

Church and Sect (2)

II. The Origin of Sects

Most sects and sectarianism itself descend from the apocalyptic and anabaptistic wings of the Reformation. (27) The world had to be shunned. The Christians were on the pilgrim way to the New Jerusalem and nothing was supposed to detain their journey. Their program was separatism and not reformation. There had been no church for centuries, but only the false Babel, and Babel had to be left. The true church was the gathering of the visible saints, who were baptized on their own profession of faith. (28) The excessive left wing movement of the Protestant Reformation should be appraised from a wider background than the 16th and 17th centuries can afford.

As an illustration we may look back for a moment to a famous heretic of the second century, Montanus, who with the two women Prisca and Maximilla, provides the classical example of that Pentecostal enthusiasm which has broken at intervals into the history of the church. Montanus and his followers had an extravagant belief in the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit, "to whose action they have abandoned themselves in complete passivity like the violin vibrating under the bow; and so emphasizing the continuance of prophecy in the life of the Church, with its spasmodic ecstasies, glossalia and kindred manifestations." (29) Montanism is regarded therefore as the prototype of many religious revivals which have become separatist movements eventually. Montanism does live very strongly in such Pentecostal groups which do believe in private revelation and in hyper individualism.

Montanism as a spiritual principle is a recurring phenomenon in the history of the church. The Pentecostal movement itself will eventually disappear as it is slowly moving in the direction towards becoming a church. No movement can survive on emotionalism and individualism alone. (30)

IV. Sects - Cultural Background

Horton Davies characterizes sects as "the religion of the hard-pressed and frustrated, who, without such faith and the company of their fellows at the bottom of the scale, would be utterly defeated." (31) Though I do think this description generalizes too much, it bears out some important points. Sects and sectarianism are part of a cultural phenomenon. Several factors have contributed to the rapid spread of denominationalism and sects on the North American continent.

In the background of many sects you find a strong economic influence. Sects are often a haven for the poor where they find recognition and fellowship. (32) Yet one must be careful not to overestimate the economic influence. This mistake has been made by many American historians. (33) Movements such as Christian Science and Unity have mainly a middle class membership.

Prof. Dr. K. J. Popma accuses the Pentecostal movement of having a hostile attitude towards culture. It fosters cultural poverty "through its preference of the spectacular and extra-ordinary." (34)

America has always been fertile soil for sects, cults and sectarian movements. Though we must always remember that their origin have their roots in Europe. The American frontier was characterized by emotionalism, fierce individualism and anti-intellectualism. (35) This spirit lent itself to separatism. The splits within sects and denominational splits are partly explained from that background.

V Sects and Sectarianism Reactionary movements

Sects and sectarianism cannot be completely explained by all the factors mentioned so far. Sects and sectarianism did not arise from a vacuum. They came out of the church. They point their fingers accusingly at the church and speak about her failures. Time and again the church has walked upon dangerous paths. She has often opened her doors to rationalism. The Word of God has often been weighed and found wanting by the church which has the sacred duty to proclaim that Word. God has been captured by the church instead of the church being captured by Him. National causes were defended by the church. "A gospel without the cross has been proclaimed from many pulpits. The preaching of the Second Coming, the hope of the church, has been neglected. The church no longer watched, worked and prayed for the glorious Second Coming of her Lord. Church membership has been too soft and easy. Congregational life failed to provide understanding and fellowship. Sects and sectarianism must also be understood from this background. These shortcomings of the church are not novelties of the ancient past but do occur with frightening frequency in the present. The spiritual climate today in our society does nurture sects and sectarianism. If churches do not take the Biblical message seriously members will leave and seek spiritual food and certainty somewhere else. A church which does not take the Bible seriously as the revealed Word of God cannot be expected to be taken seriously. (36)

VI A Critique on Sects and Sectarian Theology

a. Sectarian usage of the Bible

Biblicism is here the key word. In the many discussions I have had with sectarians, I found that the Bible was honoured as God's Word. This is commendable, but the Biblical message is narrowed down to Biblical truths. The authority of the Bible is claimed but not for all of life. Biblical authority is limited to a believer's spiritual life. Biblical studies tend to become a gathering of proof texts. The studies in the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ in such circles are frequently fanciful. It is amazing what interpretations are given to some passages in the Old Testament. Ezekiel 38:8, 9 states, "After many days thou shalt be visited: in the latter years thou shalt come into the land that is brought back from the sword, and is gathered out of many people, against the mountains of Israel, which have been always waste: but it's brought forth out of the nations, and they shall dwell safely all of them. Thou shalt ascend and come like

a storm, thou shalt be like a cloud to cover the land, thou, and all thy bands, and many people with thee." T. Myron Webb in his booklet "*Startling Prophetic Events*" explains the passage this way: "The balance of this chapter is so descriptive it needs little comment. Twenty-five hundred years ago Ezekiel said that Russia, in league with many other nations, would come against Israel "as a cloud to cover the land." This undoubtedly intimates the invasion will be from the air, followed in the usual order by land forces." (37) In Ezekiel 38:1-6 Mr. Webb finds clear references to Russia, Moscow and Tobalski, Germany. Ezekiel 39:1-5 prophesies a battle with "guided missiles, carrying atomic and hydrogen war-heads." (38) Prophetic literature abounds, but the Bible seems to be a limited book in practical day by day living.

b. Sects and the Bible

Sects are not satisfied with sola Scriptura. They must have more than Scripture affords. The Jehovah's Witnesses say that they take the Bible seriously. But they take Scripture out of context and glue texts together to make up their own prophetic views. They also recognize extra revelation. The Keaders in Brooklyn seem to have a special source of revelation from where they draw their ideas.

