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

Bruce Schuchard
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, schuchardb@csl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.csl.edu/cj
Part of the Biblical Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Homiletical Help is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Journal by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.
If you read this text to establish a law about being single or being married, you miss the larger picture. Paul wants to foster your relationship with Christ . . . whether you are single or married. Paul wants to know, “how does your life support your relationship with the Lord?”

Discipleship is difficult. Our relationship with Christ changes our relations with this world. Listen to how Paul describes this. “Let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it” (7:29–31). We are to experience the things of this world but not in an all-consuming way. Whether we are married or single, mourning or rejoicing, buying or selling . . . the most important thing is that we are in Christ. Since Christ is our life and Christ has given us life, we seek to live all of life in him.

In looking at the exhibit Cup one could discuss all sorts of things. How foolish it is for an artist to stick a cup in a cage and put it on the wall. But, the artist is seeking to bring you into a conversation that leads you closer to the Lord and to the difficulty of discipleship in him. In the same way, Paul’s letter raises all sorts of questions for people today. “Is Paul advocating the single life?” “What does Paul have against marriage?” But, Paul is not seeking to bring about that kind of a conversation. Instead, what Paul wants to foster among us today is a conversation about life in Christ and how our joys and our sorrows, our buying and our selling, yes even our marriages and our singleness lead us closer to him.

Preaching on this text involves engaging in that conversation. Using a central image sermon structure,1 the preacher could (1) begin with the art installation of Cup and the strange conversations that would occur in front of it; (2) move to this text and the strange conversations that arise because of Paul’s words about marriage and the single life; (3) return to the image and discover the deeper truth about difficult discipleship revealed there; (4) return to the text and proclaim the deeper truth about difficult discipleship that is guiding Paul’s words; and (5) lead the hearers in contemplating their lives in Christ, articulating how God works in their experiences of this world (joy, sorrow, buying, selling, marriage, the single life, etc.) to lead them closer to Christ.

David Schmitt

1 For the theory of this sermon structure, see description at http://concordiatheology.org/sermon- structs/dynamic/imagistic-structures/central-image/.

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

Schuchard: Epiphany 4 • 1 Corinthians 8:1–13

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
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