

GOD'S CALL

Major themes in the Scriptures

The Holy Spirit (23)

The Holy Spirit directing church life

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The Lord willing, today we will consider the subject, “The Holy Spirit”, the twenty-third message, in seeking to appreciate major themes in the Scriptures. A short summary of today’s message:

The Holy Spirit helps each member of the body of Christ to do his part to build up the body. How should we do our part such that the Holy Spirit can bring about the highest quality in church life?

We will seek the Lord to appreciate more of what this means.

In the last message, we saw that the Holy Spirit works in church life with concentration on the primary issue of transmitting spiritual life, motivated by divine love. That is the approach of the Holy Spirit in seeking to bring about the highest quality in church life.

So, if we are concerned about this and we want to work out church life as God intends, then we need to consider how in our lives, we can move in that direction.

As we ponder over this and we consider in the light of that, what would most significantly hinder the outworking of church life, what would work against that and cause damage to church life?

It is not difficult for us to come to the conclusion that the most serious problem is self-life.

It is self-life that will destroy church life; it is self-life that will work against what the Holy Spirit wants to accomplish. But what does it mean in practical terms?

We know that having been born of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit brought us into the body of Christ; we become members of the body of Christ. The apostle Paul tells us that we are members of the body and the illustration of the physical body can to some extent help us to appreciate the functioning of the spiritual body of Christ.

For example, if the liver can speak, it might say, "I am a very powerful organ. I remove toxins; I detoxify the dangerous chemicals in the body so that the body can function normally. Well, I will decide what to detoxify and what not to. Others in the body depend on me for that."

When the heart hears that, he says, "You think you can do that? If I don't beat, what will happen to you? I am the one who controls the situation: how fast I beat, how much blood that can flow through the whole body."

Then the lung comes in and says, "You can beat all you want but if I don't expand, there will be no oxygen and all the blood that you bring through the whole body would be of no use."

Then the head says, "You all must not quarrel. You all belong to the same body and you must work towards the same goal. You must not be self-centred: thinking of what you want to do, competing with others, wanting to be great, wanting to achieve something, to be recognized. This will destroy the whole body, including yourself. If you function that way, the liver will die, the lungs will die, the heart will die; the whole body will die. You must work together."

Sometimes, we may not be so negative to the extent that we compete with one another in what we do in the body. Sometimes, it is just that we are preoccupied with ourselves: we do our own thing, you do your own thing; I mind my own business, you mind yours.

This is also self-life and this will also destroy what God wants to accomplish in church life. We cannot afford to be unconcerned about what is taking place in the body of Christ. We cannot be just preoccupied with ourselves.

The liver says, "I just do my work, I detoxify as I see fit. I don't want to compete with you; I just do my work." But then there may be special needs at certain points of time, but he is not aware because he is not concerned; he just does his work.

The heart continues to beat as he thinks best. Sometimes he says, "I feel very tired; I will beat slowly." But then the man has gone for a run and he needs a lot of oxygen, but the heart is beating very slowly and the man collapses.

So too with the lungs: The lung may breathe according to its own estimation of what is comfortable.

So this kind of approach will also hinder and affect the development of church life.

So then how can we work in such a way that we can contribute positively in a meaningful way to what the Holy Spirit wants to do?

Galatians 5: 13-16

- 13 For you were called to freedom, brethren; only *do not turn* your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.
- 14 For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the *statement*, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."
- 15 But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.
- 16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.

The apostle Paul warns that if you bite and devour one another, you may be consumed by one another. If the parts of the body do not work together, they may in fact destroy one another.

We are called to freedom. When God placed us in the body of Christ, it is a very marvellous situation where we can have meaningful fellowship in the body, we can communicate, we can contribute, we can learn, we can honour God together.

It is a very meaningful context; it is a freedom that God wants us to have. But we can *turn* our freedom into an opportunity for the flesh. Instead of contributing to the body of Christ, we may want to show how good we are.

And we can see that in the lives of the people in Corinth, where they had spiritual gifts but they exercised them in the flesh. They compared with one another instead of helping one another.

So he says: "...but through love serve one another". The picture here is not one of self-centredness: "serve one another" is a picture of caring for one another, concern for others.

