

John 21 The Commissioning of Peter as Shepherd

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Reading: John 21

This is the last chapter in a series of studies in John's gospel.

Textual issues

Doing systematic sequential study of scripture means that we face issues that we might otherwise be tempted to avoid, because they are controversial.

John 21 occupies a curious place within John's gospel. The early church always counted John's gospel as a canonical book, and the New Testament was finally established beyond further question at the Council of Carthage in AD397. This chapter appears in all the ancient copies of John's gospel, and so is fully canonical, and I have no hesitation in accepting this.

Having said that, the chapter does not sit easily with the rest of John's gospel. John 20:30-31 is clearly intended as the final conclusion of the message that has gone before. Up to this point John's gospel is tightly structured around seven signs, with a strongly coherent message. For these reasons most scholars regard John 21 as an "appendix". I don't want to consider these issues and their implications in detail as part of the main study, but I have created my own "appendix", discussing these issues, which you can study if you wish.

Whatever our view of John 21, it is certainly the case that John's gospel has completed the case demonstrating that Jesus is the Son of God, so that believing we may have life in his name (John 20:31).

John 21 is about Jesus's appointment of Peter as shepherd of the Lord's flock. This marks a transition between the life of Jesus, and the life of the early Church.

The background to John 21: Peter's denial

When I expounded John 18:15-27¹, about Peter's denial of Christ, I proved, by quoting many scriptures, that Peter was unquestionably already the leader of the twelve disciples. He was a man of action, someone God could use, in spite of his shortcomings, and Jesus prayed that his faith would not fail. I pointed out that Peter's threefold denial was a consequence of his **virtues**. He was a man fully committed to the kingdom of God, and determined to see things through. Whilst

¹ petden5_Peters_denial_of_Christ_John_18_RH_Johnston.pdf

the disciples generally ran away, Peter sought to stick with Jesus, which resulted in him getting into a situation which was beyond his ability to handle. It broke him when he failed. Jesus had told him this would happen in advance, but Peter was not able to receive the message. He had the desire to do the will of God but lacked the power to fulfil it. God knows our hearts, but Peter reminds us how careful we should be not to claim abilities that are beyond our powers.

In John 21 we see Jesus move Peter on. There was a right time to do this. Twice in John 20 Jesus came to the disciples, firstly on the day of the Resurrection (John 20:19-23), when Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into his disciples and hence gave them new life. Then a week later Jesus appeared again to deal with doubting Thomas. But it was not yet time to talk to Peter and sort out the issues raised by his denial. Peter was not ready. He needed first the assurance that came from receiving the Holy Spirit that he was accepted by God, and loved by God. He needed to know it was not just a transient experience, but that he was still accepted by God. Knowing this, Peter could come to the place where he could be commissioned to his life's work as a leader and shepherd of the Lord's flock.

Peter also needed a "low pressure" situation for the reconciliation to take place – and the fishing trip was ideal, for former fisherman Peter was in the middle of his comfort zone, and the circumstances were relaxed and ordinary. Jesus had taught a lot about the need for forgiveness – 70 times 7 times – so Peter could be confident of forgiveness: his failure was only three times. Jesus knew what was in man, and was under no illusions about the fallen human condition.

But the issue had to be brought into the open and cleared up, for Peter's benefit, dealt with honesty and integrity, and not swept under the carpet and ignored or forgotten. Without such openness there can be no continuing fellowship, relationship, or prospect of working together. Jesus shows us in John 21 how difficult issues where others have let us down can be addressed. The discussions must be open, questioning, honest but firm, and unemotional.

John 21 begins with some, but not all, of the disciples being together. The group includes some of the inner core, such as James and John, the sons of Zebedee (John 21:2). Simon Peter says that **he** is going fishing (21:3). He does not specifically encourage the others to do this, but because he is their leader the others follow him. Peter is the leader, and whether he likes it or not, even if he would prefer to go alone, the rest follow him. Nothing that has happened since the Passover meal has changed Peter's role. He is still the leader, the one out in front. But he is now leading them back to fishing, which is where Peter was before Jesus called him.

Let me pause to draw out some rather simple, obvious, but actually very important points from this. You can tell who are the leaders in a situation simply

by looking at whom the people follow. If people don't follow you, you aren't a leader. If you are a leader, then people will follow you, and will follow you off the path, if you go off the path. Being a leader is a seriously responsible task.

Going back to fishing was a mistake, probably, but Peter could think of nothing better to do. Like Elijah (1 Kings 19), Peter was returning to the place of his first revelation (Luke 5:3-11). John 21:3-22 has a lot in common with Luke 5:3-11, but with some significant differences.

