

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine biblical anthropology. Dr. Spencer, I think we finished discussing total depravity last time, what else needs to be said about the nature of man?

Dr. Spencer: I'd like to wrap-up our discussion of anthropology by discussing a very important controversy in the church, both historically and at present. And I'd like to begin that discussion by noting that one of the distinguishing marks of true biblical Christianity is that it is theocentric, that is God-centered, not anthropocentric, or man-centered. This emphasis is extremely important in every area of theology, including anthropology.

Marc Roby: How so?

Dr. Spencer: If you have an anthropocentric view, your focus by definition is on man, which produces a strong tendency to distort a number of important doctrines and also has a significant impact on how we worship God. With regard to anthropology, an anthropocentric view often leads to thinking that man's free will is far more important and far freer than it really is.

Marc Roby: Can you explain how that affects some of the doctrines we've discussed?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. Consider the doctrine of total depravity. Remember that total depravity declares that there is no part of our nature that is unaffected by sin. We are born spiritually dead and must therefore be born again before we are able to repent, believe in Jesus Christ and be saved.

If you have an anthropocentric view of Christianity, you are virtually certain to object to this doctrine in spite of the fact that it is clearly biblical. You will instead demand that it is unfair to require of men anything that they are incapable of doing. This is the core of the Pelagian controversy.

Marc Roby: And for those listeners who don't know, Pelagius was a British monk who lived from 360 to 418 AD and he denied the doctrine of total depravity. He was strongly opposed by St. Augustine.

Dr. Spencer: And this controversy continues in the church today. The vast majority of professing Christians are, whether they know it or not, Pelagian or semi-Pelagian in their theology. Many, if not most, are unaware of this because the underlying assumption often goes unstated and almost always goes unchallenged.

Charles Hodge states the fundamental assumption made by Pelagius very clearly. He writes that "the primary assumption [is] that ability limits obligation; that a man can be neither praised nor blamed, neither rewarded nor condemned, except for his own acts and self-acquired character".¹

Marc Roby: The key statement there is that ability limits obligation. In other words, Pelagius assumed that it is improper or unfair to require something of me that I am unable to do.

¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. II, pg. 107

Dr. Spencer: That is the key idea. And I think we have to admit that the idea sounds quite reasonable at first. But let me unpack the assumption, as stated by Hodge, a bit more and then we will see why it is wrong. First, Hodge goes on to say that in the view of Pelagius, we can't be praised or blamed, rewarded or condemned except for our own actions and our "self-acquired character."

Marc Roby: Now, we probably want to explain what "self-acquired character" refers to.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. He is, essentially, referring to habits formed by a consistent pattern of actions. So, for example, if someone steals something, that is a sin and that act can be justly condemned. If the person steals repeatedly, it will form a self-acquired character; that is, a predisposition to stealing, and that inward character can then also be justly condemned.

But Pelagius denied that I can be justly held accountable for any part of my character that is innate, that is not the result of my own actions. He did not think that people are born with a good or a bad nature. And this included Adam. Pelagius denied that he was created righteous in his nature. He was neutral, according to Pelagius, and would become either righteous or sinful based on his own actions.²

Marc Roby: And, as you noted, on the face of it, it sounds reasonable to say that we should only be judged based on our own actions.

Dr. Spencer: But there are serious problems with that view. First of all, as we noted when discussing free will before, especially in Session 84, our will always chooses the action that is most desirable to us at the time when all things are taken into account. If we were ever truly neutral, we would not be able to make any decisions. But, in fact, we do have an internal nature that inclines us in one direction or another.

Marc Roby: But, as you pointed out by the example of stealing, that nature could possibly be self-acquired out of habit.

Dr. Spencer: Perhaps, but we must then ask, "Why did we ever steal the first time?"

Marc Roby: Well, it could have just been an impulse, like a child stealing a candy bar. It might not have been something that was thought through.

Dr. Spencer: That's possible. But if our character was such that we thought stealing was wrong, we would then feel guilt after that impulse action and we would not be very likely to do it again, let alone do it enough times for it to become a habit. Do you see the problem? For it to become a habit, there already had to be something in our character that approved of stealing, otherwise we would not have done it repeatedly.

Marc Roby: Yes, I see your point.

