Assembling on the Sabbath

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work..." —Ex 20:8-10

Is the Sabbath only a day to refrain from work? Are there positive things we should do on the Sabbath? Do we need to assemble with others? What should we do in services? What does the Bible say?

By Norman S. Edwards
August 1998

OUTLINE

MORE THAN A "DAY OFF"	**2**
GOOD THINGS TO DO ON THE SABBATH	**2**
DID THE COMMAND TO ASSEMBLE CONTINUE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?	**3**
WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THEY WERE PUT OUT OF THE SYNAGOGUES?	**5**
ARE ASSEMBLIES REQUIRED OR OPTIONAL?	**5**
BACKGROUND TO FIRST CENTURY WORSHIP	**6**
WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT WORSHIP SERVICES?	**7**
1 CORINTHIANS 14:26: THINGS TO DO AT SERVICES	**9**
OTHER ELEMENTS OF WORSHIP SERVICES	**12**
IS A MINISTER OR ELDER REQUIRED FOR A WORSHIP SERVICE?	**14**
CAN THESE PRINCIPLES BE MADE TO WORK TODAY?	**15**
CONCLUSION	**17**

The Sabbath was given as a "perpetual covenant" between the Eternal and his people (Ex 31:13-17). This covenant did not end with the death of our Savior. Isaiah 56 pictures a time when Israel will be gathered (v 7-8) and salvation will be available to everyone—clearly after the Messiah's return. What will these people be doing? "Also the sons of the foreigner who join themselves to the Lord, to serve Him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants—**everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath and holds fast My covenant"** (v 6). With all of the contention between the Jewish leadership and Jesus' followers, do we find arguments about keeping the Sabbath? No, we find only clear statements that the apostle Paul taught Jews and Gentiles on that day (Acts 13:42; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4).

More Than a "Day Off"

Many people are familiar with the instructions not to work on the Sabbath Day (Ex 20:10; 31:14-15; 35:2; Lev 23:3; Jer 17:22-24; Neh 13, etc.). But is that all there is to it?

> If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your own pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, then you shall delight yourself in the Lord; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the Lord has spoken (Isa 58:13-14).

This day is for seeking the Lord and serving him, not a day of frivolous entertainment.

> Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation (Lev 23:1-4).

The Hebrew words for "holy convocation" here are the same used elsewhere in this chapter for assembling on feast days. Deuteronomy 16:16 and other Scriptures make it clear that the people were to gather together. Twice we read "You shall keep My Sabbaths and reverence My sanctuary: I am the Lord" (Lev 19:30; 26:2). It is on the Sabbath day that people went to the temple, which contained the sanctuary or "holy place", the physical representation of the Eternal on earth. They were to worship and "reverence" His holiness.

This pattern of the faithful meeting at the temple on the Sabbath continued even during difficult times of the evil queen Athalia. It was on a Sabbath day that Jehoiada made Jehoash king in front of the large crowds at the temple (2Kngs 11:9,13-14).

Sabbath assemblies will continue in the Millennium. Chapters 40 through 48 of Ezekiel are a prophecy of the future restoration of a temple at the Messiah's return. They contain instructions to the priests that mention **the keeping of the Sabbath** and **appointed assemblies** in the same sentence: "And they [the priests] shall teach My people the difference between the holy and the unholy, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean. In controversy they shall stand as judges, and judge it according to My judgments. They shall keep My laws and My statutes in all My appointed meetings, and they shall hallow My Sabbaths" (Ezk 44:23-24).

Good Things To Do On the Sabbath

Psalm 92 is titled *A Song for the Sabbath day*. These 15 verses provide some wonderful insights about what we should be doing on the Sabbath day. We will quote the entire Psalm:

> [1]A Psalm. A Song for the Sabbath day. It is good to give thanks to the LORD, And to sing praises to Your name, O Most High; [2]To declare Your lovingkindness in the morning, And Your faithfulness every night, [3]On an instrument of ten strings, On the lute, And on the harp, With harmonious sound. [4]For You, Lord, have made me glad through Your work; I will triumph in the works of Your hands. [5]O Lord, how great are Your works! Your thoughts are very deep. [6]A senseless man does not know, Nor does a fool understand this. [7]When the wicked spring up like grass, And when all the workers of iniquity flourish, It is that they may be destroyed forever. [8]But You, LORD, are on high forevermore. [9]For behold, Your enemies, O Lord, For behold, Your enemies shall perish; All the workers of iniquity shall

be scattered. [10]But my horn You have exalted like a wild ox; I have been anointed with fresh oil. [11]My eye also has seen my desire on my enemies; My ears hear my desire on the wicked who rise up against me. [12]The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree, He shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. [13]Those who are planted in the house of the Lord Shall flourish in the courts of our God. [14]They shall still bear fruit in old age; They shall be fresh and flourishing, [15]To declare that the Lord is upright; He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him.

These are the major points that we learn:

1. We should praise the Eternal on the Sabbath day, with singing and instrumental music (v 1,3). This is done to some degree in nearly every church groups, but there is probably much more that we could do. If people are not available who can sing or play special praises to God, perhaps we could utilize the 20th century convenience of recorded music. In any case, the music should praise the Eternal for His great deeds (v 2,4-5); not praise the membership.

2. We should appreciate the knowledge that has been given to us, realizing that others do not understand (v 6). (This must be done with a humble spirit; we should not look down on others just because they do not understand—Zph 3:11.)

3. We should receive fresh oil, which is a symbol of the Holy Spirit (v 10). The Holy Spirit is given in increased measure when we pray for it (Luke 11:13; Acts 4:31).

4. We should go to the "house of the Lord" (v 13). This expression is used over a hundred times in the Bible to indicate either the tabernacle built in Moses' day or one of the temples in Jerusalem. Being "planted" in it certainly means that we make a habit of going there. (Since there are no temple services today, we will deal with their replacement later.)

5. When trials and evils are surrounding us, we should use this day to remember that good will triumph over evil, the righteous over the wicked, etc. (v 7-11). Many other prophecies show that this will ultimately happen in the millennial reign of Christ (Rev 20:2-6) There are several hints in the scripture that the Sabbath pictures the Millennium—the first six days of the week picturing the first six thousand years of Man's existence under his own rule.

6. Those who are mature in the Word should "bear fruit" or teach others the greatness of the Eternal, how we can trust Him. The Sabbath is a day for teaching and learning.

Did the Command to Assemble Continue in the New Testament?

We learn from the Gospel of Luke that our Savior was in the habit of assembling on the Sabbath and Holy Days as He grew up:

> His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover (Luke 2:41).
>
> So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read (Luke 4:16).

While Christ sometimes spoke outdoors as in the famous "Sermon on the Mount" (Matt 5:1), his most frequent places of teaching were the synagogues and the temple.

> Jesus answered him, "I spoke openly to the world. I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where the Jews always meet, and in secret I have said nothing" (John 18:20).

