

Socio-Religious Relevance of Βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία μου (Feed my Lambs) in John 21:15-17 to the 21st Century Ministers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

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Abstract

This study explores the socio-religious relevance of the command "Feed my lambs" βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία μου in John 21:15–17, specifically addressing its implications for 21st century ministers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Through an exegetical and contextual analysis, the research situates Christ's tripartite questioning of Peter within the Johannine literary and scriptural framework, examining how this dialogue transitions from Peter's past failure to a future apostolic office rooted in love. The investigation includes a detailed textual and linguistic analysis of key Greek terms specifically the interplay between ἀγαπάω and φιλέω translated (love), and βόσκω "feed" and ποιμαίνω "shepherd" to determine the functional scope of pastoral care. Findings suggest that the directive extends beyond literal shepherding to a holistic nurturing of the Church community, addressing the spiritual, physical, social, mental, and emotional needs of the flock. Furthermore, the study aligns this biblical mandate with Seventh-day Adventist holistic anthropology, which views the body, soul, and spirit as an integrated whole, necessitating a ministry that meets people at the point of their "felt needs", regardless. Ultimately, the research concludes that John 21:15–17 serves as a guiding principle for relational, proactive, and compassionate leadership, empowering modern ministers to navigate 21st century moral and social complexities while modeling Christ's sacrificial love.

Keywords: Pastoral Care. Seventh-day Adventist Ministry. Holistic Nurturing. Shepherding.

INTRODUCTION

Peter had denied Jesus three times and the solemn questioning in the company of his fellow disciples was the prelude to the great task of feeding the lambs of Him. The questioning has reference to one thing only and that is Peter's love for Jesus. He is not asked to renew his confession of faith, but rather his courage in the future rather than in the past. If he loves, that is enough. This is the one essential condition of the apostolic office and ministry.

An exegesis and contextual study of John 21:15-17 is very significant in understanding the concept of "feed my Lambs" in the light of pastoral care among Christians. Though diverse interpretations have been assumed to this passage perhaps for denominational or liturgical gratification, however, all these interpretations could be said to be suiting but there should be a common ground which all interpretations should not be devoid and that is evidenced in the background of the text when Jesus prepared breakfast for his disciples after which he gave them the imperative "feed my Lambs".

Amid shifting cultural values, rapid globalization, and mounting moral complexities, the charge to "feed my lambs" extends far beyond literal shepherding. This narrative place emphasis on pastoral responsibility in holistic nurturing and leadership within the Christian community. It calls for all-inclusive care of the church, nurturing people spiritually, physically, socially, mentally, and emotionally. The directive has lasting socio-religious significance that extends beyond its immediate scriptural context, especially for the Seventh-day Adventist Church ministers in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, given the mission statement of the Seventh-day Adventist as a movement, this passage serves as a guiding principle for ministry, underscoring the close connection of the mission of the church and holistic pastoral care.

Thus, the article seeks to explore the socio-religious relevance of John 21:15–17 for today's Seventh-day Adventist ministry. By situating the text within its scriptural context while engaging contemporary ministerial practice, the research will examine how Christ's charge continues to guide faith formation, communal life, and the moral and social issues confronting modern Christians.

LITERARY UNIT

This aspect of the study obliges that the passage is conscientiously read from the literary perspective and also as the word of God so as not to give up the basic meaning of the passage. The importance of this literary unit is to establish the beginning of the immediate context as well as the larger context where the passage under discussion is focus. This literary unit consists of the immediate and larger contexts of the selected passage under discussion.

GENRE

The Gospel of John in its entirety is primarily the records of acts and discourses of Jesus.¹ The type of genre to which the passage belongs is narrative and dialogue in nature. The reason for this proposition is evidenced in many verses like John 21:1b, with the phrase, "it happened this way", narrating the number of disciples who were present as seven of them, John 21:2, how the disciples hustled all night in their fishing work without getting any fish, John 21:3, how Jesus came into the scene and abetted them to get some fish, the number of fish caught and subsequently the breakfast invitation from Jesus, John 21:4-14, the section of dialogue is pictured from verses 15-17 between Jesus and Peter, and lastly the prediction of Peter's death.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The primary aim of this textual analysis is to determine as much as possible the original reading (rendition, wording) of the text from all available ancient manuscriptⁱⁱ. A small but significant textual variation about the item Jesus tells Peter to take care of after his resurrection can be found in John 21:15. The majority of early and heavy manuscripts, such as Codex Vaticanus (B) and Codex Sinaiticus (Σ), read τὰ ἀρνία μου "my lambs," which is the translation found in the majority of contemporary critical editions of the Greek New Testament. Nonetheless, a few significant witnesses, namely Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (C) and Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis (D), interpret this verse to mean τὰ πρόβατα μου "my sheep" instead.

