

The Resurrection and Post-Resurrection Narratives

Chapter 12: The Restoration of Peter

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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” (Jn. 21:15-17).

After the miraculous catch of fish and breakfast with the risen Lord, John turns his attention to the remarkable interaction between Jesus and Peter. In the previous fourteen verses the disciples are dealt with as a group, but now they are left out of the narrative while the Savior questions and restores Peter. In order to properly understand this passage, we must view it against the background of Peter’s boasting at the Lord’s supper. After Christ told the disciples that they would flee for their lives when He was arrested, tried and killed, Peter boasted that he would never stumble (Mt. 26:33; Mk. 1:29) even if everyone else did, that even if he had to go to prison and die for Jesus he was willing to do so (Lk. 22:33; Mk. 1:29). Nevertheless, Peter denied the Lord three times after he made these claims. Peter’s actions had placed him under a cloud with the other disciples and had certainly affected Peter’s confidence and communion with the Savior. Therefore, a public restoration of Peter was necessary so he could resume his role as a prominent leader in the church.

The timing of this incident is noteworthy because we are told that Jesus had already appeared to Peter privately in Luke 24:34 and 1 Corinthians 15:5 and, therefore, our Lord waited to confront Peter until after the fact of the resurrection was firmly established to all the disciples. Further, Jesus confronts Peter only *after* providing for his needs and serving him breakfast. Peter has already been assured that he belongs to the disciples and has been accepted and blessed by Christ. Therefore, “now he is ready, and only now, for that so necessary dealing with his conscience, when his heart is fully assured.”¹

The Savior’s Question

Our Lord’s approach to the restoration of Peter is unusual and marvelous. Only One who is omniscient could take such a penetrating approach. The Savior does not directly confront Peter with his sin, but rather asks a piercing question. “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these (21:15)?” There are a number of things to note regarding this question.

¹ Numerical Bible as quoted in Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:320.

First, the Redeemer addressed Peter not as “Peter” or even “Simon Peter” but as “Simon son of Jonas.” This form of address was deliberate and was designed to bring three important historical occasions together in Peter’s mind.

(1) The first thing that this address would bring to mind was Peter’s original call to be an apostle by Christ. After our Lord called Andrew, he brought his brother Simon to Jesus. When Jesus called Peter He said to him, ““You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas’ (which is translated, a stone)” (Jn. 1:42). In the Bible a change of name marks a change of life and position. Our Lord changed Simon’s name to *Cephas* (Aramaic) or *Petros* (Greek) both of which refer to a large stone, boulder or chunk of rock to indicate the change that Christ would work upon Peter’s heart and life. Peter, who was impulsive, unstable, undependable and temperamental, would be transformed into firm, solid stone as a leader in the Church of Christ. By calling Peter Simon, the Savior was reminding Peter of his former life and character. He was instructing Peter of the need to put off the old life and remain steadfast in the new. This would be crucial as Peter would now resume his position as one of the chief apostles in the church.

(2) The next incident that the name Simon would call to mind was Peter’s great confession of Jesus. This is the only other time Peter was called Simon except for Luke 22:31. After Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, our Lord said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 16:17). Then immediately the Savior added this profound comment. “And I also say to you that you are Peter [rock], and on this rock [rocky cliff] I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Mt. 16:18). The designation, Simon son of Jonah, was a reminder of what Peter was by nature, simply a human son of a human father. He was a man who, of himself apart from his relationship to Christ, could not have contributed anything worthwhile to the kingdom of God. But by his great confession (which was a result of God’s grace), Simon had become a worthy bearer of the name Peter. This new name had been called into question by the public denial of his confession during the trial. Our Lord wants Peter to see that, as a leader in the church, his confession of Christ must never waiver again.

(3) The final event that Peter would think of was the Savior’s warning to Peter in Luke 22:31-32: “And the Lord said, ‘Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.’” Jesus used the name Simon in this passage to remind Peter of the instability of his old nature. Peter now stood reminded that Christ had warned him when he was bragging of his greatness, that he was on the precipice, about to make a grievous fall. This also reminded Peter that it was only the Redeemer’s intercession that preserved him from complete apostasy. Now that Peter had returned, as our Lord prophesied, it was time to “strengthen your brethren” (i.e. “Feed My sheep”).

