

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing our examination of ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. In our session last week we discussed the difference between the visible church, which is the church as seen by men, and the invisible church, which is the church as God sees it. During that discussion we noted that we are commanded to judge those who claim to be a part of God's church because we must do everything in our power to preserve the purity of God's church. Dr. Spencer, what would you like to cover today?

Dr. Spencer: Well, in Paul's first letter to his young protégé Timothy, he told him why he wrote the letter. In 1 Timothy 3:15 he said that he wrote so that Timothy would, "know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth."¹ This statement explains why it is so important for us to guard the purity of God's church, it is God's household here on earth, his witness to the rest of the world, and the pillar and foundation of the truth.

Marc Roby: And, of course, there is nothing more important than the truth. We are told in John 8:32 that the truth will set you free. And we are told in Psalm 31:5 and Isaiah 65:16 that God is "the God of truth", in John 14:6 that Jesus is the truth, in John 16:13 that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, and in John 17:17 that the Word of God is the truth. God's very nature is truth and the church should certainly reflect that.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely, Paul was making the point that the church is to represent God and his Word of salvation to this world. If the church isn't pure, it dishonors God and lessens the effectiveness of its witness to the world. We who are part of God's church have the awesome responsibility to adorn the gospel message with holy living. Who is going to want to listen to the gospel if they look at the church and see no difference between it and the world?

Marc Roby: Yes, I don't think anyone will.

Dr. Spencer: Nor do I. There must be a visible difference between the world and the church and the church must present an attractive picture to the world or it is not functioning as it should. If unbelievers look at professing Christians and see them getting divorced, getting drunk, doing a lousy job at work, having serious problems with their children and so on, then they have no incentive to listen to the message of hope that we have. It will look like hypocritical nonsense.

Marc Roby: But the opposite is also true. If a church is known for its members being upstanding members of the community, with stable families and so on, then there is incentive to find out about that place.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. Both our life and doctrine are important. You need both in order to function as the pillar and foundation of the truth. And so, it is incredibly important for all

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Christians to know what a true church should look like and to make sure that we are members in good standing of a true church and doing all that we can to contribute to its success.

And doing this will also be what is best for us individually. We need the church. We need accountability, we need the teaching, the support, the prayers and an occasional rebuke. Left on our own, it is much more difficult to live a holy life that will be pleasing to God.

Marc Roby: Yes, I agree. Being an active member of a good church is a great blessing. And it should go without saying that we need to look in the Word of God to define what a true church looks like.

Dr. Spencer: Yes. It *should* go without saying, but it can't in this day and age. In our session last week, I quoted John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He wrote that "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"². This statement of Calvin's lists two marks of a true church: the sincere preaching and hearing of the Word of God, and the proper administration of the sacraments.

Marc Roby: But you often hear about three marks of a good church: the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and church discipline.

Dr. Spencer: That's true in some churches, like ours, but historically the number of marks has been a debatable issue. Louis Berkhof notes in his systematic theology that there have been reformed theologians who spoke of only one mark, others of two and others of three.³ In all cases however, the first mark is always the preaching of the Word of God. And, of course, that statement assumes it is the proper preaching of the Word of God.

I think Berkhof was correct when he wrote that "Strictly speaking, it may be said that the true preaching of the Word and its recognition as the standard of doctrine and life, is the one mark of the Church. Without it there is no Church, and it determines the right administration of the sacraments and the faithful exercise of Church discipline."⁴

Marc Roby: That sounds perfectly reasonable. If the Bible is properly preached, believed and put into practice, then the church will also properly administer the sacraments and church discipline because those are expounded in the Bible.

