

February 2020

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CAN MINISTERS FORGIVE SINS?

Some time ago I received a Bible question, which goes as follows:

Can you please explain **John 20:22-23**. Firstly, how could they possibly have received the holy spirit in verse 22 when this was clearly still **before Pentecost**? Secondly, how could they possibly have been given **the power to forgive sins** and also the power to withhold such forgiveness?

Those are valid questions. So let's look at these two verses.

And when He had said this, **He breathed on them**, and said unto them, **Receive you the holy spirit**: Whose soever sins you remit, they are remitted unto them; *and* whose soever *sins* you retain, they are retained. (John 20:22-23)

The answers to these questions are going to be a bit on the technical side, something that unfortunately I cannot avoid. To understand these verses correctly, we have to understand some basics about biblical Greek, the language in which these two verses were originally written.

A COMMON DIFFICULTY WITH TRANSLATIONS

The more similar in their origins two languages are, the easier it is to translate something correctly from the one into the other. The more dissimilar two languages are, the more challenges may be encountered in the process of translating from one to the other.

Now while the English language has absorbed many words from the Greek language, these two languages are in fact rather different from one another. These two languages are built on different ways of expressing our thoughts and ideas. English is a syntactic language and Greek is an inflective language, meaning that these two languages use different ways of conveying information, based on **different ways of thinking**. Our verses here express one example which illustrates this difference between Greek and English.

Biblical Greek has a relatively small vocabulary, only about 5,600 different words in all. However, where this small number of words may seem to be a limiting factor, this is vastly enhanced by the scope that was built into **the verbs** and how they can be used. The verbs in biblical Greek are frequently used to express concepts for which we don't have direct counterparts in our English syntactic language.

So whenever a biblical Greek verb expresses something for which there is no direct equivalent in the English language, then all that the translators can do is to render this verb into English as they think it should best be expressed. In the process it can happen that sometimes a certain amount of inaccuracy is created by such a translation, simply because in English we don't readily have **the concept** that the Greek verb is actually expressing.

To be specific:

In biblical Greek every verb has the potential to express **three** different things: a verb has "**a voice**", "**a**

tense" and "**a mood**".

In English we are familiar with "two voices", the active voice and the passive voice. But in biblical Greek there are **three voices**: the active voice, the passive voice and **the middle voice**. In English we don't really have a middle voice, though we can generally express this fairly easily. This "middle voice" often, but not always, indicates the subject performing an action upon himself, i.e. a reflexive action, as in the statement "the man washed himself".

(In biblical Greek two of these three voices, the middle voice and the passive voice, are then further affected by the "middle deponent" and the "passive deponent". Deponent verbs are usually verbs that don't have an active form.)

Next, in English we are familiar with **three** tenses, the present, past and future ... and a number of variations on these three tenses. But in biblical Greek there is **a fourth tense**, "the aorist tense", which has a further grammatical variation known as "second aorist tense".

This aorist tense represents a concept we just don't have in English.

The aorist tense is characterized by its emphasis on punctilious action, i.e. action marked by precise exact accordance with details, but the concept of the verb is considered **without regard for past, present or future time!** There is no direct or clear English language equivalent for this tense.

In plain terms: **sometimes** we should translate an aorist tense verb with the **present tense**, **sometimes** we should translate the same aorist tense verb with the **past tense**, and **sometimes** we should translate that same aorist tense verb with the **future tense**.

It is the context, rather than the aorist tense verb itself, that makes clear whether we should translate it into English with the present tense or the past tense or the future tense.

And that's where potential problems come in!

If one translator believes the statement applies to the present, then that translator will translate that specific aorist tense verb with the present tense. But if another translator understands the statement to apply to the past or to the future, then that particular translator will translate that very same aorist tense verb in that specific Scripture with the past tense or the future tense.

The translator's own personal understanding of the whole context is **the deciding factor** for translating a specific aorist tense verb into English with the present, past or future tense. It follows that if a translator does not have a correct understanding of the Scriptures he is translating, then there will also be the risk that **he may translate an aorist tense verb with the wrong tense into English**.

So when in a specific New Testament verse a Greek verb uses one of the two aorist tenses, then **a translator is forced to choose a tense for the English verb**, even though in Greek there is actually no emphasis at all on the tense; the emphasis in Greek is on exactness and on preciseness, without regard to the "when", because it is assumed that the "when" will be correctly understood from the whole context.

Most translations will generally render the aorist tense into English as the simple past tense, which will be good enough in most cases, though this may create a wrong picture in some instances. For example, the aorist tense may have been rendered into the English past tense in a context where **the future tense** is in fact obvious in the original context.