However, for the sake of this work, the earliest manuscript in support of the reading will be discussed further than the later ones. More so, the variant readings found is the placement of Ἰωάννου (John), in John 21:15,16, 17 rated {B} indicating that the text is almost certain, and supported by codex Sinaiticus (Σ¹) an Uncial parchment manuscripts dating from about the middle of the fourth century, having as contents (eacpr) other manuscripts that are in favor of the reading are B C* D L it^a, aur, b,d,(e), f, ff2, r1 (vg^{mss}), cop^{sa} etc. The reading in 21:17 Ἰωάννου also rated {B} is affirmed by P⁵⁹ Papyri manuscript of the seventh century, having as contents [e], other manuscripts in support are B C* D L it^a, aur, b,d,(e), f, ff2, r1 (vg^{mss}), cop^{sa}, but the Textus Receptus, following A C²ΔΘΨf¹f¹³al, reads Ἰωνᾶ (Jonah father of Simon Peter and Andrew), perhaps it is an assimilation to Matthew 16:17; John 1:42.

STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF JOHN 21:15-17

The structural analysis has to do with the arrangement of sentences, phrases and clauses in the passage for the purpose of getting the central thought of the passage under discussion. However, the structure below is arranged to proffer understanding and also bring out the central thought of the passage.

- A. After they had finished eating literal breakfast. {ἡρίστησαν} (21:15)
 - i. Jesus asked Simon Peter son of John (15)
 1. Do you truly love me {ἀγαπᾶς με} (15)
 2. More than these? {πλέον τούτων} (15)
 - ii. Peter responded to the first question
 1. Yes Lord, You know I love you {Ναὶ κύριε, σὺ οἶδας ὅτι φιλῶ σε} (15)
 - iii. Jesus entrusted the Lambs to Peter.
 1. Feed my Lambs {Βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία μου} (15)
 - iv. Jesus asked the second question to Simon Peter son of John (21:16).
 1. Do you love me {ἀγαπᾶς με} (16)
 - v. Peter responded the second time
 1. Yes Lord, you know sI love you {Ναὶ κύριε, σὺ οἶδας ὅτι φιλῶ σε} (16)
 - vi. Jesus entrusted the sheep to Peter
 1. Shepherd my sheep {Ποίμαινε τὰ πρόβατά μου}(16)
 - vii. Jesus' tripartite question to Simon son of John (21:17)
 1. Do you love me? {φιλεῖς με;} (17)
 - viii. Peter's reaction to the third question
 1. Peter was grieved {ἐλυπήθη ὁ Πέτρος } (17)
 2. Lord, you know all things {Κύριε, πάντα σὺ οἶδας}(17)
 3. You know that I love you {σὺ γινώσκεις ὅτι φιλῶ σε}(17)
 - ix. Jesus' trio entrust to Peter the sheep
 1. Feed my sheep {Βόσκει τὰ πρόβατά μου} (17).

The structural analysis of John 21:15-17 portrays a narrative and dialogue between Jesus and Peter to take up the office of a shepherd and feed his sheep. The book in its entirety is gospel and sends a message of great commission. From the passage, the consequences of Jesus' instruction to Peter are to stress the following.

- i) He demands Peter's true love to enable him accomplish this task of shepherding his sheep.
- ii) Jesus' desire to take care of the physical needs of the sheep.
- iii) He desires that the spiritual need of the sheep should be attended to.

INTERPRETATION AND THEOLOGY OF JOHN 21:15-17

In attempt to understand the scope of John 21:15-17, some key words will be considered to establish their usages and their proper renditions. Furthermore, the New International Version (NIV) of the bible will be used for the English translation of the words.

Οτε οὖν ἤρισθησαν **When they had finished eating breakfast (John 21:15).**

The word οὖν is a particle, never found at the beginning of a clause; its sense is inferential and transitional. Its meaning varies with the context, and sometimes οὖν may be left untranslated. When used inferentially, *therefore, consequently, accordingly*, may apply (Mark 1:15, Matthew 1:20). It may be used to resume a subject using "so" as in Luke 3:7, or as to indicate a transition to something new "now, then"ⁱⁱⁱ. The presence of οὖν in the text appeals more to a transition a new or first meal for the day.

Consequently, (ἤρισθησαν) verb indicative aorist active 3rd person plural is from the verb (ἀριστάω) "to take the first meal of the day" "to eat breakfast of any meal." This word ἤρισθησαν occurred 3 times and in 3 forms in the whole New Testament, once in Luke and twice in John. It reads in Luke 11:37 "to eat" "to dine" (KJV), and also in John 21:12 "to eat breakfast". The last occurrence is in John 21:15 in aorist active indicative, portraying the kind of action which has taken place. It would seem that Jesus had prepared the food for them knowing that they would be cold, wet, hungry, tired and disappointed.^{iv} On the arrival of the seven, Jesus invited them to bring some of the fish from their catch. Some scholars have interpreted this passage allegorically that the evangelist is thinking of the universal mission of the apostles and that by the unbroken net, he was thinking of the power given to the church to hold together men of every race^v. After they had finished eating together, Jesus opened the discourse.

