

The Resurrection and Post-Resurrection Narratives

Chapter 8: Christ's First Appearance to the Apostles

[Brian Schwertley](#)

Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen (Mk. 16:14).

And as they thus spake, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, "Peace be unto you." But they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit. And he said unto them, "Why are ye troubled? And why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have." And when he had thus spoken, he shewed them his hands and his feet. And while they yet believed not for joy, and wondered, he said unto them, "Have ye here any meat?" And they gave him a piece of a broiled fish, and of an honeycomb. And he took it, and did eat before them (Lk. 24:36-43).

Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, "Peace be unto you." And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the LORD. Then said Jesus to them again, "Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you." 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." But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, "We have seen the LORD." But he said unto them, "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe" (Jn. 20:19-25).

The Savior's first appearance to the apostles *as a body* receives a lot of attention from both Luke and John. Mark deals with this important appearance in one verse. John, writing after Luke, adds a lot of information not discussed in Luke's account. This visit from our Lord came at the end of a number of gracious manifestations. This appearance serves as a climax to all the other resurrection day visitations in, not only the number and importance of the people present, but also the very bold and deliberate manner in which Jesus presented Himself to this group. In this visitation, He not only carefully exhibited His scars to the disciples, but also set forth the first commission to the apostles and the church.

Our story begins with the disciples assembled in an unnamed place as they sat down to eat (Mk. 16:14). John is very specific as to the time that this event occurred. "[H]e begins by saying, 'Now when it was evening of *that* day.' That already marks the day as the first day, in light of the context (20:1). But he is not satisfied with this. So he continues, 'that day, the first of the week.'"¹ Luke's account places this event immediately after the two men from Emmaus returned to Jerusalem to tell the eleven apostles and the gathered disciples of their encounter with

¹ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 2:457.

the resurrected Savior (24:33-36). If we take into account the fact that Cleopas and his companion invited Jesus into their home when it was “toward evening” (i.e. about 6:00 pm), and the time to travel the distance from Emmaus to Jerusalem (7.1 miles), the appearance to the disciples and apostles probably occurred sometime after 8:00 pm. This “proves that John is using Roman time, not Jewish, for here evening follows day instead of preceding it.”² It is significant that John emphasized that the disciples gathered on the first day of the week, yet also records that it was evening, for if the apostolic church had maintained a sunset-to-sunset Sabbath, then John would not have regarded it as the first day, but rather the second. Then there would be no reason at all for John to emphasize that particular day, for while the New Testament often emphasizes and singles out the first day (Mt. 28:1; Mk. 16:2; Lk. 24:1; Jn. 20:1, 19, 26; Ac. 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10), the second day holds no significance at all. Luke also uses the Roman method of counting days in Acts 20:7, where Paul continued his message until midnight.

The cause of this assembly was not simply to eat but also was to discuss the very shocking news that had been received throughout the day. By this time there had been four separate reports that Jesus had risen from the dead and was alive. There was the empty tomb, grave clothes and the angels witnessed by the women (Mt. 28:5-8; Mk. 16:2-8; Lk. 24:1-8). This report was confirmed by Peter and John (Jn. 20:2-10). There was the appearance to Mary Magdalene (Jn. 20:11-18) and then to the other women (Mt. 28:9-10). There was the news that Jesus had risen and appeared to Simon (Lk. 24:34). Finally, not long before our Lord’s appearance, the eleven heard the amazing story of Christ revealing Himself to Cleopas and his companion (Lk. 24:35). This assembly contained ten of the eleven apostles (Jn. 20:24) and a number of unnamed disciples (Lk. 24:33).

The state of the group was primarily one of fear, perplexity, unbelief and also hope. John says, “The doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews” (20:19). The word “doors” (plural) indicates either two doors together or an outer door and an inner door. The statement that they were shut conveys the thought that they were shut and locked. The disciples knew how Jesus had been treated and were expecting similar treatment. Further, the empty tomb and the false story now spreading that the disciples stole the body would cause the disciples to expect some sort of retaliation by the Sanhedrin. The disciples thought it best to remain hidden behind locked doors at this time.

The fact, however, that the disciples are now found together, as a group, is commendable. It demonstrates that although their faith was weak and deficient it had not been extinguished. These disciples still had hope, for they remained together as a body and had not scattered to the wind. They came together for mutual encouragement in a time of great fear and perplexity. They, no doubt, were carefully discussing every bit of news that they had heard of the resurrection. Perhaps those who were now convinced such as John and Peter were attempting to convince the others. “In this manner we ought to struggle against the weakness of our flesh, and not to indulge fear, which tempts us to apostasy. Christ also blesses their zeal, when he appears to them while they are assembled; and Thomas is justly deprived of the favour bestowed on all his brethren, because, like a wandering soldier, he had withdrawn from the standard of union.”³ There is strength in numbers and God has commanded His people not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together with other believers (Heb. 10:25).

As we examine this first appearance to the apostles we will consider three main areas: (1) manifestation; (2) instruction; and (3) commission.

² Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1932], n. d.), 5:313.

³ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 2:264.

Manifestation

As we consider the manifestation, there are three things that are noteworthy. First, our Lord's appearance was instantaneous and miraculous. Luke says that, as the disciples were speaking to one another, Jesus Himself stood in the midst (24:36). The disciples are reclining on couches eating their supper; then, in an instant, with no warning Jesus appears. After noting that the doors were shut, John says that Christ "came and stood in the midst" (20:19). The mention of the locked doors is meant to convey to us that the Savior did not enter the room in a normal manner. At the end of the encounter with the two disciples from Emmaus, our Lord "vanished out of sight" (Lk. 24:31). Here the Redeemer appears, as it were, out of nowhere and is standing in the midst of all the disciples. All argumentation which attempts to explain this appearance in a natural manner is not in harmony with the clear teaching of the passage. The sudden appearance is certainly one reason the disciples thought they were seeing a spirit (Lk. 24:37).

The manner of this appearance tells us that although the resurrected Mediator has a true human physical body that is finite and limited to only one location at a time, nevertheless Christ has the power to vanish (Lk. 24:31) and instantaneously transport His physical body wherever He desires (Mk. 16:14; Lk. 24:36; Jn. 20:19; Ac. 9:4; Rev. 1:11, 13-17). The doctrine of papists and Lutherans that the body of Jesus was infinite and not confined to any one place is unscriptural and is a denial of the biblical teaching that the human and divine natures of Christ exist in one person, but are never mixed, intermingled or changed by this union. This is true of Jesus in both His humiliation and exaltation. If the human nature partook of the Son of God's divine attributes, then the Mediator's true humanity would cease to exist. Furthermore, John's words "came Jesus and stood" are meant to be taken literally. "He not only suddenly *stood* in their midst, but he actually came and stood! Had his human nature been omnipresent, he would not have to *come*..."⁴

Jesus appears to His disciples in this miraculous manner to get their attention, to demonstrate the reality of the resurrection and to show His glorified condition. When Jesus walked the earth in His state of humiliation, His divinity was for the most part kept hidden. But, now that His exaltation has begun His divinity is freely exhibited when and where He pleases.

