

**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 noted that Christians must place a very high priority on coming together to worship God. And we briefly noted that churches should not make changes to try and conform to the culture around them. Dr. Spencer, what would you like to discuss today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to spend a couple of minutes adding to what we said last time about not conforming to the culture around us. In Romans 12:2 the apostle Paul gave us a command. He wrote, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."<sup>1</sup> In the Greek, the verbs telling us to not conform and to be transformed are present-tense imperatives, which means that they are commands that are to be continually obeyed. This isn't something we do once and then we're finished.

**Marc Roby:** I have certainly seen that in my own life. God constantly shows us more of our old habits that we need to change and, in addition, living in the world presents us with a constant challenge because we are surrounded by ideas and behaviors that are not just unbiblical, they are anti biblical.

Dr. Spencer: And that is why it is so important for Christians to gather together on Sundays and at many other times as well. And yet we are not to pull out of the world – the old monastic idea of complete separation is unbiblical. In his high priestly prayer in John 17:15 Jesus said to the Father, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one."

**Marc Roby:** And Jesus didn't want us taken out of the world because we are commanded to evangelize the world and to be salt and light. In Matthew 5:13 Jesus calls us the salt of the earth, and then in Verse 14 he calls us the light of the world and in Verse 16 he tells us to let our light shine before men, that they may see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven.

Dr. Spencer: And salt is a preservative that keeps food from spoiling, so Jesus' point was that we are to be an influence to prevent our society from being wicked. And light, of course, is necessary to see the right way to go. The church is to be God's witness to the world. We are to point the world around us to the right way, which is God's way.

**Marc Roby:** The world will most often not appreciate that God's way is the best way.

Dr. Spencer: No, it won't. In fact, the world will usually want to take the opposite way. But the point is simply that we are to be an influence for the good in the society in which we live. But we must be very careful with whom we fellowship or the society will influence us for the worse. I

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encourage all Christians to read and, in fact, memorize Psalm One. It tells us that “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”

**Marc Roby: Yes, I agree wholeheartedly that it is a good passage to memorize. This psalm points out that there are eternal consequences for how we live our lives, which is a very important truth for us to keep in mind.**

Dr. Spencer: And we can't effectively influence the world if we have a smug or arrogant attitude as though we are better than the world. We have to remember that we *aren't* any better. We have simply been shown mercy and now have the Word of God. It is God's way that is better and we are just pointing the world to that.

There is a radical difference between God's way and the way of the world. The world is in spiritual and moral darkness. There is enmity between the world and God's children.

**Marc Roby: Which is the result of the curse that came because of Adam's sin. In Genesis 3:15 God told Satan, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”**

Dr. Spencer: The world laughs at that and considers it as just some myth, but it is the truth and it explains all that is wrong with the world. Christians must not fall into the trap of thinking that we can create heaven on earth. We should do our best to improve the world of course, but we need to do so with the sober realization that human sin is not going to go away, so there will never be heaven on earth until Christ comes again and deals with sin in the ultimate sense. This earth is destined to be destroyed and then, as we are told in 2 Peter 3:13, there will be “a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”

**Marc Roby: Alright. I think that is a clear and necessary warning about the importance of guarding our lives and our churches from the influence of the world so that we can be effective as God's witnesses to the world. What else would you like to say about ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church?**

Dr. Spencer: I want to briefly discuss the topic of church government.

**Marc Roby: Well, that is a complicated topic and has been a very contentious subject for a long time, so I'm curious to see how you intend to deal with it briefly!**

Dr. Spencer: By not saying very much, that's how! And the reason I'm not going to say a great deal is that the Bible itself doesn't say a great deal and, as Wayne Grudem points out in his *Systematic Theology*, “the form of church government is not a major doctrine like the Trinity, the

deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, or the authority of Scripture.”<sup>2</sup> But, having said that, the Bible is far from silent on the issue and it is important, so we want to discuss it. A church needs to be properly governed in order to be an effective witness.

**Marc Roby: Very well. What does the Bible tell us about church government?**

Dr. Spencer: Well, first and foremost, that there *is* government. In other words, the church isn't just a group of Christians who gather together and worship. There is authority and people do have different responsibilities. The New Testament speaks in many places about leadership and authority within the church. The word elder or its plural elders show up 67 times in 63 verses in our translation of the New Testament.

