



Research article

ISSN 2582-0214

FEED MY SHEEP IN JOHN 21:15-17 AND THE PASTORAL ROLE OF PRIESTS IN NIGERIA

Paul Danbaki Jatau, PhD

Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt-Nigeria

Email: stdanbaki4u@yahoo.com

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/BSJ.2023.5201>

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT



Article history:

Received 17-3-2023

Accepted: 22-04-2023

Available online 18-05-2023

John 21:15-17 is a self contained narrative unit, made up specifically of the encounter between Jesus and Peter, thematically distinct from although literally connected to the preceding and following units in the same chapter, first contains three short dialogues between Jesus and Peter, each of which follows the same pattern, and ends with in a command. Thereafter there is a stated implication arising out of the dialogues. Using a literary-theological approach, this work discusses analytically the metaphoric and spiritual nature of Jesus' directive to Peter to feed his sheep. This article argues that the verbs used for love in verses 15-17 may have different nuances, however, the contrast is not the focus of the dialogue. The priests who, like Peter, can truly claim that the love Jesus based on their closeness to Jesus and sound knowledge of his teaching are also asked to continue feeding or giving life to the hungry sheep of Jesus through adequate approach to evangelisation.

Keywords:

*Feed, Sheep, Pastoral,
Role, Priests*



1.0 Introduction

Following the meal on the shore, the imagery of John 21 changes from fishing and meal imagery to pastoral and shepherding imagery, and the last scene in the Gospel is a dialogue between the risen Lord and Peter. Most of the discussion about this passage has concerned two issues: whether the risen Lord appointed Peter as shepherd over the church in a singular sense (as in Matt 16:17-19), and whether the change in words for love in Jesus' questions to Peter is important or simply stylistic variation. In response, this article argues that the verbs used for love in verses 15-17 may have different nuances, however, the contrast is not the focus of the dialogue.

Some Catholic scholars and older Protestant scholars interpreted the dialogue as "the express re-installation of Peter not only as the head of the apostles, but in the direction of the apostolic company and work (Godet 1864-65). These interpreters regularly cite Matthew 16:17-19 and Luke 22:32. Alternatively, John has been interpreted as mounting an anti-Petrine polemic that diminishes Peter's role and authority vis-à-vis the Beloved Disciple (Arthur 531-48). This article argues that neither of these two lines of interpretation is correct. Although John gives pride of place to the Beloved Disciple in the passages in which the two disciples appear together, John nevertheless portrays Peter as an exemplary disciple. On the other hand, nothing in the dialogue establishes Peter's primacy over the others. St. Peter is a character who confirms God's forgiving love and defines the connection between love for Jesus and care for the community. As William E. Hull noted, "the basic issue is not the kind of love involved but the willingness of Peter to translate personal affection for Jesus into a ministry of concern for the flock" (Hull 9:374).

1.1 The Nigerian Context of Starving the Sheep

Despite the rich heritage and tradition of the church in feeding the hungry sheep of Jesus, many followers of Jesus in Nigeria today are starving from much needed spiritual food. Unfortunately, there are some Christian leaders who delight in starving the hungry sheep of Jesus. Such starvation comes through many church leaders who know the truth about the faith but choose to manipulate or suppress the truth for the sake of selfish interests, material gains, popularity, revenge, pride, and competition. Some want to avoid suffering for the truth, losing money, property, positions, opportunities, members and friends, as well as other repercussions that may arise from feeding the hungry sheep of Jesus with the truth.

There are others, however, who starve themselves and others spiritually out of ignorance. They sincerely believe that whatever they say and do is authentic, possibly because that is what they themselves were taught. And unless they have access to and accept superior knowledge, they continue to starve themselves and others of the truth of the faith. There is a third group of people who starve themselves and others owing to laziness, complacency, carelessness, procrastination, competing attention, lack of zeal and interest, lack of concern, absence of fore sight, a feeling that they and others are just okay, and a



strong belief that feeding the hungry sheep of Jesus is a responsibility for others. They offer many excuses for their attitude: lack of time, busy schedule, work, academic pursuit, illness, age, poverty, low level of education, inability to speak, fear of others, insecurity, stress, instability, envy of others, lack of materials, etc. Such people simply follow the crowd, and imbibe whatever religious teaching or practice is in vogue. They drift along in their faith, and often move from one religious group, society or programme to another in search of elusive satisfaction and fulfilment. They have no opinion or stand in their faith except what appears beneficial to them, even if it is anti-gospel, such as going about praying for the death of their enemies (see Matt. 5:43-48). Thus, they can be easily manipulated and deceived.

