St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

If one could read only one of Paul’s letters, this should be the choice—not only for its insight into the mind of the Apostle to the Gentiles, but also for his wisdom on issues that are still a matter of concern for us today.

In the first nine verses (1:4-9) the name of Christ occurs nine times. The significance of this is clear as we read on and find that four chapters are devoted to the problem of division and factionalism. Such factions are unacceptable because the believers were baptized in the name of Christ and no other, thus being made the Body of Christ. The oneness of Christ, then, is reflected in the nature of the Church expressed in that metaphor and in its
companion, the temple of the Holy Spirit. To one or the other of those metaphors Paul makes appeal as he deals with the problems of the church at Corinth.

In addition to dealing with the problem of factionalism, the letter also deals with sexual behavior, lawsuits among Christians, marriage, food problems and pagan worship. The letter includes Paul’s account (the earliest we have) of the institution of the Eucharist, the subject of spiritual gifts, the Resurrection of Christ and of the believer, and the famous “hymn of love” in chapter 13.

Paul is clear: factions and parties in the church—whose unity is grounded in Christ and his cross, who is the source of life for the Christian—are unacceptable (1:10-30). Chapter 2 focuses on the wisdom of God revealed through the Spirit. In that connection, Paul employs a daring and revealing analogy between human
spirit and the Holy Spirit (2:1-16), concluding with the affirmation “we have the mind of Christ,” which is the complement to the affirmation of the guidance of the Spirit (2:9-16).

Chapter 3 speaks of the place of the apostles in the life of the Church, includes the basic characterization of the Church as the temple of the Holy Spirit (3:1-17), and ends with the arresting statement, “All things are yours . . . and you are Christ, and Christ is God’s” (3:21-23).

Chapter 4 resumes a statement about the relative position of apostles and believers, including an ironic contrast of their relative experience in the world. He begins by characterizing apostles as servants and stewards, whom one would expect to be judged by their performance; but Paul rejects any judgment except that of the Lord who knows the secrets of the heart. No one can boast of achievements, for they are a gift from the Lord. That
leads to an ironic comment about the comparative experiences of apostles and believers who should think of themselves as children whom Paul has fathered in the Gospel. They are to imitate him, and like a father he can come to them either “with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness” (4:21).

Beginning in chapter 5 Paul responds to what he has learned from the report of Chloe’s people (1:11) and from a letter written by the Corinthians (7:1). The problems are: a case of incest (5:1); lawsuits among the believers brought before pagan judges (6:1-11); and in 6:12-20, sexual immorality. In dealing with the latter, he lays out his understanding of marriage and extends the metaphor of the Church as the Body of Christ, specifying that the bodies of individual believers are members of Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit. What is true of the Body is true also of individuals in it (6:15 & 19).

The treatment of marriage continues
in chapter 7, and there we find (1) that Paul makes a distinction between what is the command of the Lord (7:10) and his own charge, and (2) the statement that an unbelieving partner is consecrated through the believing one, an implication of the doctrine of 'one flesh' (Genesis 2:24). As to the decision whether or not to marry, that is qualified (as are matters of one's state) by the belief that "the appointed time has grown very short," and, "the form of this world is passing away" (7:29, 31).

In chapter 8, Paul takes up the question of food offered in a pagan sacrifice or of eating in a pagan temple. Since an idol is nothing, there is no harm in eating sacrificed meat—unless if doing so violates the conscience of a fellow-member of the Body (8:13).

In chapter 9, Paul refers to his rights as an apostle, of which he does not avail himself in order to make the Gospel free, all the while giving up his
deserved status in the world in order to be accessible to all. The chapter ends with an allusion to the apostle’s own self-discipline.

One can think of chapter 10 as the powerful overture to a grand composition that extends to the ends of the letter. It begins by invoking the experience of Israel during the Exodus made contemporary in the fashion of the Jewish celebration of that event (Deuteronomy 6:20-25).

The passage through the sea becomes Christian baptism, and Christ is the “Rock,” or living water that flowed from the rock for the Israelites. Here the empirical understanding of time and history goes out the window in favor of a religious, theological understanding of God’s action in history. As in the case of the sea-passage, the manna, and the rock, so the recital of the wilderness experience is understood as something set down in Scripture for the benefit of those who
have entered the new age inaugurated by God in Christ.

The matter of food offered to idols was treated in chapter 8, but now we are told that participation in a religious meal, whether pagan or Christian, is to be understood as something set down in Scripture for the benefit of those who have entered the new age inaugurated by God in Christ. In 10:23-30 Paul picks up a Stoic motto that “all things are lawful” which is undermined by the invocation of the question of conscience, both that of the self and that of the neighbor. Then he lays it on telling them to be imitators of him as he is of Christ (10:31-11:1)

In 11:1-16 Paul endorses a traditional understanding of the relative standing of men and women that bespeaks his own time and circumstances—not ours. The chief thing to remember here is that Paul’s basic and overriding concern is the good repute of the Church living, as it must, in a
hostile, pagan society. He then returns in vss. 17-22 to his condemnation of factions and divisions, this time in connection with the Lord’s Supper. Following that, we have the earliest account of the Eucharist known. It agrees with the gospel accounts except for the addition of 11:26, which points the Eucharist forward to the Second Coming rather than back to the earthly ministry of Jesus. In verses 27-32 there are the notable words identifying the elements of the meal with the Body of Christ.

Chapter 12 has to do with the gifts of the Spirit. All are “baptized into one body, and all are made to drink of one Spirit” (12:13). The gifts of the Spirit are to be exercised “for the common good” (verse 7), which explains the priorities set forth in 14:1-12 and Paul’s statement that he would rather speak “five words with my mind, in order to instruct others, then ten thousand words in a tongue!” Tongues, after
all, "are a sign not for believers, but for unbelievers, while prophecy (the interpretation of Scripture and of the signs of the times) is not for unbelievers, but for believers (14:22). Throughout the chapter the emphasis is on the principle of "the common good" and the injunction laid upon those in positions of leadership comes as a command of the Lord.

In chapter 13, doubtless the most famous passage of all, love has primacy. One can live faith and hope privately, but love is the virtue that builds up the community, the Body of Christ.

Paul includes in the chapter on the Resurrection (15) the same solemn recitation of the tradition as he received it, as he included in the chapter on the Lord’s Supper (11:23 & 15:3). The Resurrection of Christ is the fact without which Paul’s preaching and the faith of the Corinthians alike are in vain (verses 12-29). The believers are included: Christ is the
first-fruits, the guarantee of the harvest at hand (15:20-24, 51). Paul’s answer to the “how” question is the raising of a spiritual body. I suspect that Paul had no more idea what a spiritual body would be than we do. What we know is that a body enables recognition and communication; we know the physical body perishes. Now, we know the spiritual body is immortal.

In chapter 16, the subject is the collection of contributions for the “saints” in Jerusalem, and Paul’s plan for its delivery. That collection—referred to in Galatians 2:10, 2 Corinthians chapters 8-9, and Romans 15:25-29—as well as in verses 1-4 here, has significance beyond charitable relief for some persecuted “heretics.” Funds taken up in Gentile congregations for the benefit of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem are a sacrament of unity, linking the two traditions whose reconciliation did not (despite Acts 15) take place early or easily.
Paul's final message is the balance of chapter 16 which introduces us to some of Paul's friends and co-workers and other congregations, who are to greet one another with the "kiss of peace."

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