

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 20, 2019**

IN ESSENTIALS, UNITY

Matthew 7:24-27

Have you ever heard of Rupertus Meldenius? Maybe you know him as Peter Meiderlin. Sound familiar now? I didn't think so. Meldenius (or Meiderlin) was a relatively unknown German Lutheran theologian in the 17th-century who coined the phrase that has become the motto of our denomination, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church:

*In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty;
in all things, charity.*

This saying is often attributed to St. Augustine, the esteemed church father from the 4th- and 5th-centuries, but you won't find it in any of his writings. It has been attributed to others as well, including John Wesley. But it seems to have originated with Meldenius (Meiderlin), who gave expression to it in 1627, in the midst of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) in Europe, a bloody time marked by conflicts between Protestant and Catholic states. It was spread through the writings of Puritan pastor Richard Baxter and was later adopted, first by the Moravian Church of North America, and then by the EPC at its founding in 1981.

The first General Assembly of the EPC in 1981 adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms (Larger and Shorter), dating back to the 1640s, as the doctrinal standards for our church, under the authority of Holy Scripture. This means that the Westminster Confession and Catechisms are subordinate, secondary standards of belief in the life of the church. They express 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 take precedence over the Bible. Yet they are of great help to us as they articulate 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.

These *Essentials of Our Faith* are, in a word, *essential* to our unity in the EPC and with believers from any and every other Christian tradition. Every pastor or teaching elder in our denomination, as well as every ordained deacon and ruling elder in our church, including those who were ordained and/or installed two Sundays ago, must "affirm and adopt" the EPC *Essentials of Our Faith* "without exception." It is a requirement for everyone who serves as a deacon, elder, or pastor. Why? Because we believe 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 fulfillment of its God-ordained mission in the world, and for the glory and honor of God in the church.

From time to time it is good to remind ourselves of the essentials of our faith. From time to time it is good to go back to the basics, to deepen our understanding, and to renew our commitment to the foundational truths of our faith. That is what I propose to do beginning this morning as we consider the introductory paragraph of the EPC *Essentials*, which we have already said together.

Listen as I read it again:

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 inspired, infallible, and authoritative Word of God, is the bedrock foundation on which we affirm all the essentials of our faith.

TWO BUILDERS, TWO HOUSES, TWO FOUNDATIONS

In the verses we read from Matthew 7, Jesus tells a story about two builders, two houses, and two foundations. It comes at the end of the greatest sermon ever given – the Sermon on the Mount. Each builder, one wise and the other not, builds a house. One builds on a foundation of rock. The other builds on a foundation of sand. When the weather is good, when the sun is shining and the winds are calm, 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, when the ground shakes, you will discover the difference in these two houses that makes all the difference. Which, of course, is the foundation.

In the original context, when Jesus says that “everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man (or woman) who builds his (her) house on the rock” (7:24), He is referring to the words He has just spoken in the Sermon on the Mount. In a broader sense, though, it applies to the whole of His teaching in the Gospels. It applies to everything He said and taught on any and every occasion, whether to His disciples, to the Pharisees, to the crowds, or to individuals with whom He had private conversations, like Nicodemus (John 3) or Zaccheus (Luke 19) or Martha, the sister of Mary and Lazarus (Luke 10:38-42; John 11:21-27). Every word of Jesus, rightly understood and applied, goes into the foundation on which Jesus says we should build our lives.

Even more broadly, what Jesus says about His words applies to the whole of Scripture. It applies to the whole Bible – the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments – from Genesis to Revelation. The Bible itself, as the inspired and infallible Word of God, is the sure foundation of truth on which to build your life.

The point Jesus is making at the end of the Sermon on the Mount is that a life built on the foundation of trust in Him and His Word *will stand* when life gets hard and you're faced with attacks or setbacks or challenges or tragedies too big to withstand on your own. A house – or a life – built on Jesus and His Word *can* and *will* endure the storms of life in this world. It *will* stand, as James Boice says, “in the midst of the tribulations of this life (as well as) the judgments of eternity” (Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 266).

There is no escaping the truth that trials, troubles, tribulations, suffering, sorrow, pain, loss, criticism, disappointment, and eventually death come to everyone. There are no exceptions. So, what can we do? What *should* we do?

