



**THE  
RELIGIOUS  
SECTARIAN**

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Roger E. Dickson

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## Eager To Keep The Unity Of The Spirit

# The Religious Sectarian

“Devoted to or prejudiced in favor of some sect.” So says *Webster’s Dictionary* of the word, “sectarian.” Or, more definitive, Webster further defines “sectarianize”: “To imbue with sectarian principles, feelings, or ideas; to make sectarian in spirit.”

In a religious context, the word “sectarian” originally applied to those who were identified as a divisive group within a traditional religion. A religious sect was identified as such because of some unique teaching that was contrary to the accepted teaching of the traditional religion. Such was the derogatory use of the word in reference to Christians in the first century. The general public erroneously assumed that Christianity was a

sect within the context of Judaism. This accusation was made of Paul by Tertullus when Paul stood before Felix. *“For we have found this man [Paul] a pestilent fellow and a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes”* (At 24:5). And Paul admitted to Felix, *“But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers ...”* (At 24:14; compare At 26:5). The accusers called the Way a sect, but not Paul. To Tertullus, and those Jews he represented, Christianity was a sect of Judaism.

Paul, and all those of the Way, were not a sect of Judaism. They were of Christ who separated all believers from all religions that did not accept Jesus as the resurrected Son of God. According to those who rejected Christ in the first century, the word “sect” was not used in a favorable context in reference to Christians. Reference was to those who had separated themselves from those who rejected the truth of God’s work among men through Jesus.

Today, however, the use of the word “sect” refers to any group of people who have set themselves against God’s work to bring all men together as one man in Christ. A religious sect is a denominational group that has rejected the blessing of God’s unity that He gave to those who are working to preach the gospel to the world. A sectarian is one who separates himself from others within

**Sectarianism  
leads to  
denominationalism.**

the community of Christendom. If he leads a group of people, then they as a group are defined as a sect that is identified by unique beliefs or behavior.

Dictionary definitions of sectarianism seem to fall short of defining the result of sectarianism that is so prevalent in the religious world today. This is especially true in reference to any sectarian spirit that would affect the people of God. When we realize that a sectarian spirit naturally leads to the denominating (dividing) of believers from one another, then we must understand that the true nature of a sectarian spirit works against the unity of the believers for which Jesus prayed and died. For this reason, therefore, every Christian must struggle against the attack of sectarianism and its resulting fruit of denominationalism.

Everyone understands that among believers today the spirit of sectarianism is contrary to all teaching concerning the one church of the New Testament. Few people who are sectarian in spirit and behavior, however, realize that they are of such a spirit. They do not because they confuse their loyalty to a particular sect with true loyalty to Jesus. Sectarians often confuse loyalty to Jesus and His word with their loyalty to some dynamic personality or a specific group of people. Those who harbor a sectarian spirit often disguise their behavior as “contending for the faith,” when actually they harbor a spirit that works contrary to the very spirit of unity that is to be characteristic of God’s people.

It is essential as a Christian, therefore, to understand the nature of sectarianism. If we discover that we are somewhat sectarian in spirit, then we can caution ourselves lest we allow our sectarian attitude to be carried out in our behavior. In doing such, we will find ourselves working against the work of God to keep all believers together in Christ. We thus call for a great deal of self-examination when studying this subject. Because we are human, almost every one of us has some sectarian feelings. However, if these feelings are manifested through our behavior, then it is time for repentance. The sectarian is known by his fruits. And if the fruit of division originates from a sectarian attitude, then one is working against the unity of the Spirit.

**The behavior  
of the sectarian  
is contrary to the  
nature of the ekklesia.**

As we examine ourselves in reference to this subject, most will confess that they harbor some sectarian feelings, if not, behavior. If this study reveals some sectarian beliefs and behavior, then we have accomplished our purpose in challenging ourselves to maintain the unity of the Spirit. Satan would have us divided, and thus, we must continually exhort

ourselves to be united. We must always remember that the fruit of a sectarian spirit that denominates God's people from one another is the work of Satan.

One of the most difficult challenges is to convince individuals who have a sectarian spirit that they are actually working against the blessing of unity that God has given to all believers in Christ. This is especially true of independent churches that are often led by a single charismatic leader who started his "own" church. The very fact that such leaders have separated a group unto themselves is evidence that they are sectarian in spirit and practice. Once such a sectarian leader has marshaled his followers into a "local" church, he then instills in the adherents loyalty to his particular party. Loyalty to the group thus becomes more important than loyalty to Jesus, His word, and all other disciples of Jesus. The result is that a new sect is established with a leader who believes that he is doing the work of God. But the leader of such groups, with their loyal adherents, have forgotten that sectarianism is contrary to the work of God among men. It is a spirit that is contrary to the oneness of the universal ekklesia of Christ. The preachers of denominating groups are sectarian, and the loyal adherents are practicing sectarianism. With such loyalty, a sect exists and is perpetuated as an independent church. All this is completely contrary to the nature of the universal church of God's people that we read about in the New Testament.

## Chapter 1

### THE ORGANIC UNITY OF THE BODY

In order to reveal the nature of sectarianism, it is always best to begin with a clear understanding of the nature of the unified and universal body of Christ as it is explained in the New Testament. The better we understand what God intended concerning the organic relationship of unity between His children, the better we can understand the confusion that sectarianism brings when it is manifested among the saints. Sectarianism works completely opposite to what God intended and created through the cross of Jesus. Therefore, we must focus on the

principles of our unity with one another as members of the body of Christ, keeping in mind that our unity is a blessing from God.

#### **A. Giving heed to Jesus' prayer for unity:**

No passage of Scripture is more pertinent to discussions on sectarianism than Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17:20,21. Jesus knew that division would continually threaten the oneness of His body. He knew that our individualism would often surface, and subsequently, it would work against our

love for one another. He knew that His disciples would separate themselves from one another because of their individualistic pride and arrogance. For this reason, Jesus prayed that all His followers be one as He and the Father were one in purpose and being. It must always be the desire of the disciples of Jesus, therefore, to give heed to Jesus' prayer for oneness. True disciples of Jesus are known for their efforts to maintain unity among the saints of God. When there is division, it is the nature of the disciples of Jesus to seek reconciliation.

**Organic unity means to function as one body.**

Maintaining the unity of believers about which Jesus prayed means that Christians should avoid arguments over senseless issues. In fact, in order to maintain the unity about which Jesus prayed, Christians are to avoid argumentative discussions over issues

**Senseless debates encourage senseless divisions.**

that are not biblical in nature, or are simply opinions concerning matters of interpretation (See 2 Tm 2:23; Ti 3:9-11). In order to preserve unity, Christians should avoid any debates over issues that are not fundamental to our faith. Debates over nonbiblical issues and matters of opinion will only encourage argumentative behavior that is contrary to the fundamental teaching that we are to be eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ep 4:3).

## **B. Being one universal body:**

Sectarians fail to understand the universal nature of the body of Christ. No Bible

teaching strikes at the heart of the erroneous nature of sectarianism than the fundamental principle of the one universal body of Christ. While residing in prison in Rome, Paul wrote to the Ephesian disciples, who were hundreds of kilometers away, that there is “**one** body, **one** Spirit, **one** hope, **one** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism, and **one** God” (Ep 4:4-6). Paul in Rome was a member of the same one body that the Ephesians were members of in Ephesus. He continued that the one God is “*Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all*” (Ep 4:6). **Paul was referring to the global body of Christ**, not just a single group of Christians in Ephesus. He then said, “*But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift*” (Ep 4:7). Grace was given to each member of the global body.

Notice the context of Ephesians 4 from the viewpoint of Jesus initiating the building of “His church” upon the rock of His sonship and fulfillment of all prophecy as the Messiah (See Mt 16:18,19). Ephesians 4 is speaking of the universal body of Christ. In order to build His body after His ascension, He “gave some to be apostles” for the initial announcement of the gospel in A.D. 30 on the day of Pentecost (At 2), and the revelation of all truth (Jn 14:26; 16:13). He gave “some to be prophets” in order to speak the word of God by inspiration to the church

**The church is one, not one union of many sects.**

until the coming of the written word (See 2 Tm 3:16,17). He gave “some to be evangelists” who would go forth to preach the good news to the world. And He gave “some to

be shepherd/teachers” who would continue to nurture the early converts at the beginning of the establishment of the universal body of Christ. Through the ministries of apostles, prophets, evangelists and shepherd/teachers, Jesus ministered His word to the world in order to establish His universal body.

When Paul wrote in Ephesians 4 concerning the “keeping of the unity of the Spirit,” he was not talking exclusively about the disciples in Ephesus (Ep 4:3). He was talking about the body of Christ throughout the world. When he spoke of Christ setting some in the body with ministries of word and service, he was speaking of the one body that existed wherever there was a member of the body.

1 Corinthians 12 is a prime context that teaches the preceding concept of the universal body. At the same time, it is a context that teaches against any efforts to divide the body into local independent groups. The context of 1 Corinthians 12 teaches that because there is one Father, one Christ and one Spirit, the members of the one universal body of Christ function as a unit (1 Co 12:4-11). Paul’s illustration of using the one Spirit of the Godhead was not simply to correct the divisive relationship the Corinthians had with one another in dividing up into different parties. His argument was that because the body is universally one, so likewise should the members relate with one another at any location in the world. The members are united as one because the body is universally one.

In order to emphasize this point, allow us to insert the word “universal” in 1 Corinthians 12:12 in order not to miss the

point of Paul’s argument. “*For as the [universal] body is one and has many members, and all the members of the one [universal] body, though they are many, are one [universal] body, so also is Christ*” (1 Co 12:12). We must take our “local congregation” thinking out of our interpretation of 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4.

