

"Baptism in the name of" explained by carlos@thehumanjesus.org

In Matthew 28:19 Jesus commands his followers to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Yet, the book of Acts shows "baptism IN" (EN, Acts 10:38) or "INTO" (EIS, Acts 8:16) or "UPON (EPI) the name of Jesus" only (Acts 2:38, Luke using 3 different prepositions).

So did the Apostles get it wrong? Or worse, disobey the one they called lord and teacher? Or, are we simply misunderstanding the biblical concept of "name"?

First, it's a false premise to say Jesus is referring to an actual name in Matthew 28:19. Even those who use this verse to prove the Trinity would admit that "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" is not the Name of their Trinity God! After all, these are clearly titles and not names as such, let alone a singular name like "Bob" or "Jane"!

Second, in the Bible the word "name" often means what a person stands for. For example, God warns that lying prophets "think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget My name," Jer 23:27.

The NET Bible footnote on this verse explains that "In the OT, the name reflected the person's character (cf. Gen 27:36; 1 Sam 25:25) or his reputation (Gen 11:4; 2 Sam 8:13). To speak in someone's name was to act as his representative or carry his authority (1 Sam 25:9; 1 Kgs 21:8). To call someone's name over something was to claim it for one's own (2 Sam 12:28)."

As a result, the people of God are sometimes said to come "in the name of the LORD" God, meaning with His authority and power.

1Sam 17:45 David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied."

The same is seen throughout the Gospels when the crowds recognized Jesus as the Messianic king "who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Luke 19:38; cp. Mat 21:9; John 12:13; Mar 11:9).

In 1Cor 10:2 Paul teaches that during the Exodus the whole nation of Israel were baptized "into Moses in the cloud and in the sea."

Barnes' Notes on the Bible says the Greek EIS, into, "is the same preposition which is used in the form of baptism prescribed in Matthew 28:19." This means the Israelites "were thus devoted or dedicated to Moses; they received and acknowledged him as their ruler and guide; they professed subjection to his laws, and were brought under his authority. They were thus initiated into his religion, and thus recognized his divine mission, and bound themselves to obey his injunctions."

In 1Cor 1:13 Paul himself asks: "Were you baptized into the name of Paul?" (NOTE: the same Greek preposition as in Matt. 28:19, *EIS*.)

Benson Commentary rightly says, "To be baptized in or into the name of any person is, as Locke observes, "to enter himself a disciple of him into whose name he is baptized, with profession to receive his doctrine and rules, and submit to his authority....In this sense the Israelites are said, 1 Corinthians 10:2." Yet, a more fitting parallel to Mat 28:19 is found in Gen 48:16 in the story of Jacob blessing his grandsons by praying:

"The angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac." (NOTE the use of the singular "name" applies both to Abraham and Isaac just like the one "name" applied to all three in Matt. 28:19.)

The point is the one "name" equals who the patriarchs were and what they stood for, as The Complete Jewish Bible makes beautifully clear:

"May they remember who I am and what I stand for, and likewise my fathers Avraham and Yitz'chak, who they were and what they stood for."

And once again we see how throughout the Gospels Jesus himself adopts this use of the name:

John 10:25 "the works that I do in the name of my Father", i.e., the miracles of Jesus were approved and empowered by God's authority;

John 17:6 "I have manifested your name to the people", i.e., Jesus showed the glorious Gospel of God;

Mat 10:40-41a "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me. He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward..."

Here Jesus once again uses "in the name of" as a reference to a given subject's authority, namely a Christian and a prophet.

It's clear that Mat 28:19 would have been understood as a reference to the shared agenda and authority of the Father and the Son through the power of the Holy Spirit.

NOTE the spirits' presence in Christian baptism was prophesied earlier by the Baptist when he said Jesus would baptize "in the Holy Spirit," Mat 3:11!

This is the meaning behind the 3 different prepositions used by Luke in Acts, in, into or "upon the name of Jesus."

In other words, the prepositions are not contradictory but complementary and thus in harmony with Matthew 28:19. For example, in Matthew, the one preposition EIS might indicate the goal, direction, and purpose of baptism. And in Acts they reflect the authority and origin of the call to repentance and baptism. There is no conflict between Matthew and Acts.

After all Jesus did say "whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner." They are one in purpose and work through the sanctifying power of the one spirit.

Third, there are allusions to Mat 28:19 (baptism into God and Jesus by the spirit) throughout the NT:

Titus 3.5-6 "God our Saviour saved us through the washing into a new life by the Holy Spirit, poured out upon us through Jesus."

1 Corinthians 6.11 "You were sinners. But you have been washed/purified and made holy, and you have received God's approval in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God."

1 Peter 1.1-2 "The foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ." Also see: 2 Corinthians 1.21-22; 3.14; Hebrews 9.14

These verses show that Christian baptism was to be a public demonstration of the individual's Conversion-Baptism-Integration into the one body, i.e., the Christian church community.

The Tyndale New Testament commentary summarizes these points well (I, p. 275).

"It may well be that the true explanation...is that the words of 28:19 were not originally meant by our Lord as a baptismal formula. He was not giving instructions about the actual words to be used in the service of baptism, but...was indicating that the baptized person would by baptism pass into the possession of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. There is good evidence that the Greek idiom EIS TO ONOMA ('into the name' not 'in the name') could convey this meaning"

ADDENDUM: *Contra spirit over water baptism!*

Note that at Pentecost, after the Apostles were baptized by God's spirit, they preached to the people who "were pierced to the heart" and then asked "What should we do, brothers?"

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Acts 2.38

This is obviously a reference to water baptism.

Peter did not say "be baptized in holy spirit so you can receive holy spirit."

Actually what he says is "Baptism...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."