Jesus gives the answer: Make sure you build your life on a foundation that is solid, sound, and sure. This foundation is first of all *Jesus Himself*. It is a *personal faith*, a living trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord of your life, because Jesus is the Rock of our salvation. This sure foundation is the *teachings of Jesus*. It is the *teaching of the Bible* from Genesis to Revelation, all of which is the God-breathed, unerring, trustworthy, authoritative, and enduring Word of God.

The person who disregards Jesus' words, the person who disregards or dismisses God's Word, the person who ignores the message of the Bible, who refuses to take it to heart, who picks and chooses what to believe and what not to believe in the Bible, who does not put the words of Jesus and the teaching of the Bible into practice – this, says Jesus, is the foolish person whose house (life) is built on a foundation of sand. These are the ones whose houses (lives) will come crashing down like a house of cards because they do not have an adequate foundation to weather the storms and trials that inevitably come.

You can't afford to miss what Jesus is saying. Everybody needs a foundation. But not all foundations are created equal. The only foundation you can count on to get you through all the ups and downs of life is the foundation God has given us in the gospel and the message of the Bible as a whole.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

When we talk about the Bible's authority, we are really talking about God's authority. The Bible says that all authority belongs to God. So the authority of the Bible comes not from itself but from God. Jesus says: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18). The authority belongs to Him. The authority of the Bible is derived from God. It has authority, as the Westminster Confession says, because God is its author. The Confession says: “The Bible speaks authoritatively and thus deserves to be believed and obeyed. This authority does not depend on the testimony of any (person) or church but completely on God, its author, who is Himself truth. The Bible is therefore to be accepted as true, because it is the word of God” (WCF 1:4).

To say it another way, when we speak of the Bible's authority, we mean that God uses the Bible to express His authority and communicate His truth (cf. John Ortberg, “The Bible Alone,” www.preachingtoday.com).

THE BOOK THAT UNDERSTANDS ME

You may recall the story of a young Frenchman a hundred years ago named Emile Cailliet, an avowed atheist who, in his disillusionment with the world, began to read the Bible and discovered it to be “the book that understands me.” It changed the whole course of his life. I’ve told you his story before.

Are you looking for a book that understands you? Lots of books may give insight or understanding into why we are the way we are and do the things we do. But there is no other book that understands us the way the Bible does. Though the 66 books of the Bible were written by more than 40 human authors from diverse backgrounds over a period of more than 1500 years, the Bible is ultimately *one* book with *one* author and *one* theme. In the words of J. I. Packer, the Bible is “a single book with a single author – God the Spirit – and a single theme – God the Son, and [God] the Father’s saving purposes, which all revolve around Him.” The Holy Spirit inspired and directed the human authors of Scripture 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 on it.

The Bible is *the* book that understands us. It tells the truth about us. We may not like everything the Bible says, but it tells the truth. As Jesus says in John 17:17, “(God’s) word is truth.” It tells the truth about our natural sinful bent. It tells the truth about our alienation, our estrangement from God and from one another. It tells the truth about the mess we have made of our lives and of this world. It tells the truth about our total inability to fix what is wrong with us, or to fix what is wrong with the world. It tells the truth about the emptiness, foolishness, and futility of life without God. It tells the truth about our inability to make ourselves right with God.

It also tells the truth about what God has done to fix what is wrong with us and with the world, and to make us right with Him. The Bible reveals God to us. It reveals His works, His ways, and His will. It reveals His character. It reveals His heart. It reveals His love. It reveals His plan to redeem us – to save us from our captivity to sin and its consequences – and the implementation of His plan in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of His Son.

The Bible is the instrument of salvation. As Paul wrote to Timothy: “(T)he holy Scriptures ... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15). The Bible shows us how to be saved – how we can be restored to a right relationship with God and have peace with Him.

The Bible is also our guide for holy living. It is our defense against temptation. It teaches us how God desires us to live. The psalm writer asks in Psalm 119:9: “How can a young man keep his way pure?” It is a great question, but it is not just for boys and young men. It is for girls and young women, too. And it is not just for the young:

How can men and women in their prime, in mid-life, when life is not turning out the way they dreamed it would, when life throws them a curve ball, keep their way pure?

How can older men and women in the twilight of life stay on course and continue to honor God to the end?

These are not inconsequential questions.

Here is the answer from Psalm 119: “By living according to Your word.” By living according to *God’s* word. “By carefully reading,” inwardly digesting, and following “the map of (His) Word” (MSG). By allowing God’s Word not only to *inform* your life, but to *form* it and *transform* it to serve His purposes. Therefore, as the psalm writer continues in verse 11: “I have hidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You.”

