

ILLINOIS LUTHERAN CONFERENCE

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As we are in a day and age where most churches and church goers emphasize their own works with the attitude that deeds are more important than creeds, it is no surprise that sound Biblical preaching is less and less heard, and the sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper are undervalued or not valued at all by many; consequently, the term "means of grace" is frequently unused or spoken of disparagingly. Therefore, the questions to be addressed in this month's Topical Bulletin are: ***What is meant by the term "means of grace" and is the term Biblically valid? What, if any, "means of grace" are specifically mentioned in the Holy Bible?***

The term "means of grace" is NOT found in the Holy Bible BUT is rightly used to convey the Biblical fact that God employs certain external, visible means through which the Holy Ghost works faith in Christ in the heart of a sinner, preserves and strengthens that faith, and thus accomplishes the sinner's salvation since the individual sinner's God-given and God-sustained faith in Christ personally appropriates the forgiveness of sins which Jesus Christ has secured for the whole world.

Holy Scripture teaches us the aforementioned truths in the following passages:

"Therefore as by the offense of one *judgment came* upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one *the free gift came* upon all men unto justification of life." (Romans 5:18) *Hence, Jesus Christ has indeed redeemed the entire world. All people of every nation and race are reconciled to God and declared righteous in Christ (this is known as Universal Objective Justification).* "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him." (John 3:16-18, 36) *Note well that unbelief personally forfeits the forgiveness of sins and salvation that Jesus has earned for the whole world.* "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth *to be* a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, *I say*, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus." (Romans 3:23-26) *Only those people with faith in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord actually benefit from Jesus' atoning work, being declared righteous by God for Jesus' sake (this is known as Subjective Justification).* Realize that Subjective Justification is only possible because of the accomplished Objective Justification— Jesus has truly paid for the sins of the WORLD, therefore the INDIVIDUAL who BELIEVES in Jesus Christ as his or her personal Savior and Lord will not perish, but have everlasting life.

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9) *Observe that faith is a gracious gift of God and is not something a sinner can produce in himself or herself by his or her own works. Indeed, God graciously gifts*

folks with faith in Jesus Christ, and He does it by means of His Holy Word, the Gospel of Christ in particular, for Holy Writ reports: "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith. So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost." (Romans 1:16-17; 10:17; 1 Corinthians 12:3)

Note well Holy Scripture clearly teaches that the Word of God – the Gospel of Christ in particular – is the MEANS by which the Holy Ghost gifts people with faith in Jesus Christ, the very faith that personally receives the forgiveness of sins and salvation as the believer is declared righteous by God for Jesus' sake. Thus, the Gospel of Christ is the preeminent MEANS OF GRACE, for 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 relates: "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." The "Word of reconciliation" IS the Gospel of Christ, the good news that Jesus has paid for the sins of the whole world with His holy and precious, shed, red blood.

Hence, the Lutheran Confessions are in full accord with Holy Scripture in stating:

"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 or 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 [[e.g. pentecostals, charismatics, many Reformed, Baptists, etc.]], and accordingly judge Scripture or the spoken Word, and explain and stretch it at their pleasure... 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 [life], and strength of all heresy, especially of 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 without the Word and Sacraments." (The Smalcald Articles, Part III, Art. 8, Triglot pgs. 495 & 497)

"Through this means, namely, the preaching and hearing of His Word, God works, and breaks our hearts, and draws man, so that through the preaching of the Law he comes to know his sins and God's wrath, and experiences in his heart true terrors, contrition, and sorrow, and through the preaching and consideration of the holy Gospel concerning the gracious forgiveness of sins in Christ a spark of faith is kindled in him, which accepts the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake, and comforts itself with the promise of the Gospel, and thus the Holy Ghost (who works all this) is sent into the heart, Gal. 4, 6." [[“And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.” (Galatians 4:6)]] (The Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, II Of Free Will, Triglot pg. 903)

