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Introduction

The First Epistle to the Corinthians offers a profound and intimate look into the challenges of a first-century Christian community. Situated in the bustling, cosmopolitan port city of Corinth—a place notorious for its wealth, diversity, and moral laxity—the church was a microcosm of its environment. Comprised of converts from various pagan, Jewish, and philosophical backgrounds, the community struggled to translate their new faith into a coherent, holy, and unified way of life. The letter, written by the Apostle Paul around AD 55, is a pastoral response to reports and letters he received from them. It is not a systematic theological treatise but a practical, urgent, and sometimes sharply corrective guide for a church in crisis. Paul addresses a wide array of issues, from deep theological errors to practical matters of worship and ethics, consistently anchoring his solutions in the supremacy of Christ, the call to love, and the imperative for holiness.

Problem: Factionalism and Personality Cults

1. Description: The church was splintering into rival groups, pledging allegiance to different apostolic figures: Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter), and a self-righteous "Christ" group. This reflected the Greco-Roman love for rhetorical competition and philosophical schools, turning Christian leaders into brands and fostering spiritual pride.

Paul's Address (1 Corinthians 1:10-4:21): Paul pleads for unity, condemning the "quarrels" among them. He dismantles the foundation of their pride by pointing to the "foolishness" of the cross, which subverts all human wisdom. He declares that their leaders are merely servants ("I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth"), and that their allegiance belongs to Christ alone, the true foundation.

2. Problem: Toleration of Blatant Sexual Immorality

Description: A man was in an incestuous relationship with his stepmother, an act condemned even by pagan standards. Instead of mourning this sin, the church was arrogantly proud of their "tolerance," confusing grace with permissiveness.

Paul's Address (1 Corinthians 5): Paul delivers a stern rebuke, commanding the church to assemble and excommunicate the man ("hand this man over to Satan"). The purpose is remedial: "so that his spirit may be saved." He uses the metaphor of leaven, warning that a little sin, if left unchecked, will corrupt the entire congregation.

3. Problem: Lawsuits Before Pagan Courts

Description: Believers were taking their legal disputes against fellow Christians to secular courts. This public litigiousness damaged the church's witness, displayed a lack of internal integrity, and embraced the world's systems of power and revenge.

Paul's Address (1 Corinthians 6:1-11): Paul shames them for this practice, asking why they would let the unrighteous judge matters instead of the "saints." He argues that it is better to be wronged or cheated than to damage the body of Christ. He reminds them of their new identity: they are washed, sanctified, and justified, and must live accordingly.

4. Problem: Confusion over Christian Liberty and Idol Meat

Description: A debate raged over whether it was permissible to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. The "strong," knowing idols were nothing, felt free to eat it. The "weak," with sensitive consciences from their pagan past, were horrified, seeing it as participation in idolatry.

Paul's Address (1 Corinthians 8-10): Paul agrees theologically with the "strong"—an idol is nothing. However, he introduces a higher principle: love for one's brother trumps personal freedom. He famously states that if food causes his brother to fall, he will never eat meat again. Liberty must be curbed by love to avoid destroying a fellow believer for whom Christ died.

5. Problem: Disorder and Selfishness in Worship

Description: Their corporate worship services were chaotic and divisive. This was most starkly seen in the abuse of the Lord's Supper, where the wealthy would eat and drink to excess while humiliating the poor who had nothing. The meal meant to signify unity was instead highlighting class divisions.

Paul's Address (1 Corinthians 11:17-34): Paul declares their gatherings "do more harm than good." He reiterates the sacred tradition of the Last Supper and warns that partaking in an unworthy manner—without discerning the body of Christ (the church)—is to be guilty of sinning against Christ's body and blood.

6. Problem: Misuse of Spiritual Gifts, Especially Tongues

Description: The exercise of spiritual gifts, particularly speaking in tongues, had become a source of pride and disorder. People were speaking in tongues simultaneously without interpretation, creating chaotic services that did not edify or build up unbelievers or the unlearned.

Paul's Address (1 Corinthians 12-14): Paul places the gifts within the framework of the body of Christ (Chapter 12) and the supremacy of love (Chapter 13). In Chapter 14, he provides clear regulations: all gifts must aim for edification; tongues require interpretation and are to be limited in public; prophecy is preferred for its clarity. He concludes, "Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."

7. Problem: Denial of the Bodily Resurrection

Description: Influenced by Greek philosophy that despised the material body, some members denied the future resurrection of the dead. This was a foundational error that, if true, would nullify the Gospel itself.

Paul's Address (1 Corinthians 15): In a masterful theological defense, Paul argues that the resurrection is central to the Gospel. He states that if there is no resurrection, then Christ was not raised, their faith is futile, and they are still in their sins. He presents Christ as the "firstfruits" and explains the nature of the resurrected body as imperishable, glorious, and spiritual.

8. Problem: Issues Related to Marriage and Celibacy

Description: Confusion existed over the status of marriage in the Christian life. Some, perhaps adopting an ascetic view, advocated for sexual abstinence within marriage. Others, possibly reacting to immorality, argued for universal marriage.

Paul's Address (1 Corinthians 7): Paul offers a balanced view, affirming both marriage and celibacy as valid callings. He counsels mutual sexual responsibility within marriage and advises celibacy for those gifted for it, but only as a preference, not a command. His guiding principle is to "live as you were when God called you," serving the Lord in whatever situation you find yourself.

Conclusion

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians stands as a timeless pastoral masterpiece. He does not provide a single, simple fix but rather a comprehensive theological and ethical framework for being the people of God in a challenging world. The solutions he offers consistently point away from the self

and toward Christ, away from individualism and toward the community, and away from license and toward redeemed liberty expressed through love. The problems in Corinth—division, sexual immorality, theological confusion, and worship disorder—are not merely historical artifacts. They are perennial challenges for any Christian community seeking to live out its faith in a complex culture. Paul's response reminds every generation that the church's health, unity, and witness depend on its unwavering fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, applied with wisdom, grace, and a relentless commitment to love.