

- b. After they finished the meal, Jesus apparently took Peter aside to speak with him individually. It seems they walked along as they talked, for at one point Peter turned to see John following behind them (21:20). Jesus' concern in the conversation was Peter's role going forward. Peter had forsaken and denied His Lord in the moment of testing, but overarching his unfaithfulness was Jesus' promise of restoration. And when Peter was restored, he was to strengthen his brothers (Luke 22:31-34). Jesus had appointed Peter to a unique role among the Twelve and that role was in view in the question He repeatedly asked him.

The interchange as recorded is brief and has three components: a repeated question followed by Peter's response and Jesus' subsequent directive (21:15-17). After the third time, Jesus made known to Peter the fate that awaited him in view of his faithfulness to his calling (v. 18). This apostle who'd so fervently proclaimed his willingness to die for his Lord would see that outcome realized.

The essence of Jesus' question to Peter was this: "*Do you love Me?*" But each time He asked it He nuanced it based on Peter's answer. What remained constant, however, was the way Jesus addressed him; each time He referred to Peter as "*Simon, son of John (Barjona).*" Simon was Peter's given name and it was Jesus Himself who'd renamed him Peter. Most importantly, that change of name reflected Peter's future role in relation to the Messiah and His Church.

- *Peter* is the English transliteration of *petros*, a Greek noun denoting a detached stone. Peter was a stone in the sense that his confession ("You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God") voiced the enduring truth – the rock foundation (*petra*) – upon which Jesus would build His Church.
- He, Yahweh's messianic King, was going to establish His everlasting, invincible kingdom and He'd endow His disciples, beginning with Peter, with the "keys" of that kingdom. They would act in His name and exercise His power and authority in the earth; what they bound or loosed would *be*, having been bound or loosed in heaven (cf. Matthew 16:13-19, 18:15-20).

By referring to Peter as Simon, Jesus was highlighting his restoration in view of his apostolic calling. Peter, the little rock and heir of the keys of the kingdom, had shown by his denial that he was still Simon, the foolish and fearful fisherman. But the time of his restoration was at hand and he would soon begin to fulfill the calling embodied in his new name. Simon would become Peter, the fisher of men and faithful servant of the Messiah-King. But this calling was ultimately the obligation of devoted love, hence Jesus' question, "Simon, do you love Me?"

The first time Jesus posed it as a comparative question: Do you love Me *more than these*? Scholars have proposed various referents for the pronoun *these*, but the context seems to point to the other apostles. If this view is correct, the question can be interpreted in two ways. The first is "Do you love Me more than these love Me?" The second is "Do you love Me more than you love these."

The first meaning is the likely one and perhaps reflects Peter's previous intimation that his commitment to the Lord surpassed the others of the Twelve (cf. Matthew 26:33; Mark 14:29 with Luke 22:33, 54-62). In this case, Jesus was asking, "Looking back, Simon, can you really say that you love Me more than your brothers do? Have you demonstrated love for Me that transcends theirs?" It's noteworthy that many scholars have seen in Jesus' thrice-repeated question the counterpart to Peter's three denials, which itself suggests a connection between this interchange and Jesus' promise to restore Peter.

Peter answered with his typical zeal: "*Yes, Lord you know that I love You*" (v. 15b). He notably didn't respond to the comparative "more than these," which at least suggests his tacit acknowledgement that he'd been wrong and foolish to set himself above the other disciples. The truth was that he couldn't claim a greater love for his Lord than they had. Peter notably also used a different verb in his answer: Jesus inquired about *agape* love and Peter acknowledged *philia* love. This language shift has been the subject of endless speculation and commentary – at the one extreme, scholars draw an almost entire distinction between the two terms; at the other, they treat them as virtually synonymous. Context and usage are the best indicators, and that consideration leads to a few observations:

