

And Never The Twain Shall Meet

Acts 4:32-37; Romans 12: 4-13

2nd Sunday after Epiphany

16th January 2011

A man was walking across a bridge one day and came upon a lonely figure standing at the edge, about to plunge into the waters below. He immediately shouted "Stop! Let's talk about this before you do anything foolish." After a little bit of convincing, the would-be jumper agreed and the two sat down together on the bridge parapet.

"So," said the first man, trying to strike up a conversation and find some common bond, "Tell me, are you a Christian?" "Yes, as a matter of fact I am," said the troubled fellow. "Well so am I. Are you Catholic or Protestant?" "I'm Protestant," "Well so am I. Are you Anglican or Baptist?" "I'm Baptist." "Wow... Me too. Are you Convention Baptist or Fellowship Baptist?" "I'm Fellowship Baptist," "Me too, that's amazing!

"Now tell me, are you Original Fellowship Baptist or Fellowship Baptist Reformed?" "I'm Fellowship Baptist Reformed." "I can't believe it, so am I." "But," said the first man, "tell me, are you Reformed Fellowship Baptist of the Reformation of 1879, or Reformed Fellowship Baptist of the Reformation of 1915?" The jumper answered proudly, "Reformed Baptist, Reformation of 1915." To which the first man said, "Too bad, you unrepentant heretic," and pushed him off the bridge.¹

Well, we may laugh at all the divisions that exist within the church as well as the pettiness and small-mindedness that goes with them. Unfortunately, though, it's this very facet of church life that has put so many people off and made them very wary of becoming involved with traditional Christianity.

In the recently published autobiography of Mark Twain,² it has become increasingly clear how opposed this celebrated American author of Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer fame was to organised religion. His autobiography, by the way, only went on sale for the first time this past fall because he gave directions that it was not to be released for a hundred years after his death – a milestone that was passed in April of 2010.

Mark Twain, whose real name was, of course, Samuel Langhorne Clemens, pulled no punches in his treatment of organised religion. While he professed to believe in God or, at least in a Higher Power, nonetheless he maintained a very critical and sceptical attitude towards Christianity, saying things like: "Faith is believing what you know what ain't so." Or, "If Christ were here now, there is one thing he would not be – a Christian." Or, "There is one notable thing about our Christianity:[It's]bad, bloody, merciless, money-grabbing and predatory ... ours is a terrible religion."

Twain constantly railed against the hypocrisy of organised Christianity, that its proponents so often did not practice what they preached and misused their religion to justify violence, personal gain and mistreatment of the poor. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, he depicts just such religious hypocrisy when the Grangerford and Sheperdson families attend church services and then go right back to engaging in bloodshed.³ It's much like

my old story of the Scottish sheepdogs that go to church with their shepherd masters, put their paws together when the minister prays, join in the hymns with a tuneless yowl, sleep during the sermon – do all the right religious things – but then, as soon as the service is finished, go out into the parking lot and start fighting with each other.

Now, the amazing thing about Mark Twain is that he harboured all these negative views about the organised church when, by his own admission, he was brought up in a good Presbyterian Church in Hannibal, Missouri. How could a Presbyterian turn out that way? Having such radical views? I don't know! Not only that, when Twain died in 1910, he was – for all his sins – given a good Presbyterian funeral at the Old Brick Presbyterian Church in the upper east side of Manhattan. Which all goes to show just how loving and forgiving a people we hypocritical Presbyterians are! ☺

The revelation of the true extent of Mark Twain's religious views in his recently published autobiography has struck a very resounding chord with many people today who have similar views about traditional Christianity. Like him, they hold fast the core values of the faith, believing in God or a Higher Power, but rejecting the traditional structures of the church through which they are expressed.

We don't need organised religion, many people say today. We simply need spirituality. We don't need a theistic God "out there". We just want a "God presence" or an "inner Divine spark". We don't want all the trappings of the institution. All we want is an uplifting spiritual experience that gives us a sense of purpose in life and helps us get through each day.

There is, of course, a great deal that is good about such a yearning for spirituality. In the materially-oriented world in which we live, it's good that people would be in any way concerned with matters of the heart and soul. But, the trouble is that, without an organised, structured Christian community, spirituality quickly degrades into a purely self-centred exercise. Free-lance spirituality quickly becomes a pick-and-choose, suit-yourself private religion where people worship at the altar of "whatever-works-for-you" – an altar that in time turns people in on upon themselves so that they hear only their own voice and not the true divine voice. With the result they follow only their own will rather than that of God.

