

# Once More, Matthew 28:19 and the Trinity

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A web article by a Jehovah's Witness named Dave Barron asks the question, "Does Matthew 28:19 Teach of a Triune God?"<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will respond to Barron's article.

### Matthew 28:19 as a Trinitarian Proof Text

The article opens with these words:

Often looked at to be one of the few texts that fully demonstrate the Trinity, Matthew 28:19 is considered to be a primary proof text for spelling out the Trinitarian doctrine. While the Trinitarian position will fully acknowledge that the text does not speak of those mentioned within the text as "one God," this does not stop those holding to it as a central proof of their doctrine.

By framing the issue in this way, Barron sets up a straw man. Somehow he concludes that Trinitarians know full well that the text will not support the weight they put on it but nevertheless go ahead and insist on using it as they supposedly do. He creates this straw man by claiming that Trinitarians view Matthew 28:19 as "spelling out the Trinitarian doctrine." However, this is simply not the case. Trinitarian theologians do not claim that Matthew 28:19, all by itself, spells out the Trinitarian doctrine, nor that one can infer the whole doctrine from this isolated text alone. Nor, of course, can one possibly imagine that this text, or any one text, spells out the entirety of the Jehovah's Witness theological position regarding the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That isn't the way one does doctrine. By suggesting that Trinitarians do doctrine in such a high-handed manner, Barron poisons the well before even examining the text.

### Baptizing Them "Into" the Name

Barron then quotes Matthew 28:19 as stating that Christians are to baptize new disciples "into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." He comments:

All too often the Greek word εἰς is translated as "in," though here we note it to mean "into." Jamieson, Fausset and Brown note this point too, stating: "It should be, 'into the name'; as in 1 Corinthians 10.2, 'And were all baptized unto (or rather 'into') Moses'; and Galatians 3.27, 'For as many of you as have been baptized *into* Christ.'"

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<sup>1</sup>"Does Matthew 28:19 Teach of a Triune God?" (<http://www.scripturaltruths.com/god/mat2819/>). In correspondence the author has identified himself as Dave Barron. Quotations in indented block form derive from this article except where stated otherwise.

It is perfectly fine for an interpreter to call attention to the specific preposition used here and to see if there is anything distinctive about the wording “baptizing into” (βαπτίζοντες εἰς) compared to “baptizing in” (βαπτίζοντες ἐν). However, it would be a mistake to claim that rendering the former as “baptizing in” is a mistranslation, as Barron implies. In this connection it is worth pointing out that the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ own Bible version does not follow this rule. The New World Translation (NWT) translates Matthew 28:19, “baptizing them in the name of,” though it states in a footnote, “Or, ‘into.’” Note also the following texts in the NWT:

“In [εἰς] what, then, were YOU baptized?” (Acts 19:3).

“On hearing this, they got baptized in [εἰς] the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19:5).

“Or were YOU baptized in [εἰς] the name of Paul?” (1 Cor. 1:13)

“...so that no one may say that YOU were baptized in [εἰς] my name” (1 Cor. 1:15).

Clearly, the translators of the NWT recognized that “baptizing in” was a perfectly fine rendering in at least some contexts of the words in question—including in Matthew 28:19.

According to Barron,

If we were to say that Christians were to be baptized in the name of those three, it would be understood that they would be baptized by the authority of those ones. Yet this was not at all the meaning that Jesus had in mind. Albert Barnes explains: “To be baptized in [εἰς, into] the name of the Father, etc., is the same as to be baptized ‘unto’ the Father; as to believe on the ‘name’ of Christ is the same as to believe ‘on Christ,’ Jn i.12; ii.23; iii.18; 1 Co i.:13. To be baptized ‘unto’ anyone is publicly to receive and adopt him as a religious teacher or lawgiver; to receive his system of religion. Thus, the Jews were baptized ‘unto Moses,’ 1 Co x.2. That is, they received the system that he taught; they acknowledged him as their lawgiver and teacher.”