Second, the Savior's sudden, miraculous appearance caused great fear in the disciples. "But they were terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a spirit" (Lk. 24:37). The fact that Jesus appeared with locked doors, without making any noise in such an unexpected manner startled the apostles and scared them. This incident reminds us of when the disciples saw the Savior walking on the water and "cried out for fear" thinking they had seen a ghost (Mt. 14:26). "It is striking to remark, both here and elsewhere in Scripture, how invariably the appearance of any supernatural being, or any inhabitant of another world appears to strike terror into the heart of man. It seems an instinct of human nature to be afraid on such occasions, and it is strong indirect proof of man's utter inability to meet God in peace without a mediator. If man is afraid of spirits and ghosts, what would man feel if he saw God Himself?"⁵

Interestingly, when the disciples cried out in Matthew 14:26, thinking Jesus was a ghost, they used the word *phantasma*, which refers to an apparition or phantasm. But here they use the word *pneuma*, which signifies a spirit. They believed they were seeing a spirit not clothed with a real body. The use of this word may shed light on how the disciples did not believe in the

⁴ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 2:459.

⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospel of Luke* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1858] 1986), 2:514.

resurrection in spite of all the eyewitness testimony. They may have believed that since the general resurrection of the dead had not occurred and the kingdom as they believed in it had not yet come, that therefore, Christ had not really risen from the dead. Thus, they may have interpreted the reports of appearances as reports not of a physical bodily resurrection, but rather as people who saw the spirit of the Savior. This would explain our Lord's reaction when He insists they examine and handle His body and even watch Him eat broiled fish. "Behold My hands and feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have" (Lk. 24:39).

Third, note the wonderful manner in which Jesus greeted His disciples. He said to them, "Peace be with you" (Lk. 24:36; Jn. 20:19). Although "Peace to you" is the normal everyday Hebrew greeting (e.g., 1 Sam. 25:6), virtually all commentators recognize that in this context the expression means much more than "Hello, I hope everything is well with you." With Christ the common greeting, "*Shalom* to you!" is filled with rich salvific content because He has achieved true peace between God and man by His suffering on the cross. His "Shalom!" on the great day of His resurrection and victory is the complement of "It is finished" on the cross, for the peace of reconciliation and life from God is imparted throughout New Covenant history by the resurrected, glorified Redeemer. His sacrificial death is the only foundation of true peace between God and man. "[I]n the New Testament the thought of God's giving peace to men is always connected with what Jesus accomplished by his death and resurrection. Thus, in the book of Romans, Paul writes of peace as one of the results of our justification: 'Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 5:1)."⁶

This greeting which was soon repeated (Jn. 20:21) was especially precious to the disciples in light of recent events. Had not all the apostles abandoned Jesus at Gethsemane? Did not Peter recently deny the Savior publicly with curses? Had not the disciples refused to believe the prophets and the words of Christ regarding the necessity of the Lord's death and resurrection? In light of all these serious failures would not the disciples be expecting anger, blame, fault finding, chastisement and a severe rebuke? But, the first words from the lips of the Savior are: "Peace be unto you." There would be a mild rebuke, but this tender admonition was preceded by a reminder of God's grace and mercy found only in Christ. We see the great compassion of our Redeemer in the fact that His first word to His errant disciples was designed to soothe and calm their troubled minds.

The gospel of our Lord is the only way that true peace can exist on earth. If men are to have peace with each other they must first have peace with God through the precious blood of Christ's atonement. That is why the heavenly hosts' praised God at the birth of the Messiah saying, "On earth peace, goodwill toward men" (Lk. 2:14). Jesus first establishes peace between God and sinful men by paying the penalty for men's sin. Then He changes His people's hearts, causing them to repent and lay down the weapons of their warfare against God. Men are justified and sanctified because of Christ's work. Men are saved and changed from the inside out so that they are holy and at peace with each other. Any religion like Islam which makes converts by the sword, which turns the world into a perpetual battlefield, which exalts in the torture, murder and death of innocent civilians, is not from heaven but from the pit of hell. Similarly, Romanism which burned innocent Christian men, women and children at the stake for not embracing its idolatry and heresy carries within its own signs of apostasy. Bible-believing Christianity is the only true religion and worldview that spreads genuine lasting peace in hearts and cultures. If you

⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985, 99), 5:1588.

want peace with God and peace in your life, then believe in Jesus. He made peace by the blood of His cross and He gives that peace to those who embrace Him by faith.

Instruction

After our Lord appeared to the disciples and greeted them He began to teach them. This instruction involved a number of things. First, the Savior questioned the disciples: “And He said to them, ‘Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts?’” (Lk. 24:38). This question shows that Jesus knows what the disciples are thinking. The purpose of these questions is to calm the disciples’ fear and get them to focus on the deficiencies of their faith. This inquiry presupposes that the disciples’ fear and trepidation is unjustified and demonstrates a lack of belief on their part. On the one hand, the questions are meant to soothe, yet they also are the beginning of a rebuke. The disciples’ “doubts” “have been understood as (1) the fact of the resurrection, i.e. whether Jesus had actually risen from the dead; (2) the identity of the ‘ghost,’ i.e. whether the person they were encountering was actually Jesus; and (3) the corporeal nature of Jesus, i.e. whether the Jesus they were encountering was a ghost or possessed a real body.”⁷ The answer that Christ gives in Luke 24:39 indicates that all these doubts were involved, for our Lord not only proves the reality of His physical body but also identifies Himself (“It is I Myself”). “The disciples here are just as ‘foolish [and] slow of heart to believe’ (v. 25) as ever the Emmaus disciples were.”⁸

Note that a poor understanding of theology and a lack of faith in Christ gives rise to troubled thoughts and fears within us. If the apostles had paid attention to what Jesus had taught them and had understood the prophets on the suffering servant, they would have spared themselves grief and anxiety. From this we should learn to study the Scriptures to apprehend a deeper knowledge of Christ to prevent false opinions and to strengthen our faith in His person and work. Remember, a poor understanding of the Scriptures is often coupled in God’s Word with a faulty, deficient faith. It is when people are not focused on Jesus and the Word of God that they have thoughts that are untrue; hinder their joy and service to the Master; and, make them unfit for their Christian duties.

Furthermore, we should not let our presuppositions or human reasoning cloud the clear teaching of Scripture. Calvin writes, “By saying that *thoughts arise*, he means that knowledge of the truth is choked in them in such a manner that *seeing they do not see*, (Matth. xiii.14;) for they do not restrain their wicked imaginations, but, on the contrary, by giving them free scope, they permit them to gain the superiority. And certainly we find it to be true, that as, when the sky has been clear in the morning, clouds afterwards arise to darken the clear light of the sun; so when we allow our reasonings to arise with excessive freedom in opposition to the word of God, what formerly appeared clear to us is withdrawn from our eyes.”⁹ The disciples were not basing their thoughts squarely upon the Scriptures and the teaching of Christ; but, rather were speculating as to what they thought may be the case. Human presuppositions, imaginations, creativity and speculations have no place in Christian theology. “Give me understanding according to Your word” (Ps. 119:169). “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding” (Pr. 3:5).

⁷ Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 617.

⁸ John Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 1213.

⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 3:369.

