

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 24, 2016**

WHAT ABOUT BAPTISM?

Romans 6:1-7

For the first time ever, our presbytery met in New York City this past Friday and Saturday. Pastor David and I were there, along with Nico and several of our elders from Faith. The meeting was held in a beautiful, neo-Gothic church building right on Park Avenue in midtown Manhattan. It was originally built as a Baptist church in the early 1920s by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. After Rockefeller built a bigger church for the Baptist congregation and its controversial pastor, Harry Emerson Fosdick, the building on Park Avenue became home to a Presbyterian congregation that had a thriving ministry until the 1960s, when, like many other mainline Protestant churches, it began a long period of decline. Attendance dwindled to about 20 people on Sunday mornings. But in the past few years, under the leadership of a new generation of energetic, visionary believers and a gifted young pastor, Jason Harris, the church is undergoing a season of revitalization and growth that is exciting to see. Central Presbyterian Church came into the EPC and became part of the Presbytery of the East about three years ago.

Praise God for what He is doing there in the heart of New York City! God is alive, my friends, and His redemptive purposes will prevail.

Probably the most fun part of attending this presbytery meeting for me was the opportunity to operate the church's manually-operated 1920s-era elevator. I told the kind man operating the elevator (which I took to the 6th floor of the church building, where the Presbytery dinner on Friday and breakfast on Saturday were held) that back in the 1970s, when I was in college, I had worked summers in a hotel in Chautauqua, NY, where one of my responsibilities as a bellman was to operate a 1924 hand-operated Otis elevator – very similar to the one in the church. So he let me run it a couple times! To tell you the truth, you could tell I was out of practice. I didn't get the elevator to stop exactly even with the floor. But close enough. Nobody tripped getting in or out when I was running it. It was great fun to get to do it again after all these years.

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Today, with Paul's teaching in Romans 6 as the background, I want to talk with you about baptism – about what the New Testament teaches, what we believe about baptism and how we put the biblical teaching on baptism into practice in our life as a congregation (a church family) of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC).

I hope you recall that two Sundays ago, where we looked at Romans 6:1-14, we focused on Paul's message that Jesus wants us both *dead and alive* – *dead to sin* and its enslaving power in our lives *and alive to God* in Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 6:11). Not dead *or* alive but *dead and alive*. We are to consider ourselves *dead to sin* and *alive to God* through the saving grace and power of the Lord Jesus Christ, who willingly suffered and died on the cross for us.

Paul uses the paradigm of baptism to illustrate our union with Jesus in His death, burial, and resurrection from the dead. We see this in verses 3-5, where Paul explains the significance of baptism in terms of our spiritual identification with Jesus in His death, burial, and resurrection. As I said two weeks ago, baptism in this sense represents both a funeral for our old, sin-dominated self, and a resurrection to new life in the power of our risen Lord.

It is a beautiful and dramatic picture of the identification of a believer with Jesus symbolizing our death in Christ to our old, sinful, self-centered way of life, the burial of that old way, and our resurrection with Jesus to new life as a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17) through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us. When any believer not previously baptized receives baptism – especially baptism by immersion (though immersion is not required) – this connection with the Lord Jesus in His death, burial, and resurrection is visibly and vividly expressed. It can be a powerful witness to the difference that coming to faith in the Lord Jesus makes in a person's life. If you have never been baptized, it *can* be – and perhaps *should* be – a game-changing factor that moves you to seek baptism.

But what Paul presents in Romans 6 is not the only picture, nor the only dimension of baptism presented in the New Testament. There are different layers or dimensions to baptism as we encounter it in the New Testament. Before we get to that, let me make clear for you what we do in the EPC and here at Faith. We happily baptize professing believers in Christ who have not previously received Christian baptism. But, unlike churches that only baptize professing believers in Christ who have not previously received Christian baptism. But, unlike churches that only baptize professing believers, we also happily and unapologetically baptize the children – including infants – of at least one believing parent on the basis of the faith of the parent(s) in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Not all Christians, not all Christian churches, not all denominations or Christian traditions affirm or practice infant baptism (which is also known as *paedobaptism*). Not all of you believe in it. Some of you, either by conviction or preference, have chosen not to have your children baptized as infants, desiring instead that they receive baptism by their own choice as professing believers and followers of the Lord Jesus. In many cases, you have opted to have your children dedicated to the Lord instead of baptized as infants or young children. While our heritage in the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition is to encourage parents to present their children for baptism, here at Faith (and in many other EPC churches), we regard the question of infant baptism or believer's baptism to be a non-essential of the faith in which, as brothers and sisters in Christ, we have liberty to decide.

