

Paul and the Other Apostles

Key Passages

Galatians 1-2

I Corinthians 15:3-11

2 Corinthians 10-12

Romans 15:14-33

Acts 15:1-33

On reading Galatians 1-2, one cannot but be aware of a certain tension between Paul and the other apostles, especially the 'Pillar Apostles', Peter, James and John. Should this tension be viewed as a temporary phase, or as a deliberate ploy by Paul's opponents to undermine his authority with the Galatians, or as a permanent feature arising from two differing concepts of the gospel and two rival missions, led by Peter and Paul respectively?

Paul says that he is the least of the apostles because he persecuted the church of God. He also describes himself as an 'abortion' (1 Cor. 15:8), meaning by this a birth at the wrong time. That is, he had never been a disciple of Jesus during the earthly ministry of Jesus but became an apostle only by virtue of a vision after the crucifixion.

Paul, in the very place where there seems to be tension between him and the other apostles, asserts that those present at the Council of Jerusalem acknowledged and confirmed his ministry. They recognized that Paul had been called to lead a mission to the Gentiles just as Peter had been called to lead the mission to the Jews (Gal. 2:7).

Part of the problem is that Paul in Galatians 2 recounts how he had a disagreement with Peter and 'opposed him to his face'. Paul appears to hold that Peter has been inconsistent, even two-faced, and that he did not always act on principle. It is quite possible, however, that Peter came to Antioch to tell the believers there to be careful in their behaviour, otherwise the church in Jerusalem might suffer persecution if rumours arrived that divisions between Jews and Gentiles in Antioch had been entirely disregarded. So perhaps Peter was not acting out of fear or inconsistency but did what he did out of concern for the Jerusalem Christians.

In any case, the church is a new movement with new problems, and it would be strange if its leaders did not have some disagreements. Remember that it is not yet institutionalised but is a charismatic-type of organization whose leaders cannot

presume power structures or force people simply to obey them. Even Peter and Paul have to convince their audience. Nor should we assume that Jerusalem is like Canterbury or Rome, able to excommunicate or discipline without fear of contradiction or criticism.

We should not see Paul as an upstart or as a breakaway apostle, who starts his own movement. There were Gentile believers before Paul, and he was almost certainly not the first to allow Gentiles into fellowship without circumcision. Nor should we see Peter and Paul as operating two opposing missions among the same people in the same area. Paul says his mission was a pioneer mission 'making it his ambition to preach the gospel where Christ had not yet been named' (Rom. 15:20), rather than build on another's foundation. So the church agreed on areas and spheres of operation but did not seek to compete for converts.