

## **WATER BAPTISM IN MATTHEW 28:19 IN NEW TESTAMENT PRACTICE**

Water Baptism has long been incorrectly taught as being symbolic of Christ. The purpose of water baptism is to literally bury one's old life, the life before salvation, into the death of Christ. This is when the old man dies from sin. Howbeit, when a person dies physically, the dead body is buried below the ground. The ground in this sense is the water. Jesus is the one who died for our sins and washes them away with the water in His name. The person comes out of the water into a new life in Christ rendering both repentance and Water Baptism inseparable.

Matthew wrote the Gospel bearing his name within a firmly monotheistic framework shaped by the Hebrew Scriptures. Any interpretation of Matthew 28:19 must therefore be consistent with the Old Testament's uncompromising affirmation of the one inseparable God and Matthew's own Jewish theological worldview. He recorded Jesus's post-resurrection commission in these words: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19, KJV). This statement does not represent a departure from Israel's confession of one God nor does it introduce an ontological redefinition of God into three separate divine persons. <sup>[1]</sup>

The foundational confession of Israel, articulated in the Shema "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deu 6:4) remained central to Jewish faith in the first century and was never abandoned by Jesus or His apostles. The singular term "name" (ὄνομα), rather than a plural construction, is of particular exegetical significance. Within Jewish thought, "name" often denotes revealed identity, authority, and presence rather than verbal designation. <sup>[2]</sup> The phrase does not necessitate a metaphysical dissection of divine ontology but functions as a confessional and covenantal marker within the act of disciple-making.

The immediate context of Matthew 28 does not suggest that Jesus is offering a systematic exposition of the internal constitution of God. The focus is missional and practical: the expansion of the community of disciples through teaching and baptism under divine authority.

Matthew faithfully records Jesus's words and does not articulate a philosophical doctrine of God. Attempts to read later ontological formulations directly into this verse risk anachronism.

Additionally, a monotheist Jew would not have intended his Gospel to contradict the nation's foundational doctrine and understanding of God in the only way He revealed Himself to Israel in the OT. We need to be careful how all interpretations of God in 28:19 must be undertaken with sensitivity to Israel's monotheistic framework and to the literary, theological, and historical context in which the Gospel was written.

The key grammatical observation is that Jesus commands baptism "in the name" (singular), not "in the names" (plural). This linguistic detail is significant whereas the singular "name" encompasses Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, indicating not three distinct names, persons, or metaphorical evolution in the ontological being of God and His nature, but a single divine name that fully reveals God's redemptive activity. Within the narrative and theological framework of the apostles in the *Acts of the Apostles*, the revealed name is Jesus.

In praxis, the apostles did not merely recite Jesus's words but enacted and obeyed them. In every recorded instance of Christian water baptism throughout the NT, baptism is administered explicitly in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5; 22:16).<sup>[3]</sup> This consistent apostolic practice demonstrates how the earliest church understood and obeyed Jesus' command in Matthew 28:19. This instruction was delivered in the presence of all the apostles including Matthew, without recorded objection or correction, indicating a unified apostolic practice rather than isolated deviation.

Scripture must be allowed to interpret Scripture, and any attempts to isolate Matthew 28:19 from the narrative and theological witness of Acts risks proof-texting and distorting the intent of the biblical authors. When read canonically, the baptismal command of Matthew finds its interpretive fulfillment in obedience rather than contradiction where someone could accuse Matthew of saying one thing, then Peter and Paul (Acts 19:1–4) are saying something completely different.

This pattern reveals a broader NT truth, that Jesus Christ is the one God revealed in the flesh (John 1:1, 14; 1 Tim 3:16). The Father is revealed through the Son, and the Holy Spirit proceeds in the name and authority of Jesus (John 14:26). To baptize in the name of Jesus is to baptize into the fullness of God's self-revelation, not to diminish the Father or the Spirit, but to confess the unity of God's redemptive work. Therefore, the baptismal practice in *the Acts of the Apostles* strongly suggests that the apostles understood the singular "name" of Matthew 28:19 to be concretely identified as Jesus Christ.

Such an interpretation aligns with the broader NT witness that presents Jesus as the definitive self-revelation of the one God. Paul writes that "in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9). And John affirms that the Son uniquely makes the Father known (John 1:18; 14:7). Within this NT framework, "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit" function not as competing centers of identity but as revelatory expressions of the one divine name made known in Christ Jesus.