ἀγαπᾶς "agapas" and "φιλεῖς" "phileis" love

The word (ἀγαπᾶς) "love" occurred in about 110 times and in 46 forms in the entire New Testament. While (φιλεῖς) "love" occurred 21 times in 12 forms, In the New Testament, however, (ἀγαπᾶω) is more common than (φιλεω). Scholars have grappled with the question of whether the alternation of verbs (ἀγαπᾶς) "love" and (φιλεῖς) "love" that appear from the mouths of Jesus and Peter in their last conversation in the Gospel of John (21:15-23) are in dissimilarity to each other and have suggested overlapping of (ἀγαπᾶω) to (φιλεω). Frank posits a dichotomy of the verbs by suggesting that (ἀγαπᾶω) is used of divine love and usually carries the connotation of will or purpose as well as affection, and on the other hand (φιλεω) implies affinity, friendship and fondness^{vi}. Lenski's suggestion also sustains Frank's view that (ἀγαπᾶω) is the love of intelligence, reason and comprehension, coupled with corresponding purpose, he further posits that the content of (ἀγαπᾶω) outranks (φιλεω) which expresses mere personal affection or liking, including even the passion where the context requires, and no intelligence or high purpose is involved. He however, submitted that this content makes the difference and hence they are never equal^{vii}. McKay maintains that in dealing with the possible

contrast in significance between (ἀγαπᾶς) and (φιλεῖς), one needs to consider not only whether there is any general distinction to be made between them either in the language generally or in John's use of it, but also whether the context itself suggests a special distinction^{viii}. As there is an obvious possibility that synonyms may be used for stylistic variety, one must also consider to what extent variation and repetition are preferred by the author, and whether the preferences are entirely pointless^{ix}. He further portrays that (φιλεω) and (ἀγαπᾶω) are effectively synonyms, and in some passages does not seem to be any different from it^x. An examination of the usages of both verbs thus gives further reason for treating them as synonymous. The author of the fourth gospel purports to give a translation in Greek of Aramian words spoken by Jesus. He makes Jesus say (ἀγαπᾶω) in vs 15, 16 and (φιλεω) in vs 17, but by prefixing (τὸ τρίτον) to (φιλεω) in the later passage, he seems to make it plain that the verbs are identical in meaning^{xi}.

John's narrative notice (18:27) that Peter falls short (thereby fulfilling Jesus' prophecy) inevitably serves to remind Peter and present reader of Jesus' original call to self-sacrificing^{xii}. What (ἀγαπᾶω) and (φιλεω) mean in the mouths of Jesus and Peter in their first conversation after the resurrection (21:15-17) is what these words meant in their last conversation before the passion (chapters 13-17). In light of Peter's failure, Jesus consequently asks in (21:15) "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Having now exemplified the essence of (ἀγαπᾶω) by laying down his own life, Jesus' concern is that Peter will finally be willing to do as he had promised and follow him in expressing this love (13:31-38)^{xiii}. David associated the threefold pattern of question and response in Jesus first conversation with Peter following his resurrection (John 21:15-17) as a conscious recall of the three denials in (chapter 18), of course, far from original. Indeed, in light of the clear connections between 13:31-38 and 21:18-23 (referred to at the outset of this study), some have even observed that this threefold pattern of question and answer in chapter 21 must eventually echo with Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial in chapter 13^{xiv}. But the passage is clearly designed to give Jesus' charge heavy emphasis^{xv}. Threefold repetitions are common in both biblical and non-biblical writings, signalling emphasis and expressing earnestness and to solemnize the very designation, especially when is done before witness. In such repetitions, stylistic variations are the norm and do not typically convey different nuances in the variation in terms^{xvi}.

πλέον τούτων; More than these?

Grammatically, (πλέον τούτων;) "More than these?" is a comparative adverb. There are two possible alternatives at which the ablation could represent. Lenski argues that "more than these" is so evidently refers to Peter's boasting in (Matthew 26:32) "Peter replied, "even if all fall away on account of you, I never will"^{xvii}. The same account also recorded in (Mark 14:29), as a result, (πλέον τούτων) should be interpreted as masculine "more than these other disciples," he further postulates that the alternative which regard the words as neuter "more than these things" either their boat, net or fish is without motivation and make the whole scene quite uninteresting^{xviii}. The implication of the former interpretation is that it establishes Peter in a position of ruling authority over the apostles, which the passage does not establish that peter is more authoritative than others. And if this could be the meaning, the construction is elongated and ambiguous, then readers should expect the personal pronoun (συ) "you" to be introduced before or after (ἀγαπᾶς) "love" to mark the emphasis^{xix}. Another implication to this position is that the love which the beloved disciple has for Jesus seems out of place and as a result, Jesus asked Peter if his love for his master exceeds the love which the other disciples have for him including the beloved disciple^{xx}.

