

The Baptismal Formula According To Matthew 28:19

As the Book of Acts and the Epistles clearly teach, the early church baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and thereby established the pattern for us to follow. Only one verse in the Bible could possibly allude to any other baptismal formula – Matthew 28:19 – so let us examine its teaching in context.

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world (Matthew 28:18-20).

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR INTERPRETING MATTHEW 28:19

Matthew 28:19 speaks of baptism “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,” while Acts and the Epistles speak of baptism “in the name of Jesus Christ.” Before analyzing Matthew 28:19 in detail, let us consider the possible explanations as to why these two different phrases appear in Scripture.

First, one could say that the two phrases are contradictory and we must choose one over the other. This explanation violates two basic principles of biblical interpretation: (1) the inspiration of Scripture and (2) the unity of Scripture. Since the Bible is the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God, it does not contain error. Since the Bible is God’s Word to humanity, it presents a unified message and does not contradict itself.

Some people use a form of this argument by saying, “I would rather obey the words of Jesus (in Matthew) than the words of Peter (in Acts).” But this statement assumes that Scripture contradicts itself and that the apostles were in error. If this were the case, we would not be able to trust the Bible at all. If we cannot trust the apostles, it would be futile to appeal to the words of Jesus, for Jesus did not write any books of the Bible. We

must trust Matthew's record of what Jesus said just as we must trust Luke's record in Acts and Paul's statement in his epistles.

Second, one could say that neither phrase describes the baptismal formula. If so, we have no biblical formula for water baptism. This is very unlikely in light of the importance of baptism, the need to distinguish Christian baptism from other types of baptism, the common-sense reading of the passages in question, and the universal Christian practice from the most ancient times of using a baptismal formula.

Clearly, some sort of formula is necessary to identify baptism as baptism and to express its significance.

This explanation makes the baptismal formula an irrelevant technicality. By similar reasoning, one could justify celebrating the Lord's Supper with cake and punch, performing baptism by sprinkling with milk, or even omitting the baptismal ceremony altogether. If the formula is irrelevant, baptism in any name or no name would be valid Christian baptism, which is absurd. Obviously, the spiritual significance of baptism is expressed by the formula used and the name invoked.

Third, one could say that the two phrases describe two completely different formulas, either of which is acceptable. This explanation faces some of the same problems as the preceding two, for it seems to make the Bible contradict itself and minimizes the significance of the baptismal formula. It indicates that there can be conflicting methods of Christian initiation. But there is only one God and one message of salvation for all people (Romans 3:29-30). In particular, there is only one Christian baptism (Ephesians 4:5).

In the final analysis, this explanation proves too much, for if Matthew and Acts present two different formulas, there is no evidence that the early church used both. Rather, it would appear that Jesus gave one formula but the early church consistently used another formula but the early church consistently used another one, thereby disobeying the Lord from the start. Clearly, this conclusion is untenable.

Fourth, one could say that both phrases describe the same baptismal formula. This view preserves the inspiration, inerrancy, and unity of Scripture. It also rests upon two other important principles of biblical interpretation: (1) Scripture interprets Scripture and (2) truth has several witnesses. (See II Corinthians 13:1). The former principle tells us that the best interpreter of a passage of Scripture is the rest of Scripture. The latter principle tells us that the truth, especially important points of doctrine and practice, can be established in several ways, not just by one isolated text. While every verse of Scripture is inspired of God and therefore authoritative, if someone builds a doctrine on one verse alone and cannot provide additional support in Scripture, it is likely that he is misinterpreting or misapplying that one verse.

This harmonizing explanation suggests that we should start with the historical accounts in the Book of Acts and interpret Matthew 28:19 in light of them, rather than vice versa. In a situation where there are many witnesses, all of whom are trustworthy, we should rely foremost on the many witnesses that use similar language and then harmonize a lone witness that explains the matter from a somewhat different perspective.

