

Did Jesus give his power and authority to the apostles to forgive sins?

ESSENTIALS

John 20:23 has Jesus giving the Holy Spirit to the disciples and telling them that if they forgive the sins of any they are forgiven and if they retain the sins they are retained.

"They are forgiven". But by who? It is not clear on who is active.

The text gives no hint that this authority was to be passed on.

Jesus meant: "Right now whoever sins etc." It was a pure once-off done because the disciples were being prepared to set up the Church. That interpretation explains why there is no record of anybody forgiving sins in the early Church.

Evidence that it was a once off comes from the "if you forgive the sins of ANY". Any must mean literally anybody. Catholicism does not forgive the sins of any. There are conditions. For example you have to be baptised and a Catholic.

It does not say it is necessary to get forgiven through a disciple. If Jesus said you could that does not mean he felt you could not go to God directly instead.

Christians forgive sins against themselves. Sin against God is another matter. The text is saying that if the disciples forgive those who sin against them that God will forgive too. They have no power to forgive in God's name but forgive WITH God. The text distinguishes between the disciples forgiving and God doing it. Jesus did not say, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Those whose sins you forgive against God will be forgiven by God."

Some say he is only telling the disciples that if anybody hurts them they must sort it out and when they forgive them God will forgive them also. They think he is only referring to how forgiveness is personal and a process and can only happen between offender and offended. They note he does not tell them to forgive as if they were God. They feel the promise applies to all Christians. They deny the verse means anything like a Catholic going to confess sins to a stranger in the confessional to get forgiven. They say the verse excludes that nonsense.

The verse does not say that it means they can forgive sins as if they were the ones the sins were against. It makes sense to say that Jesus meant nothing more that if the disciples forgive then God will forgive AS WELL. There are two forgivings not one. The apostles make their decision to forgive and God makes his to forgive along with them. The text does not say that Jesus gave them the power to forgive sins against God. It is against commonsense to imagine that John can forgive you for Eddie when it was Eddie you hurt. The Bible assumes we have the power to think.

"If you forgive the sins of any". The if means, on the condition that. If John had meant absolution in the Catholic sense he would have been careful to prevent people thinking that the only way to forgiveness after that was by absolution. He was not so he did not mean the Catholic understanding for even Catholics do not go that far. If Jesus gave the power to forgive sins it was a gift and optional. It could be as good to confess to God alone if you want to as it is to confess to an apostle.

ABSOLVE NOT FORGIVE

Roman priests say, "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." The Church teaches that to say, "I forgive you your sins in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" is illicit. This is not just because it is changing the words. It is because absolving and forgiving are not exactly the same thing. Absolving does not necessarily forgive. It only declares that a person is hopefully freed from their sins. Whether they are or not depends on whether or not they are repentant for the right reasons. Forgiving does necessarily forgive. The Church says that only God can forgive. Yet it still says priests forgive sins.

Only one place in the Bible seems to unambiguously agree with Catholicism that priests can remit sins, John 20:23, where the risen Jesus tells the disciples, "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."

AMPLIFIED BIBLE.

But the doctrine that absolving and forgiving are not the same implies that here, Jesus is not giving the power to absolve at all. Thus the verse does not support Roman Catholic teaching. The only way the apostles could forgive sins is if they did

more than just absolve but actually saw the person was ripe for forgiveness and forgive on that basis. It presupposes a supernatural knowledge of the penitent. Roman Priests do not have such powers of knowledge.

John 20:23, where the risen Jesus tells the disciples, "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." Compare John 20:23 with John 15:7 and Matthew 18:19,20. There Jesus promise that whatever is prayed for in his name will be done and advises you to ask for whatever you will. This can be taken to be promising that you will get everything you ask for in prayer. But Jesus used language that seemed to say that but he certainly did not mean that. Jesus promised the disciples in Matthew 18 that whatever they tied up on earth would be tied up in Heaven and whatever they released on earth would be released in Heaven and then immediately after said that they would get whatever they pray for. He meant that whatever they tried to restrict or open up through prayer would be done. This is the context. When you think of all this and the parallels you see that John 20:23 is not the great text that proves Catholic doctrine that it seems to be.

The Catholic Church teaches that Jesus forgave sins by saying, "Your sins are forgiven." See Matthew 9. The Church says the gospel says Jesus forgave sins by saying that. But notice Jesus does not say, "I forgive sins" but "I declare your sins have been forgiven." "If you forgive" does not mean you are deciding to forgive. Look at how in the gospel Jesus forgives a woman except he doesn't. He tells her, "Your sins are forgiven." That is not the same as saying I decide your sins are now forgiven. Then we read, The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" So for the New Testament, "I forgive you your sins" is just a way of saying God has forgiven them. It is not the same as an absolution.

