

The Baptismal Formula Simplified

A Textual and Historical Investigation

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- This is version 3 of my study of [Matthew 28:19](#), written July 10, 2026
 - [Original version from July of 2024](#)
 - [Version 2, revision of original – a more technical study](#), with similar content as this version.
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I. A Biblical Standard: Let the Evidence Speak

The Bible sets a clear rule when it comes to proving a point: any truth must be confirmed by two or three witnesses. Moses wrote it in Deuteronomy, Paul repeated it in his letters, and Jesus himself used it as a test for what is true.¹ So let's apply that same standard to one of the most familiar phrases in the New Testament — the baptismal formula found in [Matthew 28:19](#): "baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Does this formula pass the Bible's own test? That's the question this study sets out to answer.

II. Does Matthew 28:19 Pass the Test?

[Matthew 28:18](#) –20, known as the Great Commission, contains five distinct things Jesus commanded. Let's see how each one holds up under the two-or-three-witnesses rule:

1. **All authority has been given to Jesus** — confirmed in [Matthew 11:27](#), [John 3:35](#), [Ephesians 1:22](#), and [Hebrews 1:2](#) .
2. **Teach all nations** — confirmed in [Mark 16:15](#) and [Acts 1:8](#) .
3. **Baptize believers** — confirmed in [Mark 16:16](#), [1 Peter 3:21](#), and [Acts 2:38](#) .
4. **Jesus will always be with his followers** — confirmed in [John 14:18](#) and [Hebrews 2:18](#) .
5. **Baptize in the three-fold name** — confirmed *nowhere*.

Four out of five commands have solid backup from other scriptures. But the three-fold baptismal formula — "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" — appears in [Matthew 28:19](#) and *nowhere else* in the entire Bible. It fails the very test that Jesus himself endorsed.

III. What the Apostles Actually Did

Here is where the story gets really interesting. Not only does the three-fold formula lack a second witness — the rest of the New Testament actually tells a completely different story. Every single baptism recorded after Christ's ascension was done **in the name of Jesus alone**:

- [Acts 2:38](#) — Peter told the crowd at Pentecost: "*be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ.*"
- [Acts 8:16](#) — Philip baptized in Samaria "*in the name of the Lord Jesus.*"
- [Acts 10:48](#) — Peter commanded Cornelius's household to be baptized "*in the name of the Lord.*"
- [Acts 19:5](#) — Believers in Ephesus were baptized "*in the name of the Lord Jesus.*"

Paul's letters tell the same story. In [Romans 6:3](#), he writes that believers were "*baptized into Jesus Christ.*" In [Galatians 3:27](#), he says those who were "*baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*" In [Colossians 3:17](#), he instructs that **everything** done in word or deed should be done "*in the name of the Lord Jesus.*"

Paul also asked the Corinthians a pointed question: "*Were you baptized in the name of Paul?*"² The very way the question is worded assumes that baptism is done in the name of one specific person — not three. And [Acts 4:12](#) makes it plain: "*There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.*"

The disciples understood their commission clearly. **They baptized in one name** — the name of Jesus.

IV. What the Other Gospel Accounts Say

Two other places in the Gospels record Jesus giving his final instructions to the disciples, and neither one contains the three-fold formula:

- [Luke 24:47](#) says that "*repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations.*"
- [Mark 16:17](#) records Jesus saying "*in my name they will cast out demons*" — the authority is always tied to **his name**.

When you put these parallel accounts side by side, a clear picture emerges. The most natural reading of what Jesus actually said sounds something like this: *"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them **in my name**."* That's what the surrounding scriptures reflect. And as we're about to see, that's also what the oldest historical sources confirm.

V. An Ancient Hebrew Copy of Matthew

One of the most fascinating pieces of evidence comes from a Hebrew version of the Gospel of Matthew. A Jewish scholar named Shem Tob ibn Shaprut preserved it in a 14th-century book, and it was carefully studied and published by scholar George Howard.³

This Hebrew version of Matthew records the Great Commission like this:

"Jesus drew near to them and said to them: To me has been given all power in heaven and earth. Go and teach them to carry out all the things which I have commanded you forever."

