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# The Church's Mission: John 20:19–23 Reconsidered

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I intend to place Luther's interpretation among other significant interpreters of John 20:19–23 throughout interpretive history. This essay argues that contemporary readers of John 20:19–23 have much to gain from a re-appropriation of Luther's exegesis. Luther's doctrinal and homiletical interpretation informs our reading of John 20:19–23 by suggesting that the passage primarily concerns the church's proclamation of the gospel as well as the church's ability to offer assurance of sins forgiven.

Theological and interpretive tension is by no means foreign to the Johannine literature in the New Testament. People who are not familiar with the history of interpretation may be largely unaware and rather surprised at the variety of theological interpretations surrounding John 20:19–23. A few of the questions surrounding this multilayered text are: Is John 20:22 the Johannine version of Pentecost? If Jesus imparted the Spirit to the disciples in John 20:22, in what way did they receive the Spirit in Acts 2:4? How does John 20:19–23 function as a pericope in John's gospel? Does John 20:19–23 imply that there were multiple givings of the Spirit in the New Testament? Indeed, the difficulty in ascertaining the meaning of John 20:19–23 makes it one of the most controversial Johannine pericopes found in the Gospel of John.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Among modern critical scholars there is significant disagreement as to how John 20:19–23 relates to Acts 2:4 and how it should be interpreted within the Johannine witness. For a survey of various contemporary interpretive positions see Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, John Vriend, trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 640–646; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, R.W.N. Hoare and J.K. Riches, eds., G.R. Beasley-Murray, trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 689–693; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, vol. 36 of *Word Biblical Commentary*, Bruce Metzger, ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 378–384; Gary M. Burge, *The Anointed Community: The Holy Spirit in the Johannine Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 114–149; Gerald F. Hawthorne, *The Presence & The Power: The Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991), 235–244; James D.G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy: A Re-examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 173–182; Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, Gerald Bray, ed. (Contours of Christian Theology, Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 64–65; George Johnston, *The Spirit-Paraclete in the Gospel of John* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 49–51; F.W. Beare, "The Risen Jesus Bestows the Spirit: A Study of John 20:19–23," in *Canadian Journal of Theology* 4.2 (1958): 95–100; Reginald H. Fuller, "John 20:19–23," in *Interpretation*

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## Does John 20:19–23 imply that there were multiple givings of the Spirit in the New Testament?

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Interestingly, this text actually informs both the way one understands the book of Acts, particularly the scenes in Acts 2:4; 4:31; 8:17; 10:44–48 where the Spirit manifests itself in an extraordinary manner, and Jesus' commission to the disciples to both proclaim the gospel (Matt 28:16–20; Luke 24:46–49) and offer forgiveness of sins to all who will confess Jesus as Lord (John 20:19–23; cf. Matt 18:15–20; Rom 10:9).<sup>2</sup> Thus, one's interpretation of John 20:19–23 is significant because it reveals how one understands the work of the Spirit of Christ in the New Testament. It is not surprising, then, that the Reformer Martin Luther labored to apply this pivotal text practically in the sixteenth century in his homiletical endeavors. Unlike the majority of interpreters, Luther focused primarily on the relationship between Jesus' bestowal of the Spirit in John 20:22 and the commission to all Christendom to proclaim Christ and offer absolution of sins to all people in John 20:23. It is for this reason that Luther's reading of 20:19–23 needs to be rediscovered; Luther's insight will deepen one's understanding of this Johannine passage, revealing that its meaning is about more than its pneumatological relationship with Acts 2.

This essay intends to place Luther's interpretation among other significant interpreters of John 20:19–23 throughout interpretive history. This essay argues that contemporary readers of John 20:19–23 have much to gain from a re-appropriation of Luther's exegesis. Luther's doctrinal and homiletical interpretation informs our reading of John 20:19–23 by suggesting that the passage is primarily about the church's proclamation of the gospel as well as the church's ability to offer assurance of sins forgiven.

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32 (1978): 180–184; M.M.B. Turner, "The Concept of Receiving the Spirit in John's Gospel," in *Vox Evangelica* 10 (1977): 24–42; Russell D. Quinn, "Expectation and Fulfillment of the Gift of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 144–150.

