

Chapter 13

Remitting and Retaining Sins

The Roman Catholic View

The official *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, based on the dogmas and decrees set forth by the Second Vatican Council, has several statements regarding the interpretation of John 20:23. For example,

The Apostle's Creed associates faith in the forgiveness of sins not only with faith in the Holy Spirit, but also with faith in the Church and in the communion of saints. It was when he gave the Holy Spirit to his apostles that ***the risen Christ conferred on them his own divine power to forgive sins***: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."¹

Under "The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation," it is stated,

Only God forgives sins. Since he is the Son of God, Jesus says of himself, "The Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins" and exercises this divine power: "Your sins are forgiven" [Mark 2:5,10]. Further, ***by virtue of his divine authority he gives this power to men to exercise in his name*** [John 20:21-23].²

What "men" have this power? The answer is explained as follows:

Since Christ entrusted to his apostles the ministry of reconciliation [cf. John 20:23; 2 Cor. 5:18], bishops who are their successors, and priests, the

1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 976, p. 254; emphasis added.

2 *Ibid.*, paragraph 1441, p. 362; emphasis added.

bishops' collaborators, continue to exercise this ministry. **Indeed bishops and priests, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, have the power to forgive all sins** "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."³

Finally, in explaining that the word "disciples" can refer to all believers and not just the apostles, well-known Catholic scholar Raymond Brown nevertheless restricts it to the apostles alone in John 20:23:

There is no doubt that by using the term "disciples" to describe the Apostles during Jesus' ministry John is not simply being chronologically exact ("apostle" is seemingly a post-Resurrectional title); he is also making the Apostles the symbols of all Christians who are disciples of Jesus. Thus, when Jesus speaks to his Disciples in the Last Discourse and promises that he will return to be with them and that they will bear witness to him, he is really speaking to all believers. There is a democratization of the closeness that originally only the Twelve shared with Jesus. Yet one cannot simply assume that everything said to the Twelve in John is meant to apply to all Christians. For instance, **the power both to absolve and to hold men's sins is explicitly given to (ten of) the Twelve in 20:23** in a post-Resurrection scene where they have just been sent. (Matthew, Luke, and the Marcan Appendix all have a solemn post-Resurrection commission of the Eleven by Jesus.) There is no real evidence that such power was given to all Christians.⁴

Brown adds this in his commentary on John:

In reaction to the Protestant reformers the Council of Trent condemned the proposal that this power to forgive sins was offered to each of Christ's faithful; rather this verse [John 20:23] should be understood of the power exercised by the ordained priest in the Sacrament of Penance and not simply

3 Ibid., paragraph 1461, p. 367; emphasis added.

4 Raymond E. Brown, "The Kerygma of the Gospel According to John: The Johannine View of Jesus in Modern Studies," *Interpretation* 21 (1967):391; emphasis added.

applied to the Church's power to preach the Gospel.⁵

However, he then goes on to make a rather surprising statement.

Many modern Roman Catholic scholars do not think that this declaration of their Church [Trent] necessarily concerns or defines the meaning that *the evangelist* attached to the verse when he wrote it; the import of the declaration [Trent] is to insist against critics that the Sacrament of Penance is a legitimate (even if later) exercise and specification of the power of forgiveness conferred in the verse.⁶

This statement represents a most curious hermeneutical principle. Using it, the Roman Catholic Church can expand or add to the meaning intended by a biblical author in order to support one of its doctrines. Apparently, that is how Brown and other "modern Roman Catholic scholars" would explain the frequent citation of John 20:23 in the documents of Vatican II and in the official catechism in order to support its claim to have the power to forgive sins.

Despite this faulty hermeneutical principle, however, Brown very clearly defines the exact power claimed in Roman Catholic theology:

Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic position reflects an interpretation whereby the power mentioned in xx 23 concerns the forgiveness of sins committed *after* Baptism and is given to a specified group, the Eleven, who pass it on through ordination to others.⁷

Before the advent of liberalism and the critical approach to the Scriptures, the Roman Catholic Church believed that the original intent of Jesus, as recorded by John, was to confer upon the disciples, and by succession the bishops and priests, the power to forgive sins.⁸ In one respect,

5 Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, II:1041.

6 Ibid.; emphasis original.

7 Ibid.; emphasis original.

8 This was made quite clear in one of the early responses of the Catholic Church to liberalism. The *Lamentabili Sane Exitu*, a syllabus issued in 1907 by Pope Pius X, in item 47 explicitly condemns the view that John 20:23 is not the foundation of the

this historical position of the Catholic Church is correct: it can only be the original intent of "the evangelist" that determines a valid basis for any doctrine.⁹

However, asserting that the bishops and priests of the Roman Catholic Church have the power to forgive and retain sins would seem to constitute one of the most breathtaking claims made by any ecclesiastical organization. Is this the meaning of John 20:23--as intended by Jesus?

Remitting and Retaining Sins: Verse 23

This study of John 20:21-23 has now come to the *crux interpretum* of the passage:

If you forgive the sins of any, *their sins* have been forgiven them; if you retain the *sins* of any, they have been retained.

This is one of the most difficult statements in the New Testament for which to determine the original intent of Jesus. I will state at the outset that no interpretation with which I am familiar is without its difficulties.

After such an admission, one might argue that the Roman Catholic view is the simple and natural interpretation of the words and that the difficulties associated with this text arise from attempts to avoid this interpretation. Nothing could be further from the truth. The interpretation placed on this verse by the Roman Catholic Church is replete with difficulties. These are presented after the following grammatical analysis of the verse.

