

Means of Grace: Word & Sacraments, I

We want to begin a study on the means of grace. Let us begin with some definitions, just to put ideas in our heads. We do want to get to the Holy Scriptures quickly. Berkhof defines the means of grace in this way: “While the Spirit can and does, in some respects, operate immediately, directly on the soul of the sinner, He has seen fit to bind himself largely to the use of certain means in the communication of divine grace.” You can see it immediately if we say that the means of grace, the fundamental means of grace, is the preaching of the Gospel. That is certainly the ordinary way that God saves people. You might be stretching it to say God absolutely could not save anybody any other way, but by the same token you would look suspiciously at somebody who says God regularly saves people without the preaching of the Gospel. That would not be accepted, and rightly so. So what are the means of grace? The *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, question 88, says, “What are the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption? Answer: The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption are his ordinances.” That is used in a very broad sense. And here is the subset that fills out what they call ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer. The Word, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper is what we mean by sacraments and prayer. So there are three means of grace—of which the sacraments consist of a subset of two—all of which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

Let us get to the Bible itself. We will discuss the Word of God as a means of grace, first of all, and then the sacraments in general. What do we mean when we call the Word a means of grace? Let us talk about the power of the Word. Romans 1:16 tells us that the Gospel “is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes, for both Jew and Greek.” The Gospel is the power of God for salvation. You say, “The Gospel is the message, the saving message. How can it here be said to be an attribute of God?” The message is not a quality of God. That is true. But the meaning is the Word is so powerful that this could be said of it. The meaning is that God works through the Word and demonstrates His power unto salvation of sinners. Technically speaking, the Gospel is a message and not a quality of God. But God’s power is so joined to the Gospel that it could be said to be a powerful Word and, in fact, a means of grace.

What we are saying is that God is administering grace to us as we hear the Gospel preached. Would we deny it? Of course we would not. Would we say it is an automatic thing? No, we would oppose that. It is not automatic. It must be met with faith on the part of the hearers for it to be effective. But if we do not really believe that the preaching of the Gospel is a means of grace then we ought to stop preaching. It is not just human words. As a matter of fact, if I asked you who the chief minister in the preaching of the Gospel is you would not tell me it is your pastor. You would say it is God; otherwise the pastor ought to stop preaching. God is the chief minister. It is His Word, and the human pastor is His instrument. We are avoiding any notion of anything happening automatically. But already, from the beginning, we are thinking about God’s part. And when the Scripture says, “the Gospel is the power of God for salvation,” it ascribes great power to the Word. Is it automatic power? No. But power nevertheless.

In Acts 20:32 Paul says that the Word of God’s grace is able to build up sinners. We do not actually need to examine each of these contexts in detail because we are just looking for things they say, even incidentally, about the Word. “Now I commit you,” Paul says to the Ephesian elders, “to God and to the word of his grace.” I commit you to God, and I commit you to the Word of His grace. The Word is so filled with grace that it could be described in this way, “the Word of His grace,” which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. The Word of God’s grace can edify believers. You say, properly speaking, only God edifies believers. The Bible closed on the table does not

do that. It is true, but the Bible read and believed, heard and believed, and especially preached and believed is a means of the grace of God. God works through His Word.

James 1:21 discusses the implanted Word. He says, "...receive meekly the word implanted which is able to save your souls." There is no doubt about it; the Bible ascribes great power to the Word of God.

Is this power to be conceived of apart from the Holy Spirit? No. It is conceived of with the Holy Spirit. According to John 3, people are born again by the Spirit of God: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear it sound but cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." As we said earlier in the course, there is a word play here. "Wind" and "spirit" are the same word in Greek: The holy wind of God blows where He wills. This verse assumes the sovereignty and the effective working of the Spirit to accomplish His will. God the Holy Spirit regenerates sinners. There is no mention here of the Word, but of people being born of the Spirit.

In 1 Peter 1:3 Peter mentions the resurrection of Christ in a context in which he speaks of people being born again: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." You say, "There is no mention of the Word in here. There is no mention of the Word in John 3. There it just mentioned the Spirit. And here it mentions the Father giving us new birth and the Son whose resurrection is the power behind the new birth." True enough, but 1 Peter 1:23 does mention the Word: "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." The principle is to get the full teaching of the Bible, we have to take all these things into account. And plainly the new birth is a result of the Spirit working with the Word. Word and Spirit go together.

