

The Sect Everywhere Spoken Against

by Elijah Goodwin

Elijah Goodwin's sermon discusses the historical and theological implications of the sect that Paul represented, emphasizing its divine approval despite widespread opposition.

Scripture: Acts 20:7

Topics: "Apostolic Succession", "Church Practices"

Description

Elijah Goodwin preaches about the ancient sect in Acts, emphasizing their adherence to the teachings of the apostles and prophets, their practice of baptism for the remission of sins, and their observance of the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week. He contrasts the principles of this sect with the claims of modern churches regarding apostolic succession, urging listeners to examine the faith and practices of any denomination to determine if it aligns with the original sect described in the Bible.

Transcript

"But we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest: for as concerning this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against."--Acts 28:22.

In the last chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, we have an account of Paul's perilous voyage to Rome, where he was taken as a prisoner for his devotion to, and his labors in, the cause of Christ. When he was brought into Rome, it is said: "Paul was suffered to dwell by himself, with a soldier that kept him. And it came to pass after three days, that Paul called the chief of the Jews together: and when they were come together, he said unto them, Men and brethren, though I have committed nothing against the people or customs of our fathers, yet was I delivered prisoner from Jerusalem, into the hands of the Romans; who, when they had examined me, would have let me go, because there was no cause of death in me. But when the Jews spake against it, I was constrained to appeal unto Cæsar; not that I had ought to accuse my nation of. For this cause, therefore, [29] I called for you, to see you, and to speak with you, because for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain.

"And they said unto him, We neither received letters out of Judea concerning thee, neither any of the brethren that came shewed or spake any harm of you.

"But we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest: for as concerning this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken, against."

The course pursued by these persons is somewhat different from that which is pursued by many in our day. Now it is often made a reason why persons should not be heard, because the religious party to which they belong is everywhere spoken against. They now say, we do not desire to hear you, for, as for this sect, it is everywhere spoken against. These persons, however, acted on a different principle. They seem to say, Now, Paul, we know that the sect to which you belong is spoken against all over the country; we know that all parties oppose you, but we are not willing to form our opinion of you or your party, by what others say. Your enemies may not fairly represent you; therefore, we desire to hear you on the subject. We want to hear an exposition of your views from one of the advocates of the system, from one, of the leaders of this sect. Reader, was not that the more honorable course? Surely it was. [30]

The term "sect" was not always as popular as it now is. It is used in the Scriptures, as well as in ecclesiastical history, in a bad sense. The Greek word translated "sect," in the Common Version, is *haireisis*, which occurs, in all its inflections, but nine times in the New Testament, and is translated in the Common Version "heresy" four times, and "sect" five times, which shows that the translators used the words "sect" and "heresy" interchangeably, as both signifying the same thing, and no one uses the term "heresy" in a favorable sense.

Greenfield defines the word thus: "Strictly, a choice, or opinion; hence, a faction; by impl., discord, contention." Hence, Paul numbers sects among the works of the flesh. In Gal. 5:20, he says: "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies [*haireisis*], envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like." Thus the apostle classes sects, or heresies, with the blackest crimes ever committed by fallen humanity, and even goes so far as to say that "they who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God."

Webster defines the word "sect" thus: "1. A body, or number of persons, united in tenets, chiefly in philosophy or religion, but constituting a distinct party, by holding sentiments different [31] from other men. 2. A cutting scion (obs.)." Though this mighty lexicographer marks this last meaning of the word "sect" as obsolete, he does not tell us how long it has been so. This was doubtless its primary meaning. It seems to have come from the same root from which we have the word "section," which means a part separated or cut off from the rest. Hence, Paul used the term which is rendered "sect" in our text, to represent a party cut off or separated from the true church of Christ. The church of Christ is not, then, properly speaking, a sect; it is the body, the true church of God; while a sect would be a section, a fragment, cut off from the true church of Christ. This is our reason for opposing sectarianism. We believe that the mystical body of Christ is "one body," and that in this body there should be no schism, and that no man has any divine right to draw away a party from the original organism and form a sect of it. This is heresy, the heresy so often condemned by the inspired writers. No doubt these persons used the word in this sense in our text. They were Jews, and doubtless they regarded Paul, and those with him who had embraced Christianity from among the Jews, as a sect, a party cut off from the great body of the Jewish nation.

