

THE MEANS GOD USES TO PRODUCE AND STRENGTHEN FAITH

Faith is a gift from God. If faith were a product that the church could manufacture then churches would be faith factories. The elders would ask you to bring to them your children and seekers from the community for them to work on and then, when they're finished, return them as believers. Various churches could compete with one another to see which churches turn out the best believers. In fact, the way some churches operate these days, it seems to go a bit like this sometimes.

But the church, or preachers or elders or parents, or anyone, cannot produce faith and we cannot give it to anyone. We do speak about passing on the faith to the next generation but then we are talking about teaching biblical doctrine to our children. We can also show by example what it is like to believe in God. And we can witness and explain the things of the Bible. But what we cannot do is turn the light on inside peoples' minds and have them believe and trust in God. Faith is not ours to give. Only God can give faith. The question is therefore - how does God give faith? How does faith begin to work in the heart.

Well, God uses His Word and the Sacraments. They are the means, the channels, the instruments that God uses. Let us then hear the Word of God about **THE MEANS GOD USES TO PRODUCE AND STRENGTHEN FAITH.**

1. Through the Word God's Spirit produces and strengthen faith.

Before God's Word was written down God revealed Himself in other ways. There were special appearances of God, like God talking to Adam and Eve. God telling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and then telling him not to. God talking to Moses from the burning bush. Sometimes God performed special signs and wonders. Or God made His purposes known in a vision. And so on. We call these theophanies. In these different ways God revealed Himself when the Bible books were not yet written. And through these special appearances, often dramatic and spectacular, God caused the people to believe in Him. These special revelations of God did not happen all the time. They occurred mainly at Creation, the Great Flood, at the time of the Exodus out of Egypt and during Israel's wanderings in the wilderness, and again during the time of the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

Moses was the first one whom God instructed to write down what God had said and done from the time of creation up to the time when Israel entered the promised land. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are also known as the Five Books of Moses. We call them that but to Old Testament Israel, who were the first to have them, they were known as The Law. After Moses God revealed Himself through the prophets and their books were added to The Law. Together they made up the whole Old Testament and it was known as The Law and the Prophets. They were regularly read and taught to the Jewish people and were the main means that God's Spirit used to produce and strengthen faith in the hearts of His covenant people.

When Jesus came then God again did many signs and wonders. And that's understandable because through Jesus God revealed Himself most clearly. In fact Jesus was God's fullest and final revelation. The task of the New Testament apostles and prophets, who came after Jesus, was to further explain and apply all what Jesus did and taught. God gave some new revelations to the apostles but it consisted mainly of applying Jesus' Person and Work to the New Testament church. When the apostles and prophets of the first century died, then the books that make up the Old and New Testament became God's Word for the church. The written Word about God's dealings with His people Israel and the teaching and miracles of Jesus and the apostles was all what was needed for the church's work to spread the gospel far and wide. You didn't have to ask for new miracles or new teachings because God's Word in all what it said was fully reliable and trustworthy.

In Jesus God finished saying everything He wants to say. We base this on what is said in Hebrews 1:1, 2: *"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son."*

And so God commanded the New Testament church to make disciples of all nations by teaching them to observe everything Jesus commanded. For people of any age and place to come to faith they must hear or read the written Word of God about Jesus. No one comes to a saving faith in Christ where the Scriptures have not been preached or taught or passed on. We must keep on emphasising that the Holy Spirit produces faith in our hearts through the preaching of the holy gospel.

But throughout the history of the church there have been people who claimed that God spoke to them in ways other than through the Scriptures. They were not thinking of general revelation where God reveals His power and glory in nature, history and conscience. No, they claimed to have heard a voice or seen a vision or had a special experience. Even today within the Christian church there are differences of opinion as to whether or not God still reveals Himself directly like He did to Abraham, Moses, the prophets, Jesus or the apostles. The question really has to do with whether or not the written Word of God is sufficient and the Belgic Confession is very emphatic that it is [art. 7]. The Westminster Confession clearly states, "those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased." [ch.1.1].

These Confessions are saying that we have the Bible as a clear, true and infallible record of what God has done in ages past, and especially what He has done in Christ, and what He will do up to the second coming of Christ. Anything in addition to that, things that people may claim to have seen or heard, are never as valuable or as truthful as the Bible.