James 1:18 says it well when it says, "The Father begets us through the word of truth." Even that is not complete. We would add, "by the working of the Spirit." The Spirit gives new life. It is not the Word alone, but the Spirit uses the Word in the creation of new life.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* question 89 says, "How is the Word made effectual to salvation? Answer: The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation." I do not believe you would disagree with my saying that the Word of God is a means of grace as long as we qualify we are not saying that people who hear the Gospel are automatically saved. We are furthermore not saying that it is the Gospel apart from the Spirit who saves. No, it is exactly the Gospel in the hands of the Spirit and used by the Spirit. The Spirit ordinarily works through the Gospel to create faith and then nurture it.

What about the ministry of the Word, and specifically, the ministers and the recipients? As far as the ministers go, where does their authority reside? Is it in their office? Is it in grace bestowed upon them through the hands of bishops or by the church? Is it in their own persons and the power of their personality? The answer to all those things is no. Their authority resides in the Word. Look at Luke 1:2 where Luke speaks of early Christian ministers of the Gospel as "servants of the word." That is where a minister's authority comes from—the Word of God.

Second Corinthians 1 is an important passage here. Paul had been accused of vacillating because at times he had changed his plans. He lets the Corinthians know that he did not come to them in order to spare them. In 2 Corinthians 1:23-24 Paul says, "I call God as my witness,"—putting himself under oath—"that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. Not that we lorded over your

faith, but we work with you for your joy because it is by faith you stand firm.” An apostle says, “We do not lord it over your faith.” Compare that with Paul’s attitude in Philemon verses 8 and 9: “Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.” Paul has the right as an apostle to command, but instead he appeals. To the Corinthians, he is careful not to lord it over their faith. And there he refers to the other apostles as well. Although the apostles had the right to exercise authority on Christ’s behalf, they were careful not to abuse that authority.

Calvin’s commentary on 2 Corinthians 1:24 deserves quotation. When Paul says that he is not the master of their faith, he shows that such an exercise of lordship would be unjust and intolerable and would amount to tyranny over the church. Faith should be completely free of any bondage to men. We should note who is saying this, for if ever any mortal man had a right to claim such lordship, Paul was he. Thus, we conclude that faith should have no master but the Word of God, and is not subject to human control. Spiritual lordship belongs to none but God alone. This is always a settled principle, that pastors have no special lordship over men’s consciences, because they are ministers and helpers and not lords. The minister’s authority resides in the Word of God. We are not taking back what we said about church discipline previously. But even that is an authority under the Word.

You may have a question about church discipline. The recipients are responsible to search the Word. Compare Luke’s report of the Jews’ response to Paul’s ministry in their city, Berea. They were good examples of this. They searched the Scriptures daily to see whether the things that Paul said were true. Any pastor ought to be thankful as people study God’s Word and do not just accept everything he says because he says it—that they want to know and confirm things in God’s Word for themselves.

In 1 John 2 we see a similar principle where the believers have been afflicted by false teachers who finally rejected them and left the church. The believers are said to be taught by the Spirit and are expected to reject error and accept the truth of God. Specifically, John warns about antichrists who have already come and who reject the fact that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. They deny that Jesus is the Messiah. In 1 John 2:22b-23 it says, “Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.” Already in the first century, there was a battle going on. There was spiritual error, and the apostles said quite a bit about it. They expected the believers to be taught by the Spirit in the Word and to reject error and hold fast to the truth. Verse 26 says, “I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray.” John says a lot about the Spirit and the Spirit teaching them and so forth. But in context, he certainly expects them to receive his words—even his words of Scripture instructing them about the Spirit. Once again, we have Word and Spirit conjoined. And this time the emphasis is not the ministers, but on the receivers. They are to carefully test all things by the Word and submit to the authority of the Spirit in the Word.

