

Believe and Be Baptised

Just before he ascended back into glory, Jesus issued a command to his disciples. We have it in various forms:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20).

Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in [my] name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things (Luke 24:47-48).

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

And then:

Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:15-16).

It is this last that I want to speak to you about at this time.

Christ's immediate disciples – and all believers since – have this duty, responsibility and privilege: 'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation'. Reader, if you are a true disciple of the Lord Jesus, this is your task today. Not that any of us can possibly preach the gospel to every creature – the apostles couldn't, and nor can we – but even so, we must do our part in fulfilling this command of our Lord and Saviour. His mother's counsel still stands: 'Do whatever he tells you' (John 2:5). Christ's people must obey him!

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First of all, we must be clear what we are talking about. What is this ‘good news’: ‘Go into all the world and preach the good news’? There’s no doubt about it: the good news is the gospel. The English word ‘gospel’ is derived from the Anglo-Saxon ‘godspell’; literally, good news. And we know what the gospel is: God, in his great love for sinners, sent his Son into the world to die under his wrath, so that all who trust the merits and blood sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ will be everlastingly saved from their sins. Perhaps the most well-known biblical statement on this theme is this:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him (John 3:14-17).

So much for ‘gospel’. What about ‘preach’?

When they hear the word ‘preach’, far too many people – the overwhelming majority – think first and last of a man standing in a pulpit and speaking in the form of a monologue to a silent audience. Now the word, in its biblical usage, can mean a man declaiming to a congregation, yes, but it also means a host of other things; such as talking, arguing, reasoning, proclaiming and so on. The New Testament tells us plainly how the early disciples carried out this ‘preaching’ responsibility. Yes, they had stated teachers who heralded the gospel like a town crier. But they also – all of them – engaged in personal conversation, discussion, argument, answering questions and so on, in spreading the good news; in short, they gossiped the gospel. And this is a vital aspect of what Jesus meant when he told all his disciples to ‘preach the good news’.

As to ‘all creation’ or ‘every creature’, this surely needs no explanation. The good news is to be spread throughout

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the world to every living soul. Why? Because there is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ! It may not be politically correct to say it, but say it I must, because it is the truth. There is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ. And without salvation, as Christ said, unsaved sinners must perish. Men must hear of Christ, come to Christ and be saved, or else they will everlastingly perish. But it must be Christ that they hear of! Only he can save. As to the uniqueness of Christ, and it being absolutely essential to trust him and him alone for salvation, take his own words: 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). Peter certainly got the message. Listen to him making his reply when he was being arraigned for preaching Christ: 'Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). You can't be more blunt than that!

Well, that's cleared the decks! If you are a believer, you must engage in this work of spreading the gospel of Christ so that as many others as possible can hear of him, believe and be saved. Do you realise this? Are you engaged in it? So much for Christ's command: Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation'.

Now for his statement: 'Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned'.

There are two words here that we need to be clear about: 'believe' and 'baptised'. Oh, I know most people think they know what these two words mean, but, truth to tell, there's a great deal of misunderstanding about both.

Take 'believe'. Many people think 'believe' means something like 'mental assent'. Take those who accept the facts of the Bible: they believe that Jesus was laid in a manger when he was born, they believe that he died on the cross, they believe that he rose from the dead, and so on.

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They believe these things; that is, they accept them as facts. It is very much like believing there is a place called Australia. Many have never been there, but most of us accept that such a place exists. It appears in the atlas, we see clips of it on TV, and friends tell us they have flown there, and all the rest of it. We simply accept the existence of Australia as a fact. Similarly, we get on a bus because we see it has our destination on the front; we believe, we accept, that it is going where it says.

All that is 'believing', *but none of it is 'believing' in the way Jesus spoke of it here.* 'Believing' in the New Testament sense, the saving sense, is a matter of the heart, not merely the head. Oh, the head is involved; facts have to be known. But saving faith is a dependence on those facts. More, it is trust of the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

So, for instance, a man may believe – in the sense of assenting to it – that if he asks Christ to save him, he will be saved. He may accept that if he asks Christ to wash him from his sin, and apply to him the merits of his death, the Lord will make him perfectly righteous in the eyes of God. All this is very good – as far as it goes. *But not good enough!* It is only when the sinner trusts Christ to wash him from his sin and make him right with God that he will be saved. Believing that Christ can do it won't save him; trusting Christ to do it for him, will.

