

The Pastor's Quarry

First Baptist Church of Granite Falls, MN
May, 2010

Knowledge Puffs Up

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."¹ (1Co 8:1) His point in that chapter is clear: those who understand the truth about Christian liberty must not flaunt it in front of those who don't. To be so arrogant could make them stumble. Therefore, we must be lovingly patient with those who lack the knowledge we have.

Yet as clear as this point is, it has often been muddled. All too often people have taken that one saying, that "knowledge puffs up," out of context – and used it to justify ignorance. In this way of thinking, ignorance becomes a virtue, and knowledge a vice. The more simple-minded a person is, the more spiritual he must be. Those who spend much time reading difficult books and discussing difficult things have surely lost their way – they have chosen the "ivory tower" of intellectualism instead of the simple life of vibrant faith. Seminary is especially viewed with suspicion; whole churches have been led to believe that seminary is really "cemetery," because, after all, "Knowledge puffs up!"

The irony of this scripture-twisting is that Paul actually *wants* his readers to have the very knowledge he cautions them about. There in 1 Corinthians 8, he goes out of his way to teach it. He doesn't have to. He could simply name what kind of knowledge he has in mind – that Christians have the liberty to eat meat sacrificed to idols by pagan butchers. But instead he pauses for a teaching moment. He spends vv. 4-6 building a case for this Christian liberty. He wants people to be knowledgeable. Paul's solution to intellectual pride is love, not ignorance.

In fact, one of the ways Paul commends himself to the Corinthians church is "by knowledge." (2Co 6:6) He even writes, "How will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?" (1Co 14:6b) And when he commands Titus, "Teach what accords with sound doctrine," (Tit 2:1b) he does not add, "just make sure you don't add to people's knowledge, because knowledge puffs up."

Knowledge is a good thing. We are commanded to have it. Peter writes, "Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge." (2Pe 1:5b) Don't just admit knowledge is good. Don't just halfheartedly pursue it. *Make every effort*. It is that important, not just for pastors and teachers, but for every Christian. Even if you have a hard time learning, the command is clear. Make every effort to gain knowledge!

But what kind of knowledge should we pursue? Clearly, all of our knowledge must begin and end with the Bible (Psa 1; 2Ti 3:16; Tit 2:1). But equally clearly, we must also pursue knowledge *outside* of the Bible. The Bible proves the value of all sorts of extra-biblical knowledge. God gave Bezalel and Oholiab knowledge of artistry for the artwork in the tabernacle (Exo 35:30-35). Chenaniah's knowledge of music qualified him to be King David's choir director (1Ch 15:22). God gave Daniel knowledge in all the literature of the Babylonians (Dan 1:17). Pagan literature was part of Paul's knowledge, too – he even quoted a Cretan in his letter to Titus (Tit 1:12). And when Paul addressed the Areopagus, he was quick to employ the knowledge he had acquired of their culture, citing an inscription from one of their altars (Act 17:22-23). Shall we not follow these examples?

If we don't – if we close our minds to all knowledge outside of the Bible – we simply can't live out what the Bible teaches us. Take for example the commandment against taking God's name in vain. Or take the command, "Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers." (1Ti 5:1) The Bible doesn't teach us precisely what these things mean. We must learn from our fathers, indeed, from history. So it is with almost everything else. What should our country's government be like? What kind of monetary system should we use? What kind of music should we make? What kind of curriculum should we teach our children? How should we fight our wars?

We have a choice to make. We can deliberately remain ignorant and "apply" Scripture to these things in whatever way that is popular among our friends. Or we can deliberately pursue knowledge of the world we live in – in all of the depth and breadth of our literature – and apply Scripture to these things in a way that brings glory to God.

Mark Your Calendars

Fri., May 14, 7:00 P.M.: Music and book discussion in the lower level of the church building.

Sun., May 16, 12:30 P.M.: Weekly membership classes begin for all interested in learning more about joining the church.

Fri., May 28, 7:00 P.M.: Book discussion in the lower level of the church building.

