

SECRET SECTS

by Mark Hatfield

As we live in a society filled with a divided body of so called "believers" that hold to so many different beliefs or creeds, it becomes evident that we have to defend the similar issues found in the New Testament church. The only difference between the issues of today and the sects that divided the first century church is that it is those who have their faith in Christ, who are causing the splits and division in the religious world. We have recently heard of the idea of "unity in diversity" that calls for all believers, regardless of their religious affiliation to unite and forget the issues that make their "sect" distinct from all others. It may offend you to call the denominations of the world sects, but that is the definition of the word. A sect was "1. a group of people forming a distinct unit within a larger group by virtue of common beliefs or practices. 2. A schismatic religious body. (Are you ready for the next one?) 3. A religious denomination (AHD). We have to take the time to see if the Lord approves of the many sects in the world today through a study of His word. If indeed we learn that it is error to have sects, we must make a change.

WHAT DOES JESUS TEACH ABOUT SECTS?

Listen to the words of the Savior, Jesus, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men-- the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do." And He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition." "For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' "But you say, 'If a man says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban"--' (that is, a gift to God), "then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, "making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do." (Mark 7:6-13) What "such things" might we also be doing that are merely traditions and commandments of men? Let us examine our lives!

It would be interesting to have every person take their creed, catechism, church doctrines and opinions etc. and compare it to the word of God to see if we are blindly following the traditions and commandments of men. Anytime that someone suggests we follow a teaching that is brought separate from the word of God, it begs the question "Why do we need anything but God's inspired word?" An open, studied Bible is the only thing that will ever be able to unite us in faith and to cause us to be pleasing to our heavenly Father. When Jesus prayed, He said in John 17:20-23, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: "I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me." The unity that the Father and the Son have is not the "unity in diversity" that the world calls for today. The Father and the Son do not teach and practice different doctrines, yet the world with its many sects has divided the church that should be unified.

Jesus only wanted one church and yet the world is thankful for the multiplicity of denominations. Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18), not churches. The Bible says that there is "one body" (Eph. 4:4), and this body is His church that He said He would build (Rom. 16:16; Col. 1:18, 24). Jesus is the head of the church, from which its doctrines must come (II John 9-11). The word of God encourages believers to make sure that there is no schism (faction, division) in the body (I Cor. 1:1-13; 12:25).

WHAT DID THE APOSTLES TEACH ABOUT SECTS?

In Acts 15, a sect of the Pharisees arose and taught the people that unless they were circumcised they could not be saved (Acts 15:1). When the apostles heard about this teaching they responded immediately and said in verse 24, "Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, 'You must be circumcised and keep the law'-- to whom we gave no such commandment-- it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Notice that there was no commandment for the church regarding a need for circumcision for salvation. This reveals the difference between a teaching of a sect and the teaching of God. When a command is given by God, we must obey it, but when man presses his opinions and feelings, we must reject them. For example there are those who teach that one must have "faith alone", in order to be saved. Jesus said, "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved..." (Mark 16:16) As a matter of fact the Bible teaches, "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only" (James 2:24). That is the only time "faith only" appears in the Bible... Study it!

We must understand as we read this material that we will probably excuse ourselves from ever being involved in a sect, no matter who we are. The real truth of the matter is that we will only know if we are involved in this type of division when we honestly consider our life in worship and service according to the word of God. Even Paul was called, "a ringleader in the sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5), and being a part of the sect called the Way (Acts 24:14), when he was actually a part of the blood bought church of the Lord Jesus Christ. There will always be those who oppose truth and makes those who stand for it their enemies (Gal. 4:16), but it is time that we open our eyes to the reality of this world's sects and religious divisions, while working to spread the true gospel to everyone. We are warned in the Bible that false teachers and their teachings will always be prevalent and will cause division amongst those who follow them (II Peter 2:1-3). We must be diligent students of the word of God, while making application of the truths that we learn within its pages (II Tim. 2:15). Are you a part of a sect or the church?