

# OpenTheo

## Do Verses in Acts about Baptism Support a Oneness Understanding of God?

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### #STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether the fact that the apostles baptized people in Jesus' name supports a oneness understanding of God and how to reconcile the laying on of hands to receive the Holy Spirit in Acts 8 with the idea that we receive the Holy Spirit simply by believing.

\* Does the fact that the apostles baptized people in Jesus' name support a oneness understanding of God?

\* How can I reconcile the fact that the Samaritan believers in Acts 8 didn't receive the Holy Spirit until the apostles laid hands on them with the idea that we receive the Holy Spirit simply by believing, as it says in Galatians 3:2?

### Transcript

[Music] [Bell] This is Amy Hall. I'm here with Greg Koukl and you're listening to Stand to Reason's #STRaskPodcast. Good morning.

Good morning, Greg. Let's get started with a question from Jeremy. Okay.

"The apostles fulfilled Jesus command to baptize in the name of the Trinity." See Matthew 28, 19. "By baptizing in Jesus' name." And then he gives a list of verses. Acts 2, 38, 8, 12, 8, 16, 10, 48, and 19, 5. Which seems to have involved an oral invocation of his name.

Cross-reference Acts 3, 6 and 22, 16. Does this support a Oneness Understanding of the Godhead? All right. Give us, well, I guess I can do it.

You can correct me if only. For the sake of those who may not be familiar with the Oneness Pentecostals, which is a denomination, they are not Trinitarian to be distinguished from all the rest of the Pentecostals that are. But these are Oneness Pentecostals.

And so they are modalists, which means that there is one God and one person who appears or manifests himself in different manners or modes. So in the Old Testament, God manifested himself as the Father in the New Testament, the Gospels as the Son, and in the Book of Acts and following in the Church Age as the Holy Spirit. So you have the same One God with one person manifesting himself in different ways.

Some people think of an illustration for the Trinity, which is not a good one for the classical sense, but it's a good one for modalism that water can be ice or it could be gas or it could be liquid, you know, three different phases of the same thing. Well, that actually is modalism. Modalism, Patrick, I'm making fun of a funny video that we've seen before.

Yeah, Luther and Seth, that's modalism. So that's their view. And apparently, or what one thing that seems to support the notion is the baptismal formula because the disciples were told to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

That's a great commission, Matthew 28. And when we see them actually baptizing here in chapter two of Acts and verse 38, Peter said to them repent and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins received the gift of the Holy Spirit. We see also in chapter eight and verse 12.

But when they believe Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized men and women alike. Now that's not quite so clear that they were baptized in the name of Jesus. But nevertheless, you also have chapter 10 and verse 48.

And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. And you have similar wording in chapter 19, verse five, you have a couple of other verses too that kind of say the same thing. I'm looking at this.

This was, oh, yeah. So he says, it seems to have involved an oral invocation of his name. And so he gives a couple verses.

One was three, six, which is, let's see here. Oh, gosh, you're faster at this than I am, Greg. Oh, Acts three, six, six, six, but Peter said, I do not possess silver and gold.

But what I do have, I give to you in the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazarene walk. Okay, by the way, just an observation. That's not a baptismal formula.

That's just a healing done in the name of Jesus, which means in the authority of Jesus. Peter isn't doing it himself by his own power or piety. It is because of Jesus that this happens.

And that's why he's invoking the name and that circumstance, right? And then he also cites 22 16. Now, why do you delay, get up and be baptized and wash away your sins,

calling on his name? Okay, once again, that's ambiguous as to the formula. Okay.

And then the question there for some is, is the baptism that is washing actually effectively washing the sins away or is it the calling on his name? That is the thing that brings the forgiveness of sins, but that's a little bit of a different issue. So nevertheless, we have number versus in the book of Acts that do seem to invoke Jesus name in the baptismal formula. And that would be the doctrine of the oneness Pentecostals.

So we baptize in Jesus name because there's not a father, son and spirit, they aren't separate. They are all the same. And this is the way the disciples did it, Jesus name.

Therefore, this is sometimes called Jesus only, but characteristic of oneness Pentecostals. And so this seems to support their doctrine. So before we set out to try to solve this textual problem, I want to put a couple of things in place here, Amy.

And first of all, with regards to oneness Pentecostals, what you can't do is you can't look at some ambiguity like this one. Well, Jesus said one thing, but they did another thing. And therefore, the oneness Pentecostal modalistic view is true.

Well, that's a big leap. Okay. Even if we take those verses at face value, that's still a big leap because there are all other considerations about this view.

