

GOD'S CALL

God's call is for all

Worshipping God together

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We continue, the Lord willing, our series of messages on “God’s call”.

We are seeking to see afresh what is God’s calling for us personally, each one of us, and also together as His people.

Today, I will seek to consider with you the subject “Worshipping God together”.

After the last message, I received requests to tell more stories during preaching, and the requests came from children as well as adults because they said that it would be more interesting, easier to concentrate, and help us to remember the principles.

My response is that where it is truly helpful in helping us understand what God wants to say to us, I will seek to do what I can, but it is difficult to tell a good story, and stories can also distract us from important things that God wants to speak to us in our hearts.

Many years ago, I heard the preaching of a very interesting preacher. He was very popular and he was able to keep the interest of his listeners throughout his message. He was knowledgeable, he could tell many stories, and his stories were very interesting. From beginning to end, almost everyone would laugh at what he was saying, but the problem was that at the end of the message, it was difficult to remember what was it he was talking about.

We need to have wisdom to consider what is helpful that we can learn and grow together. So you could pray for me to have wisdom in knowing when to tell good stories.

Today, we look to the Lord to seek to understand the subject of worshipping God together. Is there clear Scriptural teaching that God wants all of us to worship together, whether we are young or old? Is this something important to God in His way of working?

This is important for us because we have sought to do this over the years and over the many years that have passed by, this subject has been raised, from time to time: should we not have Sunday schools, youth fellowship groups? Should we not have another worship service simultaneously for children and even if we do not, should we not have enough meetings to cater to the needs of the children?

As I considered with you in the last message, meetings for children can be helpful to them, so too for young people and also for older people and for many groups of people. However, we want to first seek to understand: How does God want us to come together in our time of worship, and how important is it for us to do it this way, and in what way will it be really helpful? Are there various problems that can arise? What can we do about this?

In my understanding, there is clear Scriptural teaching on this and I will seek to show from the Scriptures that there is a strong emphasis and direction that God shows to us that we should see and follow. I do not see this as just an opinion, but it is something that we can examine for ourselves.

Of course, different Christians may interpret differently and come to different conclusions. Each one of us will have to seek to understand, think through for ourselves.

I see that not only does God want us to worship together, young and old, but He also wants all of us to contribute to one another in our time of worship together. Whether we are young or old, we can contribute, and contribute meaningfully.

Children are no less important than adults. We will see this as we go on to appreciate how God looks at this and what it means.

First, let us look at what happened in the early church as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and see how they responded to God. And then subsequently, we look further in the epistles to see how God helps us to understand the working of church life.

Acts 2: 41-47

- 41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.
- 42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.
- 43 Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.
- 44 And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common;
- 45 and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.
- 46 Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart,
- 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

It is important for us to recognize that in the interpretation of the Scriptures, we cannot just refer to an incident and from there seek to follow what they did in that incident. We need to understand the underlying principles: Why did they do it this way and is it meaningful to God? If so, how would it then apply to us?

So for example, we are told that they sold their property and possessions, they shared with all whatever they had. In that context, that was very meaningful, but it does not necessarily mean that all Christians throughout all ages must do likewise, that we should not own property or sell all that we have, distribute among ourselves.

There are different ways of working out. But what is the underlying principle? Why did they do it this way?

From other passages of the Scriptures, in trying to understand the meaning, we can see that basically, it was because they loved God, they loved one another and they found that this was a helpful way of doing it. There were people in need, others had more. So practically, they found that this was helpful as an expression of their love for God and for one another.

So if we understand that principle, we can see that it applies to all Christians throughout all generations. We are to love God, to love one another and in that context, seek to do what would promote that in our understanding of God's ways of working.

There are major aspects of what they concentrated upon. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. These are major aspects. Why did they spend so much devoting themselves to that?