Dr. Spencer: Hodge makes a number of arguments to show that this assumption made by Pelagius was wrong. The assumption being that our ability limits our obligation and we therefore

² Ibid, pg. 106

can't be justly judged for our character unless that character is the result of our own free actions. His first reason is that this notion is opposed by our own consciousness. He points out that "we hold ourselves responsible not only for the deliberate acts of the will, that is, for acts of deliberate self-determination, which suppose both knowledge and volition, but also for emotional, impulsive acts, which precede all deliberation; and not only for such impulsive acts, but also for the principles, dispositions, or immanent states of the mind, by which its acts whether impulsive or deliberate, are determined."³

Marc Roby: That's quite a mouthful. But I think this is the same point we just made with the example of stealing something on an impulse. We hold ourselves accountable for such actions even if they were not planned. And, in fact, as he says, we hold ourselves accountable for the "states of the mind" which produce such actions.

Dr. Spencer: And I think his point is a very important one. Because we hold ourselves accountable in this way, we are testifying that we believe there is a culpable moral character to the inner nature from which our acts proceed. He correctly points out that "When we pronounce a man either good or bad, the judgment is not founded upon his acts, but upon his character as revealed by his acts."

Marc Roby: And that agrees with what Jesus Christ himself said. He uses an agricultural metaphor and argues that you can tell a tree by its fruit. In Matthew 7:17-18 Jesus said, "every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit."⁴ And then, in Verse 20 he concluded, "Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them."

Dr. Spencer: And, obviously, he was talking about knowing people, not trees. You know their inner nature by observing their actions. He also told us in Matthew 15:19 that "out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." Which is saying the same thing. Our actions do not determine our inward nature, our inward nature determines our actions.

Marc Roby: OK, that is clearly true. What else does Hodge say about this?

Dr. Spencer: Well, consider the idea that it is *only* our outward actions, or the self-acquired nature they supposedly produce, that are worthy of judgment. Hodge points out that this idea is not only wrong, but the exact opposite is true.⁵ For example, it is the universal judgment of men that if I give something to the poor solely for the purpose of making myself look good, that is *not* a noble or praise-worthy action. The outward act is, but my *motive* is not. So, when we make

³ Ibid, pg. 107

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⁵ Hodge, op. cit., pg. 109

determinations like that, we also testify that the inward character is what is important, not just the outward act.

Marc Roby: I certainly agree with that, and I'm confident that our listeners will as well.

Dr. Spencer: And now let's go back and put this all together. If my inner character is corrupt and that corruption makes it impossible for me to obey some good command, that does not in any way imply the command itself was wrong or unfair. My inability to obey the command is a result of my corrupt inner character and that *itself* is worthy of condemnation. So to say that my ability limits my obligation is simply not right. As plausible as that sounds at first, we can see that we know better.

Therefore, we can see that it is perfectly just for God to command people to repent and believe in Christ, which is a good and gracious command, even though people are naturally, as Paul put it in Ephesians 2:1, dead in their transgressions and sins and therefore incapable of obeying that command.

Marc Roby: That makes good sense, although the conclusion is still a bit hard for most people to accept.

Dr. Spencer: I understand and sympathize. But the conclusion is biblical and, therefore, true. And it is consistent with our own internal witness. When God judges a person for failing to repent and believe, it is a just judgment based on the person's inner character, or heart. Their inability to obey the command to repent and believe is the result of the fact that they do not *want* to repent and believe because, as Paul says in Romans 5:10, they are enemies of God. This why Jesus told us, in John 3:18, that "whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

Marc Roby: A very sobering statement. And I think we have now shown that it is not unfair of God to judge someone based on his disobedience even though he is not able to obey the command to repent and believe. But that seems to be only be half of the problem. I know that Pelagius also argued that it is unfair for me to be affected in any way by Adam's sin. In other words, Pelagius denied the doctrine of original sin.

Dr. Spencer: And he was completely wrong in doing so, which is why he was declared a heretic by the Council of Carthage in 418 AD. He denied the doctrine of original sin, which we must remember says that Adam acted as a representative for the human race and that his fall affected all of his progeny. Therefore, we inherit our sinful nature from Adam. In any event, Pelagius denied this doctrine based on the same assumption; that I can only be judged for my own actions. In other words, there is no possibility of my being represented by another.

But representation is the grand plan of the Bible! Adam was the representative for all people and Jesus Christ is the representative for everyone who will repent and trust in him. If it is unfair for me to be affected by Adam's sin, then it is equally unfair for me to be saved because Christ paid the penalty my sins deserved and gave his righteousness to me.

Marc Roby: That would be a serious problem. Salvation would be impossible.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it would. That assumption is fatal to true biblical Christianity.

Marc Roby: And yet you said that most professing Christians today are Pelagian or semi-Pelagian.