So, while we believe in the propriety of infant baptism, we don't insist on it. It has been my privilege in the last almost 19 years as your pastor to participate in the dedication of many of the children of our church, as well as to baptize as professing believers a sizable number in our church family who were not baptized as children. I think – and hope – it has enriched us as a church family to not insist that everyone hold or submit to a single, uniform view or practice with regard to baptism. There *are* some things in which unity is absolutely essential. I don't believe our practice of baptism is one of them.

Having said that we *do* believe in baptizing infants who cannot themselves make a profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, let me tell you what we *do not* believe. We *do not* believe, as some do, that baptism is necessary for salvation. The idea that you can't get to heaven if you're not baptized is simply wrong and unbiblical. We are saved not by being baptized, but by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. You do not have to be baptized in order to be saved or to have the assurance that you will go to heaven. It just ain't so.

In addition, we *do not* believe in baptismal regeneration, which is the idea that baptism automatically confers or guarantees salvation. Some traditions of the Christian faith, most notably the Roman Catholic Church, teach that baptism secures salvation, that everyone who has undergone Christian baptism, *will* go to heaven. Regardless of the kind of life one has lived or whether there is any evidence of the fruit of saving faith in a person's life. We don't believe that, because the Bible doesn't teach it.

How many of you remember Archie Bunker? Let's see your hands. Some of you are way too young to remember him. Archie was the main character in the 1970s TV sitcom *All in the Family*. Archie was a hopelessly opinionated bigot that everybody could laugh at, even if on occasion you might see something of yourself in him. In one episode, Archie, who was not a regular church-goer, was obsessed with the urgency of getting his little grandson Joey baptized. (You can find this episode on Youtube, if you're interested.) Archie and wife Edith had a daughter, Gloria, who was married to Michael – Archie always referred to him as "Meathead." Joey was their son. Michael and Gloria were opposed to having Joey baptized. Michael, who professed to be an atheist, was especially vehement in his opposition. Michael and Gloria said they wanted Joey to grow up without any kind of religion. (There was a lot of that in the 70s. Still is.)

Archie, not unlike others who hold a superstitious view of baptism, was terribly troubled by this, and decided to take matters into his own hands. So, one Sunday afternoon, while he and Edith were babysitting Joey, Archie sneaked out of the house with Joey, took him to the church, told the pastor of Joey's unbaptized state, and asked the pastor to baptize him then and there. The pastor rightly refused to perform the baptism without the consent of the baby's parents. So Archie decided he would do it himself. He went to the baptismal font, took Joey in his arms, and proceeded to baptize his grandson in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. With that, Archie let out a huge sigh of relief. For now, finally, Joey's eternal destiny was secure.

That, of course, is not what baptism is about or how the sacrament is to be carried out.

In the New Testament, the first mention of baptism comes with the ministry of John the Baptist (or John the Baptizer), the forerunner of the Messiah, the one who would come to "prepare the way for the Lord" (Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4). John, we are told, burst onto the scene "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). Hundreds, even thousands, of people came flocking to John to be baptized by him as they confessed their sins. So the first dimension of baptism as we encounter it in the New Testament is that it symbolized a heart-attitude of repentance, of turning away from sin and turning back to God.

Jesus Himself came to be baptized by John. But John demurred. Understandably. He said to Jesus: “I need to be baptized by You, not the other way around” (Matthew 3:14). But Jesus insisted. Not that He had any sins to repent of, but because in His baptism (as in His death on the cross), Jesus identified with us in our sinfulness and willingly submitted to baptism by John in order, as He said, “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15).

The Gospels do not indicate that baptism was a part of Jesus’ earthly ministry. But it was a major part of the ministry of the apostles and the New Testament church following the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus into heaven, and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus’ followers on the Day of Pentecost. It was and is a part of the Great Commission Jesus gave His disciples in Matthew 28, the command to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). Since this Great Commission has never been rescinded, it remains our commission as the followers of Jesus today.