It is noteworthy that Jesus did not pray that Peter would not fall, but that his faith would not fail. The Savior allowed Peter to fall so that he would learn and be sanctified by the experience. Christ even prophesied the specifics of Peter’s fall and return so that the spiritual lessons that Peter needed to learn from this experience would not be missed. Peter’s pride and carelessness exposed him to severe temptation and led to his fall. But his fall was used by God to complete Peter’s training as an apostle. It ultimately was beneficial because it revealed to Peter the condition of his heart. It showed him the danger and foolishness of his self-confidence and was used of God to subdue his arrogant attitude. Like Peter, sometimes we need to learn our own weakness, pride and stupidity by personal experience before we can become strong and useful

for the kingdom of God. To be an effective apostle, Peter needed to learn to stop trusting in himself and instead focus on Christ and His word.

Second, the question is a searching question about Peter's love for Christ: "Do you love Me more than these?" There are a number of things to note regarding this inquiry about love.

(1) Although this question does not specifically define love, the context of it tells us what love toward Jesus is not. Peter had done two things that had placed him in the position to receive this question. The first thing he did was to completely ignore the Savior's words or warning. He was so full of pride and self-confidence that he did not listen to or obey the Shepherd's voice. The second thing Peter did was to publicly deny Christ. He had refused to confess his loyalty to the Master in order to save his own skin.

Therefore, if these activities call into question our love of the Redeemer, then obviously, love toward our Savior involves believing in and confessing Christ before men and obeying our Lord's commandments. Public confession is important in determining love and allegiance toward Jesus because people who refuse to confess the Savior publicly, do so either because they have more regard and loyalty to the friendship, honor and company of friends than the Redeemer and/or they regard their own safety, personal peace and affluence over Christ. Confessing Jesus in the days of our Lord meant, first being put out of the synagogue (Jn. 9:22), then eventually it meant arrest and persecution unto death (e.g., see Ac. 7:58; 8:1-3). People at that time often had to make a decision between love and allegiance to the Mediator or being hated by their own families, friends and relatives. That is why Jesus said, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple" (Lk. 14:26).

Therefore, love to Christ means first and foremost that He takes the first place in our hearts and lives. We are to have no other gods beside Him (Ex. 20:3; Dt. 5:7). We are to love Him with all of our heart, soul and strength (Dt. 6:5). When it comes to Jesus there is no such thing as a faith and love that is not expressed with the lips and the life. "Confession of Christ is as necessary as faith in Him, but necessary for a different purpose. Faith is necessary to obtain the gift of righteousness. Confession is necessary to prove that this gift is received. If a man does not confess Christ at the hazard of life, character, property, liberty, and everything dear to him, he has not the faith of Christ."²

Love to Christ is also demonstrated by a willingness to heed His voice and obey His commandments. Our Lord said, "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him" (Jn. 14:21; cf. 15). The true test of a professing Christian's love to Jesus is not emotions, tears, knowledge or mere talk, but rather obedience to His revealed will. Many people know what the Bible has to say, but very few are interested in obeying it. Virtually everyone is willing to make a strong profession of the love and allegiance to Christ, but this profession does not affect the way in which they conduct their lives at all. If we are to love the Savior as we ought, we must study His doctrines and precepts and conform ourselves to the Lordship of Christ. We must always be on guard because of the sin within us, so that we do not return to our carnal ways and love something of this world more than Christ. "Love for Jesus will lead to keeping the commands of Jesus: What are they? The interchange of 'my commands' with 'my word' and 'my words' in vv. 21, 23, 24 suggests that they include the full range of revelation from the Father, not simply ethical instructions (cf. 8:31-32; 12:47-49; 17:6); the lover of Jesus

² Robert Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1874] 1958), 508.

will live in the light of their guidance and their power...³ “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. For whatsoever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (1 Jn. 5:3-4). “Do not love the world, or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world” (1 Jn. 2:15-16).

