

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. When we finished last week we were in the midst of discussing the glorious topic of the believer's union with Christ, which John Murray called "the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation."¹ Dr. Spencer, you had made the point that this union is spiritual, which indicates that the Holy Spirit is the bond and that this relationship is different from other unions. At the end of our time you mentioned that this union is also mystical. Now, what did you mean by that?

Dr. Spencer: Well, we were again following the treatment in John Murray's excellent book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, and to explain what he meant by calling our union with Christ mystical he cited the wonderful doxology with which the apostle Paul finishes his letter to the church in Rome. We read this doxology in Romans 16:25-27, "Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen."²

Marc Roby: And so, when Murray calls our union with Christ mystical, he means that it is a mystery in the sense that Paul used that word in this passage.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And there are four points that Murray makes from the passage about this mystery. First, this mystery was, as Paul wrote, "hidden for long ages past", which simply means that it was hidden from us as creatures. It was always in the mind of God of course. And the second point is that the mystery did not remain hidden, Paul goes on to say that it was "now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God".

Marc Roby: In other words, we learn about Jesus Christ, his person and his redeeming work, through the Bible, which was written down by God's command and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is what Paul meant. When he referred to "the prophetic writings", he wasn't just speaking about the Old Testament prophets. The phrase is a synecdoche for the entire Bible.

Marc Roby: And we should probably remind our listeners that a synecdoche is a figure of speech where a part of something is used to refer to the whole.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's a good reminder. And this was the third thing that Murray noted from Paul's doxology; namely, that the mystery was revealed in the Bible. It is available to everyone in every nation. It is not the sole possession of some special class of people and it is not

¹ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 170

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discovered by a subjective process of meditation or private encounter with the risen Lord. It is objective and can be looked at and understood by all.

Marc Roby: Yes, that's a very important point. And it certainly distinguishes this mystery from many other things that we might call mysterious.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is very different. And the revelation had to be objective because the fourth thing Murray points out is that the purpose of God's revealing this mystery is, as Paul put it, "so that all nations might believe and obey" God. If the revelation were purely subjective, then we would all be able to say we were believing and obeying what had been revealed to us and no one would be able to contradict us.

Marc Roby: And that would eviscerate real Christianity. It would make it an entirely subjective and personal thing.

Dr. Spencer: It certainly would. But real Christianity is based on objective truth that is presented to us in the Bible. That doesn't mean that people won't distort that truth and falsely call themselves Christians, that happens all the time. But it does mean that we have an objective standard to which we can compare ourselves to see whether or not we are truly Christ's disciples.

Marc Roby: And distorting God's Word is a very dangerous thing to do. Peter spoke about this. In 2 Peter 3:16 he commented about the writings of the apostle Paul and said that "His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction."

Dr. Spencer: Everyone who calls him or herself a Christian should pay careful attention to the implicit warning given in that verse. We have to be very careful with the Word of God. This is especially true in our day when there is an abundance of astoundingly bad theology being preached from many pulpits and presented in many books, podcasts, TV shows and so on.

If you think you are a Christian, you *must* read the Word of God carefully and test what you read or hear from others to see whether or not it is in agreement with God's Word. The Bible must be our ultimate standard for truth. Non-biblical faith may make you feel better here and now, but it will not save you from eternal damnation.

Marc Roby: Jesus himself told us, in John 8:32, that "the truth will set you free." And the Bible is the truth.

Dr. Spencer: And we all by nature prefer to be told things that are pleasant and agree with our old sinful nature. But if we have been born again and enjoy union with Christ, we will acknowledge in our hearts that the Bible *is*, in fact, the Word of God and we will desire to know and obey it even when it corrects us. I'm not saying that always happens without some degree of pain and struggle of course, but it will happen.

Marc Roby: Paul wrote in Romans 8:29 that "those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son". The fact that we must be conformed implies that we need to change.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does imply we need to change. And the Word of God is the primary means of our being conformed. We must be very careful to not be deceived. If someone comes to you and tells you what he thinks the Word of God means, you must look into the Word and see if he is right. Don't just accept the word of man. If he truly is a man of God speaking the Word of God to you, he *himself* will exhort you to that Word.

Marc Roby: That reminds me of the comment made about the Bereans in the book of Acts. In Acts Chapter 17 we read about Paul and Silas presenting the gospel to the people in Thessalonica and Berea, two towns in what is now modern-day Greece. And in Acts 17:11 we read, "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."

Dr. Spencer: That's a great verse. If more people would do that today many modern preachers would be without any followers. Anyone who tells you that God's desire for you is to be rich and famous and always healthy is lying to you and all you have to do is read the Bible for yourself to see that clearly.

But, getting back to idea of union with Christ being a mystery that has been revealed, we see this elsewhere in the New Testament as well. For example, the apostle Paul tells us of his mission in Colossians 1:25-27, where he wrote that he had become a minister of the church, "by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Marc Roby: Now that is explicit, the mystery is Christ in us, which is also called the hope of glory. Praise God!

Dr. Spencer: Praise God indeed. Paul also mentions this mystery in his letter to the church in Ephesus. In Ephesians 5:31 we read the famous line, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." But then in Verse 32 Paul surprises us by saying, "This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church."

Marc Roby: That entire passage in Ephesians 5 is wonderful, it compares the relationship of Christ and his church to that of a husband and wife.

