A TRINFINITY MINI BOOK

Understanding Baptism

What it means to go down into the water

Andrew Dominguez

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About this book

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Introduction

Few subjects have caused more debate in church history than baptism. Christians have argued over how it should be done, who should receive it, and what it actually accomplishes. Some see it as a sacrament that saves. Others see it as an ordinance that pictures what God has already done.

My goal in this book is not to add to the arguments. I want to look at what Scripture says, explain why I believe baptism follows salvation rather than producing it, and show why it still matters so much. If you are thinking about being baptized, I hope this helps you take that step with understanding.

1 What the word means

The Greek verb behind our word baptize means to dip, to plunge, or to immerse. It was used in everyday life for cloth being dipped into dye. The cloth went in one color and came out another. It took on the nature of what it was immersed in.

That is a helpful picture. When a believer is baptized, he is saying that his life has been immersed in Jesus Christ. He has taken on a new identity. The water itself is ordinary. The Jordan River was used for washing clothes, for drinking, and for play. What made baptism different was the name in which people were baptized and the commitment they were making.

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Matthew 28:19-20 (NASB)

Jesus' last command to His followers tied baptism to discipleship. That is why a baptism is never done in the name of a pastor or a church. It is done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

2 Salvation comes first

In the New Testament, baptism always follows faith. When the jailer in Philippi asked what he must do to be saved, Paul and Silas answered, Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household (Acts 16:31, NASB). That same night he and his family were baptized (Acts 16:33, NASB). Belief came first. Baptism came right behind it.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NASB)

I believe baptism does not bring salvation. It declares it. The early church practiced believers' baptism as an act of obedience to Christ and a personal declaration of a person's identification and unity with Him.

Some point to Acts 2:38 (NASB), where Peter told the crowd to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. Sincere Christians read that verse differently, and I respect that. I read it alongside the many passages that tie salvation to faith alone, and I understand baptism there as the public response that went hand in hand with repentance.

3 A picture of the gospel

Baptism preaches a sermon without words. Going down into the water pictures the death and burial of Jesus. Coming up out of the water pictures His resurrection. It also pictures what has happened to the person being baptized. The old life has died, and a new life has begun.

Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:4 (NASB)

This is one reason I believe immersion best fits the meaning. Jesus came up out of the water after He was baptized (Matthew 3:16, NASB). When Philip baptized the Ethiopian official, both of them went down into the water and came up out of it (Acts 8:38-39, NASB). A burial is a full covering.

Colossians 3:1-17 (NASB) shows what that new life looks like. Since we have been raised up with Christ, we keep seeking the things above. We put to death what belongs to the old nature, and we put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love.

4 How Christians have understood it

It helps to know that believers have held four broad views. Roman Catholic teaching holds that the act itself brings new birth. Lutheran teaching holds that baptism imparts saving grace to the one who exercises faith. Reformed teaching sees baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant, an outward sign of an inward reality. Baptist teaching sees it as a testimony, one of the first public professions a believer makes.

My own understanding is closest to the last two. One statement of faith describes water baptism as a blessed outward sign of an inward work, an emblem reminding us that just as our Lord died, was buried, and was raised, we reckon ourselves dead to sin and raised to walk in newness of life. That says it well.

People who love Jesus disagree about the details. Whatever position we hold, we should hold it with humility. Ephesians 4:4-6 (NASB) reminds us that there is one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

5 Baptized in the Holy Spirit

John the Baptist said that he baptized with water for repentance, but the One coming after him would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matthew 3:11, NASB). The book of Acts records that promise being fulfilled.

In Acts the Spirit's coming was often marked by something others could see. At times believers spoke in tongues (Acts 2:4; 10:46, NASB). At other times they spoke the word of God with boldness (Acts 4:31, NASB), preached with power (Acts 4:8, NASB), or prophesied (Acts 19:6, NASB).

This subject has divided churches, and there are two errors to avoid. One is to avoid it altogether, even though Paul wrote, do not forbid to speak in tongues (1 Corinthians 14:39, NASB). The other is to treat one gift as the test of real spirituality. Paul also asked, All do not speak with

tongues, do they? (1 Corinthians 12:30, NASB). The Spirit gives gifts to each one just as He wills (1 Corinthians 12:11, NASB).

The goal is not a particular experience. The goal is a life filled with the Spirit and bearing His fruit.

6 Before you step into the water

Who should be baptized? Everyone who has trusted Christ. Children should wait until they are old enough to believe and understand what baptism means. When should you be baptized? As soon as you believe. The Ethiopian official said, Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized? (Acts 8:36, NASB). If you wait until you feel good enough, you will never go.

A baptism service can include three questions for each candidate. Do you hate the devil and all his works? Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the soon coming King, and have you accepted Him as Lord of your life? Do you desire to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ, declaring before every witness here that you are indeed His disciple?

Baptism is not only for the person in the water. It is a moment for every believer watching to ask, Am I living today as a committed, obedient follower of Christ? Is His lordship evident in my daily decisions?

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

Galatians 2:20 (NASB)

Understanding Baptism

Christians have argued about baptism for centuries. This book looks at what the word means, why salvation comes first, how baptism pictures the gospel, how believers have understood it, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and what to know before you step into the water.

Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:4 (NASB)

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