But, in the further discussion of the subject, we will use the term merely to designate the body to which Paul belonged, and not to sanction its use. [32]

I wish now to present a few plain propositions, in reference to the body of believers with which Paul stood identified. And, in doing this, I do not intend to make one leading statement that will not be received as true by all who may read this discourse:

1. This sect was everywhere spoken against. It seems that all parties--Jews and Gentiles, all, all--united in opposing this religious body. Though they could agree in nothing else, though they were at swords' points on every other subject, yet, when this sect was to be opposed, they dropped every other question for the time being, and made one common cause of this, one united effort to poison public opinion in reference to this people. And this is not the only people that have acted thus, nor is this the last time that such temporary unions have been formed, for the purpose of opposing the same cause.

Many hard things were said of these people. Let us notice some of them.

(1) They were charged with worshiping God contrary to the laws of the fathers (Acts 18:13). Now, this was a very serious charge. This, in our own day, would, in the estimation of many persons, destroy a man's religious reputation. Let it be said of a man that he is introducing forms of worship contrary to the old-established usages of the church, and how soon would he be cried down. The cry of "Innovation! Innovation!" would [33] stop all ears against him, and his standing would be ruined. But this was said of Paul and his party; this was one of the things that was spoken against this sect.

(2) They were charged with heresy. And this itself was enough to spoil Paul's influence with many persons. You know, gentle reader, that this charge would ruin a man's Christian standing and character, in many communities, even in our own day. Just point at a preacher, now, and cry "Heresy! heresy!" and you ruin his Christian influence with many. That Paul and his party were charged with heresy, we have already seen, from the meaning of the word translated "sect" in our text. On another occasion, when Paul made his defense before the Roman governor, after referring to their unfounded charges, and stating that they could not prove one of them, he said: "But this I confess, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers" (Acts 24:14). He does not acknowledge that he is guilty of heresy, but says that he worships in the way that they call heresy. This proves that they had charged him with heresy, and he admits that, if they are permitted to determine what is heresy, he would be condemned. And who would not be, even in this day of Bible light and Bible liberty, if the accusing party is permitted to prefer the charge, explain in what it consists, and apply the law [34]

(3) They were charged with teaching customs which were not lawful for others to observe. (See Acts 16:21.) Now, this was no small matter. For this charge, Paul and Silas were beaten with many stripes, and then confined in the dark, damp dungeon. And even in our own day this charge would ruin a man's Christian standing with some of the stricter sects. The rules and customs of many of these bodies are stereotyped, and their forms have become fixed. Now, let any one introduce new religious customs in such a community, and the popular cry of "New customs! Customs not lawful for us to observe!" would soon destroy his influence. But this was said of Paul and his party.

(4) They were charged with turning the world upside down (Acts 17:6). And this might have been necessary, for the world may have been down side up a long time. Still, it was a very severe charge, one that was well calculated to destroy the influence of this party. By this they meant that this sect was a set of "disorganizers; breaking up old ecclesiastical organisms, disturbing the quiet of society, unsettling everything, and settling nothing." There are men now living against whom these same things have been said, and they know something about the influence that such a charge has in stopping the ears of the people against a public teacher of religion. But all this, and much more that we can not now [35] mention, was said of the religious party spoken of in our text.

2. My second general proposition in reference to this sect is that, in the sight of God, this was the only true party, the only right church in the world. Yes, notwithstanding all parties opposed this religious body, yet God acknowledged it, and it was the only church upon which He looked with approbation. To this proposition I am sure no one objects. All say it is true. And should not this fact teach us to be very sparing of our condemnatory denunciations against any people claiming to be the disciples of Christ, lest haply we be found to fight against God? Thus, it often happens that things that are highly esteemed of men are very lightly esteemed of God, while things that men disapprove and unite in condemning are very precious in the sight of God.

