

Baptised into the Triune Name

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INTRODUCTION

The starting (and ending) point for our study must be the words of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 28:19, where he says, ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’.¹ My intention is not to exegete Matthew 28:16–20 in detail (there are plenty of good commentaries for that) but to make some observations on its context and content, and then tease out some of the implications of this for the theme of this school. In particular we need to see the reality of the union with the Triune God that baptism brings us into, and which is inseparably linked with our grace–faith union with Christ.

CHRIST THE LORD OF THE NATIONS

The context of Jesus’ statement is important in that: (i) it is linked to the clear declaration that the risen Jesus has all authority now given to him; (ii) that this authority is to be (and is being) exercised over the nations; (iii) that the nations are to be taught/discipled according to Jesus’ commands; and that (iv) Jesus would be continually present with the apostolic witnesses, to the very end of the age. This means that baptism into (εἰς) the name of the Triune God is at the very least an expression of the authority of God’s Messiah. This can be understood in an objective and subjective sense. In the bestowal of baptism, God through Christ claims the nations as his own, as indeed they always have been. In receiving baptism, the nations confess their faith in God who has saved them.² The declaration of God’s Lordship over the nations is inseparable from the proclamation of the gospel he has established in the Son, under

¹ It is not germane to our topic, thankfully, to engage with critical theories about whether these words represent the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus, but interested readers can see a good discussion of the issues in G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Paternoster, Exeter, 1976), pp. 77–90. Scripture quotations are from the NASB unless otherwise stated.

² It is a significant fact that baptism became the immediate and universally recognised mark of incorporation into the body of Christ from Pentecost onwards. This was so, no matter what was the ethnic or geographical location of the various New Testament converts/congregations (e.g. Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12–13, 16, 38; 9:18; cf. Rom. 6:3–5; 1 Cor. 1:13–17; etc.). Jews and Gentiles, slave or free, male or female, young and old were all baptised, indicating their status as citizens of heaven and as the community of the Lord, Jesus.

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whose authority the Church speaks. Thus, at its very inception as a Christian and dominical act, the matter of baptism cannot be separated from the proclamation of the gospel. Baptism is an event of the Word through the word.³

The context also indicates that baptism is an eschatological event, in that: (i) its content (dying with Christ and being raised with him to life in the Spirit, as in Romans 6–8) points to the end of the current age dominated by the prince of this world; and (ii) the act of baptism itself is only to be practiced until the end of the age. The nations of the coming age are the new Bride who, having been baptised into Christ, are one with him. Now this unity is known by faith. Then it will be seen by sight.

Furthermore the universality of the command stands in contrast to Jesus' deliberately circumscribed mission to Israel as recorded elsewhere in Matthew (e.g. Matt. 10:5; 15:24). This universality indicates that the great Davidic King now fulfils the promise made to Abraham to bring the blessing of God to the nations. The use of Abraham and David in Matthew 1:1 is a *theological* statement, the implications of which are now made plain in Matthew 28:18–20. To be sure the ingathering of the nations has been prefigured throughout Matthew (see, for example, the nascent inclusion of the nations in the magi who worship the infant Jesus in 2:1–12; the Roman centurion who recognises Jesus as a man under God's authority in 8:5–13; the Canaanite woman who petitions Jesus for the healing of her daughter in 15:21–28; and the confession made by the centurion at the foot of the cross in 27:54), but now all that was implicit in these instances is now explicit. All the nations are to be baptised into the Triune name.

Moreover, thematically, the Lordship of the Messiah cannot be separated from the establishment of the new covenant in his blood. The new covenant is the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant (in terms of salvation history) and at the same time it is the culmination of the implicit covenant with creation (in terms of its ultimate goal, a new

³ P. T. Forsyth writes, 'The perversions of Baptism have been said to take two main directions. On the one hand it drops to mere symbolism, on the other to mere magic' (*The Church and the Sacraments*, Independent Press, London, 1947, p. 193). One of the great principles of the Reformation was to link the sacraments with the proclamation of the gospel, thereby saving us from both errors. Both baptism and the Lord's Supper were witnesses to Christ, as much as was the preached word. Both the sacraments and the preached word set forth Christ who was/is to be received by faith. Christ is the substance of the sacraments, he is objectively set forth in them and his Spirit is the one who teaches the believer the significance of them. Thus, they do not work 'magically' to confer grace, faith or justification. For Calvin therefore the sacraments are another aid to our faith related to the preaching of the gospel. The sacrament is not needed to *confirm* the word, but is given to establish our faith in the word. Both baptism and the Lord's Supper 'serve our faith before him [and] serve our confession before men' (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, LCC, vol. 21, Westminster Pr., Philadelphia, 1960, book 4, part xv.1, p. 1304). The word, therefore, enables us to understand the sign, and the sign should follow on the preaching of the word. In all of this, Calvin emphasised the role of the Spirit who, as the inward teacher, comes to the believer to teach him the meaning of the word in the sacraments. Indeed I believe it was Calvin (though I could not track down the reference) who spoke of the Lord's Supper (and baptism) as the gospel in visible form.