The original writer (i.e. Paul or Peter, etc.) simply chose in this specific context not to emphasize the

timing of this future event. Rather, the writer (i.e. Paul, etc.) instead chose to emphasize precision and exactness. And because the English language translator didn't really understand what Paul (or another writer) was saying, therefore he chose a wrong English language tense for the Greek aorist tense verb.

Next, Greek verbs also express what we may call "**a mood**". Examples of different "moods" of biblical Greek verbs are: indicative, subjunctive, imperative, infinitive, participle, impersonal and optative. By using these different "moods" the verbs are again conveying clear and specific meanings in the original Greek text. Thus, "the imperative mood" conveys a command, while "the indicative mood" is a simple statement of fact, etc.

Of special interest in our context is "**the subjunctive mood**", which was used in biblical Greek to express **possibility and potentiality**.

An action stated in the subjunctive mood **may or may not occur, depending upon circumstances**. Sometimes it is difficult for a translation into English to capture this atmosphere of possibility that is inherent in the subjunctive mood. While we can certainly express this sense of possibility in English (by using auxiliary verbs like "may" and "could", etc.), many Bible translators have not really conveyed this sense of the Greek subjunctive mood in a consistent way in their English language translations of the New Testament.

In plain language: translators have sometimes expressed the sense of the subjunctive mood correctly, while in other places ignoring it, and translating a subjunctive mood verb as if it was nothing more than an indicative mood verb. When that has happened, then something of the originally intended meaning has been lost.

These comments are very general and obviously an oversimplified discussion of these grammatical features of biblical Greek. But with this limited background we should now be ready to look at John 20:22-23, and we should be able to understand what Jesus Christ was actually saying in these verses.

(COMMENT: While it has nothing to do with this present subject, we might note that **biblical Hebrew** is also an inflective language. And while biblical Hebrew verbs do not have one tense specifically dedicated to function like the Greek aorist tense, in biblical Hebrew certain tenses nevertheless do have the ability to express the present, past or future, depending on the context. So for all practical purposes biblical Hebrew is familiar with "the aorist tense way of thinking" found in biblical Greek. The point here is that the Jewish authors of the books of the New Testament, based on their own background in Hebrew, had a good understanding regarding the use of the Greek aorist tenses. This concept was not at all foreign to them, as it is to us English language speakers.)

JOHN 20:22-23 EXAMINED

Here is the text of these verses again:

And when He had said this, He breathed on *them*, and said unto them, **Receive you** the holy spirit: Whose soever sins you remit, they are remitted unto them; *and* whose soever *sins* you retain, they are retained. (John 20:22-23)

The verb translated as "**receive you**" in verse 22 is "**labete**", which is the active voice, second aorist tense and imperative mood of the verb "lambano", which verb means "to receive, take, catch, have". The use of **the second aorist tense** here is the key.

Jesus Christ was **not** saying: "you shall receive **right now** the holy spirit"! Christ was emphasizing **what** was going to happen, **without** in this specific context actually stating **when** this would happen. This is

the way the two aorist tenses function. And so by looking elsewhere in the Bible, we can know quite clearly **when** this event referred to here would happen, namely at Pentecost.

For example, in Acts 1:8, which was also after Jesus Christ's resurrection, Jesus Christ said the following:

But **you shall receive** power, after that the holy spirit is come upon you: and you shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

In Acts 1:8 the verb translated as "you shall receive" is "**lepesthe**" in the Received Text, and this is the middle deponent voice (basically similar to the active voice for us in English), future tense and indicative mood of the same verb "lambano". So here Jesus Christ very clearly used **the future tense**.

Now both, John 20:22 and Acts 1:8, apply to a time after Christ's resurrection and before the Day of Pentecost that year. In John 20:22 John recorded Christ using the second **aorist tense** to emphasize **what** would happen; and in Acts 1:8 Luke recorded Jesus Christ using the **future tense** to emphasize **when** this would happen.

While it was easy for the translators to translate the future tense correctly in Acts 1:8, they made a mistake in John 20:22 by translating the second aorist tense into English as the present tense. **That was a mistake!** The aorist tense verb in John 20:22 should really also have been rendered into English with the future tense.

So the English translation of John 20:22 really should read:

"... you shall receive the holy spirit".

Now let's look at verse 23.

JOHN 20:23

This verse reads:

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

The Greek verb here translated as "you remit" is "**aphete**", the second aorist tense, active voice and **subjunctive** mood of the verb "aphiemi", which verb means "to leave, to forsake, to forgive", etc.