Dr. Spencer: And that may be at least part of the reason why, for example, Calvin doesn't specifically list church discipline as a mark of the church. When you read that section of his *Institutes*, you find that he does speak about church discipline even though he doesn't use that

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge, Hendrickson Publishers, 2008, 4.1.8, pg. 678

³ Louis Berkhof, , *Systematic Theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1, pg. 576

⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 577

word. He wrote, “when churches are well regulated, they will not bear the wicked in their bosom, nor will they admit the worthy and unworthy indiscriminately to that sacred feast.”⁵

Marc Roby: Yes, that does clearly imply church discipline. If you don’t “bear the wicked in [your] bosom”, you must be putting them out of the church. And if you are watching over who is allowed to partake of the sacred feast of communion, then you are also exercising discipline.

Dr. Spencer: It is interesting though that when you read through this chapter of Calvin’s Institutes, you get the clear idea that he does *not* think discipline is *essential* to being a proper church. In fact, he says that so long as the two marks he mentions are present, “we are never to discard [a church] so long as these remain, though it may otherwise teem with numerous faults. No, even in the administration of word and sacraments defects may creep in which ought not to alienate us from its communion. For all the heads of true doctrine are not in the same position.”⁶

When you read the whole chapter it is very clear that Calvin considers the church to be so important that we are better off in a church that has many flaws than we are to not be in a church at all. And I think he is correct in this regard. No Christian can excuse himself from attending church simply because he can’t find a church that meets some arbitrary standard of perfection.

Marc Roby: And, of course, there are no perfect churches on this earth. We won’t know what a perfect church looks like until we get to heaven.

Dr. Spencer: That is certainly true. With all of that said however, we should do all that we can to find the best possible church to attend and to work hard to make it even better.

But, and I think this next point is extremely important, we should *not* change churches easily. If we are currently a member of a legitimate church, we have a covenant commitment to that local body of believers. If we think there is a problem that should be addressed, the Bible tells us how to deal with that. And we should pray for our church leaders and other members. But we should not unilaterally leave a church unless it has ceased to be a true church, in which case we must leave. If there is some legitimate reason for leaving a true church, then the church leaders should be in agreement with that reason and we should leave with their blessing and recommendation. We shouldn’t just leave because we think some other local church has more energetic preaching or singing or better youth programs.

Marc Roby: What you just said goes very much against the grain of our culture, even for professing Christians.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I know it does. But the church is supposed to be a place where I grow as a Christian, learning what it means to live in repentance, forgiveness and love toward my brothers and sisters in Christ. As we read from 1 Timothy 3:15 at the beginning of this session, the church is the household of God. One of the most common ways of referring to a fellow believer in the New Testament is to call him a brother.

⁵ Calvin, op. cit., 4.1.15, pp 681-682

⁶ Ibid, 4.1.12, pp 679-680

Marc Roby: And that is not just a manner of speaking. We are told in Romans 8:14-15 that “those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’” If Christians are sons and daughters of God, then we truly are brothers and sisters.

Dr. Spencer: You’re absolutely right. It is much more than just a manner of speaking; it is the truth. And it conveys a very important message, there is a natural closeness between siblings which should also be there between Christians. We are all born into a particular family. You don’t get to choose your parents or your brothers and sisters, but you are still to obey your parents and love your brothers and sisters.

The members of a local church are to function as a good family. It is true, of course, that all true Christians are our brothers and sisters, not just those in our local church, but we are to be invested in each other’s lives in the local church in a special way. And if one member leaves in a bad way, that causes harm to all of the others.

Marc Roby: Alright, well we have made the point that being a member of a church is a serious commitment, but do you have more to say about what constitutes a true church?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. I want to go back to what Berkhof said and emphasize one thing in particular. He said that “Strictly speaking, it may be said that the true preaching of the Word and its recognition as the standard of doctrine and life, is the one mark of the Church.”⁷ Notice that he didn’t just refer to the *preaching* of the Word, he also dealt with how that word is received by the hearers. He said the true preaching *and* “its recognition as the standard of doctrine and life”. In other words, the people hearing the preaching have a serious responsibility. They must listen attentively and then do their best to put the Word into practice in their own lives. There must be obedience to the Word of God.

A room full of unbelievers paying no attention while someone preaches the gospel is not a church no matter how well the person may preach the Word.

Marc Roby: Well, that seems rather obvious.

