



## The New Sectarianism

David P. Scaer

Without a government-supported church that was typical in all European countries until the last century, immigrants in the early centuries of America had the liberty to go their own way religiously. Catholics brought their old world structures with them and bishops provided continuity with the past and unity among themselves. Lutheran immigrants faced an array of religious options among which the most prominent were the frontier revivals, in which a preacher, often untrained, worked on the frail emotions of people recently detached from the cultural structures of the lands from which they came. These preachers did not represent any particular denomination, but roamed the frontier providing religious services of all kinds to those who needed. A small group gathered around one preacher is called a sect and America was full of them. So even today, everywhere in America there are sects without attachment to larger church groups.

Religious homogeneity for Lutherans coming from Europe was provided by a common doctrine expressed for most people in their church services. Lutheran congregations Sunday after Sunday prayed the Lord’s Prayer and said the Apostles’ Creed in which they confessed the Holy Spirit and the Christian church. In the Nicene Creed the unity of the church was more explicit. There is only “one holy Christian and apostolic church.” This church is not a collection of religious organizations called sects or denominations. It is recognized by its belief in Christ and holds to beliefs that can be traced back to the apostles to whom they were given by Jesus. Lutherans speak of the one church as “Christian.” Other Christians use the word “catholic,” not in the sense of allegiance to the pope, as Roman Catholics do, but a church that is spread throughout the world without boundaries.

One mark of a sect is that it regards itself as the only group possessing the truth. Believers are thus not found in other churches. Though we customarily speak of congregations, denominations, and synods as churches, there is only one church scattered throughout the world, joined together by confessing the same faith. In receiving members from other churches into ours, pastors often discover that they believe some of the same doctrines we do, and they can be admitted to the congregation

with little or even no further instruction. In other cases, some sects may have spoken in words taken directly from the Bible but understand them in such an entirely different way. They cannot be considered Christians; hence they are not to be included in the one holy Christian, apostolic church. The clue to identifying where the church can be found is the word “apostolic.” In setting forth what Lutherans believed, the Augsburg Confession finds support in documents and theologians which their Roman Catholic opponents recognized as their own. Even where religious groups and their leaders compromise the biblical teachings, we are hesitant to call them sects as long as the fundamental structure of the creeds remains in place. This is also true of groups who say they have no creeds but, in practice, they actually do. Another mark of a sect is a charismatic leader whose crowd-pleasing speaking skills becomes the focus of the group’s religious life. Extreme cases of sectarianism are better called cults, and followers contribute financially, to the point of their own impoverishment, so that the leader and his family can live lavishly. Nearly in every case, leaders of these sects are discovered as fraudulent, and their followers are emotionally abandoned without any spiritual support at all. In some cases of sectarianism followers have taken their own lives with that of the leader.

While believers have confessed the church as one church since the beginning of Christianity, unscrupulous religious leaders have also led believers out of the fold and formed sects since the beginning. Sectarianism is not just a contemporary phenomenon but one confronted by the apostles (1 John 2:19). A sect is not just any religious group, but is one that originates within a group of believers who are committed to the apostolic teaching. A group is recognized as a sect when allegiance to the leader is seen as more important than what is believed. Calling such a group a personality cult would be applicable. Many preachers known in America as evangelists, with preaching and personality skills, have attracted large numbers of people to themselves and have proven to have deluded their followers. Buildings where they gathered have gone on the auction block and their organizations have collapsed. Money is also a factor in a sect, in that their leaders often accumulated great fortunes including large estates and stock portfolios. They appeal to people’s basest desires, and they promise them salvation that consists of happy and financially successful lives.

With the collapse of the family and sense of traditional community, sectarianism has a fertile soil in America. This trend is fostered by mass communication devices in which one can join a sect at home without a congregation or a pastor. Each sect is an autonomous body without accountability to other Christians. On that account, it provides fertile and festering soil for false doctrine. 📌

*The Rev. Dr. David P. Scaer (David.Scaer@ctsfw.edu) serves as The David P. Scaer Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne.*

