

An article that appeared in *Fortune* magazine last October was titled, “The 15 Most Influential Websites.” I was curious, so I read it. Your personal favorites may not be on the list, but here are the top five:

#5. YouTube - Watching videos on the Internet seems obvious since every device is basically a smaller flat screen TV. But it took YouTube to show the world that anyone could be a video star. Just as early blogging platforms made everyone a critic, YouTube turned anyone with a smartphone into a video producer. The impact has been immeasurable, both for better and worse.

#4. Facebook - Founded by Mark Zuckerberg in the early 2000s as a way to profile Harvard classmates, it has become the world’s largest social network. More than 2 billion users frequent the platform monthly. Facebook has evolved to a medium through which both news and propaganda flow freely, mingling in ways that often make it difficult to tell one from the other. Facebook has pledged to do battle with so-called “fake news,” and says it’s refining the site’s processes to mitigate the spread of misinformation.

#3. Wikipedia - While your high school teachers and college professors may have taught you to doubt Wikipedia’s reliability, its rise to prominence is undeniable. With five million English entries, Wikipedia has become the de facto Internet encyclopedia. That said, articles can be edited by anyone with Internet access, making it susceptible to bias and inaccuracy.

#2. Amazon - Amazon in 2017 is a retail and technology behemoth, selling everything from salad dressing to server space. But it began as a humble online bookseller. The company may not have pioneered concepts like browsing a digital “store” or filling up an online “shopping cart,” but the site helped e-commerce break into the mainstream. Amazon accounts for 5% of U.S. retail sales today. And (drum roll)...

#1. Google - Since 1998, Google has become so ingrained in our vernacular that Merriam Webster added it to the dictionary as a transitive verb. The multinational tech firm has become synonymous with the notion of searching anything. You don’t “look something up online,” you “Google” it. It is the web’s most pervasive search tool, accounting for 97% of the mobile search engine market and 79% of desktop search engine use.

In case you’re anti-technology, this is how people gather knowledge in 2018, no matter how specious it may be, everything from Match.com to Shakespeare’s sonnets. People today tend to think that more knowledge is always a good thing. But is it? Paul seems to say to the Corinthians that knowledge isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. If we go back to 1 Corinthians 7:1 we will find that Paul intones, “*Now for the matters you wrote about,*” suggesting that he is responding to a previous request for guidance. Therefore, some historical context for the question at hand would be helpful.

“*Now about food sacrificed to idols...*” What in the world is Paul talking about? In the ancient Roman world pagan priests were often the local butchers. Thus, the meat for purchase usually had been offered to a god (small g) in sacrifice before it was sold to the public. People in the Corinthian church were divided over this practice, so Paul weaves their slogans into his response. The folks with “knowledge” seem to be those who claim that no idol, meaning the god represented by the idol, really exists. This is true of course,

but these people who possess knowledge seem to be exercising their knowledge without consideration of other believers. Their knowledge is producing arrogance instead of Christian love.

In the Christian faith, knowledge isn't the only factor to consider when making moral decisions. Love demands that we ponder how our behavior affects others. If one is going to possess knowledge, then one needs to view knowledge more broadly than just harmless information. Knowledge also has to be considered in terms of knowing God and being known by God.

As people think about meat, idols, and gods, Paul admits that the claims of many pagan idols and gods surrounded the Corinthian Christians. Paul refers to them as "*so-called gods*," (with a little g) because he affirms the belief that there is only ONE God, our heavenly Father, and ONE Lord, Jesus who is the mediator of God's grace. Yet not every Christian in Corinth realizes there is only one God, and many of the newest believers have just left paganism and in their minds the meat is associated with pagan idols. If they were to eat meat offered to idols, they would not be acting in accordance with their conscience.

People who realize that eating or not eating is irrelevant because there are no real gods to compete with the true God must take their decisions a step further and ask themselves if their eating will cause new believers difficulty. Their eating could even lead a newer Christian to eat food they still believe is associated with pagan gods and ruin their faith. Christ did not free us so we could flaunt our liberty and do anything we please. Would "strong" believers insist on eating food offered to idols if they knew it could destroy faith of a "weaker" Christian? Paul goes so far as to identify this casual eating and disregarding the faith of weaker believers as sin. Remember that Christ died for the "weaker" person—and if Paul were in the same circumstances he would, for the sake of the "weaker" Christian, not eat any meat that had been part of a pagan sacrifice.

