

“FLEE FROM THE WORSHIP OF IDOLS”:
BECOMING CHRISTIAN IN ROMAN CORINTH

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Introduction

What did it mean to become a Christian in the first century, either as a convert from a background in Judaism or as a convert from a background in Greek, Roman, or Egyptian cults? Surrounding religions and cultural norms strongly influenced the first Christian communities in urban environments throughout the Roman Empire, because the first generation of Christian converts came directly from other religious constructs. As the early Christians distinguished themselves from the Diaspora Jewish communities in which they originated and actively pursued Gentile converts, the fusion of believers with differing religious backgrounds caused uncertainty and conflict over acceptable beliefs and practices within Christian communities. Thus the religious contexts in which early Christian communities grew were important factors in the development of Christianity.

Much of the historiography of early Christianity dwells upon Christianity's relationship to Jews. The tendency to highlight the Christian-Jewish relationship is natural since Christianity originated in Israel as a Jewish sect. The conflict throughout the New Testament between the "Judaizers" and Paul lends itself to questions about Christianity's relationship to the Jewish religion and culture. How were members of

Christian communities different than those remaining in Jewish communities? When did this differentiation occur? How monolithic were the Jews? Answering these questions has occupied volumes upon volumes and writers such as Judith Lieu continue to dialogue with these questions.¹ Yet this discussion of group interactions between the Jewish and Christian communities often does not include the surrounding polytheists or henotheists as a third partner, despite Christianity's rapid expansion into the Roman world.

Discussions of the new Christian communities' interactions with polytheistic/henotheistic society that do occur are often deficient. Historians such as W.H.C. Frend² have treated this topic by discussing only the role of emperors and governors in persecution of the Christians, leaving out an account of ordinary people in the polytheistic population. Treatments of interactions between Christians and members of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian cults generally center on encounters between elite members of the two societies. Yet the Roman emperors did not represent the beliefs or practices of all of Greco-Roman society, nor did the Apostle Paul embody the entirety of Christian thought – if he did, with whom was he arguing when he wrote to various Christian communities?

Left unanswered by this elite-centered approach are questions about interactions between the general population of Christians and polytheists/henotheists.

¹ Judith Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?* (New York: T&T Clark, 2002).

² W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984).

How were Christian non-elites different or the same from the non-elites who surrounded them? Writings from non-elite citizens of this time period are rarely extant, leading most historians to focus on leaders, such as the Apostle Paul, whose letters remain. Several historians have made efforts to fill this hole. Wayne Meeks, in *The First Urban Christians* (1983), has attempted to read between the lines of Paul's letters to understand the Christian communities.³ Meeks admirably endeavored to reconstruct early urban Christian society, but did not discuss the Christians in parallel with their neighbors who followed other cults and focused on Paul's conception of an ideal Christian instead of trying to discover the lives of non-elite Christians. *Pagans and Christians* (1987), by Robin Lane Fox, did discuss both groups, attempting to describe the transition of the European world from polytheism to Christianity.⁴ However, Fox rarely explained how the two groups coincided at the same time and in the same place.

This thesis contributes to the historiography by providing a discussion of all three groups and their interactions in one time and space. As it is difficult to provide evidence for broad statements about these groups throughout the Roman Empire, I have chosen to narrow my focus to one particular setting – Roman Corinth in the first century. By analyzing the population in one location during a specific time frame, clear comparisons can be drawn among Christians, Jews, and worshipers of Roman, Greek, and Egyptian

³ Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

⁴ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (Lansing: Knopf, 1987).

cults in Corinth, instead of general statements about how most Christians related to most Jews or polytheists throughout the Empire. Corinth is a compelling choice for this type of study because its population contained significant numbers of Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Christians. Its role as a seaport in the center of the Roman Empire ensured a constant interchange of individuals from throughout the Empire. The Apostle Paul, Strabo, Appian, Apuleis, Plutarch, Pausanias, and other ancient writers who reference Corinth provide ample literary primary source material.⁵ Utilizing these sources as well as architectural evidence, this thesis offers an interpretation of the Christian, Jewish, Roman and Greek populations in Corinth, providing a platform for discussing the effects of the local religious environment on the development of early Christianity in Corinth.

In first century Corinth, the influx of Gentile converts with backgrounds in various polytheistic cults had effects on the Christian community that motivated Paul to write letters to the Christians urging them to leave behind parts of their cultic backgrounds he saw as sinful. Paul's efforts to correct the Christians' behavior imply that at least some of them were involved in the activities that Paul warned them to stop. Paul's commands must not be read as a synopsis of how the entire Christian community believed and behaved, but rather as the opposite – clearly, some of the Christian community opposed Paul, requiring him to argue his case against them on

⁵ For an excellent compilation and commentary on primary sources relevant to Corinth, see Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archeology*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1983).

various points. An analysis of Paul's warnings and advice for the Christians combined with a discussion about the Corinthian Jewish and polytheistic cults based on information gathered from other ancient literary sources and archeological studies of Corinth provides a way to understand the difficulties and social pressures converts with backgrounds in Judaism or polytheistic cults faced in making the transition to Christianity.⁶ Converts struggled to leave the religious constructs of their pasts as they joined the Christian community, showing that Christianity in Corinth was not formed in a vacuum, but in constant interaction with the religious constructs that surrounded it.

To clarify the following discussion, it is important to understand clearly what the various labels used to classify the many groups in Corinth mean. All of the labels utilized in this thesis refer only to the localized version of that group, unless otherwise indicated. First, it is apparent that at this early stage, Christians were not necessarily known as Christians. They often called themselves "followers of the Way."⁷ Richard Horsley argued that Paul did not consider himself a "Christian" or that he was perpetuating a new religion, especially not a universal religion with a monolithic theology.⁸ However, according to Acts, the followers of Jesus were already being called

⁶ For a similar methodology, see Bruce Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001).

⁷ Acts 9:2.

⁸ Richard Horsley, "Paul's Assembly in Corinth" in *Urban Religion in Corinth* edited by Daniel N. Schowalter and Steven J. Friesen, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 372-376. For further discussion of problems with the label "Christian," see Judith Lieu, "The New Testament and Early Christian Identity" in *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 193.

Christians,⁹ and it is clear that the Corinthian Christians were a distinct community that considered themselves to be different from the Jewish community in some important ways, as evidenced by their disregard for important Jewish rites such as circumcision and dietary laws. Proceeding with caution, the label Christian in this thesis will entail one who was a part of this community in Corinth to whom Paul was writing his epistles and who was a follower of Jesus Christ. Christians in Corinth might have had varying ethnic backgrounds, whether Jewish, Greek, Roman, or other. As shall be seen, not all of the Christians in Corinth had the same understanding of what it meant to be a Christian, either in practice or belief. Second, the designation, “Jew,” refers to an individual of Jewish ethnic and religious background, who was a part of the Corinthian Jewish community. Again, following Horsley’s analysis, it is important to note that Jews of the first two centuries were not a part of rabbinical Judaism as we understand it today – this formalization of Jewish thought and practice only came centuries later.¹⁰ The Corinthian Jewish community this thesis encounters was likely different in important ways from the Jewish community found in Jerusalem and any Jewish community found elsewhere. A third group is what the author of Acts frequently called the God-fearers. This classification refers to individuals who were of Greek or Roman ethnic background who partook in Jewish religious practices. They worshiped the God of the Jews, but had not

⁹ Acts 11:26. Other uses of “Christian” in the first and early second centuries can be found in Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16; *Did.* 12:4; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15:44; Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96-97; Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2; as well as frequently in the letters of Ignatius.

¹⁰ Horsely, “Paul’s Assembly,” 374.

undergone the final step of circumcision required to become a proselyte to Judaism. This group appeared often in Acts, frequently accepting of Paul's gospel. Proselytes, ethnically non-Jewish people who joined the Diaspora Jewish community by undergoing circumcision and observing Jewish dietary laws, can be considered a fourth group. The fifth group consists of Corinthians who adhered to the various Roman, Greek, or Egyptian cults which were polytheistic or henotheistic in nature. This religious group is often labeled "pagan." It is difficult to find a term which easily describes all those who engaged in this cultic activity, but the term "pagan" functions only as a non-label, describing everyone who is not a Jew or a Christian, rather than describing what those who worshiped Roman, Greek, or Egyptian gods actually did.¹¹ Using the word "pagan," especially in conjunction with Jew and Christian, tends to minimize the differences among various cults and makes it appear that Roman, Greek, or Egyptian cultic worshipers were a group of similar size as the Christians or Jews. This was untrue, as the Christians at the time of Paul's writings probably numbered around fifty at the most,¹² and the Jews not many more,¹³ with the rest of the Corinthian population far

¹¹ For a larger discussion of the disadvantages of the label "pagan," see the Introduction in *Corinth, the First City in Greece: An Urban History of Late Antique Cult and Religion* by Richard Rothaus. (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

¹² Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth*, 182. Murphy-O'Connor thinks that forty or fifty is the most likely size of the community, based on the number of names used by Paul and Luke in their writings to or about Corinth. Realistically, it is difficult to make anything more than an educated guess at the community's size.

¹³ For a discussion of the number of synagogues in Corinth, see Irina Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in its Diaspora Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 162-166.

outnumbering both groups. Therefore, “pagan” will not be used, and reference will instead be made to worshipers in Greek, Roman, or Egyptian polytheistic and henotheistic cults in an attempt to emphasize who these people were instead of who they were not. Though the majority of these cults could be described as polytheistic, a small number were henotheistic in nature – for example, the Egyptian cult of Isis.

Henotheism is the worship of and focus on serving a single god while acknowledging the existence of other gods that may also be worshiped. Those engaging in Greek, Roman, or Egyptian cultic activity were the mainstream culture in the Roman Empire, and were of many different ethnic backgrounds. The two most prominent ethnic backgrounds in Corinth were Greeks, the original inhabitants of the city, and Romans, the colonists sent to start the city anew in 44 BCE.

I have chosen to divide my analysis into several parts. First, I will provide an overview of Corinth and its history, detail the social groups mentioned above, and discuss the introduction of Paul’s movement to the city. A second chapter will examine the relationship between the Christians and the Diaspora Jews of Corinth. This section will show how Christianity in Corinth was in many ways similar to Judaism, but began to delineate itself from Judaism during its pursuit of Gentile converts. The final chapter will describe the effects on the Christian community of these Gentile converts, who in many cases failed to disentangle themselves fully from their backgrounds in various polytheistic cults, showing how difficult it was to be fully removed from the polytheistic cults that pervaded all of first century Corinthian society.

The individuals who converted to Paul's message of Christianity brought with them beliefs and behaviors rooted in their past religious experiences. Whether they were originally a part of the Diaspora Jewish community or one of the many polytheistic or henotheistic cults, all of the members of the early Christian community converted from another religious construct, and the integration of people from different religious backgrounds raised questions about what was proper practice for Christians. The Apostle Paul's letters to the Corinthians offered his answers to these questions, but his arguments show that his thoughts were only a part of the conversation – he was in dialogue with groups within the Corinthian church who had already formed other opinions. These groups were strongly influenced by their religious backgrounds, of which there were many when Paul arrived in the diverse city of Corinth to tell of Jesus of Nazareth.

Chapter One

“Titius Justus, a Gentile who worshiped God”

According to the narrative of Acts 18, set in the 50s CE, the Apostle Paul was run out of the Jewish synagogue in Corinth after successfully converting its leader Crispus to his message of Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. As was his custom throughout his missionary journeys, Paul responded to the Jewish rejection by turning to the non-Jews of the city.¹⁴ He moved his ministry to the house of a Gentile convert named Titius Justus. Having relocated down the street from the synagogue, Paul continued his evangelism in Corinth for eighteen more months, establishing a community of Jesus followers that has endured since. Who was this Titius Justus and what does he tell us about the Greek city of Corinth? Though his name is Roman, Acts described him as one who feared the Jewish God. First century Corinth and its layers of ethnic and religious complexity is well represented by Titius Justus, the Roman worshiper of the Jewish God turned Christian.

The diversity of Corinth demonstrated by Titius Justus was rooted in its dynamic political history that transformed the city from independent Greek πόλις (*polis* – *city*) to

¹⁴ Acts 11:6.

Roman colony. Located in a strategic location on the Isthmus of Corinth which separated northern and southern Greece, Corinth was one of the chief cities of Greece in the third century BCE, rivaling its neighbor Athens in cultural and commercial prominence.¹⁵ In the Hellenistic era, Corinth became a point of conflict between the Macedonians, the Spartans, and the Achaean League, a group of southern Greek city-states including Sicyon, Argos, and Megalopolis initially formed to oppose Macedonia and control the Peloponnese.¹⁶ Corinth became a member of the League in 243 BCE after the Achaeans expelled the Macedonian garrison. In 227 BCE, however, the threat of Sparta rising to prominence under King Cleomenes III obliged the League to ally with Macedonia, who defeated the Spartans in 222 BCE and reasserted control of Corinth and the neighboring regions. This continued until 197 BCE, when the League allied with the expansionist Romans, who defeated the Macedonians and returned Corinth and the whole of the Peloponnese to the Achaean League.

Flaminus, the Roman general, proclaimed the Greeks to be free (*libertas*) at the stadium at Isthmia near Corinth. The Romans' *libertas* was not complete political autonomy, however, and it was only a few decades before the Romans' restrictive patronage over the Achaean League led to a drastic deterioration of relations. In 147 BCE, when Rome attempted to arbitrate a conflict between the League and the still

¹⁵ See Figure 1 in Appendix A for a map of Greece which notes Corinth's strategic location on the Isthmus.

¹⁶ See Figure 2 in Appendix A for a map of southern Greece and the location of these cities of the Achaean League.

belligerent Spartans, it was met with stiff resistance. The Roman ambassador responded by threatening to dissolve much of the Achaean League by removing some of the most important cities from it such as Corinth, Sparta, and Argos. Removing Argos and Corinth while freeing Sparta from the League's control clearly favored Rome's strongest Greek ally Sparta and the Achaeans sent the ambassador back to Rome accompanied by insults and abuse. A second attempt at resolution by a Roman embassy followed in 146 BCE, but the crowd shouted down and rejected the ambassadors, not even allowing them to speak at the assembly.