It is because these are important areas in God's kingdom: sound teaching, deep fellowship, appreciation of the Lord's Supper, and the importance of prayer in working out God's purposes. These are major aspects that we can see in other parts of the Scriptures.

Now, I want to come to this part, in **verse 44**:

And all those who had believed were together.

They were together, they often came together; they learned to share, listen and serve together. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart. This is in **verse 46**.

So why did they practise this way? Why were they all together? There is no indication that they separated into different groups: Young and old, or people with different distinctive characteristics, whether married, not married and so on. But they came together regularly, solely because they were believers, because they believed in the Lord.

So there is no distinction between young or old; they came together; they spent time in the temple, from house to house, together as one whole group of people. They shared what they had; they cared for one another. There was the expression of church life.

But some may say, "Well, at that time, in that group of people, they were all adults. That is why they were not separated into young and old. Could it be that there were no children in that situation?"

Well, it is not stated here, and we can say it is possible that that may be so. So we cannot base this teaching just on this passage alone, but let us see the context, the meaning: why they did it and how they approached it in the early church.

Why did they come together in this way, how did they approach preaching and ministering of the gospel to the people?

In **Acts 2: 1-6**, we have described the day of Pentecost and how the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples. And then we see in **verse 5**,

- 5 Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven.
- 6 And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language.

So the crowd gathered in that situation and **verse 14** tells us that the apostle Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, he raised his voice and we are told that he declared to them: "Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words."

So the apostle Peter was preaching to this whole crowd of people.

Verse 37-40:

- 37 Now when they heard *this*, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?"
- 38 Peter *said* to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- 39 "For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself."
- 40 And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!"

So we see that the apostle Peter preached to all of them together and he told them that the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.

So whether they themselves, their children or their grandchildren, this message is for all and all can receive and all can benefit. It is intended for all.

As we go on and look at **Acts of the Apostles**, we will see that there is a pattern, the way in which they preached to the people.

I will just consider one passage with you now in **Acts 16: 25-34**. This describes to us the situation when Paul and Silas were imprisoned.

Acts 16: 22 tells us the crowd rose up together against them, and so as a result, they were put in prison. **Verse 25:**

Acts 16: 25-34

- 25 But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them;
- 26 and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.
- 27 When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.
- 28 But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!"
- 29 And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas,
- 30 and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"
- 31 They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."
- 32 And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house.
- 33 And he took them that *very* hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household.
- 34 And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole *household*.

This passage is interesting because it tells us again and again "he and his household". That means young and old, they were together in this whole process. The jailer was very frightened in that situation and he cried out for help. The apostles told him how he could be saved – and not just him – "you and your household" (**verse 31**).

And as a result of this, **verse 32** tells us: they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. They did not just speak to the jailer, but spoke to the whole house at the same time. And so we are told that he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. Again it tells us they all responded together. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole *household*.

So we see that this is the approach, the pattern: the apostles preached to all of them together, and wherever their hearts were open, they could believe together; and as they believed together, they stayed together; they worked together, they learned together, they worshipped God together. So from house to house they will spend their time, in the temple, wherever they were; all believers could come to God together; they could benefit.

The apostles did not say, "I will have a message for the young people, one for the children, and one for the older ones." It was one message, and it reached the hearts of all the people.

In **Acts 5: 42**, we are told:

And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus *as* the Christ.

So their approach was to reach out to all the people at the same time, wherever they were, in whatever situation they could, to help them, to reach out to them and to build them up.

So we may wonder: Why is it they gathered together instead of separating into groups? Would it not be easier for learning, more helpful to them?

If we were to divide into separate groups so that all can understand very well and find the meeting very helpful, then we may need to divide into many different groups, not just the young and old, but also those who are spiritually more mature and those who are less mature. We may also need to have groups for those who are going through spiritual struggles and who are easily discouraged, and other groups for those who are very eager and who are growing well.