How this point is supposed to undermine the Trinitarian understanding of Matthew 28:19 escapes me. Barnes here correctly interprets the text to mean that in baptism the disciple is publicly receiving the one “into” whose name he is baptized, and thus committing himself to the religion of the one named. While this point does not, abstracted from the rest of the Bible, by itself prove every element of the doctrine of the Trinity, it strongly supports a key element of that doctrine that the Jehovah’s Witnesses repudiate. Specifically, it strongly supports the understanding that the Holy Spirit, like the Father and the Son, is a person to whom the disciple commits and devotes himself in the act of submitting to baptism. Note what Barnes goes on to say:

So to be baptized in the name of the Father, etc., means publicly, by a significant rite, to receive the system of religion, to bind the soul to obey his laws; to be devoted to him; to receive, as the guide and comforter of the life, his system of religion; to obey his laws, and trust to his promises. To be baptized unto the Son, in like manner, is to receive him as the Messiah—our Prophet, Priest, and King; to submit to his laws, and to receive him as the Saviour of the soul. To be baptized unto the Holy Ghost is to receive him publicly as the Sanctifier,

Comforter, and Guide of the soul. The meaning, then, may be thus expressed: Baptizing them unto the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, by a solemn profession of the only true religion, and by a solemn devotion to the service of the sacred Trinity.<sup>2</sup>

Barron surely sees the problem, but attempts to avert the obvious implications. Let us see how he does so. He writes:

Similarly, when we are baptized “into Christ” we declare our faith in him and accept him as an influence in our lives. We follow his commands as they are recorded in Scripture and we dedicate ourselves to his service. To be baptized into the Father would carry with it the same meaning. We place our faith in him and dedicate ourselves to following his commands.

Yes, indeed. Thus, when Matthew 28:19 states that we are to baptize new disciples “into the name of the Father and of the Son,” it means that in baptism new disciples declare their faith in the Father and the Son and dedicate themselves to them. Naturally, one would expect that when disciples also submit to baptism “into the name...of the Holy Spirit,” in the very same clause, this would mean that disciples in baptism declare their faith in the Holy Spirit and dedicate themselves to him as well. Barron sees the problem:

What about the Holy Spirit? We have elsewhere argued that the Holy Spirit is not a person, and yet Trinitarian commentators have objected to such a possibility in Matthew 28:19, stating that it is unnatural for Jesus to connect the Holy Spirit with himself and the Father in this baptism if it were not one.

Putting it this way is not so much wrong as inadequate. It would indeed be “unnatural” for Jesus to speak of the Holy Spirit in this way if the Holy Spirit were an impersonal force, but this observation only suggests the real import of the argument. The point is better stated positively in this way: If we are looking for the best understanding of the text as it stands before us, our conclusion will be that the Holy Spirit is a person, just as the Father and the Son are persons. This is so because of the way all the elements of the sentence in context work together to associate the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son as one of the three names invoked in the religious rite of baptism.

### **1 John 5:7-8: Counterevidence?**

After affirming the importance of the Holy Spirit to Jehovah’s Witnesses, Barron begins to offer arguments to undermine the argument. First, he writes:

We might compare the text in question to 1 John 5:7-8, where the Trinitarian would claim that the Spirit is a person, but that blood and water are not.

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<sup>2</sup>Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament*, on Matt. 28:19, accessed online on 7/18/08, <http://www.studydrive.org/com/bnn/view.cgi?book=mt&chapter=028>.

This rebuttal—common among anti-Trinitarians<sup>3</sup>—fails because it assumes that the Trinitarian argument is as superficial as claiming that any text coordinating three terms must use all of them to refer to persons or all of them to refer to non-persons. That is not the argument. The matter is actually more complex and even subtle, though not so subtle that it requires any great sophistication to understand. There are really two factors that come into play here.

First, when the three terms in question are normally, typically, or even often terms for personal agents (humans, angels, or other beings or persons or some kind), one naturally takes all three terms as referring indeed to persons when they are coordinated in a series. So, for example, in a statement referring to “the principal and the teacher and the coach” we would by default construe *coach* as referring to a person (the “coach” of a school sports team, no doubt). We would rightly regard the objection that the word *coach* can in some contexts refer to an inanimate object (e.g., a horse-drawn carriage or railroad passenger car) as a subterfuge, a distraction from the obvious contextual setting of the term. We would not even consider such a redefinition, despite the fact that the definition of *coach* as a vehicle of some sort often appears in dictionaries as the *first* definition and the sports instructor as a second, derivative definition.<sup>4</sup> Only if the term *coach* in the immediate context explicitly referred to a vehicle (“We rode in a great coach bus to the college, and I took a picture of the principal and the teacher and the coach”) would we entertain the thought that the “coach” in question was not one of the adults working at the school.

