

# SERMONS

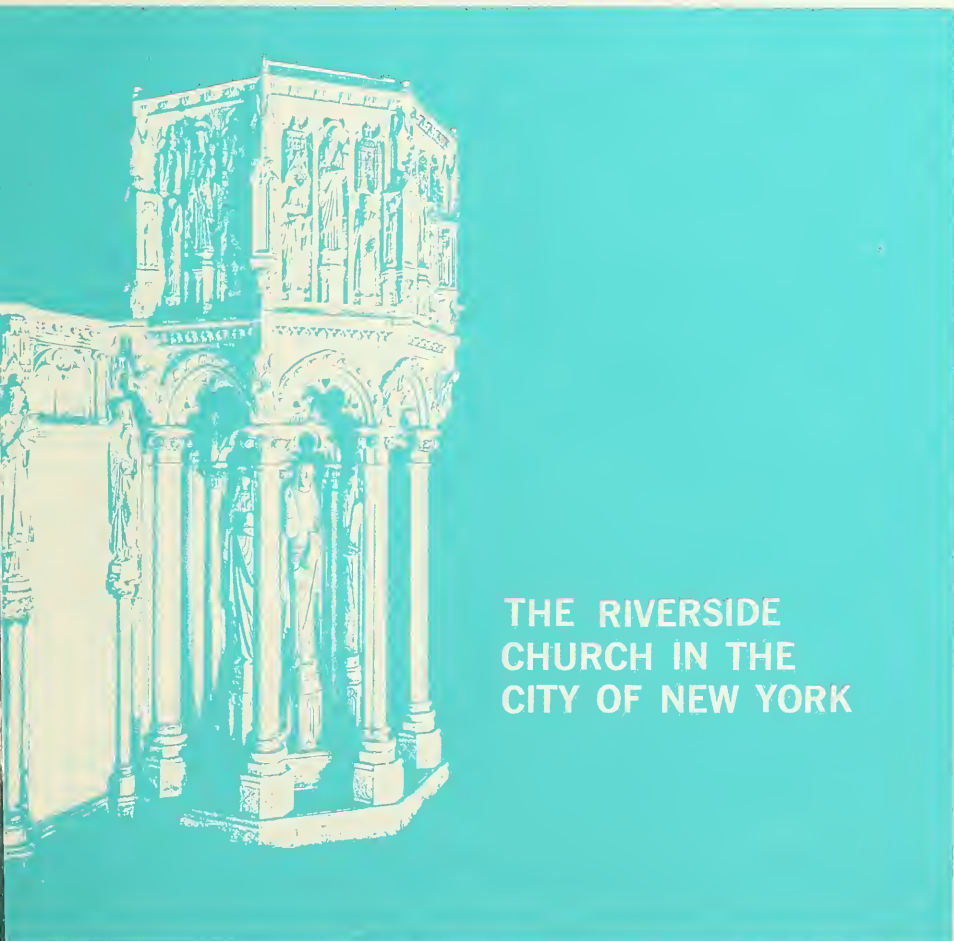
FROM RIVERSIDE

## THE MOOD OF DISCONNECTION

"If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body."

I Corinthians 12:15

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Those who thrill to the use of clear and forceful language in the service of humanity have long since discovered the persuasive pen of Norman Cousins. Recently the renowned editor of the Saturday Review tossed off a term that fell into the web of my mind and stuck. He asserted that one of the dominant moods of our society is the mood of disconnection. Men and women, feeling the mounting pressures of life, frustrated by problems for which they have neither time nor answers, seek relief by severing their connections with the larger world around them.

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Something like this is indeed happening in America. Perhaps you noticed that just the other day Dr. Jeffrey Hadden of Tulane University, a sociologist, released a report that showed the results of a poll he had taken involving some two thousand students. The responses of these students to life around them prompted him to entitle the report "The Private Generation." The majority of those interviewed were giving themselves to what the professor called "personalism." He described "personalism" as student withdrawal from institutions into the self, and the rejection of meaning or authority outside of the self.1

The exasperation and anger that a growing number of Americans feel regarding the war in Vietnam, threatens to produce a neo-isolationism in this land. Let us disconnect.

