

TEACHING AS WORSHIP

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INTRODUCTION.

I haven't belonged to an organized church since 1999. Back in those days we heard a lot about "feeding" and "being fed." People who changed churches often said of their old church, "*Oh, I just wasn't being fed, there.*" By feeding, they meant that they weren't being given the right spiritual 'food' by the church pastor. I remember that at the time something troubled me about that view of the relationship between church, worshiper, and pastor. But, I didn't follow up on it, then. Now, I am.

The symbolism of 'being fed' in church comes from Jesus' reference to His followers as a "flock" of "sheep," for whom He is the "good shepherd" [John 10:11-16]. In churches, it is the duty of the shepherd, or pastor (they're the same Greek word, *poimen*), to find proper pasturage for his flock. It is the shepherd who provides access to the spiritual nourishment needed by the sheep.

An interesting question is whether worship is just to be on the receiving end of feeding. Or, could worship also be on the giving end of feeding? Worship can be defined as being fed. But can feeding be defined to be worship? What's the Bible say?

AN OLD TESTAMENT PICTURE.

Jesus' new Christian church was Bible-based. We now call their Bible the Old Testament. It wasn't until hundreds of years later that the New Testament was put together from the writings of the early apostles. So, the tenets of the early Christian church came from the Old Testament, plus Jesus' teachings which were carried by the apostles, first in verbal form and then later in compiled documentary form.

There is an Old Testament writing that literally relates worship and feeding. It is in [Deut. 12], God's regulations governing worship in the ancient Israelite 'church.'

The Israelites didn't worship just anywhere. They were instructed to worship only in a special place that God would choose to put His Name. They were to bring their tithes and vows and offerings to that place, to present them to God. In those days, the tithes and vows and offerings were food, such as grains and first-fruits of the animals. Those offerings were to be eaten by the worshipers in front of the Lord. Together with the eating, the worshipers were to rejoice over all that the Lord had blessed them, from which came their offering.

It came to me that this 'worship service' was a literal feeding of the worshipers by what the Lord had blessed them with, which they, in turn, offered up to the Lord, rejoicing. And, I remembered the joy I had felt during my ten years of Sunday School teaching, as I offered up what the Lord had blessed me with. I realized that my worship was occurring, not in the church sanctuary, but in the Sunday School classroom. And, I was being fed, there, by what I offered, as to the Lord.

WHO FEEDS AND WHO IS FED.

In the Old Testament picture, everybody who produced anything edible and then presented it to the Lord as an offering was then fed by that same offering. So, how does this apply to our New Testament Church?

Does everyone produce and offer and feed off of what is offered?

The answer is “No.”

There are clearly those who give and those who receive. And, Paul talked about this.

[Acts 20] relates Paul’s last meeting with the elders of the church at Ephesus. Paul told those elders (*presbyteros*) that the Holy Spirit had made (*tithemi* – ordained) them overseers (*episkopos*) to feed (*poimano* – pastoring) the church at Ephesus [Acts 20:28]. Paul, the tent-maker, then suggested that they ought to have regular jobs so that they might help the weak. He then repeated Jesus’ words that, “*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*” [Acts 20:35]

There are clearly those in the churches who are not yet productive and, like infants, must be fed. According to Peter, Paul, and the writer of Hebrews, the “babes” are those who don’t know the Bible [1 Cor. 3:2], [Heb. 5:12-13], and [1 Pet. 2:2]. What they are to be fed is the Bible, which is symbolized by milk. Once they are on stronger food, they can be teachers [Heb. 5:12]. That is, they can be productive.

Paul teaches that it is the duty of self-supporting elders, to whom the Holy Spirit has given oversight, to do the church feeding, which is (linguistically) the pastoring (pasturing) function. Spiritual elders are, by definition, partakers of strong spiritual food, with God-given spiritual oversight. Those who teach reap the rewards of worship, as they are teaching. And, those joyful rewards show. They are called “the anointing” by those who are being fed. That is one meaning of the statement that the “... *anointing teaches* ...” [1 John 2:27].

REALITY IN THE CHURCHES.

There are major Protestant denominational churches whose diverse doctrines agree in one point. And, that is that an individual church is only allowed one elder, who is also the overseeing pastor, and that he must be ordained by a denominational higher-up. Such doctrine is opposed to what the Scriptures actually say. Paul rebuked such new-church doctrine in [Col. 2:20-23], just as Jesus had of old-church doctrines of men in [Mat. 15:9].

Surely there is no shortage of spiritual elders with God-given oversight, who ought to be teachers, as Paul says. Today, some are allowed to teach. But, some denominations restrict what may be taught to published materials to which lessons must be conformed. In short, some denominational churches carefully restrict access to nourishment for the sheep. They make sure that their sheep only eat denominational grass. Such restriction sometimes leaves the Holy Spirit standing outside the fence, so to speak.

So, what is the answer to the need for feeding as worship, in the churches? Jesus faced the same problem. So, he taught outside the Israelite ‘church.’ Later, Christian churches met in worshippers’ homes. After all, a church is a meeting of worshippers, not just a big stone building. The answer may well be a lot of small home churches, just as in the early days of the Christian Church.