

# Baptism by Triune Immersion

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*The practice of triune immersion as the mode of baptism for believers has been a historic distinctive of the Brethren movement. This mode of baptism is supported by three arguments: doctrinal, grammatical, and historical. The doctrinal thrust of Matt 28:19 is trinitarian and supports the triple action involved in triune immersion. The grammar and language of the text also support this approach. And history provides evidence that triune immersion was the mode utilized by the early church. Thus, triune immersion is the preferred mode of baptism.*

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## Introduction

For over nineteen centuries the imperative of Christian baptism has been almost universally recognized within all branches of Christianity. Christians, however, have differed concerning the mode of baptism and those who may properly receive it. This article focuses on the former. Since the very inception of the movement in 1708, the Brethren have practiced baptism by triune immersion. The reasons for the adoption of this mode are doctrinal, grammatical, and historical.

## Doctrinal Considerations

The spiritual significance of an ordinance is absolutely vital to its understanding and practice. As John Calvin stated, the principal thing recommended by our Lord is to celebrate the ordinance with true understanding. From this it follows that the essential part lies in the doctrine. This being taken away, it is only a frigid ceremony.<sup>1</sup>

An ordinance is a teaching aid to God's people in that it pictures truth. The form of the ordinance, therefore, should correspond to the teaching that the Word of God explicitly associates with it.<sup>2</sup> These truths can be grouped with respect to the believer and with respect to God.

## Truths with Respect to the Believer

### *A New Relationship with the Triune God*

Water baptism is an aid to teaching concerning the believer's salvation experience, symbolizing important aspects of that salvation experience. First, baptism symbolizes the believer's new relationship/identity with the triune God. In Matt 28:18–20 Jesus commands that disciples are to be baptized “in (εἰς) the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (NASB). What does it mean to be baptized “into” the name of someone? Ryrie concludes that “a theological definition of baptism would best be understood in terms of identification or association with something like a group or message or experience. This idea will fit the varied uses of baptism.”<sup>3</sup> If this is true, being baptized into the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit symbolically pictures the believer's new relationship. The believer is now identified with each member of the triune God; formerly he was separated from God (Eph 2:12).<sup>4</sup>

How does Rom 6:3–4 fit this understanding of baptism? It should be kept in mind that Romans 6 is not referring primarily to water baptism. That passage speaks of a reality, not a symbol. The reality is accomplished through the baptism with the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:27–28). If it is understood that a purpose of water baptism is somehow to symbolize Spirit baptism (a connection that needs to be demonstrated rather than assumed), the reference to water baptism in Romans 6 is secondary at best<sup>5</sup> —it refers primarily to the identification of the believer with Christ. Granting a connection between Romans 6 and water baptism does not necessarily mean that water baptism primarily pictures identification with Christ in death, burial and resurrection.<sup>6</sup> When the command for baptism was given by Christ as part of the discipleship process it had a trinitarian thrust. The primary identification, then, is with all three persons of the Godhead, not just the Son.

This trinitarian import must not be ignored. God the Father and God the Holy Spirit are also included in the original command. Furthermore, the apostles were not thinking of “death, burial and resurrection” when that command was given in Matthew 28. Thus, while it must be granted that Rom 6:3–4 does have some connection with water baptism and identification with the Son, it seems clear that this cannot become the primary doctrinal focus of baptism in view of the obvious trinitarian import intended by Jesus. Matt 28:18–20 with its trinitarian thrust allows for the important truth of Romans 6. However, an emphasis on Romans 6 alone minimizes the trinitarian import of Matthew 28. Therefore, while the importance of Romans 6 should not be diminished, neither should the trinitarian emphasis which was tied to baptism at its inception be neglected.<sup>7</sup>

This raises the question of the references to baptism in Acts. It is recorded that believers were baptized (εἰς τὸν ὄνοματι τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ) in the name of the Lord

Jesus' (8:16 ; 19:5 ). Is this baptismal formula in conflict with that which was recorded by Matthew? Everett F. Harrison points out,

