

Mark 16:16 “He That Believes Shall Not Be Condemned”

Bernie Gillespie

October 29, 2008

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. (Mark 16:16 ESV)

Some Christians believe this passage teaches that only those who are baptized are or can be saved. Is this true? Those who believe and teach in baptismal remission (and regeneration) base their teaching on this verse. Does Jesus teach that those who believe, but are not baptized, are not save? I do not believe this is what Jesus meant.

First, Jesus said, "But he that believeth not shall be damned." If you take it word for word, then the only one not condemned is the one who does not believe. Rather than take it literally, some add their interpretation "of course one who does not believe will not be saved, because he will not be baptized." That is an assumption and a fallacy known as "the converse of the condition." If you applied this to other passages you would have serious problems. For example, Paul said, "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed." (Gal. 3:29), could you reverse that and say, "If you are Abraham's seed, you belong to Christ"? Surely not!

Second, it is another fallacy to say that something is true so then its opposite is true. This is known in logic as the "negative inference fallacy" – *i.e.* taking a statement of fact and *assuming* the negative premise is equally true. For example, Paul said "you know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first." (Phil. 4:13). The negative inference would be "if Paul had been well, he would not have preached the gospel to them." This is only an assumption and not a fact. Paul preached to many cities when he was well. He desired to preach the gospel to the Philippians. But in this case his sickness led him to stay there and that led him to preach the gospel to them at that specific time. But, he could well have come through later in his journey and preached to them when he was well. My point is: we cannot make a factual statement from a negative inference. Teaching that Jesus said, "the one who believes but is not baptized is condemned" is basing a doctrine of salvation on a negative inference. It is a fallacy.

Third, there are other valid ways to understand this passage, which are different from the interpretation in question. If Jesus believed that baptism saves he could have easily settled it by simply saying, "He that believes, but is not baptized, is condemned." *Jesus does not speak about the condition of the one who believes but is not baptized.* Instead, he said, "but he that believeth not shall be damned." Bottom line, we must not force the words of Jesus in Mark 16:16 to mean that salvation is completed by baptism, since *the greatest number of passages in Scripture teach that salvation is by faith alone in Jesus alone.* Some who teach baptismal remission do not take the last part of the verse literally, but they wish everyone to take the first part that way. In their view, the first part of this verse cannot be interpreted, but must be taken at face value, while the last part needs an interpretation.

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Fourth, there are good reasons why this verse should be interpreted to mean, "the one who believes is saved." First, there is a basis in language for this interpretation. The statement of Jesus in verse 16 is a conditional statement ("If...then"). There are three possible ways, in all languages, to understand a conditional statement. 1) As Cause-Effect: example - "If you put your hand in the fire, you will get burned." 2) As Evidence-Inference - "If she has a ring on her left hand, then she's married." 3) As Equivalence - "If you are Henry's son, then Henry is your father." We must be careful *not* to interpret all conditional sentences as Cause-Effect. Mark 16:16 is a compound conditional sentence: "The one who believes and is baptized shall be saved." There is a very important principle with respect to compound conditional statements: "A compound *protasis*¹ ("The one who believes and is baptized") does not necessarily mean that both conditions have the same relation to the *apodosis*" ("shall be saved.")²

Following the rules of language, one can interpret Mark 16:16 to mean that the one who is saved is the one who believes. Why? It is because "the two conditions in the *protasis* do not necessarily bear the same relation to the *apodosis*. One might be the cause, while the other might be ground or evidence. If that is the case here, 'If you believe' is the cause and the fulfillment of the *apodosis* depends on it; 'and are baptized' is the evidence of belief and *apodosis* does not depend on it for fulfillment. This would explain the following sentence: 'The one who does not believe shall be condemned.'" [Wallace, p. 688.] That is why one of the finest New Testament scholars comments: "The order, *pisteusas* (the one who believes) before *baptistheis* (the one who is baptized), and perhaps also the absence of any "*me baptistheis*" (one who is not baptized) answering to *apistesas* (the one who does not believe), rule out a magical, mechanical conception of baptism."³

Fifth, since there are two possible ways to understand Mark 16:16, we must look to the broader teaching of Scripture to find the best understanding for Mark 16:16. First, we can see that Jesus spoke this way several other places: John 3:18 "He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." And John 3:36 "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him." There is no mention of baptism in these verses. If Jesus says that the one who believes on the Son is not condemned, but has everlasting life," and someone says, "No, that's just an assumption. You really have to be baptized," then whom should I believe – that person or Jesus?

Here is the larger point: There is way to read Mark 16:16 that does not teach baptismal remission. Since Jesus repeatedly emphasizes faith as the essential element of salvation, we must look at Mark 16:16 as either a contradiction to his other teaching, or seek an understanding of how Mark 16:16, and all his other teaching, are in harmony. It is clear that Jesus joined "believing" to salvation many, many more times than he did baptism

¹ In linguistics, a *protasis* is the subordinate clause (the if-clause) in a conditional sentence. For example, in "if X, then Y", the *protasis* is "if X". The other clause ("then Y") is called the *apodosis*.

² Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, (Zondervan, 1996), p. 684.

³ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary*, (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1966), p. 474.

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(one time). All the verses below speak in some manner about the centrality of faith in Christ (either in teaching, healing or salvation):

Matthew 8:13 And Jesus said unto the centurion, Go thy way; and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee. And his servant was healed in the selfsame hour.

Matthew 9:28 And when he was come into the house, the blind men came to him: and Jesus saith unto them, Believe ye that I am able to do this? They said unto him, Yea, Lord.

Matthew 21:22 And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.

Matthew 21:25 The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him?