3. My third proposition is that God never authorized the existence of any other sect or religious party. Are you ready to say that this is one proposition that you can not receive But when I tell you what I mean by divine authority, you will not object even to this statement. By divine authority I mean Bible authority. All the divine authority that we now have for the performance of any religious act is found in that blessed Book.

Now, I ask, where, in all the writings of the inspired apostles of Jesus Christ, do we find any [36] command for forming any other sect than the one that was at this time everywhere spoken against? Where do we find even a clear license, or divine permit, to do such a thing? Every Bible student is ready to answer, Just nowhere at all.

Now, if all this is true, and true it is, how important is it that we understand all the distinguishing peculiarities of that party. If it was the only right party at that time, and if God has never authorized the formation of any other religious party, we should surely be anxious to learn all the leading features of that sect. I speak after the manner of men. Feeling the importance of this subject, we will attempt to define that party, that old sect. And, while engaged in this investigation, I wish every other sect to be left out of view; let us draw a veil over every other religious party, and especially the various sects that exist at the present time; let us leave all these behind the curtain, while we attempt a description of that party that was everywhere spoken against, some eighteen hundred years ago.

1. THEIR CREED.--When we attempt a description of any religious party in our day, the first thing we inquire for is their creed. And when we have found that, we have made a pretty fair start towards learning the distinguishing features of the party. We inquire, then, for the creed of this ancient sect. And by their creed I mean their book of religious faith and religious practice. [37] Was it the Nicene Creed? You answer "No," because that creed was not formed for some 350 years after this sect had become so numerous as to be everywhere spoken against. If, then, we unanimously decide that the Nicene Creed was not the creed of that party, because of its youth, what shall we say of all church creeds which have been formed since Not one of these can be the creed of that ancient sect; they are all too young, by many long centuries.

Speaking on this subject, one who spoke by inspiration said: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:16, 17). This is said more in honor of their creed than to describe it; still, it points pretty clearly to the rule by which they regulated their religious practice.

He who is addressed in our text as one well acquainted with all the usages of this old sect, said of its members: "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and

of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone" (Eph. 2:19, 20). Now, as observed in a former discourse, the constitution of a church is its foundation. Well, as Christianity is a system [38] of faith as well as practice, all church constitutions express the faith of the church organized upon them. This expression of faith is called the creed of the church. Now, as this church was built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets, it was organized upon and governed by the teaching of these inspired men of God, and by that alone. Thus, we have found their creed; namely, the Holy Scriptures, given by divine inspiration.

Now, to this position I believe there is not one dissenting voice in all the land. All, both Catholic and Protestant, agree that the church had no creed, no rules of faith or practice, at the beginning, nor for many long years after, but the writings or teachings of the apostles and prophets of God. No controversy here.

2. THEIR NAME.--In describing a religious sect, it is very necessary to learn its name. Two churches sometimes adopt the same creed, and yet differ in name. I believe there are some five or six different sects that adopt the Westminster Confession of Faith. Hence, if you wish to know to which party a man belongs, it would not be enough to be told that his sect takes the above-named creed. You could not tell from that whether he was a Covenanter, Seceder, or Old or New School Presbyterian. Hence, we must, in such cases, inquire for the name of the sect. So, in pursuing our description of this ancient sect, we ask for its name. [39]

I learn from their creed, the Holy Scriptures, that they were called in their collective capacity the church of God, the church of the Lord, the church of Christ. (See 1 Cor. 1:1; Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:5; Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 11:16.) In their individual capacity they were called saints, brethren, disciples of Christ, Christians. (See Eph. 1:1; Gal. 6:1; Acts 20:7; Acts 11:26.) Now, to any of these titles they would answer. Call them saints, and they would respond, "Here am I;" call them disciples of Christ, and they would say, "Speak, for thy servant heareth;" call them Methodist, Presbyterian, Campbellite, and they would be as silent as the grave; but call them Christians, and they would respond, "Here I am; for though I suffer as a Christian, I am not ashamed." Or should you speak to one of this old sect in reference to his church, he would say he belonged to "the church of God at Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:2), or the church of the Lord at some other place.