If at Jesus' own baptism, you see the father speaking, that was assigned to John the Baptist, the spirit in the form of a dove is hovering and Jesus lips are not moving. So it isn't Jesus talking, it's the father talking. Okay.

That doesn't comport with modalistic one is Pentecostal theology. I just use that as one example, because there's all kinds of examples in the scriptures where the Holy Spirit and the father and Jesus interact in personal ways, make it a clear that they are distinct persons or else they wouldn't be able to interact that way. In fact, this is a complaint that Jehovah's Witnesses raised.

And they say, wait a minute, here's Jesus talking to the father, he's praying to the father. How can he pray to himself if he's God? Now, there's an answer to that, of course, you don't pray to a nature. That's what they share.

You pray to a person and that's what they don't share. The son is a different person from the father. It's completely consistent with Trinitarian doctrine.

But notice that even the Jehovah's Witnesses acknowledge that there is a distinction in the text between the persons. So these are some of the difficulties a person has to overcome in a fair manner in the text to hold to a modalistic oneness Pentecostal doctrine. So that doctrine just has all kinds of problems.

And these references don't rescue it from those problems. Okay, that's the first thing.

The second thing is let's just look at the textual issue.

It seems, Prima-Fashi at face value, that Jesus said for the disciples to do baptisms in a particular way, baptizing in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, making disciples. Okay. And the disciples didn't do what Jesus said because within what 40 days Pentecost, 50 days, after Jesus said that, they're doing something different.

They're baptizing in the name of Jesus. Okay. So there's a contradiction.

It's an obvious contradiction if we take the texts at face value. Now that's a problem. Either the text is contradicting itself, which means that the disciples immediately did it wrong.

First opportunity they have to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, they end up baptizing in Jesus' name. Okay. That seems to me really unlikely, which means there's another alternative, and that is maybe we are not understanding these texts properly.

And I think that's the problem. I don't think the disciples got it wrong. I think that we are misunderstanding something important here.

So let me back up and talk about the name of Jesus. Now Jesus said in John 15 and other places, if you ask anything in my name, then I'll do that for you, something to that effect, which is why people, when they pray, they end in Jesus' name Amen. I noticed something odd though about the prayers in the New Testament, particularly in the book of Acts and also in some of the letters.

There is no prayer in the New Testament uttered by any disciple that ends with the phrase in Jesus' name, Amen. None. Why aren't they following Jesus' directions? They are.

Praying in Jesus' name doesn't mean saying in Jesus' name. It means praying by the authority of Jesus. No, I don't know, young people may not, this may not mean much to them as an illustration, but when I was younger and watching TV or cartoons or whatever, and a policeman stood up in the middle of a freckus and said something, stop in the name of the law.

Well, people understood what they meant. He wasn't exercising his authority as a citizen or as individual, stop in my name, stop because I said so. No, stop because I'm representing the government and on the authority of the government, I can command you to stop what you're doing.

Okay. So that's what it means to to act in the name of someone. Okay.

If you were my ambassador for standard reason, for example, Amy, and you went to

negotiate something with someone else on behalf of the organization, you could say, I'm going, I'm here in the name of Greg Koko. I'm here on his authority. I'm here to do his bidding, his way.

And so I carry his authority. I can sign anything and it will, he'll agree with it because that's what it means for me to go in his authority or in his name. Okay.

Now with that in place, same concept is going on here. When we pray in the name of Jesus, we don't have to say in the name of Jesus because that's not what it's about. What it's about.

And there's nothing wrong with saying that. I just think it becomes kind of perfunctory. We don't think about that.

Sometimes I'll end the prayer and I'll say, Lord, by the authority that Christ gave me, I'm making these requests. Okay, that's the same notion. But if that's in my heart, anyway, I'm going before the Lord in the name of the son because of the son by his authority, by his forgiveness, by the access he gives, then then God's going to hear me.

There's nothing magic in those words in the name of. So with that in mind, I think the same concept applies here in baptism. I don't think that what Jesus was necessarily giving was a, a magic phrase that has to be uttered just so for it to work.

People are being baptized in the name of God, basically. And Jesus expresses the Trinitarian formula there in Matthew. But sometimes when the disciples do it, what they reference then is the authority of Jesus who gave them that command to do the baptism.

So they are acting on his behalf and in his name to fulfill the command that he gave to the church to be baptized and identified with the larger body of Christ and as an expression of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the newness of life that we have going from the old into the new. Okay, that's what's critical about baptism, that understanding and that we're doing it not on our own just for fun, just because we want to do something religious, but because we're doing it because of Christ based on the authority that God gave in Jesus, which can also be expressed in the phrase in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It's all the same God.