Done with diplomacy, the Achaean League declared war on Sparta, compelling Rome to respond by sending forces on land and sea. After three successive defeats in central Greece, the Achaean League desperately marshaled a force of 14,000 soldiers, 12,000 of whom were recently freed slaves, to face the Roman army of over 25,000 trained soldiers under a Roman general named Mummius. The armies met at Lefkopetros on the Isthmus near Corinth and the Achaean force was destroyed completely. Mummius then entered Corinth, killed the male population, and sold the women and children into slavery. The city was left desolate with its formidable wealth removed to Rome. The other cities of the Achaean League were returned to Roman control.¹⁷

¹⁷ Engels, *Roman Corinth*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 14-16. For ancient sources, see Polybius, 38.9.1-38.18.12; Pausanias, 7.14.1-7.16.10; Strabo, 8.6.23.

The Greek period of Corinth's history was ended. From 146-44 BCE, the city of Corinth remained almost completely deserted, with only a small number of Corinthian descendants lingering among the ruins. Not all of the buildings were destroyed during the Roman sack of the city, but they suffered from the obvious toll of years of neglect. During this period, Corinth constituted a political non-entity. As a result, the Isthmian Games, the celebrated athletic festival that the Corinthians had sponsored every two years, were placed under the care of neighboring Sikyon.

Recognizing the strategic location Corinth once held, Julius Caesar ordered the colonization of Corinth in 44 BCE. The new colony, named Colonia Laus Julia Corinthiensis, was populated by Roman colonists and quickly began to regain its former prominence among the cities of the region, firmly under Roman control. When the Empire was pitched into civil war following the death of Julius Caesar, Corinth became a strategic point through which supplies could be carried across the Isthmus to Marc Antony and Cleopatra's forces in Greece. Agrippa, Octavian's general, captured Corinth and the Peloponnese in 31 BCE, one of the steps leading to Marc Antony's defeat. Under the rule of the new Caesar Augustus Corinth did well, even regaining sponsorship of the Isthmian Games in 2 BCE. The city began to flourish once again and continued to grow under Augustus' successors. By the time of Claudius in 44 CE, Corinth had become the

capital city of the province of Achaëa and it was during Claudius' reign that Paul arrived in the city, nearly 100 years after its refounding as a Roman colony.¹⁸

The identity of the colonists Julius Caesar sent to reestablish Corinth has traditionally been understood to be a mixture of freedmen and veterans from Caesar's war campaigns. This misconception of Corinth's early population is based on selections from Strabo, Appian, and Plutarch that discuss the colonization of Carthage in conjunction with Corinth and imply that both were populated by veterans.¹⁹ Benjamin Millis disputed the validity of understanding these passages as solid evidence of veterans being involved in Corinth's colonization, arguing that these ancient authors may have assumed what happened in Carthage also happened in Corinth due to other superficial similarities such as their identical dates of destruction in 146 BCE and colonization in 44 CE. A lack of evidence found in Corinth for a large presence of veterans corroborates Millis' reading of the ancient sources. In contrast, neighboring colonies, such as Patras, show indisputable signs of having been veterans' colonies. Studies of inscriptions on statues and funerary monuments in Corinth have shown that the colonists were mostly composed of Greek freedmen,²⁰ and James Walters found

¹⁸ For a nice summary of these events, see Donald Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 14-19; James Walters, "Civic Identity in Roman Corinth and Its Impact on Early Christians," in *Urban Religion in Roman Corinth*, 400-403. Ancient sources, Polybius, 38.9.2-18.12; Pausanias, 7.14.1-7.16.10; Strabo, 8.6.23.

¹⁹ Strabo 8.6.23, 17.3.15; Appian *Pun.* 136; Plutarch *Caes.* 57.8.

²⁰ Benjamin W. Millis, "The Social and Ethnic Origins of the Colonists in Early Roman Corinth" in *Corinth in Context* (Boston: Brill, 2010) 13-35.

that the settlers numbered 12,000-16,000.²¹ Donald Engels argues that by the end of the first century, the urban center of Corinth had a population of about 80,000, with an additional 20,000 in the surrounding rural areas.²²

Because of Corinth's history, the city was both Greek and Roman – appearing Roman and functioning as a Roman city but maintaining strong Greek roots. When Mummius destroyed the city, it ceased to function as a political entity and only a few individuals remained among the ruins. When the Roman colonists came, though mostly ethnic Greek freedmen, they brought with them the Roman form of government. Many of the original colonists were Roman citizens, with full Latin names, as found on inscriptions and coins.²³ According to Pausanias, the new Corinth was “no longer inhabited by any of the old Corinthians.”²⁴ Yet, Corinth's location was still the same, and surrounded by countryside filled with Greeks who made their way to the new city. The private language within the colony was chiefly Greek as witnessed by graffiti markings, but all public monuments and government business were conducted in Latin. The layout of the forum and much of the new architecture was in a Roman style, but the old Greek temples that remained were still used, as well as the old Corinth's theater and water

²¹ Walters, *Urban Religion*, 402.

²² Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 33; 79-84; see Appendix 2 for his use of Corinth's water supply as a means for estimating the population. As Engels notes, Aresteides wrote of Corinth as the largest city in Roman Greece. Engel's guesses at the size of Corinth's population are done without census data, making them tentative at best.

²³ Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 68.

²⁴ Pausanias 2.1.2.

fountains. Corinth, in many ways, gained a strongly Roman civic identity due to its colonial charter and Roman population, but as the city grew and added Greek residents, elements of Corinth's past entered the civic identity once again.²⁵ Though Corinth became more Greek, the Greek elites had to become more Roman to navigate the political world of the Empire. The citizens of newly founded Roman Corinth learned how to navigate both cultures, maintaining Corinth's Greek heritage while adapting to and presenting a Roman appearance to the world.²⁶

Primary sources do not clearly delineate the political structure of Corinth, but parallels with other Roman colonies can give us a good picture of how Corinth was organized. Power was strongly vested in the local senate, called the *decurio* in Latin or the βούλη (*boule*) in Greek. A body of one hundred members, the senate legislated festival days, oversaw the use of public buildings, and even called out the local militia to resolve emergencies. There were several prestigious positions of executive leadership in the colony. First were the two *duovirs*, who functioned as the chief magistrates in the colony by presiding over the *decurio* and exercising judgment on civil lawsuits. Names of forty-seven of the chief magistrates have been discovered on coinage found in Corinth, and A.J.S. Spawforth's analysis of these names found that at least five of the *duovirs* were Greek notables. Their names appear rather late, during the reigns of Claudius and

²⁵ Walters, "Civic Identity," 408-410; for other evidence of Corinth's civic identity changing, see Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 95-113.

²⁶ Millis, "Origins of the Colonists" 30-35.

Nero, another indication of Corinth becoming more Greek while its elites learned to become more Roman.²⁷ Next were the two *aediles*, who functioned as the practical stewards of the city by maintaining public streets and buildings, overseeing the marketplace, and sponsoring local events in the theater.²⁸ A last position specific to Corinth was the office of the *agonothetes*, who oversaw the Isthmian Games. This was a highly prestigious role and the *agonothetes* was honored not only in Corinth, but throughout Greece, as the Isthmian Games rivaled the Olympic Games as the most prominent regional event.²⁹ The politicians who filled public offices often pledged to personally fund public projects such as aqueducts or games and festivals. This system served to benefit the citizens of Corinth, who held the right to elect public officials and could extract extravagant campaign promises from candidates.

²⁷ A. J. S. Spawforth, "Roman Corinth: The Formation of a Colonial Elite" in *Roman Onomastics in the Greek East: Social and Political Aspects* (Athens: Research Center for Greek and Roman Antiquity, 1996), 169. For an opposing view of Spawforth's analysis, see Bruce Winter, who argues that the primary trend in Corinth was towards "Romanization" in *After Paul Left Corinth*, 7-25.

²⁸ There is an inscription in Corinth crediting Erastus the *aedile* with overseeing construction. Some scholars have connected this Erastus with Paul's friend Erastus the οἰκονομος (*oikonomos*) mentioned in Romans 16:23. Making this connection has enabled these scholars to assert the presence of wealthy Christians in Corinth. See G.D.R. Sanders, "Urban Corinth: An Introduction" in *Urban Religion in Roman Corinth*, (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2005), 23 and Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, Yale University (New Haven, 1983), 58-59. Their position is disputed by Steven J. Friesen, who argues that the term *oikonomos* cannot be equated with the Latin *aedile*. He claims that the normal Greek translation of *aedile* would have been αγοράνομος (*agoranomos*), and that the *oikonomos* of Romans was instead a subordinate financial manager position often filled by a slave. Friesen illustrates his point convincingly with inscriptions from other Roman cities that describe *oikonomoi* in that capacity. Thus the Erastus of Romans should not be equated with Erastus the *aedile* of Corinth. Steven J. Friesen, "The Wrong Erastus" in *Corinth in Context*, 231-256.

²⁹ Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 97. The importance of the post of *agonothetes* is another indicator of Greek influence in Corinth, because most of the honor derived from being the *agonothetes* would have been derived from the Greek world, not the Roman world.

The citizens of Corinth prospered through conducting commerce and providing services to traders and tourists drawn to the city by commercial or entertainment interests. There was a continual presence of merchants in the city, noted to be “the market, the common meeting place and festival of the Greeks” and “the common emporium of Europe and Asia.”³⁰ Corinth’s location at the center of Greece and the Empire ensured its commercial success. Trade between the Peloponnese of southern Greece with the regions to the north all had to pass by land through Corinth. More important was Corinth’s position between the eastern and western regions of the Empire on the choice trade route between the Mediterranean Sea and the Aegean Sea and beyond.³¹ Strabo stated that “Corinth is called wealthy, because of its commerce, since it is located on the Isthmus and is master of two harbors, one which leads straight to Asia and the other to Italy.”³² Corinth’s role as a facilitator of trade on the Mediterranean was important because of the treacherous seas below the Peloponnese. “Round Cape Malea and forget about home” was an ancient proverb referring to the dangerous winds around the southern tip of Achaea, Cape Malea, which compelled many sailors instead to ferry their cargo across the Isthmus of Corinth between the Peloponnese and mainland Greece by unloading on one side, traversing the *diolkos*, a paved portage road, and reloading onto another ship on the other side. In some cases,

³⁰ Aristeides, *Discourses*, 46.23.

³¹ See Figure 1 in Appendix A for a map.

³² Strabo 8.6.20. Figure 3 in Appendix A shows the location of both harbors.

merchants would even ferry entire ships if they were small enough, though this was probably less common than just carrying the cargo.³³ The Apostle Paul experienced the dangers of Cape Malea firsthand on his way to Rome for trial before Caesar, when his ship was caught in a storm to the south of Greece and driven west until it wrecked on the island of Malta.³⁴ Thus, Corinth was a major benefactor of the difficult seas around the Cape of Malea, and its citizens were able to profit from duties on goods traded there as well as from services offered to merchants passing through the city. Donald Engels argued that Corinth was primarily a service economy, as opposed to an agrarian or strictly commercial economy. He held that though Corinth clearly did prosper via trade, its primary source of income was from services provided to those who came to Corinth for industry or entertainment.³⁵ The flow of merchants through the city would have created a large market for service commodities, such as inns, baths, restaurants, banks, and entertainment.

The sea route through Corinth brought not only merchants, but anyone traveling from one side of the Empire to the other, as well as tourists for the biannual Isthmian Games. Though the Apostle Paul did not go through Corinth on his way to Rome, it seems that perhaps he should have! The danger of Cape Malea encouraged many

³³ Ibid. 8.2.1; Polybius 5.101.4. Figure 3 in Appendix A shows the location of the *diolkos*. Figure 1 shows the Cape of Malea.

³⁴ Acts 27; see Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 51.

³⁵ Engels, *Roman Corinth*, Chapter Three "The Service Economy" 43-65.

travelers heading east from Rome to go through Corinth, especially during the stormy winter months. Not all travelers in Corinth were merely passing through, however. For some, it was the destination. The renowned Isthmian Games were similar to the Olympic Games held in Olympus to the west, attracting participants and spectators from throughout the Empire. The contests included poetry readings; musical performances; races on horseback, chariots, in full armor, and on foot; wrestling; and boxing. One of the events, the ἀποβάτικον (*apobatikon*), involved leaping from one horse to another in mid-race.³⁶ The occurrence of these games every two years increased the tourist and service industries in Corinth, as the competitors and spectators needed places to stay, food to eat, and things to do in the evenings during the games. Corinth provided these services and more, thus bringing further wealth and importance to the city.

Besides the Isthmian Games, religious cults devoted to Greek, Roman, and Egyptian gods represented by impressive temples and regular festivals in honor of the gods attracted visitors to Corinth. Corinth's heritage as an ancient Greek city included special prominence in several Greek cults, especially those of Aphrodite and Poseidon. Corinthian coins often displayed Aphrodite or Poseidon as advertisements of the religious services offered to both of the deities. Roman religion was well represented in Corinth as well, as Corinth became the center of the federal imperial cult of Achaëa,

³⁶ Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 52.

serving as the focal point of emperor worship in the province of Achaëa. The Egyptian deities, Isis and Serapis, had a strong presence in Corinth, with multiple temples around the city. Jews who came to the city for commerce or to live had several synagogues within Corinth, and the local courts granted them official recognition.³⁷ The arrival of Paul and his message of Jesus was only a small addition to the already complex religious scene in first century Corinth.³⁸

The popularity of Corinth as a destination for citizens of the Empire, whether for business, pleasure, or religion ensured that the city was full of diversity with interactions among people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds. Titius Justus, our Roman fearer of the Jewish God, exemplifies the presence of these layers of interaction in Roman Corinth. Though the brief mention of him in Acts is the only information we have about him,³⁹ as a Roman who spoke Greek, worshiped with the Jews, and converted to Christianity, Titius Justus displays how ethnicity and religion from different sources intermingled in first century Corinth. The early Corinthian Christian community was composed of individuals converted from Jewish, Greek, or Roman ethnic backgrounds who had previously worshiped the Jewish God; Greek, Roman, and Egyptian gods; or

³⁷ See Chapter Two, pages 30-31 and 34-35 below for a discussion of the official recognition of the Jewish community.

