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WHAT DO YOU MEAN - TO FEED THE FLOCK?

Most people are probably familiar with Psalm 23. The words have been put to music and this psalm is a favourite with many different churches.

David, who in his youth himself had been a shepherd, describes in this psalm his relationship with God. God is pictured as the Shepherd and we are the sheep. Let's look at this psalm more closely.

The LORD [is] my shepherd; I shall not want. (Psalm 23:1)

The expression "I shall not want" means: "I shall not lack anything that I need". David continued to say: He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. (Psalm 23:2)

God provides abundantly for us. And God knows exactly what we need. In the next verse David said: He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. (Psalm 23:3)

God will lead us and guide us in the right way of life, the way that He wants us to live. We can depend on God's guidance. David continued to say:

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou [art] with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4)

Even in the midst of the greatest possible troubles God will guide us and help us, provided we are faithfully striving to obey Him in all areas of our lives. Next David said:

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. (Psalm 23:5)

If we are faithfully following God, then His blessings will even become evident to those people around us who are not really submitting their lives to God. David concluded with:

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. (Psalm 23:6)

As we strive, in the full integrity of our hearts, to obey God in all things, we can have the confidence and the faith that God will ALWAYS take care of us, and that He has planned a part for us in His eternal Family.

THE MINISTRY

Throughout human history God has used people who have filled various spiritual offices or functions. The purpose of all of these different functions has been to facilitate the fulfillment of God's purposes for mankind, to work towards the goal of the plan of salvation.

In the Old Testament we find references to priests, prophets, pastors and shepherds. In the New Testament we find references to apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, elders, bishops, ministers and deacons.

Let's start with the words which are used in the Old Testament.

"A PRIEST" was a person who was called by God to be an intercessor before God on behalf of sinful man. This function was needed because Adam and Eve had sinned, and sins cut us off from God. Jesus Christ fulfilled that role initially in the form of the priesthood of Melchizedek. Then, after the exodus from Egypt, God gave the priesthood to the sons of Aaron, of the tribe of Levi. In the Book of Hebrews Paul explains that since His resurrection Jesus Christ has again taken back the role of High Priest to Himself, and so today Jesus Christ is our High Priest in heaven before God the Father. There is at present no human priesthood through which we are to approach God; our access to God is through Jesus Christ.

"A PROPHET" was a person who was given a specific message from God to deliver to God's people. The role of the prophets differed from the role of the priests in that the prophets were not necessarily called upon to intercede for people, though that may have happened at times. The prophets merely told people those things which God wanted them to hear, in many cases warnings of impending penalties for sins. God also used the prophets to predict things that would happen long after the time when those prophets had lived.

"A PASTOR" and "A SHEPHERD" is actually a reference to the same person. The translators simply translated the one Hebrew word sometimes as "pastors" and at other times as "shepherds". The Hebrew is a reference to the verb "to feed". Thus a pastor or shepherd is someone who feeds God's people in a spiritual sense.

This is where Psalm 23 ties in. David referred to God as his "Shepherd", or his "Pastor". By examining the things David tells us God was doing for him, we can get an idea of what is meant by "feeding the flock", the main purpose for the role of pastors. More about this in a little while.

In the New Testament we find Jesus Christ reinforcing the concept of Psalm 23, when Christ said: "I am the good Shepherd" (John 10:14). In that chapter (John 10) Jesus Christ adds to the points about a shepherd which David had spoken about in the psalm.

The Apostle Paul likewise referred to Jesus Christ as the Shepherd in the Book of Hebrews.

Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, THAT GREAT SHEPHERD OF THE SHEEP, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, (Hebrews 13:20)

After His resurrection Jesus Christ told the Apostle Peter three times "to feed" His lambs or His sheep, i.e. TO BE A PASTOR TO THEM.

So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, [son] of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, FEED MY LAMBS. He saith to him again the second time, Simon, [son] of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, FEED MY SHEEP. He saith unto him the third time, Simon, [son] of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, FEED MY SHEEP. (John 21:15-17)

Let's now look at the words we find in the New Testament.

"AN APOSTLE" is someone who "is sent by God". The word is derived from the Greek verb "apostello", which means "to send".

"AN EVANGELIST" is someone who brings "good news". The word is derived from the Greek verb "euaggelizo" (i.e. evangelizo), which means "to preach".

