

Marc Roby: Well, Dr. Spencer, it is hard to believe, but we have completed three full years of podcasts and this session marks the beginning of our fourth year!

Dr. Spencer: That is hard to believe, but we have a great deal more to cover and I'm excited to get going, so let's go ahead and begin our fourth year.

Marc Roby: OK, let's do it.

We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. More specifically, we are discussing the *ordo salutis*, or order of salvation and we are in the midst of discussing conversion, or repentance and faith. In our session last week we noted that true, saving faith has three elements: first, there is specific content, the Latin word is *notitia*; second, there is mental assent to the truth of that content, the Latin word is *assensus*; third, we must trust in God's way of salvation in order to be saved, which means we must trust in Jesus Christ, the Latin word is *fiducia*. Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: Well, I want to look at the content of biblical faith, the information or *notitia*. It makes no sense to just say I have faith. Faith must have an object. We must believe *in* something or someone. With regard to salvation, we must have knowledge of the truth in order to be saved. In John 8:31-32 we read, "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'" <sup>1</sup>

Marc Roby: And many people would respond to that statement by repeating Pilate's famous question, "What is truth?", which we read in John 18:38.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure many would respond that way. To some extent, Jesus answered the question in the verse I just read. He said "If you hold to my teaching," so truth is found in the teaching of Jesus Christ, which is found in the Bible. This is the content of saving faith.

We discussed truth back in Sessions 68, 71 and 72 when we were examining the attributes of God and we saw that there are three different meanings for the word truth as it used in the Bible. John Frame discusses this in his book *The Doctrine of God*.<sup>2</sup> The first use of the word describes the nature of a person. So, for example, when we read in 1 Thessalonians 1:9 that Paul, Silas and Timothy had been told that the Thessalonians "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God", the clear implication is that there are also false gods, but the God of the Bible, the Creator of heaven and earth, is the only living and *true* God. In other words, the only authentic God, or you could perhaps say the only real God.

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<sup>2</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2002, pg. 475

Marc Roby: Well, we use the word in much the same way when we say, for example, that someone is a true genius. We are saying that there are people who are called geniuses who aren't, but the person that we are referring to is not like them, he is an authentic genius.

Dr. Spencer: And we also use it that way as an adverb; for example, if we say that some work of art is truly magnificent. We mean it is, in fact, magnificent, we weren't using excessive flattery. The second use of the word true refers to a property of statements. If a statement is true, it means that it corresponds to reality. The third use of the word is with regard to morality.

Marc Roby: And we pointed out in those earlier sessions that, ultimately, truth is a person. Jesus Christ said, in John 14:6, that "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Dr. Spencer: And that is certainly the case in Jesus' statement that the truth will set us free. It is Jesus himself who has earned our salvation. All three senses of the word truth are important in this regard. Jesus is true God and true man in the sense of being both authentic, or genuine God and authentic, or genuine man. He is also completely truthful in everything he said as recorded in the Bible and, finally, he both has authority to tell us what is morally right and wrong and he is the only person to have lived a perfectly sinless life. So, as I said, we must have knowledge of the truth to be saved or, as Jesus himself put it, to be set free.

Marc Roby: And Jesus clearly meant to be set free from sin and death and eternal hell. So, we must know Christ in order to be saved. But, is there more that we must know? After all, there are many people who would claim a personal relationship with Christ but who don't agree with the historic creeds of Christianity.

Dr. Spencer: There are, without a doubt, many such people. We must know Christ as he truly is, and the only place we find that information is in the Bible.

Marc Roby: Well, it would seem then that there *is* some minimal set of doctrines to which a person must agree to be a real Christian.

Dr. Spencer: I agree that it would seem so, but we must be very careful. The great 20<sup>th</sup>-century theologian J. Gresham Machen, in his book *What is Faith?* wrote the following: "How much, then, of the gospel, it may be asked, does a man need to accept in order that he may be saved; what, to put it baldly, are the minimum doctrinal requirements in order that a man may be a Christian?"<sup>3</sup>

Marc Roby: And I am excited to hear how Machen answered the question.

