

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing our examination of ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. We introduced the topic last week and made the point that God views us not just as individuals, but also as members of his church. And we noted that the purpose of salvation is to make the entire church holy and fit to be in God's presence in heaven. Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to define what the church is, and to begin by looking at our English word, *church*. This word comes from the Greek word *κυριακός* (*kuriakos*), which is an adjective that means *belonging to the Lord*.¹ The word is only used twice in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 11:20 Paul wrote, "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat"², and the possessive noun *Lord's* in that English sentence is translating the Greek adjective *kuriakos*. The Greek literally speaks of a *supper of the Lord*, or a *supper belonging to the Lord*, and that is where the adjective is used, it modifies the word *supper*.

The second place the word is used is in Revelation 1:10 where John tells us that "On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet". In the Greek, the adjective *kuriakos* modifies the word *Day* to tell us that it is the *Day of the Lord*, or the *Day belonging to the Lord*. Our English translation again uses a possessive noun instead.

Marc Roby: There are three very interesting things about what you just told us. First, that the word is only used twice in the New Testament, which is surprising since according to my exhaustive concordance³, the word *church* shows up 79 times in the New Testament of the 1984 New International Version. The second interesting thing is the fact that it is an adjective, while it is very hard to see how it could be used as an adjective in most of the places where the word *church* shows up in our Bibles. And thirdly, the fact that the word doesn't mean, in some way, a gathering of God's people is also surprising.

Dr. Spencer: All three of those points are interesting to be sure, and they all have a very good answer. In Greek, as in English, an adjective can sometimes function as a noun⁴. Robert Reymond in his systematic theology notes that historically, the Greek phrase *τό κυριακόν* (*to kuriakon*), which means the Lord's place, came to be used to refer to the place where Christians met to worship. Reymond says that "As a result of this transfer, the word *church* has come to be used in our English Bibles as a translation, not of the Greek word from which it is derived, ...

¹ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd Ed., Zondervan Academic, 1998, pg. 805

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³ E.W. Goodrick & J.R. Kohlenberger III, *The NIV Exhaustive Concordance*, Zondervan, 1990

⁴ e.g., see W.D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar*, 3rd Ed., Zondervan, 2009, pg. 65 Section 9.3 and pg. 66 Section 9.9

[but] to translate the Greek word ἐκκλησία”⁵ The word ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia) means assembly and occurs 114 times in the Greek New Testament.

Marc Roby: Now, that is an interesting bit of history about our word *church*. Now, I have heard ministers point out that the Greek word ekklēsia literally means the “called-out ones”.

Dr. Spencer: That’s true in terms of the word’s etymology, but it is not true in terms of its usage at the time the New Testament was written. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* points out that the history of usage is more important than the etymology.⁶ And based on its usage in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint, as well as its usage in the New Testament and other writings, it is clear that the primary meaning is an assembly of people called together for some purpose. As Reymond notes in his theology, “If one says no more here than what the word’s etymology suggests, the church is left in an ‘ungathered’ condition.”⁷ In other words, to just say the church is people called out of the world, while true, misses the main point. The church is a people called out of the world to be God’s possession. His peculiar people. We are the church of Christ, not just a group of people called out of the world. We are gathered together for a purpose.

Marc Roby: Alright, but that begs the question of how you would define the church.

Dr. Spencer: Well, I like the definition given by Reymond. He wrote that “the church in Scripture is composed of all the redeemed in every age who are saved by grace through personal faith in the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ, [who is] ‘the seed of the woman’ (Gen. 3:15) and [the] suffering Messiah (Isa. 53:5-10).”⁸

Marc Roby: That definition is very detailed, to say the least.

Dr. Spencer: Which is part of why I like it. But also it is biblical and complete. He first makes it clear that he is interested in defining what the church is based on Scripture, which should always be the guide for a true Christian. Second, he says that the church is composed of redeemed people, which gets to the essence right away. As Paul says in Romans 3:23, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”. That is man’s fundamental problem. We are all sinners who will one day face a perfectly holy and just God who knows perfectly everything about us and all that we have ever thought, said or done.

Marc Roby: And that would be a terrifying prospect were it not for Jesus Christ.

Dr. Spencer: Who is the only Redeemer. We need someone to redeem us from our bondage to sin as we have discussed at length previously⁹. The second thing Reymond says is that the church is composed of the redeemed from every age, which is important. There is only one true

⁵ Reymond, op. cit.

⁶ G. Kittel, (Trans. By G. Bromley), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. III, Eerdmans, 1966, pg. 530

⁷ Reymond, op. cit., pg. 810, fn 12

⁸ Ibid, pg. 805

⁹ e.g., see Session 179 in particular and also the index of topics

church. We will be in heaven with Moses, King David, Isaiah, the apostles and all other true believers throughout the history of the world. Those who lived prior to the time of Christ were saved by believing in God's promise to send a redeemer, and those who live after the time of Christ are saved by believing in his person and work as the Redeemer.

Marc Roby: We are told in Matthew 1:21 that Jesus is the Redeemer, in other words the one who would save us from sin. The angel of the Lord told Joseph that Mary, "will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Dr. Spencer: And Reymond's definition deals with this salvation next. He notes that the redeemed are those who have been saved by grace through personal faith in the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ. So, Reymond's third point is that the redeemed are saved by grace. In other words, we cannot earn our salvation. No one will be able to stand before the judgment seat of Christ and point to their own life as a basis for their salvation. If we stand on our own merits, we will be justly condemned to eternal hell.

