

“Commencement” (Jn. 20:19-23)

1. Proof (19-20)

- a. Appearance: The disciples were shut in for fear of the Jews and assembled together indicative of both their fear and fellowship. Jesus came and bolstered their faith.
- b. Affirmation: He bodily appeared proving the resurrection was literal/physical showing not only His nail pierced hands but also His side! This affirmed(s) not only His own prophesy and the cryptic prophesy of the Prophets but the purpose for which He offered Himself, see Isa. 53:5-6.
- c. Arrival: However, He arrived in their midst whilst the doors were locked. His arrival obviously pleased them, verified His own claims, and thus served to encourage them in His commission to them.
- d. Accomplishment: It was still the first day of the week but the end of Easter Sunday. It was a proof of His accomplishment while at the same time a continuation of His mission = our commission.
- e. Anew: This new beginning parallels the first beginning when the Word created the cosmos and its inhabitants – ending with Adam in whom God breathed life (Gen. 2:7). Here we see the Word again breath and say, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (22). More detail below.

2. Peace (21)

- a. Petition: shalom was a common greeting with the wish (or petition of hope and internal blessing). Jesus greeted them with such. However, He also repeated it because such had been accomplished by Him. →
- b. Provision: What the common Hebrew petition hoped for, Jesus has accomplished. He had made peace between God and us (cf. Ro. 5:1). Carson noted: *šālōm* was also the embracing term used to denote the unqualified well-being that would characterize the people of God once the eschatological kingdom had dawned.¹
- c. Proclamation: He had earlier promised said peace and such was given as promised cf. Jn. 14:27; 16:33. Not unlike when He proclaimed *tetelisti* meaning “it is completed/paid in full,” before giving up His spirit on the Cross, here He proclaimed *shalom*, meaning that because the payment is complete, there can now be communion with God and repentant man.
- d. Propulsion: the repeated proclamation of shalom was accompanied with a reminder of His mission and their commission. The peace is both the result of Jesus’ atonement and the impetus of our evangelism. Such a global commission requires a trust and serenity grounded only in the person and work of Jesus. Peace is both result of and requisite to our commission.

3. Provision (22) *See also **Further Study** Verse 22

- a. Promised Agency of Conviction (Jn. 16:7-11).
- b. Prophetic Authority of Canon (Jn. 16:12-15)
- c. Postponed Acts of Commencement (Acts 2:1-4)

4. Purpose (23)

- a. Context: Context adds clarity and provides continuity. In these five verse we see Jesus’ bodily appearance and invitation for them to confirm it was Him (19-20). In verse 21 we see that Jesus reiterates the shalom greeting/promise and mentions their commission. In verse 22 we see the term breath (not breathed upon them) and instruction to “receive the Holy Spirit.” In verse 23 we see a familiar formula of sins and their forgiveness or not. This does not mean we have several different topics to preach e.g. assurance of Jesus’ resurrection (19-20), the peace He brings into our lives (21), the Spirit breathes on us..., or the power of the

¹ Carson, D. A. (1991). [*The Gospel according to John*](#) (p. 647). Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

church to forgive or retain sins. Rather, this regards the commission of the Church and thus foundation for it “proof,” result and requisite of it “peace,” the agency/cooperation for it “provision,” and the reason for it “purpose.”