2. All Scripture references are either the author's own translation from Aland, Barbara, et. al, eds. *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27<sup>th</sup> edition (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft) or are taken from English Standard Version (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

## John 20:19–23 in the history of interpretation

There are five different types of readings of John 20:19–23 that have dominated the majority of interpretive history, though admittedly there is significant overlap among interpreters.<sup>3</sup> First, there is a qualitative reading where some contend that there is a difference in quality or kind of reception of the Spirit in John 20:22 from that of Acts 2:4. Second, there is a quantitative reading where some suggest that there is a difference in the *amount* of the Spirit received in John 20:22 from that received in Acts 2:4. Third, there is a doctrinal reading where the text was first used in the early ecumenical councils to argue that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, thus John 20:22 was a pivotal text when contending for the deity of Jesus. Later, the text would be used doctrinally again to articulate a medieval theology of penance and absolution as well as a Protestant view of absolution by Luther. Fourth, there is a pneumatological-fulfillment/thematic reading where multiple interpreters have endeavored to show the function of John 20:19–23 broadly within the canon of Scripture and/or the Johannine witness. So, on the one hand, many interpreters have suggested that John 20:22 should be understood as the fulfillment of the pneumatological outpouring spoken of in texts such as Joel 2:28–29; cf. Isa 44:3; John 7:39; 14:26, 15:26; 16:7. On the other hand, others have detected in John 20:19–23 new creation and resurrection motifs that link the text lexically with biblical texts such as Genesis 2:7 and Ezekiel 37:9. And fifth, there is a symbolic reading where others have suggested that John 20:19–23 should be read as an acted parable; John 20 proleptically prepared the disciples for the outpouring of the Spirit received at Pentecost.

### Qualitative reading

Throughout the church's history several interpreters have suggested that the reception of the Spirit in John 20:19–23 is distinct from or different in kind than that received in Acts 2 at Pentecost. One of the most well-known interpreters to make this distinction in the Patristic period was Augustine. In the fifth century he proposed that there were two givings of the Spirit in New Testament Scripture—one on earth (John 20:22) and one from heaven (Acts 2:4). According to Augustine, the former was on account of the love of neighbor since it had to do with the ability to forgive sins and the latter was on account of the love of God since it manifested publicly the power of God in order that

3. Obviously, the popularity of John's Gospel from the first century to the twenty-first century makes it impossible to survey every interpreter regardless of how well-known they were in their representative time period. It is the goal of this survey of interpretive history, therefore, to highlight some of the more significant interpretations/applications of John 20:19–23 from every major interpretative epoch. Additionally, it is important to note that three of the five categories are my own, however, I did get the idea of a qualitative and quantitative reading from Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John: xiii-xxi*, The Anchor Bible, William F. Albright and David N. Freedman, eds. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970), 1038.

unbelievers may come to faith in Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

Much later in the pre-critical period of interpretation, Matthew Henry suggested that Jesus' act of breathing the Spirit upon the disciples differed from the outpouring in Acts 2:4 because the former qualified them for the mission that he was sending them on—to preach the gospel and offer forgiveness of sins.<sup>5</sup> Thus, for Henry the difference in quality between John 20 and Acts 2 is that the former enables them to absolve sins—the coming of the Spirit in John 20:22 is intimately wedded with the Great Commission in Matthew's gospel.<sup>6</sup> In the current modern period, James Hamilton makes a distinction in the type of reception between John 20:22 and Acts 2:4. Hamilton contends that the reception of the Spirit in John 20:22 is the inception of the indwelling ministry of the Spirit.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Hamilton distinguishes Acts 2 from John 20 by proposing that Acts 2:4; 8:17; 10:44–48 are about *filling* in order to empower while John 20 is about *indwelling*. The Spirit conferred on the disciples in John 20:22 enables them to mediate the blessings formerly mediated by the temple—the presence of God and the forgiveness of sins. Temple replacement becomes the key theme to interpreting the Johannine pericope for Hamilton.<sup>8</sup>

4. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1 3:224. Later, in the medieval period, Gregory the Great would articulate a reading like that of Augustine on John 20:19–29, “The gift of the Spirit on earth (John 20:22) was to bring about love of neighbor, and the gift from heaven (Acts 2:4) was to bring about love of God.” See Dom David Hurst, *Gregory the Great: Forty Gospel Homilies*, Cistercian Studies Series 123, Dom David Hurst, trans. (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian, 1990), 202. See also Lombard who also picks up Augustine's argument to contend for two givings of the Spirit. Peter Lombard, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, vol. 3 of *The Sentences*, Guilio Silano, trans. (Ontario, Canada: PIMS, 2008), 114.