"A PASTOR" is someone who "feeds God's people". We have seen this word already. The word is

generally used in reference to someone who serves a local congregation of God's people.

"A BISHOP" is a word that refers to the same position as "pastor". It comes from two Greek words, which mean "to oversee" (the welfare of God's people). It was really a synonym for "pastor", though later this word was taken up by the Catholic Church as a title of some elevated ecclesiastical office ... overseeing other ministers in addition to perhaps overseeing a specific congregation.

The word "prophet" we already saw in the Old Testament. In the historic sense of the word (foretelling future events), the apostle John was the last of the prophets of the New Testament, when he wrote the Book of Revelation. Apparently the word came to have the more general meaning of men who engaged in "inspired preaching" at church services.

"A MINISTER" is a servant, someone who carries out the instructions of "a master". The word emphasizes the role of serving God's people.

"AN ELDER" is a term that referred to a leadership position in society that was generally only open to men who were older and more mature. Within the Church it designated those who had been called by God to a position of leadership amongst God's people, basically as a synonym for "minister". Where the word "minister" focuses on the role of serving the people, the word "elder" focuses on the more mature and generally older status of the person.

"A TEACHER" refers to someone who is being used by God to teach His people the truths of God's Word, in a world where confusion, distortions, ignorance and a lack of understanding have obscured the true meaning of God's revelation to mankind.

"A DEACON" refers to someone who serves God's people in a physical way, without necessarily having any spiritual responsibilities. While the word "deacon" is not used in Acts chapter 6, our general understanding is that the seven men chosen in this chapter for the specific purpose of "serving tables" (see Acts 6:2) were chosen to become "deacons".

It should be easy to see that many of these words overlapped to a considerable degree. For example:

The man John was:

- 1) an apostle, chosen by Jesus Christ (Matthew 10:2);
- 2) a prophet, who wrote a book of prophecy (Revelation);
- 3) a teacher, who teaches us through the books he wrote;
- 4) an elder (2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1);
- 5) a minister, who served God's people;
- 6) a bishop, as were all of the twelve apostles (Acts 1:20);
- 7) a pastor who, like Peter, "fed" God's people (John 21:17).

Since being "an apostle" amounted to a higher responsibility than being "an evangelist", there was no point in John being referred to as "an evangelist" at any time, though John certainly also brought the good news to many people in his time, even as did the other apostles.

The only other word that didn't apply to John was "deacon", since he was called to spiritual service from the outset. For other men, as in Philip's case (Acts 6:5; Acts chapter 8; Acts 21:8), their original calling may have been to the office of a deacon (1 Timothy 3:10), but that calling is later expanded to a spiritual office, as in Philip's case to that of an evangelist.

That gives us a brief overview of the ministry as a whole.

Now let's focus more closely on one specific area, that of being "a pastor" or "a shepherd" to God's people.

WHAT IT MEANS "TO FEED THE FLOCK"

This responsibility, which Jesus Christ specifically emphasized to the Apostle Peter, incorporates a number of different aspects, all of which fit under the umbrella expression "to feed the flock". Thus it includes:

- 1) providing spiritual food, making the truth plain;
- 2) leading by example in the way of practical Christianity;
- 3) protecting God's people from "the wolves";
- 4) making sacrifices for the benefit of the sheep;
- 5) encouraging God's people in the face of opposition;
- 6) helping God's people to overcome trials;
- 7) focusing God's people on God the Father and on Jesus Christ;
- 8) encourage sinners to repent and to change;
- 9) identifying and avoiding "bad spiritual food", also called "vain babblings";
- 10) serving people in physical ways instead of being served.

This list is not meant to be exhaustive. No doubt people can think of other points of equal importance that should be mentioned. And some of the above points certainly overlap with other points. But when all of these ten points are examined, it should give us a fairly clear picture of what is meant by "feeding the flock". So let's examine all of these ten points further.

PROVIDING SPIRITUAL FOOD

The most essential characteristic for any man who is going to "feed" God's people is the fear of God! It is the fear of God which is the beginning of wisdom (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10) and also the beginning of true knowledge (Proverbs 1:7). Without the fear of God a person will simply NOT have a good understanding of the truth, as Psalm 111:10 tells us.

