

Unity and Variance

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

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1 Corinthians 8:1–13

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him. Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.¹

You are walking to the market to buy food for the week. You’d like to splurge a bit, maybe buy a little meat. But the meat in the market is so expensive. There’s no way you can buy it and get enough food with the rest of your money. On your way home, you walk by the temple to Athena, or Artemis, or whichever of the foreign gods it’s dedicated to. Frankly, you don’t usually pay much attention, except to avoid it. It’s funny to think that on Sundays you actually worship with people who probably visited this very temple! What would Mother say! And Father would be so angry! As usual, they are selling cow and sheep and pig meat, what’s left over from their filthy sacrifices to their filthy gods. The stench sickens you a little. It occurs to you that you could afford *this* meat, but you get a little bit nauseated. You remember how, when you were little, your parents ate some pig thinking it was kosher beef, and when they found out, they immediately and copiously vomited. You remember the shame and the stink as if it were yesterday. You wonder if they would have become followers of the Way, as you did. You miss them terribly.

¹ *Revised Common Lectionary*. (2009). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

And now that you think of it, you feel a surge of anger at those who worship with you who could imagine it would be acceptable for a follower of Jesus to eat this meat put before idols. What fellowship does Christ have with false gods? Perhaps you should start going to the fellowship that meets further down the river; there are more fellow Jews there.

You are walking to the market to buy food for the week. You'd like to splurge a bit, maybe buy a little meat. You know that it's cheapest at the temple where they worship the false god Athena. You know because you use to offer sacrifices yourself there, until you became a follower of the Way. The temple seems so empty now that you are a disciple of Jesus, although you still have friends and family who attend to sacrifices there. There's no pull there for you – well, maybe a little, but not much, and you know that wisdom is not a god but one attribute of the one true God. Buying meat from the temple is different from sacrificing animals to a false god, and you have little hesitation in doing so. In fact, you are so grateful for the liberation that you have in Christ. You know that many of your sisters and brothers in the fellowship were – or is it “are”? – Jews, who have joined the way, and that, for them, it is very distasteful or even wrong to buy this meat, but you are free in Christ.

And now that you think of it, you feel a surge of anger at those who worship with you who could imagine it would be forbidden for a follower of Jesus to eat this meat put before false idols. Are we not free indeed? Perhaps you should bring this up to the elders; maybe they can do something about those intolerant Jews.

You are getting dressed for a wedding. You are excited; your roommate from college is getting married, and she asked you to be in the wedding party! You've enjoyed the all the fuss and bother of the wedding preparations. You only wish that the wedding ceremony could take place in a proper church like Mary wanted. Well, that's to be expected, you suppose. Marriage to someone of the same sex has only been legal for a little while in your state, and it's certainly not acceptable yet in your denomination. You just know if people could just see how much in love Mary and Jenny are, their hearts would melt. Sometimes, you admit, you're just waiting for the olds to move on so the whole “gay thing” won't be an issue any more. Didn't Jesus welcome everyone? Didn't Paul say love was the greatest thing of all?

And now that you think of it, you feel a surge of anger at those who worship with you who could imagine that it would be forbidden for a Christian to fall in love and marry someone just because they happened to be the same sex. Sometimes you wonder if you should just stop going to church altogether if means being with such intolerant people. Don't they see this is a matter of justice? Injustice is injustice, people, and they should just get over it.

You open the envelope. It's an invitation to a wedding. Your roommate from college is getting married. You're a bit surprised to receive it; Jenny should know how you feel about same-sex marriage. You've met her fiancée, and she seems nice enough. You don't blame them for being attracted to someone of the same sex, but you know

this choice is wrong. Should you just ignore the invitation? There's no way that you could imagine going to the ceremony; if you went, people would think you approved of their agenda. Sigh. You know this is a hot issue in your denomination, and many people your age seem accepting of gay marriage. Don't they see this is a matter of sin? The Bible clearly states that homosexual activity is sin. Sin is sin, people, and they should just get over it. Sometimes you wonder what you'll do if your church decides that gay marriage is ok. You've heard about a new group forming; maybe you should check them out...

