

Introduction on Sects

“To Equip the Saints for Service”

The Consistories of *Ebenezer* and *Rehoboth* Canadian Reformed Churches at Burlington, Ontario, sponsored a series of “Winter-Lectures” from October 1976 to April 1977.

If one should ask, “Is that the task of consistories?” Paul’s answer is positive. Christ has given (Ephesians 4:11ff.) pastors and teachers in order to equip the saints for “*diakonia*,” for the upbuilding of the body, so that we all may attain to mature manhood, and “no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles . . .” (verse 14).

It cannot be denied that these words are as timely as ever in this age in which sects are mushrooming in number, in size, in deceitful wiles. It cannot be denied either that communicant members often are like “children tossed to and fro” when confronted with usually very aggressive adherents of sects. And all too often such members are pushed into the corner of defense, instead of being on the offensive.

Of course, this “equipping of the saints” is being done, week after week, in the “regular” work of the pastor-and-teacher (and we would like to add: elders or overseers) by preaching, by teaching Catechism Classes, and by conducting courses. However, in a sermon one can never give a complete picture of the deceitful wiles of sects, nor a complete rejection with biblical truth. One has to “stick to the text.” For that reason a more concentrated teaching on sects and their biblical character is a welcome, and in our days necessary, supplement to the regular preaching and teaching, and as such part of the “equipping of the saints,” this being the mandate of the teaching office.

That is the reason why the two consistories sponsored the lectures published in this book. Those who heard the lectures will find out that the lecturers had to leave out of their public address much that is found in the printed reproduction. Those who did not hear them will, we trust, find good guidance to oppose “every wind of doctrine.” That was and is the outspoken purpose of the whole undertaking: not only to inform us about the doctrines of various sects, but being enabled, equipped to contradict them with biblical truth; even more, to go from the defensive to the offensive, and thus to snatch some from the fire of sects. That was the first and last purpose of those two consistories: to support the members in the work of *evangelism*, of winning others for Christ. The foundation of this purpose was the strong conviction that sects and sectarians are poor, and have to be pitied; and that we, by the grace of God, are strong! Indeed,

"we have a word for the world," also for the world of sects, of deceitful wiles.

Before we conclude this Introduction with some more stress on this ultimate purpose, something should be said about "sects"; what a sect is, why it is called a sect, and in what respect a sect, although it may "cover itself with the name of the Church" (Belgic Confession, Article 29) is the enemy of the Church, the True Church.

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"Follow the Leader"

Often the word "sect" (French: *secte*; Latin: *secta*) is understood as being related to words like "section," "dissect," "sectional," etc. If this were true, "sect" would design a group, a religious group, that has separated itself from the "established" Church and its doctrine, and now leads its own, independent life next to and over against that "established" Church. *Roget's Thesaurus* mentions as synonyms: "heterodoxy," "schism," "heresy," "false doctrine," etc.; especially "*schism*" points to such a "cutting off."

Most dictionaries, however, tell us that the word "sect" is derived from the Latin verb *sequi*, which means "to follow." Although what has been said in the previous paragraph is fully applicable to most sects, the real character of a sect becomes clear only when seen as a derivative from *sequi*, i.e.: its character is best expressed in the words, "Follow the Leader."

This may not seem obvious at first sight. These dictionaries define a sect as "a body of persons distinguished by peculiarities of faith and practice . . . an organized body of *dissenters* from an established or older form of doctrine" (*Britannica Dictionary*, s.v.). *Webster* gives as the third definition, "a religious denomination, especially a small [!? vD] group that has broken away from an established Church." But its first definition is, "a group of people having a common *leadership* [!] and a *set-of-opinions*."

Here the word "leadership" pops up and rightly so. In our days several members of "established Churches" have broken away because they objected to the "structure," even the "super-structure" of the established Church where, according to them, it is so cold, so impersonal, so regulated. They hunger for more warmth, personal contact, spontaneous expression of what lives in one's heart, etc., but they will discover — usually too late — that nowhere else in the "religious" world is there more suppressive *dictatorship* than exactly there where they hoped to find freedom and spontaneity: in a sect! Sects are instituted for brain-washing people by (as *Webster* states) "a *set-of-opinions*," repeated endlessly, learned by heart as much as the sayings of Chairman Mao in his Red Booklet, to such an extent and intensity that in the end they no longer know anything besides that set-of-opinions of the creator and leader of the sect, which has nothing to do with "the complete doctrine of salvation."

It is indeed "following the Leader," but the Leader is not "Jesus the Pioneer and Perfectioner of our Faith" (Hebrews 12:2).

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Having seen this, the reader will no longer be surprised by the variety of topics chosen by the lecturers of this series.

If one takes "sect" as meaning following a leader, but not the Leader of Hebrews 12:2, it is possible to speak about Roman Catholicism as a "sect." Whether Article 29 of the Belgic Confession includes the Romanists in "all sects which are in the world" is a matter which is open for discussion. *In favour of* this understanding of these words, the following could be quoted: "The true Church must be distinguished from *all* sects that call themselves the Church." *Opposed to* including the Romanist Church in the number of sects, there is the valid argument that points to the concluding paragraph which deals specifically with "the false Church" by which, at that time, the Romanist or Popish "church" was meant. Whatever the case may be, if "sect" is derived from *sequi*, i.e., to follow a leader other than our Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith, the Romanist Church may most certainly be called a sect.

