

CHURCH AND SECT

One Saturday afternoon around Christmas time while I was doing some follow-up work for our evangelism committee, I was invited into a home. I was led into a room and saw about eight men and women sitting there with their Bibles open. The first question fired at me was "Do you believe in Christmas?"

"I replied that I believed in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour." "How can you use the names Jesus Christ?" I was asked. "Don't you know that they are names of pagan gods? Jesus is derived from the name of the Greek idol Zeus and Christ comes from the name of the Hindu god Kris." The leader of the group told me that their mission in life was to make known the right name of God. "If you don't have the right name of God in your forehead you will not be able to enter into the Kingdom. The right name through which one enters heaven is Yashua Messiah." (1)

Of course I did not get anywhere with these people as, according to the sects, clergy are the prime culprits in leading people away from the inner truth of the Bible.

Some time ago I held a few talks over the radio about the Lord's Day question. A few days later I received a large anonymous package of pamphlets, booklets and a magazine published by the Church of God, (Seventh Day), the Messianic Jews and the Bible Sabbath Association. One of the pamphlets limits heaven to seventh day keepers only. The rest of mankind is doomed. "Know this, readers, that you will never enter through the pearly gates of the New Jerusalem, or reach forth your hand and pluck the fruit of the tree of life, or drink of the clear water of the river of life unless you keep the Ten Commandments, of which the seventh-day Sabbath is the fourth." (2)

A leading faith healer of today is A. A. Allen from Miracle Valley, Arizona. His ideas are weird and yet he has a large following and A. A. Allen Revivals, Inc. grossed \$2,692,342.-, not counting the salaries of A. A. Allen and his associates. (3) A. A. Allen claims that the Lord told him in two specific revelations that it is a sin to be poor. If you don't have any money you don't have faith. How do you get rich? By giving or pledging \$100.- to A. A. Allen.

"It is one hundred percent scriptural to send a blest handkerchief to drive out the demons of poverty from your life. Just as soon as I receive your letter with your gift of one hundred dollars, or pledge for one hundred dollars, or more I will send you a new handkerchief over which I have prayed for your prosperity. I will also place your name in our "Book of Remembrance." If you have a snapshot or photo of yourself available, please send that to me with your letter. I will put it up in our church at Miracle Valley so that we will remember you in prayer after I have personally laid my hands on your picture, asking God to drive every demon of poverty from your life and home, I will also send to you a printed plaque of God's prosperity covenant. Every day it will be a reminder to you that IT IS GOD THAT GIVETH YOU POWER TO GET WEALTH." (4)

1 VARIOUS DEFINITIONS OF THE TERMS CHURCH AND SECT

Sects are mushrooming today. Spiritualism, Scientology, Mormonism, Astrology, Black Magic, Satan Churches and other movements are finding new followers everywhere. What accounts for the rather spectacular rise and growth of the sects? Some writers have tried to explain the rise and growth of the sects from a "purely" sociological point of view. Others have said that sects are the unpaid accounts chargeable to the churches. When you study the problem of sect versus church, you find that there is much confusion about the definition given in the two words. The definitions depend largely upon your outlook on life. 1. Dr. Paul Tournier, the world renowned Swiss doctor and psychiatrist, gives a psychological explanation for the existence of sects. A vague nostalgia by the feeling or having been cut off from the parent body, the church of Rome, is supposed to account for the assertiveness of many of the Protestant sects. People who do belong to sects are anxiety ridden souls who already bear within themselves an intense longing to know the truth as far as possible and to belong to a community which is as perfect as possible. Dr. Tournier ascribes the problem of sect to the unconscious complex that might well have been derived from the fact that it broke away from the Roman church. (5)

2. William E. Mann in his book "*Sect, Cult and Church in Alberta*" distinguishes between the conservative movements dedicated to the restoration of New Testament Christianity, and which are suspicious of rituals and organization, and the cults which only use isolated bits of Christian teaching. Consequently, Mann identifies fundamentalism with sectarianism because fundamentalists are exclusive and selective in membership as the emphasis is upon individual religious experience. (6) The sects (the fundamentalists and the evangelicals) assist in the adjustment of people of rural background to an urban environment. The people of rural background who move to the city are given by the fundamentalists a feeling of belonging and identity. (7) A cult is a religious group which looks for its basic and peculiar authority outside of the Christian tradition. Christian Science, Mormonism etc. would be considered as cults. (8)

3. John S. Moir, assistant professor of History, Carlton University, Ottawa, says that sects aim to restore the original purity of Christianity, ignoring the accumulation of tradition. (9) In North America a sect is fundamentalistic, Bible centered, anti-traditionalist, strongly missionary minded, It gives a larger role to women in its independent autonomous congregations. (10) A church is an organization which is accommodated to society and accepts different ethical standards for different social classes. A church is bound by traditions by comparison to the sect. (11)

