

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing our examination of ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. In our last session, Dr. Spencer, you noted that Christians must be members of a local church and must participate in that church, including being subject to its discipline. You noted that the modern trend toward the online church is unbiblical except for short periods of time in exceptional circumstances. How would you support those statements?

Dr. Spencer: I'd like to begin by noting that in Hebrews 10:25 we are commanded, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."¹

Marc Roby: And when the author of Hebrews speaks about the "Day approaching", the Rev. P.G. Mathew explains that he is speaking about, "the day when we shall see God face to face, either at our death or at his second coming."²

Dr. Spencer: That's right. Christianity is not about making this life a little better, although it certainly does that, it is, first and foremost, about eternity. Human beings are created for eternity. Death is the curse that came as a result of the fall, it is *not* natural as our modern atheistic culture portrays it.

And death is not the end of existence either, it is separation. We noted back in Session 104 that physical death is the separation of the body and spirit, while spiritual death is the separation of the spirit from fellowship with God. Physical death is temporary, all people will be united with their physical bodies when Christ returns, not just Christians. Paul said in Acts 24:15 that there will be "a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked". Those who have not surrendered to Christ will be given bodies fit for eternity in hell, while Christians will be given bodies fit for eternity in heaven. Christians must live in view of this eternal reality, and the one thing necessary is to make sure that our eternal destiny is with God in heaven.

Marc Roby: People often want to deny the existence of these two eternal realities, but the Bible is very clear on this subject.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. And we all need encouragement as we make this pilgrimage to heaven because we have real enemies opposing us. The purpose of church is not just to hear a word preached to impart some information. If that were the case, then watching a sermon online or on TV would fill the need. But even though the sermon is the focal point of a worship service, there is much more that goes on. And even if you only consider the sermon, it is very different being present in person than it is to listen or watch remotely to a recording.

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² P.G. Mathew, *Muscular Christianity*, Grace and Glory Ministries, 2010, pg. 238

This verse in Hebrews 10:25, which tells us to meet together, is a conclusion from the teaching the writer has been giving about our need to worship together. In Hebrews 10:19-22 we have the opening sentence of this section.

Marc Roby: And it is a long sentence! Let me read it: “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”

Dr. Spencer: That sentence is typical of the Scriptures. It presents us with a very logical argument. People often pit faith and reason against each other, but that is completely wrong. True faith requires the maximal use of our reason. And so, the writer begins by saying, “Therefore”. We should immediately stop and think because this word tells us he is drawing a conclusion based on the preceding material. Also, he says “Therefore, brothers”, so we can conclude that what he is about to say only applies to true believers. He then goes on to provide the basis for this conclusion by quickly summarizing two main points he has been making. He first says, “since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus”.

Marc Roby: We should remind those listeners who may not know that the Most Holy Place refers to the inner room of the temple in Jerusalem, which is where the ark of the covenant was kept. The only person who could go into that room was the high priest, and he could only go in one day a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Dr. Spencer: And he had to go in with blood. Blood had to be shed to cleanse sin. In the temple sacrifices this was the blood of animals, which pointed forward to Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews is pointing out two very important things in this passage. First, we now come by the blood of Jesus, not the blood of animals. The writer had previously made the point, in Hebrews 10:4, that “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” And then in Verse 10 he had said that “we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”

Marc Roby: In other words, the sacrifice of Christ accomplished what all those animal sacrifices could only hint at. The blood of Christ is efficacious and truly atones for our sins.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And when the writer said that “we have been made holy”, he was speaking of what is called definitive sanctification; in other words, the fact that we are radically changed by new birth and are new creations. He also wrote, just a few verses later, in Verse 14, that “by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.” And he means that it is Jesus Christ who has made us perfect *in him*. If we were perfect in ourselves, it would make no sense to refer to us, as he does in this verse, as those “who are being made holy”, rather than those who “have been made holy” as he said before. Being made holy refers to a process that is still underway, which is called progressive sanctification.

Marc Roby: And both are true. There is a radical definitive difference when a person is born again and there is also a continuing process by which God continues to work in us to make us

holy. And it is for this reason that we can have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is the argument the author is making. The Rev. Mathew comments on these verses saying that “As children of God, we have confidence. If we have trusted in Jesus Christ, then we are holy brothers, beloved of God.”³

The writer of Hebrews then also gave us a second reason for our confidence. He wrote, “and since we have a great priest over the house of God”.

Marc Roby: Which is, of course, again referring to Jesus Christ. He is not only the perfect sacrifice, he is also the perfect high priest.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he is both. And the Rev. Mathew writes that “We are God’s temple and his priests. And over this spiritual house is our great high priest, Jesus Christ.”⁴ That is our second reason for coming to God with confidence.

Marc Roby: That statement by Rev. Mathew probably needs some explaining for some of our listeners. He refers to us as God’s temple, which is biblical. For example, Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:16, “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?” And secondly, Rev. Mathew refers to us as God’s priests. We are told in 1 Peter 2:9 that “you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

Dr. Spencer: And, as Rev. Mathew points out, Jesus Christ himself is our great high priest. Therefore, given both of these facts; namely, that we have been made holy through Jesus’ sacrifice and that he is our high priest, we are told that we can enter the Most Holy Place with confidence, which means that we can come into God’s presence with confidence. And then, having summarized these two reasons for confidence, the writer exhorts us to do three things. The first of those three things is stated in the long opening sentence you read, it is to draw near to God. The second thing he exhorts us to do is in the next verse, Hebrews 10:23.

