

The impact of COVID19 on the New Testament Assembly Testimony

COVID19 has affected people of all walks of life, including the New Testament following Christians. In many places, Assemblies have not had meetings for months. Ask the older brethren amongst us, and they will say there's never been a time like this since Assembly testimony started. The first thought that rushes to our mind is that the Lord's coming is at hand. While such an awakening is good, let us not be complacent concerning our responsibilities to the Assembly. Apostle Paul requires us to live with the expectation of the Lord's coming at all times (1 Thessalonians 5:4). He uses warfare terms (breastplate and helmet) to instruct us to be sober and vigilant (1 Thessalonians 5:8). Notice, Paul's instruction here is in the context of the fellowship - "*comfort yourselves together and edify one another*" (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Hence, it is vital that we consider one another during this trying time. The challenge is, we need to do this without physically meeting because of the COVID19 lockdown.

Can Assemblies hold meetings during the COVID19 lockdown?

How do we translate the Apostle's instruction to the current lockdown situation? We know the lockdown is necessary to stop the spread of COVID19, particularly the Delta variant of the virus. This knowledge is known to people in authority and those following the development of the virus. Holding meetings or visiting Assembly members will be against the revealed knowledge. Such movement is detrimental to the safety of the members and the wider community. In this context, the instruction to obey the authority supercedes that concerning the meeting.

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath but also for conscience sake (Romans 13:1-5).

Hence the right decision when there is a lock down is to suspend meetings until the situation improves.

Is it right to switch to virtual meetings?

Many assemblies have switched to holding virtual meetings. Would that be the same as meeting at a place? The word 'meeting' is loosely used to refer to the coming together of believers. We need to remember that our coming together is unto the Lord (2 Thessalonians 2:1). Throughout the Scripture, a physical location is associated with the presence of the Lord (Exodus 25:22; Mathew 18:20).

Furthermore, a place is necessary to accommodate activities like the Lord's supper. In the upper room after the supper, our Lord wrapped a towel around Him, took water in a basin, and washed the disciples' feet (John 13:4-5). The example the Lord set is used metaphorically to serve one another. Without discounting such applications, we obey the Lord's instruction when we enquire of one another's wellbeing at our meetings. How much of such "washing of feet" is possible over Zoom?

Some assemblies have started to hold Gospel meetings via Zoom and post the recordings on social media. The use of such digital platforms to reach more people with the Gospel message seems justifiable. It, however, raises several issues that are subtly getting normalised within the Assembly circle. One is, we are starting to like the idea of preaching from the comforts of our homes. Recall the words of the Lord when he sent the seventy in pairs –

Therefore said He unto them, The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few: pray ye, therefore, the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest.

The Lord likens His work to a harvest. Harvesting is labour intensive work, at least in those days, needing a large number of labours. It happens in the field; therefore, the labours need to be in the field. The field in the context of the Assembly is the local area. Each Assembly is responsible to the Lord for the harvest in their area. Hence, our preaching and good works need to be locally focused. We need to ask ourselves whether preaching to faceless people in the virtual space is what the Lord is asking of us.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 14, Paul the Apostle emphasises the importance of doing all things to the edification of the assembly. Note, the emphasis here is the entire assembly or the local body of the Lord. Therefore, the acid test for these virtual activities is how edifying they are to the assembly members. It is worth stopping to ask ourselves whether these virtual meetings are helpful or burdening the believers. The context of the chapter is the use of tongues or languages in the meetings, which is discouraged. A language is a system based on syntactic rules. Communication is effected when both the speaker and the listeners know to follow the rules. The Internet can be viewed as a communication channel carrying the spoken words (of the meetings) from the speakers to the listeners. This is achieved by using specific hardware and software combined with established protocols. For communication to take effect, the speaker and listeners need to have and know how to handle the technology. If there are members who find this challenging, then we come under the ruling of 1 Corinthians 14: 27 & 28

If any man speaks in an *unknown* tongue, *let it be* by two, or at the most *by* three, and *that* by course; and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God.

What can we do?

True, we are going through a testing time. Nevertheless, with confidence, let us look to the Lord rather than to secular systems for answers. In this context, it is worth reminding us of 1 Corinthians 10:13, which reads.

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.

While there is no direct reference to COVID19 in the Word of God, there are several instances when God's people were in similar situations. recorded for our learning. One such instance is the wilderness when the children of Israel encountered the fiery serpents. The Lord's solution was the lifting up of the brazen serpent. Let us thank the Lord for the verses that provided the context for John 3:16, which reads as follows:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:14-16).

May the Lord help us keep our minds' eyes on the centre cross lifted up on mount Golgotha while He takes us through this trying time. Under lockdown conditions, we don't have the company of God's people, but His presence is with us, and so is his Word in our hands. May we find ourselves meditating on the Word day and night. Let us take heed to the words of Joshua in his later years to the children of Israel.

Be ye therefore very courageous to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, that ye turn not aside there from to the right hand or to the left (Joshua 23:6).

In Acts chapter 12 we have the account of the believers facing persecution. Herod killed James, the brother of John, and had Peter put in prison. Peter would have been executed but for the feast of the unleavened bread. This was a trying time for the believers at that time, perhaps worse than what we are experiencing. Verse 5 tells us how the believers handled the situation.

Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.

While the believers prayed, we read in this chapter that the Angel of the Lord went into the prison and rescued Peter.

And, behold, the Angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands.

The Herod of this time is just as active as the one in the first century. May we find ourselves, like the believers in Acts 12, praying for the COVID19 situation. This is something we can all do, as individuals, families and small groups. Let us fervently pray, looking to the Lord to cause this COVID chain to fall off. May our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ restore our meetings to the pattern given by the Apostles, even as we wait for His soon coming.