Dr. Spencer: And we should notice that the union spoken of there is not just the union of Christ with individual believers, it is the union of Christ and his church. We, as believers, should never think of ourselves apart from the church. We are a part of something much greater than ourselves. It is only in learning to love others and function as a part of that whole that we can fulfil God's commands and, therefore, his purpose for us.

Marc Roby: In fact, Christ told his disciples in John 13:35, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Dr. Spencer: That's right. Murray also points out that the union of a husband and wife is not the only similitude used to describe our union with Christ. The most amazing example is in John 17:21-23 where as part of his high priestly prayer Jesus prays for all believers, asking, "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

Marc Roby: That is truly amazing to consider. We are to be united to one another and to God in some sense in the same way that the Father and Son are united in the Trinity.

Dr. Spencer: It is completely amazing. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are of the same essence. One God in three persons. But Murray is also careful to guard against reading too much into this similitude. He wrote that "Similitude here again does not mean identity. Union with Christ does not mean that we are incorporated into the life of the Godhead. That is one of the distortions to which this great truth has been subjected."³

Marc Roby: Yes, that is an important warning. Mormons believe that we can become gods and a number of modern preachers teach the heretical "little god" doctrine that we are all gods, albeit with a little "g".

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we briefly discussed the little god doctrine in Session 48 and I don't want to waste time refuting it again here, it is patently stupid, contrary to all observable fact and blasphemous to boot. We always need to be careful to not go too far with any analogy or metaphor, whether it is used in the Bible or anywhere else.

But, getting back to our union with Christ, the Bible uses other analogies as well.

Marc Roby: One that immediately occurs to me is that of a building. In Ephesians 2:19-22 Paul wrote to gentile believers, telling them that Christ gives them the same access to the Father that Jewish people have. He wrote, "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

Dr. Spencer: That is another wonderful metaphor, although certainly less exalted than the godhead. We, as Christians, are like the stones in a temple, cemented together to become a dwelling for God's Spirit, and Jesus Christ himself is the chief cornerstone.

Another metaphor that is used is that of a body. In Ephesians 4 Paul speaks of the church as the body of Christ and says that pastors, teachers and others are given to the church to help us mature. In Verses 15-16 he writes, "speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into

³ Murray, op. cit., pg. 168

him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

Marc Roby: I love that metaphor, and Paul uses it more than once. The church is the body of Christ and he is the head. And we each have our part to play, we must each do our work to build each other up in love or the body doesn't function properly.

Dr. Spencer: This whole biblical idea of the church completely destroys the idea of many modern people that religion is a purely private thing. It is *not* all about my personal relationship with God. I cannot have a personal relationship with God without also having a relationship with God's church, his family. It is impossible. We are all parts of the body and we need each other.

Marc Roby: Paul wrote at length about the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians Chapter 12. For example, in Verse 21 he wrote that “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don't need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don't need you!’”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's very true. As our Pastor has said, the idea of an eye floating around by itself, disconnected from the rest of the body, is an abomination.

Marc Roby: Yes, not to mention more than a little grotesque.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is a gross image to say the least. We are to be united to Christ *and* to one another. But Murray notes that “Of all the kinds of union or unity that exist for creatures the union of believers with Christ is the highest.”⁴

Marc Roby: That's a challenging statement. We all need to ask ourselves if that is true of us.

Dr. Spencer: I heartily agree. And this opens up one more issue with regard to our union with Christ that must be explored.

Marc Roby: What is that?

Dr. Spencer: It is called a mystical union not only because it was a mystery that has been revealed, but also because it is mystical in the normal sense of that word, meaning a subjective experience.

Marc Roby: We often shy away from the subjective because it is so easily abused.

Dr. Spencer: That's true, but we need to be careful to not throw the baby out with the bathwater as the old saying goes. Murray wrote that “It is necessary for us to recognize that there is an intelligent mysticism in the life of faith. Believers are called into the fellowship of Christ and fellowship means communion. The life of faith is one of living union and communion with the exalted and ever-present Redeemer. ... There is no communion among men that is comparable to fellowship with Christ ... The life of faith is the life of love, and the life of love is the life of

⁴ Ibid, pg. 169

fellowship, or mystic communion with him who ever lives to make intercession for his people and who can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities.”⁵

Marc Roby: That is a wonderful statement.

Dr. Spencer: And Murray concludes that section by saying that “communion with God is the crown and apex of true religion.”⁶ But we must always be careful to guard against the dangers of subjectivism, which is why this mystical union is based on God’s revelation in the Bible. We do have real communion with Christ, but he has given us an objective revelation to circumscribe, or to put a fence around, our subjective experience. If we go outside of what the Bible teaches, our experience is not genuine. We always need to test the spirits. We read in 1 John 4:1, “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

Marc Roby: And we need the Bible to allow us to test the spirits. Do you have any last word on this topic?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, the final point that Murray makes about our union with Christ we actually already mentioned last time when we looked at Romans 8:9-11, that point is that our union is with the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Marc Roby: That is incredible.

Dr. Spencer: It is. And let me finish this topic with one final quote from Murray. He wrote, “Here indeed is mysticism on the highest plane. It is not the mysticism of vague unintelligible feeling or rapture. It is the mysticism of communion with the one true and living God.”⁷

Marc Roby: That’s a wonderful conclusion. And now let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We will do our best to answer you.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid, pg. 170

⁷ Ibid, pg. 172