

Is There a Baptismal Formula?

by David Huston

This paper is presented as a response to those who believe there is spiritual power in the mere repetition of words, even the words "In the name of Jesus Christ."

*When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.
Acts 19:5*

THE CONTROVERSY OVER WHAT CONSTITUTES the proper baptismal formula has raged for centuries. On the one hand we have the Trinitarians, who say the correct formula is in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). On the other hand, as believers in the Oneness of God, we say the correct formula is in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38). The Trinitarians say we should follow the words of Jesus rather than the words of Peter. They say that in the name of simply means by the authority of. They say the Book of Acts is inconsistent, saying in the name of Jesus Christ in Acts 2:38; in the name of the Lord Jesus in Acts 19:5; and in the name of the Lord in Acts 10:48.

But is the argument over which words or phrases constitute the correct baptismal formula even addressing the right question? In light of its meaning, should we even be using the word formula in connection with water baptism? Consider the definition of this word according to *Webster's New World Dictionary*. The first definition it gives is: "a fixed form of words, esp. one that has lost its original meaning or force and is now used only as a conventional or ceremonial expression. The second is: "a rule or method of doing something, esp. when conventional and used or repeated without thought. And the third is, "an exact statement of religious faith or doctrine."

Of these three definitions, only the third comes even close to what we mean when we speak of a baptismal formula. Yet even it fails to adequately describe the essence of what takes place when the words are uttered, "I baptize you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Perhaps, rather than entering into debates over what constitutes the correct

baptismal formula, we would be wiser to assert that there is no baptismal formula at all. This is to say that there are no special words which by their mere repetition make water baptism an authentic and efficacious spiritual experience. God does not respond to the mere repetition of words; He responds to genuine faith. To be buried with Christ in baptism is more about a name and faith in that name than it is some formulaic expression. Perhaps this is why the Book of Acts records the words in at least three variations. Could it be that God did not want us to reduce the power of the name Jesus into a mere formula?

Whether we are baptizing in water, praying for the sick, casting out demons, or praying for the Holy Spirit, we must be careful never to reduce the phrase *in the name of Jesus* to a mere form of words used or repeated without thought. When Peter came across the lame man at the Gate Beautiful, he declared, *In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk* (Acts 3:6). But he then explained, *And His name, through faith in His name, has made this man strong* (Acts 3:16). It was not because Peter knew the right formula that the man was healed; it was because Peter knew the God upon whose name He called.

In the name of Jesus is not some magic formula. It is not the Christianized version of abracadabra. To suppose that we can invoke the power of God by simply repeating the right words is converting faith into witchcraft. The very fact that Trinitarians are concerned about which is the correct formula for their ceremonial baptisms shows the vanity of engaging in any debate over baptismal formulas.

Yes, we must call on the Lord by name. But in the end, the issue is not whether or not we know the correct formula; it is whether or not we know the power of the name of Jesus, have faith in the name of Jesus, and have a living relationship with the God whom we call upon by the name of Jesus.

‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.... ’ Acts 2:38