In many different areas people are exercising the option of disconnection. Dis-affiliation is the order of the day. Students are dropping out of school, voters

are dropping out of parties, politicians are dropping out of public life, ministers are dropping out of ordination, citizens are dropping out of cities. Yes, and members are dropping out of churches. The mood of disconnection.

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St. Paul anticipated that this mood would be a threat to the life of the church. He addressed himself to the matter in the development of his metaphor of the church as the body of Christ. St. Paul did not hatch this metaphor, he appropriated it from the secular order. Aristotle, years earlier, had spoken of the state as the "body politic." This whole passage says some very basic things about the church, and, in my judgment, says them with a light and almost humorous touch. The dominant idea in back of the metaphor is that to be a Christian is to be a member of the body. The New Testament knows nothing of solitary religion. An old proverb has it that "One man is no man." Within the framework of New Testament thought it would be true to say that "One Christian is no Christian." This is what Thomas Mann was speaking to when he said, "It is hard indeed without companionship to have faith, and undeniable that actions which proceed from an entirely private and single belief have easily something unbalanced about them." 2

Paul touches on the mood of disconnection by pointing up two ways in which this mood is likely to find expression in the church. It can happen, in the first instance, when the individual part disparages itself and seeks to disconnect itself. "If the foot should say because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body." In our wiser moments we believe, do we not, that the church must have a variety of gifts, including our own. As we understand the mission of the church we recognize that there must be an assortment of perceptions, experiences, age groups, talents, personalities and mind-sets. In our wiser moments we recognize this, but there

are times, particularly times of great stress, when we are overcome by a sense of futility and deep down no longer believe that what we do makes any difference. I would suppose that the larger the church the more prevalent this line of thought. "Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body." Because I don't have some of the more startling and eye-catching capacities and abilities I really have nothing to contribute.

At times this feeling hardens into a sanctified form of self-pity and becomes serious. There is an intriguing chap who appears in the Old Testament briefly. He does not come out too well in the treatment. His name was Ahithophel. He is the patron saint of many in the church today who decide to "cut out" when their point of view is not embraced. Ahithophel was counselor to King David and to David's son and chief aid, Absalom. On one occasion David and Absalom suspected that Ahithophel was working for the other side. Consequently, when he gave advice they chose not to follow it. The Bible speaks very frankly and swiftly of the effects of this rejection: "When Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his ass, and went off home to his own city. And he set his house in order, and hanged himself; and he died, and was buried in the tomb of his father." (II Samuel 7:23) Suicide - the ultimate disconnection.

"If the foot should say, because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body" - Paul goes on to say "that would not make it any less a part of the body." (I Cor 12:15) You are connected! You do belong! You are needed!

But there is another way in which the mood of disconnection shows itself in the church. It can appear in those instances when we try to disconnect or "un-church" someone else. Drop down to the 21st verse of this chapter and you find the words, "The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you, nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you." (I Cor 12:21)

I may be wrong, but I think Paul must have chortled a bit as he wrote this and toyed with it in his imagination. Imagine the head, trying to make it on its own, getting up some sunny day and saying, "I'm going over to the library to improve my already brilliant mind;" and the feet saying in reply, "Not if I don't get you there you're not!" Or the eyes, trying to pull rank, saying, "I'm going to sweep my vision up and down the Hudson and take in the whole Jersey shore line;" and the hand retorting, "Not if I don't raise the shade you're not!"

One of the most scintillating men I have ever known is Kenneth Boulding who was at the University of Michigan during our years in Ann Arbor. He is one of the front-ranking scholars in the field of conflict resolution. In his book, The Meaning of the Twentieth Century, Boulding offers this rather homespun but penetrating observation: "There are many things that one man can do because other people are not doing them. If everybody at the same time decided to go downtown, draw money out of the bank or even pay their debts, the whole system would collapse." 3

Isn't this the way it is with the church? Can you imagine the effect on Fred Swann if everybody showed up to sing in the choir? How long would it take James Holmes to recover if everybody turned out to teach in the church school? What would we do with the whole congregation if you all came out to help us organize the Moratorium on Vietnam? The point is that some of us in the church are allowed to function where and as we do because the rest are functioning where they belong and according to their talents.