During His early ministry there are mostly references to synagogue teaching. For example:

> Then they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and taught (Mark 1:21).
>
> And He entered the synagogue again... (Mark 3:1).
>
> And when the Sabbath had come, He began to teach in the synagogue... (Mark 6:2).

During His later ministry we find more Scriptures mentioning His teaching in the temple.

> Now about the middle of the Feast, Jesus went up into the temple and taught (John 7:14).
>
> And he was teaching daily in the temple. But the chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people sought to destroy Him (Luke 19:48).

After the death of our Savior, His way was taught in the temple for a while, as well as in synagogues and houses.

> So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart (Acts 2:46).

> But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, "Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life" (Acts 5:19-20).
>
> And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ (Acts 5:42).

The number of disciples in Jerusalem continued to grow for a while (Acts 6:1), but not much later:

> A great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.... As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8:1,3-4).

We find little mentioned about preaching in the temple after this time. Paul certainly had a custom of synagogue attendance, both to preach to new people and to assemble with the brethren.

> ...They came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures (Acts 17:1-2).

Acts 18 shows that these were regular meetings of the brethren, not just efforts to convert the Jews:

> And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks.... And he departed from there and entered the house of a certain man named Justus, one who worshipped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue.... And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.... Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment seat.... (Acts 18:4,7,11,17).

Sosthenes was a converted man and continued as a leader of the brethren (1Cor 1:1), but he maintained his position as ruler of the synagogue. Additional references to teaching and assembling in synagogues are available (Acts 9:20; 13:5,14,42; 14:1,10,17, etc.).

Obviously, this practice of Christ's followers attending synagogue services was not appreciated by the unbelieving Jews. His prophecy came to pass:

> They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service (John 16:2).

It is noteworthy that His followers **were not told to leave** the synagogues, but told they would be **put out**. Sometimes the disciples recognized a hopeless situation and left the synagogues before they were put out.

> And he [Paul] went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God. But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:8-10).

Here we have a good example of meeting in another facility that was not designed for worship services—something done frequently in our age. The last Bible reference we find to brethren meeting in a synagogue is in James 2:2-3:

> For if there should come into your **assembly** a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes...

The word "assembly" is translated from the Greek *sunagoge,* which is translated "synagogue" in all 56 other places that it appears in the New Testament. There is no linguistic or contextual reason for translating it differently here. The King James and most other Bible translators could not bring themselves to admit that Christ's followers were still using "Jewish" forms of worship as late as 60 AD (the approximate time of James' writing). Such an admission would be tremendous evidence for keeping the Sabbath rather than Sunday—evidence they would rather not face. Bible translations that do properly say "synagogue" in this verse include *Young's Literal Translation, Green's Literal Translation,* the *Darby Bible,* the *Emphasized New Testament* and the *Jewish New Testament.*

What Happened After They Were Put Out of the Synagogues?

Whether it took a few years, or many years, the true believers were eventually put out of the synagogues (John 16:2). Persecution may have moved more slowly among "the twelve tribes that are scattered abroad" (Jms 1:1)—thus explaining the later reference to synagogues in James 2:2. So where did the saints (the believers in Christ) assemble after they were put out of the synagogues? The commonly thought answer is "in Christian Churches!" But what does the Bible say? Do we find biblical descriptions of church buildings? The surprising answer is, "No!" Do we find a description in the Bible of a church service? Only a partial one—and it is nothing like a typical Christian church service that one might attend today.

The Greek word translated "church" in the New Testament is *ekklesia.* It means "assembly" or "people that have come together". "Called out ones" is preferred by some, and if a crowd "comes together", they certainly must have come out of somewhere! Of interest, *ekklesia* is translated "assembly" three times in Acts 19, once for a "lawful assembly", (v 39) and twice for a rather unruly mob.

> And some cried one thing and some another, for the **assembly** *[ekklesia]* was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together (v 32, 41).

The word *ekklesia* is also used in Acts 7:38 to describe the Israelite nation at the time of Moses, the "church in the wilderness". It is also used in Hebrews 2:12, a quotation from Psalm 22:22, to translate from the Hebrew *qahal,* which is usually translated "congregation" in the Old Testament.

All other uses of *ekklesia* in the New Testament refer to the Church—the Body of Christ—the assembly of saints or the true believers. Sometimes it refers to the entire body of believers as in Ephesians 5:25: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church *[ekklesia]* and gave Himself for it." Other times it refers to a local congregation in a certain area: "To the church *[ekklesia]* which is at Corinth" (1Cor 1:2, cf Rev 2 & 3). The plural form is used to refer to multiple assemblies: "so that we ourselves boast to you among the churches *[ekklesia]* of God" (2Thes 1:4).

The biblical definition of the *ekklesia* is the Body of the Christ (Col 1:24). It is the Eternal who sets the members in the Body when they are baptized (1Cor 12:12-14,18,27). Only those who obey Him receive His spirit and are part of the Body (Acts 5:32, Rom 8:9). There is no record of an apostle or any other leader placing someone into or out of the *ekklesia.*

This paper uses "congregation", "assembly", or "body of believers" rather than the word "church" because when most people hear the word "church" they think of either a building or some kind of organized group of which one can become a member, not the definition given above.

Are Assemblies Required or Optional?

We have already seen much of the Old Testament evidence for Sabbath Assemblies. The New Testament contains more!

We can start with the signs the Eternal gave His people. Exodus 31:13 shows that the Sabbath would be a sign between the Eternal and His people. In John 13:34-35, our Savior gave a new sign whereby his people would be known: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." Today, many Jews claim to keep the Sabbath, but do not claim to have the love spoken of in these verses. Many Christians claim to have this love, but do not keep the Sabbath. **We should be doing both.** How can these signs identify us unless we are assembling regularly on the Sabbath? How can we show such love to others and how can the world see that we are showing it unless we have close acquaintances and regular fellowship? The most common reasons for people not to regularly fellowship are meetings that are too far away, meetings that take too long and doctrinal disagreement with others. If these things prevent us from assembling on the Sabbath, will we still be able to set the good example of love for each other during the other six days of the week? It is hard to believe that we would.

There are numerous Scriptures that show us that the saints assembled together on a regular basis—usually on the Sabbath (Acts 13:44; 14:27; 15:6; 15:30; 1Cor 5:4; etc.). Paul and Barnabas spent a year in Jerusalem assembling

with the brethren (Acts 11:26).

> And let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the **assembling** of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching (Heb 10:25).

The Greek word used for assembling here is very interesting: *episunagoge*. The prefix *epi* means "on", "upon", or "towards" and the rest of the word is *sunagoge;* the exact same form used for "synagogue" everywhere else in the Bible. This same word, *episunagoge,* is used only one other place in the Scriptures where it describes the gathering together of all the brethren for the Messiah's return. As Hebrews 10:25 makes clear, we need to meet together to exhort one another all the more as we are nearing the end.