Jesus is not saying he actually forgives sins as if he were God - he only says he realises God has forgiven the person and is assuring the person of that. In early Christian custom, forgiving sins means declaring that God has forgiven. It does not mean absolution. So "If you forgive the sins of any" does not support Roman teaching. Priests forgiving sins is totally unbiblical. The burden of proof is on the Roman priesthood to prove it can forgive sins. It cannot. Or if you prefer to say the burden of support is on the Roman priesthood to support the belief and make belief in their power justified it makes no difference. The Catholic priesthood makes a very very serious claim that it can't justify. Thus in going to priests for forgiveness one is going to men not God.

IN THE PERSON OF CHRIST?

The John verse says nothing about the Catholic practice of priests forgiving sins against God as if the penitent did wrong against them and they were God. There is no room for the idea that priests can forgive as if they were the God that was offended by the sinner. The Catholic Church pretends it doesn't know this. But it does. The Church believes that if a priest doesn't forgive sins it is foolish to say he is retaining sin, keeping the sinner in sin. The sinner keeps himself in sin. All Jesus is saying that the Church forgives and doesn't forgive on earth depending on whether or not the person has been forgiven or not forgiven in the sight of Heaven.

Jesus had to have meant: "If you cause God to forgive sins etc", for you can't mean, "You can forgive sins in God's place as if you are God," any more than you can say, "John loving his daughter is precisely the same as his wife loving her" for they are two different people and John can't love for her. Jesus was talking about the apostles who forgivingly welcomed the sinner and prayed God to forgive the sinner that God would really forgive. That is not the same as Romanist absolution.

The Catholic Church does not teach that its priests just give God's forgiveness in confession. It does more than that. It claims they forgive in the person of God for Christ said, "If you forgive the sins of any" and the Church says, "I absolve". That is why its claim to the Protestants that when they believe that baptism in water takes away sin they should not disparage the Catholic sacrament of absolution for there is no significant difference is trickery. Many Protestants teach that God forgives sin in baptism not the minister. The minister is not forgiving sins but only giving a rite in which God has agreed to administer forgiveness. Catholicism teaches that the priest forgives sin in the sacrament of absolution, it means that he is making a decision for God as if he were God. It is different. Its appeal to baptism is a plot to prevent Protestants from seeing how horrific and blasphemous the Catholic teaching is. The difference is plainly that in baptism God forgives sin directly himself which is the only way sins can be forgiven for if you are not God you cannot forgive sin directly for him. But in absolution it is the priest that forgives directly.

God is a personal being with free will. He is not if a priest can control God's forgiving power and make him forgive when he says. God cannot consent to such treatment for it is him ceasing to be God and a free person. The Catholic doctrine is totally blasphemous. Only one gospel seems to teach the blasphemy and if it does the gospel should be eliminated from the New Testament as a fake scripture of human and not divine origin. The rule of scripture is that at least two independent firsthand witnesses are necessary and with such an important and possibly dangerous and immoral doctrine you would need more than one gospel testimony.

SYMBOLIC?

The text is symbolic for Jesus' teaching on forgiveness forbids any deliberate attempt to retain sins or keep people in them. Not forgiving sins is not the same as acting to keep a person in their sins. Retaining is the converse of forgiveness. It is an act. Letting a person stay in their sins is merely respecting the person's will for the person cannot be forced. Retaining is forcing the person to stay in sins. Some prefer the view that the text is inaccurate which means you cannot build a system like the Catholic system of forgiving sins on it.

If Jesus said, "Make a square circle", you would not take him literally and you would know he did not mean it literally. Making a square circle is as impossible as forgiving sins against God as if you were God when you are not. So because a priest cannot give God's forgiveness but only lets himself be part of the circumstances in confession when God resolves to forgive sins and that is the nearest one can get to forgiving sins it follows that Jesus must have meant to allow God to forgive. If he meant Catholic type sacramental absolution, he did not mean the priest would directly forgive for only God can do that for the forgiveness is God's. So it was indirect.

If it is indirect, then if you cause God to forgive sins you can cause this without performing absolution. So what Jesus said could mean what the Protestants say it meant: "Forgive sins by preaching repentance by the power of the Spirit for all who repent by the grace of God will be pardoned" for that is indirect pardon.

DISCIPLINARY FORGIVENESS?

In the Greek originals of John the words translated pardoned and unforgiven are in the perfect tense who means an act completed in the past whose effects still exist. Literally Jesus said, "Those who sins you forgive have been forgiven" (page 12, Roman Catholicism What is Final Authority?). He is telling them that they will forgive whoever God has forgiven and not to forgive sins in the Catholic understanding. The Catholic idea is just too absurd, a person forgiving sins as if he were God, to have been meant.

