

Marc Roby: Before we begin our regular session this week, we want to take a moment to let our listeners know about an exciting upcoming series. Dr. Spencer, you're going to be doing an interview with Prof. Henry Schaefer III. Can you tell us a bit about him?

Dr. Spencer: I'd love to. Prof. Schaefer is one of the world's most highly regarded chemists. He is currently the Director of the Center for Computational Quantum Chemistry at the University of Georgia. It has been reported that he has been nominated for a Nobel Prize five times.¹

Marc Roby: That's impressive.

Dr. Spencer: It is. He has also published over 1,600 scientific papers. There have been scientific conferences held specifically in honor of his work and even a book published in honor of his work.²

Marc Roby: I'm no scientist, but 1,600 papers sounds like an awful lot.

Dr. Spencer: It is a huge number. He got his PhD from Stanford in 1969, so that is an average of more than 32 papers a year from then until now, which is a number that simply blows my mind. And these are not fluffy papers, they are mostly published in the best journals in his field and are clearly important papers since he is one of the most highly cited scientists in the world.

Marc Roby: When you say "highly cited", you are referring to the number of times other researchers cite his work as a reference, right?

Dr. Spencer: That's right. He has over 67,000 citations to his papers, which puts him in very elite company indeed.

Marc Roby: And yet, Prof. Schaefer is a Bible-believing Christian.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he is. And he has given talks on his faith hundreds, if not thousands, of times around the world. He will be here in giving a talk on the UC Davis campus on October 3rd and he has graciously consented to letting me interview him for this podcast while he is here.

Marc Roby: Well, I certainly look forward to hearing that interview. But now, let's get back to our study of systematic theology by continuing to examine God's communicable attributes. We finished with God's omniscience last time, are we ready to move on to another attribute?

¹ According to Wikipedia: see Jeffery L. Sheler and Joannie M. Schrof. 1991. "The Creation" U.S. News and World Report, Dec. 23, 1991, pp. 56-64. See inset quoting Schaefer and citing him as "quantum chemist and five-time nominee for the Nobel Prize," p. 62.

² E.g., In May 2010, the University of California at Berkeley hosted a large international conference in Professor Schaefer's honor, the title of the conference being "Molecular Quantum Mechanics: From Methylene to DNA and Beyond." Simultaneous with the Berkeley conference was published the book Selected Papers of Henry F. Schaefer III, Edited by R. J. Bartlett, T. D. Crawford, M. Head-Gordon, and C. D. Sherrill. In May 2014 the Peking University Graduate School sponsored a large conference in honor of Professor Schaefer in Shenzhen, China.

Dr. Spencer: Not quite. I want to take a few minutes to go over some of the implications of God's omniscience and people's reactions to this doctrine. I think these are important because this is an attribute that is frequently denied by professing Christians, in practice if not in word.

Marc Roby: What do you mean by that?

Dr. Spencer: I mean that even Christians who have accepted the biblical teaching that God is omniscient sometimes act in ways that are inconsistent with that belief. For example, we all sin. But every single time we sin we are denying the lordship of Christ and are acting as if God will not know about our sin or that he can't or won't do anything about it.

Marc Roby: In other words, we don't fear God. We are neglecting not only his omniscience, but his omnipotence and holiness as well.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's right. But we definitely should fear God. Even when our sin is just in our mind, God knows. In Luke 5 we read an account of Jesus healing a paralytic. But the first thing he did was tell the man his sins were forgiven. As a result, some of the people present were thinking to themselves that Jesus was committing blasphemy because only God can forgive sins. But, in Verse 22 we are told that "Jesus knew what they were thinking". Psalm 139:2 also tells us that God knows our thoughts.

Marc Roby: Now that *is* frightening!

Dr. Spencer: Yes it is. We have no privacy from God. He knows every thought, word and deed. He knows our emotions, how we feel about things and so on. This is a clear teaching of Scripture. And that's why the apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 10:5 that "we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."³

Marc Roby: And it certainly doesn't make any sense to say that we should make our thoughts obedient to Christ if he doesn't know what they are.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's right, that wouldn't make any sense at all. Hebrews 4:13 tells us that "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." And, in Revelation 2 we read Jesus' letter to the church in Thyatira, in which he chastises them for tolerating an immoral woman, whom he calls Jezebel.