The word (πλέον) "these" is an adjective comparative which has diverse usages. It is a point to note that Greek adjective agrees in the gender, case and number to the noun it qualifies^{xxi}. When its use to qualify a noun, it reads (πολυς), "many", (πολλη) "numerous" respectively to the gender and case, when used as substantive, it reads (πολλοι, πολλα) "many

things” (πολυ) “much”. When it is use to show a comparative degree, it reads (πλείων), when comparing neuter, it reads as (πλείον or πλέον) “more” which is the rendition on the passage. (τούτων) on the other hand is a demonstrative masculine or neuter pronoun which can be used as adjective and as substantive to either designate a person or object, but in context of the passage, it is use as neuter pronoun in reference to its preceding adjective. A proper interpretation of (τούτων) “these” should not be devoid of (πλέον) which has been demonstrated as a neuter adjective. Since adjective agrees in gender, case and number, the possible rendition of (πλέον τούτων) will be “more than these things”, these thing in context could mean their boat, net and fish and subsequently things that could divert his attention from following Jesus which Peter had returned after the passion and the resurrection of his master^{xxii}. The emphasis is not on the subject Peter versus the other disciples, but on the object, and the comparison is between that object "me" (Jesus) and other things, all the rest, may well be a neuter "these things," the things you see all around, the things of "this world"^{xxiii}. More than the boats and the nets and the fishing which Peter had returned after the passion and the resurrection of his master^{xxiv}. Though this later rendition may appear unappealing, but may as well be possibly right, and it’s free from some difficulties which affect the former interpretation.

Βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία μου Feed my Lambs

The term (Βόσκει) “To feed” is primarily used of a herdsman, the word is derived from (βόσκω) herdsmen tending flocks or herds feed, pasture, tend while grazing, of grazing animals feed, be feeding^{xxv}. The verb βόσκω occurs only 9 times in 4 forms in the entire New Testament. In all the usages in the synoptic gospels, it denotes a literal feeding. The durative imperative (Βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία μου) occurs in imperative present active in 2nd person singular, hence portrays a continuous activity therefore “ you keep feeding my Lambs”, may portray a functional rendition, providing the sheep pasture either with spiritual nourishment aptly called “milk of the word”^{xxvi}. Lenski substantiated the fact that to feed means to teach the church the faith with living voice or to govern by the gospel^{xxvii}.

David opines that Jesus' subsequent command to Peter to "feed"(Βόσκει) encourages Peter's functional identification with Jesus, still opines that the specifically pastoral language “feed my Lambs” (Βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία μου) is evocative of the imagery of the still earlier discourse of chapter 10 with its portrait of the Good Shepherd^{xxviii}. Indeed, given the clear intent of Jesus question in John 21:15 to help Peter grasp and embody the (ἀγαπᾶω) “love” that lays down its life, an evocation of the shepherd discourse can only be intended to remind Peter of the primary responsibility of the Good Shepherd, emphasized not only at the beginning of the discourse (10:11) but also in the middle (10:15) and at the end (10:17-18) the shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. Rather than merely a concession to Peter’s failure to understand and grasp the love he demands; Jesus’ pastoral charge is thus revealed as a further challenge to Peter to remember that the true fulfillment of the pastoral role to which Jesus is calling him requires an embracing of the (ἀγαπᾶω) “love” that lays down its life. There is no doubt that (Βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία μου) “you keep feeding my Lambs” which appeared in vs. 15 and 17 perform a necessary operation as it transformed Peter from a fisherman to a shepherd^{xxix}. It is clear from the text that the ministry given to Peter is the ministry of shepherding and witnessing, according to Raymond Brown, the command to peter to feed or tend as appeared in both verses 15 and 17 carries the imagery of the shepherd in the Old Testament period^{xxx}. In the description of shepherd, there is no emphasis on the shepherd’s superior position rather on his familiarity with the sheep and total dedication to the flock even to the point of death^{xxxi}. Kostenberger opines that the term (Βόσκει) occurs in LXX for feeding sheep with clear metaphorical sense of shepherd in Ezekiel 34:2^{xxxii}. Hence tending of Lambs and sheep has precedents in the Old

Testament, which is pervaded by the yearning for shepherds who are devoted to God to carry out his will.

