

# WHAT IS A SECT?

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The word "sect" is employed in the English translation to express the Greek word "hairesis." The meaning of this word is well known. It is used (except in the Acts of the Apostles, where it is found six times) only once in the Epistle to the Corinthians, once in the Epistle to the Galatians (chap. 1: 20), and once in that of Peter (2 Peter 2).

In the first epistle to the Corinthians alone is it translated by the word *heresy* (1 Cor. 11: 19). It signifies a doctrine, or a system, whether of philosophy or religion, which has its adherents united as adopting this doctrine.

Its meaning is a little modified now, because the professing church (at least the greater part of it) has taken the name of Catholic, that is to say, universal. Then every religious body, every Christian gathering, which does not belong to this community (so-called Catholic), is by it called a sect; from this the word is become a word of censure. All the Christian bodies are sometimes called sects, in the sense of divisions, when they separate themselves from the whole complement of Christians, or from those who bear this name. However, the word sect implies in itself always more or less of censure, from the idea that those who compose it are reunited by a doctrine or a particular denomination. We cannot say that this way of looking at it is entirely false; the application may be false, but not the idea itself. But what is important is to discover that which, in fact, is an assembly of Christians justly deserving this name; or, since it is applied to assemblies or Christian corporations, it is necessary to understand the true principle on which we ought to assemble. That which is not based on this principle is really a sect.

Although the Catholics (so-called) have made a bad use of this truth, it is not less true that the unity of the Church is a truth of the greatest importance for Christians, whether the unity of all individually manifested in the world (John 17), or that of the body of Christ, formed by the Holy Ghost come down here (Acts 2; 1 Cor. 12: 13).

So in John 17 the Lord asks the Father, with regard to those who shall believe through the word of the apostles, "that they all may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me," John 17: 21. We see there the practical unity of Christians in the communion of the Father and the Son. The apostles should be *one* in thought, word, and deed, by the operation of one Spirit, as the Father and the Son in the unity of the divine nature (v. 11). Then those who should believe by their word ought to be *one* in the communion of the Father and the Son (v. 21). We shall be perfect in the unity of the glory (v. 22); but we ought to be *one* now, in order that the world may believe (v. 21). Further, the Holy Ghost came down from heaven on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), baptized all believers of that time into one body, united to Christ as a body to the head, and manifested here below on the earth in this unity (1 Cor. 12: 13). We see clearly

that it is on the earth, where it says, in the twelfth chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthians, "If one member suffer, all the members suffer; and if one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it." We do not suffer in heaven. But then it is added, "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular."

The whole chapter shows the same truth; but these verses suffice to demonstrate that it treats of the Church on the earth. See here, then, the true unity formed by the Holy Ghost: first, the unity of brethren between themselves; and, secondly, the unity of the body.

**The spirit of a sect exists when we see disciples unite outside this unity**, and when it is around an opinion that those who profess it are gathered, in order that they be united by means of this opinion. The unity is not founded on the principle of the unity of the body, nor of the union of brethren. When such persons are united in a corporation, and mutually recognize each other as members of this corporation, then they constitute formally a sect, because the principle of the gathering is not the unity of the body; and the members are united, not as members of the body of Christ, when they are even such, but as members of a particular corporation.

All Christians are members of the body of Christ—an eye, a hand, a foot, etc. (1 Cor. 12: 13-25). **The idea of being a member of a church is not found in the word.** The Holy Ghost compares the Church on the earth to a body, of which Christ is the Head (Eph. 1: 22, 23; Col. 1: 18); then each Christian is a member of this body, so of Christ. But to be a member of a particular corporation is quite another idea. Now, the supper of the Lord being the expression of this union of the members (as says 1 Cor. 10: 17), when a corporation of Christians recognizes its right to receive its members to it, there is a unity formally opposed to the unity of the body of Christ. It is possible that this may be ignorance, or that these Christians have never apprehended what is the unity of the body, and that it is the will of God that this unity be manifested on the earth; but, in fact, they form a sect, a denial of the unity of the body of Christ. Several of those who are members of the body of Christ are not members of this corporation; and the Supper, although the members partake piously of it, is not the expression of the unity of the body of Christ.

But now a difficulty is presented: the children of God are dispersed; many pious brethren are attached to this opinion, to that corporation, and mixed up for advantage' sake, even in religious things, with the world. There are alas! many who have no idea of the unity of the body of Christ, or who deny the duty of manifesting this unity on earth. But all that does not annihilate the truth of God. Those who unite themselves, as I have already said, are but a sect in principle. If I recognize all Christians as members of the body of Christ, if I love them, and receive them, from an enlarged heart, even to the Supper, supposing that they are walking in holiness and truth, calling upon the name of the Lord out of a pure heart (2 Tim. 2: 19-22; Rev. 3: 7), then I am not walking in the spirit of a sect, even although I cannot gather together all the children of God, because I walk according to the principle of this unity of the body of Christ, and seek practical union amongst the brethren. If I join with other brethren to take the Lord's supper only as a

member of the body of Christ, not as a member of a church, whichever it may be, but verily in the unity of the body, ready to receive all Christians who are walking in holiness and truth, I am not the member of a sect; I am a member of nothing else but of the body of Christ. But to gather together upon another principle, in whatever manner it may be, to make a religious corporation, is to make a sect.

The principle is very simple. The practical difficulties are sometimes great by reason of the state of the Church of God; but Christ is sufficient for all; and if we are content to be little in the eyes of men, the thing is not so very difficult.

A sect, then, is a religious corporation united upon another principle than that of the body of Christ. It is formally such when those who compose this particular corporation are regarded as being the members of it. It is to walk in the spirit of a sect when those alone are recognized in a practical manner, without giving themselves out as properly members of a corporation. We do not speak of the discipline which is exercised in the bosom of the unity of the body of Christ, but of the principle upon which we are gathered together. The word does not recognize any such thing as to be member of a church; it speaks always of the members of the body of Christ. But these are bound to manifest unity in walking together.

We can cite Matthew 18: 20 as a precious encouragement in these times of dispersion, in these sad times of the last days, where the Lord promises His presence to two or three gathered together in His name. He gives us 2 Timothy 2: 22 to direct us in the path of His will, in the midst of the confusion which reigns around us.

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