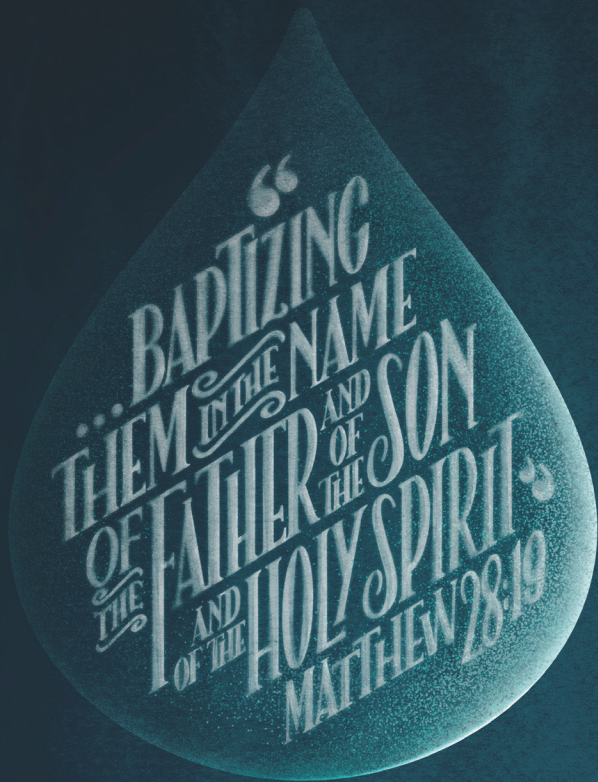


# BAPTISM

ANSWERS TO COMMON QUESTIONS



GUY M. RICHARD

## Endorsements

“This is a good introduction to baptism, written in an irenic spirit and covering a wide range of relevant material. I expect that many will find this helpful and will come to a richer appreciation of what baptism signifies.”

—DR. ROBERT LETHAM  
Professor of systematic and historical theology  
Union School of Theology, Oxford, England

“Dr. Richard is a sure and trusted guide on the issue of baptism. This is a delightful resource, particularly for paedobaptists. It will be a go-to and concise guide to give to parents who are bringing their covenant children for baptism. An absolutely essential resource.”

—DR. DEREK W.H. THOMAS  
Senior minister  
First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, S.C.



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ANSWERS TO COMMON QUESTIONS

GUY M. RICHARD



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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To Schyler, Jane Barton, and Ellie  
May you each cherish your baptism  
and strive continually to improve it  
for the rest of your life





# CONTENTS

Introduction . . . . .	1
1. What Is Baptism? . . . . .	9
2. Does Baptism Mean Immersion? . . . . .	15
3. What Does Baptism Mean? . . . . .	23
4. Why Do We Baptize, and How Should We Do It? . . . . .	31
5. Who Should Be Baptized? . . . . .	41
6. What Do the “Household” Baptisms Teach Us? . . . . .	53
7. Why Do Our Baptist Brothers and Sisters Disagree? . . . . .	65
8. How Do We Respond to the Baptist Arguments? . . . . .	71
9. But What about Jeremiah 31? . . . . .	81
10. What Objections Do We Have to Baptizing Believers Only? . . . . .	91
11. What Can We Take Away from All This? . . . . .	101
Notes . . . . .	117
Scripture Index . . . . .	123
About the Author . . . . .	129



## INTRODUCTION

As a Presbyterian pastor, I get asked questions about baptism more often than about any other issue in the church except, perhaps, predestination. The questions I receive range from the basic—What is baptism?—to the much more complex—Why do you baptize your children? Sometimes the people asking the questions come from a tradition that practices believers-only baptism. They have never had to think through what they believe on this topic because they have never actually encountered a plausible challenge to what they have been taught. Sometimes the questioners are newcomers to the Reformed faith and have not steeped in its teachings long enough to see the strength of the biblical argument for infant baptism. Sometimes they come from within the Presbyterian tradition, but they have never stopped to consider why or how we administer baptism or to compare and contrast our views with the views of our Baptist brothers and sisters.

What makes the questions so difficult is that, more often than not, people are asking them on the way out of church on Sunday morning. I have found it nearly impossible in these situations to offer answers that are concise enough to fit into the time constraints imposed by the receiving line and yet are clear

## BAPTISM

enough to cause the questioners to think more about the topic and to challenge their preconceived ideas.