The Mormons have their books of Mormon, the Christian Scientists their "*Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*" by Mary Baker Eddy. And there are many other groups which have their own particular brand of books to shed extra light on the Bible. These books are without exception the basis of sect theology. These works are not innocent additions but they overshadow and even lord over the Bible. God can no longer speak on His own. He has to speak according to the directions of the sect. Sects are self deceiving. They promise security through their extra-Biblical material but their security always proves to be that of a soap bubble. Sects have turned their backs to the God of the Scriptures and stand thus under the judgment of God.

b. Sect - man's outreach to God

For the sect member salvation by grace is not sufficient. He cannot find satisfaction in the simplicity of the gospel. He must find out more and more about the "Father's business' before he can come at peace with the Father.

Sectarian Pentecostalism falls prey to the same problem. Much is said about salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ. But before you are actually accepted as a full fledged member of Pentecostalism you have not only to experience the first birth (regeneration) but the baptism of the Holy Spirit as expressed in the speaking of tongues. If you don't experience the speaking of tongues you just don't belong to the initiated. Some of the more extreme Pentecostal groups go from one planned Revival meeting to another. It is always a mystery to me why a Holy Spirit Revival can be announced for a certain date.

Sects may preach grace but they add some strange things. The Seventh Day Adventists say "You must keep the Sabbath instead of the Sunday otherwise you will never enter through the pearly gates," and Jehovah's Witnesses say "You have to be a

minister for the Watch Tower, fulfil your obligations before you can escape the terror of Armageddon." The focus is placed on man's activities and not upon what God does for man in His grace. Man decided what God has to do to save man. The key is salvation by works and not faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross of Calvary.

c. Sect-concept of sin

In the theology of the sects sin has become sins. This is a natural conclusion of their desire to gain salvation through works. The fullness of God's grace can only be seen in the light of the depth of man's sin. Sin which reaches to the depth of man's existence is not taken seriously anymore. Sects talk about specific sins. They are moralistic in their shunning of all types of worldly temptations which can be overcome in obedient living to rules and regulations. The justice and the wrath of God executed on Golgotha is not seen in its full dimension. Some sects devalue the significant event on Golgotha. The awesome judgment is made light and Christ's work of redemption is robbed of its full significance. Some sects even deny the reality of the cross. Such sects as Christian Science take away the reality of the cross and replace it with man's own ability to overcome his own problems. There is no feeling of enmity with God which must be reconciled. Rather, man extends a hand of welcome and God is supposed to grasp it. Sect theology is basically a theology without a cross, and a bloodless salvation.

d. Sect - no sense of history

Sects have placed themselves outside of the line of history. They have cut themselves off all the rich experiences accumulated during the history of the church. According to the sects, the church has had a brief period of healthy growth and after that darkness and chaos reigned until their own sect brought the message of hope to light again. The birth of the sect was the birth of new light. For the Mormons it was the year 1829 and for the Jehovah's Witnesses it was the year 1874 when Charles Tay Russell founded the new religious organization the "Zion's Watch Tower Society." God's grace is here very limited indeed. Where was Christ before 1829 or 1874? Was God not working in one person during all those centuries? Was everyone, lost until the Mormons or the Jehovah's Witnesses arrived on the scene of history? Here is a theology of pride. God has had in their mind no dealing with the church but only with their own sect.

Much more could be said about church and sect. I have only touched upon some of the basic issues. When you study sects and sectarianism you must first determine your own understanding of the church. The critique on sects and sectarianism is based on Reformational Theology. This article offers an attempt to come to an understanding of the relationship between church and sect, and it should be understood only as that.

Bibliography

(27) Walsh, p. 315.

(28) cf. C. Smeenk. Christelijke Sociale Beginselen. Vol. II. p. 194.

(29) J. S. Whale. The Protestant Tradition. p. 209.

(30) cf. Ibid. Part III.

- (31) Horton Davies. p. 21.
(32) Elmer T. Clark. The Small Sects In America. pp. 16-18.
(33) cf. S. D. Clark. Church and Sect in Canada.
(34) Dr. K. J. Popma. Le-vensbeschouwing. Deel 5. p. 43.
(35) cf. Canadian Sociological Perspective. p. 575.
(36) Kurt Hutten. Geloof en Sekte. Het Sektarisme als anti-reformatorisch geloofsverschijnsel, zijn doelstelling en ziju tragiek. blz. 124-133.
(39) T. Myron Webb. Startling Prophetic Events. p. 20.
(38) Ibid. p. 21.

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November 1969