

A STUDY ON I CORINTHIANS



INTRODUCTION

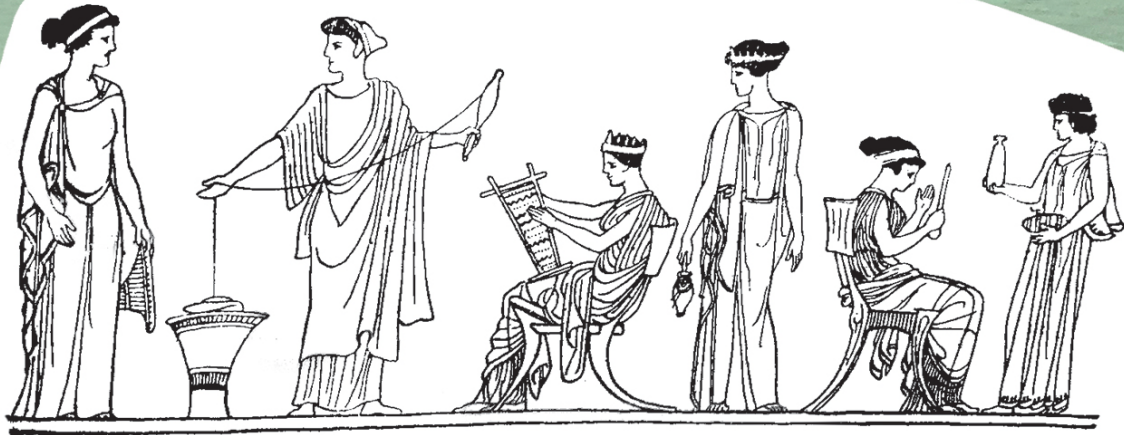
1st Corinthians was written to a church in an urban setting, much like our own city of Bangalore. It's clear from the content of the letter that the primary audience was a young, struggling congregation in a very permissive, cosmopolitan culture.

Through the letter, Paul explains how the church can be faithful to God in a totally permissive society. The message it carries is relevant even today. Let's see what Paul has to say on how involved we can be in a secular society without compromising our beliefs or the Gospel we preach.

Some of the problems that the Corinthians faced may not be identical to us. However, we can definitely learn the underlying theological principles that Paul used to arrive at his decisions.

1st Corinthians was written to the church founded by Paul in Corinth. The story of the foundation of this church is recorded in Acts 18:1–7. Paul stayed in Corinth almost two years. During this time, a strong church was founded comprising of both Jews and Gentiles.

Unlike the letter to the church at Rome, which was mostly made up of strangers, Paul's relationship with those in Corinth was intimate, loving and full of mutual reward!



THE CITY OF CORINTH

Corinth was located forty miles west of Athens, on the narrow strip of land between the Corinthian Gulf and Saronic Gulf. Access to trading sea routes laid the foundation for its commercial success. The seaports it harboured controlled commercial sea routes from east to west, and its land-bridge enabled north-south trade via land.

The church was located in a city where being a Christian was not an easy task for the following reasons:

- Though there was no persecution, the permissive culture of the land was a constant threat to individual Christians.
- Most people worshipped at the twin shrines of materialism and hedonism (the love of things and love of pleasure).
- On the hill overlooking Corinth was the temple to the goddess Aphrodite – the goddess of love and sex.
- At the temple, prostitutes were employed in a system similar to the devadasi practices of certain cults in South India.
- The city had such a widespread reputation for gross immorality that people had coined the phrase “To act like a Corinthian.”

THE BIG IDEA OF 1ST CORINTHIANS

The primary focus of 1st Corinthians is to educate people on living a Christian life in an increasing secular world. This letter was especially written for the Corinthian church, unlike the other general letters that Paul wrote to all churches.

