

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—

Lesson 45—*What are the outward and ordinary means of grace? Q. 88*

The means of grace

- I. To speak of *the means of grace* is to speak of a particularly *Reformed* notion. Other traditions or denominations don't speak of or even consider the means of grace. And among the Reformed Confessions, none of them reaches the excellence found in the Westminster Standards.
 - A. Here, then, is an area of the Christian life prized by and made much of in Reformed Presbyterianism.
- II. What does it mean to speak of *the means* of grace?
 - A. To speak of the means of grace is to speak of those means whereby God is pleased to communicate to us the benefits of redemption in Christ (cf. Q.85).
 1. The Saviour and salvation we need are all in Christ. He is the Person and His is the work.
 2. But the dilemma is: how do we receive from Christ what we need? How is Christ to communicate to us what He has only in Himself? A way needs to be devised by which God can communicate to us what is in Christ for us, and by which God can bring us into participation with what Christ has done for us. And *whatever* these means are, they need to be *such that* God gets all the glory for their spiritual efficacy and *such that* we can take them up tangibly in our hands and ears—otherwise how can we use them?
 - B. To speak of the means of grace is to speak of those means appointed by God, which He's pleased to use to communicate to us the Person of Christ as Saviour and the benefits of His saving and sanctifying work. It's to speak of those channels, conduits, and golden pipes through which we receive all the grace we need for salvation and sanctification from here to glory.
 - C. And because they've been *appointed* by God, they're also *blessed* by God with divine efficacy. We can diligently use them and know for certain that we don't use them in vain, because He's promised that Christ and His benefits come to us through them, Rom 10.17.
- III. Why are these called *outward* means?
 - A. When we studied Q.85 we said there are two kinds of means of grace: *inward* means and *outward* means.
 1. The *inward* means for bringing our souls and Christ together are *faith and repentance*, both of which are the sovereign and gracious work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts as a part of our effectual calling and conversion.
 2. The *outward* means are what's before us now (and for the rest of the Catechism) and they are said to be: *God's ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer*.
 - B. What we learn from Q.85 & 88 is that God *requires* us to *diligently use* these outward means because they're the means by which He brings us to Christ and works Christ's benefits into us.
 1. The *inward* means of faith and repentance are *His* to work in us, while the *outward* means listed here are *ours* to use but *His* to bless.
 - a) Only God can work in the heart to bring about *that faith* by which we receive and rest upon Christ and *that repentance* by which we turn from sin, and so these are called *inward* means.
 - b) Only God can bless the *outward* means and make them *effectual* to salvation and sanctification but these means are called *outward* because they're *put into our hands for us to use*.
 2. Hence there's a symbiotic relationship between the inward and outward means of grace.
 - a) We're to seek Christ and salvation by the *outward* means of grace, because God's pleased to give us Christ and work faith and repentance *in us* by the *outward* means of grace.
 - C. God may save as He pleases: saving in the womb, if He likes, and saving the mentally handicapped if it pleases Him. He's not absolutely tied to the means as if He can't save a soul without means.
 1. But while God's not tied Himself to these means, He's tied us to them—which is why He *requires* that we use them to escape His wrath and curse.

2. We disobey God directly if we neglect the means of grace and we harm ourselves in the worst way we possibly can, Dt 4.2.

IV. A few introductory comments.

- A. These are Christ's *ordinances*, which means they're *appointments* by His authority, for His purposes. They're divine decrees, obligatory upon all. And carrying the authority of Christ, they cannot be changed by man.
 1. *Laws*, like the Ten Commandments, depend upon God's nature, but *ordinances* depend upon God's will. They are ordinances *simply because He says so*. Also, whereas the Commandments regulate *life* these regulate *worship*. This explains why Reformed worship is set in stone and fixed, Acts 26.15-18; 1Cor 1.21; Rom 10.14-17; 2Tim 2.24-25.
 2. They are Christ's means of communicating to us the salvation we cannot have any other way.
- B. They're the *ordinary* means of communicating salvation. God may use whatever extraordinary means He pleases to bring a soul to Christ, but what He *chooses* to do is one thing and what He's *commanded* us to do is another.
 1. He may save extraordinarily; but we're to seek salvation only through the ordinary means.
- C. The *Word* is the primary means of grace, and the public preaching of the gospel is the primary administration of the Word, Rom 10.17; 1Cor 1.17; Acts 26.15-18.
- D. The *sacraments* are only two: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. By the one God confirms our *union* with Christ and by the other He confirms our *communion* with Christ.
- E. *Prayer* is the means by which we ask for what God's promised us and receive it according to His will, 1Jn 5.14-15.
- F. Considering these outward means, it's clear that the context in which these outward and ordinary means have been appointed by God and are to be diligently used by us is in the context of *public worship*. Cf. WCF 25.3. We're commanded to use the public means of worship and to seek Christ and salvation by them; and God's promised that we will not seek Him by these means in vain.
- G. The means have no efficacy in themselves. They do not automatically produce the result. They must be *made effectual* by the Holy Spirit (Qs. 29-31, 89, 91) and He infallibly and faithfully makes them effectual to the elect. These means are to be *used diligently* and faithfully, accompanied by faith as we look for Christ in them and seek to draw from Christ by them.

Inferences

- I. This should highlight more than any other thing, the grand importance of the Lord's Day, because it's the day of public worship, the day when we take up and handle the means of grace. It's the day God's pleased to stand at one end of these holy conduits and send through them grace upon grace for all His people who will stand at the other end with mouths wide open and hearts of faith.
 - A. The reason we have such low views of the Sabbath and such low views of public worship is not simply because we have low views of the Fourth Commandment. It's largely because we have such low views of the ordinances of public worship as means of God's grace in Christ. If we could get our minds and hearts taken up with Qs. 82-107 of the WSC, we'd never begrudge another Sabbath.
 - B. And let me just remind you that the means of grace are spiritual means working spiritual results. Their efficacy doesn't need to be felt or seen or even immediate to be real and lasting.
 - C. So take heart. Don't be discouraged. Trust God to bless the means He's appointed.
- II. Generally speaking, the Reformed church isn't known as a church with tons of programs.
 - A. In the Reformed church, there's not the same sense of needing a host of programs to supplement public worship because there's such a high view of what God promises to do in public worship for everyone who will take up the means of grace in faith.
 - B. In the Reformed church, the primary means of discipleship is the means of grace on the Lord's Day. It's then that we feed on and drink of Christ. It's then that the pastor counsels the Congregation. It's then that the Congregation diligently uses the Word, sacraments, and prayer, and it's then that God has promised to primarily and faithfully communicate to us Christ and all the benefits of His work as our Redeemer.