Let us apply this insight to the matter at hand. Matthew 28:19 places the terms *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Spirit* in a coordinated series united by the term “name” (about which I will have more to say below). The disputed term here is *Spirit*, which Jehovah’s Witnesses argue refers to an influence or force or energy—in this case, a holy force emanating from God. Whether this is a possible or actual use of the word anywhere in the New Testament is too large a subject to examine here, but fortunately we do not need to do so. It is beyond dispute that the word *Spirit* or *spirit* (πνεύμα) occurs often in the New Testament with reference to personal agents. Jesus described God as πνεύμα (John 4:24), and he is, of course, a personal agent. Paul calls the risen Christ πνεύμα (1 Cor. 15:45), and of course Christ is also a personal agent. Angels are “spirits,” πνεύματα (Heb. 1:7), and thankfully Jehovah’s Witnesses agree that angels are personal agents. Demons, which Jehovah’s Witnesses also affirm are personal beings, are also πνεύματα (e.g., Matt. 8:16). Thus, the use of πνεύμα to denote a personal agent is beyond controversy and in fact appears widely throughout the New Testament. Thus, when we come to a text in which “Spirit” (πνεύμα) is coordinated with the personal terms “Father” (πατήρ) and “Son” (υἱός), the semantic force of πνεύμα denotes quite specifically a personal agent, whatever it might potentially or arguably mean in other contexts. We would require some specific identification in the immediate context of this “Holy Spirit” as something other than a personal agent to lead us to any other conclusion.

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<sup>3</sup>The Watchtower uses the same argument: “But water and blood are obviously not persons, and neither is the holy spirit a person.” “The Holy Spirit—God’s Active Force,” in *Should You Believe in the Trinity* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1989), 22.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coach>.

This semantic phenomenon does not apply in texts where some of the terms are obviously and regularly terms denoting impersonal realities. The reference to “the Spirit and the water and the blood” (1 John 5:8) uses two terms that in their normal, typical use refer to impersonal realities, *water* and *blood*. True, we can imagine scenarios in which one or both of these words might be used as nicknames for persons (particularly *blood* in the slang of some contemporary subcultures), but such uses are too extraordinary and far afield from the context of 1 John 5:8 to have any possible relevance. The term *spirit* or *Spirit*, as we have seen, often refers to personal agents. Jehovah’s Witnesses will want to reverse the argument just presented and reason that if two of the three terms denote impersonal realities, and the third term *could* in the right context also denote an impersonal reality, then we ought to understand it so in that context. Since Jehovah’s Witnesses believe an impersonal use of the word *spirit* does exist in some biblical texts, they conclude that such is its usage in 1 John 5:8. Suppose for the sake of argument that we conceded this argument; it would simply mean that πνεύμα in 1 John 5:8 does not have the same referent as in Matthew 28:19. There is nothing impossible or unreasonable about such a conclusion (setting aside for the moment the context); the word is not a technical term that must have the same precise meaning in every occurrence in the Bible or in theological language.

On the other hand, the coordination of the three terms is not the only exegetical factor in play. There is another: the context in which the three terms are coordinated. In 1 John 5:8, the context is that the three terms refer to three “witnesses”:

This is the One who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood. It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son. The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son. And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. (1 John 5:6-11 NASB)

Here John clearly expounds on the testimony of “the water and the blood” separately from the testimony of “the Spirit,” drawing a clear distinction between these two types of “witnesses.” Jesus Christ, he says, came by or with both water and blood. This statement almost certainly presupposes that John’s readers are familiar with what he says in his Gospel:

But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately **blood and water** came out. And he who has seen **has testified**, and his **testimony** is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe. (John 19:34-35 NASB)

The collocation of the pairing of water and blood in relation to Jesus’ death with the reference to John’s testimony to this event makes it beyond doubt that the function of the blood and the water

as “witnesses” in 1 John recalls this specific incident reported by the same author.<sup>5</sup> We thus know exactly what the blood and the water are; there is no ambiguity on this score.

