

What Is Sectarianism?

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Introduction

"I am trying to think my way out of a sectarian attitude. I grew up in the context of one. I learned a sectarian spirit. I breathed a sectarian spirit. I exhibited a sectarian spirit. I am embarrassed. I am ashamed. I have repented. I am trying to outgrow it." Had this come from one who had grown up in the Baptist denomination or a Pentecostal sect, all lovers of the Truth would applaud it. Had it come from a brother in Christ who had previously entertained a loose, liberal, denominational concept of the church, but has now learned better, we could likewise be deeply grateful for such a statement.

These statements of apology for his "sectarianism" constitute the opening words of a speech titled, "Is Unity Possible?" delivered to a group of preachers in Centerville, Tennessee, in March 1983 by brother Rubel Shelly. The "sectarianism" for which he apologized is not for an unscriptural denominational view he might have held of the church. Rather, he referred by it to an earlier time when he was raising a strong voice for the New Testament concept of the church. He referred to the time when he was crying out so ably against denominationalism, liberalism, and every other *ism*—including true sectarianism.

Shelly's Previous Use of *Sect*

What is he now apologizing for? Perhaps some quotations from materials that he wrote a few years ago will answer:

Those who believe and know the truth cannot be in spiritual fellowship with error. We must be willing to practice truth as the people of God even if to do so is costly. Even if it sets one against family, old friends or once-faithful brethren. In our time of disregard for truth there are many among us who have ignored the fact that God requires us to be a separate people with regard to the truth and its practice. **Liberal brethren are talking about possible grounds of fellowship with sectarians** (Church bulletin article, approximate date, 1971, emph. DM).

There is no justification for allowing a man who denies fundamental teachings of the bible (e. g., verbal inspiration of Scripture) to stand in a pulpit or teach a Bible class. **There is no excuse for allowing some false teacher, whether an erring Christian or a sectarian, to address a gathering of impressionable young Christians and teach error without being publicly challenged** (*Getwell Reminder*, March 2, 1972, emph. DM).

I am more than tired of hearing the statement made in pulpits, college classrooms, and in brotherhood papers that the church of Christ is just another denomination among many

denominations. **The Lord's church is not a denomination. It is not a sect or party in Christendom** ([Freed-Hardeman College Lectures, 1970, emph. DM).

According to the New Testament, the church of Christ had a separate and distinct existence. **It was not composed of various people who were members of rival sects, but was composed of people with common beliefs, worship, and practices** (Tract, *Is the Church of Christ Just Another Denomination?* Emph. DM).

Some would tie us to the denominational world by joining ministerial alliances and participating in interdenominational sing-ins and social action programs. **Still others have invited false teachers in the church or outright sectarians to speak to Sunday School or youth groups so as to "allow our people to hear the other side"** ("Some Marks of Modernism," *Spiritual Sword*, April 1972, emph. DM).

It should be obvious to even a casual reader that brother Shelly is using the words *sect* and *sectarian* to mean two different things when one compares his recent use of the terms with his use of them in the past. He is now describing as "sectarian" his former outcries **against** "sectarianism"!

Definition of *Sect*

What is the meaning of *sect* and *sectarian*? *Sect* is a New Testament word, translated from *hairesis* by the American Standard Version in the book of Acts (5:17; 15:5; 24:5,14; 26:5; 28:22). The same Greek word appears three additional times. The American Standard Version renders it "factions" once (1 Cor. 11:19), "parties" once (Gal. 5:20), and "heresies" once (2 Pet. 2:1). Our English word, "heresy," is derived from this Greek word, incidentally. In three of the above contexts where *sect* appears it is used in reference to Jewish religious parties—the Sadducees and/or Pharisees (Acts 5:17; 15:5; 25:5). In the other three contexts it refers to the church as a term of reproach by her enemies (Acts 24:5, 14; 28:22). The passages in which *factions*, *parties*, and *heresies* appear are all rebukes of these traits. Thayer traces the origin of *hairesis* to words that relate to choosing, choice, and that which is chosen—therefore, one's chosen course of thought or action, hence a chosen opinion, doctrine or tenet. Note that it is used twice as a derisive term for the church by the enemies of the Truth (Acts 24:5; 28:22). They implied by the term that the disciples had chosen a narrow course of thought and doctrine that differed from the norm of God's true religion (as they viewed it) of Judaism. Paul denied that such was a true description of the church, and rather than its being a mere sect, declared it to be truly "the Way" (Acts 24:14). The same apostle sharply rebuked the very trait of selecting and advocating doctrines of one's own preference, thereby establishing a party or sect around oneself (1 Cor. 11:19; Gal. 5:20). Peter taught the same (2 Pet. 2:1).