That's the idea. We're doing this as part of our commitment to God expressed in the person of Jesus or in the Trinitarian formula. I actually don't think it matters.

And that's why you get these variations. Nevertheless, there's nothing in any of these verses that in the slightest bit substantiates modalistic oneness, Pentecostal doctrine about the nature of God. Right.

It's important to remember that this all fits with Trinitarian theology. It certainly doesn't contradict that. Even if you could say, well, this fits in with this particular verse fits in

with the idea of oneness, it certainly doesn't contradict Trinitarian theology.

And when you add all the other evidence in in the Bible, then we can see the full picture of what's going on. In fact, part of the reason why we know Jesus' deity is because of the way it will tribute things to Jesus that it also tributes to God. And we recognize, okay, all of these persons are God.

And so it doesn't contradict the Trinity to say, to speak of Jesus as being God. And I was thinking about the idea that Jesus is the way to the Father. So it makes sense to talk about believing on him.

He was the one who came and saved us. He's the one whose name is being proclaimed that we call on him and then we are saved. That is the way the whole system of salvation is working.

And I was thinking about 1 John chapter 2, starting at verse 23, whoever denies the Son does not have the Father. The one who confesses the Son has the Father also. So now we're talking about the two persons.

And so confessing Jesus Christ, for example, baptizing in his name, you have the Father also. So there's an example of coming to the Father through Jesus in his name, but you have the two persons, not just the one. So you just have to look at the whole picture and not just one little verse by the way.

This is one of the reasons that we characterize these issues, the Trinity as a solution and not a problem because if you don't have a Trinitarian doctrine in place, you can't make sense of all the passages that are relevant to the question. And one kind of parting comment, if the explanation that I gave does not sit well with some of you about the notion of the name, all right, and what that refers to, then I have a challenge for you. You either have to come up with some other solution that's a reasonable explanation or you have to affirm a contradiction because there's no question that Jesus said one thing and the disciples did, apparently did another.

If you're taking those words kind of at face value as if this is a formula to be uttered or else the action itself is not legitimate, okay? Now, I don't think that's the case, obviously, something else is going on just like your prayers. There's nothing, there's no abracadabra in saying in Jesus' name, Amen, okay? But that's kind of the way people use it. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, in Jesus' name, Amen, abracadabra.

No, forget that. That isn't that there's no magic in those words, okay? It's the authority you go to the Father in to make the request that makes the difference and that authority is in Jesus. So let's stay in Acts and go to a question from Lane.

In Acts 8, 15, and following, new Samaritan believers didn't receive the Holy Spirit until apostles laid hands on them. How does this reconcile with the idea that we receive the

Holy Spirit just by believing Galatians 3, 2? Yeah, there is an explanation here that I think is a good one, all right? But it has to do with cultural issues. Also, Ephesians chapter 1 says that we receive the Holy Spirit by believing too, having believed received the Holy Spirit of promise.

So there's no question that in the vast bulk of the New Testament age, belief in Christ is the thing that initiates the regeneration that the Holy Spirit brings. So there is all a package together, receive, believe, be baptized in the Spirit, different language that's being used, okay? So the question then is why is it that this didn't happen with everybody instantly in the beginning? I want you to think about Cornelius for a minute. Actually Peter and Cornelius, Acts chapter 10, all right? I just pulled that up right there.

Yes, he got it right there, okay. Peter was discipled by Jesus. He understood the Old Testament.

He got all this information from Jesus after the resurrection, some on the road to him, he asked two other disciples, but that had to be communicated. So there's a blossoming of understanding of how the Abrahamic covenant is fleshed out in the New Covenant, the giving of the Spirit, and the blessing to all nations, but still, 10 chapters into Acts, Peter is reluctant to talk to a Gentile, okay? And so like the change hasn't fallen into the meter. And so when he goes and he talks to these Gentiles, as he's giving the message in Acts chapter 10, they begin speaking in tongues, okay? Well, this was the manifestation of the Spirit given to them on Pentecost themselves.

And Peter says, hey, they have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. We should baptize them, okay? Now what's going on here is a message that God is communicating to Peter. And by the way, it took three times that God gave that crazy vision to Peter before he kind of came to a census, okay, I better go out and see Cornelius.

So that was prep work. And then after he saw the vision, then the messengers came to invite him to go to see Cornelius. But that was important to kind of break through a little bit.

