

Introduction

I do not try to be controversial. I'm never trying to be edgy or cool. I tried to be cool once, but then high school happened and, well, I'll never try that again. I love truth and I love accuracy and I strive to bring these together in my preaching, which results in sometimes saying things that some may find controversial.

Any controversial statements I may make should come out of the text. If, in the course of this series and in this particular sermon your feathers are ruffled, know that I'm not trying to ruffle them. Instead, consider whether God may want them ruffled. At the end of the day we are in submission to the Lord Jesus. We all come from varying streams of the Christian tradition and some of our unconscious assumptions about God and Scripture need to be challenged and if they are challenged from Scripture, then let us submit ourselves to the Lord and to his word.

We are in week three of our series “Beyond Labels: Who Is New City?” For this topical series we are using this rubric to situate ourselves in the Christian tradition:

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We are . . .
catholic, not Catholic
reformed, not Reformed
baptist, not Baptist
presbyterian, not Presbyterian
orthodox, not Orthodox
charismatic, not Charismatic
Christian, not christian

Today we will see we are baptist, but not Baptist. Our aim is not to exalt New City or put down other Christian traditions. Our aim is, as always, to make much of Christ. Because our aim is to make much of Christ and not much of New City, and to demonstrate how we must all be in submission to Christ and his word, know that the Council of Elders has been examining and studying the issue of baptism for some time and our views have been corrected by holy Scripture. We have come to recognize some shortcomings in our understanding of baptism and we have come to recognize some *misunderstandings* we've had of baptism. As we saw last week we strive to be reformed—lower-case, and being reformed has led to a greater understanding of baptism.

If you are challenged this morning, know that we're right there with you. If you have questions, the elders will be available after the service, or you are free to reach out to us some other time. We're in that classic *baptist* text, Hebrews 8.

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Heb 8:1 Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ² a

minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. ³ For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. ⁴ Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. ⁵ They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.” ⁶ But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. ⁷ For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.

⁸ For he finds fault with them when he says: “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, ⁹ not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. ¹⁰ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ¹¹ And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. ¹² For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.”

¹³ In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

Hebrews 8:1–13

A Copy and Shadow

The author of Hebrews has argued that Jesus is greater than the angels for to none of the angels did God ever say, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”. He argues Jesus is greater than Moses for while Moses was faithful in God’s house as a servant, Jesus is faithful *over* God’s house as a Son. Then he argues Jesus is greater than the Levitical priesthood.

He writes in chapter 7 Jesus had no need to sacrifice for his own sins, for he had no sin. He did not need to go through any purification ritual for he is and always remains pure and holy. In our text the author says this is the high priest we have, one who is greater than the angels, greater than Moses, greater than the entire Levitical priesthood. In verse 8 he says this priest is “seated at the right hand of the throne of Majesty in heaven”.

It’s important that Jesus ascended into heaven after his resurrection. In verse 4 he reminds them that at that time the priests were still serving in Jerusalem, still offering sacrifices according to the law of Moses. Jesus could not enter into those holy places in that temple because he was from the tribe of Judah, not the tribe of Levi. This is why he was called to be a priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Melchizedek was a contemporary of Abraham. He worshiped the one true God and offered sacrifices to him. David prophesied of Jesus’ coming when he quoted God saying, “You are

a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.” His point is that Jesus is a far greater priest of a far greater priesthood. Because a temple stood in Jerusalem, Jesus could not serve on earth as one of its priests. Instead, he is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Picture

Then he mentions those priests in the temple in verse 5: “They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.” When Moses was at Mount Sinai, God gave him a vision of heaven, where God is. The tabernacle and the altar Moses had built was a copy and shadow of a heavenly reality. They’re like a photo, like a picture of a loved one versus the actual loved one. I’d much rather have Dawnae than a picture of Dawnae. The tabernacle is a *picture*—a copy and shadow—of a far greater reality.

He explains that the instructions came from God himself. God instructed Moses to build the tabernacle according to the pattern he was shown on the mountain. Remember, the covenant given at Sinai was a glorious covenant, for through this covenant God would dwell among his people. As Moses said when God threatened to send them into the land without his presence among them, what makes them the people of God is God’s presence. Without God’s presence, the land would be just land and the people would be just another group of people.

