Outsider designations in the New Testament

When Paul says 'when you were Gentiles', he is expecting these Corinthian Christians to have undergone a significant process of linguistic re-learning. As Christians they needed now to recognise that they had once been 'Gentiles', in the sense of 'outsiders to God's people'. This is to re-envision their past, and to Judaise their language. But now they are 'no longer Gentiles' because they have been transferred from outsiders to insiders, from outsiders to God's people ('Gentiles') to insiders.

See also Paul Trebilco, *Outsider Designations and Boundary Construction in the New Testament: Early Christian Communities and the Formation of Group Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)

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How did the early Christians speak about 'outsiders'? What language did they use? Group identity or group definition involves the group understanding both who they are, and who they are not. For a group, understanding 'them', those people who are 'not us', is just as important as understanding who we are. Hence, the outsider designations used in the New Testament give us significant insight into how the early Christians understood themselves, as well as how they understood 'the other'.

Some examples of outsider designations in the New Testament demonstrate what we are considering here. Note these texts:

Rom 11:13b: 'Inasmuch then as I am an apostle *to the Gentiles* (εἰμι ἐγὼ ἐθνῶν ἀπόστολος), I glorify my ministry'.
1 Cor 6:1: 'When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to court before *the unrighteous* (ἐπὶ τῶν ἀδίκων), instead of taking it before the saints (καὶ οὐχὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἁγίων)?'
1 Thess 5:15: 'See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and *to all* (εἰς ἀλλήλους καὶ εἰς πάντας).'

Here, 'Gentiles', 'unrighteous' and 'all' are used as outsider designations for people who are not members of the readers' group. We can determine that these terms are being used as outsider designations by replacing the term in question with the word 'outsiders' in each case. 1 Thess 5:15 is a particularly interesting example. The call to 'do good to one another' is a call to act in a certain way towards insiders. In this context the call to 'do good … *to all*' is a call to do good to outsiders. The use of 'all' as an outsider designation, rather than saying ''do good … *to the unrighteous*', for example, shows that Paul is careful about the way he refers to outsiders and uses particular terms in particular contexts.

'Gentiles' is one term that is often used in the New Testament for 'outsiders' and is worth discussing at some length. Note 1 Cor 1:23: 'but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to *Gentiles'*. Here Paul adopts the Jew-Gentile map from the LXX; from a Jewish perspective, humanity can be seen to be made up of two groups.

1 Cor 12:2 contains an interesting use of 'Gentiles': 'You know that *when you were Gentiles* (ἴδατε ὅτι ὅτε ἔθνη ἦτε), you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak.'[1] Paul is writing to a group that is predominantly made up of 'Gentiles' (see, for example 1 Cor 8:1-13). But it is important to note that, in their pre-conversion days, his readers would not have thought of themselves as 'Gentiles', since this is a *Jewish* way of thinking about humanity. Previously, they would have said 'we are Corinthians' (Acts 18:8; 2 Cor 6:11), or something similar.

When Paul says 'when you were *Gentiles'*, he is expecting these Corinthian Christians to have undergone a significant process of linguistic re-learning. As Christians they needed now to recognise that they had *once* been 'Gentiles', in the sense of 'outsiders to God's people'. This is to re-envision their past, and to Judaise their language. But *now* they are 'no longer Gentiles' because they have been transferred from outsiders to insiders, from outsiders to God's people ('Gentiles') to insiders. A similar usage is found in 1 Cor 5:1; Eph 4:17.

Another usage of 'Gentiles' is found in these three texts:

Rom 11:13: 'Now I am speaking *to you Gentiles* (Ὑμῖν δὲ λέγω τοῖς ἔθνεσιν). Inasmuch then as I am an apostle *to the Gentiles* (ἐφ' ὅσον μὲν οὖν εἰμι ἐγὼ ἐθνῶν ἀπόστολος), I glorify my ministry'.
Rom 16:3-4: 'Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also *all the churches of the Gentiles* (πᾶσαι αἱ ἐκκλησίαι τῶν ἐθνῶν).' Or
Gal 2:12: 'he [Cephas] used to eat with *the Gentiles* (μετὰ τῶν ἐθνῶν συνήσθιεν)'.

