

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 11, 2015**

**THE ESSENTIALS OF OUR FAITH:
THE WORD OF GOD**

Matthew 7:24-27

The motto of the EPC, as I trust most of you know, is:

*In essentials, unity;
In Non-essentials, liberty;
In all things, charity.
Truth in love.*

Since we value unity in the essentials of our faith so highly, it makes sense to go back to basics from time to time to take a fresh look at the non-negotiable, core beliefs that make up the essentials of our faith. To that end, this morning I want to begin exploring, or re-exploring, with you the EPC Essentials of Our Faith, the beliefs that define us and unite us as evangelical and Presbyterian followers of the Lord Jesus Christ in the world today.

At the founding of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in 1981, the first General Assembly of the EPC adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms (Larger and Shorter), which date back to the 1640s, as the doctrinal standards for our church, under the authority of Holy Scripture. What this means is that the Westminster Confession and Catechisms are subordinate, secondary standards in the life of the church. They articulate what we in the Reformed and Presbyterian branch of Christianity believe to be true doctrine as taught in the Bible, which we believe and profess to be the Word of God written. The Confession and Catechisms are *not* the Word of God. They do not carry the same weight or authority as the Bible. Nor do they supercede the Bible's authority. Yet they are enormously helpful to us as they express the teachings of God's Word in a systematic way.

At the same General Assembly in 1981, the founders of the EPC adopted a document called the *Essentials of Our Faith* to provide a clear, concise statement of the non-negotiable essentials which are explained more fully in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms.

Every pastor or "teaching elder" in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, including Helen Franssell, Pastor David and I, and every ordained deacon and ruling elder in the EPC, including our deacons and elders here at Faith, must "affirm and adopt" the EPC Essentials of Our Faith "without exception." It is a requirement for ordination and installation as a deacon, elder, or pastor. Why? Because we are convinced that unity in the essentials of our faith is absolutely necessary for the spiritual health and well-being of the church, for the church's faithful fulfillment of its God-ordained mission in the world, and for the glory and honor of God in the church.

We begin today where the EPC Essentials begin, with an introductory statement regarding the Bible as the Word of God. This statement is printed in your bulletin today as an Affirmation

of Faith, which we will read aloud together at the conclusion of the message. Here is what it says.

All Scripture is self-attesting (that is, it bears witness to its own authority and trustworthiness) and being Truth, requires our unreserved submission in all areas of life. The infallible Word of God, the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, is a complete and unified witness to God's redemptive acts, culminating in the incarnation of the Living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible, uniquely and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, is the supreme and final authority on all matters on which it speaks.

This belief in the Bible as the Word of God is the bedrock foundation on which we affirm all the essentials of our faith.

In the brief passage of Scripture we just read from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses the analogy of two builders and their houses to drive home the necessity of building your life on a firm foundation that is capable of withstanding the inevitable storms and stresses of life. He also points out the tragedy of building one's life on the wrong foundation. We will come back to this shortly.

First, though, I want to tell you a story that bears witness to the uniqueness and significance of the Bible, as well as its authority and power. If you have heard it before, I promise it won't hurt to hear it again.

THE BOOK THAT UNDERSTANDS ME

Emile Cailliet was born in a small French village in 1894. "Naturalistic to the core" is the way he described the education he received as a boy. At the age of 20, Cailliet found himself on the front lines in World War I, witnessing atrocities that only served to harden his atheistic world view.

Wounded in action, Cailliet was rescued by an American field ambulance and spent nine months recovering in a hospital. During his hospital stay, he married a Scotch-Irish girl he had met in Germany on Christmas Eve 1913, the year before the war began. "She was," Cailliet wrote, "and has always remained, a deeply evangelical person. I am ashamed to confess that she must have been hurt to the very core of her being as I made it clear that religion would be taboo in our home. Little did I realize at the time that [such] a militant attitude often betrays an inner turmoil." Though he had never even seen a Bible, he insisted that it would never be allowed in their home.

