

THE
BAPTISMAL
FORMULA OF THE
EARLY CHURCH;
A Historical Theological Survey

ROBERT G. MILLS

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None of the known writers who are quoted below are Apostolic (most are Trinitarians) yet it's interesting to note that they all report, concluded or were resigned to the fact that baptism in the name of Jesus Christ was the earliest and only formula according to the Scriptures. What's also interesting is that with only one exception most of these writers fail to grasp the emphasis on the singular NAME that Matthew 28:19 refers to. Even though some mentioned that this verse may have been added later to support "ecclesiastical practice", they still miss the transcendent importance of the singular name due to their dogmatic Trinitarian view of the Godhead. I believe for them to concede that the name of Jesus Christ identifies all three so called persons of the Trinity (see John 5:43, Matthew 1:21, John 14:26) would undoubtedly lead them towards the apostolic view of God. Hence, they ignore it!

The first Christian sermon (in Acts 2) closed, we are told, with a call to repent and be baptized. These terms, or their equivalents, recur repeatedly in the stories of conversions in the Acts of the Apostles (2:38, 41; 8:12f.; 16:14f., 33f., 18:8; 19:2-5; 22:16), thus making baptism a decisive step that publicly associated the new convert with his or her fellow believers as a open profession. In the name of Jesus as a formula suggests a passing under the lordship of Jesus Christ, whose name (or authority) was

invoked in the rite. At a later time the baptism was administered in the name of the Trinity (Matt. 28:19-20, Didache 7:1, 3).

Page 101

The Dictionary of Bible and Religion

William H. Gentz

General editor

Published by Abingdon Press

1986

It has been customary to trace the institution of the practice (baptism) to the words of Christ recorded in Matthew 28:19. But the authenticity of this passage has been challenged on historical as well as textual grounds. It must be acknowledged that the formula of the threefold name which is enjoined, does not appear to have been employed by the primitive church, which, so far as our information goes, baptized in or into the name of Jesus (or Jesus Christ or the Lord Jesus: Ac 2:38, 8:16, 10:48, 19:5; cf. 1 Cor 1:13. 15) without reference to the Father or the Spirit

The conditions antecedent to baptism are plainly set forth in Acts, viz. repentance and profession of faith in Jesus as Messiah or as the Lord, following on the preaching of the word. The method of administration was baptizing with water in or into the name of Jesus. That baptism was in the name of Jesus signifies that it took place for the purpose or sealing the new

relationship of belonging to, being committed to, His Personality.

Page 83

Dictionary of The Bible

Edited by

James Hastings, D.D

Charles Scribner's Sons

1909

Luke's understanding of Christian baptism appears in Acts 2:38. Baptism is conversion-baptism; it is administered in the name of Jesus Christ, i.e. in relation to Jesus Christ and with the use of his name, so that the baptized calls on the name of Christ (Acts 22:16) even as the name is called over him, signifying to who he belongs (cf. Jas.2:7);.

Page 146

The New International Dictionary of

New Testament Theology

by Zondervan Corp.

1975

Unlike John's baptism, Christian baptism was from the first administered in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5). This phrase probably indicates either that the one who is baptized saw him acting as a representative of the exalted Jesus (cf. particularly

3:6, 16 and 4:10 with 9:34), or that the baptisand saw his baptism as his act of commitment to discipleship of Jesus...

The only certain references to baptism in Paul are Rom.6:4; 1 Cor.1:13-17; 15:29; Eph. 4:5; and Col 2:12. The clearest of these is 1 Cor. 1:13-17, where Paul obviously takes it for granted that baptism was performed in (eis) the name of Jesus. Here he probably uses a formula familiar in accountancy of the time, where in/into the name of meant to the account of. That is baptism was seen as a deed of transfer, an act whereby the baptism and handed himself over to be property or disciple of the one named.

