

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

How is it that Christianity started off being all Jewish (Jesus and his disciples were Jews), but became almost entirely Gentile (almost no Christians are Jewish)?

Yes, all the first Christians were Jews, but within a few generations, the church had almost no Jewish members, and the original Jewishness of Christianity was lost.

How Christianity moved out of “the Jewish orbit” is hard to reconstruct, but James D. G. Dunn has written an important book on the subject: *The Partings of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (1991).

Briefly put, there was not one day when Christianity ceased to be Jewish, but a series of partings (notice the plural “partings”).

An important step in the process of parting ways happened when Paul and others allowed non-Jews to join Christian congregations without converting to Judaism.

It surely seemed to the conservative

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Palestinian Church centered in Jerusalem and to non-Christian Jews that Paul and those like him were saying that God’s covenant with Israel was of no value, the distinction between Israel and the nations unimportant. If

Jews and non-Jews were to be equals in Christian congregations, were they not “blurring the line” between holy to the Lord (Israel, in covenant with God) and unholy (the nations who know not God)?

Now we know that was not how Paul saw the relationship between

God’s prior dealings with the Jewish people and what God was now doing in Christ (see Romans 9-11). But we can understand other Jews (Christian and non-Christian) seeing what Paul was doing as a rejection of his Jewishness and considering Paul to have stepped out of “the Jewish circle” by his “ecumenical” approach.

An analogy might be where the youth of a church have a Christian coffeehouse in the parish hall. If the coffeehouse allows youth from other denominations to join the coffeehouse staff, that might be O.K. with the vestry, if the outsiders are few in number and not in leadership positions. But if outsiders begin to predominate, the vestry may object and say, “Either you choose to remain under our authority and play by our rules, or you will have to find somewhere else to have your coffeehouse, because as it is now, the coffeehouse is no longer an Episcopal ministry. It has really

become an ecumenical coffeehouse not under our authority.”

By letting in Gentiles as equals, the Hellenistic churches had moved beyond the Jewish people, becoming something broader, “ecumenical,” if you will, and ceasing to be a Jewish movement.

Those mixed or even entirely Gentile congregations grew rapidly, outpacing the growth of 100% Jewish churches as the number of Jewish converts slowed to a trickle. Then, aided by competition for members and conflict with local (non-Christian) Jewish congregations, the now Gentile-dominated Hellenistic Church became hostile to Jews and Judaism, and the history of Christian anti-Judaism had begun.

The Rev. William G. Gartig will answer your questions about the Bible, Episcopal life and other religious subjects. Send questions to 2146 Cameron Ave. Apt. 5, Cincinnati, OH 45212-3631 or at gartigwg@episcopal-dso.zzn.com.