

Marc Roby: Before we resume our study of hermeneutics today, we have a question we'd like to address. One of our listeners asked about the origins of John's baptism. This question was engendered by our discussion in Session 43 of the meaning of Jesus' statement in John Chapter 3, where he said that "no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."<sup>1</sup> Our listener wrote, "I have always wondered how John the Baptist's baptism came to be. I don't recall anything from the Old Testament mentioning baptism, yet it is different from the believer's baptism." Dr. Spencer, you and I looked into this a bit, what would you like to say about that?

Dr. Spencer: It is an interesting question and I've also heard different things over the years myself about the topic. For example, in touring Israel we saw several of the ritual baths, called Mikvehs, used by Jews for ceremonial washings. And we were told that these were also used for ritual cleansings of Gentiles converting to Judaism and that this was the origin of John's baptism of repentance. That sounds reasonable and is mentioned in an article in the Zondervan Pictorial encyclopedia as well.<sup>2</sup> But, I've also read other reasonable sources saying that the practice didn't start until after the destruction of the temple in 70 AD.<sup>3</sup> If that is true, it certainly could not have been a precursor to John's Baptism. I don't know or have any reasonable way of finding out who is right on this point, but I don't think it is a critically important part of the answer.

Marc Roby: We do, of course, see references to ritual cleansing with water in the Old Testament. For example, as we noted in Session 43, in Numbers 19:9 we read about the "water of cleansing" which "is for purification from sin".

Dr. Spencer: We also noted Ezekiel 36:25 where God says that "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols." So, the idea of cleansing someone from the impurity of sin using water is certainly present in the Old Testament. But I don't know of any Old Testament passages that specifically tie water with repentance. After reading a number of different things I could find on the topic I have to conclude that we don't know for certain about some of the background, but we can say a few things for sure.

Marc Roby: OK, what are those things we can be sure of?

Dr. Spencer: First, we are sure that the Old Testament does relate cleansing with water to the removal of impurity resulting from sin as we just noted. So, that idea was known to the people at the time of John the Baptist, although we do not see this specifically tied to the idea of

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<sup>2</sup> *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Zondervan, 1976, Vol. 1, pg. 464

<sup>3</sup> E.g., F. Godet, *The Gospel of St. Luke*, translated by Shalders and Cusin, I.K. Funk & Co., 1881, pg. 110 also Wikipedia (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikveh>) reference 7 refers to the Encyclopaedia Judaica (<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/mikveh>)

repentance prior to John. John's baptism, however, was clearly tied to confession of sin since we read in Matthew 3:6 that "Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River." Second, we also know from John 1:33 that John the Baptist himself said that God sent him to baptize with water. And, in Matthew 21 we read about the chief priests and the elders asking Jesus "By what authority" he was doing the things he was doing. Instead of answering them, he showed their duplicity by asking them a question he knew they would not be willing to answer honestly. He said, in Matthew 21:25, "John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?" Now, this is far from proof since this was a rhetorical question of sorts, but Jesus' question implies that John's baptism came from heaven, which would agree with what John himself said.

**Marc Roby: We can, of course, question exactly what is meant by saying his baptism came from heaven.**

Dr. Spencer: That's a good question in fact, it isn't completely clear. Nevertheless, it is clear that cleansing with water was known to be related to purification from sins in Old Testament practice and it is known that in some way God himself commissioned and sent John the Baptist with the specific mission of baptizing people who repented of their sins. John is often correctly called the last of the Old Testament prophets. Not because he lived in Old Testament times, but because he was the last prophet to function as an Old Testament prophet, meaning that he pointed forward to Jesus Christ. Then, when Christ completed his work on the cross, we were given the more complete idea to which John's baptism had pointed, and that is Christian baptism.

**Marc Roby: OK. We are now ready to resume our study of systematic theology by continuing to examine hermeneutics, that is the principles that we use to properly interpret the Bible. Last time we discussed the use of allegory in the Bible and ended with a discussion of the place creeds, confessions and systematic theology have in helping us interpret the Bible. What do you want to discuss today?**

Dr. Spencer: The discussion of creeds, confessions and systematic theology leads immediately to thinking about the place of human pastors and teachers. There is no such thing as a Lone Ranger Christian. We will talk about this more in a later session, but for now it will suffice to say that all Christians should be in a local church under the authority of a pious and learned man, or men, of God. The Bible itself is the only thing that has inherent and absolute authority to govern our faith and conduct, but we all have need of trained pastors and teachers to help us, especially those God has placed over us in our local churches. We all need accountability and we need each other.