Background to First Century Worship

Before we look at the Scriptures to see what they say about New Testament services, it helps to have a historic perspective about the services in which our Savior participated. As we have shown previously, He taught in both the temple and synagogue. The nature of these services would allow any man of Israel to speak and teach provided that he had something worthwhile to say that was in keeping with the Scriptures. If Jesus (or "Yeshua" as his fellow Israelites probably called him) did not participate in the rest of services (songs, prayers, Scripture readings), He certainly would not have been considered a man of Israel and would not have been allowed to speak.

The synagogue services were patterned after the temple services. Even though top-level Jewish leaders in the New Testament period had great faults and broke the law by their tradition (Mark 7, Matt 23), they did not seize control of local synagogue services. Our Savior as well as other less-honorable teachers were able to teach through that system. He was able to teach a message that was in many points contradictory to what the top leaders believed. Contrast this with most modern-day church services where a traveling teacher, no matter how knowledgeable or righteous, would **not** be allowed to speak unless given permission by the organization in charge. To provide a historic background of this kind of service, we will quote selected paragraphs from chapter 19 of William L. Colman's *Today's Handbook of Bible Times and Customs* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984):

> The synagogue was extremely important in the time of Christ, serving as the center of religious education and the spiritual lighthouse of Jewish community life....
>
> When Jesus began His ministry, the synagogue could not be ignored as a force in Israel. Other than the temple in Jerusalem, no religious institution in Israel held such importance. The advantage of a synagogue was that it was in close proximity to the common person. Consequently much of the early church's initial impact was felt in synagogue services.
>
> **DIVERSITY.** Synagogues might be compared with the present diversity among Christian churches. While there were similarities between most synagogues, there were also notable differences between congregations and between regions. Ten Jewish males were necessary to form a synagogue, but beyond this standard they were free to establish their own structure and format.
>
> The Synagogue of the Libertines or Freedmen (Acts 6:9) may have been comprised of former Roman slaves. Consequently they had their own background and perspective. Some synagogues allowed meetings concerning political intrigue and insurrection against Rome. Others were very traditional, staid and noncontroversial.
>
> A synagogue, especially outside of Israel, might have people from diverse backgrounds. Often, converted Gentiles made up part of the congregations.
>
> Architecture of the buildings could differ drastically....
>
> **LEADERSHIP**. Most of a synagogue's affairs were managed by a committee of ten elders. It was their job to oversee synagogue life and select those who would be in charge of the activities. Two officials were expected to provide the main leadership, though this number often varied.
>
> *Ruler of the synagogue.* This general overseer is found in the New Testament. He was expected to maintain smooth order in the ser-

vices or other meetings. He needed to assign people to read the Scriptures and lead in prayer. When a visitor came to the synagogue, the ruler invited him to address the congregation, as was done at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:15). Jesus was invited to speak in synagogues as He traveled about (Luke 4;14,15). Such a ruler objected to Christ's audacity to heal on the Sabbath (Luke 13:14).

Attendant of the synagogue. Called a *hazzan,* this was the person who worked in the synagogue and received a salary. When the Scriptures were to be read, he removed the appropriate scrolls from the chest and afterward returned them. Jesus handed the Isaiah scroll to the attendant after reading to the congregation (Luke 4:20).

It was not uncommon for the attendant to live in a part of the synagogue.

Not every attendant was a godly person. Some were known to save the prestigious seats for those who offered a small gift. Such men may be the objects of James' scorn when He condemned the practice of selective seating. In some congregations the wealthy were given the best benches, and the poor had to stand at the back or sit on the floor at someone's feet (James 2:1-4).

SERVICES. Considering the pluralism that existed among Jews, it is impossible to define a standard order of service. Nevertheless, there were certain ingredients that would have been found in most.

Shema. As an affirmation of their faith in one God, the congregation recited a passage from the writings of Moses (Deut 6:4,5). The *shema* is the central credal statement of the faith. [It was reaffirmed by our Savior in Mark 12:29-30!] Monotheism was the cornerstone of Judaism and conflicted with the polytheistic religions that surrounded Israel.

Several prayers of thanksgiving also were used, interspersed with hearty "Amens."

Reading the scrolls. The Scriptures were at the heart of the synagogue services. Jews believed God had revealed His will in written form; consequently literacy and the scrolls were paramount. Those who recorded their experiences in the synagogue, especially around the New Testament era, noted the centrality of the Scriptures.

Often someone would then explain the Scriptures. Occasionally young people were invited to render their interpretations. *[In most church services the young person's role is primarily to be quiet.]* If an honored or respected visitor was in their midst, he was invited to speak....

The Jews were quite liberal in allowing people to interpret the Scriptures. They did not look to a select few gifted, trained or anointed leaders. Most any Jewish man was eligible to present his insights concerning the Word of God.

All of these elements are not directly supported by Scripture, but it is hard to find where they contradict Scripture. This is the kind of service in which our Savior, the apostles, and most of the first-century brethren participated since childhood. This is the system in which He preached the Gospel to Israel. **We must read the New Testament with this in mind.** These people did not consider a Sabbath service to be a few songs, two or three prayers, some announcements, and one or two "sermons" given by men carefully chosen to represent the approved theology of a corporate church organization. We are not suggesting today's congregations look primarily to Jewish tradition for their format of services—but some Jewish tradition may be more useful than Christian traditions. This author believes it is better to take this approach:

1) Start with the applicable instructions for services from the Old and New Testaments.

2) Fill in the missing details from history to help understand what Christ and His apostles were doing at their services. (Much of this history will be Jewish in nature, though some of the Christian "Church Fathers", information may be useful.)

3) Ask Christ to show a congregation what He wants them to do. This is a direct request that He answer His promise to guide and be with any meeting where two or three are gathered together (Matt 18:20).

Let us begin with what the Scriptures say:

What does the Bible Say About Worship Services?

When & Where? We have already seen that services should be held on the Sabbath day. There are scriptural references to other Holy Days, but they exceed the scope of this article. While the early believers did meet primarily in

synagogues, it was not a "requirement". The school of Tyrannus was used (Acts 19:9) as well as houses (1Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phlm 2). Since the synagogue had few specific architectural requirements and no other requirements are specified in the New Testament, we can conclude that the shape or nature of the building is not a critical part of the service.

Outdoor meetings were used also. Acts 16:11-13 mentions people meeting for prayers by "the riverside" (a more limited service since the Jewish-required 10 men were not present). It is likely that the synagogues in Philippi, a Roman Colony, were destroyed a few years before when Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome (See Acts 18:1). It is possible that the political situation may have forbidden men to meet together, but an assembly of mostly women would not be considered "dangerous". The overall lesson to be learned is this: The need to assemble to encourage each other is far more important than the physical facilities. We should make the best use of what is available.

