

**Called to Fellowship,
Commissioned to Serve**

CALLED TO FELLOWSHIP, COMMISSIONED TO SERVE

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U.S. News and World Report noted on July 23, 1979 that our bodies are now worth \$6.50. If that discourages you, remember that in 1954 it was worth 98¢. So we are more than keeping up with inflation.

You and I are made up ten gallons of water - about two Jerry cans. When someone says "don't sweat it," they may be trying to save your life. We have about one thousand four hundred cubic inches of oxygen; thirty teaspoons of salt (enough to make curry for two hundred people); chlorine to sanitize four swimming pools (Olympic size); glycerin to detonate one bomb (a small one); magnesium enough to make ten flashcubes; fat to make eight bars of soap (depending, of course, on your proportions); iron enough to make one six penny nail; and sulphur enough to rid a dog of fleas - once. \$6.50, that's all we are -- until you add that mysterious thing called life. Then suddenly you transform \$6.50 into an Albert Einstein, a Calvin, a Menno Simons.

In our text (1 Cor. 12:27) Paul says, "All of you are Christ's body and each one is a part of it." To the world we are only a social club. There is really no difference between us gathered here today and a chess club, a P.T.A. meeting or any other group gathered in self interest. According to social scientists we are another kind of voluntary association. We are just a club until you add one important ingredient - the life of Christ within us. That takes this ordinary gathering of people and transforms it into a living creature - the body of Christ!

CALLED TO FELLOWSHIP...

What is life? A few moments ago, sound waves traveling through the air struck the cells that make up my outer ear. From there they bounced into the ear where they struck the cells of my ear drum. These cells passed on the message to cells that form the auditory ossicles - the bones in the inner ear. These transmitted it to the liquid cells in the body cochlea, and these passed the message on to nerve cells that transmitted the message to the brain cells. And the message was, "It's all quiet out there. It's your turn to speak."

Immediately, the message went out through millions of cells that form the twelve bundles of nerves that make up the spinal cord, to thirty-one sets of nerves that fan out to over 650 muscles throughout the body - each made up of millions of cells. These are attached to 206 bones made up of other cells. The message was, "Get to work!" Simultaneously, light coming through the air struck cells of the lenses which bent the light to focus it on the back of my eyes. There rod and cone cells picked up the message and transmitted it through the nerves to my brain. Then with 650 muscles pushing and pulling, with blood cells rushing energy to the muscle cells, and with the brain directing the movement in response to the messages from the eyes, I staggered to the pulpit.

Meanwhile, deep in the brain, master cells sent out a panic message to the idea center where thousands of little cells sat at their desks with their pencils all ready. "Think up something to say, and try to make it sound intelligent for a change." Somewhere down in the rows of desks some little cells came up with an idea and sent it up to central station for approval. Then the idea was sent down to the word department. There cells searched

frantically among memory cells that had stored up words in little banks, and the syntax department arranged these words in the proper order. The morphology department conjugated and declined them, and sent them down to the phonetics department to be translated into muscle movements. Messages went out to hundreds of muscles in my jaw, my tongue, my face and throat. Messages went to the lungs saying, "Pump air, he needs it desperately"; to the adrenaline glands saying, "Give him a shot, he is faint - he hasn't eaten for four hours." All of that - millions upon millions of cells working together - and I had said my first sentence!

We the church are a body. But what is a body? You have gone with my imagination so far. Maybe you will go a little further. Down in here somewhere is a classroom where all the little cells that are born every minute come for instruction. As they troop in they look around. They come in all shapes and sizes - some are round, some long and thin, and some shaped like diamonds and stars. They are blue, and white, and brown, and red. Some are very beautiful, others not so beautiful.

The instructor says, "Congratulations, you are all cells." What's a cell?' asks one little cell. "A unit of life," the instructor replies. "You are born, you live, you take in food, you eliminate waste, you rest, you work, and in the end you will die." What are we to do?" the cells asked. The teacher replied, "Some of you are going to be out where everyone can see you. Some of you are going to lift heavy weights. Some are going to be waiters feeding the body, and others are going to be on garbage detail in the dark inner recess of the body. You had better get work now. You red blood cells, you have only twelve or thirteen days to live to do your job." They felt a little cheated when they heard that the liver cells are going to be around for eighteen months, and the nerve cells for a whole lifetime.