Now, this was name enough; these titles, or any of them, showed precisely where those who wore it belonged. Having, then, found the name of this old party, let us consider:

3. THEIR OFFICERS AND CHURCH POLITY.--This is a very essential part, always, in giving a description of any religious body, for churches differ more in polity, or religious politics, than in anything else. Hence, you have never fully defined [40] any church until you have pointed out the officers and polity of the church.

Let us, then, inquire into the officers of that sect that was everywhere spoken against. To learn the truth on this subject, we must go to their creed, the New Testament. From a careful examination of this Book, we have discovered that in that ancient church there were bishops, deacons and evangelists.

(1) The term "elder," among them, meant older, or persons advanced in years, persons of age and experience, but as their bishops were all such men, this term is sometimes used in their book of faith and manners interchangeably with the term "bishop." Hence, Paul "sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church," to whom he delivered a very touching address, near the close of which he said: "Take heed, therefore, unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers" (Acts 27:17-28).

Now, the word which is here rendered "overseers" is episkopos, which is the same that is rendered "bishop," wherever the term "bishop" occurs in the New Testament. We have a very similar expression in 1 Pet. 5:2: "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof." Here we have the word episkopee, which is defined in Liddell and Scott's English and Greek Lexicon thus: "An overseeing, charge; the office of an episkopos." Literally, feed the flock [41] of God, exercising the bishop's office. Here, then, are two instances in which the elders are commanded to do the work of bishops, which shows that when the teachers in that old religious party used the term "elder" as an official title, they always applied it to the bishops or overseers of the church.

In further evidence of this position, read Tit. 1:5-7: "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldst set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city as I had appointed thee. If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children, not accused of riot, or unruly; for a bishop must be blameless," etc. Why must the elders be of the character here described? Because a bishop must be blameless. Thus are the terms "elder" (presbuteros) and "bishop" (episkopos) employed to express the same office or work.

The work which pertained to this office, according to the creed of this sect, was to oversee and feed the church, to provide for the spiritual wants of the flock of God, to rule well, to keep things in order, and thus exercise a general oversight over the church, watching for the good of their souls, as they that must give account. And to them, or to their decisions and counsel, the members of the congregation were commanded to submit. (See Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:7, 17.) [42]

In every individual congregation belonging to the body of which we now speak, where the proper character could be found, they had a plurality of these bishops or overseers. 'Tis true, congregations existed for a time without such ordained rulers. Hence, Titus was left in Crete, to ordain elders in every city, which shows that there were churches in those cities, but there was something wanting; they lacked the proper overseer, and, therefore, Titus is left with them, for the purpose of supplying this lack, by ordaining elders in every city. The same fact appears in the fourteenth chapter of Acts. Here we have an account of a general tour made by Paul and Barnabas, on which tour they visited many congregations, and it is said: "When they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed" (Acts 14:23). I have quoted this Scripture to show that churches existed for awhile, among the sect which was so generally spoken against, without elders, but it also proves that when the proper character could be found, they had a plurality of ordained elders in every church or individual congregation. Here we have the church in the singular, and the elders in the plural. The same form of expression is found in Acts 20:17: Paul "sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church"--"church," singular; "elders," plural. [43]

Some of these official elders seem to have labored in word and doctrine, or preached the gospel publicly, while others did not. Hence, the apostle says: "Let the elders that rule we counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in word and doctrine" (1 Tim. 5:17). Those who thus labored seem to have been particularly regarded as the pastors of the church; hence, they were to have double honor. The word which is here rendered "honor" is timee, which occurs forty-one times in the New Testament, and is translated, in the Common Version, "precious," once; "sum," once; "honor," thirty-one times, and "price," eight times. Greenfield defines it: "A price, value, a price paid, money, honor; i. e., state of honor, dignity, honor conferred, token of respect, etc." Most commentators think it means "price" or "reward" in 1 Tim. 5:17. The reason why such elders were to have double pay was because they rendered double service; they spent much time, labor and means in their devotion to the church, and, therefore, it was but just that

they should be well sustained in the work, that they might give themselves wholly to it.

