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The Failure of Sectarianism

J. P. Sanders

(The following is an adaptation I have made from a long chapter in "Voices of Concern," a book published in 1966 and long out of print. The insightful essay, "The Failures of Fundamentalism," was written by J. P. Sanders, a fellow-student in Abilene Christian College. He graduated in 1940, received advanced degrees from Vanderbilt, and continued in Yale. -Cecil Hook)

A group may advertise itself as being non-sectarian, when the very claim is in itself sectarian. By this claim, it marks itself as being different from other groups, unique in having some special truth that keeps it from being a sect. A group may say that it has no creed, while its very "creedlessness" is its test for exclusion, or its creed. If an unimmersed Christian should seek to enter that church, he might well find the sect's creed on immersion barring his way.

Paul told the Romans that "the kingdom of God is not in eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." Evidently some of them were literalists and legalists, exalting petty details into required doctrine which all must accept. Paul told them to center on the real matters of the faith. He urged them to get rid of the legalism and sectarianism that caused them to quarrel and divide over the minutiae.

We have not yet seen a sect built on justice, mercy, faith, peace, and righteousness. Such great concerns produce something greater in fellowship than a sect.

The sect, by the nature of its life, is introspective. It has mirrors where windows ought to be. Its concern is for its own housekeeping problems--- how to maintain the orthodoxy of the sect, and how to bring others to it. It must constantly define and redefine its terms so as to guard against creeping heterodoxy. In this introspection, it loses significant relationship to the world around it. The sect is not only separated from other sects but is also cut off from the mainstream of secular life. Being absorbed in its own institutional purity, it becomes irrelevant to the social concerns of the world.

Since the sect seeks to live by a document of two thousand years ago, which it interprets with great literalness, its look is also primarily retrospective. It lives in the backwater of life, talking of old questions and ancient issues but unable to come to grips with the contemporary urgencies. The early church

was vital and dynamic, turning its world upside down, because it was valiantly dealing with the problems of its day. To try to live by a literal imitation of that church and its solutions is to be called from the living present to the dead past.

In a world like ours, filled with revolutionary change and challenge, the church must find through faith the insight and courage to minister as the early church ministered---but not by the same letter. A world with increasingly crushing problems of exploding populations, urbanization, automation, racial tension, emerging nations, armaments escalation, the constant threat of nuclear disaster, mounting discontent of the world's poor in the presence of over-abundance---in all this the church must have something more to offer than dry-as-dust irrelevancies about the form of baptism, frequency of the Supper, and church polity. While the world is topsy-turvy in its search for new and meaningful value and understanding, the church cannot sit it out, arguing about the details of its own housekeeping chores. The church must be in the world to minister to it, and to give its life as a ransom for many.

When Paul was brought before Gallio for trial, his Jewish accusers babbled and quibbled about hair-splitting differences of their literal interpretations. Gallio, a pagan but a judge concerned for justice, became disgusted and said: "If this were a matter of right or wrong, I would deal with you. But since it is a question of words and names in your own law, see to it yourselves. I am not minded to judge in such matters." He drove them from the judgment seat. Here is the sad spectacle of a pagan man driving religious men away in indignation, not because they were too challenging and demanding, but because they were too trivial, talking nonsense to the man concerned about more vital things.

In his parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus did not have to include a priest, but he did. The priest was pious, orthodox, meticulous about proper details of doctrine and practice in his temple functions, but he passed by his neighbor's need. His religion was of the temple, not of the road or marketplace. The one Jesus approved in the parable was the heretic, the despised Samaritan, who doubtless worshipped at the wrong temple in Samaria and who followed corrupted rituals at an illegitimate altar. Jesus' contrast between the priest and the Samaritan was not the contrast of race, for we do not know the race of the man who needed their help. He was contrasting priestly religion---the religion of the altar, the legalistic, literalistic, sectarian religion of the Pharisees---with the prophetic religion that is relevant to the bleeding of needy men.

When Jesus talked of separating sheep from goats, he said not a word about sound doctrine, the true sect, or any of the other priestly conditions. On the

contrary, he talked about social needs: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, ministering to the thirsty, the sick, imprisoned, and strangers. Jesus held that separation comes at the point of a man's involvement with his brother's need and his willingness to sacrifice to release him from misery. He further said that when we minister to men we minister to him. Micah had asked how we shall come to the Lord. Jesus said that we come to him through ministering to suffering. This is not far from Micah's own answer: "to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God."

The twenty-third chapter of Matthew contains parts of the bluntest and most scathing prophetic denunciation of priestly religion to be found anywhere in literature. There Jesus scored the Pharisees because they would carefully "tithe mint, anise, and cummin, and leave undone the weightier matters of the law: justice, and mercy, and faith." The conflict between priest and prophet is always here: which is more important, tithing and the other housekeeping chores of the sect, or justice in the marketplace, mercy towards the oppressed, and inward faith toward God?

One-tenth of our brethren in the United States are humiliated from morning until night every day of their lives simply because they are darker than most of us. Their cries for justice have gone unheeded, even by the church which should have been most concerned for this brother beside the road. The cry and demand has been taken into our streets. Still the nation resists, and still the church hesitates to take an unequivocal stand for their rights as men. Could anything be more priestly than for us to continue to baptize, commune, tithe and the rest, while our brethren and their children are daily humiliated? Shall we continue to call the people to solemn assemblies, to religious feasts, to prayers, and hymns, or shall we with Amos say that all these externals are no delight to the Lord but that we must let "justice roll down like waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream"?

Let justice roll down like waters for the black people of the United States and of South Africa and everywhere else. Let justice roll down for the two billions who are hungry from birth until death, while we, the minority, kill ourselves with fatness. Let justice roll down like waters, that His kingdom may come, that His will may be done on the earth even as it is in heaven. []