Ποίμαινε τὰ πρόβατά μου Shepherd my sheep

The verb in its imperative form (Ποίμαινε) “shepherd” challenged Peter’s understanding, Jesus repeats his initial question (21:16), now without reference to anything, but still with reference to the kind of love (ἀγαπᾶω) “love” he ultimately requires of Peter. Jesus challenged Peter to take up the role of the shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep (πρόβατά μου) the very word that Jesus uses now alongside the semantically broader pastoral term “tend” (Ποίμαινε) to make the allusion to his earlier discourse still more clear (10:11-18)^{xxxiii}. This word has the sense of governing, caring for, guiding, protecting, showing a kind of faithful vigilance which, a shepherd uses to keep the sheep and to make provision against their wants and dangers. Bernard opines that the variants have a common link with ἀγαπᾶω and φιλεω, and hence the charge to Peter entrusts to his care the Lambs, then the young sheep, and lastly the whole sheep, both young and old^{xxxiv}.

THE SHEPHERD AS PASTOR

There is a clear metaphor of shepherding with pastoral care and the flock of God. The Old Testament and the New Testament theological idea of shepherd is one who feeds the flocks of God with knowledge and understanding of God’s truth and takes care of the spiritual emotional and the physical needs of the flocks (Jeremiah 3:15). Shepherding involves protection, nurturing, strengthening the weak, encouragement, feeding the flock, shielding, refreshing, restoring, and leading by example on the pursuit of holiness^{xxxv}. It conveys the idea of serious concern mixed with gentle love. Pastoral care is the heart of practical theology; it is the praxis of ministry. Pastoral care means to give attentive responsiveness or to be concerned about the feeding, wellbeing and growth of the flock^{xxxvi}. Flocks here denote members of the church, and friends of the church both young and old. The concept of shepherd’s office is often used to provide a biblical understanding of the functions and role of the pastor. Lenski opines that “feed my Lambs” as read in the passage is the spiritual feeding and nourishment of children, and this formed the first part of the apostolic office^{xxxvii}.

In John 21:15-17, Jesus addressing Peter first used Βόσκει later Ποίμαινε and returns back to Βόσκει carries the lesson that spiritual care of God’s people, the feeding of the flock from the word of God is the constant and consistent necessity, it is to have the foremost place. Tending consists of other acts of discipline, provision for material things, assistance of individuals, authority, because the condition of sheep provides the necessity for tending, feeding caring for, protecting, sheep are prone to wondering and unable to find their way back to the sheepfold even when they are within sight^{xxxviii}. In fact, sheep would not survive long without a shepherd. Sheep are not only dependent creatures^{xxxix}. As a result, there is need for a shepherd who will feed, nurture, protect and shepherd the sheep, this is the imagery in which the concept under discussion falls into. It should be well understood that “feed my Lambs, tend my sheep” is not a better place to describe an office, or a pastor^{xl}. It should be noted that words are described verbs in imperative mood and not nouns. This describes the functional duty of the shepherd to feed his lambs. The process of feeding the flock is in itself laborious and troublesome, and suggestively, nothing is more difficult than to keep men under the yoke of God and to provide for the other aspects of lives, among whom there are many who are weak, others who are wanton and unsteady, others who are weak, others are who dull and sluggish, and others who are slow and unteachable^{xli}. Yukl quoted by Roof identified the protection and the opposition

encountered by the shepherd in the process of tending the sheep to social injustice, standing up for what is right in the face of financial pressures, and treating the weak and marginal members of society with respect as keys elements servant leadership. Such bold, protectiveness was reflective of the sacrificial, committed shepherd who would lay down his life for his flock^{xlii}. In agreement with Calving's analysis of the Lambs and the sheep appeals for pastoral care, it is very expedient to note that Jesus did not give Peter the office of feeding all kinds of people, but only his sheep or his Lambs. The Gospel of John contributed not only unique perspectives on Jesus, his deity, and his ministry, but insight into characteristics necessary to be effective disciples. The shepherd office discoursed in John 21:15-17 offered just such unique insights on lessons in leadership directly from Jesus. It was within the setting of John's Christology with its unique contributions to the identity and significance of Jesus that the shepherd narrative depicted characteristics of the good shepherd, the leader who protected, guided and cared for the flock^{xliii}.