³⁸ Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 92-120. For further discussion of these cultic sites, see Chapter Three below.

³⁹ Unless the analysis of Edgar Goodspeed is correct, who grants him the full name Gaius Titius Justus, with the *praenomen* Gaius used to describe him in Paul's letters to Corinth and Rome. Edgar J Goodspeed, "Gaius Titius Justus," in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 69(4) (1950), 382.

any combination of them all. As these converts joined the Christian community, they brought beliefs and practices from their former religious experiences with them. The blending of differing religious backgrounds caused conflicts to form over how members of the Christian community should behave, especially between converts from a polytheistic background and those from a Jewish background.

Chapter Two

“It is veiled to those who are perishing”

Upon his arrival in Corinth, Paul encountered a Jewish couple, Aquila and Priscilla. Natives of the Roman province of Pontus, they had recently arrived from Rome, because the emperor Claudius had expelled the Jews from the capital city.⁴⁰ Aquila and Priscilla illustrate the scattered nature of first century Judaism – the Jews were not found only in Judaea, but throughout the Roman Empire. Known as Jews of the Diaspora, or dispersion, “it was not easy to find a place in the inhabited world which this tribe has not penetrated and which has not been occupied by it.”⁴¹ A Diaspora community was clearly present in Roman Corinth, with at least one synagogue and most likely several more.⁴² Unlike the Jews of Jerusalem, most Diaspora Jews assimilated to some degree to the surrounding culture, speaking in Greek and engaging in trade with their Gentile neighbors. Interactions with Gentiles were frequent enough in Corinth to inspire some of the non-Jews who surrounded them, such as Titius Justus the God-

⁴⁰ Acts 18:2; Claudius expelled the Jews in 49 CE (Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.4).

⁴¹ Strabo, quoted by Josephus, *Ant.* 14.7.2.

⁴² Acts 18; Irina Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in its Diaspora Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 166.

fearer, to join them in worshipping the Jewish God. Despite some level of integration, the Jews of Corinth managed to maintain their identity and separation from the Gentiles through weekly meetings at local synagogues, cultural differences such as dietary restrictions and circumcision, and continued interaction with the homeland of Jerusalem evidenced by the annual Jewish tax for the temple in Jerusalem.⁴³

Early Christianity was entirely Jewish in background, originating within the Jewish religious construct and gradually creating points of separation from Judaism until it became clearly separated from it. Recent work on Jewish-Christian relations, especially in the Jewish Diaspora, has tended toward an emphasis on a much less pronounced distinction between the two groups. Several recent scholars have described early Christianity as a sect of Judaism, decades from becoming a separate religion.⁴⁴ An important element of this movement is the discrediting of Luke, the writer of Luke and Acts, as a theologically motivated historian whose main purpose is to highlight Jewish antagonism to Christianity.⁴⁵ Other writers such as Irina Levinskaya have upheld the use of Luke-Acts as historical documents, not by claiming that they are free from theological

⁴³ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), 427-430. On the temple tax, see Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts*, 145-148, and the letter from Flaccus the proconsul of Asia cited there stating that Augustus granted the Jews, wherever they lived, the ability to send money to Jerusalem.

⁴⁴ See especially Judith Lieu's critique of J. D. G. Dunn's conception of Jewish-Christian relations in "The Parting of the Ways" in *Neither Jew nor Greek?* (New York: T&T Clark, 2002), 11-29.

⁴⁵ See J. T. Sanders, *Schismatics, Sectarians, Dissidents, Deviants: The First One Hundred Years of Jewish-Christian Relations* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1993) 1-4. Also, see Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) 124-128 and included bibliography for further discussion.

motivation but by arguing that there is no less reason to use them than there is to use Paul's epistles or the works of ancient historians.⁴⁶ Luke's bias as a Christian author who clearly saw the Jews as the main source of opposition to Christianity should not eliminate his voice from the conversation. Rather, his writings should be read in concert with other source material to ascertain the historical reality, just as the writings of other ancient authors should be paired with one another.⁴⁷ In Corinth, evidence from Paul's letters at least partially confirmed the Jewish-Christian antagonism noted in Acts, lending credibility to Luke's account.⁴⁸

Though it is true the Christians were quite similar to the Diaspora Jews, there were several ways in which the early Christians in Corinth, especially those who followed Paul's lead, were distinct from the Corinthian Jews. Jews and Christians shared the use of the history of the Israelites as a means of identity formation and a faith in the one God of the Israelites. Both communities utilized similar practices in their weekly gatherings such as public prayer, ritual washings, communal meals, and public reading of the same Scriptures, i.e. the Septuagint. Yet the Christian community Paul founded met in a separate location than the Jews for a reason: the Christians represented by Paul felt that the new covenant Jesus of Nazareth instituted was superior to the covenant of

⁴⁶ Levinskaya, *Diaspora Setting*, viii, 2, 11.

⁴⁷ For example, the writings of Strabo should be read alongside those of Plutarch when applicable.

⁴⁸ See especially my discussion of 2 Corinthians 3 below.

Moses the Jews observed, in that it called for the elimination of dietary restrictions and male circumcision and that it urged the aggressive proselytization of Gentiles. These differences marked the Christians as a community distinct from the Jews, and converts of Jewish background would have had to overcome these shifts in their religious values. Indeed, some of the Christians in Corinth, despite Paul's directions, continued to hold on to Jewish norms concerning dietary laws and circumcision, demonstrating how the Jewish background of some of the Christian converts in Corinth was displayed within the Christian community.

Luke's account of the onset of Paul's mission to Corinth started in the Jewish synagogue, where he attempted to persuade the Diaspora community to join the movement of Jesus' followers. The amount of time he spent there is unclear, but Luke claimed he spoke "every Sabbath," suggesting an extended period of time, and that he addressed both the Jews and Greeks found at the synagogue, referring to the Gentile God-fearers who were present. Though Paul's time at the synagogue came to an abrupt end when he was run out and forced to move his ministry to Titius Justus' house, his strategy in targeting an audience already familiar with Jewish principles aligns with the many ways in which first-century Christianity was similar in belief and practice to the Jews of the Diaspora.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Acts 18:4-8.

Portions of Paul's letters to the church several years later illustrate that the Christian community thought highly of Jewish heritage and practice. Paul's appeal in 1 Corinthians 10 to Jewish history as a form of identity for the Christian community shows that he desired to instill in the Christians a connection to the Jewish heritage and that the Christian community was able to identify with concepts from Jewish history.⁵⁰

Another example in the Corinthian correspondence is Paul's facetious outburst in 2 Corinthians 11. The closing section of 2 Corinthians is a polemic against opponents who have infiltrated the church and turned some within the community against him by claiming he is weak and unqualified. Paul's opponents were clearly Jewish and using their background as a mark of distinction. Paul labeled these opponents "super-apostles" (ὑπερλίαν ἀποστόλων - *hyperlian apostolon*), and argued that they boast according to human standards, not Christ's. Further, Paul claimed that even his own human boasting would stand up to that of the false apostles, stating "whatever anyone dares to boast of – I am speaking as a fool – I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I."⁵¹ Paul's appeal to his Jewish heritage as an important part of his "human boasting" suggests that the "super-apostles" also offered their Jewish pedigree as a part of their credentials. That the "super-apostles" and Paul would think to appeal to their

⁵⁰ See my discussion of Jewish history as a tool for Christian identity formation in Chapter Three, pages 64-65 below.

⁵¹ 2 Corinthians 11:22.

Jewish heritage when asserting their claims to leadership indicates that the Christians valued Jewish background to some degree, at least in regard to leadership credentials. The Corinthian Christian community, even with its Gentile elements, remained closely connected enough to the Jewish faith that despite their differences, Jewish heritage was respected.

The concept of heritage – fitting into a historical story as Israel, the People of God – marks one of the key similarities between Diaspora Jews and the Corinthian Christians. Further similarities can be seen in the Jewish and Christian weekly services, as they both involved praying, reading and interpreting scripture, and eating communal meals. Christian rituals of baptism, communion, and foot washing, though given their own peculiar flavor, were clearly analogous to similar Jewish practices. Both Jews and Christians maintained the need to resolve judicial disputes among their own members internally.⁵² The Christians adopted the Jewish stance towards Greek and Roman idol worship, claiming a sharp division between those who served one God and the rest who worshiped many gods, who were effectively non-gods.⁵³ Neither Christian nor Diaspora Jewish worship involved sacrifice, the Christians because they believed Jesus was the final sacrifice and the Jews because all sacrifice occurred at the temple in Jerusalem. “Most important, the Pauline Christians took over the scripture, large and basic parts of

⁵² Wayne Meeks, *Urban Christians*, 80. 1 Corinthians 6:1-8.

⁵³ The Jewish position is articulated by Philo. See Meeks, *Urban Christians*, 166.

the belief system, and a great many norms and traditions, either whole or with some modifications, from the Greek-speaking synagogues.”⁵⁴ These common belief systems and practices with the Jews of Corinth were reinforced in the Corinthian Christian community by the presence of Jewish and God-fearing converts who arrived in the Christian world with backgrounds in Jewish thought, such as Titius Justus and the president of the synagogue in Corinth, Crispus.⁵⁵

If the Christians shared so much in belief and practice with the Diaspora Jewish community, what separated the Christians from the Jews? According to historian Shaye J. D. Cohen,

The separation of Christianity from Judaism was a process, not an event. The essential part of this process was that the church was becoming more and more Gentile, and less and less Jewish, but the separation manifested itself in different ways in each local community where Jews and Christians dwelt together. In some places, the Jews expelled the Christians; in others, the Christians left of their own accord.⁵⁶

What then was the situation in Corinth? As will be seen below, for Paul the separation was clear – faith (πίστις – *pistis*) in Jesus was the dividing line and the Jews who failed to believe in Jesus were deceived and destined to perish. He longed for the Jews of Corinth to join him in having faith in Jesus, but considered those who refused not to be true

⁵⁴ Meeks, *Urban Christians*, 81.

⁵⁵ 1 Corinthians 18:8; Acts 18:8.

⁵⁶ Shaye J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1988), 228.

followers of God. For some of the Corinthian Christians from Jewish background, however, there was more hesitancy about leaving strongly held Jewish practices behind, especially dietary restrictions and circumcision, and Paul had to convince them to continue the process of separation. The Acts 18 account of animosity between Paul and the Jews offers an initial picture of Jewish/Christian separation which can be further elucidated by Paul's discussion in 2 Corinthians 3 about the blindness of the Jews.

Luke's narrative in Acts described Paul ministering in the synagogue until they "opposed and reviled (βλασφημούντων - *blasphemounton*) him."⁵⁷ The conversion of Crispus, the president of the synagogue, followed Paul's departure from the synagogue.⁵⁸ An unknown amount of time after Paul moved his ministry from the synagogue to Titius Justus' house, the Jews "made a united attack on Paul"⁵⁹ and took him before the Roman proconsul L. Junius Gallio, older brother of the philosopher Seneca.⁶⁰ The Jews, led by their new president, Sosthenes, claimed Paul was "persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law."⁶¹ It is unclear

⁵⁷ Acts 18:6.

⁵⁸ Crispus is mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:14 as one of the few Corinthians he had personally baptized.

⁵⁹ Acts 18:12.

⁶⁰ Gallio was proconsul in Corinth around 52 CE. His proconsulship is the method by which Paul's mission in Corinth is dated to the early 50s CE. Gallio would have presided over the case at the *bema* or judgement seat in the middle of the agora. See Figure 4 in Appendix B for a photograph of the remains of the Corinthian *bema*, built around 44 CE, where the trial of Paul took place.

⁶¹ Acts 18:13.

if Sosthenes was referring to Roman imperial law or Jewish religious law, but Gallio decided that the dispute was an internal Jewish matter and outside his jurisdiction. This ruling allowed the Christian community to continue to enjoy the legal immunities granted to the Jews that allowed them to meet weekly and granted them access to kosher foods in the market.⁶² According to Donald Engels, the Jews were concerned that allowing the Christians to coexist with them would violate the terms of this immunity the Emperor Claudius granted them, as the exemption only remained valid if the Jews refrained from introducing any new or irregular religious customs.⁶³ Regardless of the Jews' motivations, Gallio told them to "see to it yourselves; I do not wish to be a judge of these matters,"⁶⁴ and the Jews were dismissed from the tribunal.⁶⁵ Luke's account argued that the Jews felt that the Christians should no longer be considered a part of their religious construct.

The description in Acts of the Jewish-Christian interaction as confrontational is bolstered by Paul's presentation of the Jews as having veiled and hardened minds and

⁶² See my discussion of kosher food markets and dialogue with Bruce Winter on the subject below.

⁶³ Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 108-109.

⁶⁴ Acts 18:15.

