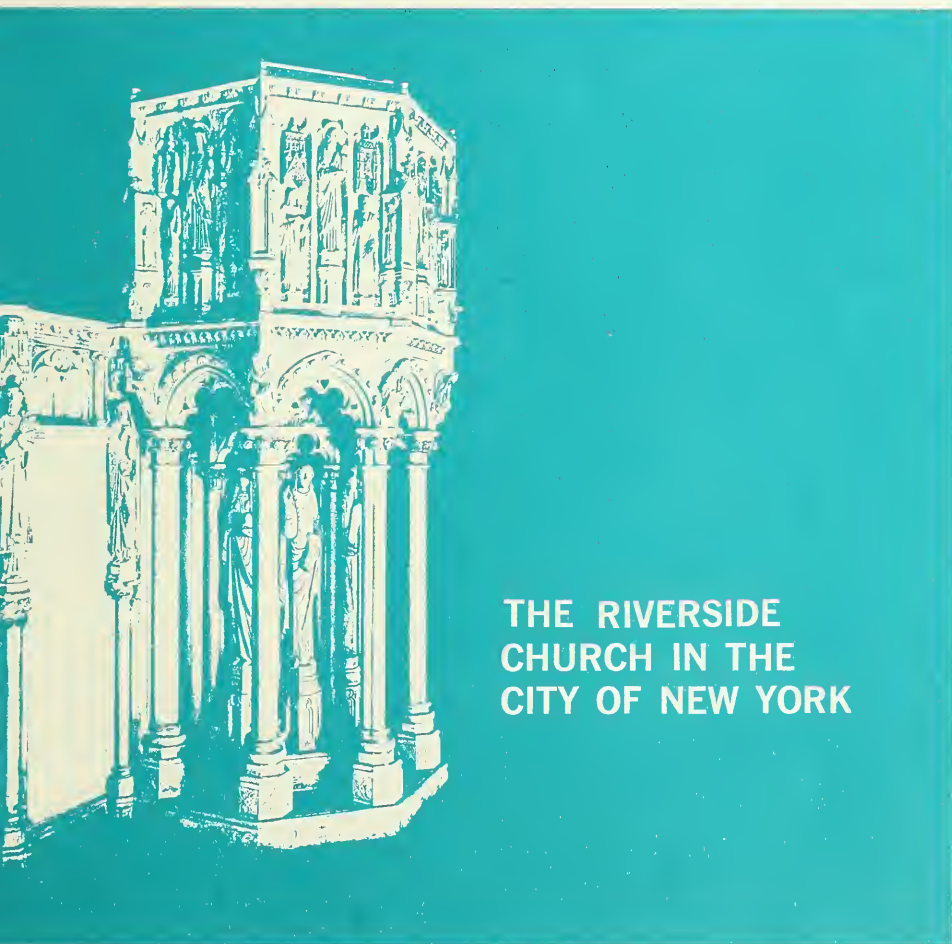


# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


TESTING THE SPIRITS

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## TESTING THE SPIRITS

*Scripture: I John 4:1-3*

It goes without saying that change is the dominant fact of our time. The winds of change whistle up and down the land and whip in upon us from around the world.

Individuals and institutions alike have been forced to develop a stance toward change. For some the stance is one of resistance at all cost. At work here is the idolization of a day that is past. The watch word of this camp is Ichabod - "the glory has departed." The best is not to be, it has already been. The controlling equation is "change equals decay."

For some the stance is one of unqualified acceptance. Neolatry is the heresy at work in this position -- the worship of the new. Here can be detected what might be called the Athenian Syndrome. We read of Paul's visit to Mars' Hill: "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new." (Acts 17:21) In this camp tradition is denigrated and history is rendered suspect. The motto that prevails is "Anything new is better than anything old."

For still others, the stance is one of agonizing appraisal. Each "new" that beckons is carefully weighed and measured. It is neither rejected, out of hand, nor automatically blest and welcomed.