They hardly make themselves available for any responsibility or service in the Church, and do not read the Bible and other good books daily, or update themselves. In this way, they starve themselves and their families, friends, neighbours and other followers of Jesus of the authentic word of God. Even certain minor problems become very huge for them, in a way that solutions are difficult for them to obtain. They may indeed be very prayerful and morally sound, yet they are empty and deeply hungry because they have not been fed with the authentic food of life that derives from Jesus through Peter, the apostles, and the entire Church.

1.2 The Metaphor of Sheep and Shepherd (John 10:1-16; 26-27)

According to Culpepper, there are four words that occur in Jesus' three commands to Peter that evoke the image of sheep and shepherd, but only one of them appears in the earlier discourse in John 10 (Culpepper 165-69). The use of the words, sheep and shepherds for God's people and their leaders is traceable to the Old Testament. Moses pleads with God to choose someone who would preside over the congregation of Israel as a shepherd so that they "may not be like sheep without a shepherd" (see Num. 27:17), a verse that is echoed in many places, including 2 Chron. 18:16, Jud. 11:19, Matt. 9:36, and Mark 6:34. After the request, the tribes of Israel, said, "The Lord said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel" (2 Sam. 5:2). Sheep go astray, hence, (see Isa 53:6), they must be tended and protected. In the words of the Psalmist, the Israelites can now be called "the sheep of his pasture" (Ps. 100:3). Like sheep, God led the Israelites out of Egypt and guided them into the wilderness and eventually, the Promised Land (see Pss. 77:20; 78:52).

God gives an assurance to bring back the sheep, look out for the ones that are scattered, feed and protect them (see Ezek. 34:11-16; Zech. 9:16). When the sheep suffer treachery at the hands of hired shepherds (Ezek. 34:1-6), God gives them one—David (see Ezek. 34:23-24).

There are some New Testament passages that discuss the images of sheep and shepherd. Those passages have to do with the appointment of shepherds or leaders for the church and warnings about threats to the church. Jesus' followers are addressed as "little



flock” (see Luke 13:32, 1 Pet. 2:25; 5:4), and this likens the church to a flock that has strayed but has returned to Christ, the chief shepherd. In his farewell speech at Miletus, Paul exhorts them, “Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the Church of God. . . savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:28-29). The latter reference captures the warning of Jesus against false prophets, who will come in sheep’s clothing but inwardly, are ravenous wolves (see Matt 7:15). First Clement likewise speaks of the church as “the flock of Christ” (1 Clem. 16.1; 44.3; 54.2; 57.2). In Ephesians 4:11 the term *poienas* (shepherds), which came to mean pastors, has to do with leadership roles in the Church. Ignatius exhorts the Philadelphians to “follow as sheep where the shepherd is” (Ignatius Philad. 2.1) (Lake 1:241).

In John chapter 10, Jesus admonishes about the hirelings who abandon the flock when it is attacked (10:1-2, 12-13). The thief comes to steal and kill. The good shepherd knows his sheep and they know him (see John 10:14); he calls them and they recognise his voice (John 10:3-4, 27). One trait that differentiates the good shepherd and the hireling, is his commitment to the flock: Hence, the good shepherd is willing at any time to lay down his life for the sheep (10:11). One can infer from the texts that the dialogue between Jesus and Peter to tend his sheep is an exhortation for him to follow Jesus’ example as the Good Shepherd and giving him a pastoral role.

2.0 The Text (John 21:15-17)

¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶A second time he said to him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”

2.1 Delimitation of the Text

This study of John 21:15-17 is a coherent unit. Although it falls within the larger context of John 21:1-25, this larger unit can be further divided into different sub units such as: Jesus’ appearance to the seven disciples (vv. 1-14); the discourse between Jesus and Peter (vv. 15-17); and Jesus and the beloved disciple (vv. 20-25). But the researcher is concerned about this particular unit of John 21:15-17 and not 15-19 as would have been expected. John 21:15-17 is regarded as a literary unit of its own, not merely because of its questions, answers and commission style of discourse, but because of the integrity of the piece in itself. This fragment which focuses on the discourse between Jesus and Peter begins with *hote oun ēristēsan* (when they had eaten) a relative clause indicating a time shift from the flowing narrative (v.15). This clause already indicates that there’s a different time for the event which is about to follow a time that is after the meal.



Furthermore, John 21:15-17 can be treated as an independent unit within the wider section of John 21:15-19 because there is a conclusion in verse 14 by the narrator which gives room for the introduction of a new scene in verse 15 where Jesus now faces Peter after the meal.

