



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 9.2 – The Doctrine of the Means of Grace

The Two Functions of the Means of Grace

As we have already learned from Scripture, no one is able to believe in Jesus by their own reason or strength. No human being on earth came up with the method of salvation. This was something that God planned and carried out without any help from human beings. Even when human beings hear what God has done for them through Christ, they cannot grasp it, understand it, believe it, or trust in it. The apostle Paul tells us plainly: **“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing”** (1 Corinthians 1:18). **“The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned”** (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Since sinful man cannot by his own powers reach up to God and gain his own salvation, and since sinful man cannot even grab hold of the Good News of Christ when it is presented to him, it was necessary for God to come down to us. God came down to us not only by sending the Son of God to live, die, and rise for us, but also by sending the Holy Spirit for the specific task of bringing us to faith in Christ as our Savior. In order to do the work of bringing sinners to faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit has chosen to use the Gospel (the Good News) of Jesus to create this faith.

The first function of the Gospel (the means of grace) therefore is to offer and convey to a sinner the forgiveness of sins that Jesus won for all by His life and death. We can compare the working of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace to the way that cities supply water to their citizens. The water is pumped into a water tower. This water in the water tower is like the forgiveness of sins that Jesus won for the whole world. The supply is inexhaustible. The forgiveness of sins is there in great abundance, enough to cover all the sins of every sinner. But now it is necessary to convey this water from the water tower to the individual homes. What is needed is a pipeline, a conveyor of some sort to bring the water from the water tower to the places where it is needed. So also the Holy Spirit uses a “pipeline” to convey the forgiveness of sins to the individual sinners who need it. This “pipeline” is the Gospel – the means of grace. It is the way by which Christ’s forgiveness is brought to sinners. We need to hear about what Christ has done and won for us, in order to gain the benefit of what He did.

The city of Corinth was an immoral city full of idolaters, adulterers, thieves, and drunkards. When the apostle Paul came to this city, the people knew nothing about Jesus Christ or how God had sent Him to win forgiveness of sins for all. Even though Jesus had already suffered and died to take away the sins of all the residents of Corinth, they knew nothing about this and, therefore, they were headed for eternal punishment in hell. But Paul brought them the message of the forgiveness of sins, and so Paul was able to write to them: **“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God”** (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). What did the Spirit of God do? He told them (through Paul and his team) about Christ crucified and risen. He brought them the forgiveness of sins. He took the water from the water tower and piped it into their hearts. They were washed, sanctified, and justified! That is, their sins were washed away, they were given the righteousness of Christ, they were declared righteous in God’s eyes. All of this was conveyed to them by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel of Jesus.

Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to His apostles to enable them to be preachers of the Gospel. This is the reason that Jesus sent out His apostles with these instructions: **“Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature”** (Mark 16:15). **“Repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem”** (Luke 24:47).

We should mention here that this Gospel is brought to us not only in Gospel words, but in the Gospel of baptism and in the Gospel of the Lord’s Supper. For what did Peter say on the day of Pentecost? **“Let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”** (Acts 2:38). And what did Jesus say about the Lord’s Supper? He told His apostles: **“This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins”** (Matthew 26:28). Since baptism and the Lord’s Supper convey the forgiveness of sins, they also are means of grace that the Holy Spirit uses to bring the water of forgiveness from the tower of Christ to individual sinners. So we say that the means of grace is the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, and that baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the two sacraments.

As we said, the first function of the means of grace is to convey the forgiveness of sins that Christ won for all by His suffering and death. The second function of the means of grace is to create faith in Christ in the heart of the sinner. Baptism is the Holy Spirit’s **“washing of regeneration”** (Titus 3:5), through which He washes away sins and at the same time creates faith in the forgiveness of sins that Christ won, the forgiveness of sins which is conveyed through baptism. Regeneration means to be born again, to have new spiritual life, to have the beginning of saving faith. Thus, baptism is a way by which the Holy Spirit cleanses us **“with the washing of water by the word”** (Ephesians 5:26).

The Holy Spirit uses the Gospel word to create faith, as it is written: **“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”** (Romans 10:17). Peter also says that we are **“born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever”** (1 Peter 1:23). Peter goes on to explain: **“Now this is the word which by the Gospel was preached to you”** (1 Peter 1:25). The Holy Spirit uses not only the preached Gospel but also the written Gospel to create faith. For John says of His written Gospel: **“These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name”** (John 20:31).

The Holy Spirit has put this power into the Gospel, so that it can accomplish what He wants it to accomplish. James, the Lord’s brother, says that **“the implanted word...is able to save your souls”** (James 1:21). The letter to the Hebrews says that **“the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart”** (Hebrews 4:12). Jesus said concerning the words He taught: **“The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life”** (John 6:63). That is why the apostle and missionary Paul was able to say: **“I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it (the Gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith’”** (Romans 1:16-17).

Questions

1. Why is the work of the Holy Spirit necessary?
2. How has the Holy Spirit chosen to do His work?
3. What is the first function of the means of grace?
4. What does the Gospel in Word and Sacrament bring to the individual?
5. Why did Jesus send His apostles into the world to preach the Gospel?
6. What is the natural human reaction to the Gospel of Christ?
7. What is the second function of the means of grace?
8. Why should we call Baptism and the Lord’s Supper forms of the Gospel?
9. What does the Holy Spirit strive to accomplish through the means of grace?