Grammatical Analysis

The Greek reads as follows:

αν τινων αφητε τας αμαρτιας, αφωνται αυτοις,
αν τινων κρατητε κεκρατηνται¹⁰

Sacrament of Penance.

9 I used, "the evangelist," because that was the phrase Brown used. Actually in John 20:23, it is the original intent of Jesus that is critical, since John in this verse simply quoted him.

10 Note that τας αμαρτιας ("the sins") is not repeated in the second

The first point to observe is how the verbs are parsed:

αφητε (*aphēte*): 2nd person plural 2nd aorist active subjunctive of αφημι (*aphiēmi*), here meaning *to cancel, to remit, to pardon*¹¹

αφεωνται¹² (*apheōntai*): 3rd person plural perfect passive indicative of αφημι (*aphiēmi*)

κρατητε (*kratēte*): 2nd person plural present¹³ active subjunctive of κρατω (*krateō*), here meaning *to retain [sins]*¹⁴

κεκρατηνται (*kekratēntai*): 3rd person plural perfect passive indicative of κρατω (*krateō*)

Additional comment on the verbs is forthcoming.

Second, the word order in the first statement suggests a certain emphasis on the first verb αφητε (*to forgive*).¹⁵

statement but should be understood.

11 AG, p. 125.

12 There are a few textual variants. Some MSS have the present form and others the future. However, the committee responsible for the United Bible Societies' *Greek New Testament* gives the perfect form, αφεωνται, a "B" rating (Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, p. 255). According to Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 849, "It seems tolerably clear that the perfect is right..." In addition to the stronger textual witness for the perfect form, there is this additional argument: there are no textual variants for κεκρατηνται. Since it is a perfect, the strong parallel between these two words suggests that the perfect form αφεωνται is also correct.

13 Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, V:314, parses this verb as a present tense, which is surely correct. Curiously, Tenney, *The Gospel of John*, p. 193, calls it an aorist tense, despite the fact that the σ is lacking, a characteristic of the 1st aorist in ω verbs, even those that are contract verbs. On the reason for changing from the aorist in the first clause to the present in the second clause, Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, p. 81, comments: "The writer spontaneously uses the aorist for the notion of forgiving, because it is an act which is posited, but the present for that of retaining, because here we have simply continuing in the same state."

14 AG, p. 450.

15 Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 847, n. 57: "The word order is interesting: αν τινων αφητε τας αμαρτιας. By using αφητε to separate τινων from τας αμαρτιας (which must in any case be taken together), a certain emphasis is imparted to the verb, 'of

Third, τινῶν (*tinōn*) is the genitive plural¹⁶ form of the indefinite pronoun and means *someone, something, a certain one, a certain thing, anyone, anything*.¹⁷ The use of the particle αν (*an*)¹⁸ with this pronoun creates an ambiguity. On the one hand, αν could be a substitute for εαν (*ean*), *if*, thus with a verb in the subjunctive mood forming a conditional:¹⁹ "If you forgive the sins of any [people]..."²⁰ On the other hand, αν could supply the "-ever" suffix on τινῶν: "Of whomsoever sins you forgive..."²¹ or "Those whose sins you forgive..." The weight of scholarship seems to be on the former option, but the choice makes no difference to the ultimate interpretation. The important point to note is that τινῶν is plural: "It is not the sins of whatever *man*, but the sins of whatever *men*, of which this verse speaks. Jesus is not speaking of individuals, but of classes"²² or groups.

Fourth, the tense of the second verb in each statement must be noted. They are both perfect passives. As in Matthew 16:19 with its periphrastic future perfects, many English versions drop the perfect sense. In this passage they translate these verbs as a present used in a future

whomsoever you *forgive* the sins..." (emphasis original).

- 16 There is a textual variant here where τινος (genitive singular) is used in both instances instead of the genitive plural τινῶν. Roman Catholic scholar, Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, II:1023, makes the following comment: "'Men's sins' is literally 'the sins of some [plural]'; yet there is substantial textual support for reading a singular 'of someone'" (brackets original). In view of this claim of "substantial textual support" for τινος, it is curious that the USB apparatus does not even mention a textual variant for τινῶν. However, Alford, *The Greek Testament*, I:910, does cite the few witnesses for τινος: B (Vaticanus), the Latin Vulgate (produced by Jerome), three other Latin versions, the Syriac Peshitta, and citations in Eusebius, Origen, and Cyprian. Thus the support for the plural τινῶν is almost beyond question. It would, of course, support the Catholic interpretation of this text to have the singular pronoun.
- 17 In the genitive plural of this pronoun, masculine, feminine, and neuter all have the same form.
- 18 Despite the transliteration "an," this word is not related to the English indefinite article "an."
- 19 This is the view taken by Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, V:314. Note also that Blass, Debrunner, and Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, p. 57, cite John 20:23 as an example of the somewhat rare "interchange of αν and εαν" in a conditional statement.
- 20 So taken by the RSV, NASB, NIV, NKJV, and ESV.
- 21 So taken by the KJV and the ASV.
- 22 Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 849; emphasis original.

sense: "they are forgiven...they are retained."²³ The *NASB*, however, retains the perfect sense: "they have been forgiven...they have been retained." There is no good grammatical reason to abandon the perfect sense here.²⁴

Therefore, recalling that the first verb in each statement is plural and that the pronouns are plural, the most literal translation of this verse would be as follows:

If you [plural] forgive the sins of any [plural], [then] they have already been forgiven to them; if you [plural] retain [the sins] of any [plural], [then] they have already been retained.