The people of God have many fish to fry. And we dare not forget this in the interest of some overwhelming need of the moment. There are three sides to the church that the people of God are concerned about. We are concerned about the church we present to God - which has to do with the way we worship and the integ-

rity of our theology. We are concerned about the church we present to each other - opportunities for fellowship and friendship, priesting and nurturing one another. We are concerned about the church we present to the world - what we think of justice and do about injustice, the dramas that we prepare and stage, the radio station we use, the education in which we engage, the healing of the sick, the teaching of the illiterate, the sheltering of the homeless and the needy.

The trick in any congregation is to strive for balance while being faithful to all three. I am committed very seriously to the importance of having a balanced church. I have asked myself many, many times in recent years, "If you got what you yearned for what would it look like?" Would a balanced congregation be made up of members each of whom could do a little bit of everything? So that if I met one of my members on a given morning I could ask him to pray with a sick man, teach Ephesians, draw up a budget, or help us organize a boycott for the mothers of the ghetto.

This might be the ultimate, but it simply is not possible. The more one thinks about it the more he wonders whether such a church would be the ideal church anyway. I am not particularly attracted to the so-called well-rounded Christian. He reminds me too much of the academic professor who knows all the sides of every case but champions none! The times call for men and women who have a sense of advocacy about what they think is the most important thing in the church's life. The man who tries to be all things to everyone usually becomes nothing to anybody. We lose our cutting edge by trying as individuals to do justice to all claims.

What if it be true that the balance is not to be found in individual members but in the body as a whole? What if the hand must keep on saying, "the hand is very important," knowing as he says it that the foot is also saying, "don't forget I'm important too." It seems to

me that this makes for a living and life-giving church. Rather than have everybody pull back until nobody is excited about anything, let each man do his thing. But let him do it without disconnectioning his fellow members in the body. When a part tries to function as the whole, the situation becomes demonic.

It's not just enough to tolerate the others. There comes a time, maybe once a month, when each member ought to fall on his knees and thank God that all the members are not exactly like him. Did you ever think how tragic the church if every member were just like you? It's not so much that one group in contending for a prayer meeting is countering a group contending for a march on City Hall. It's not a matter of counter-ing, it has to do with completing each other. "The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you. Nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you."

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To sum it up, have confidence in your own insights, your own experience of God. Don't poor-mouth yourself by saying "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body." And since each of us has a unique contribution to make, a particular conviction about priorities and mission, let us fulfill this gift and express it to the limit of our ability, recognizing that others have the right, because they are equally members of the same body, to express and fulfill their calling. "The unity of the church is not that of inorganic nature, a monotonous aggregation of similars, as in a pool of water or a heap of stones; it is the oneness of a living organism, no member of which exercises the same function as the other." <sup>4</sup>

"If all were a single organ," said Paul - which is a more polite way of saying, "If everyone were like you," "where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts and yet one body." And what coordinates it all? What keeps it all civil and productive is a com-



mon allegiance to the head, Jesus Christ. For as Paul put it in his Ephesian letter, "He is the head and on him the whole body depends. Bonded and knit together by every constituent joint, the whole frame grows through the due activity of each part, and builds itself up in love." (Eph. 4:16 NEB) May it be so of us in this place.

FOOTNOTES:

1. The New York Times, September 29, 1969
2. Mann, Thomas, The Holy Sinner, p. 268, tr by H. T. Lowe-Porter, Alfred A. Knopf, 1951
3. Boulding, Kenneth, The Meaning of the Twentieth Century, p. 67, Harpers, 1965
4. Findlay, G. G., The Expositor's Greek Testament Vol. II, p. 889, Eerdmans