Page 173

The Illustrated Bible Dictionary

Part 1

by Intervarsity Press

Tyndale House Publishers

1980

The formula of Christian baptism, in the mode that prevailed, is given in Mt. 28:19; I baptize you in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. But it is curious that the words are not given in any description of the Christian baptism until the time of Justin Martyr. (note: Justin Martyr lived from approximately 100-165 A.D)

In every account of the performance the rite in apostolic times a much shorter formula is in use. The three thousand believers were baptized on the day of Pentecost in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38); and the same formula was used at the baptism of Cornelius and those who were with him (10:48). Indeed it would appear to have been the usual one, from Paul's question to the Corinthians: Were you baptized into the name of Paul? (1 Cor. 1:13). The Samaritans were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 8:16); and the same formula (a common one in acts of devotion) was used in the case of the disciples at Ephesus.

B. Was the Trinitarian Formula Used in NT Times?
No record of such use can be discovered in the Acts or the Epistles of the apostles. The baptisms recorded in the NT after Pentecost are administered in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38), in the name of the Lord Jesus (8:16), into Christ (Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27).

From Pages 421 and 425

The International Standard Bible

Encyclopedia

Volume One

Published by Eerdmans Publishing Company.

1979.

It is relatively certain that in the early Church one

commonly referred to baptism as being done into the name of the Lord Jesus or something similar.

In Acts, Luke reveals that into the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 8:16; 19:5) was the formula that he had learned.

Page 586

The Anchor Bible Dictionary

Vol. One, 1st Edition

Published by Doubleday Press

1992

With regard to the formula used for Baptism in the early Church, there is the difficulty that although Matthew (28:19) speaks of the Trinitarian formula, which is now used, the Acts of the Apostles (2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5) and Paul (1 Cor 1:13; 6:11; Gal 3:27; Rom 6:3) speak only of Baptism in the name of Jesus.

Though there is no clear proof that this phrase was really used as a liturgical formula, the possibility of its being used thus even as late as the 3rd century cannot be excluded (Stenzel 88-93). The validity of Baptism in the name of Jesus was still accepted in the age of scholasticism. An explicit reference to the Trinitarian formula of Baptism cannot be found in the first centuries.

Page 61-62

The New Catholic Encyclopedia

2nd Edition

Published by Gale Group Inc.

2003

In nine instances Luke represents baptism as the expected response to hearing and receiving the gospel all summarized succinctly but clearly in baptism in or into the name of Jesus as Christ, Lord, Son of God (8:37). In the name implied Jesus authority for the rite; into the name (8:16; 19:5) indicated passing into Jesus ownership, as one redeemed. James 2:7 suggests an invocation of Jesus (to be present?).

Page 51

Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology

Published by Baker Books

1996

The command of the Master as reported in Mt 28:19 is to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Yet in Acts we read of baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus (8:16; 19:5) and in the name of Jesus Christ

(Fr. J.A.) Jungmann says that an explicit reference to the Trinitarian formula cannot be found in the first

centuries. He dismisses The Didache, VII, 1 as it merely repeats Mt 28:19.

(Fr. J.) Crehan summed up his findings on the subject as follows; Jesus Christ so occupied the thoughts of the early Christians and that of the apostles in chief, that to confess him was enough for baptism in the earliest times...

Page 47

Trinitas;

A Theological Encyclopedia of the Holy Trinity

By Micheal O'Carrol

Published by Michael Glazer, Inc

1987

(Frederick) Conybeare has tried to prove that the original text of Matt. xxviii, 9 did not contain the baptismal command or the Trinitarian formula, which were interpolated, according to him, at the beginning of the third century. But since the investigations of (Eduard) Riggenbach, the ordinary reading may be considered the original.

Jesus, however, can not have given his disciples this Trinitarian order of baptism after his resurrection; for the New Testament knows only baptism in the name of Jesus (Acts ii, 38; viii, 16; xix, 5; Gal. iii, 27; Rom. vi, 3; I Cor. i, 13-15), which still occurs even in

the second and third centuries, while the Trinitarian formula occurs only in Matt. xxviii, 19 and then only again Didache vii, 1 and Justin, Apol., i, 61. It is unthinkable that the Apostolic Church thus disobeyed the express command of the Lord, which it otherwise considered the highest authority.