As we focus on love toward Christ, we do not deny for a moment the emotional element involved in this love. After all, when Peter saw the Lord he was so happy he leaped in the water to go to Jesus. Further, the three-fold repetition of the Savior’s question to him grieved Peter’s heart. However, the Bible does not focus on love as an emotion, but rather centers on love as action; as fulfilling the law and confessing Christ. The reason for this emphasis is probably rooted in the fact that while we have little or no control over how we feel about someone or something, we can control our actions. Our behavior is a fruit of faith and love and thus the Bible gauges our love by our actions. Further, the best way to increase our love toward the Redeemer as an emotion is to obey His voice, by using the means of grace and diligently studying and following the Word of God. The Bible directs itself primarily to the intellect and we are responsible to rule over our emotions by submitting them to the Word of God. Remember, our Lord questioned Peter about his love because his *behavior* had given occasion for doubts to arise concerning his love.

From this incident we must learn to judge our love toward the Savior by our actions. If we are willing to disobey the Mediator’s explicit teaching to satisfy our own desires and perceived needs, then we must call into question the sincerity of our love. When a professing Christian is confronted about a scandalous sin and his response is an obstinate refusal to obey the truth, then he is demonstrating that he really does not love Jesus, regardless of his words on this matter. The Redeemer bids all of us to examine the love toward Christ in our hearts. Do you have a real love for Jesus? Are you strongly devoted to the Mediator? Is your love to the Lord demonstrated by your words and actions?

Although we must judge our love by our actions, we must also judge our actions by our hearts. This point may seem contradictory, but it is not. The point here is that there are many people who go to church faithfully and do many outwardly good deeds, but who do not do so from a sincere love of Christ. Our Lord talked about the scribes and Pharisees who loved to do good works to be seen by men (Mt. 6:1, 5, 16). There was no true heart love for God in their actions, but only self-interest. So while we must gauge our love by our actions, we must also be careful to examine our hearts in the light of God’s word to make sure we are not deceiving ourselves.

This truth is very relevant in our day, for there are hundreds of thousands of people who go to church every week who do not love Christ. There are multitudes that are deeply attached to forms, ceremonies, rituals, excitement, singing, music, public speaking, the eucharist and various church growth gimmicks who do not love Jesus. There are even many who make a very orthodox profession of faith, yet who have no love toward the Savior in their hearts. “We may know much, and do much, and profess much, and talk much, and work much, and give much, and go through much, and make much show in our religion, and yet be dead before God, from want of love, and at last go down to the pit. Do we love Christ? That is the great question.”⁴ “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ

³ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 256.

⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:497.

is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified” (2 Cor. 13:5). Are you a Christian in name only, or is your faith self-manifesting by works that flow from love to Christ? The fact that we are commanded to examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith, proves that the church may contain reprobates. As Jesus questioned Peter, we sometimes need to question ourselves. This involves a biblical examination of our confession, our behavior and our hearts.

Third, the question goes to the very root of Peter’s sin which was pride. The first time Jesus asked Peter this question He said, “Do you love Me more than these?” The expression “more than these” is ambiguous and can be interpreted in three different ways. Some believe that our Lord was asking if Peter loved the Savior more than his fishing boats, nets and old manner of making a living. This view is somewhat predicated on the idea that Peter and the disciples had decided to give up on the ministry and go back to fishing. Another view is that the Redeemer was asking Peter if he loved Christ more than he loved the other disciples. The interpretation that makes the most sense (and thus is held by the vast majority of commentators) is that our Lord is asking Peter if he loved the Redeemer more than the other disciples loved Him. Thus, Jesus was calling Peter’s mind back to the time after the Lord’s supper when Peter boasted, “Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble” (Mt. 26:33). Peter’s boast is emphatic in the Greek (*ego*, “I myself”).

This penetrating question would have the effect of saying, “Do you remember that day, Peter, when you were so confident? Do you recall how you boasted that you were more faithful and dependable than the other disciples? After all that has happened, Peter, what now do you have to say? Is your love and dedication to Me really superior to the other apostles? The whole purpose of this phrase was to teach Peter humility. If Peter was to be a rock, teaching the church, then he needed to learn humility and self-control.

