

Who are those "Servants of Satan"? (Jerry L. Sumney, Lexington Theological Seminary)
(Source: http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/PaulOpponents_Sumney.shtml, June 2015)

The following essay is a condensation of the author's work: *Servants of Satan, False Brothers, and Other Opponents of Paul*, JSNTSup. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999.

Since the beginning of modern critical study of the New Testament, Pauline scholars seem continually to return to the question of the identity of those Paul wrote against in his letters. It has been a matter of such interest because our understanding of Paul's letters is determined to a significant degree by what circumstances we think he was addressing. This is important because what something means is determined by the context in which it is said. You can see the extent to which this is true with the following statement: "His shot was on target. He just killed them." This statement might appear in a newspaper article about a sniper, perhaps as a quote from an eyewitness. On the other hand, it might come from the lips of Dick Vitale as he tells about a great game a basketball player has just completed. In either case, the words are appropriate, but they mean something entirely different. Since the same words can mean such different things, depending on what we are talking about, we need to know as clearly as possible what situation or problem Paul is talking about if we are to understand well what he says in his letters. Discussion about who his opponents are is a major element of the definition of that context.

In the mid-nineteenth century, F. C. Baur argued that Paul faced the same kind of opponent in every letter. Those opponents rejected Paul's teaching that Gentiles could become Christians without first converting to Judaism. The opposing teachers asserted that Gentile Christians, as well as Jewish Christians, needed to keep the purity regulations of the Law of Moses. These teachers, who, according to Baur, included some of the Twelve Apostles, followed Paul wherever he went, trying to bring Paul's converts over to their way of thinking. Though most scholars now reject this reconstruction of early church history, Baur's hypothesis has continued to be very influential. But such a reconstruction is unable to account for the diversity that existed in the early church. Thus, a new way of thinking about this question is needed.

Instead of starting with a hypothetical reconstruction of the early church, I propose that we start our search for the identity of those whom Paul opposes by looking at the individual letters. That is, we must let each letter speak for itself and not assume that any letter addresses the problem that another letter addresses. We may conclude that multiple letters respond to the same group of teachers, but we should not start with that as a presupposition. Once we begin to look at the individual letters, we must think about how to evaluate what Paul says about the other teachers. When in Philippians 3:2 Paul calls some other teachers dogs, we do not take that literally. It is a polemical, an argumentative, description. There are many less obvious cases where Paul says things about his opponents that we must not take as objective descriptions. Rather, we must evaluate the things Paul says about these other teachers according to the sort of context in which the statement appears. If the paragraph is argumentative or defensive, what Paul says about other teachers is probably not as reliable a description of them as it would be if it appeared in a paragraph in which Paul appears to be simply teaching about the meaning of baptism or some other matter. Additionally, we can say with more certainty that Paul thinks the other teachers espouse a particular view if he explicitly says they do. Modern interpreters often assert that the other teachers advocate the opposite of nearly anything Paul talks about in the letter (e.g., if Paul says you should not commit adultery, the opponents must be advocating that an adulterous life is proper Christian conduct). But Paul may have had reasons other than false teachers for speaking about a point of theology or ethics. Perhaps he thinks the readers need deeper understanding of a particular point to strengthen their faith or

help them maintain their faith when under stress. So unless we have evidence from more direct statements about these teachers, we must not assume that everything Paul talks about is a response to something other teachers espouse.

One other consideration is important to note before we look at individual letters. We cannot assume that all of Paul's letters were written because other teachers had begun to teach things Paul says are wrong. Some of Paul's letters were written in response to questions a church had sent him or reports about a church that one of his associates had brought to him. An example of the later case is 1 Thessalonians. Paul writes to them in response to the good report Timothy had brought back from Thessalonica. Paul also answers some questions they had sent with Timothy. There is no reason to think that anyone opposing Paul has begun to influence the Thessalonian Christians. Other Pauline letters that are not written to oppose other teachers include Romans, Ephesians, and Philemon.

If we do not begin with the assumption that every letter in the Pauline corpus (that group of letters which give Paul as their author) must address the same opponents, we immediately see diversity. The Pauline letters give evidence that two anti-Pauline movements were active during Paul's ministry and that other teachers, not connected with these movements, taught things that Paul believed his churches needed to reject. One of these anti-Pauline movements argues, much as Baur had suggested, that all Christians, Jews, and Gentiles need to obey those commands in the Mosaic Law that indicate that a person is a Jew: that is, all Christians must be circumcised, keep the Jewish food regulations, and keep the Sabbath. When Paul rejects this teaching in Galatians, it seems that those who advocate it also assert that this is what Paul teaches. So they may well not know that they are opposing Paul. But Paul rejects them and their teaching in such harsh terms that they turn against him and become a movement that rejects him and his teaching, which asserted that Gentiles do not need to adopt such regulations to be Christians. The movement that begins here may well be seen again in Philippians where Paul mentions those "dogs" who teach the things he rejected in Galatians. In the later letters of 1 Timothy and Titus, we find other teachers who understand and perhaps apply the Law in ways the author(s) of those letters finds unacceptable; however, there is no evidence to support the idea that they are part of the movement Paul deals with in Galatians and Philippians.

