

Examining the Evidence: The Case for and Against the Authenticity of Matthew 28:19.

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Abstract

The authenticity of Matthew 28:19, a crucial verse in Christian theology, has been the subject of ongoing debate among scholars. This study presents a comprehensive examination of the historical and textual evidence for and against the authenticity of this passage. The internal evidence, including the literary style and chiasmic force of the verse, supports its authenticity. The historical evidence, such as the widespread acceptance and quotations by early Christians, as well as the uniformity of manuscripts, further strengthens the case for the verse's authenticity. Also, the textual evidence, including the lack of variations in manuscripts and early quotations by church fathers, suggests that Matthew 28:19 is not a later addition. However, some scholars argue that the Trinitarian formula in the verse was a later theological insertion, pointing to the variants found in Eusebius' writings and the lack of early manuscript evidence. The study contextualizes the evidence within the broader historical development of Christian theology, highlighting the implications of the verse's authenticity for understanding the role of the Trinity in the early Church. Overall, the weight of the evidence supports the authenticity of Matthew 28:19, reinforcing its central importance in Christian theology and practice.

Keywords: *Matthew 28:19, Authenticity, Trinitarian Formula, Early Christianity, Textual Evidence, Theological Development*

Introduction

The background and importance of Matthew 28:19 are crucial in understanding the significance of this verse in Christian theology. Matthew 28:19 is a central passage in the New Testament, particularly regarding baptism and the Trinity. It is the final command given by Jesus to his disciples before his ascension, instructing them to "teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). This verse has been a subject of debate among scholars and theologians due to its potential implications on the doctrine of the Trinity and the nature of baptism (Plowman, n.d.; Wise, 2009).

The debate surrounding the authenticity of Matthew 28:19 is multifaceted. Some scholars argue that the verse is a later interpolation, inserted into the text for dogmatic reasons, particularly after the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. They point out that Eusebius, a prominent early Christian writer, often omits or stops short of the words that speak of baptism in his quotations of Matthew 28:19, suggesting that the original text might have been simpler and did not include the Trinity (Wayne, 2018). However, other scholars contend that the evidence from manuscripts, versions, and early Christian writings supports the genuineness of the verse. They argue that the verse is found in every extant Greek manuscript and version and that its inclusion in early Christian documents like the Didache further strengthens its authenticity (Smith, 2018).

The objective of this study is to examine the evidence for and against the authenticity of Matthew 28:19, considering both internal and external factors. This includes analyzing the textual and historical evidence, as well as the opinions of early Christian writers and the implications of the verse on Christian theology. By presenting a comprehensive overview of the debate and the evidence, this study aims to provide a clear understanding of the significance and legitimacy of Matthew 28:19 in the Christian faith.

Historical Context of Matthew's Gospel

The historical context of Matthew's Gospel is crucial in understanding its authorship, date of composition, purpose, and audience. Matthew's Gospel is traditionally attributed to Matthew, one of Jesus' twelve apostles, who is believed to have written the Gospel in the early Christian community in Antioch, Syria, around 80-90 AD (Keener, 2009). The Gospel's authorship is supported by early Christian writers like Papias and Irenaeus, who attributed the Gospel to Matthew (Carson, 1994). The date of composition is also debated among scholars, with some arguing for a composition during the lifetime of the apostles and others suggesting a later composition during the early Christian period (Nolland, 2005).

The purpose and audience of Matthew's Gospel are also significant in understanding its historical context. The Gospel was written primarily for Jewish Christians, who were struggling to reconcile their Jewish heritage with their newfound faith in Jesus Christ. Matthew's Gospel emphasizes Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and his connection to the Jewish tradition, making it an important document for Jewish Christians seeking to maintain their identity within the early Christian community (Case, 1909; Gurtner et al., 2011). The Gospel's purpose is to present Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, emphasizing his teachings, miracles, and death and resurrection, which are all crucial for the salvation of humanity (Senior, 1997).

Key themes in Matthew's Gospel include the kingdom of heaven, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, and the importance of obedience to Jesus' teachings. The Gospel also highlights the role of the church as the new Israel, emphasizing the importance of community and the need for believers to live in harmony with one another. The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19, which instructs believers to "teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit," is a central theme in the Gospel, emphasizing

the importance of spreading the message of Jesus Christ to all people (Weren, 2014).