INTER-TEXTUAL RELATIONSHIPS

The significance of this inter-textual relationship echoes an allusion in John and the significance of its imagery, in the sense of relationship between John 21:15-17 and other passages of the Bible. The portrayal of Peter in John 21 fills out hints that are contained in the earlier chapters. The connections between the conversation with Peter and the following texts need to be recognized^{xliv}. The images of sheep and shepherd appear in other New Testament passages, where they were commonly associated with the appointment of leaders for the church and warnings about threats to the church. Jesus addresses his followers as "little flock" in Luke 13:32, and 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4 likens the church to a flock that has gone astray but has returned to the shepherd, to Christ, the chief shepherd^{xlv}. Paul's farewell discourse to the elders or presbyters of the church at Ephesus, he encourages them thus:

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock". (Acts 20:28-29)

In Ephesians 4:11 the term for shepherds (ποιμένας), which came to mean pastors, is listed among the church's leadership roles. In John 10, Jesus warns about the thieves and crooks who do not enter by the gate and 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 (10:14); he calls them and they recognize his voice (10:3-4, 27). The distinguishing trait of the good shepherd, however, is his commitment to the flock: The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (10:11). So important is this assertion that it is repeated four times in the immediate context: "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (10:11)"And I lay down my life for the sheep." (10:15) "because I lay down my life in order to take it up again." (10:17)"I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again" (10:18). This rich web of texts suggests that when Jesus commands Peter to tend his sheep, he is exhorting him to follow Jesus' example as the Good Shepherd and giving him a pastoral role. The question that has occupied many interpreters is whether this is in any sense an exclusive role. The widespread use of the sheep, flock, shepherd image and its application to God's appointed leaders for Israel and the church confirm that Peter is being appointed as a shepherd in this scene. At the same time, other leaders were also regarded as shepherds. Considering the First Letter of Peter to the Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia:

"So, I exhort the presbyters among you, as a fellow presbyter and witness to the sufferings of Christ and one who has a share in the

glory to be revealed. Tend the flock of God in your midst, [overseeing] not by constraint but willingly, as God would have it, not for shameful profit but eagerly. Do not lord it over those assigned to you, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is revealed, you will receive the unfading crown of glory”. (Peter 5.1-4).

Also, Paul’s admonition to the Ephesian Elders opines that the role of feeding the Lambs of God is not a duty done by the pastor alone, hence by incorporating the elders suggests a homogeneity of responsibility in feeding the flock and protecting them from grievous wolves, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood”. (Acts20:28). The rest of the New Testament writings and testimony are replete with the image of the leader as shepherd.

It has been demonstrated beyond a reasonable doubt that the concept of “feed my Lambs” denoting the office of the shepherd is given a somewhat more extended development as an image of pastoral care.

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RELEVANCE

The concept of “feed my Lambs” is an evocative from the office of the shepherd, hence, the shepherd also carries out his duty of shepherding spiritually, physically, psychologically and emotionally in feeding and care to be given to the lambs (members) under the care of the shepherd.

Not sufficiently merely to offer the bread of life to the flock of God, but also to take care of the flock of God holistically both physically, spiritually and other wise for the safety and growth of the Lambs and sheep. In all the three imperatives, (Βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία μου) “feed my Lambs”, (Ποίμαινε τὰ πρόβατά μου) “shepherd my sheep” and (Βόσκειτὰ πρόβατά μου) “feed my sheep” have greater implications for pastoral care. This is because there is no dichotomy between shepherding and the ideal of pastoral care both carrying(?) in view the holistic approach to ministry.

The application of the holistic method of the passage of John 21:15-17 in the light of pastoral care should not be a barrier in fitting in to the 21st century Seventh-day Adventist pastors, though they differ in both socio-political, socio-cultural milieu and separated by time in history, yet they share the same socio-religious relevance given that it is the same humanity who need to be cared for. However, it is imperative also to establish a clear parallel between those things that are clearly parallel in the Gospel of John so as to know if the passage can be applied to 21st century pastors of the Seventh-day Adventist church. This is very important in the process of contextualization^{xlvi}. The table below shows the parallel which are the main issues in John 21:15-17 between 1st century the 21st century Christians.

First century AD	Twenty first century AD
Jesus, talking to	Jesus, talking to
Peter	Pastors
Feed my Lambs (the young ones in church)	Feed my Lambs (the young ones in church)
Shepherd my Sheep (old ones in church)	Shepherd my Sheep(old ones in church)
Feed my sheep (young and old and the invisible church members)	Feed my sheep (young and old and the invisible church members)

Seventh-day Adventist Church position on “feed my Lambs”

For proper understanding of the position of the Seventh-day Adventist church on the topic under discussion, it will be of greater importance to know the church’s view on anthropology. From the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 28 Fundamental Beliefs which is taken as the church’s understanding and expression of the teaching of the scripture, Adventists view human beings as were created in the image of God as affirmed in (Gen. 1:26, 27; 2:7). Therefore, the composition of a man is elements from the earth in addition to the breath of God formed a soul^{xlvii}. From every indication as discovered in the fundamental beliefs, the Adventists accept the fact that the body, soul, and spirit function in close cooperation, revealing and intensely sympathetic relationship among a person’s spiritual, mental and physical faculties. Therefore, deficiency in one area will hamper the other two. It is clearly stated that the “the sick, impure, and confused spirit or mind will have a detrimental effect on the one’s emotional and physical health as well” on the other hand, “a weak, sick or suffering physical constitution will generally impair the emotional and spiritual health”^{xlviii}. More so, Adventists hold that the “impact [distinct] faculties have in each other means that each individual has a God-given responsibility to maintain the faculties in the best condition. Doing so is a vital part of being restored into the image of the creator”^{xlix}. This has a greater implication and high regard for pastoral care if practiced the way it should^l.

