

## **“The Authority of the Church”**

**John 20:19-23**

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Last Lord’s Day morning we took the entire 20<sup>th</sup> chapter and considered its great theme: men and women coming to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead and that he was both Lord and Christ; first his disciples on that Easter Sunday and then generations of his people ever since. But I said then that I wanted to return to this paragraph, this brief account of the Lord’s conversation with his disciples that same Easter night. John doesn’t tell us all that happened when the Lord appeared to the eleven – actually the ten, for Thomas was not present – and those with them. We learn from Luke that he had to assure them that he was not a ghost, so startled and frightened were they by his appearance. He even had to eat some broiled fish to prove to some of them that he was a human being, the self-same human being who had died on the cross the previous Friday. John passes over most of this, giving just the briefest summary in v. 20. He is interested instead in the Lord’s commissioning of his disciples and the empowerment that accompanied that commission. This is John’s equivalent of what in Matthew is called “the Great Commission.” No doubt, in the forty days following the resurrection, the Lord told his disciples many things in many different ways about the work to which he was calling them. This is the form of that instruction that John chose to include.

- v.19 “Peace be with you” was a conventional greeting and is still today in the Middle East. However, its repetition in v. 21 means there is more here than mere convention. In the Upper Room, the night of the Lord’s betrayal, he had promised to leave his peace with his disciples, and now he is confirming that gift. *Shalom* is the characteristic quality of the kingdom of God. Along with *grace*, *peace* is included in the greeting of every one of Paul’s letters. Remember, this must have struck the disciples as a particularly comforting greeting. After all, they had not exactly covered themselves with glory at the time of the Lord’s arrest. They had deserted him. Peter had betrayed him openly. They might well have expected to be rebuked and, instead, here he greets them with his peace.
- v.21 “As the Father has sent me...” The disciples are called to carry on Christ’s work, not to begin a new work of their own. [Westcott]
- v.22 As you might well imagine, there has been an immense amount of discussion as to the meaning of the Lord’s breathing and his statement, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” largely because we assume from Acts 2 that the Holy Spirit wasn’t given, in this way, until Pentecost, some seven weeks after Easter Sunday. All in all, it seems best to take it, as most evangelical commentators do, as a symbolic act on the Lord’s part, an act that anticipates the giving of the Spirit later. In John 16:7 we have already heard the Lord say that he would send the Spirit to his disciples *after* he had left the world. In Luke 24:49, in the passage parallel to this one in John 20, we read the Lord saying, that same night in that same room, that the Spirit was not to come until some days later and that his disciples were to remain in Jerusalem until, as he says there, “they have been clothed with power from on high.” Clearly this is not yet Pentecost in John 20. Rather, remembering that Pentecost was itself a feast of firstfruits, we can think of this symbolic

giving of the Spirit as a kind of firstfruits of the firstfruits. [Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost*, 40] What is clear, at any rate, is that the nature of the apostle's situation did not change at this point. They still remain in private; they do not yet begin their public ministry. Only after Pentecost is there that great change.

Besides, it is characteristic for the Lord to do and say things more than once. Indeed, what follows in the next verse, v. 23, is also just another form of a statement the Lord made to Peter and the other disciples in Matthew 16:19, that is, during his public ministry.

v.23 Literally, the NIV's "they are not forgiven" is "they are – that is, the sins – retained."

Christians of the wiser sort come eventually to understand and appreciate that they suffer, as all Christians do, from a tendency to read the Bible in the light of their biases. Certain texts stand out to us and certain texts become almost invisible as a result of our preconceived notions as to what the Bible would say or would not say. Free-willers slide right by a host of sovereign grace texts that they simply cannot believe would place the ultimate issue of a person's salvation in the eternal counsel of God. Predestinarians slide by texts that they cannot imagine teach that God truly desires the salvation of all men. Texts that celebrate the blessing of wine-drinking just don't register with teetotalers and separatists can hardly hear the Scripture speaking about the unity of the church. And on and on it goes. And there are classes of texts that protestants like us, especially American evangelical protestants, are constitutionally disinclined to notice or to pay much attention to. We hardly ever think about them. We don't deny that they are there in the Bible, we just can't hear them. Even when we pay attention to them, it is primarily to assure ourselves that they could not really say anything that would not square with what we *have already decided* is the *true teaching of the Bible*. Interestingly, these texts that do not show up on our evangelical radar screens are often the very texts that Roman Catholics think of first. We have such a text before us this morning in v. 23.