The testimony or evidence of the blood and the water are important, but they are confirming witnesses. The primary witness of the three is that of the Spirit. We know this because of the special emphasis placed on the Spirit’s witness in the statement, “It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.” This statement puts the Spirit in a different category than the water and the blood—whatever we end up concluding as to the nature of the Spirit. The water and the blood are witnesses to the truth, but the Spirit *is* the truth. Just as John’s reference to the water and the blood recalls John 19:35, so also John’s reference to the Spirit as the truth recalls other statements from the Gospel:

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever—**the Spirit of the truth**.... When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, **the Spirit of the truth**, who goes out from the Father, he will **testify** about me.... But when he, **the Spirit of the truth**, comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 14:16-17a; 15:16; 16:13, my translation).

Note the close, repeated association of “the Spirit” with “the truth” (the noun is articular in all these occurrences) in conjunction with the explicit statement that the Spirit of the truth “will testify” about Jesus Christ. This collocation of language makes it certain that “the Spirit” of 1 John 5:8 is “the Spirit of the truth” referred to by Jesus in John 14-16.

The reader of 1 John who is familiar with the Gospel and has understood the Spirit identified as the Paraclete (Advocate) of John 14-16 to be a divine person will, of course, quite properly bring this understanding to 1 John 5:8. And there is even more.

In 1 John 5:9, John makes a comment that might strike us as out of place: “If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater.” What “testimony of men” does John have in mind here? In the context of John’s writings, it is his own testimony, his eyewitness testimony to the issuing of the blood and the water at the moment of Jesus’ death (John 19:35). John’s use of “we” in John 19:35 is not an authorial “we” but a reference to the community of Christians that included the rest of those who had seen Jesus (1:14) as well as those who believed the testimony of John and the other apostolic witnesses (21:24b). John’s point is that while believers rightly accept the testimony that he gave to Jesus, the witness of God is greater. But now let us relate this statement to his immediately preceding reference to the three witnesses. John had divided them into two categories: the witnesses of the water and the blood, which derive from John’s own eyewitness testimony; and the witness of the Spirit. In context, then, the testimony of the water and the blood is mediated through the testimony of men—specifically John himself. The testimony of the Spirit, on the other hand, is the testimony of God himself to his Son, which is

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<sup>5</sup>The Watchtower favors the view that “the spirit and the water” refer to John 3:5, and infer that the water refers to baptism. This view is plausible in and of itself (assuming, as many exegetes do, that the water in John 3:5 alludes to baptism), but the change in order (water and the Spirit in John 3:5, the Spirit and the water in 1 John 5:8) and the reference to witness in regards to “the water and the blood” make a reference to John 19:35 beyond reasonable doubt.

greater than the testimony of men. The Spirit dwelling in us, in testifying to the Son (John 15:26; 1 John 5:8), gives us God's own testimony to his Son (1 John 5:9-11).

The rich context of 1 John 5:6-11, especially in light of the same author's Gospel, presents the witness of the Spirit as the witness of God himself, and places it in a category distinct from the witness of the water and the blood that took the form of the witness of a man (John). This description of the Spirit's witness invites us to go back to John 14-16 to understand more fully who or what the Spirit is. In any case, the coordination of the Spirit with the water and the blood does not in any way imply that the Spirit is impersonal.

### **Interpreting Matthew 28:19 in Its Religious and Linguistic Contexts**

Returning to Matthew 28:19, whereas inanimate realities can be considered "witnesses" (what we would call evidences), the rite of baptism "into the name" is clearly and unmistakably an act of personal allegiance and commitment to the person or persons named in the rite. There are no exceptions in biblical usage of this very specific language. What makes it beyond reasonable doubt that the Holy Spirit in Matthew 28:19 is a person is not merely the coordinated listing of the Holy Spirit alongside the Father and the Son, nor even merely the use of the word "name" in reference to the Holy Spirit. Rather, it is the convergence or synergy of all five of the elements of the text that I have highlighted here that prove beyond reasonable doubt that the Holy Spirit in this text is a person:

- (1) The term *Spirit* often if not regularly refers to persons.
- (2) The term *Holy Spirit* is coordinated with two other terms referring to persons (Father, Son).
- (3) The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all said to have a "name."
- (4) The specific form "into the name of" assumes that the name of that of a personal agent.
- (5) The context is the administration of the rite of baptism, in which to "baptize into the name of" expresses the consecration, commitment, and allegiance of faith to the one or ones named in the rite.