Furthermore, Paul explains that believers are buried with Christ through baptism into death so that they may walk in a newness of life (Rom 6:4). Immersion in water signifies the burial of the old life, while emergence from the water signifies resurrection into a new life empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is why the invocation of Jesus's name in water baptism is essential: it is through His death and resurrection that salvation is accomplished (Rom 6:5).

Theologically, repentance and baptism are inseparable elements of the NT proclamation of salvation. Repentance (μετάνοια) involves a decisive turning of the whole person toward God, marked by a reorientation of life and allegiance to His will. Baptism, in turn, is not presented merely as symbolic but as participatory incorporation into the death and resurrection of Christ. It brings the person being baptized into Christ's saving work and lordship.

While drawing an analogy with the flood narrative in his first epistle, Peter also affirmed the salvific significance of water baptism in stating that "baptism now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body,

but as an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 3:21). This does not suggest a mechanical or magical view of baptism, but emphasizes that it is effective because it is grounded in Christ’s resurrection and received in faith and repentance.

Similarly, Paul’s typological reading of Israel’s passage through the sea as a “baptism into Moses” (1 Cor 10:2) further situates Christian baptism within the continuity of God’s saving actions across covenants. Collectively, these texts demonstrate that repentance, baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, and reception of the Holy Spirit form a unified response to the Gospel. This revelation does not emerge from isolated proof-texts but from the consistent teaching and practice of Jesus and His apostles.

Matthew 28:19, rightly understood, stands in full harmony with the Shema, the apostolic preaching in Acts, and the broader theological witness of the NT. It does not negate the richness of the Father–Son–Spirit language but understands it through the unified revelation of God in Christ. The New Testament consistently locates salvation, forgiveness, and new life “in Christ,” and baptism functions as the embodied confession of that reality.

For readers who remain unconvinced by NT evidence alone, it is important to note that the Catholic Church confessed that water baptism was always done in the name of Jesus Christ, and they later changed it to say in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. <sup>[4]</sup> As the Church’s doctrinal reflection on the nature of God developed during the second and third centuries, culminating in formal Trinitarian articulation, the baptismal formula gradually standardized into the triadic wording drawn from Matthew 28:19. [3]

Catholic liturgical scholarship itself recognizes that the Trinitarian baptismal formula reflects a later ecclesial and theological consolidation rather than an immediately uniform apostolic practice by the apostles of Christ.<sup>[5]</sup> This historical development does not negate Matthew 28:19 but demonstrates that the early Church interpreted and implemented Jesus’s command through a

Christological lens centered on the revealed name and authority of Jesus Christ.

This shifting from baptism explicitly “in the name of Jesus Christ” to the later Trinitarian formula represents a development in liturgical expression, not a sudden apostolic reversal. <sup>[6]</sup> The historical record shows that the earliest believers understood the singular “name” of Matthew 28:19 as fulfilled Christologically, an understanding that later doctrinal formulations expressed through expanded creedal language. <sup>[7]</sup>

In conclusion, Matthew 28:19 is not a departure from biblical monotheism but a missional mandate rooted in it. The one God of Israel has revealed Himself fully in Jesus Christ, and the apostles faithfully carried out His command by baptizing converts into that singular, saving name. To follow their example is not merely a matter of tradition, but an act of obedience to Christ and fidelity to the testimony of Scripture.

Far from undermining Scripture, this approach honors its internal coherence and historical rootedness, reflecting the profound theological conviction that the one God has revealed His saving name in Jesus Christ. And it is only by, in, and through that name that disciples are baptized for the forgiveness of sins and participation in new life.

### **CITATION FOR THIS ARTICLE**

Necessary Truth. “Water Baptism in Matthew 28:19 in New Testament Practice,” Edited by John M. Powell. *Center for Biblical Research and Education*. Atlanta, GA: necessarytruth.org, 2025.

## NOTES

1. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 178–81.
2. Daniel L. Segraves, *You Can Understand the Bible* (Hazelwood, MO: Go Teach Ministries, 1998).
3. Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 134–139.
4. Assizes-Browne, Christian “Classics Ethereal Library: The Catholic Encyclopedia,” Volume 2, P. 263; Maurice A. Canney, “Canney Encyclopedia of Religion,” P. 53; Daniel Segraves, *Encyclopaedia Britannica. A dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature and General Information.*, 11th Edition, Volume 3, P. 365-366.
5. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1978), 87–95; Joseph A. Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy: To the Time of Gregory the Great* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959), 51–55.
6. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.
7. Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), 314–319.