Dr. Spencer: They are. And there are varying degrees of accepting the Pelagian idea, not all of which rise to the level of heresy. In other words, it is possible to be semi-Pelagian and be a true Christian. Although your walk and your witness would be better if your theology were better, meaning more in line with the Bible. Theology *is* important!

Marc Roby: And we should point out that the most common form of semi-Pelagianism today is Arminianism.

Dr. Spencer: And we need to define what we mean by Arminianism. Historically, this term refers to followers of the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius, whom we briefly mentioned in Session 108. His followers protested against some of the doctrinal positions of Calvin and his followers. Their objections were rejected by the Synod of Dort and the rejection was codified in the Canons of Dort, which is the origin of the five points of Calvinism represented by the acrostic TULIP, which stands for: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and Perseverance of the saints.

Marc Roby: And, so far, we have looked at the doctrine of total depravity and, along the way, have mentioned but not fully explored unconditional election.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And it wouldn't be appropriate to go into all of the differences between Calvinism, or reformed theology, and Arminianism at this point. But for now I'll just say that an Arminian is semi-Pelagian in that he does not believe you must be born again *before* you can repent and believe. Rather, he would say that you repent, believe and are then born again. He would agree with Pelagius to the extent that God's command to repent and believe must imply an ability in natural man to respond. In other words, he denies the biblical doctrine of total depravity.

Marc Roby: We must be clear that an Arminian can be a truly born-again Christian. Which raises an obvious question, why is this controversy important?

Dr. Spencer: Well, I would say it is important for a number of reasons. A proper understanding of anthropology causes us to give greater glory and praise to God for saving us. We know that we were totally depraved and that God had to do a marvelous work of regeneration to enable us to repent and believe. All glory goes to God for his amazing grace in saving us. This is the result of a theocentric view of theology.

But, since an Arminian believes that his natural will is free enough to make a decision to put his faith in Christ without God first changing his nature, he deserves some credit for his own salvation. That robs glory from God that rightfully belongs to him and is the result of an anthropocentric view of theology.

Marc Roby: Now most Arminians will deny that they did anything deserving merit. They will say they are saved by grace and deserve no credit.

Dr. Spencer: That's true, but no matter what an Arminian may say about not doing anything to earn his salvation, the bottom line is that he did *something*, and that something is what made the critical difference. Look at it this way. Consider three young men in a college class together. And suppose one of them is a Christian and the other two are not. Then further suppose the Christian invites these two unbelievers to a church service. They both come and hear the same sermon. And one of them chooses to believe and the other does not. What made the difference? According to the Arminian, it wasn't that God did something to the one and not the other, the difference was simply that one chose to believe and the other did not. So, at the end of day, salvation depends on man's effort.

Marc Roby: I see your point.

Dr. Spencer: There is a story that is sometimes used as an illustration of salvation and it serves very nicely to show the difference between the Arminian position and the biblical position. An unbeliever is likened to a person who is in the middle of the ocean drowning, and the gospel is then likened to a life saver that someone throws to that person. All the drowning person has to do is grab ahold and be pulled to safety. That is the Arminian view of salvation. But notice that the drowning person had to grab ahold of the life saver and hold on. His effort was absolutely *essential* for his salvation.

The proper biblical understanding however is that an unbeliever is dead in his trespasses and sins. He isn't merely drowning, he has already drowned. He is lying dead on the bottom of the ocean and God chooses to reach down, pull him up and give him new life.

Marc Roby: That is a great illustration of the difference. I also think that the biblical position about new birth preceding repentance and faith is important in granting a believer a much greater degree of confidence in his ultimate salvation.

Dr. Spencer: Oh, I completely agree. The biblical view affords a much greater confidence in the promises of God. If I have been born again, I am a new creation and I cannot return to the old. I can join with Paul in saying, as he wrote in Philippians 1:6, that I am "confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Before I was born again I was not able to repent and believe, it would have been inconsistent with my unregenerate nature. But, having been born again, it would be inconsistent with my new regenerate nature to not repent and believe.

Marc Roby: But, of course, we must be careful to not be presumptuous about our being born again. Paul exhorts us in Philippians 2:12-13, "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

Dr. Spencer: That is a very important warning. Whether we are Arminian or Calvinist in our understanding, we must persevere in obedience or we have no basis for believing that we have been born again.

And with that I think we are done with all I want to say about biblical anthropology for now. There is certainly much more that could be said, but I want to move on and start looking at Christology.

Marc Roby: Very well, let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org and we will do our best to answer.