There was a significant problem, however: the people. As great as the covenant was, it had a significant flaw. It could not change the people themselves. It provided a means for God to remain among them, but not in the way God wanted to be among them. They could not approach the tabernacle. Only the high priest on one particular day per year after an elaborate purification ritual could enter into God’s direct and immediate presence. Everyone else had to keep their distance.

Understand this: no other nation had this privilege, but this was not what God truly wanted for his people. He wants to be *among* them. This is why he says in verse 6 that Christ is a better priest with a better ministry who brings a better covenant that is built on better promises. In verse 7 he says the first covenant had a fault. If it did not, God would not have promised a new covenant.

Then he says what the fault was: “For he finds fault with *them*”. The people were the problem because the covenant, as great as it was, could not change them. Look again at verse 8.

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Heb 8:8 For he finds fault with them when he says: “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah,⁹ not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord.

Hebrews 8:8–9

Here God promises to his people a new covenant that will be unlike the covenant given at Sinai and it will be unlike that covenant in a significant way: they *broke* that covenant. They *immediately* broke it. Remember that while Moses was on the mountain still receiving instructions from God, including the instructions for the tabernacle where God would dwell among them, the people made a golden calf and declared the calf they had just made was the god who brought them out of Egypt. They committed adultery while still at the wedding ceremony!

The new covenant will be unlike this covenant. Whereas they did not continue in that covenant, all who are in the new covenant will, in fact, continue in it. Then the author goes on to explain how and why that is.

The New Covenant

In verse 10 he tells them what this new covenant is. God will put his laws into their minds and will write them on their hearts. As the prophet Ezekiel explained, this is the promise of the Holy Spirit. The new covenant will be unlike the old covenant because the Spirit of God will cause his people to walk in his ways and to keep his commandments. When he says he will put his laws in their minds and write them on their hearts, he's referring to the promise of new hearts. God removes the heart of stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh. This is a promise of regeneration, of the new birth.

This is why Paul can say in Corinthians that if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. There is something there that wasn't there before: new life. This is the better promise of the new covenant. The old could not change a person. All it could do is make allowances for God to be among his people—at a distance!—through the ongoing and perpetual sacrifices. These sacrifices were replaced with a better sacrifice, one that only needed to be offered once. Whereas the priests in the tabernacle had to stand daily, after Christ offered himself, he sat down.

The better promise of the new covenant is that those in the covenant will be transformed. This change does not come about all at once. As Paul also said, they are changed “from one degree of glory to another”—bit by bit. Little by little, over time the Spirit of God is transforming his covenant people. He can do this because the new covenant is unlike the old covenant for the new covenant does not rely on the faithfulness of his people but on the faithfulness of Christ.

In Philippians the apostle said, “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ”. The promises of the new covenant are dependent on the work of God in Christ through his Spirit, not on his people. If the covenant were dependent on us and our obedience, we would end up just like Israel on Mount Sinai, bowing down to idols.

The old covenant was but a copy and shadow of the reality in Christ. Every aspect of the old covenant is replaced by something far greater in the new that the old could only hint at. The priesthood was merely a hint at the work Christ would do. The sacrifices merely hinted at the offering of Jesus. The tabernacle merely hinted at the fullness of the Spirit of God making his people into his temple. The people themselves merely hinted at the full and complete transformation that awaited the coming of Christ and the sending of his Spirit.

In every sense the old covenant is replaced by the new in a far superior way that makes the old covenant merely a shadow. When the author says it's a copy and shadow it's not even a high-def picture! It's a stick drawing with crayons compared to the fullness of the new covenant.

In verse 6 he says Christ has obtained a better ministry than Moses had because the new covenant is far greater than the old “as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on *better promises*”. He specifies a significant way it's better: they didn't continue

in the old but they will in the new. They were *not* changed and transformed in the old but they will be in the new. Verse 11.

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Heb 8:11 And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

Hebrews 8:11

In the new covenant we will not have to say to fellow members of the new covenant, "Know the Lord". Do you see why? "For they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest." Do you see what the Lord is saying? The new covenant will be different from the old in significant ways. Under the old covenant, one did not have to believe in order to be in the covenant. To say that another way, to be in the Mosaic covenant God made with Israel did not require faith in the Lord. One did not have to actually know the Lord to be in the covenant. All you had to do was *be born to the right parents*.