The fear of the LORD [is] the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do [his commandments]: his praise endureth for ever. (Psalm 111:10)

Before a man can "feed" God's people, he himself has to have "a GOOD understanding". Not a convincing way of speaking or writing, not forceful arguments, not great intellect; just a GOOD

understanding of the mind and the will and the purpose of God! That must be the foundation on which a pastor or shepherd or feeder builds.[Remember, the Old Testament word for pastor is "one who feeds others".]

To feed God's people means to make the truth plain, to give understanding to God's people, to help people understand the mind and the will of God, to help people correctly understand the Bible. It requires the ability (or the gift?) to teach in ways that people can comprehend and follow. It includes being able to incorporate ALL of God's Word into the great overall picture, without avoiding any Scriptures that may appear to be "difficult".

There is a great difference between indoctrination (pressuring people to accept something that "headquarters" has decided should be taught, which "headquarters" decides is the official teaching for the Church) and true teaching (which acknowledges ALL Scriptures and answers all questions openly and honestly, without any bias towards "official" doctrines).

INDOCTRINATION is simply passing on, "like a water conduit", whatever has been passed down from those at the top. With indoctrination acceptance is the important thing ("Do you ACCEPT this teaching?"); and UNDERSTANDING of the truth is only incidental and not considered to be important. Difficult questions are avoided, ignored or countered with seemingly equally difficult questions.

TRUE TEACHING, on the other hand, involves a desire to understand the mind of God. It will openly and squarely face all valid questions. The Scriptures do not contradict themselves and all Scriptures must somehow tie together. The emphasis is on giving people understanding, so that they can then also understand further Scriptures. The goal is to make people less dependent on "the feeder", so they can understand many more things on their own.

THE FEAR OF MEN, the desire to please men, the desire for financial security, the approach of unconditional loyalty to those who are over us in authority ... these all produce obstacles and barriers to truly feeding the flock! Our loyalty must always be first to God (see Acts 5:29), and our fear of God must be greater than our fear of anything else. We are to follow those over us AS they follow Jesus Christ! True, sound and correct understanding is ALWAYS more important than defending "the official teaching" of the Church.

Let's be honest and open about this.

Over the past four decades there have been, and there still are, MANY ministers in the churches of God who have seen their role as faithfully passing on what they had been taught and told. And that is fine, if what they pass on is the truth, which will stand up to any valid questions that may be asked. But when the teachings require a man to avoid facing valid questions, when upholding such teachings becomes more important than clear biblical statements to the contrary, when "the traditional teachings of the Church" take precedence over the written Word of God, THEN the flock is not being fed with the truth of God! And true understanding is being stifled instead of being stimulated and nurtured.

When a minister is faced with a valid objection to any established teaching of the Church, if the minister cannot refute this objection with sound reasoning from the Scriptures, then he needs to acknowledge that the objection is valid. We must acknowledge valid objections in order to maintain credibility in the eyes of those who bring these objections to our attention. But it goes much further than that. If we can indeed see that an objection is "VALID", then we are being tested before God. What will we do with this "valid" objection? Will we brush aside "valid objections" in favour of the traditional understanding of the Church? Or will we face up to and deal with and respond to valid objections to established beliefs?

To maintain our integrity before God we must always confront and deal with such questions. The way to

do that is to bring them to the attention of those over us in authority in God's Church, even as it was brought to our attention. Has there ever been a time when God's Church did not continue to come to a better and clearer understanding as the years went by? Raising valid questions is one way to trigger the process of better understanding. Such questions should never be viewed as a threat; they help us to move forward.

When Mr. Armstrong brought the true understanding about "the three days and the three nights" to the caretaker of the Billy Sunday Tabernacle, then that man was loyal to those over him in the Church, even though he could not refute Mr. Armstrong's presentation. In being loyal to the at that time "established teaching" of his church, he compromised his integrity! If we today refuse to face and to acknowledge new understanding, something we cannot really disprove or refute, simply because it is different from what "headquarters" teaches, then we are no better than the Billy Sunday Tabernacle caretaker. And just as surely as God stopped answering the prayers of that man almost 70 years ago, just as surely God will stop answering our prayers today.

Our integrity before God is always of the utmost importance!

Now in the Churches of God today (excluding WCG at this present time!) what pretty well all ministers will teach "most of the time" is likely to be the true and correct and proven doctrines of the Bible. Most of the time the teachings will be sound and correct. But we do not yet have ALL truth, do we? Thus there may very well be times when our understanding needs to be corrected. And at times like that we need to be open to what the Scriptures plainly tell us, without interpreting things from the perspective of our presently-held understanding. The Scriptures need to be examined on their own merits, without the common bias of "Since we all KNOW that ...", which is a way of saying that we don't really wish to PROVE what we assert "we all know already".

