For the first three months of my most recent deployment I was the only protestant chaplain at the base, which made things kind of interesting. I say interesting because the term protestant covers a lot of ground and Episcopalians tend to be on one pole. We are sacramental, liturgical and are governed by a traditional polity while many, if not most other protestants have none of these things. I could kind of fake it most of the time, but one place where I really stood out was when it came to baptism. Many protestants, especially of the Baptist flavor, really like baptism. They like it so much that they get baptized a lot. And so, I was asked on a few occasions if I could baptize someone who had already been baptized. I could not, and fortunately a non-denominational chaplain came about half way through and took care of all those baptism needs. Now the reason for this conflict came down to the differences in what we believe happens in baptism. Those who were looking for second, third and sometimes fourth baptisms did so largely because they believed the act to be symbolic, serving as a sort of announcement about their faith. For example, one of the individuals who was looking for a third baptism told me that their reason for wanting to be re-baptized was because their faith had been subpar, but was now reinvigorated. In this understanding the baptism worked as a sort of signal flair, alerting others of this new found faith. God, for the most part was not involved. But as Episcopalians, we believe something different. We believe God is very much involved. For us, baptism is not an announcement but rather a sacrament. Sacraments, if you want the generic definition, are an outward a visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. In other words, we do something visible, which in the case of baptism is the water and God does something within us. Basically, we believe that when Christ told us to go and baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit he was making an agreement. We would do something and He would do something.

And, if you are curious, the something that is done is found in today’s reading in the Acts of the Apostles. It comes from the lips of Peter, so it has a pretty good pedigree. He says this when addressing the crowds, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” So, there you have it. You repent, you are then baptized and through the action of baptism you have your sins forgiven and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. It seems straightforward enough, until people get involved. And so what I would like to do in the next few moments is to look a little deeper at baptism. To frame this discussion, I want to look at three common objections to the way we interpret Peter’s explanation. So here are the three objections:

1. If we are supposed to repent, why do we baptize babies?
2. If our sins are forgiven why do baptized people still do rotten stuff.
3. Why is Baptism necessary to receive the Holy Spirit.

Let’s start with babies. Are babies’ miserable sinners in need of repentance? It might depend on the baby, but even if they were, how could they express their repentance? I think this is one of those cases where we can get to bogged down in the details and miss the point of salvation. If Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins, that means we all have sins. We all have something separating us from God’s love – young, old, middle aged and so on. Yes, most babies are not prone to commit murder or be the ruthless head of a drug cartel but that does not mean that they do not have the original programming that leads us all to sin. Just like the rest of us they have something separating them from God. And while certainly babies are not capable of repenting their parents do it on their behalf, which may sound strange but it does have Biblical precedent. In Mark’s Gospel you may recall the story of the paralytic man who was lowered through the roof to be healed. It reads, “And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘My son, your sins are forgiven.’” The miracle and the forgiveness of sins were not done because of the paralytic but rather because of the faith of his friends. When we say that a child is baptized and their sins are forgiven them, it is because of the faith of the parents. That is why parents are asked so many questions in the baptismal rite. The action of baptism happens to the infant, but happens because of the parents’ faith.

Okay let’s move to the next objection or question. This one is about sins being forgiven and why baptized people can still be jerks. Of the various objections I have heard this seems the least interesting. I mean we ask God to forgive our sins all the time, why would we think that when we are forgiven our sin in baptism do we suddenly become incapable of sinning? In a few moments we will confess our sins and be forgiven them and next week we will do the same thing all over again. Some weeks I am not even sure I make it to past the offertory hymn without sinning again. The emperor Constantine is purported to have been baptized on his deathbed because he thought this would give him a clean shot into heaven. I assume he was hoping to croak right as the priest said that they baptized him in the name of the, “Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.” But such an understanding belittles the message of Easter. Baptism is part of what sets us right with God, but just part. For if you can simply be baptized and become perfect then there is really no need for Jesus’ death and resurrection because perfect people have earned their salvation on their own merit.

As to the last question about why Baptism is necessary to receive the Holy Spirit. This objection is based on Jesus saying in John that once he goes away the Holy Spirit will come and people take this to mean we don’t have to do anything special to receive this gift. That is true to an extent but look at the way this plays out Biblically. The place I want to look is the only place in the Bible where we hear of re-baptism and it comes in Acts Chapter 19. Paul comes across some believers who were baptized by John the Baptist and are unaware of the Holy Spirit. The text then says that Paul baptized them, “in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them.” The second baptism was needed because the Holy Spirit had not been involved in the first. And the reason for this was because the Resurrection had not yet happened and Jesus had not “gone away” when these individuals were first baptized. We may not know exactly how, but somehow Christian Baptism involves the gift of the Holy Spirit. And to wrap all of this up let’s look at the Episcopal Baptismal service. First we promise that when we sin we will, “repent and return to the Lord.” Second we are told that those receiving baptism are “cleansed from sin” and finally with the anointing we say, “you are sealed by the Holy Spirit.” Repentance, sins forgiven and gift of the Holy Spirit – it is all right there just like Peter says.

Today the text is pretty clear. Peter explains baptism in one sentence. To my mind the problems come when try to understand it perfectly. Despite what we may think, we humans are not all that clever and yet we continually try to make the God of the universe perfectly understandable and by so doing we make him much less than he is. Something grand and mysterious happens in the sacrament of baptism. We will not comprehend it all but we are given glimpses like we hear from the mouth of Peter today. And we will have to be content not fully understanding but knowing that it is part of what makes us God’s own this day and forevermore.