This is a very significant aspect in terms of church life. Although we may be members of the body and although we may know that we ought to contribute positively to the body, it is very easy for us to concentrate on what we can get out of the body rather than what we can contribute meaningfully to the body.

The apostle Paul says: "...through love serve one another". That speaks of the giving of ourselves for what is good in accordance with the will of God, to contribute to the lives of one another to be built up together.

The liver wants to function well so that the heart can beat properly, the lungs can breathe normally. So too others parts of the body: they think of the other parts - how they can function well, how they can contribute to that.

It is very easy for us be preoccupied with ourselves. If you observe the conversations of people, it would not be difficult for you to observe this.

What are we preoccupied with when we talk to one another? In many conversations, you will observe that the people who speak are very occupied with what they say and what they want to say and they want others to hear what they have to say. They may not listen very much to what the other person is saying, what the other person is trying to say, and what is meaningful to receive.

This is something that can happen very easily to any one of us and we need to take special care to consider: are we truly serving one another in love?

When we communicate with one another and our concentration is on ourselves, we will not be able to move in this direction of building up church life.

Even in a context of a prayer meeting, it is also quite possible that we concentrate on what we want to share for others to pray for us and we may not be very interested to hear what others have to say in order to pray for them.

We may not pay sufficient attention to understand what are the needs of other people, what they are going through, how we can pray for them meaningfully, but we may be quite occupied with what we are doing and we want others to pray for us.

So that is something all of us need to appreciate: the meaning “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF”. Just as you are concerned about your own well-being, you should be just as concerned for the well-being of others. It is not that it is wrong to request prayer for yourself but with that same spirit, you should also be concerned to pray for the needs of others.

So then he says the way to resolve this problem is: walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.

We need to know how to walk by the Spirit – move together with the Spirit – and then in that state, in that context, we will understand the meaning of imparting life, motivated by love.

Let us turn to **Ephesians 4: 1-6**.

Ephesians 4: 1-6

- 1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,
- 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love,
- 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
- 4 *There is* one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling;
- 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
- 6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

This passage is very helpful for us to ponder over in terms of building church life.

The apostle Paul tells us how we are to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which we have been called. We are to learn to relate with one another: with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love. Our relating with one another must be manifestation of the holiness of God, the character of the Holy Spirit.

And in that context he says, “...being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”.

Why did the apostle Paul say “preserve the unity of the Spirit”? Why did he not say, “You should create unity of the Spirit because the church is so divided, there is so much conflict in the church; we must create that unity”? But he says “preserve the unity”, meaning keep the unity, maintain the unity; do not let it be affected or destroyed.

Why? Because unity of the Spirit is an expression of the being of God: God is one and God is united. So when we learn to walk by the Spirit, when we learn to fulfil God’s purposes, we will be one, we will be united.

We do not have to do something special to create unity. The unity is there when we learn to walk according to God's ways. God will not oppose Himself; He will not work against Himself.

And that is why we see in this passage the recurring use of the word "one": *There is* one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

Why the emphasis on one? It is because when we walk in the right way, we will be one because our unity is in God and all that God is doing. We are one in the body; we are one in the Holy Spirit; we have one hope; we have one Lord; we have one faith; we have one baptism; we have one God and Father of all: the one and the same God; the one and the same hope.

So why are we fighting against one another? Why do we want to work against one another when we all have the same hope, same faith, same God, same Lord? We need to appreciate this more deeply.

When we learn to draw near to God and we appreciate Him and His ways and we truly love Him and we all move in that direction, there will be the unity of the Spirit.

The reference to the unity of the Spirit tells us that it is the Holy Spirit who draws us together, who teaches us how to walk together.

The Lord Jesus is the head of the body – yes, we follow Him; He is the One who gives the overall directions in whatever He wants to accomplish.

But in terms of the practical outworking in our lives, it is the Holy Spirit who directs church life.

He is the One who leads each one of us, He is the One who guides us, He is the One who encourages us, He is the One who teaches us God's ways, He is the One who exalts the Lord Jesus Christ and helps us to know Him in our lives.

So we need to appreciate the Holy Spirit as the One who directs church life and we learn to submit to Him, to walk together with Him.

Why is it that it works this way?

We see this in **1 Corinthians 12: 12-14**:

1 Corinthians 12: 12-14

- 12 For even as the body is one and *yet* has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ.
- 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.
- 14 For the body is not one member, but many.

