



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 9.4 – The Doctrine of the Means of Grace

False Teachings Regarding the Holy Spirit and the Means of Grace

Since the Holy Spirit has chosen to do His work only through the means of grace, that is, the Gospel in Word and sacrament, any teaching that claims that the Holy Spirit does His work of conversion and regeneration apart from the Gospel is a false teaching. For example, the Roman Catholic Church insists that the Holy Spirit has not confined Himself to the Scriptures but also speaks through tradition, through church councils, and especially also through the pope, whom they call the vicar of Christ on earth.

Religious groups like the Quakers (also called the Friends) and the Salvation Army do not use baptism and the Lord's Supper as means of grace, even though Jesus has instituted them as means of grace **"for the remission of sins."**

Pentecostal groups, such as the Assemblies of God, teach that the Holy Spirit does His work by means of special gifts such as speaking in tongues and gifts of prophecy that may impart messages beyond the Gospel and even contrary to the Gospel. Such special gifts of the Holy Spirit must always be put to the test, as the apostle John taught: **"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world"** (1 John 4:1). Various teachers claim that the Holy Spirit has spoken directly to them, giving them messages from God that they in turn must speak to the world. Such so-called messages supposedly given by the Holy Spirit are almost always contrary to the revelations that the Holy Spirit has already given to us in holy Scriptures, and therefore they not from the Holy Spirit at all, but from the person's own heart or even from the devil.

The very first mistake made by Adam and Eve in the beginning was to listen to the devil's lies rather than testing the devil's words by comparing them with what God had already told them and then rejecting them. Anyone can claim to have a revelation from the Holy Spirit, and many are deluded and misled by such claims. Mohammed claimed that the angel Gabriel gave him the message he taught. Think how many thousands of people have accepted his claims and believe that he is the last great prophet from God. Mohammed's teaching is not the Gospel of Christ at all, and therefore it is not from God.

Joseph Smith and his successors among the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons) claim to have received messages from God. The followers of Christian Science believe that God gave a message to Mary Baker Eddy. The Seventh Day Adventists regard Ellen G. White as a prophetess who received messages from God that go beyond the teachings of the Holy Spirit in the Bible. Jehovah's Witnesses also claim to get direct information from God through their leaders.

Many of the liberal churches of our day believe that the Holy Spirit is speaking through their assemblies and conventions, directing them in a way that, in some cases, moves them very far away from God's true Word. These church groups approve of many actions condemned by God such as abortion, same-sex marriage, adultery, and they fail to proclaim God's law as inspired by the Holy Spirit. They despise the means of grace (the Gospel in Word and Sacrament) and concentrate their efforts on social and political causes that have very little to do with the work that has been assigned to Christians: the use of the means of grace. Some of these church groups may even call themselves Lutheran, but what they

teach and practice is not at all in agreement with the Holy Spirit's book (the Bible) or with the Lutheran confessions contained in the *Book of Concord*.

Martin Luther gave the name Enthusiast to all these persons who teach that the Holy Spirit works without or apart from the genuine means of grace. To a greater or lesser degree these Enthusiasts despise the means of grace and believe that the Holy Spirit works directly on the individual, granting them a revelation, a teaching, or a command of God that is not to be found in Holy Scriptures. There have been cases where entire groups of people have been misled to commit mass suicide by some leader claiming to be guided by the Holy Spirit.

Even many of the followers of Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin (the Reformed churches) teach that the Holy Spirit does His work apart from means, although they believe that often His work is accompanied by the preaching of the Gospel and the use of sacraments.

The *Smalcald Articles* denounce the Enthusiasts:

"The enthusiasts of our day condemn the external Word, yet they do not remain silent but fill the world with their chattering and scribbling, as if the Spirit could not come through the Scriptures or the spoken word of the apostles but must come through their own writings and words" (Part III, Article VIII, paragraph #6).

"Enthusiasm clings to Adam and his descendants from the beginning to the end of the world. It is a poison implanted and inoculated in man by the old dragon, and it is the source, strength, and power of all heresy, including that of the papacy and Mohammedanism" (Part III, Article VIII, paragraph #9).

The greatest temptation for us Lutherans at the present time is to trust more in certain modern methods and techniques to bring people to faith in Christ than in the use of the means of grace through which the Holy Spirit promises to do His work. We need to remember the words of the prophet Isaiah: **"For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My Word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void (without results), but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it"** (Isaiah 55:10-11).

We confess in the *Brief Statement* of 1932: *"Since it is only through the external means ordained by Him that God has promised to communicate the grace and salvation purchased by Christ, the Christian Church must not remain at home with the means of grace entrusted to it, but go into the whole world with the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments, Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16. For the same reason also the churches at home should never forget that there is no other way of winning souls for the Church and keeping them with it than the faithful and diligent use of the divinely ordained means of grace. Whatever activities do not either directly apply the Word of God or subserve such application we condemn as 'new methods,' unchurchly activities, which do not build, but harm, the Church"* (Paragraph #22).

God Himself has made the decision to deal with sinners through the means of grace, and we should be satisfied with this. **"It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe"** (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Questions

1. How can we determine what is true teaching and what is false teaching?
2. How does the Roman Catholic Church despise the means of grace?
3. How do the Salvation Army and the Quakers despise the means of grace?
4. How do the Pentecostal groups despise the means of grace?
5. How do the Muslims and Mormons despise the means of grace?
6. How do the Seventh Day Adventists, Christian Science, and Jehovah's Witnesses despise the means of grace?
7. How do the liberal churches of today despise the means of grace?
8. What name did Martin Luther give to all who despise the means of grace?
9. How are we Lutherans today tempted to despise the means of grace?
10. How do we practice evangelism according to God's will?
11. Which of the false teachings described here are of the greatest danger in your locale?