

## "THE DANGER OF SEVERING THE CONNECTIONS OF LIFE"

TEXT: "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)

### INTRODUCTION

Those who thrill to the use of clear and forceful language in the service of humanity have long since discovered the persuasive pen of James Reston. Recently this editor and writer for the New York Times tossed off a term that fell into the web of my thinking 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. Times when many of us are tempted by this mood. Face it in many areas of life.

### DEVELOPMENT

~~One senses that something like this is happening in America today.~~  
A recent poll of two thousand students at Tulane University made there by a professor of sociology and entitled "The Private Generation" indicated that the majority of students 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 the self.

The exasperation and anger that so many have come to feel regarding the war in Vietnam have threatened to produce a new "neo-isolationism" in the land. Let us disconnect is the feeling of many.

James Reston was right. There is a mood of disconnection in the land today. Disaffiliation 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. And yes - members are dropping out of the church. Kring's comment

### PAUL ANTICIPATED IT

Long ago St. Paul was anticipating this mood and knew that it would be something of a problem and a threat in the life of the church.

And he addressed himself to this matter in the development of his metaphor of the church as the body of Christ. He didn't hatch this metaphor, but borrowed it from the secular order. Remember it's origin? If my memory serves me correctly it was Aristotle, years earlier, in Athens who had spoken of the state as the "body politic". And this whole passage of Paul in his letter to the Corinthians says some very basic things about the church and he says them with a light and almost humorous touch. They're things we need to hear at least once a year, and preferably at the beginning of a new church season. Some may not want to hear them.....

Right off, he reminds us (and this is the dominant idea in back of this metaphor) that to be a real Christian is to be a member of the body. Let me repeat that: to be a real 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 though it would be true to say that "one Christian is no Christian". And yet, this is the way that so many Christians today seem to regard their sense of commitment. Solitary Christians - alone, by themselves, apart from others. And this is what Thomas Mann was speaking to when he said:

trying to function apart from the body, cut off.

"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".

#### FIRST WAY IT FINDS EXPRESSION

St. Paul proceeds to develop this matter or this mood of disconnection by pointing up two ways in which this mood is likely to find expression in the church.

In the first place, it can happen 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". (Pause)

Now I think that in our wiser, better moments we believe, do we not, that the church must have a variety of gifts, including our own. And as we understand the mission of the church we recognize that there must be an assortment of talents, abilities, experiences, perceptions, age-groups, mind-sets. As I say, in our wiser moments we recognize this, but there are those times, particularly times of stress, when we are overcome by a sense of futility or failure and deep down no longer believe that what little we do is making much difference. From time to time, I will encounter a member of the church who tells me that he or she is really not important here, that he or she has no startling talents or eye-catching abilities. I 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". AHITH' o PHEL

Sometimes this feeling hardens into a sanctified form of self-pity and becomes serious. You know there is an intriguing chap who appears briefly on the pages of the Old Testament. His name was Ahithophel and he doesn't come out too well in the account. He is the patron saint of some in the church today who decide to "cut out" and "dis-affiliate" when their point of view is not embraced...or This man was the counsellor to King David and to David's son and chief aid, prog. prom. Absalom. ~~I think of him when someone threatens that they're going to "drop out" or to vote by their pledge card if their point of view or their pet program is not enthusiastically promoted.~~ 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 effect of this rejection that he experienced.

"Now when Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his ass, and went off to his home in 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 17:23)

"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". You are connected. You do belong. There is a place for you - regardless of your talent, ability, mind-set, point of view. The "body of Christ" is large enough to include all of us...and it needs all of us.

#### SECOND WAY IT FINDS EXPRESSION

Then, too, there is another way in which the mood of disconnection shows itself in the life of the church.

It can appear in those instances when we try to disconnect or "unchurch" someone else. In the 21st verse of this 12th chapter Paul says: "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".

Paul must have chuckled a bit as he wrote this and played around 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 and do some reading in order 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 street in front of my apartment house and see what all the commotion is about", and the hand retorting, "Not if I don't raise the shade you're not!"

Kenneth Boulding, in his book, The Meaning of the 20th Century, offers this rather homespun penetrating observation:

"There are many things that one man can do because other people are not going to do 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."

