Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Last week, in connection with Lord’s Day 24 and Romans 3, we saw that we are not fundamentally good people who deserve God’s blessings. In fact, all we deserve from God is judgment and condemnation. And this means that whatever good we do receive from God is an act of grace – undeserved favour. And **Ephesians 1:3-6** states exactly this: “*Blessed be … God … who has blessed us … with every spiritual blessing … to the praise of His glorious grace*.”

* So the question is: **How does God give us these gracious gifts**? Christ is the source of all our blessings and they are given to us by the Father, but they are in heaven and we are on earth. So how do we receive these blessings down here on earth?
* Well, that passage in Ephesians 1 begins the answer to that question because it described these blessings as “*spiritual blessings*.” So we receive these blessings by the work of the **Holy Spirit**. And that is why Answer 65 speaks about the Holy Spirit as the one who produces faith in our hearts and who confirms our faith.
* But how does the Holy Spirit do this? Is this just some miraculous thing that He does or does He use ordinary means? I am sure you boys and girls have seen a **conveyor belt** at work. Yes? You put an object on a conveyor belt over here and it is carried along until arrives at its intended destination over here. So, are there ‘conveyor belts’ between heaven and earth that the Holy Spirit uses to bring us God’s gracious blessings? And, if there are, what are they?

Well, beginning with this passage in Mark’s Gospel and connecting it to other, relevant passages, we are going to see that **preaching and the sacraments are the ‘conveyor belts’ that the Holy Spirit uses to give us Every salvation gift**. And our points today are a little bit different – 1, 2, 2, and 1.

