

What Are the Sacraments?

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R. C. SPROUL

What Are the Sacraments?

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© 2023 by the R.C. Sproul Trust

Published by Ligonier Ministries

421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771

Ligonier.org

Printed in China

RR Donnelley

0001122

First edition

ISBN 978-1-64289-437-0 (Paperback)

ISBN 978-1-64289-438-7 (ePub)

ISBN 978-1-64289-439-4 (Kindle)

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Cover design: Ligonier Creative

Interior typeset: Katherine Lloyd, The DESK

Ligonier Ministries edited and adapted Dr. R.C. Sproul's original material to create this volume. We are thankful to Mrs. Vesta Sproul for her invaluable help on this project.

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2022930840

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Chapter One

What Is a Sacrament?

Throughout church history, there have been perhaps a few issues that have led to as many disputes as the sacraments. We've seen debates over how many sacraments there are, how these sacraments operate, how they are to be performed, who is to receive them, and so on. There has been much confusion and conflict. Although we can't go into minute detail here about all the technical theological points involved with the sacraments, we can look at some of the basic principles.

What Are the Sacraments?

We understand that the life and worship of the church involve what we call *Word and sacrament*. Our churches—Protestant churches, particularly—have emphasized the preaching of the Word, whereas churches in the Middle Ages tended to feature the celebration of the Lord’s Supper; this is why the centerpiece of church architecture was the altar. Many Protestant churches instead made the pulpit the point of focus, emphasizing preaching rather than sacraments. Sometimes we tend to overreact in one direction or the other. But from the days of the Old Testament all the way through the New Testament, God has been concerned not only to speak to His people through His Word but also to communicate in other ways, including through the sacraments.

The English word *sacrament* comes from the Latin *sacramentum*, which is a translation of the Greek word *mystērion*. Our English Bibles translate the Greek as “mystery.” Historically, the church saw that something mysterious was involved in the liturgy of the church and in the giving of sacraments. So right from the start, we find a bit of difficulty as we try to define what a sacrament is. But in its most rudimentary form, the idea of the sacrament involves an experience of something that is *sacred*—something that

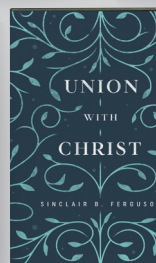
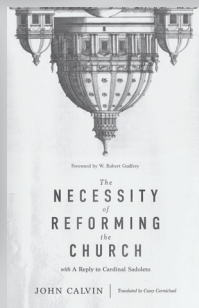
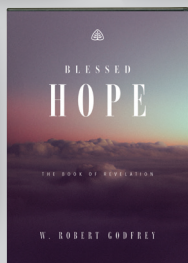
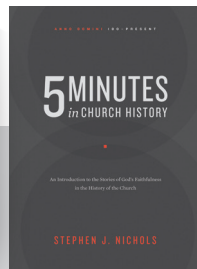
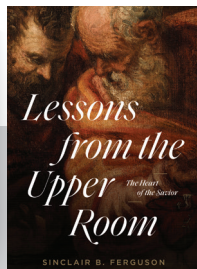
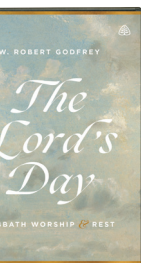
What Is a Sacrament?

we regard as extraordinary or uncommon, something with a special meaning or significance attached to it.

Theologians sometimes use the word *sacrament* in a narrow sense and sometimes in a broad sense. In the narrow sense, the term means the specific rites or ordinances that are observed in the church, which we call *sacraments*. In the broader sense, it refers to the many ways that God communicates to His people through object lessons, signs, or ordinary symbols that take on extraordinary meaning.

For example, early in the Old Testament, we have the record of the great deluge, the flood of Noah that destroyed the world. We know that after Noah and his family survived, God promised them that He would never again destroy the world by a flood. We are told that as a sign or symbol of God's abiding promise to that end, God set His rainbow in the sky. He used the common, natural phenomenon of the rainbow as a sign of an uncommon, special, divine promise of His persevering and preserving providence. So every time we see a rainbow, we are involved in the sacramental life of the faith—not in the narrow, technical sense of sacraments but rather in the broader sense of external objects that are used to enhance and support the communication of the verbal promises of God.

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around the world connect the deep truths
of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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