Ellen G. White, a prophetess and a leading voice in Adventist whose writings is held with optimum regard after the bible says thus;

“There is need of coming close to the people by personal effort. If less time were given to sermonizing, and more time were spent in personal ministry, greater results would be seen. The poor are to be relieved, the sick cared for, the sorrowing and the bereaved comforted, the ignorant instructed, the inexperienced counseled. We are to weep with those that weep, and rejoice with those that rejoice. Accompanied by the power of persuasion, the power of prayer, the power of the love of God, this work will not, cannot, be without fruit”^{li}.

Put differently, there is need to reduce sermonizing and approach the concept of feeding the Lambs of God in and outside the sheep pen in a holistic manner, by meeting people at the point of their felt need, their physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs are to be

taken care of, and then the result will be fruitful. This is an embodiment of pastoral care. However, the quote made from Ellen G. White's writing from the researcher's view is not referring to a programmatic or a worldwide development of humanitarian agencies that would care for those in need spiritually, emotionally, physically and other wide, rather she is referring to the local body or personal activities focused on holistic care of the people for the love of God to be made known to the people around the local vicinity. She further posited thus;

“When all has been done that can be done in helping the poor to help themselves, there still remain the widow and the fatherless, the aged, the helpless, and the sick, that claim sympathy and care. Never should these be neglected. They are committed by God Himself to the mercy, the love, and the tender care of all whom He has made His stewards”^{lii}.

Elements of pastoral care in John 21:15-17

The passage under discussion provides a snapshot of Jesus interacting with a few of his disciples, as stated earlier which gives insight into his leadership style and tactics. Contemporary leadership theories provide a rich quality to analyse the details of this seemingly simplistic dialogue.

The Lambs in the church

Tasker in his comments, maintains that the feeding of the Lambs, implies feeding the young, and therefore, Christians' love must experience itself in service even for the least of Christ brethren. He also suggests that with the love for Christ that service can never be rendered. According to Brown, (βόσκει), transliterated as “Boskien” “feed” are used both literally and figuratively for feeding animals, he further opines that those who feed, provide nourishment^{liii}. Horn generally signifies Lambs as “young ram”, this point is further buttressed by Barnes as he opines that “my Lambs” is often compared to the church and therefore the expression “feed my Lambs” is undoubtedly referring to the tender and the young in the Christian church; to those who are young in the years of Christian experience. He maintains that Jesus saw what had been confined in the experience of the church, and that the success of the gospel will depend on the care which the ministry of feeding would extend in their early life^{liv}.

The sheep in the church

The word sheep is sometimes used simply to indicate a group of sheep, but mostly in the Old Testament it is used implicitly and explicitly of the people of Israel, especially in the Psalms (psalm 28:9; 68:7). The connection between sheep and God is frequently implied or stated clearly in Ezekiel 34. Also in the New Testament, sheep is used for Israel described by Jesus as lost (Matthew 15:24), as well as weakened and exhausted (Matthew 9:36). It is also typically while referring to the remnant of the bands of disciples who were being sent out for mission (Luke 10:3; John 10:1-16). This is in agreement with Barnes as he opines that the verb imperative [ποιμαίνει] “shepherd” is different in meaning and in function from [βόσκει] “feed”. He further relates the former to the sense of governing, protecting, caring for, and guiding, and above all, it is the faithful and vigilance which the shepherd gives to the sheep and makes provisions for their wants and against dangers^{lv}. As a matter of fact, he relates sheep to the church in general without minding the experience and age.

The concept of feeding the sheep is a holistic art of the shepherd; hence, it is this image of the shepherd that provides the designation “pastoral care”. Several focal themes of pastoral care can be drawn from the image of the good shepherd as described in the (John 10) and therefore assigns to Peter and his fellow apostles the office of feeding the Lambs in (John 21:15-17) and subsequently to everyone who assumes the leadership in the Christian community. Pastoral care is about non-competitive relationships between people who are valued for themselves rather than just for what they are able to produce. As a result, it is empowering and transforming for all. Pastoral care is compassionate and merciful especially towards those in difficulty. It involves imagination and risk-taking to leave the ninety-nine and search for the one who has strayed. Pastoral care assumes hope for the future and involves constant reflection and evaluation.