Marc Roby: People today might not recognize how bad it was to be called Jezebel. Perhaps a modern equivalent would be to call someone Hitler. Jezebel was the extremely wicked wife of King Ahab in the Old Testament.

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Dr. Spencer: That's right, so we get the message quickly that Christ considered this woman to be evil. Based on some of the Greek manuscripts we have, she may even have been the wife of the Pastor of the church in Thyatira.⁴ But, whoever she was, she led people in the church into sin, most likely by teaching, as many do now, that because we are saved by grace it doesn't matter if we sin. But listen to Christ's condemnation of this idea. We read in Revelation 2:23 that Jesus said to the church, "I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds."

Marc Roby: That is not the Jesus that most modern churches like to preach about; one who will repay people according to their deeds.

Dr. Spencer: No, it isn't at all. But it *is* the true Christ as revealed to us in the Word of God. He searches hearts and minds and will repay each according to their deeds. Even those who are truly saved are subject to God's severe discipline. If you are born again you cannot lose your salvation, but you certainly can bring great trouble to yourself, your family and your church if you sin.

On the one hand that is obvious. If I commit some serious sin and end up in jail or something, that obviously brings shame and real hardship to my family and my church. But, in addition, Paul told the church in Corinth that they were experiencing serious problems because they were not repenting of and forsaking their sins before taking communion. In 1 Corinthians 11:29-30 he wrote that "anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep."

Marc Roby: And "fallen asleep" is an obvious euphemism for dying.

Dr. Spencer: It is, yes. In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul had told the church that God would test every person's life work by fire. This passage is most directly addressed to church leaders, but the general principle is consistent with what is said throughout the Bible for all believers. In Verses 13 to 15 we read that "fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames." Now there is comfort in that verse of course, it does say that "he himself will be saved", but there is also great pain involved for him and others associated with him as is indicated by saying he will be saved "only as one escaping through the flames."

Marc Roby: That certainly doesn't sound like a pleasant way to go to heaven.

Dr. Spencer: No, it doesn't. But, and this is extremely important, we want to be sure and make it clear that the pain we suffer for our sins does not in *any* way atone for our sins; only Jesus Christ can do that. But God does discipline his children. Now, if we are smart, we will take the warning

⁴ J. Beeke, *Revelation*, Reformation Heritage Books, 2016, pp 117-118

and live holy lives. And now let me make clear how this ties back into our topic of God's omniscience.

Marc Roby: Please do.

Dr. Spencer: We won't suffer only for sins that are obvious and seen by others. As we read a minute ago in Hebrews 4:13, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." This includes our thoughts. Remember that Christ said, in Matthew 5:28, that "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." We can conclude that even our lustful glances and thoughts, which no human being can discern, make God angry and subject us to the possibility of discipline.

Marc Roby: That is a very sobering realization.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, this realization should bring serious sobriety to our lives. Not all sickness is directly attributable to our own sin, so you don't want to assume that just because someone is sick it is a direct result of personal sin. But we should also not neglect that possibility. Most professing Christians today seem to completely ignore the possibility that they could be sick or experiencing some trial because of their sin. But, if the doctor tells you that you have cancer, or you lose your job, or whatever, a serious period of self-reflection and repentance is certainly appropriate.

Marc Roby: Yes, I agree. How else do Christians act in ways that practically deny God's omniscience?

Dr. Spencer: We practically deny his omniscience along with his omnipotence and his goodness, whenever we allow ourselves to be anxious.

Marc Roby: Anxiety is obviously a very common thing, even among Christians.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. In fact, I suspect that every single one of us has allowed ourselves to be anxious at some point. But in Philippians 4:6 we are told, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." In the Greek Paul used the imperative mood for the verb, so this is a command to not be anxious, not a suggestion. And we are given great reason to not be anxious in 1 Peter 5:7 where we are told, "Cast all your anxiety on [God] because he cares for you."

Marc Roby: That is a great comfort.

Dr. Spencer: And it is even greater comfort when you remember that God *does* in fact know everything! There are no problems of mine that go unnoticed by God. And there is no problem of mine that he cannot solve. God's omniscience is not only frightening, it is also very comforting when you couple it with his fatherly love.

Marc Roby: But, of course, we must be Christians for that to be comforting.

Dr. Spencer: That's very true. God's omniscience should be terrifying to anyone who does not know Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. I think that is why there is so much

animosity in the world directed at Jesus Christ and his followers. People know that God exists, even if they call themselves atheists, and in their heart of hearts they know they will be judged. As a result, a lot of anger wells up inside. I always find it very revealing when you encounter a very active or angry atheist.

