



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Chapter 9

The Doctrine of the Means of Grace



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 9.1 – The Doctrine of the Means of Grace

The Meaning of “Means of Grace”

The term “means of grace” is not found in the Bible, but it is a useful expression to describe the tools that the Holy Spirit uses to create faith in Christ in unbelieving sinners, as we all are by nature. It is especially important to have a good understanding of this topic, because there are many professing Christians who believe that the Holy Spirit does not use tools to create faith in Christ, but that He works directly on the human heart without any tools or means of grace. Such false teaching leads into all kinds of other errors. Anyone can claim that the Holy Spirit has spoken to his heart and has told him all kinds of things that God wanted him to know which he then teaches to others with the claim that he is speaking the Word of God.

But if we want to be faithful teachers of God’s Word, we must teach as the apostle Paul did, that **“it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe”** (1 Corinthians 1:21). The message Paul is speaking about is the Good News of **“Christ crucified”** (1 Corinthians 1:23). **“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”** (Romans 10:17). **“How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?”** (Romans 10:14).

Since the Holy Spirit is God, He certainly could have created faith in Christ in many different ways, but He has chosen to work through the Gospel, that is, through the Good News of Jesus Christ, which Paul calls **“the word of reconciliation”** (2 Corinthians 5:19). Thus, the Gospel is the Holy Spirit’s means of creating faith in Christ and the means He uses to strengthen that faith. The Gospel is the means of grace; it is the tool that God, in His grace, uses to convey the blessings that Christ has won for us all by His life, death, and resurrection. Those blessings center in the righteousness of Christ and the forgiveness of sins.

Questions

1. Why is it important to learn that the Holy Spirit uses certain tools to create faith in Christ?
2. What is the tool that the Holy Spirit uses to create faith in Christ?
3. Where is this taught in the Bible?
4. What blessing is given to us through the means of grace?



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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 discerner 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?



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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?



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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?



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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 9.5 – The Doctrine of the Means of Grace

Baptism and the Lord's Supper as Means of Grace

The two functions of the means of grace are to convey the forgiveness of sins won by Christ and to create faith in Christ, which creates the beginning of a new spiritual life. As we study the Bible, we realize that besides the Gospel word, there are also two Gospel ceremonies, baptism and the Lord's Supper, that convey the forgiveness of sins and create or strengthen faith in Christ. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, He said it was **"for the remission of sins"** (Matthew 26:28). When the apostle Peter addressed the thousands on Pentecost, he said to them: **"Let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins"** (Acts 2:38).

The mistake many Protestant churches make is that they consider baptism and the Lord's Supper to be human acts done in obedience to the Lord's commands. They then say that we do not obtain remission of sin by our own actions, and that, therefore, baptism and the Lord's Supper cannot convey the forgiveness of sins. But baptism and the Lord's Supper are Gospel gifts given to us by which our Lord conveys to us the forgiveness of sins won by Christ. The person who acts in baptism is God Himself, using human agents to carry out His intention of giving us the forgiveness of our sins.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper do not give us a different gift from the gift given to us through the Gospel in word; they give us the same gift, the forgiveness of sins, but in a different way, that is, not only through a word, but also through an activity that is directed to one individual person at a time. These various ways are intended by God to give us even stronger assurance of His gift of forgiveness. This additional assurance strengthens our faith in Christ. In fact, baptism itself is called the Holy Spirit's **"washing of regeneration and renewing"** (Titus 3:5). It is a way by which the Holy Spirit begins His work in us and creates faith in Christ along with a new spiritual life. This is especially beneficial for infants, small children, and others who may not be able to understand the words of the Gospel. The apostle Paul had been an enemy of Christ and a persecutor of Christ's Church. What a spiritual benefit it was for him to hear the words of the Christian named Ananias: **"Why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord"** (Acts 22:16)!

Martin Luther wrote: *"The gospel...gives guidance and help against sin in more than one way, because God is extravagantly rich in His grace: first, through the spoken word, in which the forgiveness of sins is preached to the whole world (which is the proper function of the gospel); second, through baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters"* (Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article IV)

A means of grace is something God does for us, that is, God is conveying and conferring His free gift of forgiveness to us. Prayer, on the other hand, is not God speaking to us and giving us something, but it is the Christian's speaking to God and asking Him for something or praising and thanking Him for a gift already received. For this reason, we should not consider prayer to be a means of grace. When we are concerned about our sins and want to be reassured that we are forgiven, we should take hold of the Gospel of Christ, remember our baptism, and partake of the Lord's Supper **"for the remission of sins."**

Since Jesus was the One who instituted both baptism and the Lord's Supper, they were not means of grace in the Old Testament era before Christ. In the Old Testament, God conveyed forgiveness to His people through the Gospel in prophecy and in type. The law of Moses, given only to the Israelites, was

intended to remind them that they were sinners, to separate the Israelites from other nations, and to keep their sinful nature in check. We can think of circumcision and the Passover celebration as Old Testament means of grace, which have no particular spiritual significance for us today. **“In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation”** (Galatians 6:15). **“Indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us”** (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Questions

1. How do we know that baptism and the Lord’s Supper convey the forgiveness of sins?
2. What can we call baptism and the Lord’s Supper because they convey forgiveness?
3. Why is it important to consider baptism and the Lord’s Supper as Gospel gifts?
4. Since baptism and the Lord’s Supper give us the same forgiveness that is conveyed by the Gospel word, what purpose do they serve?
5. Why should we not consider prayer to be a means of grace?
6. What means of grace did God use in the Old Testament?



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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?