5. Matthew Henry, *Matthew to John*, vol. 5 of *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (New York: Fleming & Revel, 1950), 1219. Unlike many of the critical interpreters who would come after him, Henry does not seem to care to reconcile John's Pentecost with that of Luke. It is clear, however, that Henry, like the majority of interpreters throughout history, adheres to a multiple givings view of the Spirit.

6. In the medieval period Bonaventure also contended that Jesus imparted the Spirit to the disciples in order to bestow authority on them for the completion of the gospel mission. Interestingly, he would connect John 20:19–23 with Romans 10:15, “How will they preach, unless they are sent?” suggesting that John 20:19–23 is the apostolic example of what Paul is writing about in Romans. Additionally, he seems to imply that John 20:19–23 is fulfilling Isaiah 6:8. See Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, vol. 11 of *Works of St. Bonaventure*, Robert J. Karris, trans. (Ashland, Ohio: Bookmasters, 2007), 969.

7. James M. Hamilton, *God's Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old & New Testaments*, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology, E. Ray Clendon, ed. (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 163.

8. See Wright, who also highlights imagery of new creation and new temple (i.e., temple replacement) from John 20:19–23. N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, vol. 3 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 601, 670–671. Following Wright, Beale too contends for temple replacement from 20:19–23 in G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 17,

## In contrast to a qualitative reading, others have suggested that John 20:19–23 is best understood by a difference in the *amount* of the Spirit conferred upon the disciples in John 20:19–23 versus Acts 2:4.

### Quantitative reading

In contrast to a qualitative reading, others have suggested that John 20:19–23 is best understood by a difference in the *amount* of the Spirit conferred upon the disciples in John 20:19–23 versus Acts 2:4. As early as the Patristic period, interpreters such as Cyril of Jerusalem pushed back from Augustine's qualitative reading, though both adhere to what could be defined as a multiple givings view, by suggesting that it is best to understand John 20:22 as the first installment of a two-part giving of the Spirit. For Cyril, however, what the disciples received of the Spirit in part in John 20 was exactly what they received in its fullness in Acts 2.<sup>9</sup> Unlike Henry and Hamilton, he makes no distinction between John 20 and Acts 2. Rather the former (John 20:22) prepares and enables the disciples to receive the latter (Acts 2:4).

Similarly, in the sixteenth century John Calvin suggests that the way to understand the reception of the Spirit in John 20:22 is that “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; for, when the Spirit appeared on them in tongues of fire, they were entirely renewed.”<sup>10</sup> Bengel implies that the disciples received *some* portion of the Spirit from Jesus in John 20:22 though they already had received it previously and would receive again later in *larger measure*.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Bengel suggests that the disciples could not have “received the full out pouring of the Spirit” in Acts had there not been an earlier inspiration like that in John 20:19–23 to prepare them for it.<sup>12</sup> In the same vein of

D.A. Carson, ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 178, 197–200.

9. NPNF, 2 7:127. Similarly, in the Patristic period Gregory of Nazianzus contended for a gradual bestowal of the Spirit. He suggested, however, that there were three givings of the Spirit in the New Testament—“before Christ was glorified by the Passion, and after he was glorified by the Resurrection; and after his Ascension, or Resurrection, or whatever we ought to call it, to Heaven” in NPNF, 2 7:383.

10. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. 2 of *Calvin's Commentaries*, The Calvin Translation Society, trans. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 269. Emphasis added.

11. John Albert Bengel, *Matthew – Acts*, vol. 1 of *Bengel's New Testament Commentary*, Charton T. Lewis and Marvin R. Vincent, eds. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1981), 726. Emphasis added. Cf. with Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 1038.