There is also a shift in the use of language by the narrator in this unit. It shifts from the use of the second person plural as seen in verses 1-14 where Jesus addresses the seven disciples, to the use of the second person singular where Jesus addresses only one person – Peter (v.15-19). Besides there is a particular pattern of a call- a question- an answer- and then the commission of verses 15-17 which distinguishes those three verses from verses 18 and 19 which does not have this pattern, thus, the exclusion of verse 18 and 19 from this particular unit of study. Also, the language of love (*philō, agapas*), feed (*boske*), tend (*poimaine*), sheep (*arnia, probata*) and the name Simon of John (*Simōn Iōannou*) runs across all three verses of 15, 16 and 17. This neither occurs in vv. 18 and 19 nor in anywhere else between verses 1-25 except in this unit of John 21:15-17.

Again there is an occurrence of the Greek phrases “*legei autō palin deutron*” (a second time he said to him) in verse 16 and “*legei autō to triton*” (He said to him a third time) in verse 17 indicating a flow and connection between the preceding verses and the context. It shows continuity in the narrative of the question and answer session and each use of these Greek adjectives indicate that what follows is grounding what precedes it. Thus the researcher believes that this fragment of John 21:15-17 can be taken as a unit of its own, within a larger unit based on the use of language, pattern and sequence of the narrative.

2.2 The Unity of the Text

John 21:15-17 is a self contained narrative unit, made up specifically of the encounter between Jesus and Peter, thematically distinct from although literally connected to the preceding and following units in the same chapter, first contains three short dialogues between Jesus and Peter, each of which follows the same pattern, and ends with in a command. Thereafter there is a stated implication arising out of the dialogues. Thus Verse 15, the first dialogue follows the pattern of *Jesus- Peter- Jesus*, and ends in the command, “feed my lambs”. In verse 16, there is a second *Jesus- Peter- Jesus* dialogue ending as well with a command, “Tend my Sheep”. The third dialogue is in verse 17, following the same *Jesus- Peter- Jesus* pattern, and also with a command, “Feed my Sheep”. In the pericope, Jesus takes the initiative to address Peter, and has the final say. He addresses Peter three times by his original name, “Simon, son of John”. Peter only makes a response to Jesus, and takes no dialogue initiative. Thus the unity of the text centres on the argument that only love, true love, deep love can guide a leader to feed Christ’s flock.



2.3 Structure of the Text

The text of John 21:15-17 as a unit of its own has a structure. This unit of three (3) verses is structured according to the key message of each verse. The article has therefore given the following structure.

- (a) The first commission
- (b) The second commission
- (c) The third commission

The work identified this structure as “ABA” structure, in the sense that the key verb used in these commissions are feed, tend and feed, it thus has a chiasmic structure in the sense that verse 15 begins with a commission to feed lambs. Whereas verse 16 gives a commission to tend sheep and verse 17 finally returns to feed once again but this time around it’s the feeding of sheep. In other words the commands are feed, tend and feed.

2.4 Literary Analysis

This section undertakes the analysis of the text in order to throw more light on the meaning of the entire unit.

2.4.1 The First Commission (v.15)

This particular verse begins with an indication that the conversation is between two people only – Jesus and Peter. Jesus calls on Peter by his Hebrew name “Simon of John”, although Jesus gave Simon the name Peter earlier than this moment, (see Matt. 16:18). But there is only one subsequent occasion when Jesus addressed him by that name (Luke 22:34). It was Jesus’ habit to call him Simon (Morris 767), so there is really nothing so significantly striking as to why Jesus would call him “Simon” on this occasion rather than Peter. Besides, the Synoptic Gospels usually refer to him as Peter, but John often uses “Simon Peter” John uses the name Peter 34 times and it is combined with Simon 17 times. Verse 15 begins with the words “when they had eaten breakfast.” Majority of scholars do not see this as a real indicator of time, but as an attempt to connect verses 15-17 and verses 12-13; they note that the disciples (“they”) play no further role in this scene. Nevertheless, when the Johannine writers wish to make a vague connection, they usually employ “later on” as in verse 1 (Brown 1102). Thus, the opening words of verse 15 clearly link John 21:15-25 to the preceding scene and position as it is a continuation of the same appearance by Jesus (O’Day 860).

In this verse, the word “*huios*” (*son*) is not the same as it was used in John 1:42. It is only in John’s gospel that the father of Peter’s name is given as John (Brown 1102). However, some biblical scholars maintain that the failure of Jesus to address Peter as “Simon Peter” indicates the fact that Peter is in disfavor after denying of Jesus. However, except for Luke 22:34 and for the instance where Jesus changes Simon’s name, Jesus does not address Simon as either “Peter” or as “Simon Peter” in any of the gospels.