For example:

Revelation 14:4 talks about 144000 who are on Mount Zion with Jesus Christ after His second coming. It plainly says:

THESE ARE they which were not defiled with women; for they are virgins. These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were redeemed from among men, [being] [the] FIRSTFRUITS UNTO GOD and to the Lamb. (Revelation 14:4)

This plainly shows that there will be EXACTLY 144000 in the first resurrection! Those 144000 are "firstfruits" unto God! It doesn't matter whether there is a definite article before "firstfruits" or not ... this group is it! The whole first resurrection. There are no other "firstfruits" hiding in the bushes somewhere, while Jesus Christ is on Mount Zion. There are no second-class firstfruits, who for some reason are not privileged to be on Mount Zion at that point in time. There will be no favourites in the first resurrection: there will be no segregation amongst those who are firstfruits. ALL FIRSTFRUITS will "ever be with the Lord" from the time of meeting the returning Christ in the air. It CERTAINLY (!!!) is not a matter that those in the first resurrection who are physically descended from the twelve tribes of Israel are somehow given a more privileged position in the presence of Jesus Christ than are those who are racially of a non-Israelite background! That idea is utterly and totally and completely absurd, though some people who feel that THEY are racially descended from the twelve tribes of Israel may even believe this biased notion.

Then we which are alive [and] remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: AND SO SHALL WE EVER BE WITH THE LORD. (1 Thessalonians 4:17)

When "the Lord" shortly thereafter stands on Mount Zion, some of the firstfruits will not be asked to go and stand somewhere else for a while, as if the privilege to be on Mount Zion would somehow not be

accorded to them. God is not building a Family in which the firstfruits will already be divided into those who are more privileged and those who are less privileged. God is NOT a respecter of persons, and ALL who are Christ's ARE Abraham's seed and "HEIRS according to the promise", not some second-rate heirs!

And if ye [be] Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.
(Galatians 3:29)

This Scripture is very plain and quite clear!

In Revelation 14:1-4 God is PLAINLY telling us that there will be exactly 144000 individuals in the first resurrection, BUT OUR BIAS AND OUR SUPPOSED UNDERSTANDING OF "OTHER" SCRIPTURES PREVENTS US FROM ACKNOWLEDGING WHAT THESE FOUR VERSES PLAINLY TELL US!

And thus many ministers will approach these verses with: "well, from OTHER Scriptures WE KNOW that there are definitely MORE people in the first resurrection than just 144000; so THEREFORE Revelation 14 must be referring to only a part of those in the first resurrection." And their unfounded bias will not allow them to read this passage for what it actually tells us. Their problem is that they understand the "other Scriptures" incorrectly, and then they try to make this passage fit in with their incorrect understanding of the "other Scriptures". But they will not examine the wrong premise from which they start out.

Anyway, this is just one of a number of examples I could present to illustrate where the unfounded bias of those who "feed the flock" prevents them from acknowledging the plainly stated facts of Scripture.

We should always be mindful of James' admonition in James 3:1.

My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.
(James 3:1)

Let's move on to the next point.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

True religion is not just head-knowledge, though it does include that. But true religion is primarily A WAY OF LIFE.

And one of the greatest responsibilities upon those who feed God's people is to lead by example, to put true Christianity into practice in our lives, examples for God's people to emulate.

Our actions always speak louder than our words. We ourselves must practise what we preach. And further, we must provide practical examples of how the principles of God's Word can be and should be translated into actions in our daily lives.

This is not an easy responsibility, since none of us are perfect. We all fall short and we all still sin. We all have our failings. Speaking for myself, I certainly know that I am not any better than the next man.

But we don't have to be perfect to set the right examples, though perfection should certainly be our goal. In spite of our imperfections we should nevertheless be able to live before God in the integrity of our hearts. And when we sin and miss the mark, then we need to repent and confess to God.

Collectively God's people are to be a light to this world (Matthew 5:14); and individually those who feed the flock are to be lights to the flock. Even as a shepherd leads his sheep on the path which he wants them to take, so the pastors of God's people need to lead by example. This is not to say that the sheep

will automatically follow in their footsteps. In fact: generally it is far more likely that people will quickly emulate a bad example than they are likely to emulate a good example. This should tell us how important it is not to set a bad example for God's people.

