

Such variations militate against an unbending baptismal formula.

It is entirely possible that being baptized in the *authority* of Jesus essentially amounts to being baptized by the baptism *authorized* by Jesus—one in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). A.T. Robertson comments: “In Acts the full name of the Trinity does not occur in baptism as in Matthew 28:19, but *this does not show that it was not used*. The name of Jesus Christ is the *distinctive* one in Christian baptism and really involves the Father and the Spirit.”¹⁰

In keeping with this, some scholars have suggested that Acts 2:38 may contain what is called *asynecdoche of the part*—a figure of speech in which the *part* stands for the *whole*. Such figures of speech were common in biblical times. For example, the term *face* can refer to a whole person (1 Kings 10:24; Job 11:19), *field* can represent a whole country (1 Sam. 27:7), and *day* can refer to an indefinite time period (Ps. 18:18).¹¹ It may be, then, that “the apostles indeed did use the full formula [Father, Son, and Holy Spirit], but simply referred to the act of baptism by the shorter phrase ‘in the name of Jesus Christ’...in common with the wider practice of that day of being baptized ‘in the name’ of one’s spiritual teacher, as John’s disciples were ([Acts] 19:3).”¹²

Whether or not this is so, the hermeneutic principles summarized above decisively debunk the Oneness view that Jesus is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Scripture consistently testifies that Jesus is the second person of the blessed Trinity, the eternal Son of the eternal Father, and the blessed One who came to earth to reveal the Father to humankind (John 1:1,14,18; cf.14:9–14).

— Ron Rhodes

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.
2. Oneness Pentecostalism, distinct from mainstream Pentecostalism, is similar to other cults in its denial of the Trinity. It is different from other cults, however, in its strong insistence on the absolute deity of Jesus Christ, holding that Jesus is the one true God who manifests himself in three modes.
3. Brent Graves, *The God of Two Testaments* (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 2000), 297.
4. Norman Geisler, *Explaining Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 14–15.
5. Gregory Boyd, *Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity* (Grand Rapids:

Baker, 1992), 85. Note that while Boyd offers sound arguments against Oneness Pentecostalism in this book, he elsewhere expresses belief in open theism, an unorthodox view.

6. Westminster Confession of Faith, 1:9.

7. Jewish existentialist Martin Buber (1878–1965), in his book *I and Thou* (1923), made the phrase “I-Thou” famous, distinguishing this type of relationship from an “I-It” relationship. In this article, I use the term in a simple, nonformal sense to speak of direct, interpersonal, mutual, reciprocal, and loving relationships between persons.

8. Boyd, 68.

9. Daniel Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 94.

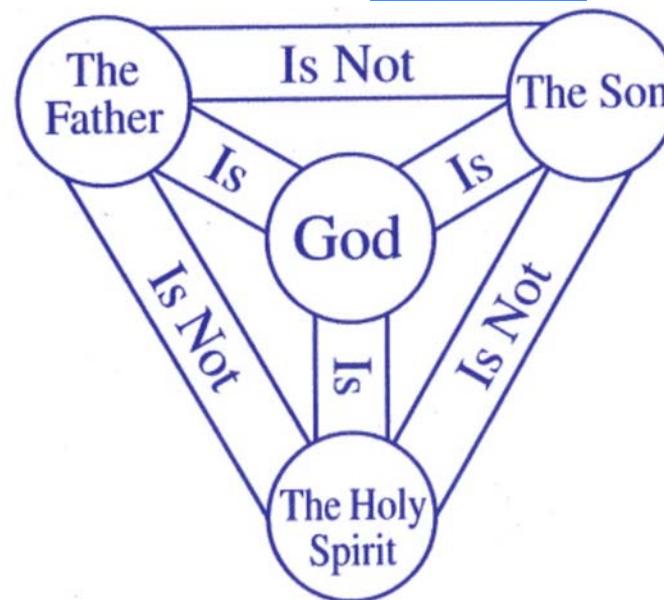
10. A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Logos Software, emphasis added.