The Greek verb here translated as "you retain" is "**kratete**", the present tense, active voice and **subjunctive** mood of the verb "krateo", which verb means "to hold, take, lay hold on", etc.

The key here is the use of the subjunctive mood with both these verbs.

This is an example where the majority of translators did not at all convey the meaning of the subjunctive mood in their translation, instead choosing to render both Greek subjunctive mood verbs as if they were used in the indicative mood.

As pointed out above in the brief discussion of the subjunctive mood, Jesus Christ was here speaking

about **the potential** or **the possibility** for them "to forgive" or "to leave behind" the sins of people.

There are some translators who have made an effort to capture the sense of the subjunctive mood in this verse. So, for example, in Young's Literal Translation John 20:23 is rendered as follows:

If of any you may loose the sins, they are loosed to them; if of any you may retain, they have been retained. (John 20:23, YLT)

Young's translation has tried to capture this sense of possibility for the subjunctive mood, by use of the expression "if ... **may**" for both verbs.

And in Green's Literal Translation John 20:23 is rendered as follows:

Of whomever you forgive the sins, they are forgiven to them. Or whomever you **may** retain, they are retained. (John 20:23, LIT)

While Green implies an unconditional statement in the first part of this verse, he has acknowledged the **conditional** aspect of the subjunctive mood in the second part of the verse by using the expression "you **may** retain".

When we understand the subjunctive mood correctly, then we should understand that in these verses Jesus Christ was saying the following:

- 1) In John 20:22 Jesus Christ focussed on **what** would happen to them in the near future. They would receive **power** in the form of the holy spirit.
- 2) This power would **enable them to do something** not possible without access to that power. This power would give them **the potential** to make possible the forgiveness of other people's sins. Here is how that would work.
- 3) The power of the holy spirit would enable them **to discern** who is truly repentant and who is not really repentant!
- 4) This ability to discern true repentance correctly would give them **the potential** to announce to **people whom they baptized** that their sins had indeed been forgiven **by God**, and to withhold such an announcement from people whom **they discerned** were not really repentant, and whom they therefore did not baptize. People who do not have the holy spirit also do not have the ability to discern true repentance.

[COMMENT]: This was a major contributor to the breakup of the Church after Mr. Armstrong's death. Back in the 50's and 60's some unrepentant men managed to get themselves baptized and then ordained into the ministry, mostly because they were reasonably good speakers. Because they were still unrepentant, **they did not receive the holy spirit**, and so they were unconverted throughout their entire time in the ministry.

But once they were in the ministry, they then had **the power to baptize other people**. But since they themselves did not have God's spirit, therefore it was really **impossible for them to discern true repentance**. So they went on baptizing sprees, with the result that some of the people they baptized were indeed truly repentant, but many other people they baptized were just as unrepentant as these ministers themselves. And some of the unrepentant people baptized by the unrepentant ministers went on to themselves also being ordained into the ministry. The process just compounded itself.

By the 1970's Mr. Armstrong understood this, and so he would repeatedly openly say that he hoped that "at least 50% of the membership was converted" ... because he realized that unconverted people were being baptized. Privately Mr. Armstrong questioned whether even 20% of the membership was truly converted. This means that Mr. Armstrong publicly acknowledged that around 50% of church members were very likely still unrepentant, and privately he feared that this number might be as high as 80%.

After Mr. Armstrong's death and under the new administration in the Church far in excess of 50% of the baptized church members walked away from the true teachings of God. This proved that Mr. Armstrong's fear had been correct, because if they had been "of us", then they would not have left God's truth (see 1 John 2:19).

But it all started with unrepentant men getting into the ministry, and then baptizing large numbers of other unrepentant people.

Unrepentant ministers don't understand what real repentance is. They thought that repentance is equal to keeping the Sabbath and the Holy Days, tithing and not eating unclean meats. Add to that a few other things, like not smoking, etc. If people complied with these things, then they baptized the people.

But **none of these things are proof of repentance**. Repentance has to do with changing the way we use our minds, establishing a different way of thinking in our minds. And ministers who themselves did not have God's spirit were incapable of discerning whether someone had a truly repentant attitude, or whether that person had simply accepted a set of doctrines. Even carnal people are capable of practicing certain true doctrines. Real repentance, while obviously accepting all of the true teachings, has to focus on how we use our minds. But let's continue with our subject.]

5) The use of the second **aorist tense** for the first statement in verse 23 (i.e. "you remit") also shows that Christ was emphasizing **what** the holy spirit would enable them to do **without focussing on when** they would be able to do this.