Dr. Spencer: It is obvious, but it still needs to be said and taken note of. And Calvin had the same idea in his statement. His first mark of a true church was not just that the Word of God was properly preached, he referred to “the word of God sincerely preached and heard”. The hearing must be just as sincere as the preaching.

Marc Roby: That makes me think of what the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica. In 1 Thessalonians 2:13 he said that “we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.”

⁷ Berkhof, op. cit., pg. 577

Dr. Spencer: That verse makes the point very clear. And in Matthew 7:24 Jesus said that “everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”

Marc Roby: Yes, that’s clear – we must hear *and* apply the words to be blessed.

Dr. Spencer: We have an obligation when we go to church to hear the Word preached. We are not there to be entertained; we are there to be instructed. And the instruction is of no use, in fact it increases our guilt, if we don’t pay attention and then put it into practice. In Ezekiel 33:30-32 God is speaking to his prophet and he says, “As for you, son of man, your countrymen are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, ‘Come and hear the message that has come from the Lord.’ My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.”

Marc Roby: That passage is quite a condemnation of the people. God says that because they didn’t put the prophet’s words into practice, they saw him as nothing more than an entertainer who played and sang beautiful songs to them.

Dr. Spencer: And notice that God doesn’t condemn Ezekiel in this passage! It is certainly possible for a preacher to fall into the trap of acting like an entertainer, just telling funny stories and entertaining the crowd. And any preacher who does that is *not* preaching the gospel. God will not be pleased with him. But, in this case, the fault is with the people, not the preacher. In other words, even when a preacher delivers a solid, edifying message from God’s Word, it is entirely possible that people in the congregation receive it as entertainment. They may go home saying, “That was a wonderful word today, and very uplifting. A fine sermon.” But if that is all they do and then they go on about their week without ever seeking to apply the word to their own lives, they are treating it as nothing more than entertainment.

Marc Roby: And whenever someone does that, he will not prosper.

Dr. Spencer: No, he won’t. In fact, as I said, he is increasing his guilt because he is treating the Word of God with contempt. When a true minister of the gospel speaks from the pulpit, he is speaking the very words of God. That doesn’t mean he is infallible, even the best ministers will make mistakes, but God does speak to his people through his ministers.

Marc Roby: Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:11-13 that “It was he”, speaking of Jesus Christ, “who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

Dr. Spencer: All true ministers of the gospel are given to the church by God. That doesn’t make them perfect, but it means that we should listen carefully to what they say. The purpose of the preaching is to build us up and help us become mature Christians.

It's interesting that a couple of verses earlier, in Ephesians 4:7-8, Paul wrote "But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: 'When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.'" Paul is looking at Christ as a victorious general returning from battle and giving gifts to the people. And some of the gifts he gives to the church are true pastors and teachers.

Marc Roby: Alright, I think we have established that the first and most important mark of a true church is the proper preaching *and* hearing of the Word of God.

Dr. Spencer: And proper hearing implies putting the word into practice. Which, if it is done faithfully, will lead to the other marks of a good church being there as well. And, as Calvin went to great lengths to establish, we are better off in a poor church than no church. Even if the Word is poorly preached, so long as it is still the Word of God and not heresy, we will be fed. We might be getting the equivalent of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches instead of filet Mignon, but we are getting fed and we won't starve to death.

Marc Roby: Alright. You could say that the first mark admits of degrees. So long as a church preaches the true Word, they have that mark, but that mark may be much better in some churches as versus others.

Dr. Spencer: That's a reasonable way to put it. And if someone has just moved to a new area, or is a new Christian and not yet a member of a church, he or she should look for the best church in the area to join. But, once you are a member of a true church, you should take that commitment very seriously as I noted before. Going to church is not like going out to dinner, you don't just pick the church you feel like attending on any given Sunday, or change churches because you like the service somewhere else a little better. You are to be an active part of a local family.

Marc Roby: That's an important point, and it looks like that is a good place to finish today. But let me first remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We enjoy hearing from you.