

to repent but also to be *baptized* (Acts 2:38). Their baptism was not simply an external marker of faith but a means by which God would invigorate them by his Holy Spirit. The Lord's Supper, too, is more than a memorial. It is a communion of the body and blood of Christ in which believing participants experience vital fellowship with the crucified Savior (1 Cor. 10: 16; Cf. 11:24-25).

Prayer

It can be argued that prayer is not a means of grace in the strict sense. Berkhof suggests that prayer is not an "...objective ordinance, but a subjective condition for the possession and enjoyment of the blessings of the covenant..." Still, Prayer is necessary because "God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only, who with sincere desires continually ask them of him." (H.C. Q/A 116). Prayer reminds us of God's fatherly care and keeps us dependent on him for all things.

Naaman almost died a leper because he despised God's means for his healing. Some of us go through life hungry and unhappy because we have not learned to recognize God's means for our salvation. The greater tragedy is that many people go to hell disinterested in God's means of grace.

Do you want to grow spiritually? Do something shockingly ordinary: Devote yourself to the preached word of God, use the sacraments to direct your faith to Christ, and spend time in serious prayer. If these means seem ordinary, then we understand God's goodness. Spiritual growth isn't a mystery. Trust God, use his ordinances, and expect him to provide the growth.

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HOW TO GROW SPIRITUALLY

USING GOD'S ORDINARY MEANS OF GRACE

BY WILLIAM BOEKESTEIN

There was once a powerful Syrian general named Naaman, who had an incurable disease called leprosy. At God's instruction, Elisha promised Naaman healing if he would wash in the Jordan seven times. In response to the message Naaman became furious; dipping in the Jordan was too undignified an act for him. If not for the persistence of his servants he would have returned to Syria unhealed (2 Kings 5:1-14).

There was once a teenager who struck out on his own after receiving a large inheritance. To no one's surprise but his own, one day the money dried up and the young man had no idea where his next meal would come from. One day, a neighbor offered the hungry youth \$100 per day in exchange for helping to paint his house. Listen," he replied, "I don't need work, I need food!"

There was once a couple that had so fallen out of love that both partners were desperate for help. One Sunday their pastor preached from Proverbs 11:14 on the need for believers to seek godly counsel from others in Christ's body. Driving home, the husband sighed, "An-other impractical sermon."

In each of these illustrations a means of relief was offered to each person facing a problem. In each case, the persons in need spurned the way of help because it didn't fit their definition of help.

For the same reason, many people miss God's simple, ordinary, plan for their spiritual growth, called the means of grace.

Means or Mystery?

Louis Berkhof defines means of grace as the "objective channels which Christ has instituted in the Church to which He ordinarily binds himself in



communicating his grace.” In the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, the Bible teaches us

“...the outward and ordinary means by which Christ gives to us the benefits of redemption. They are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer, and all these are made effective in the salvation of the elect” (Q/A 88).

The means of grace reflect God’s promise to work in certain ways. We use the means of grace when we recognize where God promises to bless, and put ourselves in that place, trusting in his promise to save and sanctify elect sinners. This is the pattern we find in the fantastic growth of the early church. In Acts 2, Luke reports that three thousand sinners were saved in a single day (2:41) and daily more were added to their number (2:47). These believers turned the world upside down not because they had found a trendy new way to “do church” but because of their astounding conformity to the image of God’s Son. Luke tells us what the church was doing when it grew. “They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). Today, “steadfastness” seems to lack pizzazz but there’s no denying that it worked!

Spiritual growth is not a mystery. If you find ten people who are growing spiritually, most of them will tell you that they are using the means of preaching, sacraments, and prayer. Spiritual growth doesn’t require innovation. Many modern books on spirituality focus on exceptions. An oft-used phrase is, “find God’s wave and ride it.” This assumes that God grants growth erratically and irregu-

larly. In this model, only those who are sufficiently spiritually astute will figure out how God happens to be moving, and enjoy the ride—until he changes directions.

In our day the question is often asked, “Can’t God use something else besides preaching, sacraments and prayer?” This question reflects the “grasping at straws” that takes place in many churches today to find ways to promote spiritual growth. Of course God *could* use movie clips. God once used a donkey to rebuke a prophet. (2 Peter 2:15-16). Should we now *expect* God to speak through donkeys? He could use total silence. He could use dance. He could use depression. He could use a murder (Acts 13:29). We need to learn to ask, “What has God promised to use?”

In our church when a new family joins the congregation the minister gives this admonition: “I charge you then, beloved, by the diligent use of the means of grace and with the assistance of your God, continue in the profession which you have just made.” We use the means of grace because this is how God promises to feed us and make us his disciples (Matt. 28:18-20).

Passé or Omnipotent?

To teach on the means of grace today is not necessarily to introduce a new subject. It is to reinforce the importance of a subject that is often misused in one of two ways.

What’s Next?

In some circles, the idea of the means of grace is quickly dismissed as outmoded fundamentalism. This posture assumes several different forms, like: “We’ve tried that; it’s time

for something new!” Or, “I feel far closer to God when I’m in nature than when I’m in church.” Or, “I don’t need to come to church to connect with God.”

Neglecting the means of grace can only result in spiritual loss. The sad irony is that those who neglect the means of grace, and spiritually deteriorate, are often unable to understand why they have so degenerated. They’ve become so spiritually anemic they no longer have the strength to assess their situation. Likewise, those who use the means of grace, are not always able to see how effective they are. “I come to church, partake of the sacraments, spend time in prayer, and I don’t seem to grow.” Of course, it’s possible that such a person really isn’t diligently and believingly using the means. But those who are, should think carefully about their hunch that the means of grace aren’t working. Such a person might as well say, “I eat three times a day but I don’t get any healthier. I think I’m going to quit.” What shape might we be in if we *weren’t* being fed by God through his ordinary means? Is it really true that those who have “outgrown” the means of grace have greater spiritual vitality?

Means “as” Grace

On the other hand, it is possible to confuse the means of grace with grace itself. This danger has been at the heart of the Protestant protest for half a millennium. The means of grace do not operate on the principles of mechanics. It is not the case that baptism necessarily washes away sins, or that every participant of the Lord’s Supper receives the blessings of Christ. There is no guar-

antee that simply hearing sermons will make you godly. Going through the motions of prayer will not connect you with God.

As G.I. Williamson put so well: “The ordinances do not rule God; God rules the ordinances. But He uses them because He pleases” to do so. We must use the means of grace believingly. We must trust the Lord, not the ordinances.

Preaching, Prayer, Sacraments, and...

The means of grace teach us the important role that God-ordained religious activities play in our lives. Surely exercises like maintaining godly associations (1 Cor. 15:33), using edifying media, sharing our faith with others, engaging in works of service, making diligent use of time, and caring for our bodies will impact our spiritual wellness. But in his kindness, God highlights certain ordinances that will regulate the routine of any healthy Christian.

The Preached Word

Today, preaching is often seen as a way of motivating people to go out and serve. In reality, preaching is how God feeds us and changes us. Through preaching, the word of Christ comes to dwell in us richly (Col. 3:16). “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17).

The Sacraments (Matt 28:18-20)

Likewise, the sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism are more than mere memorials; they actually strengthen the faith of those who receive them rightly. Hearing Peter’s Pentecost sermon, those who were pricked to the heart asked what they should do. Peter not only tells them