We see in this question the great wisdom of Christ. His purpose in asking Peter this question about love was not only to fully restore Peter to his previous position as a chief among the apostles in front of the other disciples, but also was to teach Peter not to make the same mistake again. Once Peter was cured of his over-confidence he would be more watchful, prayerful and careful. We also must not forget that the other six disciples would greatly benefit from this conversation. Although they had not shown the same pride and over-confidence as Peter; nevertheless, we are told that after the holy supper, they all promised that they would not deny Jesus (Mt. 26:35; Mk. 14:31). And, although they did not fall to the degree that Peter did by denying Jesus three times, they were guilty of abandoning the Savior at His greatest time of need. The great leaders of the church needed to learn humility and watchfulness, for they were to be the great examples and teachers of the flock. The true qualifications for leaders or shepherds in the church is not great talk of courage, zeal and a readiness to die for Jesus, but rather humility, steadfastness, and a patient endurance in providing food and care for the Savior’s sheep.

Fourth, our Lord asked virtually the same question three times but with small variations to emphasize and teach different things. One of the most obvious differences is Jesus’ use of a different word for love the third time he asked Peter this question. The first two times he asked the question the verb *agapao* is used. This verb is used of the highest form of love in Scripture. This is the word, used in John 3:16, which describes God’s love of the elect. *Agapao* is the love of reason, intelligence, purpose as well as affection. Some scholars regard *agapao* as the most superior form of love. The last question contains the verb *phileo*, which is used more for affinity, friendship and affection. “Both words represent a high aspect of love. Since they are used of both God (3:16; 5:20) and men (14:27; 16:27) in this Gospel, they seem to be [almost]

interchangeable with no great difference in meaning.”⁵ But, in this context we should see a difference.

Essentially what is happening here is this: Christ asks Peter if he loves Him with the highest form of love possible, a love greater than the other disciples as he had boasted earlier. Peter, now thoroughly humbled by his three-fold denial of Christ, answers by saying, “Yes, Lord, You know I love You with a *phileo* kind of love.” In other words, My affection and dedication toward You is still here, Lord, but I no longer claim to have the highest, superior form of love.” “Even now, with bowed head, he himself realizes that his love has been anything but the high love of the true understanding of his Lord and of the sincere purpose of living up to that understanding. So often he has misunderstood, so often Jesus had to correct his wrong impulses. No; he dared not claim real *agape*. So he answers, *philo se*, ‘I have affection for thee.’”⁶ This answer, which is steeped in humility, shows a real repentance on the part of Peter. The root cause of his fall, sinful pride, has been replaced with Christian humility.

The second time Jesus asks Peter about his love, He uses the same word for love (*agapao*) but drops the comparison with the other disciples. “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me with the highest, superior form of love?” Peter responds with the same answer “Yes, Lord, You know that I have a friendship-affection kind of love (*phileo*) for You.”

The third time our Lord asks the question Jesus now condescends to Peter’s evaluation of himself by dropping the use of *agapao* and using the verb *phileo*. “Simon, son of Jonah, do you have affection for Me? Are you still my friend?” This time Peter is grieved by the three-fold repetition; he also changes his answer and makes it a bit stronger. In the previous two answers Peter appealed to our Lord’s perfect knowledge of his heart. But now he speaks of the Savior’s divine omniscience relating to all things. “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love you” (Jn. 21:17).

This is one of the most touching scenes in the whole Bible. We see Jesus deal with His errant apostle in a very firm yet gentle manner; a manner designed to do him the most good. We also see Peter humble himself, for he was truly repentant and very sorry for what he had done. Note that his sorrow was not rooted in the consequences that the sin had brought upon his life; but, he was sorry for his ill treatment of his Master. Peter, no doubt, had a holy hatred of his sin because he had dishonored his Redeemer, ignored His word of warning and had called into question his love of Jesus. “The very ‘grief’ which Peter felt at being thrice asked about his love, was intended to do him good. It was meant to remind him that if he was grieved to be asked thrice, ‘Lovest thou Me?’ how much more must his Master have been grieved when he thrice denied Him!”⁷