Here's how bad it got under the old covenant system in which one simply had to be born to the right parents—Israelites—in order to be included in the covenant. In the time of Elijah the prophet Israel was following after the various Baals. He had a battle with prophets of Baal in which the God of Israel demonstrated his power over all false gods. Then Elijah complains that he is the only faithful person in all Israel. He thinks he's alone in following the Lord. Here's God's response to him.

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1 Kgs 19:18 Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

1 Kings 19:18

God tells Elijah he is not alone in following the Lord for the Lord will "leave" seven thousand in Israel, those who have not bowed to Baal. The idea here is God will cause this to happen. He will *cause* there to be seven thousand faithful Israelites. Seven thousand. *Seven thousand*. Out of how many millions of Israelites in that day? Remember, six-hundred thousand men, plus women and children, left Egypt. Hundreds of years later there had to be millions of Israelites, all of whom *were in the covenant*. How many were faithful? How many *knew the Lord*? God promised seven thousand.

All Israelites were in the covenant but most were not faithful believers in the Lord. God promises a better covenant built on better promises and a significant difference between these covenants is this: there is no need in the new covenant to tell other covenant members to know the Lord, for they shall all know him, from the least of them to the greatest. The promise of the new covenant is there will be no unbelieving members of the new covenant.

baptist not Baptist

Smarty
Word

New City Church is lower-case b baptist because we believe the right recipients for baptism are those who *through faith* and not through *physical descent* are members of God's new covenant in Christ. One was born into the old covenant. The better promise of the new covenant is that one is *born again* into the new covenant. This is the reason we do not

embrace infant baptism. Under the old covenant physical descent placed one in the Mosaic covenant but in the new covenant the singular criterion for entrance into the covenant is faith and faith alone. *They shall all know me*, God says.

Because of this significant advance in the new covenant, an advance in which we receive the fullness of what the old could only hint at, we at New City baptize those who make a credible profession of faith. When we baptize a person as a church we are declaring that person is a believer, one who knows the Lord and is, therefore, a member of the new covenant in Christ.

Through baptism a church is declaring that one is a believer in Jesus. This is why Jesus' words in Matthew 18 are so very important. In the context of church discipline Jesus said this:

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Mt 18:18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.
Matthew 18:18

The verb tenses in Greek are extremely important. Jesus is saying that when a church binds someone on earth, that is, when a church excommunicates a person as an unbeliever, provided that church is following God's Spirit, that person *will have been bound* in heaven. That is, the binding on earth is actually after the binding in heaven and reflects the heavenly reality for that person.

Some time ago we had to bind such a person who demonstrated that he was not, in fact, a follower of Jesus. By removing him from membership we were binding him, for *he had already been bound* in heaven. Our actions as Christ's church reflected the reality in heaven.

Similarly, what we loose on earth *will have been loosed in heaven*. When we baptize a person upon that person's credible profession of faith, we are declaring what heaven has already been rejoicing over: that person is a follower of Jesus and is in the new covenant in Christ and is a brother or sister in Christ. We're not *creating* this reality. Baptizing this new believer is illustrating this reality.

It is through baptism that we *loose* a person on earth who has already been loosed in heaven. God is *doing something* through baptism, and here is why we are not capital B Baptist: we hold to a sacramental view of baptism. Here's another area where we have to go beyond labels. I think Calvin had it right when he said a sacrament is an external sign by which the Lord strengthens and sustains our faith. These sacraments are baptism and for those who have visibly demonstrated their entrance into the covenant, communion. Through these two covenant acts, one being one-time-only and the other being an on-going practice, God works in us to strengthen our faith.

This is a significant reason we are not capital B Baptist, and I hesitate to say this because there is no definitive definition of what a Baptist is. There are confessions that define specific groups but there is a broad range of views here. Generally speaking the Baptist view of baptism is that it is merely symbolic and is little more than a public testimony to one's faith in Jesus. For many, it is but an act of obedience with no further significance.

It is so much more than a mere symbol, but to see how much more than a mere symbol it is, we have to ask what is happening in baptism. I promise you this, if you haven't been challenged in this series so far, you will be right now. What is God doing in baptism?

