

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today. Last week we finished our examination of soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. Dr. Spencer, what would you like to cover today?

Dr. Spencer: Well, in our session last week we noted that God's ultimate purpose in creation is the manifestation of his own glory. And, with regard to us, his people, his proximate purpose is to make us holy. But we must realize that God doesn't deal with us just as individuals. Now, he certainly saves us individually and deals with each of us individually in a number of ways, but that isn't all that he does. He also deals with us collectively. Each of us is a part of the church and God frequently deals with us as members of the church rather than individuals.

Marc Roby: Can you give us an example?

Dr. Spencer: Certainly. Let's briefly look at a couple of well-known verses, 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. In those verses Paul wrote, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."¹

Now, many Christians are familiar with these verses, but most of them probably don't know that the English language hides something here. The second-person personal pronoun *you* in these verses is plural in the Greek. Paul is speaking about the church as a whole, not just individual believers. We each have our role to play, but it is the church collectively that is the temple.

Marc Roby: Yes, it is sometimes unfortunate that the second-person pronoun *you* in English can be either singular or plural.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. And those verses aren't alone, we see the importance of the church as a whole in many places in the Bible. For example, in Ephesians 4:1 Paul admonished his readers, "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." The second-person pronoun here is again in the plural in the Greek, Paul was addressing his readers as a group. And he goes on in Verses 2-6 to say, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

Marc Roby: That is a familiar and wonderful passage, and it makes clear how important it is for all of us in the church to live together in love. The church is made up of individuals and, as you have said, we all have a role to play. It makes me remember Jesus' statement to his disciples about love. In John 13:34-35 he said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have

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loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Dr. Spencer: That’s a great passage to make my point. But we should first take note of what is new about this command. Way back in Leviticus 19:18 God had commanded his people, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.” So loving our neighbor was a not a new command. What was new about it was that we are to love one another *as Christ loved us!*

Marc Roby: And that is a very high standard, Christ took our sins upon himself, bore the wrath of God and died for us. None of us ever meet that standard.

Dr. Spencer: That’s true, we don’t. But we are to strive to do so. The church is the environment in which each individual Christian is to learn how to sacrificially love others. And I really want to take note of what Jesus said next. He said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” He is speaking about the witness of the church to the world. The church as a whole is to glorify God, not just the members of the church as individuals.

Marc Roby: I’m afraid the church has often failed in that regard.

Dr. Spencer: It most certainly has. The visible church, meaning the one made up of all professing Christians, as opposed to all those who are truly born again, is a mixture. Some people in it are not born again, they are false Christians. And even those who are born-again still sin, so it is inevitable that the church will provide an imperfect witness to the world in this age. But in the age to come, when the church will be exclusively made up of perfected, glorified believers, it will be a perfect witness for the glorious work God has accomplished.

Marc Roby: That is indeed a great day to look forward to.

Dr. Spencer: Oh, absolutely. And in that day it will be abundantly clear that God has taken a group of sinful people, regenerated them, purified them and glorified them to form his perfect church. A church fit to spend eternity in heaven with God. It is the church as a whole that will perfectly display God’s glorious work of redemption. It is his work and his glory.

Marc Roby: It is impossible to imagine what our fellowship with God and with one another will be like without sin.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. In his high-priestly prayer in John 17, Jesus made an incredible set of statements about the unity that we, as believers, should enjoy. In John 17:20-23 we read that Jesus said, “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 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: Those statements are amazing. That we, meaning the church, may be one as the Father and the Son are one.

Dr. Spencer: It's impossible to imagine given all of the divisions and problems in the church brought about by sin, but that is God's plan. And note again that the purpose of our unity and love for one another is to adorn the gospel with the witness of our lives. Jesus said it was so that the world may believe that the Father sent him and to let the world know that the Father loved the church even as he has loved Christ.

Marc Roby: That is a high calling indeed.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is a very high calling. And God has had this plan in mind since before the creation. Remember that in Ephesians 1:4 we are told that God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world. And in Isaiah 60:21 we read that roughly 700 years before Christ, God announced through the prophet, "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." The English Standard Version and the King James Version both translate that last phrase as saying that God may "be glorified", rather than saying that the church is for the display of his splendor.

Marc Roby: Now it's incredible to think that the church, made up of sinful, fallible human beings, is such a focal point of God's creation and will, ultimately, glorify him.

Dr. Spencer: It blows the mind in fact, although we must remember that in its final state the church will be sinless and pure. The truth is that the church is God's greatest creation. When he created this physical universe and all living beings, including man, he had only to speak, which is, of course, an anthropomorphism. But the message is clear; creation didn't require some extreme effort or sacrifice on the part of God.

But the church, on the other hand, required that God redeem a chosen group of people out of the mass of fallen, sinful humanity and then remove their sin and perfect them. And redeeming these people required the incarnation and sacrifice of God's eternal Son, the second person of the holy Trinity.

Marc Roby: That is the greatest cost imaginable. And it lets us know in no uncertain terms how valuable the church is to God.

Dr. Spencer: In fact, six times in the Old Testament God refers to his chosen people as his *segullah*, his treasured possession. The first reference is in Exodus 19:5. And in Exodus 19:5-6 we read that God spoke to Moses in his capacity as the representative of the Israelites and said, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Marc Roby: And the whole goal of salvation, as we discussed last week, is to make us holy.

Dr. Spencer: And that is why we, as Christians, should be extremely careful to live holy lives. I am not preaching a works-based salvation, that would be heresy. Our redemption is too costly and nothing we can ever do would be enough to earn it. Salvation is a free gift of grace. But the

whole purpose of salvation is for us to be a part of God's holy church. So how on earth can anyone think that living a holy life is not important?