Are We Sectarian?

From the foregoing comments we are able to see that "sectarianism" is the result of men's choosing their own favorite doctrines and opinions (and even leaders) in religion and forming themselves into parties or sects by such choices. To be sectarian is to actively seek to create or build up a sect or sects. It becomes immediately obvious that "denominationalism" and "sectarianism" are closely related in meaning and that we have correctly used the term interchangeably through the years. Denominationalism is the end product of a sectarian spirit. Brother Shelly consistently used *sect* and *sectarian* to refer to denominational bodies a few years ago, as the quotations earlier given clearly demonstrate. When he decried a "sectarian spirit" in years past he correctly aimed his remarks at the true sectarians, that is, denominationalists who emphasize their favorite doctrines while ignoring those with which they disagree; they have created sects and parties around those beliefs, whether true or false. Now, however, he is lashing out at his brethren when he speaks of sectarianism. Consider the following additional statements from his Centerville speech:

Somewhere along the line, maybe 50 years ago, we abandoned that theme [unity of Christians, DM] and we crystallized and we became to a large measure what we set out to oppose [namely, sectarianism, DM]... Somehow those of us who make the plea for people to be Christians only have let that plea come out to the world something after this fashion: "Come over to us and be Christians only, because after all, we are the only Christians." That is arrogant, that is wrong, that is self-righteous, **that is sectarian...** (emph. DM).

Has the Lord's church become a sect, a denomination, as he avers? Brother Shelly's accusing words remind me of the statement of another apostate brother, Lynn Anderson, in 1973, in which he said the church is a "big, sick denomination." Brother Shelly, along with many of us strongly opposed brother Anderson's statement and its grave implications when he made it, and correctly so. Given brother Shelly's recent descriptions of the church, perhaps he owes brother Anderson a public apology for censuring him a few years ago for saying essentially the same thing.

I deny that the church has become a sect or a denomination, either in the past 10 years or the past 50 years or more. It is not sectarian to teach that all of the saved are in the church of Christ, because the Bible teaches it (Acts 2:41-47). It is **not** sectarian to insist upon having fellowship only with those who both enter into Christ by being baptized unto remission of sins (Acts 2:38; Gal. 3:27-28) **and** who continue to walk in the light as God is in the light of Truth (1 John 1:5- 7). We can have **no** fellowship—either with a big "F" or a little "f"—with the unfruitful works of darkness (Eph. 5:11) or with those who abide not in the teaching of Christ

(2 John 9–11), and it is **not** sectarian to so teach. It is not sectarian to contend for the Scriptural plan of salvation, the distinctiveness of the church, the authorized organization, worship, and designations of the church. **Neither** is it sectarian to insist that any and every plea for unity must continue to be made only on the Lord's terms. The actual sectarians contend for none of these things, and this is at least in part why they are sectarians. How dare one come along and confuse the meaning of this term by applying it to the very things that **keep the Lord's church from becoming sectarian**—namely, preaching the whole counsel of God without compromise (Acts 20:26)!

It is indeed regrettable that brother Shelly has taken up the very cry of some of the most radical liberals that have been in our midst in his blanket accusation of "sectarianism," but this he has most surely done. Even a hurried reading of such venomous attacks upon the church in the past few years as the book *Voices of Concern* and such periodicals as *Mission Magazine*, *Restoration Review*, and *Integrity* will demonstrate this consistent theme. Their favorite tactic is to hurl *sect* and *party* at the bride of Christ.

Conclusion

I opine that brother Shelly is now being far more sectarian in the new ecumenical movement he is championing than he was in his behavior of the early 1970s for which he is now apologizing. He has made a choice of thought and action in recent months that is increasingly crystallizing around him and that is centered on one doctrine or interest in particular. That central interest is **unity among professed believers**, which is certainly a most laudable and scriptural aim. However, as laudable as unity is, it is not the entirety of the Gospel or doctrine of Christ, nor is Truth or principle to be sacrificed in order to attain it. Ironically, the new course our brother has set out upon has the potential to be a greater **divisive** force among the Lord's people than any other issue of the past several decades. Ironically, an "anti-sectarian" sect seems already to be well along in its development. My response to the charge that the church has become a sect (an echo of the enemies of Truth from the beginning, Acts 24:5) is Paul's response to the same charge: "But this I confess unto thee, that after **the Way which they call a sect**, so serve I the God of our fathers..." (Acts 24:14, Emph. DM).

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