

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by beginning an examination of the final locus of reformed theology; namely, eschatology, which means the doctrine of last things. **Dr. Spencer,** how would you like to begin this discussion?

Dr. Spencer: Well, since this is the first podcast of the new year, I want to begin by wishing all of our listeners a blessed 2022!

Marc Roby: And I join you in that wish.

Dr. Spencer: And then before we get into today's material, I also want to remind our listeners of the six loci of reformed theology, which we have been using as an outline for these podcasts. So far we have finished the first five loci, which are: First, theology proper – in other words, the study of God; Second, anthropology, the study of man; Third, Christology, the study of Jesus Christ the Redeemer; fourth, soteriology, which means the study of salvation, and fifth, ecclesiology, which means the study of the church. That leaves us with just one locus left to cover, the sixth, eschatology, which as you said means the study of last things.

Marc Roby: And this is a topic that has generated a great deal of controversy over the centuries. Even very good, bible-believing theologians disagree about many of the details of eschatology. But, at the same time, it is a topic that should be of great interest to everyone.

Dr. Spencer: Oh, it certainly should be of interest to everyone. In 1 Corinthians 15:19 the apostle Paul wrote that "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."¹ As we have stated a number of times in different ways, to focus primarily on this life is a perversion of biblical Christianity. Christianity is not a self-help program, nor is it primarily concerned with social issues.

Marc Roby: Although we can confidently say that whenever the biblical ethic is followed, it is beneficial to both the individual and the society!

Dr. Spencer: That is very true. And I'm not saying that the Bible is unconcerned about our lives in this world or about social issues, that is far from the truth. It is simply that those are not the primary focus. The primary focus of Christianity ultimately is God, not man. He made this universe for his own pleasure and we are part of that creation. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism correctly asserts in the answer to the first question, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

And, with regard to man, the primary focus of Christianity is on solving our most fundamental problem, which is sin. In fact, it is really our only problem. Our sin must be comprehensively dealt with in order for us to become the glorified saints God wants to dwell in his eternal heaven.

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Marc Roby: And sin is defined by God. Quoting from the WSC again, the answer to Question 14 tells us that “Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.”.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. Sin, at its core, is cosmic treason. It is rebellion against the Creator and Lord of all.

But getting back to the topic of eschatology, Louis Berkhof correctly noted in his *Systematic Theology* that “The question of eschatology is a natural one. A doctrine of the last things is not something that is peculiar to the Christian religion. Wherever people have seriously reflected on human life, whether in the individual or in the race, they have not merely asked, whence did it spring, and how did it come to be what it is, but also, whither is it bound?”²

Marc Roby: And leaving aside his old-fashioned sounding English, Berkhof is certainly right in asserting that human beings have generally had a great interest in figuring out not only where we came from and why the world is as it is, but also what happens when we die. These are problems that philosophers have dealt with for as long as we have written records.

Dr. Spencer: And, no doubt, even longer. Although we obviously don’t know what went on before written records were kept or preserved.

You noted earlier that eschatology has been a controversial subject throughout the history of the Christian church, which is certainly true. And there are good reasons for that. First, the Bible doesn’t tell us everything we would like to know about the future. God has not chosen to reveal everything to us.

Marc Roby: Yes, we need to remember what we are told in Deuteronomy 29:29, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.”

Dr. Spencer: It is very important for us to keep that in mind, especially as we consider this topic. We must be humble enough to accept that God doesn’t owe us a full description of his plan. But he has given us all that we need to know. Our job is to work to understand his revelation, believe it and obey it. And to trust him for the things that he has not chosen to reveal.

Marc Roby: But people are not always content with what God has revealed.

Dr. Spencer: No, they aren’t. And so there have been, and I’m sure will continue to be, many attempts to peek behind the veil so to speak and find secret meanings hidden in what God has revealed. But we must avoid the temptation to do that. And that temptation can be quite strong because the second reason why the topic has been so controversial is that much of what the Bible does say about eschatology is told to us in figurative or symbolic form and is very difficult to interpret.

² L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1938, pg. 661

Marc Roby: Which lends itself to people trying to discern secret, hidden meanings in the symbolism. But that also leads to an obvious question, “Why would God use symbolic language like this?”

Dr. Spencer: Well, he doesn't explicitly tell us why, but there are some obvious reasons. First, the realities of eternal matters like heaven and hell are either so wonderful or so terrible that they defy clear, literal description. We simply have nothing in our experience that is equivalent. Therefore, God used figurative language. In other words, he uses images of things we do know about to teach us about the unknown even though those images fall far short of the reality. Also, in keeping with the idea that he has not chosen to reveal everything to us, figurative or symbolic descriptions lend themselves to giving us a dim view of matters.³ We get to see what we *need* to know without being given all of the detailed information we might *like* to know.

We must remember that God is the sovereign ruler, not us. We need to have a theocentric, or God-centered, view of history; not only past history, but what will take place in the future as well.

Marc Roby: I think that statement might require some fleshing out. What do you mean when you speak of having a God-centered view of the future?

Dr. Spencer: I mean we need to see that there is an ultimate purpose to creation. And then we need to see ourselves as just being a very small part of the whole picture. We need to try and see what the grand purpose is and what part we are to play in it. Let me give an example, to which at least some of our listeners will be able to relate.

Marc Roby: Please do.

Dr. Spencer: If you are singing in a choir, you are usually focused on your individual part. But you also need to be aware of the whole and how your part fits in. You don't want to be too loud, or too soft, and you want to hit the right notes of course. But when each person gets his part right, the result can be wonderful. If, for example, all parts get their notes just right at some point, you can hear the entire chord and it is beautiful.