6) **The purpose** for this "ability to forgive and to retain sins" was so that they would be able **to correctly deal with people who came to them for baptism!**

Likewise, today a minister will typically say to a repentant person whom he has just baptized words to this effect: "On the authority of Jesus Christ I can now tell you that all your past sins have been forgiven" ... **a direct application of John 20:23**.

An example of using this discernment **to retain** a person's sins is found in Acts chapter 8, where the Apostle Peter was speaking to Simon Magus and Peter said:

Repent therefore of this your wickedness ... for I perceive that you are in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity (Acts 8:22-23).

Through the power of the holy spirit Peter could very clearly **perceive** that Simon Magus was unrepentant and even bitter, and that his heart was not right with God; **and therefore** "his sins would be retained", even though Simon Magus had managed to get himself baptized.

EXAMINING THE CONTEXT OF THESE VERSES

John 20:22-23 is something Jesus Christ said to His disciples after His resurrection. The way John has organized his gospel account, this is **one of the last instructions Jesus Christ gave to all of His**

disciples, even though there is another whole chapter that discusses one specific event after this instruction (i.e. John 21).

It is really the parallel of Christ's last instruction to the group as recorded in Matthew's account, where Matthew wrote:

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, **All power is given unto Me** in heaven and in earth. Go you therefore, and teach all nations all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, *even* unto the end of the age. Amen. (Matthew 28:18-20)

[**Comment:** The correct text for Matthew 28:19-20 is thoroughly discussed in my July 2015 article "Our Trinitarian Baptism Formula". The words "baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy spirit, teaching them to observe" should **not** be a part of these verses. My article provides extensive proof that these words were deviously added to this chapter.]

Here Jesus Christ started out by referring to **the power** He had and then proceeded to give them a specific command. We have the same thing in John 20:22-23. They were going to receive some of this **power** in the near future, and then they were to make use of this power in fulfilling this command to go and teach all nations.

One of the consequences of such preaching would be that some will "believe" the truth. In this regard Mark recorded this incident as follows:

He that believes and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believes not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues. (Mark 16:16-17)

Those who believe need to be baptized. And when faced with requests for baptism from people who had heard their preaching, then the holy spirit would enable them to discern **who** they should baptize (i.e. "whose sins they therefore should pronounce forgiven") and who they should **not** baptize (i.e. "whose sins they should retain").

The use of the subjunctive mood in John 20:23 also makes **allowance for them to not be infallible** in this regard, but to on occasion make mistakes. Thus Philip made the mistake of baptizing the clearly unrepentant Simon Magus in Acts 8:13, and most of us ministers ever since then have likewise made "some mistakes" with unrepentant people whom we have baptized ... we have not always correctly discerned a lack of true repentance in such people.

John 20:23 should be seen as a companion verse to Mark 16:16-17, **to baptize repentant people**. John 20:23 is **not** some arbitrary conferral of authority to forgive or to retain sins in general.

It is a conferral of an ability that would enable them to correctly counsel people for baptism and to then **correctly discern** who should be baptized, and who should not be baptized. **The act of baptism is a clear statement that sins have been forgiven** (see Acts 2:38); the withholding of baptism is a **statement that sins are still being "retained"**. And the holy spirit enables ministers to make the correct decisions in this regard.

So to answer our original questions:

No, Jesus Christ was not saying that the disciples would receive the holy spirit right then in John 20:22. That is simply a wrong translation of the Greek text. The disciples only received the holy spirit on the Day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2, and a correct translation of the aorist tense verb in John 20:22 is in full

agreement with this.

And the statements about "remitting" or "retaining" sins are a reference to **authority to baptize repentant people**. It is not a matter of deciding on whose sins to forgive and whose sins not to forgive. It is a matter of the holy spirit empowering those apostles **to discern** which people were truly repentant and who should therefore be baptized; and which people were not repentant and who therefore should not be baptized. Sins being forgiven or not forgiven is **a consequence** to being repentant and then baptized, or unrepentant and then being refused baptism.

That is how the Apostle Peter understood this. And that is why Peter said: "repent and **be baptized** every one of you ... **for the remission of sins**" (Acts 2:38). This is a direct reference to "**whose soever sins you remit, they are remitted unto them**".

As already mentioned, the evangelist Philip did not have this discernment, and he baptized the unrepentant Simon Magus (see Acts 8:13). The Apostle Peter, on the other hand, did have this discernment and he told Simon Magus "your money perish with you ... you are in the gall of bitterness" (see Acts 8:20-23). In modern language, Peter basically told Simon Magus: you're carnal, bitter and unrepentant, and you have no part in God's Church.

Peter had real discernment. And he "retained" Simon Magus's sins.

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