- b. Confusion: Even if some deduce the purpose in this verse as evangelistic, they may still misunderstand the previous verse if such are not seen as a unit. For example, the Spirit was not promised and given for our self-amusement, consumption, power, manipulation, or elation. He empowers us to fulfill the Great Commission for which we are “sent,” which also ties in verse 21. And when vv. 19-20 are taken in, it all serves to encourage, empower, and exhort us to prioritize and fulfill said commission in the authority of His Word and assurance of His accomplishment and provisions because we ourselves enjoy peace with God. As usual, I find N. T. Wright’s comments illuminating. “Now read verse 23. ‘If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven.’ How do you feel about that? Are you up to the job? Of course not! But worse is to come. ‘If you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained!’ If anyone imagines they are ready and willing to take on *that* task, they need to go back to school for a few strong lessons in humility. ¶But Jesus thinks the **disciples** can do it. Indeed, he’s not asking them if they would like to; he’s giving them a command. They are to go and do it. But of course that’s not the whole story. They could come back at him and say, ‘But we thought only God could forgive sins!’ And they’d be right. God is going to forgive sins—*through them*. The command comes after the crucial promise and gift: ‘Receive the **holy spirit**.’ ¶The holy spirit! Jesus has said so much already about this spirit, his own spirit, the spirit which is the father’s special gift to his people. Now the time has come. The point of receiving the holy spirit, it’s clear, is not to give the disciples new ‘spiritual experiences’, though to be sure they will have plenty. Nor is it to set them apart from ordinary people, a sort of holier-than-thou club—though to be sure they are called to live the rich, full life of devotion and dedication that is modelled on Jesus’ own. The point is so that they can do, in and for the whole world, what Jesus had been doing in Israel. ‘As the father has sent me, so I’m sending you’ (verse 21).”²
- c. Clarity: I just provided a bit with the last paragraph. Nevertheless, considering the broader context of the canon helps us to better understand v. 23. There is a clear delineation. The two closest parallels are Mat. 16 & 18 where Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Son of God is linked with the keys of the Kingdom (Mat. 16:17-19) and where binding and loosening of the church relate to forgiveness (Mat. 18:17-18). Taken together, confession and forgiveness are results of our commission – to which we now turn again. →
- d. Commission: As Jesus came to reveal the light of God, we are to spread His light in this dark world (Jn. 17:18). We are His ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:18-6:2) who spread His fragrance... (2 Cor. 2:14-17). Some will receive Him and others will reject Him (Jn. 3:19-21; 9:39 cf. Isa. 55:11; Mat. 10:34-39).
- e. Carson: Carson again is helpful in this summary: “The Christian witnesses proclaim and declare, and, empowered by the Spirit, live by the message of their own proclamation; it is God who *effectively* forgives or retains the sin. Thus Christian ministry is a continuation of Jesus’ ministry (cf. notes on v. 21): through the gift of the Spirit the authority that Jesus exercises in, say, John 9, is repeated in their lives. Jesus there gave both sight and faith to the one who knew he was blind; to those who claimed to see, he declared, ‘Your guilt remains’ (9:41). Thus the retention of their sin was both description and condemnation. And the

² Wright, T. (2004). [*John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21*](#) (pp. 148–149). Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Paraclete who is given as a gift to Jesus’ followers (v. 22) continues the same two-edged work through them (*cf.* notes on 15:26–27; 16:7–11).³

- f. Caution: To give assent w/o application = repudiation. The correct Jesus must be both preached and received! It was the Jesus who had nail-scarred hands and pierced side and who said that the closest of relationships would be sacrificed when one follows Him. He said that greater persecution would meet His followers and that whoever desires to become His disciple must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Him. Not the Jesus who just wants to affirm you and make your life a pleasure. Not the Jesus who just fills us with His Spirit to get emotionally romantically lost in elation. Not the mythological Social Justice Jesus who wants to take from those who have and give it to those who don’t (*cf.* Mat. 25:28-30; Ex. 23:2; Lev. 19:15 *cf.* Deut. 1:17).

Further Study

Verse 22

The best treatment I found on this verse is by NT scholar D. A. Carson. I’ve provided highlights below:

Despite most of our English versions, the text does not say ‘he breathed *on them*’ but simply ‘he breathed’ or, perhaps, ‘he exhaled’ (*enphysēsen*).⁴

Perhaps it is worth recalling the similar sense of ‘imminence’ generated by the approach of the Greeks (12:20ff.). From that time on, Jesus speaks of his ‘hour’ as having arrived (*e.g.* 12:23, 31; 13:31; 17:1, 5). Indeed, John 17:5 is cast in the form of an imperative: ‘And now, Father, glorify me in your presence ...’; but that does not mean the glorification takes place even as Jesus speaks. Similarly, John 13:31 (‘Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him’) is followed by the new commandment, which in the nature of the case was unlikely to be the lodestar of the earliest disciples until after the resurrection and the gift of the Spirit. So there is no intrinsic reason for thinking that the imperative of 20:22, *Receive the Holy Spirit*, must be experienced immediately.

