

Mark 16: An Exegetical Essay

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Introduction

The closing verses of Mark 16 are often appealed to by Revivalists as a standard “proof-text” to authenticate their “Pentecostal” experience, internally, and externally with others. Unfortunately there seems to be an all too common practice of selective reading within these fellowships; the *contexts* of the various key biblical passages do not often seem to be read—or applied—in their entirety, the result being that people quite often “miss the forest for the trees”.

For many years the *Revival Centres* has followed founding pastor Lloyd Longfield's idiosyncratic interpretation that Mark 16 should be read as a *parable* from verse nine onwards. It would appear that this approach has been taken simply to justify the *absence* of the majority of the signs outlined in the passage, within RCI assemblies. Former RCI pastor, Drew Dixon, has written an excellent essay that appears at the “Please Consider” website, “Mark 16: is it a Parable?”, which conclusively demolishes this line of argument (www.pleaseconsider.info/articles/mark_16/mark_16.htm). I certainly have nothing to add to his work, other than to note that I have consulted commentaries on the book of Mark from the fourth century onwards in an effort to locate *anyone* at *any* point in the history of Christianity who has offered a similar suggestion. I have not been able to find even one. This alone should cause us to seriously question pastor Longfield's interpretation.

Aim, method and end-state

The aim of this essay is to critically evaluate precisely what it is that the closing verses of Mark 16 teach, when contrasted with Revivalist belief. The tools that I use to complete the task are the standards for biblical studies, and involve a close analysis of the passage as it appears in Greek. I will then compare the results of my examination against the two major Revivalist positions: those of the *Revival Centres International* (RCI) and the *Revival Fellowship* (RF). I am confident that the reader will reach more or less the same conclusion as I: that what the RCI and RF both believe and teach concerning this passage, is fundamentally and thoroughly flawed.

Background

I'd like to commence by briefly addressing an issue that seems to be quite controversial in some circles. It has to do with the question of “authenticity” with respect to Mark 16:9-20.

Many Revivalists would naturally feel concerned that a good number of modern Bible translations, including the immensely popular New International Version (NIV), contain footnotes that read something like this:

The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20.

They are anxious because their preferred *King James Version* (KJV) **does** contain these verses, consequently, they worry that the modern translations might be trying to distort, or perhaps even remove, entire passages from the Word of God. At issue seems to be the trustworthiness of Scripture. However, as I will demonstrate, this simply is not the case¹.

There currently exist approximately 5,713 Greek manuscripts²—generally incomplete—of the Christian New Testament, and the vast majority of these date from the eighth century onwards³. There are two important considerations that result from this fact. First, the date is, of course, about 700 years removed from the time in which the last New Testament book was written. Second, it needs to be understood that the text of the New Testament became more or less fixed, in its Greek form at least, at Constantinople sometime between the fifth and seventh centuries. So it is *not* surprising to discover that the majority of the Greek manuscripts currently known reflect what is a polished and edited form of the Greek New Testament, one which derives from an *intentional recension* undertaken by Lucian of Antioch in the fourth century, and which is now commonly referred to as the Byzantine text type⁴. This is the text form that developed in the centuries after Constantine became the Roman Emperor, a text form which came to be the Bible of today's Greek Orthodox Church. It is also, more or less, the same Greek text form that underpins the much later KJV.

But we also have a number of Greek New Testament manuscripts dating from much *earlier* than the eighth century, generally from the third, fourth and fifth centuries. In addition to these we can draw upon quotations of various New Testament passages in the writings of the Church Fathers from the second century onwards, quotations which cover the *entire* New Testament less seventeen verses from Revelation!⁵ And finally, we have translations of the New Testament into other languages that are from the third century forwards⁶. What we discover is that the form of the Greek text that was in widespread use during these earlier centuries—that is from Palestine through to North Africa—displays quite marked differences to the later, more refined and “smoothed” Byzantine text type. All the manuscripts of Mark that include chapter 16 include the text up to verse 8: “*And they said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.*” But from verse nine onwards, significant differences appear. In fact, there are three “longer” endings to Mark's Gospel. They are⁷:

“Early, on the first day of the week, after he arose, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had previously cast out seven demons. She went and told those who were with him, while they were mourning and weeping. And when they heard that he was alive, and had been seen by her, they did not believe. After this he appeared in a different form to two of them while they were on their way to the country. They went back and told

the rest, but they did not believe them. Then he appeared to the eleven while they were eating, and he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen him resurrected. He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to everyone. The one who believes and is baptised will be saved, but the one who does not believe will be condemned. These signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new languages; they will pick up snakes with their hands, and whatever poison they drink will not harm them; they will place their hands on the sick and they will recover.' After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. The eleven went out and proclaimed everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through the accompanying signs."

