From gentile to Jew to Christian: was this the course of conviction and affiliation for a gentile convert to "Christianity" in the first century? This question may be raised with Paul of Tarsus, the Jewish-Christian who deliberately assumed the special role of "Christian" evangelist to gentiles. He distinguished his role and its attendant theological problems from the comparable role of Peter, another Jewish-Christian who particularly addressed his appeal to Jews. The inquiry that we here make of Paul might be formulated thus: From a theological standpoint, was it required of a gentile to become a Jew in the process of becoming a "Christian"? A variant formulation might take this form: When the Jew, Paul, converted a gentile to "Christianity" did the convert thus become a Jewish proselyte? What was the mind of Paul on this theological question? The response is involved in the general milieu of gentile-Jewish-Christian relationships in the first generation of Christian origins. In the attempt to understand Paul's mind on such a question one is led to the related inquiry: Who is a Jew?

It has been maintained by many that in Paul's missionary enterprise the convert as a gentile might come directly to Christ; that is, he need never assume a state of allegiance to Judaism. This would mean that in the mind of Paul, within the first Christian generation, there was a third religious entity; such as came to be called in the second century a "third race". Independent of the cults of gentiles, and separate from Judaism, there would be converts from both who would completely withdraw in order to enter upon the "Christian" Way, separated from both. This view has been attributed by many to Paul, and yet even in our advanced stage of exegetical criticism there is reason to challenge the view and to press for renewed analysis of Paul's own contention, as bearing upon the issue here raised.

They were Jewish missionaries, Paul and Barnabas, who were quite prepared to receive gentiles into their religious community without circumcision, although the dominant Jewish position was insistence upon the rite as traditionally practiced. Obviously the
Jewish leaders considered that Paul’s converts were moving from gentile religion to Judaism. That Paul discounted the need for circumcision does not mean that Paul excused the gentile “Christian” from membership within Judaism. Foakes-Jackson did so interpret Paul’s charge to the Galatians (5.2): “... if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.” He attributes to Paul the warning that “if they became Jewish proselytes, they would be more attracted to the fulfilment of the external precepts of the Law ...”  

But this is not the position that Paul took. He did make his position quite clear and we may well rely upon his own words, in his epistles and as reported by Luke. Whereas Paul did renounce the requirement for a physical circumcision for the Gentile convert, he argued vigorously and at length for the retention of that traditional characteristic of Judaism, circumcision, correctly understood. A convert must accept circumcision; that is, the “true” circumcision. He urges: “If a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?” (Rom 2.26). “He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal” (Rom 2.29). Paul’s declaration is applicable both to the born Jew and to the Gentile convert whose spiritual circumcision satisfies the law and qualifies him for membership within Judaism. In the Colossian letter (2.11), Paul adheres to the “circumcision made without hands ... the circumcision of Christ,” a rite performed once-for-all signifying for the Gentile convert the true mark of Judaism as found in the Law of Moses.

What greater or clearer qualification for the Gentile convert to be acceptable within Judaism could there be, than to be recognized as in the line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? So Paul argues that the man of faith is a spiritual descendant of Abraham, who was “the father of all who believe without being circumcised,” as well as “the father of the circumcised who ... follow the example of the faith which our father Abraham had” (Rom 4.11f). “He is the father of us all” (Rom 4.16). This was later reflected in the Epistle of Barnabas (13.7), where God speaks: “I have made thee, Abraham, the father of the gentiles who believe in God in uncircumcision.” By this reasoning, Paul brought his Gentile converts within Judaism as “the household of faith” (Gal 6.10), for “in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham