

Lutherans have a history of being well-educated. Our founder, Martin Luther, was well-educated. He nearly finished university with a law degree. Decided instead to become a monk. And then subsequently went back to university to receive his doctorate in theology.

After which he became a highly respected professor at the University of Wittenberg. And the author of literally thousands of pages of Biblical commentary and theological study. He was a well-educated man.

And that has continued to this day. Lutheran pastors have some of the highest academic requirements of any denomination. Lutherans continue to have a sizable network of parochial grade schools, high schools, and colleges.

Lutherans have an extensive, well-developed systematic theology, rooted in Scripture and the Book of Concord. In fact, I had a Methodist pastor once tell me that Lutheran theology sounded rather boring to him, because all the questions have already been answered. I assure you, they haven't... but all of the important ones certainly have.

Lutherans have a history of being well-educated. But that's actually a double-edged sword. And St Paul shows us the danger of relying on our knowledge in our Epistle lesson today.

This epistle is actually an interesting bit of Roman history and culture. It addresses the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols. Now, for us, this is a completely irrelevant topic, but for the Corinthians Paul was writing to, it was vitally important. An issue of daily consequence. Because meat sacrificed to idols was a huge part of their culture and economy.

That meat could be found in two forms. First, it could be found in a temple itself. Corinth was a major city of Greece, filled with temples to various Greco-Roman deities. And much like our own church has a fellowship hall that it used for both religious and social purposes, these temples could be used for both worshipping a god or goddess and celebrating a wedding reception or birthday party.

When such a celebration took place, the host would bring in a sacrificial animal. A pig, goat, or fattened calf, for instance. The animal would be slaughtered. And then the meat divided into three portions. One portion for the god whose temple you were in. One portion for the temple priests who worked there, as a sort of rental fee for using the space. And one portion for the gathered guests to eat at the party.

The Christians of Corinth were being invited to these parties. Their family and friends still worshipped these false gods. And invited these Christians to join in their celebrations thinking that the Christian God was yet another in a vast pantheon of gods that could be worshipped. And therefore, what's the big deal? It's just a party. Come eat with us.

The other way that meat sacrificed to idols could be a problem was in the marketplace. Because plenty of people made sacrifices at temples for reasons other than having a party. They wanted a god's blessing. They wanted to lift a perceived curse. They just wanted to be a pious follower.

And so they would go and make an offering to Zeus, Athena, Artemis, or whatever other deity they wanted to appease. And then, after the animal was dead and the ceremony complete, the priests would be left with a large quantity of valuable meat. Which they would then sell in the market, or even give away to the poor as an act of charity. Some historians believe that the majority of the meat eaten in Greco-Roman cities was originally sacrificed to a god or goddess. It was everywhere.

Which meant that not eating that meat took a conscious effort on the part of the buyer to find out where the meat had come from before they bought it. And probably end up spending more to buy from sources that didn't sell temple meat.

How did the Corinthians deal with this situation? Well frankly, not very well. Because they have used a used a machete to dissect a situation that requires a scalpel.

They have taken the viewpoint that they know the one true God. They know that Zeus, Athena, and Artemis aren't real. They know that this idol is nothing but a lump of wood or stone or metal. They know that this meat is just meat. It didn't change just because it was sacrificed to a false god. They are well-educated in the scriptures. They know the truth.

And, in one sense, they're right. They do know the one true God. Zeus, Athena, and Artemis aren't real. Idols are just lumps of wood, stone, and metal. Meat is meat, and God doesn't really care where it comes from. *"Food will not commend us to God,"* Paul says to them.

All of this is true. And yet, they are still wrong. Dead wrong. Why? Because knowledge isn't everything. In fact, as I said, knowledge is a double-edged sword.

Knowledge does teach us many things. Knowledge is a wonderful tool. But knowledge also "puffs up," Paul says. It makes us arrogant. It makes us selfish.

And that is where the Corinthians have gone wrong. Because they have taken all their knowledge and become tremendously selfish and prideful. Such that they can't even see the people around them who they are hurting by their actions.

They are blind to the family and friends who see them show up to these temples parties and think to themselves, "Oh, so they do worship just another god in our pantheon. Well, that's a relief. I was actually wondering if their was anything different about their religion."

They are blind to the family and friends, just recently baptized and brought into the faith, who show up in their own homes for dinner and see sitting on the table a pork roast, branded with the symbol Zeus, and think to themselves, "Wait... I thought they were Christians? How can they eat that? They're hypocrites! Can I trust anything they've told me about the faith?"

The Christians of Corinth couldn't see anyone else but themselves. They couldn't see anything but their own desire for parties and cheap meat. They were selfish. And that selfishness hurt the people around them. It led into doubt and false belief and division in the church.

This passage gets used by Christians as an analogy to lots of different things in our society. Some valid, some not. Just last week, our Bible class was energetically debating whether it applied to something like serving alcohol at a church function. I'm not sure it does apply, but I'm not going to go off on that tangent today.

No, I'd rather focus on that first verse of the passage. The one we rarely seem to quote: *"Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."* Knowledge is inherently selfish. It's trapped in your own head. It's helpful to you, but no one else.

As Lutherans, we tend to be very well-educated in the scriptures. We know the Bible. We know Luther's Catechism. We know all sorts of tidbits of doctrine and practice. I don't know if you even realize how much better educated in the scriptures you are than many of your fellow Christians just because you had to go through a catechism class.

But only through love does that knowledge help someone else. Because we share our knowledge with others out of love for them. We apply our knowledge in this world, in our words and actions, out of love for the people around us.

Knowledge without love is arrogance. It's selfish. It's a means to feel superior to others. A reason to look down on the world. An excuse to tear down our neighbor, because we know better.

If you, as a Christian, have knowledge without love, then you know nothing. Because you don't

know the love of Jesus, who knew everything. Literally everything. And yet, laid down his life in love for us.

On the other hand, love is the best form of knowledge. Because to love God is to be known by God. We don't need to know everything in order to love God. Because once he knows us, then we love him.

Once we are his child through baptism and faith in his Word, then we have all the knowledge we need. Because, at that point, we know the Gospel. We know the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the dead, and the eternal life that he has bought for us.

Lutherans have a history of being well-educated. And that's a good thing. It's good to know God's Word. It's good to study the catechism and the Lutheran Confessions. It's to be well-versed in the church fathers and the history of the church. It's good to receive an education.

But the real question is, "Why are we becoming well-educated?" Because education simply to acquire knowledge is pointless. In fact, it's less than pointless. Sometimes it's downright sinful.

But education to help others? Education to serve our neighbor and help him learn the faith? Education that builds up the church in love, so that we might be a blessing to others? That's doing the work of Christ.

Because to be well-educated is good. But to be loving is even better. Amen.