

The Trinity Verses: Matthew 28:18 – 19

by Steve Katsaras (stevekatsaras@hotmail.com)

Matthew 28:19

En. "...make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (NAS)

Gr. "...μαθητευσατε παντα τα εθνη, βαπτιζοντες αυτους εις το ονομα του πατρος και του υιου και του αγιου πνευματος" (BGT)

This text has widely come to be known as the *Trinitarian baptismal formula* - baptism into the threefold name. This is perhaps the strongest text found in the Bible that supposedly proves that God is a plurality of persons, spoken directly by Jesus himself!

Is this assertion true?

Is Jesus advocating 3 divine persons within the one essence of God by introducing this formula?

The following is a study of the text using a range of methods to highlight the weight of evidence for/against each argument.

Q: Does the Bible elsewhere indicate baptism in the threefold name? No.

Q: Does the Bible elsewhere indicate baptism in a one-fold name? Yes - the name of Jesus!

Act 2:38, "...be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ..."

Act 8:16, "...been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus."

Act 10:48, "...be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ."

It seems the apostolic practice of baptism was performed in one name, not a threefold name.

This is further suggested in Paul's argument of division/baptism to the Corinthians...

1 Cor 1:13, "...were you baptized in the name of Paul?"

1 Cor 1:15, "...were baptized in my name."

Paul is indicating that believers baptism did not happen in *his* (one and only) name - since his name is only one (not threefold), so the Christian baptism was practiced in the one name of Jesus Christ, not in the threefold name (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).

Q: Can the typology of baptism reveal whether the baptismal name is one-fold or threefold? Yes, it can.

Rom 6:3, "...were baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death?"

Rom 6:4, "...we have been buried with him through baptism into death..."

Col 2:12, "...having been buried with him baptism..."

It was Jesus who died, was buried and rose again. God the Father and the Holy Spirit did not experience any of this. Hence, Paul states that believers baptism is a way for a repentant sinner to identify himself/herself in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus - thus the baptismal name is one-fold (Jesus), not threefold (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).

Q: Can the consequence of baptism reveal whether the baptismal name is one-fold or threefold? Yes it can.

Gal 3:27, "...were baptized into Christ have put on Christ."

The consequence of believers baptism is that now the repentant sinner seeks to model out in their lifestyle the one in whom they identified with, ala the baptismal name. Christians are called to "put on the Lord Jesus" - **Rom 13:14**, thus indicating that the baptismal name is one-fold, not threefold (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).

Q: Is there anything else in the Bible analogous to water baptism in the threefold name? No.

Q: Is there anything else in the Bible analogous to water baptism in the one-fold name of Jesus? Yes.

Joh 3:18, "...he has not believed in the name of the only begotten..."

Faith is derived from the one-fold name (Jesus), not the threefold name (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).

Joh 14:26, "...the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name..."

Baptism of the Spirit was promised to be received in the one-fold name (Jesus), not the threefold name (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).

Joh 20:31, "...you may have life in his name"

Eternal life is promised to those believing in the one-fold name (Jesus), not the threefold name (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).

Act 3:6, "...the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene - walk"

Act 3:16, "...basis of faith in his name, it is the name of Jesus..."

Healing was accomplished by faith in the one-fold name (Jesus), not the threefold name (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).

Act 4:12, "...there is no other name under heaven...by which we must be saved"

Salvation is received in the one-fold name (Jesus), not the threefold name (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).

Act 4:18, "...not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus"

Evangelism was carried out in the one-fold name (Jesus), not the threefold name (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).

Act 4:30, "...signs and wonders take place through the name of your holy servant Jesus"

Miracles were performed in the one-fold name (Jesus), not the threefold name (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).

Eph 5:20, "...always giving thanks...in the name of our lord Jesus Christ..."

Prayers were to be done in the one-fold name (Jesus), not the threefold name (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).

Col 3:17, "...whatever you do...do all in the name of the Lord Jesus..."

This the Christian principle - whatever you say or do (that must also include water baptism), right?

Paul affirms that powerfully by comparing water baptism in the one-fold name (Jesus) with the baptism of John the Baptist.

Act 19:3 - 5

v3 - the disciples of John were baptized into John's baptism

v5 - the disciples then were re-baptized into Jesus' baptism

The comparison suggests a one-fold name (Jesus), not a threefold name (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).

Up until this point, it seems the corpus of the NT indicates doing all things in the one-fold name of Jesus, not in the threefold name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It seems that the Bible does not teach the threefold name, for the apostles in the book of Acts did all things in the name of Jesus, not in the Trinitarian baptismal formula.

So what is to be done with **Matt 28:19**? How are we to interpret it? How are we to understand it?

Let's examine the text grammatically...

En. "...make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit"

Gr. "...μαθητευσατε παντα τα εθνη, βαπτιζοντες αυτους εις το ονομα του πατρος και του υιου και του αγιου πνευματος"

Let's explore some arguments that have been put forth in an attempt to understand this complicate text...

- The word name (ονομα) is singular, not plural (ονοματα), which stresses one name – Jesus
- The word name (ονομα) is singular, with three nouns and the conjunction and (και), implies 3 names

The 2nd point is a more accurate assessment of the text.