Matthew 21:32 For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.

Mark 1:15 And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.

Mark 5:36 As soon as Jesus heard the word that was spoken, he saith unto the ruler of the synagogue, Be not afraid, only believe.

Mark 9:23 Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.

Mark 9:42 And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea.

Mark 11:24 Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them.

Mark 16:14 Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen.

Mark 16:17 And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues;

Luke 8:12 Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. 8:13 They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away.

Luke 8:50 But when Jesus heard it, he answered him, saying, Fear not: believe only, and she shall be made whole.

Luke 20:5 And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say, Why then believed ye him not?

Luke 22:67 Art thou the Christ? tell us. And he said unto them, If I tell you, ye will not

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believe:

Luke 24:25 Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken:

John 1:7 The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe.

John 1:12 But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:

John 2:11 This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him.

John 2:22 When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said.

John 3:12 If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?

John 3:15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

John 3:18 He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

John 3:36 He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.

John 4:21 Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father.

John 4:48 Then said Jesus unto him, Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.

John 4:50 Jesus saith unto him, Go thy way; thy son liveth. And the man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way.

John 4:53 So the father knew that it was at the same hour, in the which Jesus said unto him, Thy son liveth: and himself believed, and his whole house.

John 5:38 And ye have not his word abiding in you: for whom he hath sent, him ye believe not.

John 5:44 How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?

John 5:46 For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. 47 But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?

John 6:29 Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.

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John 6:30 They said therefore unto him, What sign shewest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee? what dost thou work?

John 6:35 And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst. 36 But I said unto you, That ye also have seen me, and believe not.

John 6:40 And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.

John 6:47 Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life.

John 6:64 But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him.

John 6:69 And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God.

John 7:5 For neither did his brethren believe in him.

John 7:38 He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. 39 (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)

John 8:24 I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins.

John 8:30 As he spake these words, many believed on him.

John 8:45 And because I tell you the truth, ye believe me not.

John 8:46 Which of you convinceth me of sin? And if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me?

John 9:18 But the Jews did not believe concerning him, that he had been blind, and received his sight, until they called the parents of him that had received his sight.

John 9:35 Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when he had found him, he said unto him, Dost thou believe on the Son of God?

John 9:36 He answered and said, Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him?

John 9:38 And he said, Lord, I believe. And he worshipped him.

John 10:26 But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you.

John 10:37 If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. 38 But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him.

John 10:42 And many believed on him there.

John 11:15 And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him.

John 11:25 Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me,

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though he were dead, yet shall he live: 26 And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this? 27 She saith unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world.

John 11:40 Jesus saith unto her, Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldst see the glory of God?

John 11:42 And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me.

John 11:45 Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him.

John 11:48 If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation.

John 12:11 Because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus.

John 12:36 While ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light. These things spake Jesus, and departed, and did hide himself 37 But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him: from them. 38 That the saying of Esaias the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? 39 Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again,

John 12:42 Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue:

John 12:44 Jesus cried and said, He that believeth on me, believeth not on me, but on him that sent me.

John 12:46 I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness. 47 And if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.

John 13:19 Now I tell you before it come, that, when it is come to pass, ye may believe that I am he.

John 14:1 Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me.

John 14:11 Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works' sake. 12 Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father.

John 14:29 And now I have told you before it come to pass, that, when it is come to pass, ye might believe.

John 16:9 Of sin, because they believe not on me;

John 16:27 For the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God.

John 16:30 Now are we sure that thou knowest all things, and needest not that any man should ask thee: by this we believe that thou camest forth from God.

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John 16:31 Jesus answered them, Do ye now believe?

John 17:8 For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that thou didst send me.

John 17:20 Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; 21 That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

John 19:35 And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe.

John 20:8 Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw, and believed.

John 20:25 The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.

John 20:29 Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

John 20:31 But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.

One person asked me, “If you can show me where (in scripture) when one believes, he is saved, then I also will believe it.” In Luke 8:12 Jesus said: “Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved.” That’s very straightforward. If we take all the verses listed above, how could anyone say that those who believe, and according to Jesus, will never “hunger” or “thirst,” know “all things are possible,” “is not condemned,” have the “power to become the sons of God,” will “not perish, but have everlasting life,” will be raised “up at the last day,” is given “the Spirit” in their heart like “rivers of living water,” shall live and “shall never die,” will “see the glory of God,” “be the children of light,” will “not abide in darkness,” shall do “greater works than these,” and even “be one in us [Father & Jesus],” and yet not be saved? Either Jesus never heard the baptismal remission interpretation of Mark 16:16 or he meant something quite different.

If we interpret Mark 16:16 in harmony with the rest of Jesus’ teaching, then we can see that the emphasis is on believing unto salvation, or not believing unto condemnation. It is not on baptism as the means of salvation. This is the most consistent understanding throughout all of Scripture. In Genesis 15:6 it says, “And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness,” which Paul says is the pattern for the church even today:

“Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed.” (Galatians 3:6-8)

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Paul also says again in Romans 4:3 “For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.” Or if we take the only verse in the Book of Acts where someone asked “How can I be saved?” we see the answer Paul gives is the same:

“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.” (Acts 16:31)

Paul says in Romans 10:10

“For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”

And in 1 Corinthians 15:1-2

“Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.”

Or in Ephesians 1:12-13

“That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, . . .”

Or in 1 Timothy 1:16

“Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting.”

Or if we read the writer of Hebrews in 4:3

“For we which have believed do enter into rest, as he said, As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest: although the works were finished from the foundation of the world.”

Or in the first epistles of John 5:1

“Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God:”

The message is the same. It is not faith *plus* baptism. It is not faith *plus* anything. In is faith alone in Christ alone.