



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 9.6 – The Doctrine of the Means of Grace

The Use of the Word “Sacrament”

There is no word in the Bible that is used to refer to both baptism and the Lord’s Supper. When we examine what the Bible says about baptism and the Lord’s Supper, we can see that there are some things that they have in common. Both baptism and the Lord’s Supper were instituted by Jesus Christ Himself. Baptism was instituted during the forty-day period between Easter and Pentecost, when Jesus said to His disciples on a mountain in Galilee: **“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you”** (Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper on the evening before His death, the day we call Maundy Thursday. He told His apostles at that time: **“Do this in remembrance of Me”** (Luke 22:19). **“This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes”** (1 Corinthians 11:25-26).

Another thing that baptism and the Lord’s Supper have in common is that both of them are **“for the remission of sins”** (Matthew 26:28; Acts 2:38). This makes them means of grace, just like the Gospel in word.

The third thing that baptism and the Lord’s Supper have in common is that the Gospel word is combined with the use of specified earthly elements: water in the case of baptism, and bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper. The use of water is required in baptism, as we learn from the words of the Ethiopian eunuch, who said to the evangelist Philip: **“See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?”** (Acts 8:36). With regard to the Lord’s Supper, it is clear that Jesus used **“bread”** (Matthew 26:26) and the contents of a cup containing the **“fruit of the vine”** (Matthew 26:29). We know that this was grape wine (rather than grape juice), for some among the Christians in Corinth were getting **“drunk”** during their celebration of the Lord’s supper (1 Corinthians 11:21).

There are differences between baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism was administered to whole families; the Lord’s Supper is only for those able to examine themselves. Baptism is given once; the Lord’s Supper is celebrated often. The water of baptism is applied externally; the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper are taken by the body internally by eating and drinking. Jesus did not designate the water of baptism to be something else; on the other hand, Jesus declared the bread of the Lord’s Supper to be His body and the wine of the Lord’s Supper to be His blood.

We use the term “sacrament” to refer to baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The Bible does not use the word “sacrament”. Since “sacrament” is not found in the Bible, Christians are free to define it in different ways. The definition that we generally use in the Church of the Lutheran Confession includes the three points that baptism and the Lord’s Supper have in common: a sacrament is a ceremony instituted by Christ that conveys the forgiveness of sins won by Christ by means of the Gospel word combined with the use of earthly elements.

If we use this definition of a sacrament, there are only two sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. But Lutherans have not always defined “sacrament” in this way. Some of our Lutheran confessions speak of confession and absolution as a sacrament, because Jesus instituted the ministry of the keys (John 20:22-23) and the ministry of the keys does convey the forgiveness of sins. In this case the

definition of the sacrament does not include the use of earthly elements. Such a definition of sacrament is legitimate, because God has not given us a definition that we should use.

The term “sacrament” has been defined in different ways in church history. Over a long period of time the Roman Catholic Church gradually developed the concept of seven sacraments. They include five other ceremonies together with baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These other “sacraments” are Confirmation, Penitence, Unction, Ordination, and Marriage. The problem with Roman Catholic teaching is not that they define “sacrament” differently, but that they insist that their definition is the only correct one, and that they put church-made ceremonies, such as confirmation into the same category ceremonies that Christ has instituted. It is also incorrect to put marriage on the same level as baptism and the Lord’s Supper, since the gift God gives us through marriage is not the forgiveness of sins.

The Roman Catholic Church officially condemns all those who do not teach what they do. The Council of Trent declared “If anyone says that the sacraments of the New Law were not all instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ, or that there are either more or fewer than seven, namely, baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, penance, extreme unction, ordination, and marriage, or also that some of these seven are not truly and properly sacraments, let him be anathema” (*Council of Trent, Seventh Session, Canon 1*). But our Lord has set us free from such man-made regulations. The apostle Paul wrote: **“Stand fast...in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage”** (Galatians 5:1).

There are other customs and ceremonies described in the New Testament, but they are not prescribed or commanded by our Lord. For example, we hear of the laying on of hands (Acts 9:17), the holy kiss (Romans 16:16), and the love feast (Jude 12). The laying on of hands is still practiced in some of our congregations in connection with the installation of pastors and the confirmation of catechumens. The holy kiss and the love feast are no longer part of our tradition. Such customs are not to be put on a level with baptism and the Lord’s Supper, as baptism and the Lord’s Supper were commanded by God as Gospel ceremonies conveying the forgiveness of sins.

The genuine means of grace, therefore, is the Gospel – the Good News of Jesus – in word and sacrament. By the term “sacrament” we mean baptism and the Lord’s Supper. In the next chapters of this course we shall discuss baptism and the Lord’s Supper in greater detail.

Since God has given us the Gospel in word and sacrament as a means of grace, we should treasure the Gospel of Christ as one of the most wonderful blessings our God has given us. It is through the means of grace that we are enabled to trust in Jesus Christ as our Savior from sin and attain salvation and eternal life.

Questions

1. What three things do baptism and the Lord’s Supper have in common?
2. What makes baptism and the Lord’s Supper means of grace?
3. Prove that water should be used in baptism.
4. Prove that bread and grape wine should be used in the Lord’s Supper.
5. Why are we free to define the term “sacrament” in more than one way?
6. What is the official Roman Catholic teaching concerning sacraments?
7. What definition of “sacrament” do we usually use in our teaching?
8. Why must we disagree with the Roman Catholic definition of sacrament?
9. Why do we not say that the laying on of hands, the holy kiss, and the love feast are sacraments like baptism and the Lord’s Supper?