It's important, of course, to remember that Christianity was never an exclusively individualistic, spiritual religion. Right from the beginning, it was an organised movement. Didn't Jesus organise twelve disciples and structure their mission in Galilee? Wasn't the early church, the church of Peter and James, organised from a very early stage, with bishops, elders and deacons, local meetings and general assemblies? Paul's vision of the church also involved organisation. Similar to the human body. "We have many parts in one body and all these parts have different functions. We are one body in union with Christ, and we are all joined to each other as different parts of one body."⁴

Now, there was good reason why the early Christians knew they had to be organised. So they could live out their inner spirituality. So they could show Christ's love by caring for the needy. So they could serve others most effectively. They had to be organised to serve. The passage from Acts 4 – about the believers sharing their possessions – reveals just how organised the church at Jerusalem was in these earliest times. So they could properly deliver the practical Christianity that was the outworking of their inner spirituality.⁵

Today, in the 21st century, the church of Jesus Christ is much more highly organised than ever. And while many denigrate the church on this account, still it is only through this organisation that Christians have been able fulfil their Master's command to care for the needy throughout the world.

For instance, within hours of the Haiti earthquake a year ago, the Christian church – because it had been so well organised and active for many long years in the islands of the Caribbean – was immediately able to swing into action. With knowledgeable people on the ground. Mobilising relief assistance teams. Distributing essential supplies such as food, water, medicines, blankets, clothing and cooking utensils.

And we Canadian Presbyterians were privileged to be right there by means of the international organisation of Christian churches called ACT of which we are members. *Action by Churches Together* is a Geneva-based, global alliance of 200 different Protestant and Orthodox Churches and relief agencies with a multi-million dollar emergency relief budget to which our *Presbyterian World Service and Development* immediately sent hundreds of thousands of dollars along with experienced personnel. All this relief work was only possible because the Church was organised. Organised to serve.⁶

And this organised service still continues in Haiti. In its latest report, *PWS & D* says that, "Since the earthquake on 12 January 2010, [our Presbyterian] churches and individuals [have] raised over \$1.6 million – almost all of which PWS&D has invested through the ACT Alliance, Canadian Foodgrains Bank and Canadian Churches in Action – to provide transitional houses, food, clean water, health care, seeds, tools, schools, income generating initiatives, psychosocial and art therapy programs, and support for communities affected by cholera."⁷

Unfortunately, today, it is fashionable in many Christian circles as well as in the wider world to disparage the organised church. And, yes, we admit to its faults and failings over the years. But, let's celebrate what is good about the organised church. Not only our *Presbyterian Church in Canada* but, even more so, the worldwide church. What it has achieved – and continues to achieve – for the cause of Jesus Christ.

Let me share with you some words that celebrate the organised church. Words that come from an unlikely source. From journalist, Brian Stewart, who spent many years as the CBC's chief foreign correspondent, reporting from the world's most troubled regions, affected by war and natural disaster.

"For many years," he says, "I've been struck by the rather blithe notion, spread in many circles including the media, and taken up by a rather large section of our younger population, that organised, mainstream Christianity has been reduced to a musty, dimly lit backwater of contemporary life, a fading force. Well, I want to tell you from what I've seen from my "ring-side seat" at

events over decades that there is nothing that is further from the truth. That notion is a serious distortion of reality. I've found there is NO movement, or force, closer to the raw truth of war, famines, crises, and the vast human predicament, than organised Christianity in Action. And there is no alliance more determined and dogged in action than church workers, ordained and lay members, when mobilised for a common good. It is these Christians who are right 'On the Front Lines' of committed humanity today and when I want to find that Front, I follow their trail.

"It is a vast Front stretching from the most impoverished reaches of the Developing world to the hectic struggle to preserve caring values in our own towns and cities. I have never been able to reach these Front lines without finding Christian volunteers already in the thick of them, mobilising congregations that care, and being a faithful witness to truth, the primary light in the darkness – and, so often, the only light."⁸

Great words. Words that remind us, not to be overly-apologetic, but to be proud of the fact that the church of Jesus Christ is so well organised – organised to achieve so much in these troubled days. Not only that. They are great words that challenge us, as Christians, to become even more organised in the days that lie ahead to serve the needy world in which we live.

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¹ Adapted from an old Southern Baptist story

² *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, (Vol. 1), ed. by Harriet E. Smith, Benjamin Griffin and Victor Fischer, University of California Press, November 15, 2010

³ Mike Latona, "Was Mark Twain ant-Christian?", Catholic News Service, 12 January 2011, www.therecord.com.au; cf. Also *Mark Twain*, .wikipedia.com

⁴ Romans 12:4ff

⁵ Acts 4:32ff

⁶ ACT International <http://act-intl.org/>

⁷ "Helping Haiti Recover and Build", *Presbyterian World Service & Development*, January 2011, www.presbyterian.ca

⁸ Brian Stewart, "On The Front Lines", Address to the 160th Convocation of Knox College, May 12, 2004 <http://www.utoronto.ca/knox/dconadd04.htm>