Who assembles? Several Scriptures tell us all believers assembled together, both men and women. History shows children were present, too. Paul directly addresses children in two of his letters which were read to congregations (Eph 6:1; Col 3:20). If he did not expect children in the audience, he would have said, "parents, tell your children to...."

Should unbelievers be invited to attend? There is not one example of someone "inviting someone else to a service" in the New Testament. The whole emphasis of the preaching of the Gospel was for people to repent, be baptized, and accept Christ as their Savior. Worship services were for those who were already believers. Nevertheless, unbelievers may sometimes come into a worship service. When they do, they should not be escorted out, but should see an orderly service that will convince them that "God is truly among you" (1Cor 14:23-25).

There are some people who should **not** be assembling with other believers. People with obvious flagrant sins who would bring a bad name on all of them should not be accepted in fellowship (1Cor 5:11). Deceivers who are teaching false fundamental doctrines should not be there (2Jn 7-11). Those who are "obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings", or who feel wealth is a sign of righteousness should also be avoided (1Tim 6:3-10).

While the Scriptures tell us we should assemble on the Sabbath, neither the Old nor New Testament commands any kind of punishment for non-attendance. **It is the individual's responsibility to attend as often as possible.** If sickness or other circumstances interfere, each believer must decide what to do. Indeed, the Old Testament commands us to stay away if we have certain diseases. When Paul talked about "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together**, as is the manner of some"** (Heb 10:25), he did not say to disfellowship or shun those who were forsaking the assembling.

How should we be dressed? This writer knows of a woman whose husband had studied the Bible for years but never attended services. He finally decided to attend with her. They were not wealthy and he did not own a suit and tie. He wore a clean shirt and pants but when he arrived at the service she normally attended, he was not permitted to enter because he did not have a suit. While Scriptures such as Isaiah 64:6 and Zechariah 3:3-4 compare dirty clothes with sin, our mission is to bring not "the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Mark 2:17). The parable of the man rejected for not having a wedding garment (Matt 22:1-14) is not talking about a worship service either literally or by analogy. It is telling us that we must be completely ready for His Kingdom when it comes.

Individually, we should strive to be clean and neat for services, but the Bible clearly teaches that we should not reject anyone based on their clothing. John the Baptist wore very plain clothes but was called the greatest man (Matt 3:4; 11:8-11). The context of 1 Timothy 2:9-10 seems to be public worship: women should not put on a "style show" but emphasize modesty. Finally, we have specific instructions in James 2:2-4:

> For if there should come into your assembly [synagogue] a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a **poor man in filthy clothes,** and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, "You sit here in a good place," and say to the poor man, "You stand there," or, "Sit here at my footstool," have you not shown partiality among

yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

1 Corinthians 14:26: Things To Do At Services

This single verse states many of the activities of the Corinthians' Sabbath services:

> How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a **psalm,** has a **teaching,** has a **tongue,** has a **revelation,** has an **interpretation.** Let all things be done for edification (1Cor 14:26).

This entire section of Scripture is about worship services. However, it is in the context of Paul correcting the existing Corinthian services. We do not have a complete "plan for services" from Paul, neither do we have a complete description of what the Corinthians were doing. We cannot be sure that Paul corrected everything that he felt needed to be corrected as only a few chapters before he said, "And the rest I will set in order when I come" (1Cor 11:34). Nevertheless, there are key elements of the Corinthian worship service of which Paul approved. Each one is well worth studying. Later, this paper will cover other details mentioned elsewhere.

Psalms or songs. Most congregations of all denominations have maintained this instruction to some degree. There are dozens of commands in the Old Testament to sing praises to our Father. Paul repeats one in Hebrews 2:12, specifically stating:

> In the midst of the congregation I will sing praise to You.

Ephesians 5:19 mentions:

> ...speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.

Ephesians 3:16 continues this approach:

> Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

The book of Psalms mentions a wide variety of vocal arrangements, instruments, and styles of music. Music could be quite loud (Psalm 98:4; 33:3). The only major limitation is that the songs we sing should praise the Eternal, or teach some valuable lesson as described in the verses above. We should avoid songs that primarily praise the singers.

The Scriptures are not fulfilled if we only sing decade-old or hundred-year-old hymns. There are seven commands in the Old Testament to sing a **"new song"** to the Eternal (Pslm 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isa 42:1). Even in Revelation 5:9 and 14:3 we find that new songs are still being sung. Those who have a talent for writing music should be encouraged. The performing of music new to the congregation (often called "special music") should be continued.

Teaching. Most congregations typically do this—some do it for many hours each week! The Greek *didache* used here has a broad meaning—like the English word "teach". It could apply to an exposition of Scripture or a discourse on some particular subject. It does not imply divine inspiration. Our concept of a sermon or sermonette fits into this category. However, many people believe that only "elders" or "ministers" and a few carefully selected men should be allowed to teach in services. This idea is supported neither by the Bible nor history. The Scripture says, **"each one of you"**—everyone had something to contribute and teaching could be one of those things.

We have read the history of synagogues, how they allowed any man of Israel to speak about the Scriptures. We have seen how Christ and His apostles were able to teach in a number of synagogues having no "rank" or position in those organizations nor being part of some regional or national organization. In Acts 6 we find seven men selected and appointed to serve widows—Stephen and Philip, two of the seven, are doing major Gospel preaching in the next two chapters of the book. Indeed, all the brethren except the apostles were scattered from Jerusalem, but they preached the Gospel everywhere (Acts 8:1,4). Acts 18:18-28 shows the story of how Apollos, a man neither selected by the brethren nor having hands laid on him, of his own accord began to teach the Truth. Aquila, Priscilla and others had to teach him other things, but he continued on in his role as a teacher (1Cor 4:6; 16:12). Hebrews 5:12 mentions that men who have attended for a long time should be teachers. All of these things do not neatly fit into the typical "church organization" with which most "Christians" believe they must be members.

Yet 1 Corinthians 12:29 indicates that not everyone is a teacher, so no individual should ever be "required" to teach. Those who have the gift of teaching (Rom 12:7; 1Cor 12:1-8,28; Eph 4:11) should be doing most of the teaching. Since "God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased," (1Co 12:18), we must not artificially limit who is allowed to teach.

A natural question arises: if nearly every man is given a chance to teach, will not the congregation be subjected to error and confusion? Sometimes corrections will need to be made, but confusion should not result (the entire fourteenth chapter of 1Corinithians is about how to remove confusion—see verse 33). 1 Timothy 1:3-4 is an admonition to stop some people from teaching wrong or unnecessary doctrines. Also, Titus 3:9-10 tells us to "avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless. **Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition."** The Greek *Paraiteomai* ("reject") means "refuse"—the same word is used in 1 Timothy 5:11 where women were not allowed to join the special service. As the women in these verses who were not accepted were not "put out" of their congregation, so those who speak error are not to be "put out". Those who teach error are to be rejected as teachers after two warnings. Yes, congregations will probably hear some error. But for years, nearly all congregations have heard some doctrinal error from their trained ministry. The purpose of fellowship is for those who assemble to grow. Part of that growth is learning to distinguish truth from error (Deut 13:3; 1Cor 11:19).