Jehovah's Witnesses attempt to refute this argument by isolating each of these five points and attacking some of them (usually just the second and third points) separately, showing that no one of these points by itself can establish that the Holy Spirit is a person. This is understandable, given that popular and even scholarly literature typically cite one or two of these points (again, usually just the second and the third) as proof of the personhood of the Holy Spirit without recognizing or developing the argument holistically. However, once we understand that it is the way these semantic elements of the text work together—particularly the way the wording conveys meaning in the religious context of the rite of baptism—it is clear that the Trinitarian argument from the personhood of the Holy Spirit cannot be refuted in this way.

The point may be illustrated from additional statements and arguments presented by Dave Barron, our Jehovah's Witness author. He writes:

Indeed, it is no less natural for the Holy Spirit to be an influence that we are baptized into than it is for Jesus' death to be an event that we are baptized into.

Barron's argument seems to be as follows: Jesus' death is not a person, but one can be "baptized into his death" (Rom. 6:3); therefore, one can be "baptized into" the Holy Spirit without the implication that the Holy Spirit is a person. Immediately the problem with this argument becomes apparent. Paul does not say that we are "baptized *into the name of his death*"; moreover, the word *death* is not often or typically used as a term for animate or personal agents, unlike the term *spirit* or *Spirit*. For these two reasons, Romans 6:3 simply is not comparable to Matthew 28:19 in the way that the Jehovah's Witness argument requires. The argument fails because it treats the linguistic element "baptize into" in isolation from the other elements of the text.

Barron also attempts to discount the evidence of the term *name* in Matthew 28:19 by itself by showing that the word need not refer to a personal agent:

The semantic range of the word that is translated as "name" is fairly wide. Thayer's lexicon explains: "By a usage chiefly Hebraistic the name is used for everything which the name covers, everything the thought or feeling of which is roused in the mind by mentioning, hearing, remembering, the name, i. e. for *one's rank, authority, interests, pleasure, command, excellences, deeds, etc.*..." There is much to the word that has nothing to do with a personal, proper name.

This argument is doubly flawed. First of all, Barron has quoted Thayer's lexicon only so far as it suited him and then misconstrued what little he did quote. The "rank" and "authority" expressed or associated with the name are obviously those of a person. The "interests, pleasure, command, excellences, deeds, etc.," are equally those of the person bearing the name. The word *one's* itself in this context refers to the person, the someone, who bears the name. Lest there be any doubt on this score, though, one (!) need only continue reading in the same entry of Thayer's lexicon (picking up right where Barron left off):

thus, εἰς ὄνομα προφήτου, out of regard for (see εἰς, B. II. 2 d.) the name of prophet which he bears, equivalent to because he is a prophet, Matt. 10:41; βαπτίζειν τινα εἰς ὄνομα τίνος, by baptism to bind anyone to recognize and publicly acknowledge the dignity and authority of one (cf. βαπτίζω, II. b. (aa.)), Matt. 28:19; Acts 8:16; 19:5; 1 Cor. 1:13,15.<sup>6</sup>

Ouch. Thayer not only make clear that he is referring to various associations or connotations related to the names of persons, he also explains that "to baptize someone into the name of someone" (βαπτίζειν τινα εἰς ὄνομα τίνος) means "by baptism to bind anyone to recognize and publicly acknowledge the dignity and authority of one"—and he cites Matthew 28:19 as his first example! Barron omits any reference of this contrary evidence against his position, treating the lexicon as a postmodernist treats Scripture, as a source to be remolded to fit one's own agenda.

<sup>6</sup>A *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, by C. G. Grimm and C. L. W. Wilke, trans., rev., and enlarged by Joseph Henry Thayer (1889), in BibleWorks.