⁶⁵ After being dismissed, Luke records that Sosthenes was then publicly beaten by onlookers. For further discussion of this incident, see Moyer Hubbard, "Urban Uprisings in the Roman World: The Social Setting of the Mobbing of Sosthenes." *New Test. Stud.* 51, pp 416-428. Church tradition claims that Paul refers to the same Sosthenes as a brother in 1 Cor. 1:1, but the name was a common one and there is no way to know for sure. Other traditions name him the second leader of the Corinthian church.

being destined to perish in 2 Corinthians 3, where Paul offered a harsh critique of the

Jews and confirmed a separation between the two groups:

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside.⁶⁶ But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses⁶⁷ is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. (2 Corinthians 3:12-16)

Paul's words marked a bold distinction between his gospel of Jesus Christ as Messiah and the Jewish message of the Mosaic covenant. Although both audiences were listening to the reading (*ἀναγινώσκηται, anagignoskeitai*) of Moses, only those who turned to the Lord could properly understand the true meaning. Paul labeled the "old" covenant of Moses the ministry of condemnation, and the "new" covenant of Jesus the ministry of justification. Though he maintained there was glory in the first ministry, he claimed that the first ministry's glory was now lost in comparison to how much more glorious this second ministry was, having *τῆς ὑπερβαλλούσης δόξης, (teis hyperballouseis doxeis – surpassing glory)*. Further, this second ministry, the ministry of Christ, was not only more glorious but also was permanent. Joining the covenant of Christ granted freedom and transformation through the Lord, who was the Spirit (τὸ

⁶⁶ The background of Paul's reference to Moses can be found in Exodus 34:29-35.

⁶⁷ Meaning the law and teachings of Moses that form the first part of the Jewish scriptures, i. e. the Torah.

πνεῦμα, *to pneuma*). In a final condemnation of the Jews, Paul stated that “even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are ἀπολλυμένοις (*apollumenois* – *perishing*, or *being destroyed*). In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”⁶⁸ Notice that natural blindness was not the cause of the Jews’ lack of sight, but a physical κάλυμμα (*kalumma* – *veil* or *covering*). This suggested that those blinded would have been naturally able to see the “light of the gospel,” just as the Christians could, but the presence of a veil placed over their minds by the “god of this world,” or Satan, impeded them from seeing. The Jews who did not believe could not see the truth of the gospel because Satan had deceived them, were unable to see through the blinding veil to the gospel of the glory of Christ, and were ultimately destined to perish. Clearly, Paul saw and articulated a distinction between the Christian and Jewish communities in Corinth.

The Christian welcoming of the new covenant of Jesus at the expense of the Jewish covenant of Moses was not merely a spiritual distinction but had practical implications. The Christians enabled the Gentiles who surrounded them to join their group by eliminating two significant barriers: dietary restrictions and male circumcision. According to Luke, the lifting of the dietary restrictions began to occur shortly after the inception of the Jesus movement. In Acts 10, Peter was given a vision from God urging

⁶⁸ 2 Corinthians 4:4.

him to eat food considered ritually unclean under the Mosaic law, with a voice commanding, “what God has made clean, you must not consider ritually unclean!”⁶⁹ This vision was immediately followed by an opportunity for Peter to witness to the Roman centurion Cornelius, the first God-fearer mentioned in Acts. Peter took this combination of events as confirmation from God that the Gentiles are to be included in the Christian movement, an indication that food laws marked a boundary between the Jewish community and God-fearing Gentiles. Peter’s actions in welcoming Cornelius into the Christian community also implied a negation of dietary restrictions.

Not all of the Corinthian Christians were settled on how to handle the consumption of unclean food. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul commanded the Christians to “eat all (πᾶν – *pan*) that was sold in the market,”⁷⁰ including that which may have been unclean by Jewish standards because it had been offered to idols. Paul also told the Christians to eat without worry of offending kosher laws at private dinners, unless a dinner companion pointed out that the meat in question was offered to idols and indicated that he found it inappropriate for Christian consumption. In this exception, the Christian should refrain not for his conscience, but for the sake of the dinner companion who objected.⁷¹ Bruce W. Winter has noted that Paul’s reasoning behind his command is extraordinary – “the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it,” quoting Psalm 24:1, a

⁶⁹ Acts 10:15.

⁷⁰ 1 Corinthians 10:25.

⁷¹ 1 Corinthians 10:25-28.

common blessing the Jews used before eating their meals.⁷² Winter proposed that meat in the market became a pressing concern after Paul left Corinth because of changing social conditions, namely the removal of kosher meats from the Corinthian market as a part of the anti-Semitic attitude marked by Claudius' expulsion of the Jews from Rome⁷³ and the beating of Sosthenes following Gallio's swift judgment against the Jewish case. Winter appealed to a parallel case in Sardis, where an injunction from the emperor granted the Jews the right to kosher meat in the meat market of Sardis.⁷⁴ If the removal of kosher food from the marketplace was the impetus for Paul's remarks, his response was clearly different than what the Jewish community's would have been. Paul's discussion of the topic in 1 Corinthians 10, as well as his citation of a Corinthian slogan – "food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food"⁷⁵ suggests that some in the Christian community had asked questions about kosher food, and that a conflict had risen between Christians who endorsed buying meat in the market and Christians who refrained from doing so.

A similar situation can be seen in the questions surrounding male circumcision. A council of Christian leaders in Jerusalem before Paul's arrival in Corinth partially influenced the Corinthian Christians' understanding of the role of male circumcision

⁷² 1 Corinthians 10:26; Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 300.

⁷³ Acts 18:17.

⁷⁴ Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 298.

⁷⁵ 1 Corinthians 6:13.

within Christianity. The council occurred after some men from Judea came to Paul's home church in Antioch in Syria, preaching that "unless you are circumcised according to the Law of Moses, you cannot be saved."⁷⁶ Paul and his companion Barnabas disagreed with this strongly, and after a debate the matter was taken to Jerusalem for the apostles and elders there to adjudicate. The Acts account noted the importance of religious background in determining who advocated circumcision, setting "some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees" who argued the necessity of circumcision against Paul and Barnabas.⁷⁷ Peter joined Paul and Barnabas, claiming that the church should not place the burden of circumcision on the Gentile converts since, "we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they are."⁷⁸ James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, gave the final word, outlining a compromise that allowed Gentiles to remain uncircumcised but called on them to avoid eating meat that was offered to idols or strangled, touching blood, and engaging in sexual immorality. This compromise was sent via letter to the church at Antioch and most likely to the other churches as well. Paul departed on his next missionary journey soon afterwards, and would have arrived in Corinth with the Jerusalem council's decision in hand.

⁷⁶ Acts 15:1.

⁷⁷ Acts 15:5.

⁷⁸ Acts 15:11.

Though Paul undoubtedly taught the Christian community his view of circumcision when he was there, some Christians were still uncertain what they should do about the Jewish practice several years later. In 1 Corinthians 7:17-20, Paul gave his “rule in all the churches.” He urged everyone to remain as they are – if uncircumcised, not to seek circumcision; if circumcised, not to attempt to remove the marks of circumcision. There was no need for Gentile converts to try to fit in with the Jewish converts, or vice versa. “Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything. Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called.”⁷⁹ By Paul’s reasoning, following that of the Jerusalem council, God no longer commanded circumcision. This was a strong shift from the Jewish use of circumcision as a boundary between themselves and everyone else. As noted in the passage in Acts, at least some of those from a Jewish background would have found this difficult to accept. That Paul felt obliged to address the subject shows that differing opinions about circumcision were present within the Corinthian Christian community, with some Gentile converts considering becoming circumcised and some Jewish converts considering hiding their circumcision.

The removal of the circumcision requirement enabled the Christian community to aggressively proselytize Gentiles. When Paul was pushed out of the synagogue, he made the move to Titius Justus’ house and continued his preaching, intent on spreading

⁷⁹ 1 Corinthians 7:17-20. For further discussion of Diaspora Jews’ lack of aggressive evangelism see page 33 below.

his gospel of Jesus to the Gentiles outside of the synagogue. Diaspora Jewish communities did not engage in aggressive evangelism of Gentiles, though some Gentiles were attracted to the synagogues, as evidenced by Paul's ability to witness at the Jewish synagogue in Corinth to "both Jews and Greeks."⁸⁰ The Jewish boundary of circumcision most affected Titius Justus' group of Gentiles, the God-fearers.⁸¹ God-fearers as described in Acts were people who attended the synagogue and were interested in worshiping the Jewish God, but were unwilling to take the step of male circumcision that would allow them to be a proselyte.⁸² Judith Lieu has questioned this standard model for the God-fearers, effectively demonstrating that epigraphical evidence for the God-fearers shows that some of them were called God-fearer because they sponsored Jews politically or financially, not necessarily because of their personal religious attraction.⁸³ Lieu's conclusions, however, do not indicate that the God-fearers as described in Acts did not exist; only that some God-fearers were called such for non-religious reasons. Shaye Cohen described seven possible categories for how Gentiles

⁸⁰ Acts 18:4.

⁸¹ The terms used in Acts to refer to this group are φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν (*foboumenoi ton theon* – *fearer of God*), Acts 10:1-2; 10:22; 13:16; 13:26; σεβομένου τὸν θεόν (*sebomenou ton theon* – *worshiper of God*), Acts 13:50; 16:14; 18:6-7; σεβόμενοι προσήλυτοι (*sebomenoi proseilutoi* – *worshiping proselyte*), Acts 13:34; σεβόμενοι Ἕλληνες (*sebomenoi helleines* – *worshiping Greek*), Acts 17:17; or just σεβομένου (*sebomenou* – *worshiper*), Acts 17:4. Luke's references to this group are generally accepted as parallel to the epigraphical term θεοσεβείς (*theosebeis* – *God-worshiper*, or *pious*). For a discussion of epigraphical evidence of God-fearers and the use of the term θεοσεβείς in second century Christian writing, see Judith Lieu, "The Race of the God Fearers" in *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 49-68. Also, for the Aphrodisias inscription that most clearly shows the use of θεοσεβείς, see Levinskaya, *Acts*, 52-82.

⁸² Judith Lieu, "Do God-fearers Make Good Christians?" in *Neither Jew nor Greek*, 31.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 37-42.

showed affection for the Jews, the first five of which would have been consistent for a God-fearer: “(1) by admiring some aspect of Judaism; (2) acknowledging the power of the God of the Jews by incorporating him into a pagan pantheon; (3) benefiting the Jews or being conspicuously friendly to Jews; (4) practicing some or many of the rituals of the Jews; (5) venerating the God of the Jews and denying or ignoring the pagan gods; (6) joining the Jewish community; (7) converting to Judaism and ‘becoming a Jew’”⁸⁴ Of these seven categories, the last two would have marked a change from God-fearer to proselyte, discussed below. A God-fearer could have fulfilled any combination of the first five categories.

Though not all of the God-fearers were equally invested in Judaism as a religion, Luke clearly sees their presence as crucial to the success of the Christian mission and an important group for the Christians to evangelize. Paul’s method, repeated throughout Acts, of preaching first at the Jewish synagogue in each city effectively connected him with the religiously motivated God-fearing group, who were physically present at the synagogue. Acts repeatedly mentions Christian interactions with God-fearers and shows them to be the first Gentiles to respond to the Christian message; Titius Justus of Corinth is an excellent example. The presence of God-fearers at Jewish synagogues is an attractive explanation for how Paul’s message, so rooted in Jewish history and thought,

⁸⁴ S.J.D. Cohen, “Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew” in *Harvard Theological Review* 82, (1989), 14.

could have connected to large numbers of Gentiles.⁸⁵ Was this group a significant part of the Gentile section of the Corinthian church? Caution should be exercised, as there is little evidence outside of Acts' mention of Titius Justus for God-fearer involvement in the Corinthian church. Further, Paul's exhortations to flee from idols and sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians implies that at least some of the Christians were not connected to the Jewish community in religious practice before joining the Christian group.⁸⁶ Thus, it is unknown if Titius Justus represented a larger group of God-fearers who converted to Christianity in Corinth or not. However, the message of Christianity was ideal for converting such Gentiles who had some level of respect for or adherence to Judaism, but had not committed to undergoing circumcision.⁸⁷

What about the Gentiles who were willing to undergo circumcision in their quest to worship the God of the Jews? These individuals were considered a part of the Jewish community as proselytes (προσήλυτος – *proseilutos*). The term προσήλυτος in the Septuagint denoted foreigners who were dwelling in the land of Israel and were required to observe certain elements of the Israelite law.⁸⁸ In the Diaspora, the word acquired religious connotations, and came to mean a Gentile who was committed

⁸⁵ Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts*, 122.

⁸⁶ 1 Corinthians 5, 10:14-22; see Chapter Three, pages 56-60 below for further discussion.

⁸⁷ For a contrary argument, see Lieu's "Do God-fearers make Good Christians?" in *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 31-47.

⁸⁸ Deuteronomy 5:14, 16:10, 16:13, 16:9-14.

enough to be circumcised and observe the Jewish dietary laws. First century Diaspora Jewish communities clearly grew through an increase in proselytes, as evidenced by literary and epigraphical evidence. Several sources refer to Tiberius, the emperor from 14-37 CE, banning the Jews from Rome in 19 CE because “they were converting many of the natives to their ways.”⁸⁹ A small number of tombstones have been found honoring προσήλυτος as fully Jewish.⁹⁰ The evidence is clear that some Gentiles in the Roman Empire were attracted to the Jewish religion strongly enough that they moved beyond the category of God-fearers and became proselytes. Likely, some of the “Greeks” in attendance at the Corinthian synagogue were proselytes.

Was Paul’s decision to “go to the Gentiles”⁹¹ a novel concept within the Jewish community at Corinth, or does the presence of proselytes in the first century imply that the Jewish communities of the Diaspora were proselytizing? In the 1950s, most historians of early Christianity agreed that Judaism was a missionary religion and that the Jewish mission prepared the way for Christianity.⁹² This consensus has since been replaced by the opposite view, which claims that Judaism was not a missionary religion

⁸⁹ Dio Cassius, 57.18.5a; Other sources are Josephus, *AJ* 18.81-84; Tacitus, *Annales* 2.85,4; and Suetonius, *Tib.* 36.1.

⁹⁰ Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts*, 25-26.

⁹¹ Acts 18:6.