Since each member of the congregation is responsible for detecting a speaker's error, are the speakers free to say whatever comes to mind, hoping it is inspired, but counting on the congregation to catch any doctrinal error? Absolutely not! A teacher is responsible to the Eternal for teaching truth.

> My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment (James 1:3).

A person would be much better off not teaching than teaching error. Those who teach must pray, study, and put their heart into their efforts. (**If** teachers in services were always appointed by a ministerial hierarchy, this verse makes no sense—Paul should have been instructing the "ministry" not to "ordain" many teachers.)

Speaking in Tongues and Interpretation. (Continuing our analysis of 1Cor 14:26) Numerous Bible references explain that speaking in tongues was a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit (Mark 16:17; Acts 2:4; 10:46; 19:6; 1Cor 12:10). Much information is contained about this gift in the 12th and 14th chapters of 1 Corinthians. Today, most church groups go to one extreme or the other. Most do not speak in tongues and may even automatically "put out" anyone who does. The opposite extreme are groups whom frequently "speak in tongues"—sometimes dozens of people doing it at once (in opposition to Paul's instruction).

It is important to recognize that the scriptures mention three different types of "speaking in tongues". In Acts 2:1-11, people spoke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and others heard them all in their own language. This is a miracle that few claim today, but if it does happen, we would hope that church leaders of any sort would have the wisdom not to try to stop it.

Another kind of "speaking in tongues" is done privately, as an encouragement to the believer: "For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands *him;* however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries" (1Cor 14:1). This practice should not be much of an issue among believers if those who do it do it privately.

In regard to "tongue speaking" in services, Paul says: "If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one **interpret.** But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God" (1Cor 14:27-28). It is important to note that the Greek word used here for interpret is *diermeneuo,* which conveys the idea of "explain the meaning". This is distinct from the other Greek word *methermeneuo* which means specifically to translate from one language to another.

There may be some need to allow people to speak in tongues in a service to see if there is someone who believes they have been given an interpretation, but the process should be only a small part of the service as Paul shows above. How do we know if someone is just "faking it"? We might not be able to tell the first time. But if a certain tongue-speaker never has an interpreter or

if the interpretation is never edifying, then brethren or an overseer should go to him and ask him to stop doing it. A congregation should not vilify this gift. Paul says, "do not forbid to speak with tongues" (1Cor 14:39). On the other hand, one should never seek this gift so much that they are willing to accept "mindless babble" instead of the real thing.

Revelation or Prophecy. Paul seems to use these words interchangeably (see 1Cor 14:29-31). Both of them indicate a message directly revealed from the Eternal, either about the future or information for the present. Many commentaries will say any "inspiring" sermon is prophecy, citing verses like 1 Corinthians 14:3:

> But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men."

This verse shows the effect of prophecy, but does not define it. Most of the usage of the words "prophet" and "prophecy" (Greek *prophetes* and *propheteuo*) in the New Testament are references to the Old Testament prophets who received messages directly from the Eternal or his angels. Many more uses are found in the book of Revelation, a prophecy of Christ. Every place where we have the actual message of a New Testament prophet written, it is a miraculous revelation (John 11:48-52; Acts 11:27-30; 13:1-3; 21:10-11; Rev, the book). Many theologians like to define prophecy as "inspired or encouraging preaching" so they can give a sermon and feel like they have this spiritual gift—when **they do not have it!** Sermons are often wonderful examples of "teaching", but they are not "prophecy"!

Teaching is conveying information that you have learned from Scripture and your life experience. Prophecy is a message directly from the Eternal. The prophet may not even understand the message himself (Dan 12:8-9; John 11:48-52). In the case of Balaam, he was not a righteous man, and hoped to give a prophecy opposite to what the Eternal gave him, but he had to speak what he was given (Num 22-24). The New Testament easily demonstrates that teaching **and** prophesying are not the same thing: women were allowed to prophesy (Acts 21:9; 1 Cor 11:5) but were not allowed to teach (1Tim 2:12).

Hebrews 1:1 does **not** say that there are no more prophets. One of the biggest prophecies of all Scripture was written after this time, the book of Revelation (Rev 22:7-10). Also, **John** warned his readers to "try the spirits" because "many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1Jn 4:1). If there were no more true prophets, why would John warn them to "try the spirits"? Should he have told them "all prophets are false"? No! The nature of prophets continues as it always has been: some are true, some are false, and we are left to read the Scriptures and judge. As with tongues, Paul gives specific instruction on how to deal with prophets in the congregation:

> Let two or three prophets speak, and **let the others judge**. But if **anything** is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. And the spirits of the prophets **are subject to the prophets.** For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints (1Cor 14:29-33).

Obviously, anyone could stand up and say, "I have a message from God!" But in most cases, they would be liars—false prophets. For this reason, the other saints must judge, to determine if the prophet's sayings are according to Scripture (Deut 13; Isa 8:20; Deut 18:21-22). There should be no contradictions.

> If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord make Myself known to him in a vision, and I speak to him in a dream (Num 12:6).

The Eternal used visions and dreams **frequently** in the Old Testament and also in the new (Matt 2:12-22; 27:19; Acts 2:17; 11:5; 16:9). Also, we find that the Holy Spirit speaks directly to people (John 16:13; Acts 8:9; 10:19). (This does not make the Holy Spirit a person: tape recorders and computers speak the messages of others and are not people. The great power of the Eternal can speak His message at a distance.) Paul tells us that the prophet must be in control of himself. Never accept messages from someone who is not in control of him or herself!

While warnings against false prophets abound (Jer 23:9-40, Matt 7:15, 24:11,24, Acts 13:6), no Scripture says to ignore prophets, rather we are told:

> Do not **despise** prophesyings" (1Thes 5:20, KJV).
>
> Therefore brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy... (1Cor 14:39).

Some church organizations joke about being a "non-prophet organization." We would all be better off if we asked the Eternal to send us some true prophets who will speak His words to us today. We need a better understanding of scripture. We need His direct guidance in our services. We need His deliverance in the difficult times ahead.

Let all things be done for edification. This is a general principle that should guide all worship services. Everything should be beneficial to the congregation. Services are not a place for speakers, musicians, or those with spiritual gifts to show off their abilities. They are not a place to tell unrelated jokes or personal stories. Parts of the Bible **are** humorous, but all of it has a purpose. We never find a message from the Eternal starting with, "Have you heard the joke about the...." Messages should be interesting and significant enough to hold a serious listener's attention. Unrelated jokes may draw attention to the speaker, but often distract from the real message.

