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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 13.11 – The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Use of the Means of Grace in the Church

Since the Holy Spirit has chosen to create and sustain faith in Christ through the means of grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, Christ's Church on earth uses the means of grace in this world to carry out its work of sustaining the faith of its members and to create faith in those who are not yet believers in Christ. Christ said He will build His Church (Matthew 16:18), and He does build His Church by using the members of His Church to carry out His work. He is the Vine; they are the branches. Without Him they can do nothing. But with Him they can bring forth abundant fruit.

After Christ told His disciples that He would build His Church, He told them that He would give to each individual believer who confessed His name as Peter did **"the keys of the kingdom of heaven"** (Matthew 16:19). In fact Jesus promised all of His disciples the keys of heaven when He said to them: **"Assuredly, I say to you (plural), whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven"** (Matthew 18:18).

What did Jesus mean by this binding and loosing? That becomes clear from what Jesus said to His disciples on Easter Sunday evening. After showing Himself alive to them in the place where they were gathered, **"Jesus said to them again, 'Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.' And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'"** (John 20:21-23).

As Jesus gave them the Holy Spirit, He also gave them the authority to forgive sins and to retain sins. The loosing Jesus had spoken of refers to the forgiving of sins, and the binding refers to the retaining of sins, that is, not forgiving them. The the forgiving of sins, the loosing of sins, was their chief duty and responsibility. For just as the Father had sent His Son Jesus into the world to seek and save lost sinners, so Jesus sent His disciples into the world to seek and save lost sinners.

This is clear also from the fact that after His resurrection Jesus repeated several times His instructions to his disciples that they should preach the Gospel everywhere in the world. He told them to use that one means of grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. That was their main assignment. Every one of the four Gospels contains these instructions.

In the Gospel of Matthew we read: **"Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 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; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age'"** (Matthew 28:18-20). The binding key is not even mentioned in these words. The emphasis is on the loosing key, and this loosing key is the Gospel. The sacrament of baptism is specifically mentioned, and the Lord's Supper is also referred to indirectly by the reference to observing all the things that Jesus commanded. The Lord's Supper is one of the things Jesus commanded.

The Gospel of Mark quotes Jesus' words to His disciples: **"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned"** (Mark 16:15-16). Again the emphasis is on the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins. But the binding is also referred to by the mention of condemnation for those who reject the Gospel.

Luke refers to the use of the means of grace in both his Gospel and in the book of Acts. After Jesus rose from the dead, He said to His disciples: **“Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem”** (Luke 24:46-47). Notice here that Jesus’ disciples were also to preach repentance as preparation for the preaching of the remission of sins. This refers to the preaching of God’s law to sinners to make them aware of their sins and the punishment their sins deserve. This preaching of the law is not a means of grace, for the law by itself can bring no one to faith in Christ. But it is a necessary first step in most cases, for without the law most people are not aware of the seriousness of their problem and the hopelessness of their situation. But every Gospel preacher is eager to get to the main point: the preaching of the remission of sins through Christ.

In his book of Acts Luke also refers to Jesus’ instructions concerning the means of grace. He said: **“You shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”** (Acts 1:8).

The mention of the Holy Spirit should have reminded them of what Jesus had said to them about the Holy Spirit on the night of His arrest, as recorded in the Gospel of John. **“The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you”** (John 14:26). **“When the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning”** (John 15:26-27). **“If I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment. ... When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth, and He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you”** (John 16:7-14).

Jesus’ words to His disciples most surely indicate that the emphasis is on the loosing key, not the binding key, that is to the remission of sins, not the retaining of sins. Nevertheless, there is a time and place for the binding of sins, as Jesus made clear: **“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them”** (Matthew 18:15-20). Notice the care with which the Christ’s Church is to deal with an impenitent sinner. The purpose of the Church’s action is to gain the brother, that is, to lead him to repentance so that he can be reclaimed. It is not God’s will that any sinner should perish in impenitence and forfeit the forgiveness that Christ has won for the world and also for the impenitent person.

The proper use of the binding key is illustrated by an incident that took place in the Christian congregation at Corinth. One of the members was continuing to live in open adultery, and the congregation was doing nothing about it. The apostle Paul therefore called attention to their inaction and gave them this instruction: **“In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus”** (1 Corinthians 5:4-5). Notice that this action should be taken for the purpose of saving the sinner. Just as the law of God must be taught for the purpose of presenting the Gospel of forgiveness and salvation, so the action of excommunication is a preaching of the law to lead the sinning person to repentance,

so that he may be saved. That is why Paul gave this instruction: **“Put away from yourselves the evil person”** (1 Corinthians 5:13).

As the Church uses the means of grace, it is important that the Church exhibits the spirit and mind of Christ. The Church is not to do its work like an earthly business or a government authority. Jesus told His disciples: **“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many”** (Matthew 20:25-28). The Church, and especially its leaders, should imitate their Master in His self-sacrificing and loving service to others.

Jesus told His followers not to imitate the proud scribes and Pharisees, who liked to give harsh orders and receive honor and respect from those lower than they. **“Do not do according to their works. ... All their works they do to be seen by men. ... One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. ... But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted”** (Matthew 23:3-12).

When Jesus entered a certain village and the people did not want to receive Him, His disciples James and John thought that fire should come down from heaven to destroy that village. But Jesus said: **“The Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them”** (Luke 9:56). The desire to save others is the attitude and spirit Jesus wants His Church to have. The most important element in the Church’s work is the salvation of souls. **“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost”** (Luke 19:10).

When there were some tensions between some of the members of the congregation at Philippi, the apostle Paul wrote to them: **“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross”** (Philippians 2:3-8).

The way the Church administers the means of grace is very important. If one speaks the words of Christ’s Gospel in an angry or cruel way or acts in a way that is contrary to the spirit of the Gospel, he is hindering the gracious working of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“Let all that you do be done with love”** (1 Corinthians 16:14).

Questions

1. What is meant by the means of grace?
2. What are the keys to the kingdom of heaven?
3. What two things do these keys do?
4. When did Jesus give these keys to His disciples, to His Church?
5. What is it that Jesus wants proclaimed throughout the world?
6. How does the Church use the keys Jesus gave them?
7. When would the Church use the binding key?
8. Why is it important to teach the law, even if it is not a means of grace?
9. What is the purpose of excommunication?
10. With what attitude should the Church carry out its ministry?
11. Why did Jesus tell His disciples not to be like the Pharisees?