Paul's normal usage of 'Gentiles' has the meaning of 'outsiders to God's people', and he uses the term in this sense when he says in Rom 11:13 that he is 'an apostle *to the Gentiles*'. But in Rom 11:13 he also says, 'Now I am speaking *to you Gentiles'*, using the term of 'Gentile' believers. 'Gentiles' has the same sense in Rom 16:3-4 and Gal 2:12. As we have seen, in Paul's view, after conversion readers could now see themselves as 'once having been Gentiles'. In the conceptual worldview of 'Jew and Gentile', they had *once* been the latter – non-Jewish outsiders. *Now* they were 'brothers and sisters', 'believers', 'saints' and so on, but Paul found that 'Gentiles' was *still* a helpful term for them. It was shorthand for those who were not originally part of Israel, and so were formerly part of 'the Gentiles' (τὰ ἔθνη), but who were *now* part of God's people, yet to whom Paul wanted to say some different things from what he would say to those we often call 'Jewish Christians' or 'Jewish Christ-followers'. So he uses τὰ ἔθνη of *Christ-followers* in this different sense. The vital point for Paul of course, is that such a distinction between 'Jew' and 'Gentile' *no longer mattered* with regard to salvation. Paul has neutralised 'the Gentiles' (τὰ ἔθνη), so that it no longer carries negative or derogatory connotations, as its use for insiders here demonstrates. But its ethnic meaning is *not* obliterated, since it is very important to Paul that those he calls τὰ ἔθνη ('the Gentiles') are *still* of non-Jewish ethnicity. The vital matter is that their ethnicity is no longer salient as far as in-group relations are concerned. Ethnicity is no longer a boundary issue.

I suggest that Paul *continued* to use τὰ ἔθνη of 'Gentile believers', when it was

[1] The NRSV unhelpfully translates this as 'You know that when you were pagans', which obscures the point that this is a distinctive use of the term 'Gentiles'.

potentially confusing (since in 1 Cor 12:2 he could also say that they were *no longer Gentiles*, and because he can *still* use τὰ ἔθνη of 'Gentile *outsiders'*), because it is vital to Paul that they were saved precisely as 'Gentiles' (τὰ ἔθνη) and not as 'Jews' (Ἰουδαῖοι). Speaking of them as 'the Gentiles' *even when they were Christ-believers* emphasised this point. They had not, need not, and indeed must not become 'Jews' (Ἰουδαῖοι) as the argument in Galatians in particular shows, and so they remain as 'Gentiles' (τὰ ἔθνη). But in addition, other terms were too long-winded! For the alternatives - 'believing Gentiles' or 'non-Jewish outsiders who have now become insiders' or 'who have now become part of God's people by adoption', or something similar – hardly roll off the tongue! But what we see here is a creative and innovative redefinition of the term.

Another significant outsider designation is 'the unbelievers' (οἱ ἄπιστοι). As far as we know, 'the unbelievers' is not used in Greco-Roman or Jewish contexts in the way that Paul and other New Testament texts use it, that is, as a designation for all outsiders in general. Its use by Paul[2] seems then to have been an innovative use of language. It almost certainly arose because of the importance of *pistis* (πίστις), faith, for Pauline Christians. Faith in Jesus was one of their key identifiers, one of the key distinguishing features of early Christians. Hence Paul often speaks of 'Christians' as 'the believers'.[3]

This use of 'faith' language seems to have quickly led to speaking of 'them', of outsiders, as 'unbelievers'. The group 'boundary' that distinguished insiders from outsiders was formed by 'faith', so that insiders could be called 'believers' or 'faith people', and outsiders could be called the opposite, 'unbelievers'. It was not that these outsiders had no 'faith' (which can be understood as 'fidelity' as well as 'faith') at all, or did not believe in anything. Rather they did not understand *pistis* as the early Christians did, and did not believe in the way that members of the group did, in Jesus or God and so can be called a-pistoi, unbelievers. But the label used by the group was not 'unbelievers in Jesus', since group members knew what the label 'unbelievers' meant, and the label was 'shorthand' – an abbreviated label which did not need to be expanded when used within the group. What we are seeing is what insiders called outsiders when speaking *of* outsiders within the group; it is not necessarily language that insiders would use when speaking *to* outsiders.

What else do we learn about the early Christians by considering the terms they used for outsiders? Firstly, they used a whole range of terms for outsiders. As befits a new movement, they had not just settled on one or two terms for 'them', but rather can be seen to be experimenting with a whole range of terms.

Secondly, many of the terms that were used for outsiders come from the LXX, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. This was an entirely natural reservoir of language upon which to draw. A multiplicity of terms for outsiders is found in the LXX, so this is one of the reasons that we find a multiplicity of terms for outsiders being used by early Christians.

Thirdly, we can also see a good deal of linguistic creativity being demonstrated by the early Christians. As I have noted above, 'unbelievers' (οἱ ἄπιστοι) seems to be a new term for outsiders. While people from both a Jewish and a Greco-Roman context would understand

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[2] See 1 Cor 6:6; 7:12, 13, 14 (twice), 15; 10:27; 14:22 (twice), 23, 24; 2 Cor 4:4; 6:14, 15.

