

What Is Baptism?

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R. C. SPROUL

What Is Baptism?

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Chapter One

Baptism and Salvation

One of the most stirring descriptions of the church is found in Ephesians 4:4–6, where we read: “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” The church is one body filled with one Spirit and united around one hope, worshiping one Lord and one God in one faith. And, we are told, there is one baptism.

What Is Baptism?

Thanks to this passage and numerous other biblical affirmations, the sacrament of baptism has occupied a central role in the church throughout its history and is an important aspect of Christian worship. Yet we find that a great deal of controversy surrounds the subject of baptism. It seems there are questions over just about every aspect of the sacrament: the origin or institution of baptism; the meaning of baptism; the administration of baptism (Who is permitted and authorized to baptize people?); the formula for baptism (Is baptism to be administered only in the name of Jesus or in the names of all three persons of the Trinity?); the mode of baptism (Is baptism to be by sprinkling, pouring, dipping, or immersion?); and the proper recipients of baptism (Is it restricted to adults who have made credible professions of faith or may infants be baptized as well?). Another major controversy has to do with the efficacy of the sacrament (What does baptism actually accomplish in the lives of those who receive it?).

Given that we have one Lord, one faith, and one baptism, we might think that there would be fewer questions surrounding this sacrament. It is tragic that Christians are so sharply divided about these issues. And yet, the divisions and the controversies show that Christians recognize that

baptism is a serious matter. After all, no one can read the New Testament, even in a cursory manner, and not clearly see that baptism is a very important element of the Christian faith. So Christians who take their faith seriously also take baptism seriously, and they want to get it right. They care enough about baptism to debate areas of uncertainty.

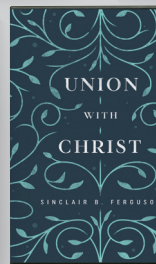
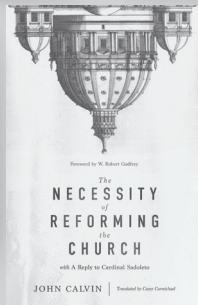
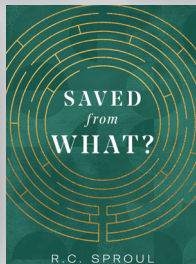
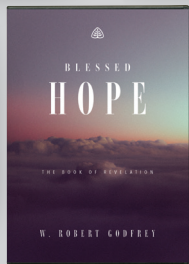
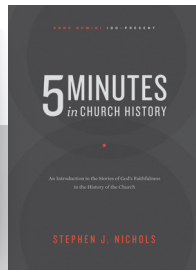
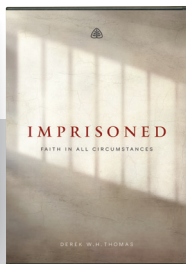
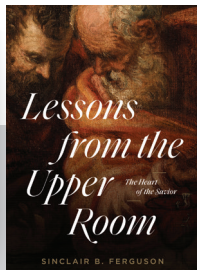
Without a doubt, the greatest controversy over baptism has centered on its role in salvation. Must a person be baptized to experience the new birth? This question has been an enormous point of contention in the history of the church, so I want to address it in this opening chapter.

Faith Vs. Baptism

The Roman Catholic Church sees the sacrament of baptism as the instrumental cause of justification. What does Rome mean by that? To help answer that question, I want us to look back to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who articulated the idea of instrumental causality.

Aristotle identified various types of causes. His favorite illustration of the various causes involved a statue. He said a statue has several causes, several things that must be present for the image to take shape. First, he said, there has to

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