Marc Roby: Now that does seem to be a clear contradiction.

Dr. Spencer: It is a contradiction. A contradiction of God's eternal purpose as clearly stated in the Bible. If a person has truly been born again, that person has a new set of desires and *wants* to live a holy life. When he sins, misery results until he repents of the sin and is reconciled to God. That is why so much of the preaching that goes on nowadays is a stench in God's nostrils.

We live in a time that is, I fear, very similar to the kingdom of Judah prior to being conquered by the Babylonians.

Marc Roby: And that Babylonian conquest was a horrible and brutal thing. It brought an end to the Jewish nation. Many of the leading people were killed and many more were taken into captivity in Babylon and were there for seventy years.

Dr. Spencer: The prophet Jeremiah lived through the time of the Babylonian victory and subsequent destruction of Jerusalem. The book of Lamentations contains his laments over the suffering of his people and in Lamentations 2:14 he wrote, "The visions of your prophets were false and worthless; they did not expose your sin to ward off your captivity. The oracles they gave you were false and misleading."

Marc Roby: That is quite a condemnation of the religious leaders of that time.

Dr. Spencer: And I would say that it is quite a condemnation of many religious leaders today as well. One of the jobs of a true pastor is to expose sin. Only when sin is exposed can it be repented of and forsaken.

Marc Roby: Exposing sin is not a pleasant or popular task.

Dr. Spencer: No, it isn't. It isn't pleasant or popular for a pastor, for an elder, for a parent, or a teacher, or a friend. But we must care more about God's kingdom rule, his honor, and being faithful to him than we do for momentary peace in our earthly relations. And if we truly care about people, we will want to be honest and expose sin. It doesn't do anyone a favor to ignore serious or repeated sin.

Marc Roby: Although we don't want to be spending all of our time confronting each other with every little sin. We are told in 1 Peter 4:8, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, if we didn't do that, we wouldn't have time for doing much besides confronting one another! But in speaking about serious or repeated sins, the apostle Paul warned about the kind of apostasy that would be seen in the church. He wrote to warn his younger disciple and co-worker in 2 Timothy 3:1-5, saying, "But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather

than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.”

Marc Roby: That’s harsh. He says to have nothing to do with these people. I think many today would consider that unchristian behavior.

Dr. Spencer: I think you’re right about that. But the reason he says it is that such people bring shame to the name of Christ and are a danger to true Christians. When he says that they have a form of godliness but deny its power, he is talking about the power to say “No” to sin and live a holy life. And he went on in 2 Timothy 4:3 to write, “For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”

Marc Roby: Paul exhorted Timothy, in 1 Timothy 4:16 to, “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

Dr. Spencer: We all need that exhortation. Both our life and our doctrine are important. And unholy living and unbiblical doctrine are common in the modern church. Preachers tell stories and entertain people. They tell them what their itching ears want to hear. Not confronting them with their sin, but trying to make them feel good about themselves.

Marc Roby: Yes, the church has become a social club. A place to go visit with friends, sing some uplifting songs and listen to an entertaining message. The great 19th-century theologian and preacher, Charles Spurgeon, once said that “A time will come when instead of shepherds feeding the sheep, the church will have clowns entertaining the goats.”²

Dr. Spencer: He had a way with words. And that is, I’m afraid, all too true today. Such churches are not true churches. They are preaching a different gospel and a different Jesus, and they lead people to hell. We are all sinners and we need to change. That process is painful, but it is necessary to be made holy. And the church is important in that process.

Marc Roby: Can you be specific about how the church is to be involved in helping its members live holy lives?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. First and foremost, through serious, exegetically sound preaching of the Word of God. Second, through proper administration of the sacraments. Third, through exercising proper church discipline to deal with unrepentant sinners. And fourth, by providing good Christian fellowship. Community life is very important. It gives each of us a place to exercise our gifts in service to others and to have others help meet our needs. In other words, to learn to love and serve one another biblically.

Marc Roby: And real love, the Bible makes clear, is sacrificial love. As Jesus said, we are to love one another *as* he loved us.

² <https://quotefancy.com/charles-h-spurgeon-quotes>

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. The main thing I wanted to accomplish today was to establish the connection between our study of salvation, or soteriology, which we completed last week, and our next topic, which is the study of the church, or ecclesiology. These two things are intimately linked.

Marc Roby: And we should remind our listeners that we have been going through the six loci of Reformed theology. We have finished the first four, which are: First, theology proper – in other words, the study of God; Second, anthropology, the study of man; Third, Christology, the study of Jesus Christ the Redeemer; and fourth, soteriology, which means the study of salvation. We have two loci remaining to cover: the fifth, ecclesiology, which means the study of the church as you just noted; and finally, the sixth, eschatology, which means the study of last things.

Dr. Spencer: That's a good reminder. And in our next session I want to start examining ecclesiology proper. As I have tried to show today, God often views his church as a unit. The church is variously referred to as the body of Christ, the bride of Christ and the Temple of God. We are told that we are citizens of heaven and we have been adopted as God's children, we are part of the family of God. All of these descriptions emphasize the unity of the church. We are all individuals of course, but we don't live as disconnected individuals, nor do we work out our salvation as disconnected individuals.

Marc Roby: And so, church membership is not optional.

Dr. Spencer: No, it isn't. Christians should be active members of a good church. The idea that we can be members of some nebulous universal church and just attend different churches each week, or stay home and watch a service on TV, or just do our own private service, is not found anywhere in the Bible. In fact, it contradicts the Bible's clear teaching about the importance of fellowship and learning to live in love and forgiveness as committed members of a local church.

Marc Roby: Alright. I look forward to studying ecclesiology in more detail in the coming weeks. Before we close for today, let me remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We will do our best to answer your questions.