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R. C. SPROUL

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Chapter One

The Church Is One

In the seventeenth chapter of John's gospel, Jesus gives the most extensive prayer that is recorded for us in the New Testament. It is a prayer of intercession in which He prayed for His disciples and for all who would believe through the testimony of the disciples. That prayer is called Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. One of the central themes of that prayer is Christ's request to the Father that His people might be one. It was a prayer for Christian unity. Yet here we are, in the twenty-first century, and the church is probably more

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fragmented than at any time in church history. We've seen a crisis with the question, "What is the church after all?"

Historically, via the ancient church council of Nicea, the church has been defined by four key words. It is, 1) one, 2) holy, 3) catholic, and 4) apostolic. As we study the nature of the church, I want to look at these four descriptive categories as they define the nature of the church.

First of all, the church is one. Really? If we surveyed the landscape of modern-day Christianity, the last word we might use to describe it would be *one* or *unified*.

How are we to understand and respond to Christ's prayer for the unity of the church and for the ancient church's declaration that the church is one? There have been different approaches to this throughout history. In the twentieth century there was what has been labeled "the ecumenical movement." This was an attempt through the World Council of Churches and other bodies to move in the direction of forming or reforming denominational splinter groups into one centralized, ecclesiastical body. The whole goal of the ecumenical movement was to restore unity to the visible church. One of the things that we saw as a result of this push toward unity was an increasing number of mergers between denominations that formerly

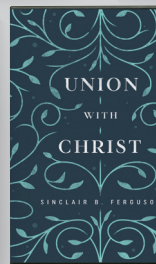
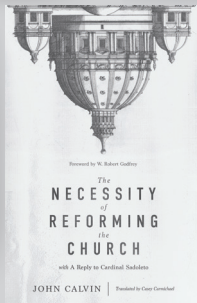
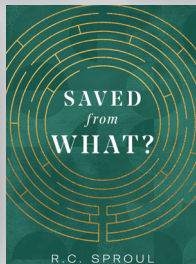
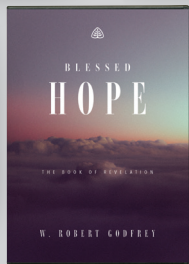
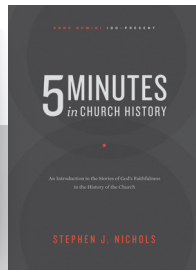
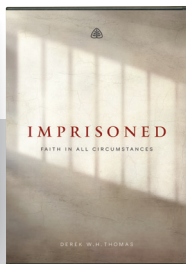
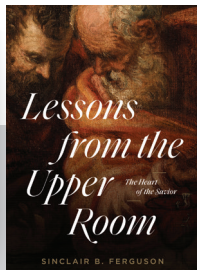
were divided. Unfortunately, what often happens when two churches or denominations merge is that certain people don't agree with the merger, and they leave the newly formed organization to create a new organization that aligns with their values. So, in their effort to have fewer churches through unification, these movements simply create more churches.

In addition, another problem has emerged. This is the problem of pluralism. Pluralism is a philosophy that allows for a wide diversity of viewpoints and doctrines to co-exist within a single body. Because so many doctrinal disputes have emerged within some churches, they have tried to keep the peace and unity, and at the same time accommodate differing views within the church. It is an attempt to accommodate conflicting viewpoints.

As the church becomes more pluralistic, the number of contradictory viewpoints that are tolerated increases. In turn, organizational and structural unity become the central concern. People strive to keep the church visibly united at all costs. However, there is always a price tag for that, and historically, the price tag has been the confessional purity of the churches.

When the Protestant movement began in the sixteenth

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