As with the periphrastic future perfects in Matthew 16:19, the Roman Catholic interpretation of John 20:23 is weakened if the perfect passives here are taken in the sense of true perfects: if the disciples forgive sins, those sins have already been forgiven. This does not describe the role of Roman Catholic priests.

Likely for this reason Catholic scholar Raymond Brown raises an argument against interpreting these verbs as perfects.

In an article professedly written to refute the sacramental interpretation of this verse, J. R. Mantey, *JBL*, 58 (1939), 243-49, insists that the perfect tense implies past action and that the present and future readings are attempts to make the verse fit a sacramental theology. Therefore, he would translate it as "their sins *have been* forgiven," with the theological implication that no more is involved than declaring the forgiveness of sins that has already taken place. Mantey has been answered by H. C. Cadbury, *JBL* 58 (1939), 251-54, who, although he professes no interest in defending the sacramental interpretation of the verse, shows that Mantey's understanding of the perfect tense does not apply to conditional sentences. A perfect

23 *KJV, ASV, RSV, NIV, NKJV, and ESV.*

24 Tenney, *The Gospel of John*, p. 193. In his comments on Matt. 16:19, Carson, *Matthew*, p. 370-372, also discusses the related grammatical issues in John 20:23 and concludes, "In John 20:23 the Greek perfects must be taken as retaining their normal force as perfects, because both verbs have acceptable present and future tenses used elsewhere: neither verb exhibits a preferential pattern for the perfect" (p. 372).

tense used in the apodosis ["then" part] of a general condition does not necessarily refer to an action that is prior to the protasis ["if" part]; rather such a perfect can have a future reference (BDF [Blass, Debrunner, Funk], §344). Thus the textual variants of 23 with the present and future tenses (see BDF, §323) have exactly the same meaning as the reading with the perfect tense, except that the perfect tense draws more attention to the continuous character of the action: the sins are forgiven and stay so.²⁵

However, this is not the end of the story. After noting the same two papers cited by Brown, Carson points out that the debate was picked up again in a Ph.D. dissertation by W. T. Dayton and a follow-up paper by Mantey himself.²⁶ Of special interest are

Dayton's short lists of periphrastic future perfects in Strabo, Lucian, and some papyri; for all these retain perfect force, even when used in the apodosis of a general condition.²⁷

Therefore, it remains the case that there is no good reason to abandon the perfect force of the verbs in John 20:23.

There is one point on which Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars agree: the action of remittance and retention of sins represented by the second verb in the two statements is an action by God.

Objections to the Roman Catholic View

The first objection would seem to determine the issue even if there were no additional arguments.

(1) The power and authority to forgive sin is everywhere in Scripture described as a special prerogative of God. The Jews believed this, and Jesus clearly accepted their position and used it as an indirect proof of his deity.

And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic,

25 Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, II:1023-24.

26 Carson, *Matthew*, p. 370-71.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 371.

"Son, your sins are forgiven." But some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; **who can forgive sins but God alone?**" Immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, "Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven'; or to say, 'Get up, and pick up your pallet and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," He said to the paralytic, "I say to you, get up, pick up your pallet and go home."²⁸

The following three objections are based on hard evidence from the context and grammar.

(2) In the Catholic view, the apostles alone received the authority to forgive sins and this authority is passed on to their "successors," the bishops. However, these words were not spoken to the apostles only but to the entire group that was gathered in the room with Jesus. Therefore, of whatever this gift consisted, there is no reason to conclude that it was limited to the apostles and thus their "successors," the bishops. As with the empowering of the Holy Spirit in verse 22, the power to remit and retain sins was also granted to all the disciples in the room, and thus probably extends to the church in general.²⁹

28 Mark 2:5-11; parallel Luke 5:20-24. The question, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" and its use in Jesus' argument implies not only that men cannot forgive sin, but also that this is a divine prerogative that God will not delegate to men. Thus the catechism of the Roman Catholic Church simply pleads its case when it cites this very text: "Only God forgives sins. Since he is the Son of God, Jesus says of himself, 'The Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins' and exercises this divine power: 'Your sins are forgiven' [Mark 2:5,10]. Further, by virtue of his divine authority he gives this power to men to exercise in his name" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1441, p. 362).

29 Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 848, argued similarly, stating that "there were almost certainly others than the apostles present. There seems no reason for thinking that this group of Christians was anything other than that mentioned in Luke 24:33 ff., and that certainly included Cleopas and the friend who walked with him to Emmaus. The gift Christ made was to the church as a whole. We have no reason at all for thinking that those present formed a 'ministry'. They were rather representatives of the whole church." As quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Catholic scholar Raymond Brown, "The Kerygma of the Gospel According to John: The Johannine View of Jesus in Modern Studies," p. 391, stated that "the power

(3) If the second verb in each statement is taken as a true perfect passive, then it is difficult to explain how this verse describes the action of a Roman Catholic priest absolving sin. In the Catholic view, the sin is not forgiven before the priest forgives it. However, the perfect tense implies that it has already been forgiven.

(4) As also pointed out in the section on grammar, the pronoun $\tau\iota\upsilon\omega\upsilon$ used in both statements is plural. This implies that the objects of forgiving or retaining sins are classes or groups of people. The picture presented by this language is not one in which a minister deals with the sin of a single individual. It is therefore quite different from the doctrine of absolution that the Catholic Church bases on this verse.

