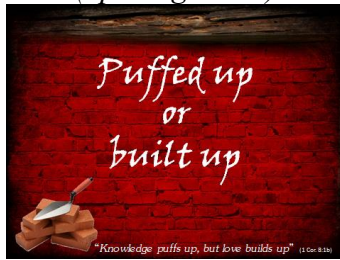


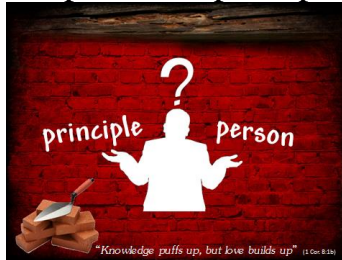
# Puffed up or Built up

2/2/15 1 Cor. 8:1-13 LGVCOB

(opening slide:)

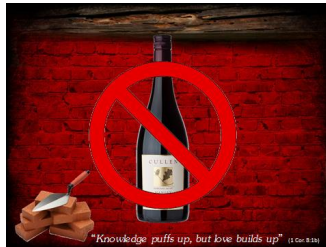


What is most important: a principle or a person?



It's not an irrelevant thing to ask, especially at a time when convictions are being tried in distant lands, as well in nearby school hallways. What is most important: a principle or a person?

Back in the 1800s, the Brethren encountered a movement in this nation



which called for the prohibition of alcohol as an evil which was destroying our society. Now basically, Brethren have always been fairly conservative.



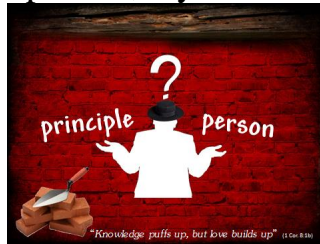
Back then they were still among the plain people, like the Amish. Being conservative, they did not take to jumping onto political bandwagons - such as this new



Temperance movement. Eventually the old Brethren accepted the principles of

this movement as their own, and it is still the official Brethren position that we ought to abstain from things harmful, and be moderate in all others. It's a helpful principle to live by.

However, what is most important, my friends:

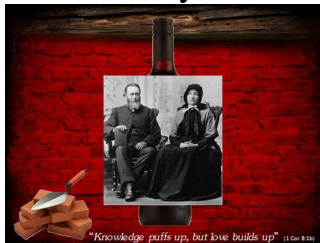


a principle or a person? In reading the historical record, we discover how those who went before us came to their conclusions. Might this help us find our way today? Our denominational forbearers did wrestle a great deal over the use of alcohol, particularly in relation to the wine of communion.

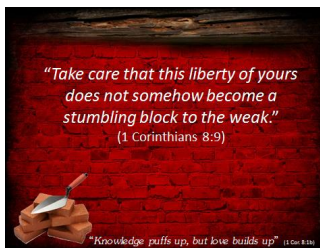


Back and forth they went on whether or not wine should be used, some saying that - as a harmful substance - it had no place in the church; others asserting that the Bible said Jesus used wine and not grape juice.

You know what finally decided the issue?

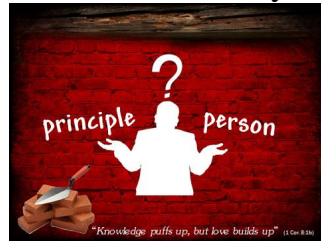


It was the concern for brothers and sisters who were recovering alcoholics, and the temptation that wine during communion might present to them, personally. In fact, it was this scripture which provided guidance in the matter.



*Take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak,* Paul wrote to the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 8:9). The Brethren

decided, when it came to alcohol, that the person was more important than the principal in coming to a conclusion. But what do you think?



Which is more important, the principle or the person?

There was another movement in the 1800s which helped provoke a war. The issue was slavery. Many were the voices calling for its abolition.

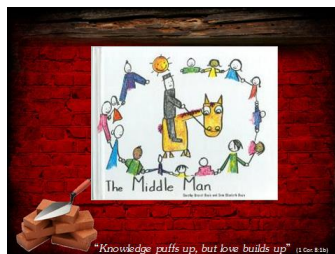


Our friends, the Quakers, were at the forefront. But, again, the Brethren, being somewhat conservative, were not ones to jump on any bandwagon. Of course, Brethren did not believe in holding slaves. Upon joining the church, new brethren were required to free their slaves. That was a principle they lived by.

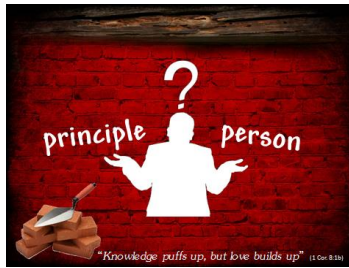


The general agreement on this issue prevented our church from splitting into northern and southern factions during the civil war, unlike many other denominations - that and our belief that a Christian should not participate in war.