The variation in terminology—Jesus Christ and the Lord Jesus—is enough to warn us that this is not to be understood as a precise formula. In fact, it was intended not as a formula at all but as an indication that when the candidate confessed that sacred name, Jesus Christ was central to the new relationship that was being certified in the baptismal rite.<sup>8</sup>

A comparison of texts in the *Didache* (A.D. 120) is of great interest in this regard. Only those who had been baptized “εἰς ὄνομα κυρίου” were permitted to partake of the Eucharist.<sup>9</sup> Yet baptism in the very same document has a trinitarian thrust.<sup>10</sup> As Harrison observes, “there is no more need to see contradiction between Matt 28:19 and the language of Acts than to see it between the two passages in the *Didache*.”<sup>11</sup> The references in Acts thus are not a particular formula but rather indicate that the baptism was Christian in distinction from other baptismal rites known in the first-century world.<sup>12</sup>

#### *A Public Confession of Faith*

Second, since water baptism denotes a new identification or association with the triune God, baptism is a public confession that the believer has indeed put his faith in God.<sup>13</sup> As such, it can also indicate the believer's desire to identify himself with the program outlined in the Great Commission and manifested in the local church.<sup>14</sup> Baptism was not an option for believers—“the idea of an unbaptized Christian is simply not entertained in the N.T.”<sup>15</sup>

#### *An Act of Commitment*

Corresponding to the change in relationship pictured in baptism, a third implication is the believer's act of commitment. One should not profess through baptism a close association with the triune God without reflecting in lifestyle a corresponding allegiance and dedication to that God. In Matt 28:18–20 baptism is a vital part of the discipleship process. Thus, it not only points back as a testimony of salvation, but it also points ahead to the path of discipleship to which the believer is committing himself. Averbek concludes that baptism “was a rite of commitment and dedication. It was not only a demonstration of faith, but a promise of faithfulness.”<sup>16</sup>

#### *A Cleansing from Sin*

Fourth, baptism symbolizes the result of salvation—cleansing from sin. Since water is used in baptism, it should be easy to realize this truth. However, the NT makes the connection between baptism and the washing away of sins explicit in Acts 22:16.

Baptism is the symbol of the reality of cleansing. “His [Paul’s] baptism was to be the outward and visible sign of his inward and spiritual cleansing from sin by the grace of God.”<sup>17</sup> Perhaps Jesus’ use of the term “bath” in John 13:10–11 also ties together the truth of spiritual cleansing and its symbol in baptism.

## Truths with Respect to the Triune God

Inseparably related to the truth that water baptism symbolizes the new union of the believer with each member of the triune God is the truth that baptism represents truth concerning the very nature of God as well. Thus, the trinitarian formula of Matt 28:19–20 makes water baptism illustrate the work of each member of the trinity in salvation.

### *The Unity of God*

Triune immersion symbolizes the nature of the triune God. Baptism as a unified act points to the unity of God. Baptism as three separate but equal dips points to the one God as a triunity of three separate but unified persons. Thus, triune immersion is a portrayal of the triune God.

### *The Role of All Three Persons*

Triune immersion suggests that all three persons of the Godhead played a role in the believer’s salvation. While these ministries are not strictly compartmentalized, it is generally true that the Father is the source of salvation, the One who sent the Son (John 3:16–17; 6:38 ; Eph 1:1–14). The Son, sent to die as the perfect sacrifice for sin, accomplished this salvation (John 10:17–18; Eph 1:1–14; 1 Cor 3:11). The Holy Spirit actualized this salvation in individuals when he applied Christ’s sacrificial death to every believer (John 3:6; Eph 1:13–14).<sup>18</sup>