Why is it that King David had 37 "mighty men" (2 Samuel 23:39)? Why didn't King Saul have that many "mighty men"? Why didn't King Solomon have that many "mighty men"? Why specifically King David? These were men who were willing to die for King David. What is it that inspired such loyalty to King David? It was DAVID'S EXAMPLE! It was his courage! He was the first one to fearlessly confront a giant (i.e. Goliath). Others followed his example and then also confronted giants. It was David's integrity that made him "a man after God's own heart", and his example inspired others to emulate him.

The example a pastor sets is one of the greatest ways of "feeding the flock". It is a serious responsibility.

PROTECTING GOD'S PEOPLE FROM WOLVES

Even at the time when Jesus Christ was born as a human being Satan (the dragon) stood by "the woman ... to devour her child" (see Revelation 12:4). The Church of God has always been exposed to persecution and to infiltration. As Jude wrote:

For THERE ARE CERTAIN MEN CREPT IN UNAWARES, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, UNGODLY MEN, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ. (Jude 1:4)

The Apostle Paul warned the elders from Ephesus with these words:

For I know this, that after my departing shall GRIEVOUS WOLVES enter in among you, not sparing the flock. (Acts 20:29)

And Jesus Christ explained that the difference between a true shepherd and "a hireling" (a false shepherd who will do whatever those who 'hire' him require him to do) is that the true shepherd PROTECTS the sheep.

But he that is AN HIRELING, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, SEETH THE WOLF COMING, AND LEAVETH THE SHEEP, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. (John 10:12-13)

The hireling has no real concern for the sheep; to him pastoring a congregation of God's people is just a job, simply a way to earn a living. The root of the Greek word translated as "hireling" refers to someone who works for pay, for a salary or for a wage.

So the question is: is the pastor's loyalty first to the sheep which have been entrusted into his care, or is his loyalty first to those who "hired" him, who pay his wages? The central administration of WCG has always required that his loyalty be FIRST to those who have "hired" him; first the loyalty is supposed to be to "the government of God", which supposedly comes "from the top down". Maybe that is the case, and maybe not? Maybe that is just a way of enforcing loyalty towards those who control the shepherd's income?

The point Jesus Christ was making in John 10:12-13 is that a pastor's responsibility to protect the sheep TRANSCENDS his commitment to ensure a steady flow of future pay packets! It is the hireling who is motivated by the money he is paid.

But how does the pastor protect the sheep from the wolves? What is it that the wolves want? Who are the wolves working for?

The wolves are on Satan's side, right? So the goal of the wolves is to destroy the sheep and to scatter the sheep. The method often used is to introduce false teachings to the sheep. Once those false teachings have been accepted, more false teachings are introduced, to the point where eventually "the grace of God" is turned into licence to sin (see Jude 1:4 again). Implied in this process is GIVING PEOPLE PERMISSION to do things that God's Word instructs us not to do. When people act on such "permission to sin", then they are destroyed! That is precisely what is happening in WCG today.

The problem is that the INITIAL introduction of the process to permit sins is the razor-thin edge of the wedge, which is driven ever so gently into the Church for the purpose of eventually splitting the Church like you would split a piece of wood. And very few people are likely to recognize that initial razor-thin wedge. Those first and very cautious attempts at introducing changes are made to appear as something very good and desirable. People are easily deceived by hidden motives.

Even today there are still MANY people, who have left WCG, but who will staunchly tell you that the initial changes Mr. Tkach introduced into the Church were actually "GOOD"! They don't understand that those initial changes were nothing more than "the bait" or "the bribe" or "the sugar coating of the bitter pill"; and WITHOUT THOSE INITIAL CHANGES the process to introduce heresies into the Church of God could NEVER have succeeded! But people LIKE the bait, right? After all, if a fish could get the bait without getting hooked, the fish would also tell you that the bait is "a good thing"!

This is where the pastor's responsibility to protect the sheep from the wolves comes in. While the sheep may not recognize the motivation behind the bait presented to them, while they may not recognize that super-thin edge of the wedge, the pastor should be watching! The pastor should have enough spiritual discernment to UNDERSTAND the road which those seemingly innocuous changes will take. The pastor should be able to discern "the end of the matter", what it is bound to lead to in the long run.

