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Intellectual Weaponry

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1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Every homeowner has been there. Something's wrong, and you're not exactly sure what. Maybe the heat stopped working. So you call the HVAC company, and they come over, take a walk into your basement, and come up a half an hour later to tell you that your boiler needs replacing. Thousands of dollars. Oh, and the stairwell is too small for the new one to get through, so you're going to have to hire somebody to take all the railings out of the stairwell. And, assuming that this all must be true, but not really knowing any better, you sign over gigantic check to make it right.

Moments like these happen all the time. They happen at car mechanics and the hardware store, they happen in the lawyer's office or with your accountant, and they can happen in truly serious places, like the doctor's office. Important moments when somebody else has knowledge that you don't.

During moments like these, you're at the mercy of an expert, and that can be a difficult situation, and not something that a simple Google search can remedy. You want the knowledge that only an expert possesses, knowledge that can save or cost you thousands, or knowledge that can influence your very life, but it's inaccessible. Instead, you have to trust that the person on the other side has your best interest in mind, and we know from experience that there are times when that happens, and there are times when that doesn't happen.

There's a term for this - asymmetry of information - and it happens all the time. It's a term that is often used in the field of economics, but really has wide-ranging applications. In fact, I would guess that a huge number of people right here have been on both sides in moments of asymmetric information, either as an expert in your field, or as you're trying to process information and make a decision.

A key consequence of this situation is not only asymmetric information, but that there is a power imbalance as well. That's the situation we find ourselves in this morning in Corinth, where Paul is writing to that church which is in a situation of lopsided power. Their situation is food sacrificed to idols. First, a little background to try to even out the playing field with this information. Back then, if you were a participant in the civic life of the city, you would probably end up in one of the local temples. And while you were there, the meat that had been sacrificed to the god would become part of a meal there. And perhaps, if you were lucky, you might be able to bring some leftovers home. This was all fairly normal stuff

- everybody did it. If you wanted to be a normal participant in civic life, then you needed to be part of the religious life of the city as well.

Now, imagine you're a follower of the Jewish rabbi Jesus who you call "Lord." Can you still go to the temple? Can you eat the meat? On the one hand, you might say "no, absolutely not! That would be idolatry, because we would be participating in the worship of a false idol, specifically prohibited in the Jewish Scriptures!" On the other hand, you might say "sure, but you and I know that this god these people pray to is no god at all. There is no god but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Jesus is Lord. So eat what you want, and remember to give thanks to the true God."

Now, we might say about that first group of people, the ones who scrupulously avoid temple meat and therefore are vegetarian, that they're a bit simple-minded. Yes, they know the Scriptures, but perhaps they're not reinterpreting them for their new context. They seem uncritical and stuck in the past. The second group, on the other hand, has done some advanced theological thinking, and come to a rational, modern conclusion, appropriate for the time and place. They're the high-minded ones of the group. And, in fact, Paul seems to agree at first, and goes ahead and admits that it seems like they possess advanced knowledge that the first group isn't aware of, or hasn't thought through.

I don't know about you, but I tend to like that second group's argument. That argument appeals to my sense of intellectual curiosity. I like to think that I value getting to the heart of the matter, understanding all the details, rather than making a judgment based on mere appearances. Of course, I also like that argument because I'm a fan of hamburger and steak, and that conclusion means that I get to keep eating those things.

So why does Paul want to take that second group to task? I think here Paul is firstly suspicious of any rationale that gets people out of making hard decisions, or changing patterns of behavior, and we should be too. The vegetarian Christians are not only giving up a source of food, but they are willingly excluding themselves from partaking in parts of civic life in Corinth. They're making a sacrifice on a number of levels for the sake of fidelity to Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the "knowledgeable" ones seem to be wiggling their way out of any meaningful sacrifice with their intellectual superiority.

Secondly, I think Paul is concerned about how this second group, let's call them the enlightened group, is using this knowledge. Rather than for building up the community, this knowledge seems to be tearing them apart. In fact, we should assume that the exercise of this knowledge is doing damage to the faith of those who have abstained from this temple meat. It seems that they are looking at the pattern of others in their community, and coming to believe that it's okay to partake in some idol worship, believing that those false

gods have some reality. In that case, the lesson is that it's okay to be a follower of Jesus *most* of the time. Those weaker Christians, as Paul says, are at the mercy of the knowledge of the second group, and can be easily led astray as their faith is still developing.

