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Epiphany 4 • 1 Corinthians 8:1–13 • February 1, 2015

Bruce Schuchard

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, schuchardb@csel.edu

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The goal of the human person who wishes to achieve everything that there is to achieve in life is _____.

How would each one of us fill in the blank? According to the Hellenistic philosophers of the apostle Paul's day, the pinnacle of human experience, of human existence

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and achievement, was not faith, hope, and love (“and the greatest of these is love,” 1 Cor 13:13). No, according to Paul’s contemporaries, the goal of humanity was instead *knowledge*. The goal of the truly ascendant, the exemplary, the perfected human person was not love but was instead enlightenment. How narcissistic, how self-congratulatory and self-aggrandizing such philosophies can be in practice for those who make them their own.

Therefore, Paul writes of the pursuit of such things—of that which we all have in common (“we know that we all have knowledge”) but which the Hellenists took to another and alien level. Paul’s response? “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (8:1). To be sure, adds Paul, “If anyone imagines [with the misguided pursuit of knowledge] that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know” (8:2). His pursuits are woefully misdirected. The invariable result of his efforts is bankrupt indeed. “But if anyone loves God,” if anyone loves he who is love and who loved us first, that person shows himself to be one who has been touched, transformed, united to, God in his person, in his very nature. He shows that what truly is excellent actually has happened to and in his life. For *the* purpose of each and every human person’s existence, *the* proper, genuinely fulfilling goal of every human person in this world, is not to know as no one else has ever known but to *be* “known by God” (8:3). For in blessed union with the one who declares, “I know you, I have called you by name, you are mine” (Is 43:1), does one become everything that our God would have us to be, does one become the image and reflection of the one who loved us first.

“Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols” (8:4), writes the apostle, how we should respond in the stead of the one who loved us first, how we should respond to any issue that scandalizes and/or misleads a brother or sister, is clear. “We know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ and that ‘there is no God but one’” (8:4). In other words, we know that the question of food purportedly sacrificed to a “god” who is nothing more than a figment of the human imagination is really a moot question. Such food offered to a fiction is in reality no different than any other food, and so it neither helps nor harms more than any other food. “For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed 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” (8:5–6). Therefore, rightly understood, the Christian is in principal free to eat or not to eat. It matters not.

“However,” cautions Paul, “not all possess this knowledge” (8:7), that is, not all in their walk of faith have a full understanding of such things. Misunderstanding still clings to us all, causing some to view these and other matters in an unfortunate, even harmful, light. So, “some, through former association with idols, eat [and, when they do so, view such] food as really offered to an idol [in other words, to them, to eat is, by definition, to affirm the existence and to seek the favor of the god to whom such sacrifice is given], and [so] their conscience, being weak, is defiled [when either they or a brother eats]” (8:7). “Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do” (8:8). “But take care,” warns the apostle, that

this freedom and “this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak [that is, if his understanding of what he is seeing is unfortunate], to eat food offered to idols [that is, to see such idols as actual deities to be honored whose favor must be sought]?” (8:9–10). “And so by your knowledge [in the exercise of your so-called freedom] this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ” (8:11–12).

This, urges the apostle, must never be. Therefore, “if food [or any other matter of Christian freedom] makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat [that is, I will refrain, even when I otherwise am free], lest I make my brother stumble” (8:13). For that which is preeminent is that which God is. “Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love (1 Cor 13:13). Therefore, concludes the apostle, “let all that you do be done in love” (1 Cor 16:14).

Bruce Schuchard