

An Assortment of Readers' Responses

Colleagues,

Every now and then one of you will send me a note about something you read in the latest post. I stash these away as they come in, now and then flagging an item that ought to be shared more widely. Here are a few from the current collection.

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1. Late in June you got a reflection by yours truly on John 20:23 ([ThTheol #882](#)). I pitched the notion that the translators we rely on, usually without question, might well have been botching this verse all along by turning opaque Greek ("if you hold them, they are held") into determined English ("if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"). In an ensuing argument for reading the two halves of the verse as parallel expressions, I observed that the second edition of BDAG, the standard Greek-English lexicon, offers "retain" as a meaning of the Greek verb in question, but only at the tail end of a long entry, and with John 20:23 as the sole verse to which the meaning applied. That struck me as pretty thin. I wondered if BDAG's third edition, not on my shelves, had hung on to this. It had, as I learned a few weeks ago from friend and colleague **Dick Gahl**: "I finally looked it up," Dick wrote. "BDAG, third edition, *krateo*, entry #7: "'to cause a condition to continue, to hold in place'; specifically to John 20:23, 'pronounce the sins unforgiven (opposition to *aphienai*).'"

So I pass this along for the record. Also for the record, I continue to wonder which came first in arriving at this as the "definition" of the word in this particular and sole instance: was it the lexicographer's investigation or the theologian's

prior assumption, anchored in the long and perhaps erroneous history of the verse's interpretation? Again I wish that Fred Danker were with us still so I could ask him—e'er so politely, of course.

2. The same post on John 20:23 snagged a response from **Ed Schroeder**:

"Here's my Aha-version of this verse from some time ago. It's not theologically different from yours, but grammatically. It starts with a verb in the aorist subjunctive, a hypothetical:

"'If you were to carry out the forgiveness authorization you now have (since I'm sending you on the same assignment on which the Father sent me), it would work. Sinners would be forgiven. If you (present subjunctive) were to leave them still stuck in their sin (by not carrying out the job I've just assigned to you), they'll stay stuck. Not that you are authorized to decide whether to unlock or lock the forgiveness door. That's nonsense. Only God does the locking/unlocking. You're now authorized and have in hand the "key" to unlock. If you don't do it, it won't happen.'

"If there is substantive parallelism in the picture, it could be between these two verses:

'As the Father sent me, so I you,' and 'When you do forgiveness, it happens. When you don't, it doesn't.'

"There is a triple parallelism, one might say, in the substance of all three of Jesus distinct messages. i) Peace to you. ii) Receive the Holy Spirit. iii) As Father sent me, so I send you. (And in case you might still be fuzzy about that point of that sending (*missio*), it's forgiveness of sins—which is also the substance of the two prior messages.)

"Forgiveness might be seen as the cantus firmus of John's whole

gospel. Right from the get-go, it's the first item specified in chapter one as Jesus' job-description, 1:29. The other bookend is the text we're talking about. The Jesus and Peter appendix in chapter 21 is a reprise of the cantus firmus."

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3. Speaking of Ed Schroeder, on July 4 ([#883](#)) we sent you some thoughts of his about the ever-popular assumption that the church's job is to lead the world in "building God's dominion on earth" (so the phrase, printed in a church bulletin, that Ed was responding to). Ed's reflections—"On Kingdoms and The Kingdom, as we titled it—brought two responses.

First, from **Bill Buegge**, with a useful reminder about the imperative of attending carefully to the vocabulary we use when we aim to communicate with people today:

"All the references to 'kingdom' in the above make me wonder whether the Bible isn't caught in the language of the worlds in which it was written. Maybe today, when there aren't many kingdoms, when kingdoms that exist are failing, we'd refer to the Democracy of God? Or (to really annoy) God's internet? Or God's Caliphate? Certainly not 'the Dictatorship of God'! That would be weird.

"The problem for me when I think of 'kingdom' is that Walt Disney cartoons in lavenders and pinks dance through my head."