Marc Roby: Which says, “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. We must firmly hold onto our profession of faith. God himself is faithful and we must be also. Then the third exhortation is in the next verse. Hebrews 10:24 says, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” This is a significant part of the purpose of the church. To spur one another on includes encouraging, rebuking, helping, teaching, fellowshiping with one another and so on. And that cannot be accomplished if we are all sitting in our own living rooms listening to a sermon. It requires that we be together. Which then leads to the verse we started with, Hebrews 10:25, which tells us to not forsake meeting together.

³ Ibid, pg. 230

⁴ Ibid, pg. 231

Marc Roby: Yes, I think it is clear that watching a service on the internet or TV doesn't satisfy what the author meant by meeting together in that verse.

Dr. Spencer: No, it doesn't at all. Now, as I said last time, there are times when it may be appropriate for a short season. For example, if I have the flu, I should not go to church and spread it around. And if it is possible for me to watch a service that I miss, that is a good thing. But if I'm healthy and able to go, I should be in church with my brothers and sisters.

There can certainly be legitimate differences of opinion about what kinds of precautions were and are justified by the Covid pandemic or other unusual circumstances, but Christians should put a very high priority on worshipping God together. And that means far more than just sitting in a room together to listen to a sermon and sing a few hymns. As we have discussed before, it means having real fellowship and being accountable to one another. Being involved in each other's lives. Helping one another in a myriad of ways that go far beyond the Sunday church service.

Marc Roby: In other words, being a part of a local community of believers, which is in many ways like a large family.

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly the picture we should have, a family. There was a very disturbing article in the Wall Street Journal recently about the changes brought about in churches by the Covid pandemic.⁵

Marc Roby: What did you find disturbing about it?

Dr. Spencer: That a number of church leaders simply want to try and change church to fit this new trend in society. Now I don't want to be misunderstood, I'm not saying that you can't change anything about the way a church operates. That would be silly. Nor am I suggesting that you can't use modern technology like the internet to reach people, that would also be silly – especially if I said it on a podcast, which make use of modern technology!

Marc Roby: Yes, that would be hypocritical, to say the least.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it would. But a church needs to be extremely careful about making changes just to conform to changes in the society. Yes, we want to reach people, but the purpose of Christianity is to present the old-fashioned gospel message to unbelievers and then to build up believers so that we can walk faithfully before God and do the work he has given us to do. It is God's business who he saves. Our job is simply to preach the gospel and to live a life that is consistent with our preaching.

Marc Roby: That leads to an obvious question. What do you think of the modern idea of so-called seeker friendly churches?

⁵ *Churches Changed During the Pandemic and Many Aren't Going Back*, by Janet Adamy, Wall Street Journal, Nov. 12, 2021, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/church-pandemic-covid-online-11636728162?mod=flipboard>

Dr. Spencer: Well, to be completely blunt, the idea is unbiblical on its face. We are told clearly in Romans 3:11 that there is, “no one who seeks God.” Jesus also told us in John 6:44 that “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him”. Now, there certainly are people in whom God is working and the church should not offend and drive such people away. But if we try to avoid offending them by changing the message of the gospel or by changing our worship service so that it feels comfortable to them, like going into a coffee shop or a concert, we have a problem.

Marc Roby: You just described many modern churches – a coffee shop and a concert.

Dr. Spencer: And that is a problem. Where is the reverence? Where is the recognition of the fact that we are sinners coming into the presence of a holy and just God? We don’t bless God by coming to church on Sunday. He blesses us tremendously by allowing us to come into his presence! He blesses us tremendously by giving us his Word.

Evangelism is a good thing. In fact, we are commanded to go and tell the world the gospel. And we should be welcoming of visitors in our churches. But we must preach the unadulterated full gospel. As Paul said in Romans 1:16, the gospel “is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes”.

Marc Roby: And we always have to remember that the Holy Spirit must work in the heart of an unbeliever or the gospel is foolishness to him. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:18 that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Dr. Spencer: That is very true. Whenever someone tries to remove the offense from the gospel, they actually remove its power. People have to be told that they are sinners in need of a Savior; they can’t save themselves. If there is no ultimate judgment and no hell, then there really is nothing to be saved from.

Marc Roby: But, as the angel told Joseph in Matthew 1:21 regarding the child that Mary was carrying, “She 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: That is the only reason that Jesus Christ came to this earth. And since this is the final podcast before Christmas, it is appropriate to remember that fact. Jesus Christ is eternal God. He is the second person of the holy Trinity and enjoyed perfect fellowship with the Father and the Holy Spirit for all eternity before becoming man.

Marc Roby: It is incredible to think about the sacrifice that God made in sending his Son to become a man and to die for our sins.

Dr. Spencer: I don’t think we can possibly grasp the magnitude of that sacrifice. We must always remember that God did not have to create this universe at all. He had no need. He created for his own pleasure and purpose. And he made man in his image to have fellowship with him. And he gave man the greatest possible purpose, which is to know and glorify him. But he did this knowing that man would sin. And then, in eternity past, God chose a specific group of people to

save out of the mass of sinful humanity. And in his eternal council, God the Father planned our salvation, God the Son agreed to accomplish our salvation, and God the Holy Spirit agreed to apply that salvation to individual sinners.

Marc Roby: And those of us who enjoy the great privilege of being chosen by God must praise him, thank him, love him and walk in grateful obedience all of life while we look forward to seeing him face to face and spending eternity in his presence.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we must. We must always remember that we are no better than people who were not chosen to be saved. It was not because of anything in us, or anything we have done, or will do, or could do. It was merely God's sovereign choice to love us and save us.

Marc Roby: Hallelujah! That is certainly the greatest gift that anyone could ever possibly receive.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. And so I'll close this session by wishing all of our listeners a very merry Christmas. May Jesus Christ truly be your Savior, your Lord and your greatest joy.

Marc Roby: I join you in wishing everyone a merry Christmas. And let me also remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We will do our best to answer.