The baptismal formula grammatically seems to imply three names, not one name.

"name (noun) of the Father (noun) and (conjunction) the Son (noun) and (conjunction) the Holy Spirit (noun)"

Let's explore a sentence in the English language...

"Q: what is the name (noun) of your father (noun) and (conjunction) your mother (noun)?"

"A: my father's name is John and my mother's name is Vicki"

By the use of the conjunction and (καί), the nouns are connected together with the noun name (ονομα). Grammatically speaking, the above question is really asking 2 names: the name of the father and the name of the mother. So is the statement in **Matt 28:19**. This statement is really asking for 3 different names: the name of the Father, the name of the Son and the name of the Holy Spirit. It is grammatically so, because it implies 3 persons - and each person is supposed to have a name!

The problem is - the NT is silent regarding the threefold name (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).

It is at this point that we have to begin to ask some pretty serious questions.

Q: What if the Trinitarian baptismal formula really is not supposed to be in the Bible?

Q: What if the Trinitarian baptismal formula is a latter addition into the text?

Let's explore the Greek manuscripts, especially the earliest known, surviving ones to-date...

- Codex Alexandrinus (400 – 440)
- Codex Sinaiticus (330 – 360)
- Codex Vaticanus (325 - 350)

It is universally agreed that every single Greek manuscript, including the earliest ones to date, all contain within them the Trinitarian baptismal formula. How about Greek manuscripts earlier than the Codex Vaticanus that include the ending of Matthew's gospel? The only Greek manuscripts earlier than the Codex Vaticanus are really just fragments of papyrus that contain a sentence here, a paragraph there of the NT - 96 papyrus fragments have been found that date back into the 2nd century - unfortunately none of them contain Matt 28:19!

What happened?

In 303, Roman Emperor Diocletian unleashed persecution against Christians throughout the empire. In addition, he ordered the destruction of all the Christian Scriptures. In Caesarea at that time, existed a theological school and library, where some of the great church fathers came to study there. Its theological library won the reputation of having the most extensive ecclesiastical library, containing more than 30,000 manuscripts! Under the persecution of Diocletian, some of this library was destroyed - but enough survived to continue to transmit the NT!

Eusebius of Caesarea (263 - 339) was a Roman historian, biblical scholar and Christian polemicist. He became the bishop of Caesarea in 314. Regarding the persecution of 303, Eusebius writes...

"I saw with mine own eyes the houses of prayer thrown down and razed to their foundations and the inspired and sacred Scriptures consigned to the fire in the open market place" - Ecclesiastical History, Book 8, Chapter 2.

Why would these earlier manuscripts be of importance? Cause all the current surviving Greek manuscripts to-date are copies printed **post** the Council of Nicea (325)! It was at that Council where the Trinitarian formula began to officially shape the mind of the Christian church!

What may we be postulating then?

Q: Is it possible that Matt 28:19 may have been altered post-Nicea to include the Trinitarian baptismal formula?

Q: Is it possible that Matt 28:19 pre-Nicea may have been different from what is preserved in post-Nicene manuscripts?

Q: If this is true, how are we to support this, without any manuscript evidence?

Without manuscript evidence, one can only turn to patristic writings that predate Nicea (325) and see how, if any, church father, actually used quotations of Matt 28:19. With that, we'll examine some of the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea.

"...but the rest of the apostles, who had been incessantly plotted against with a view to their destruction, and had been driven out of the land of Judea, went unto all nations to preach the gospel, relying upon the power of Christ, who had said to them, 'Go ye, and make disciples of all nations in my name'" - Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapter 5.

"...what king or prince in any age of the world, what philosopher, legislator, or prophet, in civilized or barbarous lands, has attained so great a height of excellence, I say not after death, but while living still, and full of mighty power, as to fill the ears and tongues of all mankind with the praises of his name? Surely none save our only Saviour has done this, when, after his victory over death, he spoke the word to his followers, and fulfilled it by the event, saying to them, 'Go ye, and make disciples of all nations in my name'" - Oration in Praise of Emperor Constantine, Chapter 16, Section 8.

"All nations are invited to come consider the awe-inspiring deeds, which God performed in behalf of his people, in Egypt, in the Red Sea, in the Jordan; and to reflect that he who could confute his enemies of old, is still powerful against them. Hence we should rejoice in him, who by his power endureth forever. We should understand these words of that saying of Christ: 'All power is given to me in heaven and on earth. Going make disciples of all the nations in my name.' Wherefore Aquila translates it: 'who exercises authority in his power forever' - Commentary of Psalms (Psa 65:5 - 6).

"That Christ's voice was endowed with power is evident from his deeds; for when he said to his disciples: 'Come, follow me, and I shall make you fishers of men,' he actually fulfilled this promise by his power; and again when he commanded them saying: 'Going make disciples of all the nations in my name,' he manifested his power in very deed" - Commentary of Psalms (Psa 67:34).