Another practice of some that does **not** edify and should not take place: some speakers sometimes tell "tall tales" or put down other members of the congregation. Those doing this usually claim it is all "good clean fun", but thousands of parents have been asked about these stories and have had to tell their children that the speaker was "joking" or "not telling the truth **that time**". Even worse, some children may not have asked and really believe that "Mr. So-and-so runs over people with his pickup truck" (or whatever the phony story was about).

> Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death, is the man who deceives his neighbor, and says, "I was only joking" (Prv 26:18-19).

Other Elements of Worship Services

Scripture Reading. Scripture readings were a part of worship services since the time of Moses (Deut 31:11; Josh 8:30-35; Neh 8:1-8; 9:1-3). "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath" (Acts 15;21). Any synagogue history will show that the Scripture readings **were** a central part of the service. Acts 13:15 confirms that both the Law (the first five books) and the Prophets were read every Sabbath. Our Savior participated in these synagogue readings:

> So he came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the **Sabbath** day, and stood up to read. And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when he had opened the book, He found the place where it was written:... [He read Isaiah 61:1 and half of verse 2] Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:16-17,20-21).

The eyes of everyone were "fixed on Him" because He did not complete the passage normally read. He stopped in the middle of a verse! The latter half of the verse talks about "the day of vengeance of our God" which was not being fulfilled at that time. Since this was the start of His ministry, this may have been the first time He deviated from the usual synagogue practices. Most synagogues participate in one of two systems whereby the bulk of the law and prophets are read either every year or every three years. With this system in place, even a person who moves or travels will hear a consistent presentation of the Scriptures.

Since nearly everyone can obtain and read the Bible, do we really need Scripture readings at our services? If you ask an elder or minister at most any congregation, they will admit that many of their members have a very shallow knowledge of the Bible. In congregations where those attending have been given Bible tests, the results have not been encouraging. Many people know the teachings and practices of their "churches headquarters" much better than they know the Scripture. If Scripture readings are not included in services because "people can read them at home", then we **should** stop sermons (teaching), too, because people could subscribe to religious magazines and read them at home as well. When the Scriptures are read, we can be sure people are hearing truth (realizing there may be a few translation errors). When a man is speaking or writing, we have to be a lot more careful!

When we see the biblical precedent for Scripture readings in services, the next question is "How do we decide what to read?" Some con-

gregations leave it rather arbitrary, allowing an official or the reader to decide which Scripture to read. We feel this is a mistake as we are commanded to "live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut 8:3). There is a tendency to read the Scriptures that we think we understand and ignore the ones that do not fit into our theology. Some groups have adopted the synagogue readings and added a New Testament reading for each week. Some read the Scriptures in their original canonical order (Law, Prophets, Writings, Gospels/Acts, General Epistles, Paul's Epistles, Revelation). A simple approach is to read from Genesis to Revelation. Reading the scriptures in any order is probably better than not reading them at all.

Group Prayer. The Scriptures appear to refer to two kinds of prayer: personal prayer and group prayer. Christ taught that personal prayer should be in private, and it should not be repetitious:

> And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, **go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father** who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. But **when** you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words (Matt 6:5-7).

We find the majority of examples of the prayers of Christ and his followers were private (Mark 1:35; Acts 10:9, and many others). Yet we do find examples of group prayers in the Scriptures. Certainly the histories of temple and synagogue services record many memorized prayers. The **temple** is called a "house of prayer" in Matthew 21:13. When Zacharias received his message from the angel, "the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense" (Luke 1:10). The apostles went to the temple for prayer services.

> Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour" (Acts 3:1).

This is the exact time of the traditional temple and synagogue afternoon (or *minchah*) prayers. We find other references to temple prayers in Acts 16:16 and 22:17 and other prayer services in Acts 12:12 and 16:13.

Paul's instructions for group prayers come in the famous "hair" chapter (1Cor 11).

> Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions as I delivered them to you (1Cor 11:2).

The Greek word for "traditions" here, is the same word used for the traditions of the Scribes and Pharisees. Chapters 11 through 14 all relate to various aspects of worship services (verses 16-18 make the context of worship services clear). Without getting into a discussion of whether hats, hair or veils should be used for a covering, we discover in verses 4-5 that both men and women pray and prophesy in services.

In many ways, group prayers are much like songs without music. Indeed many of the Psalms are prayers (see Psalm 17; 55; 61; 86; 90; 102; 142). They can be sung or they can be read by a group. While music can make words easier to remember and enhance the overall beauty, it is often easier for us to focus on the **meaning** when we are just reading. Some historians are convinced that we have actual copies of some of the prayers used in first-century synagogues. These prayers usually consist of several related Scriptures with a few references to significant events or traditions. The prayer in Acts 4:24-31 seems to follow the general formula. This prayer was obviously written down for the book of Acts, but we have no way of knowing if it was ever repeated as a group prayer.

Group prayers can be included in today's services by reading existing prayers in the Psalms, prophets and New Testament. The **prophets** contain many good passages confessing the sins of our nation and asking for national mercy in times to come. Writing prayers specifically for our day is no more difficult than writing new songs for worship services—many individuals have done a fine job. As congregations must decide which hymnbook(s) to use, they must also decide which prayers to use. No one should ever think that group prayers replace personal prayers. Each person is still responsible to praise, to confess to, and to ask of his Creator.**Role of women in worship services.** The biblical statements about women being "silent" in services are easily misunderstood. "Silent" is a poor translation since it means "no sound at

all". We have just covered the Scriptures that talk about women "praying and prophesying" in meetings. Obviously, they must make sound to do that. So how should these "silent women" verses be translated and what did Paul mean?

The problem is much easier to understand when we realize that during Paul's day temple and synagogue services had separate areas for men and women. Synagogue rooms were divided by a partition. Orthodox Jews still do this. It has some benefit in that it was much easier for mothers (and grandmothers) to tend to small children with less interruption to the service. Since electronic sound was not available then, the women's section might be considered a large "mother's room". Most of the reading and teaching would come from the front and the men's side. (This practice of separating men and women is not taught by the Bible and we are not teaching it either, but it helps us understand the context in which Paul made his statements.) Anyone who has spent much time in mothers' rooms of a large congregation realizes that there is a tendency for all sorts of "side-conversations" to develop. When one looks at the Greek words used for silence in the verses below, we see that Paul was not excluding them from all service participation but from unrelated chatter:

> "Let your women keep silent [Greek *sigao*] in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church" (1Cor 14:34-35).

The Greek *sigao* is used in the context of "being quiet while someone else is talking"(Acts 12: 17; 1Cor 14:28,30). The interpreters and prophets were simply quiet while the others spoke, not for the entire duration of the service. Similarly, women were not to start their own conversations on their side of the room when someone else was speaking. If they did not understand what was being said (or missed something due to crying children) they were not to speak across the room to ask their husbands, but to wait to ask them at home.

We should consider the other related Scripture, 1Timothy 2:11-12:

> Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.