To protect the sheep from the wolves, the pastor needs to explain THE TRUTH, not give sermons that "support headquarters", when "headquarters" is encouraging permissive changes which don't really carry God's approval. Any time a change is introduced with words like ... "nowhere does the Bible FORBID us to do ... (whatever we are being given permission to do)", it should always raise a giant red warning flag! That is OBVIOUSLY a way of seeking approval for our own will; it is not a way of seeking to find out what is pleasing to God.

"Protection-strategy" involves teaching God's people that it is NEVER, NEVER a matter of reasoning from "what the Bible nowhere forbids"! That is a totally carnal approach to the religion of the Bible. The way to protect the sheep is to teach them to wisely apply the right principles to SEEK what IS pleasing to God (see 1 John 3:22) and to AVOID seeking "what is not forbidden".

A protector of the sheep will point out where "permissive changes" are in conflict with the things that please God. He will explain the truth on the matter, and encourage the sheep to do MORE than is required by God, to go above and beyond the call of duty (see Luke 17:9-10; etc.). He will encourage the sheep to stay away from the edge of the cliff, to avoid going to the limit of what "may perhaps be allowed". He will stir people up to always act in a way that is good and beneficial for OTHER people, that's what is meant by "love". He will teach the sheep to always watch out and be on guard against those who want to lead them astray.

He will make the truth PLAIN to God's people. That's what Mr. Armstrong did.

SACRIFICING FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE SHEEP

A part of feeding the flock is being willing to sacrifice for the benefit of the sheep. The main way of sacrificing "our lives" for the sheep is to give them OUR TIME. "Time" is what our lives consist of. There

is only so much time in every day. And a pastor must be prepared to give that time for the good of the sheep.

And that has probably been true for most pastors in God's Church in this age: being available for God's people at any and all times of day and night, going out at short notice to in some way serve God's people. As a result many of us have neglected our own families to some degree. Even Epaphroditus pushed himself too hard and sacrificed a great deal in order to serve God's people (see Philippians 2:30), to the point that he became sick. And Paul commended his spirit of sacrifice for God's people.

ENCOURAGING GOD'S PEOPLE IN THE FACE OF OPPOSITION

God's people often face opposition. It may come from family members, or from people in our neighbourhood, or it may be at the place of work.

There may perhaps be some very "religious" relatives who are pressuring a new member of God's Church with any number of arguments against the Sabbath and against the Holy Days, and against tithing. At times like that people need encouragement from their pastor to stand their ground, to be faithful to God. They may need some reassurance that the teachings of God's Church are indeed sound and biblically correct. They may need to have "difficult Scriptures", which have been thrown at them, clearly explained. And they may need to be encouraged to further cement their own foundation in the truth of God. They need to be pointed to the Bible, and where in the Bible to look for answers to their particular situations.

When they face opposition, God's people need to know that their pastor is always on their side, ready to help and to encourage them in any way he possibly can. That is the special type of feeding they need during times of opposition.

HELPING GOD'S PEOPLE TO OVERCOME TRIALS

This point is perhaps similar to the previous point, but it goes further. It is not just a matter of opposition from those who challenge God's people. These are the trials which don't necessarily have an antagonist, at least not a human antagonist.

This includes the health trials most of us have to face sooner or later. It includes the loss of employment and the inability to find a new job. It includes the severe financial trials so many people have to deal with. It includes the trials of living under extremely dangerous circumstances. It includes the trials of feelings of insecurity and loneliness and hopelessness. It includes trials resulting from feelings of guilt over past actions. It includes the trial of coping with death in the family.

These are not the trials where we just have to hang in there in spite of opposition from friends and family. No, these are the trials where we ourselves often need to learn major lessons. We may need to change our conduct to avoid these trials continuing. We may have to confess our sins to God, sins we find hard to admit even to ourselves. While it may not always be the case, with these trials it is especially important to examine ourselves, JUST IN CASE we ourselves carry some responsibility for the trials. Are there perhaps specific lessons we need to learn? Is there some way in which we should change our conduct and behaviour?

This is where we especially need the help of a true shepherd. Without an objective outside opinion we often are too short-sighted to see the real problem. We need honest and concerned input to guide our thinking towards the right solution. This is not the time for patent answers; we need to be guided in our UNDERSTANDING. And above all, we need to try to see our situation, and the trials we are enduring, from God's perspective. The Bible gives us a great deal of insight in this regard.