Peter’s response tells us something important about how to view our relationship with and service to God. The apostle assumed a position of humility before the Mediator. Even if Peter had not blatantly sinned by denying Christ, his previous position of pride was unbiblical and dangerous. “The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverse mouth I hate” (Pr. 8:13). “When pride comes, then comes shame; but with the humble is wisdom” (Pr. 11:2). “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Pr. 16:18). The arrogant mind of a man leads him into a fall. And, for a believer, a fall brings him into a deep and rugged valley of humiliation. Therefore, humility keeps one safe from stumbling. It is a great, persevering virtue. Peter should have already learned this doctrine from

⁵ Merrill C. Tenney, *John*, 9:201.

⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel*, 1420.

⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:507.

the lips of the Master who said, “So likewise you, when you have done all these things you are commanded say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do’” (Lk. 17:10). If this is the proper attitude of someone who has done his duty, what position of humility must we take who have not done half or even a hundredth part of the things commanded us?

Peter also placed his faith in Christ’s omniscience. The apostle could not even come close to articulating his feelings and devotion toward Jesus. His recent past had been so disconcerting that, on this area, his thoughts were like the troubled sea. Therefore, he rested upon the Savior’s divine knowledge. He knew that the Redeemer divined what was in the deep recesses of his heart. Indeed, the Mediator knew his heart better than he did himself. “That Christ knew *all* things comforted this disciple, as it should us. Peter realized that the Lord knew the *depths* as well as the *surface* of things, and therefore, that He saw what was in his poor servant’s *heart*, though his *lips* had so transgressed. Thus did he once more own the absolute Deity of the Saviour.”⁸

Feed My Sheep

That Jesus receives what Peter says as evidence of genuine love and true repentance is clear from His declaration to Peter: “Feed My lambs.” This command (like the question about love) is repeated three times for emphasis. There are a number of significant things about this declaration.

First, note that love to Christ by our Lord’s under-shepherds is connected to feeding the sheep. A man who does not first have a strong love toward his Savior cannot faithfully discharge his ministerial duties. “Love to Christ’s person is one of the most important graces that can adorn a Christian, and specially a minister.”⁹ If a minister loves Jesus, then he will not water down the gospel or neglect discipline for the sake of popularity or money. If an elder loves the Redeemer he will be happy to show that love by visiting widows and orphans. This passage teaches us that all the things we do and all good works must be motivated by and rooted in our love of the Master. If we keep this perspective, obedience and good works become a pleasure rather than something that we must force ourselves to do.

This connection also tells us something about Jesus’ great love for His people. Christ asks His under-shepherds to show their love to Him by caring for His flock. The salvation and care of our Lord’s sheep is the first thing on His mind. He essentially says, “Show Me your love by loving My sheep.” “All believers ought to draw from it no ordinary consolation, when they are taught that they are so dear and so precious in the sight of the Son of God, that he substitutes them, as it were, in his own room. But the same doctrine ought greatly to alarm false teachers, who corrupt and overturn the government of the Church; for Christ, who declares that he is insulted by them, will inflict on them dreadful punishment.”¹⁰

This passage also teaches us that our love to Christ can be gauged by how we treat others, especially the brethren. John writes, “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death.... By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for His brethren. But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from

⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:324-325.

⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:508.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 2:289.

him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 Jn. 3:14, 16-18).

Second, our Lord uses slightly different terms to describe the flock that needs to be fed. When Christ responds to Peter the first time, He uses the word *arnia* (*arnos*) which indicates lambs or young sheep. The next two times the Savior uses the word *probata* (*probaton*) which refers to sheep. The use of these different words is probably not meant to refer to different age groups (e.g., children and adults) in the church, but rather to different levels of Christian maturity. The church consists of new believers (babes in Christ) and mature Christians. The care of the flock involves teaching and direction for both the novice and the theologian. All kinds of believers must be considered. “Now having profited by your experiences (because of your sincere sorrow), consider the members of my Church to be your lambs, and feed them; your sheep, and shepherd them; yes, your *dear* sheep, and in feeding them love them! *Do not neglect the work among the flock, Simon. That is your real assignment! Go back to it!*”¹¹

The man who pastors the flock must not direct his preaching and teaching only to those who are young, ignorant, tender and weak, but also to those who have grown to a good degree of strength and maturity. The tendency in our day is to dumb everything down for new believers and children at the expense of mature adult believers. While preaching must not be overly intellectual like a seminary lecture, it must contain enough solid food to benefit the strong sheep in the flock. Moreover, covenant heads are given the responsibility by God to make sure that those under their care understand the sermons preached on the Lord’s day.

