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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ibs-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php)

Shortly after I graduated in theology I was invited to join an ecumenical study group one of whose leading members was Jimmie Haire. Most of our time was devoted to discussing the nature of the church as seen in the New Testament, among the Fathers, at the time of the Reformation and today. I do not believe we ever dealt in detail with the point which is raised in this article though much we said bordered on it.

The first two clauses of 1 Peter 2.17, a text well-known in N. Ireland because of its appearance on Orange Order banners, raise the issue: 'Honour all men. Love the brotherhood'. The brotherhood in this letter is of course the church and not the Orange Order. The text makes a distinction in the way Christians should treat one another from the way they should treat those not of the church. Such a distinction is regularly found in sects. Hence the title of the essay.

We need to begin by saying something about how the term 'sect' is used in this brief essay. It is not used in the way many Christians who belong to the larger churches use it of small bodies whom they regard as on the fringe of Christianity but rather in the way in which sociologists employ it. The people to whom 1 Peter is written though a small body were not a small body on the fringes of a great church. There was no great church. They were a small body on the fringe of a wholly non-Christian culture. As such they might be expected to display some of the characteristics which sociologists detect in 'sects'. Such groups normally have, at least in their own view, clearly defined boundaries which set them off from the surrounding society. They seek to keep themselves pure from its contaminating influence. They take great care of their own members and if misfortune befalls one of them the remainder are assiduous in rendering assistance. They adopt rigid doctrinal and ethical positions and are not slow to deal with members who fail in these respects. All this suggests a certain exclusiveness, yet they are not exclusive in the sense that they do not seek more members; they are normally avidly missionary minded. It is clear that at least some of these features distinguished some sections of the first

century church as described in the New Testament.

Now to return to 1 Peter and the distinction it draws in the attitude Christians should adopt to one another and to outsiders. The emphasis on love within the brotherhood is found elsewhere in the letter (1.22; 4.8) and at many other points in the New Testament (Rom. 12.10; 1 Thess. 4.9-12; Heb. 13.1). The idea is also expressed in other ways, especially in the phrase 'love one another' (John 13.34-5; 15.12,17; 1 John 3.23). The term 'brother' almost certainly entered Christianity from Judaism via Jesus but was easily appreciated by Gentiles who became Christians because of its use in contemporary religious cults. For Christians it represented the close way in which they felt themselves related to one another as members of the same family (cf. Mark 3.31-35; 10.29-30). In many cases the ties of biological kinship in which they had been nurtured were shattered when they became Christians; within the church however they found themselves members of a new family which cared for them as much as if not more than their old families had done. Although other passages in the New Testament emphasise the need to love fellow-Christians the distinction drawn in 1 Peter 2.17 between the two attitudes to fellow-Christians and to non-Christians is not found in any of them. The sustained stress on love to fellow-Christians may suggest it lay unexpressed in the minds of their authors but this cannot be proved.

It is this distinction which is puzzling and perhaps embarrassing. When we examine what Jesus said we find the distinction is not only missing but contradicted. Jesus took up the Jewish teaching on the love of one's neighbour (Lev. 19.18), which contemporary Jews understood as meaning that Jew should love fellow-Jew, and he changed it into a love for all men. This is the burden of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37; cf. Mark 12.28-34). When again Jesus said to his followers that they should love their enemies (Matt. 5.43-44) he was not suggesting that they should love only their enemies who were fellow-Jews but all, whether Jews or Gentiles, whom they regarded as enemies.

When Paul comes to talk about love we have seen that he does speak of love within the brotherhood but unlike the other writers of the New Testament he also speaks of

love for all men with an emphasis like that of Jesus. Love of neighbours is the fulfilling of the law (Rom. 13.8-10; Gal. 5.14). In Gal. 5.14 Paul ties the general law to the particular case of the way Christians should treat one another as v.15 shows and in 1 Thess. 3.12 he connects love to all men with love to fellow-Christians (cf Gal. 10.6). Love for the brotherhood is then for Paul a special case of love for all men. He is thus clearly aware of the the universal nature of the command of Jesus though he applies it in some instances to the internal life of the church. In some of the other writers of the New Testament, as we have seen, the existence of the general command is not recognised and the narrower command of love of the brotherhood is stressed. This means that for Paul unlike these other writers there was no danger of thinking that Christians and non-Christians should be treated differently. If that distinction is a characteristic of a sect for Paul the church is not a sect.

Returning to 1 Peter and the distinction in the ways people should be treated we can see that the existence of the distinction implies that at least in the writer's mind and in those of his readers it would be known who were brothers and who were not. Those within the church would be able to recognise their fellow-members and the church would have clearly defined boundaries. This is another characteristic of the sectarian mentality. But if boundaries go with different treatment for those within and without them and if Jesus taught that all men should be treated in the same way does this mean that he did not draw a line round his followers marking them off from those who were not his followers? He certainly laid down conditions to be fulfilled before anyone could count himself as a follower. But these were not the kind of conditions which can be easily used to draw rigid lines. Who can legislate to define 'crosses' if bearing the cross is the sign of discipleship (Mark 8.34)? Who can enter into the mind of others to determine whether they have been born again if this is what makes them Christians (John 3.5)?

