**The Lord’s use of means**

Text: 1 Peter 1:23

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**Scriptures:** Isaiah 40:1-8; 1 Peter 1:17-25

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 19, 119:89-96, 461, 204, 529

**Series:** Canons of Dort (#13) – Article 3:17

**Theme:** The Word of God as the means of God’s grace

**Proposition:** The Lord ordinarily uses means of grace

**Introduction**

I enjoy food. I like the taste, smell and texture of the meals that I eat. How about you? I am very thankful to live in a place and time where I have enough to eat. I know that many people in this country and in the wider world are not so privileged. Not only is food enjoyable to eat, it is also absolutely essential. Without the ongoing intake of nutrition our bodies waste away, and we die if we go without food for too long.

However, think about this. God could have made us physically in such a way that we would not have needed to eat food. He is more than sufficiently powerful and creative to have sustained us without our needing the means of food. For example, He could have designed us with an internal ‘bio-battery’ that would last longer than a lifetime.

Likewise, God could regenerate/cause to be born again those He has elected to salvation without the use of any means. However, generally He does use means both to produce and to sustain spiritual life, just as He does physical life (Isaiah 55:10). This truth is expressed in our text: **“***you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable,* **through *the living and abiding word of God***” (1 Pet 1:23).

The Lord’s use of means is the topic addressed by Canons of Dort article 3:17 which begins with these words: “*The almighty working of God whereby he brings forth and sustains this our natural life does not exclude but requires the* ***use of means****, by which he according to his infinite wisdom and goodness has willed to exercise his power*”.

In the beginning, God generated life **through** His Word: “*By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, And* ***by*** *the breath of His mouth all their host*” (Ps 33:6). Now He re-generates spiritual life through the same Word: “*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing* ***through*** *the word of Christ*” (Rom 10:17); “*Of his own will he brought us forth* ***by the word of truth****, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures*” (Jam 1:18).

The kind providence of God towards His children is also a means of grace: “*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose”* (Rom 8:28)*.* In this way God extends special grace to us in the midst of trial, difficulty, distress, disappointment and despair. That is why James can write: “*Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials*” (Jam 1:2).

It has been said that “*prayer is a means God uses to give us what He wants*”. The Westminster Larger Catechism includes prayer as a means of grace: WLC (154) “*The* ***outward and ordinary means*** *whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his redemption are all his ordinances; especially the word, sacraments* ***and prayer***”

The continental Reformed Confessions contain a helpful, but narrower definition of the means of grace: Article 3:17 in the Canons of Dort identifies **three** means of grace as being “*the holy admonitions of the gospel*”, “***under the administration*** *of the Word, the sacraments, and discipline*”. We could call these the ‘institutional means of grace’ within the church.

These are also referred to as the ‘marks of the church’ in Belgic Confession Article 29: “*The true church is to be recognised by the following marks: It practises the pure preaching of the gospel. It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them. It exercises church discipline for correcting and punishing sins. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God*”. We are going to look at each of these in turn under the headings:

1. Preaching
2. The sacraments
3. Discipline
4. **Preaching**

Jesus, quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3 said, *'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God'*" (Matt 4:4). The Word of God is vital for spiritual life just as food is essential for physical life. The Protestant Reformers recognised from Scripture, the key importance of the preaching of God’s Word in the church. This is the apostolic truth revealed by Paul in Romans: “*But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"…. So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*” (Rom 10:14-17.

God accomplishes salvation **ordinarily** through the ministry of the church: He is pleased to use the ordained preaching of His Word as a means to create faith in the hearts of His children. I say ‘ordinarily’ for God is certainly able to operate to save apart from His Word. This is the way that unborn elect children are regenerated by the Holy Spirit. I say ‘ordinarily’ also because God is certainly able to operate to save through the proclamation of His Word by the disciples of Christ outside the institution of the church. The Word itself does not have power in and of itself to convert people and to produce holiness in them. The Word of God is not like some ‘magic wand’ that can be used to automatically produce Christians. That incorrect idea may be expressed in the Lutheran view that “*the Word of God has* ***intrinsic power*** *to convert all men indiscriminately*”

Sitting under the preaching of God’s Word **does not guarantee** conversion. This Biblical truth is expressed in the Canons of Dort in Articles 3.9 ‘*why some who are called do not come’* and 3:10 *‘Why other who are called do come*’. As we have already seen in the Fourth Head of Doctrine that the Canons of Dort have been carefully dealing with the doctrine of Irresistible Grace: If the Lord calls someone effectually, they **will certainly** be saved. His grace is truly irresistible by His elect. Jesus said, *‘All that the Father gives Me* ***will come*** *to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out’ (John 6:37)*

Preaching is a channel, and outward means of God’s supernatural grace. It is the primary means that the God has ordained to bring many of His adopted sons and daughters to glory in Christ. This is why the Protestant Reformers put such great emphasis on preaching, both in worship services where a sermon preached from God’s Word is central and in church building architecture where the pulpit is placed front and centre.