This interpretation fits the view that the verse is really just about not giving God's forgiveness but Church forgiveness or disciplinary forgiveness. It could still mean that even if it said if you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven. The fact that when somebody sinned, because the early Church couldn't see if they had sincerely turned to God for mercy and received it or not, the person was not considered a proper member of the Church but left out of many things and compelled to do penance until the bishop reconciled them to the Church at the end of their probation. Jesus in Matthew 18:17 commanded that the Church must not forgive or have any friendly relations with unrepentant sinners. So if John 20:23 means disciplinary forgiveness, then Jesus was authorising the practice. He is saying he will sanction the decision the Church makes on earth. He is not saying it will necessarily make the right decisions all the time but he recognises the need for his Church to make some decisions based on its own judgement and in accordance with the principles he gave. He is saying then, "If you forgive the sins of any in this disciplinary way I forgive them that way too. If you retain their sins I retain them too." This makes more sense than saying he meant he could enable them to forgive sins as if they were God for only God can pardon sins.

Moreover, the Bible occasionally speaks of declaring an act like it was performing it (Jeremiah 1:10; Isaiah 6:10). The John text could have been using this peculiar method of expression. It may just mean that to successfully declare pardon is to forgive.

God could forgive you terms of church discipline but not as a friend. A judge may forgive you personally but still have to punish you through the law.

GROUP ABSOLUTION?

In the original Greek, the Bible says that if the apostles forgive the sins of any and any being plural they are forgiven (Ordination, Rev Willie Bridcut, Irish Church Missions). Jesus had no reason to use the plural. The single would do. Unless the plural would imply that if a group of people were forgiven they are forgiven. The plural does not necessarily imply that the single will be forgiven for the apostles were busy men. And busy men like them have the job of reconciling break-offs from the Church to the Church and deal with groups. So the forgiveness was only meant for schismatic or sinful factions in the Church not for individuals. The verse then does not support Catholic style secret confession or individual absolution. It forbids them.

USELESS

In Catholicism, it is a man forgiving sin so to use Catholic style forgiveness is to live without the forgiveness of God. If you commit a crime and seek a pardon from the king a pardon from your next door neighbour will be ineffective. Roman Catholicism then by having men forgiving sins instead of God is anti-God and anti-Christ. It is pure bigotry to base all that absolving on one Bible verse and especially one that is so ambivalent. This cult is being irresponsible. The Catholic who

thinks he or she is getting forgiveness from God in confession is wrong and misunderstands the doctrine for it comes from the priest. The priest forgives for God and makes God's decision like God can't make his own.

The Catholic interpretation of John that it authorises priests to decide who should be forgiven by God is unlawful for there is no need to go that far. We must take the simplest interpretation which is that the author did not have the Catholic doctrine in mind.

Catholics are used to the idea of priests forgiving sins. But it is wholly ridiculous. They read their ridiculous notion back into the texts. It is not there. The use of the text by popes and priests is quite manipulative.

"YOU ARE GODS"

Jesus in the gospel of John when accused of claiming to be God responds that the Bible calls its Jewish hearers gods.

If we become God or equal to God we can forgive sins. Is that what John's gospel meant if it says men can forgive sins? Does the Catholic Church secretly think it does?

CONCLUSION

Let Loraine Boettner give us the conclusion, "Does this mean that the church can forgive sins? The difficulty with this conclusion is that the church is not mentioned here in John 20:22-23. We see in John 20:19-20 that this is a secret meeting of the risen Jesus and His disciples save Thomas. Therefore, the disciples are the ones receiving this benefit, not the church. This benefit is seen clearly in the acts of Peter concerning Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11, when Peter condemned them to death by the witness of the Holy Spirit. The Apostles were given a measure of the Spirit not seen today; therefore, to say that any individual or even the collective church can hold the same powers as the Apostles did would be in direct contradiction with 1 Corinthians 13:8-10.

The charge in John 20:22-23, however, is also much like the ones given to these disciples concerning binding and loosing in Matthew 16:19 and Matthew 18:18; it may be observed that the Apostles, and the church after them, had the ability through the preaching of the Gospel to lead men to salvation or to have them condemned in their unbelief. The actions taken by the Apostles (and also by the church) were done in accordance with the will of and by the agency of God, not by any declaration they made on their own. Thus, it is inaccurate to say that the church has the power to remit sins based on the Apostles' ability to do so. Just as we have seen that no one has the authority to claim the Apostles' ability to bind and loose, no one can claim their ability to loose or retain sin."