⁹² Some of the influential works: A. von Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904-5); K. G. Kuhn, *προσήλυτος*, TDNT; 6 (1968), 727-744; W. G. Braude, *Proselytizing in the First Five Centuries of the Common Era, the Age of Tannaim and Amoraim* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1940). For a complete listing and discussion of the historiography, see Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts*.

at all.⁹³ The evidence supports the second school of thought – Diaspora Jews did not feel religiously compelled to evangelize non-Jews, though they welcomed Gentiles who wished to become God-fearers or proselytes. As Irina Levinskaya deftly showed, literary evidence for the presence of proselytes must be read alongside related sources. An example is Dio Cassius’ quote cited above, which should be qualified by reading Tacitus on the same topic. Tacitus held that Egyptian cults were also expelled from Rome at the same time as the Jews, yet “no one explains this as a result of particular missionary zeal on the part of Egyptian preachers.”⁹⁴ Roman tendencies to seek out new or exciting religious experiences were enough to lead them to the Egyptian cults of Isis and Serapis; they could also be enough to lead them to Judaism. Further, the silence of Josephus and Philo on the matter is striking. Though both were clearly familiar with and pleased by the proselytes they knew, neither of them discuss Jewish missionary activity. Josephus never uses the word προσήλυτος, and Philo uses it only when citing the Septuagint.⁹⁵ Finally, the Book of Acts, with its missional thesis, never alluded to Jewish missionary activity. Luke only mentioned the word προσήλυτος three times, sporadically and never with a reference to the Jews making a concerted effort to bring Gentiles into their ranks.

⁹³ A.T. Kraabel, ‘The Roman Diaspora: Six Questionable Assumptions’, *JJS* 33 (1982), 450-456; S.J.D. Cohen, “Was Judaism in Antiquity a Missionary Religion?,” *Jewish Assimilation, Acculturation, and Accommodation: Past Traditions Current Issues and Future Prospects*, ed. M. Mor (New York: University Press of America, 1992), 14-23; M. Goodman, “Jewish Proselytizing in the First Century,” *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, eds. J. Lieu, J. North, and T. Rajak (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 53-78.

⁹⁴ Levinskaya, 31.

⁹⁵ Levinskaya, 33.

There is little reason to believe that Gentile proselytes were drawn to the Jewish faith through Jewish missionary activity.

In strong contrast to Jewish attitudes towards missions, the Christian community held evangelism as a key component of their faith. Paul, whose presence in Corinth was evangelical in nature to begin with, clearly had no problem with continuing his mission among the Gentiles after being run out of the Jewish synagogue. The Christian community in Corinth was to flee from idols and avoid immorality, but at the same time, Paul wanted them to interact with people outside of the Christian community. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul finished his denunciation of the man living with his stepmother by recalling how he told the Corinthians not to associate with sexually immoral persons.⁹⁶ He then clarified his statement – “not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world.”⁹⁷ He meant instead to avoid associating with immoral individuals who also called themselves fellow believers, such as the man living with his stepmother. Though the community was to have boundaries, its members were at the same time to evangelize the Corinthians outside of those boundaries – a prospect made much more palatable by the removal of dietary laws and circumcision.

⁹⁶ See further discussion of 1 Corinthians 5 in Chapter Three, pages 59-60 below.

⁹⁷ 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.

Corinth's Christian community was open to and in pursuit of all who were willing to become believers. By opening the door to all, no matter their religious background and without strenuous requirements such as circumcision, the Christians gained converts the Jews never would have. However, the influx of Corinthians who did not share a background in Jewish moral law caused the boundaries of the Christian community to be stretched and strained, compelling Paul to write letters full of reprimands and corrections. Those within the Christian community who did not see a need to uphold the Jewish moral law stated "all things are lawful for me,"⁹⁸ denoting an openness to behavior outside of Jewish norms. Paul's response to this slogan indicates that it was being used to justify sexual interactions with prostitutes.⁹⁹ This mindset can also be seen in 1 Corinthians 5, where some of the Christians respond to a man living with his stepmother with *φυσιώω* (*fusioō* – *arrogance* or *conceit*), rather than shame. The Corinthian Christian community became more diverse in its understanding of moral norms by evangelizing Corinthians with religious backgrounds outside of Judaism.

The Corinthian Christian community's growth out of the Jewish community caused a change in the identity of the Christians. As the Christians decided against dietary laws and circumcision and for aggressive evangelism, the Christians with Jewish backgrounds had to struggle with leaving behind their religious norms. Further, as more

⁹⁸ 1 Corinthians 6:12.

⁹⁹ See the context surrounding the set of slogans in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. Paul clearly saw a connection between the slogan and the immoral behavior he denounced.

and more Greeks and Romans with backgrounds in polytheistic cults began to convert, the Christian community had to debate what the moral code of Corinthian Christianity should be. Should Christianity throw out the moral law of Judaism along with the ceremonial law? Or should the new converts from the Gentile community have to learn to change their ways and leave behind the religious constructs of their past?

Chapter Three

“Flee from the worship of idols”

The mission to the Gentiles was successful enough that Paul addressed the Christians as ἔθνη (*ethnei* – *Gentiles or non-Jews*)¹⁰⁰ in 1 Corinthians 12:2 – “you know that when you were ἔθνη, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak.”¹⁰¹ Paul’s discussions throughout the letters about idols alluded to individuals in the Christian community who had interacted with idols regularly. Luke claimed as well that Paul was highly effective in gaining converts from the non-Jews of Corinth who had backgrounds in Greek, Roman, and Egyptian idol-worshipping cults.¹⁰² All of the idol based cults in Corinth and throughout the Roman Empire embraced polytheism, allowing for the integration of multiple deities in one supplicant’s religious experience – converts joining the Christian community would have brought this model with them. Paul was fighting against this concept through his epistles, attempting to persuade his

¹⁰⁰ Literally, “of the nations.” The NRSV has “pagans.”

¹⁰¹ Author’s translation, 1 Corinthians 12:2.

¹⁰² Acts 18:10. Notice that the Lord’s word that “there are many in this city who are my people” comes after Paul has left the synagogue, implying that these people were Gentiles.

audience not to add following Jesus to their other religious practices, but to cease from all religious activity outside of Christianity.

For the Gentile Corinthian converts who were not God-fearers or proselytes, viewing their new faith as exclusive would have been a shift in religious practice. Although the Jews had a long history of exclusivity, the Greek, Roman, and Egyptian cults in Corinth did not; they welcomed the worship of multiple deities. The Greco-Roman cults worshiped gods who fulfilled one or a few aspects of life, such as Poseidon, the god of the sea and earthquakes. Though the Egyptian goddess Isis was perhaps an exception who fulfilled multiple roles,¹⁰³ the Isis cult most worshiped in Corinth specifically focused on Isis Pelagia, or Marine Isis, inventor of the sail and guardian of the seas.¹⁰⁴ In contrast, The Christian God fulfilled all needs and encompassed all facets of life. Worshiping Him alone was enough to ensure divine protection from any kind of disaster and the provision of any service necessary. Therefore, worship of gods other than Him was blasphemous. Paul, quoting an early Christian confession, said “yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Elizabeth McCabe, *An Examination of the Isis Cult with Preliminary Exploration into New Testament Studies*, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2008), 56-66.

¹⁰⁴ Dennis Smith, “The Egyptian Cults at Corinth,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 70, No. 3/4 (Jul-Oct 1977), 228-229.

¹⁰⁵ 1 Corinthians 8:6. Cf. Romans 11:36; Colossians 1:15-16.

Another shift in religious structure for converts from polytheistic cults would have been the Christian acceptance of the authority of the Scriptures found in the Septuagint and the ongoing authority of the apostles to speak or write commands from the Lord. The authority of the apostles is seen in the Jerusalem conference about circumcision, when the judgment about circumcision was treated as binding to all the churches.¹⁰⁶ The apostolic authority of Paul was in dispute throughout his letters, as he argued against other leaders who tried to supplant him in Corinth.¹⁰⁷ Paul assumed apostolic authority in 1 Corinthians 14 – “Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. Anyone who does not recognize this is not to be recognized.”¹⁰⁸ In another passage in 2 Corinthians 13, Paul referred to the “authority the Lord has given me”¹⁰⁹ in a warning that he may need to be severe in using that authority if the Corinthian Christians in question did not amend their faulty ways. New Corinthian Christians who came from a background of religious fusion that honored multiple gods would not have been accustomed to such a leader claiming authority from God to instruct them, as this structure was not typical in other cults.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Acts 15, especially verse 28.

¹⁰⁷ 2 Corinthians 11.

¹⁰⁸ 1 Corinthians 14:37-38.

¹⁰⁹ 2 Corinthians 13:10.

¹¹⁰ See the Conclusion in Rothaus, *Corinth, the First City in Greece: An Urban History of Late Antique Cult and Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

Some of Paul's commands were efforts to create a more inclusive atmosphere for converts from polytheistic backgrounds, notably his views on circumcision and dietary laws. By disregarding circumcision and allowing the purchase of meat in the marketplace without question, Paul and the Christians who followed him eliminated two of the biggest obstacles that had previously faced converts to Judaism. However, though Paul argued for inclusivity on these fronts, he took a strong stand against Gentile Christians interacting with their past religious practices, specifically the worship of idols:

Therefore, my dear friends (ἀγαπητοί, *agapetoi*) flee from the worship of idols. I speak as to sensitive people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar? What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what they sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Or are we provoking the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? (1 Corinthians 10:14-22)

Paul urged the Christians to “flee from the worship of idols,” indicating that some of the Christians were engaging in cult practices involving idol worship. Paul declared participating in sacrifices to idols to be incompatible with worship of the Christian God. He claimed that though the idols themselves are without power, they represented demonic powers that are not God. Since offering sacrifices implied fellowship with the one being worshiped, the Christians continuing their involvement in idol worship were fellowshiping with the demons, a practice that provoked the Lord to jealousy.

Fleeing from the idols of Corinth would not have been an easy task for the non-Jewish people of Corinth who joined the Christian community. Public life was integrated with honoring the gods and the emperor and his family through festivals, games, and sacrifices. Emperor worship was a significant part of creating a Roman identity throughout the empire, and neglecting to participate in giving honor to the ruler and his family would have placed Corinthian Christians outside of the civic community in some respects.¹¹¹ Additionally, each of the gods represented a means by which to navigate various parts of life: how to deal with sickness, ensure safe travel, gain fertility, or even create a historical identity.¹¹² A new Christian attempting to cut off these lingering connections would have had to find a new structure to manage these aspects of life. Some of the new Christians of non-Jewish background likely failed to separate from the religious customs of their past and others who succeeded in completely “fleeing from idols” in obedience to Paul’s directive surely arrived in the new Christian community influenced by the religious experiences of their past.¹¹³

What then was the religious experience of most Corinthians, and how did it compare with Paul’s “ideal Christian?” As stated earlier, the religions of Corinth came from three main backgrounds: Greek, Roman, and those from Egypt and Israel, called

¹¹¹ Winter, 269-286.

¹¹² For a general study on the various cults in Corinth, see *Corinth in Context: Comparative Studies on Religion and Society*; and Donald Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 92-120.

¹¹³ See Bruce Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*; also, Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*.

Eastern religions. The Greek pantheon of gods was clearly dominant until Mummius' sacking of the city in 146 BCE, but after Caesar's colonization, the Roman elements gained traction, both in the pantheon and through the imperial cult that included emperor worship. The final category, Eastern religions, included monotheistic Judaism and Christianity, as well as the gods from Egypt, Isis and Serapis. The connection between Greek and Roman gods was especially close, as they were often paralleled, with deities bearing both a Roman name and a Greek name, such as Venus/Aphrodite. The colonization of Corinth led to an amalgamation of Greek and Roman gods, as the Roman colonists recognized the similarities of the Greek and Roman gods and were careful to rebuild temple structures on the same locations as they had been a century earlier. The Romans rebuilt the temple of Apollo, the Temple of Aphrodite on the Acrocorinth, the sanctuary of Asklepios, and the Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore.¹¹⁴ Thus the Romans restored at least these Greek worship sites. It is unclear how the temple sites were used in the interlude between 146 and 44 BCE. Was there continuity of rituals during this period? Christine Thomas has suggested that there may have been, but that when the Romans arrived, there was change to the Greek worship, as all of the temples were rebuilt in Roman styles.¹¹⁵ "The traditional cults retained their historic locations,

¹¹⁴ Christine M. Thomas, "Greek Heritage in Roman Corinth and Ephesos," in *Corinth in Context*, 119-123.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

but the religious practices changed” to a Roman fashion.¹¹⁶ The Corinthian colonists’ approach to the temples illustrates how the polytheistic religious community was able to practice religious fusion by merging multiple religious backgrounds in one space.

One of the first cultic sites renovated after the founding of the colony was the sanctuary of Asklepios, the god of healing, who was worshiped throughout Greece at dedicated healing sanctuaries, including one at Epidauros forty miles to the south of Corinth that attracted visitors from all over the world.¹¹⁷ These sanctuaries became sites for training of doctors and Asklepios himself functioned as the ultimate doctor. Though Asklepios’ mythical father, Apollo, also was known as a god of healing, only Asklepios fulfilled the role of healer exclusively.¹¹⁸ Asklepios was credited with healing ailments of all kinds such as infertility, paralysis, gout, headaches, insomnia, and even baldness. Worshipers in need of healing brought terracotta votive offerings of a body part such as an eye, leg, or arm, and offered them as a request for healing, or in thanks for a healing that had already occurred. Hundreds of these offerings have been found in the remains of the Corinthian Asklepeion.¹¹⁹ Supplicants came to the sanctuary to spend the night, reporting in the morning how Asklepios had healed them. At Epidauros, those in need of

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 137.

¹¹⁷ See Figure 2 in Appendix A for the location of Epidauros to the south of Corinth.

¹¹⁸ Bronwen L. Wickkiser, “Asklepios in Greek and Roman Corinth” in *Corinth in Context*, Brill (Leiden, 2010), 46.

