

# THE MEANING OF JOHN 20: 21 - 23

*By Denver Cheddie*

21 Then said Jesus to them again, Peace *be* unto you: as *my* Father hath sent me, even so send I you. 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on *them*, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: 23 Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; *and* whose soever *sins* ye retain, they are retained.

This presents one of the most difficult Biblical passages to interpret, and one that can easily be used to propagate false doctrines if not done properly, as has been the case<sup>[i]</sup>.

Many, in approaching a difficult bible passage, interpret it in such a manner so as to somehow fit it into their overall predetermined theology, which is to say the least very subjective. It also allows the interpreter to either read into the passage what it does not say or explain away certain elements that do not conform. I will attempt to interpret this passage in the given context to determine the meaning that was understood by the initial hearers and the meaning intended by the speaker<sup>[iii]</sup>. I will use this principle of interpretation to defend the position that John 20:22,23 refers to the authority Jesus gave to exercise discipline in the church.

## **Some Preliminary Questions**

There are several questions that must be answered to properly understand this passage. 1) To whom precisely was Jesus speaking? 2) What did He mean in this context when He said, "Receive the Holy Spirit"? 3) What did He mean that the recipients would be able to forgive and retain sin?

Before I give my understanding of the passage, let us consider some common interpretations offered to answer these questions.

## **Jesus' Intended Audience**

Various views are that the audience was 1) the 11 apostles, 2) Peter alone, 3) all disciples present, and 4) all believers of all time.

There is nothing in the text to substantiate the view that the promise was given to Peter only or the 11 apostles alone. It is argued that John 20:23 resembles Matthew 16:18, 19 where it may appear that Jesus was specifically addressing Peter.

Matthew 16:18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 19 And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

However the same promise as Matt 16:19 is repeated in Matthew 18:18, where Jesus' audience seems to be all who would become church leaders.

It is also unlikely, in John 20, that Jesus was referring to all believers of all time since this was a unique experience distinct from Pentecost where physical Jesus physically breathed on the group present. The empowering

and inner transforming aspects of the Holy Spirit's ministry that took place at Pentecost<sup>[iii]</sup> are available for all time (Acts 2:38,39), but the reception of the Holy Spirit in John 20:22 is distinct. It most likely was referring to all present and as I will argue later to all church leaders in subsequent generations.

## **The Meaning of "Receive the Holy Spirit"**

One view is that Jesus was simply promising the disciples that the Holy Spirit would come at a later time, which turned out to be the Day of Pentecost. This view hardly does justice to the text. It seems to me that the act of breathing on them suggests that they received something right there and then. Surely the mighty rushing wind of the Spirit did not move in slow motion.

Another view is that it was a full outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the apostles prior to Pentecost. Again this has to be rejected since both Jesus and the disciples referred to the full outpouring as yet future even after this event (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4,5,8).

A third view is that the giving of the Holy Spirit was an act of recreation. Just as God breathed physical life into Adam, Jesus breathed spiritual life into His disciples, which for others occur at conversion. This view seems to be common among commentators<sup>[iv]</sup>. However this interpretation implies that there would have been a transformation in the lives of those who received this impartation. But is this the case? Peter's

question in John 21:21, "What about this man [John]?", suggests that he still saw John as a rival as he did before Jesus breathed on them. The real transformation took place after Pentecost not before. Furthermore Biblical evidence militates against this view since the Holy Spirit could not come to reside *in* believers before Jesus was glorified (John 7:38,39; 14:17; 16:7). He was *with* them all along and had certain inputs in their lives but could not reside *in* them at this point. Thus this interpretation, in my view, is not correct.

## **The Meaning of Forgiving and Retaining Sin**

Some believe that the apostles were given power to forgive sins in a direct and absolute sense. Firstly this view is inconsistent with Luke 5:21 which states that only God can forgive sin. If this interpretation is correct then the Bible has unexplainable discrepancies. The question to ask concerning this view is "did the disciples understand Jesus' pronouncement in this manner?" The answer is a resounding no. At no point in the Bible is there even a hint that the disciples went around forgiving and retaining people's sins in that sense. Evidence is lacking that the original hearers understood it in this manner, and neither should we. Catholics further stretch the unimaginable by claiming that Jesus was not just speaking to all present, but to Peter in particular (*not in the least hinted by the text*), Peter was later to become the first Pope in Rome (*historically very debatable*), and the promise of forgiving and retaining sins was passed on to all subsequent popes (*absolutely ridiculous!*)

