Did the Catholic Church edit Matthew 28:19?

Apologetics · https://thebiblicalroots.org/answers/did-the-catholic-church-edit-matthew-2819/

No. There is no credible historical or manuscript evidence that the Catholic Church altered Matthew 28:19 from an original baptismal formula that read only "in Jesus' name." The overwhelming manuscript evidence we possess—from Greek manuscripts, early Christian writings, and ancient Bible translations—contains the familiar wording: "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19).

Claims that Matthew 28:19 was changed centuries after the apostles are popular in some anti-Trinitarian circles, but they do not withstand historical scrutiny. While there are legitimate scholarly debates about many textual issues in the New Testament, Matthew 28:19 is not one of them. The Trinitarian formula appears in every known Greek manuscript of Matthew that contains the passage.

The most common version of this claim cites a quotation allegedly from *The Catholic Encyclopedia* stating that the Church changed the baptismal formula in the second century. However, researchers have repeatedly shown that this quotation does not appear in the referenced article and is widely regarded as a fabricated or misattributed citation.

Another argument appeals to the church historian Eusebius (c. AD 260–339), who sometimes quoted Matthew 28:19 in abbreviated form as "in my name." Some have suggested this proves that an earlier version of Matthew existed. Most scholars, however, conclude that Eusebius was paraphrasing the passage rather than providing a precise textual citation. Importantly, Eusebius also quoted the full Trinitarian wording of Matthew 28:19 in other places. If he had possessed manuscripts with a different reading, we would expect evidence of that textual tradition elsewhere. None exists.

It is true that the book of Acts frequently describes baptism being performed "in the name of Jesus" (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5). But these passages are generally understood as describing the authority and allegiance of Christian baptism rather than prescribing a specific verbal formula. In the same way that a police officer acts "in the name of the law," the phrase identifies the basis or authority of the action. The early church saw no contradiction between baptizing according to

Jesus' command in Matthew 28:19 and describing Christian baptism as being done in His name.

In fact, some of the earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament reflect the Trinitarian baptismal formula. The *Didache*, a first-century or early second-century Christian document, instructs believers to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This witness is remarkably early and demonstrates that the wording of Matthew 28:19 was known long before the fourth-century debates over the Trinity.

Theologically, the verse is significant because it places the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together under a single "name" (singular), not three separate names. Christians have long recognized this as one of several passages that contribute to the doctrine of the Trinity, alongside John 1:1, John 20:28, 2 Corinthians 13:14, and other texts. But even if Matthew 28:19 did not exist, the doctrine would still rest on a broad range of biblical evidence.

Key Scriptures to Study

- Matthew 28:18–20 — Jesus commands baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- Acts 2:38 — Baptism is associated with faith in Jesus Christ.
- Acts 10:48 — Cornelius and his household are baptized in Jesus' name.
- John 1:1–3 — The Son shares the divine nature.
- John 20:28 — Thomas calls Jesus "My Lord and my God."
- 2 Corinthians 13:14 — Father, Son, and Spirit are joined in a Trinitarian blessing.
- Ephesians 4:4–6 — Unity of Spirit, Lord, and Father.
- 1 Peter 1:2 — Salvation is described in Trinitarian terms.

Objections & Misconceptions

Common Objection: "The apostles only baptized in Jesus' name in Acts."

Acts describes Christian baptism as being performed under the authority of Jesus Christ. These descriptions do not necessarily record the exact words spoken during the baptismal ceremony. The apostles were obeying the command Jesus gave in Matthew 28:19.

Common Objection: "Eusebius quoted Matthew 28:19 differently."

Eusebius often paraphrased biblical texts. He also quoted the full Trinitarian wording elsewhere. No surviving manuscript tradition supports a shorter reading.

Common Objection: "The Trinity was invented centuries later."

The formal doctrine developed over time as the church clarified biblical teaching, but the raw biblical data underlying the doctrine appears throughout the New Testament. Matthew 28:19 is one example among many.

Embedded media: https://www.youtube.com/embed/TnmTxOWboV8?feature=oembed

Why This Matters

This question ultimately concerns whether we can trust the text of Scripture. The evidence strongly supports the authenticity of Matthew 28:19 and demonstrates that Christians today are reading the same passage known to believers in the earliest centuries of the church.

More importantly, the verse reminds us that Christian faith is centered on the God revealed in Scripture—the Father who sent the Son, the Son who accomplished our redemption, and the Holy Spirit who brings us to faith.

Recommended Resources

- *The Forgotten Trinity* — James White
- *The Trinity: An Introduction* — Scott R. Swain
- *Delighting in the Trinity* — Michael Reeves
- *The Text of the New Testament* — Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman
- *The Heresy of Orthodoxy* — Andreas Köstenberger and Michael Kruger