

John 20:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.

Analysis

Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained. This controversial verse grants disciples authority in sin's remission/retention. The Greek perfect passive construction (aphēontai, ἀφέωνται; kekratēntai, κεκράτηνται) indicates completed action with ongoing results: "have been and remain forgiven/retained." This suggests disciples declare rather than determine forgiveness—they announce what God has already accomplished through Christ's work.

Protestant interpretation emphasizes declarative authority: as ambassadors proclaiming gospel (2 Corinthians 5:20), ministers announce forgiveness to believers and warn unrepentant sinners of retained guilt. Roman Catholic theology sees sacramental authority for priestly absolution. The context supports Protestant reading: immediately following Spirit-reception (v.22) and mission-commissioning (v.21), this authority flows from gospel proclamation. Those who believe the apostolic message receive forgiveness (Acts 2:38, 10:43); those who reject it remain in sin (John 3:18, 36). The church's authority derives from faithfulness to Christ's Word, not institutional hierarchy. This power operates through preaching, not religious ceremony divorced from gospel content.

Historical Context

Jesus's language parallels rabbinic authority to "bind and loose" (Matthew 16:19, 18:18)—declaring what is permitted or forbidden under Torah. Early church

preaching exercised this authority: Peter announced forgiveness at Pentecost (Acts 2:38) and pronounced judgment on Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). Paul exercised church discipline (1 Corinthians 5:5) and pronounced blessing on faithful churches (Romans 15:29).

Church history shows varied applications. Eastern Orthodoxy and Catholicism developed formal confession with priestly absolution. Reformers like Luther and Calvin rejected sacramental penance while affirming ministerial authority to proclaim forgiveness through gospel preaching and warn of judgment for impenitence. Anabaptist traditions emphasized congregational discipline. All Christian traditions recognize some form of this authority, disagreeing on its locus (ordained clergy vs. all believers) and exercise (sacramental vs. declarative). The text's emphasis on Spirit-empowerment (v.22) and mission context (v.21) suggests authority functions through faithful gospel proclamation in the Spirit's power.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. How should the church exercise authority to announce forgiveness and warn of judgment in contemporary contexts?
2. What is the relationship between Christ's finished work, the Spirit's power, and the church's ministry of reconciliation?
3. How do you balance gospel assurance of forgiveness with sober warnings about impenitence?

Interlinear Text

ἄν	τινων	ἀφιένται	τὰς	ἀμαρτίας	ἀφιένται
soever	Whose	they are remitted		sins	they are remitted
G302	G5100	G863	G3588	G266	G863
αὐτοῖς	ἄν	τινων	κεκράτηνται	κεκράτηνται	
unto them	soever	Whose	sins ye retain	sins ye retain	
G846	G302	G5100	G2902	G2902	

Additional Cross-References

Matthew 18:18 (Parallel theme): Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Matthew 16:19 (Parallel theme): And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

1 Timothy 1:20 (Parallel theme): Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.

Acts 10:43 (Sin): To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.

Acts 2:38 (Sin): Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.