¹¹⁹ Fotopoulos, *Food Offered to Idols in Roman Corinth*, 54.

healing sometimes stayed for weeks or months until their ailment was healed. Corinth's Asklepeion was not equipped for long term visits, however, and so most likely functioned as a local healing sanctuary only. For the Corinthian public, the Asklepeion was the hospital of the city and the most likely space in which miraculous healing could occur.

In contrast to seeking healing at the Asklepeion, Christians in Corinth may have turned to one of their own with "gifts of healing according to the one Spirit"¹²⁰ that Paul refers to in his listing of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians. Examples of healing among the followers of Jesus are found in Acts – Peter and John healing a lame man, Peter's shadow falling upon the sick and causing healing in Jerusalem, and Paul himself raising a young man from the dead who died from a two story fall out of a window after falling asleep when one of Paul's messages became long-winded.¹²¹ Paul's inclusion of the gift of healing in his list of potential gifts from the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12 implies that the gift of healing was not exclusive to Christian leaders such as Peter or Paul, meaning others in the community were able to use power from the Holy Spirit in this way. Additionally, Paul's lengthy discussion of how the Corinthian church was exceptionally gifted by the Spirit and the inclusion of "gifts of healing" in his list indicates that the community in Corinth likely had one or more individuals with this gift. Corinthians who

¹²⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:9.

¹²¹ Acts 3:1-10; 5:12-16; 20:7-12.

became Christ-followers maintained an understanding of healing as a supernatural gift, but from a different source than those who turned to Asklepios for remedies. Rather than bringing offerings to a sanctuary in exchange for a cure, Christians needed to find someone with the gift of healing from the Holy Spirit and have faith in the Holy Spirit's ability to work through that individual. Finding healing within their own community was necessary, for if the Christians were to heed Paul and "flee from the worship of idols," approaching Asklepios with votive offerings was not an option.

Though Corinth's Asklepeion was overshadowed in fame by the nearby sanctuary to Asklepios at Epidauros, the same is not true for the Corinthian shrine to the goddess Aphrodite. As Athens was considered the city of Athena, Corinth was called the city of Aphrodite. It is the cult of Aphrodite that has gained for Corinth a reputation of lasciviousness, due to the historian Strabo's remarks stating that the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth was so rich that:

It owned more than a thousand temple-slaves (ἱερδούλους, *hierdoulous*), courtesans (ἑταίρας, *hetairas*), whom both men and women had dedicated to the goddess. And thereafter it was also on account of these women that the city was crowded with people and grew rich; for instance, the ship-captains freely squandered their money, and hence the proverb, "Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth." (Strabo, *Geography* 8.6.20)

This excerpt has led many commentators to decry the immorality of Corinth and marvel at the Apostle Paul's ability to plant a church in such a wicked city. Such a judgment is faulty, however, as Strabo's statement was clearly about how the temple used to be, using past tenses to describe the practice (was – aorist; had dedicated – pluperfect;

squandered – imperfect). Later in the same chapter, he referred to the temple of Aphrodite in the present tense and described it as a small temple, without any mention of riches or a thousand temple-slaves.¹²² Additionally, Charles Williams II argued that the cult of Aphrodite Hoplismene must have been a state sponsored cult since its images appeared on Corinthian coins, and that it is highly unlikely that a Roman sponsored cult would have sponsored institutionalized prostitution, as there is no evidence of such practices occurring elsewhere in the Empire.¹²³ Lastly, there is no architectural evidence of a facility able to house Strabo's one thousand prostitutes.¹²⁴ If there were in fact contrary to these evidences temple prostitutes for Aphrodite, Strabo's information must have been greatly exaggerated. The existence of sacred prostitution in first century Corinth cannot be established, and is unlikely.

The small Corinthian temple to Aphrodite of the first century Strabo described was situated on the Acrocorinth, which is the highest point in the city, indicating importance. Several different manifestations of Aphrodite were worshiped in the first century. The Aphrodite worshiped on the Acrocorinth was Aphrodite Hoplismene

¹²² See Stephanie Budin, *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2008), 165-167. Budin argues in her book that sacred prostitution did not exist anywhere, in all of antiquity. Joining her is John R. Lanci in "The Stones Don't Speak and the Texts Tell Lies: Sacred Sex at Corinth" in *Urban Religion in Roman Corinth*, 213.

¹²³ Charles K Williams II, "Roman Corinth: The Final Years of Pagan Cult Facilities along East Theater Street" in *Urban Religion in Roman Corinth*, 245.

¹²⁴ Fotopoulos, *Food Offered to Idols*, 173. Fotopoulos is one of the few authors who finds sacred prostitution in Roman Corinth somewhat plausible, though he admits that it is not provable. He cites C.K. Williams as raising a possible scenario in, "Corinth and the Cult of Aphrodite" in *Corinthiaca: Studies in Honor of Darrell A. Amyx* ed. M. A. Del Chiaro, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1986), 21.

(Armed), the defender of the city. Images on coins, a wall fresco, and statuary remains depict Aphrodite looking at her reflection in the shield of Ares, the god of war. This evidence affirms the concept of Aphrodite the military protector of the city. There are also some indications of the presence of Aphrodite Anadyomene (Rising from the Sea), referring to the story of Aphrodite's birth as a grown woman from the sea. Thus Aphrodite could be connected with Poseidon and the sea in mercantile Corinth.¹²⁵ Alternatively, several representations of Aphrodite around the Corinthian theater show her naked to the waist, often in a bath.¹²⁶ These portrayals give credence to Aphrodite the goddess of love and beauty, whose worshipers would have honored her not for protection through her military prowess but for the fulfillment of their domestic needs, including those of sexual nature.

Though Aphrodite's temple prostitutes did not surround Paul upon his arrival, the sexual norms of Corinth still contrasted strongly with his proscribed sexual practices for the Christian community, and new Christians joining the community in Corinth would have had to adjust to new expectations of sexual behavior. Corinth's reputation as a place sanctioning prostitution and open sexuality can be validated separately from supposed temple prostitution in the worship of Aphrodite. *Lais*, a renowned courtesan (ἑταίρα, *hetairas*), was considered the standard for beauty throughout Greece during

¹²⁵ Williams, "Pagan Cult Facilities," *Urban Corinth*, 243-247. Also, see Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 98.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 245.

the Peloponnesian War era in the fifth century BCE. Tourists continued to visit her tomb outside of Corinth in Roman times, indicating some level of acceptance of her occupation.¹²⁷ The Greek poet Aristophanes, who lived around the same time as Lais, coined the term κορινθιάζομαι (*corinthianize*), meaning to practice fornication.¹²⁸ In the Roman era, Greco-Roman formal dining often involved sexual relations as a form of entertainment, especially during the evening meal.¹²⁹ A guest at formal Greco-Roman meals often expected sexual encounters after the food and wine had been consumed, and could even bring his own harp-girl or lover with him to the meal to facilitate sexual pleasures for himself.¹³⁰ Acceptance of bi-sexuality was broad, and the Roman historian Seneca refers to the poor state of the wine server, who had to appease both his master's drunkenness and his lust.¹³¹ Quintillian, a Roman orator, decried that children could see "our female lovers and our male concubines; every dinner party is loud with foul songs and things are presented to their eyes about which we should blush to speak."¹³²

¹²⁷ Pausanias 1.2.4-5.

¹²⁸ Aristophanes, *Fragments*, Edited and translated by Jeffrey Henderson, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) See Fragment 370, "to play the Corinthian."

¹²⁹ Fotopoulos, *Food*, 169.

¹³⁰ Fotopoulos, *Food*, 171. Also, see Plutarch, *Quastoinos Convivales*, 644C-D.

¹³¹ Seneca, *Epistle 95*, 24.

¹³² Quintillian *Inst. Or* 1.2.6-8

Paul's letters to the Corinthians offer some confirmation of immorality at dinner parties. After reminding the Christian community in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, of who they used to be – fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, passive homosexual partners (μαλακοὶ – *malakoi*),¹³³ active homosexual partners (ἀρσενοκοίτης – *arsenokoiteis*),¹³⁴ and thieves – he referenced his ongoing argument against eating food offered to idols, then urged them to flee fornication with prostitutes. In 1 Corinthians 10, again in the context of his opposition to Christian involvement in eating meat offered to idols, he commands them to both “flee from the worship of idols”¹³⁵ and “not indulge in sexual immorality,”¹³⁶ indicating that the actions of idol worship and sexual immorality were linked in some way. John Fotopoulos has argued that the food offered to idols would have been eaten at formal meals where prostitutes would have been present.¹³⁷ Sexual norms present a place of contrast between the acceptable practices of those worshipping the Greek and Roman deities of Corinth and the ideal behavior of the Christian community.

¹³³ Alternatively, *effeminate/soft men*.

¹³⁴ Alternatively, *male prostitutes* or *sodomites*. See Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 110-120 for a detailed discussion of both μαλακοὶ and ἀρσενοκοίτης. Winter argues persuasively for the interpretation *active homosexual partner* over *male prostitute* on page 119. The interpretation of both words is affected by an understanding of Roman law against passive homosexuality by Roman citizens. See note 138 below.

¹³⁵ 1 Corinthians 10:14.

¹³⁶ 1 Corinthians 10:8.

¹³⁷ Fotopoulos, *Food*, 178.

The Greco-Roman world was not without limitations on sexual behavior, however. Roman law declared some forms of homosexuality a crime, though its enforcement is questionable.¹³⁸ Nor was the Christian community without sexual misconduct. Clearly, Paul would not have had need to protest against sexual immorality if it had not been happening in the Christian community. Some of the Christians had interacted with prostitutes, because Paul felt compelled to reason with them against the practice, telling them that their bodies are members of Christ and asking, “Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!”¹³⁹ A more extreme violation of sexual norms is found in 1 Corinthians 5, where Paul expressed disgust at the Christians’ acceptance of a kind of sexual immorality “not found even among the nations (τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, *tois ethnesin*); for a man is living with his father’s wife.”¹⁴⁰ He was astounded that the Christians could be embracing such vice and even becoming arrogant (φυσιόω, *fusioō*) about it. Paul ordered the man be

¹³⁸ Roman law utilized a double standard allowing homosexuality as long as the passive male sexual partner was not a Roman citizen. Slaves and non-citizens were free to play the role of passive homosexual partner, but it was illegal for anyone to penetrate a Roman citizen, as this violated the sanctity of a Roman citizen’s body. It is easy to see how enforcing this prohibition would prove difficult and most literary references to the Roman law have to do with rumors and scandals rather than actual prosecutions of the crime. In contrast to the Roman standard, Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 quoted above prohibited both passive and active homosexuality with the terms μαλακοί and ἀρσενικοίτης. Understanding the complexity of the Roman rule concerning homosexuality explains why Paul felt the need to use two different words to condemn homosexuality. See Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 110-120.

¹³⁹ 1 Corinthians 6:15.

¹⁴⁰ 1 Corinthians 5:1, author’s translation. ἔθνεσιν is alternatively translated *Gentiles* or *pagans*.

removed from the fellowship.¹⁴¹ These episodes of sexual activity within the Christian community are examples of converts from Corinth's polytheistic cults bringing their behavioral norms with them as they joined the Christians.

Sharing special prominence in Corinth with Aphrodite was Poseidon, god of the sea and earthquakes. Corinth's close relationship with the sea made Poseidon an important deity to honor, and a survey of all the coin types found in Corinth found that Poseidon was represented even more often than Aphrodite.¹⁴² There was a special sanctuary to him at Isthmia, the southern harbor, where the biennial Isthmian Games were held, and he was considered the special sponsor of the games. His coins may have served as advertisements for the event. In Poseidon's sanctuary complex at Isthmia was a large temple to Poseidon alongside a smaller one to Melikertes. Poseidon had a temple at each of Corinth's harbors as well as numerous statues, altars, and a fountain dedicated to him in Corinth itself. Reliance on Poseidon to grant calm seas and smooth sailing was important for merchants who depended on safe sailing journeys to make a profit. The sea, with its unpredictability, was especially capable of producing religious devotion in hopes of calming its wrath. Corinth, especially the Isthmus, was subject to periodic earthquakes, which gave Corinthians another reason to grant Poseidon special consideration.

¹⁴¹ 1 Corinthians 5:4, 5. There is some dispute about the exact meaning of these verses, but some form of excommunication seems to be the most reasonable reading.

¹⁴² Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 96. Poseidon had 29 coin types, and Aphrodite had 17.

In contrast, the ideal Christian response to such uncertainty was to trust in their God. Paul's unfortunate journey around Cape Malea resulted in his ship being carried in the middle of a storm for days, until food supplies ran out. Yet Paul did not despair, for he saw an angel "of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, do not be afraid, Paul . . . God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you."¹⁴³ If any of the Christians in Corinth were merchants or sailors, they would have been concerned with how the Christian God would care for their ships on the unruly seas if they were no longer to give honor to Poseidon.

In the same sanctuary as Poseidon's temple was a small shrine to a young boy named Melikertes who had died and turned into the marine god Palaemon. Though Aphrodite and Poseidon were special to Corinth, much as Athena was special to Athens, their status as major deities ensured that they were worshiped throughout the Empire in some fashion. Melikertes/Palaemon, however, was worshiped specifically in Corinth because his myth originated there during the Hellenic period. This local myth gave Corinth an origin story for the Isthmian Games. Origin stories such as that of Melikertes/Palaemon and of Bellerephon and the Pegasus, discussed below, helped to provide Corinth with a civic identity, something that obeying Paul's command to "flee from the worship of idols" would have disrupted.

¹⁴³ Acts 27:23-25.

