

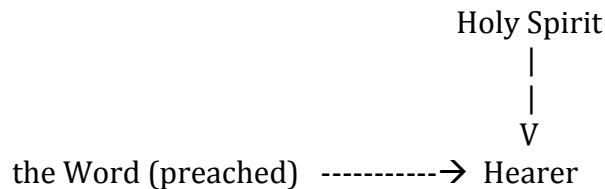
Brief Illustration of the Means of Grace

The term “means of grace” refers to God-ordained religious practices (hearing the Word preached; receiving the Sacraments) which are used as instruments by the Lord in converting and edifying his people.

Since these religious exercises are physical, mental and spiritual in nature, some understanding ought to be sought from the Word concerning the relationship between these activities and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Let me introduce a physical model which might help explain what I mean: Think of the physical activity of hearing the Word preached, coupled with God’s work in making the Word spiritually understood by us. Consider the following image:

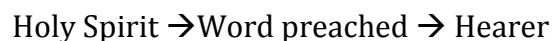
Figure 1



The idea being portrayed here is that the preaching of the Word and the actual work of the Spirit to sovereignly prepare hearers are independent. There is a “right angle” between the effects of the ministry of the Word preached and the ministry of the Spirit giving understanding of the Word. Word and Spirit come at the hearer in different ways and at different times, according to the sovereignty of the Spirit.

Now consider the following image:

Figure 2



In this image the work of the Spirit is pictured as happening in intimate conjunction with the preaching (without intending to imply that the Spirit never works independently).

However, these two figures convey two different impressions of the function and significance of the “means of grace.” In Figure 1, the “means,” which in the example is the preaching and hearing of the Word, is decoupled from the Spirit in some measure (without in any sense denying the profound necessity for the Spirit’s ministry). He works independently from the “means of grace,” and we have no sure connection between the exercise of the “means of grace” and the work of the Spirit.

In Figure 2, a peculiar supernatural significance is attached to the preaching. There will be times when the dead will be command to live – and they will. The preaching takes on a significance beyond the conveyance of information to hearers who have been prepared by other means,

independently of the preaching. There is real supernatural power in the preaching, which from time to time may even become visible to us, just as Jesus raised Lazarus, not by supernaturally waking him from the dead so that he could hear his name being shouted, but by the shouting of his name, and just as “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”

Now the same approach can be used with respect to the Sacraments. They preach. In a sense, they do nothing more than preach, since there is no Sacrament without the Word. A Sacrament is the gospel in Word, and in seen and felt Images (taste, etc.). Figure 1, illustrating the “decoupled,” or “distant” connection between Sacrament and Spirit leads to one conception of the “means of grace” in the sacraments, namely, that they are not means by which grace is received at all, but are testimonies to grace already given another way. On the other hand, Figure 2 intends to show the strong correlation between the Spirit’s work and the preaching of the Gospel, and the Spirit’s work and the administration of the Sacraments. There is real supernatural power there, too.

Significance of the Two Images

When the angle between the religious exercise and the work of the Spirit is large (independent), then we have a “low church” view of the “means of grace,” if they are granted at all to be “means.” When the theological angle between the religious exercise and the work of the Spirit is small (parallel), then we have a “high church” view of the “means of grace.” This extends not only to Word and Sacrament, but even to liturgy, etc., which takes on a kind of quasi-sacramental character. Indeed, it extends to the spiritual fellowship of the church herself.

In the “low church” view, there is no chance that the “means of grace” will be substituted for Christ. But, the full panoply and usage of “means,” and the respect that goes with them, will be lacking except for the preaching. The exclusive emphasis on preaching can then change the church into a school, where information is mainly conveyed, along with a few rudiments of worship. A high view of sacraments, or of the real character of preaching, of liturgy, and of the real nature of the church herself, will probably be lacking – though the fellowship in the Lord among the people is certainly enjoyed. The “high church” way of life will be rejected, because “the Spirit doesn’t work that way.” He doesn’t work through means like that, or to that extent. They believe fully in the works of the Spirit, but that independency between the religious exercises and the work of the Spirit dominates the thought.

In the “high church” view, there is more respect for the “means of grace,” and more edification through them, according to the terms of Scripture. However, it is also possible for the “means” to be exalted unduly, or for Pharisaism to set in as people pride themselves on mechanically operating the liturgical machinery. The centrality of evangelical preaching again comes to the fore here, as the salvation of the spiritual “highness” which is accorded to the means of grace.

How to we calculate the relationship between Means of Grace and the Holy Spirit

With a high view of the Means of Grace (no quotes now), we have to have a Scriptural balance on what we think of these Means.

For example, in Romanism, the elements of the Supper are transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ. That is, Christ is himself “incarnate” in sacrament. (I realize this is a misuse of the

word “incarnate,” but please bear with me). Since Christ himself is really there in the elements of the Sacrament, he should be worshiped there. But, we see no evidence of this in Scripture. Christ is not “incarnate” in the elements of the Supper. So, how is he present? I suggest that we may speak of the elements being used as “instruments” or “mediators” of Christ’s bodily presence. Likewise, baptism is an instrument of Christ’s presence, and preeminently preaching is an instrument of Christ’s presence. There is a high degree of “parallelism” between the use of the Means of Grace and the ministry of the Trinity through the Spirit. But, by maintaining the “instrumentality,” we are preserved from an unscriptural reverence for bread, wine, water, Bibles, or the persons of preachers. They are real mediators of the real thing, but they are not the real thing in themselves.

Now, we don’t have any idea how the Spirit works. We do not understand the spiritual “engineering.” It is helpful to take Calvin’s approach here, and say that the Scripture revelation is “accommodated” to our babyish understandings. Therefore, when we read

^{1Co10:16} The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?

we must admit that the bread and cup are a (real) participation in the body and blood of Christ -- through the elements as instruments or “mediators,” in the hand of God. We do not make them instruments to ourselves individually by the force of our own faith, but they are real instruments in the hands of the Spirit. When we eat and drink, we may rest in the true and living faith of the gospel, that by receiving this sacrament I do receive the forgiveness of sins, and participation in all the virtues of Christ, as well as commit myself to him and his body, the church.

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