What follows next is the questioning of Peter. Jesus questions Peter “Do you love me more than these”? With this, we arrive at a scene which has made so deep an impression on the mind of Christendom – the searching threefold questioning of Peter (Gossip 806). What does Jesus mean by “these”? Who or what are “these”? Despite the back and forth arguments, most commentators agree with the analysis that Christ was referring to “the other disciples” by “these”. This in a sense, referred to Peter’s earlier confident boasting that even if “all” should fail him, he for one, certainly would not. But according to Gossip, this seems unlike Christ. Gossip opines that it was not Christ’s way to handle people so as to harass a fallen and repentant man, fretting his sore, or so to pit one of his followers against the others and still less, in these other’s presence. He rather believes that Christ was referring to the “old life” of trading as a fisherman and pulling out of the trade, looking back after having put his hand to the plough (806-807).

For Leon Morris, there are a few ways to understand the phrase in the question “more than these”? First, is to see it this way – “Do you love me more than these other men? And secondly is to see it as “Do you love me more than these things” (Morris 768). Contrary to the initial first way of taking the words, is the difficulty of assuming that Jesus would invite one of his disciples to compare the quality of his love with that of other followers. This is similar to the view held by Gossip. Yet we must remember that Peter had clearly professed a commitment to Jesus that surpassed that of the other apostles (see Matt. 26:33; Mark 14:29; John 13:37; 15:12-13).

In the second case, one can understand the words “more than these” to refer to the fishing apparatus and all that it meant. This view is held by scholars such as C. B. Williams. Rev and others like Leon Morris. They opine that the word “these” could be understood to symbolise an entire way of life (768). Reasoning in the same line, the question would now challenge Peter as to his whole future.

Another way to look at it would be “Do you love me more than you love these others? But this view is very unpopular since it does not hold much ground. Peter had showed much more love for Jesus than he had for the other disciples despite the fact that he enjoyed the company of his other disciples and fishing companions. Therefore, even though scholars such as Bultmann, Westcott, Lenski and Barclay accept the view that Jesus was referring to the other disciples by “more than these”, not many have taken the words to signify “more than these men love me”. The beauty of scholarly work is the divergent opinions towards the same issue. It is important to note that the actions of Peter already had shown that he never wanted a crucified Master or Lord. Thus, how did the commitment of Jesus stand in this context? Was Peter ready to love Jesus as a crucified Lord and not as he (Peter) wanted him to be? This was an important question which Peter had to face and answer.

In the first three questions about Peter’s love, the comparative clause that appears is “more than these.” According to Raymond Brown, the exact reference of the “these” is not certain. He goes on to explain that scholars such as Bernard and McDowell are among those



who treat “these” as the equivalent of an English neuter object of the verb. Thus reading “Do you love me more than you love these things”? (i.e. boats, fishing) and as a support for such a translation, we recall that in the aftermath of the miraculous catch of fish in Luke 5:1-11, Peter was among the disciples who left everything to follow Jesus (Brown 1103).

However, most scholars take “these” as the masculine subject of an implied verb. Thus reading “Do you love me more than these other disciples do”? Comparing it with the Greek used in John 4:1. This translation too, is not without its own grammatical difficulty because normally, one would have expected the emphatic Greek “you” by way of contrast with the “these”. There seems to be an irony here: Jesus is trying to see the commitment of Peter who earlier boasted at the last supper of a love greater than that of the other followers. Although the boast was not made in the gospel of John but in Matthew’s account (see Matt. 14:29:33)–“Even though they all fall away I will not”. Thus, for Raymond Brown, the solution to this problem is offered by Bultmann: namely, that the implications of the clause should not be considered too seriously, for it is only an editorial attempt to bring the other disciples into the picture and thus, to bind verses 15-17 to vv. 1-13 (1104).

Peter’s answer “yes Lord, you know that I love you” in verse 15 does not allude to the “more than these” comparative clause. This could probably be an allusion that the comparative clause is not too important. The same basic answer would be supplied again and again in verse 16 and with some elaboration in verse 17; the first two times, the verb “to know” is “*oidas*” while in the last response, it is “*ginōskeis*” which is translated as “to know well”. Nonetheless, “*oidas*” also appears in verse 17, in the “you know everything” clause. Seemingly, there is no distinction of meaning. In all these answers by Peter, the Greek pronoun “you” is expressed. This expression according to Raymond Brown is a sign of emphasis (1104). Therefore, the reply of Peter is in the affirmative – “yes Lord”, and he continues “... you know that I love you”. Even Leon Morris agrees with Raymond Brown that the “you” is emphatic as the disciple appeals to the sure knowledge possessed by the master (Morris, 768).

