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Religious Influences in Corinth

Corinth was a religious melting pot with older and new religions flourishing side by side. Apollo, Aphrodite/Venus, Asclepius, Athena, Athena Chalinitus, Demeter and Kore, Dionysus, Ephesian Artemis, Hera Acraea, Hermes/Mercury, Jupiter Capitolinus, Poseidon/Neptune, Tyche, Fortuna and Zeus were the gods and cults celebrated by the **Corinthians**. Some welcomed the religious stimulus that strange new gods provided (see the commentary on **Acts,** to **see link click Cb – An Unknown God in Athens**), since they offered new ways of experimenting with their religion and worship. Most people could accommodate all gods and goddesses into their religious behavior, and they could choose from a great cafeteria line of religious practices. Many believed that there was safety in numbers: the more gods that one appeased and had on one's side, the better. Roman officials did not police private worship and acted only when religious behavior was perceived as disturbing the peace and security they so zealously guarded.

Paul's opening comments in **Romans** (see the commentary on **Romans Ak – The Pagan Gentile**) imply that Jewish and Gentile believers were different from the dominant pagan culture because of their religious intolerance of other gods and their rigorous standards regarding sexual conduct. As a result, they were labeled "atheists" because they refused to join in the worship and sacrificial meals offered to local, traditional gods and in their great festivals that quickened local pride, or to help polish the city's image as loyal to the emperor by taking part in the imperial cult. This irritated their neighbors to no end. Believers may also have been seen as strange because they themselves had no temples. They met in private homes (or rented assembly halls) at night, greeted each other with a holy kiss, and consumed the body and blood of **One** who was crucified by Roman authorities in a remote part of the empire. Believers also had no particular national identity and consequently had not established political ties with the Romans. Any denial of the imperial cult would have made them particularly vulnerable and politically suspect.



The most important religious influence in **Corinth** at that time was the imperial cult, which worshiped political power as divine. Religious ceremony and political authority were inseparable. Thus, the establishment of a federal cult in **Corinth** was a matter of great political, social, and financial importance for the colony. The cult was the incarnation of Roman ideology on Greek soil and tended to raise the prestige of the city. In addition to the Isthmian games, celebrated every two and four years, **the Corinthians** celebrated the emperor's birthday every year. This required an overt display of reverence for the imperial house and the performing of sacrifices and participating in festivals and feasts. In fact, the citizens of **Corinth** were expected to sacrifice on altars outside their homes as the cult procession passed by.

Paul's proclamation that **Yeshua** alone is **Lord (8:5-6)** directly challenged the imperial cult. **Lord Yeshua** was a different kind of "emperor," "savior," and "son of God" than Caesar. The problem for some was that this **Lord Yeshua** offered no actual political favors in this worldly realm. Thus, one cannot avoid the impression that the main obstacle which hindered the progress of **the Way (Acts 9:2, 19:9** and **23, 22:4, 24:14** and **22)**, and the force which could have drawn new believers back to conformity with the prevailing paganism, was the public worship of the emperors. It was not necessarily a change of heart that might drag a convert back into paganism, but the overwhelming pressure to conform imposed by the institutions of his city and the activities of his neighbors. At a later time and in a different place, Pliny the Younger, the Roman magistrate, used the imperial cult to determine whether people were believers or not. If they were willing to deny their

Lord and sacrifice incense to a statue of a living emperor, they were not believers.[9]

This raises the question of how someone like **Erastus**, whom **Paul** identifies in **Romans 16:23** as **the city treasurer** of **Corinth** and therefore a man of prominence and high political office, could cope with the pagan trappings of **his** office. How could someone with this role have carried out **his** civic duties and maintained **his** social and political connections as a practicing believer? The wealthier members of **the Corinthian** church would have faced enormous social pressure to conform to religious expectations, particularly those related to the imperial cult, if they were to advance or preserve their place in society. This problem was the source of much of the tension between **Paul** and the wealthier members in the church at **Corinth**. This background information may shed light on **Paul's** discussion on the issue of food sacrificed to idols, and why it would have been so problematic for many in the church.[10]