

**Marc Roby:** We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing our examination of ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. We have discussed the definition of a church, the marks of the church, the difference between the visible and invisible church, and the fact that the individual members of the church are all in a covenant relationship with God. Dr. Spencer, what would you like to discuss today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to look at some problems that are very important in the modern church. The first one I want to address is the selfish, individualistic nature of many modern believers.

**Marc Roby:** Now, what do you mean by that?

Dr. Spencer: I mean the all-too-common idea that I, as an individual Christian, choose which church to attend based on whether or not I think that church is fulfilling *my* needs, rather than seeing myself as a part of a church family to which I have a serious obligation. And that idea virtually always goes along with the idea that I am perfectly free to change churches at any time and for any reason without any unpleasant consequences.

**Marc Roby:** Well, that is more-or-less the American way though, isn't it?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. And, in fact, it is the way of much of the western world, not just America. And we must say up front of course that we agree it should be your right, as a citizen of a given country, to choose your own church. I certainly don't want the government telling me what church to attend. But we need to be very careful in taking that freedom too far.

As we discussed last week, if I have been born again, I am united to Christ by faith and he is my Lord. In other words, he has absolute authority over my life. And while it's true that in the end I must stand before him as judge on my own, it is also true that he clearly established the church as an organization for his glory. And to guard his glory he gave the church real authority. If I am obedient to Christ, I must belong to a local church and submit to the authority of that local church.

**Marc Roby:** How would you support that statement biblically?

Dr. Spencer: I would first point out that it is assumed throughout the New Testament that Christians will be members of local churches, not just individuals running around worshipping with whomever they want, wherever they want, whenever they want. While some references to "the church" in the New Testament refer to the whole body of believers here on earth, most of them refer to specific churches. As an example of the former, you can look at Matthew 16:18 where Jesus tells Peter, "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."<sup>1</sup> That is clearly referring to the church as a whole, not just one local congregation.

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**Marc Roby:** But most of Paul's letters, on the other hand, are written to specific churches; the church at Rome, or Corinth, or Ephesus for example. Therefore, even though he clearly understood that his letters would be read by others, he did assume believers were members of a local church and he dealt with needs that are specific to that church.

Dr. Spencer: That's true. There are far more references to specific churches than there are to the church in general. The word church, or the plural churches, appears 110 times in the New Testament in the translation we are using. I went through those 110 occurrences and while there are some that you could argue about, I think that 90 of those refer either exclusively to a local church or, even though they are applicable to the church in general, were written to a specific church and are meant for that church first and foremost. We read, for example, about "the church at Jerusalem", or "the church at Antioch", or "the church that meets" in a certain home, or we read about elders being appointed in a particular church, or about a particular church welcoming Paul or some other visitor.

**Marc Roby:** Alright, that does seem fairly obvious once you point it out.

Dr. Spencer: The bottom line is that it is obvious throughout the New Testament that believers gathered in specific local churches. The idea of *only* being a member of some universal church is simply unbiblical. We *are* all members of the universal church if you want to use that term. It includes all Christians throughout the world and throughout all time. It is, in other words, the collection of all those people who will be with God in heaven for all eternity.

But many teachings in the New Testament assume that individual Christians are all members of some local church. They don't make any sense if that isn't true.

**Marc Roby:** Can you give us some examples of the kind of statements you're talking about?

Dr. Spencer: Certainly. In Acts 20:17 we are told that while Paul was in Miletus, he called for the elders from the church in Ephesus to come and see him. He then gave them some directions and encouragement and, specifically, in Acts 20:28 he told them 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."

Now this statement clearly assumes that there was a specific group of Christians who belonged to this particular local church and that this group of elders was given responsibility by God to watch over them, to be shepherds or overseers.

**Marc Roby:** Yes, that is clear. These elders were obviously not responsible for the believers in Jerusalem, or Athens, or anywhere but their own church in Ephesus.

Dr. Spencer: That is my point. And as another example, we read in Titus 1:5 that Paul told Titus, "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and

appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.” The reason there had to be elders in every town was so that each local church would have its own elders. This assumes local churches.

There are many more verses we could look at, but I’ll just point out one because it completely seals the case.