4. David A. Martin asserts that sects have chiliastic notions and reject infant baptism. (12) A sect regards the whole of mankind outside its boundaries as damned. (13) Sects either drive individualism to the anarchist extension or to the collectivism of the communist extreme. Sects are largely confined to the lower classes. (14)

5. These last definitions of church and sect are based mainly on a sociological approach. It seems that the work of S. D. Clark, "*Church and Sect in Canada*", has been

a basic source and an inspiration for most of the writers on church and sect. His premise is that the church and sect difference arises out of the conflict between forces of order and separation. "The church seeks the accommodation of religious organization to the community; the welfare of society is something for which it feels responsible. The sect emphasizes the exclusiveness of religious organization; the worldly society is something evil of no concern to the spiritual minded." (15) Dr. Clark mentions that the support of the religious sect comes from that section of society which is unsettled and lost its sense of belonging. (16)

Dr. Clark's view is based on Ernst Troeltsch view of Church and Sect type. (17) Troeltsch (1865-1923) discussed the issue from a viewpoint which was to be dogmatically unprejudiced. He viewed Christianity as one of the many religions. To him all religions, including Christianity, are the outgrowth of religious feelings. Religions are affected and their distinctive forms are in part redetermined by their various environments. In his book "The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches" he pays close attention to the social ideas which influence the various forms of Christianity. He calls church and sect two independent sociological types, implied in what he styles the "religious sociological basic scheme of Christianity," with its radical tension between individualism and universalism. A person becomes a member of the church community by birth. The Roman Catholic Church is the best example of church type. A person joins a sect on a voluntary basis. The sectype is the individualistic faction in the "religious sociological basic scheme of Christianity." (18) It is not difficult to see now the liberal influence which is behind much of present North American thinking on church and sect.

II. IN SEARCH OF A DEFINITION OF THE TERM CHURCH AND SECT

What constitutes a sect and a church? The etymology of the word sect does not help too much in the formulation of a definition. The word sect - from the root of sequi - means the "following" or clientèle of a leader, and not a fraction broken off, as it is sometimes thought to signify. (19) Usually, the word sect gives a rather bad impression. No one would like to hear that he belongs to a sect. In order to understand what a sect is you must have an idea what the church is.

1. A Definition of the Church from a Reformed Point of View

From the Reformed point of view the visible church has been defined "as the community of those who profess the true religion together with their children." (20) The church community is not merely a gathering of individual believers. The church community is an outcome of God's gracious work through the covenant. The covenant concept is basic to the understanding of the church. If we leave the concept of the covenant we throw the doors wide open to sectarianism. The Reformed view of the church includes the belief that the church is built by Christ, by His Word and Spirit, in the line of the covenant. We must therefore reject the idea that the church community is based on the personal qualities of individuals. We cannot stand in judgment over a person's salvation. Some fundamentalist brethren have told me on several occasions "That person cannot be a Christian because he smokes." A man's eternal destiny is judged whether or not he

is addicted to the tobacco weed. Dr. Dooyeweerd rightly said: "Apart from the fact that it is beyond human power to judge the hearts of our fellow men, the qualities of the individual Christians are a treacherous kind of quicksand for a church-formation. (21)

a. Biblical Data

Already in Scripture we do find references to sects. In Acts 26:5 the pharisees are called "the strictest sect of our religion." In Acts 28:22 the Christians are described as a sect. The word sect here means school or party. In Corinthians 11:19 and Galatians 5:20 the "word means discension or a faction. A sect in these Scripture references is understood to be a group which follows a leader or party. Paul commands Titus (3:10) to admonish the heretics who were about to split the church. (22) The word sect here means man-made destructive opinion. (23) If we keep these Biblical distinctives in mind then we cannot label every movement which does not belong to the traditional church - a sect.

b. The difference between sect and sectarianism

Walsh in his book "*The Christian Church in Canada*" puts both the Mormons and the Mennonites in the category - sects. He does not make any distinction between heretical and sectarian movements within the Christian Church. (24) This cannot be done! In order to try to make clear distinctions I will give the following definitions.

1. Communities which should be classified as sectarian instead of sect. In this category, you can place two movements.

a. The Plymouth Brethren and like-minded. Such communities do not want to be a church and are opposed to the institutional concept of the church. They are a fellowship of believers who carry their "voluntary" principle to the extreme. Yet they belong to the evangelical Christian faith.

b. Baptists and movements such as Pentecostalism which stress one particular truth at the expense of the total teaching of the Scripture. In such communities you will have the denial of infant baptism and a very strong emphasis on the autonomy of the local church.