Good answers to these questions require more than a one- or two-minute explanation. They are not easily or explicitly answered by a quick Bible reference. Even a topic as difficult as predestination might be easier to explain than baptism. (Note that I said easier to *explain*, not easier to *accept*!) In answering questions about predestination, I can simply point people to Romans 9, for instance, and tell them to go home and read it and then come back and discuss it with me. But I cannot assign one or two passages of Scripture to answer questions about baptism. Explaining baptism requires a more extended examination of many different Bible texts that must be pulled together (or systematized) in order to develop a picture of what the Bible as a whole teaches on the issue.

Another complicating factor is that oftentimes it is not the explicit teaching of various passages but their obvious implications that help us develop a clearer picture of what the Bible teaches about baptism. This, too, makes it more difficult to give a short answer to people's questions. Seeing and understanding these implications requires more sustained thought and interaction than we are able to do on the way out of church on Sunday morning. And it means that we need a more extended format—like this book, for instance—to walk people through the whole of the Bible's teaching.

But it also means that we need to be prepared for a built-in suspicion that many people—especially those within the evangelical Protestant tradition—have toward things that appear

## INTRODUCTION

overly complicated. As Mark Noll has argued in his insightful and challenging book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, evangelical Christians have historically tended to value action over thinking and simplicity over complexity. They have not been interested in devoting the time and energy necessary to sustain complex thought and argumentation because they have instead been “dominated by the urgencies of the moment.”<sup>1</sup> Canadian scholar N.K. Clifford puts it this way: “The Evangelical Protestant mind has never relished complexity. Indeed its crusading genius, whether in religion or politics, has always tended toward an over-simplification of issues and the substitution of inspiration and zeal for critical analysis and serious reflection.”<sup>2</sup>

As evangelical Christians, we tend to think that simpler is better, and we lose patience with long and complex argumentation. We are suspicious about any doctrine that requires complicated arguments to support it. Surely, we think, God does not intend for us to go to great lengths and to unravel great complexities in formulating or defending our doctrine, does He?

In responding to this suspicion, we need to point out first that many of the most important theological doctrines of the Christian faith cannot be defended with one or two proof texts but require an extended and oftentimes complicated examination of Scripture. The doctrines of the Trinity, the union of the two natures of Christ in one person, and the nature and extent of the atonement are good examples of this. Each requires a detailed and somewhat complicated examination of the whole

## BAPTISM

of the Scriptures. Baptism is no different, and this leads us to our second point.

We need to remember that *everyone's* answers to the common questions about baptism are going to be somewhat complicated—or, at least, they should be. That is because the Bible is not explicitly clear on its answers to many of these questions. Take the question about the proper recipients of baptism. There is no verse in the Bible that says, “Thou shalt baptize your children.” There is also no verse in the Bible that says, “Thou shalt *not* baptize your children,” or, “Thou shalt baptize only adult believers.” The same thing can be said about the mode of baptism. There is no verse in the Bible that says, “Thou shalt baptize by immersion,” and there is no verse that says, “Thou shalt baptize by sprinkling.”

The fact that the Bible is not explicit on these questions does not mean that we should refrain from attempting to answer them. We need to search the Scriptures and to do our best, using all the tools at our disposal, to understand what the Bible teaches regarding the proper recipients of baptism. The lack of explicit teaching in the Bible simply means that we have to work a little harder and dig a little deeper to find the answers to our questions. And that is true for everyone who takes up this issue.

In the third place, we must respond to the built-in suspicion toward complicated argumentation by reminding people that Jesus instructed us to study the Bible by way of drawing out the relevant implications of every text of Scripture—no matter how small or complicated those implications may be—and

## INTRODUCTION

formulating our theology accordingly. We can see an example of this in Matthew 22:29–32, where Jesus chastises the Sadducees for denying the doctrine of the resurrection. He tells them that their denial demonstrates that they know “neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (v. 29). Thus, in Jesus’ opinion, the Sadducees should have known about the doctrine of the resurrection because it is implied in Exodus 3:6: “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Matt. 22:32). Based only on the tense of the verb—I *am*, not I *was*—Jesus says that the Sadducees should have deduced that God is not the “God of the dead, but of the living,” and, therefore, they should have embraced the doctrine of the resurrection instead of rejecting it. In other words, Jesus says, the Sadducees had a responsibility to study not only the explicit teaching of every passage of Scripture but also its implicit teaching and to build their theology accordingly, no matter how tedious or complex the arguments may have become. And you and I have this same responsibility.

It is with all of this in mind that I am writing this book. I hope to provide answers to many common questions about baptism and to do so in a more thoroughgoing way than I am able to do in casual conversations or on Sunday mornings at church. Many of my answers will necessarily be more complicated than they would be if I could simply cite a Bible verse or two. And many of my answers will be based on the clear implications of passages that do not explicitly deal with the topic of baptism. But, thanks both to accepted theological practice in regard to other doctrines and to Matthew 22:29–32, I know



## BAPTISM

that I stand on safe theological and exegetical ground in doing these things.