In connection with this point, we should note that the apostle Matthew recorded Matthew 28:19 and also stood with Peter when he preached on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14). The question, “**Men and brethren, what shall we do?**” was addressed to all the apostles (Acts 2:37). If Peter had given an incorrect answer when he told the crowd to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38), Matthew would have corrected him. Peter heard Jesus speak to Matthew 28:19, Matthew heard Peter speak Acts 2:38, and only about one or two weeks separated the two events. Clearly, both apostles understood that the two statements harmonized.

Moreover, we must realize that the Gospel of Matthew was not written until long after the occurrence of the events recorded in Acts. Most scholars say Matthew was written about A.D. 62-63 or later. As the accounts in Acts show, prospective converts heard the preaching of the apostles concerning baptism in the name of Jesus before they heard oral traditions about the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:19. And the early

church practiced baptism in the name of Jesus on the authority of the apostles long before they were able to read the words of Jesus as recorded in Matthew. In actual life, then, the church interpreted the words of Matthew 28:19 in light of their new-birth experience and historical practice, not vice versa. When the Gospel of Matthew was distributed, there is no evidence that the church changed its baptismal practice; instead they evidently understood Matthew 28:19 to be consistent with their existing practice.

ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT OF MATTHEW 28:19

Leaving the foregoing considerations aside, let us examine Matthew 28:19 itself to see what the verse teaches. In studying a particular passage of Scripture, we should use the grammatical-historical method, sometimes called the literal method. That is, we should seek to understand the words according to their historical and grammatical usage. In making this determination, several factors are important, including biblical history, biblical geography, biblical culture, setting (immediate background or situation), literary mold (genre), special literary forms (such as figures of speech and parables), context (immediate literary passage), word meanings, grammar (syntax), and the harmony of Scripture. Five of these factors are particularly relevant to our inquiry concerning Matthew 28:19.

GRAMMAR

Matthew 28:19 describes only one name, for *name* is singular and not plural. (If someone thinks it is inappropriate to emphasize this distinction, he should read Galatians 3:16, where Paul placed utmost importance on the singular in Genesis 12:7; 22:17-18). Many commentators have recognized that the singular form is significant here. For example, Matthew Henry wrote, “We are baptized not into the ‘names’ but into the name, of the Father, Son, and Spirit, which plainly intimates that these are one, and their name one.” This understanding accords with Old Testament predictions that God would be revealed and known by one name: “**Therefore my people shall know my name**” (Isaiah 52:6). “**In that day shall there be one LORD, and his name one**” (Zechariah 14:9).

Under any interpretation, the titles of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost describe the one God. What, then, is the one supreme name by which God is revealed today? Some commentators say it is Jehovah, but as chapters 1-4 have shown, the Old Testament name Jehovah has been incorporated into and superseded by the New Testament name Jesus.

Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are not proper names but descriptive titles. Even if they were proper names, this verse specifically describes only one name, not three. We must still ask what is the one proper name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Without doubt the name of the Son is Jesus, for the angel told Joseph, “**And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS**” (Matthew 1:21).

Jesus said, “**I am come in my Father’s name**” (John 5:43). He said to the Father, “**I have manifested thy name...I have declared unto them thy name**” (John 17:6, 26). The Old Testament predicted that the Messiah would declare God’s name (Psalm 22:22; Hebrews 2:12). Jesus received His name by inheritance (Hebrews 1:4). The name that Jesus actually received, came in, manifested, and declared was Jesus. When He performed miracles, it was the name of Jesus that was broadcast from person to person and village to village. In short, the Father has revealed Himself to the world by the name of Jesus.

Jesus also said, “**But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things**” (John 14:26). People receive the Holy Spirit by turning away from sin and turning to Jesus in faith. In short, they receive the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus.

WORD STUDY

A study of the biblical use of the titles of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost underscores the interpretation just given. The Bible teaches emphatically that God is absolutely one (Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 44:6-8, 24; Galatians

3:20), so these titles cannot refer to separate personalities or distinct centers of consciousness in God.