The Greek *hesuchia* ("silence") refers to a quiet crowd (Acts 22:2, 2Thes 3:12). Again, women should be listening to the service, rather than creating auxiliary conversations. There is nothing in this or othe7r scriptures that would prevent a woman from asking questions or participating in a congregation's discussion. Some take the above scripture to mean that a woman should never teach at all, but this is not the case as other scriptures show that Priscilla helped to teach Apollos (Acts 18:26), older women need to teach the younger (Titus 2:3-4), and mothers must teach their children (2Tim 1:5—Timothy apparently gathered most of his Bible knowledge from his mother and grandmother).

Some Bible students have concluded from the above statements that women can teach privately, but not in a service. This raises the question, "what is a service?" If a female Sabbath-school teacher conducts a meeting where the entire class sings, prays, reads the Bible, and hears a teaching message, is that a service? When Aquila, Priscilla, and Apollos studied the Bible together, was that a service? Remember, that Scripture requires no formal building or ministry to be present for a worship services, but Christ promises to be wherever two or three are gathered in His name (Matt 18:20).

We cannot hope to solve this issue in this short paper. All we will do is echo Paul's words: "Let all things be done for edification" (1Cor 14:26). If the Eternal has truly given a message to a woman, other people should not refuse to hear it (The Eternal used Deborah to judge Israel (Jdgs 4:4). On the other hand, it makes little sense for a woman to teach if she has little edifying to say, but wants to teach simply because she thinks she is "just as good as the men who teach". If a congregation is experiencing uncertainty or difficulty with the role of women in services, they should ask Christ to show them what to do.

Is a Minister or Elder Required for a Worship Service?

It exceeds the scope of this paper to cover all the Scriptures regarding leadership and government among the people of the Eternal. You may write to the address at the end for our free article *How does the Eternal Govern Through Humans?*

Nevertheless, we need to cover this point lest anyone feel they cannot assemble without a "minister". First, let us understand that nearly every time the words "minister" or "deacon" appears in the New Testament, they are translated from the Greek *diakonos* or *huperetes* meaning "servant". **They do not imply some kind of administrative or religious office** as most every church organization teaches. You cannot find a place in Scripture where someone is "ordained" or has hands laid on them and becomes a "minister" or an "elder". We do find "elders" selected for leadership in Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5. The Greek *presbuterous* ("elder") is often used to describe the older men who were not believers (Acts 23:14, 24:1, 25;15). It is used for any older person (1Pet 5:5), for men in the Old Testament (Heb 11:2) and for women (1 Tim 5:2). When the term is used without qualification, it implies men typically over 40, though men of wisdom and capability (such as our Savior and John the Baptist) may have been considered elders at age 30.

> For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you (Titus 1:5).

Titus was written late in Paul's ministry. Are we to believe that there had never been any Sabbath assemblies in Crete before Titus came to appoint leaders? The following verses give rather involved qualifications of a "bishop" or "overseer". How could Titus know who was a good father, not self-willed, not given to wine, not greedy, hospitable, just and holding fast the faithful word **unless he asked** the various congregations that had been together for some time. He probably followed the formula in Acts 6:3 of appointing those known by the brethren to be good servants. Paul gives reasons why leaders of various kinds are needed, but "so you can assemble together" is not one of them. We see a number of congregations simply met in homes (1Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phm 2, etc.).

There are many purposes for leaders in congregations, especially as they grow larger. One of the first things a group will want to agree on is who will take care of the various functions. These decisions do not require someone of a certain "rank" (an unbiblical concept), but "when two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matt 18:20). The **unconverted** certainly need a "man to guide them" (Acts 8:31). But once the Holy Spirit is established in us, it will "…lead you into all truth…" (John 16:13) and it is the "…Holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation…" (2Tim 3:15). Whenever the Eternal's people read the Scriptures, they all "speak the same thing" (1Cor 1:10).

Can These Principles Be Made to Work Today?

Many of the readers of this article will come from a background where Sabbath services consisted of a certain number of prayers, congregational songs, and messages. (Special music and announcements may have been added, but were not considered an essential part of the service.) Many people have learned in this format, but only a few have gained the valuable teaching experience that all of us need. If you and those with whom you fellowship are interested in implementing some of these changes, a practical "how to do it" section follows:

The Place. Try to arrange a home or a hall that is relatively free of distractions. The "quality of the building" is not nearly as important as the ability to conduct the service according to biblical principles. Hotel meeting rooms tend to be surrounded by business and worldly influences not conducive to keeping the Sabbath. If small children are present, a separate mothers' or parents' room is desirable, preferably with piped-in sound. It is best to have a room where setup and take-down can be done before and after the Sabbath, but that is not always possible. Scripture allows necessary "work" to be done on the Sabbath: "the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless" (Matt 12:5). We are priests now (1Pet 2:5-9, Rev 1:6).

Music. The traditional opening, middle, and closing songs work quite effectively, though the number could certainly be increased. People who must (or just do) arrive late or leave early do not disturb this part of the service as much as they would a reading or teaching. Those with musical interests should be encouraged to write and/or perform a variety of music praising the Eternal. Since most people in our western culture do not perform music, but primarily listen to recorded music, perhaps recorded music could be made a part of services. There are hundreds of small religious groups producing music—some of which is completely taken from

Scripture and very appropriate for services. Members can listen to some of these in stores or at home and then bring the best to services. Teens and children should be encouraged to participate in both performing and selecting. A few simple songs that young children can sing should be included.

Scripture Reading. This is one of the easiest changes to implement. One of the Scripture reading methods previously discussed can be chosen and followed each Sabbath. As many individuals as possible should take part in this. The ancient synagogue tradition allowed boys to begin reading the Scriptures once they had completed their *bar mitzvah* ceremony, usually at age 13. It is a near historic certainty that there were times when our Savior sat in a synagogue and listened while a 13-year-old read. For most young people, a "church service" simply means a time they must be quiet for an hour or two. Younger people are far more likely to listen and learn if they and their friends have something to do in the service. We do not feel we have a scriptural basis for setting a minimum age, but we will suggest that the person should be willing to read and certainly be old enough to read loudly, clearly, and without continual distraction due to mis-spoken words. The responsibility should be taken seriously—a person who treats it like a big joke should be stopped and replaced.

Paul teaches that women may participate in prayer, prophesying and singing (1Cor 11:5; Heb 2:10-13). **Should women participate in Scripture readings? We do not have a clear Bible answer on the subject.** History of synagogue services is divided on this point, also. As men are not required to read, women certainly should never be required to. But should they be allowed to read if they want to? We offer this as a possible understanding of the scriptures: 1 Timothy 2:12 states that a woman should not "have authority over a man". However, women are permitted to prophesy, which could involve speaking a message from the Eternal that the people may obey. Does this conflict with Paul's other statement about authority? No, it does not! A woman who prophesies is not giving orders, but merely communicating what she has seen or heard through the power of the Holy Spirit. Hearers may decide to listen or they may not. Similarly, if a woman reads from the Scriptures, she is not in authority over her readers, but merely communicating the authority of the Eternal.