Second, Jesus reprimanded the disciples for their unbelief. “He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen” (Mk. 16:14). When our Lord met with the two on their way to Emmaus He upbraided them for refusing to believe the prophets. Here the Savior reproves them for failing to believe the eyewitness testimony of those who had seen Him. The disciples’ problem is identified as “hardness of heart.” This is one word in Greek (*sklerokardian*). It denotes not a mere “callousness or insensibility of the affections [i.e. the emotions], but torpor and inaction of the whole heart in its widest sense, including intellect as well as feeling.”¹⁰ This rebuke was necessary to rouse them from their spiritual depression, irrationality, and faithless negativity into which they had been plunged by the crucifixion. It was one thing for these disciples not to believe the testimony of a heathen and quite another to reject multiple, independent eyewitness accounts from dedicated believers. Only a hardness of heart could explain it. It was dishonoring to the Redeemer to disbelieve His own words passed on to them through His chosen messengers. It shows obstinacy rooted in blindness. “Note, the evidences of the truth of the gospel are so full, that those who receive it not, may justly be *upbraided* with their unbelief; and it is owing not to any weakness or deficiency in the proofs, but to the hardness of their heart, its senselessness and stupidity.”¹¹ This passage proves that God will hold responsible all men throughout history who reject the testimony of gospel preachers.

Third, Christ sets forth the proof of His bodily resurrection. “Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.’ When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet” (Lk. 24:39-40). John notes that Jesus also showed them the scar on His side (20:20). This is an amazing section of Scripture for here we see “that no fact of history is better attested than the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The common mass of facts accepted by all men as historical [is] not one-tenth as-certainly assured to us as this fact is.”¹² The manner in which the Savior proves the resurrection is as follows.

(1) The Lord first asked the disciples to carefully examine Him with their eyes. The disciples were able to look at Jesus from only a few feet away. They could see that He had a real physical body and was not a disembodied spirit. Christ made sure the disciples saw the scars of crucifixion. There were visible nail prints in the Redeemer’s hands and feet where the large spikes had been pounded in. There was the mark of a large gash in the Mediator’s side where His side was pierced by the Roman spear. This scar was so large and deep that, on the next Lord’s day, doubting Thomas could thrust his hand into it. That such grievous wounds were already healed astonished the apostles. “Their sight of the Lord was not a hasty glimpse, but a steady inspection, for John in his first epistle writes, ‘Which we have seen and looked upon.’ This implies a lengthened looking, and such the Lord Jesus invited his friends to take.”¹³

The Savior presents His scars as badges of honor. They are the marks of His great victory over Satan, sin and death. Thus, He will wear them for eternity as a perpetual witness to the price He paid to win our redemption. When John was transported to the great throne room of heaven he described the enthroned Mediator as a “Lamb that had been slain” (Rev. 5:6). On that great day when Christ returns and we behold Him we will see these same scars. The Prince of peace

¹⁰ J. A. Alexander, *Mark* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1858] 1960), 441.

¹¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:571.

¹² Charles H. Spurgeon, “The First Appearance of the Risen Lord to the Eleven” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1888] 1969), 33:221.

¹³ *Ibid.*

will wear them like a man wears his medals won in battle. These scars will forever remain precious to us because they exhibit the atoning death that gave us life. “Christ, even in his exaltation, looks upon his sufferings for his people as his crown and glory.”¹⁴

(2) Then Jesus asked the disciples to come closer and touch and handle His body. Sometimes when a person sees something extraordinary or remarkable he says to himself, “I can’t believe my eyes,” or “I must be dreaming.” Therefore, our Lord adds to their sight the evidence of the sense of touching. The Savior gives a reason for this invitation; that spirits are not solid. They do not have flesh (muscles) and bones. The disciples could touch and squeeze the Mediator’s arms. They could feel the bones in His fingers and in His wrists. They could easily distinguish between flesh and spirit. Thus, they could not deny that their crucified Lord stood before them in the same (albeit glorified) body in which He was buried. “[T]he Crucified is *the risen Lord* in the fullest sense of the term, and the risen Lord is *the Crucified*, the flesh and blood Redeemer, whose real death and real resurrection accomplished salvation for the whole person and the whole world.”¹⁵ “Jesus makes the disciples learn what a resurrection body is like: it is the same body of that person, and yet both the person and the body are in a new and wonderful state.”¹⁶

(3) Even though our Lord has already given the disciples indisputable evidence of His resurrection, He adds one more proof. He eats a piece of broiled fish and some honey in their presence (Lk. 24:41-43). Obviously, a disembodied human soul or spirit cannot eat solid food. This so impressed Peter that he mentioned it in the first sermon to the Gentiles. “Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to eyewitnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead” (Ac. 10:40-41).

This last proof of our Lord’s literal, bodily resurrection was given as a consequence of the disciples’ first reaction when they examined the Savior. After Jesus showed them His hands, feet, and side Luke says, “They still did not believe for joy and marveled.” The expression “did not believe for joy” is difficult. It means that when the disciples first saw the Savior they were so full of excitement and joy that they could not believe what they were experiencing was real. In recent days, the disciples had experienced such sorrow, fear and hopelessness that this new glorious information seemed impossible. They thought that Jesus was dead and that in this life they would never see Him again. But then, out of nowhere, all of a sudden, the Savior is standing in their midst only a few feet away. “One moment they would say to themselves, ‘This must be Jesus. How wonderful.’ The next moment they would say, ‘It is just too good to be true.’”¹⁷ “This cannot be real.” Matthew Poole writes, “If they had not now believed they doubtless would not have rejoiced, but their faith was the cause of their joy; yet the excess of their joy was the hindrance of their faith; so dangerous are the excessive motions of our affections.”¹⁸ Our emotions must always be closely directed by the Scriptures because they are fickle and unsure guides of the intellect. The disciples’ joy had a good beginning, but soon ran amok in the storm of emotion. Faith can only gain the victory if, in our joy, we focus on God’s Word and not our own reasoning. Jesus ate of the food to graciously strengthen the weakness of His followers.

¹⁴ George Hutcheson, *The Gospel of John* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1657] 1972), 421.

¹⁵ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1999), 379.

¹⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, [1946] 1961), 1200.

¹⁷ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 1074.

¹⁸ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1685] 1963), 3:275.

The Savior's use of the senses of hearing, seeing and touching to prove His resurrection and the nature of it, teaches us by way of application that God never requires us to believe anything that is obviously contradicted by our senses. For example, the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, which teaches that the bread and wine of communion actually and literally become the physical flesh and blood of Christ, is obviously false and contradicted by simple observation. Anyone can see that the bread remains bread and the wine remains wine. The color, texture, taste and even the molecules remain the same. To believe such nonsense flatly contradicts Scripture and common sense. (One could say the same thing about consubstantiation, which claims that Jesus' true physical presence is "in, with and under" the elements). Further, the idea propagated by dispensationalists that people who are born again, saved and sanctified can live in habitual sin and unrighteousness and be true Christians defies common sense and the Scriptures. Jesus said we can know them by their fruit (Mt. 7:16ff.). If we observe someone living in continued carelessness and immorality, we must not regard him or her as a real believer. The word of God requires us to believe in things that are *above* finite human reason; that our puny minds cannot fully comprehend; but God never requires us to believe in things that are *contrary* to reason. There are no contradictions in Scripture or Christian theology.