However, I do not see that this is the way that God wants us to work together in our time of worship. There is a place to look into these various needs at a personal level, in other groups, in other occasions, but in terms of our gathering for worship, if all of us function meaningfully together, I see that God will speak to all of us and all our needs can be meaningfully met.

There is a place to attend to different needs of different people in different situations. But the primary aspect that we need to understand is the main issue of God speaking to our hearts, and to help one another to develop the state of our hearts such that at every stage of our development, we can properly benefit from Him.

One major aspect that we need to remember is that when we become Christians, something happens which brings about a very significant change and that is, we are born of the Spirit, and we immediately become part of the body of Christ, the church. This is something very important for all of us to understand, and this is true not just of adults, it is true also of children. The moment we are born of the Spirit, the moment we have become a Christian, we are immediately part of the body of Christ, the church. We become a member of the body of Christ.

We will look at the Scriptures to see how God puts great emphasis on this aspect of building the body of Christ together, of the body of Christ building itself up in the Lord. God wants the body to grow well and each member is expected to contribute to the health of the whole body. Every member has a part in this body, and every member must do his part to contribute to this.

I see it would be helpful for us to spend more time to see more clearly what the Scriptural teaching is on this subject of gathering for worship.

Romans 1: 1

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called *as* an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,

Paul introduces himself as “a bond-servant of Christ Jesus ... an apostle”. He was called of God to preach, to teach, to minister to the people, non-Christians, Christians; establish churches, help them grow and develop. So in **verse 7**, he goes on to say, “to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called *as* saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

So we know that this epistle is addressed to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called *as* saints. Who are these people? It is clear that these are Christians: all Christians, all those who have believed in the Lord Jesus, whose sins are forgiven.

So the apostle Paul wrote this epistle to the Christians in Rome. They are described as all who are beloved of God in Rome, and they are described as saints or holy ones, those who are called by God, who are sanctified by God, who are called to live a holy life.

So whether young or old, as long as they were Christians, they were together as one people of God - the beloved of God and they were saints.

We then go on to see how the apostle Paul helps them understand what this means.

Romans 12: 4-5

- 4 For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function,
- 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

So we see the apostle Paul told the Christians in Rome that they were members of the body of Christ, and they were individually members of one another.

This principle is important for us to recognize: that as Christians, God has brought about a spiritual reality in our lives, that we have become members of the body of Christ; we are also members of one another. But it is very important for us to understand that although we are members of the body of Christ, although we are members of one another, we may not necessarily benefit from being a member of the body of Christ, we may not necessarily benefit from being members one of another. Why is it so?

That is because although we have chosen to repent, to come to God and to be forgiven, we have to nurture that life, we have to build up that life, we have to move together with God in that direction for this to grow and become fruitful.

The Lord Jesus told His disciples along the lines of the great importance of abiding in Him just as a branch abides in the vine. If they were to abide in Him and He were to abide in them, they would then bring forth fruit. If they did not abide in Him, there would be a consequence: They would dry up; they would be thrown away, and they would be burned. So there is a consequence depending on how we respond.

So it is important for us to understand that while we are members of one another, we need to nurture that, we need to move together according to God's instructions. We are members of the body of Christ, we are individually members one of another, we must abide in Christ and abide in His body to move together. So what is this body of Christ?

Colossians 1: 18, the apostle Paul explains with regard to the Lord Jesus Christ and he says:

He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

So he explains to us that the body of Christ is the church, and the Lord Jesus is the head of the body; He is the head of the church.

So when we become a Christian, we now belong to the body of Christ, we now belong to the church. We therefore need to understand what does God want of the church, how does God want the church to function?

If we abide in this, in accordance with God's instructions, we will therefore contribute to the building of the church, the growth of the body; we will also benefit from it. If we do not, then we cut ourselves off from the life of the body, we cut ourselves off from the life of the church. So all this requires our response and continued response. We must continue to walk with God in the right path. Otherwise, it would affect the flow of the life of God in the body.