But it wasn't just a principle that held us together, it was more personal than that. A lot of it had to do with a man



who criss-crossed the battle lines between north and south to keep lines of communication open among the Brethren. As a medical Doctor, he ministered to wounded on both sides. Perhaps you recognize the story of John Kline, who finally was shot, as he traveled, by confederate soldiers who considered this Virginian a traitor.



What is most important: a principle or a person? I had to ask myself that question back when I was in Brethren Volunteer Service.

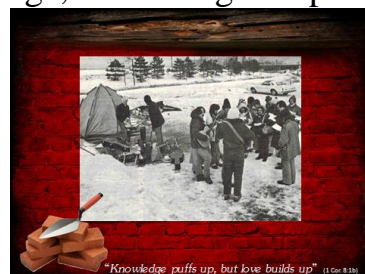


Fresh out of college, I went to work on a peace education team, what was called a "peace caravan," touring the Midwest, talking with Brethren, Mennonite and Quaker youth and adults about our common peace witness. In the course of that year I got to know a great many people in the wider "peace" movement.

Somehow, in the course of that year, it was discovered in Chicago that several defense contractors were planning to hold an arms bazaar near O'Hare airport. They called it "Defense Technology '79," and invited representatives from third-world nations to come and see and buy the latest hardware for their militaries. I became involved in planning a protest of the affair, representing our three denominations.



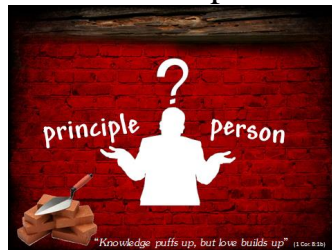
This question came to my mind a lot - What is most important: principles or people? Certainly, there were many folks in the peace movement in Chicago with whom I just did not agree. Many operated out of theologies or philosophies very different from my own. Some were very "un-peaceful" in how they acted and lived. Others were burdened with deep scars. I can still see one Vietnam veteran's face, who was filled with an inner rage, as he sought to prevent war.



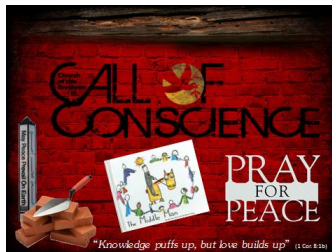
The bazaar took place in January, and three of us decided to camp out in the

parking lot of the convention center as a 24-hour-a-day witness. I wrestled with that decision. I was not comfortable with many of the protest methods others were planning. Perhaps, like a good Brethren, I felt funny about jumping onto political bandwagons. The three of us were Christians, though. One was there, he said, to witness for Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. The other wanted to represent the poor people in the third world whose governments would spend money there on weapons and not food. I, well, when I finally decided, I was there with a concern for the people involved: the protesters, the police, the participants in the arms bazaar.

As far as I was concerned, some of the best witnessing happened around our campfire in that frigid January weather. The police thought we were nuts but they came and talked, though they never left the warmth of their car. In the process, we became friends. People just dropped by, like one fellow who wasn't sure why he was there. We discussed convictions, and also, unplanned, we spoke about Jesus - and then he knew why he came. It was an experience I won't forget.



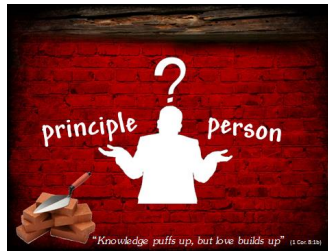
But even now, I still ask the question. What is most important: a principle or a person? Convictions, the things we believe - that which we live by - these are important.



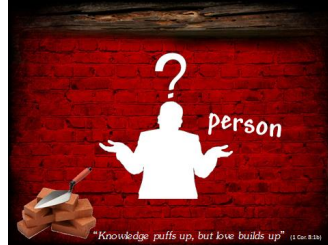
I believe very strongly that war is a sin, no matter what righteous reasons are given to justify it. This is a principle by which I live. It has been the position of our denomination. But this conviction rests not on its intrinsic value as a philosophy, its ability to stand alone and be judged on its own merits. No, this principle rests in, it depends upon, it finds its truth in a person ó



Jesus of Nazareth. The One who is called the Prince of Peace.

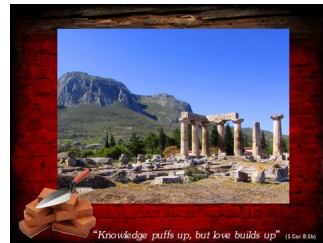


So then, what is most important: a principle or a person?