One other remark, in reference to these bishops. Their official power or work seems to have been confined to the individual congregation to which they belonged. We never read in their creed, or in their writings, of the bishop of the churches, but bishops of the church. (See Phil. 1:1.) Not [44] one bishop to many churches, but many bishops to one church. Reader, don't begin to look behind the curtain, behind which we concealed all modern sects a short time ago. Let them remain out of view as much as possible, until we have completed our description of that ancient sect which is named in our text.

(2) The deacons, in this religious body, seem to have had the charge of all the temporal affairs of the congregations. In every organized body composed of flesh and blood and breath, there must necessarily be financial concerns. So, in the church of which we speak. The places where the congregations assembled had to be lighted, warmed, and kept in order; this required money. Then, the poor were to be provided for, and the Lord's table was to be furnished. All this, and many other contingencies, required funds; and this required men whose special business it should be to take charge of and oversee these matters. Such men were appointed in that old body, and they are, by common consent, called deacons. The word translated "deacon," in the Common Version, is diakonos, which means "a minister; one who renders service to another; an attendant; servant" (Gre. Lex.). According to the "Englishman's Greek Concordance," this word occurs thirty times in the New Testament. It is translated, in the King's Version, "minister," twenty times; "servant" seven times, and "deacon," three [45] times. But it is worthy of remark that they never applied this word to the bishops or elders of the church, notwithstanding they were servants of the church. Thus, it would seem that they intended, by this word, to express a particular class of servants. Such as served the church in reference to her temporal affairs were especially called deacons, though they may have also ministered the Word of life to the people. The first account we have of setting persons apart, to serve the church in this capacity, is recorded in Acts 6:2-6. These men were set apart, by prayer and the laying on of hands, to serve the congregation in raising, holding and distributing the funds which were raised for the support of the poor, and, especially, poor widows.

(3) Evangelists.--The term "evangelist" comes from the Greek word unangelistees, which means "one who announces glad tidings." To do the work of an evangelist, therefore, is to preach the gospel, or announce to the world the good news concerning Christ. Such were Timothy, Titus, and many others who, in the days of the apostles, went forth to proclaim salvation to the people, to convert sinners to God, and to plant Christian congregations.

Now, what a beautiful arrangement this was. In every individual congregation were the bishops, overseeing the church, laboring for their spiritual welfare, settling their difficulties, instructing the [46] ignorant, strengthening the weak, encouraging the fearful, seeking out and restoring the wandering, and building up all upon their most holy faith. Then, there were the deacons, superintending all the temporal affairs of the congregation, seeing that the poor, the widows and orphans were provided for, and that all the contributions of the brethren were properly and judiciously applied. And then there were the evangelists, going like swift-winged messengers of light, bearing the news of salvation to a dying world, turning them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, planting new congregations, and thus enlarging the borders of Zion.

Thus we see something of the offices and order of that sect which was everywhere spoken against.

(4) Their Ordinances.--In order to give a full description of any religious denomination, we must always inquire into their ordinances. Some parties agree in almost everything but their ordinances. Some sprinkle water upon their members, while others immerse their members in water. Now, this constitutes a very striking difference, which would distinguish these parties from each other, if they were alike in everything else.

