

STUDY 11 The Means of Grace

Four main points

1. Private Devotions
2. Public Worship
3. Baptism
4. The Lord's Supper

1. Private Devotions

Reading:

KTT 293–296
H & W 166-167
John 16:24; Rom. 8:26, 27; 2 Tim. 3:14-16

2. Public Worship

Reading:

KTT 283–284
H & W 167-168
Acts 2:42-47; Col. 3:15-17

3. Baptism

Reading:

KTT 284–289
H & W 168-173
Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:3-5; Tit. 3:5; Col. 2:11

4. The Lord's Supper

Reading:

KTT 289–293
H & W 173-178
Matt. 26: 26-28; 1 Cor. 11:23-29

1. Private Devotions

Broadly this is prayer and Bible Study, though devotional reading and other practices (e.g. meditation) could be added. The Christian life is about communing with God and serving him. The chief means of communing with God and knowing his will are prayer and Bible Study.

Hammond says:

The nature of prayer is very far from being generally understood. To many Christians it is merely an instrument for obtaining deliverance from awkward situations or the obtaining of something which is desired ... It is the result of our Lord's High Priestly work that the individual Christian has now the right of direct access to the throne of God. This in itself should give a dignity and value to all prayer which other exercises of the soul may lack ... God has connected special blessing with the united prayer of the Church.

The Word of God is the means of grace in three ways. (1) It is the medium through which God makes himself known when it is read either privately or publicly. (2) In Christian preaching it is the instrument God normally uses to produce conviction of sin, saving faith and sanctification. (3) It is connected closely with all the other means of grace.

There seems to be no doubt that the Christian will derive great benefit from the practice of a daily personal devotion. These need to take whatever form works for the individual. Prayer is not a technique. We need to learn from Jesus the value and importance of regular prayer. Prayer enables us to grow as Christians, to serve God, to praise God and to experience God. The Bible directs the Christian life, equips the Christian for battle, energises the Christian for service, corrects the Christian from error, develops faith and teaches God's will.

2. Public Worship

There is a natural relationship between private devotions and public worship. If those who gather together in public worship are devout Christians then a quality of the knowledge and presence of God will be discernible.

It is true that a Christian can worship anywhere but there is an emphasis in Scripture on the gathering together of the people of God, as if God delighted in the gathering, every bit as much as we delight in the best of family gatherings.

All the important elements from our private devotions come to the surface in public worship. The Christian is uplifted, challenged, encouraged by the prayers, worship and gathering around the Scriptures that is experienced when meeting with the people of God. The place of the exposition of the Scriptures is very important:

While the Holy Spirit is the true giver of full understanding, the individual Christian's capacity for the reception of divine teaching is limited. One of the means provided by God for increase in the capacity for reception and in the knowledge of divine things is the spoken ministry of the Word of God ... Preaching is 'truth expressed through personality' and too much emphasis cannot be laid on the value to the Christian of the stimulus to deeper study supplied by the wider experience of the true Christian minister.

The ministry of the Word of God and the proclamation of the truth are vital in authentic Christian Worship. We tell forth the truth about God in the context of acknowledging the truth about ourselves. The acceptance of Christianity's revealed truth is essential. False teaching is opposed throughout the Bible and especially in the New Testament letters. The teaching of the Church is not only to be learned in theory but also to be practised.

3. Baptism

The Protestant Church acknowledges just two sacraments - Baptism and the Lord's Supper. These are means through which the constant activity of God becomes more fully known. It is not the sacramental action that confers the grace of God (*ex opere operato*, 'by the act performed') but through faith the sacraments may help us receive the grace of God.

Baptism is the means of entry to the visible church. Two important areas of symbolism in baptism are purification and dying and rising with Christ. Those who hold that purification for sins is the more important are generally satisfied that the amount of water makes very little difference. Baptists, however, regard dying and rising as very important and so see immersion as the very essence of baptism.

The major controversy in baptism is not how much water should be used but who are suitable candidates for baptism. The simpler view is that of the "Baptist" denominations. In this point of view certain qualifications are required of the candidate - namely, a definite profession of faith in Christ and an avowal of allegiance to him; a certain knowledge of Christian doctrine; a renunciation of the old life and old allegiances. Such a candidate is baptised as a believer, on profession of faith.

The paedobaptist view stresses the grace of God rather than the response of faith. Baptism is seen as the successor to circumcision as the sign of the covenant with the people of God. In Christendom this resulted in the so-called indiscriminate baptism of all children. As Christian belief and practice continue to decline the Church is faced with the dilemma of how much commitment (faith) to require on the part of the parents of those presented in baptism. Confirmation (or similar) is offered by those denominations that baptise infants while Baptists dedicate babies.

4. The Lord's Supper

Nearly all Christians are agreed as to the obligation to share in the Lord's Supper resting on the followers of Christ. The bread and wine are elements of the Lord's death. Receiving the bread and wine also constitute an act of profession of faith on the part of those who share. There is also the dimension of Christians sharing together in the fellowship of Christ.

The question as to the nature of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper has caused considerable disagreement among Christians. The Roman Catholic view is that Christ is present in a physical sense and that the bread and wine change (transubstantiation) into the body and blood of Christ at the consecration. Protestants regard this as a wooden interpretation of the words of institution.

The Reformed view is generally found in one of two forms in English-speaking countries. The first is that the Lord's Supper is merely a sign or symbol, a memorial of the death of Christ (Zwingli). Baptists commonly hold this view. A second view is that the Lord's Supper is a celebration of the spiritual presence of Christ as a seal and pledge of what God does for believers (Calvin).

Methodist theology of the Lord's Supper is very difficult because of the High-Church background of the Wesleys reflected in the collection of *Hymns for the Lord's Supper*. Generally these affirm the latter Reformed view outlined above.

It is commonly believed that the Lord's Table is open to all in the Methodist Church and in practice this is true. However, in theory communion is for the baptised members of our Church and occasional visitors from other Churches. Historically receiving communion was very much linked with membership. Latterly controversy has centred on whether children may receive communion and if so at what age.