Third, the words used for taking care of the sheep are also different. In verses fifteen and seventeen Jesus uses the word *boske* which means “feed.” The shepherd is to provide food and pasture for the sheep. In verse sixteen a different word is used: *poimaine* (from *poimen*) which means to shepherd. This word includes the giving of food but also refers to all the other things being a shepherd involves: governing, leading, protecting, directing and so forth. “The shepherd was known for his feeding and protecting the flock (Jer. 31:10; Ezek. 34:2); for seeking out the lost sheep (Ezek. 34:12) and for rescuing those who were attacked (Amos 3:12). . . . In keeping with this concept one finds in the OT many passages which speak of the leaders of God’s people as shepherds under God. In Numbers 27:17 and 1 Kings 22:17, the plight of Israel without leaders is likened to sheep without a shepherd. Later, the prophets, priests and kings who failed God and God’s people were condemned as shepherds who deserted or misled the flock (Jer. 2:8; 10:21; 23:1 ff.; Ezek. 34:21 ff., etc).”¹²

Both of these words are obviously used metaphorically to describe Peter’s spiritual work as an apostle and elder (1 Pet. 5:1) in the church. The sheep, which are professing Christians or members of the visible church, need spiritual food and protection. The apostles and their successors throughout history (gospel ministers) are responsible to teach (feed) and govern (lead and protect) God’s people (the sheep). It is noteworthy that in the New Testament the terms “shepherd” and “overseer” or “bishop” are often connected. For example, when Paul gave his final charge to the Ephesian elders he said, “Therefore take heed to yourself and to all the flock [*poimnion*] among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [*episkopous*] to shepherd [*poimainein*] the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Ac. 20:28). The apostles serve under their Master who is the chief “Shepherd and Overseer” (1 Pet. 2:25) of the church. The sheep belong to Christ and must be cared for in the manner that He has commanded

¹¹ Willaim Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 489.

¹² J. B. Scott, “Shepherd” in Gen. Ed. Merrill C. Tenny, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975, 76), 5:398.

in His Word. “The shepherd imagery blends the ideas of authority and leadership with self-sacrifice, tenderness, wisdom, hard work, loving care, and constant watchfulness.”¹³ The shepherd must learn the needs of the sheep and must be willing to go to great lengths to protect the sheep from harm. This involves governing the church in accordance with God’s Word and teaching the church so that members will grow in grace and spiritual maturity. The Scriptures have a number of things to say about the care of Christ’s flock.

(1) The first and foremost method of feeding the sheep is through preaching and teaching the Word of God. Thus, Paul designates those who teach in the church as pastor-teachers in Ephesians 4:11. The pastor-teacher has a responsibility to equip the saints for the work of ministry for the edifying of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12). This is why Paul says an elder must be able to teach in 1 Tim. 3:2. Paul trained Timothy to teach faithful men in his congregation so that they in turn would “be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). Thus Paul commanded Timothy saying, “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). (The word, “preach” [*kerusso*], means “to proclaim aloud, publicly.”¹⁴) When Paul uses the word in the context of teaching the saints, it refers to the sermon in public worship. Preaching in the biblical sense always refers to teaching out of the Bible. It involves not setting forth our own opinions, philosophies or ethics but expounding God’s Word (Mk. 4:34; Lk. 24:27; Ac. 2:14-40; 17:3; 18:36; 28:23). The Scripture is directly applied to each congregation through correction (i.e. reproving sins), rebuke (i.e. speech desired to cause a person to change direction or prevent undesirable behavior from occurring) and exhortation (i.e. pressing truths home to the conscience with an appeal to respond). Paul indicates that this must be done with all “longsuffering” (i.e. with patience and persistence) and teaching (i.e. careful biblical argumentation is to be used to support admonition, rebuke and discipline). Paul uses strong language when describing the ministry of the Word because God’s flock is made up of saved sinners who have a tendency (because of the flesh [the sin remaining in our human nature]) to wander off course. Preaching the Word feeds, edifies and builds up the flock and protects the sheep from self-inflicted harm (sin, backsliding) and wolves (false doctrine, heresy and false teachers). In order to preach effectively and protect the sheep from harm, a pastor must have a solid knowledge of Scripture and theology, “holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict” (Tit. 1:9). The weapons a pastor uses to protect the sheep are not carnal but spiritual.

