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Opposing Forces

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What was the first-century church up against as it struggled to become established?

The fact that Christians in the Roman Empire often faced opposition is well known. The recorders of [church history](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/church-history/first-christians/47371.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/church-history/first-christians/47371.aspx>) have devoted many pages to Rome's persecution of those who claimed to follow Jesus Christ—persecution that came to a head from time to time under the reign of emperors such as Nero.

What is less well understood is the opposition, competition and persecution that feature within the pages of the New Testament itself, and not only in the [apostles](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/series-index-the-apostles-of-jesus-4043) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/series-index-the-apostles-of-jesus-4043>)' letters. In fact, antagonism was already the norm during Jesus' ministry. Although many of His listeners admitted that He spoke with authority, even ordinary people found His teachings too hard to accept. But more importantly, Jesus' teachings challenged the established religious hierarchy of the day. Thus His message caused some to feel the need to compete as well as oppose.

The exact nature of the antagonism the [first-century church](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-pulpit-of-preconceived-ideas-1040.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-pulpit-of-preconceived-ideas-1040.aspx>) faced is well worth considering, because unless we understand the forces at work from the very beginning of what is referred to as the Christian Era, we simply cannot put the

rest of church history in its proper context. Misunderstanding the milieu in which Jesus, the apostles and the early church operated thus fuels further misunderstanding, and the story that emerges cannot help but be inaccurate.

SECTARIAN JUDAISM

In the latter part of the 20th century, church historians began to recognize that first-century Judaism was not a unified, homogeneous unit. On the contrary, it was highly fractured—a “variegated Judaism,” as one commentator puts it. We gain some insight by studying the Gospel accounts, with their many references to Sadducees, Pharisees, Herodians, Scribes and Samaritans. These groups represent most of the large sects according to the first-century Jewish historian Josephus (he added the Essenes to his list—a group not mentioned in the New Testament but currently associated with the [Dead Sea Scrolls](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-bible-dead-sea-scrolls/1012.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-bible-dead-sea-scrolls/1012.aspx>) and the ancient settlement at Qumran). But in many ways this was only the tip of the iceberg. History records not only divisions within these groups but also identifies numerous smaller sects within Judaism. It can be argued that Jerusalem fell to the Romans in 70 C.E. because of the infighting that went on among the various parties within the city.

Major points of difference included the timing of the Messiah’s expected appearance, what writings were considered valid, and who should rightfully belong to the priesthood or be the high priest. This significant diversity was compounded outside Judea in places such as Alexandria, Egypt, where Greek philosophical ideas had greatly influenced the Jewish community. Examples of such influence can be clearly seen in the writings of that city’s eminent Jewish philosopher, Philo.

With differences among the Jews already well entrenched during Jesus’ lifetime, it is inevitable that upon His death the church immediately found itself facing competition and opposition from other Jewish groups and pagan philosophies that threatened to derail some members.

A DIVIDED CHURCH?

What about the apostles themselves? Did they hold opposing viewpoints from one another? It is certainly true that the Gospels show a level of competitiveness among Jesus’ own disciples, who were at times fractious and self-seeking. But did that behavior carry forward beyond Jesus’ death and the establishment of the church?

While a few theologians today are reconsidering the long-held position that the apostles' views of the law in particular were widely divergent, most remain steadfast in that opinion. Paul's epistle to the Galatians, for example, provides what they see as proof of a conflict between him and Peter (see Galatians 2:11–14). Nineteenth-century German theologians David Strauss and Ferdinand Baur (leader of the Tübingen School of theology, which influenced most New Testament studies for over a century) are largely responsible for introducing this idea. Each applied the newly established dialectic of German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel to conclude that the first part of Acts deals with Petrine Christianity, while the latter deals with its supposed antithesis, Pauline Christianity. They based their conclusions on the idea that Galatians brings to light the contrary views of these two men and a resulting split within the church. More recently Markus Bockmuehl, in his work *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches*, has proposed that the problem was not between Paul and Peter but between Paul and a group of visitors from Jerusalem who had been sent by James.

But does the epistle support such inferences? Paul does not use the same critical language against Peter as he does against his religious opponents in Galatia. Clearly Paul intended us to understand that Peter (and Barnabas with him) took his point and reacted appropriately rather than in a hostile or competitive manner.

What about James and Paul? Were they speaking out of two sides of a conflicted Christian mouth, or did they in fact say the same thing?

In reality, the alleged contention between them is just another attempt to show that they, too, were at doctrinal odds. To read Peter and/or James as opponents of Paul is to force a preconceived notion onto the text that the New Testament simply does not support (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-new-testament/18198.aspx>). An increasing number of commentators today see no reason to maintain the fiction of such a split, which was postulated by Martin Luther in the 16th century and considered by so many writers since then without closely reading the biblical accounts in their entire context. A 2007 book on James includes a chapter titled "The Letter of James as a Document of Paulinism?" Author Margaret M. Mitchell notes that the epistle of James actually makes sense of the epistles of Paul and in the process offers a reconciliation of Paul "with the 'pillars'"—the church's leaders including James.