The next three objections show that the Catholic view is *prima facie* highly unlikely.

(5) The weakness of human nature is so great, even among born-again believers, that it is highly improbable that Jesus would delegate to any mortal man such a tremendous power as that of absolutely pardoning or absolving someone's sin.³⁰

(6) It would be injurious to the man himself to entrust him with such power, for the temptation would inevitably arise to usurp the office of mediator between God and man.³¹

(7) What insight into a man's heart was possible for the apostles themselves is difficult to determine. They did have (or received) on occasion the ability to perceive

both to absolve and to hold men's sins is explicitly given to (ten of) the Twelve in 20:23 in a post-Resurrection scene where they have just been sent. (Matthew, Luke, and the Marcan Appendix all have a solemn post-Resurrection commission of the Eleven by Jesus.) There is no real evidence that such power was given to all Christians." However, Morris, p. 848, n. 60, responds as follows: "Despite Brown's 'explicitly' it is very difficult to see this. The passage does not mention the Twelve and I see no evidence that the gift was given to the Ten. John speaks of 'the disciples' as being present (20:19, 20). Brown admits that John's use of the term 'disciples' sometimes at least is a way of indicating that Jesus 'is really speaking to all believers.' He gives no reason for a different usage here."

30 Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, IV:399.

31 Ibid.

what was in the heart.³² However, it is highly doubtful that any minister since the apostles has had that ability, and it is certain that there has been no denomination or branch of Christendom in which all of its ministers have had that ability. So apart from direct revelation from God, how could ministers through the ages judge the truth of any man's repentance and faith?

The remaining two points are arguments from silence. As such, they would not in themselves preclude the Catholic interpretation. However, in conjunction with the previous arguments, they make the Catholic interpretation even less likely.

(8) This problem is well stated by Ryle:

There is not a single instance in the Acts or Epistles, of an Apostle taking on himself to absolve, pardon, or forgive any one. The Apostles and preachers of the New Testament declare in the plainest language whose sin is pardoned and absolved, but they never take on themselves to pardon and absolve.³³

(9) There is no indication in the pastoral epistles written by Paul to Timothy and Titus that he regarded absolution as part of the ministerial office.³⁴

Therefore, another interpretation must be sought.³⁵

32 For example, Acts 5:1-11 and possibly 8:21; 13:9.

33 Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, IV:399.

34 Ibid.

35 Roman Catholic scholar Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, II:1044-45, seems to have come up with an interpretation by which no one's use of this verse is wrong. "We doubt that there is sufficient evidence to confine the power of forgiving and holding of sin, granted in John xx 23, to a specific exercise of power in the Christian community, whether that be admission to Baptism or forgiveness in Penance. These are but partial manifestations of a much larger power, namely, the power to isolate, repel, and negate evil and sin, a power given to Jesus in his mission by the Father and given in turn by Jesus through the Spirit to those whom he commissions. It is an effective, not merely a declaratory, power against sin, a power that touches new and old followers of Christ, a power that challenges those who refuse to believe...In the course of time this power has had many different manifestations, as the various Christian communities legitimately specified both the manner and agency of its exercise. Perhaps John's failure to specify may serve as a Christian guideline: exegetically, one can call upon John xx 23 for assurance that the power of forgiveness has been granted; but one cannot call upon this text as proof that the way in which a

The Traditional Protestant Interpretation

Though there may be different nuances in the way this view is stated, all of them center on the same basic idea: the power granted by Jesus here is an authority to **declare** or **proclaim** sins remitted or retained. At first, the perfect passive verbs in John 20:23 might seem to support this view: "I declare that your sins have already been forgiven!"

Philip Schaff summarizes the difference between the Catholic and Protestant views as follows:

Two perversions of Scripture were the largest factors in developing the theory of meritorious penance. The first was the false interpretation of John 20:23, "Whosoever sins ye forgive they are forgiven, and whosoever sins ye retain they are retained." The passage was interpreted to mean that Christ conferred upon the Apostles and the Church the judicial authority to forgive sins. The Protestant theory is that this authority is declarative.³⁶

For example, Calvin comments as follows:

While Christ enjoins the Apostles to *forgive sins*, he does not convey to them what is peculiar to himself. It belongs to him to *forgive sins*. This honour, so far as it belongs peculiarly to himself,

particular community exercises this power is not true to Scripture." All of this generality overlooks the fact that Jesus had a specific power in mind when he conferred it as recorded in John 20:23. It is the job of the exegete to determine what that original intent was. The power to forgive sin is a divine prerogative (cf. Mark 2:5-12). It is therefore impossible to conceive that Jesus would make a vague and general statement in Scripture about this power from which it would be impossible to determine what is meant by it and how it is to be exercised, thus leaving it up to "various Christian communities" to make such decisions, ranging as they do all the way from a mere declarative power to an absolute power exercised by a class of priests--and all able to cite John 20:23 as justification!

36 Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, V:730. The other "perversion of Scripture" was this: "The second factor was the Vulgate's translation of the New Testament for the word "repent," *pœnitentiam agite*, 'do penance,' as if repentance were a meritorious external exercise, and not a change of disposition, which is the plain meaning of the Greek word μετανοέω, 'to change your mind.'"

he does not surrender to the Apostles, but enjoins them, in his name, to proclaim *the forgiveness of sins*, that through their agency he may reconcile men to God. In short, properly speaking, it is he alone who *forgives sins* through his Apostles and ministers.³⁷

J. C. Ryle offers the same explanation:

The meaning of the words, I believe, may be paraphrased thus: "I confer on you the power of declaring and pronouncing authoritatively whose sins are forgiven, and whose sins are not forgiven...." I believe that nothing more than this *authority to declare* can be got out of the words [of John 20:23]...³⁸

However, there is a serious problem with this view. The problem can be seen in Poole's lengthier presentation of it.