Well, the church that we are endeavoring to describe had its ordinances also. They observed one leading and important ordinance, which was sufficient of itself to distinguish this party from every other sect upon earth. I think I may safely [47] say that among all the various religious sects that then existed, or that ever had existed, human or divine, no such ordinance as this ever had existed. I ask, Where was it ever known that a religious sect observed a public ordinance in memory of the death of the founder of the party? The birthdays of kings, and of the founders of kingdoms and empires, have often been celebrated by public festivals, but did ever a nation thus celebrate the day on which a benefactor died?

Such, however, is the nature of that distinguishing ordinance to which I now refer. It is sometimes called, in their book of faith and manners, the Lord's Supper; sometimes it is simply called the breaking of bread, and sometimes, the communion of the Lord's body and of the Lord's blood. (See 1 Cor. 11:20, Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 10:16.)

This ordinance was very simple in its form, but very powerful in its import. It consisted, simply, in giving thanks, breaking and eating of bread, and drinking from the cup the fruit of the vine, in memory of the broken body and shed blood of Jesus the Christ. There is one fact connected with the founder of this body of people which accounts for this most unusual ordinance, and that is that, though "he was put to death in the flesh, he was quickened by the Spirit." Yes, He rose from the dead on the third glorious morn, and thus brought to light, life and immortality [48] Well, then, may His followers commemorate His death, since by His death and resurrection He has secured salvation from sin, and eternal life to all who believe in Him and obey His holy commands.

Am I asked on what day they attended to this significant ordinance? They "came together on the first day of the week to break bread" (Acts 20:7). But do you ask, "On what first day"? I answer, "On the first day." I can not learn, from all the records they have left us of their customs, that they made any difference in Lord's Days. The record does not say that they came together on a first day, or on some first day, but on the first day. As often, then, as the first day of the week came, they came together to observe this ordinance, and thus they commemorated two of the most interesting events that have ever transpired since time commenced her march, conjointly: the death of Christ for our sins, and His resurrection for our justification. This, of itself, was enough to distinguish the sect from all others.

This people practiced another ordinance, which was not so much an ordinance in the church as an initiatory rite into the church. This ordinance is called baptism. All the members of this sect were baptized. While defining this religious body, it may not be amiss to state that, with them, baptism was a burial. Hence, the apostle said: [49]

"You are buried with him by baptism" (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2, 12).

(5) Their manner of converting sinners, and adding them to the church, or, to use a modern phrase, their manner of making Christians. Their practice in this matter was quite different from most of the other religious bodies around them. The apostle Paul speaks of their practice, in the fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians, first negatively, and then affirmatively. He first tells what they did not do, and then what they

did do. He says they "renounced the hidden things of dishonesty." They used no unfair means to make proselytes; they did not "walk in craftiness"; they used no cunning trickery to seduce men into their party; they renounced all the secret tricks and cunning craftiness and hidden mysteries, by means of which the leaders of other parties deceived the people. (See Eph. 4:14.) They pursued an open, aboveboard, straightforward course. They did not "handle the word of God deceitfully."

How may a man do this? What is meant by "handling the word of God deceitfully"? I answer, by making it speak a language that the author did not intend, or convey a different idea from what the Lord intended to convey. This may be done by taking parts of sentences from different portions of the Book, and putting them together under another arrangement. In this way a man can prove anything he pleases from the [50] Bible. The Scripture says that Judas "went and hanged himself"; and Jesus says: "Go thou and do likewise." Now, this is all Scripture, and what does it prove? Why, that a man should hang himself. Now, this is handling the word of God deceitfully.

The same may be done by suppressing a part of a sentence. Example: "Let him that stole, steal" (Eph. 4:28). Now, that is every word Scripture, and it proves that it is right to steal. But the apostle finishes the sentence with the words "no more"--"Let him that stole, steal no more." Now, the preachers in that old sect never handled the word of the Lord in this way. They did not disconnect and scrap the word of God; they did not handle it deceitfully, for the purpose of making proselytes. They gave God's word fair play. By "manifestation of the truth, they commended themselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." They proclaimed the plain, unvarnished truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and thus, by "warning every man, and teaching every man," they reached the hearts and consciences of the people.