The baptismal clause — including the three-fold formula — is completely missing. A respected Bible translation called *The Scriptures* even notes this in its footnotes, pointing out that the three-fold formula is simply "not found in the Hebrew Shem Tob text."⁴

VI. The Most Important Historical Witness

Now we come to what may be the most powerful piece of evidence in this entire study.

Eusebius of Caesarea was a church historian who lived from about 260 to 340 AD. Scholars describe him as the man to whom we owe more of our knowledge about early New Testament history than almost anyone else. He had access to a remarkable library — one that contained manuscripts far older than anything we have today, some possibly 50 to 150 years older than our oldest surviving copies.

Eusebius quoted [Matthew 28:19](#) nearly **twenty times** in his writings — and every single time he quoted it *before* the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, he used this shorter version:

"Go, and make disciples of all the nations in My Name, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you."

No mention of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. No baptismal formula at all.

A Cambridge scholar named F.C. Conybeare studied this exhaustively and concluded that the manuscripts Eusebius was working from *"preserved the original reading, in which there was no mention either of Baptism or of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."*⁵

One of the most respected academic Bible commentaries on Matthew put it this way: the short form appears so consistently in Eusebius's writings that it is easier to believe he was faithfully quoting the actual text of the Gospel — and that at some point later, the longer three-fold formula was *added in*, replacing the original "in my name."⁶

A Syrian church leader named Aphraates, writing in the 300s AD, also quoted this verse — and his version simply says *"they shall believe in Me."* That's a paraphrase of "in my name," and it matches Eusebius exactly.

Even the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* weighed in: Eusebius's nearly twenty quotations of the shorter reading bring *"the first gospel into line with the rest of the New Testament."*⁷

VII. Narrowing Down When the Change Was Made

We can actually narrow down roughly *when* the longer formula was inserted into the text.

Justin Martyr was an early Christian writer who lived from about 100 to 165 AD. He wrote detailed descriptions of how baptism was practiced in his day — and he did mention a three-fold formula. But here's what's significant: **he never once cites [Matthew 28:19](#) as the source of that formula.** Instead, he appeals to the prophet Isaiah and to the traditions passed down by the apostles.

Scholars have pointed out that this is very telling. If Justin had known that [Matthew 28:19](#) contained the three-fold formula, he almost certainly would have quoted it. The fact that he didn't suggests he was working from a copy of Matthew that didn't have it.⁸ And when Justin does echo the Great Commission in his other writings, he uses language like *"being made disciples in the name of his Christ"* — which matches the shorter version, not the three-fold formula.

The first writer to quote [Matthew 28:19](#) with the full three-fold formula as Scripture is Irenaeus of Lyon, writing around 180 AD.

This gives us a window: the change most likely happened sometime between **140 and 180 AD** — after Justin (who didn't know it) and before Irenaeus (who did). The most reasonable explanation is that a three-fold baptismal formula already existed in early church practice — and at some point during that window, a scribe inserted it into [Matthew 28:19](#), replacing the original "in my name."⁹

VIII. What Scholars Have Concluded

This isn't a fringe theory. Over more than a hundred years, mainstream Bible scholars from across many traditions have reached similar conclusions:

- The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1910) noted that baptism in the name of Christ alone was "*still so widespread*" in the 3rd century that Pope Stephen declared it to be valid.¹⁰
- The *Jerusalem Bible* (1966) suggested the three-fold formula in [Matthew 28:19](#) "may be a reflection of liturgical usage established later in the primitive community."¹¹
- A Vatican II-era catechism stated plainly that "*only in the 4th Century*" did the three-fold formula become standard, and that the early apostolic church "*did not know the trinitarian baptismal word — but only the Christological one (into the name of Jesus Christ)*."¹²
- The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992) stated that according to "*a wide scholarly consensus*," [Matthew 28:19](#) "*is not an authentic saying of Jesus*."¹³
- Historical theologian James Martineau noted that "*no historical trace*" of the formula appears before the mid-second century.¹⁴
- Adolf Harnack, one of the great church historians, admitted: "*We cannot make out when the Trinitarian formula emerged*."¹⁵
- Peake's Commentary called the passage "*a late doctrinal expansion*."¹⁶

IX. A Word to My Adventist Friends

For those of you who come from a Seventh-day Adventist background, I want to address something directly.