One example of the legacy of this understanding is seen in the Heidelberg Catechism. For example:

Question 67: ARE BOTH THE WORD AND SACRAMENTS THEN INTENDED TO FOCUS OUR FAITH ON THE SACRIFICE OF JESUS CHRIST ON THE CROSS AS THE ONLY GROUND OF OUR SALVATION? **Answer:** Right! In the gospel the Holy Spirit teaches us and through the holy sacraments he assures us that our entire salvation rests on Christ's one sacrifice for us on the cross (*The Heidelberg Catechism*, Board of Publ'ns of the Christian Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, 1981).

Another example is seen in the Westminster Confession:

Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and His benefits; and to confirm our interest in Him; as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to His Word (Westminster Confession of Faith, Free Presbyterian Publ., Glasgow, 1994, ch. 27, pt 1, p. 111).

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heavens and a new earth). Both are evident within the proto-evangel of Genesis 3:15, and both rest on the work of the cross. The proclamation of the universal Lordship of the Messiah, then, could not take place until the work of redemption was completed. ‘Christ came to redeem, which He could only do by His Incarnation; He did not come to be incarnate, and incidentally to redeem.’⁴ It is only the crucified and risen Christ who could make the declarations (and issue the command) of Matthew 28:19f.

The Apostolic Proclamation of Christ’s Lordship

When we look at the apostolic proclamation in the book of the Acts, it is clear that the Lordship of Jesus the Messiah was the central theme of their message. Apostolic proclamation is *kerygmatic* in that it is announcement leading to command, rather than information leading to invitation! The very nature of the apostolic gospel is bound up with the Lordship under which the apostles stood. But the apostolic gospel proclaims not only *that* Jesus is Lord (i.e. the fact) but also the basis, nature and implications of that Lordship.

In terms of the pattern of apostolic proclamation, the fact of Jesus’ Lordship rests on the basis of Jesus’ ascension to the right hand of the Father (see, for example, the pattern of Peter’s ministry in Acts 2, or Paul’s—to the Greek philosophers no less!—in Acts 17). This ascension is the outcome of Jesus’ completed work of redemption and the defeat of his enemies in his cross–resurrection.

The contrasting nature of Jesus’ Lordship to the rulership of the ‘lords many’ (both heavenly and earthly) who exercise authority on the earth is clear. Not only is this contrast embedded in Jesus’ own teaching (e.g. Mark 10:35–45; John 13), but it is a repeated theme in the epistles and the book of the Revelation. The implications of this Lordship are spelled out in Jesus’ own teaching (e.g. Matt. 25, where the parables all relate to the *parousia* as an exercise of Jesus’ Lordship, or the other parables of the kingdom in places such as Matt. 13); and in the New Testament letters. The exposition of Christ’s Lordship over the cosmos (e.g. in Phil. 2:1ff.), but also the explanation of what it means for the people of God to live under the Lordship of Christ as a new community in the earth (e.g. the latter sections of Paul’s letters), alike contrast the nature of life in and under the Lordship of Christ with life in and under the lordship of the world systems. The Lordship of Jesus means that neither Caesar nor Satan is lord; that he rules over them from the right hand of God; that the nature of his rule is nothing other than the rule of love; and that his word is to be heeded, and repentant nations are to be baptised in submission to his grace.

All of this proclamation is with a view to the repentance of the nations and the coming of the final Day of the Lord. Baptism of the repentant nations is God’s stamp of ownership on them, and their observing of the commands of his Son is their free recognition that they have been purchased by Jesus’ blood, that the Father may be glorified in them. Thus:

... the peoples are to become disciples of the sovereign Lord and baptism is a means to this end; the idea of appropriation, dedication, submission, and belonging that attaches to the Greek use of εἰς τὸ ὄνομα perfectly accords with the major motif of making disciples.⁵

⁴ P. T. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, p. 197.

⁵ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, p. 90.

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Heppe similarly comments: ‘The symbolic sense of this action is that the person baptized is implanted into the triune God as His property to His service and praise, as surely as the dispenser of baptism accomplishes the outward action upon him’.⁶

Thus, the person who is baptised belongs to God, by being brought into union with him in baptism, thus being sealed as his property. Which God do Christians belong to? The God revealed in the Triune name. In that the Christian ‘puts on’ Christ in baptism (Gal. 3:27; cf. Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10), he puts on the one in whom the Father is known, and through whom the Spirit is given. Which people does God own in this world? The baptised Church, his ‘chosen people’, set apart as his precious possession (1 Pet. 2:9) is *his*, and no one else’s!

