The Great Commission
Mark 16:15-16

By Tim Warner

Copyright © Pristine Faith Restoration Society

Mark 16:15-16 (NKJV)
15 And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.
16 He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."

Mark 16:15-16 (PFRV)
15 And He said to them, "Go into all the world. Preach the good news to the whole creation.
16 The one having believed and having been baptized shall be saved. But the one having disbelieved shall be condemned."

This passage of Scripture is critical to the baptism debate. Yet, it is seldom realized how forcefully it alone can settle the whole debate. The usual argument for the inclusion of baptism as part of the necessary response to the Gospel is that baptism is included with believing, the result being that one is saved. The counter argument is that only disbelief (not failing to be baptized) is listed as the condition for condemnation. Therefore, baptism is said to be irrelevant or only incidental.

The Nature of the Question

The question we must answer, however, does not deal with the requirements for condemnation. It deals with the requirements for salvation that Jesus established. It is a mistake to assume that baptism is not important to salvation merely because its absence is not specifically listed as a cause for condemnation.

We need first to clear up a common misconception about the term rendered "does not believe" in most versions. You may notice that we have rendered it "disbelieved." This is a very important distinction. The former rendering ("does not believe") appears to give the impression that one has been passive, failing to do something – believe. Yet, the Greek verb is in the active voice. The word is "απισθησας," the normal Greek word for "believe" with the negative particle "α" prefixed to it. It is the same distinction between a "theist" (one who believes in God) and an "a-theist" (one who disbelieves in God). An "atheist" is not someone who has never heard of God, or has simply failed to consider God. An atheist is one who has contemplated the concept of God, and has rejected

Him. This rejection is an ACTIVE choice. In the same way, the Greek participle we have rendered "the one having disbelieved" is in the active voice and requires active rejection, not merely a passive failure to act.

It is self evident, then, that one who has actively "disbelieved" (that is, heard the message of the Gospel and totally rejected it), is not someone who might be baptized. When Jesus said, "The one having believed and having been baptized," He used the active voice for "believed" and the passive voice for "baptized." Believing requires an active response. Baptism, on the other hand, is passive in that one is baptized by someone else. It would only add redundancy to the statement for Jesus to say, "the one having disbelieved and not having been baptized shall be condemned." Why? Because it is inconceivable that someone who heard the preaching of the Apostles and totally rejected it would line up to be baptized at the conclusion of the preaching! Therefore, Jesus' statement covers the subject adequately regarding the only two possible responses to the preaching of the Apostles. On the other hand, the argument that baptism is only incidental in this passage, is awkward indeed. Why would Jesus include baptism as a condition for salvation if it were only incidental?

There are serious grammatical problems for those who see baptism as only incidental in this passage. One of the major reasons that Greek is such a precise language is its abundant use of participles. Participles are verbal adjectives, and can carry both the characteristics of verbs and nouns. While this may seem to complicate the language, it adds a level of precision that is not easily achievable in English without adding helping verbs. Let us first consider the adjectival and substantive function of the two participles in question, rendered "the one having believed" and "having been baptized."

The Granville Sharp Rule

When a participle has the definite article, it is being used as a substantive (like a noun – a person, place, or thing). When we have two substantives in the same case, connected by "και" (and), and the first substantive has the article but not the second, the two substantives are being viewed as a single entity. Here, Jesus said, "ο πιστευσας και βαπτισθεις" (literally, "the ones having believed and having been baptized"). This statement refers to only ONE class of people who are identified as those who have believed and been baptized. The promise of salvation is only to this class of people. The Great Commission promises no assurance at all to those who hold that baptism has no part with salvation. One wonders why Jesus would send His disciples out with such a commission and not even address the class of people who were to be the recipients of their message!

The Verbal Tenses of Participles

For those who downplay the importance of baptism, an even more serious problem arises regarding the tenses of the participles ("believed" and "baptized") in relation to the future indicative verb rendered, "shall be saved." The verbal tense of participles (more precisely the TIME element, whether past, present, or future), is relative to the time of the main verb rather than the time of the speaker. In this sentence, the main verb is rendered "shall be saved." It is future indicative, meaning that its time element is future from the perspective of Jesus and His disciples. But, the two participles rendered "the ones having believed" and "having been baptized" are both aorist tense participles. The time element of both participles ("the one having believed" and "having been baptized") is BEFORE the verbal action of the future indicative verb rendered, "shall be saved." Ultimately, this means that both believing and being baptized anticipate (occur before) salvation in Jesus' statement. You cannot place salvation BETWEEN believing and being baptized and be grammatically correct. In other words, this passage CANNOT refer to those who believed, were then saved, and were afterwards baptized. It is grammatically impossible. It can only refer to those who believed, were baptized, and THEN were saved. That in itself is an insurmountable problem for those who would discard baptism from this passage, or place baptism after salvation in the sequence of conversion events. Some might attempt to escape this grammatical problem by proposing the idea that "condemnation" of the disbelievers occurs at the judgment, and therefore "saved" must be in reference to the judgment also. Yet, we learn from John's Gospel that "condemnation" is a continuous state from the moment one rejects the Gospel.

> John 3:18
> 18 "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe [disbelieves] **is condemned already**, because he has not believed [disbelieved] in the name of the only begotten Son of God.
>
> John 3:36
> 36 He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe [disbelieves] the Son shall not see life, but **the wrath of God abides on him**."

Since it was a clear teaching of Jesus that "condemnation" was immediate for the disbelievers, there can be no question that Jesus was referring to the same condemnation in Mark 16:16. Consequently, if the condemnation immediately follows disbelief, so too does salvation immediately follow belief and baptism.