The question therefore amongst divines is, Whether Christ in this text hath given authority to his ministers actually to discharge men of the guilt of their sins; or only *to declare unto them, that if their repentance and faith be true, their sins are really forgiven them?* The former is by many contended for; but it doth not seem reasonable, 1. That God should betrust men with such a piece of his prerogative. 2. That God, who knoweth the falsehood of men's hearts, and *the inability in the best ministers to judge of the truth of any man's faith or repentance*, as also the passions to which they are subject, should give unto any of the sons of men an absolute power under him, and in his name, to discharge any from the guilt of sin; for certain it is, that without true repentance and faith in Christ no man hath his sins forgiven; so as no minister, that knoweth not the hearts of men, can possibly speak with any certainty to any man, saying, his sins are forgiven. What knowledge the apostles might have by the Spirit of discerning, we cannot say. But

37 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 2 vols., trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003; original publication date, c. 1555; Pringle translation date, 1848), II:271; emphasis original.

38 Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, IV:398.

certain it is, none hath any such certainty of knowledge now of the truth of any man, declaring his faith and true repentance; from whence it is to me apparent, that no man hath any further power from Christ, than **to declare to them, that if indeed they truly believe and repent, their sins are really forgiven.** Only the minister, being Christ's interpreter and ambassador, and better able to judge of true faith and repentance than others, (though not certainly and infallibly,) such declarations from a faithful, able minister, are of more weight and authority than from others. And this is the most I can conceive should be in this matter...³⁹

In this quote from Poole, note that due to "the inability in the best ministers to judge of the truth of any man's faith or repentance," this "authority" to "declare" the forgiveness of sins must be put into an if-then declaration: "if their repentance and faith be true, [then] their sins are really forgiven them."

There are at least three problems with this traditional view.

First: the statement,

"**IF** you truly believe and repent, **THEN** your sins are forgiven"

is simply the content of the gospel. To add the phrase "I declare" to the apodosis ("then" part),

"**IF** you truly believe and repent, **THEN** I declare your sins are forgiven"

is a completely vacuous addition and cannot possibly fulfill the requirements of the major announcement Jesus made in John 20:23.

Second: the apodosis ("then" part) of the above statement corresponds to the protasis ("if" part) in John 20:23: "If we forgive your sins, then they are forgiven." There is no precondition to forgiveness in this statement. The if-then statement of the "declaration" version of the gospel

39 Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 3 vols. (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1963; original publication date, 1685), III:381; emphasis added.

message is not the if-then statement found in John 20:23.

Third: the statement, "We 'declare' your sins are forgiven," hardly equals the force of "We forgive your sins," which is what the language of John 20:23 clearly presumes.⁴⁰ I suggest that this is a fatal objection.⁴¹

40 Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, V:735, has this remark about Peter the Lombard (died c. 1164): "The year 1200 marks the dividing line between opinions differing most widely on the meaning of the priest's absolution. Peter the Lombard represented the prevailing view of the earlier period when he pronounced the absolution, a declarative announcement. Alexander of Hales represented the later period, when he pronounced it a judicial sentence. According to Peter [the Lombard], God alone remits sins. It was the Lord who restored the lepers to health, not the priests to whom he sent them [Matt. 8:1-4; Mark 1:40-44; et al.]. They did nothing more than bear witness to the healthy condition of the lepers. The priest's prerogative is ended when he 'shows or declares those who are bound and those who are loosed.'" Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, IV:398, agrees with this analogy and makes it an argument in favor of the traditional Protestant interpretation. However, there is no analogy between what the disciples were told in John 20:23 they could now do and what the OT priests were told to do. The authority of the OT priests was explicitly defined as "pronouncing" clean or unclean (Lev. 13:3, 6; 14:7; et al.). The disciples were told they could forgive or retain sins. For there to be an analogy here, the priests would have to have been told they could make a person clean or make him unclean.

41 Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, IV:398, raises an interesting point: "The language of the Old Testament Scripture shows conclusively, that the Prophets were said to 'DO' things, when they 'DECLARED' them about to be done.' Thus Jeremiah's commission runs in these words, 'I have this day set thee over the nations, and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant,' (Jer. i:10.) This can only mean to *declare* the rooting out and pulling down, etc.--So also Ezekiel says, 'I came to destroy the city' (Ezek. xliii.3;) where the marginal reading is, 'I came to prophesy the city should be destroyed.' The Apostles were doubtless well acquainted with prophetic language, and I believe they interpreted our Lord's words in this place accordingly." This much is true: Jeremiah is told that he will destroy nations but what he is actually being commissioned by God to do is to proclaim such destruction. However, the two situations are not really analogous. For centuries God raised up prophets to declare the revelatory word of the Lord. Often this word was a prediction of judgment or restoration. Thus it was natural that the literary device used in the case of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (if the MT reading is accepted) would on occasion be employed. However, the disciples were not being sent out as prophets. For the analogy to work, a revelation from God would need to be received by an apostle for him to know whose sins to declare

