

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing our examination of ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. Last week we gave a definition of the church, which was taken from Robert Reymond's theology text. 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, 'the seed of the woman' (Gen. 3:15) and suffering Messiah (Isa. 53:5-10)."¹ Then, Dr. Spencer, we finished with you saying that this is a definition of the invisible church. Can you explain that comment?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. In his *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem gives the following definition: "*The invisible church is the church as God sees it.*"² Which is contrasted with the visible church, which Grudem defines as "*the church as Christians on earth see it.*"³

The difference, of course, is that we do not know infallibly which professing Christians are truly born again and which are not, while God does know infallibly who is who. We are told in 2 Timothy 2:19 that "The Lord knows those who are his"⁴. But, even though we don't know infallibly, the church is still called to judge the doctrine and life of its members.

Marc Roby: In the modern church people are often terribly offended by the idea that we should doubt anyone's profession of faith. If you ever have the audacity to say that you don't think someone is a real Christian, people will be shocked and say something like, "How dare you judge another person's faith?"

Dr. Spencer: I've run into that exact situation. But the reality is that we are commanded to judge those who claim to be Christians. Paul deals with this very clearly in his first letter to the Corinthian church. In Chapter Five he instructs them to put out of fellowship a man living in sexual sin, and in 1 Corinthians 5:11-13 he says, "I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. 'Expel the wicked man from among you.'"

Marc Roby: And when Paul wrote "Expel the wicked man from among you" he was essentially quoting a sentence that shows up multiple times in the Book of Deuteronomy, which says, "You must purge the evil from among you." For example, in Deuteronomy 24:7 we read, "If a man is caught kidnapping one of his brother Israelites and treats him as a slave or sells him, the kidnapper must die. You must purge the evil from among you."

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

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 855

³ Ibid, pg. 856

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Dr. Spencer: That is most likely the verse Paul had in mind. When you look at all of the people who claim to be Christians in this world, that group is a mixture. Some of them are truly born again and are members of the invisible church, but many are not as Christ said in Matthew 7:22. Those who are members of the invisible church have been redeemed by God and are in the process of being made holy. And God commands us to do all that we can to preserve the holiness of the visible church. The reason is that sin is destructive and we could say contagious, and so it is a serious danger to those who are members of the invisible church.

Marc Roby: I think the fact that sin is destructive is obvious. Sin leads to all sorts of quarrels, divisions, divorce and so on. It disrupts the unity of the church. But what do you mean by saying that it is contagious?

Dr. Spencer: Well, the apostle Paul warned his disciples about this in the same chapter we have already quoted from. The Corinthian church was actually proud of its tolerance of the man that Paul commanded them to put out. But he explained how wrong they were. In 1 Corinthians 5:6-7 he wrote, “Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.”

Paul was using yeast as a metaphor for sin and was telling the church that when you tolerate a little sin, it tends to turn into more and greater sin. He rebuked them by pointing out that Christ had to die as a sacrifice to pay for our sins, so we should never take sin lightly.

Marc Roby: Yes, I see your point. The visible church, which comprises all people who profess to be Christians, is a mixture of false Christians and true Christians. And the church has a responsibility to exercise discipline, meaning to put out unrepentant sinners who are living in clear violation of God’s laws.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. And we discussed church discipline at some length a long time ago in Sessions 30 through 33, so I don’t want to go into that again. My point here is simply to distinguish between the visible and invisible church. This distinction is important in understanding some verses.

Marc Roby: Can you give us an example?

Dr. Spencer: Certainly. In Ephesians 5:25-27 the apostle Paul commands husbands, saying, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” In order to interpret this verse correctly you need to know that Paul is speaking about the invisible church. Christ did not give himself up for everyone who *claims* to be a Christian, he gave himself up for everyone whom the Father has chosen to save.

Marc Roby: And can you give us an example of a verse where the word church is used to refer to the visible church?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. Look at the beginning of Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica. In 1 Thessalonians 1:1 he says, "Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you." He is writing to the entire group of people in Thessalonica who self-identify as Christians. But it is virtually certain that that group of people included some who were not truly born again.

Marc Roby: Is the distinction between the visible and invisible church important in other ways as well?

Dr. Spencer: Oh yes. We cannot be naïve as Christians. Just because someone claims to be a Christian, or a church calls itself Christian, does not mean that the claim is true. We need to be careful with whom we fellowship and who we listen to. There are many false Christians and false teachers out there and we need to be able to recognize them or they will have a tendency to pull us away from the pure gospel.

In addition, we need to realize that even those who are in a church need to hear the gospel message. It is simply wrong to assume that they are all saved. We *all* need to hear the gospel regularly. I can remember one man who attended our church for a while and was disturbed because he thought we preached the gospel too much. He wanted us to preach way more often about the end times and the blessed hope that awaits Christians. He thought preaching the gospel was only for those outside the church.

Marc Roby: You said that he attended for a while, what happened to him?

Dr. Spencer: He left the church to go to a church that does not preach the gospel. They talk about the end times a lot and they have some very dubious teaching. The net result is that many people who go there are probably not born again. That is a dangerous place to be. The ministers and elders of a church have a weighty responsibility, which is very clear from the apostle Paul's farewell address to the elders of the church in Ephesus.

In Acts 20:28-31 we read that Paul told those elders to, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!"