The title of Father refers to God in parental relationship to humanity. The one God is the Father of all humans and all spirits by creation (Malachi 2:10; Hebrews 12:9). In a special way, He is the Father of His chosen people, who have been adopted into His spiritual family (Deuteronomy 32:6; Romans 8:15). And He is uniquely the Father of the only begotten Son of God, for the Spirit of God – not any man – actually caused the baby to be conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary (Matthew 1:18, 20).

The title of the Holy Ghost, or Holy Spirit, refers to the one God in His spiritual essence and action. God is the Holy One (Isaiah 54:5), the only one who is holy in and of Himself. Other holy beings are simply partakers of His holiness (Hebrews 12:10). And God is Spirit (John 4:24). Holiness forms the basis of his non-moral attributes. The title of Holy Spirit, then, simply describes who and what God is. The Bible uses it particularly in reference to God's activity in the world and in human lives, performing works that only a Spirit can do. (See Genesis 1:2; John 3:5; Acts 1:8; 2:1-4). The one God, the Father, is actually the Holy Spirit. (See Matthew 1:18, 20 with Luke 2:49; Matthew 10:20; Romans 8:15-16; I Peter 1:2 with Jude 1).

The title of Son relates to the Incarnation to God manifested in the flesh. As a human, Jesus was called the Son of God because the Spirit of God literally caused Him to be conceived miraculously (Luke 1:35). The Son was begotten on a certain day (Hebrews 1:5). The Son was made of a woman and sent out into the world on a divine mission (Galatians 4:4). The Son died (Romans 5:10). These examples show that the title of Son never refers to deity alone, but always to God as revealed in humanity or to the humanity in which God was revealed. The deity indwelling the Son is actually the Father. (See John 10:30, 38; 14:9-11).

When we understand the biblical definitions of these titles, we readily see that Matthew 28:19 does not speak of three different names that identify three different persons. Rather, it uses three titles of the one God. These three titles do not describe eternal divisions in God's nature; rather, they focus on three roles God assumed for our redemption. In

order to provide the sinless, substitutionary, atoning sacrifice for our sin, God came in flesh in the Son. In begetting the Son and establishing a relationship to humanity, God is the Father. In regenerating and transforming those who believe and obey the gospel, God is the Holy Spirit. Our salvation experience, which includes water baptism, depends upon each of these aspects of God's redemptive work. Jesus is the one name given for our salvation (Acts 4:12).

SETTING

To interpret a scriptural passage, it is important to ascertain its setting or background. Instead of approaching Matthew 28:19 with nineteen hundred years of doctrinal development and attaching modern theological meanings to its words, we should try to understand the verse from the point of view of the original speaker, audience, occasion, and purpose.

Jesus spoke the words of Matthew 28:19 to His disciples, who were devout Jews trained from birth to believe that God is absolutely one (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). He commended this view (Mark 12:28-31; John 4:22) and said nothing to modify it in any way. The terminology and concepts of trinitarianism did not appear until about A.D. 200, so the disciples did not think in those categories. There was no chance of Jesus' words being interpreted in a trinitarian way at the time.

The disciples had long confessed Jesus as the Son of God (Matthew 16:16), and just a few weeks earlier, Jesus had removed any uncertainty or misunderstanding from their minds as to His true identity. Just before His crucifixion, He told them that He was the Father incarnate. When Philip asked to see the Father, Jesus replied, "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father? Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? The words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works" (John 14:9-10). He explained that the

only way they could ever see the Father, who is an invisible Spirit, was to see Him, for He was the revelation of the Father in flesh.

On the same occasion, He explained the identity of the Holy Spirit. “And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you” (John 14:16-18). The Spirit they would soon receive was really not another person; rather, the Spirit would be Jesus in another form. He dwelt with them in flesh, but soon He would come back to dwell in them spiritually.

After the Resurrection, Thomas confessed Jesus as “my Lord and my God” in front of all the apostles, and Jesus commended him for his faith (John 20:28-29).

When Jesus gave the instructions of Matthew 28:19 to His disciples, these lessons were fresh in their minds. They clearly understood that Jesus was the one God of the Old Testament, the one God of their historic faith, revealed in flesh. As to His deity He was the Father, as to His humanity He was the Son, and He would soon come back to dwell in them as the Holy Spirit. It was easy for them to understand that the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost is Jesus.