- 1) The first and second question/answer interchanges repeat the same structure (*agape/philia*). The third, however, has Jesus employing Peter's verb in His question (*philia/philia*). This pattern suggests that John wanted his readers to see a distinction in the two verbs and find significance in the arrangement of their use.
- 2) No two terms (as they exist in a language at the same time) are ever *strictly* synonymous and the same is true of *agape* and *philia*. Two similar words can be used interchangeably in a given context, but they still retain their unique semantic range. That is, each has dimensions of meaning that aren't shared by the other, regardless of whether they can function as approximate synonyms in a particular context. Indeed, if two terms are strictly synonymous, they are redundant and one isn't necessary.
- 3) There are examples in John's gospel of such contextual equivalence involving *philia* and *agape* (ref. 11:3-5, 36, also 13:23 with 20:2). Some scholars are quick to cite those instances as determinative, but they neither prove nor necessitate the equivalence of *agape* and *philia* in this passage.
- 4) On the other hand, Peter's affirmation (*Yes, Lord*) seems to suggest that he understood his *philia* love as affirmatively answering Jesus' inquiry about *agape* love. Would Peter have responded in this way if he perceived a significant difference between these two terms? He may have answered, "yes," but likely with some qualification. This conclusion is supported also by Peter's grief at Jesus continuing to ask the question (v. 17) – he'd affirmed his love twice; why did Jesus ask him yet a third time?

Jesus responded to Peter's affirmation with the simple directive, "*Feed My lambs.*" If Peter did indeed love his Lord, then he needed to serve Him according to his calling, which meant caring for His lambs. The nouns *lamb* and *sheep* are roughly synonymous (cf. vv. 16-17), but the former connotes innocence, purity and dependence suggesting preciousness and the need for devoted care (cf. Isaiah 40:11). Here, the close parallelism of Jesus' three-fold directive shows that this connotation applies also to the term *sheep*; Jesus' *sheep* are His *lambs*. Peter's love for His Lord meant caring for His little ones as a faithful under-shepherd. He was to administer the Good Shepherd's oversight and care, shepherding them with His loving concern and devotion (ref. 10:11-18; cf. also 1 Peter 5:1-5).

Peter's answer led Jesus to rephrase His question in a more direct form: "*Simon, son of John, do you love Me*" (21:16). When asked if he loved Jesus more than his counterparts did, Peter answered only that he did indeed love Him. He avoided the comparative part of the question, which implies that he'd come to see the folly of his former claims; after what had transpired he couldn't say that he had a greater love for his Lord than the other disciples. The way Jesus reiterated His question, then, seems to have taken it a step further: Did Peter love Him *at all*?

Again Peter adamantly affirmed his *philia* love, insisting that Jesus was well aware that he loved Him. ("You *know*" speaks to an experiential knowledge; Peter was asserting that Jesus had observed his love for Him in his words and actions.) This time Jesus responded by instructing Peter to "shepherd His sheep," effectively repeating the same directive, but in a nuanced form.

The Lord then repeated His question a third time, but rephrasing it according to Peter's response. Twice He'd used the verb *agapao*, but this time he used *phileo* as Peter had. Peter was hurt by this rephrasing and it showed in his response: *Lord, I've demonstrated my love for You and I know that You recognize it because You discern all things.* Once again Jesus issued the same directive, but this time bringing the previous two forms together: "*Feed my sheep*" (v. 17).

Taking all of these considerations into account, the interchange can perhaps be opened up as follows: "*Simon, do you really love Me with a knowledge and commitment that surpasses your brothers?*" "*Lord, you've seen that I'm devoted to You.*" "*Simon, do you love Me in the way I'm asking?*" "*Lord, I've told you I'm devoted to you.*" "*Simon, are you truly devoted to Me? Then you must care for My sheep as I care for them. I know you believe you've loved Me, but your devotion didn't sustain you in the hour of trial. Fear and self-concern overcame it just as with your brethren. But I promised to restore you and that will involve the transformation of your devotion to Me. You **will** love Me with the sort of love I'm speaking about and this love won't yield to fear and self-interest. You will share in My love and, as it has done with Me, this love will sustain and drive you until the end. Your love for Me – My love perfected in you – will lead you to the same place My love led Me. You, too, will stretch out your hands to be taken where you do not wish to go. But you must abide in this love and that means following Me.*"