The recent actions of Peter have not revealed his love for his master, and he is not in a position to point to them. However, he can and he does appeal to the full understanding of the situation of Christ. Peter knows that he has failed, denied and deserted Christ with every aggravation of disloyalty. This, he does not forget, and yet though it may not look like it, though he cannot prove it, and recent happenings may rise up to mock the claims, he knows that he still loves Christ in spite of everything; and thus, confidently calls Christ Himself as his witness, challenging him to deny it, agreeing that he will fall or stand by the master’s decision in the matter (Gossip 806), Peter says – “you know”.

Jesus’ commission to Peter goes thus–“feed my lambs.” This charge of Jesus to Peter in verses 15-17 is regularly interpreted as the pastoral and apostolic commission of Peter. That is, in the text of John 21:15-17 Jesus appoints Peter to be the shepherd of his flock. In the charge of Christ to Peter in this first commission of verse 15, Christ thinks first of the



little ones and their needs (809). The young of sheep are lambs and Jesus' first commission does not refer to the sheep, but to the lambs. This commission is very important and there's a reason for the lambs (the most vulnerable) to be catered for first of all.

Christ made the statement, "Feed my lambs" fundamental. To this, Gossip says:

Are we not told authoritatively by these psychologists that what happens to and in us during the first four or five years, or little more, is of such immense importance that it fixes, if not our fate, certainly our struggle throughout life? Our own eyes tell us that if one tugs at a grown branch, it may give a little, but the moment one lets go, it springs back into its set position, whereas a tendril can be permanently trained in the desired direction. Mothers, Nurses, teachers – who can begin to reckon up the momentousness of the task committed to them! (809)

Even when Christ's apostles tried to drive the little ones away from Jesus, Jesus cautioned them and used that occasion to teach another vital message of the importance of the little ones. And if we are to go by the nature of the lambs as tender as they are one would clearly understand that the word "feed" does not necessarily refer to feeding with the "Eucharist". After all, in Catholic teaching, the really young ones are not up to age of reason to know the difference between the sacred species and ordinary food. Thus, the pastor/shepherd cannot feed the toddler/infant with the Holy Eucharist. But Christ insists that the little ones (lambs) must be fed. With what then, if not with good instructions from the word of God and good nutrition for the stomach? What the article intends to deduce from this is the fact that material feeding ought not to be eliminated from the understanding of the commission of Jesus – "feed my lambs". The lambs/shearlings need milk and good nutrition to grow into sheep.

2.4.2 The Second Commission

In verse 16 Jesus questions Peter again at the second instance but drops the comparative clause- "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter's reply is exactly as before- "yes Lord, you know that I love you". Furthermore, there is an agreement with Jesus! Once again there is the emphatic "you" deployed; and again the appeal by Peter for Jesus to know that he does indeed love him (Jesus) (Morris 771).

In comparison with the previous verse, it is observed that the commission differs. It differs both in the action verb deployed and in the object of the verb. The verb used here is different from the verb used to charge Peter in the first commission of verse 15. In verse 15 "*boske*" is used to designate "feed" and "*arnia*" was deployed for "lambs". But in v.16 the second commission uses the verb "*poimaine*" to designate "tend" and the word "*probata*" for "sheep". This second commission goes beyond the mere charge to feed lambs, but a clarion command to tend sheep. The verb used here has a somewhat broader meaning. According to Leon Morris it means "exercise the office of shepherd" over and against simply "feed" (Morris 771). Therefore, there is a command given to Peter in this second commission to engage in pastoral duties.



According to John Marsh, this verb “*poimaine*” (tend) includes all the duties of the shepherd, not simply that of providing the sheep with pasture, although he insists that this distinction as that between sheep and lambs should not be pressed too far (Marsh 671).

He argues that the commission “feed my lambs” in verse 15 seems almost to mix the metaphors of the passage (John 21:1-25) but the metaphor of the net which catches the whole range of men, the Church. In other words, Jesus commands Peter in this verse 16 to nurture his sheep, thereby referring to the people- the grown youths and adults who are also always in need of shepherding. Thus, Peter must guide, guard, lead, feed, nurse, and take care of/tend the sheep of Christ. It should be noted that twice, Jesus has used the strong, new, typically Christian word for love “*agapas me*” and twice Peter had deliberately avoided using it in his reply but responds with “*philō se*”. Nonetheless, Jesus still goes ahead to commission him to tend his sheep.

2.4.3 The Third Commission

Verse 17 begins with the third call and questioning of Peter. This time around, the question remains as same as the second questions in verse 16-“Do you love me”? It is worthy of note that it is in this last question that reminded Peter of his three denials, Jesus no longer uses the strong word for love “*agapas me*” but rather uses Peters own very word for love – “*philōeis me*”, the very word by which Peter had hoped to use in order to escape the worst of the probing “Simon of John, do you love me”? As if to say “Peter, are you even sure of that lesser kind of love for me? Peter cannot and knows that he cannot lay claim even to this lesser love. All his self-knowledge and self-confidence has gone; the only thing he can trust is his lords knowledge of him that has even at this moment already twice commissioned him (Marsh 671).