Marc Roby: That is a serious charge. He tells them that savage wolves will come and he says that some will even come from among their own members.

Dr. Spencer: It is clear that the men God has placed as shepherds over his church have a serious obligation, which includes ferreting out false teaching and removing unrepentant sinners. We are all sinners and any time you have a large group of sinners together you will have problems. Which is why the Bible gives us clear directions on how to handle those problems and assigns men with authority to watch over the church. And we have to be vigilant. False Christians may take a long time to show themselves. Paul experienced that, just look at Demas.

Marc Roby: Yes, Demas provides a clear warning to us all to guard our hearts. We read about him three times in the New Testament. In Colossians 4:14 Paul wrote that “Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings.” And in Philemon 1:24, Paul again includes Demas among those who send greetings. But then, in 2 Timothy 4:10, Paul wrote that “Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica.”

Dr. Spencer: That is a powerful warning, both to leaders to remain vigilant and to all Christians to continue to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, as Paul says in Philippians 2:12. 2 Timothy was probably Paul’s last letter. We don’t know any other details about this man Demas, but it is clear that Paul had considered him to be a faithful fellow worker in the Lord for some time. John Calvin quoted St. Augustine as having said about the church that “In regard to the secret predestination of God, there are very many sheep without, and very many wolves within”⁵.

Marc Roby: That’s scary. Augustine didn’t say there were *a few* sheep outside and *a few* wolves inside, he said *very many*! Therefore, we must reach out to the sheep who have not yet come to know Christ and we must watch out for the wolves within.

Dr. Spencer: That is precisely the warning. We may look at some people outside the church as being hopeless and be completely wrong, they may be among the elect. And we may think of some people in the church as very pious and also be wrong. We must be walking in holiness ourselves, studying the Word of God and praying in order to avoid dangers and to be useful as witnesses to the lost. And we must do that individually *and* as members of a good church. And I’m obviously using the word *church* in the sense of the visible church, and even more specifically, a local congregation.

Marc Roby: And how do you define a good church?

Dr. Spencer: That became a very important question at the time of the reformation. Having discerned that the Roman Catholic Church had strayed very far from biblical norms both in terms of doctrine and purity of life, the reformers had to wrestle with that question. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin wrote, “Wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence, since his promise cannot fail, ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them’ (Mt. 18:20).”⁶

Marc Roby: Alright, Calvin lists two requirements for a true church in that passage: the sincere preaching and hearing of the Word of God and the proper administration of the sacraments. But before we discuss those things more, Calvin’s quoting Matthew 18:20 raises a common question.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge, Hendrickson Publishers, 2008, 4.1.8, pg. 678

⁶ Ibid, 4.1.9, pg. 678

Jesus said that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is there. So how many people are required to make a church?

Dr. Spencer: Well, in one sense the minimum number is set by that verse at two. So, in some sense, when my wife and I gather for devotions, we are a church. But I think that is stretching the term church pretty far.

Nevertheless, I wouldn't want to set a minimum size, I would simply say that believers need fellowship and we need to have a group of other believers with whom we can share gifts and resources, and with whom we can worship and with whom we can learn what it means to walk in love and forgiveness. We will, in general, grow in faith and good works more in a church that is led by pious and learned men who can preach the Word of God with clarity and power and who properly administer the sacraments and church discipline, and that usually requires some reasonable number of people to support. But there are obviously many circumstances that might limit the size of a congregation quite significantly.

Marc Roby: And large congregations have a different set of problems.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, they have a very significant set of problems. If you are in a church with one or two thousand members, it is very easy to get lost in the shuffle and not be known well by anyone. Or to just have a small group of friends who attend the same church but then never really interact with anyone else, especially not with anyone in leadership. And that is a serious problem. As Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders makes clear, the leaders in a local church are to be shepherds. And you cannot shepherd people if you don't know them.

Marc Roby: In John 10:14-15 Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep."

Dr. Spencer: That is an important statement. First, as I said, you can't properly shepherd someone you don't know. And you must know far more than the person's name. You should know what he or she does for work and how well they do it, you should know their family and their history, you should know their gifts and how they are involved in the church. And the sheep should know the shepherd too; again, not just his name and degrees, but know his life. Does he practice what he preaches?

And, secondly, you see that the shepherd is to lay down his life for the sheep. Now, Christ did that literally and in a way no one else can possibly do, but a true shepherd lays down his life in a very real sense. He sacrifices in many ways in order to be a faithful shepherd.

Marc Roby: And so in a very large church, there must be enough leaders to have the church somehow organized into smaller units, where there can be individual relationships and accountability.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I think any really large church has to have some structure in leadership to deal with this problem. And no matter what the size of the church, the leaders and the members need to work hard to make sure that people are actively involved in the life of the church and walking

in holiness. The church as a whole is to be a witness for Christ and it will be a bad witness and dishonoring to Christ if the church allows serious open sin to exist.

Marc Roby: In many churches today, the members only come on Sunday, listen to the sermon, and then go home and have no further interaction during the week.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is common, I agree. And it is not at all the biblical idea of a church. Christ told his disciples in John 13:35 that “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” But if the church does not function as an extended family to some degree, but just a group of people getting together on Sundays, then how can anyone see our love for one another?

Marc Roby: Yes, that’s a very valid question, but it looks like we are out of time for today, so we’ll have to continue this discussion next time. And now, let me remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We will do our very best to answer.