1 Corinthians 1: 1-3

- 1 Paul, called *as* an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother,
- 2 To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their *Lord* and ours:
- 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I will be spending some time in this epistle because this is the epistle where we appreciate the principle of open worship - our gathering together for worship. We need to see more clearly the context in which the apostle Paul wrote **1 Corinthians 14: 26** regarding open worship.

So **1 Corinthians 1: 1-3** tells us the apostle Paul wrote this epistle to the church at Corinth, which means that it included all believers at Corinth, all who were members of the body of Christ, whether young or old. There is no distinction. He wrote to the church of God which is at Corinth. So this epistle was meant for all of them without distinction: all the believers, all who were members of the church at Corinth.

1 Corinthians 11: 17-21

- 17 But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse.
- 18 For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it.
- 19 For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you.
- 20 Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper,
- 21 for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk.

Paul's epistle to the Corinthians helps us to understand that church life may not work out so well if the believers do not pay close attention to God's instructions and do not respond well in their own personal lives. But we notice that the apostle Paul wrote to them as a church and they were taught to come together as a church. They came together, they gathered together as a church. He said, "you come together not for the better but for the worse". It is possible for things to go wrong, if we do not pay heed to the important principles of the Scriptures.

They came together, there were wrong attitudes amongst the people. He said, "there are factions, and there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you".

So there is a differentiation. When we respond well, we do not respond well, to God, there will be differences that would emerge. So it is important for us to learn to understand what is it that God requires of us, so that we can all move together.

He says, “when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper”. Why was the apostle Paul upset with them?

It is because they were self-centred. They were preoccupied with themselves, what they wanted for themselves. They did not adequately understand what God required of them was important for them in working out church life together.

So the apostle Paul refers to Christians in Corinth coming together as a church, which means that all the believers would come together, whether young or old. There was no differentiation into different groups of people. As a whole church, they would come together.

1 Corinthians 12: 4-7

- 4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.
- 5 And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord.
- 6 There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all *persons*.
- 7 But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

There are important principles here the Lord wants us to recognize and to pay heed to. This passage emphasizes that it is the same God who is at work in all believers, and we serve the same Lord and we are helped by the same Spirit. It is important that we recognize this and concentrate on this.

If we are preoccupied with ourselves and do not concentrate on God and what He desires together, then we will move apart. We must concentrate on what God desires of us, worship the same God, serve the same Lord and being helped by the same Spirit.

Each one of us is also called upon to exercise ourselves according to God's enabling and God's provision in order to contribute to the common good.

The common good means the good of all. We are not to be preoccupied with what we want to get out of the worship service, each one of us coming with our own objectives, with our own ideas of what we want to get out of the worship service. We come here to worship God together, to build up the body of Christ together, to contribute to the common good. That must be the approach that we take, and when all of us take this approach then all of us will benefit, we will all grow together.

In the last message, when I sought to help us understand that children can understand spiritual reality, the older ones may think that the message is not so relevant to them: "Oh, this is meant for the children, helps them to recognize, but for me it does not apply." Then when I speak on more difficult issues, the children may think this is not helpful to them. They do not quite understand all the things that are being considered - "This is meant for adults."

This is not true and we should not think in this way because we are all members of the same body, and it is important for us to understand the functioning of the different members of the body and to help one another to grow together.

So in reality, each message that is meaningful before God can and should help all of us, although in different ways, at different levels, to different degrees.

If we truly seek the Lord, we are prayerful, He will teach us and we can all learn at different levels, at different stages of development, but all will be edified.

After the last message, one of the older sisters shared with me that in the past, she often felt very hesitant to share on Sunday because of the presence of the children.

She was concerned that the children might misunderstand what she shared or they might wonder why is it adults behave like that, and why is it they can fail in this way in their Christian lives. She said that she might also feel uncomfortable with the little eyes looking at her, and may find it more difficult to relate with them after that.