My goal in writing this book is to get readers to think through what the Bible teaches about baptism—whatever conclusions they may come to. Far too often as evangelical Christians, we pass over the hard task of searching the Scriptures and thinking through what is actually said in favor of accepting someone else's conclusions or embracing what seems to make sense to us without ever critically evaluating the biblical text. I hope to challenge Christians to engage with Scripture on this topic and to come to their own conclusions as to what the Bible teaches. That engagement is itself an indispensable part of how we are to “be transformed by the renewal of [our] mind[s]” (Rom. 12:2).

In my own context as a pastor, I have actually had quite a few seasoned Christians admit to me over the years that they had never really thought about the issue of baptism before coming to our church. They had always assumed that the obvious examples of baptism in the New Testament were clear and strong enough evidence to warrant applying it only to believers after they had made a profession of faith. This admission is one of the main reasons that I started devoting an entire class period of the new members class to the topic of baptism. I want to get people thinking about what the Bible actually teaches about baptism—regardless of whether they are convinced by my arguments.

But my goal in putting this book together is also to challenge Christians who may disagree with one another on this

## INTRODUCTION

topic to deal with each other more graciously than they have in the past. The topic of baptism as a whole—but especially the topic of the proper recipients of baptism—has been far too divisive within the church for far too long. It is important for all of us to realize and to acknowledge that, regardless of where we come down on this question, we are all wrestling with what the Bible actually teaches. It is not that one side in the baptism debate is appealing to explicit passages of Scripture to support its views while the other is appealing only to its implications. Both sides are appealing to the implicit teaching of Scripture, because, as we have indicated, the Bible is not explicit on many of the common questions that we have about baptism. And it is not that one side in this debate is appealing to Scripture to support its views while the other is appealing to tradition or history. Both sides are appealing primarily to Scripture and are coming to different conclusions on what the Bible teaches. If people in the church could only acknowledge these things and treat each other accordingly, we would all be a lot better off.

We need to remember that the debate surrounding baptism is a family debate. Those who disagree with me on this topic are my brothers and sisters through faith in Jesus Christ. We are family—members of the one “household of God” (1 Tim. 3:15). Moreover, we are all members of the one body of Christ. We are united to Christ and, thereby, united to one another. To borrow the imagery of the human body that Paul uses so effectively in 1 Corinthians 12:12–26, some of us are hands, some are feet, some are fingers, and some are toes, but all of us are part of the same body. For us to fight over issues like

## BAPTISM

baptism is like fingers fighting with hands or toes fighting with feet or one hand fighting with the other hand. By all means, we need to discuss these matters, and we may even disagree. That is OK. Disagreement is not a bad thing, in and of itself. Disagreement can be helpful. It can bring clarity and focus. But the *way* we disagree and what we do with that disagreement are important. We need to remember these things and keep them in mind as we tackle this topic. We are on the same side, and we are engaged in the same endeavor, namely, to discern the will of God in all things and to be as faithful to Him as we can be. It is in that spirit that I offer the following discussion on the topic of baptism.

Before moving on, it bears mentioning that there is a great deal of agreement between Christians on the topic of baptism. For instance, we all agree that Christian baptism is important; that it should involve the application of water to the individual; that it should be done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (see Matt. 28:19); and that it is linked inextricably with faith (either on the part of the person being baptized or on the part of at least one parent of the one being baptized). The areas of disagreement—though they have taken center stage—are not the whole story. There are many areas of agreement between Christians in regard to baptism, and it is important to point that out at the beginning of our examination.

# WHAT IS BAPTISM?

If we were to start reading the New Testament from the beginning, we would not be able to get very far before we encountered something called baptism. As early as Matthew 3:1, we run into a man by the name of John, who is otherwise known as “the baptizer,” and, a few verses later, we see why. This John, we are told, devotes his life to “baptizing” many different people (vv. 6, 7, 11), the Lord Jesus Himself being one of them (vv. 13–17). The baptisms that we encounter in these early chapters of Matthew’s gospel are described simply as occurring. Very little explanation is given as to how they were performed or why they were performed. We are left to conclude that the practice of “baptism,” whatever it is, must have been something that was familiar to Matthew’s Jewish audience in the first century.

The same thing can be said for all the baptisms that we see in the New Testament. Thus, when Jesus commands His followers to go and make disciples in Matthew 28:18–20, He

## BAPTISM

instructs them to baptize those disciples in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But He nowhere explains what He means by baptism, and we nowhere read that the disciples were confused by what He was saying. None of the remaining eleven who were with Him raises his hand or interjects with a question. They all appear to understand what Jesus is talking about.

