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JOHN 20:22-23 EXPLAINED

The other day 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?

Let's look at these two verses.

And when he had said this, he breathed on *them*, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; *and* whose soever *sins* ye retain, they are retained. (John 20:22-23 AV)

To understand these verses correctly, we have to understand something 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 from the one into the other. The more dissimilar two languages are, the more difficulties may be encountered in the process of translating from one to the other.

Now biblical Greek has a relatively small vocabulary, only about 5600 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 that we simply don't have in the English language. So whenever a Greek verb expresses something for which there is really no 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 IS INEVITABLE that a certain amount of inaccuracy is at times created by the translation ... since in English we simply don't have THE CONCEPT that the Greek verb is actually expressing.

To be more specific:

In biblical Greek every verb has the potential to express THREE different things: the 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" indicates the subject performing an action upon himself, i.e. a reflexive action (e.g. the man washed himself). In biblical Greek these three tenses are then further broken down into "middle deponent" and "passive deponent".

In English we are familiar with THREE tenses, the present, past and future ... and variations on these three tenses. But in biblical Greek there is a FOURTH tense, "the aorist tense", which further has a grammatical variation known as "second aorist tense". This is also 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 equivalent for this tense. This means that when 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 on the tense at all ... the emphasis in Greek is on exactness and on preciseness without regard to the "when". 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 is also likely to create a wrong picture in some instances. For example, the aorist tense may be rendered into the English past tense in a context where THE FUTURE TENSE is in fact obvious in the original context, but the speaker simply chose not to emphasize the timing of this future event ... the speaker instead chose to emphasize precision and exactness.

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 very clear and specific meanings. Thus, "the imperative mood" conveys a command, while "the indicative mood" is a simple statement of fact.

Of special interest 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. It is difficult for a translation to capture this atmosphere of possibility that is inherent in the subjunctive mood ... in English we say something either "did or didn't occur", something "will or will not happen", something "is or isn't true", etc. ... and we lose the meaning of THE POSSIBILITY of something happening, depending upon circumstances, which is inherent in Greek verbs used with the subjunctive mood.

With this somewhat simplified background we are now ready to look at John 20:22-23.

JOHN 20:22-23 EXAMINED

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 actually stating WHEN this would happen. This is what the two aorist tenses convey. By looking elsewhere in the Bible, we know quite clearly WHEN this event referred to here would happen ... at Pentecost.

Thus in Acts 1:8 Jesus Christ said the following:

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye 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 AV)

In this verse the verb translated as "you shall receive" is "lepesthe" in the Received Text and this is the middle deponent voice (basically like 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, are at a time after Christ's resurrection and before the Day of Pentecost that year. In John 20:22 Christ used the second aorist tense to emphasize WHAT would happen, and in Acts 1:8 He used 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 ... it should really also have been rendered into the future tense in this specific verse.

So in English John 20:22 really should read: "... you shall receive the Holy Spirit".

Now let's look at verse 23.

John 20:23 reads:

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

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.

As pointed out above in the brief discussion of this mood, Jesus Christ was here speaking about THE POTENTIAL or THE POSSIBILITY for them "to forgive" or "to leave behind" the sins of people.

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 of the subjunctive mood by use of the expression "IF you MAY loose the sins".

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.

3) It 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 that their sins had indeed been forgiven BY GOD, and to withhold such an announcement from people whom THEY DISCERNED were not really repentant.

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!

Even today a minister will 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 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 ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, *even* unto the end of the world. Amen. (Matthew 28:18-20 AV)

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 baptize people. The Holy Spirit would enable them to discern WHO they should baptize (i.e. "whose sins they should pronounce forgiven") and who they should NOT baptize (i.e. "whose sins they should retain"). And the use of the subjunctive mood in John 20:23 makes allowance for them to not be infallible in this regard, but to on occasion make mistakes. Thus Philip made the mistake of baptizing Simon Magus in Acts 8:13, and most of us ministers ever since then have made "some mistakes" with people whom we have baptized ... we have not always correctly discerned true repentance or a lack of it.

John 20:23 should be seen as a very clear companion verse to Matthew 28:19, to go and baptize repentant people. John 20:23 is NOT some arbitrary conferral of authority to forgive or to retain sins ... 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.

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