It is not that we have oneness among individual autonomous local churches. The oneness is in reference to the oneness of the **many members**. Remember what Paul said: “*For as the [universal] body is one, and has many members ...*” (1 Co 12:12). How can some insert, “has many autonomous groups” into this text? The context is speaking of individual members, not groups of members.

We are the one universal body because every branch (individual member throughout the world) is connected individually to the One Vine, Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, in this universal relationship that the branches have with one another, there has been the attack of sectarianism among the members. Subsequently, sectarian interpreters have slipped into the context of 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 a word that is found nowhere in the New Testament in reference to the disciples of Christ. It is the word “local.” And thus we have used in Christian writings, the phrase, “local church.” This is just another way of sectarianizing the one universal body of Christ, the very thing Paul argued against in the contexts of 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4.

### C. **Being one with one another:**

Paul urged the Corinthian disciples to “*speak the same thing, and that there be*

**One Spirit  
assumes  
one body.**

***no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment***” (1 Co 1:10).

This mandate was not that they be cloned as a cult into using the same words and phrases in their speech, or behaving as regimented soldiers who were denied their individualism. Christianity is not a cult. The nature of Paul’s instructions is opposite to what the sectarian would be

and do. Paul’s **Unity does not make the church a cult.** statement introduces the Corinthians’ division over personalities, even though the personalities, Cephas, Apollos and Paul, spoke the same thing. Cephas, Apollos and Paul were not cloned as robots without the right to have opinions. When it came to speaking the same fundamental teachings of God, however, they spoke as the oracles of God (1 Pt 4:11). They were totally one man in Christ in reference to fundamental teachings, but individual in how they carried out the fundamentals in their own lives.

**D. Stand fast in one spirit:**

Paul exhorted the Philippians that they ***“stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel”*** (Ph 1:27). This thinking and behavior is completely opposite the nature of the sectarian spirit. Christians are to strive together for the faith, not against one another. The **Unity allows freedom to work individually for a common cause.** more Christians strive with one another, the less they strive for the faith of the gospel (See 2 Tm 2:23; Ti 3:9-11). The

spirit of unity struggles against the spirit of sectarianism. These two spirits of men are always in conflict with one another.

#### **E. Be eager to keep unity:**

The entire context of Ephesians 4 teaches against the denominating behavior that is the product of a sectarian spirit. Paul exhorted the Ephesians to ***“walk worthy of the calling with which you have been called”*** (Ep 4:1). And in order to walk this walk, one must be ***“eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”*** (Ep 4:3).

It is the nature of love to be eager to keep unity. It is the disciples’ love for one another that moves them to keep the unity that they have in Christ. It is not that they are eager to establish unity. They already have the blessing of unity because they are all one man in Christ as a result of their baptism into Christ (Gl 3:26-29). They must earnestly keep that which they already have because

**There can be no unity among loveless people.**

of their common obedience to the gospel (See Rm 6:3-6; Jd 3). Being a disciple of Jesus demands that Christians understand that there is always an attack against their blessing of unity. Satan knows that there is awesome power in a united community. If he can keep the community of God divided, then he has greatly diminished God’s work among men.

The sectarian does not realize that his spirit works against the Spirit of unity that Christians have in Christ. He does not realize that unity is a fundamental teaching that defines the nature of true Christianity. To

take advantage of the sheep of God in order to promote one's unbiblical doctrine is working against the fundamental principle of unity in Christ. Every effort, therefore, must be made by every Christian to preserve the blessing of our oneness in Christ.

**Unity defines true Christianity.**

#### F. Guarding our freedom for unity:

We preserve the unity of the Spirit by guarding one another's freedom in Christ. Wherever the spirit of sectarianism seeks to divide the people of God, then we can be assured that our freedom in Christ is under attack. Paul expressed the fundamental principle of freedom in Galatians 5:1. "*Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.*" This statement was a reflection of what Jesus promised all His disciples. "*Therefore, if the Son will make you free, you will be free indeed*" (Jn 8:36).

Galatians 5:1 is in the context of some Jewish brethren who were seeking to bind circumcision as a condition for salvation (See At 15:1). They were certainly wrong in their doctrinal position, for they were binding where God had not bound.

**Sects deny freedom.**

Throughout the book of Galatians, Paul adequately argued that there is nothing in circumcision (Gl 5:2-4), nor salvation that is supposed upon the foundation of perfect keeping of law (Gl 2:16). But the position of the Jewish legalists was more than keeping the rite of circumcision as a legal requirement for salvation. To them as Jews, if they were not circumcised, they lost their Jewish

heritage. And in this context, it seems that they were trying to proselyte the Gentiles into their heritage of Judaism through circumcision. But such would destroy the freedom in Christ that the Gentiles gained when they obeyed the gospel.

Obedience to the gospel brings freedom from the bondage of perfect keeping of law in order to be justified. We must protect this freedom, lest someone with strong views on a particular matter of opinion would seek to divide the disciples from one another by binding a "circumcision issue." **We are free to be different.** **We have the freedom to advance our opinions, but we do not have the freedom to bring anyone into the bondage of our opinions.** One with a sectarian spirit is often willing to sacrifice freedom for the sake of binding his "circumcision issues." Keep in mind also that those who have a strong sectarian spirit will not allow anyone to express their opinions if they are contrary to their opinions.

When discussing the subject of unity, we have always found that those who focus so much on unity often have some distorted view of unity. They often seem to be concerned about things of which God has no concern in reference to the unity of His children. Some superficial appearances of unity about which some obsess would be such things as everyone assembling together at the same place. Or, it may be assuming that when everyone is assembled, then there is unity among the brethren. Or, some have erroneously assumed that unity consists of every disciple in a city assembling in the same manner, that is, in a church building, in

a school, or in a house. Forced unity is supposing that everyone uses the same words and phrases to express themselves concerning matters of the disciples' work. Some impose unity by demanding a certain dress code on the dis-

**Cults clone.  
Freedom unites.**

ciples for certain occasions. There are also those who assume we are united if we all evangelize in the same manner, or conduct the assemblies of the church according to the same ceremony. Extreme views of forced unity would be assuming that the disciples must agree on all matters of opinion and interpretation. All such efforts to impose unity are superficial, if not sectarian in their very nature. Since all such things lie outside the authority of the Scriptures, then to bind in these areas where the Scriptures are silent would be binding where God has not bound. If one binds where the Scriptures are silent, then one becomes sectarian and divisive when he is supposing that he is promoting unity.

The obsession of some who are orchestrating unity sometimes betrays their desire to muster legally all the saints together after their concept of unity. The first thing the unity obsessionist must understand is that his definition of unity may be outside the realm

of God's definition for unity. Legalists always have a corrupted view of unity. Their understanding of unity is actually union. They seek to be unified when everyone marches according to their opinions and interpretations that they believe are binding. We must always keep in mind that cults are the most unified religious groups on earth. When legalists have produced "unity," they have actually produced a sect, or possibly, a cult.

We must never forget that cults and sects will always cast out of their fellowship those who come with fresh ideas, or challenging matters of opinion. There is no freedom in a denomination that is the result of a sectarian spirit. Even churches that were established on the foundation of biblical authority will often circle

**Freedom allows  
differences for  
the sake of  
uniting.**

around and deny freedom of thought once their heritage is established as the foundation of their faith. Their "heritage of doctrinal interpretations" becomes the new catechism that destroys the freedom of the adherents. The evidence that a group is a denomination is if there is no freedom for biblical interpretation, or biblical application (methodology) within the denominated group.

## Chapter 2

### DISUNITY AMONG THE EARLY DISCIPLES

The early Jewish disciples of Jesus were born into a culture that promoted exclusion. They were Jews who were taught from their youth to exclude all other cultures. Throughout His ministry, Jesus' Jewish dis-

ciples struggled with their Jewish exclusiveness while they walked with Jesus. After the Holy Spirit manifested the kingdom of God through His baptism of the apostles in A.D. 30, the sectarian spirit of the Jewish

Christians seemed to linger as the church moved from being predominately Jewish to predominately Gentile. In order to reflect on ourselves, we mention here the struggle the early disciples seemed to have with their Jewish sectarian spirit. Our study of their attitudes helps us define the nature of sectarianism. It helps us understand this attitude that was so contrary to the one universal body of Christ, and the fact that the first disciples, who were Jewish, were to go into all nationalities of the world.

#### A. Excluding others from the work of God:

During the ministry of Jesus, John and some of the other disciples, had witnessed the work of an unknown disciple who was not affiliated with their group. The unknown disciple was casting out demons in the name of Jesus (Mk 9:38-40). The disciples' reaction to what they witnessed is interesting. *"Teacher, we saw one casting out demons in Your name, and he did not follow us. And we forbade him because he did not*

**"Us" and "them" speech betrays our sectarianism.** *follow us"* (Mk 9:38). Notice that the disciples forbade the unknown exorcist from casting out demons because he did not follow "us." Their reaction betrayed their sectarian spirit. The word "us" indicates that they would have continued in their sectarian spirit to the development of a denominational group if Jesus had not corrected them. Sectarrians, as the disciples on this occasion, will always use "us" and "them" terminology. And in using such terminology, a denomination is formed.

The unknown disciple was not of their

party, and thus, what he was doing, to them, was obviously wrong. In the spirit of true sectarianism, they set themselves up as judges in the matter. They executed judgment on one who brought glory to Jesus, for what he was doing was "in the name of Jesus." But still, he was not of their party.

