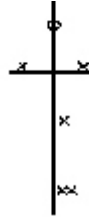


Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod



Emmanuel Lutheran Church

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LCMS Commission on Worship
Bible Translation Evaluation
1333 South Kirkwood Road
St. Louis, MO 63122

Dear Sirs,

Greetings in the Name of our Advent Lord!

I am writing in response to the analysis performed by the Synod's Commission on Worship on modern translations under consideration for use in the Church's Lection connected with the New Hymnal Project.

While I appreciate the study conducted and comparisons made, I am somewhat saddened by the lack of consideration as to how the translation selected will impact the Catechism and the catechetical task of the church. For that reason, I hope that you will read and consider the comparison that I have prepared of the translations being considered in the light of their treatment of John 20:22-23. This passage as cited in the Catechism is very important to our teaching and practice regarding the Office of the Holy Ministry and the variety of translations will impact such teaching and practice in important ways.

Thank you for considering this important issue. I am ready and willing to correspond with you further if you have any questions or if you would care to correct and help me with my concerns.

Your servant in Christ,

Rev. Joel R. Baseley

Comparison of John 20:22-23

ESV: “If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven, if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.”

NASB: “If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.”

NIV: “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

NKJV: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Greek Majority Text

αν τινων αφητε (aorist active tense subjunctive) τας αμαρτιας αφιενται (present passive indicative) αυτοις αν τινων κρατητε (present active subjunctive) κεκρατηνται (perfect passive indicative) .

The grammar and vocabulary of the Greek in this passage give us a perfect *sedes doctrina* for the Office of the Keys and our pastoral practice. In connection with forgiving of sins, who ever is forgiven (aorist subjunctive denotes an punctilar action, not continuous action) their sins, their sins are forgiven (present passive). This indicates that Divine forgiveness is given coincident to the declaration of forgiveness, that is, at the same moment. In connection with binding to sin, the act is described as a continual declaration of a past (perfect passive) condition, meaning that it is declared to them that they have been and continue to be bound to their sins. They remain under the Law, having rejected forgiveness in the Gospel.

How is this passage used in our Small Catechism? It is a *sedes doctrina* for the Office of the Keys that then flows seamlessly into the description of our belief and practice. Please note (from the 1943 / '71 version)...

What is the Office of the Keys?

It is the peculiar church power which Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive the sins of penitent sinners, but to retain the sins of the impenitent as long as they do not repent.

Where is this written?

Thus writes the holy Evangelist, John, chapter twentieth: The Lord Jesus breathed on His disciples and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.

What do you believe according to these words?

I believe that, when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, especially when they exclude manifest and impenitent sinners from the Christian congregation, and, again, when they absolve those who repent of their sins and are willing to amend, this is as valid and certain, in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself.

Church practice flows directly out of the words of Christ's institution. Absolution is given from the pastor at the same time as it is given by Christ himself, and the unrepentant (that is, those without faith) are placed out of the congregation under the same sentence of the Law they were born under and their status under the curse of original sin is confirmed by rejecting them from the congregation since they have rejected Christ's grace. Deciding against grace, they are left with the Law given through Moses and its curse. This is in perfect keeping with the verbs in Greek and their grammar. Church practice is perfectly tied with the Bible passage quoted and properly translated in KJV in the 1943 Catechism.

But do these actions of church practice under Christ's command follow from the words in the other translations being investigated by CPH and the Synod's Commission on Worship? Is the translation transparent enough to grant the church actions of absolution and the placing of the reprobate under the curse of being bound to their sins, since they reject the only One who can free them from their sins? Let's compare them briefly:

ESV – By translating "bind" or "retain sin" with "withholding forgiveness," the implication is made that someone who wants forgiveness is being denied the same. The Britannica World Language Dictionary defines withhold as : "1. To hold back; restrain. 2. To keep back; decline to grant. 3. To refrain, forbear."

Thus the "withhold forgiveness" in this text would mean to hold back forgiveness and to decline to grant it, implying that one who wants forgiveness is not given it. This is not what the church does. The church rather declares to the impenitent (those who do not want forgiveness for a sin) their ongoing state of reprobation. If they will not have Christ answer for their sins, they themselves must and thereby they are recognized as unbelievers.

"Withholding forgiveness" has little congruence with "exclude from the Christian congregation", but suggests a refusal to give forgiveness to someone who wants it. "Retain their sins" has direct congruence with "exclude them from the Christian congregation," because it is occasioned by the refusal of the Gospel and grace and the necessary application of the Law; not withholding forgiveness, but binding to sin.

This translation of the text, when placed above the catechismal answer to the question, "What do you believe according to these words" will not therefore allow the answer stated in the Catechism to be derived from the text. The fault lies in the inaccuracy of this translation.