Group Prayer. The most common group prayer is where one person speaks and the others say "amen" if they agree. These are scriptural and should continue. In addition, the congregation can all pray together by reading from the Psalms or prophets. Of course, one person should announce the passage and lead the reading. Anyone who does not distract from the service can read along. It helps if everyone has the same version of the Bible. If this is not possible, perhaps the leader can copy the passage beforehand and distribute it to the congregation. As congregations do pick and choose hymn and special music selections from a variety of sources, so they may also decide to include additional written prayers in their services. Obviously, these things must be done to worship the Eternal and for edification of the brethren, not to bolster some type of personal or group loyalty. Group prayers for the repentance of our nation or for the strengthening of those saints struggling with heresies would be appropriate for today.

Speaking in Tongues and Interpretation. If no one in your congregation has this gift, this will not be a part of your services. Instead, someone in the congregation might give a short prayer asking the Eternal to give His people the spiritual gifts mentioned in the Scriptures (1Cor 7:7; Rom 12; 1Cor 12; 1Cor 14; 2Tim 1:6). If someone does speak in tongues, one who can interpret should also be sought. If someone does have this spiritual gift, the main thing they need to do is be careful not to offend others who may not be used to this as a part of a service.

Prophesying. This is another gift to pray for regularly if no one you know has it. Sometimes, people may have dreams or visions where they are not certain of the origin: the Eternal, an evil spirit, or their own overactive mind. If there is nothing obviously against Scripture, they should be given time to explain the vision or dream, and the others should judge—look to the Scripture to see if anything conflicts. The purpose of the one doing the speaking should be to describe exactly what he or she saw and heard, **not** to try to interpret the dream or vision. If the meaning is unclear, brethren can seek more understanding later. A dream should not dominate a ser-

vice.

Teaching. This is still a vital and important function. Each congregation needs someone who can teach about a subject from the Scriptures, expounding certain passages, encourage others, etc. Paul indicated that mature brethren should be teachers (Heb 5:12). The opportunity to teach should be made available to those who believe that the Eternal has given them something to teach. If they begin to teach error, then the congregation or its leaders will need to correct them and they should stop teaching. It usually does not take long to see who has the gift of teaching. All teachers should pray for understanding and wisdom before they speak. This is not an opportunity to just "say what is on your mind". Those who speak false doctrine should lose the chance to speak after two warnings (Tit 3:10).

One of the worst things that can happen at a service is for someone to take a long time "teaching" when he really has nothing to say. Paul talks about two or three tongue-speakers and two or three prophets at most speaking. At least seven men traditionally read from the Scriptures in synagogue services. It would be better to have several short teachings than a long one where the speaker is just trying to fill up the time. If the speakers and subjects are always prescheduled months in advance, there is little room for inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Length of Services. Adding these elements to worship services will make the process take longer. If facilities and driving time permit, a longer service can be good. It is less tiring to listen to a variety of events over three hours than it is to listen to primarily two speakers for two hours. Historically, many synagogue services were longer than two hours. Since people may be driving an hour or more to a service, they are likely to be hungry when it is over—especially children. Preparing for snacks and drinks afterward is a good thing. It gives the children something to look forward to, and encourages continued fellowship among the adults.

The goal of a service should never be to "fill up a certain amount of time", but to make sure there is time for those things that the Eternal wants to do in your service.

Deciding Who Does What. If you believe that Christ actually directs His congregations, you do not have to "plan out" the last detail of everything before beginning to meet. It is vital to become friends, and learn about each other's abilities before trying to "create a structure." **Everyone must pray for the Eternal's will to be done in every decision.** If the Holy Spirit is working through everyone, there will usually be general agreement.

If there is terrible disagreement, try to determine why. Is there someone who insists on running the service "their way"? Do they have a history of great success running Bible-based services? Or do they simply think they know better than others? If great disagreements exist when there are no officially-recognized leaders in a group, it will still exist after there are leaders. People need to talk out their major disagreements before committing to fellowship together. If people are more committed to the group than their own disagreements, then they may eventually be able to work their problems out.

If your group is able to meet together, read scriptures, sing songs, and hear teachings without a lot of "leadership positions", then it will probably be able to continue. As the apostles added jobs when they needed them in Acts 6, your group can do the same. Eventually, some leadership positions will be needed. See our article, *How Does the Eternal Govern Through Humans?* for a scriptural explanation of biblical government.

Conclusion

Many of the concepts mentioned in this article are very different from those to which most of our readers are accustomed. Nevertheless, every effort has been made to base them on the reality of Scripture and history.

We feel you are better off fellowshipping with a traditional church organization than staying home for the Sabbath. We need to learn to get along with others, to learn from others and to serve others. These things can be done much better in a group of other believers, even if they have obvious problems.

Do not expect either a small group or a large organization to change their format of services in one day. Everyone needs time to study these issues on their own and come to their own convictions. These things require prayer, fasting and study. Most church leaders have never studied this subject and really think that the Bible

teaches that services should be completely run by a single pastor. They look at years of "churchianity" and say, "See, that is how it has been done!" But if politely challenged, they may agree to study the scriptures on the subject. If your group does study this subject, they may agree with some of this article but not other parts. They may not see it the way you do.

> If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men (Rom 12:18).

If you can agree well enough to continue to meet together, do so. If not, like Paul and Barnabas, two groups may need to work separately for a while, remaining friends (Acts 15:36-39).

We would like to issue **a warning to anyone thinking to use the principles in this article to make a following for themselves.** Yes, it is relatively easy to show anyone with an open mind that most congregations do not take their format of services from the scriptures. It might not be hard to convince them to leave. But unless you point them to our Father and His Son as their leaders (rather than yourself) you have helped them very little. Those who are ignorant of the scriptures will be punished lightly while those who know better will receive "many stripes" (Luke 12:48). Our fellowship is first with the Father and His Son (1Cor 1:9 1Jn 1:3), not with a human leader.

We hope this article encourages many to look into the Scriptural basis for Sabbath services and to make changes to their worship where possible. There is certainly evidence that the Eternal does work through the traditional church services. People have changed their lives and served others in that context. However, we believe that looking directly to Christ for leadership, rather than to men or organizations, allows Him to accomplish much more through His spirit (1Cor 3:1-11).

We realize that we do not have all the answers. Comments and criticisms of this paper are welcomed—especially regarding misuse or misunderstanding of Scripture. Real-life experiences with Bible-based Sabbath-service formats would be appreciated. We hope to use such information in future versions of this article. We would appreciate your prayers in these matters. 🕮

For practical information on starting a local congregation, ask for our article, *Starting a Local Congregation.*

This copy distributed by *Church Bible Teaching Ministry,* PO Box 474, Perry, Michigan 48467-0474
Tel: 989-738-7700 E-mail: info@cbtm.info