As far as the scope of the ministry of the Word, it is as broad as the Gospel. Compare Acts 20 and 21, where we learn again of Paul’s ministry of the Word. We learn a lot from this chapter. Acts 20:20 says, “I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.” This is the message of the Gospel. He calls it “the gospel of God’s grace” at the end of verse 24. The task the Lord has entrusted to him, he says, is the task of testifying to the Gospel of God’s grace. So the scope of the ministry of the Word, in its narrow scope, is the Gospel message. In its broadest scope, Acts 20:27 says, “I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole

council, the whole will of God.” So the scope of the ministry of the Word narrowly conceived is the Gospel, and broadly conceived it is God’s whole will in Scripture. The results of the ministry of the Word of God as a means of grace are salvation and edification. Sometimes we forget that in the verses just preceding the great inspiration passage in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul basically says, “Timothy, from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, the holy writings which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” The result of the ministry of the Word is salvation, because these writings alone are able to make us wise unto salvation. He goes on and says in verse 16: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful. It has utility for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Compare this to what Paul says in 1 Timothy 6:11. It is a title for the pastors that were, in context, specifically being equipped. Of course, by way of application it pertains to every believer. Thus the results of the ministry of the Word according to 2 Timothy 3:14-17 are salvation and edification. What a powerful Word God has given us. It is able to save our souls and then build us up.

According to 1 John 2, the results of the ministry of the Word are that people might know the Father and the Son. In 1 John 2:24-25 John says, “See that what you heard from the beginning”—the message preached—“remains in you. If it does you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us—even eternal life.” The result of the ministry of the Word is knowing God, and knowing God is eternal life. Compare this with John 17:3, which says, “This is eternal life that they might know you [the Father] and the one whom you have sent, Jesus Christ.”

Now let us move on to the sacraments in general. We have really had nothing new so far, and it sets us up to talk about some of these matters. My thought in all these things has been greatly shaped by David Jones’ outstanding notes. Augustine defined a sacrament as a “sacred sign.” Sign means symbol. It is a sacred sign, a holy sign. We would add “instituted by Christ.” A sacrament is a sacred sign, a holy symbol. A sacrament, he said elsewhere, is the visible form of an invisible grace. That is the answer to the question of if this is not physical, if it is not automatic, then how could it be said to be external? And it is because by nature it is visible. Not automatic, not physical per se, that is, not physical apart from the spiritual, but physical-spiritual, if you will. It is the spiritual working with the physical: the Spirit working with the physical. The sacrament is the visible form of an invisible grace. Take away the Word, Augustine said, and the water of baptism is neither more nor less than water. The Word is added to the element of water, and there results the sacrament as if itself also a kind of visible Word. This concept of visible Word has its roots in Augustine and comes through Calvin into Protestantism. Augustine is the source of this. This is a very helpful way of looking at baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

As we will see in a little bit, baptism and the Lord’s Supper give no new content. They do not give some new information. Rather, the information they convey is the Gospel. The Lord Jesus Christ felt the Gospel was important enough that He gave it to His Church. He commanded the apostles to preach it and to write it down and so forth. He also ordained two ceremonies for His Church. When you think about the Old Testament background and the multitude of ceremonies, it strikes us as small by comparison, and it makes the two very important to the Lord. And baptism and the Lord’s Supper convey no new content. They convey the same content as the Gospel. They are, in short summary (Augustine is right, I am convinced) visible Words. They are the Word of God acted. The Church did not make them up. The head of the Church gave them to the Church. In other words, the Lord Jesus Christ thought the Gospel was so important that He built the life of His Church with two ceremonies: an initiation rite, Christian baptism—which is a pictorial representation of the Gospel—and an ongoing rite of fellowship between God and His people and His people and God. It is a rite of communion, if you will, which is the ongoing application of the Gospel in the life of the people of God. So the concept of

visible Word is so important.

I am going to keep returning again and again to the parallel between Word and sacrament. If the sacraments are the words of God acted, then I can speak of them under the Word. Remember Berkhof, who says you must have the Word of God for a sacrament to be a sacrament; and remember my insistence that without the words of institution, there is no Lord's Supper. And without the baptismal formula there is no baptism. But give me the Word with the ordinance and I can say of the ordinance what I say of the Word. For example, if you agree with me that the Gospel preached is a means of grace, then the Gospel acted out in the life of the Church is a means of grace. Paul even says as much in 1 Corinthians 11 when he says, "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." What is he saying? He is saying that action is never apart from the words of institution. He assumes that. He just gave those words. As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you preach, you proclaim, you herald the Lord's death. That is, the Lord's Supper is a visible and auditory word. So I think Augustine was really on to something.

In baptism notice it is not the water itself. It is not some quality of water, or if I say quantity I am going to get myself into trouble here. But it is not the water itself; it is the water joined with the Word of God that makes the mere element of water into something more—into a sacrament, a holy sign instituted by God, a kind of visible Word.

