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The Pagan Background of Counterfeit Spiritual Gifts

Pagan backgrounds: As related in his commentary on *First Corinthians*, John MacArthur teaches that the pagan cults of Greece and Rome were part of what are commonly called the mystery religions. By **Paul's** time they had dominated the near eastern world for thousands of years and indirectly would dominate much of western culture through the Middle Ages and, to some extent, even today.



These mystery religions had many forms and variations, but one common source. In **his** vision on the island of Patmos, **John** was shown **the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters, on whose forehead a name was written, a mystery, "Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth (Revelation 17: 1 and 5 NASB)**. Here, **the Lord** pictures **His** judgment of world religion. Before the Great Tribulation begins, the true Church will have already been raptured (see the commentary on **Revelation, to see link click [By - The Rapture of the Church](#)**), and by the second half of the Great Tribulation the world will begin to establish a religion of its own that will be truly universal. It will embrace all the world's false religions, which will **give their power and authority to the beast, the antichrist (Revelation 17:13)**. The final form of that all-powerful, universal religion will represent the completion of the mystery religions that historically originated in ancient **Babylon**.

In its organized form, false religion started with **the Tower of Babel**, from which **Babylon** derives its name. Cain was the first false worshiper, and many people have followed after his example. But organized pagan religion began with the descendants of Ham, and one of

Noah's three sons, who decided to erect a great monument that would **reach into heaven** and make themselves a great name (see the commentary on **Genesis Dm - Let Us Build a City and Make a Name for Ourselves**). Under the leadership of the apostate **Nimrod** they planned to storm heaven and unify **their** power and prestige in a great worldwide system of worship. That was man's first counterfeit religion, from which every other false religion has emerged.

God's judgment frustrated **their** primary purpose of making a grand demonstration of humanistic unity. By confusing **their language, they did not understand one another's speech. So, from there ADONAI scattered them all over the earth, and they stopped building the city. For this reason, it is called Babel [confusion] - because there ADONAI confused the language of the whole earth, and from there ADONAI scattered them all over the earth (Genesis 11:7-9)**, thus halting the building of **the Tower** and fractured **their** solidarity. But those **people** took with them the seeds of that false, idolatrous religion, seeds that **they** and **their** descendants have been planting throughout the world ever since. The ideas and forms were altered, adapted, and sometimes made more sophisticated, but the basic system remained, and remains, unchanged. That is why **Babel**, or **Babylon**, is called **the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth (Revelation 17:5 NIV)**. **She** was, and is, **the mother** of all false religions.

From various ancient sources, it seems that **Nimrod's** wife, **Semiramis** (the First), apparently was high priestess of the **Babel** religion and the founder of all mystery religions. After the Tower was destroyed and the multiplicity of languages developed, **she** was worshiped as a goddess under many different names. **She** became **Ishtar** of Syria, **Astarte** of Phoenicia, **Isis** of Egypt, **Aphrodite** of Greece, and **Venus** of Rome - in each case the deity of sexual love and fertility. **Her son Tammuz**, also came to be deified under various names and was the companion of **Ishtar** and god of the underworld.

According to the cult of **Ishtar**, **Tammuz** was considered a sunbeam, a counterfeit version of **Yeshua's** virgin birth. **Tammuz** was called **Ba'al** in Phoenicia, **Osiris** in Egypt, **Eros** in Egypt, and **Cupid** in Rome. In every case, the worship of those gods and goddesses was associated with sexual immorality. The celebration of Lent is not Scriptural, but developed from the pagan celebration of **Semiramis'** mourning for forty days over the death of **Tammuz (Ezekiel 8:14)** before **his** alleged resurrection, another one of Satan's mythical counterfeits.

The mystery religions originated the idea of baptismal regeneration, being born again merely through the rite of water baptism, and the practice of mutilation and beating oneself to atone for sins or gain spiritual favor. They also began the custom of pilgrimages, which

many religions follow today, and the paying money for the forgiveness of sins for oneself and for others.³⁴⁵ In the Catholic church, for example, purgatory is supposed to be under the special jurisdiction of the pope, and it is his prerogative as the representative of **Christ** on earth to grant indulgences (in other words, relief from suffering) as he sees fit. This power, it is claimed, can be exercised directly by the pope to alleviate, shorten, or terminate sufferings, and within limits it is also exercised by the priests as representatives of the pope.³⁴⁶ The Catholic church teaches that a person can shorten a loved ones time in purgatory by paying indulgences.