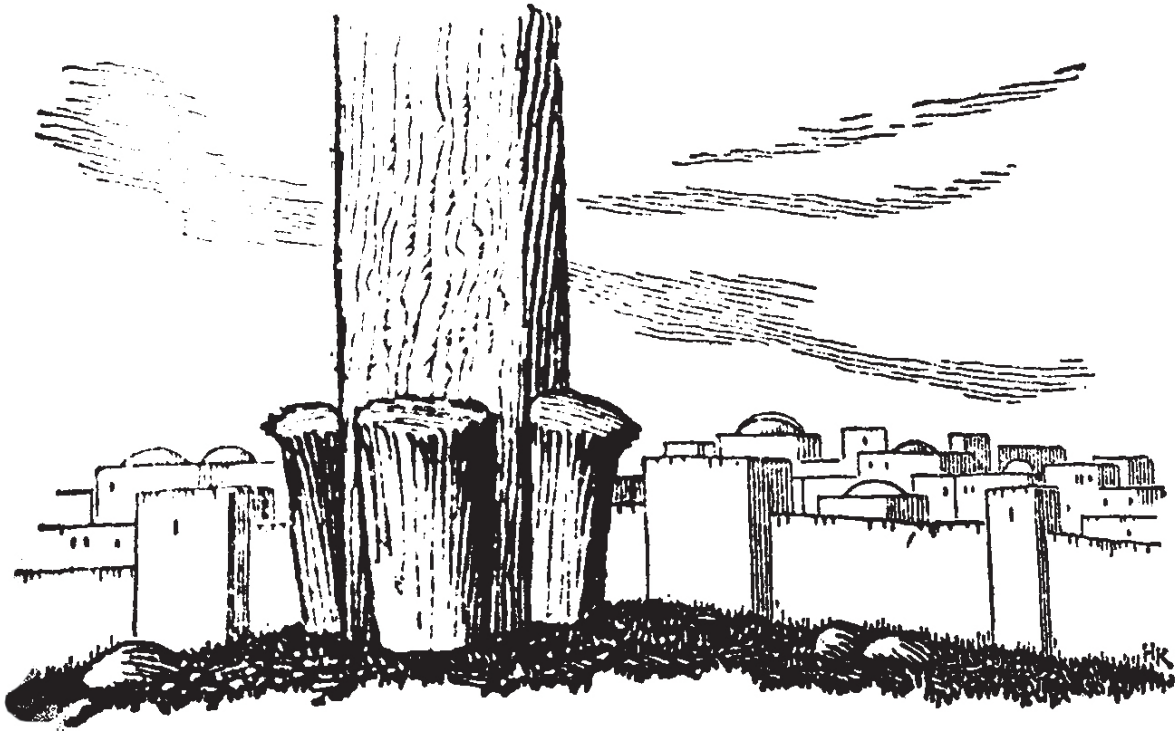
Some of the problems faced by the Church in Corinth were:

- A quarrelsome spirit
- Disunity due to differing spiritual gifts
- Disbelief in the resurrection
- Cases of sexual impurity
- Flirting with idolatry



Paul's standard approach to finding solutions was to analyse the problem through the lens of the Gospel. Even though Paul was addressing specific issues in the first century church, the principles from this letter can be applied to our present times. The same Holy Spirit that worked in the mind and spirit of the apostle will guide us when we try to live a life in accordance with the scripture contained in 1st Corinthians.

THE GOSPEL



We learnt in the book of Romans that the Gospel is the power of God to save us. The Gospel or the good news is that Jesus Christ died for our sins (paid the penalty of our sins), was buried and rose again on the third day to conquer sin and death. All those who believe in Him will experience this power as they journey towards salvation.

In 1st Corinthians, Paul is emphasizing the fact that belief in the Gospel is not solely for the purpose of going to heaven. It affects every facet of our lives here on the earth – our thoughts, emotions and actions and even our relationship with one another. Followers of Jesus have to be intentional about living out the Gospel in our day to day lives.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapters 1-4

Divisions

1 Corinthians
3:5-7,
“Who then is Paul,
and who is Apol-
los, but ministers
through whom you
believed, as the
Lord gave to each
one? I planted,
Apollos watered,
but God gave the
increase. 7 So then
neither he who
plants is anything,
nor he who waters,
but God who gives
the increase.”

Chapter 11-14

Gatherings

1 Corinthians
12:4-6,
“There are diversi-
ties of gifts, but
the same Spirit. 5
There are differ-
ences of ministries,
but the same Lord.
6 And there are di-
versities of activi-
ties, but it is the
same God who
works all in all.”

Chapters 5-7

Immorality

1 Corinthians
6:19-20,
“Do you not know
that your body is
the temple of the
Holy Spirit who is
in you, whom you
have from God,
and you are not
your own? 20 For
you were bought
at a price; there-
fore, glorify God
in your body and
in your spirit,
which are God’s.”

