

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

I know there are some Christians who insist that baptism be done “in the name of Jesus” and not “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” and they quote the Book of Acts where it says, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38). It looks like the Early Church did not use the Trinitarian formula. How do we justify using it?

Well, yes, the Book of Acts does give the impression that in the first few years of Christianity, baptism (at least in Palestine) was done “in the name of Jesus” and not using a Trinitarian formula. But it seems at least some Christians in the New Testament Period adopted a Trinitarian form of baptism, since the Gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus saying, “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...” (28:19). This suggests that Matthew’s community used a Trinitarian formula.

If the theory is right that the Gospel of Matthew comes from a congregation in Syria, that would fit with the next Christian writing to specify a Trinitarian baptism: the Didache.

The Didache is an important document because it seems to be quite early, perhaps even from the first century. Many things about this work strongly suggest that it comes from a time very

early in the history of Christianity. An example is that we do not yet have the episcopal system of government. Instead there is a governing body of elders and deacons and travelling prophets wandering from village to village. Both of these features suggest the first or early second century.

The Didache is the earliest known “church order,” that is, a “how-to” manual for running a congregation, including how to baptize and celebrate the Eucharist.

Concerning baptism, the Didache says: “Baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” in running water. But if you do not have running water, baptize in other water. And if you are not able [to baptize] in cold, then in warm. But if you have neither, pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Notice that the person baptized is to be immersed three times using a

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Trinitarian formula. The fact that immersion is to be done three times in succession makes it likely that the first time the Father would be mentioned, the second time the Son and the third time the Holy Spirit. So here with this triple immersion, we clearly have a Trinitarian baptism, not a single immersion with the words, “I baptize you in the name of Jesus.” If Trinitarian baptism was not the original way of baptizing, it certainly developed quite early.

Note also how flexible and not rigid or dogmatic the Didache is about the method of baptism. There are preferences but not rigid demands on several points. Running water is preferred, but stagnant is acceptable. Cold water is preferred, but warm is acceptable. Immersion is preferable, but if the body of water is not deep enough, pouring three times on the head is acceptable.

It seems that for the writers of the Didache, the validity of a baptism did

not depend on it being done in just one approved way. Rather, it would seem, the intention to baptize was primary, though the manner could vary.

This is very much in contrast to the beliefs of some churches that either insist on immersion (for example, Baptists) or on particular words being said (for example, non-Trinitarian, “Jesus only” Pentecostals). It seems that at least on these specifics relating to baptism, the Early Christians (or at least some of them) were not as rigid and dogmatic as some Christians today.

Unless we accept the contention of “Jesus only” Pentecostals that the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is “Jesus,” then, even if we give no weight to the evidence of the Didache, we still have New Testament warrant for both formulas: Acts for “in the name of Jesus” and Matthew 28:19 (“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”) for the Trinitarian formula.

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