Listen to this anecdote told by, John Haas, a Roman Catholic theology professor.

The man sitting next to me on the plane was pleasant enough. He was well dressed, had a kind face, and showed a surprisingly friendly concern for me as a total stranger. So when he finally revealed that he was a Protestant minister, I was not surprised. He spoke openly and easily of his faith and of the joy he had found in his relationship with the Lord. He continued to be courteous to me even when he learned that I was Catholic. He said that he was pleased to learn that I, too, knew and loved the Lord Jesus. But as the conversation progressed, he eventually could not avoid giving expression to a frustration he had with the Catholic Church.

"You know," he said, "I just cannot understand why you Catholics engage in these practices which have no basis in Scripture!" "Oh?" I responded, a bit surprised. "What particular practices did you have in mind?" "Well, for example, this practice of men presuming to forgive other men's sins! This practice of confession," he replied. "But that *is* based on Scripture," I insisted. "After Our Lord's resurrection, He appeared to His disciples in an upper room, He breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit! Whose soever sins you

forgive are forgiven, whose soever sins you retain are retained!” “Well, that may be in your Bible,” he responded. “It’s not in our Protestant Bible.” “Do you have a copy of your Bible with you?” I asked. “Of course I do,” he responded reproachfully, as though I thought he might travel without it. I took the worn, black leather-bound King James bible he handed me, turned to the twentieth chapter of John, and read the passage aloud in its eloquent Elizabethan prose. A look of astonishment and confusion came over the man’s face. “I never noticed that before,” he said. After a moment’s silence, he went on, “I’m going to have to think about this.” Of course that kindly minister had undoubtedly read the passage many times before. But he had never done so in the light of Catholic practice. [First Things (Aug/Sept 1995) 12]

Now, shame on a Protestant minister who didn’t remember that this text may be found in John’s Gospel, even in his account of Easter Sunday! But, you see the point. Protestants, perhaps especially American evangelicals of the revivalist tradition, are not disposed to pay much attention to a text that speaks of men having the authority to forgive sins.

The fact is, if you consult Protestant commentaries on this text, you will find them preoccupied with the task of proving that this text should not be read in any way that suggests that the officers of the church have any authority to forgive or retain sins. They argue this way. When Jesus says, in v. 23, “If you forgive anyone his sins...” the relative pronoun is actually plural, not singular. “Whosoever sins you forgive...” Therefore, Jesus is not talking about the sins of a particular man or woman, he is talking about classes of people. In other words, all that here is being said is that the church has the authority to tell the world what sorts of sins are forgiven and what sorts of sins are not. [Morris, 849] Well, quite apart from this dubious appeal to Greek grammar – in fact, all the English translations capture the Lord’s meaning in the same way as the NIV has rightly captured it here – the Lord Jesus has said a similar thing several times before and in those cases there can be no doubt that he is speaking of the sins of individual people and of the forgiveness or not of individual people.

Or, these Protestant commentators say, the Lord was speaking to everyone in the Upper Room that night. We know from Luke that others were there besides the ten members of the original Twelve. So, whatever the Lord means by what he says, he isn’t bestowing upon the Christian ministry the power to forgive sins, he must be bestowing that authority only on the entire church as a whole. There is not particular man or church officer who has this authority, only the entire Christian church as an institution. [Morris, 848-849] However, this too is a very doubtful dodge. The parallels to this statement clearly emphasize the role and place of the apostles, especially Matthew 16:19, where the Lord makes his famous remark to Peter about giving to him the keys to the kingdom of heaven. The authority of the apostles, then, in many texts of the NT, was devolved upon the ministers and elders of the Christian church. And, in any case, no one is denying that the authority of the ministry and of the apostles before, was a specialized and concentrated form of that general office given to all Christians. We are all witnesses, even if, to a special degree and with a special measure of authority the apostles were witnesses and Christian ministers following them. There is a universal priesthood and a special priesthood and has been from the beginning.

