

SECTARIANISM:

CAUSE AND CURE

By Ralph Mahoney and Dennis Corrigan

What is sectarianism? What causes it? And how does it work in the church to hinder God's purposes? If we can answer these three questions we can bridge the walls that separate us in the church. To properly identify sectarianism we need first of all to consider what it is not.

IT IS NOT NECESSARILY DENOMINATIONALISM

To have an organizational or denominational structure, identity or name is not wrong. It is only when we allow denominational pride or organizational exclusivity to separate us from other believers that it becomes wrong.

We have moved into *sectarianism* when we assume a superior posture to others, feeling that we are "the select of the elect."

We have to be careful that we don't become like a Pharisee. The Pharisee stood in the temple and prayed this, "I thank thee God that I am not as other men. . . or even as this publican." (Luke 18:9-14 NKJV) This Pharisee saw himself as spiritually superior to the sinful publican and stood and bragged in religious pride about it. He fell deep into the pit of sectarianism.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE SECTARIANISM WHEN YOU SEE IT

There are numerous illustrations in the Bible that illustrate the sectarian spirit.

DO THEY SAY "SHIBBOLETH?"

Judges 12:5&6, is a story about ancient Israel. Some of the people of Israel had refused to be identified with the battle of one of the other tribes. These two tribes of Israel confronted one another as a result. They were beginning to

slay one another, even though they were brothers. The test of whether they lived or died was, “Say now SHIB-boleth.” If the respondent said “SIB-boleth” not pronouncing it correctly, he was seized and slain. Thus there fell at that time 42,000 of Ephraim.

Sometimes in the body of Christ we “verbally murder” believers because they don’t embrace common understanding about doctrinal positions or sacraments.

Church history illustrates this: Two segments of the early church divided because they couldn’t agree about the wording of a certain creed. One group insisted it read, “The Holy Spirit which proceeded from the Father and the Son,” while the other was adamant about it reading, “from the Father and from the Son.”

Adding “from” divided the church. One group said “SHIB-boleth,” the other, “SIB-boleth,” and over this they broke fellowship. Such petty doctrinal differences should never be allowed to divide the church.

“HE DOES NOT FOLLOW WITH US”

We read in Luke 9:49, *“And John answered and said, ‘Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to hinder him because he does not follow along with us.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Do not hinder him for he who is not against you is for you.’”* In this example Jesus’ disciples rejected a man who “didn’t follow them.” He wasn’t a part of their “group.”

I know a man who received the baptism in the Holy Spirit but was rejected by a conference of pastors because he had not been baptized in the Spirit in a church of their denomination. This type of sectarianism causes unbelievers to reject Christianity. They see these unkind and unloving attitudes and do not want to have anything to do with the Church.

Without realizing it, this group of pastors I mentioned above were telling God He couldn’t pour out His Spirit on anyone who wasn’t a member of their denomination.

This was Peter’s reaction to the Gentile believers in Cornelius’ house (Acts 10:44- 49). Peter would not have baptized them in water unless God had supernaturally communicated to Peter He was no respecter of persons. The

Lord had to tell Peter He had accepted the Gentiles. Because the Lord had accepted them, he expected Peter to accept them also. Doesn't the Lord expect us to accept our brothers whom he has saved, cleansed, and washed in His blood, even if they don't follow us?

ELDAD & MEDAD

Numbers 11:16-20 recounts the incident when Moses gathered seventy elders of Israel to share his anointing and responsibility for judging and ruling the nation. He stationed them around the tabernacle. The Lord poured His Spirit out on them, and they all began to prophesy. Eldad and Medad were two of these seventy elders, but they had not gone to the tabernacle with the others.

When the seventy elders began to prophesy, Eldad and Medad prophesied also, but they were in the camp. *“So a young man named Joshua ran and told Moses and said, ‘Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.’ Then Joshua the son of Nun, the attendant of Moses from his youth, answered and said, ‘Moses, my lord, restrain them. ‘But Moses said to him, Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!’”*

Here Joshua displays a sectarian attitude common among believers: if others are ministering in a form different than ours, we usually want to restrain them. This is the form of sectarianism that most often confronts revival movements. The established churches reject the new revival because of the different form it takes.

God always pours out His Spirit in fresh revivals in a way we have not seen before. While we are comfortably stationed around the tabernacle of tradition, Eldad and Medad prophesy in the camp of the new revival. This sectarianism forces a new revival outside of the establishment and ultimately forces formation of new denominations. Tragically, after another generation or so, these new denominations will likely reject the next revival the Lord sends.

“I’M OF PAUL...I’M OF APOLLOS...I’M OF CHRIST!”

