

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 learned that the first and most important mark of a true church is the faithful preaching and hearing of the Word of God. Dr. Spencer, what would you like to cover today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to finish our discussion about the marks of a true church. As you noted, the first and most important mark, and some would say the only necessary mark of a true church, is the faithful preaching and hearing of the Word of God. But we also noted that a second mark, the proper administration of the sacraments, and a third mark, which is the proper exercise of church discipline are also often listed.

Marc Roby: And most, if not all, reformed theologians would agree that both of these additional marks are important. We also noted that these marks will naturally follow if the first mark is truly present because they are both clearly taught in the Scriptures.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And there is a fourth mark as well that our Pastor, the Rev. P.G. Mathew has added, and that is true Christian fellowship. I think this mark, while not explicitly mentioned by any other theologians that I'm aware of, is certainly implicit in much of what is written about what constitutes a true church.

Marc Roby: And there is no doubt at all that this mark is presented in the Bible. We could look at many verses, but for example, on the Day of Pentecost, when God poured the Holy Spirit out on his apostles and Peter preached to the crowd, we are told that 3,000 people were added to the church in Jerusalem and then, in Acts 2:42, we read that "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."¹

Dr. Spencer: And that passage continues, in Verses 44-45 to say that "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." These verses do *not* teach that the early church practiced socialism as is sometimes wrongly concluded. Rather, they teach that the early church was practicing true Christian love and fellowship.

People's possessions were still their own, but they freely shared with those who were in need. We are to have fellowship for the purpose of building each other up in the faith *and* for the purpose of helping each other with our material needs.

Marc Roby: Last week we discussed the fact that the church is to be God's witness here on earth. And Jesus Christ told us, in John 13:34-35, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

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Dr. Spencer: That is an important point. All Christians are brothers and sisters in the Lord as we noted last week, and we must love one another sacrificially. I am to use my gifts and resources to help you if you are in need and you are to use yours to help me if I'm in need.

We should also note that when we talk about the marks of a true church, we must necessarily deal with the issue of the purpose of the church. Because, obviously, a good church will be one that fulfills its God-given purposes.

Marc Roby: And the ultimate purpose, of course, is that the church exists to glorify God.

Dr. Spencer: That's true. But I want to get a bit more concrete about what that means. Wayne Grudem does a good job of enumerating the purposes of the church in his *Systematic Theology*.² He lists three purposes, which depend on the relationship. The first purpose, which has to do with our relationship with God, is worship. The church exists to worship God. I would add to what Grudem says on this point though and note that we worship God not just with our singing and praise and so on, but with all of life. So worship, in the broadest sense, is linked with the second and third purposes Grudem notes. The second has to do with our relationship to other believers. The church is to nurture its members and lead them to maturity in Christ. The third purpose has to do with our relationship to unbelievers. The church is to evangelize them. In other words, to share the gospel.

As individual believers then, we have two purposes, or obligations with respect to other people, and these purposes are intimately linked. We are to build each other up in our faith *so that* we can, individually, glorify God with our lives *and* present a compelling witness to the world.

Marc Roby: Now, does Grudem say which, if any, of these three purposes he considers most important?

Dr. Spencer: No. In fact, he says that all three are of equal importance because they are all commanded in Scripture, and I think he is absolutely right in saying that. In the first case, worship is clearly commanded throughout the Bible. For example, in 1 Chronicles 16:29 we are told, "ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name. Bring an offering and come before him; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness." And we are told in John 4:24 that Jesus said, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

Marc Roby: And Grudem's second purpose is also present in the Bible. We are also clearly commanded to build each other up in the faith. In 1 Thessalonians 5:11 the apostle Paul wrote, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing."

Dr. Spencer: And Grudem's third purpose, evangelism, is also commanded in Scripture. In the great commission given to us by Jesus, we read in Matthew 28:19-20 that he commanded us to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pp 867-868

Marc Roby: That is a very clear command and it also contains the glorious promise that Christ will be with us as we do his work.

Dr. Spencer: In fact, we couldn't do his work without his help. Jesus declared in John 15:5 that "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

Marc Roby: And, to view it the other way around, *with* Christ we can do whatever he has commanded us to do. As Paul said in Philippians 4:13, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

Dr. Spencer: And God does not just dwell in us individually. We read about the church as a whole in Ephesians 2:19-22, where Paul wrote, "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

The pronouns in this passage are in the plural in the Greek. Paul is speaking about God dwelling in the church as a corporate body, not just in individuals.

Marc Roby: And that brings us back to the idea of this fourth mark of fellowship. Paul said that the building is joined *together* and that we are being built *together*. The fellowship of believers is implicit in that passage.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. And that fellowship extends beyond the idea of encouraging one another with the Word and worshipping together. We are to live our lives together.

The apostle John spelled this out clearly. In 1 John 3:16-18 we read, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."

Marc Roby: John's rhetorical question is a good one. It is hard to believe that you truly love someone if you are unwilling to share material possessions with him when he is in need.

Dr. Spencer: In fact, I would say it is impossible. But, and this is a critically important qualification, the brother is in *need*. This is not socialism as I said earlier. We aren't talking about wealth redistribution to try and make all members of the church equal in material wealth. But we are talking about helping someone out with the basic needs of life, which certainly includes food, clothing, housing and whatever is needed to secure and maintain these.

So, for example, if your car breaks down and you can't afford to fix it, I should help you fix it, or loan you a car, or give you a car, or whatever else is in my power to do that will provide the transportation you need in order to do your job and take care of your other responsibilities.