The disciples were sectarian in their thinking and behavior in these early days of the ministry of Jesus. Jesus' response to the disciples concerning their sectarian spirit was pointed. *"Do not forbid him, for there is no one who will do a miracle in My name who can afterward speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is on our side"* (Mk 9:39,40).

It is difficult for the sectarian to believe that God can work through other individuals who are not of his particular party. His party spirit hinders him from accepting the fact that God is out there working in order to bring about His purpose. When Paul said *"that all things work together for good to those who love God,"* we must not assume that all the work of God is solely with those who love God (Rm 8:28). He certainly works through others on behalf of the saints in order to bring about good for the saints.

When God promised that He will *"make a way of escape so that you may be able to endure"* temptation, we must assume that He works through others in order to provide a way of escape for His children (1 Co 10:13). The sectarian believes that God works exclusively through His children. But the fact is that **He works in all ways on**

**God works through all creation to accomplish His purpose.**

**behalf of His children.** Since His ways are past finding out, we should caution ourselves in limiting His work (Rm 11:33). **The spirit of sectarianism seeks to limit the work of God on behalf of His people.** And in the case of John and the other disciples, their sectarian spirit led them to forbid the good works of the unknown disciple because he was not of their party of disciples. Sectarianism has a narrow view of the work of God. The sectarian limits the work of God though God may choose to work through anyone in order to carry out His purpose of bringing His people into eternal dwelling.

### B. Excluding other races:

The case of the disciples' encounter with the Samaritan woman was an opportunity for Jesus to make His Jewish disciples aware of their racial sectarianism (Jn 4:3-42). The Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans, who were a mixed race between the Jews and Gentiles. Though the Samaritans resided within the land of Palestine, the Jews separated themselves from the Samaritans. They did so because they believed that the Samaritans were not heirs of the promises of God. They based their argument on this thinking because the Samaritans were not the true Israel of God.

The occasion for the encounter of the disciples with a woman from Samaria happened when Jesus went through Samaritan territory on His way from Judea to Galilee (Jn 4:3,4). At about midday, Jesus and the disciples came to Jacob's Well that was near the city of Samaria. While the disciples went into the city to buy food for the journey, a Samaritan woman came to the well for wa-

ter. It was there that Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman, and set the stage for the disciples to manifest their racial sectarianism.

While the disciples were in the city, Jesus asked the woman for water. The response of the woman in John 4:9 explains the scenario that Jesus established for the sake of His disciples. *"Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, 'How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink, since I am a woman of Samaria?'"* John, in his narrative of the account, added, *"(For Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans)"* (Jn 4:9). After the conversation of Jesus with the woman, wherein she realized that Jesus was greater than a prophet, His disciples eventually returned from the city and discovered that He was not only talking with a woman, but with a Samaritan woman. John recorded, *"And they marveled that He talked with a woman"* (Jn 4:27).

**The racially different are one man in Christ.**

They were in Samaritan territory. Their marvel was not only that Jesus had a conversation with a woman, but their sectarianism went deeper. He talked with a **Samaritan woman**. As Jews, the disciples had no dealings with the Samaritans. The occasion manifested their racial sectarianism because of their reaction.

Sectarianism will often raise its ugly head when different races of people or tribal groups encounter one another in their fellowship as the body of Christ. There is probably nothing greater that destroys the fellowship of the saints than sectarianism that comes in among disciples who are of differ-

ent racial or tribal groups. Wickedness is revealed when believers of different racial groups refrain from coming together because of either race, tribe or gender. God is no respecter of persons (At 10:34,35; Rm 2:11; Cl 3:25; Js 2:1-13; 1 Pt 1:17). Those who would show respect of persons in reference to either race, tribe or gender, therefore, are not behaving according to the character of God who created all races from one man (At 17:26). If one's racial sectarianism is manifested by racial discrimination, then one does not reflect godliness in his life. Paul concluded, *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bondservant nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Gl 3:28).

**"Different"  
can be  
"same"  
in Christ.**

### C. Excluding other cultural groups:

It was the custom of the Jews to keep themselves from fellowshiping with other cultures. They had been commanded by God throughout their history to maintain their Jewish identity as the Israel of God. The reason for this was that God wanted it to be manifested that the promise of the Blessing that was made to the fathers through Abraham was fulfilled in the coming of the Christ (Gn 12:1-3). And from the seedline of Abraham, through the nation of Israel, the Blessing came through Jesus (Gl 3:15-18; 4:4). After the fulfillment of the promise, the physical identity of Israel was to fade away in Christ (Gl 3:26-29). Unfortunately, some of the early Jewish disciples had a very difficult time in allowing their Jewishness to fade away in Christ. As a result, the social structure of their culture was contrary to the na-

ture of the great commission of Jesus, for Jesus had commanded that the disciples go to every nation of people and preach the gospel to every ethnic group (See Mt 28:19,20, Mk 16:15).

**The great  
commission  
breaks down  
cultural  
barriers.**

With the preceding thought in mind, notice carefully what Peter said to Cornelius, a Gentile, upon his arrival at Cornelius' house (At 10,11). *"You know that it is an unlawful thing for a man who is a Jew to keep company with or come to one of another nation"* (At 10:28). If God had not shown a special vision to Peter to go to the house of this Gentile, we wonder if Peter would have carried out the great commission to preach the gospel to this one who was of "another nation"?

Peter's cultural sectarianism was strong. God knew this, and thus, He chose him as the one to whom the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles would be introduced. The message from God through Peter to all Jews was that if Peter, who was a true Jew, could go into the house of a Gentile and preach the gospel, then all Jewish believers should do the same. The unique case of Peter being led by God to the house of Cornelius was not only for the purpose of saving Cornelius and opening the gospel door to the Gentiles. It was also for the purpose of leading the Jews out of their exclusiveness of Jewish culture into every ethnic group of the world (Mt 28:19).

When Peter went to the house of Cornelius, he took Jewish witnesses with him. The sectarianism of these Jews was manifested when they witnessed the coming of the Spirit upon the household of Cornelius.

*“And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out also on the Gentiles”* (At 10:45).

When Peter and the Jewish witnesses returned to Jerusalem, they were confronted by the Jerusalem brethren. *“So when Peter came to Jerusalem, those who were of the circumcision contended with him, saying, ‘You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them’* (At 11:3). However, after Peter explained what had happened, *“they held their peace and glorified God”* (At 11:18).

What is significant about the case of Cornelius was that it took a special vision from God to get Peter out of his Jewish cultural cocoon in order for him to obey the great commission. It took a miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the household of Cornelius to convince Peter, and those Jewish brethren who were with him, that God wanted the Gentiles to hear and obey the gospel. It took all the preceding to convince the Jewish brethren in Jerusalem the same truth. Cultural sectarianism is ugly when it becomes a pattern of behavior that limits one’s fellowship to a specific cultural group. It is a sin that hinders the preaching of the gospel across cultural barriers. It initially held up the carrying out of the great commission of Jesus to preach the gospel to every nation (See Mt 28:19,20; Mk 16:15,16).

#### **D. Excluding others to start one’s own “church”:**

Peter embarrassed himself in Antioch

**The gospel neutralizes segregation.**

where the church was composed primarily of Gentiles (Gl 2:11-21). He knew better concerning how he behaved when fellow Jews came from Jerusalem. Nevertheless, he allowed his Jewish spirit of exclusion to be carried out in his behavior. He separated himself from the Gentile brethren when he was intimidated by his fellow Jews who came up from the heart of Judaism, that is, Jerusalem. Paul later wrote of the incident, *“But when Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned”* (Gl 2:11).

**Churches are not started; only believers are baptized.**

Now what Peter did in Antioch was serious since he stood condemned because of his behavior. Before the visitors came from Jerusalem, Peter behaved according to the spirit of unity that we have in Christ. *“Before certain men came from James [in Jerusalem], he ate with the Gentiles”* (Gl 2:12).

Peter’s previous vision from God and encounter with Cornelius had proved to him that no racial or cultural sectarianism should manifest itself in the behavior of those who were one in Christ (At 10,11). He was thus having a good time in fellowshiping the Gentiles of the church in Antioch. *“But when they [the Jews from Jerusalem] came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the other Jews likewise joined in his hypocrisy, to the point that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy”* (Gl 2:12,13). This could have been the beginning of “Peter’s church” in the city of Antioch.

Peter, Barnabas, and his fellow Jews

in Antioch, had no problem with fellowshiping the Gentile brethren before the Jerusalem visitors. But the legalistic Jewish brethren from Jerusalem threatened their Jewishness. Peter, Barnabas, and the other Antioch Jewish brethren, were intimidated by the legalistic Jerusalem brethren. As a result, when Peter behaved according to his cultural sectarianism, he “stood condemned” for his behavior. He essentially started another “church” that was composed exclusively of Jews. His behavior was a regression to church politics for the sake of conforming to the cultural sectarianism that was practiced by the Jewish brethren.

Peter, as well as the other Jewish brethren in Antioch, “*were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel*” (Gl 2:14). Regardless of the reasons, when one separates himself from other brethren for purposes other than false teaching, **Church politics denies being straightforward about the truth. he is not being straightforward about the truth of the gospel.** He is being hypocritical. He stands condemned. Practicing sectarianism in our relationship with the people of God will cause one to lose his soul.

