

What Is Baptism?

Crucial Questions

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.

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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

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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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be a *material cause*, which he defined as the material from which the statue is made. It could be a block of stone, a chunk of wood, or some other substance. He then identified the *efficient cause*, a person who changes the shape of the material and refashions it. For a statue, the efficient cause is the sculptor. Next there is the *formal cause*, a plan, idea, or blueprint that directs the alteration of the material. There is also a *final cause*, which is the reason for the statue. Finally, Aristotle identified the *instrumental cause*, which is the tool or means by which the change in the material is wrought. In sculpting his *Pieta*, Michelangelo could not just command the marble to take the shape he desired. He needed a chisel and a hammer. Those were the instruments by which the change in the marble took place.

As Protestants, we say that justification is by faith alone. That little word *by* is critical to our understanding of how justification takes place. It does not mean that faith is meritorious and obligates God to save us. Rather, the word *by* indicates grammatically what we call the instrumental dative, which describes the means by which a thing comes to pass. So, to use Aristotle's categories, faith is the instrumental cause of justification, according to the Protestant view.

By contrast, the Roman Catholic Church says the instru-

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mental cause of justification is baptism. Rome proclaims that a person is justified when he or she is baptized by a priest. At baptism, the person receives an infusion, an inpouring, of grace in the soul. This grace is sometimes called the grace of the righteousness of Christ or the grace of justification. When it is infused into the soul of the person who is being baptized, that person enters a state of grace.

A Second Plank of Justification

In the Roman Catholic view, it is necessary for the person who is baptized to cooperate with infused grace to stay in a state of grace, because, according to Rome, people can lose their justification. If a person commits a very serious sin, the grace of justification is killed. Thus, the Roman Catholic Church calls such sins “mortal sins.”

Since saving grace is infused into a person at baptism, it would seem that if a baptized person commits a mortal sin, thus wiping out the grace of justification in his or her soul, in order to be justified again, the person would have to be baptized again. But the Roman Catholic Church does not rebaptize people who commit mortal sins; it teaches that even though justification is lost by mortal sin, there is a

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character indelebilis, an indelible mark that is placed on the soul of everyone who is baptized.

Thus, restoration to justification in the event of mortal sin is through another sacrament, penance, which the Roman Catholic Church describes as the second plank of justification for those who have made shipwreck of their souls (the sacrament of penance was what provoked the controversy that led to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century). So the first instrumental cause of justification is the sacrament of baptism. If you lose your justification, the next time the instrumental cause is the sacrament of penance. In short, according to Rome, sacraments are the instruments by which salvation is communicated.

“From the Working of the Work”

As part of its argument for the efficacy of the sacraments, the Roman Catholic Church states that they function *ex opere operato*, which means literally, “From the working of the work.” When the Protestant Reformers began to question Rome’s teachings, they asserted that *ex opere operato* must mean that anyone who is baptized automatically is justified. Roman Catholic authorities replied that justification is not

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An empty ritual or something more?

Christians agree that baptism is an essential practice in the church, and they also agree that it does not in itself save people from their sins. But why is there disagreement when it comes to whom should be baptized and how?

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul introduces us to the sacrament of baptism and explains why well-meaning Christians come to different conclusions about it. As he unpacks its meaning, we see that baptism is a sign and seal of God's promise of redemption, of cleansing from sin, and of new life in Christ.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

Dr. R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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