In Romans Paul is explaining the beauty of the gospel of Jesus. Paul has just written that where sin increased, God's grace increased even more, for his grace is sufficient to save anyone. This leads to a common question: if God's grace increases to cover all my sins, why bother to avoid sin?

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Rom 6:1 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:1-4

Paul says we cannot continue in sin because we have died to sin. Because a death to sin has occurred, how can it exercise any power over us? Then he explains when and how this death occurred. Those who have been baptized into Christ were baptized into his death. They were buried with him through baptism. And finally, they were raised from the dead through baptism.

It's important to recognize that baptism is not the thing doing this. Baptism is not some magical act that somehow unites you with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. Listen: *God in Christ through his Spirit* unites you with Christ, and he does so *through* baptism.

I suspect there might be some ruffled feathers right now so let me add to it. If I were to say this morning, "Baptism saves you", many of you would be ruffled. You might even momentarily consider a new church. But what if I quoted from someone who was in the early church who said that very thing? Would it carry more weight?

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¹ Pet 3:21 Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

1 Peter 3:21

The apostle Peter declared that baptism saves you. The context is Noah and the ark. Baptism corresponds to the ark. God saved Noah and his family *through* the ark, just as God saves people *through* baptism. Peter is clear: it ain't the water. God does the saving. It is not the physical act of baptism that saves. It is the appeal to God for a good conscience. It is the faith of the one being baptized, the faith that trusts God to wash away all that person's sins.

It is *not* the physical act of baptism but faith in Christ that saves. However, baptism is an important event in the life of the believer for it is through baptism that God unites that believer with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection.

This is the point where you might be thinking of the thief on the cross. *He* wasn't baptized. No, he was not, so let me illustrate this with adoption.

Jim and Priscilla have adopted children who were born elsewhere. From the moment each child entered the United States, that child was *their child*. They were legally responsible for

their child. They had to provide for their child. They got health insurance for their child. They fed and clothed and housed and taught and protected and cared for their child, for as soon as the child arrived, the child was *their child*. However, there still had to be the legal act declaring Suzy, for example, to be their daughter. She was already their daughter! Still, in a formal ceremony, a judge declared through a final and definitive crack of the gavel that Suzy is their daughter.

That wasn't all. Not only were Jim and Priscilla the parents of Suzy and Suzy the daughter of Jim and Priscilla, the judge called forward their oldest child. The judge declared to him, "Nathan, you are now the brother of Suzy and Suzy is now the sister of Nathan." The judge cracked the gavel and gave him a certificate demonstrating it was official. The judge did this with each one of their children, emphasizing she was their sister and they were her siblings. This visible and legal act made the adoption *official*.

If, God forbid, something terrible had happened before the final, legal declaration of adoption, Jim and Priscilla would still have been her parents and would still have provided the necessary arrangements and still *would have mourned the loss of their daughter*, all without the formal, legal declaration declaring she was part of the family. *She was already part of the family*.

The thief on the cross was saved by faith before he was able to be baptized. Without baptism he was and remains today a son of God in Christ. As Jesus promised him, he is with the Lord in paradise. That is not the ordinary course, however. The ordinary course for baptism is upon profession of faith when the one being baptized fully comprehends the decision to follow Christ and is able to count the cost.

Out of Time Yet Eternal

Since baptism is the mechanism God uses to unite us with Christ, and since Jesus died nearly 2,000 years ago, our baptisms are all out of time. That is, they take place long after the events with which we are united with Christ. In the year 30 when God saw Jesus on the cross, he saw us there with him. When he saw Jesus laid in his tomb, he saw us there with him. When he raised Jesus from the dead, God *raised us with him*. Except none of us existed yet.

Baptism, then, is out of time. It is separate from time. Just as assembling together in the name of Jesus enables us to be the *catholic* or *whole* church by causing us to cross space and time, so baptism crosses space and time and places us on the cross with Jesus, in the tomb with Jesus, and coming out of the tomb with Jesus. God is outside of time and so God and God alone is the eternal *present*. He is I AM, not "I Was" or "I Will Be". Jesus said, "Before Abraham was, I am"—not, "Before Abraham was, I *was*."

Here's where our understanding of baptism has changed significantly. There is one Lord, one faith, one *baptism*. Because God is outside of time and because baptism is the mechanism through which he unites us with Christ and because the physical act of baptism is not what brings about this union with Christ but faith is, when a person both has faith in Jesus and *is* baptized, that baptism unites him or her with Christ.