**Marc Roby: Which verse is that?**

Dr. Spencer: In Hebrews 13:17 we are commanded, “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.” If you think about that command for even a moment, it is clear that if church leaders must give an account to God for how they have carried out their responsibilities, and if God gave them authority over people, this *must* be in the context of a local church. An elder in California certainly can’t be reasonably held accountable for the behavior of some Christian in Oklahoma, whom the elder has never even met! Nor can an elder reasonably have authority over someone he doesn’t know.

**Marc Roby: Yes, I agree that that verse cements the argument. It obviously only makes sense given the assumption that all believers are in local churches, each of which is under the authority of a specific group of elders. And it makes it clear that God has given those elders authority.**

Dr. Spencer: You see this authority clearly in Paul’s letters to his younger protégé Timothy also. For example, in Paul’s first letter to Timothy, he specifically tells him four times to give certain *commands* to the people he is pastoring; not suggestions, but commands. In 1 Timothy 1:3 Paul wrote, “As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer”. Then in 1 Timothy 4:11 Paul tells him to “Command and teach these things.” Which refers to all the instructions he has been giving.

Then again in 1 Timothy 6:17 Paul instructs Timothy to, “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth”. And in the next verse, 1 Timothy 6:18, he gives more instruction about the rich, saying, “Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.”

**Marc Roby: I don’t think very many modern Pastors believe that they have authority to command the members of their congregation to do anything.**

Dr. Spencer: It is a sad situation, but I’m confident that you’re right about that. Many churches don’t even have formal membership. They are just a collection of people who come together on Sunday. There may be people there who come every Sunday, but there is no commitment demanded of them. If they choose to start attending a different church next week, they are not violating any commitment by doing so. But true Christians are not just in a covenant with God, we should be in a covenant community here on earth as well. Not having any idea of a covenant relationship in the local church completely circumvents the idea of biblical discipline.

**Marc Roby: It would certainly be hard to discipline anyone if you know that they can just start going to the church down the road instead.**

Dr. Spencer: As a matter of fact, it would be impossible. Now, of course, even if you have formal membership and the person has agreed to come under the authority of the elders, when you discipline someone, he can still just leave and go to a different church. Very few churches will ask where a new member is coming from or want to know why he left the previous church.

**Marc Roby: That makes it sound like the church has no *real* authority. I mean, if you don't have the power to do anything about someone rejecting your discipline, the discipline would seem to be of no real significance.**

Dr. Spencer: That is far from the case though. We have talked before about the different spheres of authority that God has ordained. The family has the rod, the state has the sword and the church has the keys. After Jesus told Peter that he would build his church, he also said, in Matthew 16:19, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Now, this verse is a little difficult to understand in English, but the words used for bind and loose refer, respectively, to what was forbidden or allowed by the rabbis.<sup>2</sup> When Jesus spoke of someone being bound in this context, he meant that they are forbidden from entering heaven, whereas, if they are loosed, they are permitted to enter heaven.

**Marc Roby: But, surely, no local church actually has authority to send an individual to heaven or hell. Hasn't this verse usually been interpreted to mean that by preaching the true gospel, the church holds the keys to heaven? If someone accepts the gospel, he is saved, in other words, admitted to heaven. But if he rejects the gospel, the door to heaven remains locked so to speak.**

Dr. Spencer: That is the most common way to interpret the verse and it is correct as far as it goes. But when you speak about church discipline, you can go a little further. There is another verse that is important in understanding what is meant here. In Matthew 18 Jesus is speaking about church discipline and, specifically, a word of correction being brought to an individual by the church. In Verse 18 he says, "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." This verse uses the same Greek words for bind and loose as were used in Matthew 16:19. And when it says the person the church binds or looses "will be" bound or loosed in heaven, that could also be rendered "will have already been" bound or loosed in heaven.<sup>3</sup> In other words, when the church properly administers church discipline, it is announcing a verdict that has already been reached in heaven.