(c) There is too slight a demonstration within the Gospel of John that this alleged bestowal of the Spirit made the slightest bit of difference in the lives of Jesus’ followers. The disciples still meet behind locked doors (v. 26) and the natural inference is that they are still afraid of the Jewish authorities (v. 19). When Thomas comes to faith, it is not because of the promised witness of the Spirit (15:26–27), but because he sees the risen Jesus for himself. Those who accept John 21 as part of the Gospel, even if it is cast as an epilogue, cannot fail to observe that the disciples are sidling back to their old employment (21:1–3), sorting out elementary reconciliation with the Master (21:15–19), and still playing ‘let’s-compare-service-record’ games (21:20–22). All this is not only a far cry from the power, joy, exuberant witness, courageous preaching and delight in suffering displayed by the early Christians after Pentecost in Acts, it is no less distant from the same virtues *foretold in John’s farewell discourse, where the promise of the Spirit receives such emphasis*. If John 20:22 is understood to be the Johannine Pentecost, it must be frankly admitted that the results are desperately disappointing, and the promises of John 14–16 vastly inflated. The alternative is surely preferable. The episode in 20:22, which most will agree is in some sense symbolic, is best understood as symbolic of the endowment *that is still to come*.

(d) Granted that John is deeply interested in the *theological* unity of Christ’s cross, resurrection, ascension, exaltation and bestowal of the Spirit—a point on which all sides agree—that fact remains that he specifies that the episode of 20:22 takes place on the first Easter day (20:19).⁵

³ Carson, D. A. (1991). [The Gospel according to John](#) (p. 656). Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

⁴ Carson, D. A. (1991). [The Gospel according to John](#) (p. 651). Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

⁵ Carson, D. A. (1991). [The Gospel according to John](#) (p. 653). Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

John 20:22 is not mere symbolism anticipating an endowment of the Spirit that is nowhere mentioned, it is symbolism anticipating the endowment of the Spirit that the church at the time of writing has already experienced, and of which outsiders are inevitably aware.

(g) Thus it appears that John has preserved the theological unity of the death/exaltation of Jesus, and of the eschatological Spirit-blessings Jesus secured, *not* by sacrificing historical authenticity, but by drawing attention through this episode to what was already known amongst his readers. Jesus’ ‘exhalation’ and command *Receive the Holy Spirit* are best understood as a kind of acted parable pointing forward to the full endowment still to come (though in the past for John’s readers). A suitable Johannine analogy might be the washing of the disciples’ feet: ‘Unless I wash you, you have no part with me’ (13:8). That can be read at a simplistic level as exhausted in the footwashing. Readers with more insight understand that the footwashing itself points forward to the spiritual washing achieved by the Lamb of God whose death takes away the sin of the world. John has repeatedly developed these anticipating steps in his narrative; it is not surprising if he uses one more to show that the story does not end with his book.⁶

Bruce Milne concurs with Carson and insightfully surmised:

Jesus here is teaching the apostles who the Spirit is. Lest a ‘symbolic’ interpretation be thought to reduce this incident to an insignificant affair, let it be noted that until they understood who the Spirit was they were in no position to receive his outpouring. The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost was in a deep sense dependent upon this action on the evening of Easter. Who is the Spirit? He is the life-breath of the exalted Jesus! Jesus the risen one breathed on them and said, *Receive the Holy Spirit*. ‘The Holy Spirit is Christ himself in the power of his resurrection ... the outstretched arm of the Exalted One.’²⁹

This understanding of the relationship between Jesus and the Spirit is precisely the one expressed by Peter at Pentecost. When the bewildered crowds demand to know the meaning of the phenomena, Peter’s answer is: ‘this Jesus ... Exalted to the right hand of God, he has ... poured out what you now see and hear’ (Acts 2:33). No purer expression of this Johannine incident and its meaning is conceivable. Thus Christianity at its outset was saved from the danger of becoming a religion focused essentially on supernatural phenomena, ‘signs and wonders’ as such. Instead, from its earliest moments, it was the religion of Jesus of Nazareth⁷

⁶ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 655). Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

²⁹ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV (2), pp. 322f.

⁷ Milne, B. (1993). *The message of John: here is your king!: with study guide* (p. 301). InterVarsity Press.