However, surely the Lord was intending to say *something* of importance. When some of the Protestant commentators are done with this text, one wonders why the Lord bothered to mention

these things at all, his remarks meaning so little. These commentators are so concerned not to give any comfort to Roman Catholic theology and practice that they fail to listen to the words that Jesus spoke. In their account, as it turns out, he wasn't saying much of anything at all. No! Clearly here, if words mean anything, the power to declare the forgiveness of sins and to refuse to declare that forgiveness has been transmitted to some men. That fact must not be lost in the consideration of the meaning of the Lord's commissioning of his apostles.

But, it is essential that we develop the Lord's meaning in keeping with what he actually says. Surely, it is fair to say that the Roman Catholic practices of auricular confession – confession into the ear of a priest – and of penance – the assignment of duties, penalties really, that the penitent must perform to satisfy for the temporal penalty of his or her sins – with all of that system's completely unbiblical and anti-biblical principles; I say, surely it is fair to say that that system is a far cry from anything that Jesus says here or anything else ever taught in the Bible. Nowhere in Holy Scripture is there a sacrament of penance such as we find in Roman Catholicism. Nowhere are believers commanded to confess their sins to a priest and nowhere do we find them doing so. The tax-collector in our Lord's parable, standing head bowed in the temple, had no priest and used no confessional. He confessed his sins to God directly and, the Lord says, that he went to his house justified (Luke 18:9-14). Neither do we find any such practice as the imposing of religious acts as penalties for sins committed.

Well, then, if the Roman Catholic practice is not the Lord's meaning, what does he mean? Well, in three obvious ways, the Lord places in a very definite context this authority to forgive and retain sins, and so illuminates his meaning for us.

**I. First, that authority must be exercised in keeping with the ministry and the teaching and the authority of the Holy Spirit.**

That is emphatically the context of the transmission of this authority by the Lord to his disciples. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he told them, and then went on to speak of their forgiving and retaining sins. John has told us about the ministry of the Holy Spirit in some detail in previous chapters. He spoke of that ministry as a continuation of Christ's own ministry. He spoke of it as a ministry of conviction of sin and of leading to faith in Christ. It would be a ministry in keeping with the Word of God. So, clearly, the ministry of the disciples must be a ministry that conforms to the teaching and the working of the Holy Spirit. It must be a ministry in keeping with the Spirit-inspired Word of God. Only when the disciples speak and declare as faithful servants of the Spirit of God do they wield this divinely given authority in a manner that will be ratified in heaven.

**II. Second, the absolution and retention of sins is only declarative, that is, it is not the absolution or retention itself, but only the declaration of what has been done already in heaven.**

Now this is a point of Greek grammar, but it is an unassailable point, admitted on almost all sides. The verbs translated "they are forgiven" and "they are not forgiven" are in the perfect passive tense. In Matthew 16, in the parallel passage in v. 19, you have a similar construction. Here, literally, it reads, "if you forgive anyone his sins *they have been* forgiven..." The sense seems clearly to be that the forgiveness has been granted by God already or refused by God already. The declaration by

a man or the officers of the church is of what God has *already done*. Men do not create forgiveness or unforgiveness, they merely declare it. If the church is acting under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, it will be found that her pronouncements on matters of human sin and forgiveness only reveal on earth what has already been decided in heaven.

**III. Third, the whole system and practice of the government of the Christian church is assumed in this text and so the authority to forgive or retain sins must be exercised in keeping with that system and practice as it is taught in Holy Scripture.**

We know this because this is only one of several places where the Lord Jesus said a similar thing. In the first instance, in Matthew 16, we there read about Peter, as first among the apostles, being the foundation upon which the church would be built. Paul says a similar thing in Ephesians 2 when he speaks of the church being built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. In the second instance, in Matthew 18, we read there of the steps to be taken with a sinning brother and of the practice of church discipline. Here, in John 20, the matter of forgiving and retaining sins, is placed in the context of the Lord's sending out his disciples to preach the gospel and to disciple the nations and to form the church everywhere in the world.