But when they thus reached their consciences, until they were pierced in heart, and asked what they must do, what course did these teachers pursue? What did they tell the poor, trembling, heart-smitten, anxious, inquiring, mourning seeker to do? Reader, don't call from behind the [51] curtain any sect now living, until we hear the direction of one of the leaders and teachers in the sect whose distinguishing features we are now endeavoring to set before you, given to persons in this very distressing state of mind. Hear it, reader; hear it with an honest heart: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2:38).

Now, what did these mourning souls do? Did they begin to object, and argue the case with the apostle? Did they begin to inquire what good there was in water baptism? No, verily. They were in good earnest; they were honest before God. Hence, it is said: "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized, and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls" (v. 41). Here, then, is a practical illustration of their whole process of making Christians and adding them to the church.

Now we are prepared to contemplate this ancient sect in all its parts. It now stands out before us in bold relief. We have found its creed, its name, its officers and polity, its ordinances, and its manner of converting sinners and adding them to the church. We have seen that all who became members of this religious body heard the Word until it was commended to their hearts, and that they then repented of their sins, and were [52] baptized. Mark this well. They were all obedient believers.

Now, I feel very confident that no man who professes faith in Christ, or in His word, will dispute one proposition that we have made, or one of the distinguishing features that we have pointed out in the religious party that we have been describing, unless it be the very last sentence which I penned in the description. But if any doubt the truth of that statement, we must leave them to their own musing, only

requesting them to examine that proposition very carefully, before making a final decision.

We now have one important question to answer, after which we shall close this discourse. Does that ancient sect now exist? Is it still standing, or has it waxed old, like a garment, and vanished away? Have the desolating ravages of ambitious men, which have uprooted kingdoms, desolated countries, blotted from existence churches, and changed times and seasons, slain that old party of which we have been speaking? Has the ever-rolling wave of time swept it away forever, or does it still maintain a visible existence among the myriads of ecclesiastical organisms of the present day? These, gentle reader, are important questions. If, as you have admitted, that old sect was the only right party at that time, and if there is no Bible authority for the existence of any other religious party or body, then it is important to [53] know whether that party is dead or alive. We then repeat the question, Does that party now exist?

"Yes," says the Roman Catholic, "it still exists. Here it is; we are that same old sect, come down in regular succession from the apostles. We have the regular apostolic succession, and, therefore, are the same body of people, and all who desire to be members of the real, genuine, old mother church, should join us."

But I hear an objection--a deep-toned, thundering voice, like the sound of many waters--crying out, "No, no! we are the true party. We are the same old sect that was everywhere spoken against; we have the true and regular apostolic succession." This voice comes of the Protestant Episcopal Church, or the high church of England. But, if this is true, she must have changed her position since our text was written, for then it was the low church spoken against all over the country. But it is not my object to settle the question as to which is, or which is not, the true church. I only make this suggestion in passing.

I suppose, however, that it is a well-known fact that there is a controversy now going on between the Roman Catholics and Episcopalians, on the subject of the succession. Each seems to admit that if they can not trace their church organization and their ministerial ordination through an unbroken chain back to the apostles, their church fails to be the church of Christ; that it is an unauthorized [54] sect; a figment broken off from the true church or body of Christ.

The Protestant Episcopal Church reasons thus: They say that the church is no more a new church after the efforts of Henry the VIII., than a man is a new man when he falls into a mud puddle and then washes himself clean. He may look very different, but still he is the same man. So, they say, it was with the church. They admit that the church had become very corrupt, that it was much defiled by sin; but that Henry VIII., of England, cleansed the church, washing off its impurities, and that these excrescences gathered themselves together, and by some unholy principle of adhesion formed the Roman Catholic Church! This, however, is denied by the Church of Rome. She contends that she is the only holy and apostolic church, and that Henry was excommunicated for his worldly ambition and fleshly lusts, and his want of fidelity to his legal wife.