In the discussion of the symbolism of baptism it is essential that the historical context of Matthew 28 be properly understood as it relates to the progress of revelation. The Jews demanded the death of Jesus because of his claim to deity. He claimed equality with the Father (Matt 26:59–66; John 19:7). The Jews were strict monotheists and conceived of God as one person, not three. But the OT revelation of the oneness of God was now being expanded to demonstrate that God was three in one. Modern interpreters should listen to the baptismal command through the ears of the disciples who first heard it. These Jewish men were confronted with the trinitarian nature of God. The Son and the Holy Spirit were distinguished from the Father and made equal with Him. This would receive further support as the NT unfolded. However, this occasion in Galilee was a “red-letter day” in the progress of revelation. The Jews had rejected the deity of Christ and thus the revelation concerning a triune God. The Lord

commissioned his apostles with a teaching symbol to perpetuate the truth that God is a triunity, and thus prevent the Church from committing the same error. This doctrinal emphasis is the focus of water baptism: the triune God and the relationship of the believer to each person in the Godhead. Thus, the trinitarian formula emphasizes the “distinctively Christian character of this baptism” as compared to earlier types of Jewish baptisms.<sup>19</sup>

Since an ordinance portrays spiritual truth in a physical act, the form of the ordinance must correspond to the truth being symbolized. Triune immersion best symbolizes the triune God and the believer’s new relationship with him.

## Grammatical Considerations

Does the language of Matt 28:18–20 support the view that the doctrinal emphasis in baptism is trinitarian? If so, is triune immersion the best mode to portray that doctrinal emphasis? I believe the answer to both questions is yes.

The verb βαπτίζω points to immersion as the best mode of baptism. From the time of Hippocrates, the term was used in the sense of “to immerse,” with the idea of going under or perishing. It could be applied to sinking ships or drowning men.<sup>20</sup> “Despite assertions to the contrary, it seems that βαπτίζω, both in Jewish and Christian contexts, normally meant ‘immerse,’ and that even when it became a technical term for baptism, the thought of immersion remains [*sic*].”<sup>21</sup>

The prepositional phrase (βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος), baptizing in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit contains the article before each person. Thus each one is distinguished from the others.<sup>22</sup> Meyer points to the elliptical construction that is found here:

Had Jesus used the words τα ὀνόματα instead of τὸν ὄνομα, then, however much He may have intended the names of three distinct persons to be understood, He would still have been liable to be misapprehended, for it might have been supposed that the plural was meant to refer to the *various* names of each separate person.

The *singular* points to the *specific name assigned in the text to each of the three respectively*, so that εἰς τὸ ὄνομα is, of course, *to be understood* both before τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος; comp. Rev 14:1: τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, along with the trinitarian doctrine set forth in baptism, the grammar as well seems to recognize each of the three persons in the Godhead. Motion corresponding to that doctrinal emphasis would be appropriate and expected. Those advocating

other modes of baptism seem to reduce Christ's statement to "baptizing them as you repeat this verbal formula." But this assumes a dichotomy between doctrine and form which is not substantiated in the text. Jesus was not merely employing a verbal formula; he was giving the doctrinal content to be symbolized in the act of baptism.<sup>24</sup> The action of triune immersion best represents the teaching being set forth since it distinguishes and properly recognizes each person of the Godhead.

## Historical Considerations

Doctrine cannot be determined by tradition or history. However, history can be very helpful in answering important questions about how the early Church understood apostolic teaching and practice. The testimony of early church history strongly supports the practice of triune immersion as the mode of baptism.

The *Didache* does not specifically refer to "triune immersion." However, it is a very early extra-biblical testimony to the baptismal practice of the apostolic churches.

Concerning baptism, baptize thus: Having first rehearsed all these things, "baptize in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," in running water; but if thou has no running water, baptize in other water, and if thou canst not in cold, then in warm. But if thou have neither, pour water three times on the head "in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."<sup>25</sup>

The requirement of triple action in baptism is clear in this passage.<sup>26</sup>

Justin Martyr's (A.D. 110-165) description of baptism even adds the elliptical "in the name of" before each person as in its allusion to Matt 28:19.<sup>27</sup> Tertullian (A.D. 145-220) states that the candidate for baptism is "thrice immersed."<sup>28</sup>

He commands them to be baptized into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, not into a unipersonal God. And indeed, it is not once only, but three times, at each name, into each separate person, that we are immersed."<sup>29</sup>