It is important to note, that pastoral care must be in recognition that God is the root and the true model for pastoral care. However, a clear and unique focus for pastoral care does not constitute a boundary or limit of care as stated earlier. Graham opines that although the ministry of pastoral care is essential, impelling Christians to care for one another as sisters and brothers in Christ, their duty of care extends beyond themselves in the manner of the Good Samaritan of (Luke 10:25-37). The pastoral carer should express himself through the eye of relationship rather than position, and hence should refuse to consider himself in a position of authority but as one in a relationship of helping.

Wenzel argues that the pastoral carer is to provide supporting and caring environment, and as a matter of fact, the responsibility of a pastoral carer including guiding, comforting, correcting, encouraging, nurturing, protecting healing, supporting and also worshipping^{lvi}. Derek opines that loving the flock with equal love as the Lord loves all his people should be the pre-eminent motive in the pastoral work, the concern of and needs of the members should be constantly the concern of the shepherd^{lvii}. The vital part of any pastor is the work of shepherding the flock.

From Cheyne’s desk, humanitarian service must be inclusive in the art of feeding the Lambs; hence the shepherd should provide full participation of those who are the object of assistance. He further argues that for the duty of the shepherd to be truly biblical, the approach must be holistic in nature^{lviii}. The pastor cannot carry out the practice of feed my Lambs alone, hence the pastoral carer as the vision leader could carry all members along according to Graham the church is not a self-enclosed community it is a community that extends to its non-Christian neighbours the same love and compassion by which it has been formed in Christ^{lix}. Therefore, they must move towards personal empowerment rather than dependency, and must also seek to provide for ways of escape from injustice, iniquities, and importunities which will bind the church and the communities politically, socially, economically, spiritually and other wise. For the work of the pastoral carer to be holistic, every aspect of the concept of feed my Lambs and the message preached must be interrelated and interdependent with all other aspect ministry, the shepherd must become very sensitive to the physical needs and also the spiritual needs which ultimately create chasm between God and human. Another point worth noting is that the concept of feed my Lambs as concerns the context of mission, the shepherd must come to recognize that humanity’s spiritual nature cannot be dealt with in isolation from human circumstance, whether that be social, political, physically, spiritually.

In the Seventh-day Adventist church in Nigeria, there are categories of worshipers, those whose spiritual life is deteriorating; the rich lavishing in ignorance of the knowledge of God and are spiritually bankrupt; children that are savaging in the garbage heaps; single mothers who are trying to provide for their children perhaps just a meal for the day having no skill or education; children who are on the street hawking and selling their bodies and engaging in promiscuity; those who are facing violence and violation within the family for embracing

Seventh-day Adventist faith; family whose father is been dismissed from work as a result such family have no financial income for sustenance all in the name of a new Sabbath faith embraced; those who are been traumatized by violent robbery incidents, those who lost their loved ones and perhaps the bread winner of the home, those children who lost their parents and are roaming round the street; the sick ones whose sicknesses have deteriorated them; People are wounded, people are hurting, people experience profound hunger, while the sheep are hungered and thirst for the true word of life. These are sets of people found in the Nigerian society, these are barriers at both individual and communal level which could make the sheep helpless, and suggestively, pastoral caring is inclusive in the communities need to be spelled out in practical terms if the church is going to be recognised in her neighbourhood, the first condition is to break down the barriers by engaging in the search for solutions to felt needs. And this engagement requires a humble recognition that the reality that counts for the large majority of this people is not the reality of the kingdom of God but the reality of daily life problems that make them feel powerless, helpless, and terribly vulnerable. These problems exist both spiritual and physical. They need to be loved, cared for and ministered to in order to break the barriers that keep them from understanding the gospel of eternal life and overcome their dilemmas. The church will however respond to the pastoral call to feed the Lambs to the extent to which she combines the sacrifice of praise with the sacrifice of good deeds in order to alleviate human suffering, therefore it is most conceivable that the concept of feed my Lambs becomes a priestly service in which the whole church is involved.

CONCLUSION

The passage "Feed My Lambs," as noted in John 21:15–17, is of great socio-religious significance for Seventh-day Adventist pastors in the twenty-first century. It highlights how much communities needs pastoral care, accountability and holistic nurturing. The directive to “feed my lambs” emphasizes how ministers as shepherds are entrusted with actively leading and tending their flocks. In order to meet the many needs of both members and the larger community.

The command to "feed" also suggests a proactive approach to providing a holistic care which includes the physical, social, mental and spiritual care. "Feed My Lambs" is still relevant for modern ministers in the Seventh-day Adventist church because it encourages relational, active, and compassionate ministry. Ministers can achieve the divine charge by living up to these values, using their circle of influences to tackling members and outside communities' challenges. This will enable them to effectively lead congregations in a way that represents Christ's love, promotes the church's message, and fosters faith in the face of the complexity of life.

Endnote

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