Marc Roby: What do you mean?

Dr. Spencer: Think about it. Have you ever heard of a society of people who spend a lot of time trying to disprove the existence of Santa Claus?

Marc Roby: No, I haven't, and I don't expect to either.

Dr. Spencer: And that's precisely my point. If someone is truly convinced in the core of their being that God cannot exist, there is no reason for that person to expend huge amounts of time and energy trying to disprove his existence and to discredit the Bible. And there is no cause for anger. He might feel sorry for people who believe that God exists, but unless one happens to be a close relative or friend I can't imagine that would motivate him to spend a lot of time and energy on the topic. So, whenever I see a really active atheist, and there are many atheist clubs on college campuses and elsewhere, I think it reveals a person who knows that God *does* exist and is angry at the prospect of being judged.

Marc Roby: That's an interesting thought. It reminds me of the line from Shakespeare's play Hamlet, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." Do you want to say anything more about God's omniscience?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, just one more quick point. In J.I. Packer's little book *Concise Theology*, he makes the following statement: "God's knowledge is linked with his sovereignty: he knows each thing, both in itself and in relation to all other things, because he created it, sustains it, and now makes it function every moment according to his plan for it."⁵ And he then cites Ephesians 1:11 in support, which says that in Christ, "we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will". Packer then goes on to say that "The idea that God could know, and foreknow, everything without controlling everything seems not only unscriptural but nonsensical."

Marc Roby: That states very clearly the point we made in Session 65 that God cannot know everything that will ever happen unless he has the ability to control everything that will happen.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, Packer makes that point quite forcefully I think. And Ephesians 1:11 is very clear; everything has been "predestined according to the plan" of God.

Marc Roby: And we again see the simplicity of God as well. His attributes of divine sovereignty and omniscience are linked.

⁵ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, Tyndale House Pub., 1993, pp 31-32

Dr. Spencer: And his omnipotence comes into play as well. Planning is one thing, but he must also be able to execute his plan. And with that, I think we are done with God's omniscience and it's time to move on to the next attribute.

Marc Roby: Okay. Assuming that we are going to continue following the treatment in Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, that means the next attribute would be God's wisdom, correct?

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And Grudem defines this attribute in the following way: "God's wisdom means that God always chooses the best goals and the best means to those goals."⁶ Wisdom and knowledge are closely related, but different. It is possible for a person to have vast knowledge but not be very wise in putting that knowledge to use, and it is also possible for someone who is relatively ignorant to, nonetheless, be wise. Grudem's definition is similar to that given by others as well; they all contain the idea of some end purpose being achieved, and the purpose and the means both being the best possible.

Marc Roby: And God's purpose in creation is the manifestation of his own glory as we discussed way back in Session 2.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And his wisdom guarantees, as I noted then, that the manifestation of his glory is the best possible purpose for creation. Nothing in creation can compare with the glory of God, but creation itself can display the glory of God. So, there is no other purpose that would be as great.

God's power, holiness, justice and mercy, to name just a few of his attributes, are all displayed by creation. And when I say creation here I am not just talking about the physical universe, but also God's plan for the history of the universe and, more particularly, his plan for the history of mankind.

Marc Roby: That makes me think of the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which asks, "What is the chief end of man?" And the answer is, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's a wonderful statement of our purpose, and it is completely biblical. In Isaiah 60:21 God tells us about the future glory of his people and says, "Then will all your people be righteous and they will possess the land forever. They are the shoot I have planted, the work of my hands, for the display of my splendor." In the ESV and other translations, instead of saying "for the display of my splendor", it says "that I might be glorified". There are many other places in the Bible where we are told that God's ultimate purpose is the manifestation of his own glory.

Marc Roby: Probably the most well-known verse is 1 Corinthians 10:31, which says, "whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

Dr. Spencer: That is probably the best-known verse, and we quoted it in Session 2. But there are many others as well. For example, in Ezekiel 36 God tells his people about what he is going to

⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 193

do and, in Verse 22 we read, “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name”.

Marc Roby: We have also pointed out before that it isn't just human beings that are made for God's glory, even the inanimate creation is created for that purpose. Psalm 19 famously begins by saying, “The heavens declare the glory of God”.

And I think this is a good place to stop for today, so let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We look forward to hearing from you.