And this from **Tim Rahn**, who unwittingly primed the pump for some posts-to-be, in the near future, I hope:

"Good stuff as always. I've always been skeptical and unsure of what the ELCA's tag line, God's Work, Our Hands, means. It usually means that some peace and justice agenda is involved. I thought that was the specific work of God's left hand. It seems this dominance of bringing in the kingdom has all but

overshadowed the real work of the church and that is one Gospel and sacrament ministry. Thanks to Crossings for [pushing] the right hand proper agenda of dispensing the unique forgiveness that Jesus brings.”

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4. Steve Kuhl’s exploration of Pentecostalism, delivered to you this summer in three parts, fetched an important comment from **Travis Scholl**, the managing editor of *Concordia Journal* and other publications of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis:

“Thanks for this. I wanted to let you know that Leo Sanchez, who teaches systematic theology here at Concordia and directs our Center for Hispanic Studies, has spent a lot of time focusing on the doctrine of the Spirit, with particular emphasis on the two-thirds world and the explosion of Pentecostalism in Latin America. You—and perhaps even the whole Crossings community—might find his newest book interesting: [Receiver, Bearer, and Giver of God’s Spirit: Jesus’ Life in the Spirit as a Lens for Theology and Life](#).

“He will be continuing this thinking and research in the upcoming year through a grant from the Louisville Institute. He really is one of the bright young theological minds in American Lutheranism today, and I wanted to make sure he was on your radar screen.”

[*Editor’s quick response:* Yes, I’ll look for the book. Thanks so much, Travis, for reminding us that gifts from God continue to unfold on both sides of the big Lutheran barricade. For the fact that we keep needing such reminders: Kyrie eleison. Or again, “Come, Holy Spirit!”]

5. Reader **James Koenig**, a church musician in Manhattan Beach, California, also weighed in on Steve’s essay—

"[Raised] with thoroughly Lutheran underpinnings, I gained a whole new perspective on some positive contributions of Pentecostalism through Dr. James A. Forbes Jr., Senior Minister Emeritus of the Riverside Church in New York City. Prior to that I had always associated Pentecostalism with an ultra-conservative social agenda. I am reminded of how certain aspects of Lutheranism take away something of the portals of the mystical in worship and practice. One often encounters a rather antiseptic suburban sterility in worship— even to the point of the new 'church speak' referring to a sanctuary as 'worship space' as if the word 'sanctuary' is either too big or too 'high handed.' Ask refugees about 'sanctuary' and you get a better understanding of the whole concept of a place set aside. What we've done, in my opinion, is something akin to what the Calvinists did 'back in the day' when they stripped decoration from church as if it was a sign of idolatry instead of an opportunity for 'entry.' It's almost like a predilection for 'bland' food over anything 'spicy'—or God forbid, something as sensual as 'aromatic.' At any rate, I highly recommend James Forbes excellent little book, [*The Holy Spirit and Preaching*](#)."

6. A couple of you let me know how unhappy you were with Mike Hoy's analysis of the Donald Trump phenomenon (#884, "The Donald and Me"). It struck you as skewed, unfair, Democratic propaganda dragged in where politics don't belong, i.e. a venue for theology. This too begs for further reflection in posts to come. I bring it up at the moment simply by way of a warning as I feed you a second paragraph in Jim Koenig's response to Steve Kuhl's essay (see above). It will grate on some of you. Others will cheer. Those cheering will struggle to grasp why others do not, feeling scraped instead. I commend to everyone's perusal a [*thoughtful and respectful account in today's New York Times*](#) of the burdens presently weighing on some conservative Christian evangelicals in a corner of Iowa. May it generate a modicum of

sympathy and understanding among those who view “those others” as a horror. (Such a pass we have come to, when those who bear Christ’s name are so woefully divided in their deepest passions and convictions that love all but disappears.)