So this led her to hold back from sharing on many, many occasions. She felt uneasy.

However, she said that after the last message, she came to appreciate that the presence of children in the gathering for worship is a meaningful thing.

She said, "If I were to bear in mind to share in a way that could help them to understand, the sharing could actually help them to see the realities of life, what life is like, and also to prepare them for the years ahead."

And she found that it helped her to appreciate why it is a meaningful thing for all of us to contribute, participate together. Young and old, we can help one another to grow together.

So it is important that our concentration should not be on our own individual needs and what we prefer, but on what is meaningful before God for all. When we do that properly and every one of us functions properly – the proper working of each individual part – all of us will benefit. If all of us do it right, then the different needs will be properly met.

Let us go on to **1 Corinthians 12: 13**. The apostle Paul says:

1 Corinthians 12: 13

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Again, notice it is “all”. It refers to “all”. By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. All true believers have been brought together into the body of Christ. All believers in the Lord Jesus have become one with the Lord Jesus in the realm of the spirit; we have become one spirit with Him. We have become united with Him in the body of Christ.

We all receive life and enabling from the Holy Spirit and we can all contribute. So that is a spiritual reality that we must see and appreciate. But there are different degrees of spiritual life and strength and maturity, different depths of union with the Lord Jesus, different qualities of oneness in the body of Christ. But there is that reality that we must nurture, that we can build up, that we must work at.

So in **1 Corinthians 12: 20-25**, the apostle Paul helps us to see more how this works out.

1 Corinthians 12: 20-25

- 20 But now there are many members, but one body.
- 21 And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."
- 22 On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary;
- 23 and those *members* of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable,
- 24 whereas our more presentable members have no need *of it*. But God has *so* composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that *member* which lacked,
- 25 so that there may be no division in the body, but *that* the members may have the same care for one another.

The apostle Paul tells us the body of Christ includes different kinds of members. They have different functions and they are meant to work together. God does not want all the children to be together, all the older people to be together, all the married people to be together. He wants all the members of the body of Christ to be together, to work at it together.

Of course, there can be limitations in the physical realm. If we meet in a house, we cannot accommodate a thousand people. So we may have to separate into different groups. But still the principle applies. As long as we are a member of the body of Christ, we can come together. It is not dependent on the age. The principle is that we need to see that as members of the body of Christ, we all function together; different members have different functions.

Some of us may think that the children are not so important. They may be considered as less honourable. And the children may think that they just tag along, they just follow; the adults are the main people who are involved in the worship service; they just come along. However, that is not how God looks at it. God wants all of us to know that all members of the body of Christ are important to Him, if we love Him and want to do His will.

This is the important thing: Do you love God? Do you want to do His will? To what degree are you committed to walk in His ways? If you do, then whether young or old, God appreciates you. God loves you and He wants you to do your part. All members contribute to the whole health of the whole body. That is an important principle in the working of the body of Christ. All members contribute to the whole health of the whole body.

Many years ago, a group of men and a few young children were stranded on an island. There was no food to eat after a few days. In his hunger and his discomfort, one man said to another, "I am starving. I wish the children were not here with us. They are a burden to us. We have no food and we still have to look after them."

One of the children overheard the conversation and he said, "Uncle, are you hungry? I have some biscuits for you. I kept them because they are my favourite biscuits and I wanted to eat them slowly."

The man felt ashamed of himself when the child said that but he was grateful to share his biscuits. He was starving. He enjoyed the biscuit. The other hungry men also ate a biscuit each and they were all very happy and they were encouraged. Some of the children also took some of his biscuits.

The first man then said to his friend, "I am so glad to have this child with us. I have not only eaten of his biscuit to relieve my hunger, but I have also learned from him to be generous and to care for others with the right spirit. It is good that the children are here with us."

Soon after that, a ship passed by and they were rescued. When they went up the ship, they realized that there were other children who also had biscuits that they kept with them, but they were not bringing out to share. They were afraid that if they shared they would have nothing to eat.