John informs us that the disciples' disbelief was short lived. He writes, "Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord" (20:21). The evidence that Jesus set before the disciples was effective. The disciples no longer doubted because the evidence was overwhelming and could not be denied. All the grief that the disciples had been experiencing for the past three days was turned into joy. "The promise of Jesus made to them in the Upper Room, that he would 'come' to them (14:18) and turn their grief into joy (16:20-22) was now fulfilled. Joy is a fundamental blessing of the kingdom of God (e.g., Isa. 25:6-9; 54:1-5; 61:1-3)."¹⁹ "Note, A sight of Christ will gladden the heart of a disciple at any time; the more we see of Christ, the more we shall rejoice in him; and our joy will never be perfect till we come where we shall see him as he is."²⁰

Commission

Once all the disciples are fully convinced of the resurrection by our Lord's instructions and the exhibition of His person, Christ turns His attention to the commissioning of His disciples. "So Jesus said to them again, 'Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.' 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'" (Jn. 20:21-23).

It is interesting that all the gospels contain a commissioning of the apostles by the risen Lord (Mt. 28:16-20; Mk. 16:15-18; Lk. 24:46-49; Jn. 20:21-23). The Savior's orders are not given until the resurrection is first proven because the apostles are special eyewitnesses of the resurrection. When the apostles chose a replacement for Judas Iscariot, a prerequisite was being an eyewitness of the risen Christ. "Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection" (Ac. 1:21-22).

¹⁹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 379.

²⁰ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1218.

The commission begins with a repetition of the greeting, “Peace to You,” which (as noted) goes beyond the simple Hebrew salutation. The peace that comes as a result of the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ is emphasized not only because the disciples need this peace to go out into a world that will hate and persecute them; but, also because “as his witness and messengers they are to dispense this very gift of peace in a peaceless world.”²¹ This is one reason that Paul begins every one of his epistles with the salutation, “Grace and peace [or grace, mercy and peace] from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:3; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Th. 1:1; 2 Th. 1:2; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Tit. 1:4). Paul refers to the message of Christ’s salvation as “the gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15) and says Jesus “came to preach peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:17-18).

This commission contains three main elements. Our Lord first links the commissioning of the apostles to the sending of the Son by the Father. “As the Father sent Me, I also send you” (Jn. 20:21). In the gospel of John the sending of the Son into the world by the Father is emphasized (Jn. 3:16-17; 4:34; 5:24, 30, 36, 37, 38, 43; 6:29, 38, 39, 40, 44, 57; 7:16, 18, 28, 29, 33; 8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42; 9:4; 11:42; 12:44, 45, 49; 13:16, 20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3, 18, 21, 23; 20:21). Our Lord wanted the people to know that He came as the representative of the Father, with the Father’s authority, to do the will of the Father. Now that Jesus has successfully completed the Father’s will by achieving redemption for the elect, it is time for the disciples to go out and represent the glorified Savior. “*The commissioning authority is the same; the message is the same (nevertheless, there is this difference: Jesus through his atonement makes the message possible; the apostles simply proclaim it!); and the men to whom it is proclaimed are the same.* Hence, ‘just as...so.’”²² Christ had explicitly discussed the apostles’ future ministry in these terms in John 13:20 and had contemplated this commission in His high priestly prayer to the Father (Jn. 17:18, 20).

The commissioning of the disciples is a consequence of God’s plan in eternity to send Christ to save His people. Now that Jesus has achieved salvation and has risen victorious, He sets apart the apostles as ambassadors to establish his kingdom throughout the world. “Let it therefore be held by us as an ascertained truth, that the Apostles were now, for the first time, appointed to be ordinary ministers of the gospel.”²³ The verb “has sent” (*apestalke*) which is in the perfect tense indicates “a sending in the past that continues to hold good in the present.”²⁴ The verb used to describe the sending of the apostles (*pempo*) is present tense and indicates a continuous act. The redemptive work of Christ has been accomplished, but also has a lasting, continuing, permanent effect on history and the world.

As the Savior enters the state of His exaltation, His mission of applying His perfect, achieved redemption continues. It will be powerful and effective because the priest-King is alive, active and victorious. He will rule by the power of the Holy Spirit and the sword that proceeds out of His mouth, the Word of God. Therefore, right from the start of the New Covenant church, Jesus makes it very clear that the apostles are not acting on their own authority or starting something new, but are carrying on Christ’s work. “[B]y virtue of the authority given him as a Mediator, he gives authority to them, as his ministers, to act for him, and in his name, with the

²¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, [1943] 1961), 1369.

²² William Hendriksen, *The Gospel According to John*, 2:460.

²³ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 3:266.

²⁴ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 379.

children of men; so that those who received them, or rejected them, received or rejected him, and him that sent him, ch. xiii.20.”²⁵

This sending by the Lord raises the question: who does this sending apply to? Does it apply to the church in general (men, women and children), or is it directed to the apostleship and perhaps beyond them to ordained teachers throughout history? Although there were others in the room beside the ten (Lk. 24:33), there are good reasons for restricting this commission to the apostles. (1) This was an official setting apart and sending that has the characteristics of ordination to a church office. (2) The sending out is a sending out to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, teach the saints, set up new churches, do signs and wonders to authenticate the gospel message and new revelation, and administer church discipline. These tasks are restricted by Scripture to an ordained office. Preaching the gospel, and teaching in the public assemblies are explicitly restricted in the Bible to certain church officers. “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:11-12). Note: Paul restricts church offices and their function to only *some* in the church; not all are so gifted. (3) There were probably women in the room and Paul says that women are forbidden to teach or have authority over men. “Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says” (1 Cor. 14:34; cf. 1 Tim. 2:11-14). (4) In the history of the apostolic church in Acts the only people sent out to preach the gospel and set up new churches were ordained men set apart for such a task: the apostles and their close associates the evangelists (Ac. 1:14; 3:12; 4:19, 20, 31; 5:12, 18-21, 25, 29, 42; 6:4, 7, 8; 8:5, 13, 25, 35, 39; 10:34ff.; 11:19; 13:2-5, 16, 42-43; 14:1-3; 15:12, 22, 36, 40-41; 16:4, 10, 17, 40; 17:1-3; 10-13, 17-22; etc). (5) The sending involves carrying out judicial, ministerial tasks (Jn. 20:23) that are restricted in other portions of Scripture to church officers (cf. Mt. 16:19; 18:18; 28:19-20, etc). (6) If we compare passages that correspond to John 20:21, such as John 13:20 and 17:18-20, we see that previously in John’s gospel this kind of language is directed to the apostles *alone*. Therefore, exegetically, it is very unlikely that John, out of accord with his previous statements, wants us to understand this commission as given to everyone indiscriminately in the whole room or to all believers without exception. Hendriksen writes,

That Jesus has the *ten* (and in a sense also the absent apostle, Thomas; hence, the *eleven*) in mind follows also from the very similar or parallel passage in 17:18, 20. Note: “Just as thou didst send me into the world, so have I also sent them into the world...Neither concerning these only do I make request, but concerning those also who believe in me through their word.” One might paraphrase this: “Just as thou didst send me into the world, so have I also sent *these eleven men* into the world...Neither concerning *these eleven men* only do I make request, but concerning those also who believe in me through their word.”²⁶

Many expositors, in their desire to apply this charge to the church in general, fail to consider the context of this passage and thus downplay the crucial role that the apostles played in redemptive history. The apostles were the *immediate* messengers of Christ. They were the sent out witnesses for Jesus of His teachings, miracles, suffering, death and resurrection. They were unique, by virtue of their special commission and gift of inspiration. Consequently, in their office they were infallible as teachers, and absolute and infallibly just as rulers. Paul says that the

²⁵ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1218.

