

# The Doctrine of the Means of Grace

○ **UR** Lord Jesus Christ obtained eternal salvation for all men through His atoning work on the cross at Calvary (2 Cor 5:21; Rom 5:18). In the Scriptures, God now prescribes certain external means by which this salvation is to be offered and conveyed to sinful men. These external means are referred to by the orthodox Lutheran Church as ‘the means of grace’. The means of grace consist only of the Word (the Gospel) and the Sacraments (Baptism and the Lord’s Supper). The Sacraments are true means of grace only because they house and convey the Word of the Gospel (Acts 2:38; Matt 26:26-28). They are, as Augustine said, ‘a visible Word’. There are two purposes to the means of grace. First, by them the Holy Spirit earnestly offers the grace of God to those who hear or read the Word (2 Cor 5:20). Secondly, by them the Holy Spirit works faith in the hearts of men, so that they are converted, justified, sanctified, and finally glorified (Rom 10:17).

Martin Luther writes:

God has always followed this custom of giving a visible sign, a person, place, or spot, where He could certainly be found. For if we are not bound and held by a physical, external sign, every one of us will seek God wherever he pleases. For this reason the holy Prophets wrote much of the Tabernacle, the dwelling place and tent where He willed to be present. Thus God has always done. In a like manner He has built us Christians a temple where He would dwell, namely, the spoken Word, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper, which also are perceptible things. But our false prophets, factious spirits, and ‘enthusiasts’ despise it and cast it aside, as though it were worthless, and say, ‘Truly, I will sit and wait until a flying Spirit and revelation comes to me from heaven. Beware of that!’ (SL III:924f.)

According to Holy Scripture the pre-eminent means of grace is the Word of God, specifically the Gospel of Christ (Rom 1:16). The Gospel not only offers grace to the sinner, but also works faith in the heart to receive the gift of God. The Gospel is a means of grace in every form in which it is presented, whether it is preached publicly (Mark 16:15,16; Luke 24:47), read (John 20:31; 1 John 1:3,4), pronounced as an absolution (John 20:23; 2 Cor 2:10), expressed as a symbol (John 3:14,15), or considered in the heart (Luke 2:51; Rom 10:8). In short, no matter how the Gospel is brought before the minds of men, it is always a true means of grace, offering and conveying the grace of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

Luther writes:

Over against all that reason suggests or would measure and fathom, yes, all that our senses feel and perceive, we must learn to cling to the Word and simply judge according to it... For if you insist on judging according to what you see and feel and, when you are told God’s Word, urge your opposite feelings and say: You have good talking, but my heart talks quite another language, and if you felt what I feel, you, too, would talk differently, etc.: then God’s Word is not in your heart, but by your own thoughts, reason, and musings you have smothered and extinguished it. In short, if you will not esteem the Word above all your feelings, eyes, senses, and heart, you will inevitably be lost, and there is no help for you... I also feel my sin, and the Law, and the devil on my neck, that I lie prostrate under it as under a heavy load. But what should I do? Were I to judge according to such feelings and my strength, I and all men would have to despair and perish. But if I desire to be helped, I must verily face about and look at the Word and learn from it to say: I indeed feel God’s wrath, the devil, death, and hell; but the Word says otherwise, namely, that I have a gracious God through Christ, who is my Lord, superior to the devil and all creatures. (SL VIII:1102.)

The Word of God is truly powerful and efficacious (1 Thess 2:13; Heb 4:12). That is, it has an actual effect on those who hear and receive it. It does something to them. In short, it is a power that converts, regenerates, and renews the minds of men. We must never separate the operation of the Spirit of God from the Word of God. Wherever the Word of God is, there also is the Spirit of God (1 John 5:6; John 17:17).