The authority of pastors and elders is never absolute, and it is not inherent, it is delegated. But it is, nonetheless, real authority and, like all authority, is meant to bless us. If I am unsure about how to interpret a passage in the Bible, I should study it carefully myself first. Then I should look to various commentaries by good scholars, and then I should also check with the leaders in my church. It is their God-given responsibility to interpret and apply the scriptures to the people under their care.

**Marc Roby: People get real nervous about this idea of being under anyone, especially in our anti-authority day and age.**

Dr. Spencer: That's true, but the danger comes from unbiblical teaching, which leads to unbiblical practice. And it isn't usually very difficult to spot unbiblical teaching. We'll give some examples later, but for now let me just say that good pastors and teachers are a great help in understanding and applying the scripture and we should make use of that resource and we need to come under their authority. We are told in Ephesians 4:11-14 that Christ "gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming."

**Marc Roby: That's a vivid picture – if we don't participate in a good church we can remain infants in Christ. Can you give an example of when the authority of the elders would come into play in interpreting the Scriptures?**

Dr. Spencer: Yes. I have an acquaintance who had to move to North Carolina for work a number of years ago. He is a serious Bible-believing Christian and he put a lot of effort and time into looking for a good church. He had young children and, after looking for quite some time, the very best church in his area was one that practiced infant baptism, which he didn't agree with. He asked me what I thought about the situation.

Now I happen to agree with him that believer's baptism is the biblical norm, but I do not think it is an essential issue. I suggested that he talk to the elders about this and if they were adamant that his children be baptized if he and his wife became members, he should go ahead and do so out of deference to the church leadership and to avoid causing divisions. I must also say that he already knew for certain they did not believe in baptismal regeneration, they understood baptism to be the sign of the covenant, equivalent to circumcision in the Old Testament. Had they believed in baptismal regeneration the question would never have come up because that is a serious doctrinal error.

**Marc Roby: That's an interesting case. Are we done with discussing the authority of elders in interpreting and applying the Bible?**

Dr. Spencer: I think we are for now. But I would like mention that we discussed delegated authority in the state, home and church at greater length before, in Sessions 28 through 33. And, since I can easily imagine some of our listeners might be wondering where it is proper to draw the line on delegated authority in the church, I would refer them to Session 33 on the limits and abuses of authority in the church. I would also add the comment that the most common abuse of authority by far is the abrogation of the biblical responsibility to exercise authority for the good of the church.

**Marc Roby: Very well. What do you want to look at next with regard to hermeneutics?**

Dr. Spencer: I want to make a general statement about our attitude in studying the Bible. We must be very careful that we come to our study of the Bible with the right attitude.

**Marc Roby: And what attitude is that?**

Dr. Spencer: We must sincerely desire to hear from God. As Paul says in Romans 12:2, we need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. We need to see that we are sinners and cannot trust our own ideas. Proverbs 3:5-6 tells us, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” One of the worst things we can do in studying the Bible is to have an attitude of arrogant certainty that we know what it says.

**Marc Roby: But, of course, a mature Christian can be very solid in his beliefs on many different points of doctrine.**

Dr. Spencer: Oh, he definitely can be. I don’t mean that we are constantly doubting our understanding of the Bible. Nor do I think that it is common for a mature Christian to have his views altered in any dramatic way as he studies a given passage for maybe the twentieth time. But I mean that we must always have an attitude of humility that is open to being taught by God’s word and Spirit. For a mature Christian who has studied the Bible carefully, the most common thing is that what you are reading ties in with what you believe to be true and you see new connections, different nuances and new applications that you hadn’t seen before.

But, for a new Christian, or one who has never studied the Bible carefully before, it may very well happen that you find something you believe is simply not true. It is unbiblical. There is a lot of very bad theology out there – what the passage we just read in Ephesians 4 called “every wind of teaching” – and if you haven’t studied the Bible carefully yourself you can easily absorb that teaching. But, serious study with a humble attitude of wanting to know what God says, not what men say, will help you to escape such bad teaching.