²⁶ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 2:460.

apostles and New Covenant prophets' work formed the foundation of the New Testament church: "having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20). "No man, therefore, could be an apostle unless,--1. He was immediately appointed by Christ; 2. Unless he had seen him after his resurrection, and had received the knowledge of the gospel by immediate revelation; 3. Unless he was rendered infallible by the gift of inspiration. These things constituted the office, and were essential to its authority. Those who without these gifts and qualifications claimed the office are called 'false apostles.'"²⁷

Although this sending out, in both the narrow and broader context of Scripture, applies primarily to the apostles, it does apply to the whole church in the sense that church officers are representatives of the church. Furthermore, while the Bible does not require every church member to go into all the world to preach the gospel, nevertheless all believers do have a responsibility to be witnesses for Christ by their behavior and their conversation. There are examples in Scripture of both men and women privately witnessing and teaching others about Jesus (e.g., the Samaritan woman, Jn. 4:28-30, 39; Priscilla and Aquilla, Ac. 18:26). There is also Paul's commendation to the Thessalonian believers, "For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything" (1 Th. 1:8).

By way of application, note the importance of the lawful ordination and sending out of preachers of the gospel. In our day of many parachurch organizations and *self-proclaimed* prophets, leaders and preachers, Christ's methodology must be followed. Hutcheson writes,

Ministers are of Christ's sending and employing by his sovereign authority, as his courts and ministers do, ministerially in his name, send them out; they must not run unsent; they who want them, and would have them blessed to them, should seek them of him; they who are lawfully called are to act in his name and authority, which is to be acknowledged by people in their discharge of trust, and such messengers are to be looked on as a great and special gift bestowed on the church by her exalted Lord. All this is imported in this, "I send you," now when he is risen from the dead, in his begun exaltation. (See Eph. iv. 8-11.)²⁸

He Breathed on Them

After Jesus commissioned the apostles He then qualified and empowered them. "And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (Jn. 20:22). This verse considered in the broad context of New Covenant redemptive history is difficult and has occasioned a number of different interpretations. As we study this section of Scripture we will first consider our Lord's action and then examine this imperative.

This is the only verse in the New Testament where Jesus is said to breathe on someone. Regarding this action note the following.

²⁷ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Ephesians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1856] 1964), 159. The view that our Lord's commission was directed only to the apostles "was the interpretation put upon Jn. 20:20-23 by the earliest Christian writers who allude to these verses. Justin (*Tryph.* 106) ignores the presence of any but apostles. Origen (*de princip.* 1.iii.2 and *Comm. in Jn.* 388) and Cyprian (*de unit.*4, Epist. lxxiii.6) say explicitly that *Accipe spiritum sanctum*, etc., was addressed to the apostles. The Liturgy of St. Mark (which may be as early as the second century) is equally explicit. I do not know, indeed of any early writer who takes a different view" (J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark (1928) 1976], 2:677).

²⁸ George Hutcheson, *John*, 421.

First, the verb used (Greek, *enephusen*), “He breathed” (which is only found here in the New Testament), is the same verb used in the Septuagint in Genesis 2:7 where God breathed life into Adam. Thus, the symbolism of Christ’s impartation of the Holy Spirit sets the beginning of New Covenant history in parallel with the first creation of man. The new creation is every bit as significant in God’s eyes as the first creation. In fact, Paul even says that Christ is Lord over both creation and the recreation. Both the material world and the church came into being through Him. “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible.... All things were created through Him and for Him.... And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence” (Col. 1:15, 16, 18). Because of His sacrificial death and resurrection, Jesus breathes life into His body, the church. Because of the Savior’s resurrection, He brings the new creation into existence by His Spirit. Just as there was no life in man until God breathed into him the breath of life, there can be no birthing of the church until Christ breathed on the apostles. “Strictly speaking, one should not view this as the *beginning* of the new creation but rather as the beginning of the *incorporation of man* into that new creation which came into being *in the Christ* by his incarnation, death, and resurrection, and is actualized in man by the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17).”²⁹

Although given in the immediate context of our Lord’s actions, the allusion to Genesis 2:7 is not John’s central focus. Nevertheless, John is a master of using simple terms and phrases in a manner that is profound and deep, that sometimes points the mind beyond the simple, obvious meaning to related theological truths.

Second, the breath of Christ symbolizes what immediately follows—a particular gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God was not in our Lord’s human breath which was physical air. But the breath was a sign that it is the resurrected Redeemer who imparts the Holy Spirit to the apostles and the church. It is important to remember that wind in Scriptures is the prominent symbol of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 3:8; Ez. 37:9; Ac. 2:2). The outward symbol of Jesus breathing on the apostles would be completely inappropriate and even blasphemous if the Holy Spirit did not proceed from Christ. This fact teaches us two closely related truths.

(1) The theanthropic Mediator as an aspect of His glorification is the One who pours out the Holy Spirit on His church. Before the crucifixion John said, “The Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (7:39). The saving sovereignty of the Spirit was dependent upon the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The apostles and the church could not bring gospel blessings into the world until redemption was accomplished and then applied by the living-ruling Savior. Christ the “life-giving Spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45) communicates the life that He achieved by His redemptive work to elect sinners throughout the world by His Spirit. Further, as a reward for His redemptive obedience Jesus is the exalted, all-powerful King and Head of the church who dispenses the gifts of the Spirit of God to the church. As Paul says, “He ascended...and He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers...” (Eph. 4:9, 11). David also spoke of this aspect of our Lord’s glorification. “Thou hast ascended on high, Thou hast led captivity captive: Thou hast received gifts for men: yea, for the rebellious also, that the Lord might dwell among them” (Ps. 68:18 KJV). Our Lord not only commissions the apostles, but also prepares them by the grace and gifts of the Spirit for their mission.

²⁹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 381.

By way of application, note that no man is qualified to any office in the church, especially that of teaching and ruling who is not first enabled and gifted by the Holy Spirit. To properly interpret the Holy Scriptures and guide men into the truth of the gospel is a job far beyond fallen human capacity. Therefore, we should not be surprised that the glorified King sends His Spirit to men to enlighten their minds, guide their tongues and mold their hearts so they are able to faithfully discharge their duties. “[I]t is the glory of Christ alone to form those he appoints to be teachers of his church; for the reason why the fullness of the Spirit has been poured out upon him is, that he may bestow it upon each person according to a certain measure.”³⁰

(2) Jesus’ act of breathing upon the apostles (Jn. 20:21) and His pouring out the Holy Spirit upon the church (Ac. 2:17, *ekcheo*, “poured out”) on Pentecost teaches us something important about the trinity’s work in the economy of redemption. Although the Holy Spirit prepared and qualified Christ for His mediatorial work (Lk. 1:35; 3:32; Heb. 10:5-7; Jn. 3:24), the risen Savior sends the Holy Spirit to form, teach and guide the church. The sending of the Holy Spirit by the glorified Messiah is not arbitrary, nor simply for dramatic effect, but is an important aspect of the theanthropic Mediator’s reward and Kingly rule. “Christ executeth the office of a king, in calling out of the world a people to himself, and giving them officers, laws and censures, by which he visibly governs them...” (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, A. 46).