Well, you may be saying in your heart, "This is another story that you have made up." And you are right. It is meant to help us to understand the principles involved. Not all children are good; not all children are bad. It is up to you how you want to live your life.

The child who was generous helped the older people to appreciate what it means to be generous, to have the right spirit. Those who are not so generous will also not benefit; they want to eat the other child's biscuits and still keep their own.

Well, perhaps many of us are doing the same thing.

We sit there, we wait for other people to do their part, but we do not do ours. Why? It costs us something. We will have to consider this further and see how it should work out, that all of us can and should do our part in the right way and help all of us to be built up together.

The Lord willing, in the next message, if it is appropriate, I will tell you a real life story, with the same lesson.

Let us go on to **1 Corinthians 14: 4-5**.

1 Corinthians 14: 4-5

- 4 One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church.
- 5 Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but *even* more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying.

Notice the apostle Paul says very strongly and clearly the principle of our participation and contribution. He says, "How you participate is important. What is the direction of your participation? Will what you do benefit the body of Christ?" He says "that the church may receive edifying." "Edifying" means "being built up", something good, something that helps.

So we are called upon to be conscious of this. We can all contribute to the building up of the body of Christ. All of us can and all of us should and we must.

If we love God, we will do our part. But we can only do this when we abide in the Lord Jesus. We do not go our own way but we seek Him, we trust Him and we depend upon Him.

We must have the right spirit of loving God and loving others as God teaches us. Without that, we cannot properly build up the body of Christ.

So again **1 Corinthians 14: 12**, the apostle Paul says:

So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual *gifts*, seek to abound for the edification of the church.

The apostle Paul emphasizes “seek to abound for the edification of the church.” We all know that many Christians are keen about serving God. But we must take care in the way we seek to serve God. We must make sure that our service is according to God’s instructions and not according to what we like. It is very easy for us to serve God in the way that we like, what we prefer, what is more advantageous to us.

What God wants of us is to contribute to the building up of the church, not to become popular, to become respected or to enjoy ourselves, but to encourage and help one another to build the kingdom of God. This is the thrust, and this is the important emphasis that we must constantly adopt as we come together in worship, and as we build up the body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 14: 22-26

- 22 So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy *is for a sign*, not to unbelievers but to those who believe.
- 23 Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?
- 24 But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all;
- 25 the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.
- 26 What is *the outcome* then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.

So again and again, the apostle Paul tells us, whatever is done must be for edification. Most of us are reasonably familiar with **verse 26** which teaches us the principle and practice of open worship.

The apostle Paul says, “when you assemble...” When we assemble, all of us can contribute, we can have something that we can contribute for the edification of the church.

But we may not be so familiar with the verses before **verse 26** and we should look at the thrust and the context.

The apostle Paul says in **verse 23**: Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues where there is no interpretation, it will lead to confusion. The apostle Paul speaks of the whole church assembling together. So again he tells us that it is young and old, all the believers, they come together, they assemble together.

Open worship is meant for all to participate, but he tells us that there must be a healthy direction that will lead to edification of the church. He says, “if the whole church assembles together and each one speaks in tongue, and there is no interpretation, it leads to confusion. There is no benefit to anyone, and if an unbeliever were to come in, the unbeliever would say that all of you are mad.” Why? Because there is no meaning to what you are doing. You are supposed to come together to worship God, but each one is preoccupied with himself, speaking in tongues, and the others do not understand what is going on.

So he says that “if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God declaring that God is certainly among you.”

So if all prophesy, then it leads to the manifestation of the presence and the power of God. “Prophesy” here in this context basically means “speak on God’s behalf”. It can be in the form of sharing, teaching, whatever form that communicates what God wants to tell us.