NASB – In translating the present passive indicative "they are forgiven" as a present perfect tense "they have been forgiven," the NASB suggests that the punctiliar forgiveness (aorist subjunctive) given by the pastor is the declaration of a past forgiveness which continues into the present. This is foreign to the text. While it is true that as believers they are already in grace, the text itself links the remission/forgiveness (present tense) with the punctiliar action and thus points out the present gifting of grace through the churchly act of Absolution. The imported tense of the NASB suggests it is a mere assertion of a condition which was given previously. This invites a distinction to be made between the church's forgiveness and the bestowal of forgiveness. This points away from the forgiveness declared to something that came before without specifying where it was given. It

is a pattern of thought (foreign to the text) which lends itself to a Reformed anti-sacramental theology rather than a means of grace theology, which is THE proprium of the text. This verse is Sacramental and those actions of forgiving and the bestowal of forgiveness must not be skewed as does NASB.

Additionally, the translation's parallel usage of "have been forgiven" and "have been retained" may lend itself best to be explained systematically in terms of a double predestination in which some from eternity have been forgiven and others from eternity have had their sins retained (predestination to damnation).

This translation of the text, when placed above the catechismal answer to the question, "What do you believe according to these words" will not therefore allow the answer stated to be derived from the text. The fault lies in the inaccuracy of this translation.

NIV – In translating "bind" as "do not forgive" NIV replaces an active verb (retain or bind) with the omission of an action. "Do not forgive." Thus the church is directed in this translation to do nothing towards those who are not repentant, as opposed to excluding them from the Christian Congregation and binding them to their sins. One might argue that after a number of years of using this reformed translation, this has become the standard practice of our church body, that is, doing nothing with those who do not cherish the means of Christ's grace, rather than warning them of their despising saving grace given in Word and Sacraments.

This translation of the text, when placed above the catechismal answer to the question, "What do you believe according to these words" will not therefore allow the answer stated to be derived from the text. The fault lies in the inaccuracy of this translation. It should never have passed doctrinal review in the newer Small Catechism (1986 version).

NKJV – Of the four translations, only the NKJV grants an accurate translation of the verse in order to draw from it the orthodox teaching of the Office of the Keys expressed and taught in Luther's Small Catechism.

The loosing key is given in the Absolution of the Church with the coincident forgiveness of sins for the beleaguered soul (unlike ESV which declares a past forgiveness instead of a present one). And the binding key does not result in a lack of an action as in NIV (not forgiving) or in a sudden and jarring withholding of forgiveness to someone who desires it as in the ESV, but in the action of declaring the Law and sins bound to the sinner who refuses grace, which is our doctrine and practice.

I admire the attempt on the part of the Commission of Worship to compare modern translations for selection in our Lectionary and Hymnal. But I believe that it is most necessary to weigh the adequacy of translation to our Catechetical task. With respect to Luther's admonition to choose one translation and use it in perpetuity so as not to confuse our learners, it is most important to choose that translation wisely. Not wishing to cause offense to those who have chosen in the past, but respecting the wisdom advised by Luther, the fact that the 1983 Catechism quotes the NKJV version where it was recognized that the NIV was inadequate tells me that the NIV was the

wrong translation to use in instructing our children. Most disturbing is that the seat of doctrine of the Office of the Key was not recognized as terribly erroneous in the NIV as used in the Synod's Official Catechism, 1983. I would not want this error to be repeated.

For all the fine linguistic analysis performed by the Commission on Worship in comparing these translations, I believe that the inadequacy of translation for this one passage alone is enough to disqualify all translations save the NKJV or KJV. I can put up with some woodenness in translation, style flaws and out of date idiom sooner than doctrinal errors imposed by a poor translation or by imported (false) theologies. I have not looked at the theology imposed upon other important verses of Scriptures, but this one (along with others casually noticed throughout the years) is enough to warn me off the use of ESV, NIV and NASB. The faithful use of the KJV and continuation of the NKJV in the church are great witnesses to our generations that "The Word of God cannot be broken" and that God has faithfully preserved his Word to this day. As a doctrinal reviewer of CPH, my concern is purely doctrinal. The doctrinal concerns I raise to you outweigh the stylistic benefits you point out in the other translations in my thinking. Also, as a parish pastor I am concerned that the Scriptures I read in church are the same as the children memorize and as the liturgy quotes so that there is no confusion, but a learned familiarity. When I see doctrinal problems through the inadequacy of modern translations and having great trust in the KJV/NKJV from years of experience, I see no reason to depart from that textual and translation tradition that served us well during years when God blessed us richly. I would hope you might be convinced to consider and adopt this faithful translation acknowledging the fidelity of the NKJV translation as most transparent in communicating the very words and thoughts of God!

Your servant in Christ,

The Rev. Joel R. Baseley