Peter was grieved and rightly so in reaction to a third question in succession of similarity. It seemed that he felt within himself that his first two responses may have fallen on deaf ears or were not just good enough to be taken and accepted hence, the need for the same question a third time. Peter was grieved according to John Marsh because the question was asked three times Marsh 672. Peter however responds “Lord you know everything...” so at last Peter is brought to the point of being completely broken and at that point he is completely remade in the reception a new of his divine commission to feed Christ’s sheep (Marsh, 671)

It is worthy to note that while there was no article used with “*deuteron*”, (a second time) in the second questioning of verse 16, the definite article appears in verse 17 in “the third time”, (*to triton*) indicating emphasis.



Raymond Brown insists that the real stress is not on the use of “*phileis me*” but on the “*to triton*” – still a third time Jesus asked – a translation that implies the synonymous character of the questions (Brown 1106).

Thus, Peter is hurt. It is also noticeable that after Peter is hurt, Jesus does not question him any further. Grammatically, this scene is well constructed. According to Raymond Brown, the hurt is based on being asked three (3) times, some biblical exegetes would trace the sorrow of Peter to the fact that by this denial’s he had given Jesus cause to doubt him (Brown, 1106). Mark 14:72 is a parallel where after the cockcrow that marks Peter’s third denial, we are told that Peter wept bitterly. This is the only place where Peter is recorded to have been hurt to the point of grieving or weeping bitterly. Thus, the connection and possible reason why he was hurt and grieved by Jesus’ third time question.

Peter, according to Morris was very sad and his sorrow at the threefold question impelled him to a somewhat fuller reply (Morris 772). Although his reply is more comprehensive, it lacks the speedy response of “yes Lord” as in verses 15 and 16. This time, Peter relies on the Lord’s intimate knowledge of all things rather than venturing on his own affirmative. Peter responded with “Lord you know all things” (v.17), and this statement is very important in Johannine Christology (see John 2:25; 16:30).

Reading from the Greek version, it is obvious that Jesus’ use of the word for “love” differs from the previous two verses. He uses “*phileis me*” in the final question as different from the “*agapas me*” he used in the first two questions to Peter. This therefore means that Jesus comes down to Peter’s level of love in order to bring him up to speed with the real Christian agape meaning of love. Worthy of note too is Peter’s change of word used to designate the verb “know”. Indecently, we have another variation in vocabulary in that Peter’s word for “know” is different from his previous replies. In verse 15, he replied with “*oidas*” in verse 16 he retains this verb in his “*oidas*” but in his third response after being grieved Peter responds with “*ginōskeis*”. This is the same verb used by John in John 2:24 to acknowledge Jesus’ omniscience, especially of all the hearts of men. But again according to Morris, there is no real difference in meaning; Jesus’ final commission as seen in verse 17 combines the verb from the first form with the noun from the second form (Morris, 772).

Therefore, there can be no doubt that this whole literary analysis points to the fact that Jesus restores Peter to his position of being a leader of the apostles. For three times he denied his Master; three times also he affirms his love for Him; and three times he has been commissioned to feed or tend the flock. This demonstrates the fact that, regardless of the mistakes done in the past, Jesus restores him (Peter) to a place of trust. It is worthy of note that the main reason for which Jesus questions Peter prior to his commissioning is love. Love is a *conditio sine qua non* for Christian service. However, other qualities may be desirable, but the indispensability of love is undisputed.



2.5 Peter's Responsibility of Feeding the Sheep

By commissioning Peter three times in a forensic manner to feed his lambs, tend his sheep and feed his sheep, Jesus legally constituted Peter as the leader of the disciples and His followers at large (see Matt16:18-19). As leader of the followers of Jesus, Peter is the shepherd who has the full responsibility of feeding Jesus' sheep. Yet the shepherd image is not restricted to the person and office of Peter. The image is used too in the early church for the elders of the church, who are also charged with leadership responsibilities: "I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it - not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away" (1Pet. 5:1b-4).

Peter's responsibility as leader of the followers of Jesus is to feed Jesus' sheep. This implies that: the sheep are hungry; the sheep cannot feed themselves; even if the sheep are not able to eat, Peter must find a way to feed them and so keep them alive; the sheep actually belong to Jesus, and not Peter, so Peter must feed the sheep as Jesus would. But did Peter actually feed Jesus' sheep, and how did he do it?