CONTEXT

In verse 18 Jesus said, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” Verse 19 continues, “Go ye therefore...” Jesus did not mean, “I have all power; therefore, baptize in three different names (or in another name), and I will be with you always.” Rather, He was saying, “I have all power, so baptize in my name, and I will be with you always.” G.R. Beasley-Murray, a Baptist scholar, has explained, “A whole group of exegetes and critics have recognized that the opening declaration of Mt. 28:18 demands a Christological statement to follow it: ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me’ leads us to expect as a consequence, ‘Go and make

disciples *unto Me* among all the nations, baptizing them in *My* name, teaching them to observe all I commanded you.'

Because of the context, many scholars think that verse 19 originally contained a Jesus Name formula that was changed by postapostolic Christianity. They note that the church historian Eusebius, who lived in the 300s, often quoted verse 19 by using the phrase "in my name." He did this many times before the Council of Nicea but never afterwards. Others hold that verse 19 describes the nature of baptism and was not originally interpreted as a baptismal formula.

The second position seems likely. The problem with the textual argument is that all existing manuscripts contain the present wording of Matthew 28:19.

While many scholars see that the context demands a Jesus Name formula, due to their trinitarian preconceptions they fail to see that the existing wording does in fact describe baptism in the name of Jesus. The evidence from Eusebius shows that in early church history it was standard to interpret the words of Matthew 28:19 as a reference to baptism in the name of Jesus. This interpretation apparently began to change when the proponents of trinitarianism, which developed during the 200s and 300s, tried to find scriptural support for their position.

HARMONY OF SCRIPTURE

1. *Parallel passages.* Matthew was not the only writer to record the last instructions of Jesus to His disciples. Both Mark and Luke record equivalent teachings in somewhat different language (Mark 16:15-18; Luke 24:47-49; Acts 1:4-8). Each account records Jesus' command to His disciples to preach the gospel everywhere and His promise that divine presence and power would accompany them. Matthew and Mark both mention baptism, and Luke refers to it indirectly. (Compare Luke 24:47 with Acts 2:38).

Significantly, all three Gospel accounts describe a name in which the disciples are to proclaim the gospel. In each case, including Matthew, the name is singular. In Mark's account, Jesus said, "In my name" (Mark 16:17). Luke's account says repentance and remission of sins would be preached "in his name" (Luke 24:47). To harmonize Matthew with Mark and Luke, we must understand that "the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" is Jesus.

2. *Fulfillment.* In the final analysis, the whole of Scripture is the context for interpreting a particular passage. When we study the Book of Acts and the Epistles, we find that the rest of the New Testament interprets Matthew 28:19 to be a reference to the name of Jesus. The apostles uniformly carried out the instructions of Jesus by baptizing in His name. They were able to integrate those words into His total teaching to a greater extent than we can today, and they had the opportunity to ask for a detailed explanation. Thus they were in the best position to interpret His meaning correctly and to obey His command exactly. Since the apostles understood and fulfilled the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:19 by baptizing everyone in the name of Jesus, we should do the same today.

Significantly, this conclusion holds whether or not the doctrine of the trinity is correct. While some of the points we have made about Matthew 28:19 rest upon a nontrinitarian interpretation of the Bible, the arguments from grammar, context, and harmony of Scripture stand independent of a discussion of the Godhead. Consequently, many trinitarians recognize that the New Testament in general and Matthew 28:19 in particular teach baptism by invoking the name of Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

Matthew 28:19 does not contradict the rest of Scripture; rather, it teaches the same truth as Acts and the Epistles. It describes the name of Jesus as the name in which to baptize. The proper way to understand, obey, and fulfill Matthew 28:19 is to follow the example of the apostles, the ones to whom Jesus personally gave the command. In short, we are not merely

to repeat the words of Matthew 28:19 at baptism, but we are to invoke the name it describes – the name of Jesus.