You see the difference? There's all the difference in the world between accepting the facts and trusting the Saviour. There's all the difference in the world between believing with the head only, and believing with the head *and heart*. And heart trust is essential for salvation.

Let me prove it. Consider these words of Paul:

If you confess with your mouth: 'Jesus is Lord', *and believe in your heart* that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is *with your heart that you believe* and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved (Rom. 10:9-10).

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That's plain enough, surely? 'If you... believe in your heart... you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified'; that is, made righteous, accounted righteous, in the sight of God (Rom. 5:19). Moreover, 'believing in Christ' (Acts 16:31) is equivalent to 'receiving Christ' (John 1:12). Let me quote the verse: 'To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God'. You can see the equivalence straightaway; it stands out a mile. To 'receive' Christ is to believe on or in him. Very well. But the word 'receive' means 'welcome', and 'welcome' speaks of open arms and open heart. It is certainly far, far more than mere mental assent. So it is with 'believing'.

There's plenty more where that came from. Take Peter, commanding his hearers: 'Be saved from this perverse generation'. 'Then those who gladly *received* his word were baptised; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them'. Then again: 'The apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also *received* the word of God'. Or this: 'The natural man does not *receive* the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned'. One more: 'As you have therefore *received* Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith' (Acts 2:40-41; 11:1; 1 Cor. 2:14; Col. 2:6-7, all NKJV). In none of these cases will 'assent' do. To 'receive' Christ, to 'receive' the word of God, is to welcome Christ, to welcome the word of God, to rely upon Christ and the word of God.

And that's what 'believe' means in this promise of Christ: 'Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned'; that is, whoever welcomes Christ, receives Christ, trusts Christ, and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not

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welcome, receive, trust Christ – in other words, refuses him (Heb. 3:12; 12:25) – will be condemned.

Reader: Do you believe in this sense? Do you trust Christ? Are you trusting Christ, now?

So much for ‘believe’. What about ‘baptise’. As you know, the New Testament was not written in English, but it was written in a form of Greek. Sadly, when making it available for non-Greek readers, the translators failed to translate the *baptizō*; rather, they transliterated it into *baptism*. They should, of course, have translated the word, and it would have saved a world of trouble if they had done so. There is no doubt about the meaning of *baptizō*. Contrary to what many think, it means ‘to dip’ or ‘to plunge’ or ‘to immerse’. There is no question of this, none whatsoever. The only way to baptise a person is to dip or plunge or immerse him or her in water. Sprinkling or pouring fails miserably.

What is more, the only people who should be immersed – baptised – are believers. It’s just as Christ says in this verse: ‘Whoever believes and is baptised’. Note the order: belief must come before faith. Consequently, we are not talking about infant sprinkling, baby sprinkling, nor even adult plunging. We are talking about the dipping of believers.

Now, why ever should believers be baptised? Why should men and women be plunged into water, immersed, when they profess faith in Christ? What’s the connection? What’s the meaning of it? What’s the purpose of it?

There are several New Testament answers to this, and several arguments for the practice, but let me stick with the one that is obvious – obvious because it follows directly from my text. What am I talking about? It is perfectly clear: belief must be followed by baptism because *that is precisely what Christ commands!* Hear him: ‘Whoever believes and is baptised’. *He* links to the two. *He* spells out the order. And, in a sense, that’s the end of it! True belief

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in Christ involves trusting him as Saviour and submitting to him as Lord. Remember his mother's words: 'Do whatever he tells you' (John 2:5). Believers must be baptised because their Lord and Saviour commands them to be baptised.

And on this matter of obedience, Christ was explicit:

If you love me, you will obey what I command... Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me... If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching... If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love (John 14:15,21,23; 15:10).

And so was John. He was there when Christ said the above, and he never forgot it. Years later he wrote:

We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands... we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them... This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome (1 John 2:3; 3:21-24; 5:3).

So then: 'Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned'. It's all a question of obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Reader, if you are a believer, have you been baptised following profession of your faith in Christ?