So we have a divide here. We have a divide with the Jews. We have a divide with the Samaritans, which are half Jews.

We have a divide with the Gentiles, all right? And so there's a period of transition where God makes it really clear at each step of the way, the transition points. And there are actually three of them in the New Testament, one's Cornelius, one's the Samaritans. And there's another one that were disciples of John the Baptist who hadn't heard that there even was a Holy Spirit.

So in these transitions, there is an act of bestowing the Holy Spirit on by the authority, by apostolic authority, in the case of Peter. Peter in this case in Acts chapter 10, earlier

on with Philip went down and preached in Samaria. And then the apostles came down and there was the giving of the Holy Spirit.

And what this becomes in practical terms is a way that God is getting the narrow-minded Jews used to the idea that the new covenant is for all people, just like he promised implicitly in the Abraham of Covenant. And so first the Samaritans, hey, they get the Holy Spirit too, the apostles are there. Can you imagine what would have happened if all of a sudden Samaritans are believing, and they say they have the Holy Spirit too, and the apostles don't believe this, and the rest of the church that are Jewish don't believe this, now you've got to riff.

And the same thing could have happened with Gentiles. But there's a connector between the apostolic band trained by Jesus and the acknowledgement of the giving of the Holy Spirit to these disparate groups that then confirms for them that the gospel is for everyone, not just the Jews, not just for half Jews, not just for, but not just for Jews, but also for half Jews, and also for Gentiles. And so we see this transition.

Unfortunately, sometimes when people read that kind of an isolation, without taking into consideration the declarations like in Galatians that was just mentioned or Ephesians, that the Spirit is given upon belief, they think that there's a second thing that has to be done. Somebody's got to lay hands and then you get this special deal and then you start speaking in tongues. But that wasn't the case.

Ephesians and Galatians were written later after these transitions had taken place when the norm was believe and receive. Prior to that, there was another cultural concern. God himself was concerned with and needed to rectify on.

That's why you have these transitions, these different passages. And just to clarify too, I know you said they were narrow minded in the sense that they were had a narrow view of what was going to happen with this salvation. But we can't really blame them for that because this in actuality, the covenant was just with the Jews.

Gentiles could join the Jews and become under the covenant and be circumcised and become part of that. You're talking about the Mosaic covenant. I'm talking about the Mosaic covenant.

Yes. So it's not that... The impulses understand. Yeah, it was totally understandable.

Ephesians too says, talks about how formally they were strangers to the Gentiles, were strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. So it's completely understandable that this would catch them by surprise. Although they should have known and they point this out, I think Jesus points this out, they should have known based on things that were said throughout the Old Testament, that this blessing would come to the whole world.



And God talks about bringing Gentiles into his people. And I can't think of where that is in the Old Testament. But you go your whole life and you're trained to follow the Mosaic law, you're trained to separate yourself from the other nations.

For many reasons, that was necessary. And so all of a sudden, this happens and it's no surprise that they have to have it drummed into their heads. Well, you and I, we get things really easily, right? God never has to repeat things for us.

We're just right on top of it, like the rest of the church. So yeah, we can be sympathetic. Because a lot of times, I think people assume this was all because of some kind of bigotry, but it actually, there was a good reason for God separating the Jews from the Gentiles.

So they're, I mean, they're, since we're fallen, there probably was some bigotry involved also. But there was also a desire to keep God's covenant and honor his covenant and follow his law. So it wasn't, it wasn't like they were, they were terrible people and God had to.

Oh, well, that law was made as a dividing wall on purpose to keep the Gentiles and the Jews separate. So there wouldn't be syncretism. There wouldn't be a mixing of religions.

And they took them a long time to get that, to get that right. And once they got it right, they kind of went overboard, you know, after they returned to the land. And by the time of Jesus, now everything was rigid.

This is why Paul says that in the new covenant, same chapter, you're just referring to an Ephesians chapter two, that that dividing wall has been broken down. So that the two can become one new man. And of course, that's the church, which is a major emphasis to the book of Ephesians.

And you can really understand their, their fear, because like you just said, they took them a long time to get that right. They got exiled from their land because of syncretism. And because of the evil that they were doing.

So it's, it's no surprise that when they, the people who want to honor God don't want to go against what he says. And so it took a lot to get this through their heads. And thank goodness they did, Greg, because now we are God's people.

So all right. Thank you, Jeremy. Thank you, Lang.

We appreciate hearing from you. If you have a question for this podcast, please send it on Twitter with the hashtag #STRS or you can go through our website at str.org. We look forward to hearing from you. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for a stand to reason.

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