Have you ever thought of that? And isn't this the way it is with the church? For instance, can you imagine the effect on Mr. Woodside if everybody showed up on Wednesday at 6:15 to sing in the choir? What would we do if everybody signed up to teach a Sunday School class, or everyone showed up to work on the Annual Fair. What would we have done last February if instead of 30 persons coming to our housing concern meetings we had had 300 persons. 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, interests, and abilities. Most areas, I might add, can always in this church do with new energies and new recruits. Our problem is not that of too many showing up, but not enough.

The people of God, in a sense, have many fish to fry! And we dare not forget this in the interest of some overwhelming need of the moment.

### THREE SIDES TO A CHURCH

As I see it there are three sides to a church that the people of God are concerned about.

First, we are concerned about the church we present to God - which has to do with the way we worship on a Sunday morning and the priority we give to it in our own personal lives. Our commitment to come and support it through thick and thin. .not to dis-c Our commitment to share a talent by singing, let's say, in the choir, or helping with the ushering if that be the task we commit ourselves to.

Secondly, we are concerned about the church we present to each other - our opportunities for fellowship, for friendship, priesting and nurturing one another. Again, this includes our commitment to some task, let's say, in terms of leadership in an organization or occasion of fellowship.

And thirdly, we are concerned about the church we present to the world - what we think of justice and do about injustice, or the education in which we engage, in tutoring and teaching others, the social action project in the community, or the task force to which we make a commitment of time and concern, or helping to minister to the hospital.

The trick in any church is to strive for balance while being faithful to all three. I like the idea of a balanced church. Sometimes I ask myself, "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 our members on a given morning on 86th Street I could ask him to pray

with a sick friend, or teach a class in church school, or sing a solo or serve as an usher in the service, or find a mistake in the bank statement, or help us to meet some community concern in housing, or to paint the ladies room on the 4th floor.

This might be the ultimate, but would it be the ideal church? Do balanced members produce the ideal church? It's something to think about. The well-rounded, balanced Christian may not be the best kind. He may be something like the academic professor who knows all sides of an issue, but the champion of none! The time in which we live calls for men and women who have a sense of advocacy and urgency about what they think is the most important thing in the life of the church. Our cutting edge can be dulled and perhaps lost as individuals by trying to do justice all the time to all the claims that present themselves.

#### BALANCE AS A WHOLE

I think that St. Paul would suggest that it is better to strive for balance as a whole rather than to strive for balance in the individual member. 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 a life-giving church. Rather than have everybody pull back until nobody is excited about anything, let each person do his thing. But let him do it without disconnecting his fellow members in the body. As you know, when a part tries to function as a whole the situation can become tense and difficult. It doesn't happen to us often here in this church ~~because we're not that large~~, but I can recall one or two times when we have two or three major programs producing some conflict and tension ~~like last November when the drama production, the Financial Canvass, and the Annual Christmas Fair were making demands on all of us. At times, it was like a three ring circus all under the same tent, and I felt like a clown directing traffic and trying to keep people out of each other's hair...~~ keep them HAPPY!

It's not just enough to tolerate each other. There comes a time, maybe once a month at the Communion rail, 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 would be if every member were just like you? And perhaps there is a sense in which we need to seriously ask ourselves the question: What kind of a church would it be if each member were like myself?

#### SUM IT UP

To sum it up, then: have confidence in your own insights, and your own experience of God. Don't poor mouth yourself by saying: "Because I am not a hand, I am not ~~af~~ of the body". Don't be tempted to sever connections simply because your point of view is not embraced or your program not given full support across the church. 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. abilities

As it is, there are many parts and yet one body. And what co-ordinates it all? What keeps it all civil, productive and creative and moving forward? It is a common allegiance to the ~~head~~, Jesus Christ. For as Paul put it in this letter to the Ephesians:

"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"

May it be so of us in this place....in this church in weeks and months ahead!

LET US PRAY

We thank thee, O God, for thy church and we ask that thou wilt make us more useful servants of it.

Help us within the setting of this warm fellowship to accept ourselves, and each other, to love our fellowmen, and to trust thy power and love.

We ask these things, O Lord, in the midst of all our trials and tribulations, knowing that wherever two or three or more are gathered together in thy name, thou art there.

Amen