Peter's role as the leader of the followers of Jesus after the ascension of Jesus is amply attested in the Acts of the Apostles. He is mentioned first in the list of the apostles in Acts 1:13. He addresses the first group of believers numbering 120 persons (Acts 1:15-22) after the ascension of Jesus. He is the one who proposes a replacement for Judas in the college of the apostles, an indication that Peter's feeding of the hungry sheep of Jesus included administration. It was also Peter who took up leadership and spoke, addressing the Judeans on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36). He baptised and added 3,000 persons that day to the Christian community after his speech. All these persons, under the leadership of Peter, "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2: 42). Peter exercised other forms of leadership, such as healing a crippled beggar (Acts 3:1-10), and addressing people on the truth of the power of God in healing the cripple and in raising Jesus from the dead (Acts 3:11-26).

Peter exercised his leadership role in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, condemning their selfish action (Acts 5:1-11). It was through Peter's leadership of the early Christian community that the Gentile Cornelius and his family came to faith (Acts 10:1-11:18). In his role of feeding the sheep of Jesus, Peter was arrested by Herod and imprisoned, but was delivered miraculously from prison (Acts 12:1-19). As leader of the church, Peter played a major role during the first council of the church in Jerusalem as the first to speak on an issue concerning the admission of Gentiles into the church (Acts 15:6-11). Furthermore, two important NT letters, 1Peter and 2 Peter have been attributed to Peter as the leader or shepherd of the early Christian community. According to tradition, Peter the first leader or shepherd of the church was martyred through crucifixion.



Under his leadership, the early Christians “devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). He kept them united to each other, such that, “all who believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2:44). Peter fed Jesus’ sheep through his exemplary ministry of teaching, preaching, administration, and prayer. Like Jesus, and on behalf of Jesus, he was courageous even in the face of persecution, proclaiming the truth to all including those in political authority. He acted in harmony and agreement with the other apostles, as was evident in his admission of Gentiles (Acts 10:1-11:18) and during the council at Jerusalem (Acts 15:6-11). These are some of the legacies on feeding the hungry sheep of Jesus that Peter left behind in the church, which have been passed on to his successors the Popes from generation to generation.

In line with the apostolic tradition of feeding the hungry sheep of Jesus, the Popes all through history have played a uniting role in the Church. They have remained as a leadership point of reference for all members of the Church, the followers of Jesus. Through their ministry of preaching, teaching, writing, service, prayer, administration, they encourage, correct, advice, and guide the faithful to a deep and authentic faith according to the mind of Jesus, and in line with sacred scriptures and sacred tradition of the Church. Feeding the hungry sheep of Jesus with the truth has thus become part of the tradition of the Church, which must continue to be upheld by the clergy, religious and laity in unity and collaboration with the successor of Peter. Paul exhorts on this: “so then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter” (2 Thess. 2:15).

3.0 The Feeding Role of Priests in Nigeria

Priests by virtue of their ordination are entrusted with the task and the responsibility of providing pastoral care to the faithful. Just as a shepherd cares for his sheep, the priest cares for his flock. In these turbulent times when many people are beginning to lose faith in God and in themselves, it might simply mean, being present in a difficult situation with no agenda, no judgment, no solutions, or no advice. Therefore the priests must seek increasingly creative ways to promote mutual reliance by radiating God’s love and care to a frightened and traumatic people. One way to achieve this is for the priest to consciously make himself physically present by being available and accessible to the faithful. This is because the patients of COVID-19 perceive the priest as the God-person in their midst. The very presence of the priest reminds them that God is very present to them. Other functions include:

Nourishment to Souls

As revealed in John 21:15-17, the first role of the priest is to ensure the spiritual nourishment of the faithful, its growth and safekeeping. Priests as shepherds are charged to manage and to administer the welfare of the sheep that belongs to Jesus. The point is shepherd-leaders are to



move beyond feeding the lambs with milk to feeding the sheep with solid food. “Solid food can be metaphor for training in righteousness so that the sheep can be fully equipped, able to stand in the day of testing. They must be fed with the basics and the fundamentals of the biblical dogma, ecclesiastical catechesis, and the apostolic paradosis” (Simpson 2005).

Leading Role

The task of priests, as leaders of the faithful, is the promotion of their sense of being the faithful, their necessary connectedness and reliance upon one another, their mutual dependence, and their connection with the larger Church and with the community (Robbinson 153-54). Hence, the focus of priests is to lead the sheep to greener pasture and refreshing water. The faithful are taught and this enlivens them, they are guided in paths of righteousness. They are protected from fake pastors or prosperity preachers who brainwash the people with their sugar-coated speeches. The shepherds staff and rod are for disciplining the flock and protecting them from hard the sheep are doomed without discipline little wonder the words discipline and disciple have similar pronunciation and spelling.