Chapter 8-10

Food & Idols

1 Corinthians
10:23-24,
“All things are
lawful for me, but
not all things are
helpful; all things
are lawful for me,
but not all things
edify. 24 Let no
one seek his own,
but each one the
other’s well-be-
ing.”

Chapter 15-16

Resurrection

1 Corinthians
15:20-22
“But now Christ is
risen from the
dead, and has
become the first-
fruits of those who
have fallen asleep.
21 For since by
man came death,
by Man also came
the resurrection of
the dead. 22 For
as in Adam all die,
even so in Christ
all shall be made
alive.”

1 CORINTHIANS 1-4

Spiritual Immaturity Brings Division

Unity through wholeness and oneness is the very character of God. It is reflected in Christ and is central to the Gospel that the church preaches. This means the Spirit of God is active when Christians function as brothers and sisters.

Paul rebukes the Corinthians for creating disharmony by dividing the church based on the leaders they favour.

1 Corinthians 1:12-13, *“Now I say this, that each of you says, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Apollos,” or “I am of Cephas,” or “I am of Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”*

According to the first chapter of 1st Corinthians, there were primarily three groups of people.

1. Team Paul

The followers of Paul consisted of Gentile converts who took great pride in the fact that they were in the church from the beginning. Paul's group wore a badge of distinction as they were baptized under the preaching of apostle Paul himself.

2. Team Apollos

This group probably consisted of those members of the church (Acts 18:21-28) who were drawn to the powerful preaching and insightful interpretation of the Scriptures by Apollos.

3. Team Cephas

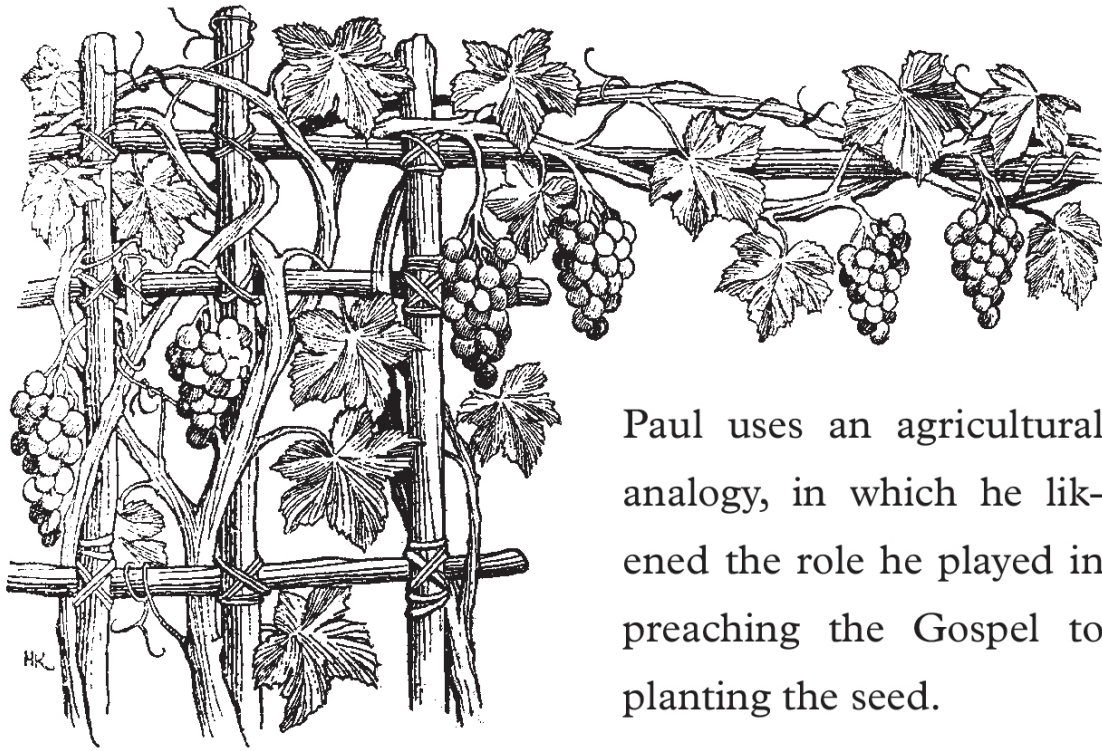
Cephas had gathered traditional Jewish Christians who were deeply rooted in the faith of their forefathers. There is no indication that Peter ever visited Corinth, but the members of this group identified themselves with the church in Jerusalem. They probably weren't too comfortable with the Gentile converts who paid no attention to Jewish customs.