**Marc Roby: That's far too many occurrences to be ignored. But before you go on any further, let me ask a question that I suspect a number of listeners may be wondering about. What does the Old Testament have to say about church government that is still relevant to us today?**

Dr. Spencer: Let me answer by reading a somewhat lengthy quote from John Murray. He wrote that “It is a fact that detailed regulations were given by God for the government of Israel. A great many of these prescriptions could not have a permanent relevance to the church because they pertained to the preparatory and transitory conditions of Israel under the Old Covenant. As regulative of religious life and worship, they could only be regulative as long as the ceremonial institution lasted.

“There is, however, one feature of the government of Israel as the people of God that can scarcely have failed to provide a pattern for the government of the church under the New Testament. It is the frequent mention of, and the place occupied by ‘the elders’ in the life of Israel.”<sup>3</sup>

**Marc Roby: That's very interesting. The idea of elders is common to both the Old and New Testaments.**

Dr. Spencer: It is. But before we go on to look at that further, I want to make a couple of general comments. First, the only supreme ruler of the church is Jesus Christ. We reject as completely unbiblical the idea of the Pope, or anyone else, being a unique, authoritative representative of Jesus Christ here on earth. Only the Word of God, contained in the Bible, is infallible. But, with that said, and consistent with what we have said in previous sessions about church discipline, there is authority vested in the church by Christ.

Second, I want to note that there have historically been different forms of church government. Robert Reymond notes that “four distinguishable forms of church government (with variations

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 904

<sup>3</sup> John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pp 336-337

and combinations of these) have been proposed over time: the presbyterian form, the episcopal form, the congregational form, and the Erastian form.”<sup>4</sup>

**Marc Roby: Well, I think we had better define those four forms. Presbyterian churches have local churches ruled by elders. Then there is a presbytery, which rules the local churches in a given region, and then there is a general assembly, which rules over all of the presbyteries.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is a hierarchical scheme, but based on rule by elders. The English word presbyterian is a transliteration of the Greek word πρεσβυτέριον (presbuterion), which is used, for example, in 1 Timothy 4:14, where it is translated as “body of elders”.

**Marc Roby: Alright. And an episcopal form of government assumes that there is some sort of priesthood or clerical order, which governs the church. This scheme is also hierarchical. Local churches are under the oversight of some higher level.**

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. And the word episcopal also comes to us from the Greek. The Greek word ἐπίσκοπος (episkopos), which is used in Titus 1:7, is translated as and literally means an overseer. The Greek preposition ἐπί (epi) can mean over, and the Greek word σκοπός (skopos) means to look around, or to watch.

But, independent of the word’s origins, this scheme of church government assumes a distinction between a priesthood or special clerical class, and the laity that is foreign to the New Testament.

**Marc Roby: Certainly the priesthood of all believers was a major tenet of the reformation. We are told in 1 Peter 2:9 that we, as Christians, “are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that [we] may declare the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light.”**

Dr. Spencer: And from that verse and others the reformers correctly understood that we no longer need a special priesthood to intercede with God on our behalf. Every Christian can approach the throne of grace with confidence as we are told in Hebrews 4:16. We can all pray and worship and offer the sacrifice of praise. The Old Testament priesthood was part of the sacrificial system, which served only to point forward to Jesus Christ, the one, final and perfect High Priest and perfect sacrifice.

The episcopalian form of government is used, for example, in the Roman Catholic church. I won’t spend any more time on it, I will simply quote from Reymond, who wrote, “It is enough to say in response” to arguments in favor of this form of government, “that episcopacy receives no support whatever from the New Testament.”<sup>5</sup>

**Marc Roby: And that brings us to the congregational form of church government, which basically says that each local church is independent and determines its own form of government.**

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Zondervan Academic, 1998, pg. 896

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pg. 905

Dr. Spencer: This form of government was supported by such notable theologians as John Owen and Jonathan Edwards.<sup>6</sup> Wayne Grudem lists five different types of congregational government, the church may be ruled by: a single elder or pastor, a plurality of elders, a corporate board, pure democracy, or no government at all, which Grudem calls “no government but the Holy Spirit.”<sup>7</sup>