Thayer goes on at some length to elaborate numerous other contexts in which the word *name* is likewise used in reference to persons. Omitting no contrary evidence (since there is none), I quote the rest of Thayer's paragraph minus the citations and secondary source notes for the sake of clarity and focus:

*to do a thing...*, i.e. *by one's command and authority, acting on his behalf, promoting his cause...* of the Messiah,... of his own free-will and authority...; to do a thing...*of Jesus,....* According to a very frequent usage in the O. T...*the name of God* in the N. T. is used for all those qualities which to his worshippers are summed up in that name, and by which God makes himself known to men; it is therefore equivalent to his *divinity*, Latin *numen* (not his nature or essence as it is in itself), *the divine majesty and perfections*, so far forth as these are apprehended, named, magnified...(keep them consecrated and united to thy name (character), which thou didst commit to me to declare and manifest.... After the analogy of the preceding expression, *the name of Christ...* is used in the N. T. of all those things which, in hearing or recalling that name, we are bidden to recognize in Jesus and to profess; accordingly, of "his Messianic dignity, divine authority, memorable sufferings, in a word the peculiar services and blessings conferred by him on men," so far forth as these are believed, confessed, commemorated,... whoever nameth the name of the Lord namely, as his Lord...to hold fast i.e. persevere in professing,...to do or to suffer anything.... The phrase ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Χριστοῦ is used in various senses: a. *by the command and authority of Christ*: see examples just above. b. *in the use of the name of Christ* i.e. the power of his name being invoked for assistance,...universally.... c. *through the power of Christ's name*, pervading and governing their souls.... d. *in acknowledging, embracing, professing, the name of Christ...* in professing and proclaiming the name of Christ.... e. *relying or resting on the name of Christ, rooted (so to speak) in his name, i.e. mindful of Christ:....*, i.e. (for substance) "to ask a thing, as prompted by the mind of Christ and in reliance on the bond which unites us to him," ... God is said to do a thing...*regardful of the name of Christ*, i.e. moved by the name of Christ, for Christ's sake, διδόναι the thing asked,...i.e. because one calls himself or is called by the name of Christ.... The simple dative τῷ ὀνόματι Χριστοῦ signifies *by the power of Christ's name*, pervading and prompting souls,...; so also τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου (i. e. *of God*) λαλεῖν, of the prophets,...by uttering thy name as a spell,... εἰς τό ὄνομα τοῦ Χριστοῦ συνάγεσθαι is used of those who come together to deliberate concerning any matter relating to Christ's cause (German *auf den Namen*), *with the mind directed unto, having regard unto, his name,...* i.e. *on account of professing my name, ...to beseech one by employing Christ's name as a motive or incentive...*; by embracing and avowing *his name*, ...equivalent to for defending, spreading, strengthening, the authority of Christ,... τό ὄνομα is used absolutely, *the Name*, namely, κυρίου, of the Lord Jesus....

How Barron decided this entry to be supportive of his claim that the word *name* need not refer to a person is difficult to imagine. But this is not even the main problem with his argument, although it is bad enough. It is a fact that the word *name* can refer to something other than a person; specifically, the word *name* can refer to the proper name of a location, such as Gethsemane (Mark 14:32), Nazareth (Luke 1:26), Emmaus (Luke 24:13), and the like.<sup>7</sup> We can probably imagine other contexts in which the word *name* might refer to something other than a person, though Thayer mentions no such examples and Barron has cited none of his own.<sup>8</sup> For our purposes the main problem is that it isolates the use of the term *name* from the religious and linguistic context. Whatever unusual or exceptional uses of the word *name* we might imagine or even find, in the linguistic and religious context of being “baptized into the name of” the term *name* unambiguously refers to the personal object of one’s religious commitment expressed in baptism.

Oddly, Barron states that the “name” may refer in Matthew 28:19 to the “office” of each one named:

Within Matthew 28:19 the most natural understanding would be to take “name” to refer to each one’s office. This would include the functions that they perform. As to be baptized into Christ is to recognize who he is and what he does while accepting his influence upon our lives, to be baptized into his office would carry with it a parallel sense. We would recognize his role and accept his influence. We would do this of the Father and the Holy Spirit as well.

