

Jesus-only Baptism?

Matthew 28:16–20

Last week I had the privilege of baptizing three boys. As each one came up to the baptismal font, I applied water and said, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.” Our congregation witnessed this sweet event and took a vow to love and receive these boys as members of Christ’s body, into which they were received. I reminded you that Christ claims those boys as his own and calls us, his people, to receive them in commitment and love. Then, in my sermon, I preached on our Lord’s words in the text that we read once again this morning. I mentioned that there is a lot here in this text—and indeed there is!

After the service there was a question about my passing reference to a rival baptism used by some cults and splinter-groups that stridently contend that the proper form for baptism ought to be: “I baptize you in the name of *Jesus*”—full stop! They refer to their practice as “Jesus-only baptism.” They contend that their truncated version of the baptismal form is the only valid baptism. They are very passionate about this and argue that the church of Jesus Christ ought to bring its universal baptismal practice in line with *their* understanding!

Should we? Let’s examine Jesus-only baptism in the light of Holy Scripture.

First of all, recognize that this is a serious matter. To reject the wording that Jesus gave to the apostles is to reject the doctrine of the Trinity. This is no trivial matter. Every Christian ought to have a working understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity—there is only one God, eternally existing in three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit—regularly drilled into his mind every time he witnesses a baptism.

Notice that right in the heart of the Great Commission Jesus instructed his church: “*make disciples* of all nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Those are the very words of Christ and cannot be improved upon! This is the clearest formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity found anywhere in the Bible. Indeed, as summarized in our Confession of Faith, “the party is to be baptized . . . in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called thereunto.”¹

As I pointed out last week, Jesus intentionally said, “in the *name* [singular] of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” If he had said, “in the *names* [plural] of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” he would have been teaching *tritheism*—three gods—a form of pagan polytheism! Norma and I did a crossword puzzle yesterday with the clue: “name of a Hindu god.” As we figured out the answer I remarked, “There are a lot of them.” Yes, the Canaanites, Babylonians, Assyrians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Celts, Norse, Hindus, Buddhists, American Indians, Aztecs, Incas and many other cultures have their

¹ Westminster Confession of Faith 28.2, https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_28

many gods. They have gods of the weather, gods of war, gods of fertility, gods for every imaginable problem. The only problem is that *all of these gods originated in the human brain*; not by divine revelation. Scripture warns, “All the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens” (Ps. 96:5). There is only one God who is the Creator of all things and all men—only one true God to whom all men and angels will ultimately give account—and that is the God who is all-knowing, unchanging, the God who put the knowledge of himself into the heart and conscience of every man, woman and child on the face of the earth.

Holy Scripture reveals that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who *suppress the truth in unrighteousness*, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are *clearly seen*, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that *they are without excuse*, because, although they *knew God*, they *did not glorify Him as God*, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and *changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.*”²

“The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork.”³

All men are “without excuse.” The God of heaven—the one-only living and true God—holds them accountable to worship and serve him alone. He says, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”

The way we baptize reveals that there is *one* God—not many—in three divine Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The baptismal waters are applied once, symbolically affirming that this God is one. There is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”⁴

Some churches apply the baptismal water *three* times or immerse (or partially immerse) the person three times; both practices come dangerously close to teaching tritheism—that there are *three* gods. Details matter! How important it is to administer baptism exactly as our Lord Jesus said to do it! We cannot improve upon his teaching or practice.

What Jesus is teaching in our text is known as the doctrine of the Trinity. *Doctrine* means *teaching*. Christians speak of the Trinity because they understand that God’s Holy Word, which our Lord Jesus identified as “truth”—*absolute* truth—not “mostly truth” or “generally truth” or “containing truth” but *truth itself*—

² Rom. 1:18–23

³ Ps. 19:1

⁴ Eph. 4:5

teaches that there is one God, Lord of heaven and earth, eternally existing in three divine Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This is standard Christian teaching. The Merriam-Webster dictionary—not an explicitly Christian resource—nevertheless has a very good definition of the Trinity—I quote: “the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three persons in one Godhead according to Christian dogma.” The Merriam-Webster editors have done their homework and expressed this accurately. No Christian church would disagree.

Note: in instituting Christian baptism Jesus taught the doctrine of the Trinity! This doctrine is not something that was imposed upon Scripture by zealous, well-meaning but misguided humans. Let this sink in: The Lord Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, taught the doctrine of the Trinity in his Great Commission. It is not an easy doctrine. There is an element of mystery to it. Its broad outlines are plain in Holy Scripture, but in the final analysis, finite man cannot fully comprehend the Infinite. If we could fully explain the Infinite, we would be infinite ourselves!