Feeding the flock in circumstances like this involves the pastor's discernment, whether it is just encouragement that is needed, or whether that is the time to gently point out the connection between cause and effect. We ourselves may desire encouragement and support in our position; but understanding the link between cause and effect may actually be more helpful for us (and perhaps also a little painful?) in the long run.

There may even be occasions where our own conduct is plain foolishness, and a concerned pastor will have to point this out to us, for our own good.

FOCUSING GOD'S PEOPLE ON GOD!

This is an ongoing part of feeding the flock. It is easy to acknowledge God on the one hand when we attend services, and then to turn around and live our lives without taking God's existence and the presence of His Spirit into account.

For example, Elisha was focused on God whereas his servant was not. That different focus enabled Elisha to cope with trials in a far better way. Notice the case in point:

And Elisha prayed, and said, LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. AND THE LORD OPENED THE EYES OF THE YOUNG MAN; AND HE SAW: and, behold, the mountain [was] full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. (2 Kings 6:17)

Like this young man, we need someone to help us focus on the presence of God's power. When we have this correct focus, it will manifest itself in a correct application of the fear of God in our lives. The less we are focused on God, the less of the fear of God we will have.

God has called us to have a part in His eternal Family, and His Son Jesus Christ has made it possible for us to boldly approach the throne of grace (see Hebrews 4:16) to seek forgiveness, mercy and help with our trials.

The pastor needs to constantly encourage people to never lose sight of this picture, of God's involvement in our lives, of God's desire to finish the good work He has started in us (see Philippians 1:6). When we are tempted to lust and to covet and to act selfishly, it is easy to lose this focus on God. The correct focus can be a powerful help in the battle to resist temptations. The right kind of feeding the flock will provide this correct focus on God the Father and on Jesus Christ.

ENCOURAGING SINNERS TO REPENT AND TO CHANGE

This too is an important part of feeding the flock.

We all sin. King David sinned grievously when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and then had her husband murdered. David NEEDED to have someone confront him with his sins, and to encourage him to repent. And David did repent when this happened.

God has called us, the weak of the world. We don't have rock-solid character to always only do what is right; we still fall short and sin. That shouldn't surprise us.

The worst thing which could have happened to David would have been that his secret sin had gone unchallenged. Likewise, when we sin secretly, the worst possible thing that can happen to us is that we seem to get away with our secret sin! The best possible thing that can happen under circumstances like that is that we are forced to confront our secret sins. As David wrote:

Who can understand [his] errors? cleanse thou me from secret [faults]. (Psalm 19:12)

The process of confronting us with our sins opens up the possibility to "be cleansed" from those sins. No confrontation means no cleansing!

This is not a pleasant responsibility for a pastor. But it is of vital importance to the sheep. It may be that someone has become involved in adultery, it may be that a member has stopped tithing, it may be that a member is no longer praying and studying the Bible, it may be that a member is guilty of gossiping, it may be that a member has a problem with alcohol consumption, it may be that a member is borrowing money and not repaying such debts, it may be that a member is abusive towards his or her spouse, whatever the case may be ... when a pastor becomes aware of such a situation, then he needs to confront the individuals involved, even as Nathan confronted King David.

As I have said, this is not a pleasant responsibility, but it is assuredly a part of "feeding the flock".

IDENTIFYING AND AVOIDING "BAD FOOD"

The good shepherd leads his flock into "green pastures" and to "still waters". There are some things the sheep should eat, and there are other things they should not eat.

Likewise, there are "spiritual foods" which it is better for God's people to avoid. A good shepherd will identify these things for his sheep.

Since the demise of WCG there has been a tremendous proliferation of "literature" to influence God's people. Much of it is very helpful indeed; but not all of it is necessarily "good". Some of it actually leads people AWAY FROM the truth.

A good shepherd will lead his people to understand where the errors and the flaws are in such wrong teachings and ideas. In that way he will help God's people to avoid "ingesting" such false ideas.

Over the past two years many people have sent me books, booklets, articles and taped messages, with the request that I "evaluate" these things for them, or that I give them "my opinion" on the merit of these things. Frankly, that has been far in excess of what I could possibly cope with. There is only one of me to read through all the things sent to me and to listen to all the tapes I have received. I have been able to do that with only a few of the things that have been sent to me, and then I have sometimes written up "my opinion" in the form of an article.