**Marc Roby: Can you give us an example?**

Dr. Spencer: Certainly. Some professing Christians today are convinced that homosexuality is not a sin. Let me quote from an argument made by Jimmy Creech, a former United Methodist pastor. His argument is fairly representative of the kind of terrible stuff you see when people try to make biblical arguments to support a position that is entirely unbiblical. He wrote that “There are references in the Bible to same-gender sexual behavior, and all of them are undeniably negative. But what is condemned in these passages is the violence, idolatry and exploitation related to the behavior, not the same-gender nature of the behavior.”<sup>4</sup>

**Marc Roby: That statement is simply untrue. Leviticus 18:22, for example, says “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.” There is no reference whatsoever to violence, idolatry or exploitation, it is a very simple and straightforward statement.**

Dr. Spencer: You’re right. We can also look in Romans 1, where the apostle Paul tells us that people inherently know God exists, but suppress that knowledge. In Verses 25-27 he writes that

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<sup>4</sup> Quote taken from <https://www.hrc.org/resources/what-does-the-bible-say-about-homosexuality> on May 11, 2018

“They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.”

**Marc Roby: That seems very clear, and there is again no indication anywhere in the passage or its context that Paul is referring to violent, idolatrous or exploitive behavior. Does Mr. Creech have other arguments?**

Dr. Spencer: Oh yes, it gets far worse. He also writes that “There was no word in Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek for ‘homosexual’ or ‘homosexuality.’ These words were invented near the end of the 19th century when psychoanalysts began to discover and understand sexuality as an essential part of the human personality in all of its diversity. Consequently, it cannot be claimed that the Bible says anything at all about it. The writers of the Bible had neither the understanding of it nor the language for it.”<sup>5</sup>

**Marc Roby: That is amazing. It’s hard to believe that anyone would take such nonsense seriously. Does he really believe that it was only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that people “began to discover” that sexuality is an essential part of human personality?**

Dr. Spencer: It is very hard to understand that. You have to have your mind made up and simply be looking for some way to try and justify what you want to be true, rather than having any sincere desire at all to find out what the truth is. I would have a lot more respect for someone who simply said “I think being homosexual is fine and so I dismiss the Bible as having any authority.” At least that is honest. But to try and make an argument that homosexuality is not prohibited by the Bible requires this kind of stupidity and flat out dishonesty.

Let’s take a minute to look at his argument though. As far as I can determine, he is correct about the etymology of the English word homosexual, it comes from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But to say that “The writers of the Bible had neither the understanding ... nor the language” to describe homosexual behavior is unbelievably ignorant and just plain wrong. Anyone who has ever studied ancient Greece knows that homosexual behavior was absolutely understood and described. All you have to do is look in Wikipedia and you can find all sorts of references if you want to read about such things.<sup>6</sup>

**Marc Roby: And, of course, the New Testament, written in Greek, condemns homosexual behavior too, the passage in Romans 1 that we mentioned a couple of minutes ago is one place, but not the only one.**

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> The article on Homosexuality in Ancient Greece has many references and the basic information ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality\\_in\\_ancient\\_Greece](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality_in_ancient_Greece))

Dr. Spencer: That's right. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 Paul wrote, "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."

Marc Roby: Again, I don't see any direct connection between the homosexual offenders that Paul mentions and violent, idolatrous or exploitive behavior.

Dr. Spencer: You don't see it because it isn't there. And the Greek word that is translated as "homosexual offender" in this verse also appears in 1 Timothy 1:10, where in the 1984 NIV it is translated as pervert, but in the ESV it is translated as "men who practice homosexuality".

I could go on, but to be honest, we've already spent more time than this transparently disingenuous and fallacious argument deserves.

Marc Roby: And yet, surprisingly, there are a significant number of people out there who call themselves Christians and who believe this kind of nonsense.

Dr. Spencer: Yes there are, but it isn't really surprising when you consider that most professing Christians today are biblically illiterate, which is why this podcast is so important. I must also emphasize how dangerous such teaching is. If someone believes this false teaching, he is being led down the broad road that leads to eternal destruction. In other words, he is being led to hell. That is what Jimmy Creech and others like him are doing, they are leading people straight to hell.

Marc Roby: That's a serious statement to end on, but our time is gone for today. I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We'd love to hear from you.