As I taught last week, there are four verbs in the Great Commission: “go,” “make disciples,” “baptize” and “teach.” In the original Greek, three of them are participles. The lone finite verb—the main verb of the sentence—is not “go” (as might seem from English translations) but “make disciples.” Remember that. A literal translation would be: “Going . . . make disciples . . . baptizing . . . teaching.” The heart of the Great Commission is: “make disciples . . . baptizing them.” That’s verbs 2 and 3 out of an intentional group of four. This is the heart of the Great Commission.

Baptism is thus the mark of *discipleship*, according to Jesus, who ordained Christian baptism—it was *his* idea. Baptism did not originate in the church. It did not originate in the mind of fallible men, but in the mind of Christ. “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.”⁵ “We have the mind of Christ.”⁶ Jesus did not *become* the Son when he was born of the Virgin Mary. He was the *eternal* Son—the Son of God the Father—from eternity past. It is the Lord Jesus who infallibly taught that Christian baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity is the mark of discipleship.

The duty of parents and churches is to make disciples; and disciples—at whatever stage of discipleship—are to be baptized. Christian parents ought to present their children, whom they are raising up as disciples of Jesus, for Christian baptism, which marks their children as belonging to Christ as *his* followers and learners—that is, his disciples. If a Christian parent is *failing* to intentionally bring up his son or daughter as a disciple of Christ—if he is letting his child be raised by TV or the internet or the surrounding culture—then he is failing in his duty as a

⁵ Phil. 2:5

⁶ 1 Cor. 2:16

parent. He needs to repent and begin to raise his child as a disciple of Christ. The elders of this church can help you in this endeavor. Please ask us.

The baptism of covenant children is the parent's testimony to the world: *My child is a Christian; he or she is distinguished from the world; he or she belongs to Christ; if you dare to tamper with my child, you are tampering with the property of the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords. "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea."*⁷ *Hands off!*

To reject the doctrine of the Trinity is no minor matter. On the contrary, it is a major error and serious heresy—I would say *damnable* heresy (meaning that a person who rejects the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be saved, but will be damned eternally). I realize this is strong language and may make you uncomfortable, but this is the faith of the ancient church, as I will show.

Consider the Athanasian Creed, the third of three ecumenical creeds found in *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* (p. 853): "Whoever desires to be saved should above all hold to the catholic faith. Anyone who does not keep it whole and unbroken *will doubtless perish eternally*. Now this is the catholic faith: that we worship one God in Trinity and the Trinity in unity, neither confounding their persons nor dividing the essence. For the person of the Father is a distinct person, the person of the Son is another, and that of the Holy Spirit still another. But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, the glory equal, the majesty coeternal."

Here is a beautiful and well-thought-out statement of the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. As I pointed out last Lord's day, Jesus' statement in the heart of the Great Commission, ". . . teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" teaches Trinitarian baptism. I pointed out that in the original Greek each divine Person is in the exact same case (genitive); each Person is marked by the definite article. The same grammatical form is used for each Person, indicating their perfect equality. I stated that if baptism is not administered with this express language it is *not* Christian baptism. Christian baptism, marking out the disciples—the property of the Lord Jesus Christ purchased with his own blood—is to be administered "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (that is, in the name of the Holy Trinity).

So why do some groups demand that baptism should be administered in the name of Jesus only—"Jesus-only baptism"? Let me prove to you that it is: (1) a failure to rightly divide the Word of truth, (2) based on a heretical view of the doctrine of God.

⁷ Matt. 18:6

First, it is a failure to rightly divide the Word of truth. The Great Commission is mentioned several times in the New Testament, but *only in the Matthew account does the Lord Jesus reveal the baptismal form*: “. . . baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Mark gives a short summary of the Great Commission: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:15). What he says is true and accurate, but there is no mention of the baptismal form.

Luke’s mention is even shorter: “And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). Again, it is a true and accurate account, but it does not mention the baptismal form.

Acts 1:8 gives a shortened version as well: “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” True words, but no mention at all of baptism.

Since the Lord Jesus ordained baptism, we should look to *him* to define it. He specifically instructed his church to baptize “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” This couldn’t be clearer. Yet cults and quasi-Christian splinter groups unrelentingly try to muddy the waters and sow seeds of doubt that the church got this right.