Why are we here? asked another little cell? "Remember," said the teacher, "you are all parts of the body. You live and die, work and sleep. You will have your own little problems. But that isn't really important. What is important is that you give life to one another and to the body."

Do we really believe that? We can stop worrying about the bend fenders, the refrigerators that break down, the bills and deadlines that press us. These are not what are really important. What matters is that we give life to one another - and to the body.

Look around at the cells to which we are called to minister. Teachers, we are to give life to our students; bosses to your secretaries and workers; doctors to your nurses and patients. Our task is to give life to one another. And all the jobs that press upon us are insignificant when compared with that task. We are called to Fellowship.

...COMMISSIONED TO SERVE

But we are called to fellowship so that we may be commissioned to serve. The cells of the body function to give life to each other so that the body might minister to the world.

In our second text found in John 17:18, we see Jesus gathered with a small band of disciples - the beginnings of the body that would one day be the church. A scraggly lot they were - a few farmers, some fisherman, an ex-IRS man. They were gathered in the dark on a lonely hill planning a revolution. Prudence would say that this is a time to lie low. The temple police and the Roman soldiers have united their forces, and they are on the way to capture this little band of revolutionaries. Any strategist knows that in such times it is best to go underground. so everyone breads up. Head down stream until you reach the valley and then everyone fend for yourself. We will meet in three months at Galilee at Peter's house. And Peter, yo go with Jesus. You are the only one with a sword. What kind of revolutionaries are you anyway, without your words? So advises Prudence.

But in this crucial moment, knowing that any other course of action would lead him to the cross, Jesus turns to his little band of disciples and commissions them for service. In his high priestly prayer he says, "As thou has sent me into the world, so I send them into the world." Often we think that the Great Commission was born at the time of the ascension, in all the joy and glory of victory and the demonstration of God's power. Earlier at the ressurection Jesus had said, "Even as the Father hath sent me, so send I you." But it is here in the Garden of Gethsemane, when defeat seems closing in upon them, that Jesus first commissions his disciples to a world wide ministry. As he had been sent, so now he is now sending his followers.

The costliness of service. Jesus know the costliness of service, the price that must be paid in the church's mission to the world. He was facing the cross when he commissioned his disciples.

In Kampala, Uganda, there is little pink building on Nakasero Hill. Outside is an innocuous sign, "State Research Bureau." This was the headquarters of Idi Amin's dreaded secret police, housing over three thousand prisoners. An estimated 20 of them were killed every day: strangled, hammered to death, shot. On February 17, 1976, Archbishop Janani Luum was arrested and brought there. As he knelt in the courtyard praying for his captors they shot him. An estimated 500,000 were killed in Uganda - most of them cells of our body. In 1977 leaders of the Western churches sent a letter to church leaders in Ugand asking, What can we do to help? Shall we send food, or money? Can we help you to escape?" The answer cam back, "Don't send us money, the Lord provides. Don't help us to escape, our witness is needed here. Send us 350 clerical collars so that when our people are arrested and put into prison, and then they are shot, they will see their Christian leaders standing in the middle of them and take courage and stand fast."

We have assumed that mission takes place in times of peace when visas are readily had and when there is no danger to the lives of the missionaries, I am conviced that we are moving into an era when we are going to have to realize that missions always moves out under the cross. Discipleship begins at the cross. It isn't our lives that matter, it is the glory of Gcd. It isn't security at home and jobs that matter, it is a witness to a world lost without God.

The centrality of service. But Jesus knew not only the costliness of missions, but also its centrality. At home take time to read the first part of his high priestly prayer - I won't take time to do so here. Jesus begins this prayer not looking at the cross, but at the cosmic sweep of history.

He begins in eternity past. Go back with me in your imagination, to the beginnings of time when God was seated on his throne communing with himself. John in Revelations describes it as a throne surrounded by a rainbow, brilliant as emeralds, and surrounded by the sea of glass. Before it are seven torches and the twenty-four elders. And God said, "Let us make an earth and give to it sunrises and sunsets, the splendors of mountains and lakes, and the beauties of flowers and butterflies. And into this paradise let us put people so that we may have fellowship."