Peter Tholambard, the compiler of the sentences in the Middle Ages, said a sacrament is "a sign of the grace of God and the form and cause of an invisible grace." Here the definition has turned in a Roman institutionalized direction, and we are nervous by this expression, "the cause of an invisible grace." I am nervous. The Westminster standards, concerning which I am not nervous, say, "A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ." That is crucial. Human beings do not make up sacraments any more than we make up the Word. And to see how many there are, we have to see how many Christ gave. The answer is He gave two. "A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ; wherein, by sensible signs. . ." The word "signs" means symbols. "Sensible" means pertaining to the senses. God is good. He stoops to our weakness and He communicates the Gospel not only in the Word preached, but also—it seems to me in the Lord's Supper—to all of our senses. We touch the Gospel, if you will. We taste the Gospel. I am never going to argue for something automatic happening in the sacraments, anymore than I would in the preaching of the Word. You have to believe. But if this is the Word, the visible Word, it seems to me, is a visible Word. It is the Word that is heard. It is the Word that is touched and tasted. All the senses are involved in God's administering His grace to us. Again, according to the Westminster standard, "A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ; wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers." We will unpack that more as we move along.

Someone could ask, "Why is foot washing not considered a sacrament? Why is prayer considered an ordinance and not a sacrament?" Well, by definition, sacraments are signs. Prayer is not a sign. Prayer is a means of grace. Prayer is not a ceremony that the churches do, observe, and so forth, as in these two. So we are not devaluing prayer. In fact, we are valuing it very highly when we include it, along with the preaching of the Word and the sacraments, as the means of grace. That has tremendous possibilities and ramifications for the life of the Church when you think about it. If in fact God gives us grace through these means, then we certainly had better pray. This is one of the ways, one of the means, God has ordained to minister to us. I like it because it does not minimize at all the human responsibility and so forth in the human aspect. But, it puts it in a certain context. That is, it puts it in a divine context wherein God ministers to us through prayer. We certainly serve and worship God in prayer too. But once again,

it is that reformed order of the divine action bringing about a human reflex and response to it. So we are not devaluing prayer when we say it is not a sacrament.

Concerning foot washing, there is some debate on this among Bible believing Christians. But I would agree with the standards, that Jesus' words in John 13, were not intended to institute another ordinance. But rather, He acted there in a symbolic way, also giving an example of humble service, and did not intend to institute a third ordinance for the life of the Church. I understand that some Christians do practice foot washing. And I would respect them on that score. Sometimes they consider it something lesser than the two higher ordinances.

Let us work with biblical teaching and compare the Word and sacraments. I have moved somewhat quickly, especially on the Word section. Here I want to slow down, because if I can communicate to you the similarities between the Word and the sacraments and then the dissimilarities between the same two, then we will have gone a long way toward understanding everything else we are going to say about baptism and the Lord's Supper. In some of these matters there are places where good people disagree. And it is not my goal, for example, to try to convert Baptists, because Bible believing Baptists are already converted. And I said already that my goal is to promote understanding. But I do think every Christian ought to have a biblical understanding of every aspect of our faith, and that includes the neglected areas of the Church and the ordinances of the Church. And Christians who have received little teaching have not thought those things through. They have probably read no books, or very few, concerning these matters. We have assumed things, churches do things certain ways, and we have gone along without thinking. There has been a failure in the teaching end. Let us try to remedy some of that, and maybe we can all remedy that with our own disciples.

Let us move on to the comparison of the Word and sacraments. In terms of similarities, the author is the same. All Scripture is inspired by God. I understand human beings wrote the Word of God. And 2 Peter 1:21 says that man wrote it. But it also says "...as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." The Bible is a human word, to be sure; God intended to communicate to human beings. If He had used God-speak or angel talk, we would not be able to understand. But when we say the Bible is a human word, and it is correct, we have not said the more important thing. It is God's Word in human speech. And although men spoke, they spoke as they were borne along or carried by the Holy Spirit. In 2 Peter 1, Peter says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God." The meaning is that it is spoken forth by God so that He is the author of holy Scripture.