The apostles in the book of Acts in no way meant to undercut or redefine or correct their Lord. When Acts 2:38 observes that on the day of Pentecost, Peter says, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you *in the name of Jesus Christ*,” he is not correcting or improving on the words of the Lord. *He is not even administering baptism!* Rather, he is pointing his Jewish hearers to Christ, the true Messiah of Israel. He is informing them that if they want to be right with God, they need to acknowledge the ascended Christ who was pouring out his Spirit upon his church. You cannot be saved without faith in Christ.

Again, Acts 8:16 mentions that the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen on the Samaritan disciples; rather, “They had only been baptized *in the name of the Lord Jesus*.” They were baptized by his authority and commission, and by baptism they now belong to him and are united with him.⁸ Acts 8:16 does not provide a historical account of the Samaritans’ baptisms.

There’s another, even-shorter summary in the account of Peter taking the gospel to the house of Cornelius. Cornelius was a Roman centurion, a God-fearer who was following the religion of the Jews. The apostle Peter was sent to him to tell him about Christ. As Peter preached, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard

⁸ Matthew Poole’s *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Logos Bible Software)

the word.” Peter’s Jewish traveling-companions were astonished, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, and Peter “commanded them to be baptized *in the name of the Lord*” (Acts 10:48). Now not even the Jesus-only Pentecostals say, “Just go ahead and baptize people *in the name of the Lord*: I baptize you in the name of the Lord.” Their whole reason for existing outside and distinct from the Christian church is their contention that people must be baptized in the name of *Jesus only*. That is their central doctrine—the one they keep challenging the Christian church on.

Clearly, the words “in the name of Jesus Christ,” “in the name of the Lord Jesus” and “in the name of the Lord” are references to Christian baptism, but *never* is the church instructed to baptize individuals using these shorthand references. Moreover, there’s no record of any apostle administering baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus—none! They had been with the Lord. What he had said was sufficient for them.

As we just saw, the Great Commission is mentioned four times in the New Testament, but Matthew 28:19 is the only text where the Lord gives explicit instructions as to how baptism is to be administered: “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Only someone with an agenda would be blind to this, and would argue from texts that only mention baptism but do not explicitly teach how it is to be administered. *Only those who do not want to believe in the Trinity would pursue this feeble line of argumentation.*

There is no place anywhere in the Bible where God says, “On second thought, please administer holy baptism in the name of Jesus only—or maybe ‘in the name of the Lord only’ would do. I’m trying to make up my mind. Just do whatever you think best.”

Conclusion: The Jesus-only Pentecostals (also known as Oneness Pentecostals) have an agenda. They want to believe that there is *no* “godhead”⁹—*no* Trinity. They believe that God is a singular spirit who reveals himself in different modes. They are modalists, promoting the ancient heresy of modalism: that God is a single Person, who at one time revealed himself as the Father, later as the Son, and still later as the Holy Spirit. This teaching was rejected by the ancient church, and for good reason: if this be true, then God underwent *change*—God changed!—something that cannot be. “I am the LORD, *I change not*; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed” (Mal. 3:6).

At Jesus’ baptism we read that “behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’”¹⁰

⁹ Acts 17:29, Rom. 1:20, Col. 2:9

¹⁰ Matt. 3:16–17

In our Lord's high-priestly prayer in John 17, God the Son prays to God the Father: "Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are."

In 1 John 4:14 the disciple whom Jesus loved testified that "the Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the world." The Father did not send *himself*; he sent *his Son*. God is not playing word-games with us!

These are clear instances where the Persons of the Trinity appear at the same time. These instances—and others like them—are incompatible with modalism—that God is a singular spirit who reveals himself in different modes.

So do not be deceived by those who deny the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. They might be well-intentioned. They might be loving and kind. They might be good neighbors. They might be pro-life. They might talk about loving Jesus. But the Jesus they believe in is *not* the Jesus of the Bible, and he cannot save. This might seem harsh. It might even seem unloving. But it is the truth of Holy Scripture.

Hold fast to the faith once delivered to the saints. And appreciate the beauty of Christian baptism, where the God of the Bible places his name upon the person he claims in holy baptism, solemnly receiving him or her into the bosom of the Christian church, to be nurtured and matured as his disciple, belonging to the Lord of glory—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—forevermore. That is our true security, our true belonging. Apart from Christ we are lost; but united to the triune God by faith we are saved eternally. Amen.