As with those of us who have been on the other side of the desk at the car mechanic, there's some asymmetry of information going on here, and those with the knowledge are those with the power, and that power has the potential to truly harm.

Greater knowledge, perceived or real, can be a dangerous thing. Like almost any tool, the intellect can easily be weaponized, and is perhaps more damaging than most. It's not just in cases of asymmetric information. We live in a world where intellectual power has huge currency. We choose to go to war or to make treaties based on ideas and force of argument. We influence the decisions of friends and family by compelling words. We imprison the guilty and exonerate the innocent through litigation, not arms. Often, we're convincing those without expertise with our expert opinions. The life of the mind is an incredibly powerful tool, and one that we ought to take with the utmost seriousness.

Paul thought so too, perhaps sensing that his own life and work, born from a rigorous Pharisaical training, would be measured for millennia by the content and quality of his words, his thinking transcribed for millions upon millions. His words to the church are careful, but they are a bold admonishment to a culture who believed deeply in the power of ideas and rhetoric. Very well, he says, think your thoughts, but remember to enact them in love.

Yes, love. Just a few chapters later, most of us are familiar with the passage often used at weddings - love is patient, love is kind, love does not boast. The theme of love pervades Paul's letter not just here because he believes that the ideas and actions of love need to pervade all human life, that love is the real driver of human good. You're smart? Good for you. Good job, respect amongst your neighbors, people listen to you? Fine. But if all of those things aren't enacted through the lens of love, it's worse than useless.

Bear in mind that love for Paul doesn't exactly mean the same thing that it means for us. It's not a warm feeling of deep caring, or an intense passion. When Paul is talking about love, he's thinking about the Hebrew word *chesed* - the enduring faithfulness that God expresses to humankind. The commitment to utterly seek good for others, even to one's own detriment. This is the self-giving sort of love that Paul means.

Love, for Paul, is what orders the world rightly, creates healthy bonds, and breaks through divisions. So if the intellect doesn't serve the purposes of love, it is dangerously free of

constraint. It's a powerful tool, and it can be bent to almost any end, constructive or destructive.

We here are a people who value intellectual curiosity and rigor as a worthy goal. So how much more do we have to ensure that the pursuits of the mind are done always in the pursuit of love? With our armory of ideas, have we checked them all — that they are directed towards loving our neighbors? Towards seeking good for those who are powerless? Towards advocating for the marginalized? Towards selfless ends?

If so, through our words and our insights and our convictions, we can do immense good in the world. We rightly admire the intellectual giants who have spent their resources on behalf of a better and more loving world. We want to see a world in which the most perplexing problems are given the best attention. We laud the smartest young people when they pursue the noblest of endeavors.

But we can do immense damage as well. Sticks and stones may break our bones, but names and words and ideas may also break the soul. What we think and what we say to one another, whether in Davos or Aspen, in the classroom or around the dinner table, have the power of creation and destruction. When said and enacted with the end being that self-giving sort of love, we create.

This isn't anti-intellectualism, in fact, the very opposite. We, as followers of Jesus, find ourselves in pursuit of a life of the mind that is in obedience to God's love. And that's hard work. Faith, rather than telling our brains to turn off, tells them to step up the creativity. Faith tells us that God is moving the world towards just and loving purposes, but the roadmap requires our input. Our minds are gifts in achieving a just and loving world, rather than resources to be leveraged for our own gain.

This requires our selflessness, which is perhaps one of the greatest intellectual challenges. When everything in ourselves is telling us to protect ourselves and to seek our own good, to instead override those impulses and do for others even greater things than we do for ourselves, that takes some mind-over-matter. Who knows the battle in the mind of our Lord that caused him to sweat blood in the garden of Gethsemane — that caused him to collapse in anguish. And yet the selfless end, the end rooted in God's love, was the one that he chose. Greater love hath no one than this.

We are intellectually curious people. We are people with endless educational resources in a city of museums and think-tanks and world-class institutions. To this, we can add as Christians the deepest commitment to loving our neighbors, ensuring that our pursuits of the mind also be pursuits of the heart. Amen.