

April 27, 2003

Preach, Teach, Encourage

It's hard to believe that after not writing on theological matters for months, I suddenly find myself compelled to write twice in two weeks. My daughter and I returned to church again today and, although I had sent the pastor a copy of last week's Easter Message, they still welcomed us warmly.

Fear not. This will not become a regular practice. My field is law and finance, not theology. But, the Bible passage chosen by the pastor for this week's message is one only a lawyer could love, and, in some ways, his message based on this passage supports what I said about modern Protestant theology last week.

The relevant portion of the passage – appropriate for the week after Easter – is John 20: 19-23, which recounts Jesus meeting with most of the disciples (all except Thomas) and his gift of the power of the Holy Spirit. I'm embarrassed to say that I forgot to check which version of the Bible he used, but as I recall the translation of the most important passage, verse 23, is the same as that found in the New American Standard Bible (among others), which reads as follows:

And with that he breathed on<sup>1</sup> them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained."

"Retain"? Now there's a word that lawyers understand! Transactional lawyers spend a lot of time dealing with the allocation of liabilities. If, for example, you are selling the family business, the buyer can either buy the stock of the company that the family formed to conduct the business, or the buyer can simply buy the assets of the company. If the buyer buys the stock, the purchase price is paid directly to the family and the buyer owns the company and all of its assets. If the buyer just buys the assets of the business, the purchase price is paid to the company and the family continues to own it. It is now a shell company that, in place of its operating assets, now holds the purchase money. The buyer's decision to buy assets or stock largely is determined by tax issues (which I am going to ignore) and liability issues.

So what? And what does this have to do with the meaning of John 20: 23?

Well, if the buyer buys stock, he will own the company, including all of its liabilities. If, on the other hand, the buyer only buys assets of the company, the historical liabilities of the company are left behind. As you might expect, the buyer and family sometimes want the best of both worlds. In some cases, the buyer wants to buy stock, but does not want to take on all of the historical liabilities of the company. In such cases, the family – assuming it is willing to do so – agrees to retain the liabilities of the company for the period prior to the purchase.

Liabilities are like sins. So the use of the word "retain" in John 20:23 is interesting, indeed.

First, of course, the significance of the gift of the Holy Spirit cannot be overstated (although I am about to do so)<sup>2</sup>. Essentially, the gift of the Holy Spirit gives the believer God's

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<sup>1</sup> The word translated as breathed on (emphysao) is the same word used in the Greek Old Testament to describe God's breath of life into the face of the man he formed the man from the dust of the ground in second creation story in Genesis (Gen 2:7), a topic I'll discuss someday when I eventually write on the Second Really Big Question.

powers of forgiveness. Before receiving the Holy Spirit, the act of forgiveness by the believer was interpersonal and its effect limited to the relationship between the believer and the sinner. The forgiveness was effective between believer and sinner, but not between the sinner and the rest of the world, or between the sinner and God.

Before Jesus, only God granted general forgiveness of sins. Then Jesus granted general forgiveness sins, and his death and resurrection validated his power and authority to do so. Now, through the gift of His Holy Spirit, Jesus is empowering his disciples and their successors – all believers – to act in his stead. Every believer has a power of general forgiveness, a power formerly reserved solely to God. In the words of the law, believers are the agents of Jesus with the power to bind their legal principal - God – to general forgiveness of sins.<sup>3</sup>

That this is the meaning of John 20: 23 is clear, because otherwise the verse is meaningless. If the power of “forgiveness” conferred by the gift of the Holy Spirit was only interpersonal, it was a gift of nothing because interpersonal forgiveness is something even non-believers have the power to grant.<sup>4</sup>

Now accurate translation becomes crucial. What is the significance of the gift of the Holy Spirit? Look again at the New American Standard Bible translation of John 20: 23: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained." The first portion – if you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them – is clear enough. It is the remainder that is potentially profound (and, as I will argue, probably not comprehended by those prototypical good guys sitting in the pews and smiling too much). “You retain”? “You”? The believer offering the forgiveness? “Retain”? How does one “retain” what one never had to begin with?

First, let’s deal with a red herring. There are other translations of this passage that do not refer to retention.<sup>5</sup> But, the translations that do not discuss the alternative to forgiveness in

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<sup>2</sup> There is continuing academic debate over how the gift of the Holy Spirit in John is related to the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. Some scholars suggest that the two accounts have different theological meanings. Others hold that the two accounts describe two different events.

There is a strong argument that the gift of the Holy Spirit in John is a separate event from the one described in Acts. Note that a week after this event, the disciples are still behind closed doors. Later, they are fishing, not spreading the good news. Also, as of the time of Jesus gift of the Holy Spirit in John not all of the conditions for the presence of the Spirit had been met. The Holy Spirit was to have been received only after Jesus' return to the Father, and in verse 23 Jesus is preparing to return, but has not yet returned.