But, while these two great religious bodies are contending for the apostolic succession, each endeavoring to defend its title to primitive ground, I hear the muttering sound of voices, as of a mighty multitude all in confusion, crying out and saying: "You are both wrong; we are the old sect; we have come down in a regular line from apostolic times." But, when pressed at this point, I find most of them denying the succession as claimed by the churches of Rome and England, [55] and contending that every man has a right to make his own church, and found his own church polity!

Reader, are you a Protestant? Then I know your course of reasoning, when you are examining the claims of the Church of Rome to being the sect spoken of in our text. You first ascertain all the leading features of

that old party, and then you compare these with the leading peculiarities of the church as it now exists; and if these do not correspond, you say the churches are not the same. Suppose, for illustration, that some leading member of the Methodist Church should assume that the Methodist Church is the real old Baptist Church, that had come down in regular succession from the days of Roger Williams. You would reply: "This can not be; as a church, you have a different creed, a different name, different officers, different ordinances, and you have a different mode of receiving members; therefore, being different from the Baptists in all these points, it can not be the same church."

Just so you reason the case with the Romish Church. You bring up before your mind all the leading distinguishing features of that old church that was so generally spoken against in the beginning, just as I have done in this discourse, and then you compare these items with the corresponding items in the Romish Church, and, finding such a great difference, you decide that that is not [56] the same church. You say the Romish Church has a very different creed and system of church polity from that old sect; that it is different in name, and, as to officers, it has swarms of these that were unknown in that old church, and as to ordinances, you say that there is no resemblance between them at all. Now, you say, with all these differences, it can not be the same church.

In all this, my dear reader, you are correct. Your reasonings are logical and fair, and your conclusions just and true.

Now, all that we ask of one who may be desirous to know the truth on this subject, is for him to adopt the same course of reasoning in every case, when attempting to ascertain which is the sect that is named in our tent. Bring up all these leading features, and compare them with those of any denomination now claiming succession from that old religious body, and I will be satisfied with the result. Whenever you find a religious body, or church, organized upon and governed by the same creed and church laws, and by them alone, called by the same name, having the same officers, with the same powers--practicing the same ordinances and using the same means for the conversion of sinners--telling the penitent believer to do the same things for remission, and receiving members into the church in the same way that that old party did, you have then found the same sect, the same religious body. Yes, this is the true succession. [57] It is not a succession of ordination, or of ordained ministers, but a succession of faith and practice, that makes the true, holy, apostolic succession.

Should a company of persons who never saw a Bible or a priest be shipwrecked, and cast upon some uninhabited island; should they there find a Bible containing both Testaments, and, by reading it, they all become firm believers in Christ, the Son of God, and the divine Saviour--suppose, then, that one of the company baptizes one of the number, and he, in turn, baptizes the rest; suppose, then, that they adopt that holy Book, containing the teaching of the apostles and prophets of God, as their only rule of faith and practice; they appoint their bishops and deacons according to that Book, and proceed to keep the ordinances as they were delivered by the apostles--that would be, to all intents and purposes, the same body of people--not the same persons, but the same religious organism. It would be the regular, pure and holy apostolic church.

Now, I am not going to make the application. My object has been to prepare the reader of this discourse to make the application himself. I have endeavored to develop great, important principles--principles the truth of which is uncontroverted--hoping that the reader will have interest enough in the subject of church standing to give the subject careful examination, and honesty of heart and nobility of soul sufficient to enable him to act [58] according to the honest convictions of his own mind, enlightened by truth divine, on

the great subject of Christianity.

Reader, this is no ordinary subject. The importance of this theme overreaches the cold boundaries of time, and lays hold on things eternal and invisible. Your interests in two worlds depend upon your action in the premises. Oh, then, be honest with yourself, your conscience, your Bible, your God, and act for eternity while you may. [59]

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/elijah-goodwin/the-sect-everywhere-spoken-against/>

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