The other anti-Pauline movement focused its attention on the qualifications one needed to be considered an apostle or a leader. 1 Corinthians shows that the Corinthians have been arguing about what it takes to be a good leader. Paul contends throughout 1 Corinthians that they have adopted the wrong standards for evaluating leaders. Some Corinthians have noticed that Paul does not measure up well according to the standards they have been discussing, but there do not seem to be teachers who have come into the Corinthian church saying that Paul is not qualified to be an apostle. However, by the time the letters of 2 Corinthians are written, some people who claim to be apostles have come to Corinth. They brought letters of recommendation from other churches, and they say that Paul is not a real apostle. Since they bring letters from other places, it is clear that they are part of a broader movement that opposes Paul. Paul rejects these teachers and their criteria for evaluating leaders. They argue that God's Spirit makes leaders powerful in their speech and demeanor and gives them obviously successful lives. They say that Spirit-endowed leaders do not have the troubles others have because God works through them so powerfully. (These are the people Paul refers to as "servants of Satan.") Paul rejects this line of reasoning, arguing that the life of all Christians, leaders, and others is conformed more to the life of the crucified Christ. So God does not remove problems from the lives of leaders, rather God is with them in the midst of their troubles and helps them maintain their faith and spread the Gospel while they suffer. This, Paul says, makes it clear that the power comes from God and not from the apostle's own person. So only the manner of leadership he describes is consistent with the Gospel he preaches.

These two anti-Pauline movements are concerned with very different issues. One focuses on the way Gentiles are to be brought into the people of God and whether their way of relating to God through Christ must include those elements of the Law which identify a person as a Jew. The other movement had developed an understanding of leadership that meant they rejected Paul's claim to be an apostle. Therefore, one is concerned with group boundaries (what does it take to be one of us) and the other with how one exercises leadership within the group. These are the kinds of questions we should expect emerging movements such as early Christianity to need to clarify as they determine what it means to be part of the movement. So it should not be surprising that we find both of these issues being addressed in Pauline letters.

Besides those letters that address the two anti-Pauline movements, other letters address problems that arise as various teachers advocate teachings which Paul and other writers see as incompatible with the Christian Gospel. Colossians opposes teachers who claim that all Christians need to attain visions of angels worshiping in heaven and then to replicate that worship here on earth. They have gone so far as to claim that those who do not have such a visionary experience have not been forgiven of their sins and so are not really Christians. The author of Colossians (whom many say was not Paul) rejects this teaching, arguing that all one needs to have a relationship with God is faith in Christ. He contends that visions do not show that a person is closer to God than those without visions. These rejected teachers think Paul, who had powerful visions of his own, would agree with them. It is easy for us to say they were wrong about that, but we have no evidence that they intended to disagree with Paul.

Similarly, 2 Thessalonians opposes teachers who claim to agree with Paul. But this letter (which again many think was written by a disciple of Paul after Paul's death) says they are wrong. The opposed teachers have an over-realized eschatology. Over-realized eschatology is a claim to possess gifts from God that others say are received only at the Second Coming of Christ. All Christians believed that the coming of Christ marked the beginning of "the Last Days," the beginning of the eschatological era. Since this period had dawned, they received some blessings now to sustain them until they received the fullness of those gifts at the Second Coming. One example of such a gift that all agreed Christians received in the present is the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Thus, all Christians had a partially realized eschatology. The teachers rejected in 2 Thessalonians claim to have received things that the author of 2 Thessalonians says will be received only at the End. What they seem to claim to have received is the power to overcome troubles, perhaps specifically persecution from outsiders. As a result of their experience of these blessings, they have appointed themselves as the leaders of their church and have begun to demand that others defer to them and support them financially. 2 Thessalonians rejects their claims, contending that when those blessings are received it will be the Second Coming. The teachers rejected in 2 Timothy are similar to those we saw in 2 Thessalonians. Both have an over-realized eschatology, but there is no reason to suspect that there was a connection between the two. It is more likely that two different groups developed similar tendencies.

It seems clear that there was not just one question or one issue that occupied the first-century church. There were many issues that had to be dealt with in those early days. Some problems surfaced in more than one place, but the range of questions was rather broad and the questions are of the sort one expects in a new movement that has to perform all the tasks of self-definition that more established groups have had done for them by the predecessors within the group. The ways that some of those who are opposed in these letters claimed to agree with Paul also show that there was not an all-encompassing anti-Pauline sentiment in the early church. Paul was respected and claimed even by those who taught things that Paul rejected.

A study of those who are opposed in the Pauline letters leaves unanswered many questions about the

situations those letters addressed, but this is an important part of understanding those situations. Coming to a more secure understanding of those opposed moves us closer to understanding that historical background and so gives us a better foundation on which to base our interpretation of what is said in those letters.