12. Bengel, *Matthew—Acts*, 726.

thought, Westcott suggests in the nineteenth century that there was not a difference in kind of reception between John and Acts. Rather, the impartation of the Spirit on the day of Jesus' resurrection “was the necessary condition for the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.”<sup>13</sup> So, for Westcott “the relation of the Paschal [gift of the Spirit] to the Pentecostal gift [of the Spirit] is therefore the relation of quickening to endowing.”<sup>14</sup>

### Doctrinal reading

One does not have to do much exploring to find that many interpreters have rigorously endeavored to understand how the apparent bestowal of the Spirit in John 20:22 relates to the unprecedented outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2. Many interpreters, however, have also concerned themselves with a doctrinal reading of John 20:19–23.<sup>15</sup> Thus, some interpreters used this pericope of Scripture to argue for the deity of Christ. This type of reading is not surprising when one considers that John's stated purpose in the composition of his gospel is that one “may believe that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus and that by believing one may have life in his name” (John 20:31). Again, one of the most well-known interpreters in the Patristic period to read John 20:19–23 in this way was Augustine. He suggested that in this text Jesus' act demonstrated that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Athanasius postulated that Jesus breathed the Spirit on the disciples to demonstrate that he was not inferior to the Spirit, but equal to the Spirit in the Godhead.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, centuries later in the medieval period the doctrinal application of John 20:19–23 would be drastically different. Among the medieval theologians there were three key biblical texts used to develop a theology of penance: Matt 16:13–20, Matt 18:15–20, and John 20:19–23. Over time three competing camps emerged, each arguing for a different understanding of absolution and penance—two views take extreme positions while the third attempts to mediate both of the extreme positions. On the one hand, the contritionist camp and Peter Lombard contended that

13. B.F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John: The Authorized Version with Introduction and Notes* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1882), 295.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Doctrinal readings were exceptionally common in pre-critical eras of the church. In a private conversation, Dr. Jonathan Pennington has suggested that the critical era's focus on historicity and other “behind the text” matters tend to squelch the doctrinal application of texts like John 20:19–23.

16. NPNF, 1 3:224. Ironically, once again in the medieval period Gregory the Great would pick up Augustine's argument and contend that the giving/sending of the Spirit in John 20:22 manifests that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. See Hurst, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, 205. See also, Lombard who, in the medieval period, would say that Jesus would not have said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” if he did not intend to communicate that the Spirit proceeded from both the Father and the Son. See Peter Lombard, *The Mystery of the Trinity*, vol. 1 of *The Sentences* Guilio Silano, trans. (Ontario, Canada: PIMS, 2007), 70, 73.

17. NPNF, 2 4:336.

for absolution and penance to take place the most important element was genuine heartfelt sorrow for sin arising out of a love for God.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the absolutionist camp and John Duns Scotus proposed that the most crucial element for absolution and penance to take place was the absolution pronounced by the priest. Thus, penance must be effective *ex opere operato*.<sup>19</sup> The third camp, which is more a mediating position represented by Thomas Aquinas, argued that both the penitent's contrition and the efficacious absolution of the priest were essential for there to be genuine absolution and penance.<sup>20</sup> None of the camps mentioned above assured forgiveness of sins for the sinner, rather they suggested probable forgiveness of sins at best.

### ***Pneumatological-fulfillment and/or thematic reading***

Many other interpreters have gone beyond doctrinal reading applications of this Johannine pericope and have suggested that John 20:22 should be understood as the fulfillment of the pneumatological outpouring prophesied about throughout the biblical canon. According to these interpreters, this is most clearly prophesied about in texts like Joel 2:28–29 and developed in John's gospel (John 7:39; 14:26; 15:26; 16:7).<sup>21</sup> Yet, others have detected in John 20:19–23 new creation motifs and resurrection themes that link the text via lexemes with two very significant Old Testament texts, Gen 2:7 and Ezek 37:9.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Westcott, along with others,

18. Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John Chapters 17–20*, vol. 69 of *Luther's Works* Christopher B. Brown, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 315.

19. Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 26–27. The Latin phrase means, “from the work done.”

20. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John: Chapters 13–21*, Fabian Larcher and James A. Weisheipl, trans. (Washington: Catholic University Press, 2010), 273. Cf. Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John Chapters 17–21*, in *Works* 69:316. Interestingly, another medieval interpreter, Gregory the Great, also participated in the medieval discussion of penance. Yet he distinguished himself, like Luther after him, in that he would say there can be true absolution—“the pastor must look at the sin, and the repentance following the sin, so that his sentence absolves those to whom almighty God grants the grace of sorrow. There is *true absolution* on the part of the one presiding only when it is in accord with the decision of the internal judge.” See Hurst, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, 205.