But that is really something people should be taking to their local pastors, and they should then have the confidence that they will be guided wisely and soundly by their pastors. They have come across some spiritual food, which on the surface looks good to them, but they want it carefully examined by someone else before they are prepared to "swallow" it.

Many men will quickly dismiss out of hand new ideas which they know or feel are wrong. However, to really HELP God's people, such rejections need to be based on, and supported by, sound biblical reasons. A pastor needs to help people understand HOW and WHY such ideas are wrong. It is not enough that such a rejection is based on nothing more than the pastor's reputation as biblically knowledgeable. Nor is a superficial reference to some Scripture or other enough. The scriptural basis of the matter needs to be clearly explained to people.

Frankly, for the first nine years of Mr. Tkach's administration (i.e. up to the time of his 'anti-law' sermons) there was a famine for God's people in this regard. One heresy after the other was being introduced into the Church, and many members of God's Church did not really have someone to turn to, who would clearly expose these heretical teachings for what they are. This may explain a certain amount of reluctance which many of God's people still have in taking serious issues to their pastors for an honest

assessment. There needs to be a restoration of confidence in the doctrinal integrity of the ministry. The more a minister was known to go along with all the heretical changes that were introduced, the more he needs to clearly and unswervingly demonstrate that NOW he is doctrinally sound and dependable. It is a fact that at this point in time many of God's people still have reservations about the doctrinal reliability of men who are known to have taught errors in the past.

Exposing false teachings is also a part of feeding the flock.

SERVING PEOPLE IN PHYSICAL WAYS

For a long time it has been taught, wrongly so, that "the government of God" exists in the Church of God. That is not really true, and it never has been true! The government of God is not something that ANY mortal human being will EVER (in his mortal state) be involved in. The government of God will be a government by IMMORTAL spirit beings, with Jesus Christ at the head, and all of it under the authority of God the Father. I have explained this in other articles in the past.

A consequence of that wrong understanding has been that the ministry was accorded an unduly elevated position, since they were supposedly higher up in the chain of authority of "God's government" than the lay members. In practice many ministers were often BEING SERVED BY GOD'S PEOPLE. I remember as a student at Ambassador College in the 60's hearing that "Ministerial Assistants" were expected to clean the minister's car and to work in his garden. That kind of "student talk" may have been a gross exaggeration of the facts, but it illustrates the exalted position in which the ministry was viewed in many cases.

When the New Testament Church started out, the apostles were the ones who served at the tables. But it very quickly became apparent (since 3000 people were baptized on one day) that this was not a feasible way to handle the situation. And so they ordained seven deacons. But this does not mean that IN SMALLER CIRCUMSTANCES a minister should not be the one to also serve physically, as time and opportunities permit.

And here it is not a matter of serving in situations where the whole congregation is aware of it (e.g. serving at a special meal on a Church Picnic). Those occasions are fine, but what is really needed is service to those who are IN NEED! At a picnic where the ministers serve the food no one is really "in need"; if the ministers didn't do the serving at that point, then someone else would readily do it.

What is really needed here is that the pastor discerns where people need help. Examples could include:

- providing lifts for people who don't have a car;

- shopping for someone who is unable to do so himself/herself;

- helping a widow who is moving to another house;

- elementary repair jobs for people who are unable to do these things themselves;

- helping someone with his new computer;

- searching out medical information in the medical library of the local university for people who are suffering from specific health problems;

- helping people with their income tax returns.

- helping people to find competent legal advice;
- accompany elderly and frail people in trying situations;
- take meals to a sick member who lives all alone; etc.

I do not mean to imply that these things should occupy a major portion of the pastor's time. But there will be occasions when some people in his congregation are really in need in one area or another. At times like that the minister has the choice whether to phone another person in his congregation and asking that person to provide the needed help, or whether to provide the needed help himself. While there will be occasions where other people will be far more qualified and capable to provide such help, there should also be occasions when the pastor himself gives that help, without calling on someone else to do it for him.

Sometimes helping his people in physical ways is also good for the pastor. And many pastors have done many of these things for many years. In fact, many pastors could add a whole string of other suggestions to the above list (e.g. helping disaster victims).

Helping his people in physical ways when such help is really needed is just as much a part of "feeding the flock" as is providing spiritual guidance and counsel.

And that covers the points I listed earlier in this article.

While this is certainly not an exhaustive treatment of the subject, it should nevertheless provide some indication of what is meant by the expression: "to feed the flock".

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