

FEEDING THE SHEEP

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In John 21 Jesus asks Peter three times whether he loved him and each time after Peter responded that he did Jesus said, “feed my sheep”. In the context, they had just eaten after having drawn in many fish and I have no doubt Peter recalled the Jesus’ promise to Peter when he was first called to make him a “fisher of men” (Matt 4:18-20). The need to feed the sheep today is just as great as it was in Jesus’ time. But what we feed the sheep and the manner in which we feed the sheep is critical and an indicator of our love for Christ.

Proper spiritual food

Of course this is not the first reference in scripture to feeding God’s people and we can go back to the OT to better understand the spiritual focus of Jesus’ statement because it reflects a principle that is consistently found in scripture. When Moses gave command and reminded the Israelites he said, “*And he [God] humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live*” (Deut 8:3). Jesus later recalled this statement when fending off temptation from Satan (Matt 4:4). Eating to live is more than physical bread, we need to live by every word that comes from God. Jesus later spoke of the manna that came down from Heaven referencing the OT foreshadowing with manna and he said, “*Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world*” (John 6:49-51). It’s not surprising that Jesus is described as the “Word” (John 1:1,14). If we are to live, we must believe the Word and only through the Word can we have life everlasting. And that’s why Paul described the Philippian brethren as “*holding forth the word of life*” (Php 2:16)! If we are to prevent spiritual death we must partake of the spiritual bread of life –the Word.

Living by faith

To be pleasing to God, man must live by faith. It the same truth described more directly and later highlighted in Hebrews and was also established early on in the Old Testament. In fact the Hebrew writer gives many examples of those who obtained a good report (Heb 11:2, 39) because they lived by faith. The earliest example given is that of Abel who offered sacrifices to God by faith. In fact, prior to the examples of faith in Hebrews 11 we see the statement, “*now the just shall live by faith*” (Heb 10:38). Paul makes it very clear that, “*... faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*” (Rom 10:17). So there is a clear and biblically established link that one must live by faith to be pleasing to God and obtain a good report. It is further established by God’s own definition that faith can only come by hearing God’s word so if we are to live by faith we literally must hear God’s word and live by it in obedience –living by every word from God. There are other passages that also emphasize the importance of feeding the sheep the right food (God’s word). Peter said, “*If any man speak, let him speak as the*

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(continued)

oracles of God" (1Pet 4:11). We are reminded that no prophecy of scripture was of any private interpretation –they are God’s words inspired by His Holy Spirit. (2Pet 1:20-21).

Food from the pulpit

In many pulpits today God’s words are seldom read and only lightly referenced. This isn’t feeding the sheep. Notice God’s words through Jeremiah to the prophets of his day, *“But if they had stood in my counsel, and had caused my people to hear my words, then they should have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings”* (Jer 23:22). Too often we have those who are willing to feed the sheep other than with God’s Word; certainly in the religious world but also in the church. It seems ironic to call it a “Bible class” when the Bible isn’t studied but rather a man authored book based on biblical principles –and sometimes not even that. Many congregations have taken on the roles of financial advisor, therapist, event planner, etc. and still call it ‘feeding the sheep’ but we shouldn’t mistake the Word of God for man’s words and wisdom. But it’s not just ‘what’ the sheep are fed; it’s also how they are fed. Notice God’s design as described by the inspired apostle Paul, *“For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe”* (1Cor 1:21). So often the emphasis in church evangelism and outreach is entertainment based. We see various forms of worship such as skits and other styles that aren’t authorized by God nor are they aligned with His wisdom in how His Word is delivered.

The right emphasis

Paul described his delivery, *“And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God... and I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling... And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom...”* (1 Cor 2:1,3,4). Paul, like Moses and many other spokesmen for God was not eloquent in speech. I’m convinced there are relatively few congregations today that would hire Paul as their preacher; he doesn’t fit the mold. Not that we need to go out of our way to deliver the message in an obnoxious way but far too much emphasis is about a preacher’s delivery capability which often is emphasized over God’s Word. One of my pet peeves is the tremendous amount of backslapping that goes on in the brotherhood for preachers’ ability to speak or be ‘powerful’ in their delivery. Paul gives the reason this is not to be –1Cor 2:5. Look it up! But faithful preachers can be encouraged by faithful audiences willing to feed on God’s Word and not demanding an entertaining style. The situation Jeremiah faced was dire, *“A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof?”* (Jer 5:30). If we are to feed the sheep we need to do it by faithfully speaking the truth in love (Eph 4:15) and trusting God to give the increase (1Cor 3:6-7).