

THIS AMAZING FELLOWSHIP PART 1

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Romans 8:35,37-39

I don't know what you believe about the Church, but as a young man having given my life to the service of Christ, I have a growing love and appreciation for This Amazing Fellowship which is the Church of Jesus Christ.

To be sure, there are those who scoff at the Church and speak of it as a convalescent home for aging saints. Or, a small island of men surrounded by an ocean of women. But with all the joshing and jokes there is, beneath the surface of our life today, an ever deepening awareness that the Church has the only real answer to the needs of mankind.

The words of Albert Einstein are strangely akin to the feelings of many a bewildered modern. Said he, "When Naziism came to Germany, I looked to the universities to defend freedom, knowing that they had boasted of their devotion to the truth. They were immediately silenced. Then I looked to the great editors of the newspapers whose flaming editorials had proclaimed love of freedom. They were silenced in a few short weeks. I looked to the individual writers who had written much of the place of freedom in modern life. They, too, were mute.

Only the Church stood squarely across Hitler's campaign to suppress truth. I never had special interest in the Church before, but now I feel a great affection and admiration, because the Church alone had the courage and the persistence to stand for intellectual truth and moral freedom. I am thus forced to confess that: what I once despised, I now praise unreservedly."

Of course Albert Einstein is not yet a Christian. But he and many like him are finding that the Church is more than dead dogma and hollow creed. It is a living, vital, energetic fellowship that has no ax to grind. No hidden motive. No secret aim. It lives and moves and has its being for one specific purpose: To give people life.

And now, when everything and everyone seems to be trying to tear the world to shreds, it is the

Church alone that offers the one faint ray of hope to a hopeless world.

Yes, I love the Church, and in the series of Communion messages I begin today, I hope to give you some of the impressions that have led me to call the Church of Jesus Christ: This Amazing Fellowship.

To begin with, it might be well if we sharpened our understanding of the difference between the Church and the churches.

The Church is more than steel and stone and mortar as we see it here today.

The Church is more than an organization of Pope and Priests and Bishops.

The Church is, in the truest sense, a living organism made up of all believers everywhere. It is the body of Christ. A great world fellowship of all who call themselves Christian.

An individual can belong to the Church without belonging to one of the churches, although I doubt if he or she will for long. And likewise, a person can belong to one of the churches without belonging to the Church. In fact, I think this is quite evident to anyone who cares enough to give it a thought.

There are many members of the churches who look upon their church as a mere formality. A pleasant appendage to a host of other things. After all, no one wants to be thought of as a pagan.

And so person after person submits to the ordeal of baptism or confirmation in much the same manner as they would submit to the initiatory hazing of a college fraternity. To them, it's another club. The price of membership is baptism so, "Let's be baptized" if that's what it takes. And thus they become members of one of the churches.

But they are poles apart from membership in the Church, that committed band of those who are the Ecclesia. Ec, meaning "out." Cleasia, meaning "the called." The Ecclesia. "The called out." And it is this Church which is the Amazing Fellowship of which I speak today. For it is a unifying fellowship which conquers --

The Differences That Divide Us.

There is an old word which has only come into its own in the last decade or two. It is the word: Ecumenical. It is a word we Protestants have needed for a long time. For when we have spoken of the universal Church of Christ, we have, up until now, been restricted to the ancient words of the Apostles Creed: The Holy Catholic Church.

Now this does not refer to the Roman Catholic church. If you will open up your dictionary you will find that catholic is defined as meaning, “Universal and general, as affecting all mankind.” But our Roman friends have conveniently forgotten to make this clear to their followers, and have used the Apostles Creed as evidence “that even Protestants believe in the Catholic church.” For that reason alone, it’s good that we now have a word which means that we mean and says what we say.

There has been much said in recent years about the need for greater unity within the ranks of Protestantism. On this I agree. But unity and uniformity are different things. In fact, I think we need fear when we only have one of something.

One government with one party running it, for instance.

One church exercising totalitarian control over the minds of people.

In fact, there was a time when there was just one church and, instead of being the bright spot on history’s page, it is a blotch which we call The Dark Ages.

I have been in countries where there is only one form of government, with one party grasping it tightly in its iron hand. It was there I saw fear and terror such as I have never seen before.

I have been in countries where there is only one church, and there I encountered persecution, bigotry and religious hatred such as one could hardly imagine.

I thank God for the apparent differences inherent in Protestant churches, for beneath this surface

stuff there is a unity of faith and love.

The churches: be they Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran or any of the rest which appear to be separate entities on the surface are, underneath, all members of the Church which is the Body of Christ in this world.

To be sure they worship differently.

Some with great formality and others with little or none.

Some worship kneeling and others sitting or standing.

Some enter vigorously into their hymns of praise and songs of devotion while others sit passively in sanctuaries of silence.

But all worship with one heart.

They are all led by one Spirit.

They are all built upon one foundation.

They all draw their beliefs from the self-same Book.

They are all joined to one great center: the person of Jesus Christ.

During our preaching mission abroad, we visited many of the great cathedrals of Europe. I remember especially the cathedral in Milan. Famous, of course, for it is there that the original painting of the Last Supper still stands.

Hidden back in one of the smaller chapels we came upon a series of mosaics depicting the ancient Prophets and the New Testament Apostles. With exquisite artistry the craftsmen had gathered thousands of bits of marble of many different colors and, fitting them into place with consummate skill, had produced a portrait of the past that led one to feel the very presence of the saints.

I remember the emotion of the moment, because I had the presence of mind to note it down in my diary that night. For as I gazed up into the faces of Paul and Peter, James and John, Abraham and Isaac, Elijah and David, I could not help but think of another and far greater artist. Our Lord,

Jesus Christ!

The Master of Masters who has been searching hither and yon throughout hundreds of years and in thousands of lands, picking out one of one color and one of another, one of this temperament and one of that, fitting them all together into a likeness of Himself and calling it: The Church.

I am sure many of you have seen or visited the Statue of Liberty. Inscribed on a plate at her base is the famous poem by Miss Emma Lazarus. It is the call of America to people who are downtrodden and oppressed. But more than that, I think it is the call of the Church. The Ecumenical Church. The Universal Church. This Amazing Fellowship which conquers the differences that seem to be swallowing up our world.

It is the voice of hope to people who are lost in spiritual darkness.

It is the voice of freedom to those who are bound by sin.

It is the voice of help and health to those in need:

“Give me your tired, your poor
Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free.
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send here, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my golden lamp beside the Golden door.”

This is the Church which does the work of Christ upon earth. It is a little flock. Its members are few in number compared with the children of the world. One or two here. Three or four there. A cluster in this town. A cadre in that. But these are they who shake the Universe. These are they who change the course of history with their prayers. For these are “The Called Out.” The Ecclesia. The Church. This Amazing Fellowship which conquers the differences that divide us, and thus, is The Hope of the World!