Marc Roby: But it doesn't, for example, mean that if you drive a top-of-the-line luxury car, you have to give me one also.

Dr. Spencer: No, it doesn't mean that at all. If I have an old beat-up car that runs reliably, you should be grateful if I loan or give that to you. We all need to guard against jealousy and covetousness. Money is not evil and it is not a sin to be rich, but we are told in 1 Timothy 6:10 that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."

Marc Roby: And Christ warned us in Matthew 6:24, saying, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

Dr. Spencer: That is an important warning. And of course, it is far more than just money that we should share. If I have the ability and tools to build bookshelves and you want to have some, I should be happy to come over and have fellowship as I help you build them.

You can easily come up with all kinds of examples, but the point is simply that we are to be invested in each other's lives and families and we are not to think of our possessions or time as just being for our own use. God gave us whatever abilities or possessions we have and he gave us all the time we have and we should be ready and happy to share them, first with believers, but even with unbelievers as a witness to the love of God. In Galatians 6:9-10 the apostle Paul wrote, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

Marc Roby: All right. We can say then that a true church *must* exhibit the first mark; that of faithfully preaching and hearing the Word of God. That mark is absolutely essential. And a good church will also exhibit the second mark of properly administering the sacraments, the third mark of properly exercising church discipline, and the fourth mark of having vital fellowship, where the members seek to build each other up in the faith and to take care of one another's material needs.

Dr. Spencer: I think that is a good summary. Robert Reymond put it succinctly when he wrote the following about the first three marks: "While the second and third are necessary for the *well-being* of the church, they are not necessary for the *being* of the church."³

Marc Roby: That's a great statement. And, obviously, the fourth mark Rev. Mathew added is also necessary for the *well-being* of the church.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. Now, back in Session 228 we gave a definition of the church, which we took from Robert 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

³ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd Ed., Zondervan Academic, 1998, pg. 854

Jesus Christ, ‘the seed of the woman’ (Gen. 3:15) and suffering Messiah (Isa. 53:5-10).”⁴ That definition, as we pointed out, is for the invisible church, in other words, the church as God sees it with his infallible gaze.

And we have now also discussed the purposes of the church, which are three according to Grudem: worship of God, nurturing of believers and evangelism. Robert Reymond gives a more complete list that includes things we have discussed, or will discuss, under different headings. He said the duties of the church are, “to worship and serve God, to witness to his truth, to evangelize the world, grow the church and nurture its young, to administer the sacraments, to minister to the saints, to govern its affairs, and to perform deeds of benevolence and mercy.”⁵

Marc Roby: That’s a fairly complete list of the responsibilities of the church. Do you have anything more you want to say about the marks of a true church?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. I want to take a different perspective on this question, which comes from James Boice’s book *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, which we have used extensively before. He asks the question, “What should characterize the church?” And he finds the answer in Scripture itself. He wrote, “The most comprehensive answer is seen in Jesus’ prayer for the church recorded in John 17. He prayed that the church might be characterized by six things: joy (v.13), holiness (vv. 14-16), truth (v. 17), mission (v. 18), unity (vv. 21-23) and love (v. 26)”⁶

Marc Roby: Yes, that’s a good list also.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. And I would argue that we have covered all but one of the items more-or-less explicitly. Holiness and truth are both part of living lives that adorn the gospel. Unity and love are both part of living in proper fellowship with our brothers and sisters. And mission we covered explicitly, but we used the term evangelism.

Marc Roby: And that leaves us with just the term ‘joy’.

Dr. Spencer: Yes. And that is the main reason I wanted to note what Boice wrote. Christians are to be joyful. That is an important part of our witness to the world. And we have great reasons to be joyful! God has taken away our condemnation and has promised us eternal heaven. There is nothing greater that could possibly be given to us.

Marc Roby: But I think Christians sometimes think that our joy is only going to come in heaven. Many seem to think that living a holy life is somehow lacking in joy.

Dr. Spencer: I think you’re right about that, and it is sad and completely unbiblical. We should have great joy here in this present life. And, in fact, unlike unbelievers, we should be able to have joy even in terrible circumstances. After all, we have God’s glorious promises. For

⁴ Ibid, pg. 805

⁵ Ibid, pg. 893

⁶ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 576

example, Romans 8:28 says, “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Marc Roby: Yes, that should certainly produce joy. The “all things” mentioned there includes suffering. Paul also wrote, in Romans 5:3-5 that “we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

Dr. Spencer: That’s very true. We know what happens in the end; God wins. After Peter declared that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, we read in Matthew 16:18 that Christ said, “I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” There have been differences of opinion about specifically what “this rock” refers to, but without getting into that issue right now I want us to notice that Christ said that *he* will build his church and the gates of hell – meaning all the powers of Satan and his demons and the world of unbelievers, which he rules – cannot overcome it. The ultimate success of the church is certain. And that should give us great joy.

Marc Roby: Of course, we need to properly define joy. You’re not saying that Christians never experience pain or suffering or sadness.

Dr. Spencer: No, no I’m not suggesting anything like that. That would obviously be wrong. This joy refers to a deeper sense of calm assurance and expectation of something wonderful. We know God and we know and trust in his promises and his power to keep them, and that gives us a joy that is not dependent upon our external circumstances.

Marc Roby: Are we now finished with discussing the marks of a true church?

Dr. Spencer: I think we are.

Marc Roby: Alright, then this is a great place to end for today. I’d like to remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We will do our best to answer you.