1 Corinthians 3:3-7, “For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? 4 For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not carnal? 5 Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? 6 *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.*

The real proof of the power of the Gospel is in changed lives. Paul urges the church to be perfectly joined together in the same mind and judgment through fellowship. He was not calling for uniformity of thought and action but oneness of the spirit. His passion for an undivided church was so strong that he addressed those who weren't spiritual, as carnal.

Who, exactly, is carnal according to Paul?

Those who receive the Spirit, but let their lives be controlled by their old nature. Paul ties spiritual maturity not to the activities we participate in church, but to a conducive character and attitude that allows the Holy Spirit to produce fruits such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.



Paul uses an agricultural analogy, in which he likened the role he played in preaching the Gospel to planting the seed.

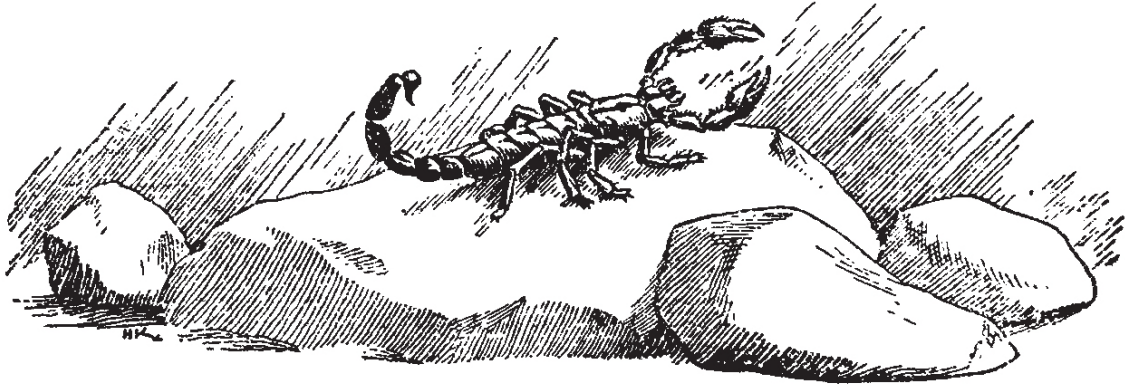
Apollos came along in tandem and watered the plants, which was just as important as planting the seed. They were not in competition with each other but were partners in a common venture, team members with a common goal. And while their work was very important, it was subordinate to the plan of God, who provided the increase.

He felt it wrong to say, "It's all up to God," and equally wrong to say, "It's all up to me." We are God's fellow workers (1 Cor.3:9) in the work of the Kingdom. Paul considered himself as the wise master builder of the Corinthian church by virtue of having begun the work there.

The Gospel that Paul had received and had preached to them was of Christ's death, burial and resurrection. **And while the church might have a variety of builders and different building materials, it had only one foundation and that was Jesus Christ.** This was the church's key to unity then, and it remains so today.

1 CORINTHIANS 5-7

Immorality is Not to be Ignored



When we live day after day in a world where immorality is accepted, there is a danger that we will become insensitive to it. In fact, the culture would so influence us that almost nothing would shock us.

The church in Corinth was no different. It was so famous for its sexual immorality and unrestrained prostitution that the word “Corinthian” became synonymous with sexual immorality.

1 Corinthians 6:18-20, *“Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. 19 Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? 20 For you were bought at a price; therefore, glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.”*

Biblical faith refers to sex as a gift from God. It is aimed at bringing happiness and fulfilment to those who are married. However, there are many in secular society that treat sex as nothing more than a fleeting act for physical gratification.

Paul encourages the church to “glorify God in the body” by transforming their perspective of life and understanding that:

- Our bodies are in union with Christ and is the temple of the Holy Spirit.
- Christians cannot justify a lifestyle that involves casual sex, alcohol, drugs or any vice that destroys a person.
- Once we are followers of Christ, every area of our life comes under the influence of our relationship with Christ - no area is exempt.

All things might be lawful but all things are not beneficial. We have been delivered from sin and are declared justified, sanctified and washed. But along with the freedom that we enjoy in Christ comes responsibilities for the rest of our lives.