Thus, theologians spend a lot of time arguing about the size of the cast of dancing angels on the head of a pin, but the overriding meaning does not get a lot of analysis.

<sup>3</sup> The disciples are called to witness to Jesus ministry, not just by teaching His message, but by actually manifesting Jesus' presence through the Holy Spirit. Thus, disciples and their successors will be the agents of Christ and the Holy Spirit for an on-going confrontation of the world.

<sup>4</sup> Note that Thomas was not present when the Spirit was given. But it is Thomas who confesses Jesus as Lord and God, a confession that is the work of the Spirit. So, the gift of the Holy Spirit was not limited to the individuals present. Rather, the Holy Spirit is now introduced into the world and brings new life wherever faith is found.

<sup>5</sup> Alternative translations for this passage that I was able to easily find are as follows (I couldn't find my Revised Standard Version, sorry):

- New American Standard Bible: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained."
- Amplified Bible: He breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit! [Now having received the Holy Spirit, and being led and directed by Him] if you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of anyone, they are retained.

terms of retention seem logically weak. They simply say that if you do not forgive sins, they are not forgiven. Such language is either tautological or "mere surplussage". Or, in terms easier to understand, "Well, duh!"

My Greek is weak (that is to say, non-existent), but John's gospel is generally well crafted, and it is difficult to believe that half of one of the most important verses is meaningless. And, the word "retained" is used too consistently in a number of translations. So what does it mean for the believer offering the forgiveness to retain those sins he chooses not to forgive? I'm not entirely sure, but if I was one of those prototypical good guys sitting in those pews, I would not like where this seems to be going.

Perhaps the gift of the Holy Spirit is a Trojan Horse. Perhaps appointment as Jesus' agent for the purpose granting general forgiveness comes with vicarious liability for the sins of all mankind, the sins that Jesus took on. Perhaps, as consideration for the benefits of acting as Jesus' agent, believers have the sins Jesus took on imputed to them. Thus, they retain the sins they choose not to forgive. In a society where church attendance and financial support are voluntary, this is not a possibility that I would highlight to the congregation.

But, there's more.

Let's return to our family desiring to sell their business. As an alternative to the buyer purchasing the stock of the company with the family retaining some of the liabilities, the buyer could buy the company's assets. That leaves the family with the company and its liabilities. But,

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- King James: 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.
  - English Standard Version: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld." Contemporary English Version: Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they will be forgiven. But if you don't forgive their sins, they will not be forgiven."
  - New King James Version: And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."
  - 21<sup>st</sup> Century King James Version: He breathed on them and said unto them, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."
  - American Standard Version: And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Spirit: whose soever sins ye forgive, they are forgiven unto them; whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.
  - Worldwide English: When he had said this, he breathed on them and said, `Receive the Holy Spirit. Whoever you make free from the wrong things they have done will be free. Whoever you do not make free from the wrong things they have done will not be free.'
  - Young's Literal Translation: he breathed on [them], and saith to them, `Receive the Holy Spirit; if of any ye may loose the sins, they are loosed to them; if of any ye may retain, they have been retained.'
  - Darby Translation: And having said this, he breathed into [them], and says to them, Receive [the] Holy Spirit: whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted to them; whose soever [sins] ye retain, they are retained.
  - New International Version (UK): And with that he breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.

often the family does not want to bear the risk of having to deal with the liabilities after the company has been sold. They want to move to Florida, play golf, and take it easy. This, too, can be accomplished if the buyer is willing to assume the company's liabilities.

The pastor's message this morning focused his discussion of the gift of the Holy Spirit on the forgiveness of the believer's sins. A very prudent decision considering the implications of the full meaning of the gift. He spoke about how wonderful this forgiveness is and how the congregation is challenged to take the message out into the world. The congregation was challenged to spread the good news, by preaching, teaching and encouraging others who are suffering. That's not too hard to do. They don't have to actually relieve the suffering by taking any affirmative action.

In my life I feel impotent if all I can do is to counsel and pray for those who are suffering. Meaning and satisfaction in my life comes from taking on the problems of others, making them mine, and resolving them. In other words, assuming their liabilities, which in my line of work usually involves an assumption of sins. Now, affirmatively taking on full responsibility for resolving the sins of others is neither easy, nor particularly enjoyable, so I generally refrain from doing it. I am not a saint (to put it mildly). But, I know that Christ's message to me is a challenge to fully take on the burdens of others and, to the (very limited) extent I meet that challenge, I am richly rewarded.

Although the reward of fully assuming the burdens of the suffering is much greater than that gained by merely counseling, supporting and praying, it would be a really hard sell to my friends in the pews. And, I suspect that very few pulpits ever focus on what it might mean for the believer to retain the sins they choose not to forgive.