According to the Melikertes myth, Hera, the wife of Zeus, became angry with the young boy Melikertes' father, Athamas, because of his kindness to her enemy Dionysos. She drove him into madness so that he turned on his wife Ino and two boys, murdering Melikertes' older brother Learchus. Ino and Melikertes fled until they were cornered on a cliff where Ino chose to jump into the sea with Melikertes. In an alternate version of the myth, Ino was struck with madness as well, and killed Melikertes in a boiling cauldron. The result of the sad death of the mother and child was that they both became immortal, Ino as the goddess Leukothea, and Melikertes as Palaimon, a marine deity closely associated with Poseidon. As the deity Palaimon arose, a dolphin carried Melikertes' dead body to the Isthmus, where the ruler of Corinth, Sisyphus, granted him a noble burial and honored him with the first Isthmian Games.¹⁴⁴

Worship of Melikertes turned Palaimon occurred especially at the celebration of the biennial Games. Though this cult was started long before the Roman conquest in 146 BCE, the Roman colonists quickly resumed its practice and wasted no time in reclaiming the Isthmian Games for Corinth upon their arrival. Most likely, the first Isthmian Games in the new colony would have occurred in 40 BCE.¹⁴⁵ A ritual ceremony would be performed at the Games, most likely at night, with two young Corinthian men carrying a bed of pine branches with a statue of Melikertes on it, reenacting his funeral

¹⁴⁴ Elizabeth R. Gebhard, "Rites for Melikertes-Palaimon in the Early Roman Corinthia" in *Urban Religion*, 168.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.

while singing a traditional funeral dirge (θρένος, *threnos*). At least the main features of this Greek celebration of Melikertes/Palaimon appears to have carried over into the Roman period, as multiple literary sources indicate.¹⁴⁶ The first shrine to Melikertes/Palaimon built in the sanctuary of Poseidon was constructed in the mid first century CE, contemporary to Paul's arrival in Corinth. Corinthian Christians would have been surrounded by celebrations of the Melikertes/Palaimon myth, certainly every two years during the Isthmian Games, if not more frequently.

Whereas the story of Melikertes/Palaimon was specifically tied to the Isthmian Games, the myth of Bellerephon and the Pegasus explained the origin of Corinth's chief water supply, the Peirene fountain.¹⁴⁷ Called holy (σέμνος, *semnos*) in Euripides' *Medea*,¹⁴⁸ the fountain gained its reputation as a special place through myths involving the winged horse, the Pegasus. According to Strabo, the Peirene was connected via underground tunnels to a smaller fountain on the Acrocorinth, and the Pegasus' hoof striking the ground on the Acrocorinth started the flow of both.¹⁴⁹ In another story, Bellerephon, grandson of the famous Corinthian king Sisyphus, sought to kill the Chimera, a fire-breathing monster. A seer instructed him that this would only be possible if he captured the Pegasus, so he did so with Athena's assistance by throwing a

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 180.

¹⁴⁷ See Figure 5 in Appendix B for a photograph of the facade of the Peirene fountain.

¹⁴⁸ Euripides, *Med.* 68-69.

¹⁴⁹ Strabo, 8.6.21.

golden bridle over the Pegasus' head after finding it drinking at the Peirene fountain. Bellepheron then rode off on the winged horse to successfully accomplish the task. Bellepheron and Pegasus were portrayed on statues in the city, on coinage, and in processions through the city.¹⁵⁰ As one of the two main fountains in Roman Corinth,¹⁵¹ at least some of the Corinthian Christians would have used the Peirene and they would have been aware of its mythical background. Visitors from throughout the Empire who came to the spring on the Acrocorinth, believing it to be connected to the Peirene, treated it as a holy place by inscribing dedications on its walls.¹⁵²

Both Melikertes/Palaimon and Bellerephon and Pegasus at the Peirene Fountain constituted part of Corinth's mythical history, which functioned to help shape the Corinthians' civic identity. Commemoration of these mythical stories through religious ceremonies and festivals was a part of history keeping in Corinth. To participate in the celebration of Corinth's history, however, would have involved interaction with idol worship, and in Paul's mind, with demons (δαίμονίων, *daimonion*). He offered an alternative historical basis to the Christian community – that of descendants of Israel, joined to the Israelites through common faith in the same God. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul

¹⁵⁰ Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 99-100; Betsey Robinson, "Fountains and the Formation of Cultural Identity at Roman Corinth" in *Urban Religion*, 116-128. The use of Bellepheron and Pegasus in procession is recorded in a ceremony for Isis in Apuleis, *The Golden Ass*, 11.8.

¹⁵¹ The other being the Fountain of Glauke, which also had its own history as a monument to Medea's struggle against Jason. See Robinson, "Fountains," 129-138.

¹⁵² Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 100.

addressed the Corinthians as siblings (ἀδελφοί, *adelphoi*) and referred to the Israelites as “our fathers.” He then described the activities of the Israelites, who in unity (Paul repeated the word all (πάντες, *pantes*) five times) followed the spiritual rock of Christ until a section of them became idolaters and indulged in sexual immorality, causing God to strike many of them down. Paul provided the example of the Israelites as an encouragement and admonition to the Corinthians in his effort to convince them to “flee from the worship of idols,” arguing that just as in “Israel according to the flesh” those who eat the sacrifices are partners in the altar, so do the Corinthians become when they eat the food sacrificed to idols.¹⁵³ Paul’s effort in convincing the Corinthians to avoid idol worship of any kind hinged on the community of believers sharing in the heritage of the Jewish people. Since commemoration of Corinthian history involved festivals such as that of Melikertes and idol worship, Paul effectively replaced the history of those in the Christian community who were not of Jewish background with that of his own and Israel.¹⁵⁴ What would that have meant for Christians of Greek or Roman background? To become a full part of the Christian community meant leaving a part of their civic identity behind.

Another aspect of “fleeing from idols” that would have removed Corinthian converts from the civic community was the avoidance of emperor worship. The role of

¹⁵³ 1 Corinthians 10:18-20.

¹⁵⁴ For a complete treatment of the background of Corinthian Christian identity, see Cavan W. Concannon, “*When You Were Gentiles*” (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

idolatrous religion in maintaining civic and imperial identity was most apparent in the imperial cult, which included emperor worship. The Senate's apotheosis of Julius Caesar marked the beginning of a new Roman trend – adding dead rulers to the number of the gods. Under Augustus, worship began to be given to the living emperor, though much less so pronounced in Rome than in the provinces. Around 12 BCE, Augustus began to make bolder steps, instituting the municipal group, the *Augustales*, as an official way for wealthy freedmen or freeborn outsiders to enter municipal life through the imperial cult.¹⁵⁵ He made efforts to include common people in the cult as a way to encourage devotion to the state. After he died, an official act of the Senate granted him divine status, establishing for him a temple and priests in Rome itself in addition to those already present throughout the Empire. Subsequent emperors continued the cult of the dead emperor, though with varying degrees of urgency, and the practice soon extended to include worship of their families as well. In Corinth, ready evidence of the imperial cult can be seen in the ancient forum, as the base of a statue utilized in the imperial cult is still visible today. A likely reconstruction of the inscription on the base is “*DIVO-AVGVSTO-SACRVM*,” meaning the statue that once stood upon the base was that of divine Augustus.¹⁵⁶ The temple of Octavia, the sister of Augustus, functioned as the center of the federal imperial cult of Achaëa in Corinth. The temple overlooked the

¹⁵⁵ Margaret L. Laird, “The Emperor in a Roman Town: The Base of the *Augustales* in the Forum at Corinth,” in *Corinth in Context*, 72-75.

¹⁵⁶ See Laird, “The Emperor,” 67-116.

forum from an elevated position higher than all the other temples not on the Acrocorinth, indicating importance. Corinth's role as the host of the federal, or provincial, cult meant that emperor worship in Corinth was on behalf of the entire province of Achaëa, not just an individual city, and enabled Corinth to require funds from surrounding cities for the annual celebration.¹⁵⁷ Festivities honoring the emperor occurred annually on the emperor's birthday, at which Corinthians wore crowns and offered sacrifices in front of the emperor's statue and at the temple of Octavia. Additionally, every four years, the Isthmian Games were called the "greater games" and conducted under the aegis of the imperial cult, combining with the nearby Caesarean Games and the Imperial Contests.¹⁵⁸ Worship of the emperor included offering sacrifices at the temple of Octavia or in front of statues of the emperor and doing so formed an important aspect of civic and imperial identity in Corinth. By honoring the emperor, the citizens in Roman cities could show fidelity to the empire; worshiping the emperor was the same as proclaiming loyalty to Rome.

Christians striving to "flee from the worship of idols" could not continue to honor the emperor through worship, as Jesus was now κύριος (*kurios* – Lord) and σωτήρ (*soter* – Savior), both titles the imperial cult used to describe the emperor. It was in 54 CE, shortly after Paul's time in Corinth, that Corinth became the center of the federal

¹⁵⁷ Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 269.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 271.

imperial cult of Achaëa, combined with the onset of the “greater games.”¹⁵⁹ Epigraphical evidence suggests that the president of the Games often invited all Roman citizens to come dine at Isthmia before the Games, something that would have affected the elite among the Christians, if any were Roman citizens like Paul. These meals would have been a chance to associate with dignitaries from throughout the province and the Empire. New Christians who wished to abstain from taking part in the Games or in emperor worship were not compelled to do so in the first century, most likely as a result of Gallio’s ruling granting the Christians the same exemptions as the Jews.¹⁶⁰ Though there were no legal obligations requiring Christians to join in the imperial cult, social pressure – especially on any Christians who were Roman citizens – would have been formidable. New Corinthian Christians who chose to refrain from celebrations on the emperor’s birthday or attendance at the Isthmian Games had to remove themselves from a significant part of the local Corinthian civic community and lost a way to engage in the Roman imperial community.

A third layer of religious influence in Corinth besides those of Greek and Roman origin came from Egypt, specifically in the henotheistic cult of Isis and Serapis.¹⁶¹ Isis and

¹⁵⁹ Spawforth, “The Achaean Federal Imperial Cult I,” 161-163.

¹⁶⁰ Winter, 276-280; See Winter’s “Gallio’s Ruling on the Legal Status of Early Christianity,” 221-23. Under Domitian in the second century, emperor worship did become compulsive in some areas of the empire, leading to violent persecution of Christians who refused to engage in imperial cult activities.

¹⁶¹ For a survey of the material remains of Isis and Serapis in Corinth, see Dennis Smith, “The Egyptian Cults at Corinth,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 70, No. 3/4 (Jul-Oct 1977), 201-231.

Serapis are worshiped together, as they were both siblings and husband and wife. In the origin myth, Osiris' (Serapis is the Hellenized name for Osiris) evil brother Set killed and dismembered him. Isis, Osiris' sister and wife, travelled throughout Egypt to collect all of his body parts, and upon succeeding, resurrected him through her mourning over his body. Osiris then became the god of the underworld and helped his son Horus to destroy his brother and nemesis, Set. The resurrection theme in the origin myth was an important component of the Isis cult and provides the closest parallel among the religions of Corinth to the Christian conception of resurrection.¹⁶² The date of the Egyptian deities' arrival in Corinth is unknown, but a time during the Hellenistic period seems likely, as evidence records the presence of the Egyptian cults in neighboring Athens and Delos at that time.¹⁶³ Beyond the rather scarce archeological record, Pausanias and the descriptions of Lucius Apuleius, who recorded a vision of Isis and his later initiation into the cult in great detail in *The Golden Ass*, denote the presence of Isis and Serapis. There were two temples of Isis in Corinth; one worshiped Isis Pelagia, or Marine Isis, the provider of safe seas, and the other worshiped Isis Aegyptia, who fulfilled Isis' more traditional Egyptian roles of providing healing, fertility and healthy crops.¹⁶⁴ Coins in Corinth portraying Isis always show the goddess with a sail, referring

¹⁶² Everett Ferguson does not view the resurrection of Osiris as a true resurrection (like the Christian version) but simply a restoration to live in Hades. See Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 270.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 228.

¹⁶⁴ Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 103.

to Isis Pelagia, and there may have been a statue of the same image in the Kenchreae harbor.¹⁶⁵ It was to this version of Isis that the annual festival of Πλοιαφέσια (*Ploiaphesia*) was held at the Kenchreae harbor, as Lucius Apuleis described in his account of his conversion to the Isis cult in Corinth.¹⁶⁶

Themes of resurrection and afterlife are present in Apuleis' recounting of his initiation to the Isis cult. During his initiation process he interacted with the goddess, who told him:

All the remaining days of your life must be dedicated to me, and that nothing can release you from this service but death . . . You shall live blessed. You shall live glorious under my guidance; and when you have travelled your full length of time and you go down into death, there also (on that hidden side of the earth) you shall dwell in the Elysian Fields and frequently adore me for my favours. . . More, if you are found to merit my love by your dedicated obedience, religious devotion, and constant chastity, you will discover it is within my power to prolong your life beyond the limits set to it by Fate. (Apuleis, *The Golden Ass*, 238-239)

This assurance from Isis gave Apuleis the expectation of her blessing on his current life and a continuation of blessing in the next when he would arrive at the Elysian Fields, where "there is made the easiest of life for mortals" if only he gave Isis his dedicated service.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 229.

¹⁶⁶ Apuleis, *The Golden Ass*, Translated by Jack Lindsay, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), 239-246.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 238-239. For a contrary view on the nature of the afterlife granted by Isis, see Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 298.

This expectation in the Eastern cults of blessed afterlife in exchange for adherence to the cult paralleled Paul's teaching in his letters to the Corinthian Christians. From his instructions in 2 Corinthians, it is clear that some of the Christians did not believe that they would have an afterlife. Paul declared that "we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence."¹⁶⁸ Continuing, he describes the current body as an earthly tent, groaning for the future when "what is mortal will be swallowed up by life." In 1 Corinthians, he placed the entirety of the faith on the fact of Christ's resurrection, saying that "if Christ has not been raised, your faith has been futile and you are still dead in your sins. Then those also who have died have perished."¹⁶⁹ He argued that if there is no resurrection, there was no reason to worry about living this life well, quoting a proverb from one of the Greek playwright Menander's plays – "if the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'"¹⁷⁰ Whereas some of the Corinthian Christians did not believe in a resurrection, Paul argued strongly in favor of belief in an afterlife and placed the entire value of a Christian's faith upon that fact. The Christian belief in resurrection shared strong similarities with that of Isis and converts to Christianity from followers of Isis would have seen continuity between the two religious constructs.