In caring for the sheep it is important that they receive a balanced diet. That is why Paul made a special reference to the fact that he had preached “the whole counsel of God” (Ac. 20:27). Teaching that only focuses on certain doctrines (e.g., prophecy or eschatology) while neglecting others (e.g., justification and sanctification) can produce malnourished sheep that are easy prey for false teachers. Further, it is extremely important that preaching be thoroughly rooted in Scripture and nothing else. Paul told Timothy to order certain men in his church to teach “no other doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:3) than that received from the apostles. In many evangelical churches today sermons are full of pop-psychology and self-help pragmatism that has nothing to do with Scripture and does not sanctify God’s people (see Col. 2:8, 20-23). God’s sheep need expository, applicatory preaching of the whole counsel of God, full of sound doctrine (1 Tim.

¹³“According to Scripture, then, ‘heralding’ or ‘preaching’ is *generally the divinely authorized proclamation of the message of God to men. It is the exercise of ambassadorship*” (William Hendriksen, *Thessalonians, Timothy and Titus* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957], 309).

¹⁴ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 1995), 149.

1:10), without human philosophies and commandments. The position of the New Testament on preaching presupposes that the Bible is the inerrant, authoritative Word of God that is sufficient to meet all of our needs (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Although preaching is the primary method of feeding the flock, there are other ways that God's Word is communicated to others such as personal counseling and family visitation. These things enable communication to occur in a more personal manner so that private problems or concerns can be addressed.

(2) The shepherds are to lead by example. "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; not as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:2-3). The elders are not to lead by brute force or by forcefully gaining mastery over others (*katakrieuo*), but rather are to serve and set a godly example. It is for this reason that elders must not be involved in polygamy and must rule their households well, having their children in submission with all reverence (1 Tim. 3:4). The Roman Catholic concept of a church hierarchy which rules the church like political princes is antithetical to Scripture.

(3) Shepherds also care for the sheep by correction and discipline. Discipline is designed to do two things. One is to restore sheep who have wandered astray. The other is to protect the flock from the leavening effect of unrepentant sin or heresy in the church. The procedure for retrieving a fallen brother is set forth by our Lord in Matthew 18.

Church discipline is one of the most neglected duties of church leaders in our day. The root of this lack of discipline is the church's adoption of a humanistic concept of love. Generally, people today have a negative view of discipline as unkind and uncompassionate. The reality is that a lack of church discipline is unloving and cruel. No one would consider allowing a lamb to stumble into a ditch or fall off a cliff to be compassionate. But that is essentially what overseers are doing when they refuse to deal with public scandalous sin or heresy in the church. Discipline must be done according to Scripture in as gentle a manner as possible; yet, it must be done. "For the right discharge of the duty of discipline the elder requires the spirit both of faithfulness and of tenderness. These are fully illustrated in our Lord's dealing with offenders, which we should often study. How faithful was he, and yet how tender! Oh, that we could deal with erring brethren in the spirit of Jesus Christ!"¹⁵

Peter loved Christ and was now prepared to feed His sheep. In fact, as we shall see, Peter was also willing to die for His Savior. May God increase our love of Jesus so that we would be dedicated servants of our Lord and even be willing to die for Him if necessary.

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¹⁵ David Dickson, *The Elder and His Work* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), 94.