21. As early as the Patristic period, Novatian suggested that John 20:22 is the fulfillment of Joel 2:28–29. See Herbert Moore, *The Treatise of Novatian on the Trinity*, *Translations of Christian Literature* 2, Herbert Moore, trans. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1919), 124.

22. In contrast to the hermeneutical moves of those mentioned above, Ryle is the only interpreter that I have encountered that specifically states that John 20:22 was the Johannine version of Jesus opening the disciples' minds to understand the Scripture, the Lukan version is found in Luke 24:45. See J.C. Ryle, *John 10:31—John 21:25*, vol. 4 of *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 397. It is interesting, however, to notice that Ryle, in his commentary, reviews a selective survey of interpretive history (he refers to the interpretations of Lampe, Hooker, and Theophylact) in the attempt to unlock the meaning on John 20:19–23.

makes an inter-canonical connection with Gen 2:7 and suggests, “The same image which was used to describe the communication of the natural life, is here used to express the communication of the new, spiritual life of the re-created humanity.”<sup>23</sup> Additionally, Keener suggests that John 20:22 “combines two of the central aspects of the Spirit's work that appear elsewhere in John...both purification or rebirth (Gen 2:7) and empowerment.”<sup>24</sup>

### ***Symbolic reading***

Lastly, and in dramatic contrast to the majority of their epochal contemporaries, a select few interpreters have suggested that John 20:19–23 is to be regarded as a symbolic promise of the gift of the Spirit that will be given later at Pentecost. Theodore of Mopsuestia was the first to espouse this view in the Patristic period. He contended that John 20:22 is to be regarded as a symbolic promise of the gift of the Spirit given in Acts 2:4.<sup>25</sup> Tragically, for Theodore, his reading of John 20:19–23 was condemned as heretical at the fifth ecumenical council at Constantinople in AD 533.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, Theodore's “heretical” view would be picked up and championed again in the twentieth century by well-known biblical interpreter Don Carson.<sup>27</sup> Referring back to the Patristic

23. Westcott, *The Gospel According to John*, 294. Cf. Henry, *Matthew to John*, 1218. Additionally, like Westcott in the nineteenth century, Pink sees new creation motif in Jesus' actions in John 20:22. See Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John: Three Volumes in One* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 1101–1. Thus, what the disciples received in John 20 was the first fruits of the resurrection. So, “what happened at Pentecost was the baptism of power, not the coming of the Spirit to indwell them.” Cf. with Hamilton, *Indwelling Presence*, 173.

24. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 2 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), 1204. On another level, however, Keener would connect the work of the Spirit in John 20:19–23 with the mission of the disciples to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. *Ibid.*, 1205.

25. Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Ancient Christian Texts, Joel C. Elowsky, ed., Marco Conti, trans. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), 164. See also Chrysostom who suggested that Jesus did not give them the Spirit, rather he made them ready to receive the Spirit in Acts 2. Thus, according to Chrysostom, that is why John did not say, “You have received the Holy Spirit” but, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” He had no problem, however, saying that Jesus gave them a spiritual power and/or grace to remit sins. See Chrysostom, *Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist: Homilies 48–88* Roy J. Deferrari, ed., Sister Thomas Aquinas Goggin, trans. (New York: Fathers of the Church Inc., 1960), 453; compare with Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels Collected Out of the Work of the Fathers: St. John* (London: James Parker & Co., 1874), 605.

26. D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, D.A. Carson, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 651.

27. Carson contends that contrary to most of our English versions, the text does not say “he breathed *on them*” but rather “he breathed.” He suggests, then, that the verb should be understood as absolute—that is, having no auxiliary structure since it is not accompanied by an additional syntactical structure to carry this prepositional force. When the verb is not hindered by some auxiliary expression specifying on to whom or into whom

period, Carson contends that John 20:19–23 is an acted parable of what will actually happen in Acts 2—“this is a symbolic act that anticipates the future imminent bestowal” of the Spirit.<sup>28</sup>

### Summary

This brief survey of interpretive history demonstrates the variety of ways exegetes have applied/read this controversial Johannine pericope. Though the majority of conversation has revolved around the relationship between the “giving” of the Spirit in John 20:19–23 and the “outpouring” of the Spirit recounted in Acts 2, it has not been uncommon for interpreters to see other levels of meaning in Jesus’ bestowal of the Spirit—in other words, its significance for articulating a robust doctrine of Jesus’ deity, its implications for the procession of the Holy Spirit, its connection to Old Testament prophetic texts and the theme of temple replacement. Albeit, only a few, as will be demonstrated below, have connected the pericope with oral proclamation of the gospel and the authority Christians possess to assure forgiveness of sins.