Dr. Spencer: Well, you are about to be disappointed then, because he doesn't answer the question. And, in fact, he goes further. He not only said that he has never answered the question, he wrote, "Indeed it is a question which I think no human being can answer. ... This is one of the things which must surely be left to God."<sup>4</sup> But, he then goes on to say that churches need to be

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<sup>3</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?*, The MacMillan Comp., 1925, pg. 155

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

very careful in admitting members. They need to examine potential members to see whether or not they have a credible confession of faith and, he says, “To that end, it should, I think, be made much harder than it now is to enter the Church: the confession of faith that is required should be a credible confession; and if it becomes evident upon examination that a candidate has no notion of what he is doing, he should be advised to enter upon a course of instruction before he becomes a member of the Church.”<sup>5</sup>

**Marc Roby: That seems to me to be somewhat at odds with what he said about not being able to define a minimal set of doctrines.**

Dr. Spencer: I agree that it is somewhat at odds, but I don’t think he contradicts himself. He is opposed to giving a formal statement of exactly what doctrines must be believed, but he is definitely in favor of being sure that someone has a reasonable understanding of the gospel.

He wants to avoid the problem of putting down in print the absolute minimum a person must know and believe in order to be saved because, as he says, “who can presume to say whether the other man's attitude toward Christ, which he can express but badly in words, is an attitude of saving faith or not?”<sup>6</sup> And, in addition, he points out that “Some men seem to devote most of their energies to the task of seeing just how little of Christian truth they can get along with.”<sup>7</sup>

**Marc Roby: Wanting to get along with the absolute minimum for a passing grade, so to speak, would be a bad sign in terms of the truthfulness of a person’s claim to faith.**

Dr. Spencer: I agree. If someone really wanted to see how little they could get away with believing, it would be sure sign the person was not born again. Born again people love Christ and want to know as much about him and his work as possible. But I think Machen is wise to refrain from giving a formal list of the minimum content of true, saving faith. His emphasis is on examining the person’s doctrine *and* life. A credible confession must include a changed life and some sign of love for God.

Nevertheless, I do think we can list some things that would clearly need to be part of any minimal list of necessary doctrines, and I think there is good reason for doing so since people can call themselves Christians and mean something completely at odds with biblical Christianity. It would be dangerous to the health of a church to admit such people to membership.

**Marc Roby: And dangerous for the people themselves too I would add. Can you give an example?**

Dr. Spencer: Yes. The best example I’ve seen is one that James Boice gives in his book *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, which we have used before. Let me read something he wrote because it is downright shocking, and yet it is representative of much of what goes on in the name of Christianity today. Boice wrote that “A number of years ago in a rather extended discussion about religion a young man told me that he was a Christian. As our conversation

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp 156-157

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pg. 155

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pg. 159

developed I discovered that he did not believe that Jesus Christ was fully divine. He said that Jesus was God's Son, but only in the sense that we are all God's sons. He did not believe in the resurrection. He did not believe that Jesus died for our sin or that the New Testament contains an accurate record of his life and ministry. He did not acknowledge Christ as Lord of his life. ... nevertheless he believed deep in his heart that he was a Christian."<sup>8</sup>

**Marc Roby: OK, that is rather shocking.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. And although this may be an extreme case, in less extreme forms it is far more common than many of us would suppose. And I'm quite sure that Machen would agree that this young man was *not* a true Christian and should not be admitted as a member of a church. You simply cannot reject the true divinity and humanity of Christ, or the resurrection, or the Lordship of Christ and be a real Christian.

These issues were settled long before the reformation and are clearly stated, for example, in the Nicene Creed. So, while we agree that it would be unwise to try and publish an exhaustive list of so-called essential doctrines, we certainly can state some of them. And I think Machen's reservations are valid. Someone can be brought to a true saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and yet have a very poor understanding of Christian doctrine.

