

"It's not what you know. It's who you know."

Years ago, joining a Presbyterian church was a best business practice. If the boss or the owner attended, a wise employee came as well. We were the place to make the right connections with the right people. It was social networking – 20th century style.

Time has marched on, yet the enduring value of relationships remains. It's as true now as it's ever been that "it's not what you know. It's who you know."

And yet, we sacrifice relationships for the sake of being right. We value what we know above who we know. Push comes to shove, and we shove rather than embrace.

It's not our best church practice, but it is the history of the church – 1054 AD the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches split over the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and their understanding of papal authority; The Patriarch of Constantinople, Michael I and Pope Leo IX excommunicate each other. 16th Century, the Roman Catholics expel the Protestants led by Martin Luther and John Calvin primarily over the doctrine of salvation by grace and the authority of Scripture versus papal authority.

Presbyterian history is particularly disfigured by division. Our presence in Reading reflects that. The Presbyterian Church split over slavery in 1857. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church split off from the Northern Church in the 1930's due to disagreement over the teaching of evolution, the inerrancy of Scripture, and changes in the Westminster Confession. The Presbyterian Church in America split from the Southern branch of the Presbyterian Church over the ordination of women. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church split off from the Northern branch for the same reason.

You may have read recently about a new Presbyterian group. The Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians. At this point, they have not split from the Presbyterian Church USA; they are not a new denomination as has been erroneously reported, but their stated aim is: "As an expression of The Fellowship of Presbyterians, ECO seeks to serve the ministry and mission of Christ's Church. Our name represents a three-fold commitment to make disciples of Jesus Christ (Evangelical), connect leaders through accountable biblical relationships founded in God's grace (Covenant), and commit to a shared way of life together (Order). The acronym ECO also speaks to our commitment to strengthen the "ecosystems" of local churches, providing the resources needed to grow, thrive, and reproduce."¹ It all sounds good. These are commitments I and I suspect most Presbyterians could joyously make. But, the presenting issue which sparked the genesis of this group was the change in our Form of Government that allows the ordination of homosexuals, so we will see where this group leads.

What do we do when we disagree? How do we handle it when one person's freedom violates another person's conscience? None of the divisions I've described occurred over minor matters, but historians have observed that the failure of the church to remain united in the midst of our disagreement about

¹ <http://www.fellowship-pres.org/evangelical-covenant-order/>

slavery was a factor that led to the Civil War. In these anxious and divisive times, will we help lead our nation through the stress and strain, or will we get dragged down and perhaps drag our nation with us? "It's not what you know. It's who you know."

✦ What You Know

My New Testament professor Paul Achtemeier said in class one day that you could preach on any conflict in the church from 1 & 2 Corinthians. Controversy and Corinth were the proverbial birds of a feather that flock together.

The presenting issue in Corinth was eating meat sacrificed to idols. Some felt free; others felt that for a Christian to eat meat sacrificed to an idol was to participate in the worship of that idol; worship that rightly belongs only to God, because *1 Corinthians 8:6 (NRSV) ... 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.*²

The theology of this second group is sound. Paul agrees – one God, one Lord.

The theology of the first group is also sound. *1 Corinthians 8:4 (NRSV) Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one."*³

Conflicts are easy to resolve when one group knows what's right and the other group is wrong. Things get complicated when both groups know what is right but draw different conclusions from what they know. If we continue to try to "win" by proving that "we're right and they're wrong," the conflict can escalate quickly and tear us apart. This is the tragic history of the Presbyterian Church; this is the tragic history of interfaith relations that justified crusades and jihads. This is the blasphemy that convinces us to kill in the name of God. We'll blow up an abortion clinic and the people in it to save unborn lives. What? We'll tell people with AIDS that this is God's punishment for their sin. What? Dear God, save the world from a Church that knows we're right.

Before we go one step further, before I say another word, we need to confess that they (whoever they may be, the people with whom we disagree) they aren't the only ones who think this way. We do too. "We're right and they're wrong" isn't just a sin of history or a sin of those across some partisan divide. It is our sin; your sin and my sin.

What do we do when we disagree? How do we handle it when my freedom violates your conscience? Remember what you know. Confess your sin. "Knowledge puffs up." Admit your pride. "There is no God but one," and we're not God. Remember what you know. Be humble. They could be right too.

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

³ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

✦ Who You Know

What you know is important. Who you know is more important. Connections count. Building the relationship matters more than being right.

Paul makes the distinction: *1 Corinthians 8:1 (NRSV) Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*⁴

When push comes to shove, Paul won't shove. Paul embraces. "Love builds up." In a few chapters he'll teach us that love "does not insist on its own way.... It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." For Paul, it is more important to love than to be right. It is more important to build the relationship that is the Church, the body of Christ, than for all of us to agree on what is right.

This respect for one another is a Presbyterian core value. The Westminster Confession is quoted in the Foundations section of our New Form of Government. It's a section that has guided the Presbyterian Church since the 1700's.

"God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything *contrary to his Word, or beside it* in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also" (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 6.109, emphasis added).

So how is it that a denomination that professes "God alone is Lord of the conscience" can have such a record of un-reconciled conflict?

Like the Corinthians, we valued what we know more than who we know. We'd rather be right than remain in relationship with one another.

But, "*knowledge puffs up...love builds up.*" It's not what you know. It's who you know.

We know one another, and we know God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul's concern is one that all too often gets lost in our rush to be right. *1 Corinthians 8:12 (NRSV) But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.*⁵

⁴ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

⁵ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

When we trample over one another because we have to be right, we step on someone for whom Christ died. When we divide so we can conquer, we do damage to the body of Christ, the Church; we forget who we know, *1 Corinthians 8:6 (NRSV) ... 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.*⁶

Paul models what this means. He doesn't tell the Corinthians what they should do. He doesn't try to set them straight so they get it right. To do that would be to fall into the old familiar trap. Instead, he says what he will do. He takes responsibility for himself. Is it right to eat meat sacrificed to idols? Is it wrong to still take seriously what happens in the temple to a false god? That's not Paul's priority. Paul's priority is "*love builds up,*" and if a behavior does not build up the body of Christ, he won't do it.

What if we followed in Paul's footsteps? What if when push came to shove, we chose to embrace? We chose to honor the conscience and convictions of those with whom we disagree? We chose to worship the one God we know through Jesus Christ our Lord whom we meet in one another?

"God alone is Lord of the conscience." "*Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*" When push comes to shove, don't shove; embrace. Remaining in relationship is more important than being right. "It's not what you know. It's who you know." Amen.

⁶ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.