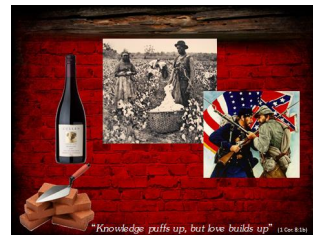


I must answer that ultimately it is a person.

When the apostle Paul wrote to the followers of Jesus in Corinth,



he essentially said as much. Now, the issue in that instance was not alcohol, nor slavery, nor war and peace.



But the guidance given by Paul applies beyond the issue with which those folks were struggling. Whether or not to eat food that had been offered to idols

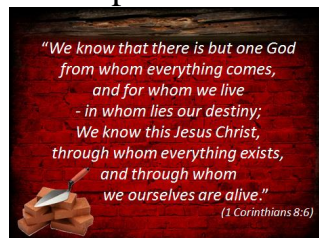


was a burning concern for Christians in first century Corinth, to be sure. However, we have a hard time catching what their problem was, as we stand here in twenty first century Baltimore.

To the folks in Corinth who knew the truth, and the truth had set them free, Paul sent a reminder that the truth is not just a principle, a basic philosophy by which to live.

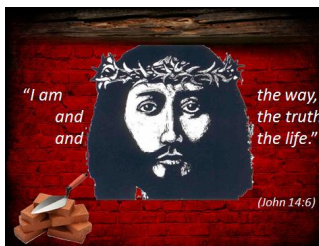


Unless our knowledge of truth is grounded in a personal understanding of God's love, it merely inflates the ego. By this I mean that the truth is not just a principle, or a set of convictions. It is centered in a person.

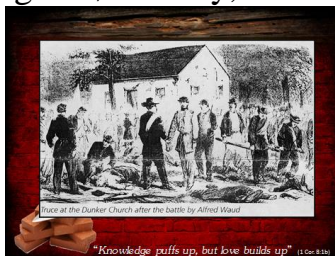


*“We know,”* wrote Paul, *“that there is but one God from whom everything comes, and for whom we live - in whom lies our destiny; We know this Jesus Christ, through whom everything exists, and through whom we ourselves are alive.”* (1 Corinthians 8:6)

*“You shall know the truth,”* Jesus had said, *“and the truth shall set you free.”* (John 8:32) The truth is not just a principle, or a set of convictions - the truth is a person.



*“I am the way, and the truth, and the life,”* he said (John 14:6). Because it is centered in Jesus Christ, this truth by which we live becomes personal all the way around. When it comes to loving one's enemy,

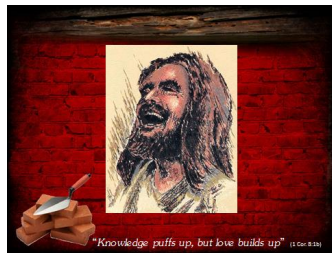


as Jesus called us to do, this love is not an abstract notion. It is a guiding principle

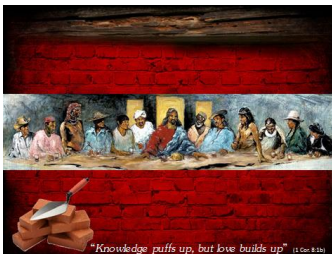
that is really a person. Thus, when our convictions are grounded in this love of God in Jesus Christ, we are empowered to see those who oppose us in a whole different light. In fact, we see ourselves differently, also.



Now, I'm not just talking about enemies ÷over there.ö I speak also of the growing conflict between opposing camps ÷over here.ö It's very important that we keep our principles in perspective. How can we do that? As a follower of Jesus,



I place him ahead of my principles. In this way the door is opened to the possibility of living in peace with my neighbors, near or far, friend or foe. Face it, I am not all that peaceful a person. If the principles by which I live are not centered in Jesus there's no way I could ever even listen to someone with whom I disagree.

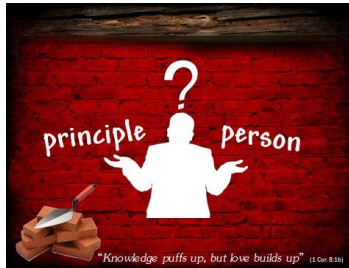


But because my principles are centered in a person, because my convictions are personal, and by that I don't mean private, but rather based in a relationship that keeps me humble, that daily reminds me of who I am as a human being created by God, and who others are - also human beings created by God; because my principles are personal, because of this powerful relationship, a door is open for me to treat even a bully with dignity and respect, and care about his or her well-being.





It is good to have principles, to live by deeply held convictions. Without them we would be lost. Our society is in need of people of conviction. Even so, it is the tendency of principles to puff us up with self-importance, such that we place our convictions above everything else, as well as everyone else. Without love, our principles are just hot air. *“Love builds up,”* said the apostle Paul - something we need to remember every day.



So, let me ask you one last time, what is most important to you: a principle or a person?