These, of course, are ministries that are often discussed in the New Testament. The conduct of those who perform these ministries is strictly ordered. Elders in the church, for example, in the exercise of the powers of the keys, must not lord it over the people of God, but must exercise their authority in humility and in love as men who must give an account. It must be a ministry exercised in obedience to Christ and his Word, for he is the only King and Head of his church. And on and on it goes. The Bible is full of instances of men who hold office in the church but who, because of their infidelity to God and to his Word, have no authority to speak for God, no spiritual power over the hearts and lives of God's people. "I didn't send them and they do not speak for me!" How many times does the Lord say this about the false prophets in Old Testament days! And how many times do we find Paul and other NT writers telling Christians in their churches to ignore the teaching, the warnings, the threats of false teachers who have appeared to trouble the church. My goodness, the Apostle Paul himself was excommunicated; he was cast out of the church for his loyalty to Jesus Christ. But what was retained, in his case, by the elders of the church, had not been retained in heaven. They said he was *not* forgiven, but God said he *was*!

No, there is no support for Roman Catholic practice here. What the Lord Jesus is talking about is a ministry of the Holy Spirit through the church and the officers of the church and so only that ministry that is faithful to the Spirit's work and teaching. He is speaking of an authority to declare what has already been done in heaven. And he is speaking of that authority that only ministers and elders faithful to the Gospel and to the law of Christ can exercise. *But, if there is no comfort for Roman Catholics here in John 20:23, there is no comfort to the ordinary American evangelical mind here either!* There is a real authority conferred here. The Lord Jesus transmitted a power to declare sins forgiven or retained and he transmitted that power to men we know to have been frail, sinful, and deeply imperfect Christian men. In other words, it is not a merely theoretical authority; it is a real authority given to real men.

What we have here is an authoritative church. We have the promise of the knowledge on earth of what has been determined in heaven. But what we have in our day in a Christian community and

a culture that will not stand for an authoritative church and does not seem to prize the knowledge of what heaven has spoken and done. The typical Protestant evangelical reads this text and sees red. He sees Romanism and he sees authoritarianism. He fears for his privacy and his independence. He fears that his favorite text in all the Bible – Matthew 7:1, “Judge not, lest ye be judged” – will in some way be undermined by this statement of the Lord. He does not want anyone over him with the power to declare him unforgiven! He is an evangelical, to be sure, but he is also very much a democrat and an egalitarian. And so he either hurries on to another text more congenial to his views, or he stays long enough to find an interpretation of the Lord’s words more congenial to his views, even if that interpretation usually ends up being something that, on the face of it, seems to be the reverse of what the Lord Jesus actually said!

Now, no one should doubt how tragically such a text has been misused in the history of Christianity. Listen to Martin Luther describe the state of things before the Reformation.

“The state of the church was terrible under the Pope. Then nothing was seen or heard which could encourage a heart in such distress, except that each year the story of the Passion was taught, though quite indifferently. This faintly indicated where pardon was to be sought. Everything else led away from the promise of forgiveness towards one’s own righteousness. And so in many monasteries we saw stricken and despairing people passing the entire time of their lives and in the end wearing themselves out in the conflict by their worries and griefs. Because this doctrine was unknown, the rest of the brothers did nothing more than stand nearby and try to obtain the protection of saints with their idolatrous prayers... Nothing is more terrible than to be in sin and yet to be remote from, or ignorant of, the forgiveness of sin or the promise of grace. But the pope was responsible for the concealment of the forgiveness of sins, because sound doctrine and true forms of worship were not maintained in the church. If some in faith were saved, it was the bare reading of the passion of Christ accepted in faith which saved them, against the will and opposition of the pope.” [Works, 1:179-180]

And why was this? Because the church and its officers had lost their grasp of the gospel. They had forgotten how sins are forgiven. What the church said in forgiving and retaining sins was usually dead wrong! The church had lost sight of the titanic achievement of Jesus Christ and the power of faith in him to make sinners righteous before God. As a result the church had lost its voice. It could not declare sins forgiven. It could not tell people that their sins were done away, cast behind God’s back, trampled under foot, separated from them as far as the east is from the west, and remembered no more. The Bible taught them to tell the faithful such a thing, but they had become, in their unbelief, deaf to the Bible and dumb before the people of God. As John Calvin put it in his comment on this text in John 20, we learn here that the forgiveness of sins that is committed to Christian pastors and elders *is not to be sought far off!* It is right here; it can be known; it can be declared by men. This treasure of forgiveness is, Calvin admits, exhibited in earthen vessels, but not only does that remind us that the forgiveness itself comes from God and not from men – but brings it near to us, in voices that we can hear. To a person who knows God holy and himself a guilty sinner, there is nothing greater in all the world than to know himself or herself forgiven! Christ is here speaking of the authoritative declaration of that wonderful news.