¹⁶⁸ 2 Corinthians 4:14.

¹⁶⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:17, 18.

¹⁷⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:32.

The new Christian cult shared the Isis cult's doctrine of resurrection, yet a contrast was readily apparent to Corinthians familiar with both. Though the Isis cult was welcoming and "appealed to the depressed classes of the Roman empire,"¹⁷¹ the cost of undergoing initiation as Lucius Apuleis did was formidable. Since only those who were initiated could access Isis' resurrection, eternal life was only available to those wealthy enough to pay for it.¹⁷² Though there may have been many worshipers in the Isis cult in Corinth, only the small inner circle was initiated and the initiatory rights themselves were kept a secret.¹⁷³ In contrast, the Christian community, though it also required baptism as an initiation process, did not require any monetary gifts from converts. The Christians welcomed any who would join their community, no matter their background or financial status. However, Paul and those who followed him restricted the openness of the Corinthian Christian community by requiring converts to leave their old religious structures behind and grant the worship of Jesus exclusive prominence.

As the Corinthian community welcomed those of non-Jewish background into their midst without requiring circumcision or adherence to Jewish food laws, they encountered a new set of problems found in the religious backgrounds of the new non-Jewish background Christians. As evidenced by Paul's exhortations to "flee from the

¹⁷¹ Sarolta A. Takacs, *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman World* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1995), 4.

¹⁷² H. Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 191.

¹⁷³ Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 299.

worship of idols,” some of the new Christians did not completely abandon their previous lifestyles and cultural practices, instead attempting to integrate their past cultic experiences into Christianity. Since Paul’s Christianity was an exclusive religion incapable of fusing with surrounding cults, this was unacceptable and required the use of his apostolic authority to discipline and correct those who had failed to separate themselves from the other Corinthian religions. To no longer participate in idol or emperor worship, however, required the new Christians from various cultic backgrounds to separate themselves in many ways from the civic community of Corinth, and on a broader scale, from the imperial identity of Rome, as cultic practices were intertwined in nearly every aspect of Corinthian life including loyalty to Rome. The difficulty of this separation kept some of the Christian converts from successfully obeying Paul’s command to “flee from the worship of idols,” creating strain within the Christian community over which practices from the diverse religious backgrounds of the Corinthian Christians were allowable within the Christian community.

Conclusion

The religious background of converts to Christianity strongly influenced the development of the local Christian community in Roman Corinth, especially Gentile converts who had previously been engaged in polytheistic cultic activity. After analyzing some of the problems the Apostle Paul was attempting to deal with in his letters, it is apparent that not all the members of the Christian community at Corinth saw their new religion the same way as Paul did, giving him many reasons to offer criticism and advice. The behavior required of a Christian was at question, because the joining of Corinthians who had followed Judaism with those who had worshiped at polytheistic cults caused conflict and uncertainty: Must they be circumcised? May they eat meat from the market? Should they attend evening meals in temples? May they attend the Isthmian Games? What was acceptable sexual behavior? Fundamentally, what must a Christian do to be considered a “brother?”

For Paul, and the Corinthian Christians who followed his lead,¹⁷⁴ the definition of a Christian was one who had faith in Jesus Christ as Messiah. His focus on belief as the

¹⁷⁴ Most obviously, Chloe’s people of 1 Corinthians 1:11.

dividing line can be seen in 2 Corinthians 6, when he used “believer” to refer to those within the Christian community, and “unbeliever” to refer to those outside the community – “Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness?”¹⁷⁵ Though belief was Paul’s only requirement for admission into the community and assurance of salvation, he thought this belief in Jesus would produce a change in behavior. Paul told the Corinthians that, “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”¹⁷⁶ Here was Paul’s answer to both converts of Jewish background and those who came from the idol-worshipping cults – there was no reason to retain the religious practices of the past, because in Christ, everything is supplied. Christ granted liberty from the law and circumcision, requiring only a “circumcision of the heart” creating a religion not bound by ethnicity. At the same time, following Christ was exclusive, and it was impossible to “drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons,” because to do so would surely provoke the Lord to jealousy.¹⁷⁷ The power of true belief in Jesus would compel new Gentile converts to pursue moral lives, even without the strict rules of the Jews. Paul’s trust in faith (πίστις, *pistis*) was his answer to the

¹⁷⁵ 2 Corinthians 6:14. For other examples of the believer/unbeliever dichotomy, see 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 and 2 Corinthians 4:4.

¹⁷⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

¹⁷⁷ 1 Corinthians 10:14-22.

difficulties created by a community which merged people with distinctly different religious backgrounds.

For some Corinthian Christians, most likely former God-fearers, proselytes, or Jews, it seemed natural that distinctions they were accustomed to, such as circumcision or refraining from meat offered to idols, would be the boundaries of the Christian community. Their reluctance to leave behind the ceremonial law would have led to consternation at other Christians continuing to eat dinner in idolatrous temples. For others, with backgrounds in the polytheistic cults of Corinth, boundaries between different cults was an alien concept. They argued that freedom in Christ allowed them to continue their old interactions with the polytheistic cults of Corinth, including eating in temples and attending the Isthmian games. Perhaps some of these Christians simply added Jesus to their pantheon, continuing to perform cult activities in honor of other gods. Clearly, at least some Christians were willing to allow a man living with his step-mother to continue as a member of the community, a loose sexual boundary that Paul found reprehensible.¹⁷⁸

These different viewpoints on the boundaries of the Christian community are only visible when considering opinions other than Paul's. This thesis' emphasis on non-elites and attempt to understand what an average convert to Christianity would have believed contributes to the historiographical hole caused by a tendency among

¹⁷⁸ 1 Corinthians 5.

historians to treat the beliefs and rhetoric of Paul as indicative of the entire Christian community and to ignore the effects of the local religious context. For example, Wayne Meeks does discuss the problem of boundaries in his analysis of early Christian communities, but he explains some Christians seeing the boundaries differently by a supposed class distinction, without any reference to converts' previous religious experiences and how their past would have affected their interactions in the Christian community.¹⁷⁹ Following the methodology of Bruce Winter, this study chose one location and one set of Pauline texts, so that the relationship between the local religious setting and the information found in the texts can be shown as clearly connected. Finally, this thesis provides a direct comparison of Christianity with both Judaism and polytheistic cults, as opposed to the many studies that focus merely on Jewish-Christian relations. This thesis has shown that the religious backgrounds of converts to early Corinthian Christianity were vital in determining the nature of the early Christianity. Understanding the context of Corinthian Christianity, especially the religious context, helps discern the likely causes of Corinthian Christian diversity in thought.

Several questions about Corinth's Christians arise which this study has not answered and which could become subjects for future research. Is it accurate to place all of the polytheistic cult worshipers in one group of Christians? Or, for example, was there a strong enough distinction between those who primarily worshiped Isis and those

¹⁷⁹ Meeks, *Urban Christians*, 84-110.

who primarily worshiped Aphrodite and Poseidon that the effects of those specific backgrounds appeared in the Christian community? The focus on salvation and resurrection found in the Isis cult may have changed how Christian converts from that cult conceived of the Christian concepts of salvation and resurrection, whereas the greater Greco-Roman pantheon did not emphasize afterlife. In a parallel question, is it accurate to lump the Corinthian Jews together, or were there multiple Diaspora communities or at least multiple Jewish groups within the Corinthian Diaspora community? Again, using the question of resurrection as an example, the presence of Sadducees among the Corinthian Jews would help to explain why there was resistance to Paul's concept of resurrection, because the Sadducee sect of the Jews did not believe in the possibility of resurrection.¹⁸⁰ These questions of further diversity among the groups surrounding the Christians seem likely to yield affirmative answers, but additional study is needed on the topic.

Another set of questions discuss how representative the Corinthian Christian community was for early Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire. Was the development of Christianity in Corinth typical? Can the findings of this thesis be generalized throughout the Roman Empire? Were there multiple conceptions of Christianity's boundaries in other cities as well, and did those conceptions originate in the diverse backgrounds of Christian converts? Did converts in other locations face the

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Matthew 22:23-33.

same struggle to “flee from the worship of idols?” These questions could be answered by conducting studies similar to this one in other locations. For example, did it mean something different for a polytheistic cult worshiper in Rome to become a Christian than it did for a polytheistic cult worshiper in Corinth? Especially helpful would be a comparison of the religious backgrounds found in multiple cities along with a comparison of these cities’ Christian communities. Finding differences among the Christian communities that correlate to variances in the local religious backgrounds would show that the local environments had a strong effect on early Christian development throughout the Empire.

A few final questions can be asked about the trans-local nature of Christianity. Though Christianity likely developed in different ways in different locations, the connections between early Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean region appear to have been strong, as evidenced by Paul’s request of the Corinthians to send monetary aid to other Christian communities in need,¹⁸¹ and the extensive travel by missionaries such as Paul and Apollos between communities throughout the region. The Corinthian Christians “were made aware that they belonged to a larger movement, ‘with all who invoke the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place.’”¹⁸² How did the universal nature of Christianity interact with the local influences on Christian

¹⁸¹ 2 Corinthians 9.

¹⁸² Meeks, quoting 1 Corinthians 1:2 in *Urban Christians*, 107. See Meeks’ section, 107-110, on the universal identity of early Christians, as well as Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 173, for a slightly contrasting view on the topic.

communities? In other words, if there were different groups of Christians in Corinth, were there even bigger distinctions between Christians in Corinth and Christians in another city like Antioch? If so, how did these distinctions influence trans-local Christian identity?

Many of these questions could be answered through further studies of Christians and their surroundings in local contexts. By comparing studies of Christian communities in different cities, more can be learned about the growth of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire and what it meant for Jews or Gentiles to become a part of early Christian communities.

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Appendix A

Maps



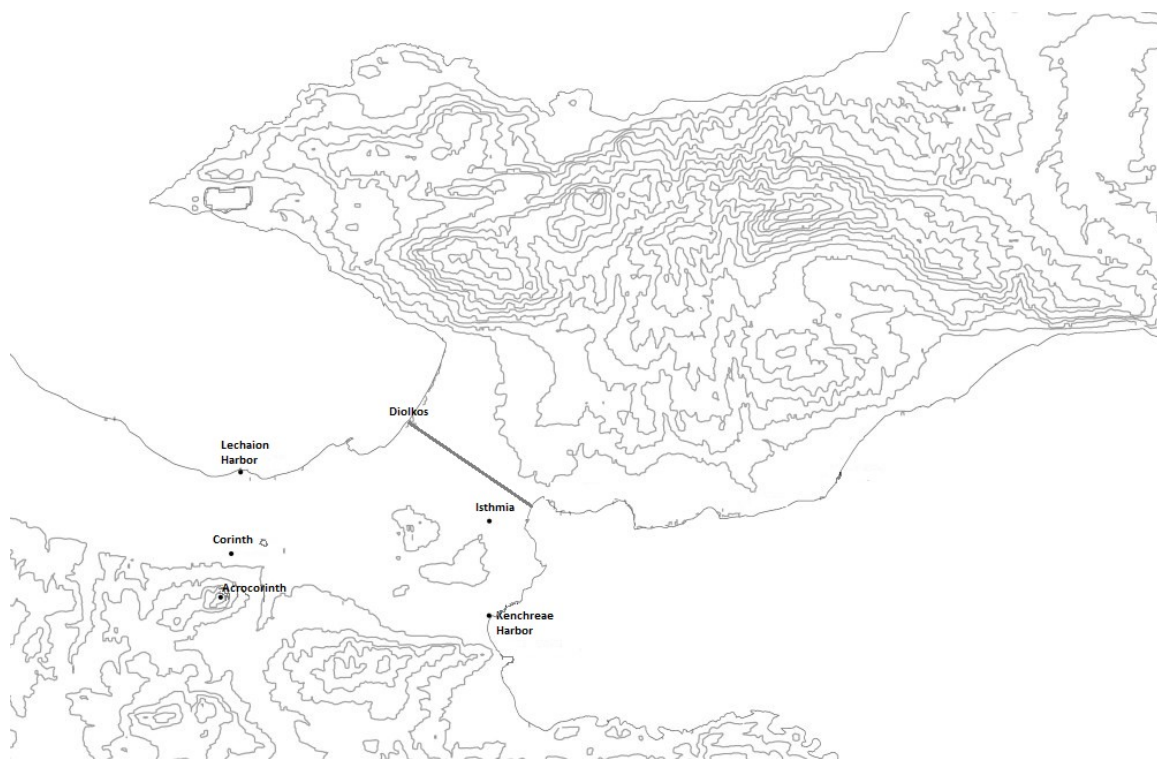
Figure 1. A map of Greece and the Aegean, with Corinth and Cape Malea marked by author.¹⁸³

¹⁸³ Fig. 1. The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Athens, Greece. Available from: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, <http://www.ascsa.edu.gr/index.php/excavationcorinth/maps-and-gis-data-for-corinth-and-greece> (Accessed April 25, 2015).



Figure 2. A map of the Peloponnese, with city-states of the Achaean League as well as Epidauros marked by author.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Fig. 2. The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Athens, Greece. Available from: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, <http://www.ascsa.edu.gr/index.php/excavationcorinth/maps-and-gis-data-for-corinth-and-greece> (Accessed April 25, 2015).



*Figure 3. A map of the Corinthian Isthmus, with relevant locations noted by author.*¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ Fig. 3. Corinthianmatters, Harrisburg, PA. Available from: Corinthianmatters, <http://corinthianmatters.com/maps/maps-of-the-corinthia>. (Accessed April 25, 2015).

Appendix B

Photographs



Figure 4. The *bema* where Paul stood trial, from the east.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ Author's collection.



*Figure 5. The facade of the Peirene Fountain, from the north.*¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ Author's collection.