Receive the Holy Spirit

After our Lord’s symbolic act of breathing on the disciples He said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (Jn. 20:22). Because of Acts 2:1ff. this command (“Receive,” *labete* is an aorist active imperative) has been difficult for commentators and has resulted in a number of different interpretations. In order to carefully examine this statement and come to a sound interpretation of this verse, consider the following observations.

First, note what the passage does not mean. It cannot mean that at this point in time the disciples were to receive the Holy Spirit for the first time, for the Spirit’s presence and work on the heart is necessary for conversion. The apostles, obviously, were already believers and not pagans. Both the Old (see Ez. 11:19; 36:26; 44:9) and New Testament (see Jn. 1:13; 3:3, 5, 8; Col. 2:11; Tit. 3:5) teach that an immediate work of the Holy Spirit is necessary for the new birth and effectual calling (see Jn. 6:44, 65). Paul said, “Now we have received, not the spirit of this world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God” (1 Cor. 2:12). “[N]o one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). Therefore, the apostles received the Spirit when they first were converted and believed. “Whether they realized it or not, the Holy Ghost was in their hearts already.”³¹

This incident must not be confused with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. A number of modernist and neo-evangelical commentators take the position that John was not interested in a strict, accurate chronology and thus deliberately placed the sending of the Spirit on the day of resurrection. According to this view (at least with certain neo-evangelical scholars), Acts 2 contains the authentic account while John (aware of Acts) simply wanted to make the same theological point. But, because John wrote only one volume, not two, they contend he compressed events so that the giving of the Spirit could be placed in the resurrection narrative. Given the doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, such a view is totally

³⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 3:267.

³¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:445.

unacceptable. The Bible is inerrant not only when it speaks of theology or spiritual matters, but also when covering historical events.

Further, John's own gospel anticipates the Pentecost event. In John 16, Jesus repeatedly makes it very clear that Holy Spirit will not come until after the ascension. He said, "It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the helper will not come to you" (Jn. 16:7). In this discourse Christ talks about *going away* to the Father and *being absent* from the apostles (see 16:5, 7, 16, 17, 19; cf. 17:5) before the Holy Spirit is sent. Therefore, one must not view John 20:22 as the beloved disciple's version of Pentecost. Thus, the idea, originally developed by modernists, that John telescopes the resurrection, ascension and coming of the Holy Spirit to the day of resurrection is untenable. According to John himself, the Savior must be absent from the apostles with God in heaven before the comforter is sent. In this passage the Lord is still with the apostles.

(3) It is a mistake to view the breathing on the apostles and the words "receive the Spirit" as merely a promise or announcement of which the outpouring at Pentecost was the historic fulfillment. Our Lord did not say "you will receive" (future tense), but "receive" or "take." "The aorist *labete* is decidedly punctiliar and denotes reception then and there and not a process of reception that is to go on and on."³² The verb is the word used for "take" in all the accounts of the institution of the Lord's supper (Mt. 26:26; Mk. 14:22; Lk. 22:17) where the reception of the elements was immediate. Consequently, the use of this verb "still more plainly implies that some gift was offered and bestowed then and there: it is wresting plain language to make 'take ye' a mere promise."³³ Therefore, there was a resurrection day gift of the Holy Spirit that is distinct from the Pentecostal gift of God's Spirit.

Note also the evident differences between the resurrection day bestowal and Pentecost. As noted, the resurrection day gift is directed to the apostles. It is for their distinctive work. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is poured out on the whole church. On the Lord's day, Jesus bestows the gift in person and precedes it with the sign of His breath. On Pentecost, the Savior is in heaven or *absent* and the sound of a mighty rushing wind comes from heaven. On the day of resurrection there were no "divided tongues as of fire" (Ac. 2:3), speaking in tongues, bold public preaching or wide-scale conversions. Further, Pentecost is the direct fulfillment of Jesus' promise in Jn. 16 as well as a number of Old Testament prophecies (e.g., Joel 2:30, 31; Zech. 12:10; Isa. 32:14-17; Ezek. 36:26; cf. Ac. 2:16); the resurrection day bestowal is not. "Wherefore it cannot be doubted that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost was His first and real coming into the Church."³⁴ Given these differences, it is best to view the resurrection day bestowal as not a promise, but as something separate, different and unique.

Second, given the considerations above and the immediate context, which is a commission and statement regarding the judicial responsibilities of teaching and church discipline, this impartation of the Holy Spirit should be viewed as a bestowal related to knowledge, understanding and authoritative teaching. Previously, the apostles had been severely deficient in their understanding of redemptive events. They did not even perceive the meaning or purpose of Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection. On this very same day, the day of resurrection, they were particularly blind in spiritual understanding regarding the many evidences and testimonies set before them. Therefore, after the effective demonstration of His bodily resurrection, Christ bestows on the apostles the Holy Spirit so that, as the primary

³² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, 1372.

³³ Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1882] 1981), 343-344.

³⁴ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1900] 1956), 115.

witnesses, teachers and expositors in the church, they will have the necessary understanding and knowledge for their task.

The parallel account in Luke's gospel points to this interpretation. Luke says that after our Lord gave a detailed explanation concerning Himself, "He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (24:45). Then, after their minds were enlightened, the disciples' commission is again stated in explicit terms (24:47-48). "[L]ight in the understanding is the first thing required in order to make a man an able minister of the New Testament. Our Lord was commissioning His first ministers, and sending them out to carry on His work. He begins by giving them light and knowledge: 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost. I commission you this day, and confer on you the office of ministers. And this gift I confer on you is spiritual knowledge.'"³⁵ Jesus communicates the peace of salvation and a special spiritual gift of understanding the Scriptures so that the apostles may be prepared for their common work.

This interpretation is supported by the great change we find in the apostles after this meeting. Although we are often taught that a radical change occurred *only* at Pentecost, we must not neglect the change in the apostles *before* Pentecost:

Read the closing chapter of each Gospel and the first of Acts, and the proofs of this are conclusive. Their irresolution, their unbelief, their misapprehensions, were all gone. When the cloud finally received the Saviour from their sight, instead of being dispersed in consternation "they worshipped him" and "returned to Jerusalem with great joy" (Luke 24:52)—this was "joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17): Moreover, they continued "with one accord in prayer and supplication" (Acts 1:14)—this was "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). Peter has a clear understanding of Old Testament prophecy (Acts 1:20)—this was the Spirit guiding into the truth (John 16:13). And these things were *before Pentecost*.³⁶

Therefore, with reference to the apostles, there are at least three separate gifts of the Holy Spirit. There is the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration; the special endowment qualifying these men for the apostolic office (Jn. 20:22); and, the baptism with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Ac. 2:1ff.). A number of commentators speak of the giving of the Spirit as an "earnest" of a greater gifting and empowerment to come at Pentecost. For example, Calvin writes,

The Spirit was given to the Apostles on this occasion in such a manner, that they were only sprinkled by his grace, but were not filled with full power.... And, indeed, he did appoint them to be heralds of his Gospel, so as to send them forth immediately to the work, but ordered them to take repose, as we read elsewhere, *Remain ye in the city of Jerusalem till ye are endued with power from on high*, (Luke xxxiv. 49). And if we take all things properly into consideration, we shall conclude, not that he furnishes them with necessary gifts for present use, but that he appoints them to be the organs of his Spirit for the future; and, therefore, this *breathing* ought to be understood as referring chiefly to that magnificent act of sending the Spirit which he had so often promised.³⁷

Thus, the apostles received something more than they had before (special gifts of the Holy Spirit), but they would receive even more spiritual blessings when Christ sits on His throne. The day of resurrection then, is organically connected to Pentecost.

³⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:446.

³⁶ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:287.

³⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 3:268-269.

Retaining and Remitting Sins

After commissioning the apostles and bestowing gifts for their task, our Lord turns His attention to the great responsibility of their mission. The apostles' job of preaching the gospel, teaching doctrine and setting up churches has a distinct judicial aspect. Jesus said, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn. 20:23).

Christ is telling the apostles that their responsibility to preach the gospel and govern the church is very serious business. If men do not believe in the gospel, the apostles have the responsibility to tell such people that they are not saved; that they are still in their sins. But, if people do believe in Christ and repent, the apostles are to tell such people that they are saved, baptize them, and admit them into the visible church. This aspect of the apostles' commission applies to all office bearers throughout history. Church officers are responsible not only to proclaim the gospel, but also (when appropriate), they are to inflict and/or remove ecclesiastical censures. The apostles are not simply preachers, but also church planters and governors. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they have the authority of announcing that a person is saved or that a person is not a Christian *as long as what they say is in accordance with the teaching of God's holy Word*. In other words, their authority is *ministerial* and *declarative* and not intrinsic, subjective, autonomous or arbitrary.

We emphasize the declarative nature of this responsibility in opposition to Roman Catholic dogma that the apostles and their successors (cardinals, bishops and priests) have by ordination an intrinsic and absolute power of retaining or remitting sins. Consequently, various popes in the Middle Ages would threaten princes and kings with excommunication for political, financial and arbitrary reasons. Also many godly men were excommunicated for rejecting the heresies and idolatries of the papal church. That our Lord has in mind only a declarative and ministerial sense to His words is proved by the following observations.

First, the tense of the verbs used indicates that church officers can only *declare* that which God *has already done*. The passage literally reads, "Those whose sins you forgive [aorist; i.e. punctiliar] have already been forgiven [perfect; i.e. already determined with a continuing result]; those whose sins you do not forgive [aorist] have not been forgiven [perfect]." This means that God doesn't forgive or refuse to forgive based on a church officer's prior decision. But rather, ministers simply announce what is already the case according to God. And how do men know if a person's sins are forgiven or retained by God? The only way to know is by searching the Holy Scriptures to see what God says. Church officers announce; they do not create or autonomously legislate. If a body of church elders arbitrarily disciplines a person that has not actually violated Scripture, that session is guilty of serious sin and God does not recognize, but repudiates their judicial decision.

Second, the Bible explicitly teaches that only God has the authority to forgive sins. When the scribes said, "Why does this Man speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mk. 2:7), they were right. "In the OT God alone can forgive sins, and later Judaism adhered scrupulously to this understanding."³⁸ Here, these learned Jews were correct in their interpretation of the Old Testament. Their great error was in not understanding the person of Christ; that He was indeed divine. No one but God can forgive sins and for a mere man to claim

³⁸ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 95.

that he can is blasphemy. Therefore, Jesus answered by saying, ““But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins’—He said to the paralytic, ‘I say to you arise, take up your bed, and go to your house’” (Mk. 2:10-11). The Savior proved that He was God when He healed the paralytic, for blasphemers cannot perform signs. The idea that a pope, bishop or priest can forgive sins is wicked and idolatrous.

In Acts 8:22 after Peter rebuked Simon the sorcerer for attempting to buy gifts of the Holy Spirit with money, Peter told Simon Magus to repent of his scandalous sin and pray to God for forgiveness. If Peter (whom Romanists erroneously call the first pope) had the power to forgive sins, then why did he tell Simon to confess his sins directly to God? Confession, or an acknowledgment of sins, is commanded throughout the Bible for forgiveness of sins. But, it is noteworthy that it is always a confession to God, never to a man. It is a striking fact that although Paul, Peter and John dealt frequently with men and women in sins, both in their teaching and in their practice they never permitted a sinner to confess to them.³⁹

Third, one can carefully read the entire New Testament without finding even one example of an apostle, evangelist, pastor or elder absolving or pardoning a person’s sins. They do frequently discuss having one’s sins removed or forgiven. However, they always relate it directly to the person and work of Christ. The message of forgiveness was “repent and...be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Ac. 2:38); “to Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins” (Ac. 10:43); “let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins” (Ac. 13:28). “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” (Ac. 16:43). “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). Therefore, a study of the whole New Testament reveals that the apostles themselves did not interpret Jesus’ words in John 20:23 in a Roman Catholic manner. “While Christ enjoins the Apostles to *forgive sins*, he does not convey to them what is peculiar to himself. It belongs to him to *forgive sins*. This honour, so far as it belongs peculiarly to himself, he does not surrender to the Apostles, but enjoins them, in his name to proclaim *the forgiveness of sins*, that through their agency he may reconcile men to God.”⁴⁰

There is also nothing in Scripture about confessing one’s sins to a priest. This makes perfect sense for the Bible teaches that it is the privilege of every believer to confess his sins directly to God. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9). Paul said, “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). The papal system places a human sinful mediator between God and Christ. Such a doctrine is not only exceedingly sinful, but highly injurious because people are taught to look to men instead of Christ for forgiveness. J. C. Ryle writes,

The experience of the Romish Church, in which the priests are practically regarded as having the power to absolve sinners, and shut heaven against persons not absolved, affords the strongest indirect evidence that our Lord’s words can only have been meant to bear a “declarative” sense. Anything worse or more mischievous, both to minister and people, than the

³⁹ James 5:16 which says, “Confess your faults to one another to one another, and pray for one another,” is a command to be done by all Christians for mutual edification. Obviously, if a professing Christian sins against a brother, he needs to acknowledge that sin and ask the offended brother for forgiveness. This passage, however, has absolutely nothing to do with confession to a priest or anyone else to receive forgiveness from God.

⁴⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 3:271.

results of the Romish system of penance and absolution, it is impossible to conceive. It is a system which has practically degraded the laity, puffed up and damaged the clergy, turned people away from Christ, and kept them in spiritual darkness and bondage.⁴¹

Fourth, the parallel account in Luke's gospel gives us details not found in John's gospel that make it clear that Jesus is emphasizing the nature and importance of gospel preaching. After our Lord breathed on the apostles and opened their understanding so they could comprehend the Scriptures He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things" (Lk. 24:46-48). The statement about retaining or remitting sins is obviously connected to the preaching of the gospel, not the confessional. The church's function is to proclaim the gospel to all men; teaching them that forgiveness is found only in Christ and that those who reject Jesus will die in their sins.