What the Antioch case teaches is that in moments of confrontation concerning brotherhood issues, one should certainly guard himself from taking sides in matters of opinion. What the Jerusalem brethren initially brought was their cultural sectarianism from Jerusalem that was based on the Jewish rite of circumcision. Circumcision was an outward manifestation of one’s conformity to a legal interpretation of law (See Gl 5:1-6). Peter, Barnabas, and the other

resident Jewish brethren in Antioch “fell in line” with the party of Jewish legalists who came from Jerusalem. Their separation from their fellow Gentile brethren in Antioch brought them under condemnation because their behavior denied the very nature of the unity of the body of Christ. Add to this the fact that the foundation upon which they established the “circumcision church” was contrary to the freedom from perfect law-keeping that we have in Christ (Gl 2:16; 5:1).

**“Circumcision churches” are always sectarian.**

#### **E. Exclusion based on personalities:**

When Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians, the church in Corinth was divided into at least three sects (1 Co 1:10-13). Each sect was loyal to their favorite personality. Some said, “We are of Paul.” Some said, “We are of Apollos.” Others said, “We are of Cephas.” Nevertheless, there were the faithful who knew better, and thus, they said, “We are of Christ.” **Anytime a group of people give their allegiance to a human leader over Christ, they become a sect.** Some of the Corinthians had become sectarian in their behavior because different groups aligned themselves with their favorite personality. Fortunately in this case, the personalities, Cephas, Apollos and Paul, **did not** promote such sectarian behavior. They were only the occasion for the sectarian spirit that existed among some of the Corinthians to manifest itself.

**Christians preach Christ, not church.**

Paul began his correction of this sec-

tarian division in the Corinthian church by pleading, “*Now I urge you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment*” (1 Co 1:10). This is the standing principle of unity by which the people of God should be judged. The spirit of sectarianism is contrary to this principle, and thus, sectarianism must be opposed whenever disciples find themselves

**No man has a right to stand between God and man.**

being divided from one another because of personalities. **No disciple can have a truly Christ-centered faith if he allows his allegiance to some man on earth to stand between him and Christ.** Cults are started when some leader casts his spell over innocent people who give their allegiance to him.

Everything that we are exhorted to do as brothers and sisters in Christ speaks against the spirit of sectarianism. We are to be of “*one accord*” and “*of one mind*” (Ph 2:2). In order to preserve this unity, we must, as Paul wrote, “*let nothing be done through rivalry*” (Ph 2:3). We must not

compete with one another. We must not do anything through “*empty conceit,*”

**“One another” does not mean “one and the others.”**

thinking that we are better than our brothers (Ph 2:3). If we exalt ourselves over our brothers and sisters, then we are living contrary to the spirit of unity that must be characteristic of the body of Christ. In order to guard ourselves against a spirit of sec-

tarianism that would lead to sects among us, we must “*in humility of mind let each esteem others better than themselves*” (Ph 2:3). By living this way, we will dwell in the unity of brethren (Ps 133:1). We will prevent ourselves from developing sects among ourselves similar to what happened among the Corinthian brethren.

#### **F. Exclusion for the sake of power:**

In some way Diotrephes had gained an authoritative position among the disciples to whom John wrote and who were in the area of where Gaius lived (See 3 Jn 9-12). The case of Diotrephes reveals the behavior of the sectarian who calls disciples after himself, and then, controls those disciples by his dominant personality. A sectarian who seeks to dominate others, as Diotrephes, will (1) love to be first, (2) not receive other preachers from outside his group, (3) unjustly slander other evangelists with malicious words,

(4) personally refuse to receive other brethren, (5) forbid others who receive other brethren, and then, (6) cast out of his party those who do not obey his demands (3 Jn 9,10). John referred to this sectarian practice as “*evil*” (3 Jn 11). And notice, “*He who does evil has not seen God*” (3 Jn 11). The sectarian who enacts his sectarian attitude by dominating others is doing evil. He does not know the Son of God who prayed that His disciples may all “*be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be one in Us*” (Jn 17:21).

**Dominant leaders develop divided churches.**

Paul warned that dominant personalities would come who would rise up among

the leaders of the church. *“Also from your own selves will men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves”* (At 20:30). These “perverse things” would result from the twisting of the Scriptures, which some would do to their own destruction (2 Pt 3:15,16).

A sectarian is often identified by his unique doctrine that has no biblical authority, which doctrine he binds on others. But even worse, some sectarian groups are defined by their twisted interpretations of the Scriptures. Some who build sects fail to study their Bibles, and thus, to them the Bible is hard to understand (1 Pt 3:16). Peter said that they are “untaught

**Untaught teachers produce spiritually sterile sects.**

and unstable,” and thus, they distort the Scriptures to their own destruction. Sectarian leaders are able to do this because there are many followers who *“will not endure sound teaching. But to suit their itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires”* (2 Tm 4:3). They will thus *“turn away their ears from the truth and will be turned to fables”* (2 Tm 4:4). When we connect one who is untaught in the Scriptures, with those who have itching ears, we **always end up with another sect.**

We live in a world of Christendom today that is burdened with “pastors” and “prophets” who are untaught, and thus, are leading “itching ear churches” down a path of destruction. It would be good to mention here the warning of James. *“My brethren, be not many of you teachers, knowing that we will receive the stricter judgment”* (Js 3:1). Before one would assume the respon-

sibility of leading a group of God’s people, he should be sure he is a student of the word of God.

Some have often asked why God would allow untaught leaders to lead the people of God. The answer is simple. God created us with freedom to make our own decisions. However, as free-moral beings, we will give account before Him of our beliefs and behavior (2 Co 5:10). We must never forget what Paul said in 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12.

*... and with all deception of wickedness among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so that they might be saved. And*

**God sends delusions to those who do not love the truth.**

*for this reason God will send them strong delusion so that they should believe a lie, that they all might be condemned who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.*

The fact that the early disciples had to grow out of their sectarian attitudes reveals that we too must grow out of ours. It is wrong to harbor a sectarian spirit by simply saying that this is the way we are. Sectarianism is something out of which we must grow because it keeps the people of God away from one another.

From the examples of sectarianism that are revealed in the Scriptures, we could draw some conclusions in order to correct any sectarianism that we may be harboring in our hearts. We must always keep in mind that the spirit of sectarianism is the foundation for division and denominationalism. An independent denomination may exist because

of a particular identity that is promoted by the leader, or leaders. An independent denomination remains separate from all other independent denominations because of a spirit of sectarianism. Because of sectarian leaders, the members of denominations are often encouraged not to associate with those of other sects. They are encouraged to remain separate from others lest their denomination lose its identity.

If a group of denominations form a union, they too can manifest an exclusive spirit by keeping themselves denominated (divided) from other unions or associations of denominations who have identified themselves by different catechisms of belief or codes of conduct. Traditional religions usu-

ally keep themselves denominated from other traditional religions. They do so because each association of traditional religion has a heritage they must defend in order to identify and validate themselves as a unique association or alliance of denominations.

**Union is counterfeit unity.**

We must conclude that sectarianism runs deep in Christendom. The tremendous diversity of religionists who claim a part of Christendom reveals the fact that men covet their denominational identity more than oneness in Christ. They validate their identity as “Christian” by their membership with a particular denomination more than their personal relationship with Christ.

### Chapter 3

## IDENTITY OF THE SECTARIAN SPIRIT

As we study through the identity of the spirit of sectarianism in this chapter, we are sure each one of us will find himself somewhat sectarian in some area. What is important to remember, however, is that we must continually struggle against this spirit. It is the spirit of exclusion that keeps brethren away from one another, and subsequently, works against the unity that we have in Christ. It also keeps us away from those we may be able to bring to a knowledge of the truth.

The apostle Paul was nonsectarian in all his beliefs and ministry. And for this reason, he was not afraid to take the gospel to any man

**Paul went anywhere to anyone to preach.**

in any place. We would be of the same spirit, as he exhorted, “*Be imitators of me even as I also am of Christ*” (1 Co 11:1)..

There are reasons why the spirit of sectarianism leads to a unique denominational group, and thus, encourages those of that group to shun others. The diversity of denominations that exists today manifests that there are many ways the spirit of sectarianism is carried out in the lives of religiously minded people. This is especially true in reference to the vast assortment of independent churches that exist under the umbrella of Christendom.

With the principles of the preceding two chapters in mind, it is essential to break down some of the reasons for the existence of so

many sectarian groups that exist under the umbrella of Christendom. Either one or more of the reasons of this chapter must be strong in the minds of the denominated. Sectarian feelings are strong because disciples are led to ignore Jesus' prayer for unity among His followers (Jn 17:20,21).

Here are some of the reasons and curses of the spirit of sectarianism that has played itself out in causing so much division and denominationalism in Christendom:

### A. Sects have religious identities.

**All Christians are religious, but not all religious people are Christian.** The sectarian is truly religious. But because he has forsaken the authority of the word of God as the validation for his religiosity, he is simply religious. The sect of which he is a member is simply a religious sect that is not scripturally validated as Christian. If the sect is composed of a membership of people who have not obeyed the gospel, then it is only a sect of religious people. This is so because the word of God plays a very small role in the existence of the sect to which he belongs, for the members have little concern about salvation that is according to the instructions of the word of God.

We would not, therefore, criticize some sects because of their religiosity. Sometimes, they are very religious because of their lack of scriptural validation. In fact, the less Bible oriented the group, the more the adherents seem to seek validation through extreme religiosity. This is why many sects have tremendously noisy, and often chaotic assemblies. The emo-

**All sects are religious, but not all sects are Christian.**

tional energy of their assemblies is the only proof they have that the Holy Spirit is supposedly among them. The more hysterical the assembly, the more it is assumed that God is among them.