That Jesus did not draw rigid lines can be seen more positively in other ways. He taught that God made no distinction in the way he treated people since he sends

his rain and makes his sun to shine equally without discrimination on the evil and the good (Matt. 5.45; note that this is linked to the passage about loving one's enemies and thus provides a basis for treating all men and women in the same way). One day John complained to Jesus that there was a man practising exorcism in the name of Jesus who did not belong to the group of disciples; John had forbidden him to continue to do so. John had obviously a clear idea that there should be a defined boundary around the group of the followers of Jesus and he knew where he would draw it and who was in it and who was not. Jesus however would not agree with John and told him that those who were not against him were for him. This is unpleasant doctrine for Christians who like to be able to lay down rules to determine who are Christians and who are not. Matthew who has been described as the ecclesiological evangelist apparently found the incident not to his taste and omitted it!

One of the complaints made by his contemporaries against Jesus was his friendship with those classed by surrounding society as immoral (Matt. 11.19; Luke 7.34). After Levi's response to his call to join him Jesus went to a party, probably in Levi's house, where there were many such immoral people. When he was criticised he responded by saying that he had come not to call the righteous but sinners (Mark 2.17). We are so accustomed to this text in the form Luke gives it where he adds 'to repentance' that we forget that Jesus was speaking of calling people to himself (or possibly 'to God'). He did not lay down a condition, repentance, which had to be fulfilled by those with whom he would associate. His call was completely open. His criticisms of the Pharisees were fierce because they made their rules defining the boundaries and shut the kingdom of heaven against the access of others (Matt. 23.13). Their whole attitude was one of exclusiveness.

If then Jesus laid down this emphasis at the beginning and if we find in 1 Peter a distinction drawn between the way Christians should treat other Christians and the way they should treat non-Christians how did the change come about? That Christians should stress their love for one another is perfectly natural since they regarded themselves as a family and since it is always

easier to love those who love us than those who are indifferent, if not positively hostile, to our love. The awareness that our love will be returned will of itself create in our minds a distinction between those who so return it and those who do not. The boundaries of the 'family' are created by the mutual relation of the members to one another. If moreover the members are seen to love one another this makes it easier for those who are not Christians to perceive the reality of the love Christians preach about. All men will know that we are Christ's disciples when we love one another (John 13.34).

There were however much more important factors which led to the drawing of boundaries and the distinction in attitude towards Christians and non-Christians. If other Christians returned love when it was shown the rest of the world usually did not, and in many cases was actively hostile. The formal or governmental persecution of Christians was only sporadic in the first century. Nero may have punished them for allegedly setting fire to Rome but there was no general persecution throughout the empire. There is however strong evidence in the New Testament that Christians frequently suffered at the hands of their immediate neighbours or the local authorities (e.g. Acts 17.5-9; Heb. 10.32-33). We can realise how common this must have been when we remember how the first Christians in the new mission fields of the nineteenth century suffered similar hostile pressure even though their controlling colonial governments were friendly to Christianity.

Pressure from outside would then drive the Christians in on themselves and define their boundaries for them even if they had no desire to do this for themselves. There was of course much more than actual persecution which led to outsiders seeing the distinction between themselves and Christians and which led to Christians needing to draw the boundaries more clearly. We can see this in Paul's long discussion of what to do in regard to the eating of food sacrificed to idols. Some had great difficulty in deciding whether they should eat or not. They felt the pagan world pressing in on them and needed a clear line to be drawn which would preserve them from falling back into their former pagan ways. They would have felt the same in respect of many other areas of

their new lives. That Christians adopted different standards from pagans in respect of many of these matters meant that they became aware of themselves as a unit, and so of their boundaries.

If Christians were to be successful in their evangelism it was important that the world should think well of them and their behaviour. So we find Paul relating love for the brethren to the exhortation that they should be careful of the impression they made on others (1 Thess. 4.9-12). If men saw the genuine nature of their love for one another they would give God the glory, i.e. become Christians (Matt. 5.16; cf. 1 Pet. 2.12). When Christians quarrel among themselves the world turns away from them. What then happens when there are those within the church who by their behaviour cause it to be criticised? What happens if someone behaves in a way that would be regarded as immoral even by non-Christians? Such a person must be excluded from the fellowship (1 Cor. 5.1-5); the old leaven must be cleared out so that the new leaven of the gospel may be seen (1 Cor. 5.6-8). We should note in passing that Paul does not regard the incestuous believer as irrevocably damned when expelled from the fellowship; he hopes that expulsion will result in his salvation (5.5). The church then to maintain its own good name was forced to discipline those of its members who went astray. The act of discipline gradually produced definitions as to what constituted the boundaries of the church.

We can begin to see then how the church in some areas, for 1 Peter may not be typical of all areas, gradually began to take on sectarian characteristics. These did not come from an inner dynamic within the church working itself out but rather from the pressure exerted on the church by the cultural situation in which it existed. There is little evidence that it was fostered by any sense that the church proudly possessed the truth in a way that no other group did, as we find in some fringe sects today. The cases of discipline which helped in defining boundaries arose at this stage more out of divergences in behaviour than of belief. There appears indeed to have been considerable variety of belief within the New Testament church.

Sectarianism, if we may put it like that, was then

forced on the church rather than being a necessary characteristic of its nature and existence. It grew out of the hostile situation in which the church found itself in the first century. Such hostility towards the church is still found in many parts of the world today, but in others it is missing. Where that hostility is absent the church then must always be careful not to adopt an unnecessarily rigid sectarian position, though of course it will from time to time have to define its boundaries in respect of belief and behaviour. Its history shows that it has always been too eager to exclude and has adopted more often the attitude of the Pharisees than that of Jesus. His teaching must never be ignored in the rush to exclude those we do not like or of whose faith or morals we do not approve.