

I. The Means of Grace (generally)

A. The meaning of “means of grace” or “means of faith.”

1. Remember what “grace” is

- a. Grace in God as an attribute of God is God’s beauty.
- b. Grace as extended to us is God’s beautiful attitude of favour
- c. But now we mean by grace the power of God spiritually to make us beautiful with the beauty of Christ. When God is said to work in us that is the operation of grace (I Cor. 15:10; Eph. 3:20; Phil. 2:13; Col. 1:29; I Thess. 2¹³, etc).

2. Remember, too what “faith” is.

- a. Faith is that spiritual bond which unites the elect to Jesus Christ their Head. By faith we hold for truth everything which God reveals in His word; we have confidence that salvation is ours.
- b. But the question is: where does this faith come from? It does not come from man’s freewill, but from God the Holy Spirit.
- c. And the Holy Spirit *uses means* to work faith in God’s people: those are the means of grace.

3. God does not simply “zap” people with faith and grace.

- a. He uses means to work faith and to strengthen that faith in us: the two means which the Holy Spirit uses are the preaching of the gospel and the sacraments..
- b. God is pleased to use means: He takes elements from everyday life to work His purposes. God could dispense with means. For example, He could feed us without bread but He does not. A person who expects to live physically must eat food.
- c. Similarly, if we expect to live spiritually, and if we expect to grow spiritually in grace, we must use the means of grace. God can keep His children alive in exceptional circumstances, but He does not bless those who *neglect and despise* the means He has ordained.

B. The means of grace are means to work spiritual life & strengthen that spiritual life in His people.

1. The means of grace are not mechanical

- a. That is Rome’s view. Rome teaches that sacraments give grace simply by being used. The phrase Rome uses is *ex opere operato* (from the work worked). For Rome the sacraments are *the* means.
- b. That is also the view of many “Protestants” who are superstitious, esp. about the sacraments.
- c. But the preaching and sacraments do nothing without the work of the Holy Spirit.
- d. In addition, the preaching & sacraments must be received by faith: if we sit under a sermon or take the Lord’s Supper without exercising faith we will never benefit from the means of grace.

2. The means of grace are official

- a. There are some elements which God uses (such as Bible reading, prayer, fellowship) which are not official means of grace. They are “informal” means.
- b. “Official” comes from the idea of “office.” These are means tied to the offices of the church. Officebearers administer the means of grace: OBs preach; OBs baptize; OBs administer the Lord’s Supper (Matt. 28:19).
- c. Therefore the means of grace are given to be used *only* by the church institute: para-church organizations and ministries do not have the right to preach, baptize or administer the Supper.

3. Since these are the means of grace, if we want to grow in grace we must use them in the true, instituted church (II Peter 3:18; I Tim. 4:16)

- a. One who cuts himself off from the means of grace, esp. when one absents himself from the preaching, will not grow spiritually, just as a person who deliberately refuses to eat or who eats badly will not grow well physically.
- b. There will also be no healthy growth for the one who attends the false church: there are really three kinds of preaching, false preaching (that is poison); weak preaching (that is lacking in nutrition and will lead to stunted growth); and faithful preaching (sound, health giving) (I Peter 2:2).

C. These means of grace are only grace to God's people

- 1. Some believe that God is gracious to all and that the preaching and sacraments are grace to all.**
 - a. This is the view of the Federal Vision heresy: they believe that God gives grace to all who are baptized, but that grace is conditional and can be lost through unfaithfulness.
 - b. This is the view of the Well Meant Gospel Offer: they teach that God is favorably inclined toward all who hear the preaching and the preaching *itself* declares to all hearers that God loves everybody and desires to save everybody. Or being under the preaching gives them a "chance."
 - c. But we must not think that just because someone is under the preaching God is favorable to him.
 - d. The preaching is not automatically grace: if God does not apply the Word to a man's heart with His blessing the preaching will not do any good.
- 2. The preaching & sacraments, which are grace to the elect, are means to *harden* the reprobate**
 - a. Therefore no one ought to trifle with the preaching or sacraments: it is the most serious thing in the world to hear preaching and use sacraments without faith.
 - b. When the reprobate hear the Gospel it provokes their hatred against God and reveals their stubborn opposition against God so that God is seen just in punishing them. Think of Pharaoh: God preached to him thru Moses but Pharaoh was hardened by it (Rom. 9:18; II Cor. 2:15-16).
 - c. This is also true of the sacraments: a reprobate who is baptized is hardened by his baptism; a reprobate who partakes of the Supper is hardened in sin and brings judgment upon himself.

II. The Means of Grace specifically

A. The means of grace are the preaching of the Gospel and the sacraments

1. Of these two, the preaching is the chief means of grace

- a. This is so because preaching works faith in God's elect, the sacraments confirm faith which God has already given. The sacraments are *not* converting ordinances (Rom. 10:17; I Tim. 4:16).
- b. The preaching of the Gospel is necessary for salvation. No man who has never heard the Gospel can believe and therefore no man who has never heard can be saved (Rom. 10:14). A person can be saved without water baptism or converting of the Lord's Supper. Rome teaches otherwise: "The church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the new covenant are necessary for salvation" (*Catholic Catechism*, para. 1129).
- c. The sacraments cannot stand alone. They must have the preaching of the Gospel to explain them. This is why Reformed churches have baptism and the Lord's Supper during the worship service with a sermon and the reading of the Form.

2. The sacraments are a "secondary" means of grace. This is not to despise or neglect sacraments

- a. Sacraments are means of strengthening faith and increasing assurance. They are given by Christ to help us in the weakness of our faith. They must be used and greatly valued by the church.
- b. Sacraments are holy visible signs & seals instituted by Christ for use in His church.
- c. There are only two sacraments because only two were instituted by Christ. Rome has seven sacraments: they are baptism, confirmation, penance (confession), Eucharist, holy orders, matrimony and extreme unction (last rites). *Rome offers "cradle to grave" sacramental salvation.*

B. The importance of the means of grace (the preaching and the sacraments)

1. They are marks of the true church (the third mark is faithful Christian discipline)

- a. When a church corrupts these means of grace it is moving toward the false church.
- b. These means are necessary for the nourishment of spiritual life and therefore salvation

2. They are the presence of Christ in the church institute

- a. Christ is present spiritually in the preaching: His voice is heard
- b. Christ is present spiritually in baptism and the Lord's Supper
- c. Christ is also present spiritually through the offices of elder, pastor and deacon
- d. When a church despises the means of grace, the Spirit is grieved & Christ withdraws His gracious presence. When a church loses the means, Christ has departed and the spirit of falsehood prevails. To remain there is to endanger your salvation and that of your children.