And I'm certain that there are many other examples that people can come up with on their own depending on their own talents and interests. A well-executed play in football or basketball for example. Each person does his part and the overall result can, in a sense, be beautiful.

Marc Roby: And so, to sum it up, we need to understand God's overall purpose for creation and try to fulfil our role to the best of our ability.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And God has revealed his overall plan to us. Not with the level of detail we might desire, but he has revealed it to us. People sometimes talk about returning to the

³ 1 Corinthians 13:12 says, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

Garden of Eden, but that is *not* God's plan. The Garden of Eden was the beginning, it is not the end.

Marc Roby: What was wrong with the Garden?

Dr. Spencer: Well, nothing was wrong. But it wasn't an unchangeable state. Man was created perfect, but he was also able to sin. And, as we know, he did sin. But when we get to heaven, we will no longer be able to sin. And, as a result, we will be in a much better place than Adam and Eve were. Heaven goes on for eternity. We aren't told all that we will do in heaven, but we know we will praise and worship God and have fellowship with him and with each other. In Matthew 8:11 Jesus said, "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." And we know that our time there will never end. We will not grow old, we won't be sick, there will be no sorrow, no pain, no trouble.

Marc Roby: That is completely impossible to imagine. But the verse you just read also raises a question. Jesus referred to the kingdom of heaven. In fact, he spoke about that many times. For example, in Matthew 4:17 we are told that "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'" The obvious question is, "What is the kingdom of heaven?"

Dr. Spencer: Let me read a quote from George Ladd to answer that question. He wrote that "The Kingdom is primarily the dynamic reign or kingly rule of God, and, derivatively, the sphere in which the rule is experienced. In biblical idiom, the Kingdom is not identified with its subjects. They are the people of God's rule who enter it, live under it, and are governed by it. The church is the community of the Kingdom but never the Kingdom itself. Jesus' disciples belong to the Kingdom as the Kingdom belongs to them; but they are not the Kingdom. The Kingdom is the rule of God; the church is a society of men."⁴

Marc Roby: That seems reasonably clear. And, obviously, the existence of a kingdom implies the existence of a king.

Dr. Spencer: And God is the King. He is the supreme ruler of everything. In the Bible the kingdom is referred to as the kingdom *of God* sixty-six times. And the final and full manifestation of the kingdom is in heaven, so it is called the kingdom *of heaven* thirty-two times.

In his *Concise Theology*, J.I. Packer notes that "The kingdom is present in its beginnings though future in its fullness; in one sense it is here already, but in the richest sense it is still to come."⁵

Marc Roby: Yes, it's obvious that the kingdom has not yet come in the fullest sense from what Christ said at the Last Supper. We read in Mark 14:25 that Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of

⁴ G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pg. 111, quoted in W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 863

⁵ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, Tyndale House Pub., 1993, pg. 194

God.” Jesus was obviously referring to the future manifestation of the kingdom, which will occur after he has come again in judgment.

Dr. Spencer: And yet, when Jesus was accused of casting out demons by the power of Satan, we read in Luke 11:20 that he replied in part, “if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you.” What he meant, of course, was that he was demonstrating the power of the King by driving out demons. And the kingdom is where the King exercises his authority and power. So, in a sense, the kingdom of God was present with them at that time.

Marc Roby: In fact, in Luke 17:20-21 we read that “Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, ‘The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, “Here it is,” or “There it is,” because the kingdom of God is within you.’”

Dr. Spencer: And by saying that the kingdom of God is within you, Jesus was making the point that the kingdom of God is manifest within his believers. When Jesus was asked about his kingdom by Pilate, we read in John 18:36 that Jesus replied, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

Jesus’ kingdom is a spiritual kingdom. That doesn’t mean that he is not also the ruler of this physical universe, he most definitely is. But the kingdom of God does not refer to God’s rule over unbelievers, it is referring to his ultimate glorious kingdom, which has his chosen people as its subjects. He rules in them now by his indwelling Holy Spirit.

Marc Roby: Although, as you said, God is the ruler of this physical universe, so he is absolutely sovereign over everyone, whether the person is a believer or not.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he is. But he allows people, even believers, to do things that make him angry. In Ephesians 2:1-2 Paul wrote, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.” Satan is the “ruler of the kingdom of the air”. That doesn’t mean that he is absolutely sovereign, but God has chosen to give him a certain amount of freedom to war against God’s people. God can, and does, overrule him or things would be much worse in this world than they are, but Satan and his demons have real power.

Marc Roby: We are told in 1 John 5:19 that “We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.”

Dr. Spencer: That verse clearly speaks about the two families of human beings or we could say, the two kingdoms. Everyone either belongs to Satan or to God. No one likes to hear that, and unbelievers will strenuously object. Satan allows you to have a sense of autonomy, but it is a lie. And these two families of men are visible now, although not perfectly. They will, however, be manifest in the most obvious way imaginable when Christ comes again. That is when the kingdom of God will appear in its full form. We are told in 2 Peter 3:13 that “in keeping with his

promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.” That will be the eternal home of God’s children.

Marc Roby: And that will be blessed place indeed.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it will. Far greater than we can imagine. But for those who have rejected Christ in this life, their eternal home is in hell, where they will endure the just wrath of God for all eternity.

Marc Roby: That is terrifying. And I look forward to more of what the Bible teaches us about eschatology next week, but we are out of time for today. Therefore, let me remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We’ll do our best to answer you.