The Rabbinic Background

The Rabbinic concept of binding and loosing is presented under the discussion of Matthew 16:19 in chapter 11. There it was noted that the Hebrew terms אָסַר (*āsar*, to bind) and הִתִּיר (*hittîr*, to loose) were used in two different senses by the rabbis, representing two different types of power assumed by them: a **legislative power** and a **judicial power**. The words were more commonly used in the first sense, the second sense less often but nonetheless attested. To summarize:

- Characteristics of the Rabbinic legislative power of binding and loosing:
 - objects: **acts or things**
 - action: prohibiting [binding] or permitting [loosing] them

- Characteristics of the Rabbinic judicial power of condemning and absolving [from binding and loosing, respectively]:
 - objects: **people**
 - action: imposing [condemning] or removing [absolving] a ban from the congregation

The interpretation of the power of binding and loosing in Matthew 16:19 proposed in chapter 11 included these particulars:

- The power of binding and loosing was committed to

forgiven or retained. However, there is no indication in the context that a revelatory word from the Lord would come to the apostles every time God wanted them to declare the sins of a specific individual or group of people had been forgiven. Even if this might be demonstrated for the apostles, it certainly would not apply to the church as a whole throughout the centuries. The church is not now receiving revelation from the Lord. Finally, there was no "whosoever" or "if" in the prophetic word. Neither Jeremiah, Ezekiel, nor any other prophet was given authority by the Lord to say this: "If you speak the word to destroy a nation, then it will be destroyed."

the apostles alone.

- The power of binding and loosing conferred on the apostles by Jesus might have consisted of the authority to make legislative decisions, the authority to impose or remove the ban on individuals (expelling from or receiving back into the congregation), or both. Since the apostles did make both types of decisions, perhaps the best conclusion is that Jesus incorporated both Rabbinic senses in his conferral.
- However this power is defined, it was a power exercised by apostolic authority under the infallible influence of the Holy Spirit and therefore wholly consistent with the demand of the periphrastic future perfect passive verbs.

Very likely the Rabbinic use of "binding and loosing" in some way stands behind the authority granted by Jesus in John 20:23 to remit and retain sins as it did behind the authority granted in Matt. 16:19. In fact, many scholars, in addition to the Roman Catholic Church, tie the two passages together.⁴² Some even take the power granted in the two passages to be identical.⁴³ The view taken here does not propose a direct link between them, and it does not take the two powers to be the same. Nevertheless, whatever interpretation is finally proposed, it must be based on the historical context in which Jesus spoke the words. As Edersheim cautioned with regard to Matthew 16:19, he similarly cautions here: "we must first inquire what idea it would convey to those to whom Christ spoke the words."⁴⁴

In the view proposed here, the terms "remit" and "retain" reflect the second, lesser used sense of terms אָסַר (*āsar*, to bind) and הִתִּיר (*hittîr*, to loose), namely, the judicial

42 For example, Protestant: Alford, *The Greek Testament*, I:174, 188, 910; Catholic: Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, II:1039-41. In fact, Brown, being of the critical school, suggests that Matthew's two statements in 16:19 and 18:18 are actually post-resurrectional statements.

43 Both Büchsel, "δεω (λυω)," *TDNT*, II:61, and Menoud, "Binding and Loosing," *IDB*, I:438-39 appear to take the two passages as completely parallel.

44 Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, II:645.

sense involving the ban. However, the "ban" is of a different nature than the one assumed in the discussion of Matthew 16:19.

A Proposed Interpretation

As was the case with John 20:22, the interpretation of verse 23 cannot be made without recourse to Luke 24:44-49.⁴⁵ Ryle cites Lightfoot's view as follows:

Lightfoot thinks that, in interpreting these words, we must carefully remember that they were probably spoken in close connection with our Lord's words in St. Luke, when He says that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name, beginning at Jerusalem." (Luke xxiv.46.) He thinks that on hearing these words, scruples might arise in the Apostles' minds: "Is this so indeed? Must remission of sin be really preached in Jerusalem to men stained with Messiah's blood?" And then he thinks these words are spoken to encourage them. "Yes: you are to begin at Jerusalem. For whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them." Finally, Lightfoot asks, with much sense, "On what foundation and with what confidence could the Apostles have preached remission of sins to such wretched men as the murderers of their Lord, unless authorized by a peculiar commission granted by the Lord Himself?"⁴⁶

Lightfoot's first point is correct: the statement by Jesus in John 20:23 must be connected with his command in Luke 24:45-47. However, he goes in the wrong direction by attributing certain "scruples" to the apostles about which neither text gives any hint.

45 Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, II:1041-42, claims that "harmonization is a poor way to solve the problem of the Johannine meaning of the power to forgive [sins]." On the contrary, harmonization, that is, the use of parallel passages such as Luke 24:44-49 to help discover an author's original intent, is a hermeneutical principle of long standing among conservative scholars. Moreover, this principle makes perfect sense on the assumption that the Bible is the revelation of God without error. It may seem to be a "poor" way to interpret a passage to a liberal critic when he sees no problem concluding that the various writers of Scripture contradict each other.

46 Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, IV:402.

What then is the relationship between these two statements of Jesus? Note how they are verbally linked:

23 If you forgive the sins of any, *their sins* have been forgiven them; if you retain the *sins* of any, they have been retained.

45 Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

In Luke's account, Jesus ordered the disciples to preach the "forgiveness of sins" to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem; in John's account, he stated that if they "forgive the sins" of any classes or groups of people, those sins are forgiven. The vital connection is between preaching forgiveness of sins and forgiving sins.