Page 435

The New Schaff-Herzog

Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge

(Vol. One)

Baker Book House

1954

Christian baptism is the initiatory rite of the religion of the Lord Jesus Christ; the testimony of the New Testament and the history of the Christian church establish that as a fact beyond the shadow of a doubt.

For some eighteen hundred years that church in its various branches has administered the rite usually with the use of the words, I baptize thee (or as in the Greek Orthodox Church,—is baptized) in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. But those words were never used in baptism by the original apostles, or by the Church during the early days of its existence, according to the record of the Acts of the Apostles and the apostolic Epistles of the New Testament.

According to that record, in the earliest manuscript readings and versions, all baptisms of those early days were commanded to be, or stated to have been, performed in, or with the invocation of, the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

As already noted, ever since, or since shortly after, the close of the apostolic age (about 100 A.D) the Christian church has used the words, the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in baptism, while the Church of the apostolic age used the name of the Lord Jesus Christ in the same rite, according to the Acts and the apostolic Epistles.

It is interesting to note that the first record of the use of the words of the so-called baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19 is found, not in the New Testament, but in an uninspired document, however much truth it may contain.

Pages 61, 62-63, 65

A Remarkable Biblical Discovery or

The Name Of God According to the Scriptures

(3rd Edition)

by William Phillips Hall

American Tract Society

1929

There are about 7 records of water baptism in the

book of Acts and 7 records in the epistles to water baptism. Every record speaks of water baptism as being into the name of the Lord, or Lord Jesus, or Jesus Christ.

There is no record in Acts or the Epistles of the disciples merely quoting the command of Matthew 28:19. No one fulfills a command by quoting it. The disciples did not quote the command, they obeyed it. The command of Jesus is to baptize into the name (not Names) of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. This is the name of the Godhead bodily and it finds its glorious fulfillment in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Pages 33-34

The Book of Acts

by Kevin J. Conner

City Bible Publishing

1992

In Acts and the epistles, baptism is said to have been in or on the name of Christ, or as into Christ

The first record of their use in baptism (the words of Christ in Matt 28:19) is in the Teaching of the Apostles (approximately A.D. 100).

Page 36

Christianity in the Apostolic Age

1955 edition

By George T. Purves

Baker Book House

1900

The trinitarian formula and trine immersion were not uniformly used from the beginning, nor did they always go together. The Teaching of the Apostles, indeed, prescribes baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, but on the next page speaks of those who have been baptized in the name of the Lord the normal formula of the New Testament. In the 3rd century baptism in the name of Christ was still so widespread that Pope Stephen, in opposition to Cyprian of Carthage, declared it to be valid.

Page 365

The Encyclopaedia Britannica

11th Edition Vol. 3

The Encyclopaedia Britannica Company

1910

With the early disciples generally baptism was in the name of Jesus Christ. There is no mention of baptism in the name of the Trinity in the New Testament, except in the command attributed to Christ in Matt. 28:19

The Christian leaders of the third century retained the recognition of the earlier form, and, in Rome at least, baptism in the name of Christ was deemed valid, if irregular, certainly from the time of Bishop Stephen (254-257).

To Christian thought at the beginning of the second century the Holy Spirit was differentiated from Christ, but was classed like Him, with God. This appears in the Trinitarian baptismal formula, which was displacing the older baptism in the name of Christ. Trinitarian formulae were frequently in use by the close of the first and beginning of the second century.

Pages 95 and 57-58

A History of the Christian Church

1952 edition

By Williston Walker

Charles Scribner's Sons

1918

The risen Jesus is represented as commanding the disciples to undertake the conversion of Gentiles and their baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That this verse is not historical but a late tradition, intended to support ecclesiastical practice, is shown by the absence of the trine formula of baptism in Acts and the Epistles...

Page 86

*Landmarks in the History of
Early Christianity*

Kirsopp Lake

MacMillan and Company Ltd

1920

There is no doubt that the writer of Acts regarded baptism as the normal means of entry into the Christian Church. There is also no doubt that he represents an early stage of Christian practice in which baptism was in the name of the Lord Jesus (or of Jesus Christ) not in the triadic formula (Acts 2:38, 8:16, 10:48, 19:5).