Textual Evidence

Manuscripts

Early manuscripts containing Matthew 28:19 are crucial in understanding the authenticity of this verse. Unfortunately, all ancient manuscripts that contain the original words of Jesus found in Matthew 28:19 have been lost or destroyed (Jones, 2009). The earliest complete manuscript of Matthew is Codex Sinaiticus, which dates back to the 4th century, and it contains the traditional Trinitarian formula "baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit"(Wayne, 2018). This lack of early manuscripts has led some scholars to question the authenticity of Matthew 28:19. However, the manuscript evidence is unanimous in its agreement on the ending of Matthew and the Trinitarian formula. Every ancient manuscript where the final pages of Matthew have survived contains the account of Jesus giving the Great Commission and includes the command to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Wayne, 2018). This consistency across different manuscripts and languages suggests that the Trinitarian formula was part of the original text.

The earliest Christian writings also provide significant evidence for the authenticity of Matthew 28:19. The Didache, a document considered one of the earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament, contains instructions on baptism that mirror the Trinitarian formula in Matthew 28:19 (Wayne, 2018). Justin Martyr, a Christian living in the early second century, also affirms that baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was the practice of the earliest churches (Wayne, 2018). These early writings demonstrate that the Trinitarian formula was widely accepted and used in early Christian practice. The oldest known manuscript record of Matthew 28:19 is found in Codex Sinaiticus or Codex Vaticanus, which dates back to the

4th century. These manuscripts contain the traditional Trinitarian formula, which has been consistently preserved across different manuscripts and languages. This consistency suggests that the Trinitarian formula was part of the original text and not a later addition (Aune, 2010). In a nutshell, while the lack of early manuscripts is a significant challenge, the manuscript evidence and early Christian writings provide strong support for the authenticity of Matthew 28:19. The consistent preservation of the Trinitarian formula across different manuscripts and languages, as well as the widespread acceptance of this formula in early Christian practice, suggest that Matthew 28:19 is an authentic part of the New Testament.

Citations by Early Church Fathers

The writings of Justin Martyr, a Christian living in the early second century, provide important evidence regarding the authenticity of Matthew 28:19. While Justin does not explicitly cite Matthew as his source, he affirms that baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was the practice of the earliest churches (Bobby, 2011; Ignatius, 2015; Valiant, 2018; Wayne, 2018). This suggests that the Trinitarian formula found in Matthew 28:19 was widely accepted and used by early Christians, even before the time of Justin Martyr. However, some scholars argue that Justin's quotation of a similar but not identical formula indicates that he may not have known the traditional text of Matthew 28:19. Overall, Justin's writings offer valuable insight into the early Christian understanding and practice of baptism, which lends support to the authenticity of the Trinitarian formula in Matthew 28:19.

Eusebius' citations of Matthew 28:19 are significant in the debate about the authenticity of this verse. Eusebius, a prominent early Christian writer, quotes a shorter version of Matthew 28:19 in some of his works, which has led some to question the authenticity of the full Trinitarian formula. However, scholars have argued that Eusebius' quotations do not necessarily indicate a shorter original text. For example,

Eusebius' method of citing Scripture often involved omitting phrases he considered irrelevant or blending phrases from other passages, which could explain the variations in his quotations (Finnegan, 2018; Josiah, 2021; Valiant, 2018). According to Snapp (2019), Eusebius' writings suggest that he was familiar with the full version of Matthew 28:19, and his references to the verse in different contexts do not necessarily imply a shorter original text.

Irenaeus of Lyons, a prominent Christian writer of the second century, quotes Jesus as saying, "Go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Ghost" in his work *Against Heresies* (Book 3, Chapter 17, Section 1) (Barton, 2007; Ignatius, 2020; Wayne, 2018). This quote is significant because it is one of the earliest and most reliable references to Matthew 28:19, and it explicitly attributes the words to Jesus. Irenaeus' quote is also notable for its consistency with the manuscript tradition, which uniformly preserves the Trinitarian formula in the Great Commission.

Tatian, a second-century Christian writer, is often cited in discussions of Matthew 28:19. Tatian's work, *Diatessaron*, is a harmony of the four Gospels, which includes Matthew 28:19. This citation is significant because it provides early evidence of the verse's inclusion in the Gospel of Matthew. Tatian's *Diatessaron* was widely used and respected in early Christian communities, and its inclusion of Matthew 28:19 suggests that the verse was already part of the Gospel by the early second century (Bradshaw, n.d.).