Luke 5	John 21
V4 Jesus "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch"	V6a Jesus "Cast the net on the right side of the boat and you will find some"
V5 Master we toiled all night and took nothing	V3b That night they caught nothing
V6 They enclosed a great shoal of fish	V6b They were not able to haul [the net] in for the quantity of fish V8 net full of fish V11 net full of large fish, 153 of them
V7 they filled both boats so that they began to sink	V8 The other disciples came in the boat dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from land
V8 Peter's response – "Depart from me for I am a sinful man O Lord"	V8 Peter jumped fully clothed into the sea (we may note the contrast with Peter walking on the water) because it was the Lord – he wants to be there first!
V10 Jesus's command "Do not be afraid henceforth you will be catching men"	V15-18 Jesus commissions Peter as shepherd leader
V11 They left everything and followed him	V19 Jesus commands Peter "Follow me". V20-21 Peter is evasive

Thus Jesus is also deliberately taking Peter back to the start in contriving the rest of this situation. Peter must have realised the similarity of the circumstances. Jesus wants to deliver Peter from fishing for a second time, and give him a job to do.

In John 21:13-14 Jesus gives the disciples bread and fish, and they know the Lord is with them. This has similarities with the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35, where Jesus revealed Himself to them through His breaking of the bread (Luke 24:30,35). This was the sign that Jesus had given in the upper room. I think we have lost something in ritualising the breaking of bread. There was nothing ritualistic about the meal at Emmaus, nor here on the side of the sea of Tiberias. One was part of an evening meal, this one a breakfast, and included fish as well as bread. In each case Jesus was revealed to his disciples. This close fellowship – communion - context, with its message of personal acceptance, was ideal for bringing the tricky subject of Peter's love into the open.

Jesus commissions Peter

Jesus addressed three "do you love me?" questions to Peter. These parallel the three questions through which Peter denied his Lord.

We should always be wary if **God** starts asking us questions, or makes conditional statements. John 21 is one such example of quite a few throughout scripture. Being questioned means you have a problem, are in the wrong situation, or doing the wrong thing, and God is trying to get you to **think**, and **review** where you are, and to **change** – i.e. repent – and do the will of God. You should always be very careful how you answer. Whatever you do **avoid repeating your answers**, because that means you are not moving on, which is the purpose of the questions. We see Peter in some sort of fixity of response here, but it is perhaps far more obvious in the case of Elijah (1 Kings 19:9-18), because Elijah's fixed response to God's question "What are you doing here?" is so lengthy. (See Numbers 22:9,20,28,30, 31-33 for a further instructive example of questions, and even a conditional statement (v20) that should have made Balaam cautious, but led instead to "lock in" and judgement.)

In John 21:15-17 Jesus's three questions are all different. We should learn lessons from this for when we want to mend broken relationships. We must avoid boxing people in. Jesus's questions to Peter got easier as He sought to help him to recognise the character of the relationship that he has with Jesus. If we press

people to repeat themselves three times, their attitude usually becomes fixed and immovable. "What I say three times is true" is true psychologically, though not as regards the facts. Be very careful to avoid locking people in when you are trying to restore people. Shepherds – and Peter is to become a shepherd – need to be particularly careful about this. Jesus is teaching Peter about this by example.

Some translations make a mess of John 21:15-17, by failing to distinguish the meanings of the different words. It is therefore necessary to retranslate the text.

V15 Question 1 Jesus: "*Simon son of John do you love (Greek: agapao) me more than these?*"

This linked back in their minds to Peter's protest in John 13:37 "*Lord why cannot I follow you know? I will lay down my life for you*", where Peter was perhaps claiming to be more faithful than the rest of the disciples.

Answer 1 Peter "*Yes Lord, you fully know that I love (Greek: philo) you*" – that is to love in the sense of love as a friend, the purely human level of love.

Peter not only ignores the question which asks if Peter loves (*agapao*) Jesus more than the others, but responds by saying he loves at the human level (*philo*) and not at the divine level (*agapao*). That is where Peter considers himself to be in his relationship with Jesus.

Command 1 Jesus "*Feed my lambs*".

I shall return to consider the shepherding commands later. Suffice it for now to note that Peter's answer is sufficiently good to allow him to continue his ministry as a shepherd leader.

V16 Question 2 Jesus "*Simon son of John do you love (Greek: agapao) me?*"

Jesus repeats the question in terms of agape or divine love, but without the challenge of comparing it with the agape love expressed by others. It is a weaker question, perhaps one which Peter might rise to.

Answer 2 Peter repeats exactly the same answer as before.

Peter is not moving forward in his thinking, and risks getting boxed in by repeating himself.

Command 2 Jesus "*Shepherd my little sheep*"

V 17 Question 3 Jesus "*Simon son of John do you love (Greek: philo) me*", i.e. love me at the human level.