Marc Roby: No one likes to hear that, and unbelievers virtually always object to the idea that they are guilty in the sight of God. But, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism properly says in the answer to Question 14, "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God." And we all stand guilty of sin by that biblical definition.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, and we must define sin as God defines sin, not as we want to do.

Marc Roby: If it were left up to us to define sin, our definition would conveniently consist only of the things we have not personally done.

Dr. Spencer: That's true. Most people are perfectly happy to say that murder is a terrible sin because they have never murdered anyone. But lying, well now we have to be more careful and nuanced in defining sin, or at least we have to have different categories of sin, not all of which deserve God's punishment, maybe just a slap on the wrist.

But, getting back to Reymond's definition; his fourth point is that we must have personal faith. In other words, you can't be saved by being born a Jew. Or by being born in a supposedly Christian country or family. Or by going to church every Sunday and being a member of good church. Or by being baptized. Or anything else you might want to point to. Paul said in Romans 10:9, "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Marc Roby: And, of course, the confession that Jesus is Lord must be true. Which implies that we walk in obedience to his commands. Jesus said, in John 14:15 that "If you love me, you will obey what I command."

Dr. Spencer: And to call Jesus Lord would mean nothing if it didn't imply that we submit to his authority as Lord.

And moving on, Reymond's fifth point is that our personal faith is in the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ. There must be a sacrifice. God's perfect justice must be satisfied, he cannot simply wink at our sin and say it doesn't matter. To do so would be unjust. God's gift of salvation is free to

us, but it was the most expensive and precious gift ever given. As Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:18-19, “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”

Marc Roby: The idea that there has to be a sacrifice is again something that unbelievers almost universally reject.

Dr. Spencer: That’s true, but the Bible is clear about it. In Hebrews 9:22 we are told that “the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” Our modern age thinks of sacrifice as barbaric, but sin and rebellion are ugly and so the remedy required is also ugly.

And even our culture recognizes that sacrifice can be noble. For example, most people think it is heroic when a person risks his life to save another person. And if someone dies while rescuing someone else, we speak of the person’s sacrifice as a noble and good thing. What unbelievers dislike about the sacrifice of Christ is the idea that God is holy and must punish sin.

Marc Roby: Yes, that idea makes people uncomfortable since we know we have sinned.

Dr. Spencer: That’s the problem. And getting back to Reymond’s definition, his sixth point is that Jesus Christ is the ‘the seed of the woman’, which is a reference to Genesis 3:15. In that verse we read that when God cursed Satan for tempting Adam and Eve to sin he said to him, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

Marc Roby: That statement is called the protoevangelium, meaning the first gospel. It was the first time God told people that he had a plan to redeem us from our sin.

Dr. Spencer: And by citing this, Reymond’s definition makes it clear that the church is something that God had planned from the very beginning. It is not some reaction to unexpected events. It is, in fact, as we have argued before, the main reason for creation. This world – or we could say this age – will come to an end. And then every single human being who has ever lived will either be a part of God’s church and spend eternity with him in heaven, or they will have rejected God and will spend eternity in hell experiencing God’s wrath.

Marc Roby: That is certainly an important point.

Dr. Spencer: It is. And the seventh and final point made by Reymond’s definition is that Jesus Christ is the suffering Messiah, which is a reference to Isaiah Chapter Fifty-Three. In Isaiah 53:5 we are told that “he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” And it is clear that this is speaking about the promised Messiah, which simply means Anointed One. In other words, one who has been commissioned and set apart for a particular job.

Marc Roby: And we have pointed out before that the Greek word Χριστός (Christos), from which we get our word Christ, also simply means anointed. Christ is the promised Messiah.

Dr. Spencer: And by pointing out that Jesus Christ is this promised suffering Messiah, Reymond's definition reminds us of two things. First, that God revealed his plan of salvation to man in greater and greater detail as time progressed. The protoevangelium was very simple and didn't contain much specific information, but then the law, the Old Testament sacrificial system, and the prophets throughout the Old Testament provided more information. But in these last days, God has given us Jesus Christ himself.

Marc Roby: You are quoting from Hebrews when you say that. In Hebrews 1:1-3 we read, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I was quoting from that. The Bible is historical. It is not mythology. It is God's revelation to man. We live in a very privileged time, we have the whole of the Bible along with thousands of years of history to make the Bible's truthfulness clear and to provide us with many great Christian witnesses and many great Christian scholars and teachers to help us understand and apply the Word of God to our own lives.

It is a great privilege and responsibility to be a member of God's church.

Marc Roby: And now that you have explained the definition fully, perhaps it would be good to repeat it.

Dr. Spencer: I agree.

Marc Roby: Very well. Reymond wrote that "the church in Scripture is composed of all the redeemed in every age who are saved by grace through personal faith in the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ, [who is] 'the seed of the woman' (Gen. 3:15) and [the] suffering Messiah (Isa. 53:5-10)." ¹⁰

Dr. Spencer: There are other definitions we could give of the church, but I think this is a very good one and we will use it as our working definition. But, we must point out that the term *church* can also refer to one small part of what we could call the universal church, which is what Reymond's definition applies to. So, for example, in 1 Corinthians 1:2 Paul addressed his letter, "To the church of God in Corinth".

Marc Roby: Is there anything else you want to say about this definition?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, one last thing. Reymond defines what is sometimes called the invisible church, which is not the same as the visible church.

¹⁰ Reymond, op. cit., pg. 805

Marc Roby: Well, I think explaining what you mean by that will take some time, so this is probably a good place to finish for today. Therefore, let me remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We enjoy receiving them.