“Moreover, the declaration, John 6, 44, that *no one can come to Christ except the Father draw him*, is right and true. However, the Father will not do this without means, but has ordained for this purpose His Word and Sacraments as ordinary means and instruments; and it is the will neither of the Father nor the Son that a man should not hear or should despise the preaching of His Word, and wait for the drawing of the Father without the Word and Sacraments. For the Father draws indeed by the power of His Holy Ghost, however, according to His usual order [the order decreed and instituted by Himself], by the hearing of His holy, divine Word, as with a net, by which the elect are plucked from the jaws of the devil. Every poor sinner should therefore repair thereto [to holy preaching], hear it attentively, and not doubt the drawing of the Father. For the Holy Ghost will be with His Word in His power, and work by it; and that is the drawing of the Father.” (The Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, XI Of God’s Eternal Election, Triglot pgs. 1087 & 1089)

The Lutheran Confessions as quoted above mention Sacraments in addition to God’s Word – the Gospel of Christ – as being MEANS OF GRACE. The Sacraments – Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, as instituted and commanded by Christ – are “means of grace” because God’s Word is attached to the visible elements in the sacraments. Indeed, since God has connected His most gracious promise of forgiveness with Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, these also are true and effective means of grace, namely, by virtue of the divine promises attached to them. Accordingly, the Gospel of Christ is and remains the preeminent MEANS OF GRACE. Without God’s gracious Word of promise attached to water in Holy Baptism and to the bread and wine in Holy Communion the Sacraments would not be “means of grace” nor would they be Sacraments in the true Biblical sense. The WORD OF GOD IS ESSENTIAL since the Holy Ghost works through that Word, and consequently BAPTISM and the LORD’S SUPPER are therefore true MEANS OF GRACE.

The following quotes from the Holy Bible make it clear that Baptism is indeed a true means of grace, a means through which the Holy Ghost works faith in Christ in the heart of a sinner, or preserves and strengthens faith in Christ in the heart of a sinner who already has come to faith through the Gospel when preached or read— such faith being the hand which personally receives the forgiveness of sins and salvation. “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” (Acts 2:38) “And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” (Acts 22:16) “...Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word.” (Ephesians 5:25-26) “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

The following quotes from the Holy Bible make it clear that the Lord’s Supper is indeed a true means of grace, a means through which the Holy Ghost strengthens and preserves faith in Christ in the heart of a sinner who already has come to faith through the Gospel when it was preached or read or attached to the waters of Holy Baptism— such faith being the hand which personally receives the forgiveness of sins and salvation. “And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed *it*, and brake *it*, and gave *it* to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave *it* to

them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." (Matthew 26:26-28) "And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake *it*, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you." (Luke 22:19-20)

The Calvinists among the Reformed churches hold that prayer is also a means of grace, which is strange since they also hold that the Holy Ghost operates directly without means. Nevertheless, although prayer is a Christian's privilege it is NOT a means of grace because prayer is a work of man, a fruit of Christian faith; prayer is NOT a means by which God gives or preserves faith in Christ. It is only through God's Word and Sacraments that God offers and conveys His grace and pardon, gifts folks with faith, keeps them in the faith, and grows them in the faith. When we Christians pray to the Lord for forgiveness of sins, it is our faith in Christ that personally receives the forgiveness that God offers and gives in His Word and Sacraments, for Jesus says: "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you." (John 15:16) On the other hand, if prayer is rendered with the thought that it is a meritorious work of man, such prayer is NOT prayer in Jesus' name but is contrary to the direction of Jesus and is an abomination in the sight of God, "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them. But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith." (Galatians 3:10-11)

Those who think their prayers merit forgiveness as a good work they do to earn favor with God, need to hear and take to heart the following words of Jesus: "And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking." (Matthew 6:5-7)

Let us therefore highly value the means of grace God has given to us: His Holy Word – the Gospel of Christ in particular – and the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Let us make regular use of the MEANS OF GRACE, the certain external, visible means through which God the Holy Ghost works faith in Christ in the heart of a sinner, preserves and strengthens that faith, and thus accomplishes the sinner's salvation since the individual sinner's God-given and God-sustained faith in Christ personally appropriates the forgiveness of sins which Jesus Christ has secured for the whole world.

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