The Bible is not just an ancient book about people who lived a long time ago or things that happened a long time ago. The moral compass and moral code in the Bible are not outdated. Hebrews 4:12 says: “The word of God is living and active and sharper than any double-edged sword. It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” In it God still speaks today.

The Bible exposes our sin. God uses it to convict us of our sin and call us to repentance. It is also our defense against temptation, when we allow God’s Word to speak into our lives. As a church leader from another century famously said: “The Bible will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from the Bible.”

And, yes, because the Bible is *God’s* Word, it gives us comfort when we need to be comforted. It offers encouragement to those who are discouraged. It gives hope to those whose hearts are troubled. It gives strength to the weak. And it overflows, from start to finish, like God Himself, with streams of love and grace that come free of charge to people who don’t deserve them and never will.

CHRISTIAN VALUES UNDER ATTACK

As much as ever, the Bible is the foundation we need to stand firm as followers of Jesus in a culture increasingly opposed to Christian values. This opposition is being played out in a public way very close to home for us. You may have read or heard this past week of the attacks on Karen Pence, the wife of Vice President Mike Pence, and Immanuel Christian School in Springfield, where the Second Lady of the United States is now teaching art. Mrs. Pence previously taught at Immanuel for 12 years when her husband was a member of Congress. Mary Sue has worked at ICS for more than 20 years. Some of you also have ties to the school.

The vitriol aimed at Mrs. Pence and the school for holding to biblical teaching and affirming historic Christian values is a sign of the times. Paul wrote to Timothy: “All who desire to live a godly life in Christ will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). This has been true in some – many – parts of the world for centuries. We are increasingly seeing it fulfilled in our own land. It should not surprise us, but here in America we have had the luxury of being comfortable Christians for so long that it is both startling and terribly distressing.

The Pences, Immanuel Christian School, and Immanuel Bible Church have all come under vicious attack this week for affirming and promoting the teachings of the Bible, as Christians have done for the last 2,000 years. In effect, they are being demonized for simply being Christian. They are being condemned for believing what Christians believe and teaching what the Bible teaches. It could happen to us. It could happen to you.

To affirm and hold fast to the Bible's teachings on human sexuality and marriage is not bigotry or hatred, regardless of the views of many voices in our culture. Rather, our affirmation of and adherence to what the Bible teaches is rooted in our belief that God is God, that His Word is true and authoritative, and that the way of life to which He calls us is best. In a post-Christian age, when there no longer exists a cultural consensus that Christian beliefs and values are true and right, what Christians have always believed is increasingly under attack.

As followers of Jesus, we must not allow opposing voices, however loud or forceful or seemingly popular, to cover us into silence or, worse, into compromising or abandoning the clear teachings and principles of God's Word. Jesus wants us to be both winsome in our witness and unwavering in our commitment to the message and authority of the Bible. He wants us to be loving and gracious toward those with whom we disagree (or who disagree with us), but uncompromising when we are standing on God's Word.

PRAYERS FROM HAITI

I want to wrap up this message by sharing with you two prayers prayed by Haitian Christians focusing on the Word of God and its role in our lives:

Our Great Physician,
Your word is like alcohol.
When poured on an infected wound,
it burns and stings,
but only then can it kill germs.
If it doesn't burn,
it doesn't do any good.

Lord, we find Your word like cabbage.
As we pull down the leaves,
we get closer to the heart.
And as we get closer to the heart,
it is sweeter.

(Wally R. Turnbull and Eleanor J. Turnbull,
God Is No Stranger, 14, 92)

Take God's Word seriously. Take it for what it is – a book and a message bearing the imprint and authority of God Himself. Take time to read it (or listen to it) and meditate on it daily.

Write down key verses in a notebook. Write them on sticky notes and put them in your car, on your refrigerator, or somewhere else where you will see them regularly. Memorize God's Word. Resolve to cultivate an intimate (or more intimate) relationship to the Bible. Let it have the run of the house in your life (Colossians 3:16, MSG). Believe it. Build your life on it. And, as Jesus said, put it into practice.

I echo these words from John Ortberg: "Don't be driven by your experience, by your desires, or by what is culturally trendy. Let your life be driven by the Word of God" (Ortberg, "The Bible Alone"). And remember that the God of the Word is with you always (Matthew 28:20).

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.