This is, of course, the commonest ending to Mark's Gospel, and is the one that's found in most English translations, including the KJV.

But there is also:

"They reported briefly to those around Peter all that they had been commanded. After these things Jesus himself sent out through them, from the east to the west, the holy and enduring preaching of eternal salvation. Amen."

The above ending is regularly found written after the traditional "longer ending" in manuscripts from the seventh century onwards. This would seem to indicate that there was some uncertainty as to which was the "proper" text, so both were included, just to be safe!

And finally, there is the version of a "longer ending" that's quoted by Jerome, early in the fifth century:

"And they replied, saying, 'this age of lawlessness and unbelief is under Satan, who through his demons doesn't permit the true power of God to be understood; therefore, reveal your righteousness now!' They were speaking to Christ, and he said to them in reply, 'The limit of the years of the authority of Satan has been fulfilled, but other terrible things draw near, even for the sinners on whose behalf I was delivered up to death, that they might turn to the truth and no longer sin, so that they may inherit the spiritual and incorruptible glory of righteousness which is in heaven.'"

So, according to the Greek manuscript evidence, there are actually *four endings* to Mark's Gospel! The earliest, and therefore the "best" Greek manuscripts (which is a value judgment in any case) *do not* include the longer ending that is found in the Byzantine text, and which stands behind the KJV. Neither do the earliest translations. Further, quotes from Mark's Gospel in the letters of most of the Church Fathers from the second and third centuries do not show any evidence that they knew the common "longer" ending either⁸. It is only from the mid to late third century that endings after verse eight start to multiply in the manuscripts, and in the letters written by Church Fathers.

So what does this mean? Do we simply ignore Mark 16:9-20? Hardly!

What I have presented above is a very brief overview of the textual evidence that clearly indicates that the *original author* of Mark's Gospel, who probably wrote sometime around AD 60, did *not* include verses nine through 20. However, the evidence also suggests that “extended” endings to the Gospel began to be considered towards the middle of the second century, and these clearly reflected traditional beliefs and understandings held within the early Church⁹.

So, there are really *two* issues that we need to consider. First, that there is absolutely *nothing* in the common “longer” ending, or in any of the other “longer” endings for that matter, which stands contrary to the rest of the New Testament witness concerning Jesus Christ and his teachings. Second, the Church decided to accept **all** of the “longer” endings as representative of orthodox teaching when it recognized the boundaries of the New Testament canon, sometime around the fourth century. Consequently, they **all** form part and parcel of the received Scripture in use by the Christian Church Universal. So it remains perfectly correct to appeal to Mark 16:9-20 as Scripture; but it is patently incorrect to claim that it was originally written by John Mark, traditionally held to be the author of the gospel that bears his name.

Mark 16:15-18

Having now spent a little time reviewing the history of the passage, we're in a position to move forwards, to consider precisely what it is that Mark 16:15-18 teaches.

*He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to everyone. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved, but the one who does not believe will be condemned. These signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new languages; they will pick up snakes with their hands, and whatever poison they drink will not harm them; they will place their hands on the sick and they will recover.”*¹⁰

Jesus' parting words to his disciples were, “*go into the world, and preach the gospel to everyone!*” To Christ, the most important thing in the world was not that the disciples *go into* it, but that the gospel was preached. The single Greek imperative, in other words the sole *command* of the verse, is κηρύξατε τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, translated as “preach the gospel” into English (the word that is rendered “go” is simply a Greek participle¹¹). It would probably be quite well known that I fundamentally disagree with the various Revivalist churches over just what it is that properly comprises this all-important gospel. I offer that a misunderstanding of the nature of the gospel invariably leads to a misunderstanding of the nature of, and the requirements for, salvation. History demonstrates that such confusion all too frequently results in a rapid spiral into works-based, human-centric and fear-breeding forms of religious legalism, given that legalism remains the natural “religion-of-choice” for spiritually fallen human beings.

Having been presented with the content of the gospel (which is summarized in verse 15), the hearer is forced into making a choice: to either **believe**, or to **disbelieve** (so verse 16).

The person who believes, Jesus assured his disciples, will be baptized and will be saved. However, the one who chooses not to believe the gospel of Christ will stand condemned. It is at this point that we need to take note of several important features of Greek grammar. The words that has been translated “believes” (πιστεύσας) and, “is baptised” (βαπτισθεὶς), are both aorist, active voice participles, whilst the verb “will be saved” (σωθήσεται) is future tense, in the passive voice, and indicative mood. What this grammatical verbiage indicates, is that the person who exercises belief in the gospel message, the person who demonstrates that he or she *truly* believes by being baptized (the aorist aspect being generic in this instance), can rest in the certainty of receiving everlasting life from God, into the future. It is crucially important to understand that the “being baptized” component remains *secondary* to the “believing” component, as (1) the Greek coordinate conjunction translated “and” functions in a *cumulative* rather than in a *copulative* sense, and (2) that this remains a normal role of the second *protasis* in implied conditional Greek sentences¹². In other words, a lack of baptism will *not* lead to a lack of eternal life (*contra*, especially, the teaching of the RF)¹³. The same, of course, is true for the oft-quoted Acts 2:38 proof-text.