The relationship between the body and the Spirit: The body is the body of Christ; we are members of the body of Christ; it is the one Spirit who baptized us into one body; it is the Holy Spirit who brought us together in the spiritual realm so that we become members of the body of Christ.

So therefore if we want to work out the life of the body, we must look to the Holy Spirit. He is the One who places us in the body of Christ as He sees fit. Whether you are a liver or a heart or lung, eyes or nose or feet, the Holy Spirit is the One who decides in the context of God's perfect will how we should function in the body.

So each one of us must learn to appreciate what He is seeking to do and cooperate with Him. If we are a hand and we want to function like the foot, it will bring much problem to the body; likewise the other way round.

Yes, there are some people who can use their feet as if they are hands because they have no arms and they can be very skilful. But that is not the best way.

Sometimes when some parts of the body do not function well, other parts may have to take over for the time being, but it is not the best. The hand is created differently from the foot and when God assigns you a place, it is because He has either equipped you or will equip you for that function. So let us learn to appreciate the Holy Spirit as the One who directs and we learn to submit to Him.

Not only that, we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

We know that the emphasis of the Holy Spirit in church life is the impartation of life, but where does that life come from?

That is the life of God and that life of God comes from the Holy Spirit: we are to drink of one Spirit. The Lord Jesus in speaking of the Holy Spirit said, out of our innermost being there shall flow rivers of living water. The living water speaks of the Holy Spirit, the life of God.

So we were all made to drink of one Spirit. When we partake of the Holy Spirit, we are partaking of the life of God and as we partake of the life of God so that that life becomes part of our lives, we can then learn to transmit life to others.

We have seen the principle “death works in us but life in you”. If we want to minister life, we must learn to die: we must give up whatever we have to God so that He can work through us to minister to others, and that path can be at times very difficult, very painful, but very meaningful.

So if we want to minister life, we must learn to drink of this Spirit abundantly: have life and have it abundantly.

If we do not learn to relate with the Holy Spirit such that His life can fill us and flow through us freely, then much of our efforts will be on the basis of our own natural abilities and therefore, we will basically be walking in the flesh according to our own natural abilities and the ways of the world.

So we need to appreciate that church life has to be based on the life of the Spirit.

We can now go on to consider how this works out in practical terms in church life. How does the Holy Spirit direct church life?

Acts 13: 1-4

- 1 Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was *there*, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.
- 2 While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."
- 3 Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.
- 4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

This is a record of an event. It does not mean that if we work out church life, we must follow this exactly.

There are different manifestations how this may work out in practical terms, but the underlying principles are very important. We need to appreciate the spiritual principles present that help us understand how God works.

First, we notice that it took place in the context of church life: Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was *there*...

In the context of working out church life, there were these prophets and teachers – prophets and teachers in that context were spiritual leaders, looking to God for guidance to understand what ought to be the direction of the church – and then it tells us these people, who were the prophets and teachers; but the principle applies to every believer working out church life.

Here it speaks of these people who have responsibilities in the spiritual realm that are of significance; but every member of the body of Christ has responsibilities that are significant, which we may not at times appreciate.

Verse 2 tells us: While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said...

“The Holy Spirit said” tells us it is guidance from God; the Holy Spirit taught them, told them, what they were to do. He was directing church life.

But how did it happen?

It happened while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting.

This is helpful for us to understand. They were not occupied with what they wanted for themselves: they had great ideas; they wanted to do certain things, they asked God to bless them. It was not that way.

The emphasis was: they were ministering to the Lord. Ministering to the Lord tells us that it was a spirit of devotion, a spirit of worship. They were seeking to understand what was in the heart of God; they were appreciative of the being of God, the purposes of God. That is why they came together.

This is very important for us when we come together in church life.

Are we ministering to the Lord? Are we occupied with what is in His heart, what is important to Him, what He is seeking to accomplish? Or we have many ideas of our own: how His work should be done; we can accomplish great things.

It is in the context when they were ministering to the Lord and fasting that the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

"Set apart for Me" tells us that He is the One who directs: He is the One who gives the command, "Go. Do."

So it is in the context of God's perfect will that the Holy Spirit will guide the people of God as to what they should do to contribute to the work of the church.

And it is very specific: "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul..." Out of these people that were there, the Holy Spirit selected two. So it is up to Him to select. He chose the two.