Four stories, all made up, of course. Two from the days of the early church, when the hot issue was whether it was morally acceptable for a Christian to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Two from today, when one of the hot issues is LGBTQ inclusion in the church – that is, how we should or should not include lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, and queer people in the church. I am hoping that we can learn from Paul some strategies for dealing with this hot issue. Of course, I speak to this not only because it is a hot issue, but because of the work of the Unity and Variance task group of Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference which I'm involved with, and that Michael deals with in helping churches approach difficult issues in the church.

Some of us believe that sexual relationships with members of the same sex are inherently wrong, and, therefore, the church cannot condone same-sex marriage or relationships or credential pastors who are in same-sex relationships, any more than it could condone, say, adultery. I know this is an inadequate description, but roughly correct. Let's call this the traditional view.

Some of believe that sexual relationships with members of the same sex are not inherently wrong, and, therefore, there are often times when the church can and should celebrate same-sex marriage, and celebrate gay pastors not only if they are celibate, but also those who marry. This is also an inadequate description, but roughly correct. Let's call this the accepting view.

And, frankly, some of us are really confused. Perhaps this is the normal view.

So, which is the right view? Ha, ha, I'm not going to go there. But what I am interested in is how those of us who hold the traditional view and those of us who hold the accepting view and those of us who are just confused should be interacting with one another. This is perhaps the biggest lesson I have been learning from The Colossian Forum, and I've very grateful to Michael for that.

So listen, I think this is important.

The basic question of us, and it's the driving question for the Unity and Variance task group, is:

How can we be faithful – how can we exhibit the fruits of the Spirit – while we address our differences?

Well, let's look at the strategies that Paul describes in the passage in 1 Corinthians. One of the first things he says is that "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge."

Paul is calling us, I believe, to a deep humility. We may think we clearly know what the right thing to do is, but Paul claims we can never know enough. We might really know that "sin is sin," or "injustice is injustice," but we need to be careful lest we become puffed up and full of ourselves. Our goal as Christians is to be full of the holy Spirit, to grow into Christ, and there's no room for our inflamed selves there.

Secondly, Paul is calling us to build one another up, and not to use our (so-called) knowledge as a weapon either deliberately or inadvertently which will destroy our brothers and sisters. These are our family, and when we hurt our family, Paul says, we "sin against Christ." This is not something we want to do.

To be clear, Paul is not speaking against knowledge. Paul believes there is a right way to view eating food sacrificed to idols. And I believe (although I am no Paul) that we will come to something like a right view about same-sex relationships. But we must hold that knowledge humbly, graciously, and in service to building one another up in Christ.

So, third, Paul reminds us to pay attention and care for those with whom we disagree. We may think we know the right way, we may be free of error, but our liberty needs to be used in service to others.

Now I want to say something harsh. Something based on much of what I have read about the origins of our denomination, Mennonite Church USA, and stories I have heard told, and even the comments and letters to the editor of The Mennonite Weekly. I believe a great deal of intense viciousness which is fairly called violence has been directed by those who hold the traditional view towards LGBTQ people in our midst, and (to a lesser extent) their allies. This wounding is, I believe, also a sin against them, and against Christ, which must be repented and lamented. And, when we see it occurring, we need to call it out and correct it. Furthermore, this violence is largely asymmetric; that is, most of the acting in bad faith flows from some of those with traditional views towards LGBTQ people, and not so much the other way around.

We are the family of Christ; we are not violent towards our brothers and sisters. We humbly build one another up, pay attention and care for those with whom we disagree.

Elsewhere, Paul writes:

I ... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making

every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:1-3)

And of course Paul writes of the fruit of the Spirit:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22,23)

For you traditionalists, how can you gently and humbly bear with those who hold the accepting view or who are simply confused? How can you live in love and joy with them? How is God calling you to be patient and forbearing to them? To be kind and generous to them? To faithfully stay with them? What role do they have in helping you achieve “the full stature of Christ”? Are there amends you need to make, sins you have to confess, about the ways you’ve treated LGBTQ people and their allies? Are there fellow traditionalists whom you need to rebuke?

For you of the accepting view, how can you gently and humbly bear with those who hold the traditional view or who are simply confused? How can you live in love and joy with them? How is God calling you to be patient and forbearing to them? To be kind and generous to them? To faithfully stay with them? What role do they have in helping you achieve “the full stature of Christ”?

For those of you who are confused, do these words help you to see that perhaps the major call is for you to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit in the company of the body of Christ?