In Chapter 7, Paul reiterates that one’s faith in Christ ought to strengthen one’s marriage and not create unhealthy tension. He emphasizes the following in his letter to the Corinthians:

- *Marriage is to be monogamous. One husband and one wife for life is the deal.*
- *Premarital or extramarital sex violates God’s idea for marriage.*
- *The Christian life should be modelled before unbelieving partners so they too understand the love and forgiveness in Christ.*

1 CORINTHIANS 8-10

Choose Love Over Knowledge

1st Corinthians 8:1-3, “Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. 2 And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. 3 But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him.”

The issue raised in the letter stems from the food that was sacrificed to idols. Some of the Corinthian believers were concerned about buying and eating meat that had been offered as a sacrifice. Paul was not so much concerned about the kind of meat eaten by believers but the consequences of interpersonal behaviour. Rather than building up their brothers and sisters in faith, some church members were causing them to fall back into idolatry.

Food offered to deities (*Prasada*) plays an important role in South Asian culture. Believers who work in secular environments are faced with the problem of responding to their colleagues who offer prasada. Believers need to ask God for wisdom to determine what matters and what does not. The key issue is the effect that our response could have on an unbeliever or a weaker believer.

There are a number of questions that cross our minds in this regard. Some of the common questions are:

- *Can eating prasada appear as an approval of idol worship?*

- *Should Christians abandon traditional meals to honour ancestors which some see as a harmless tradition, while others regard as idolatry?*
- *Where are the lines to be drawn between church and culture?*
- *Should a Christian withdraw completely or participate with discernment?*

Paul does not answer any of these questions directly because he looks at the issue from a different perspective. His aim to strengthen the interpersonal relationships between believers far outweighs his concern about eating food offered to idols. Hence, he says:

- Those who eat food offered to idols must be careful because it can result in spiritual harm to others. The exercise of freedom by stronger Christians (who think idols are nothing and indulges in eating prasada) can become an obstacle or stumbling block for weaker Christians (who avoid idols and their food) (1 Cor. 8:9).
- Paul would not want any brother or sister to fall into sin and so he is willing to forget not only the practice of eating food offered to idols but also the practice of eating meat altogether, if necessary, to protect the weak from stumbling (1 Cor. 8:13). Also, its common sense not to flirt with idolatry.
- The central message of this section is that love is more important than knowledge. Knowledge doesn't always make us considerate of others but has a tendency to make us proud. Even our knowledge about God can do this to us. Rather than asserting our freedom, rights and privileges, we are to shape our actions so as to encourage our Christian brothers and sisters

The principle here is to seek what is beneficial and constructive to all. Believers should not seek their own good but the good of others (1 Cor.10:23). Paul highlights a similar theme on love in the next section (1 Cor. 13).

1 CORINTHIANS 11-14

Let Worship Gatherings Unite Believers

Paul starts this section with immediate condemnation of the Corinthians' actions when they gather to worship. He complains that their meetings are doing more harm than good (1 Cor.11:17). Paul, primarily, addresses three issues here:

- Traditional head coverings for women
- Respecting the Lord's Supper
- Handling spiritual gifts

HEAD COVERINGS

Paul insisted on head coverings because the church gathering of Corinthian believers was beginning to resemble those of pagan mystery religions. There is abundant evidence that Greek women in these cults engaged in acts of worship with uncovered heads or untied hair, or shaven heads. Some used to believe that unbound hair and hair styles had an effective magic spell. Also, Greek ladies used to shave their head as a part of their culture but Jewish ladies raised an issue with these Gentile converts not covering their head for worship. Interestingly, Paul's mention of head covering is in the context of long hair and not just a literal head covering (Compare 11:5 vs 11:15-16).

Although social decorum required men and women to maintain symbolic distinctions (or gender hierarchy based on society), he argues that in the Lord things are different. In Christ, men and women are equal and should live in mutual interdependence (1 Cor.11:11).

Therefore, Paul feels that when the church is dealing with things that relate to local customs or it is better to go along with them without compromising the Gospel.