Peter was grieved at this third question, because Jesus asks whether he loves at the human level. Jesus is now even challenging Peter about whether he has really loved even at the human level, the level of love that Peter believes he has for Jesus. This provokes Peter to answer in a different - rather desperate - way, since he fears losing Jesus's love:

Answer 3 Peter "*You fully know everything, and you recognise [by your observation and experience] that I love (Greek: philo) you*".

Most translations of this answer make no distinction between two different words translating them both as "know", but the first implies full and certain knowledge ("fully know"), the second – ("recognise") - the knowledge which comes from observation and experience.

Peter believes that he has done all that was possible in the way of human love. He recognises its limitations, but he has done as well as anyone could. Human love is so deficient, so imperfect, and so inadequate. Peter know it always fails; it lets people down just when other people most need it. What a contrast with the divine agape love which never fails (1 Corinthians 13:8).

Command 3 Jesus "*Feed my little sheep*".

In John 21:18-19, Jesus then continues, confirming what He had said to Peter in 13:36, that Peter will die as Jesus died. Now He adds that Peter will not be given a choice in the matter – he will be carried to the place of execution. Peter still had choice in John 13:36. This lack of choice should be seen as mercy on Jesus' part. Peter knows he cannot be trusted to carry through his desired actions – his desire to follow his Master to the end - by his own volition. Jesus words are intended as **reassurance**, but they contain a deep challenge to **follow** as well. "If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and **follow me**."

Peter cannot handle this deeper challenge. He adopts a classic evasion strategy, avoiding the sharp focus on himself by applying the hard teachings **to someone else**. Christians often do this. Thus Peter deflects attention away towards the disciple John (v20-21), who was following Jesus (v20 – this, importantly, suggests the whole previous conversation took place privately (Matthew 18:15)), but Jesus draws Peter immediately back to the challenge by repeating the command to Peter to follow Him. **Following**, that alone, will be proof of whether Peter loves Jesus. Peter's love will finally be proved in death.

John did not need such a test, because he had not made the same claim, nor experienced Peter's failure. But John's future is not Peter's business. Each of us is accountable for himself alone, and must concentrate on his own relationship with God.

Do I love Jesus?

The challenge was to Peter, but this passage is very sobering. Do I love Jesus? I don't know. Like Paul I am not aware of anything against myself (1 Corinthians 4:4), but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not judge before the time (1 Corinthians 4:4-5). The Lord only knows and will eventually disclose all our hearts.

There are many religious songs that I don't sing. I am especially reluctant to express prayers or songs saying how much I love God or Jesus. This passage shows why. When we express such love, are we not often like the previously over-confident Peter of John 13:37? Do we really understand the depth of what we are claiming, or what such depth of love demands of us? I believe it is better to keep silent and let our deeds testify to the extent of our dedication. May the Lord judge me, by His experience, whether - and to what extent - I love Him.

God is not deceived by empty words in the way we are. Remember Amos 5:23-24 *"Take away the noise of your songs, to the melody of your harps I will not listen, but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream."* He measures us by the standards of practical justice and righteousness: deeds not words. The kingdom of God does not consist of talk but power (1 Corinthians 4:20).

Reading: Ezekiel 34:1-24

Peter's shepherd job

Peter is given a total of four commandments in the passage, which are critical to a shepherd's calling:

- Feed my lambs
- Shepherd my little sheep
- Feed my little sheep
- Follow me (which is repeated)

It isn't clear how well Peter fulfilled this commission. John 21:20-21 suggests that Peter wasn't listening very well. Peter took the leading role very strongly at the start of Acts, but he fades out of the picture after chapter 11, and we find him failing to lead as he should in Galatians 2:11-14, when Paul had to rebuke him. 1 Peter 5:1-5 suggests Peter saw himself as just one of many elders, who all serve under the chief Shepherd, Jesus. But Peter did better than Elijah, who failed to fulfil every detail of his revised commission in 1 Kings 19:15-18. I have often seen that those who think that they failed God find it hard properly to resume

their ministry when Jesus restores them. The prospect of failure haunts them. But it does not have to be like that.

There is no question from John 21 that Jesus appointed Peter as the leader, and that Peter exercised that role in the first phase of the development of the church.

An essential characteristic of a Biblical shepherd is that he is the leader of the sheep (John 10, Ezekiel 34), who leads the sheep to good pasture, which the sheep then eat for themselves. The failure of the Ezekiel shepherds **started** by them **not feeding** the flock (Ezekiel 34: 2). Jesus is the good shepherd who cares for the sheep and feeds them (**read John 10:7-18**). Peter is being called to the identical ministry, and will die in the same manner as Jesus died. Shepherding is associated with personal sacrifice.

The primary task of the shepherd is to feed the sheep. If the shepherd neglects to feed the sheep they will starve, they will scatter in search of food and risk becoming food for wild beasts (Ezekiel 34:2-6).