11. See original Hebrew.

12. Jerome Smith, *The New Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*, Logos Software, insert added

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Is Jesus the Father and the Holy Spirit?

**“Jesus Only-Jesus is the
Father and the Holy Spirit” ?????**

Modalism first surfaced in the third century in the writings of Sabella's and Paul of Samosata. This heretical view denies there are three distinct persons in God, claiming instead there is only one being who manifests Himself in three different modes. Modern Oneness Pentecostals garner support for their modalistic view by interpreting Matthew 28:19 in conjunction with Acts 2:38. In Matthew 28:19 Jesus instructed the disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them *in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit*” (emphasis added).¹ In Acts 2:38, however, Peter instructed his listeners: “Be baptized *in the name of Jesus*

Christ” (emphasis added). Oneness Pentecostals² conclude that Jesus Himself must be the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, because they claim that “Jesus” is the “one name that refers to three titles of one God.”³ They then assert that the apostles correctly fulfilled Christ’s command to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19) by baptizing converts in the name of Jesus *only* (Acts 2:38;8:16;10:48); hence, a Trinitarian baptism is invalid. The phrase “in the name of Jesus” *must* be pronounced over the person being baptized. It is difficult to know where to begin in evaluating Oneness Pentecostal hermeneutics. It is certainly *not* like looking through a telescope at a single hermeneutic problem, but more like looking into a kaleidoscope, for there are many interrelated herme-

neutic problems that, when combined, only serve to distort biblical Christianity (2 Pet.3:16). In what follows, I demonstrate that Oneness Pentecostals are “serial offenders” where it concerns violating some of the fundamental rules of hermeneutics.

HOLDING ILLEGITIMATE PREUNDERSTANDINGS. A theological “preunderstanding” is a doctrinal opinion one has previously formed. The danger for Bible interpreters is that their interpretations easily can be biased by their theological preunderstandings. Oneness Pentecostals unfortunately approach the whole of Scripture with the preunderstanding of the Oneness doctrine, and it distorts their view of many Scripture verses, including Matthew 28:19 and Acts 2:38.

The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy provides this helpful corrective: “We affirm that any preunderstandings which the interpreter brings to Scripture should be in harmony with scriptural teaching and subject to correction by it. We deny that Scripture should be required to fit alien preunderstandings, inconsistent with itself.”⁴ The point of this affirmation is to avoid interpreting Scripture through an alien grid or filter that obscures or negates its true message. To avoid misinterpreting Scripture, interpreters must be careful to examine their presuppositions in the light of Scripture. Only those preunderstandings that are compatible with Scripture are legitimate.

INAPPROPRIATELY CROSS-REFERENCING VERSES. It is inappropriate to draw theological conclusions from cross-referenced verses without giving due consideration to what other explicit and clear verses reveal on the matter. For example, Isaiah 14:12 identifies Lucifer as the “morning star.” Revelation 22:16 identifies Jesus as the “morning star.” Ignoring other relevant verses, one inappropriately could conclude that Jesus is the Devil.

Oneness Pentecostals are guilty of inappropriate cross-referencing in their treatment of Matthew 28:19 and Acts 2:38. One must recognize that the theological inferences one draws from comparing cross references are legitimate *only* to the extent that they reflect the teachings of explicit and clear Scripture verses on the matter.⁵ This is precisely where Oneness Pentecostals go wrong.

NOT INTERPRETING DIFFICULT VERSES IN LIGHT OF CLEAR VERSES. It is common sense that one must interpret difficult verses in light of the clear verses of Scripture. Martin Luther expressed this principle with the words, *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*—

Latin for “Scripture is its own expositor.” The Westminster Confession of Faith perhaps put it best: “When there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture...it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”⁶

Contrary to the Oneness preunderstanding of modalism, many clear Scripture verses indicate that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons. We know the Father is a person because He engages in I-Thou (direct, interpersonal, mutual, reciprocal, and loving)⁷ relations with the other persons in the Trinity (John 3:35), and has the attributes of personality: intellect (Matt. 6:8), emotions (Gen. 6:6; Ps. 86:15), and will (Matt. 12:50). The Son likewise engages in I-Thou relations (John 11:41–42), and possesses intellect (John 2:24–25), emotions (Matt. 9:36; John 11:35), and will (Luke 22:42). The Holy Spirit also engages in I-Thou relations (Acts 8:29), and possesses intellect (Rom. 8:27; 1Cor. 2:10–11), emotions (Isa. 63:10; Eph. 4:30), and will (1Cor. 12:11).

