

Did Jesus Give Us Authority to Forgive and Retain Sins?



Jesus' Example

Jesus both forgave and retained the sins of others.

Jesus had authority to forgive sins

Matthew 9:6; Mark 2:10; Luke 5:24; So that you will know the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...

Jesus forgave sins

Matthew 9:2 Mark 2:5; Luke 5:20; Jesus told the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven."

Luke 7:36-50; Jesus told the repentant sinful woman who washed His feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you."

Jesus retained sins

John 9:41; Jesus said to the Pharisees, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

Greek Definitions of: Forgive, Retain, Sins

The numbers below are references in Strong's Concordance.

Forgive and Retain

Forgive - 863 *aphiēmi* (from 575 /*apó*, "away from" and *hiēmi*, "send") – properly, *send away; release* (discharge). **Definition** to send away, leave alone, permit

Retain - 2902 *kratēō* – to place under one's grasp (seize hold of, put under control). **Definition** to be strong, rule

So, the Greek word for forgiving means to release or send something away; and retaining means to strongly hold onto something.

Sins

Sin - 266 *hamartía* (a feminine noun derived from 1 /A "not" and 3313 /*méros*, "a part, share of") – properly, *no-share* ("no part of"); *loss* (forfeiture) because not hitting *the target; sin* (*missing* the mark). *Meros* - **Word Origin** from *meiromai* (to receive one's portion) or *allotment*

The Greek word for sin literally means "not a share of" which (in context) suggests losing one's share/place/membership/inheritance in the Body of Christ.

A disciple's 'inheritance' in the Body of Christ is actually an allotment, like the allotment of land each tribe and family of Israel received when they entered and possessed their promised land. I developed the concept of a Christian's allotment in my first book, "[Your Inheritance in Christ](#)," so I won't go into more detail on this topic here.

To release or retain someone else's inclusion in the Body of Christ is a huge decision that determines that person's spiritual salvation or condemnation.

Did the Resurrected Jesus Give His Disciples Authority to Forgive and Retain Sins?

"If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained." Jn 20:23 (NASB)

The Setting

After the crucifixion the disciples were hiding in a locked room for fear of the Jews. The resurrected Jesus appeared in their midst and said, "Peace to You! According as the Father has commissioned Me, I am sending you." Then, He exhales and is saying (both verbs are present tense) to them, "Get (lay hold by aggressively accepting what is offered) the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained."

Summary

1. Jesus commissioned the disciples.
2. Jesus breathes on His disciples and says, "Lay hold on and receive the Holy Spirit being offered to you."
3. Jesus then gave the disciples authority to forgive and retain the *hamartia* of others, which literally means the authority to decide the acceptance or rejection of someone's share, or allotment, in the Body of Christ.

Any Instances of the Apostles Forgiving or Retaining Anyone's Sins?

I don't know of any individual Christian who has ever exercised this authority.

1. Paul told the Corinthians they 'should have' put a Christian believer who was living in open sin out of their fellowship. Then Paul turned the sinner over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh (1 Cor 5:2, 3). The man later repented and was restored into fellowship (2 Cor 2:5-11).
2. The apostles were told to stamp the dust from their feet, as a sign against those who reject the gospel message. (Jesus said it will be more tolerable for the lands of Sodom and Gomorrah than for them.)
 - a. Instructions before the resurrection: Mt 10:14; Mk 6:11; Lk 9:5, 10:11
 - b. Paul and Barnabus shook the dust off their feet against the Jews at Pisidia Antioch in Acts 13:51. Afterward, some Jews came from there and incited a crowd to stone Paul and drag his 'dead' body out of the city at nearby Lystra. Many believe this is when Paul was snatched up to the third heaven in 2 Cor 12:2.
3. In Acts 18:6, Paul stopped preaching to resistant, blasphemous Jews, leaving them in their fallen state, but he didn't 'retain' their sins.

Membership and Excommunication

Membership

Both Protestant and Catholic denominations commonly use membership in their Church to signify that the Church witnesses to a person's forgiveness and inclusion in the Body of Christ. Thus, many Churches 'forgive' a person's sins by formally accepting them into membership.

Excommunication

When a member significantly differs from denominational teachings, Churches use the process of excommunication to formally remove them from their body. In doing so, their intent is effectively to 'retain' the person's sins, damning them.

Spiritual Authority

The practices of membership and excommunication seem to have a solid basis in John 20:23, but only if the Church is alive and submitted to the Holy Spirit of God. Jesus told the disciples to receive the Holy Spirit before He empowered them to forgive or retain sins. The Holy Spirit's involvement and participation is a prerequisite to the exercise of forgiving or retaining sins, since only He knows what's in a person's heart.

If a Church organization is dead, as almost all modern denominations are, its membership and excommunication decisions are meaningless in the spiritual realm.

Conclusion

1. Jesus both forgave and retained the sins of others.
2. After His resurrection, Jesus (1) commissioned the apostles, (2) gave them the Holy Spirit, and (3) empowered them to forgive or retain sins.
 - a. There's no explicit record of the Jerusalem apostles ever using this authority.
 - b. Neither did Paul directly use the authority to forgive or retain sins.
 - i. Paul turned the Corinthian sinner's flesh over to Satan
 - ii. Paul stopped preaching to resistant Jews, saying their blood was on their own heads.
3. For centuries Churches have used formal acts of membership and excommunication to forgive or retain sins. This only has a spiritual effect if that Church is submitted to the Holy Spirit.