As we’ve already noted, just sitting under preaching does not guarantee conversion. Neither does the effectiveness of preaching ultimately depend on the preacher! This is certainly no excuse for laziness, but it is comforting to know that the power to save belongs to God alone. Charles Spurgeon who has been called ‘The prince of preachers’ recalls the snowy day – it was 6th January 1850 – when aged 15 he was on his way to his church in Colchester, England. A blizzard prevented him from going on, so he turned down a court and came to a small Methodist church where 12-15 people were gathered, but the minister had not arrived because of the heavy snow. Spurgeon recalls that: “*a poor man, a shoemaker, a tailor, or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach. He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had nothing else to say. The text was, ‘Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth’ He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter*”.

After briefly speaking about his text, he turned to Spurgeon and said: ‘Young man, you look very miserable.’ Spurgeon writes *“Well, I did; but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made on my personal appearance from the pulpit before. However, it was a good blow struck. The lay preacher continued: ‘And you will always be miserable—miserable in life and miserable in death—if you do not obey my text. But if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved.’ Then he shouted, as only a Primitive Methodist can, ‘Young man, look to Jesus Christ.’ There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that moment and sung with the most enthusiastic of them of the precious blood of Christ.”*

God powerfully uses the means of His Word preached and proclaimed to bring people to saving faith in Christ. For His glory alone! This is comforting, encouraging and motivating for us in our evangelism and outreach. Ultimately, it is neither the testimony of our lifestyles nor the eloquence and persuasiveness of our gospel proclamation which brings new life to an unbeliever. It is God alone, primarily working through means of grace. The second of which are:

1. **The Sacraments**

The Protestant Reformers recognised from Scripture that the primary means of grace is the Word of God. In contrast the Roman Catholic Church places the primary emphasis on the sacraments, believing that these automatically convey grace to those who receive them. The Latin phrase ‘ex opere operato’ “by the work performed” expresses this view of how the Roman Catholic church teaches that the sacraments ‘work’. The truth is that the sacraments (baptism and Lord’s Supper) are means of grace, but they are **secondary** to the Word. That is why we have the pulpit higher and central and, if we do have a physical Lord’s Supper table, it is symbolically placed below the pulpit.

The role of preaching and the sacraments is a little like that of water and fertiliser for a plant growing in soil. The plant is strengthened and nourished when fertiliser is added, but water is essential if it is to live. We could say that faith will not ‘germinate’ through the sacraments alone. Faith is worked by means of the preaching of God’s Word and it is strengthened by use of the sacraments.

This is expressed in the form for Lord’s Supper: “*Do not allow the weakness of your faith or your failures in the Christian life to keep you from this table, for it is given to us because of our weakness and because of our failures – in order to* ***increase our faith by feeding us*** *with the body and blood of Jesus Christ*”. The sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace. They represent Christ and His benefits. However, the sacraments (baptism and Lord’s Supper) cannot lead to salvation **without** the Word of God accompanied by the Spirit.

The third means of grace identified in the Canons of Dort is

1. **Discipline**

Christian discipline is a ministry of the Word. In that sense it is similar to preaching. It is a directed verbal ministry of the Word. What the Scriptures say about errors of belief or sins is conveyed by Biblical exhortation to a person to encourage them to repent. Christian discipline begins with individual members of a local congregation. "*If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother*” (Matt 18:15). If a brother or sister refuses this admonition and expresses no sorrow and a commitment to a change of conduct, the one who witnessed the sin must take one or two others with him “*If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses*” (Matt 18:16). If the brother still refuses to repent, the matter must be brought before the elders following the pattern of Matt 18:17: “*If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church*”.

If there is still no repentance, the elders will commence the process of formal church discipline. In our Reformed churches, this begins with ‘silent censure’ – the person is not permitted to come to the Lord’s Supper table, but no public announcement is made. The elders continue admonitions calling the sinner to repentance. If there is no change, then three announcements are made to the church.

* In the first announcement, neither the name of the sinner nor the sin is announced.
* In the second announcement, the name of the sinner and the sin is announced to the church.
* In the third announcement, the congregation shall be informed that, unless the sinner repents, he/she will be excommunicated at a specified date.

Church discipline is a means of grace with the aim of restoring an unrepentant sinner Canons of Dort Article 3:17 finishes with these words which also conclude this sermon: “*For grace is conferred through admoni­tions, and the more readily we do our duty, the more this favour of God, who works in us, usually manifests itself in its lustre, and so his work best proceeds. To God alone, both for the means and for their saving fruit and efficacy, all glory is due throughout eternity. Amen*”.