Tenney comes close to the most likely interpretation of John 20:23:

All who proclaim the gospel are in effect forgiving or not forgiving sins, depending on whether the hearer accepts or rejects the Lord Jesus as the Sin-bearer.⁴⁷

The clause, "If you forgive the sins of any" simply cannot be interpreted as meaning, "If you declare forgiven the sins of any." The language requires that the disciples in some way actually forgive sins, not simply declare them forgiven. The view proposed here satisfies this requirement. Preaching the gospel results in forgiveness of sins. Therefore, those who preach this gospel "in effect," as Tenney says, forgive sins in that by preaching they bring that forgiveness about. Whereas Luke 24:47 portrays the orders given by Jesus in terms of a **call to action** (to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins), John 20:23 describes the same activity in terms of **results**

47 Tenney, *The Gospel of John*, p. 193. Note also Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 118: "This [action in John 20:23] cannot be understood as the exercise of an arbitrary authority; it is the inevitable issue of witnessing to the Kingdom of God. It is furthermore an authority exercised not by Peter but by all the disciples--the church."

(if you forgive the sins of those nations, their sins are forgiven).

However, in attempting to explain the part of the verse about retaining sins, Tenney perhaps misses the point. The language of John 20:23 indicates that it is the disciples by their action who forgive or retain sins, not the hearers by accepting or rejecting the gospel. Moreover, as pointed out in the section on grammar, the pronouns are plural. An abstract group is referenced. Therefore, whether or not sins are forgiven or retained does not "depend on whether the hearer [singular] accepts or rejects the Lord." I propose instead that the groups referenced are those in various specific geographical areas. This is suggested by the phrase, "beginning from Jerusalem" and eventually extending to "all the nations" in Luke 24:47. If the disciples go into a particular area to preach the gospel--Jerusalem, Judah, Samaria, or the ends of the earth⁴⁸--they "**in effect**" forgive sins of those in that area; if they do not go into an area, they "**in effect**" retain the sins of those in that area.

Moreover, since it is the Lord himself who has led the church throughout the centuries into the areas to which he wanted the gospel carried, the perfect passive tense of the verbs is easy to explain: those sins the church remits by preaching the gospel in a certain area to a certain group of people have already been forgiven by God because he directed the church into that area in the first place. A similar statement could be made about the retaining clause. It is God who ultimately makes the decisions about whose sins are to be remitted and whose are to be retained as he directs the expansion of the church into new areas.⁴⁹

48 Acts 1:8.

49 Acts 16:6 gives an example of the Holy Spirit forbidding Paul to preach in the province of Asia, at least for the time being. According to F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 310, Paul's original plan was probably to go on to the capital of that province, Ephesus. Paul was later allowed to preach at Ephesus in Acts 18:19-28. Since the eventual goal was to "all the nations," there seems to be no necessary reason to suppose that the second part of John 20:23 about retaining sins is equal in likelihood or desirability as the first part about remitting sins. It is simply completing the statement about how the disciples forgive sins: "on the other hand," so the thought might go, "they retain the sins of those areas in which they do not preach, and it remains thus unless and until such time as they do enter those areas and preach." This explanation seems to fulfill the reasonable requirement placed on any interpretation of John 20:23 by Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 849: whatever interpretation is given for the first part of

John 20:23 can therefore be interpreted as follows:

*[Preach in his name "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" "to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."]. If you [members of the church] forgive the sins of any [geographical or national group of people **by preaching this gospel to them**], then they have already been forgiven to them; if you [members of the church] retain the sins of any [geographical or national group of people **by not preaching this gospel to them**], then they have already been retained [until such time as you carry the gospel to them].*

Toward Resolving the Difficulties

The view presented here has the advantage of not interpreting the strong statement of John 20:23, "If you forgive the sins of any, then they are [or have been] forgiven," by a weak statement, namely, a mere declaration of sins forgiven predicated on a true response of faith: "If you truly believe, then I declare your sins are forgiven." Instead, like the Roman Catholic view, it interprets the two statements in John 20:23 in their natural sense, namely, that forgiving and retaining sins are the acts of those to whom Jesus spoke, while at the same time avoiding the numerous problems associated with the Catholic view.

Despite that advantage, at the beginning of this discussion of John 20:23, it was stated that no view is without its difficulties. Hopefully, the view presented here has perhaps the fewest difficulties, but those that do exist must now be addressed.

Artificial and Unnatural

Although this view retains the strong, natural sense that the church could now forgive sins rather than simply "declare" them to be forgiven, it nevertheless still sounds a bit artificial and unnatural to claim that the

the verse must be "on all fours" with the interpretation of the second part. Whatever is said about remitting sin must be said about retaining sin. "The one goes with the other."

church forgives sins by preaching the gospel.

But there is a legitimate distinction, often made in theology, between mediate and immediate causes.⁵⁰ Consider the example of rowing a boat. The immediate cause of the boat's motion is the action of the oar on the water, while the mediate cause is the rower himself. Similarly, at the "class," "group," or "national" level, it is God by his providential direction of the spread of the gospel who ultimately forgives sin: his decisions, not man's or the church's, is the mediate cause of forgiveness.⁵¹ However, he acts by means of an intervening cause: he uses the preaching of his people to that "class," "group," or "nation" as the instrument to effect their forgiveness.⁵² Thus the intervening or immediate cause of forgiveness is the action of preaching by the church.

Therefore, on this interpretation of John 20:23, Jesus told the disciples what would be the *immediate cause* of forgiveness: **THEY** would forgive sin through preaching "repentance for forgiveness of sins" "to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem." This is a significant, non-trivial announcement for Jesus to make to his Messianic community.