Tertullian, a prominent early Christian writer, provides significant evidence for the authenticity of Matthew 28:19. In his work *De Baptismo*, Tertullian quotes Matthew 28:19, using the Trinitarian formula "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" to emphasize the importance of baptism in the early Christian community (TrinityTruth.org, 2024). This citation is significant because it demonstrates that

the Trinitarian formula was widely accepted and used in early Christian practice, even among non-Catholic writers like Tertullian (Plowman, n.d.).

Comparison with Synoptic Gospels

The comparison of Matthew 28:19 with the parallel passages in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark and Luke) provides valuable insights into the authenticity and significance of this verse. In the Gospel of Mark, the final commission given by Jesus to his disciples is recorded in Mark 16:15-18. This passage does not include the Trinitarian formula found in Matthew 28:19, but instead instructs the disciples to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). While the content of the commission is similar, the lack of the Trinitarian formula in Mark's account has led some scholars to question whether the formula in Matthew 28:19 is a later addition. However, the Gospel of Luke provides a more direct parallel to Matthew 28:19. In Luke 24:47-49, Jesus instructs his disciples to "preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" and to wait for the "promise of the Father" before going out to fulfil this mission (Ondich, 2022). While the Trinitarian formula is not explicitly stated, the emphasis on the authority and power of God the Father, as well as the role of the Holy Spirit, is consistent with the theological themes present in Matthew 28:19. The differences between the Synoptic Gospels' accounts of the Great Commission may be attributed to the distinct perspectives and purposes of each author. Matthew's emphasis on the Trinitarian formula reflects his theological focus on the nature of God and the importance of baptism in the early Christian community. In contrast, Mark and Luke may have chosen to omit the specific Trinitarian language in favour of a more concise or thematic presentation of Jesus' final instructions to his disciples. Nevertheless, the overall message and significance of the Great Commission are consistent across the Synoptic Gospels, underscoring the importance of this event in the life and ministry of Jesus (Clay, 2024).

Scholarly Perspectives

Arguments for Authenticity

The authenticity of Matthew 28:19 is supported by several compelling arguments. Firstly, the Trinitarian formula in Matthew 28:19 is consistent with the theological themes and emphasis found throughout Matthew's Gospel. Matthew's Gospel is known for its strong Christology, emphasizing Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. The command to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" aligns with Matthew's presentation of Jesus as divine and equal to the Father (Karim, 2013). Also, the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 is the climactic conclusion to Matthew's Gospel, reinforcing the importance of the Trinitarian formula within the overall theological framework of the book. Secondly, the manuscript evidence overwhelmingly supports the authenticity of the Trinitarian formula in Matthew 28:19. All known Greek manuscripts, including the earliest available manuscripts from the 4th century (Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus), contain the traditional Trinitarian reading (Finnegan, 2018). The consistency of this reading across a wide range of manuscripts and languages suggests that the Trinitarian formula was part of the original text and not a later interpolation. Furthermore, the Trinitarian formula in Matthew 28:19 is attested by numerous early Christian writers, known as the Church Fathers, who quoted or alluded to this passage in their writings. Figures such as Tertullian, Cyprian, and Eusebius all refer to the Trinitarian formula, demonstrating its widespread acceptance and use in the early Church (Finnegan, 2018; TrinityTruth.org, 2024). This patristic evidence provides strong support for the authenticity of the Trinitarian formula in Matthew 28:19. Finally, the arguments for a later addition or interpolation of the Trinitarian formula in Matthew 28:19 are not entirely convincing. While Eusebius, a 4th-century church historian, occasionally quotes a shorter version of the Great Commission, this does not necessarily mean that the Trinitarian formula was a later addition (Finnegan, 2018). The

lack of compelling textual evidence or historical records that clearly demonstrate the Trinitarian formula was a later interpolation weakens the case for rejecting the authenticity of this passage.