This is the provision of good leadership that Wright refers to as “the necessary work of justice and protection of the weak that needed to go on” (277). The task of the leader is of directing the flock out to pasture and catechising them to be united. The sheep that is obedient to the shepherd cannot be in unity with pseudo-leaders (wolves) who appear in sheep clothing. These pseudo-shepherds masquerade as angels of light by disguising their authenticity and genuineness in areas of prayer, speech, appearance, display of miracle etc. Tenney reminds us that:

The life of the sheep was dependent upon the power and provision of the shepherd. Their recognition of him and his recognition of them established the relationship. Hearing his voice, following his leading, entering the fold through him, and the refusal to follow others was John’s picture of belief. (165).

The true pastor is the one whose way of life aligns with the opinion of Bruce L. Shelley (2008) who averred that, “the Pastor is a shepherd of souls, and the sheep are his flock figures suggesting loving, sacrificial leadership. Both Peter and Paul link this shepherding ministry with the oversight of the Christian Churches” (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 2:25) (132). The aforementioned calls for leadership capacity and effectiveness in our in the Nigerian society. It is crystal clear that, greedy and selfish leaders melt like snowflakes when the heat is on, they do not persevere (Strauch 85). By the virtue of their ordination, priests have been commissioned to be overseers.

4.0 Conclusion

This article set out to analyse afresh the John 21:15-17, wherein Jesus asked Peter to feed his sheep, and to apply it or challenge the priests in Nigeria. It has emerged from the analysis of the text that as a leader of the early Christian community, Peter carried out his role creditably



well, and the commission to feed Jesus' sheep has been handed over to successive generations of Popes working in collaboration with Bishops and other clergy. In the light of emerging socio-cultural and religious realities in the country, priests need to brace up and be more committed to their role as pastors or shepherds of the people.

References

- Barclay, William. *The Gospel of John: The New Daily Study Bible*. Vol 2. Minnesota: Liturgy Press, 2001.
- Bromiley, G.W. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, G. Kittel & G. Friedrich (eds.), Abridged in One Volume, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1985.
- Brown, Raymond. *The Anchor Bible. The Gospel According to John*. New York: Doubleday, 1970.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Ibadan: Pauline, 1994. no. 1589.
- Crossan, Dominic. *The Gospel of Eternal Life Reflection on the Theology of St. John*. Milwaukee: Bruce, 1967.
- Culpepper, R. A. "Peter as Exemplary Disciple in John 21:15-19" in *Perspectives in Religious Studies* (2010), 165-16
- Gray, E., n.d. 'Shepherd', in Holman Study Bible, viewed 29 March 2014, from <http://www.studylight.org/dic/hbd/view.cgi?number=T5746>
- Godet, Frederic Louis. *Commentary on John's Gospel*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1978.
- Gossip, Arthur J. *The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary* on 12 volumes, vol. ix. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995.
- Harrington, Daniel, J. *The Gospel of John, Sacra Pagina Series Vol. 5*. Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1998.
- Howard, Wilbeht F. *The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary* in 12 Volumes vol. ix. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995.
- Hull, William E. "John," in *Broadman Bible Commentary 12 Vols*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970.
- Lake, Kirsopp. trans., *Apostolic Fathers 2 Vols.*; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970.
- Lenski, R.C.H. *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*. Minnesota: Augsburg, 1961.
- Lightfoot, R. H. *St. John's Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 1969.
- Marsh, John. *The Gospel of John*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1968.
- Maynard, Arthur H. "Peter in the Fourth Gospel," *NTS* 30 (1984): 531-48.
- Moloney, Francis. *The Gospel of John. Sacra Pagina*. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998.
- . *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*. Yale: University Press, 1998.
- Morris, Leon. *The Gospel of John, the New International Commentary of the New Testament*. Revised. Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1995.
- O'Day, John Gail R. *The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary* on 12 volumes vol. ix. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995.
- Robinson, Dennis. "An Instrument in His Hand- Newman and a Theology of the Priesthood" in *Sacerdos in Aeternum Reflections on Priesthood Today*. Leuven, Faculty of Theology, 2005.
- Shelley, B.L. 'The Meaning of Church Vocation', in J.D. Berkley (ed.), *Leadership Handbook of Management and Administration*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2008.



Strauch, A. A Christian Leader's Guide to Leading with Love, Lewis and Roth Publishers, Littleton, 2006.

Tenney, M.C. John - The Gospel of belief: An Analytical Study of the Text, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1975.

Wright, C.J.H. *The Message of Ezekiel: A New Heart and a New Spirit*, InterVarsity Press, Nottingham, 2001.