**Marc Roby: I think the no government option could also be called chaos.**

Dr. Spencer: I agree. It is impossible to see how that could possibly be consistent with the idea of church authority. The final form of government I mentioned is the Erastian form, which is where the civil government also exercises authority over the church. This is the form used, for example, in the Lutheran state church of Germany and in England.<sup>8</sup>

**Marc Roby: And that form is completely inconsistent with the American notion of a separation of church and state.**

Dr. Spencer: And I would also contend that it is completely unbiblical. The leaders of the civil government are not required to be believers, let alone to have any degree of spiritual maturity, so it is completely impossible for them to properly exercise spiritual authority over believers. When Jesus was asked about paying taxes to Caesar, he said, in Matthew 22:21, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” It would probably be stretching that verse too far to say that it mandates that the civil and ecclesiastical authorities be separate, but I think it certainly requires that if they are the same, all leaders must meet the biblical requirements for being a church leader. Jesus Christ must be the head of his church, and no state that I know of is willing to submit itself to the Word of God.

**Marc Roby: All, right. So, now we come to the \$64,000 question; which form of church government is the right one?**

Dr. Spencer: I think the New Testament is clear that there should be a group of men, typically called elders, who should oversee each local congregation. Exactly how the authority is divided within that group is not specified in the Bible, although it seems clear, for example, that the apostle Paul held a position of authority over some pastors of individual churches, such as Timothy and Titus.

We see in Titus 1:5 for example 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.” This verse shows the authority of Paul and the authority of Titus, but also shows that elders were appointed in each local church.

**Marc Roby: Of course, we don’t have any of the original apostles around anymore.**

Dr. Spencer: No, we don’t. Not in the sense of the apostles appointed by Christ. But we do see the idea of elders ruling local churches all through the New Testament. And the reformed idea of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pg. 906

<sup>7</sup> Grudem, op. cit., pp 928-936

<sup>8</sup> Reymond, op. cit., pg. 907

the priesthood of all believers does not in any way negate the fact that we still see elders, pastors, teachers, deacons and other church officers mentioned in the New Testament. The key things are that these men are not some separate, special clerical or priestly class, and they must all be committed to the Word of God, the Bible, as the only inerrant rule for faith and conduct. They don't make up the rules themselves.

**Marc Roby: And Paul gives some detailed qualifications that are to be met by elders. For example, found in 1 Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:6-9.**

Dr. Spencer: And I don't want to go through those in any detail. I will simply note that it is a serious responsibility to be an elder of a church. We are told in Hebrews 13:17 that elders will have to give an account to God for how they have discharged their duties. As I noted, the elders must be governed by God's Word. But there is one error that is very common in the modern church and which I therefore want to briefly address, and that is the use of women as pastors and elders. That is simply unbiblical. Pastors and elders must be men.

**Marc Roby: That's going to upset a lot of people. They will say that is a chauvinistic rule that only existed at the time the New Testament was written because women didn't have equal rights at the time.**

Dr. Spencer: But equal rights have nothing to do with it. Women are of equal worth to men in God's sight. Women can also be every bit as intelligent, learned or spiritual as men. But it is still true that God created men and women differently and with different roles. It is not an issue of who is better, it is simply an issue of what roles God has assigned. In Genesis 2:18 we read that "The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'" And in 1 Corinthians 11:3 Paul says, "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God."

Being the suitable helper and having the man as head does not in any way imply that the woman is inferior. In fact, she may well be the smarter and more capable person. And women can serve in many ways in the church. But we dare not ignore the commands and decrees that God has given to us. Among the requirements Paul lists for an overseer, or elder, in 1 Timothy 3:2 and 4 are that he be the "husband of but one wife" and that "He must manage his own family well". Now since the husband is to be the leader in the family, it is impossible for a woman to fulfill the requirement to manage her own family well. To do so, would require that she rule over her husband, which is a direct contradiction of 1 Corinthians 11:3 and other Scriptures.<sup>9</sup>

**Marc Roby: Are we done then with discussing church government?**

Dr. Spencer: We are.

**Marc Roby: Well, I look forward to starting a new topic then next time. Now let me close by reminding 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>9</sup> For example, 1 Timothy 2:12 and Ephesians 5:22