**Marc Roby: Well, certainly as one example, young children can have true saving faith without very detailed knowledge of doctrine.**

Dr. Spencer: That's very true. I like the treatment of the topic of faith in Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*. He defines saving faith in the following way: "Saving faith may be defined as a certain conviction, wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit, as to the truth of the gospel, and a hearty reliance (trust) on the promises of God in Christ."<sup>9</sup>

**Marc Roby: That definition gets around the issue of defining specific content nicely. He says that you must have a certain conviction of the truth of the gospel, but he doesn't specify which details of the gospel message you must know and understand.**

Dr. Spencer: That's right. A child may have saving faith that the gospel is true, and yet have an *understanding* of the gospel that would be considered extremely deficient in an adult. The primary issue really is one of trust. We trust in the truth of the gospel and we trust in the person and work of Christ.

In our session last week we said that true saving faith has three components, which are often given by their Latin names, *notitia*, *assensus* and *fiducia*, but can also be called information, assent and trust. This three-component view is the classic reformed view<sup>10</sup>, but some theologians reduce it to two elements: knowledge and personal trust<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> J. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 409

<sup>9</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1938, pg. 503

<sup>10</sup> E.g., see R.C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?*, Baker Books, 1997, pg. 71

<sup>11</sup> E.g., see Berkhof, *op. cit.*, pg. 505

Marc Roby: And Berkhof's definition certainly sounds like it has only two elements. He refers to a certain conviction of the truth of the gospel and then trust in the promises of God in Christ.

Dr. Spencer: I agree it sounds that way, although he goes on to give the familiar threefold division of reformed theology. But the two views are really the same at their core, because when theologians speak of true saving faith as consisting in just two elements, knowledge and personal trust, their idea of knowledge is information that we have agreed is true, in other words, to which we have given our assent. This is the view expressed by the Heidelberg Catechism for example in the answer to Question 21, which asks, "What is true faith?"

Marc Roby: And the answer given in the catechism is, "True faith is not only a sure knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word, but also a firm confidence which the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel, that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits."<sup>12</sup>

Dr. Spencer: That's a great answer. And for our purposes right now the important points are that it refers to a "sure knowledge", which is information and assent, and a "firm confidence", which is trust.

Berkhof goes on to examine this knowledge further. He wrote that "The knowledge of faith consists in a positive recognition of the truth, in which man accepts as true whatsoever God says in His Word, and especially what He says respecting the deep depravity of man and the redemption which is in Christ Jesus."<sup>13</sup>

Marc Roby: In other words, we believe the bad news that we are sinners deserving of hell and cannot save ourselves and we acknowledge the truth of the good news that Jesus Christ came to save sinners.

Dr. Spencer: Those are the two necessary points yes. As we've said a number of times, no one will believe the good news if they have not first believed the bad news. Who will believe in a Savior if he doesn't see that he needs to be saved?

Marc Roby: I would have to say no one.

Dr. Spencer: And I would agree. And Berkhof says more. He writes that "There must be certainty as to the reality of the object of faith; if there is not, faith is in vain."<sup>14</sup>

Marc Roby: And, of course, the object of our faith is Jesus Christ. If we are not certain that he really existed and did the things the Bible says he did, and most notably, that he died on the cross for his people's sins and then was raised from the dead, never to die again, well then our faith is in vain. In fact, we are told in Hebrews 11:6 that "without faith it is impossible to please God,

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<sup>12</sup> G.I. Williamson, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, P&R Publishing, 1993, pg. 36

<sup>13</sup> Berkhof, op. cit., pg.503

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pg. 504

because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

Dr. Spencer: That verse makes it clear that faith has content, it lists two things we must believe. First, it says that we must believe that God exists. And the context obviously indicates that this means we accept the Bible’s teaching about who God is. For just a few verses earlier, in Verse 3, we read, “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” And second, the verse says that we must believe God rewards those who earnestly seek him. This is speaking about God’s work of redemption and his promises to men, which again we only learn about in the Bible. So, faith has content, or we could say an object, and the object of biblical faith is the person and work of Christ as told to us in God’s Word.

Marc Roby: And that is great place to end for today, so let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org).