For the preceding reason, sects are often more religious than they are "Christian." They are often very religious people carrying out religious ceremonies, but do not have the foundation of the Bible as the authority for their existence. The sectarian has lost his biblical orientation, and thus his scriptural relationship with Jesus. He trusts, therefore, in either a name, code of conduct, fellowship of loyal adherents, dress code, system or ceremony of assembly, or simply the emotional experiences of himself or his leaders. At least there is some unique trait that will identify the group and separate it from other parties. It takes only one sectarian mark of identity to build a sect.

### B. Sects often focus on personalities.

Jesus knew the nature of people who were searching. *"But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were distressed and were scattered, like sheep having no shepherd"* (Mt 9:36). It is easy for a dynamic personality or speaker to take advantage of the searching nature of the sheep. If one is focused on himself as a leader, he will with his gift of speaking flatter people into submission to his personality (See Rm 16:17,18). Such leaders will *"by appealing words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the innocent"* (Rm 16:18). The deceived followers may not

**Sects diminish when the preacher leaves.**

have a sectarian spirit. But because of their loyalty to their leader, they will be drawn away into a sect of believers after their leader. They will then become just another denomination.

Not every member of a sect is sectarian. Some have innocently given their loyalty to a sectarian leader. However, if their loyalty to their leader leads them away from other believers, then they are being sectarian.

### C. Sects often have legal identities.

It is inherent within the spirit of sectarianism to always establish traits of identity in order to keep adherents faithful to the denominating group. It is for this reason that the denominating group always calls for those who would join the group to adhere to some statement of faith that is often focused on one's commitment to the beliefs of "the church." Since "the church" is identified by specific traits that separate it from other "churches," then the newly "won" proselyte must conform to the legal identity of the group to which he has been converted. "New converts classes" often become indoctrination sessions where new converts are cloned according to the "identity" of the church to which they were converted, often forgetting that one is converted to Christ, not church.

We have found that many house churches fall victim to sectarian legalism in reference to meeting in the homes of the members. Some house groups have wrongly identified themselves as "faithful" because they meet in houses. Certainly, the early Christians met in their homes (Rm 16:3-5; 1

Co 16:19; Cl 4:15; Pl 1,2). However, meeting in homes was never a legal doctrine. Meeting in homes never validates one as a faithful Christian. Because some house church people have claimed such, they have at the same time identified themselves as sectarian because they have made the meeting in the homes of the members a code of identity. The leader of such house groups, as Diotrephes, may have had a falling out with some authority in an institutional church, and subsequently, pulled away his own group of disciples who now meet in their homes. This is sectarian behavior if we assume that faithfulness demands meeting in a home. It is not wrong to assemble in homes. But to teach that meeting in homes is a sign of either spiritual superiority or legal validation, is to allow our sectarian spirit to bear the fruit of denominationalism.

The early Christians did not meet in their homes because such was a matter of doctrine. They met in their homes out of necessity, and because they wanted to maintain a closer relationship with one another in small groups. It was their choice, not their doctrine. And so it is today.

When disciples meet in small groups they maintain a closer relationship with one another. And in a closer relationship with one another they are better able to stir up love and good works (See Hb 10:24,25). But meeting in homes was never a mandate of the early church.

### D. Sects demand membership:

It is the spirit of sectarianism to demand the allegiance of adherents to a particular

**Sects put church before Christ.**

**Disciples are not defined by their assemblies.**

party. Allegiance is required in order that the members indicate their separation from other groups. This is often done by calling on new adherents to “place membership” with the party to which they would sign their allegiance. The problem with this is that there is no such call in the Bible for one to “place his membership” with any particular group of disciples, or when one moves from one group to another.

Upon our obedience to the gospel, believers are recorded in the Lamb’s book of life (Ph 4:3; Rv 3:5; 13:8; 20:12). One must always remember that when he obeys the gospel in baptism, God adds him to the ekklesia (church) of His people (At 2:47). The citizenship of baptized believers is in heaven (Ph 3:20). Membership is God’s business, not ours. Disciples must take confidence in the fact that they have been enrolled by God as citizens in heaven, and thus, they do not need a second enrollment (membership) on earth with a particular sect. **Our membership with a sect on earth does not validate our citizenship in heaven.**

Denominations that are the result of the spirit of sectarianism, however, seek proselytes to place membership with their unique group. Once membership is placed with a specific group, attendance at the assigned assemblies of the group, or other codes of doctrinal identity, become the marks of one’s “faithfulness” to the group. Faithfulness is thus relegated to a legal compliance with the catechism that identifies the sect.

The preceding call for “faithfulness” is illustrated by the sect of “false brethren” who

came in among the brethren in Jerusalem. This was the case when Paul went up to Jerusalem after fourteen years of absence. On this occasion, he took with him, Titus, a Gentile (Gl 2:1,2). In the Jewish church of Jerusalem, circumcision was a legal code of faithfulness and identity among some of the Jewish disciples. Unless one was circumcised, he could not join in the fellowship of the disciples, and thus, he was considered unfaithful (At 15:1,2).

Paul stood against legalistic identities. He did so because it was a denial of the truth of the gospel. Many years after the Jerusalem visit, he wrote of the incident, “*But not even Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised*” (Gl 2:3). Because some brethren sought to make circumcision a legal identity of their sect of Christianity, Paul referred to them as “false brethren” (Gl 2:4). They secretly “*sneaked in to spy out our lib-*

**“Circumcision churches”  
always bring  
bondage.**

*erty that we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage*” (Gl 2:4). Paul’s answer was clear to those who would seek a legal identity of their sect. “*To whom we did not yield in subjection even for an hour, so that the truth of the gospel might continue with you*” (Gl 2:5).

We must always remember Peter’s exhortation in 2 Peter 2:19. “*For by whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought into bondage.*” Sects promote bondage. Those who would promote the bondage, are false brethren who come into the fellowship of the body of disciples in order to spy out their liberty. If we allow our-

selves to be taken into bondage, the truth of the gospel will not continue with us.

### E. Sects recruit proselytes.

This point of definition of sectarianism was manifested in the situation that Paul faced in the Galatian church. He wrote to the Galatians concerning the legalistic Judaizing teachers who had come among them, *“They zealously recruit you, but not for good. Yes, they want to exclude you so that you might be zealous for them”* (Gal 4:17).

The sectarian leader recruits people to his camp of beliefs. His mission, therefore, is to save the saved. His outreach is often questionable because his recruiting is that others might follow him, not Christ. Sectarrians move among the saved in order to recruit the saved to their unique opinions and Bible interpretations, or as Paul stated, to have a following for themselves (At 20:30).

One can know that he is sectarian in spirit when he seeks to manipulate people into believing his own opinions and interpretations. If a sectarian is gifted with speaking, he often creates a sect by convincing others that his opinions and interpretations

**If one is recruited, he is excluded.** are correct. Through his fair speech, he brings others into the bondage of his unique beliefs. And by doing such, he

**excludes his followers from the true body of believers.** Followers of such leaders need to understand that when they are recruited by a legalistic leader, they are excluded from those who continue in the faith.

**Sectarrians recruit to exclusive parties.**

### F. Sects are often competitive.

The Corinthian church had some among the disciples who were very sectarian in their behavior. As previously stated, they had denominated themselves into allegiances to at least three personalities: Apollos, Cephas and Paul (1 Co 1:12,13). Their sectarian behavior was defined by Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:12 when Paul spoke of the apostles' behavior in their relationship with one another in comparison to the sectarian behavior of some brethren in Corinth. *“For we do not class or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.”*

**Christians bond; sectarians compete.**

The sectarian sees himself in competition with fellow brothers in Christ. His competitive nature encourages him to commend himself by seeking the chief seats (See Mt 23:6). Sectarrians measure themselves with others in order to exalt themselves above others. When preachers are sectarian in spirit, they will compete with other preachers of neighboring churches. A sectarian preacher who compares himself with the following of another preacher can never understand the universal oneness of the church of Christ. He will always be concerned about what others are doing, or calling themselves, in order to do the same or better. For the purpose of self-exaltation, he often seeks to outgrow what he considers competing churches in the community.

Sectarianism that is manifested by a competitive spirit is clearly manifested in the titles that preachers seek to take upon them-

selves in order not to be left behind in the pastoral competition. One preacher will designate himself as an “apostle,” so a preacher in a neighboring church must also call himself an apostle. One person is “ordained” a pastor, and all others also seek the ordination. One goes to Bible school in order to receive a diploma, and others feel they too must graduate with a diploma from a Bible school. One receives a Bachelor’s Degree, but a competitor must have a Master’s Degree. Those who compete against those with Master’s Degrees seek Doctor’s Degrees. This spirit of competition is subsequently continued in the sects for which these “degreed” leaders preach, for some sects will not support a preacher unless he

**God looks on our hearts;  
sectarians look on  
diplomas & degrees.**

has some degree, regardless of what degree of work he has done in the kingdom of God. So goes the competition of nonsense among the sects of preachers considering themselves above others and “measuring themselves with themselves.” Sectarians need to read again Paul’s exhortation to the sectarians in the Corinthian church, “*that none of you take pride in one against another*” (1 Co 4:6).