We now arrive at the most disputed portion of this biblical passage: Christ's teaching on the “signs”, themselves.

These signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new languages; they will pick up snakes with their hands, and whatever poison they drink will not harm them; they will place their hands on the sick and they will recover...

Given that Jesus used the Greek plural for “signs” (σημεῖα) in our passage, the first question that we need to ask ourselves is simple: how is this word used within (1) the New Testament record generally, and (2) in Mark's gospel particularly?

According to my exhaustive Greek Concordance¹⁴ the word σημεῖον (being the nominative, singular, neuter form; which is to say, the “dictionary” form of σημεῖα) appears 77 times throughout the New Testament. Most of the occurrences are in the gospels (48 times, with six occurring in Mark); however, the word also appears in Paul's writings (eight times), in Hebrews (once), and in John's Revelation (seven times). The standard definition is, “(1) a sign or distinguishing mark whereby something is known, and (2) an event that is an indication or confirmation of intervention by transcendent powers.”¹⁵ According to the extended discussion that fills two subsequent columns of *Bauer*, the second definition is the one that *best* suits our current passage (along with four of the other five occurrences of the word in Mark's Gospel). In this respect, σημεῖον has within its semantic domain the concept of “miracle”. A standard Greek lexical reference work¹⁶ distinguishes clearly between σημεῖον, and τερας (“miraculous sign”), but notes that the latter occurs exclusively in the plural, and is only found in combination with the former in the New Testament. This would indicate that Mark intended for his readers to understand that the “signs” of 16:17 point to the direct intervention of God, and then in an openly miraculous way.

We should particularly note that Mark went further, in that he describes five specific “signs” (note they are *plural*) that would “accompany” (a future tense, active voice, indicative mood verb) those who “believe” (once again an active voice, aorist participle). They are: (1) that in Christ's name they will drive out demons; (2) they will speak in new languages; (3) they will pick up snakes with their hands; (4) whatever poison they drink will not harm them; and finally, (5) that they will place their hands on the sick and they will recover.

The RCI understands the majority of these “signs” (specifically, numbers one, three and four) to be somehow “parabolic” or metaphorical. One wonders whether or not this has more to do with their organization rejecting the existence of demons philosophically, coupled with their belief that Mark surely could not have meant literally what he appears to state with respect to the handling of snakes and the drinking of poison. Consequently, the RCI teaches that the first “sign” really ought to be interpreted as “*the casting out of false religious ideas*”. The third “sign” then refers to “*the handling of sly, malicious people*”, with the fourth “sign” relating to “*the hearing of false doctrine without being harmed spiritually*”. Of course, Drew Dixon's article at “Please Consider” conclusively demonstrates that this sort of interpretative wrangling simply is not honest.

The RF, on the other hand, apparently accepts the literal interpretation of the majority of Mark's “signs”, but understands them to be latent promises within each individual and true believer. Promises to be called upon, *when*, *where*, and *as* required. The difficulty with this interpretation, however, is that it confuses what Mark calls “signs”, with what Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians as “spiritual gifts”. The former serves to demonstrate the reality of God to an unbelieving world, the latter serves to build-up an already believing Christian community. In reality though, the RF has also attempted to reinterpret away the clear and simple teaching of Scripture, because it does not conform to the organization's doctrine, experience, or practice.

Because the Revivalist groups universally claim the gift of tongues (the *reality* of the gift being a biblically defensible position, the *universality* of the gift not being so), and because they universally link this particular spiritual gift with the receiving of God's Holy Spirit in the mystery of salvation (which is *not* a biblically defensible position); they cannot simply jettison Mark 16:15-18 due to the difficulties that a straightforward reading of the passage presents them with.

“Yes, all *must* speak in tongues! We do see some people being healed through prayer *sometimes*. But if they are *not* healed, then clearly *they* lack faith! No! We will *not* have any of that demon 'stuff'-and-nonsense here! And do not even *begin* with the poison-drinking, snake-handling rubbish!”

Unfortunately though, Mark does *not* allow for so casual a picking-and-choosing of what one is prepared to accept as valid when it comes to the “signs” that Mark 16 presents. To him, one either *accepts* the lot, or one *rejects* the lot. Why? Because the grammatical antecedent to the “they” that is implicit in each of the third person “sign” verbs (“drive”, “speak”, “pick up”, “drink”, and “place”), is the same “*those who believe*” of verse 17, and which mirrors the “*whoever believes*” introduced in verse 15. Therein lies the

Gordian knot that the Revivalist groups have unsuccessfully attempted to unravel. According to the logic of the two Revivalist interpretative positions, *all* believers **must** evidence *all* of the signs, *all* of the time (noting, of course, that a “sign” is only a sign when it is on display).