This theme is found throughout John's gospel, only the terms ("remit," "retain") are different. In the beloved disciple's gospel there is "much about 'having life eternal' and 'not having life' or 'perishing' from 3:15 onward, and no man has life without being rid of his sins. The same is true in 1:12, regarding the 'power to become sons of God.' Compare 5:24, and in particular 8:21 and 24, 'dying in your sins,' and 9:41, 'your sin remains.' In fact, the entire gospel is full of the fundamental truth of divine grace and forgiveness.... All is now concentrated and brought to a focus in two weighty statements by which Jesus bestows upon his disciples the great power [of gospel preaching] he has so far exercised himself."⁴²

The main purpose of preaching the gospel is so that men would have their sins removed by Christ and be reconciled to God. Paul even refers to the work of the apostles as "the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18). If preachers are to be faithful to their calling they must accurately, firmly and repeatedly proclaim Christ's gospel. Also, they must tell people plainly that those who reject the gospel are still in their sins. Their sins are retained. Their offenses and guilt remain and God's just verdict of condemnation rests upon them. Those who preach the gospel ought to take their jobs very seriously and those who reject Christ ought to be terrified by Jesus' words. The gospel call invites all to embrace Christ by faith and be saved and it also proclaims damnation and destruction to those who despise the Savior's glad tidings.

Fifth, the language of "retaining" or "remitting" describes the apostles as not only preachers, but also as ecclesiastical judges. Following the preaching of the gospel, comes admittance or exclusion from the church and the sacraments. "The authority of the messengers includes both the communication of salvation and the imposition of judgment. It is the judge's authority to acquit and to pronounce guilty that is described by this pair of opposites and the synonymous phrases 'bind and loose' [Mt. 18:18] and 'forgive and retain sins.' As pairs of opposites are used in pairs of words mean that the messengers receive total authority."⁴³ In Matthew 18:18 the binding and loosing is connected with cases of unrepentant sin in the church. Sin is the transgression of the law. The context of John 20:23 places the remitting and retaining in connection with the acceptance or rejection of the gospel. In both Matthew 18:18 and John

⁴¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:448-449. The Roman Catholic doctrine of auricular confession of sin to a priest instead of to God was a rather late human innovation instituted by Pope Innocent III at the Lateran Council in 1215. It is related to the Romanist sacerdotal concept of the priesthood which is rooted in a heretical concept of Christ's atoning death as insufficient and unbiblical views of Mt. 16:19 and Jn. 20:23.

⁴² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, 1375.

⁴³ Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, 238, as quoted in George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 383.

20:23, the authority exercised by the ecclesiastic judges has solely to do with making judgments based on biblical law and New Testament applications of moral principles; or, whether a person has a credible profession of faith in Christ. The point is that in neither of these passages do we find Jesus taking His own intrinsic authority as God and transferring it to His apostles. They are called upon to make judgments according to the law and gospel. The Roman Catholic interpretation assumes with no scriptural evidence whatsoever that the apostles and their supposed successors are given intrinsic legislative authority which they are not.

The only time it would even appear that an apostle or prophet had some sort of special power or authority apart from the written word is when they were exercising special spiritual gifts such as writing or speaking by divine inspiration or exercising the gift of knowledge (e.g., the cases of Ananias, Sapphira and Simon Magus). These gifts, however, were unique and the judgment involved came by direct revelation, not private opinion. The apostles like the prophets before them were not acting like kings, but as ambassadors; that is by *declaring* to the people what God Himself has spoken. This aspect of the ministry of the apostles has ceased and was never intended by God to be handed down generation to generation in the churches. In this sense then, there is no such thing as apostolic succession. “Modern ministers are not successors of the Apostles, but of Timothy and Titus. The Apostles were particularly qualified, and gifted, and furnished for the very peculiar work they had to do, as the first founders of Churches. But, in the strictest and most accurate sense, their office was one which was not transmitted. With them it began, and with them it ended.”⁴⁴

Other Applications

There are a number of things that we should learn from this authority bestowed upon the apostles that extends to the church and her ministers.

First, we see that our Lord set up the visible church to be orderly and holy. There is a particular doctrine that is to be proclaimed and passed on to future generations, and there is church discipline to keep unbelieving, unrepentant, obstinate sinners out of the church. The visible church is to function under sound doctrine and strict discipline. “All the members of the church are subject to the order established by Christ in his house, and none ought to free themselves from his yoke; all are bound to submit to his doctrine in the mouths of his servants, and all also are under his rod of government.”⁴⁵

Churches that are unfaithful to this commission by perverting the Savior’s gospel (e.g., Arminianism, Romanism, Shepherdism, the Auburn Avenue heresy) and refusing to discipline people who are guilty of scandalous sin and heresy are not living in obedience to our Lord’s commission. They must not be supported by our membership or tithe.

Second, by showing us the nature of true authority this commission helps us identify and avoid arbitrary human ecclesiastical authority. Many professing Christians do not understand that the keys of the kingdom (see Mt. 16:19; 18:18) are purely ministerial and declarative. The authority of the pastoral office comes solely from understanding, exegeting, expositing and applying the Bible in preaching, teaching, writing, counseling and discipline. When the true meaning of Scripture is applied people are obligated to submit to the teaching or counsel not because the pastor said it, but because God has said it. The idea that church officers can make up or create new doctrines, rules or worship practices out of thin air and believers are obligated to

⁴⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:449.

⁴⁵ George Hutcheson, *The Gospel of John*, 423.

submit to the new human traditions because the church elders say so is akin to Romanism and the great sin of Jeroboam the son of Nebat. Church courts can only tell men that their sins are remitted, or that they are retained or bound *in terms of God's infallible Word*. "No *independent* power is conferred upon the church, and to imagine so is to follow after the Pharisees, as the modern church has so often done."⁴⁶

Therefore, we must view this commission as a great charter of Christian liberty. If a church session or presbytery wants to charge a church member with something, they must not only carefully follow biblical procedure (see Mt. 18:15-20; 1 Tim. 5:19), but also must first prove from Scripture that sin or heresy has been committed. Further, the decisions of ecclesiastical courts that are contrary to or not based on Scripture are not binding. The court's responsibility is to condemn people who have first been condemned by God. Christians should not be afraid of ecclesiastical tyrants, but should rather expose them to the light of Scripture.

Third, this section of Scripture shows us the importance of submitting ourselves to biblical preaching and church admonition or discipline. When a pastor or church session tells a professing Christian that they are living in sin and need to repent and what is said is based on the Word of God, their words must be taken very seriously. Christ says that such words are fully backed up by God Himself, that biblical church censures are "bound in heaven" (Mt. 18:18). This subject is brought up because many church members think they can escape divine justice by denouncing the pastor or session and leaving the church; or by appealing to some technicality in the denomination's book of church order. If you have done this or are contemplating it, do not be deceived. God is not mocked. You may fool a few people in the church and you may even succeed in damaging the pastor's reputation, but you cannot fool God. He has already made His decision concerning your obstinacy and you will pay dearly for your rejection of God's truth. Hutcheson writes, "This exercise of ministerial authority, however carnal hearts may condemn and slight it, either in doctrine or discipline, yet, being gone about according to the rules of the word, it is so effectual as it is ratified in heaven, and the penitent or obstinate sinner will find God's mind towards them to be according as is declared in his name on earth.... And this may be a matter of terror to the obstinate, and of encouragement to the penitent."⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Gospel of John* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House, 2000), 272.

⁴⁷ George Hutcheson, *The Gospel of John*, 423.