Sun., May 30, 1:15 P.M.: Another installment of the Fifth-Sunday Biography Series, this time on the life of Jonathan Edwards.

Fri., June 11, 7:00 P.M.: Music and book discussion in the lower level of the church building.

Fri., June 25, 7:00 P.M.: Book discussion in the lower level of the church building.

Quote of the Month

*Most modern people appear to resent the past and seek to deny its substance for either of two reasons:
(1) it confuses them, or
(2) it inhibits them.
If it confuses them, they have not thought enough about it;
if it inhibits them, we should look with a curious eye upon whatever schemes they have afoot.*

Richard Weaver
Ideas Have
Consequences

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Jesus, in Thy Transporting Name

Anne Steele (1717-1778)

Jesus, in thy transporting name

What blissful glories rise;

Jesus – the angels' sweetest theme –

The wonder of the skies.

Jesus, and didst thou leave the sky

For miseries and woes?

And didst thou bleed, and groan, and die

For vile, rebellious foes?

Victorious love! Can language tell

The wonders of thy power,

Which conquered all the force of hell

In that tremendous hour?

What glad return can I impart

For favors so divine?

O take my heart, this worthless heart

And make it only thine.

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A Bit of History

The years following the American Revolution were a heady time for the common man. He had picked up his musket, defied the British King, and claimed the right to govern himself. He voted for his leaders now, and he even had the right to get voted in himself. He was, in his mind, on an equal footing with every other person in America. With this idea of equality came an increasingly entrenched resentment of those who elevated themselves above the common man. Nowhere was this resentment more powerful than on the western frontier, where the uneducated pioneers sneeringly called the educated gentlefolk of the east, “Yankee aristocrats.”

Yet despite this resentment, some of those “Yankee aristocrats” were brave enough to set up schools in the frontier. Baynard Rush Hall was one of those men. The son of General George Washington’s staff surgeon, Hall studied at Union College and Princeton Theological Seminary before accepting a teaching position in the 1820’s at the new Indiana Seminary in Bloomington, Indiana. It was not an easy assignment. In an embellished memoir of his time there, Hall gives us a peek into the culture of the American frontier.

In one story, Hall tells of a preacher who visited the area. People flocked to hear him:

The new preacher to-day, doubtless apprised of the strangers’ coming, in order to create confidence, and ward off any false shame and unworthy fear of man, struck off, after prayer and singing, with an open avowal of enmity to all learning and learned preachers.²

This instantly established this preacher’s credibility with these pioneers. Were he an educated man, they might have felt “false shame and unworthy fear of man,” and resented him. But because he loudly proclaimed his ignorance, they gave him a hearing.

“Unhappily,” Hall later observes, “smartness and wickedness were supposed to be generally coupled, and incompetence and goodness.”³ Ignorance was a virtue, and knowledge a vice. The learned man was suspiciously like the uppity city-folk the frontiersmen had said good-riddance to. Just hiring a new mathematics professor “enraged the people who set no value on learning and deemed one small salary a waste of the poor people’s education money.”⁴

When the Trustees later sought another professor, several dozen unlearned pioneers came forward and insisted they were qualified; one of them indignantly contended “that all offices, from president down to fence-viewer, were open to every white American citizen.”⁵ The Trustees, of course, chose a well-educated man instead:

All from that moment united in determined and active hostility towards the college . . . and, in short, towards “every puss proud aristocrat big-bug, and d---n’d blasted Yankee in the New Purchase.”⁶

These proud frontiersmen had very thin skins. They smarted at the thought of being shown up by their betters. But they are not alone. To this day, “The passion for equality is simultaneous with the growth of egotism.”⁷ And many prefer to stroke that ego instead of admitting they have something to learn – and making every effort to learn it.

² Robert Carlton, Esq. (Baynard Rush Hall), *The New Purchase: Or, Seven and a Half Years in the Far West*, ed. James Albert Woodburn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1916), 172. Hall wrote under the pseudonym Robert Carlton.

³ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 328.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁷ Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 42.