The same would go for "Horizontalism" which has many "leaders" who lead people away from Christ, and thus astray.

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The word "sect" is also found in the New Testament, especially in the Book of *Acts*. It is the translation of the Greek word *hairesis* or heresy. Acts 5:17 speaks of "the sect of the Sadducees" (others translate: "the party . . ."); 15:5 "the sect (or party) of the Pharisees" (N.B. these people belonged to the Christian Church at that time, but were the forerunners of the Judaizers, and thus formed a special group or sect *in* the Church).

Small wonder, then, that in the eyes of the Jews the believers were also a sect, because they led a separate life and followed a Leader Who, in Jewish eyes, was a deceiver and imposter; therefore they called Paul "the ring-leader of the sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5, 28:22).

Finally, in I Corinthians 11:19, Galatians 5:20, II Peter 2:1, the believers are warned against "factions [sects] in your midst," "party spirit," and "destructive heresies [same word: sects, vD] even denying the Master," the Leader Jesus Christ.

From the biblical evidence may be derived that every "religious group" that follows a master other than Jesus Christ alone may be called a sect. Only of the true Church it may be said that there "Jesus Christ is acknowledged as the only Head of the Church" (Belgic Confession, Article 29), "the only universal Bishop and the only Head of the Church" (Article 31).

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The *Christelijke Encyclopedie* (ed. Kok Kampen, The Netherlands), after having referred to the age of the Reformation, when the Romanists called the Lutherans and Reformed "sects," while the latter called Anabaptists, etc., "sects," mentions the following as the main traits of a sect:

1. *Religious Individualism*. While the Church is pluriform in the good sense of the word, in a sect you meet only like-minded people, brain-washed into one frame of mind.

2. *Anti-Church Religiosity.* As mentioned before, sectarians do not feel at home in a Church and a Church federation, where "all things are managed according to the Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected," Belgic Confession, Article 29. This is not to say that we would not understand that many believers do not feel at home in modernistic, Bible-criticizing, hierarchical so-called "churches." We should only be thankful that believers in such Churches act according to the call of Article 28 of the Belgic Confession, "to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the [true] Church, and to join themselves to this congregation," i.e., "the holy congregation" of Jesus Christ. But sectarian-minded people separate themselves even from the true Church!

3. *Religious Subjectivism.* Sects often have disregard for the Scriptures as the written Word of God; rather, they listen to what they consider to be the Voice of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. Therefore they also disregard the Covenant, the Church, the "means of grace," i.e., the preaching of the Word and the use of the Sacraments.

4. *Intimate Fellowship for Reaching a Higher Level,* higher than just the "ordinary" communion of saints which is found in the Church.

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In conclusion, it may be granted that sects offer some attractive features for people. You do not have to think for yourself: just follow the leader. You only meet people who think exactly as you do. The sect promises more than you can find in the Church: you may even reach perfection! But all too often people become disillusioned after some time, because they did not realize, with the Heidelberg Catechism, that even the most holy men have only a small beginning of the new obedience, as long as they are in this life (Lord's Day 44). Equally often their children turn away from "religion" completely because they loathe the unhealthy atmosphere of the sect in which their parents think they found the solution to all their problems.

It all boils down to this: What leader to you follow? If one does not follow Jesus Christ Who from the beginning to the end of the world gathers His one Church from all nations, those chosen to everlasting life (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 21), one is a sectarian; one belongs to a sect.

The Church is the result of God's choice.

A sect is the result of human choice.

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Test the Spirits and Snatch Some Out of the Fire

This Introduction started with mentioning the intention and purpose of the lectures published in this book (hopefully followed by some more volumes in the future). This intention is certainly not only to obey the apostle's command, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but *test the spirits* to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). Indeed, this comes first, so that we ourselves and our children are "no longer tossed to and fro by various winds of doctrine" (Ephesians 4). However, the more one studies such spirits or sects,

the more one realizes his own riches in the "complete doctrine of salvation" of which Jesus Christ, the Mediator of the Covenant, is the Heart and Centre: our complete Redeemer in Whom we *are* righteous before God.

If, then, this is the result of studying sects, we should, as disciples of Jesus Christ, have compassion on the victims of sects. Are they ever poor, although they think they are rich. We have a word for them: The Word! For that reason this book has a sub-title, borrowed from Jude, verses 20 to 23. Among other things, we read there, "And convince some, who doubt; save some, by snatching them out of the fire; on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment spotted by the flesh." On the one hand, no communion whatsoever with evil, be it in conduct or in doctrine (Jude warns mostly against the latter). On the other hand, "save some!" "snatch them!" Be not only on the defensive, but rather, take the initiative and go on the offensive, with the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, and with the "full Gospel" of Jesus Christ in Whom we have everything for this life and for the life to come.

May the grace of God accompany this book on its way, and contribute a little to the equipment of the saints for service, a service that consists in saving some and snatching them out of the hand of the father of lies.

G. VanDooren.