[3] A participle of the verb 'to believe' (πιστεύω) is used as a designation in Rom 1:16; 3:22; 4:5, 11, 24; 9:33; 10:4, 11; 1 Cor 1:21; 14:22 (twice); Gal 3:22; 1 Thess 1:7; 2:10, 13; 2 Thess 1:10; 2:12. 'Faithful' (πίστος) is used as a self-designation twice, in 2 Cor 6:15 and Gal 3:9; cf. Col 1:2.

the label, it had not been used before for 'outsiders to our group' in the way that the early Christians used it. Just as we create new language in particular social situations ('post-truth', and 'to google' come to mind), so the early Christians were creative with language. Paul also demonstrates linguistic creativity in the way he uses 'Gentiles'. This linguistic creativity has theological significance; thus, as I have noted, the use of 'unbelievers' as an outsider designation shows how important faith was for the early Christians.

Finally, the outsider designations used by the early Christians raise the question of the relationship between *group distinctiveness* and *attitudes to outsiders*. Some of the designations used for outsiders can be seen as terms that make a strong distinction between 'us' and 'them' and so are strongly exclusionary terms. 'Unbelievers', 'outsiders', 'the unrighteous', 'sinners' and so on are terms that strongly exclude outsiders. They contribute strongly to a sense of group identity, and underline what distinguishes early Christians from others.

However, this does not mean that the early Christian groups were socially isolated or withdrawn. 1 Cor 14:22-25 is interesting here:

> [22]Tongues, then, are a sign not for *believers* but for *unbelievers*, while prophecy is not for *unbelievers* but for *believers*. [23]If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and *outsiders* or *unbelievers* enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind? [24]But if all prophesy, an *unbeliever* or *outsider* who enters is reproved by all and called to account by all. [25]After the secrets of his [the *unbeliever's*] heart are disclosed, that person will bow down before God and worship him, declaring, "God is really among you."

Here we see a strong and clear distinction between 'believers' and 'unbelievers'. Believers are those who belong to the group, who have one of our key defining characteristics of faith. Unbelievers do not share this, and so are clearly not part of us, not part of 'the whole church' which gathers (v23). However, it is clear from this passage that *outsiders* or *unbelievers* entered the place where 'the whole church' gathered *and* were allowed to be there. The early Christians may have met in someone's home,[4] or perhaps in rented space, or in a restaurant, or out of doors. These gatherings were open and accessible. 'Unbelievers' were excluded from being members of the group, but they were included in the meetings. In using the designation 'the unbelievers' (and in many other ways), Paul differentiates and demarcates the Corinthian Christians from their society, but he does not want to divorce them from that society. Unbelievers are demarcated from the group, but not in such a way as to vilify or to demean them, nor are they spoken of in such a way as to encourage social exclusion of unbelievers or social isolation of believers from unbelievers.

In addition, in what Paul says in 1 Cor 14:24-25, he argues that prophecy should be prioritized over tongues because of the *impact* of prophecy (as opposed to tongues) on outsiders. When an outsider hears prophecy, the secrets of the unbeliever's heart may well be revealed and he or she could well be converted. By contrast, when outsiders hear tongues, they will think the Christians are mad. What we see here then is the principle of 'other-regard': the impact of actions on outsiders is to be a key factor in determining what happens in worship. Paul is here applying the same principle to the 'unbeliever' – that of 'other-regard'

[4] Hence the 'house church'; see 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Philm 2; Rom 16:5.

– that he applies elsewhere to the 'weaker' believer.[5] An activity of believers should be curbed if its impact on the unbeliever who is present is deleterious, just as the activity of the strong (believer) should be curbed if it has an adverse impact on the weaker believer. This is to accord a very significant status to the 'unbelievers' and to apply the overarching principle of 'love of the brother or sister'[6] to 'love of the unbeliever', even if Paul does not state it in precisely these terms. The overarching principle used to decide between two activities (whether to speak in tongues or to prophesy) is the impact of each action on the unbeliever.[7]

Hence we see that the early Christians demarcated themselves from outsiders, and yet were open to outsiders joining the group and we can even discern the principle of 'love of the outsider'. In my view, this dialectic between a strong group identity and openness to outsiders is characteristic of early Christian groups.

[5] See 1 Cor 8:7-13; Rom 14:1-23; for other-regard in general see Phil 2:1-4; Rom 15:2, 7; 1 Cor 13:5.
[6] See e.g., Rom 14:15.
[7] Paul here is applying his 'evangelistic maxim' expressed in 1 Cor 9:20-23.