If all of us prophesy so that we can all learn and benefit together, then even if an unbeliever should enter, God can also speak to that person: The presence of God is manifested, the power of God is present. We know that gathering for worship is basically meant for believers (but it is possible that unbelievers may enter) – it is the whole church gathering to exercise itself in worshipping God.

So the emphasis is that we must come together on the basis of God's instructions to edify the church, and when we do that, God will be pleased to manifest Himself and the body of Christ will be built up.

So whether young or old, we are called upon to come together to work together.

1 Corinthians 14: 31, the apostle Paul says:

For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted;

Notice the emphasis: The apostle Paul says, "all can prophesy", "all may learn", "all may be exhorted". It does not matter whether you are young or old, married or not married, intelligent or not so intelligent. All can prophesy, meaning we all can contribute our part.

If we do it with the right spirit, when we do it in the way that God leads and guides, we can all contribute and all may learn. All can learn, if we come and seek God and ask Him to speak to us, if we are actively involved as a member of the body of Christ.

But if we sit there as spectators, we sit there to judge other people, then we may not learn. But if we come as a member of the body of Christ to exercise ourselves, we will all be able to learn, and all may be exhorted, all can benefit.

So what one member does will affect the rest of the body.

The toe may think that what the finger does is not of importance to him, but that is not true. If the finger does not exercise itself, refuses to work, to put food into the mouth, very soon the toe will die: There is no food. It is not true to say that the toe does not need the finger.

God has composed the body so that we are meant to function together. If we do not abide in the body of Christ, we will be depriving ourselves, cutting ourselves from the life that God wants to give to us.

So the Lord willing, we will consider further the Scriptural teaching on this subject and how it works out, and why is it that God works in this way. There are important principles for us to understand and also later, the Lord willing, we will consider in practical terms, how this can be worked out more effectively in open worship.

But today, it is important for us to see this principle that the potential for open worship is very great if we do it right.

If we come with the right spirit, we come as a member of the body of Christ, we come identified with God's heart, we come to do our part, each one of us faithfully, then there is much that God can bring about as a result.

Although we are Christians, it does not mean that all of us will end up well, that the Lord will say, "Well done, good and faithful servant". It does not mean that if we are all members of the body of Christ, we will all be properly built up.

It depends on whether we will be faithful to God or not. That is the reason why the Lord Jesus communicated very strongly in His messages to the seven churches in **Revelation chapters 2 and 3**.

Why does He repeat “to him who overcomes ... he who overcomes”? Because He knows that there will be many who do not overcome: those who are self-centred who want to go their own way, those who are lazy who do not wish to exert any effort, those who just want to enjoy themselves.

All those who do not properly do their part will not become overcomers, and that is something we must take heed seriously.

We all must work at it, and when we all work at it, then the whole congregation can grow and develop.

We are members of the body of Christ, not just here in this place, but we are members of the body of Christ throughout the world – the whole body of Christ in the world – and we must contribute our part in whatever we can to the whole body of Christ, and the only way we can do that is when we are faithful to God to the utmost that we know how. To the best of our understanding, we must do as we have come to see and believe.

Different ones may see differently; to the degree that we see, we do our part. Whatever you understand sincerely to be what God desires of us, to that degree you respond to Him.

What God requires of us is first and foremost the right spirit, to love Him, to be willing to do His will. When we are willing, He will teach us, He will show us.

Let us then, as we come before the Lord, ask Him to help us think through this issue afresh, to seek to appreciate what God is seeking to do in the way that He wants to build His kingdom.

The potential is very great in terms of what we can do in contribution to the kingdom of God, but it will only be realized if we are diligent, we are hard working, to seek God and to do our part. God will help us, but we must come to Him, and we must respond to Him.

Let us ask Him to search our hearts and help us to understand ourselves, and if in any way we have gone astray, if in any way we have not done what He wants us to do, we can come to Him for His forgiveness so that He may refresh us and strengthen us, and renew us, help us to see afresh what it means to live for Him.