When Eunomius's innovative single-immersion baptism stressed his anti-trinitarian doctrine, an interesting analysis was made by later church fathers. Gregory Nanzianzen (A.D. 330-391) observed,

He, Eunomius, subverted the holy law of baptism which had been handed down from the beginning, from the Lord and the apostles, and made a contrary law, asserting that it is not necessary to immerse the candidate thrice, nor to mention the names of the Trinity, but to immerse only once, into the death of Christ.<sup>30</sup>

This is echoed by Sozomen in his *Ecclesiastical History* (6:26) and by Socrates in his *Ecclesiastical Church History* (5:24). Thus, the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381 determined that any bishop who would not use three immersions was to be deposed.

This very brief survey of some of the significant historical evidence makes it clear that the early church understood the trinitarian thrust of Matt 28:19 to require triple-action baptism.

## Conclusion

This evaluation of (1) the evidence concerning the doctrinal emphasis of baptism, (2) the correlation of the grammar and language of the text with that doctrinal emphasis, and (3) the records of early church history points to triune immersion as the best and thus the preferred mode of baptism. Together, these suggest that triune immersion at least be considered as the proper form of Christian baptism.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises*, Vol 2, *Tracts and Treatises on the Doctrine and Worship of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) 190.]

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of this principle see David R. Plaster, *Ordinances: What Are They?* (Winona Lake: BMH, 1985) 43-67.]

<sup>3</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine* (Chicago: Moody, 1972) 151.]

<sup>4</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) 275; William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 1001; and Willoughby C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*(ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1907) 306-7.]

<sup>5</sup> Alva J. McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace* (Chicago: Moody, 1973) 144; and Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (London: Banner of Truth, 1972) 193.]

<sup>6</sup> 6. Richard Averbeck, "The Focus of Baptism in the New Testament" *GTJ* 2 (Fall, 1981) 292-94; and F. Hauck, "bavptw," *TDNT* 1 (1964) 529-45.]

<sup>7</sup> 7. Cf. Plaster, *Ordinances*, 53-56 for further discussion of this point.]

<sup>8</sup> 8. Everett F. Harrison, "Did Christ Command World Evangelism?" *Christianity Today* (November 23, 1973) 9.]

<sup>9</sup> 9. *Did.* 9.5.]

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.1, 3.]

<sup>11</sup> Harrison, "Did Christ Command World Evangelism?" 9.]

<sup>12</sup> Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1982) 193.]

<sup>13</sup> Allen, *Matthew*, 305.]

<sup>14</sup> Averbeck, "Focus of Baptism," 301.]

<sup>15</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 77.]

<sup>16</sup> Averbeck, "Focus of Baptism," 300.]

<sup>17</sup> Bruce, *Acts*, 442.]

<sup>18</sup> Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 1001.]



<sup>19</sup> Homer A. Kent, Jr., "The Gospel According to Matthew," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1962) 111; and Tasker, *Matthew*, 275-76.]

<sup>20</sup> Hauck, "bavptw," 1.530.]

<sup>21</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, "Baptism," *NIDNTT* 1 (1967) 144.]

<sup>22</sup> See Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Rome: Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963) §§165,171,184.]

<sup>23</sup> H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew* (Winona Lake: Alpha Publications, 1979; reprint of 6th ed., New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884) 528. Cf. also Robert G. Bratcher, *A Translator's Guide to the Gospel of Matthew* (London: United Bible Societies, 1981) 375.]

<sup>24</sup> Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 433; Allen, *Matthew*, 307; Meyer, *Matthew*, 529; and Tasker, *Matthew*, 275.]

<sup>25</sup> *Did.* 7.1-3.]

<sup>26</sup> Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, 212.]

<sup>27</sup> Justin Martyr, *Apol.* 1.71.]

<sup>28</sup> Tertullian, *De Corona* 3.]

<sup>29</sup> Tertullian, *Ad Praxeas* 26.]

<sup>30</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, *Theological Orations*.