

Paul and his Opponents

Key Passages:

2 Corinthians 11:1-30

Galatians 1:7; 4:12-17; 5:10-12; 6:12-13

Philippians 3:2, 3, 17

Since the time of Ferdinand C. Baur it has been customary to regard Paul as continuously involved in a conflict with Judaizers. Why should Paul have been in conflict with people from his own ancestral faith? The reason is, of course, Paul's mission to the Gentiles. Prior to the advent of this mission, there were normally only two types of Gentile affiliation to the synagogue communities. Gentiles could convert fully to Judaism by accepting circumcision and keeping the law. Such Gentiles were then regarded as full members of the Jewish community. But those who did not wish to take this radical step of becoming a proselyte could still be loosely associated with the synagogue as adherents known as God-fearers or God-worshippers.

The radical step that Paul and other Christians took was to assert that Gentiles could become part of the people of God without accepting circumcision or join the synagogue. Prior to the Gentile mission there were only synagogues with Gentiles attached, but after this development a rival group arose so that Gentiles now had two options: they could join the synagogue, or they could join one of Paul's communities. If they joined the synagogue, they would be subject to the discipline and obligations of the Jewish community, but they would also have a strong sense of belonging and of a new identity. In the Pauline communities, Gentiles would also have to separate from the patterns of pagan society, but they were in some sense at least not properly Gentile or Jewish in that they did not follow the dominant behaviour patterns of either of the former major groupings in their society. It is probable therefore that as a new religious grouping, they were subject to a certain amount of pressure from outside.

The traditional source of this pressure has been regarded as Jewish Christians. It has been argued that these Christians would have wanted the Gentiles to continue the prior pattern for converts, i.e. to become Jews or to remain as adherents of the synagogue. But since the removal of Gentiles even from the fringes of the synagogue must have had some effects on the Jews themselves, it is quite likely that synagogue leaders would also have sought to influence this removal of adherents. So it need not be Jewish Christians who oppose Paul's mission, but actual Jews who feel they are acting in the best interests of their members. Nor needs these synagogue leaders be under the influence or leadership of the Jerusalem apostles, especially James. It is more likely instead that instead of a group of Jewish Christians following Paul around

on his missionary travels and creating ongoing conflict within his communities, there may have been local opposition by non-Christian Jews who resented Paul's interference with their adherents.

What has been implicitly argued against in the previous paragraph is the existence of a counter-mission by Jewish Christians, led by Peter or James. Michael Goulder's *A Tale of Two Missions* presumes that the latter was the case and that a Jewish-Christian mission led by Peter with the support of James was in conflict and in competition with Paul's Gentile mission. Rather, there existed an agreement between the apostles and Paul that there would be two separate missions, recognizing each other and not interfering with each other's constituency or territory (cf. Acts 15 and Galatians 1-2). What is clear for the Gospels and Acts as well as from Paul's letters is that all Jews were not necessarily opposed to the Gospel, that to suggest that Paul's opponents were necessarily, always and in every place, Jewish Christians or Jews, is simply not warranted and remains an anti-Jewish bias that has dogged New Testament since the early decades of the nineteenth century.