



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 9.3 – The Doctrine of the Means of Grace

The Holy Spirit Works Only through the Means of Grace

There is no doubt the Holy Spirit could have chosen to convey the forgiveness of sins won by Christ and to create faith in Christ in many different ways. But the fact is that He has chosen to do His work through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. He also uses the law of God – both the natural law in man’s hearts and the written law – to prepare human hearts for the reception of the Gospel. But only the Gospel conveys the forgiveness of sins and creates faith. The apostle Peter speaks about being **“born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever”** (1 Peter 1:23). The apostle Paul wrote to his converts in Corinth: **“I have begotten you through the gospel”** (1 Corinthians 4:15). Jesus prayed for all the future generations of believers **“who will believe in Me through their word”** (John 17:20), that is, the word of His apostles. Jesus said: **“The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life”** (John 6:63). 1 Corinthians 1:21 most clearly teaches that God has chosen to work through His Word: **“It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.”**

God has put this power into the Gospel, no matter whether the Gospel is spoken or written or pondered in the heart. The power of the Gospel is also at work when the Gospel is pictured or presented in the form of art or symbols, and when it is combined with the earthly elements of water in baptism or of bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper.

Probably the most common way, however, is through the speaking of words, and that is why Jesus told His apostles: **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature”** (Mark 16:15). That is why Jesus told them: **“Repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations”** (Luke 24:47). So also Paul asked: **“How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?”** (Romans 10:14).

But from the days of Moses the Gospel has not only been presented orally, but also in writing. Jesus said to His opponents: **“If you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe His writings, how will you believe My words”** (John 5:46-47). Jesus said of the Old Testament Scriptures: **“They...testify of Me”** (John 5:39). In Jesus’ parable of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus He taught that there is nothing more powerful to convert sinful man than **“Moses and the prophets”** (Luke 16:31).

Jesus Himself did not write any letters or books, but His apostles did. John wrote his Gospel as a means of grace, for he included these words: **“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 apostle Paul gave instructions to the Christians in Thessalonica concerning his letter to them: **“I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren”** (1 Thessalonians 5:27). Paul wrote to Timothy that **“the holy Scriptures...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus”** (2 Timothy 3:15) The Scripture, **“given by inspiration of God”** (breathed out by God), **“is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work”** (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The Gospel can also be pictured by symbols, as the saving crucifixion of Christ was pictured by the snake on a pole that saved those who looked at it (John 3:14-15). Mary **“pondered...in her heart”** the

words and actions of the angels at the birth of her Son Jesus and the words of her twelve-year-old son Jesus. Certainly the Holy Spirit was still at work through these words of God as Mary meditated them (Luke 2:19, 51).

Without the Word of God, the people in the world are walking **“in darkness”** and living **“in the land of the shadow of death”** (Isaiah 9:2). Without the Gospel of Christ, the situation of the heathen was like this: **“The darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people”** (Isaiah 60:2). They **“sit in darkness and the shadow of death”** (Luke 1:79). Before the Holy Spirit brings the truth of Jesus to people, **“the Gentiles walk in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart”** (Ephesians 4:17-18).

The Holy Spirit uses the Gospel to bring people out of the darkness of unbelief into the light of the Gospel. John the Baptist was **“filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb”** (Luke 1:15). We see that the Spirit working in him was associated with the speaking of Jesus’ mother Mary, for his mother Elisabeth said to Mary: **“As soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy”** (Luke 1:44). Jesus told Nicodemus that the Spirit worked with the water of baptism to bring about a new birth (John 3:5), for baptism is indeed the Holy Spirit’s **“washing of regeneration”** (Titus 3:5). The apostle Paul pointed out to the Christians in Galatia that the Holy Spirit did not come to them through their obedience to the law, but rather through the hearing of the Gospel. He asked them: **“Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?”** (Galatians 3:2). In the context of what Paul was saying, the answer is clearly through hearing – as we have already seen that faith comes through hearing the Gospel.

Martin Luther faced the false teachers of his time who believed the Holy Spirit did His work directly without using any mean. Martin Luther concluded: *“God gives no one His Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before”* (Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article VIII, paragraph #3). *“God will not deal with us except through His external Word and sacrament”* (Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article VIII, paragraph #10).

Questions

1. How has the Holy Spirit chosen to do His work?
2. How does the Holy Spirit use the law and how does He use the Gospel?
3. In what different forms can the Gospel of Christ do its work?
4. What is the means God has chosen to convert sinners into believers?
5. How did the snake on the pole in Moses’ time proclaim the Gospel?
6. How does the Bible describe people who do not have the Gospel?
7. What did some false teachers claim about the Holy Spirit in Luther’s time?