Now, who is the author of the ordinances? Where did the church get the idea for the ordinances? You say, "Well, at a church council they got together and they voted and decided." No, they did not. Christ, the Lord of the Church, the head of the Church, in Matthew 28:18 said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age." Christ commanded the apostles to baptize people. Christ is thus the author of Christian baptism. It was not a good idea the apostles had. Likewise, the Lord's Supper is divinely commanded, as in Matthew 26:26. "Take and eat," Jesus said. I am not saying the disciples understood the full ramifications of His words and understood then that He was instituting an ordinance that would last, according to 1 Corinthians 11, until Jesus comes again: "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes again." But in fact, that is what He was doing. And in hindsight, we look back and understand when He said "take and eat, this is my body." Verse 27 says, "drink of it all of you." He was giving commands and He was

instituting the Lord's Supper. Think of Paul's recollection of those words and Christ's own ministry to him in 1 Corinthians 11.

So I understand it is basic, but I want to begin with basics. The Word and the sacraments are similar in that their author is God Himself. God the Holy Spirit gave the Word. God the Son commanded the apostles to baptize and to partake of the Lord's Supper.

In terms of content, I have already hinted at this. The content of the Word, in regard to its "narrow scope" or focus, is the Gospel. In 1 Corinthians 15, as you know, Paul rehearses this when he says, "By this gospel that I preach to you, you are saved if you hold firmly to the word I preach to you. Otherwise you have believed in vain." And here is the word he preached: "For what I received I passed on to you as the first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." The content of the Word, in terms of its saving message, is the Gospel.

What is the content of the ordinances of the Christian Church, of its sacraments? The content of the sacraments is the same Gospel. There is no new content given in baptism and the Lord's Supper. In that way, they are the Word. You say, "If they are the Word, then why give them? He already gave the Word." We give them because He thought the Word in the Gospel message was so important that He did not want the Church to dare forget it. So He underscored it, emphasized it, and drove it home by commanding the apostles to baptize and to have the Lord's Supper.

In Acts 22:16 Paul is rehearsing his own salvation, his own conversion: "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name." I admit these words could be understood as if the performance of the action itself accomplished the washing away of sins, the cleansing of sins. I would oppose that understanding and say it is not the mere act performed. Rather, the meaning of Christian baptism here is so closely associated with the rite itself that at times the one could stand for the other. The meaning of baptism, in part, is the washing away of sins. So I am not saying the mere performance of the act accomplishes that. I am saying the meaning of baptism is the washing away of sins. That is, the message of forgiveness. You say the message of the Gospel is the message of forgiveness. It is true. It is two ways of saying the same thing because the message of the sacraments is nothing less than the message of the Gospel.

I have already quoted 1 Corinthians 11:26 a number of times, and we will probably do it many more. "Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." The Lord's Supper is thus a proclamation of the death of Christ. It is a proclamation of His atonement. That is, it is a proclamation of the Gospel.

So, the author of the Word is the same as the author of the sacraments, God Himself. The content is the same in the narrow focus of the Word. The content is nothing less than the Gospel itself. Some may say, "You mean to tell me when I go to a Christian baptism, when I see a baptism, that I should be thinking that the Gospel is here pictorially represented?" Yes, exactly. "And the next time I take the Lord's Supper I should see the risen, glorified Christ working through the minister, making Gospel promises to me?" Exactly. You say, "Wait a minute, what about this risen, glorified Christ through the minister business?" Remember, you have already given me that. In the preaching of the Gospel, we have already said, the human minister is not the ultimate minister. If God were not standing behind him as it were, if God were not speaking through the minister to the extent the minister is faithful to the Word (I am not claiming direct revelation as in the apostles), then the minister should stop preaching. God is the

Minister, capital M, in the preaching of the Gospel. Is He not? Well, God is also the Minister, capital M, in the performance of the ordinances in the church. In that way, we do not baptize into our own name, 1 Corinthians 1, but into the name of the Trinity, or, for shorthand, in the name of Christ. And the minister at the Lord's Supper is not the pastor ultimately. No, it is the risen Christ in whose name the pastor ministers the elements. Thus the content of the ordinances is the Gospel.

People often have questions about the meaning of Christian baptism and how it relates to the symbolism. We will be talking about it more, but in short the answer is that regeneration is different from forgiveness. Regeneration is the giving of new life by God. It is moving from death to life. And both baptism and the Lord's Supper have multiple meanings. But the basic meaning of both, the essential meaning under which the others come, is union with Christ. When we are baptized, we are joined to Christ. Said better, the main significance of Christian baptism is joining us to Christ. The main meaning of the Lord's Supper is the invigoration of our union with Christ.