The other three must not grumble and say, "Why not me? I know more, I am more familiar; I can do better." No, each one must submit to the direction of the Holy Spirit.

He says, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." It is the Holy Spirit who calls; He is the One who has a work for them to do.

So what happened when the Holy Spirit spoke?

We are told they responded: Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

So the people who heard what the Holy Spirit said, who understood the will of God, they prayed and they sent them away in accordance with the instructions of the Holy Spirit. So they did their part; they were moving together with the Holy Spirit.

And then **verse 4** tells us: So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

So we see here men and God at work together.

The men came together; that was their choice. They ministered to the Lord; that was the devotion of their heart. They prayed because they wanted to know God's will and God's ways. So this was men's part: they did their part, looking to God, seeking Him.

Then God responded: As they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said...

So God responded to the devotion of men working together with Him and the Holy Spirit told them what to do. And they obeyed: In faith, they moved together and so, effectively the Holy Spirit sent out the apostles to do the work.

So this brings us to a very major, important aspect of church life: How can we most effectively contribute our part to bring about the highest quality of church life?

God spoke through His prophet to King Asa, and He said, "For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His."

This is a very wonderful verse and the riches are very deep; it applies to every area of life; and in working out church life, this is central.

What does it mean that God may strongly support those whose heart is completely His?

What does He support?

Does God support us to do the things we like to do, the ideas that we have at the natural plane, the things that the world find attractive? Does God support us in that direction? We all know He will not. There are many, many examples in the Scriptures that show us that when men go astray, seeking their own will, God rejects them.

What does God support?

It has to be that God will strongly support us in doing His will: in fulfilling His perfect will, in bringing about the most meaningful course of action; we may want to do it, we may love that path but we have no power to live that way.

God will strongly support us. He will enable us to do all that is necessary in order to fulfil His will.

If that is the case, then we have no fear: Whatever may take place, God being sovereign, all powerful, we can accomplish His will. The apostle Paul said: "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."

But this verse has this very important condition: that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His.

What does that mean?

It is very easy for us to say, "Yes, my heart is completely His. I don't live for myself. I give myself to Him and I want to do His will." And we may say that quite sincerely.

But this is something that we need to be very careful about.

We need to come before God in all honesty and humility and ask God to search our hearts to know whether is it true, is it genuine, is it deep enough; are we truly prepared to live as He intends, whatever it might mean, wherever it might lead?

Or do we have our own preferences: "I want it this way, this way and that way. If it is not, I will cry. If it is that way, I will be very happy."

Are we able to rejoice in the Lord always: that we recognize His will is perfect?

What would it mean in practical terms when we say that our heart is completely His?

We think in terms of the meaning behind it. When we say our heart is completely His, can it still mean we want to go our own way? Can it still mean that we prefer our own preferences? Can it still mean that we seek for the things of this world and we want to seek the approval of men? It cannot be.

If our heart is completely His, then it has to be that all we want is what God wants.

Generally, when we talk about self-life, we usually say we do not seek for something for ourselves: We are not self-centred; we seek for what is meaningful to God or we seek what is helpful for others.

Generally that is true.

But there is one thing that you can meaningfully seek for yourself and seek with all your heart; and not only will it not be wrong, it is good; it is very good, and very important.

We must not give up seeking anything for ourselves. We must seek something for ourselves.

And what is that?

We must seek for that which is perfectly good in the eyes of God; we must seek for that which is the best in the eyes of God for ourselves.

God created us – each one of us – with a very great potential. He does not want us to give that up and destroy it. He wants us to realize that potential and in order to realize that potential, we must want it very deeply: We want to be good in the eyes of God; we want to be faithful to Him whatever happens. We want a deep and meaningful relationship with God that is based on His perfect will.

So that is something that we can seek for ourselves.

So when our heart is completely His, it means that all we want is God's will; all we want is to bring joy to Him; all we want is to fulfil what is most meaningful to Him – that is what we want for our lives.

If that is what we want, God will strongly support us and God strongly supporting us will mean that all that is at His disposal He will make available to us, so that Christ can dwell in us, Christ can be formed in us, the fruit of the Spirit can grow in us; we can be His good and faithful servant, we can be His close friend, we can walk with Him, we can fulfil His will, we can contribute to the lives of others.