The Corinthians have a motto that Paul responds to and which he quotes: "*We all possess knowledge.*" Well OK, we all possess noses too. What does that have to do with the current dilemma? This is how Paul responds: "*Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*" Did all of us smart, informed and sophisticated 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians hear that? "Knowledge" here means an informed conscience. The verb "possess" means "to inflate...or to make conceited." In human relationships a person's knowledge of anything, even of spiritual matters, does not guarantee that such knowledge leads them to gracious, caring interactions with others. Knowledge can also be used as a weapon to hurt others or as an excuse to care only for our own needs or wants. Love in human relationships, however, ensures that in some way the other person is given consideration and will come out better in the end.

"*But not everyone possesses this knowledge,*" Paul goes on to say in verse 7. Jayne mentioned to me recently that there are still students in the Blackhawk School District where she teaches who do not have Wi-Fi or even a personal computer to use in their home. We can't assume that everyone has the same knowledge or even the basic information that we have. How do some Corinthians describe the food sacrificed to idols that Paul is talking about? "*Defiled.*" That word's literal definition is "to cause something to become dirty or soiled." The spiritual extension of this means "to cause something to be ritually impure." Paul is describing the actions of the "strong" causing pain and anguish for the "weak." The weak are made to be guilty and, in turn ritually impure, unusable to God, which is the direct opposite of the gospel.

*“For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols?”* Paul asks in verse 10. Often a pagan temple complex would have a banqueting area where believers and guests ate together. Many groups in Roman society (Corinth was a Roman colony) met for social events to eat together. They all had their patron god or gods who were acknowledged and honored in the meal.

Some of them thought the issue of eating food offered to idols could be solved by saying, *“We all possess knowledge”* and part of that knowledge is that *“An idol is nothing at all in the world”* (8:4); it has no real existence since there is only one true God. But Paul makes his case this way: Some have been accustomed to eating idol food and have not yet been “liberated” in Christ from thinking that a real god is associated with the food (8:7-10). So when a Christian who is liberated eats in an idol’s temple (8:10), it could be devastating to a newly converted Christian (8:11-13). Paul’s plea is simple enough: “Please give consideration to your brothers and sisters in Christ.”

In Paul’s day Christians naturally began to substitute the Lord’s Supper when they gathered together as the central meal of the new Christian family. But Paul does not lay down a law, which he does do in other instances. He explains how love for one another will lead us to make the most helpful decisions when it comes to our moral behavior. Paul does not allow the weak to manipulate the strong, but merely counsels that the stronger Christians consider the most loving thing to do under the circumstances.

The principle that Paul gives the Corinthians for handling this issue can help churches in any century and in any place because it applies to a variety of circumstances. For example, we Christians might agree that there are activities and actions that are always right for everyone. Such as, it’s always right to tell the truth, to love your neighbor, to serve those in need, to worship God.

At the same time, there are certain activities on which most all Christians agree are always wrong for everyone. The “Thou shalt nots” from the Ten Commandments come to mind. But there are many questions about behavior where there is no clear biblical injunction, such as social drinking or how Christians are to keep the Sabbath. Often the gray areas are a reflection of the culture or the times and have little to do with biblical faith.

Because Christians today have different opinions on many issues, if Paul were writing to the church today he might say: “We all possess opinions.” But our opinions should never be our guiding principle. Love is the one and only guiding principle for all of our actions in the church and out in the world. If we love one another and we prize the fellowship of the church, we will not let our differences become a source of division.

I think Paul may have sensed as he wrote this letter that those who would be hearing it might push back and say to him, “That’s not fair. We’re the ones who are right, yet we’re the ones who have to give in.” So in verse 13 he speaks very plainly to them in the first person. He answers the thing he anticipates by pointing out that *in his own life* he would never make food something that *“causes a brother or sister to fall into sin.”*

Paul personally lived what he was recommending to the Corinthians.

He practiced what he preached.

That should mean something. Amen.