This latter stance, I believe, is the only one that the church can adopt responsibly. As John's first letter reminds us, we are not to believe every spirit. There is such a thing as a Zeitgeist, a spirit of the age. We must test the spirits to see whether they are of God.

Among the gifts that God gives to his church, ac-

ording to I Corinthians 12, is the ability to distinguish between spirits. As new theologies are proposed, new forms of worship, new strategies for deploying the ranks, new styles of ministry, new definitions of benevolence, new understandings of mission, we must in each case try the spirits to see whether they are of God.

I believe that we will be judged at the end by the fads that we have resisted and the trends that we have followed. I use the word fad here in the sense of a short-lived novelty. I use the word trend to describe the durable new that bears the imprimatur of God's spirit and not the spirit of the age.

But the big question remains. How can we tell one from the other? If I know my own heart, I am tempted to say that what I believe in is a trend but that what you believe in is a fad. How can we extricate ourselves from this excessive subjectivity? To what can we look for a norm?

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I chose the 4th Chapter of I John as our scripture for the day because I believe that it can help us at this critical point. It provides a standard of measurement as to what we should resist and what we should welcome as Christians.

It should be noted by way of background that this epistle was written primarily to counter the heresy of Gnosticism. We don't have much heresy nowadays primarily because we have no standards. I say it kindly, if our fathers had not been somewhat careful about what the church believed the chances are that we'd be something other than Christians today!

Gnosticism was a complicated heresy. Its name derives from a word in Greek for knowledge. It had an esoteric quality about it, because only the elite

could fathom the inner mystery. But what I think disturbed John and others about Gnosticism was that it represented a false spiritualization of the gospel. The Gnostics really could not believe that God actually inhabited the earth.

Cleverly Ford in a quick way summarizes the main accents of Gnosticism: "1. Language about Jesus Christ is no longer concrete. He has no flesh and blood. He does not dwell among men. 2. Man becomes the battleground between flesh and spirit, he is not a unity. This is because the Biblical Hebraic understanding of man is abandoned. 3. Biblical realism is replaced by symbolism. 4. The Old Testament is rejected and with it the notion of God as Creator and one who has dealings with man. 5. There is no community of faith on earth, the ecclesia is an aeon, pre-existent and heavenly."<sup>1</sup>

These people divided life. They separated the Old Testament from the New Testament, God from the world, the supermundane Christ from the historical Jesus, man's spirit from man's body. Redemption, for the Gnostic, was the separation of the Spirit from matter. To them the material order was inherently, unavoidably and intrinsically evil.

This explains why John wrote that "every spirit who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (that is, who denies these Gnostic allegations) is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God."

There is a suggestive alternate rendering of the last part of that verse which is supported by the Vulgate. Every spirit which does not confess solvit Jesum -- dissolves Jesus, or severs Jesus, or annuls or unmakes or destroys Jesus. It is the conviction of a renowned ecclesiastical historian by the name of Socrates that this wording was original and that it was subsequently altered by those who wished to sep-

arate the deity from the man of the incarnation. Christians must reckon seriously with the incarnation, which means reckoning seriously with history! "Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God."

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With that as a canon, let us sample together a few of the questions that concern us these days as the "new" keeps breaking in upon us. What about social activism on the part of the church? Let us be honest and concede that there are many whose expectations of the church do not include social action. They see the church primarily as a body that engages in worship, education and fellowship -- period! Any penetration of the world, in their view, takes place through the proclamation of the word in what is loosely called "the missionary movement" and the individual initiatives of Christians wherever they are.

The assumption here is that if enough people are converted to Jesus Christ they will exercise such positive Christian influences as will change things for the better. They hold that a geometric progression can take place that will enable believers to exert an influence far beyond their numbers.

But I believe that if we are to take history seriously, if we are not to "sever" Jesus in our time we will have to move beyond the practice of personal virtue. I say this because we are being increasingly controlled not by single other people here and there but by entities that are large, corporate and impersonal.