Going further, our heart completely His means one very major aspect that we need to ponder about constantly, and that is: our lives must be always and totally available to God for whatever He wants to do, however He wants to do it, in whatever way.

Is this true of our lives? Are our lives totally available to God always, or we have conditions: It is available in certain circumstances but not in others? When the conditions suit us, our lives are available to God?

When we read through the Scriptures we see the sad story again and again. Many who love God are not willing to be totally available to God. They select what they want and when it is not so comfortable, not so pleasant, not so much to their liking, they will not be available to God. They will find their own way; they will follow the world. They use their own power, their own wisdom.

If our lives are totally available to God, God will have the freedom to be close to us, to speak to us, to guide us, to help us.

We see in the **Acts of the Apostles** how the Holy Spirit spoke to Paul and told him where to go and where not to go and he knew very clearly.

That does not mean that that is the way that God would speak to all of us.

In many ways God may not speak to us in that way, but we can know the will of God even though we may not hear His voice in that kind of way. That is because when our heart is completely His, we will be able to understand the moral and spiritual principles that underlie the way that God operates. We understand His heart: how He thinks, how He considers.

God tells us His ways are higher than our ways, His thoughts than our thoughts.

That is true but sometimes we miss the point that when we learn to identify with God, when we truly love Him, we are absorbed in Him, His ways become our ways, His thoughts become our thoughts. We begin to think like Him: Paul says, "...we have the mind of Christ"; we think like Him. And so, in various situations of life, we will be able to appreciate what would be meaningful to Him.

And if we understand that, we live in that way then even if we make mistakes in terms of specific events, issues, situations, practical steps, it will not be serious because the meaning will be there.

Specific actions can be modified if the moral meaning is the same. If God wants you to be a teacher and you end up as a lawyer, will it make a very great difference?

Generally it will not make a great difference if the way you have gone about it is right: you love Him, you are available to Him, you seek His guidance; even if you were mistaken, you will be a good lawyer. If you were correct and you became a teacher, you will be a good teacher.

But if your heart is not completely His, whether you are a lawyer or teacher or whatever it is, you will not be a good witness for Him.

So underlying it, the whole issue is are we truly available to Him; and not be so worried that we may not be able to recognize every single aspect, every single step, that we need to take.

This takes time for us to learn, to grow to be like Him in understanding of spiritual issues and His ways.

But if we learn that, then life becomes very enjoyable: It is a very wonderful life of freedom and meaning.

So when we are available to God at all times, the way we live our lives will definitely be one in which we learn to pray without ceasing because we always want to know His will, we are in fellowship with Him all the time, we seek to understand how He wants us to conduct ourselves. So “pray without ceasing” will not be something so strange. It will be a way of life and we will love His will and we will not run away from it.

Let us turn to **John 15: 5-8**.

John 15: 5-8

- 5 "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.
- 6 "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned.
- 7 "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.
- 8 "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.

This is the practical implication of being available to God, of our heart being completely His. The Lord Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."

If our hearts are completely His and we are totally available to Him, how do we live our life?

Certainly, we will abide in Him and He will then abide in us and we will bear much fruit.

What does it mean to abide in Him?

To abide in the Lord Jesus, there are so many different issues that can be considered but the primary aspect of abiding in the Lord Jesus is that we are absorbed in Him, we are preoccupied with Him day and night.

He is our life, He is our Lord; we love Him and so we are absorbed in who He is, what He has done, what He wants to accomplish, what He has said. We ponder over this day and night to understand: what does it mean for us? Because we are available to Him, so we want to know what is in His heart.

But how many Christians are prepared to spend time to ponder over what is in the heart of the Lord? We are more occupied with the things of this world; there are so many things that seem so attractive that we want to be occupied with.

But if we want to abide in the Lord, then we must take the time, make the effort, to come to Him, listen to Him, ponder over who He is, what He has said, what He wants to do. It is in that state that He will abide in us.

He stands at the door and knocks. If we open the door, He will come in and He will dine with us, and we with Him. But if we do not open the door, He may go away.

So if we do not come to Him, we do not abide in Him then He may not then abide in us.

He abiding in us tells us that all the riches in Christ become available to us in practical living. Whatever we need for the situation in order to fulfil the will of God will be available to us because Christ abides in us, His life fills us.