### G. Sects always build fences.

The very definition of a sect is that there is some type of fence built around the adherents of the group in order to guarantee the allegiance of each member, and thus, continue the identity and existence of the sect. The fence, or fences, can either be loyalty to a dynamic leader, some unique doctrinal statement, an accepted tradition, heri-

tage, or code of conduct. Fences are built for the purpose of separating one sect from another. Sometimes, fences are built by the sect in order to preserve what the sectarian believes is the true church. And since he believes that his is the true church, all other churches represent deception and darkness. A sectarian, therefore, is one who defends his fence for the sake of preserving the unique identity of his sect as a beacon of light to the community, not realizing that his fence produces darkness. There may be light inside a stone wall fence, but the fences cast a shadow of darkness on the outside the perimeter of the fences.

**Fences always  
cast shadows  
of darkness.**

It is the nature of any religious group to eventually develop unique traits of identity. We are creatures of habit, and in reference to our particular religious group, over time we establish unique marks of identity that often set us apart from others. When these marks of identity become entrenched in our group, they become the foundation of comfort by which we validate ourselves as a church.

When the marks of identity (traditions) are threatened, we feel that our church is threatened. And actually it is. Anyone who validates his faith by the traditional religious behavior of his particular group, will feel threatened when the traditions are challenged. Those sects that focus on their heritage or tradition as the authority for their

**Traditionalists  
are always  
intimidated  
by the Bible.**

existence will always feel threatened when the traditions are threatened. Unfortunately, when a particular group

establishes its marks of identity, the adherents often fall into a zealous, if not vicious spirit of defense in order to perpetuate the existence of the sect. The validation for existence as a group is not the word of God, and thus, the members cannot resort to the Scriptures in times of threat in order to defend their existence as a church. It was for this reason that Paul challenged the Corinthians, *“Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test your own selves ...”* (2 Co 13:5).

With the word of God, true Christians *“do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world”* (1 Jn 4:1). A church that is based on the word of God will always seek those who speak as the oracles of God (1 Pt 4:11). They will not feel threatened when challenged, for they simply resort to the word of God. And no one is sectarian when the word of God is the foundation for his faith and behavior. However, a sect will shut the door to anyone who brings a Bible in order to test their existence according to the authority of the word of God. Sectarians can determine if they are a sect if they are fearful of Bible teaching.

## H. Sects maintain comfort zones.

The irony of sectarianism is that it is emotionally more secure than walking by faith and trusting in the word of God. The sectarian finds more comfort in maintaining the heritage or traditions of the past, than in searching the Scriptures in order to continue the discovery of new teaching in the word of God (See At 17:11). And because of this, it is easy to fall into the trap of being a sect,

rather than walking by faith.

We simply find comfort in following a legalistic pattern of behavior. Since the forefathers of our faith established the pattern, then it is easy to follow the pattern of our forefathers' faith. When churches start quoting as authority their forefathers, rather than the Scriptures, then we know that a sect exists. In such sects, leaders are usually sent to the schools that represent the sect in order

**Legalism  
is a quest for  
comfort zones.**

to guarantee that their future leaders know the pattern of faith of the forefathers. The diplomas that hang on the walls of the sectarian leader, therefore, are a stamp of approval that the said leader has agreed to believe and promote the identifying trademarks of the sect. We feel very comfortable when we walk into the office of the sectarian preacher and the diploma from the sect's colleges and universities hang on his wall. His diplomas certify him as “one of us,” and therefore, he can preach for us.

Establishing a comfort zone of legal religiosity was the problem with the sect of Pharisees in Israel during the days of Jesus' ministry. Jesus confronted the Pharisees on a matter of legal comfort by saying, *“All too well you reject the commandment of God so that you may keep your own tradition”* (Mk 7:9). Jesus' illustration of the rejection of the commandment of God was in their tradition (heritage) of pronouncing something “Corban.” He said, *“But you [Pharisees] say, ‘If a man will say to his father or mother, ‘whatever I have that would help you [parents] is Corban’”* (that is to say, given to God)” (Mk 7:11). The financial assistance the children were to give to their

parents was absconded by the religious leaders, the Pharisees. They conveniently pronounced that such assistance was “Corban,” that is, “dedicated to God.” Since this was a traditional teaching, the Pharisees were in the comfort zone of their legal theology that had been handed down to them by their forefathers. Of course, when something was “dedicated to God,” it was given to them as God’s representatives.

There is a great deal of comfort in the fact that our leadership is perpetuated by the certification of “our schools” that are supported by “our churches.” We think this is somewhat different than the situation of the early disciples who were considered ignorant and unlearned men by the religious establishment (At 4:13). All the apostles had when they went forth as messengers for Jesus was Jesus and His word (See Jn 14:26; 16:13). We would assume that today this is still all that one needs to be a messenger for Jesus. There is no such thing in the New Testament that one must be “ordained” in order to be qualified to go forth and preach the gospel. Only sects depend on the ordination of their preachers in order that they validate who can preach for them.

**One needs no certification to preach the gospel.**

### I. Sects use unique names.

In order to guarantee loyalty to a particular group, sectarians use names in order to identify their party of adherents. Sects can be very inventive concerning the use of names. We have on our files the “Jesus Celebration Church,” “New Life Assembly of God Church,” “The Alliance Church,” “Christ Intervention Church,” “Bible Evan-

gelical Church,” and so on. Sects manifest great ingenuity in selecting a name in order to identify their particular group within the community of numerous denominations.

Some seek to validate their groups doctrinally by the sectarian use of a reference to God’s people in the New Testament. We thus have the “Church of God,” “The Church of Christ,” “The Family of God” or “The Church of The Firstborn.” **The fact that there are several different**

**Names are inherently divisive.**

**phrases used in the New Testament to refer to God’s people is clear evidence that God never intended to place a unique sectarian name on His people.**

However, in order for the sectarian to set his group apart from others, he changes a simple description of the people of God in the New Testament into a proper name in order to separate his group from all other groups.

The problem in using a unique name in order to identify a unique assembly of people is that when individuals assemble under the name, they lose their individuality in their relationship with Jesus. When Jesus said that He was the vine, and the apostles were the branches, He was not talking about groups as branches, but individuals (Jn 15:5). Our relationship as a member of the body of Christ is direct and individual with Jesus. Our relationship is not via a unique assembly of people that come together under a unique name. Paul referred to our individual relationship with Christ as members of the body when he stated, *“But now God has set the members, each one of them in the body, just as He has desired. And if they were all one member, where would be the body?”*

But now **they are many members, but one body**” (1 Co 12:18-20). The organic body of Christ exists because of the individual members. The members do not exist because the body exists. There would be no body if there were no members. When the first believer came out of the waters of bap-

**Members make up the body of Christ who is the head.**

tism in A.D. 30 the day of Pentecost, the body of Christ was born.

It was born because repentant believers on earth submitted to the kingdom reign of Jesus from heaven (See Ph 2:5-11). And when they submitted in obedience to the gospel, they became Christians (At 11:26). Baptized believers, therefore, individually live under the name “Christian” (See 1 Pt 4:16).

Regardless of where we are assembled any day of the week, we still have a personal and individual relationship with Jesus as a member of His body, and thus, live as a Christian. The body does not exist because of its assemblies. The place where members may be on Sunday does not infringe on their personal relationship with Jesus, neither does it determine their membership of the body. If it did, then we would be questioning a very clear concept that Jesus made in John 4:21-

24. “*God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth*” **wherever they are** as individual Christians (Jn 4:24). This means that neither on a unique mountain place, nor in a favorite city place, as Jerusalem, is the true worship of individual Christians to be confined. But in “every place” individual be-

lievers can pour out their hearts in worship. Our worship of God is not validated by a unique place, nor by assembling under the name of a particular sect, regardless of the origin of the name. When one is added to the body of Christ by God, he is a member of the worldwide body of Christ every hour and every day of his life. If he is persecuted as a result of this commitment, then he is persecuted because of the name “Christian,” not the name of some particular sect. Peter said that “*if anyone suffers as a Christ, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this name*” (1 Pt 4:16). The statement of Peter focuses on “anyone” and “him,” not the name of some church. Nowhere in the New Testament is it stated that we suffer in the name of the church.

**God's people are named individually; not collectively.**

#### **J. Sects often reject one another.**

Once the spirit of sectarianism has produced a denomination, then the sectarian spirit of the adherents is further intensified by the denominated members’ judgment of other denominations. And because the denomination has identified itself as the “true” church, then it seeks to maintain its identity by giving itself a unique name and by keeping itself pure from other denominated groups. The sectarianism of the denomination is revealed in the fact that the adherents may view the assortment of local independent denominations as the identity of the universal church. They see themselves as just one individual autonomous group of the whole.

The problem with this view of the uni-

versal church is that it focuses on groups and not individuals. We must remind ourselves again that when Jesus said to the twelve disciples that He was the vine and they were the branches (Jn 15:5), that the pronoun “you” did not refer to groups, **but to individuals**. A lengthy explanation does not need to be made to support the clear fact that our relationship with Jesus is individual, **not via a group of individuals**, that is, a “local church.”

**Jesus relates to His people as individuals.**

When Jesus approached the churches of Asia in Revelation, He always concluded, “*He [individual] who has an ear, let him hear ....*” (See Rv 2:7,11,17). There were faithful individuals among the assemblies of all the seven churches. Though the churches in the cities as a whole were moving into apostasy, some individual members of the universal church in the cities were remaining faithful. Jesus’ relationship is always with individuals. And individuals always have a personal relationship with Him.

However, when a group of individuals manifest their sectarianism as a group, they will often separate themselves from other groups of individuals (churches) with whom they do not agree or consider unfaithful to the truth. Some churches have even gone so far as to disfellowship entire groups of individuals because they did not agree with the teaching of a particular individual who assembled with the disfellowshipped group of disciples. This practice is nowhere found in the Scriptures and is contrary to how Jesus dealt with the seven churches of Asia.