In short, to project the preconversion behavior of some of the apostles (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/series-index-the-apostles-of-jesus-4043>) onto the emerging church after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ would be to do both the individuals

involved and church history as a whole a disservice. The transformation of the disciples following the resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit created a new and unified spirit among the first followers.

COMPETITORS ABOUND

Almost without exception, the books of the New Testament each address or at least take note of *external* opposition faced by the apostles and the church as a whole in the first century.

The book of Acts provides the earliest record of the young church, beginning with Jesus ascending to heaven and sending the Holy Spirit to strengthen the tiny group of followers. The first clear mention of competition, other than from the religious sects in Jerusalem, is found in Acts 8:9–24, the account of Simon Magus in Samaria. Although Acts doesn't devote time to Simon's subsequent activity, second-century writings indicate that he went on to establish himself as a competitor to the church and that he made significant inroads.

Not all seemingly competitive endeavors were like that of Simon Magus, however. Apollos of Alexandria is introduced in Acts 18:24–28 as a potential rival who, on learning about the church and the teachings of the apostles, joined forces with them.

There were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies... . And many will follow their destructive ways.”

2 PETER 2:1–2

Going on to the Epistles, we find more details of competitors and sometimes of their messages or teachings. The epistles of Peter, John and Jude all speak of false teachers who not only opposed the apostles but sought to draw away disciples after themselves (2 Peter 2:1–3; 1 John 4:1–3; 3 John 9–11; Jude 4). Their erroneous teachings were often characterized by ideas that blossomed into subsequent heresies such as [Docetism, Marcionism and Gnosticism](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/article.aspx%3Fid%3D1048) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/article.aspx%3Fid%3D1048>).

It is the apostle Paul, however, who provides the greatest insight into the opposition the church faced. For example, according to his letter to the congregation in the Greek city of Corinth, that group encountered a number of individuals whom Paul accused of masquerading as “ministers of righteousness” (2 Corinthians 11:13–15). We’re told that some of these early opponents contended that the resurrection of the dead, spoken of and written about by a number of the apostles and by Jesus Himself, was a fable (1 Corinthians 15:12–18) or that it held no future promise (2 Timothy 2:16–18).

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.”

GALATIANS 1:6–7

Paul's letter to the churches in the region known as Galatia talks of another problem that competed with apostolic teaching from a very early date. Paul writes, "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ" (Galatians 1:6–7).

Grasping the exact nature of the issue has proven difficult, however, in that the apostle's approach in writing to the Galatians is to deconstruct the opponents' arguments without ever telling us exactly who they were or what they were teaching. The Galatians themselves would have been very familiar with the situation, of course, so spelling out such details for them would have been unnecessary. We, on the other hand, are left to deduce their dogmas from the points Paul goes on to make.

Clearly these competitors were Jewish; they sought to have male adult gentile converts circumcised so they would be considered proselytes and hence counted as members of the house of Israel. But were they followers of Jesus Christ (who in those days were considered a branch of Judaism)?

In fact, the question of how a male gentile could be saved and thus participate in the world to come was a significant point of contention among Jews in the first century, so Paul's view that circumcising a gentile male was not required wasn't such a radical idea. The debate goes on even today within the framework of particularism versus universalism. Then as now, both sides used the Scriptures to justify their beliefs.

Paul had come to understand and teach that gentiles could be saved without becoming part of Israel through circumcision. Not all the leaders of the early church had yet come to see this, however, and some balked when they heard about it. So contentious was the issue that it became the subject of a conference of apostles and elders in Jerusalem, as recorded by Luke in Acts 15. [His account \(http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/article.aspx%3Fid%3D1832\)](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/article.aspx%3Fid%3D1832) indicates that the issue came to a head but also that the apostles and other leaders soon reached unanimity on the subject through the unifying effect of the Holy Spirit; all agreed that Paul's understanding was correct. In contrast, there is no record of any such unity or any resolution in the Galatians account. It is impossible to say for certain whether the apostle's opponents in that region claimed to be followers of Jesus, but they were clearly out of step with church leaders and may even have been members of another Jewish sect.

In other situations, some disciples did stray from the apostles' teachings, and some of them saw opportunity to advance their status by spreading ideas of their own creation. The apostles warned the church against such individuals (see 3 John 9–11).

But not all opposition came from among the Jews. Pagan groups associated with various philosophical schools also saw the church as a place from which to recruit disciples for themselves. In Colossae, Paul confronted the teachings of just such a group, which provides an interesting case study of at least one form of competition the church faced. (We will take a closer look at that in the next issue of *Vision*.)

Taken together, the record of the New Testament from its earliest days is that the church existed in a hostile environment in which groups of both Jews and gentiles tried to wrest the disciples away to their own teachings. Such false teachings were not the result of the apostles and leaders of the church fragmenting. Any real opposition was from outside, and the effect of such opposition would only increase in intensity as the apostles and original leaders of the church passed from the scene.