### Why we need Luther: homiletics

In contrast to the majority of interpreters that both preceded him and followed him, the Reformer Martin Luther held that John 20:19–23, among other significant biblical texts, allowed him to articulate the gospel—justification by faith alone in Christ alone—as he understood it over and against a medieval, Catholic theology of penance. His doctrinal reading and interpretation as well as his homiletical application of John 20:19–23 is significant because it marks his departure from any and all forms of the medieval schools of the theology of penance.<sup>29</sup> This is most evidently

the breath is breathed, it simply means “to breathe.” Thus, he translates 20:22—“And with that he breathed, and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

28. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 653, 655. Both Köstenberger and Witherington agree with Carson that this is a symbolic act, not an actual bestowal/giving of the Spirit. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Robert Yarborough and Robert H. Stein, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 574; and Ben Witherington III, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 340–341. Compare Carson with Westcott, who said “To regard the words and acts a promise only and a symbol of the future is wholly arbitrary and unnatural.” See Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 295.

29. Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John Chapters 17–20*, *Works* 69:323. The reason that I mention Luther’s homiletical application of John 20:19–23 is because I reviewed nine sermons preached by Luther on this mysterious Johannine pericope to the same congregation in Wittenberg over an eighteen-year period (1522–1540) and it is clear in his sermons that homiletical goals informed his hermeneutical interpretation/application of the passage. It is helpful to recall that Luther, in his historical context, warred against Catholic religious authorities who abused their position and did not alleviate repentant sinners of guilt with the hope of the gospel. Luther preached John 20:19–23 frequently because it was assigned in the Sunday lectionary for the Sunday after Easter—Quasimodogeniti. Thus,

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seen in Luther’s proposed definition of penance. In contrast to John Duns Scotus, Luther contended that absolution must be received by grace and faith, not *ex opere operato*.<sup>30</sup> And, in contrast to all definitions of penance, Luther’s understanding of absolution assured the forgiveness of sins. For him, absolution offered to a repentant sinner was as certain as if Christ himself stood there to speak the absolution in person (John 20:23; cf. Matt 18:18–20; Luke 24:47). Certainty of God’s favor was at the heart of the gospel for Luther; the Catholic teaching of uncertainty of sins forgiven was one of the greatest abuses of the papacy, according to Luther.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, when interpreting John 20:19–23, Luther consciously contested the interpretation promulgated by medieval exegetes that suggested Jesus’ intention by breathing the Spirit onto the disciples was to communicate that authority was given over worldly kingdoms and not only forgiveness of sins.<sup>32</sup> Rather, he understood John 20:22–23 to strengthen the faith of Christians who would hear the absolution from the apostles and other disciples, not to buttress the authority of the apostles and those who would descend from them as popes and bishops.<sup>33</sup> Thus,

these sermons allow for insight into Luther’s relation to the late medieval theology of penance.

30. *Ibid.*, 319. See also Luther’s sermon preached in Wittenberg on April 12, 1523, from John 20:19–29 in *Ibid.*, 337–339. Luther says, “The Word of God wants to be received *in faith*.” See Tentler for an articulation of Scotus’s view of absolution; Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation*, 263–272; 281–294.

31. See Luther’s sermon in Wittenberg on April 8, 1526, from John 20:19–23 where he states, “Brother, God speaks to you the forgiveness of sins, and though a man says it, it is just as much as God Himself is speaking.” See Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John Chapters 17–21*, *Works* 69:347.

32. As mentioned above, there were three key biblical texts used by medieval interpreters to develop a theology of penance: 1) Jesus’ giving of “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” to Peter in Matt 16:13–20; 2) Jesus’ conferral of the power to bind and loose in Matt 18:15–20; and 3) John 20:19–23 where Jesus breathes on the disciples, tells them to receive the Holy Spirit and says, “If you forgive someone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness of sins from someone, it is withheld.” See Lombard, who contended that “God granted to priests [only] the power of binding and loosing.” Peter Lombard, *On the Doctrine of Signs*, vol. 4 of *The Sentences*, Guilio Silano, trans. (Ontario, Canada: PIMS, 2010), 101, 109. See also Bonaventure who states that Jesus conferred the power of the keys to all the disciples in John 20:22, but the plenitude of the power that Jesus imparted was given to Peter and his successors. Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 970, 974.

33. Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John Chapters 17–21*,

for Luther, the authority to forgive did not come from the office of the minister; rather, it came from the authority of the Word alone. So, Luther contended from John 20:19–23 that laymen too might assure absolution *if* in step with the Word of God with confidence as if Christ himself were present offering the absolution since 20:22–23 was spoken to all Christendom—that is, the authority to forgive sins was given to all disciples who believe the gospel, not only the apostles.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, Luther's articulation of lay-absolution from John 20:19–23 had implications for the oral proclamation of the gospel. This set him apart not only from medieval theologians, but also from other Protestant interpreters because he contended that John 20:19–23 meant that it is crucial for absolution to be spoken from one person to another (cf. Rom 10:17).<sup>35</sup> For Luther, “the absolution was Christ's own authoritative Word, spoken *by a human being* to another [human being] by Christ's mandate (Matt 28:16–20; Acts 1:8), and received, as the promise of the gospel must always be, according to Luther, by faith alone (Eph 2:8–9).”<sup>36</sup> For him, receiving the gospel by faith alone was the antithesis of a medieval theology of penance. Interestingly, Luther suggested that absolution could be received either through private confession or public/general proclamation, like preaching. Thus, Luther could say, “the Gospel is nothing other than absolution” and “absolution is nothing other than the preaching of the Gospel” when preaching from 20:19–23.<sup>37</sup>

### Summary

This brief survey demonstrates how Luther's interpretation of John 20:19–23 is valuable for accentuating layers of meaning

*Works* 69:321. Lombard would use James 5:16 to say that it was insufficient for an individual to confess only to God, rather all were required to confess to a priest to receive absolution from sin. See Lombard, *On the Doctrine of Signs*, 99.

34. Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John Chapters 17–21*, *Works* 69:322, 347. Contra Lombard and others who would interpret John 20:23 to mean that it was insufficient for a layman to offer absolution from sin, rather only priests could confer this type of forgiveness. See Lombard, *On the Doctrine of Signs*, 101–105. Yet, he held open the possibility for confession to a layman in the most extreme circumstance even though he thought the layman had no authority to bind or loose.

35. Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John Chapters 17–21*, *Works* 69:323. See Luther's sermon in Wittenberg from John 20:19–31 on April 23, 1536, where he says “*through* what the apostles *speak*, they will be saved, because when they believe in the *word* of the apostles, they believe in the Word of Christ” in *Ibid.*, 413.

36. See Luther's sermon in Wittenberg from John 20:19–31 on April 16, 1531, where he says, “[it is] faith alone that saves and justifies” ... and “Our works have nothing to do with [our salvation], but only the mouth of the apostles. Unless you *hear* them, you are damned” in *Ibid.*, 398.

37. *Ibid.*, 324. See also Luther's sermon in Wittenberg from John 20:19–23 on March 30, 1529, where he says, “The apostles and their successors should also accomplish this very same thing (i.e., saving what is destroyed and lost because of sin) after [Jesus'] example, removing sin, death, hell, and the wrath of God *through their word and preaching*.” *Ibid.*, 367.

## For Luther, this text is primarily about *who* can forgive sins, not its relationship to Acts 2.

in the pericope normally underemphasized in the interpretive enterprise. In contrast to the majority pre-critical and critical interpreters, Luther's homiletical use of John 20:19–23 is compelling because he applies the text in a drastically different way than the majority of interpreters have. For Luther, John 20:19–23 teaches a Protestant view of absolution which has implications for the preached Word—oral proclamation is necessary for absolution. So, for Luther, this text is primarily about *who* can forgive sins, not its relationship to Acts 2. Rediscovering Luther's exegesis of 20:19–23 is necessary in order to develop a more robust interpretation of the pericope. Indeed, Luther enables his audience to see that one's interpretation should go beyond merely the relationship of John 20:19–23 to Acts 2:4.