Diotrephes was sectarian in that he sought to covet and withdraw those disciples

he dominated from all other disciples, even the apostle John (3 Jn 9,10). If others did not conform to his withdrawal from those with whom he disagreed, then he threatened to cast them out of his fellowship. His behavior was strictly sectarian in that he sought to develop an exclusive group that conformed to his beliefs and behavior. One who is sectarian in spirit always seeks to stand between Jesus and His disciples. If he is the leader of a particular group of disciples, he will stand between the group and Jesus by dominating the group and dictating their relationship with other groups of disciples.

**Diotrephes leaders always denominate the disciples.**

#### **K. Sects are inherently self-exclusive.**

One can always identify his sectarian spirit by his unwillingness to reach out to others with whom he may disagree. The sectarian will often shun any association with those who are not of his faith. He will thus live within the comfort of his own religious cocoon. However, consider the nonsectarian behavior of Aquila and Priscilla. At one time in their ministry we find these two Christians meeting in a synagogue in Ephesus on the Sabbath (At 18:26). We do not know how long they had been meeting in the synagogue before they encountered Apollos. But if Aquila and Priscilla were sectarian in their behavior, then they would have never encountered the great evangelist Apollos in a synagogue. They would never have had the opportunity to instruct him more accurately

**Christians are evangelistic anywhere and anytime.**

in the word of God (At 18:26).

It appears that Aquila and Priscilla followed the custom of Paul, who regularly went from one religious center to another, specifically from one synagogue to another (At 17:1,2). At one time in his ministry, Paul even sought to go into the temple of Artemis in Ephesus in order to preach the gospel (At 19:30). His desire to speak to the riotous mob in the temple emphasizes his nonsectarian motivation to give everyone a chance to hear the gospel.

Sectarians are afraid to go into the temples and synagogues of religious people. They are often afraid because of their own spiritual insecurity. And in their insecurity, they misunderstand passages as 2 John 9,10, thinking that in some way they might be spiritually tarnished in the presence of unbelievers, or in some way giving heed to “false teachers.” The sectarian will not give himself the opportunity of reaching out to other religious leaders. He will not because in his thinking, he feels that if others are empowered by more knowledge of the Bible than he is teaching his own group, others will go from his group to the rival group. And they should.

Unfortunately, the sectarian not only excludes others from his party, he will not allow himself to associate with those with whom he disagrees. Sometimes the problem goes beyond the preacher himself. He may want to make a friend of another religious leader. However, his sectarian group will not allow him to do so, thinking that he is befriending those against whom he should be in constant conflict. At least they may frown on his association with other religious workers because they are claiming his time.

They do not want him “wasting time” with other religious leaders when he should be with them. Such churches need to talk to Jesus about this, for Jesus associated with whomever whenever (See Mt 11:19; Lk 7:34). Jesus would not allow His followers to keep Him from preaching the kingdom of God to others (See Lk 4:42-44).

#### L. Sects often minimize Bible study.

Everyone knows the response of the Bereans when Paul preached Jesus as the Messiah in the synagogue. They “*received the word with all readiness of mind and searched the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so*” (At 17:11). This is not the picture of sectarian behavior. In extreme cases as the Roman Catholic Church during the Dark Ages, the study of the Bible was actually forbidden. In fact, the Roman Catholic Church during those years of the 1500s and before, persecuted those who would even translate the Bible into the language of the people. William Tyndale was burned at the stake because he translated the Bible into English so that it could be read by the common people.

**The biblically challenged will fear Bible study.**

Sectarian leaders often behave as those about whom Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:7. There are those who are “*always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.*” Though God desire that all come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tm 2:4), there are those, because of their prejudice as religious leaders, who can never come to the point of rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Tm 2:15). Their questionable motives for

being a religious leader will not allow them to be objective in their Bible studies. It is for this reason that those of their flock who have pure and objective motives in their Bible study must be suppressed if they come to the class with new truth that contradicts the position of the preacher on any matter of biblical interpretation.

Sectarian churches do not encourage participatory Bible classes where every person shares the results of his or her own personal studies. The reason for this is obvious. Sectarians must guard their identity by some tradition, doctrine or catechism. If the sect is led by a dominant leader, the leader believes that the group must conform to his understanding of the Scriptures. If in open Bible study one of the marks of identity of the sect is brought into question, then the validity of the sect is questioned. Religious leaders who lead sects, therefore, do not encourage their members to open their Bibles and *“examine yourselves as to whether you are in the*

*faith. Test your own selves”* (2 Co 13:5). The sectar-

**The Bible is our standard of self-examination.**

ian is always in fear of discovering in Scripture something that might disqualify his sect. If one has built his “own church” according to his own religiosity, then he cannot allow the authority of the Scriptures to supplant his authority or the identity of his church.

### **M. Sects are often led by Balaamites.**

This point is defined in 2 Peter 2:15 where Peter said that some *“have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness.”* If

there were ever a passage that spoke clearly about those who preach for money, this is the passage. Jude made a parallel statement in Jude 11. *“Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain and have run greedily after the error of Balaam for reward ....”*

It is truly unfortunate that there are religious leaders who preach the power of the gospel for the sake of increasing their purse. Through flattering lips, and emotional appeals for contributions, Balaamite preachers are often viciously sectarian in order to protect their flock for the sake of their salary. Their “evangelism” of-

**Balaamites view churches as a source of revenue.**

ten has the ulterior motive of increasing the Sunday morning contribution for the sake of a raise in pay. Balaamite preachers are always sectarian, for their loyal adherents are the source of their paychecks. A preacher can sometimes determine the extent of his sectarian spirit by the degree by which he covets the contribution. And the adherents can often determine the level of the sectarian spirit of their preacher by the number of times he preaches on contributions.

This does not mean that we are not to support those who go forth for the sake of the name of Jesus. Mandates given in passages as 1 Corinthians 9 clearly teach that preachers must be supported. We must keep in mind, however, that we support preachers because they preach the gospel. They do not preach in order to be supported. And thus every supported preacher must ask himself if he would continue preaching if the church discontinued his support.

## N. Sects often seek union, not unity.

It is not our plea in restoring Christianity to be detoured from our plea for unity by amalgamating different religious sects into unions or associations. True unity is God's business and blessing to all those who have obeyed the gospel. Unions are the efforts of men to bring independent sects, or denominations, together into alliances wherein each sect agrees not to debate or "sheep steal" from one another, nor to be involved in one another's autonomy. However, because sects confuse union as unity, they miss the unity of the Spirit that is the result of our common salvation (Jd 3).

Paul wrote that we are "*eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*" (Ep 4:3). Believers are blessed with unity when they obey the one gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ (Gl 3:26,27). Unity is a blessing that is given by God, not orchestrated by man. For this reason, Christians are eager to maintain their blessing of unity that they have from God because they have obeyed the gospel.

Unfortunately, men seek to bless themselves with union by agreeing to disagree on matters of faith, while maintaining their own sectarian fences. They seek to be harmonious neighbors around whom each party has

**Unity is from God; union is from man.** agreed to maintain its own doctrinal differences that often contradict one another. What many fail to see is that the unity about which the Bible speaks is a spiritual oneness that is devoid of any sectarianism. No party spirit is to exist in the unity that we have from

**Unionists seek to plagiarize true unity.**

God. When one is baptized into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, he comes into unity with the (1) Father, (2) Son and (3) Holy Spirit that is based on the (4) authority of the word of Christ (Mt 28:19,20; Jn 14:15; 15:10; 1 Pt 4:11). If any one of these four essentials is forsaken, then there is no unity among the obedient. If anyone believes in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but denies the authority of the word of God, then he does not enjoy the unity that is a blessing from God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

**Unity must be based on the word of God.**

If the authority of the word of God is forsaken, then the sectarian can never have God's blessing of unity. He cannot because he must deny the authority of the Scriptures in order to establish a union with those who maintain beliefs that are not based on the word of God. It is his binding where God has not bound that defines him and his adherents as a sect. For this reason, those who plead for true unity cannot call on the blessing of unity from the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, while at the same time they deny the authority of the word of God. **Christians enjoy the blessing of unity because they accepted the authority of the Scriptures in all matters of faith.**

The word of God must validate our faith. Our faith must not be validated by our traditions, feelings, heritages, or our catechisms of doctrine. True unity is a result of sincere baptized believers who trust in the authority of the Scriptures. Those who seek unity do not go to the councils of men in order to formulate an agreement for union. Unfortunately, we often send our admired leaders to councils to orchestrate a union of

churches, while at the same time guard our sectarian behavior from becoming united with all those who have obeyed the gospel by baptism into Christ. We stand behind our iconic leaders, assuming that we have unity, when all they can produce is union that is devoid of the authority of the word of God. And in their state of sectarianism, many often cry out “Lord, Lord,” and yet, never do the will of our Father in heaven (See Mt 7:21-23).

It is unfortunate that a sectarian spirit will divide those who call upon the one true and living God. Our common acceptance of the God of heaven as our Father does not guarantee that we will be united as the body of Christ. There is more to unity than accepting the same God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Brotherhood is guaranteed only when all those who accept the one God have submitted themselves to the authority of His will. One can claim to be a disciple of Jesus. However, Jesus said that one is His disciple when he obeys His will (Jn 14:15; 15:10,14).