1. So we begin with **1**. And by 1 we mean **first** or **primary**. And our point here is that preaching is the No. 1 or primary ‘conveyor belt’ that the Holy Spirit uses to give us all God’s gracious gifts.
   1. Our passage in Mark is Mark’s version of what we commonly call the **Great Commission**. The one that we typically think of when we speak about the Great Commission is the one in **Matthew 28**: “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*.” And the reason why Mark’s version is different than Matthew’s is because Jesus would have spoken about these things many times before He ascended to heaven. And so, the one that Mark records for us is: “*Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned*.”
   2. And our specific interest here is the priority that the Lord Jesus gave to proclaiming or preaching as other English Bible versions have it. He didn’t prioritize baptism or the Lord’s Supper; He prioritized preaching! And this priority of preaching is a common theme of the New Testament.
      1. You school students will be familiar with a **flow chart**. A flow chart is a visual representation of the sequence of steps that are needed to perform a process. So a flow chart will show step 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and the end result. Well, in **Romans 10** we are given the flow chart of salvation. The end result is that a person “*calls on the name of the Lord and is saved*.” But to call on the name of the Lord, a person first has to believe in Jesus. But to believe in Jesus, a person has to hear about Jesus. And to hear about Jesus, someone has to preach Jesus. So preaching is needed for a person to come to faith in Christ.
         1. This is why Answer 65 says, “The Holy Spirit produces [faith] in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel.”
      2. And we see many examples of the priority of preaching in the book of **Acts**.
         1. In **Acts 2**, after Peter preached the Gospel, 3000 people repented and believed in Jesus. So preaching was the ‘conveyor belt’ that the Holy Spirit used to give those 3000 people the gracious gift of faith.
         2. And in **Acts 16**, Paul arrived in Philippi and found a group of women who had gathered near a river for prayer. So did he invite them to the water and baptize them? No. He preached about Jesus. And one of the women, Lydia, heard and believed. Preaching was the ‘conveyor belt’ that the Holy Spirit used to give Lydia the gracious gift of faith.
         3. And there are many other similar examples in Acts. The Apostles arrived somewhere and the first thing they did was preach Christ.
      3. So preaching Christ is the primary means of grace. It is what the Holy Spirit uses to produce faith in a person’s heart. And this is why you often hear me and others in this pulpit pray about the Word *and the Spirit* working together. You see, there were more than 3000 who heard Peter’s Pentecost Day sermon. And there were more women there than just Lydia who heard Paul’s sermon. But the Holy Spirit took the words of Peter and Paul and He planted it deep in the heart of the 3000 and Lydia so that it germinated in faith.
   3. So now that we know that faith is not something we produced ourselves, but something that the Holy Spirit produced in us, what should our first response be? Praise and thankfulness! Our hearts should burst with gratitude for this undeserved blessing! We should pray, Dear Father, thank you for this precious gift! Lord Jesus, thank you for your work on the cross that saved me! Holy Spirit, thank you for producing faith in my heart through the preaching of the gospel!
      1. And then, let us pray, regularly, for the preaching ministry of our congregation and in churches and mission posts all around the world. Pray that the Lord would produce and strengthen faith in the hearts of many people through preaching.
      2. But pray also for theological colleges that train men to be preachers. If preaching is God’s *primary* means of grace, then we need theological colleges to train men well.
      3. And pray for our brother Brett as he continues to be trained to preach.
      4. And pray that the Lord would raise up more men who desire to be preachers.
2. So, preaching is the primary means of grace – preaching is the ‘conveyor belt’ that the Holy Spirit uses to *produce* faith in our hearts. And that brings us to our second point, which is **2**. And by 2 we mean **just 2 sacraments**.
   1. And this maybe the shortest sermon point I have ever preached! And that is because we have looked in detail before at what makes something a sacrament. And we have seen that the Protestant or Non-Roman Catholic church universally recognizes just two sacraments – baptism and the Lord’s Supper. They are the only two holy rites or ceremonies that were instituted by the Lord Jesus and required of every believer and which have signs attached – water with baptism and bread and wine with the Supper. And that is why Answer 68 is so succinct: Christ instituted two sacraments in the New Testament: “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.”
3. So with that in view, we can move to our third point, which is also **2**. But here we mean two in the sense of **secondary**. And our point here is that baptism and the Lord’s Supper are Numbers 2a and 2b or the secondary ‘conveyor belts’ that the Holy Spirit uses to bring us God’s gracious gifts.
   1. In verse 16 of our text, Jesus said, “*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved*.” So the right response to the primary means of grace, preaching, is belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. But in the earlier examples from Acts that I told you about, immediately after those 3000 people of Acts 2 and Lydia in Acts 16 professed faith in the Lord Jesus, they were baptized. And this is the regular pattern in Acts with similar accounts of preaching – we see it with the Ethiopian Eunuch; he professed faith in Christ and was baptized. We see it with the Roman Centurion, Cornelius, and the Philippian jailer, and Crispus – immediately upon professing faith in Christ, they and all in their households were baptized.
      1. And this is because baptism is the sign of entrance or belonging or membership – a baptized person is considered part of the church.
      2. And as Question and Answer 66 explains, sacraments have a very practical or tangible value. They are often referred to as **visible signs of invisible grace**. And so, in the case of baptism, we all know that if you want to clean dirt off your body, you use clean water. So the water of baptism is a symbol of our sins being washed away by the blood of Jesus. It is so simple that even a child can get it!
   2. And although Jesus didn’t refer to the **Lord’s Supper** here in Mark, we know from Matthew’s account of the Last Supper that when Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper, He said, ‘*Do this in remembrance of me*.” And that is command language. And from Paul’s explanation of the Lord’s Supper in **1 Corinthians 11**, it is clear that we are to do this often.
      1. And this is because the Supper is the sign of nourishment or feeding. Just as we need to eat regularly, so we need to feed on Christ and all His blessings, regularly.
      2. And this is the same pattern as with the Old Testament sacraments. In the Old Testament, circumcision, the equivalent of baptism, the sacrament of entrance or belonging, was performed once. But Passover, the sacrament of nourishment, was every year. As we read earlier in Exodus 12, it was a regular reminder of how the Lord delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt.
      3. Now, the Bible does not specify exactly how often we should celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Some churches celebrate it every week and some churches celebrate it monthly or bi-monthly or quarterly. That is for each congregation to decide.
      4. But the signs of the Lord’s Supper are bread and wine. And again, what they represent is so simple even a child can get it – the bread represents the broken body of Jesus and the blood represents the poured out blood of Jesus.
   3. But our main point here is that baptism and the Lord’s Supper are secondary ‘conveyor belts’ of grace; they are used by the Holy Spirit to *confirm* or *strengthen* faith in Christ, not to produce it, as preaching does.
4. And this is where we slide into our fourth and final point. We began with **1** – as in preaching is the No. 1 or primary means of grace, then we had **2** – as in just 2 sacraments, then we had **2** again, as in the sacraments are No. 2 or secondary means of grace. And that brings us back to **1**. And by one we mean there is **only one ground** of our salvation – the finished work of Christ.
   1. In our text, Jesus said, “*Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned*.” So you can divide all of humanity into two groups – the saved and the condemned. The saved are those who have their sins forgiven and who receive eternal life, and the condemned are those whose sins are not forgiven and who will spend all eternity in hell. And what is it that separates the saved from the condemned? Belief – “*Whoever believes … is saved and whoever does not believe is condemned*.”
      1. Listen to **Romans 10:9**: “*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved*.” So it is all about belief.
      2. But as we have seen, this belief is produced in our hearts, through preaching, by the Holy Spirit. So even our believing is a gracious gift from God. Therefore, the act of believing is not a ground of our salvation. You are not saved because you have believed; the only ground of salvation, the entire basis of our salvation, the beginning and end of our salvation, as Answer 66 puts it, is “Christ’s one sacrifice finished on the cross.” And as Answer 67 puts it, “[Your] entire salvation rests on Christ’s one sacrifice on the cross.”
      3. Christ did not say on the cross, Well, my part is finished, the rest is up to you; He said, “*It is finished*.” And the power of His finished work is with Him in heaven. The way we receive it is by faith, which the Holy Spirit produces in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel and confirms through our use of the sacraments. But His finished work is the only ground of our salvation. And preaching and the sacraments together point us to His finished work.
   2. So brothers and sisters, is it good for you to be in church this afternoon? Absolutely! Is it good for you to take time this week to think about the Lord’s Supper and to examine yourself? Certainly! Is it good for you to try to be more faithful in your obedience? For sure. But your salvation does not rest on those things; it rests on Christ! There is nothing that you can do to add to what He has already done! And on the other side of the coin, do your sins grieve the Holy Spirit? Yes they do. Will they trouble you even to the point that you might doubt your salvation? Yes they will. But what is the only ground of your salvation – “Christ’s one sacrifice finished on the cross.” Praise God for preaching and the sacraments, the ‘conveyor belts’ that the Holy Spirit uses to give us every salvation gift. Amen.