Several pagan practices were especially influential in the church at **Corinth**. Perhaps most important, and certainly the most obvious, was that of **ecstasy**, considered to be the highest expression of religious experience. Because it seemed supernatural and because it was dramatic and often bizarre, the practice strongly appealed to the sin nature of mankind (see the commentary on **Romans Cd - The Reason for the Inner Conflict**). And because **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh** had performed many miraculous signs in the apostolic age when **God** was establishing **His** Church, some of the **Corinthian** believers confused those true wonders with the false signs counterfeited in the **ecstasies** of paganism.



Ecstasy (Greek: *ekstasis*, a term not used in Scripture) was held to be a supernatural, sensuous communion with the deity. Through frenzied hypnotic chants and ceremonies, worshipers experienced semiconscious euphoric feelings of oneness with the god or goddess. Often the ceremony would be preceded by vigils and fasting, and would even include drunkenness (**Ephesians 5:18**). Contemplation of sacred objects, whirling dances, fragrant incense, chants, and other such physical and psychological stimuli usually were used to

introduce the **ecstasy**, which would be in the form of an out-of-body trance or an unrestrained sexual orgy. The trance is reflected in some forms of Hindu yoga, in which a person becomes insensitive to pain, and in the Buddhist goal of escaping to Nirvana, the divine nothingness. Sexual **ecstasies** were common in many ancient religions and were so much associated with **Corinth** that the term *Corinthianize* meant *to indulge in extreme sexual immorality*. The pagan temple dedicated to Bacchus still stands in the ruins of Baalbek (in modern Lebanon) as a witness to the debauchery of the mystery religions.

The situation in Corinth: B'rit Chadashah **Corinth** was filled with priests, priestesses, religious prostitutes, soothsayers, and diviners of the mystery religions who claimed to represent a god or gods and to have supernatural powers that provided their claims. Unbelievably, some of their dramatic and bizarre practices were mirrored in the church.

The Corinthians knew of the prophet **Joel's** prediction: **After this, I will pour out my Spirit on all humanity. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions; and also on male and female slaves in those days I will pour out my Spirit (Joel 2:28-29)**. They also knew that **Yeshua** had said that the coming of **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh** would be accompanied by amazing signs and events (**Mark 16:17**). Perhaps **they** might have even heard firsthand from **Peter** of the miraculous events at Shavu'ot, with the **tongues of fire** and speaking in other **languages** (see the commentary on **Acts [Al](#) - The Ruach Ha'Kodesh Comes at Shavu'ot**). Perhaps **they** were so determined to experience those wonders that **they** tried to manufacture them.

First Corinthians was one of the earliest written letters (see the commentary on **Galatians [Ae](#) - Dates of Books in the B'rit Chadashah**). Yet even in a short period of time, Satan had begun to confuse believers about many doctrines, practices, and signs. The pure water of the truth of **ADONAI** was being muddied, and nowhere more than **Corinth**. The father of lies began to passionately counterfeit the gospel and its wonders, and the gullible, worldly, self-centered, thrill-seeking **Corinthians** with their pagan backgrounds, ate it up.

People do not counterfeit what is not valuable. The Deceiver counterfeits **the Spirit's** gifts because he knows they are so valuable to **God's** plan. If the Evil One can get **God's** people to become confused about or abusive of those gifts, he can undermine and corrupt the worship and ministry of the Church. Counterfeit gifts, whether through false manifestations or through misguided and selfish use, poison the Church and make it weak and ineffective.

One of the chief evidence of the spiritual immaturity of the **Corinthian** believers was a lack of discernment. If an occult practice seemed to have supernatural effect, they assumed it

was of **God**. If a priest or soothsayer performed a miracle, they assumed it was by **God's** power. Like many believers today, **they** believed that if something seems to “work” it must be right and good. Some of the believers there, however, realized that the confusion, division, and immoral practices that characterized many of the **Corinthian** church members could not be of **God**. **They** asked **Paul** to tell **them** how to determine what was of **the Ruach** and what was some other kind of **spirit**. The apostle **John** would later write: **Dear friends, don't trust every spirit. On the contrary, test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world (First John 4:1).**³⁴⁷