An Overview of the First Epistle to the Corinthians

The City of Corinth is located on the isthmus that connects the southern section of Greece to the Peloponnese (Macedonia and Achaia). The connecting isthmus is five miles across. Sailors, coming from Athens or Asia Minor, often stopped in Corinth walking the five miles rather than sailing around the Cape of Malea. Sailing around was, to some extent, a treacherous trip due to the strong Mediterranean winds. Because of the geographic location of Corinth, it was perfect for trade and commerce. Ships, on their way westward, would stop here. Quick population and economic growth was the result.

The city of Corinth was a city of great wealth. Wealth and population explosion gave way to an entertainment industry. The Isthmian games were a main source of entertainment to the Corinthians. The games, similar in nature to the Olympic games of neighboring Olympia, occurred every other year. The apostle Paul referred to these games at 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

A city with economic success, vast population, and world renown Olympic style games would naturally attract a variety of religious movements. Most cities of this day were devoted to a particular god or goddess. Ephesus was devoted to the goddess Diana. The principle deity worshipped in the city of Corinth was Venus, the goddess of love and licentiousness.

Just to the south of the city was a giant rock formation raising 1800 feet above sea level known as the Acrocorinthus. A temple to Venus was erected on the northern side of this mountain. The temple employed 1000 female prostitutes for the worship of Venus. Barnes notes that many merchants lost everything they had in the city of Corinth “worshipping Venus” (Barnes’ Notes; pp. iv [Commentary on I Corinthians to Galatians]). A common proverb of their day was: “It is not for everyone to go to Corinth.” The city of Corinth reminds us of our modern day Las Vegas, Nevada. It was the “sin city of their day.”

The apostle Paul came here around the year 51AD, preaches the gospel of Jesus Christ, and establishes a thriving church (Acts 18:1-4). Paul’s visit to Corinth was on his second tour of preaching. He had entered the city alone awaiting the arrival of his traveling companions Timothy and Silas who were to strengthen the churches in Philippi and Thessalonica (Acts 17:10-15).
Paul remained in the city of Corinth for about 2 years and then left for Ephesus eventually making it back to Judea (Acts 18:18-19). While Paul was in Corinth, he wrote the epistles to the Galatians and the Thessalonians and upon his second visit he wrote the epistle to the Romans. The epistle to the Corinthians was written by Paul while at the city of Ephesus on his third tour of preaching. 1 Corinthians 16:8-9 states, “But I will tarry at Ephesus until Pentecost; for a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries.” The date was likely AD 55 to 56.

The letter to the Corinthian brethren was an obvious response to two letters Paul had received during his three year stay in Ephesus (Acts 20:31; 1 Corinthians 16:8-9). Paul refers to a letter he had received from the “household of Chloe” explaining the contentions among the brethren there (see 1 Corinthians 1:11). Again at 1 Corinthians 7:1 he alludes to a letter that had reached his hands that was written by the church in Corinth. These two letters outlined the sinful direction the Corinthian church was headed. Paul was well informed of the problems that were occurring among the brethren in Corinth before writing this first epistle. Paul's previous time in Corinth afforded him first hand knowledge of what the brethren were faced with in their everyday affairs. The dissolute condition of immorality within the city of Corinth and false teachers brought an evil influence that had far reaching affects among the brethren.

The church in Corinth had come to be divided with many problems in regards to their following the authorized word of God. Today we may refer to such a church as Corinth as an open fellowship or liberal congregation. The brethren were erroneously dividing themselves based on who had baptized them (1 Corinthians 1:12-16; 3:3-4, 21; 4:6). Some Christians were guilty of tolerating sin in the church (1 Corinthians 5:1ff), defrauding each other in human courts (1 Corinthians 6:12-20), committing fornication (1 Corinthians 6:12-20), and not considering each other's personal conscience (1 Corinthians 8-10). Furthermore Christian women had lost sight of their God ordained place in public (1 Corinthians 11:1-16) and among God's people in the church (1 Corinthians 14:34-36). The Corinthians had perverted the Lord's Supper by dividing up into social classes (1 Corinthians 11:17ff) and faction was running rampant (1 Corinthians 11:18). The Corinthians were performing spiritual gifts for selfish reasons rather than for the profit of the whole church and thereby causing schisms in the church (1 Corinthians 12-14). The assembly of saints had come to be chaotic (1 Corinthians 14:26ff) and there were false teachers telling people that there would be no resurrection of the dead (1 Corinthians 15:12).

The apostle Paul could have easily given up on these brethren due to their multitude of problems; however, due to a great love for their souls he systematically deals with each sinful issue. We can do no less today when it comes to the body of Christ. Though a church may have a multitude of "issues" we nonetheless have the responsibility to systematically deal with each one. We can only meet our own personal responsibility. Change must ultimately come from the erring.
Responding to the Gospel Call

Introduction:

Our Bibles present God as calling out to man that he may save them (Matthew 11:28; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15). As a father that loves and cherishes his children God wants mankind to be saved from the awful consequences of sin (Revelation 20:15). The Lord wants man to be saved from sin yet man must do his part (Isaiah 1:18-20). How will you and I respond to the call of the gospel?

I. The Gospel calls upon the Lost to be Saved:
   A. Jesus died so that man may be saved from sin (1 Corinthians 15:1ff).
   B. God calls upon man to hear and believe (Romans 10:17; Hebrews 11:6)
   C. God calls upon man to confess and repent (Romans 10:9; Acts 17:30).
   D. God calls upon man to be baptized and live faithful all the days of life (Acts 2:38; Revelation 2:10).

II. The Gospel calls upon Christians to Repent:
   A. Humility is a must for the one who would serve Jehovah (Matthew 5:3-11 - "good heart")
   B. Simon the Christian (Acts 8:18ff).

III. How do men Respond to the Call of the Gospel?
   A. Different people react differently:
      1. Paul's sermon to the Athenians (see Acts 17:32-34).
      3. The people of Asia (Acts 19:8-10).
   B. Some people are "pricked in the heart" (their sins bother them - Acts 2:37).
   C. A bothered conscience leads to obedience to the call of the gospel (Acts 2:41).

Conclusion:

How do you and I respond to the gospel? Some will not hear. Some hear yet will not obey. Some obey yet do not live in faith. Some obey and give God half hearted service. Some obey yet place their confidence and trust in the things of this world. Some hear, obey, and do their best to conform their lives to the image of Christ. What best describes you?