Unrelated to the Rabbinic Background

But there is a relationship. As pointed out above in the section, "The Rabbinic Background," the words, אָסַר (*āsar*, to bind) and הִתִּיר (*hittîr*, to loose), were used in two different senses by the rabbis:

The more frequently used sense:

50 Sometimes other terms are used for mediate/immediate causes. One also finds the terms primary/secondary and efficient/instrumental causes.

51 At the individual level, God forgives sin by accepting a true response of repentance and faith. What is claimed here is that at the class, group, or national level, God forgives sin by directing the preaching of the gospel to that class, group, or nation.

52 In the case of preaching to an individual, the apodosis ("then" part) of John 20:23 is not guaranteed by the promise in this verse, whereas it is in the case of "nations" in view of the perfect tense of ἀφεωνται.

אָסַר (*āsar, to bind*): to prohibit some action

הִתִּיר (*hittîr, to loose*): to permit some action

The less frequently used sense, but attested:

אָסַר (*āsar, to bind*): to impose a ban =
to expel from the congregation

הִתִּיר (*hittîr, to loose*): to remove a ban =
to receive back in
the congregation

The two uses of these terms represented two distinct powers assumed by the rabbis. They did not believe they had the power to forgive sin, but this secondary power of imposing or removing a ban is related to sin. As Edersheim explained, "By the second [assumed power], they 'remitted' or 'retained,' declared a person free from, or liable to punishment, to compensation, or to sacrifice."⁵³ These decisions would determine whether a ban on that person was imposed or removed. Thus we arrive at a use of these Hebrew (or equivalent Aramaic) terms that come very close to the two Greek words ἀφιῆμι (*aphiēmi, to remit*) and κρατέω (*krateō, to retain*).

Therefore, while still retaining the connection with sin, what Jesus did in John 20:23 was to elevate the "ban" from individual cases in local congregations, as might be in view in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18, to a geo-national level. By preaching the gospel in a certain area to a certain group of people, the church forgave sins, thus admitting many from that group to the Messianic community. By not preaching the gospel in a certain area to a certain group of people, the church retained sins, and none from that group would be admitted to the Messianic community.

No Special Authority Needed

John 20:23 certainly gives the impression that Jesus has granted some sort of special authority or power to the Messianic community that it did not have before. But why is there a need for some special authority or power simply

53 Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, II:85.

to carry and preach the gospel "to all the nations"?

The answer is found in the fact that Jesus here is giving the church a commission, a commission to preach the gospel "to all the nations" during the interadvent period. Earlier, when preaching the "gospel of the kingdom," the disciples had been specifically told, "Do not go in *the* way of *the* Gentiles, and do not enter *any* city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."⁵⁴ Moreover, the message to preach had now been expanded to include the death and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, the disciples did indeed need new authority to preach the new message "to all the nations." While the rabbis had presumptuously assumed⁵⁵ the power of the ban, Jesus specifically authorizes the church to carry out an analogous, though broader, task.

No Connection between Verses 22 and 23

Are the interpretations of verses 22 and 23 as proposed in this chapter and chapter 12 connected? Is there some discernible flow of thought from 22 to 23?

Verse 22 was interpreted in terms of Luke 24:44-47:

22 And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, *their sins* have been forgiven them; if you retain the *sins* of any, they have been retained."

44 Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

54 Matt. 10:5-6.

55 Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, II:85, calls both the legislative and judicial powers assumed by the rabbis "pretensions."

Two separate and distinct empowering works of the Holy Spirit were required before the church could fulfill the commission Jesus gives her.

First, Jesus in John 20:22 confers the Holy Spirit to empower the disciples to understand Messianic prophecy, especially its core truth that the Messiah must first suffer and make atonement for sins before entering into his glory. Clearly, understanding this twofold Messianic mission was an absolute prerequisite to the soon-to-begin preaching of "repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed...**beginning from Jerusalem**."⁵⁶ Therein lies the connection between verse 22 and verse 23: Jesus confers the empowering Holy Spirit to open the minds of the disciples (verse 22) so that they could then remit the sins, not only of Jerusalem, but also of "all the nations" by preaching this gospel of "repentance and forgiveness of sins" (verse 23).

Second, Jesus in Acts 2 confers the Holy Spirit to empower the disciples to carry out the actual act of preaching (remitting sins).

Comfort to Roman Catholics and Former Roman Catholics

I have had a former Roman Catholic friend express concern, one would even have to call it worry, over this verse in John 20:23. Could her sins still be forgiven outside the Catholic Church? It would perhaps help allay such fears to close this study of John 20:21-23 with an encouraging comment from J. C. Ryle:

Whatever sense we place on the words, let us beware that we do not give to ministers, of any name or denomination, a place, power, authority, position, or privilege, which Christ never gave them. Putting ministers out of their proper place has been the root of endless superstition and corruption in Christ's Church. To regard ministers as mediators

56 There are several examples in the Acts and the epistles where these insights into Messianic prophecy were explicitly presented: Acts 2:14-39; 3:11-26; 7:37; 8:30-35; 13:26-41; 18:27, 28; 26:22, 23; 1 Pet. 1:10-12.

between Christ and the soul, to confess to them privately and receive private absolution from them, is a system for which there is no authority in the New Testament, and the high road to every kind of evil. It is a system equally mischievous to ministers and to people, utterly subversive of the Gospel, and thoroughly dishonoring to the priestly office of Christ.⁵⁷

57 Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, IV:403.