Acts 2 tells us that, convicted by Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost, those who heard it “were cut to the heart” and asked what they should do in response. To which Peter replied: “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise,” Peter said, “is for you and your children and all who are far off” (Acts 2:37-39).

For those who had not been baptized, baptism was the appropriate response to signal their repentance, their newfound faith in Christ, and their allegiance to Him. We see this repeated in the case of the man from Ethiopia who was baptized by Philip in Acts 8. But there is a new, added wrinkle to baptism in Acts 10, following the conversion of a Gentile named Cornelius (Acts 10:47-48), which is seen again in Acts 16, where the whole household of a believing woman named Lydia was baptized (Acts 16:15), and again when the Philippian jailer to whom Paul and Silas witnessed and all his family were baptized (Acts 16:33). This new, added wrinkle is the baptism of entire households or families when the head of the household was converted to faith in Christ. Though the New Testament does not specifically mention the baptism of infants or children, we may reasonably conclude that they were included in the baptism of entire households or families, since in the New Testament a household consisted of the head of the household, his wife and children, other relatives living in the home, as well as dependent servants.

It is admittedly an inference, but we in the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition infer from this that the children of believing parents were included in the sacrament of baptism. Another reason we baptize infants and children is because we see baptism as a replacement for circumcision as the sign of inclusion in the covenant community of God’s people. Baptism is for us a sign of God’s covenant with His people and a sign of His covenant blessings. Whereas circumcision was the covenant sign in the Old Testament, in the New Testament the sign of the covenant is baptism, which symbolizes the cleansing of our hearts from sin through the shedding of Jesus’ blood for us, and our inclusion in the covenant promises of God to all His children through faith.

Consider this analogy that illustrates how these covenant blessings play out in the baptism of a child. Suppose you're the parent of a young child or children, and you have a rich uncle or other relative who comes to you and says: "I'm going to give each of your children a check for \$10 million." You would, I presume, be blown away by this. You know this will make a huge difference financially in the lives of your children, even if they don't understand the significance of it. It will guarantee your children's financial future. However, a check for \$10 million (or any amount) is useless unless the person who receives it endorses it and deposits it in the bank. If you never endorse it, the \$10 million never really becomes yours. There is a sense in which infant baptism is like this. It is like a humongous check in that it brings the promises of God to the child who is baptized, but those promises do not take effect unless and until the child personally comes to faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. What we look forward to in the baptism of a child is the day when that child will "endorse" the covenant and embrace saving faith in Jesus Christ for himself or herself.

Baptism saves no one. As a sacrament, though, it is a visible sign of the cleansing from sin and new life in Christ that is given to all who trust in Him for salvation. The baptism of an infant also gives us a beautiful picture of the nature of God's grace, which is extended to us even when, like a helpless baby, there is nothing we can do to earn it or deserve it. Which is the way God's grace works, no matter how young or old we may be.

As usual, there is much more that could be said about baptism, whether we're talking about infant baptism or believer's baptism. Let me quickly address just one more thing. If you were baptized as an infant, you may wonder if it is okay or necessary to be re-baptized as a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. I won't claim to have an authoritative word from God on this, but here is my opinion: If you received Christian baptism as an infant or child, it is not necessary for you to be baptized again as a believer. In fact, as the Westminster Confession of Faith says, "Ordinarily, baptism should be administered only once to a person" (WCF 28.7). Is it a sin to be re-baptized? I don't think so. It is not necessary, but I don't think it is a sin. Please don't ask me to re-baptize you, though, because my ordination vows as an EPC minister prevent me from re-baptizing a person, except under very unusual circumstances.

My goal in this message has not been to convert any of you to a particular point-of-view about baptism, but rather to help you see – perhaps more clearly – the richness of the biblical understanding of baptism as applied to both believers and their children. If you are the parents of children who have not been either baptized or dedicated, I urge you to consider both options and choose the one that seems best to you. If you are a believer who has never been baptized, I strongly urge you to undergo baptism (whether by sprinkling, pouring or immersion – any of which are acceptable) as a way of publicly identifying with Jesus and His church, and giving public witness to your faith in Him and your intention to live in this world as a fully-devoted follower of His.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.