Scripture, moreover, affirms that these persons are distinct from each other. We know Jesus is not the Father because the Father *sent* the Son (John 3:16–17). The Father and Son *love* each other (John 3:35) and *speak* to each other (John 11:41–42). The Father *knows* the Son and the Son *knows* the Father (Matt. 11:27). Jesus is our *advocate with* the Father (1 John 2:1). They are *two distinct witnesses* (John 5:31,32,37). We also know Jesus is not the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit is *another* comforter (John 14:16). Jesus *sent* the Holy Spirit (John 15:26). The Holy Spirit *descended upon* Jesus (Luke 3:22) and *seeks to glorify* Jesus (John 16:13–14).

What all this means is that *however* one reconciles Matthew 28:19 with Acts 2:38, it is not an option to say Jesus is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for clear verses in Scripture render such a view impossible. As the Reformers put it in their principle, *analogia scriptura*, if an interpretation of a particular verse contradicts a truth taught elsewhere in Scripture, the interpretation of that verse cannot be correct.

IGNORING CONTEXT. In the broader context of the New Testament, Jesus considers the Father as someone *other* than Himself hundreds of times. In fact, the New Testament describes the Father and Son as distinct from each other within the very same verse dozens of times (e.g., Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:4; Gal. 1:2, 3).⁸ This broad context alone sets the interpretive parameters

beyond which one is not free to go, effectively prohibiting anyone from claiming that Jesus is the Father.

In terms of immediate context, Matthew’s gospel is solidly Trinitarian. There is one God (Matt. 4:10;16:16;22:32,37). The Father is God (6:6,9,14–15;10:32–33;11:25), Jesus is God (1:23;9:6;11:27;12:8;16:27;19:28;25:31;26:64), and the Holy Spirit is God (1:18,20;10:20;12:18,28,32). Within the unity of the one God are three persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (28:19). All three persons of the Trinity, moreover, were present (and *distinct* from each other) at Jesus’ baptism (3:16–17). In view of this, it makes good sense that Jesus, before ascending into heaven, would instruct the disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for each played a pivotal role in human salvation.

THE CONTEXT OF ACTS 2 IS DIFFERENT. Here, baptism “in the name of Jesus” makes good sense because the Jews—“men of Judea” (v.14), “men of Israel” (v.22)—to whom Peter was preaching had rejected Christ as the Messiah. It is logical that Peter would call on them to repent of their rejection of Jesus the Messiah (vv.22–37) then invite them to identify with Him publicly via baptism (v.38).

Using Faulty Exegesis. Proper exegesis of Matthew 28:19 reveals two pivotal facts about the nature of God: (1)The singular form of “name” indicates that God is one, and that His nature is singular (one divine essence); and (2)Within the unity of this one God are three distinct persons, *the* Father, *the* Son, and *the* Holy Spirit, something given strong emphasis in the original Greek with the three recurring definite articles before Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁹

Word studies also reveal that the phrase “in the name of” often meant “by the authority of” in biblical times. Acts2:38 thus indicates that the Jews to whom Peter was speaking were to be baptized *according to the authority of* Jesus. The verse does not mean that the words “in the name of Jesus” must be pronounced liturgically over each person being baptized. If Acts 2:38 were intended to be a precise baptismal formula, one must ask why this formula is never repeated in exactly the same way throughout the rest of Acts or the New Testament. In different verses, people are exhorted to be baptized “on [Greek: *epi*] the name of...” (Acts2 :38), “into [Greek: *eis*] the name of...” (Acts 8:16), or “in [Greek: *en*] the name of...” Jesus Christ (Acts 10:48).