ONE WITH CHRIST: ONE WITH THE TRIUNE GOD

Other papers in this school will deal with many of the aspects I touch upon here, but it is worth reiterating the point that baptism is not a testimony about us, or even about our faith. Baptism does not witness to what *we* have done, but what *God* has accomplished. In the New Testament, the elements of proclamation, reception/regeneration (i.e. Spirit baptism) and water baptism form an inseparable unitary complex. The cases such as the disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus (Acts 19:1–10) are the exceptions which prove the rule. The New Testament knows nothing of an unbaptised believer, and so the New Testament writers use ‘baptism’ as a shorthand expression for all that it means to hear the gospel, be regenerated by the Spirit, receive the word by faith and be united with Christ in so believing.

Because baptism speaks of a complex more than a rite, the act of baptism expresses a number of things. Very clearly it speaks of at least four things: (i) incorporation (into the visible community of the Church); (ii) initiation (into a life lived according to the Spirit, not according to the flesh—i.e. equivalent to putting off and putting on); (iii) instruction (i.e. the community into which one is baptised both lives under the teaching/instruction of God and exists for it, so the new life of the believer is a life lived by hearing a new Word); and (iv) immersion (we are plunged into Christ by the Spirit). All of this, however, is because by grace through faith a believer is united to Christ in the Spirit as an adopted son of the Father. Forsyth’s comment that (in the Reformation) ‘Grace was not an infusion of vital substance or supernal influence, but it was a relation of active persons’⁷ is still apposite. The tendency to demean grace to something we can dispense through our actions has not left the race!

John Murray comments:

Such passages as Romans 6:3–6; I Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27, 28; Colossians 2:11, 12 plainly indicate that union with Christ is the governing idea. Baptism signifies union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. It is because believers are united to Christ in the efficacy of his death, in the power of his resurrection, and in the fellowship of his grace that they are one body. They are united to Christ and therefore to one another. Of this union baptism is the sign and seal. The relationship which baptism signifies is therefore that of union, and union with Christ is its basic and central import.⁸

⁶ H. Heppé, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Wakeman Great Reprints, London, n.d.), p. 615.

⁷ P. T. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, p. 195.

⁸ John Murray, ‘Christian Baptism’ in *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 13:2, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, May 1951, p. 109.

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But, by its very nature, union with Christ means relationship with all the members of the Godhead:

We must bear in mind, however, that the formula which our Lord used in the institution of this ordinance is more inclusive than that of union with himself. Baptism is into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. It means therefore that a relation of union to the three persons of the Godhead is thereby signified. This is entirely consonant with the teaching of our Lord elsewhere regarding the union that is established by faith in him. It is not only union with himself but also with the Father and the Holy Spirit (*cf.* John 14:16, 17, 23; 17:21–23). Consequently baptism, by the very words of institution, signifies union with the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, and this means with the three persons of the trinity, both in the unity expressed by their joint possession of the one name and in the richness of the distinctive relationship which each person of the Godhead sustains to the people of God in the economy of the covenant of grace.⁹

The words of Matthew 28:19, then, describe what baptism *means*, rather than merely giving us a formula that we should use.¹⁰ One of the interesting features of the Acts narrative is that baptisms are recorded ‘in the name of Jesus’ or ‘into the name of Jesus’ or just ‘into the name’ (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5; *cf.* Rom. 6:3; 1 Cor. 1:13; Gal. 3:27),¹¹ but Bavinck is surely right when he observes that:

In all these cases [*viz.* baptism ‘into Moses’, ‘in the name of Paul’, ‘into the body’, ‘in the name of Jesus’, etc.] no one thinks of a formula used in connection with the rite of baptism. The expression ‘in the name of Jesus’ is not meant as a formula but is a description of the character of Christian baptism.

He then goes on to say:

Now the same thing is meant when Jesus says in Matt. 28:19 that his disciples must be baptized ‘into the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit’. It is not here prescribing to the apostles what they have to *say* during the administration of baptism but what they have to *do*. Christian baptism is and must be an incorporation into fellowship with the God who has revealed himself as Father, Son, and Spirit.¹²

To be baptised into the Triune name means to become united with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit through grace–faith union with Jesus the Messiah. To be baptised into this name is to be immersed in the very life of God himself, with the eschatological goal that we will be utterly conformed to the likeness of the Son.

⁹ ‘Christian Baptism’ in *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 13:2, p. 110.

¹⁰ Nor is it telling us what form of immersion/affusion we should use or how many times we should use it. Though the pattern of threefold initiation has a long history in the Church (e.g. *The Didache*, 7), and while it is still Orthodox practice, the name is singular. We are not baptised into three names, but one name. We are baptised into the name of the Triune God.

¹¹ Questions about the relationship between the Trinitarian phraseology of Matthew 28:19 and the use of the name of Jesus in Acts, have prompted some interesting developments, not least the rise of the Oneness Pentecostals (where valid baptism is in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ only, and who will rebaptise folk who have been baptised in the traditional Trinitarian formula). It should be noted, however, that the matter is not merely formulaic, as Oneness teaching is self-consciously *not* Trinitarian in its theology.

¹² H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics—Volume 4: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2008, p. 504.