Early in her marriage, Ellen White was baptized using the three-fold formula by her husband, James White. And she did make strong statements supporting that practice. But it's worth knowing that much of the historical evidence presented in this study — especially Eusebius's citations — was simply not available or widely known in her lifetime.

Ellen herself left the door open for exactly this kind of discovery. In her own words:

*"New light will ever be revealed on the word of God to him who is in living connection with the Sun of Righteousness. Let no one come to the conclusion that there is no more truth to be revealed... The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people, is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by **close investigation**."*¹⁷

That is a remarkably humble and courageous statement — and **it applies here** — this study is a "**close investigation**" of Matthew 28:19.

X. Conclusion

When you bring all of this evidence together — from the pages of the New Testament itself, from ancient manuscripts, from the writings of early church leaders, and from the considered judgment of scholars across generations — one conclusion stands out clearly:

The three-fold baptismal formula in [Matthew 28:19](#) was almost certainly not part of the original text.

The most likely original reading was simply "*baptizing them in my name*" — and the evidence for that comes from every direction:

1. The formula has no backup witness anywhere else in the Bible.
2. Every baptism in Acts was done in the name of Jesus.
3. The parallel accounts in Luke 24 and Mark 16 both use "his name" or "my name."
4. The ancient Hebrew copy of Matthew omits the formula entirely.
5. Eusebius quoted the shorter version nearly twenty times from manuscripts older than any we now possess.
6. Justin Martyr, writing before 165 AD, never cited [Matthew 28:19](#) as the source of the three-fold formula.
7. The formula was most likely inserted into the text between 140 and 180 AD.
8. The Jerusalem Bible, the Anchor Bible Dictionary, the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Peake's Commentary, and the Vatican II Catechism all point in the same direction.

And perhaps most powerfully of all — the disciples themselves, who heard Jesus speak these words with their own ears, never once baptized in the three-fold name. They baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. In doing so, they were faithful to what Jesus most likely actually commanded.

Footnotes

¹ [Deuteronomy 19:15; 2 Corinthians 13:1; John 8:17](#)

² [1 Corinthians 1:13](#)

³ George Howard, *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* (Mercer University Press, 1995)

⁴ Institute for Scripture Research, *The Scriptures*, footnote "d" on [Matthew 28:19](#)

⁵ F.C. Conybeare, *The Hibbert Journal* (1902)

⁶ Driver, Plummer, and Briggs, *International Critical Commentary on St. Matthew*, 3rd ed. (1912), pp. 307–308

⁷ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th Edition, article "Baptism," p. 369

⁸ *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, on Justin Martyr and [Matthew 28:19](#)

⁹ Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (Scribner's, 1953), p. 95; Schaff-Herzog *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, p. 435

¹⁰ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th Edition, article "Baptism," p. 365

¹¹ *Jerusalem Bible* (1966), footnote on [Matthew 28:19](#)

¹² *Bible Catechism*, Vatican II Edition, p. 64

¹³ *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 1 (1992), p. 585

¹⁴ James Martineau, *The Seat of Authority in Religion* (1905), p. 568

¹⁵ Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma*

¹⁶ Peake's Commentary (1929), p. 723

¹⁷ Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (CW 35.1–2)

Author's Note: The original version of this study was published in July 2024 at [sidnash.org](#). This revised and simplified edition (July 2026) was produced with the research assistance of Claude 4.6 Sonnet, an AI language model, which contributed additional documentation from early church sources, critical scholarship, and encyclopedic reference works. The two-or-three-witnesses framework, the core biblical argument, and all verified primary source quotations from the original study are the author's own work. As always, the reader is encouraged to verify every citation independently.

Link to original study: "[Gospel Commission Verification](#)"

Desiring to live by every word that comes from the mouth of Jehovah ([Deut8:3, Matt4:4](#))

-[Sid Nash](#): 07/11/2026. Latest version: <https://sidnash.org/docs/BaptismalFormulaSimplified.html>