Others see it as authority to announce the terms of conditions for having one's sins forgiven (i.e. preaching the gospel) or the right to declare whether or not someone's sins are forgiven based on their response to the gospel. This view is very popular and it fits well with evangelical theology, not violating any other doctrines. Personally, I would hesitate to enter into debate with a Catholic scholar using this interpretation. In my view it is weak. It would be considered nothing short of a desperate attempt to avoid the literal implication of the text so as to preserve one's predetermined theology. It does match well with verse 21 where the context is the evangelistic thrust of the church. Yet I find it difficult to understand why exactly the Holy Spirit is needed simply to declare the terms of forgiveness, or to declare that God has forgiven a repentant person's sins. Jesus did not physically breathe on me, does that mean I cannot declare the terms of forgiveness of sins to the unsaved? Why also was it needed at this point in time? Why could it not wait until Pentecost? This experience is clearly distinct from Pentecost and must have a distinct purpose. The outpouring at Pentecost was needed for inner transforming and empowerment. If there is nothing distinct about this particular "outpouring", then it was redundant.

## **My Interpretation**

The expression "receive the Holy Spirit" and its equivalents have various meanings in scripture<sup>[iv]</sup>. In the book of Acts, this expression refers to the reception of the Holy Spirit subsequent to conversion for the purpose of empowerment. In Romans 8:15, we receive the Holy Spirit at conversion for the purpose of adoption<sup>[vi]</sup>. It has been previously argued that the

reception of the Holy Spirit in John 20:22 refers to neither empowerment nor transformation. It is something distinct. What the disciples received, in my view, was a particular ministry of the Holy Spirit for the reason given in verse 23 – to “forgive” and “retain” “sins”. This particular reception is unrelated to the results of Pentecost. This context cannot be ignored and in my view, the other views fail to properly address the link between “receiving the Holy Spirit” and “forgiving and retaining sins”.

To understand verse 23, we must ask, “What unusual activity took place in the disciples ministries that was not a result of Pentecost? In particular, did anything unusual happen between the reception of the Holy Spirit in verse 22 and the Day of Pentecost 50 days later?” If not, then the experience of verse 22 was meaningless. They could just have easily received the full works at Pentecost. Why now? A perusal of scripture reveals one such incident that took place during this time frame – the selection of the 12<sup>th</sup> apostle after Judas’ death. Where could the disciples have ever received authority to appoint an apostle? By definition an apostle must be personally hand picked by God. I suggest that this was what the disciples received when Jesus breathed on them. This is the aspect of the Holy Spirit’s ministry they received prior to Pentecost.

The expression in verse 23 is similar to Matthew 16:19 where the “keys of the kingdom” refer to authority associated with building the church, and Matthew 18:18 where “binding and loosing” refers to church discipline<sup>[vii]</sup>. The broader context of Matthew 18 speaks of *handling offences*, which includes as subcategories *forgiveness*, *reconciliation*, and *church discipline*. There is a relation between these last three terms. That is

forgiveness can refer to 1) releasing personal debts (18:21-35), 2) reconciling broken relationships (18:15,16), or 3) receiving persons back into fellowship (18:17-20 cf. 2 Corinthians 2:7,10). Note the striking similarity between 2 Corinthians 2:10 and John 20:23.

2 Cor 2:10 To whom ye forgive any thing, I *forgive* also: for if I forgave any thing, to whom I forgave *it*, for your sakes *forgave I it* in the person of Christ;

John 20:23 Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; *and* whose soever *sins* ye retain, they are retained.

The context of the former verse is clearly church discipline – the case of the fornicator who was first excommunicated and now is being received back into fellowship. I believe that the expression in John 20:23 refers to various roles of church discipline where the leaders had God’s backing in choosing and refusing others to fellowship and ministry.

The selection of Matthias as the 12<sup>th</sup> apostle is an example of choosing someone to ministry. This aspect of the Holy Spirit’s ministry began before Pentecost and continued afterward, as seen in the release for ministry of Saul and Barnabas by the leaders in Acts 13:1-3. Examples of welcoming and disbanding members from fellowship are seen in the case of the fornicator at Corinth who was first excommunicated (1 Corinthians 5:3-5) and later received back after repenting (2 Corinthians 2:5-8). Alexander the coppersmith and Hymenaeus were both “delivered unto Satan” by Paul (1 Timothy 1:20). The reception of gentiles into fellowship (Acts 11:1-18) and the case of Ananias and Saphira (Acts 5:1-11) may also be cited. This authority of the Holy Spirit exists for the apostles and to an extent, pastoral leaders. This is how the disciples “forgave” and “retained” sins, and most likely this was what Jesus had in mind.