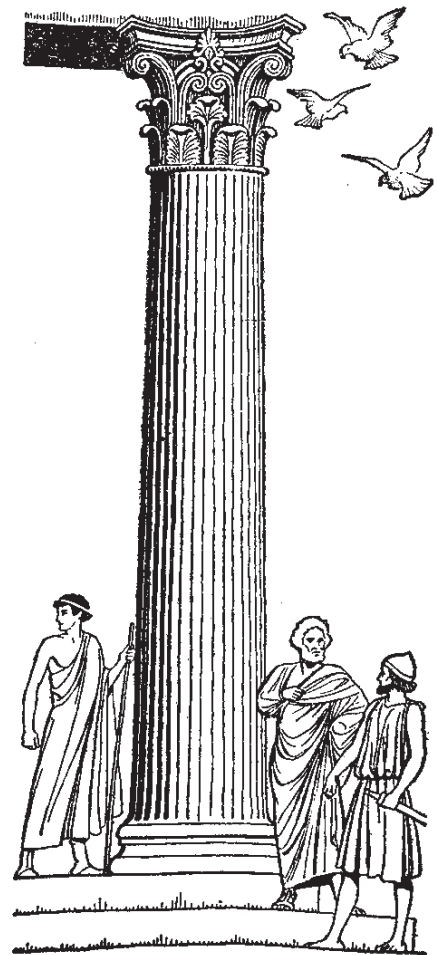
Q. What happens when we do so?

A. We bridge the gap between believers and unbelievers.

Q. What happens when we fail to do so?

A. Failing to do so could be offensive and create a barrier to the Gospel of Christ.

When a church (or individuals within the church) goes out of its way to flout the local customs, it forgets that the purpose of the church is to bring people to Christ and not to tell them how Christians live. Paul's advice to stand firm in our faith without hurting the sentiments of others is relatable even today. (So, a city church might look different from village church in its appearance based on the acceptable culture). This approach is the best way to mitigate awkward situations and bring people to Christ.



HOLY COMMUNION

The next issue that Paul addressed is the inequality at the Lord's Supper, which brought dishonour to the Gospel. The Lord's Supper is to celebrate the life, death and resurrection of our Saviour. It has a direct connection to the Jewish Pass-over meal which included all family members on an equal footing – there was no place for divisions between rich and poor or young and old. But some rich folk in the church had their own private communion service and let the poor go hungry. Paul is resolute about being united at the Lord's Supper.

Q. How does the Lord's Supper (or Holy Communion) encourage us?

A. *The Holy Communion is a constant reminder that there is forgiveness for sinners and strength for the weak and weary.*

Q. What shouldn't we bring to the Lord's Table?

A. *We are warned to change attitudes of insensitive to His presence, lack of love for our fellow church members, and regret for His great sacrifice on our behalf.*

If we truly enter into the spirit of the Lord's Supper, we will have a heightened sense of our own unworthiness and the power of God's grace. This awareness of God's love for us ought to make it easier for us to love one another.

(Please Note: We as a church practice Holy Communion for baptized believers just like the first communion meal that Jesus had with his 12 disciples)

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Spiritual gifts are God's way of fulfilling His mission of equipping and transforming the body of Christ (the Church). The Holy Spirit empowers people with His gifts for various kind of ministry that enables the growth of the church. While there are different kinds of spiritual gifts, these gifts shouldn't be confused with the talents or attractive personal qualities that makes us unique. Spiritual gifts are poured out to establish God's kingdom and mission, which is not possible by mere natural effort.

Q. In the Corinthian church, what was the problem caused by spiritual gifted members?

A. Some who possessed these gifts and exercised them caused division instead of building up God's kingdom. This spiritually gifted cohort considered themselves an 'elite group'.

Q. Even the spiritually gifted weren't united. What caused divisions among them?

A. Their distorted understanding of the manifestation of the Spirit led them to value some gifts above others because of the status associated with them. This caused disorder and discrimination within the church, which Paul addresses very strongly.

Paul clarifies that there are different kinds of gifts, services and manifestations. Each of these ministries are distributed by the Holy Spirit and the same God is at work in everyone (1 Cor.12:4-6). Paul emphasizes not on the diversity of the gifts, but their source in the triune God.

He also reminds the Corinthians that the Spirit's gifts are given for common good and not merely for the private edification of the individuals who receive them (1 Cor.12:7).

What are the benefits of being a part of a mega church?

Being a mega church is one of the most ideal models for a church in a city because it releases more workers of the gospel with diverse spiritual gifts into the harvest field. A mega church releases greater vision, greater expectations, greater grace, greater anointing and greater testimonies. Please note that a small church or a mega church are both equally qualified and one is not inferior or superior to the other. But a mega church cannot be ignored by the government and politics as they play a role in being an influencer for thousands of people. A mega church cannot be persecuted easily. As the church increases in size it becomes a powerful community. The Bible predicts that the *"glory of the latter house shall be greater than of the former"*. We know that the church in the first century began as a megachurch where 3000 and 5000 people were baptized in a single day. We, in the latter days, shouldn't settle for anything less.