Page 29

Dictionary of the Apostolic Church

Volume 1

Edited by James Hastings

Published by Charles Scribner's Sons

1919

It (baptism) was unequivocally done in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins (Acts 2:38). Jesus as a person was at the center of the liturgical act. From Jesus, baptism got its supernatural efficacy: forgiveness of sins and entry into the community of the faithful.

Page 16

The Early Church

An Abridgment of History of the Church

Volume 1

Edited by Hubert Jedin

Crossroad Publishing Company

1993

The early church, in practicing baptism, did so on the authority of her risen Lord (Mt 28.19; cf. Mk 16:16). In Acts baptism is carried out in the name of Jesus (Acts 8.16; 19.5). Baptism in the name of Christ is also presupposed by 1 Cor 1.13.15. Being baptized in Christ's name means that the baptized person now belongs to Christ. Since our earliest New Testament sources speak of baptism in the name of Jesus, it may be that the developed Trinitarian formula of Mt 28.19 represents a reading back of the Church's later liturgical practice into the time of the resurrection appearances.

Page 17

The Theology of Baptism

By Lorna Brockett

Fides Publishers

1971

Persons were baptized at first in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38,10:48) or in the name of the

Lord Jesus (Acts 8:16, 19:5). Afterwards, with the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, they were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost (cp. Justin Martyr, Apol.i.61).

Page 53

An Encyclopaedia of Religions

By Maurice A. Canney

Gale Research Company

1970 reprint of the 1921 Edition

Jesus himself conducted a baptismal rite through his disciples, a baptism which cannot be assimilated to John's nor to that of the spirit, but one that was in the name of Jesus.

From its earliest days the church baptized in the name of Jesus, that is, as a way of one's belonging to Jesus through the Lord's power; she understood the importance of this ministry of hers by tracing it back to a command of the Risen One.

Page 108-109

Dictionary of the New Testament

By Xavier Leon-Dufour

Translated by

Terrence Prendergast

Harper & Row Publishers

It seems clear from the narrative of Acts that early Christian baptism was not in the Threefold Name, but either in the name of Jesus Christ or into the name of the Lord Jesus. This agrees with the wording of two Pauline passages where the Apostle speaks of Christians being baptized into Christ or into Christ Jesus. This particular argument of course does not claim that Jesus could not have instituted baptism in any form, but only that it is unlikely that he enjoined baptism in the Threefold Name.

Page 107

The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism

By W.F. Flemington, M.A.

S.P.C.K

1964

The primitive formula that we come across in Acts, linking the baptismal rite with an invocation of the name of Jesus (cf. Acts 2:38, 8:16; 10:48; 19:5; 22:16), lies behind two passages in the first epistle to the Corinthians (v.13). Here Paul indirectly suggests that baptism was conferred in the name of Jesus, and this is something which he does say quite unambiguously when he talks about the holiness given by baptism: You were washed; you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (6:11). This admittedly a reference to a primitive liturgical formula, but it was a formula which for St.Paul,

expressed a profound reality—the fact that the baptized now belonged to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Page 190

Baptism in the New Testament

A Symposium

Translated by David Askew

Helicon

1964

Baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus whatever else it came to imply, was in the earliest time a baptism for the sake of the Lord Jesus and therefore in submission to Him as Lord and King. The name of the Lord Jesus is called over the baptized. He therefore dedicates himself to the Lord and is appropriated for Him; since this is done by the command of the Lord, and act performed on His behalf, we must view it as an appropriation by Him.

Page 101-102

Baptism in the New Testament

By G.R. Beasley-Murray

MacMillan and Company Ltd

1963

Trine immersion may have been based on the command to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). That phrase is

frequently attested in the second century as a formula accompanying baptism.

Page 161

Encyclopedia of Early Christianity

2nd Edition

Editor Everett Ferguson

Garland Publishing, Inc.

1998

At first the rite (baptism) seems to have been performed simply in the name of Christ, but before the close of the first century the Trinitarian formula had come into use, as attested in Matt. 28:19.

An Encyclopedia of Religion

Edited by Vergilius Ferm

The Philosophical Library

1945