When we turn to the Old Testament, we find evidence that the Jews had some kind of familiarity with the concept of baptism. The same Greek words that occur in the Gospels are used in the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament—on several occasions. And since the Septuagint predates the birth of Christ by a good bit, we know that first-century Jews would have had some idea of what baptism was long before John the Baptist came onto the scene.<sup>1</sup>

The account of Naaman in 2 Kings 5 is one occasion in the Old Testament that is particularly instructive in terms of helping us understand the Jewish mind-set toward baptism. Naaman was the commander of the army of the king of Syria, a man of tremendous courage and might, but he had leprosy (v. 1). Through a series of providences, Naaman was directed to go and seek healing from the prophet Elisha. When he arrived at the prophet's house, he was commanded to “wash in the Jordan [River] seven times” in order to be clean (v. 10). But we read in verse 14 that Naaman went and *baptized* “himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored.”<sup>2</sup> The significant thing about this passage is the fact that “wash” in verse 10 and “baptize” in verse 14 are

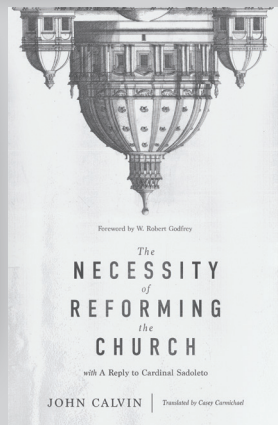
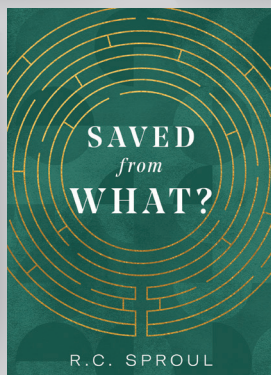
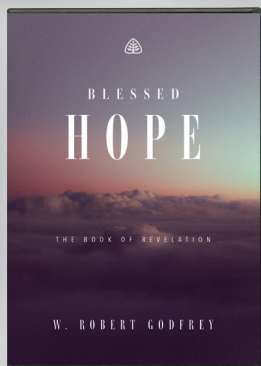
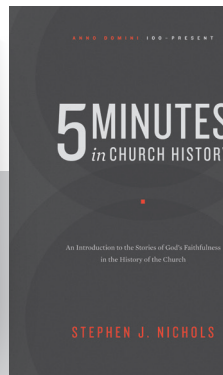
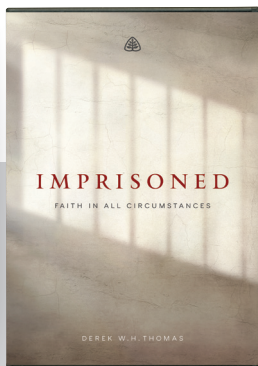
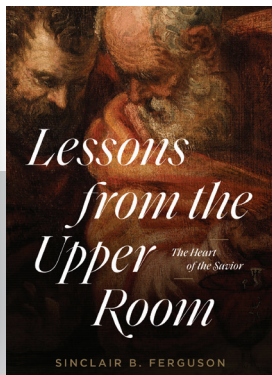
## WHAT IS BAPTISM?

used interchangeably. Naaman was commanded by Elisha to “wash” in order to be healed, and he “baptized” himself and was restored to health.

Hebrews 9:10 is another significant passage that helps shed some light on the Jewish understanding of baptism leading up to the first century. It tells us unequivocally that the Old Testament ceremonial system, long before the time of Christ, included many different kinds of ritual “baptisms.”<sup>3</sup> Although this passage does not explicitly tell us which specific kinds of rituals were known as baptisms, it does alert us as to their presence in the Old Testament. Because the context of Hebrews 9 is talking about the temporary rites and practices of the ceremonial system, it is not a great stretch to see the ritual washings of the regulations for clean and unclean people as being chiefly in mind here. When we look back at these ritual washings (of which there are at least eleven), we see the repeated requirement to wash garments, objects, and people in water in order to rid them of their ceremonial uncleanness. Sometimes this washing is partial, as in Exodus 30:18–21, in which the priests are commanded to wash only their hands and feet before entering the tabernacle. Sometimes it is wholesale, as in Leviticus 14, where individuals are commanded to wash their whole bodies and also their clothes. In all these cases, however, washing or cleansing in water is the common feature.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, when we consider the example of Naaman from 2 Kings 5 together with the many ritual baptisms from the Old Testament, we are able to conclude that the first-century Jew would have regarded baptism as a rite of washing or cleansing in

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