"From the preceding verse we learn that the earth shook and trembled. This was realized when Christ entered Jerusalem, and the entire city was in consternation; also when the nations of the world trembled upon hearing the words of the Gospel from the lips of the Apostles. How should we understand the prophet when he says that Christ's way is in the sea, and his paths in many waters, and his footsteps will not be known? This passage receives light from his promise to his disciples: 'Going make disciples of all nations in my name'" - Commentary of Psalms (Psa. 76:20).

"...this command seems to be given to the disciples of our Saviour. Since they are messengers of good tidings, they are called messengers, and light ones, to distinguish them from the apostles of the Jews. Wherefore the prophet addresses these messengers of good tidings thus: you disciples of Christ, go as the Saviour himself has commanded you: 'Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel', and 'Going make disciples of all nations in my name'" - Commentary on Isaiah (Isa 18:2).

"...for he who said to them, 'make disciples of all nations in my name' also forbade them to establish churches in one and the same place" - Commentary on Isaiah (Isa 34:16).

It seems in the works of Eusebius, in his writings that predate Nicea (Ecclesiastical History, Oration in Praise of Emperor Constantine, Commentary of Psalms, Commentary on Isaiah, etc...) **his quotation of Matt 28:19 seems to miss the threefold name in exchange of the term "my name" (whom the mouth of the speaker is Jesus Christ)!**

One historian who read all the works of Eusebius, published the following statistic regarding how many times he quotes Matt 28:19 in his writings: 17 times he renders Matt 28:19 as "in my name" not the Trinitarian baptismal formula!

Q: Would the writings of Eusebius be a faithful attestation to earlier, lost manuscripts regarding Matt 28:19?

A: Consider the following...

- Eusebius lived in Caesarea and had access to the theological library and 30,000 manuscripts of the biblical canon
- In this library existed an Aramaic version of Matthew's gospel (now lost) that may have rendered Matt 28:19 differently

It is now highly probable that Eusebius' quotation of Matt 28:19 from earlier, 2nd century manuscripts, may have been vastly different from what is now a somewhat modified version, post-Nicea. How can we be sure of that? One need only to examine one of Eusebius' post-Nicene writings...

"...believing each of these to be and to exist, the Father truly Father, and the Son truly Son, and the Holy Ghost truly Holy Ghost, as also our Lord, sending forth His disciples for the preaching, said 'Go teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost'" - Letter to Caesarea.

Post-Nicea, in the latter part of his life, Eusebius quotes Matt 28:19 in his writings with the Trinitarian baptismal formula, only 3 times. Some historians suggest that the phrase "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" may have been used as a battle-cry by the orthodox against the adherents of those who were declining to include the Spirit in a trinity of persons as co-equal, con-substantial and co-eternal with the Father and the Son. It is quite possible now that this Trinitarian baptismal formula may have made its way into the textual copying process by scribes.

Q: What does this mean regarding Matt 28:19?

A: This verse may have been altered. Let's explore how it may have looked like pre/post Nicea.

"...make disciples of all nations, baptizing in my name..." - Pre Nicea

"...make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" - Post Nicea

Q: Which of the 2 would fit the NT corpus better? The 1st or the 2nd?

A: The 1st.

Q: Would the context of the ending of Matthew work with Matt 28:19, pre Nicea? Yes. Let's explore...

Matt 28:18, "...all authority has been **given to me**..."

Matt 28:19, "...baptizing them in **my name**..."

Matt 28:20, "...to observe all that **I commanded**..."

Note the words of Jesus - words like me (v18), I (v20) - singular personal pronouns; if you insert my name (v19) in place of the Trinitarian baptismal formula, it harmonizes the context perfectly and the obedience of the apostles in the remainder of the NT is accurately portrayed!

Let's further our witness by including quotations from other leading scholars...

"The command to baptize into the threefold name is a late doctrinal expansion. Instead of the words, 'baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost' we should probably read simply-'into my name.'" - Peake's Bible Commentary, Page 723.

"The command to baptize in Matthew 28:19 is thought to show the influence of a developed doctrine of God verging on Trinitarianism. Early baptism was in the name of Christ. The association of this Trinitarian conception with baptism suggest that baptism itself was felt to be an experience with a Trinitarian reference." - Theological Workbook of the Bible, Page 29.

"This text is dismissed almost contemptuously as being 'no word of the Lord.'" Adolf Harnack, History of Dogma.

Conclusion

It is highly probable that, although all current surviving Greek manuscripts of today render Matt 28:19 as the Trinitarian baptismal formula, it seems to be a later addition post the Council of Nicea of 325. From patristic writing pre the Council of Nicea, the use of Matt 28:19 in their writings seems to indicate, not a Trinitarian formula, but rather a "Jesus only" formula. No threefold name can be found in pre-Nicea writings from the church fathers in their quotation of Matt 28:19. It seems that the baptismal formula "in my name" (Jesus Christ) was commonly used, to suggest the original authenticity of earlier manuscripts and the real words spoken by the mouth of our lord - hence harmonizing his words with the apostolic actions, in regards to believers baptism.

This, I feel, warrants enough evidence to suggest that Matt 28:19 never intended to speak of God as plurality of persons, nor of a Trinity. Baptism was a believers identification in the cross of Jesus. Perhaps an correction needs to take place back in this verse to harmonize the rest of the NT.