Arguments Against Authenticity

Arguments against the authenticity of Matthew 28:19 include suspicions of later theological insertion and the variants found in Eusebius' writings. Some scholars argue that the Trinitarian formula in Matthew 28:19 was added by the Church Fathers to support their Trinitarian doctrine, which was not fully developed until the Council of Nicea in 325 AD (Finnegan, 2018; Karim, 2013). This theory suggests that the original text of Matthew did not include the Trinitarian formula and that it was inserted later to support the emerging Trinitarian theology. Eusebius' variants of Matthew 28:19 are also seen as evidence against the authenticity of the Trinitarian formula. Eusebius, a prominent early Christian writer, quotes a shorter version of the Great Commission in his writings, which does not include the Trinitarian formula (Zyl, 2022). This variant reading is significant because it suggests that the Trinitarian formula was not part of the original text and that it was added later. Furthermore, the fact that Eusebius' variant reading is contemporary with the earliest manuscripts of Matthew 28:19 raises questions about the authenticity of the Trinitarian formula (Zyl, 2022). Scholars have also expressed skepticism about the authenticity of Matthew 28:19 due to the lack of early manuscript evidence and the possibility of scribal errors. Some argue that the Trinitarian formula is not found in any early Greek manuscripts and that it was inserted later by scribes (Finnegan, 2018; Zyl, 2022). Karim (Karim, 2013) observes that the fact that the Trinitarian formula is not mentioned in any other New Testament passages, except for Matthew 28:19, raises questions about its authenticity. These arguments and theories highlight the ongoing debate among scholars about the authenticity of Matthew 28:19 and the role of the Trinitarian formula in Christian theology.

Critical Analysis

The debate surrounding the authenticity of Matthew 28:19 is complex and multifaceted. On one hand, the traditional reading of the verse, which includes the Trinitarian formula "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit," is supported by the overwhelming majority of manuscripts and early Christian writers. This reading is also consistent with the theological themes and emphasis found throughout Matthew's Gospel (Karim, 2013; Valiant, 2018). On the other hand, some scholars argue that the Trinitarian formula was added later by the Church Fathers to support their developing doctrine of the Trinity. They point to the lack of early manuscript evidence and the variant reading found in Eusebius' writings as evidence against the authenticity of the verse (Finnegan, 2018).

One key piece of evidence supporting the authenticity of Matthew 28:19 is the consistency of the Trinitarian formula across different manuscripts and languages. Despite the lack of early manuscripts, the uniformity of the reading across a wide range of texts suggests that the Trinitarian formula was part of the original text (Valiant, 2018). Additionally, early Christian writers, such as Tertullian and Eusebius, quote or allude to the Trinitarian formula, demonstrating its widespread acceptance and use in the early Church (Karim, 2013; Valiant, 2018). However, some scholars argue that the Trinitarian formula is not found in any early Greek manuscripts and that it was inserted later by scribes (Finnegan, 2018).

To fully understand the evidence surrounding Matthew 28:19, it is essential to contextualize it within early Christian history. The development of the doctrine of the Trinity was a gradual process that occurred over several centuries. The Council of Nicea in 325 AD marked a significant turning point in this process, as it formally codified the doctrine of the Trinity. However, the Trinitarian formula in Matthew 28:19 predates

this council and is found in early Christian writings, such as the Didache and the writings of Tertullian (Karim, 2013; Valiant, 2018). This suggests that the Trinitarian formula was already an established part of Christian theology by the early 3rd century AD.

Conclusion

The debate surrounding the authenticity of Matthew 28:19 is a complex and multifaceted issue. The arguments in favour of the authenticity of the verse are compelling, as they are supported by the overwhelming manuscript evidence, the consistency of the Trinitarian formula across different manuscripts and languages, and the widespread acceptance and use of the formula in early Christian writings. The arguments against the authenticity of the verse, which suggest that the Trinitarian formula was a later theological insertion, are not entirely convincing, as they rely heavily on the variant reading found in Eusebius' writings and the lack of early manuscript evidence.

The authenticity of Matthew 28:19 has significant implications for understanding the development of Christian theology and the role of the Trinitarian formula in the early Church. If the Trinitarian formula is indeed authentic, it suggests that the doctrine of the Trinity was already an established part of Christian theology by the early 3rd century CE, predating the Council of Nicea. This would challenge the notion that the doctrine of the Trinity was a later theological development and would highlight the importance of the Trinitarian formula in the early Christian community. Furthermore, the authenticity of Matthew 28:19 reinforces the central role of the Great Commission in the Christian faith, as it emphasizes the importance of spreading the message of Jesus Christ to all nations and the significance of baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This passage has been a cornerstone of Christian theology and practice for centuries, and its authenticity is crucial for understanding the foundations of the Christian faith.

In conclusion, the evidence strongly supports the authenticity of Matthew 28:19, and this has significant implications for our understanding of the development of Christian theology and the role of the Trinitarian formula in the early Church. While the debate continues, the weight of the evidence suggests that this passage is a genuine part of the Gospel of Matthew and a crucial component of the Christian tradition.

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