Luther writes:

And in those things which concern the spoken, outward Word, we must firmly hold that God grants His Spirit or grace to no one, except through and with the preceding outward Word, in order that we may thus be protected against the enthusiasts, i.e., spirits who boast that they have the Spirit without and before the Word. All this is the old devil and old serpent, who also converted Adam and Eve into enthusiasts, and led them from the outward Word of God to spiritualising and self-conceit... In a word, enthusiasm inheres in Adam and his children from the beginning [from the first fall] to the end of the world, [its poison] having been implanted and infused into them by the old dragon, and is the origin, power, and strength of all heresy, especially that of the Papacy and Mahomet. Therefore we ought and

must constantly maintain this point, that God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments. It is the devil himself whatsoever is extolled as Spirit with the Word and the Sacrament. (*Triglotta*, 495, Part III, Art. VIII, 3-10.)

Since God has connected his most gracious promise of forgiveness with Baptism and the Lord's Supper, these also are true and efficacious means of grace. Of Baptism, Scripture teaches that it is 'for the remission of sins' (Acts 2:38), and 'for the washing away of sins' (Acts 22:16; Eph 5:26; 1 Cor 6:11). In the Lord's Supper, Christ offers to the communicant His own body and blood shed 'for the remission of sins' (Luke 22:19,20; Matt 26:26-28). Luther writes:

If God were to bid you pick up a straw or strip of feather, and with it command, order, and promise that through this act you should have forgiveness of all your sins, grace, and everlasting life, should you not accept that with great pleasure and gratitude, love it, praise it, and esteem that straw or feather a higher and holier possession than heaven and earth? For however insignificant the straw or feather is, by it you get so precious a gift as neither heaven nor earth, nor all the angels, can give you. Why are we such shameful folk that we do not esteem the water of Baptism, the bread and wine which is Christ's body and blood, the spoken Word, and the laying on of hands for the forgiveness of sins to be as precious and sacred a thing as we would hold such a straw or feather to be?... Even though you were able to carry heaven and earth on your shoulders, in order to be saved, it would be labour lost, while he who picked up the straw (if God commanded it) would do more than you, even if you could carry ten worlds.' (SL XVI:2296.)

We must always uphold the *objective* nature of salvation. That is, we must ever assert the objectivity of Christ's atonement and the means by which His work is applied to men. Christ died for men's sins whether they believe it or not (John 1:29; 3:16). This truth is not dependent in any way upon man. God offers and applies this salvation to men through the Word and Sacraments. The means of grace will exercise their power in every case where they are applied. What Dr Walther writes on this point deserves our constant, diligent attention. He says:

The characteristic feature of our dear Evangelical Lutheran church is her objectivity, which means that all her doctrines by their very nature keep man from seeking salvation in himself, in his own powers, aspiration, performance, and condition and lead him to seek his salvation outside of himself, while the characteristic feature of all other churches is their subjectivity, they all leading men to ground his salvation upon himself. (Cp *Lehre und Wehre*, 36,19.)

In this connection we must warn also against the error of making faith its own object. That is to say, believers must never base their faith upon their faith. Faith must be based alone on the Gospel, never on anything within man. Luther correctly says that any man who bases his faith on his 'experiences', particularly on his possession of faith, is an 'idolatrous apostate'. He further explains, 'For he trusts and builds on his own, namely, on a gift which God has given him, and not on God's Word alone, just as another builds and trusts in his strength, riches, power, wisdom, holiness, which as well are gifts given him of God' (SL XVII:2213).

In this article, we have seen that 'the means of grace' are those divinely prescribed vehicles by which God offers and conveys to men His grace in Christ Jesus. These vehicles are His Word and Sacraments, specifically Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In order to protect us from lying spirits and to make His promises sure and secure, God has chosen to communicate His salvation in no other way. The Reformed teach a way of faith without means, while the Roman Catholics teach a way of means without faith. Both errors equally corrupt the Scriptural doctrine of the means of grace. God's Word asserts that salvation, wrought by Christ at the cross, is offered and conveyed through the means of grace, and is received by faith alone. Any other ground of confidence of which men may boast is false and idolatrous. —S Wood.

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