And this comes to us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit: He will strengthen us, He will guide us that Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith; we will be strengthened by the Spirit in the inner man. It is in that context that we will bear fruit.

And the words of the Lord Jesus are very clear: "...**apart from Me you can do nothing**".

It is rather strange isn't it, that there are so many things that Christians are doing that amount to nothing because they do not abide in Him and He does not abide in them in any significant measure because we are preoccupied with our own ways, our own thoughts, our own inclinations.

But it need not be that way. We can be very fruitful if we learn to concentrate on what it means to live for Him, to be available to Him.

I want to conclude today by referring to **Revelation 3: 1-6**.

Revelation 3: 1-6

- 1 "To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.'
- 2 'Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.'
- 3 'So remember what you have received and heard; and keep *it*, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.'
- 4 'But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.'
- 5 'He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.'
- 6 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

"To the angel of the church in Sardis" – this message is addressed to the church in Sardis: a group of believers in a specific place physically.

So while we say that the body of Christ is spiritual, we also must recognize that the body of Christ is expressed in outward form in different places.

So there is this group of people in Sardis who belonged to the body of Christ in their local context and the Lord Jesus had a message for them, for this particular church.

If you read the letters to the other churches, you will notice that they are different. Each letter is different and specific for that church.

So in this church the Lord Jesus warned them; He said, 'Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.'

There was something deficient and they must repent. If they did not repent, there would be serious consequences: "if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you".

So as a group of people, the church in a local place can be positive or negative to varying degrees.

It is up to us how far we will go in developing the quality of church life that God intends. And again here at an individual level or at a congregational level, we should not be competing and comparing with other people to see who is better. That is not the issue.

But each one of us must fulfil our part faithfully: we do what we understand the Lord wants us to do, we be faithful to Him. Each one must do that, each congregation that seeks to work out church life must seek to fulfil what they understand is meaningful to God.

Then the Lord Jesus said, 'But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy'.

So these few people are different from the majority. The majority had a problem; the Lord Jesus was not pleased. But there were a few people that He was pleased with: "...they are worthy... they will walk with Me in white".

So this tells us that each one of us will have to account for our own lives even though we are members of the body.

If we are the liver and we do not function well as a liver, God is going to judge the liver.

But as far as the whole congregation is concerned, the body locally, if the liver does not function well, it will have an effect on that body.

So too for us in working out church life: If we do not do our part, it will affect the body. But at the personal level, ultimately each one of us has a relationship with God and God will deal with us accordingly. There are those who have not soiled their garments, they are worthy; they will walk with the Lord in white.

And so the final two verses tell us these two aspects: personal level and corporate level.

Verse 5: 'He who overcomes': It is a personal level – applies to each individual – 'He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.' So that is a message to each individual: whoever overcomes will be rewarded.

And then finally He says, 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

It is not just to the church in Sardis: it is to all the churches.

All churches must listen carefully because the underlying spiritual principles apply to all churches.

That context may refer to the church in Sardis but the underlying reasons as to why they function well or not well will be applicable to all churches.

And although this message came from the Lord Jesus, He says, 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

So it is the Holy Spirit directing, speaking, guiding in church life. We must listen to what He has to say. We must obey; we must depend on Him and walk with Him.

So if we want to live our lives well and fulfil God's call in our lives, we must learn to appreciate what the Holy Spirit is seeking to do in our lives and in the body of Christ, and submit to His direction and depend on His enabling.

So let us be conscious that the Holy Spirit is the One who directs church life and His approach is to impart life, motivated by love.

This must be our approach and if we want to impart life, we must learn to die: to die to selfish desires, to give up the world and to give up ourselves fully to God, that our heart be completely His.

In that context, we learn to abide in the Lord and He in us, and we will bear much fruit at a personal level and corporately in church life. We can then move together.

When we all do that, there will be unity of the Spirit because we are being led by the Spirit, we are moving together in the Spirit; the life is the life of God.

And so, church life will be of quality.

Let us come before the Lord and ask Him to help us to appreciate Him more deeply, to be conscious of what our life on earth ought to be as we look forward to eternity.

Let us not waste away our opportunities, our time, our resources; and let us not move in a negative direction that will cost us our spiritual life in the future.

Let us ask the Lord to help us to respond well to Him.