**Marc Roby: That's a scary thought. But, of course, an individual church can be wrong.**

Dr. Spencer: Oh yes, of course an individual church can be wrong. But if a person is disciplined by a local church, it is a very serious matter. If the local church is a true church and functioning

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<sup>2</sup> W. Bauer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd Ed., Revised and augmented by F.W. Gingrich and F. Danker, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979, pg. 178 (entry 4 for δέω)

<sup>3</sup> William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar*, 3rd Ed., Zondervan, 2009, pg. 122

correctly, the person is in grave eternal danger. If he doesn't repent and get reconciled to the church, he is headed for eternal hell.

**Marc Roby: That is very serious authority indeed. Much more serious than the sword or the rod, both of which are only capable of temporal punishment.**

Dr. Spencer: And it is a serious sin for churches to allow people to become members without finding out their history. If a person has been excommunicated by a legitimate church, he is under discipline and should not be received into membership somewhere else. He should be told to repent and go back and be reconciled to the church from which he was excommunicated.

But just because a person who has been excommunicated can find another church to join, that doesn't mean that the excommunication is not valid. That person is in very real danger. The authority of the church is, ultimately, a very serious thing. It deals with our eternal destiny.

**Marc Roby: Alright, but can you now tie this back into the conversation we were having about the need for believers to be members of a local church? Excommunication is obviously the most extreme example of church authority, but how does this affect most believers on a day-to-day basis?**

Dr. Spencer: It makes it clear that being a member of a local church is a serious responsibility. We have talked about this before in terms of the biblical mandate to build each other up and the need for all of us to learn to forgive one another and to serve one another, in other words, to love another. These clearly depend on there being a local body of believers living together.

But there is also the need for us to receive correction. And we need to see how serious this can be. If a man's life or doctrine are seriously out of line, the church *must* bring correction. If he fails to heed that correction, he *must* be put out. That serves two purposes simultaneously: First, it helps to keep the church pure and protect the members, and second, it is intended to bring the offender to repentance.

**Marc Roby: In other words, the purpose of discipline for the individual being disciplined is always redemptive. The hope is that he or she will repent and be restored.**

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. But if he refuses, then the church has still protected the other members from error and preserved the honor of Christ. The witness of the whole church is seriously harmed when open sin is allowed to continue. The church is to be holy. It is to be visibly different from the world. If the world looks at the church and sees divorce, drunkenness, laziness, lying, sexual immorality and so on, there is precious little incentive to listen to the gospel message.

**Marc Roby: And the holiness of the church depends, at least in part, on each individual Christian being a member of a local church, where he or she is known and is under the authority of the elders.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes. In the New Testament, we see references to elders, overseers, shepherds, teachers and pastors. The individual roles are not clearly defined, but the names themselves go a long way in describing the roles. Elders are typically represented as ruling a local church. Elders

are usually also teachers and overseers, but it isn't necessary that every elder be a teacher or that every teacher be an elder.<sup>4</sup> The point is that the church is governed by mature, godly men. They are, of course, sinful fallible men, but if they are mature Christians, as they should be, and they take their job seriously, as they should, then when the council of elders comes to a decision it is a serious matter.

And, while we have been discussing church discipline because it is the clearest example of the authority given to the church, the whole idea of a group of believers being bound to one another as a local church is a truly wonderful thing and produces many benefits to the members.

**Marc Roby: We've discussed before the fact that we are all given different gifts and are to use them to help each other as well as those outside the church.**

Dr. Spencer: The encouragement and help that we provide to each other are very important. We all need help to live the Christian life. That is why a Christian is depriving himself of a great benefit if he is not a member of a local church. Let me mention one application of this principle that is important today.

**Marc Roby: Yes, please do.**

Dr. Spencer: The Covid pandemic has caused a lot of Christians to "attend" church online, but that is *not* a biblical way of living. There may be specific circumstances that make it an acceptable substitute for a short season, but that cannot be the only way a person relates to a church. As we have said before, there are no lone-ranger Christians.

**Marc Roby: I think we will need to discuss that a little bit more, but it will have to wait for next week. For now, let me remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We enjoy hearing from you.**

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<sup>4</sup> e.g., see the theological note *Pastors and Pastoral Care* on page 1816 of *The Reformation Study Bible*, English Standard Version, Ligonier Ministries, 2005