For the church to take history seriously in our day it must deal responsibly with these imposing entities. There are many engineers out in Seattle who are unemployed. On the day that they were laid off they were no less able to handle engineering than they



were the day before. They are not out of work because they lacked initiative, or because their employment record is one of cronic absenteeism. They were laid off because the government made a decision to discontinue the SST project.

When banks set the prime rate of interest in this country they affect directly your decision to start or not to start a new house -- irrespective of how frugal, loyal, and good-neighborly you are.

When the federal government decides that it can tolerate an unemployment rate of five percent in the nation, thousands of our citizens are affected regardless of their initiative or dedication.

Social activism is not extraneous to the gospel. It is not something that we "endure" from a church in order to occasionally hear the gospel. Social activism is a valid part of the gospel.

There is that other constituency "out there" for which we are accountable. The ones Jesus laid upon us; the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the imprisoned and the stranger. Coming back from Houston, Texas Friday, I noticed for the first time ever that in the parable of the final judgement in Matthew 25, it is not individuals who are separated as sheep from goats, it is nations. The critical question in that searching parable is how did the nations take care of their hungry, their thirsty, their sick, their imprisoned and their strangers? "Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God and every spirit which does not severs Jesus."

What about anti-institutionalism? This question clamors for answers regularly. It is easy to get caught up in a drive against corporate bigness and bureaucratic hollownsss. But is it not clear that to deny the validity of institutions in our time again amounts to a refusal to take history seriously -- and

thus to sever Jesus.

And this not just because institutions are a buffer between man and the awesome powers of the state, but because nothing of worth can survive in history in disembodied form. Maybe that's why God gave your spirit a body to be housed in. Art needs its museums and galleries. Music needs its halls and orchestras. Education needs its schools and libraries. And the gospel needs the church. The campus radicals who were so strong in our country four or five years ago turned out in retrospect to be awfully long on rhetoric but very short on polity. The aim is not to de-institutionalize America but to re-institutionalize it -- freeing our structured collectivities of as much injustice as possible.

Finally, a question that I find myself and others asking often, What about the Jesus movement? What about its corollaries such as the charismatic groups that are springing up all over? The secular press enjoys religious novelty, and the Jesus people are coming on strong especially on the west coast, and in some parts of the midwest.

What should our reaction be? At issue here is something more significant than how we feel about sandaled feet and long hair. We need an objective frame of reference. Is there anyone who would like to stand to say that he is against young people having a primary, soul shaking experience of Jesus? Not I. One young person in the Jesus movement said, "I learned from the orthodox what to believe and from the liberals the meaning of social involvement, but it wasn't until I joined this movement that I learned to love Jesus."

Well and good. The two words that Jesus used most often with people were "come" and "go." One senses that in some sectors of the Jesus movement the only word that has been heard is "come." They have come and they have gathered themselves communally in house



churches and other forms of shared living, but often they have not gone out from there in quest of the better world that belongs to the Christian vision of the Kingdom of God.

That's the question! Not where these people got their start but where they're going with their start. We are not simply to come together for fellowship and mutual enjoyment. Imagine that tomorrow morning the whole sales force of R. H. Macy should gather at the store 10 minutes before opening time and that once inside they should lock all the doors and spend the day selling to each other. That's the model of the inbred church. You sell to me and I sell to you. You share with me and I share with you. Meanwhile, out there where He is working, we are absent.

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"Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God. Every spirit which does not confess severeth Jesus." How appropriate that we should reflect on this truth as we near the Lord's table. Jesus said as he gave us the bread and cup, "This do in remembrance of me." He didn't say, "This think in remembrance of me." -- as though the gospel could be captured in our minds. He didn't say, "This feel in remembrance of me." -- as though the gospel had to do primarily with the emotions. But "this do." "Take, eat. . . drink this," for we are nourished by tangible signs in order that we might make a difference in a tangible world.

Amen.

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Ford, D. W. Cleverly, Preaching Today, p. 37, Epworth Press, 1969.

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