He employs an analogy of the human body to rebuke the attitude of superiority within the church. The more important members of the body like the eyes and head cannot scorn the weaker members like hands and feet (1 Cor.12:21). God put the body together as an interdependent organism in which diversity is both essential and valued. Similarly, the difference between members in the church should not lead to division but caring for one another (1 Cor.12:25).

Finally, Paul ends this section with a profound chapter on Love while serving one another. He suggests seven ways to manifest Christian love and eight things that love does not do.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8, *“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8 Love never fails...”*

1 CORINTHIANS 15-16

Resurrection is Our Only Hope

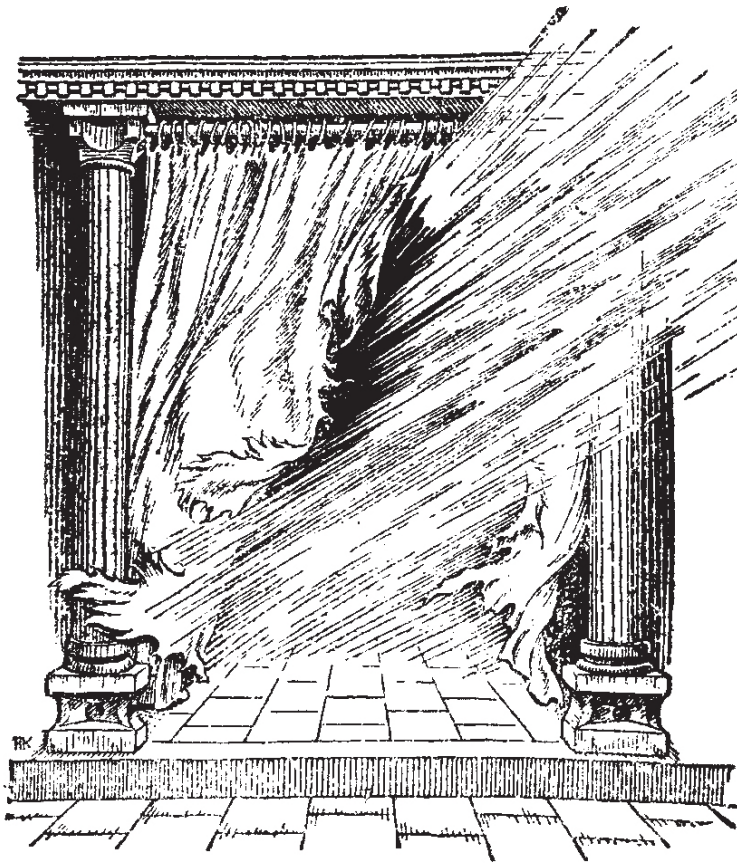
The central event in Christianity is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Had it ended on the Cross there wouldn't have been any Good News to share, no bold church to bear witness, no New Testament to teach and preach, and no hope for real life on Earth or in the hereafter. It is possible to underestimate the importance of the Resurrection to our faith.

1 Corinthians 15:3-8, *“For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, 5and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. 6After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remains to the present, but some have fallen asleep. 7After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. 8Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.”*

While we do not have the precise question that prompted Paul to include this portion, we do know that it was written in answer to a question on the Resurrection of Christ. Paul's rather extensive answer gathered teachings concerning the Resurrection. However, he did not present facts without tact. His answer was wisely curated to enhance the faith and hope of those who asked the question.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians reached its pinnacle with his discussion on the hope of life beyond the grave and the nature of Resurrected life. He spoke to the Corinthians regarding their concerns and replied to their questions, which culminated in a hymn of victory.

1 Corinthians 15:50-57, *"I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— 52 in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. 54 When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."*



55 “Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

CONCLUSION

- The central message of first Corinthians revolves around the crucified Messiah who rose from the dead.
- The cross is God’s wisdom and power and our behaviour must conform to the Gospel’s truth.
- The role of the Holy Spirit is to reveal the cross as the key to God’s wisdom in every area of our lives.
- A spiritual life is a life that ‘dies to oneself’ and lives to glorify God’s work and His mission in this world.
- Paul encourages us to live out our lives according to the Gospel.

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