**Unity is not inherent in union.**

When different fellowships of men give their allegiance to their favorite leadership, and subsequently reject loyalty to the authority of the word of God, they will never have unity. When we allow men to arise among us to draw away disciples after themselves, then we have denied our blessing of unity that comes by accepting the total authority that proceeds from King Jesus (At 20:30; Mt 28:18). Those who are sectarian in spirit always have favorite leaders. But those who defend the unity of the faith always focus their favoritism on Jesus and His word.

## **O. Sects often seek emotional validation.**

It is the spirit of idolatry to create God after our own image and a religion after our own desires. The reason we do this is because we are often rebellious creatures who focus on ourselves. In our rebellious spirit, it is difficult for us to allow God to control us through the revelation of His written word (Hs 4:6). In our ignorance of His word, combined with our self-seeking religiosity, we create religiosity after our own intellect or emotional experiences. This is why there are so many sects in the religious world that find their validation for existence in some leader who has experienced a moment of emotional hysteria or had some illusive dream. Such sects exist on the foundation of human experience, and not on the word of God. And because these sects are founded on human experiences, it is quite difficult to turn such groups to the authority of God’s word, since their personal experiences have priority over a “Thus saith the Lord.”

**Religiously rebellious spirits will always create sects.**

The Bible is filled with warnings that men not follow after their emotional incantations in order to validate their religiosity (Dt 4:19; Is 44:25; 47:12,13; Hs 4:12; Zc 10:2; Mc 5:12,13). The Bible is filled with exhortations that believers exercise self-control in their behavior (At 24:25; 1 Co 7:5,9; 9:25; Gl 5:23; 1 Tm 2:15; 2 Tm 3:3; Ti 2:2; 2 Pt 1:6). And the Bible is filled with exhortations not to be deceived, even by our own emotional incantations and vivid dreams (Mt 24:4,5,11; Mk 13:5; 1 Jn 1:8; 2:26; 3:7; 2 Jn 7; Rv 2:20).

Emotional experiences and vivid dreams may validate people as religious, but we must always keep in mind that all religious people are not in a covenant relationship with God. Muslims and Hindus have ecstatic emotional experiences and vivid dreams. They are often intensely religious, and subsequently, validate their religiosity by their personal experiences and dreams. But this does not mean that their experiences and dreams prove that they are of God. We do not deny that Christians have great emotional experiences, and sometimes, very vivid dreams. But we would question using such encounters with ourselves as proof that we are of God or God is with us. Many times our dreams and experiences contradict one another. Would we accuse God of sending conflicting messages? Regardless of our experiences, we must always center our discussions around Peter's exhortation, *"If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God"* (1 Pet 4:11).

Some people endlessly talk about their supposed encounters with the Holy Spirit in their lives, but say little or nothing about the oracles of God. As long as there are enough people out there who have itching ears to hear and follow such things, there will be religious leaders who will lead "itching-ear churches."

There is a new witch doctor in town who has stolen concepts from the New Testament in order to make himself a "spiritual" leader of the people. He has mixed a little Bible with spiritualistic beliefs and come up with a spiritism by which he holds the people

**Unity can never be based on emotional experiences.**

captive by his own emotional experiences. He has come with a message that all those who follow him can experience the same emotional hysteria by which he has validated his own faith. There are countless sects that are led by leaders who have deceived themselves, and thus, lead a church of deceived followers who know little of the word of God. God will allow such "spiritual" leaders to lead the deceived, but in the end, He will bring down judgment on all who loved and obeyed a lie (2 Th 2:9-12).

The leaders of emotionally validated churches are skilled in cheerleading audiences into "amens." With their personal experiences and dreams as a supposed validation of God's work in their own lives, these speakers lead others through their personal experiences and dreams, not the Bible. When cheerleading preachers are unlearned and untaught in the word of God, they always resort to personal experiences and dreams as the authority for their message, and their right to "preach." The people are subsequently convinced that God is working in the speaker's life, and thus, they are deceived into following a man and not the word of God. And so goes the leadership of thousands of independent churches that choose to follow someone's personal experiences and dreams, and not the Bible.

Belief is an emotional experience. But the difference between a sect of people who are emotionally out of control and the body of God's people is that God's **people do the will of the Father** (Mt 7:21). They have

**"Itching ear" churches are always sectarian.**

**God's people are moved by the power of His word.**

brought their minds and bodies under the control of God’s word (See 1 Co 9:27). They add to their knowledge of God’s word, **self-control** (2 Pt 1:6). They are a people who are controlled by God through their obedience to His word.

## P. Sects deny the organic nature of the body of Christ.

Consider this last point in view of all those characteristics that identify many sectarian churches, which characteristics these churches often take pride in as a validation that they are a church of Christ. Jesus said, *“The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of meal until the whole was leavened”* (Mt 13:33).

**Organic means  
all members  
working  
together.**

The kingdom of God is within the hearts of the submitted (Lk 17:20,21). It is **hidden**. It **silently** works. Its effect goes throughout the **whole** community. The kingdom reign of Jesus moves the individual kingdom citizen to go about his or her community, patiently sowing the seed of the kingdom (Lk 8:11; At 5:42). There is no fanfare, for our desire is *“to lead a quiet life”* (1 Th 4:11; 2 Th 3:12). Kingdom citizens seek to *“lead a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and honesty”* (1 Tm 2:2; 1 Pt 3:4). It is

**Christianity  
is not  
a fanfare faith.**

not the goal of kingdom citizens to be noticed, praised or promoted (Mt 23:6). The result of the kingdom reign of Jesus in the hearts of people moves them to organically influence communities for the glory of God (Cl 3:17; 1 Th 2:6).

The more we understand the organic nature and function of the ekklesia of Christ, the more we understand the difference between the expression of man-made religiosity and the true church of Christ. The spirit of sectarianism has certainly produced something strange in our world of Christendom today than what we see in the behavior of the early New Testament disciples. Sometimes we wonder that if the electricity went out for an extended period of time, many of the churches of today that depend on such would also go out.

If Jesus were to come personally today and begin anew His ekklesia (church) of disciples, He would probably establish something so different from the religious churchianity of the day, that all of us would feel that we were a part of something very strange. It would be something so different from what we see today in the denominational world that all of us would be struck with awe as to what He would have established.

We would also say that if the apostle Paul would come into one of our assemblies, he might find us so different from what he established in the house assemblies of the first century that we again would be struck with awe. Our assemblies inherently become customary, and often, our customary becomes traditional, then unique, and then, sectarian. There is a great deal of freedom in reference to how disciples can assemble together. We are sure that the assemblies of many churches today are very different from the assemblies of the first century ekklesia. But because the Holy Spirit left little information on how we should assemble,

then we assume that we have freedom to determine from assembly to assembly the nature of our coming together.

We must caution ourselves about becoming sectarian in reference to our assemblies. If we feel uncomfortable in attending the assembly of another group of disciples, then we should first caution ourselves about binding ceremonies where God has not bound. Simply because we are uncomfortable in the assembly of another group of disciples is not a mandate to judge or bind. Our uncomfortable feelings, when attending the assembly of another group, may betray our sectarian spirit.

The fact is that Jesus seeks to personally come into the heart of every penitent believer wherever he may be, regardless of where he assembles with other disciples. He said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone *hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will sup with him, and he with Me*” (Rv 3:20). He cries out, “*Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me*” (Mt 11:29).

Our problem is that we are hearing the voice of every self-proclaimed prophet and learning from every biblically challenged teacher. We have cursed ourselves with our desire to follow our favorites and educate ourselves in the mire of twisted scriptures. And it is all to our own destruction (2 Pt 3:16). We write to the religious world of Christendom wherein there are countless leaders who have established their own sects of faith and set themselves on an “evangelistic” effort to proselyte from one another.

**Sects use assemblies to validate their existence.**

Such sectarian leaders take pride in their marks of identity, and thus, exalt one denomination over another, assuming that the message of each is the message to save the saved. Our sectarian spirit of superiority assumes that everyone else is inferior, and thus, our mission is to snatch single converts out of the camp of the enemy in the name of evangelism. Our arrogance lends us to being “sheep stealers” and “church splitters.” We must remember that sectarianism is a vile sin that destroys the very spirit of unity for which Jesus prayed and died (Jn 17:20,21).

**Sects exalt marks of identity; Christians exalt Christ.**

On the positive side of sectarianism among the disciples is what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:19. “*For there must also be factions among you so that those who are approved may be made known among you.*” When there is sectarian division among the saints, those who are peacemakers are revealed. Those who are covetous for purse and positions are also manifested.

Sectarian division among the disciples is an opportunity for those who are of the spirit of unity to identify those whose hearts are contrary to the spirit of unity. Those who “are approved” can be identified by their spirit of humility that they manifest when arrogant, self-righteous and pompous Balaamite preachers seek to draw away disciples after themselves.

So where would we go from here? First, we must remember the prayer of Jesus for unity among His people (Jn 17:20,21). If

**Factionous times are opportunities to discover the pure in heart.**

a particular leader is crying out for unity, then we know that that leader is on the same page as Jesus' prayer. Those who love the body of Christ and recognize the curse of sectarianism, eagerly work to keep the unity of the Spirit (Ep 4:3).

Second, we must restore the authority of the word of Christ as our center of reference for preserving the unity that we have in Christ. If we do not, we will be settling for a cheap union of churches that will carry

on with the existence of religious sectarianism. The world will continue to mock every Christian group who proclaims that we are one man in Christ. We pray for the day when men sacrifice their traditions, opinions and power for the sake of submitting to the authority of Jesus who reigns from heaven through His word. It is for this reason that we call on all to repent of their sectarian behavior in order to join with others to be the one universal body of Christ.