

# WHAT *Is* BAPTISM?

The Crucial Questions Series

By R. C. Sproul

WHO *Is* JESUS?

CAN I TRUST *the* BIBLE?

DOES *Prayer* CHANGE THINGS?

CAN I *Know* GOD'S WILL?

HOW SHOULD I *Live* IN THIS WORLD?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN *to Be* BORN AGAIN?

CAN I BE SURE *I'm* SAVED?

WHAT *Is* FAITH?

WHAT CAN I *Do with* MY GUILT?

WHAT *Is the* TRINITY?

WHAT *Is* BAPTISM?

CRUCIAL  
QUESTIONS

NO. 44

# WHAT *Is* BAPTISM?

R. C. SPROUL

**RT**

*Reformation Trust*

PUBLISHING

---

A DIVISION OF LIGONIER MINISTRIES · ORLANDO, FLORIDA

*What Is Baptism?*

© 2011 by R.C. Sproul

Published by Reformation Trust Publishing  
a division of Ligonier Ministries  
421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771  
Ligonier.org ReformationTrust.com

Printed in Grand Rapids, MI  
Color House Graphics  
August 2011  
First edition

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the publisher, Reformation Trust Publishing. The only exception is brief quotations in published reviews.

Cover design: Gearbox Studios  
Interior design and typeset: Katherine Lloyd, The DESK

All Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Sproul, R. C. (Robert Charles), 1939-  
What is baptism? / R.C. Sproul.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.


ISBN 978-1-56769-260-0

1. Baptism--Reformed Church. 2. Reformed Church--Doctrines. I. Title.  
BX94275.B36.S67 2011  
234'.161--dc23

2011020970

## Contents

One—BAPTISM AND SALVATION . . . . .	1
Two—JOHN'S BAPTISM AND JESUS' BAPTISM . . . . .	11
Three—THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT . . . . .	23
Four—THE MEANING OF BAPTISM . . . . .	33
Five—THE MODE OF BAPTISM . . . . .	49
Six—THE CASE FOR INFANT BAPTISM . . . . .	59



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, worshipping one Lord and one God in one faith. And, we are told, there is one 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 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 instrumental 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 *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 automatic, for the infusion of grace that occurs at baptism does not lead to justification if the recipient hinders it with unbelief. Incidentally, this means that those who are baptized as infants are certainly justified because they are not capable of resisting the infusion of grace.

Against the *ex opere operato* principle of Rome, the Reformers argued that the benefits signified by baptism are not received apart from faith. When God gives the sign of baptism to a person, He gives a promise of all of the benefits that He will bestow on all who believe. Therefore, a person can be baptized and yet never come to faith and never experience all of the benefits that we have enumerated. So classical Reformed theology repudiates the idea of any kind of automatic efficacy of baptism.

Does that mean that baptism is simply an empty sign? Why do it if it does not accomplish anything? We do it first because Christ commanded it, but also because it conveys the sign of the promise of God of salvation by faith and all of the benefits that flow from that. When a person is baptized and comes to faith, if he later worries about the loss

of his salvation, he can recall his baptism—not because the baptism guarantees his salvation, but because it reminds him of the unfailing promise of God to preserve all those who are engrafted into Christ. As we will see, when Abraham asked how he could be sure that God would fulfill His promise to give Abraham the land of Canaan, God went through a covenant ceremony. In other words, God took an oath. He made a covenant promise, saying, in essence, “Abraham, may I be destroyed if I do not keep my promise to you.”

God does not promise any of the benefits of salvation to unbelievers. The promise is only to those who believe, and the promise is absolutely sure for them. Therefore, baptism is infinitely valuable.

Baptism, then, is not necessary for salvation. We have only to consider the example of the thief on the cross; he was not baptized, yet Jesus promised that he would be in paradise that day. Some who believe are physically hindered from being baptized, and some people refrain because they believe it's not necessary. I still believe they will be in heaven if they have truly trusted Christ alone for their salvation.

The debate over the place of baptism in the salvation of

sinners is but one of the controversies that have attended this sacrament through the centuries. My goal in this booklet is to touch on some of these disputes. I will not go into detail, but I hope to provide an overview and introduction to some of the key issues that surround this sacrament.