Such is the problem. However, there remains, of course, a perfectly valid and biblical solution. The RF in particular, has assumed *two* things about Jesus' words at the beginning of verse 17: “*these signs shall accompany those who believe*”. First, that the future tense indicates a **promise** rather than a **prediction**. And second, that it remains a promise to *all* believers. However, given that the statement appears after a *conditional sentence* (16:16), and given the entire range of subsequent contextual grammatical conditions that Mark presents: “...*he that...and is...shall be...*”, it is decidedly clear that the statement itself should be understood in the reverse: as a **prediction** rather than as a **promise**. This is reinforced by the fact that each of the six instances of third person plural verbs mentioned with respect to the “signs” of verses 17 and 18 are Greek **categorical** (or “*generalizing*”) **plurals**. Categorical plurals separate and distinguish one group from every other group. This form of plural exists in Greek, as it more easily yields itself to a *generic* notion: the focus is more towards the *action*, than it is towards the *actor* (i.e. “this is the sort of person who does this”). In our text the “signs” serve to distinguish *Christian believers* as a **group**, from *every other group* of people on the planet.

Our current text does *not* teach that *all* believers *will* cast out demons through to healing the sick. The stress is *not* on the notion of “promises” given to believers, it remains on the *authentication* of Christianity as being from God, before an unbelieving world. The passage, therefore, teaches that *some* Christians *may* speak in tongues. Others *may* cast out demons. Others still *may* be involved in the range of supernatural effects that are described, but these effects are simply one part of what it is that demonstrates the **uniqueness** of the Christian Church as a group separate to, and separate from, every other group in existence! The effects—the “signs”—are *not individual promises*, they are **corporate predictions**.

Conclusion

Revivalists collectively appeal to Mark 16:15-20 to authenticate their shared spiritual experience of “tongues”, and further, to validate their unique theology that one must speak in tongues in order to be a “true” believer. However, as has been clearly demonstrated from the Greek text, Mark 16:15-20 does *not* reflect or represent the Revivalist *theology*, its *experience* or its actual *practice*. Each of the Revivalist groups has gone to extraordinary lengths over the years to explain-away the “missing signs”, when what has really been missing is a proper appreciation of the passage's true meaning, as it stands. The Revivalist groups, quite simply, have gotten Mark 16 wrong.

In closing, the grammar of the Greek text of Mark 16:15-20 does *not* support what the Revivalist groups teach. In fact, it stands directly against this Revivalist dogma.

Footnotes

¹ I've personally undertaken undergraduate and postgraduate training in New Testament textual criticism. This is the close study of the ancient New Testament manuscripts, their similarities and differences

² Of which only about 50 are complete New Testaments

³ Approximately 85% of them

⁴ Named as it is after the Byzantine period which began at Constantinople

⁵ Almost 1,000,000 quotations: enough to reconstitute the entire Bible (less 17 verses)

⁶ Approximately 10,000 manuscripts (in Syriac, Coptic, Latin, Armenian)

⁷ All translations from the Greek text into English are my own

⁸ Irenaeus (d. 200) wrote in Latin. *“Towards the conclusion of his gospel, Mark says: ‘So then, after the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God’”* (*Against Heresies*, 3.10.6). This is clearly a direct quote from Mark 16:19

⁹ Jerome (d. 419) commented that the common “longer” ending was absent from almost all of the manuscripts known to him

¹⁰ This is a very good example of an implied conditional sentence in Greek, one using a substantival participle in place of the formal structural markers, “...if...then...”

¹¹ Participles are forms of the adjective that derive from verbs. What they do is ascribe to a noun participation in the action, or state, of the verb

¹² The two conditions listed in the protasis (the implied “if”) do not bear the same relationship to the apodosis (the implied “then”). The first is the cause (“[if] you believe”), and the fulfillment of the apodosis depends on it (“[then] you will be saved”). The second functions as the evidence of belief (“and [if you] are baptised”), consequently the apodosis does not depend on it for fulfillment

¹³ In other words, the acceptance of baptism follows on from the believing, rather than being equal to it in obligation

¹⁴ Kohlenberger, *et al.*, *The Exhaustive Concordance to the Greek New Testament*, Zondervan, 1995

¹⁵ Bauer, *et al.*, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., University of Chicago Press, 2000; s.v. σημειον, ου, τό (pp.920-921)

¹⁶ C. Brown (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol 2 (rev ed.) Paternoster Press, 1985, svv. σημειον & τερας , pp. 626-635