There is one further mistake that many make upon this verse; and it is a very serious mistake indeed. If we take the first part of Christ's words: 'Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved', and stop there, it looks as though baptism is essential to salvation, does it not? I admit it: it looks for all the world as though baptism is essential to salvation. Some go as far as to say that baptism is the vital thing, and baptism produces salvation. But this is a

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diabolical error – and the text does not teach it. We must not read Scripture with a superficial glance. Read on. Read the complete commission.

Jesus is perfectly clear: ‘Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, *but whoever does not believe will be condemned*’. Can you see it? Baptism is not essential to salvation – but faith is! How can I say that? Because this is the very point that Jesus makes. It is the one who does not believe who is condemned; that is, will perish and suffer everlasting hell. The way to go to hell is not to trust Christ. The only way to avoid God’s wrath is, as the New Testament always teaches, by trusting Christ. Baptism has nothing to do with it. Baptism does not save. Baptism does not deliver from condemnation. Lack of baptism does not make a sinner perish. Unbelief, not lack of baptism, is the condemning sin. Jesus was categorical:

Everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son (John 3:15-18)

In short:

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him (John 3:36).

Here it is, as plain as plain could be: salvation is a question of believing, trusting the Lord Jesus Christ, and damnation comes to a man because he lives and dies as an unbeliever, never trusting the Saviour, never willing to receive him. It is not a matter of baptism at all. It is a matter of faith and unbelief.

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Having said that, the text still stands: ‘Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned’. And this is what it amounts to: while baptism is not essential for salvation, *it is essential for all who believe*. There is no getting round it: ‘Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved’. We dare not drive a wedge between faith and baptism. Jesus linked them; we must not separate them. The thief on the cross is the only New Testament case of a person being saved who was not baptised, but he was saved, even though he was not baptised. For obvious reasons, he could not be baptised. But he could believe – and he did!

So there stands the text: ‘Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned’. What can we take from it for ourselves? What should we take from it? Let me apply it now.

If you are a believer, have you been baptised – in the New Testament sense? No? Then you must! Your Lord and Saviour commands you to be baptised, and obedience to him is an essential mark of true believing. Let us hear you asking, as the Ethiopian eunuch did: ‘Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptised?’ (Acts 8:37). No reason at all, why you should not be baptised – if you are a believer. And if you are a believer, *every reason why you should be baptised*.

Turning to the unbeliever, let me speak plainly to you. Unless you trust Christ you will perish. Do not neglect this great salvation, I plead with you. Do not refuse this glorious Saviour and his offer of salvation. Trust him at once. Listen to these words. Let them sink in:

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?... See to it that you do not refuse him who

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speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? (Heb. 2:1-3; 12:25).

Reader, you could not ask for clearer warnings than these. Heed them, I urge you. Moreover, answer the question you were asked: How will *you* escape if *you* do not trust the Lord Jesus Christ? How will you? You won't! If you offer your efforts, works and observances... they are, as the Bible says, useless and worse: 'All our righteous acts are like filthy rags' (Isa. 64:6). I tell you yet again: there is no deliverance from condemnation but through the merits and work and person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Come to him, trust him, and you will be saved.

Finally, I turn back to you as a believer, and I include myself. Here we have Christ's standing commission for us: 'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation'. And we know why: 'Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned'. Sinners are perishing all around us. What can we do to preach the gospel to them so that as many as possible might hear, believe and be saved, and then, in obedience to their Lord and Master, be baptised? You surely know these words:

Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men... For Christ's love compels us... God... reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain... I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation (2 Cor. 5:11 – 6:2).

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I pray that what I have written here may do something towards encouraging that ministry to unbelievers. Further, I hope that any sinner who happens to read my words will feel they have been invited to come to Christ and trust him. More, I hope they will feel that I have commanded them to come, exhorted them to come and pleaded with them to come. Better by far, listen once again to the words of Christ: 'Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned'. Above all, do not merely hear or listen to the words of Christ. Come to Christ, and come now! Trust him at once, and you will be saved. Refuse him, and die refusing him, you will perish. Let it not be so! May it never be! God forbid it! Let me say it again: Believe and be saved. Believe and be saved, and then, being saved, be baptised.