If you, my friends, have never laid awake at night wondering in a cold sweat if sins as great and as protracted as yours could really be forgiven by a God as righteous as the living God is righteous, you do not yet really understand either the enormity of your sin or the holiness of God and you have never yet really appreciated the wonder of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ. If you have never shuddered at the thought that you might be among those who thought themselves forgiven who were not and were at last cast into hell having thought all their lives that they would go to heaven, you have not yet read the Bible with an honest heart.

We American evangelicals are so worried that some churchman might judge our lives and retain our sins – which, if we love our souls we ought to want him to stand ready to do if, in faithfulness to God's Word and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, it is required in our case – that we have even been willing to have the proclamation of forgiveness muted. For we understand that the two go together, forgiving and retaining sins. Unless the church has the authority to do the one, it cannot do the other. But, surely, Christ was good and wise to transmit to his church the authority to speak on his behalf concerning this most important of all matters, whether men and women are at peace with God.

More than once I have had people come to me seeking assurance of their forgiveness. I read recently the 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan, Richard Sibbes, recognizing the need sometimes for those afflicted by the guilt of their sins to confess them privately to their ministers and to hear the declaration of their forgiveness uttered by a minister of Jesus Christ. [*Works*, 2:261; 1:54] A young mother came to me, not so long ago, to seek assurance that some sins she had committed years ago were really forgiven. She had never confessed them to anyone except to God and she wanted to know for sure that she had been forgiven. She wasn't taking the matter so lightly, so easily, so glibly, so casually as many Christians now do. And it was a wonderful thing for me to have the authority to tell her, in the Lord's name, that her sins *were forgiven*, penitent and faithful as she was.

But, of course, these declarations can be made in many ways, as the parallel texts to this one also indicate. They can be made in church discipline, both in casting sinners out of the church and in restoring them to her fellowship; they can be made in worship in the absolution that follows the confession of sins; they are made when elders bring folk into the membership of the church in the first place, they are made in preaching the gospel and they are made in private conversation. I know there are some here who never come to me or to Pastor DeMass to ask about their sins precisely because they suspect that I will tell them that their sins are *not* forgiven. They are more afraid of hearing me tell them that than they are afraid that their sins are not forgiven by God!

But, however the declarations are made, what Jesus clearly means, unmistakably means, is that when the Christian ministry and eldership speaks in conformity to the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture, when it makes declarations in the Spirit of Jesus Christ and in humble and loving submission to him, it can be known on earth what has been determined in heaven regarding the peace and salvation of human beings. This is not the whole Bible, of course, there are secrets of the heart that cannot be judged by men. But, the Lord did not hesitate to say, "what you forgive will have been forgiven and what you retain will have been retained." This is a good thing, not a bad thing, and will be thought a good thing by anyone who cares about his soul and wants to know of his standing with Almighty God. The church can tell him what he needs to know.

John Donne has beautifully expressed what should be the hope, the expectation, and the intention of every faithful preacher of God's Word, every faithful Christian elder, and every faithful Christian, both for himself or herself, and for the entire ministry of the Christian church.

“It is not God's ordinary way to be whispering of secrets. For publication of Himself he hath constituted a Church. And in this church, his ordinance is ordinance indeed; his ordinance of preaching batters the soule, and by that breach, the Spirit enters; his Ministers are an earthquake, and shake an earthly soule; they are the sonnes of thunder, and scatter a cloudy conscience.” [Cited in J.S. Stewart, Heralds of God, New York, 1946, p. 211.]

A faithful Christian should be so glad that there are men on earth who can tell him or her that his sins or her sins are forgiven. There is nothing in the world more important to know than that – nothing nearly so important to know as that! There is no one in this world who can tell you beforehand that you will live a long life. No one can tell you if you will be wealthy and prosperous. But there *are* men, many men, ordinary men, who can tell you if your sins are forgiven and if you will go to heaven when you die. Is that not what you want to know? What you must know? The Lord Christ thought so.