

# Wings

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*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”  
Isaiah 40:31*



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## The Spirit of Sectarianism

The greatest barrier to unity among God's people is not error on specific issues, but a deeper problem, the desire to resolve our issues by dividing.

“For we have found this man a plague, a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes” (Ac. 24:5).

“But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets” (Ac. 24:14).

These two statements, delivered before the Roman governor Felix, represent two divergent views of early Christianity. The Jewish orator Tertullus describes the new faith as a “sect,” another splinter in the already divided religion of Judaism (the sect of the Pharisees, Ac. 15:5; the sect of the Sadducees, Ac. 5:17; and now the sect of the Nazarenes). Paul's response to the charge disavows that label, preferring to describe his faith as based on “all things which are written” in the Scriptures.

Whatever their different perceptions of Christianity, the common understanding shared by both men was that sectarianism was evil. Within the community

of Christians themselves, sectarianism was frequently condemned. Warnings against “heresies” (Gal. 5:20, 2 Pet. 2:1) and “factions” (1 Cor. 11:19) use the same word as “sect” in Ac. 24. The original word means literally “a choice,” thus, “a predilection either for a particular truth, or for a perversion of one, generally with the expectation of personal advantage; hence, a division and formation of a party or sect in contrast to the uniting power of ‘the truth’” (Vine, *Expository Dictionary of N. T. Words*). The spirit of sectarianism, in other words, is not necessarily a conflict between truth versus error, but *the desire to divide into warring factions* over the issues that we disagree upon. The threat is not the beliefs themselves, but the eagerness to push those beliefs to the point of division, even over matters that do not require uniformity of conviction.

The history of Christianity provides a sorry display of the spirit of sectarianism at work. The various creeds and statements of faith erected by every new denomination are nothing more than attempts to institutionalize the disagree-

ments that believers have over a variety of issues. Rather than resolve the differences and maintain unity using the tools God has provided in His word, believers take the easy path and simply create a new sect.

Even churches of Christ, historically opposed to creedal religion, have fallen victim to the spirit of sectarianism. In recent years, some churches have circulated a list of questions on key doctrinal issues, insisting that preachers they support answer the questions “correctly” as a condition for support. These questionnaires are no different from creeds—artificial human boundaries imposed on top of the Scriptures, inevitably promoting division among God's people.

The basis of our unity is, as Paul noted, “all things which are written.” Factions may be forced upon us by those who follow a different standard (1 Cor. 11:19), but that is their choice, not ours. Christ came to bring peace among men, and His followers must reflect that mission in their relations with one another. The spirit of sectarianism destroys everything Jesus died to achieve.

– David King