Of course, an “office” could only refer in this context to the official position or role or function of a personal agent. An impersonal force or energy does not occupy an “office.” This explanation of what it means to be “baptized into the name of” someone is not quite right, but in any case it also fails to avoid the direct implication that the Holy Spirit is indeed a person.

A little later in his article, Barron observes:

Examining the grammar alone, little can be derived from Matthew 28:19 in support of Trinitarian theology.

Indeed, but one cannot derive Trinitarian theology or *any* theology, or even any meaning at all, from “the grammar alone”—of *any* text. Humans communicate meaning, including theological meaning, through a complex construction of linguistic elements, involving genre, semantics, syntax, and grammar, in historical, cultural, philosophical, religious contexts. It is, frankly, absurd and naïve to criticize Trinitarianism or any belief on the grounds that one cannot derive

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<sup>7</sup>See also “the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem” (Rev. 3:12), contrasted later with the “name” of “Babylon the Great” (Rev. 17:5).

<sup>8</sup>In John 10:3, Jesus gives a parable about a shepherd who “calls his own sheep by name,” referring to the familiar practice of giving names to animals—though of course the sheep in the parable represent human persons. In Revelation 6:8, John describes a vision he had of a rider on a horse and says that the rider’s name was Death. See also Wormwood as “the name of the star” (Rev. 8:11). In Mark 5:9 and Luke 8:30, a demon-possessed man says that *his* name (ὄνομα) is *Legion* because he was possessed by many demons (Mark 5:9); thus, this verse is no exception.

that belief from the grammar of a passage considered alone. Here again, the author's mistaken method is isolating these various aspects of a text from one another in order to dispense with their role in creating the meaning that text conveys.

To blunt the evidence that the Holy Spirit in this text is not only a person, but a divine person, Barron cites Luke 9:26:

“the glory of him [Christ] and of the Father and of the holy angels”  
τῆ δόξῃ αὐτοῦ καὶ τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τῶν ἁγίων ἀγγέλων

He notes that this coordinated triad is grammatically parallel to our key phrase in Matthew 28:19:

“the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”  
τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος

He then comments:

The text of Matthew 28:19 no more demonstrates a Triune God than the text of Luke 9:26, especially when the latter would include angels in that God.

The fallacy in this argument is again twofold. First, the grammatical parallel between the two texts is real enough, but the case for understanding Matthew 28:19 in a Trinitarian way does not appeal solely to the grammatical form of that phrase.

Second, as I pointed out at the beginning of this paper, Matthew 28:19 does not in and of itself, apart from the rest of the Bible, demonstrate every component of the doctrine of the Trinity. This does not mean, however, that it contributes nothing to our understanding of God as triune. As we have seen, it clearly presents the Holy Spirit as a person. (The grammatical parallel in Luke 9:26 actually confirms this conclusion, since obviously the “holy angels” are personal beings. Likewise, the “Holy Spirit” in Matthew 28:19 is also clearly a person.) This one conclusion has significant ramifications for theology. If the Holy Spirit is a person, then he is not, as Jehovah's Witnesses think, an impersonal force or energy or influence that emanates from God. Furthermore, if the Holy Spirit is a person, then he must be either an uncreated, divine person or a created person. There is no realistic chance of squaring with the Bible the notion that the Holy Spirit is a created being, which would explain why virtually no religious group professing to adhere to the Bible teaches such an idea. But this leaves us with the conclusion that the Holy Spirit is an uncreated, divine person. That conclusion is a significant plank in the Trinitarian theological platform.

### **The Holy Spirit—a Person without a Name?**

Jehovah's Witnesses sometimes argue that since the Bible never assigns a personal or proper name to the Holy Spirit—in contrast to the Son who has the name *Jesus*, for example—Matthew 28:19 cannot plausibly be understood to be referring to the Holy Spirit as someone who has a name. The *Watchtower* magazine, for example, had this to say in 1991:

Actually, the Bible never speaks of the holy spirit in the same way that it speaks of God or of Jesus. For example, in the Bible, the holy spirit does not have a personal name.... If the names of the Father and of the Son are so important, why does the holy spirit not have a personal name? Surely, this detail alone should make a person wonder whether the spirit is really equal to the Father and the Son.<sup>9</sup>

The *Watchtower's* argument here proceeds from a couple of assumptions. The first is that the Bible never identifies the Holy Spirit as Jehovah (Yahweh). This assumption is open to challenge. The apostle Paul states, "Now the Lord is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:17), and in the immediate context "the Lord" is Jehovah (v. 16, cf. Ex. 34:34). But we may agree that the Bible rarely if ever applies the name Jehovah directly to the Holy Spirit.