These movements mentioned definitely belong to the evangelical fold, but cannot be classified as church because of their voluntary principles, their denial of the covenant basis of the church and in the case of Pentecostalism the underscoring of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit at the expense of the other two Persons in the Trinity.

The word sectarian should be used in this category and not the word sect as this word leaves a rather bad taste.

2. A Description of Sects

For practical purposes I believe that the word sect should be confined to the heretical movements which have become rivals to the Christian faith, while desiring to be classified as Christian. Horton Davies in his very interesting book *"Christian Deviations: The Challenge of the Sects"* divides the sects into two groups - the Judaistic and Gnostic heresies. These two divisions are helpful because they give a key to the understanding of various sects:

a. Judaistic heresies.

From the beginning of the Christian era legalism has fought against the life of the Spirit. Legalism is a persistently recurring element in the sects which come under the heading "Judaistic heresies". Legalism has triumphed over grace. These heresies are: Seventh-Day Adventism, Jehovah Witnesses, and Mormonism. Seventh-Day Adventism revives sabbatarianism, making it a doctrine essential for salvation, and also limits the number of the elect to its own members. Jehovah Witnesses have founded their system of theology on the Old Testament as interpreted by Charles Taze Russell and successors. Salvation is limited to members of their own group. Of all the sects, Mormonism seems to be the strangest. Despite its beautiful rendering of Christian hymns, Mormonism is far removed from Christianity. Its teaching is a perversion of Old Testament teachings combined with Joseph Smith's fantasy - the Book of Mormon.

b. Gnostic heresies

They represent attempts to combine elements of Christian teaching with doctrines of other systems of faith. They are essentially syncretistic and pantheistic. Examples of the Gnostics are: Christian Science, Unity, and Theosophy. Horton Davies sums up the basic elements of these sects, or to use another word - cult, as follows: "We may note that Gnostic eclecticism has the following features in common. Their religion appeals to the proud rather than the humble in heart, for it claims to sum up the best in other religions and thus castigates adherents of the older faiths as old fashioned. Its appeal is largely to intellectuals and initiates and not to the great under-privileged multitudes of the world. Their philosophy is almost always pantheistic and shares the characteristic weaknesses of that outlook; for example, it despises the body which for the Christian is the temple of the Holy Spirit; it 'teaches an automatic immortality which makes an end of a moral interpretation of history; it depersonalizes God so that He becomes an essence' or a 'principle' and ceases to be the THE Person; consequently it despises history and the world as illusory, and shows an ostrich-like optimism towards sin, and an unwillingness to change the social conditions, which militate against the full development of personality. Salvation is through identification with God by means of meditation, not by the transformation of the will." (26)

Bibliography

- (1) cf. What is the name of the Heavenly Father? published by the Assembly of Yahweh.
- (2) Remember. Church of God Publishing House.
- (3) Time, March 7, 1969.
- (4) A. A. Allen. Power to Get Wealth. How You Can Have It! pp. 62f.
- (5) Paul Tournier. A Place, For You. Psychology and Religion, New York, 1968, pp. 32f.

- (6) William E. Mann. Sect, Cult and Church in Alberta. p. 5, 71ff.
- (7) Ibid. p. 154.
- (8) Ibid. p. 6.
- (9) John Webster Grant. Sectarian Tradition in Canada p. 119.
- (10) Ibid. pp. 119f.
- (11) Ibid. p. 121.
- (12) David A. Martin. Pacifism. An Historical and Sociological Study. Reprinted from the British Journal of Sociology. Vol. xiii, No. 1, March, 1962, p. 210.
- (13) Ibid. p. 213.
- (14) Ibid. p. 223.
- (15) S. D. Clark. Church and Sect In Canada. p. xii.
- (16) Ibid. p. 433.
- (17) Ibid. p. xii.
- (18) Herman Dooyeweerd. A New Critique of Theoretical Thought. Vol. iii. pp. 527ff.
- (19) George Park Fisher. History of Christian Doctrine. New York, 1927, p. 9f.
- (20) L. Berkhof. Systematic Theology. p. 568.
- (21) Dooyeweerd. p. 532f.
- (22) C. N. Impeta. Kaart van Kerkelijk Nederland. blz. 18.
- (23) cf. 2 Peter 2:1.
- (24) The Christian Church in Canada. pp. 313-317.
- (25) Horton Davies. Christian Deviations: The Challenge of the Sects. p. 84.
- (26) Ibid. p. 167, cf. pp. 160-173.

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