taught them to live according to the rules. The college had a fairly long history and by the time I was a student, the rulebook was like an encyclopedia. It took an incredible amount of planning and ingenuity to come up with doing something that would result in another rule being added to the book. Trying to think of something that in 60 years had not been done was a huge project, but we were up to the challenge and along with a couple of guys we managed to do that.

Instead of just making a rule and saying, "This is it! From now on no one can purchase chicken from sellers who have offered it first to idols." Paul backs up and shows that this issue is like a weed, it has roots. Little issues are connected to big ideas. What are some of those bigger ideas or bigger issues? Look at the text.

In verses 1-3, there are four statements that Paul makes.

- We know that we all possess knowledge.
- Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.
- The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.
- But the man who loves God is known by God.

There are a couple of things that are very obvious – aren't there? Look at how many times the text mentions "know" or "knowledge." This continues in v.4, 7, 9, and 11. Now, look at how knowledge is set in relationship to love. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. There is a difference between swelling and growth. "the man who loves God is known by God." God's knowledge of a person is set within a relationship of love. Let's unpack this a little bit.

A. Pride values knowledge over love.

It is often said that knowledge is power. Ok, so what do you do with that power? Pride views knowledge as a weapon with which to gain an advantage over others. You can blow people away with what you know. You can win arguments, deflate another person, and intimidate other people. "I know more than you." Particularly, in the church this is devastating. I know where Habakkuk is, therefore, I am spiritual. I spend one hour a day just reading the Bible – what about you? I listen to nothing but sermons and Christian music? I know a Greek word.

Keep in mind that there is legitimate Godly knowledge and there is self-centered arrogant knowledge. Knowledge that is prized by the world is an arrogant self-serving knowledge.

B. God connects true knowledge to love.

The point is very clear – isn't it? As a follower of Christ, you are to be more concerned (love) with your relationship to other believers than you are to your own "rights." A person could say because of my spiritual insight, I am fully aware that chicken offered to idols does not change the chicken. An idol is nothing – really. Therefore, anyone who thinks differently than I do is an idiot. There is nothing wrong with the meat that has been first offered to idols and therefore, there is nothing wrong for me to eat that meat. If you are bothered by it, get over it! But there is more to life than eating what you want. If that is all the bigger your world is, you need to get a bigger God.

The church is, among other things, an intimate web of relationships. Genuine relationships demand authentic communication and they require an atmosphere of love. All of which is done imperfectly by us. There are times, many times when you do not understand what someone else has done, or you do not agree with what someone else is doing. And the issue is not a clear-cut issue. How you respond is a reflection of your spiritual maturity. You can see where this text is leading us.(4a) The person who "knows" that meat that is associated with sacrifices to pagan deities is technically fine to eat, can use that knowledge to be little a person who is weak in the faith and doesn't know that. The whole point of the text is that your relationship to others is more important than you exercising your rights.

2. God - is the big idea. 8.4-6

Living for God is seen more in our love for God, than in our intellect about God or other things. Paul now is saying, Now, back to the question that you raised. It is true that an idol does not really exist, even if it is part of a long and glorious pagan tradition. We know that there is no God, but the true God. For the sake of argument, though, even if these so-called gods appear to have influence over people's lives, they are still not legitimate, for there is only one true God. However, the fact that these cults and religious traditions exist means that habituated patterns of loyalty and devotion that were practiced for years by people who, while new converts to Christ, were immersed in this stuff for years before their conversion means that we cannot blow this stuff off and act as if it has no affect on their lives or attitudes anymore. There are a bunch of people in your church who were deeply affected by this false knowledge, and while it is false, fake, and illegitimate, it sure had a profound affect on their lives.¹

Verse 6 is a stroke of genius by Paul. He uses the argument of the strong and knowledgeable as the basis for which they need to be sensitive with those who are uncomfortable with eating meat associated with pagan deities.

¹ See Thiselton's commentary on this passage

- A. **God is the Originator** – from whom all things came.
- B. **God is the Goal** – for whom we live.
- C. **Christ is the Means of Creation** – through whom all things came
- D. **Christ is the Means to the Goal** – through whom we live.

Conclusion: The fame of God and the glory of His Son and His church (His people) are more important than anything else – even your “right” to eat what you want or your personal opinion about what is right. We do not learn in order to advance ourselves. We learn in order to be more effective servants. That is true, godly knowledge.