Feed My Lambs
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When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." (John 21:15-17)

What is the first mandate of a pastor? What will be the core and primary responsibility in the priority of a pastor? What is it to sum up a pastoral ministry? What is the alpha and omega of the pastoral responsibility? What is it that a pastor should do first and to make sure even at the last. I believe that this passage of Jesus Christ to Peter addresses and answers all of these questions, "to take care of my sheep, first to feed my lambs and make sure to feed my sheep".

First, I like you to take a careful consideration and biblical concept of “shepherd” in the Bible. The word, “shepherd” in the Bible is usually meant to be a leader or someone in charge of and responsible for taking a good care of those who follow. If this person does a good job as a leader, this person is called a good shepherd. In this view, a shepherd could be a parent or a guardian, a manager or an employer, a governor or a lawmaker, or even a president (or a king or a queen) for today's context. The Bible teaches and points out the ultimate "Good Shepherd" to come and lead the people of God (John 10, Ezekiel 34, Psalm 23).

Second, you may have heard a categorical frame of various “love” (such as agape, phileo or eros) for divine love, mundane friendship, or sexual desire. But this is a modern invention and categorization and not biblical especially to distinguish the love of agape and of phileo for it has nothing to do with the language of the Bible in the time of Jesus. These two words were used interchangeably at the time of Jesus for both New and Old Testament writings in Greek. The word, “agape”, in verb form was used also for the love of material greed, sexual desire and many other ungodly loves, even in rape. Further it is almost certain that both Jesus and Peter spoke in Hebrew tongue (or Aramaic, as you may have seen the movie, Passion, by Mel Gibson in 2004). So please discard this nonsense word-study of love if you heard in the past and stuck with it.

Third, the process of the “feeding” here means the process of teaching and learning the Word of God, the Bible, even according to Peter himself (Hebrews 5:12-14, 1 Peter 2:2). Our Lord has given this commandment to Peter the head of the Apostles, with the confession of Peter’s love (in contrast to the confession of Peter’s faith in Matthew 16:13-20). And for this Jesus has asked Peter “three times”! Even Peter finally sensed that this is something very serious. (In contrast, Jesus entrusted John for his mother “once” on the cross in John 19:27).

Here Jesus is not asking Peter to do something very difficult. This task may be an easy and routine task that Peter and others apostles have done for new convert, including baptism. Essentially this is simply to tell and instruct new disciples of what Jesus has done, spoken and commanded. Surely if Jesus has asked Peter to do a mission impossible, Peter may not feel so “worried”. Strangely enough, our Lord never asked Peter to build a denominational-size mega-church or stadium-size worship-center or a shopping-mall-like user-friendly church, to feed millions in starvation, to fast forty days, to found a global Christian
network or broadcasting company, to be a martyr or to be stoned to death, to heal terminal-disease patients or to raise the dead, or even to perform miracles of wonder or to be able to speak in tongues for a few dozen foreign languages. Truly Peter has lived a colorful life as the head of the apostles, has accomplished many wonderful things and even more, and died on the cross as a martyr. Yes, there are so many pastoral tasks and priority, including worship and fellowship, evangelism and mission, education and discipleship, managing and leading, helping, healing and counseling. But why does Jesus command first of all and last of all to “feed my lambs” and to “feed my sheep”, to “take care of my sheep”?

The first mandate and first in priority of "taking care of my sheep" according to Jesus Christ is to "feed my lambs". We may ask why this should be first in priority and most critical among the pastoral tasks and functions. It is because a lamb is like a new-born baby who cannot take care of itself but absolutely depends upon someone (one’s mother) to feed (whereas the sheep can take care of themselves grazing outside for most of the time). Thus it is the shepherd’s most critical task to make sure a lamb to be fed first and well fed with a plenty of the spiritual milk (the word of God, pure and rich) against the starvation. Its very immediate survival and future growth totally depends on the feeding and nutrition of its early age. Yes, there are so many things and works that a pastor can do. But what will it be if one asks Jesus (or Peter) what would be one and only one task that a shepherd should do first of all and do his best throughout his ministry? And what makes a person a good and serious shepherd in the approval and delight of our Great Shepherd? I believe that it is this ministry of "feeding" given by our Lord.

Have you (a pastor) ever thought about how to get "A+" for your grade report by our Great Shepherd? How does our Lord evaluate His shepherd in care of His sheep? I believe that this ministry of "feeding" is the key to any successful pastor, to do first of all and do well and thoroughly to take care of His lambs and His sheep. I believe that this ministry of “feeding” the word of God to His sheep is the “Alpha and Omega” of our pastoral ministry. Amen.