After the War, Cailliet returned to his studies, but his reading in literature and philosophy failed to satisfy the yearnings of his soul for real meaning in life. Realizing that it may sound strange, he said he longed "for a book that would understand me." But he knew of no such book. So he decided to create one of his own. He did so by marking passages in the reading for his courses "that would speak to (his) condition, then carefully copy them in a leatherbound pocket book (he) would always carry with (him). The quotations, which (he) numbered in red ink for easier reference, would (guide him)," he believed, "from fear and

anguish, through a variety of intervening stages, to supreme utterances of release and jubilation.” That was his plan.

The day finally arrived when Cailliet finished this “book that would understand (him)” and “help (him) through life’s happenings.” It was a beautiful, sunny day, as he recalled. He walked outside, sat down under a tree, and opened his “precious anthology,” as he called it, with the highest of hopes. As he read, though, he experienced “a growing disappointment.” The various passages he had copied so carefully failed to speak in a meaningful way to his life and the longings of his soul. “I knew then,” he said, “that my whole undertaking would not work, simply because it was of my own making.” Dejected, he put the book back in his pocket.

He had no idea what to do now. But God was at work. “At that very moment,” Cailliet said, “my wife, who knew nothing of the project on which I had been working, appeared at the gate of the garden, pushing the baby carriage.” Earlier in the day she had gone to the marketplace. Turning down a side street because the main boulevard was so crowded, the cobblestones rattled the carriage so badly she knew she would have to turn aside. Spotting a patch of grass beyond a small archway, she went in for a moment of rest. The patch of grass, it turns out, led to an outside stone staircase that she climbed without fully realizing what she was doing. At the top, she found a long room with the door wide open. So she went in. At the far end sat an older gentleman working at a desk. Noticing the carving of a cross on the wall, she suddenly realized that the office was part of a church building. It was a French Huguenot (Protestant) church. The venerable-looking gentleman was the pastor. (I wonder if anyone will ever refer to me as “venerable-looking.”)

Madame Cailliet walked up to the man at the desk and asked impulsively: “Have you a Bible in French?” He smiled and handed her a copy. She took it and left with a mixture of joy and guilt.

When she got home, she began to apologize to her husband, knowing that he had forbidden the Bible to be brought into their home. But Cailliet interrupted her: “A Bible, you say? Where is it? Show me. I have never seen one before!”

As she pulled it out, Cailliet literally grabbed the Bible from her hands and rushed to his study. He opened it at random and found himself reading the Beatitudes of Jesus. “I read and read and read,” he said, “now aloud with an indescribable warmth surging within. I could not find words to express my awe and wonder. And suddenly the realization dawned upon me: This was the book that would understand me!”

He continued to read long into the night, mostly from the Gospels. As he read, he said, “The One of whom (the Gospels) spoke, the One who spoke and acted in them became alive to me.”

“The providential circumstances amid which the book had found me now made it clear,” Cailliet testified, “that while it seemed absurd to speak of a book understanding a man, this could be said of the Bible because its pages were animated by the presence of the living God

and the power of His mighty acts. To this God I prayed that night, and the God who answered was the same God of whom it was spoken in the book.” (Adapted from *Eternity Magazine*, July 1974).

After completing his Ph.D. in France, Emile Cailliet came to the United States and eventually served as Professor of Christian Philosophy at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1947 until his retirement in 1959. It turns out that one of Cailliet’s teaching assistants at Princeton was a seminarian named Charles MacKenzie, who was President of Grove City College when Mary Sue and I were students there.

A BOOK LIKE NO OTHER

“The book that would understand me.” Are you looking for “a book that would understand you”? The Bible is that book. It is a book like no other. A truly remarkable book, it is really a sacred library of 66 separate but interconnected “books” written over a period of more than 1500 years (between ca. 1450 BC and ca. 90 AD) by more than 40 human authors from diverse backgrounds and different sectors of society. The biblical authors include kings and other leaders, prophets, priests, a tax collector, a doctor, a tentmaker, a farmer, and a couple of fishermen (James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 58).