“For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe’s people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, ‘I am of Paul,’ and I of Apollos,’ and ‘I of Cephas,’ and I of Christ. “For

since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? (1 Cor. 1:10-12; 3:3).

When we divide because we have identified with prominent leaders, we are guilty of sectarianism. The Corinthians had been blessed by several outstanding ministers. Instead of allowing this to unite them and strengthen their fellowship, they began to take pride in their association with key leaders and their fellowship was fractured and they fell into sectarianism. Paul called this carnality and spiritual immaturity. I'm sure he would evaluate similar attitudes today in the same way.

“ONLY I AM LEFT”

Exclusivity is a manifestation of sectarianism related to pride. The prophet Elijah was guilty of this. After he had confronted the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, he became discouraged. When God asked him about his complaint, Elijah replied, *“I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life.”* (1 Kings 19:10 NKJV)

Elijah saw himself as the only one in the nation serving God. But the Lord spoke to him and said, Elijah, I have ten thousand in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal. Elijah had a sectarian attitude, one which smacked of spiritual superiority and pride.

This attitude is still common today in some groups. Because they are “the little flock” they see themselves as holding to higher spiritual values than other members of the body of Christ. They end up in the bonds of sectarianism. Whenever we begin to feel that we have a superior understanding of the Bible or some exclusive grip on what God is doing with His people, we are probably caught in the snare of sectarianism. Many dangerous cults have emerged as a result of this attitude.

If we recognize any of the above attitudes in our own life or that of the organization with which we are associated, let us repent of it, renounce it, and turn from it. Let us embrace our brothers and sisters in other denominations, organizations and fellowships in the love of Jesus. Only by positive action can we shed this blindfold of carnality.

WHAT CAUSES SECTARIANISM

Sectarianism springs out of our fleshly, unsanctified nature. Spiritual immaturity and lack of spiritual understanding contribute to this serious problem in the body of Christ. Paul writes to the Galatians, who were being influenced by the sectarian attitudes of legalistic teachers and says, *“Now the deeds of the flesh are evident which are these, immorality, impurity, idolatry, sorcery, strife, jealousy, factions, envying, drunkenness, and things like these . . .”* (Gal 5:19-21) Those sins which lead to sectarianism are right in with the sins of drunkenness, idolatry, sorcery. Paul calls them all works of the flesh. The Church generally will not tolerate immorality, drunkenness, idolatry, and sorcery among its leaders. However, we rarely deal with the sectarian attitudes in ourselves or others.

THE FORM WITHOUT THE FORCE PRODUCES SECTARIANISM

We are warned by Paul in his second letter to Timothy about those who would hold a form of Godliness without its force (2 Tim. 3:1-9). Groups which put an overemphasis on the form without the force (or power of God) generally drift into serious sectarian attitudes.

The way this happens is illustrated in God’s dealings with Moses. The Lord sent a mighty move of the Holy Spirit to His people that brought them out of Egypt and into the wilderness. Great miracles, signs and wonders came and certain forms and traditions were established in the life and blessing of this great move of God.

One of the things that happened in the wilderness was the raising of the brazen serpent to cure the people from snake bite. (Numbers 21:4-9) Because of rebellion, the Lord allowed the fiery serpents to come among the people as judgment. When Moses cried out to the Lord for deliverance, the Lord instructed him to make a fiery serpent and set it on a cross and raise it up in the midst of the camp. The Lord promised Moses that anyone who looked on the fiery serpent would be cured from the poisonous snake bite and remain alive. The people “looked and lived.” It was an amazing and marvelous miracle of God’s grace and mercy (it illustrated Him who centuries later would come and hang upon a cross to be made sin for us that we might “look and live” as we beheld Jesus in sacrificial death for us (John 3:14-15).

But as we move forward in history from Moses time, about 700 years, we find the people were committing sin by burning incense to the brazen serpent that Moses had made. (2 Kings 18:3 & 4).

A very bold and courageous king by the name of Hezekiah “. . . broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it” and Hezekiah called it Nehushtan (which means a piece of bronze).

What God had intended to be a source of life and blessing to the children of Israel had become an object of worship and division. The people were more preoccupied with the “form” than the “force.” *It was not the brazen serpent that delivered them but rather the power of God behind the brazen serpent.* It was the obedience and faith of the people “looking and living”, that caused healing to come. But the Israelites turned from worshiping *the God* who saved them to worshiping *the object* God had used to save them. The generations that followed Moses worshiped the form rather than the God who was behind the form. (See Rom. 1:20-25)

We tend not only to do this with brazen serpents but with great leaders upon whom God puts his anointing and blessing. Many denominations today revere and worship “Nehushtans” of their past history whom God blessed and used to bring life to them. But they need to take their eyes off the leader that was the progenitor of their denomination and turn them back on the Lord.