I then hear the spirit of God saying, "But sin will enter the picture, and with it oppression and injustice, poverty and sadness, parting and death." There must have been a great silence as all of heaven began to contemplate who could go to redeem humankind. And at that moment Jesus speaks out and says, "I will go. Send me to become human among humans; to live as a servant; to die that all who believe may be redeemed." That concept of an incarnational mission to redeem and serve runs central throughout Jesus' ministry. In the temple at the age of twelve; in Galilee and Judea as he moves with his disciples; and in his death and resurrection his life is focused on the centrality of mission. It is that task that he gives to us as a church. Where the church has retained that vision of the centrality of mission it has remained alive, and where it has lost that vision it has died. Jerusalem, then Antioch, Ephesus, Constantinople, Rome, Scotland, Germany and England have all once served as centers of God's ministry to the world. As each of them lost their sense of mission, God moved on.

Gathered for fellowship then dispersed to serve - in and out - that is the rhythm of the church. When fellowship takes over and mission is lost the church stagnates. As leaders in the churches you are going to have to build the balance between fellowship and mission, between building the body and ministry to the world.

Mission - our Jerusalem; our children, our families, our kinsmen and those in our neighborhood. Our Samaria; the world at our doorstep - the Chicanos, the Japanese, the Vietnamese who live right around us. Our Judea and utter most parts of the world; the estimated two billion who have never heard of salvation through Jesus Christ, who will not hear unless we move out in mission.

Let's make this a little more personal to us as a Mennonite Brethren. As a conference eighty years ago we committed ourselves in India to minister not to the 250 million then in the land, but to one million in Andhra Pradesh. We have planted a church of thirty thousand, and reached about ten percent of the untouchable population. But there remains yet the eighty percent of the people in the upper castes among whom we have not church. Nor can we expect India churches to evangelize these people, for they would be rejected. We have also left largely unevangelized the tribal people, the migrants, the gypsies and the muslims within the area. We have pledged ourselves as a conference to evangelize these people. Few others are working in the area. Similarly, we have committed ourselves to evangelize certain tribes in Zaire, and populations in Brazil and Japan. And in these areas there also remains people who are yet unreached with the Gospel.

Let me close with a brief parable. The story is told of the Northeast frontier where there is a rocky coast and many ships were wrecked. People living in the nearby village often went into the storm to rescue people from the waves and rocks. Somebody said, "Why don't we organize a club so that we can rescue more people?" So they organized a rescue club. They bought boats and ropes, and in times of fair weather they practiced rowing out to the rocks and casting their ropes. And by these means they were able to save more people. In time someone said, "Why don't we build a boat house to house our boats near the shore?" So they built a boat house. And someone said, "Why don't we build a shelter so that we can stay out on the beach during the storm, and can warm those we rescue." So they built a small house. Then somebody had a good idea and said, "Let's put a kitchen in there so we can serve hot food to people brought in from the cold waters." And someone said, "Let's put some games in the club house to occupy us as we wait during the storm." so they built a kitchen and added a game room. In time it became fashionable to spend week-ends down in the beach house. The members had contest to see who could get out to the rocks the fastest and throw the ropes most accurately. Those who won received silver cups for their victories. And the time came when everyone enjoyed spending time at the club house, so they hired some professional to do the rescuing. And then they decided rescuing was to costly to they dispensed with the life-saving business.

Now a few young men said, "We have lost the vision that started the club. Eating and enjoying the games isn't what it was all about." So they moved down the coast and started a real life-saving club. They went out in the storm and rescued many. And then someone had an idea so they built a little shed to house their boats. Then they had contests with the club up the coast to see who could get out to sea the fastest, and they were happy when they beat the big club and could row faster and throw the ropes farther. And they decided to add a kitchen to feed those rescued from the cold, and a game room for those waiting in the storm. And then they hired professionals to do the job of rescuing the lost, and in time dropped the task altogether. And again, some young people said, "something has gone wrong." They went down the coast to start a real life-saving club. In time they built a boat house, a shelter, a kitchen and a game room. You know the rest of the story. They say that today on that coast there are a number of beautiful yacht clubs, but not many people are interested in rescuing those lost in the storms, although there still are wrecks and people still are drowned.

We are called to fellowship in order that we many be commissioned to serve.

(I would like to express my appreciation to Mel White for the illustration of the cells.)