Nevertheless, as the Holy Spirit inspired and directed these authors, God used them to produce a book that is extraordinary in the unity of its message, a unity that can only be explained and accounted for by the sovereign and supernatural imprint of God Himself upon it. Ultimately, the Bible is *one* book with *one* author and *one* theme. It is not a miscellaneous collection of writings by and about the Jewish people and their perceptions of God. It is, as J. I. Packer has said, “a single book with a single author – God the Spirit – and a single theme – God the Son, and the Father’s saving purposes, which all revolve around Him.”

The Bible *is* the Word of God. It is the self-revelation of God, the voice of God, in human language. In the Bible, God has spoken. And God still speaks through it today, because His Word is “living and active and sharper than a double-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12).

All Scripture, as Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16, is “God-breathed.” It is endowed with God’s authority. It is saturated with God’s love. It is filled with God’s wisdom. Because it is the Word of God, the Bible commands and deserves our unreserved submission in every area of life.

The Westminster Confession of Faith says that the Bible speaks with authority, and so deserves to be both believed and obeyed. The authority of the Bible does not depend on the testimony or endorsement of any person or church or other group. Its authority depends completely on God, who is its author and who is Himself truth. Therefore, the Confession affirms, the Bible is to be accepted as true, because it is the Word of God (WCF, chap. 1).

Think about this: If God has spoken to us in His Word – the Bible (I believe He has!), if God still speaks today through His Word (I believe He does!), and if the Bible is the book that truly understands us (I believe it is!), isn’t it foolish to neglect it, to disregard it, and fail to

take it to heart? Isn't it foolish to overrule God's Word and replace it with our own "wisdom"?

The Bible is the book that understands us because it tells the truth, and it tells the truth in love. It tells us the truth about God, about the world, about human nature and human destiny, about sin, about suffering, about rebellion, about redemption, about life and death, about right and wrong, about good and evil, about justice and mercy and love and grace. It tells us the truth about ourselves and what God in His incomparable love has done about it. It tells the truth because it *is* the truth.

THE FOUNDATION

In Matthew 7, as Jesus brings the Sermon on the Mount to a close, He tells a story about two builders and the houses they build. One builds on a foundation of solid rock. The other builds on a foundation of sand. In good weather, both houses look fine. They both appear to be safe and secure. But when the storms come, when torrential rains fall, when the winds hit with hurricane force, when flood waters rise and the waves beat against them, you will discover the difference in these two houses that makes all the difference. Which, of course, is the foundation.

The point is that a life built on the foundation of Jesus and His Word *will* stand. It *will* endure the storms of life in this world. It *will* stand, as James Boice points out, "in the midst of the tribulations of this life (as well as) the judgments of eternity" (Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 266).

The simple truth is that trials, troubles, tribulations, suffering, sorrow, pain, loss, disappointment, and eventually death come to everyone. It is an unavoidable, inescapable fact of life. What then can we do? What then should we do?

Jesus gives the answer: Make sure you build your life on a sound, solid, sure foundation. What is that foundation? It is the foundation of a personal faith, a living trust in Jesus Christ Himself as Savior and Lord of your life, because Jesus is the Rock of our salvation. The sure foundation is the teachings of Jesus. The sure foundation is the teaching of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, all of which is the God-breathed, infallible, authoritative, enduring Word of God. The sure foundation is the book that understands us, the book that tells us what God has done about our sin and our inability to save ourselves, the book that teaches us the truth and shows us how to live.

HEARING AND DOING

It is not just hearing God's Word, though, or being exposed to the teaching of the Bible that makes the difference. Hearing is not enough. Yes, reading the Bible is absolutely essential. Attending a Bible study is a good thing. So is listening to sermons. But none of these is enough. Like the wise builder in Jesus' analogy, we must not only hear His teaching, we must put it into practice. We must believe God's Word. We must live by it. We must be "doers of the Word" (James 1:22). We must allow God's Word to "dwell in us richly"

(Colossians 3:16). We must allow it to saturate our hearts, our minds, our desires, our dreams, our words, our actions, and the whole course of our lives. All to the glory and praise of God.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.

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