The lambs are the weakest and hence most vulnerable, and so these are mentioned first. They are the first priority for the shepherd's care. But all the "little sheep" need to be fed too. They all need to be guided towards good pasture. The word "little sheep" is a variant of the usual word for "sheep" in the New Testament. Most commentators assume that it is purely a term of endearment. But I am not convinced of this. I think it is a reference to those who are not yet mature in faith.

Peter was himself one of the Lord's sheep, but not a "little sheep". He is expected to be one who follows Jesus directly. Jesus will shepherd Peter, guiding him to suitable pasture so that he may lead others. So there should come a point, I believe, in each Christian's experience where he becomes primarily dependent on being shepherded by Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep (Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 5:4). This constitutes spiritual maturity. This is not directly connected to chronological age, or how long you have been a Christian. Clearly, Peter in 1 Peter 1:1-5 believes that other people can become shepherd leaders or elders just like himself. These are the ones who have become dependent on Jesus, are following Him, and who are consequently equipped to lead and feed others who are as yet not mature enough to be guided directly. The command to such shepherds is as it was to Peter – "Follow me". Paul confirms this outlook, saying, "*Be imitators of me as I am of Christ*" (1 Corinthians 11:1).

So Peter is to follow Jesus, and he is to lead the lambs and younger sheep to pasture. He is also to shepherd them, which implies a duty to discipline them if necessary. Ezekiel 34 makes clear that the shepherd has a role in controlling the sheep, for their good, and for the benefit of the others. Some sheep trample the

food that belongs to others (Ezekiel 34:17-19), whilst strong sheep push weak sheep aside (Ezekiel 34:20-23).

But such discipline must not rule the sheep with force or harshness (Ezekiel 34:4). Indeed the ability to do such disciplining in a Biblical manner depends on the supportive relationship established between the shepherd and the sheep. The shepherd must **earn** the right to discipline the sheep by feeding them, and if he does so, then they will be willing to follow him. Only by feeding them does the shepherd gain the respect and trust of the sheep. Sheep only follow a shepherd who leads them to pasture (John 10:3-13).

Only within such a relationship can the shepherd discipline the sheep, but even that needs some further clarification. The shepherd is not to rule by force (Ezekiel 34:4). Nor are Christian leaders to be like the Gentiles who lord it over people; rather they must be as those who serve (Mark 10:42-45). So, in Hebrews 13:17 in "*Obey those leading you and submit to them*", the Greek word for "obey", here used in the passive voice, means "to be persuaded". Vine's Expository Dictionary² states that "*the obedience suggested is not by submission to authority but resulting from persuasion*". No Christian leader can command his followers to do something against the inner witness of the one who follows. That is the world's way. But the Christian walks by faith, and whatever is not of faith is sin (Romans 14:23). Jesus works with us by persuasion, and so must his under-shepherds. I have already written more fully about this under the title "The character of Christian leadership"³.

So then, the question is. "Who is my shepherd?" Who is your shepherd, leading you to pasture? Your shepherd can't eat for you, but shows you where the grass is, and where the water is (Psalm 23). Are you mature enough to be shepherded by Jesus? Are you in a leading role, feeding other people? No one is a shepherd who does not lead others to pasture, whatever formal church office they may hold. It is not a recognised appointed "position" in the church: shepherding is solely about spiritual realities. Spiritual leadership is earned by feeding the sheep. Jesus commissioned Peter for that task, certainly, but he was already the leader of the group, and would live out this job in the days that lay ahead by feeding the sheep.

Conclusion

This passage differs from the rest of John's gospel. It represents the handing over of authority on earth for the Lord's flock to Peter. But Peter can only lead them if he himself follows Christ, and feeds them. Peter knows something, at least, of his

² Vine W E Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words Oliphants 1952. (Many electronic bible resources include this work)

³ leader2_the_Character_of_Christian_Leadership_RH_Johnston.pdf

limitations, and he has been assured that his desire to follow Christ to the end will find the fulfilment in sharing Christ's death, which he had desired.

There is much here to learn about restoring relationships with people who have let us down, and, together with other passages, about the character of spiritual leadership. Much of this challenges our natural notions of leadership, for we are not to lord it over people like the Gentiles (Mark 10:42-43), but instead leaders are to follow Jesus and lead by feeding the sheep, which causes them to follow. In the kingdom of God, no one forces anyone to follow another, but if someone follows Christ and leads the way, then those who are Christ's sheep will surely follow, and willingly.

Sheep, know who your shepherd is!

This paper supports ministry at Victoria Hall Christian Fellowship, Camberley on 21.11.2004. (The elders of Victoria Hall Christian Fellowship do not necessarily endorse the opinions expressed in this paper, which are entirely the responsibility of the author).

These notes not comprehensive but should stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author: R H Johnston (email: rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk).

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