### Conclusion: how Luther's reading improves our reading

Luther's reading of John 20:19–23 improves our reading of Scripture by demonstrating that John 20:19–23 is more than a theological proof-text for the deity of Christ or a perplexing manifestation of the Spirit in the New Testament. Rather, Luther's doctrinal and homiletical<sup>38</sup> use of the passage reminds his hearers, and his sermonic readership, that the gospel of Jesus Christ is primarily about the mercy of God that is manifested by the forgiveness of sins (John 20:23) and reconciliation with God (Rom 5:11; 2 Cor 5:18; cf. Gen 3). Thus, this pericope is primarily about gospel mission. The Twelve, minus Judas, are drawn into the mission of the Father, Son, and Spirit; the spirit-filled disciples are representatives of the new messianic community as they preach absolution in Christ (John 20:23; cf. 15:26–27).<sup>39</sup> Unlike the Law

38. For a recent homiletical interpretation see John Piper, “The Risen Christ—His Peace, Power, and Purpose,” *Desiring God* (April 7, 2012), [online], accessed April 11, 2012; available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/the-risen-christ-his-peace-power-and-purpose>; Internet. Throughout the sermon, it is clear that Piper's interpretation/application is governed by his homiletical goals. Thus, he notes 1) that Jesus' ability to enter the room with the disciples even though the door was locked manifests that Jesus is capable of penetrating spiritual areas of one's life that no one else is able to; and 2) that Jesus' offer of peace is connected with YHWH's command to not fear in Isa 41:10. Neither of these things is explicit in the text and the former point is not a “literal” application of the text. Yet, like Luther, he is less concerned with critical questions that attempt to solve what appears to be a literary/theological contradiction.

39. Köstenberger notes that John 20 is primarily about “the commissioning of Jesus' followers.” Additionally, he suggests that John 20:23 echoes Isa 22:22, “what is at stake is the authority to grant or deny access to God's Kingdom” through

in the Old Testament, the gospel of Jesus Christ creates a new community of people from every tribe and tongue and nation through the proclamation of repentance and absolution of sin (Rom 11; Col 3:11; Rev 7:9–12; cf. Acts 2:41–47; 4:4, 32–37). Therefore, because this gospel reconciles those who repent not only to God (Col 1:20) but also to all who join the community of faith through repentance (Eph 2:11–16), it is necessary for the community of Jesus to wield the power of absolution justly (Matt 18:15–35; John 20:19–23). Thus, Luther rejected the medieval criteria for the authority to forgive sins because he rightly noticed that this ability to absolve sins was given to the entire church.<sup>40</sup> As a result, Luther would preach against the authority of the papacy in his sermons on John 20:19–23.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, Luther's reading and application enabled his hearers,

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the proclamation of the gospel, through mission. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, "John," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 506.

40. Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer also would stress the involvement of the community of faith in the forgiveness of sins from John 20:19–23, "therefore, [Jesus] gave his followers the authority to hear the confession of sin and to forgive sin in his name." See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community*, John W. Doberstein, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 111.

41. See his sermons in Wittenberg on John 20:19–31 on March 30, 1529, and April 23, 1536. Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John Chapters 17–21*, *Works* 69:368, 412–413.

and now his readers, to distinguish between the gift of the Spirit in John 20:19–23 and the gift of the Spirit in Acts 2:4—the former concerns the inception of the indwelling Spirit that is necessary for the gospel mission while the latter concerns empowering of the Spirit that is necessary for the success of the gospel mission recounted as the gospel moves away from Jerusalem in Acts. Thus, refreshingly, Luther does not merely concern himself with reconciling John 20 and Acts 2 because he has no problem preaching the text as it is. He is not concerned with text-critical questions that collapse John 20 with Acts 2 or hypotheses that present a stark dichotomy between the giving of the Spirit in John and the outpouring of the Spirit in Acts. Therefore, he does not relegate this mysterious text to the realm of un-interpretable or un-preachable. Luther's lack of attention to this relationship, however, does not mean that there is no significance in exploring this relationship. Rather, he demonstrates that this text is primarily about mission—the preaching of the gospel and the assurance of sins forgiven.

Indeed, John 20:19–23 is surrounded by mystery. Among other things, when composing his gospel, the Apostle John did not seek to answer all of the "crucial" questions that would arise from this pericope—questions like, "How will this pericope be reconciled with Acts 2:4 written by Luke?" This essay has argued that contemporary readers of John 20:19–23 have much to gain from a re-appropriation of Luther's exegesis; that his doctrinal and homiletical interpretation/application can inform our reading of John 20:19–23 in the twenty-first century.