In any case, here is Jim, Part Two—

“It was interesting to observe representation of God and religion in the two conventions [this summer]. Conservative David Brooks wrote that Trump is ‘a morally untethered, spiritually vacuous man who appears haunted by multiple personality disorders. It is the ‘sane’ and ‘reasonable’ Republicans who deserve the shame— the ones who stood silently by while Mr. Trump gave away their party’s sacred inheritance.’ I personally kept recalling other times and other examples of the Republicans being willing to co-opt their party and making strange bedfellows. I remember when the elder George Bush was running. I was watching the convention and suddenly out walks Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition as a major speaker. I thought ‘They have made a deal with the devil.’ It made me mad. I was so utterly offended that they had him—then later Jerry Falwell—allegedly representing the ‘Christian’ perspective. That’s not my Christian perspective. Last week there were moments when I felt like I had ‘been to church’! There were truly Spirit-filled moments. The wonderful presentation by Rev. William Barber II, pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, North Carolina, raining fire and brimstone on Trump and championing justice, equality, LGBT rights was an exciting and righteous presentation of progressive Christianity with Pentecostal style and underpinnings. (He’s a friend of James Forbes Jr.) These were interesting two weeks. And of course where the Holy Spirit dwells other spirits that are not so holy abound and are riled up. Ours is to discern, forgive, and also to insist.”

Editor's comment: And some, also among us, will see the devil where Jim saw the Spirit—which makes the stuff of our latest posts all the more urgent as matters for the Church to grapple with, and for Thursday Theology to keep focusing on as well. God grant that we will.

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7. Finally, a bit of humor to leaven the lump. And this comes from—guess who?—Jim Koenig, reflecting last January on #869, an essay by Ed Schroeder on “Radical Hospitality.” It addressed the question of whether the Lord’s Supper is meant to be so “open” that it’s open also to the unbaptized.

“A colleague whose area was youth ministry was ‘corrected’ by a sabbatical pastor when she used the term ‘altar.’ She was told ‘It’s not an altar— it’s a table.’ (Are we now talking about pulpit and table fellowship?) Why can’t it be both? The metamorphosis of altar into table and table into altar is quite striking and spiritual with its layers of meaning.

“No, I don’t think that anyone at a church service who just follows suit and goes to communion will implode on contact. Still, we must not lose the reverence for the sacredness of the “meal” in the process. Anymore I shake my head when I hear the extensive communion menu. It’s like a Saturday Night Live routine. ‘All are welcome. Communion will be served on the floor today. Take a chunk of bread and dip it in either the light colored grape juice or the red colored wine. If you have a problem with the common cup, individual glasses are available. If you are gluten free, gluten free wafers are offered from the assistant.’ ‘Chunk of bread’: are you kidding me? Yes, the sacred ‘chunk’ is the new language of the mass. And a pottery crafted double intinction vessel for dunking is not really a common cup. And then to top it all, there is a pump bottle of Purell hand cleanser on the altar or table or whatever it is—

“—yes, whatever it is. We are sadly parsing out the practice while losing the sense of the mysteries of the faith. The Lord’s Supper for its intimacy has been referred to as God’s conjugal visit. (Post communion prayer: As you live in me may I live in you until eternal life.) I say that whether you do it on the altar or on the table— it had better be a love feast, and a love that passes understanding. It should be neither red meat for watch-dogs, nor a thing to be taken lightly.

“A communion hymn, to the tune of ‘Lord Keep us Steadfast In Thy Word’)

O keep us from their cooties Lord
And may the church not make us bored
Upon your altar/table be
The blood that’s shed for you and me.

And may the follies of the church
Not leave us in a rubric lurch
O may our practice bless and please
The God who brings us to our knees.

(About that kneeling, it’s a choice
I’ll cross myself, God hears my voice
We offer Jesus come and see
We each have our own recipe.)

O grant this Eucharist to be
a means of grace for you and me
And though it’s clumsy welcome all
A ladder up, after the fall.”

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Amid all, peace and joy to one and all, from the One who speaks the word and makes it so. Thanks to all who contributed, and to all who keep reading.

Jerry Burce