The second assumption is that in order for Matthew 28:19 to be referring to an actual name for the Holy Spirit, it must be a personal or proper name. This assumption is simply unwarranted, although Trinitarians as well as anti-Trinitarians have sometimes made this assumption. Trinitarian apologists, for example, have sometimes argued that "the name" in Matthew 28:19 must be the name Jehovah, which therefore applies to all three persons. Most notoriously (and fallaciously), Oneness Pentecostals argue that since the personal, proper name of the Son is *Jesus*, and since Matthew 28:19 speaks of "the name" in the singular, the implication is that *Jesus* is the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

The error here is in thinking that the term *name* in Matthew 28:19 must refer to a proper name, like *Fred* or *Mary*. That is simply incorrect. The word *name* in the Bible can, of course, refer to proper names, but it can also refer to what in English we often call "titles." The prayer "Our Father who are in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Matt. 6:9; also Luke 11:2) refers to *Father* as a name. The divine name YHWH or Jehovah is conspicuously absent from the Lord's Prayer, even in the NWT. Likewise, in his prayer to the Father before he was arrested, Jesus stated that he had manifested to the disciples the name of the "Father"—referring to the Father by that designation six times, and never by the name "Jehovah" or any other "proper name" (John 17:1, 5, 11, 21, 24, 25). Jesus once said, "For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ'" (Matt. 24:5); here *the Christ* is the "name" in question. Similarly, Peter says that Christians are blessed if they are "reviled for the name of Christ" because they are known by the name "Christian" (1 Pet. 4:14, 16). In an interesting contrast, Paul chastises those who are proud of bearing "the name 'Jew'" but not living up to that name (Rom. 2:17). The "name" that Jesus has that is "above every name" is the name "Lord" (Phil. 2:9-11; cf. Eph. 1:21). The "more excellent name" that Jesus has in comparison to the angels includes, at least, the designation "Son" (Heb. 1:4-5), and probably also the names "God" (1:8) and "Lord" (1:10). The Book of Revelation states that Christ's "name is called the Word of God" (Rev. 19:13) and that he also has the "name" *King of kings and Lord of lords* (Rev. 19:16).

These passages clearly illustrate that the word *name* in the New Testament need not refer to a proper name. By far the simplest and most natural interpretation of Matthew 28:19, then, is that

<sup>9</sup>"Identifying the Holy Spirit," *Watchtower*, 1/15/1991, 3, 4.

the text is referring to *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Spirit* as three distinct names. One of the points that Barron gets right in his article is that the expression “the name of” followed by two or more names is not referring covertly to one name shared by the two or more individuals named (Gen. 48:6, 16; Deut. 18:20; Ruth 1:2; 2 Sam. 7:9). Rather, the word *name* in this usage functions distributively, referring to each name that follows. This means that in Matthew 28:19, *Holy Spirit* is just as much a “name” as are *Father* and *Son*. All three are personal designations descriptive of each in a distinctive way pertaining to how disciples who declare their faith and loyalty to those three in baptism relate to them.

If the Father is a divine person (which he is), and the Holy Spirit is a divine person (which we now see that he is), it is difficult to escape the conclusion that in Matthew 28:19 the Son is also a divine person—which the Jehovah’s Witnesses concede in any case, although they view him as a lesser divinity. But now it appears that Matthew 28:19 teaches that the first thing new Christians should do, upon repenting of their sins and believing in Christ, is to be baptized as an act of faith, commitment, and allegiance to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three distinct yet closely related divine persons. Given that the Gospel of Matthew presents this climactic instruction in the context of a stoutly Judaic monotheistic worldview (cf. Matt. 22:37), Matthew 28:19 goes a long way toward establishing a rudimentary Trinitarian way of relating to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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