**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**1 CORINTHIANS-014**. **LOVE BUILDETH UP by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Now, as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth. 2. And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know. 3. But if any man love God, the same is known of him. 4. As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one. 5. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) 6. But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by Him. 7. Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some, with conscience of the idol unto this hour, eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. 8. But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse. 9. But take heed, lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak. 10. For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; 11. And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? 12. But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. 13. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend."*

*1 Corinthians 8:1-13*

It is difficult for us to realise the close connection which existed between idol-worship and daily life. Something of the same sort is found in all mission fields. It was almost impossible for Christians to take any part in society and not seem to sanction idolatry. Would that Christianity were as completely interwoven with our lives as heathen religions are into those of their devotees! Paul seems to have had referred to him a pressing case of conscience, which divided the Corinthian Church, as to whether a Christian could join in the usual feasts or sacrifices. His answer is in this passage.

The longest way round is sometimes the shortest way home. The Apostle begins far away from the subject in hand by running a contrast between knowledge and love, and setting the latter first. But his contrast is very relevant to his purpose. Small questions should be solved on great principles.

The first principle laid down by Paul is the superiority of love over knowledge, the bearing of which on the question in hand will appear presently. We note that there is first a distinct admission of the Corinthians intelligence, though there is probably a tinge of irony in the language We know that we all have knowledge. You Corinthians are fully aware that you are very superior people. Whatever else you know, you know that, and I fully recognise it.

The admission is followed by a sudden, sharp comment, to which the Corinthians knowledge that they knew laid them open. Swift as the thrust of a spear comes flashing Knowledge puffeth up. Puffed-up things are swollen by wind only, and the more they are inflated the hollower and emptier they are; and such a sharp point as Paul's saying shrivels them. The statement is not meant as the assertion of a necessary or uniform result of knowledge, but it does put plainly a very usual result of it, if it is unaccompanied by love. It is a strange, sad result of superior intelligence or acquirements, that it so often leads to conceit, to a false estimate of the worth and power of knowing, to a ridiculous over-valuing of certain acquirements, and to an insolent contempt and cruel disregard of those who have them not. Paul's dictum has been only too well confirmed by experience.

Love builds up, or edifies. Probably the main direction in which that building up is conceived of as taking effect, is in aiding the progress of our neighbours, especially in the religious life. But the tendency of love to rear a fair fabric of personal character is not to be overlooked. In regard to effect on character, the palm must be given to love, which produces solid excellence far beyond what mere knowledge can effect. Further, that pluming one's self on knowledge is a sure proof of ignorance. The more real our acquirements, the more they disclose our deficiencies. All self-conceit hinders us from growing intellectually or morally, and intellectual conceit is the worst kind of it.

Very significantly, love to God, and not the simple emotion of love without reference to its object, is opposed to knowledge; for love so directed is the foundation of all excellence, and of all real love to men. Love to God is not the antithesis of true knowledge, but it is the only victorious antagonist of the conceit of knowing. Very significantly, too, does Paul vary his conclusion in verse 3 by saying that the man who loves God is known of Him, instead of, as we might have expected, knows Him. The latter is true, but the statement in the verse puts more strongly the thought of the man's being an object of God's care. In regard, then, to their effects on character, in producing consideration and helpfulness to others, and in securing God's protection, love stands first, and knowledge second.

What has all this to do with the question in hand? This, that if looked at from the standpoint of knowledge, it may be solved in one way, but if from that of love, it will be answered in another. So, in verses 4-6, Paul treats the matter on the ground of knowledge. The fundamental truth of Christianity, that there is one God, who is revealed and works through Jesus Christ, was accepted by all the Corinthians. Paul states it here broadly, denying that there were any objective realities answering to the popular conceptions or poetic fancies or fair artistic presentments of the many gods and lords of the Greek pantheon, and asserting that all Christians recognise one God, the Father, from whom the universe of worlds and living things has origin, and to whom we as Christians specially belong, and one Lord, the channel through whom all divine operations of creation, providence, and grace flow, and by whose redeeming work we Christians are endowed with our best life. If a believer was fully convinced of these truths, he could partake of sacrificial feasts without danger to himself, and without either sanctioning idolatry or being tempted to return to it.

No doubt it was on this ground that an idol was nothing that the laxer party defended their action in eating meat offered to idols; and Paul fully recognises that they had a strong case, and that, if there were no other considerations to come in, the answer to the question of conscience submitted to him would be wholly in favour of the less scrupulous section. But there is something better than knowledge; namely, love. And its decision must be taken before the whole material for a judgment is in evidence.

Therefore, in the remainder of the chapter, Paul dwells on loving regard for brethren. In verse 7, he reminds the knowing Corinthians that new convictions do not obliterate the power of old associations. The awful fascination of early belief still exercises influence. The chains are not wholly broken off. Every mission field shows examples of this. Every man knows that habits are not so suddenly overcome, that there is no hankering after them or liability to relapse. It would be a dangerous thing for a weak believer to risk sharing in an idol feast; for he would be very likely to slide down to his old level of belief, and Zeus or Pallas to seem to him real powers once more.

The considerations in verse 7 would naturally be followed by the further thoughts in verse 9, etc. But, before dealing with these, Paul interposes another thought in verse 8, to the effect that partaking of or abstinence from any kind of food will not, in itself, either help or hinder the religious life. The bearing of that principle on his argument seems to be to reduce the importance of the whole question, and to suggest that, since eating of idol sacrifices could not be called a duty or a means of spiritual progress, the way was open to take account of others weakness as determining our action in regard to it. A modern application may illustrate the point. Suppose that a Christian does not see total abstinence from intoxicants to be obligatory on him. Well, he cannot say that drinking is so, or that it is a religious duty, and so the way is clear for urging regard to others weakness as an element in the case.

That being premised, Paul comes to his final point; namely, that Christian men are bound to restrict their liberty so that they shall not tempt weaker brethren on to a path on which they cannot walk without stumbling. He has just shown the danger to such of partaking of the sacrificial feasts. He now completes his position by showing, in verse 10, that the stronger man's example may lead the weaker to do what he cannot do innocently. What is harmless to us may be fatal to others, and, if we have led them to it, their blood is on our heads.

The terrible discordance of such conduct with our Lord's example, which should be our law, is forcibly set forth in verse 11, which has three strongly emphasised thoughts--the man's fate--he perishes; his relation to his slayer--a brother; what Christ did for the man whom a Christian has sent to destruction--died for him. These solemn thoughts are deepened in verse 12, which reminds us of the intimate union between the weakest and Christ, by which He so identifies Himself with them that any blow struck on them touches Him.

There is no greater sin than to tempt weak or ignorant Christians to thoughts or acts which their ignorance or weakness cannot entertain or do without damage to their religion. There is much need for laying that truth to heart in these days. Both in the field of speculation and of conduct, Christians, who think that they know so much better than ignorant believers, need to be reminded of it.

So Paul, in verse 13, at last answers the question. His sudden turning to his own conduct is beautiful. He will not so much command others, as proclaim his own determination. He does so with characteristic vehemence and hyperbole. No doubt the liberal party in Corinth were ready to complain against the proposal to restrict their freedom because of others weakness; and they would be disarmed, or at least silenced, and might be stimulated to like noble resolution, by Paul's example.

The principle plainly laid down here is as distinctly applicable to the modern question of abstinence from intoxicants. No one can doubt that moderation in their use by some tempts others to use which soon becomes fatally immoderate. The Church has been robbed of promising members thereby, over and over again. How can a Christian man cling to a moderate use of these things, and run the risk of destroying by his example a brother for whom Christ died?