I'm being very precise in my wording. When a person believes and *is* baptized, that baptism unites him or her with Christ. I don't mean when a person believes and then *gets* baptized. I mean when a person believes and has experienced baptism in the Name of the

Trinity, he or she is united with Christ, even if the order was wrong. Here is where we are truly not capital B Baptist. If a person was baptized as an infant, or even baptized prior to faith in Jesus, regardless of age, it is that person's faith that connects his or her baptism to Jesus in his death, burial, and resurrection.

Faith in Christ makes baptism the mechanism for union with Christ. If a person was baptized as an infant and then, 20 years later, believes in the Lord Jesus and is saved, that baptism was the legal adoption ceremony by which she was adopted into God's family. I will readily acknowledge that the baptism was *improperly administered*, yet upon real, genuine faith in Christ, is fully and completely a Christian baptism.

If she had been baptized at age 20 when she first believed in Jesus, her baptism was already out of time by nearly 2,000 years. God is outside of time so God is able to connect the dots between something in, say, the year 2023 and something in the year 30. If her baptism had taken place in the year 2003 when she was an infant, it's simply a few more years out of time.

Baptism is something that happens *in time* from our perspective. This is why it is good to delay baptism until a person is old enough to truly comprehend repentance and faith and what it means to deny one's self in order to follow Jesus. This is why I wish I had delayed my children's baptisms. How much more powerful and meaningful it would be if they were truly counting the cost of following Jesus!

Baptism reflects an *eternal* reality that is *outside of time*, namely, that God in Christ through his Spirit has claimed you as his own, has adopted you as his child, has placed you in a family with countless brothers and sisters in Christ.

Whether you were baptized as an infant or you were baptized as an adult, you ought to remember your baptism, for this is God's promise to you, a better promise from a better covenant that came about from a better ministry by a far better priest, the Lord Jesus Christ. Remember your baptism! Paul himself frequently reminded the churches to remember their baptism.

When encouraging the Corinthians to faithfully use their spiritual gifts to serve one another and the Lord, what did he say?

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¹ Cor 12:12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12:12–13

He told them to remember their baptism! You were all baptized into one body of Christ, so serve one another for your baptism calls you to this. When he called the Galatians to stay faithful to the gospel of Jesus, what did he say?

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Gal 3:26 for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Galatians 3:26–29

He told them to remember their baptism because it demonstrates they are sons and daughters of God through faith alone, for in baptism God is the one doing something miraculous. They did not need circumcision for God in Christ has already claimed them, regardless of earthly status. When calling the Colossian believers to remain steadfast in Christ, to resist the pull of false teaching, what did he say?

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Col 2:11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Colossians 2:11–12

They must remember their baptism! He specifically mentions old covenant circumcision and indicates it has been replaced with something far greater, with regeneration, the *spiritual* circumcision of the heart. Do you see the advance of the new covenant? The merely physical act of circumcision pointed toward the miraculous act of regeneration—the new birth. They were to remember their baptism as the focal point of God’s work in Christ in their lives.

To be lower-case b baptist is to remember our baptism, to remember God’s promise of a better covenant built on better promises through the better ministry of a better priest. When you’re struggling with sin and you can’t see to muster the power to overcome, remember your baptism. Remember that you died with Christ, you were buried with Christ, and you were raised with Christ. This is your baptism.

When you’re struggling with loneliness or despair and anxiety are threatening to destroy you, remember your baptism. It is no magic pill that will suddenly take away all your troubles. Rather, it is God’s promise to you that he who began a good work in your will bring it to completion at the day of Christ. This means the promise of your baptism is God will sustain you. He will not let you go.

When you’re struggling with a sense of purpose or wondering if you have anything to offer, remember your baptism. It is your adoption ceremony by which God declares you are his child, that he claimed you as his own before the foundation of the world and he would literally move heaven and earth for you.

New City, let’s be true baptists, and let’s remember our baptism. Let’s remember what God in Christ through his Spirit has done. To remember our baptism is to remember the work of God to save us. Let us remember the better ministry performed by a better priest for a better covenant built on better promises. Baptism is God’s promise to you of his faithfulness to save you. It is his declaration that he will do all that he says he will do.