Matthew 9:1-8 gives the account of Jesus healing a paralytic. The crowd became uneasy when Jesus told the man "Thy sins be forgiven thee". Later on they rejoiced because "God gave such authority unto men" (v 8). Verse 8 seems to suggest that men have the same authority on earth to forgive sin that Jesus displayed on this occasion<sup>[viii]</sup>. But in what way did Jesus forgive this man's sins? Was he forgiven in the sense that he was now saved, sanctified and as sure for heaven as if he were already there? Hardly likely! Salvation is different from physical healing. What Jesus (as a man) forgave, and hence what men can forgive, is certain consequences of sin. Only God can forgive acts of sin and motives for sin. The examples sited above show exactly what consequences of sin the disciples forgave and retained, namely with regards to church fellowship<sup>[ix]</sup>.

Now how does this interpretation fit into the overall context of John 20:22, 23 as suggested in verse 21 i.e. the evangelistic thrust of the church? Church discipline is one aspect of the overall mission of the church. Although not considered to be on the same level as preaching the gospel and healing the sick, who can question that the presence of the fornicator in Corinth did not hinder evangelism (1 Corinthians 5:7,8), or that the release of Paul and Barnabas into ministry was not for evangelistic purposes, or that the welcoming of gentiles into the church was not part of the overall evangelistic mission of the church?

## Summary

Jesus gave a special authority to the apostles and disciples present, which is available to pastoral leaders of all ages. This authority is distinct from the empowering and transforming works of Holy Spirit. With this authority, church discipline could be maintained whether positive or negative. With it, the disciples could forgive certain consequences of sin.

This interpretation explains 1) the receiving of the Holy Spirit, 2) the nature of the disciples' ability to forgive and retain sins, 3) the link between the two; 4) it fits into the evangelistic context of the passage, 5) is consistent with historical events, and 6) does not contradict any other portion of scripture.

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<sup>[ii]</sup> For example the Roman Catholic doctrine of penance, confession of sins to priests, etc.

<sup>[iii]</sup> My personal belief is that every verse of scripture should be interpreted in this manner - individually and then as a whole - and together all verses would mesh to form a complete and proper understanding of the Bible. The books of the Bible were written by different authors in different circumstances, and thus every passage has a meaning that was intended by God and the author, and that meaning should be able to stand on its own (without the help of other scriptures). If the Bible is the Word of God, as we believe, there will be no inconsistencies because scripture cannot be broken. We should not attempt to synchronize scripture to fit our predetermined thinking, but rather allow scripture to synchronize itself. We should not read into it what we would like it to say, but let the Bible speak for itself.

<sup>[iii]</sup> It is generally agreed by both charismatics and cessationists that the Holy Spirit comes to the believer with a two-fold purpose: 1) inner transformation e.g. regeneration and sanctification, 2) empowerment for service. They also agree that both aspects of the Holy Spirit's ministry came to those present on the Day of Pentecost. The major difference is that charismatics hold that both works of the Holy Spirit are initiated at different occasions (conversion and the baptism in the Holy Spirit), while cessationists believe they both occur at conversion.

<sup>[iv]</sup> See for example (The Wycliffe Bible Commentary; Adam Clarke's Commentary; Barnes' Notes) on John 20:22, Electronic Database, Biblesoft, 1996.

<sup>[v]</sup> The idea that one word or expression has more than one possible meaning is nothing new. For example the word "faith" has at least 3 meanings in the New Testament: 1) the common meaning i.e. faith in God for a need, 2) the body of Christian doctrine i.e. the faith (Jude 3), and 3) faithfulness (Galatians 5:22).

<sup>[vi]</sup> Douglas A. Oss also holds this view that the same expression is used to refer to different works of the Holy Spirit in Lukan and Pauline theology. See *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today – Four Views*, ed. Wayne A. Grudem, (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1996), pp. 244, 250-57, 270, 305

<sup>[vii]</sup> The context of this verse suggests that Jesus was talking about church discipline and not prayer.

<sup>[viii]</sup> Note that verse 8 cannot be considered a misconception by the crowd (i.e. they thought God gave such power unto men) because the language suggests that it was the author himself, Matthew, under inspiration who claimed that God gave such power to men.

<sup>[ix]</sup> The disciples also forgave the consequences of sin in the sense of physical healing, but this was a result of Pentecost. That aspect was not related to church discipline.

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