

THIS AMAZING FELLOWSHIP - PART 2

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Romans 8:35,37-39

Last month, in the first of this short series of Communion meditations on the theme of the Church, we showed how This Amazing Fellowship is just that, because

it conquers the differences that divide.

We saw that throughout hundreds of years

and in thousands of lands our Lord has been calling

one of this color and one of that.

One from this background and environment

and one from that.

Blending them, as it were, into a massive mosaic created in the likeness of Himself and calling it: The Church.

We caught a fleeting glimpse of what the unity of the Church really means.

We learned it does not mean that to be part of This Amazing Fellowship we have to

level out our various idiosyncracies or

stereotype our varying points of view.

We discovered that unity does not mean uniformity.

It simply means that we come finally to the place where we look upon our fellow worshipers, whatever their denominational blood type, as brothers and sisters for whom Christ died.

We acknowledge that Christians of another group or denomination are not our competitors, but our allies.

Another regiment, if you will, the Great Army of God.

For back behind the barriers and divisions, there is one point on which we all agree:

“If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature.”

As the poet has put it:

“Not alone we conquer, not alone we fall,
For in each loss or triumph, lose or triumph all.
Bound by God’s far purpose in a living whole,
Move we on together to the shining goal.”

This was never more powerfully brought home to me than back in 1948 when I attended the Baptist World Alliance in Cleveland, Ohio. On the closing night over 17,000 Baptists from some 46 nations in the world were gathered in the Cleveland Municipal Auditorium.

Dr. C. Oscar Johnson was the President at that time, and had the dramatic sense to see the possibility of making a lasting impression upon us all. He called upon us to sing, in our native tongue, the great Baptist hymn of unity.

I was standing beside Joel Sorenson, youth secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, who is a Swede.

On my left stood Hans Arndt, a German, and leader of the Baptist youths.

In front of me stood a man as black as the dark jungles of Africa from which he came.

By his side, completely unaware of the color of his skin, stood a stalwart southern Baptist from deep in the heart of Texas.

Behind me, I learned afterwards, were representatives from China and Japan. Two nations which only months before had been fiercely joined in a bloody war.

I confessed that I didn’t sing.

The emotion of the moment was too great.

I simply stood in awe and listened to 17,000 fellow Christians from nearly a half a hundred different lands singing, each in his or her own tongue, the great Baptist hymn of unity:

“Blessed be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love.”

The Church. This Amazing Fellowship that makes
the crooked way straight
and the rough places plain and,
in the process, conquers the differences that divide.

But more than that, it is a fellowship which flourishes and flames even in the face of:

THE DIFFICULTIES THAT DEFEAT US.

I was thrilled last week as I read in the November issue of Missions magazine that there are some 5,400 Baptist churches in Russia. And, that they are full!

We have known for some time that there are about one-half a million Baptists behind the Iron Curtain. But Dr. Lord, the president of the Baptist World Alliance, reports that he learned on a recent trip

there are over two and one-half million people in Russia
who are active participants in the life of various churches.

Turn to the National Magazine of the Presbyterian Church of the USA and you will read the thrilling story of revival in Korea. Kem Spencer, a college chum of mine and, incidentally, one of the groomsmen at our wedding, is a missionary in Korea. He confirms firsthand the reports we've read.

Kem tells how the battle-scarred Korean Christians are meeting together for huge mass prayer meetings that often last all night. He reports that up in North Korea, in the face of terrific Communist resistance, the apostolic band of native Christians are making greater progress than they have ever made before.

We see the sweeping advances of Communism across the world and cry out in alarm,

“The church is in danger!” Of course it is.

That’s where Christ intends it to be!

It is only when it seems safe that we need to fear.

There is a power which comes from meeting adversity and testing.

In fact, God may have no greater gift to give His church than that of difficulty and danger. It is through these blessings in disguise that we are drawn to lean in full surrender upon Him.

“Man’s extremity is God’s opportunity.”

Indeed! It is when we reach sights end, that we arrive at faith’s beginning!

How lastingly this was impressed upon me during our final days in Germany. Lucille and I were scheduled to sing and preach in one of the large revival tents purchased by the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society and given to the German Baptists for revival work there. The meeting was set for the little university town of Tuebingen, which is about 50 kilometers from Stuttgart.

As we set out for the service in our little English car, it began to rain. Now I used to live in California where it really knows how to rain. But I have never seen a deluge like that one. It seemed as though the heavens opened up and an ocean was dumped upon us. I had to stop several times because the windshield wiper could not carry the water away.

Lucille and I talked it over as to whether we should try to go on.

“Surely no one would come out on a night like this.

Why, back home in America folks would hardly come to a nice, warm, well-lighted church. Surely these people won’t come to a cold, dark, rain-drenched tent.”

But we decided we had made a promise and were bound to keep it.

When we finally arrived in Tuebining and found the tent, my worst fears were substantiated.

The place was flooded.

Having been exposed to the hard German winters, the weather-proofing had worn away in many places and the water sifted through the canvas.

I stepped gingerly between the puddles and looked inside the tent. Three or four men were feverishly tearing down some of the benches so wooden planks could be spread out in the aisles for people to walk upon.

I went back to the car and told Lucille we had made a long, hard trip for nothing.

But I learned a lesson that night.

I learned that when people have been stripped of all that we call wealth, when they have been robbed of all the material things we, here in America, think make for happiness,
they develop a true sense of values.

About 7:45PM they began to come.

First one here and another there.

Then by twos and threes.

Finally by scores and hundreds.

Through the darkness and the driving rain they came until, when I stepped into the pulpit the tent, which seated 2,000 people, was jammed.

To my utter amazement, they began to pull up the sides of the tent and I saw several hundred more standing outside in the rain.

Here and there an umbrella.

A few with heavy overcoats.

Many more in just shirt sleeves and dresses standing in

the cold and wet because the tent would not hold another person.

They had not come to hear me preach.

They had come to worship Jesus Christ.

When our part of the service ended, I asked them to sing their famous hymn of Christian triumph.

And they sang.

Oh, how they sang.

It must be as the angels in Heaven sing around the throne.

Poor broken people.

Homes and love ones gone.

Churches and business houses bombed away.

Everything we called security blasted into oblivion.

Some without shoes.

Many with the barest minimum of clothing.

Hungry.

Tired.

Sick.

Alone.

But oh, how they sang!

With a depth of understanding which only comes through loss and suffering, they lifted their voices in a mighty declaration:

“A mighty fortress is our God

A bulwark never failing.”

As I listened, I raised a prayer of Thanksgiving for the church.

This Amazing Fellowship

that conquers tragedy and danger,

and helps us overcome the difficulties and human loss which, otherwise, would defeat us.