Looking to “the instrument that God used,” instead of “the God who used the instrument” can produce a very sectarian attitude which isolates and blocks us from fellowship with other believers.

We have seen in modern times the Lord anointing an evangelist so that he lays hands on the sick and miracles take place. Sometimes the evangelist forms an organization, builds an elaborate headquarters and the people focus their attention, love and affections and adoration on the man rather than the God who is using the man.

At one of our World MAP conferences some years ago, the Lord was moving mightily and we were all thrilled at the great expression of God’s life and blessing among us. A group of ministers came to me and wanted to form a “fellowship” of pastors. A dear elderly man of God who loved the Lord intensely stood up among us as a father and said, “Brethren, if you want to get closer together, get closer to Jesus. If we all gather closer around the Lord

we'll be drawn together with one another. We can all meet around Him, and as we draw closer to Him we'll be drawn closer to one another."

He saw the real answer. It was not that we form another "fellowship" and cling to this revival God was giving us as "God's latest revelation for the Church." He realized this would produce sectarianism. Instead he encouraged us to give our love, devotion and attention to the Lord Jesus Christ and around Him we would be united.

In effect he was saying what the apostle John said nearly 20 centuries ago. *"If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another."*(1 John 1:7)

Sectarianism is always an evidence that we're walking some area of darkness. If we walk in the light we'll always have fellowship one with another. We'll not be divided by sectarian pride or denominational "loyalty" or other forms of religious deception that bring division in the body of Christ.

Some years ago I heard an outstanding minister from India speaking about this. He told us how the nation of India looks in the dry season. There are thousands of little puddles and ponds all over the country filled with frogs. He said they're all shouting "Hallelujah, Praise the Lord!" as they croak their praises to God. The frogs in all the puddles are saying, "Our puddle is the best puddle. Come over and join our puddle. We have the most spiritual puddle. We're all baptized in the right kind of water in our puddle and if you don't jump in our puddle you won't go to heaven."

But as this dear man of God continued his message he *said*, do you know what happens when the monsoons hit India? They bring millions of gallons of water pouring out of the heavens upon our land. As the waters rise in all the puddles, the whole land is soon flooded and all the little puddles become one great big puddle."

He went on to teach us that the answer to sectarianism, division and strife in the church is a great outpouring of God's rain of blessing from heaven upon us. If we will move in the Spirit, walk in the Spirit, and receive God's mighty, end time outpouring of the Holy Spirit, we will be lifted above the sectarianism of our "puddles" and all the 'frogs will be swimming in the same puddle. No longer will denominational pride and sectarian attitudes divide us. We will walk together in love one to another.

PRACTICAL STEPS TO KEEP US FROM SECTARIANISM

1. *Be flexible and adaptable to whatever God is doing in your geographic area.* Someone has said that a fossil is a creature that came to a time of change and couldn't make the transition. I believe God is moving in a fresh and new way today. I believe He's doing the "new thing" as He said in the prophet Isaiah. It requires flexibility and adaptability on our part to embrace the fresh new move of the Holy Spirit God is bringing in the church. If we fail to accept God's revival floods from heaven, we can end up dry, barren and fossilized.
2. *Put more emphasis on Jesus as the head of the church.* Paul tells us in Colossians to "hold fast to the head." This means that we will take our instructions from Jesus even above instructions from any other human source. There are times when the Lord will come and speak to us and if we will obey what He says, it will always release great life and blessing and healing and help to those in need. However, if our preconceptions about the way God moves hinders us, and if our sectarian allegiance to "custom and tradition" bind us from obeying the Lord, we end up victims of sectarianism.
3. *Never reject anyone whom Jesus has accepted.* If the Lord Jesus Christ has saved someone and sealed them with His Holy Spirit of promise, who are we to reject such from fellowship? Now I'm not talking about those who might be walking in sin or disobedience, but I'm talking about people who might hold a different interpretation about certain doctrines, or may conduct their services a different way from us, or conduct their liturgies in a different form. *If we reject these people we are rejecting Jesus.*
4. *Pray this prayer:* "Our Father in heaven, I recognize sectarian attitudes in my own heart and in the fellowship and denomination that I 'm associated I repent of those attitudes right now! I repent of them on behalf of myself and my denomination I renounce those attitudes in myself and others and pray that you will purge me and my denomination from all such sectarian attitudes. I ask you to unite me with you and then with other members of the body of Christ who are walking in love and obedience with you. Thank you for receiving me Jesus, thank you for receiving others in other organizations and denominations. I receive them now in love and will walk in the unity of the Spirit from this day forth by your help and grace. Amen."