God is perfectly free, of course, to use any event, or any person, to prepare the hearts of those whom He is going to call through His Word. Some missionaries have come to peoples who never before heard the Word of God but were keen to receive it. Or an invitation to come to church or a warm welcome given to the visitor at church may be the Spirit's way of making someone receptive to the gospel when they hear it preached. Your Christian witness to an unbeliever can lead to a follow-up contact where he or she welcomes regular instruction of the gospel. God's way of reaching the heart of someone can be a church wedding or a church funeral, where people, who otherwise never hear God's Word, will hear it then. God can use your invitation to a neighbour for a cuppa or a meal as a means to reach their hearts. He can use loneliness to drive a person to search for God. In fact, more often than not, it is hardship and not affluence that drives people to call out to God for help and deliverance. Suffering, more so than health, has been used by God to have people come to know about His peace and comfort.

Missionaries, of course, have also met with hostility and even death. Life's trials can also make people bitter and resentful over against God. Lack of Christian love and un-Christian behaviour by Christians can cause people to give the church a big miss. Cruel teasing and ridicule at school can drive a young person away from God.

But whatever ways God uses to prepare the heart towards a saving faith, they are merely avenues leading up to what the Spirit is able to do through the preaching of the holy gospel - making a heart dead in sin come alive in Christ. A general interest in God is not yet saving faith. A mere seeking or a searching for God does not yet save the sinner.

Christ saves sinners through faith. And what is faith again? Faith is a combination of knowledge, acceptance and trust. In order to believe in God and all what He has revealed in the Bible you must *know* what the Bible is teaching. Then you must *accept* as truth what the Bible is teaching. And then you must *personally* trust that Jesus is also *your* Saviour and Lord. And once faith has begun in the heart, like a seed that is planted and begins to grow, then it needs the ongoing preaching and teaching of God's Word to keep it alive and make it grow further and stronger.

Let's say a bit more on *how* the Holy Spirit uses the Scriptures to produce faith in the heart. Let's look at some examples from the Bible. We mention Lydia first. She was Jewish and therefore still worshipped God in the Old Testament way and believed that the Messiah was still to come. Lydia and some other women used to come together for prayer. They had not yet heard that Jesus was the Messiah. Providentially, God made Paul go to their place of prayer and he preached the gospel to these women. As this was taking place, as Lydia heard what Paul was saying, then "*The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message*" [Acts 16:14]. The Spirit used Paul's preaching of the Word to touch Lydia's heart. As she listened she began to realise that she was a sinner in need of salvation and Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, through whom she could become right with God.

The other women who were with her heard the same message, but on that particular day it was only Lydia who responded positively to the preaching. God's Spirit works as He pleases. He uses God's Word to work faith in the heart but it remains God's sovereign pleasure as to whom He will cause to respond and when. Our task is simply to keep on preaching and teaching His Word. We simply sow the seed and God will produce a harvest.

Then look at the Philippian jailer. His circumstances were quite different. Lydia was Jewish and already knew about God. The jailer was probably a Roman and had no prior knowledge of God. Paul and Silas were brought to his prison in a terrible state. They had been severely beaten. It didn't bother the jailer, he was used to that. City officials told the jailer to guard them carefully, which he did by putting them in an inner cell and clamping

their feet in the stocks. But in that most uncomfortable state, Paul and Silas were singing hymns to God in the night but we don't know if the jailer heard that. The other prisoners certainly did.

Then God used a violent earthquake to wreck the jail, causing the doors of the prison to fall off their hinges and prisoners' chains to come loose. But none took the opportunity to escape. The jailer assumed that they had and was very afraid what the escapees might do to him and others he was about to commit suicide. But he heard Paul's urgent cry not to harm himself for none of the prisoners had escaped. The jailer was overcome. Who could possibly stop a bunch of cutthroats and dangerous men from escaping when the opportunity was there? The man he took delivery of the previous night, beaten and flogged, and whom he had put in the stocks, seemed to have everything under control. That tough, hardened jailer fell on his knees before Paul and Silas, trembling, and asked Paul and Silas, *"What must I do to be saved?"* [Acts 16:30].

Did the jailer know what he was asking? Did he know what he had to be saved from? Up to this moment he had not heard anything yet from the Word of God. But somehow God had prepared the jailer's heart through all the dramatic events of the night. He took Paul and Silas to his house, washed their wounds, and listened to Paul and Silas speaking the Word of the Lord to him and his family. After being instructed from the Scriptures the jailer and his family believed in God. All were baptised and the jailer was filled with joy.

And what about Paul's own conversion? Paul knew the Scriptures since childhood. He was a Jew. He was part of God's covenant people. Stopping Paul on his way to Damascus was not the first time God had contact with him. It had started much earlier. His forefathers had served God. With a strong tradition in Judaism, Paul had become a Pharisee. You could say that God had been preparing Paul's heart for years even before his conversion. But up to his experience on the road to Damascus, when God struck him with a blinding light and knocked him from his horse, Paul had never understood what part Jesus played in God's salvation of sinners.

Most of you who now believe and have a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus, became Christians like Timothy, who had a Christian parent telling him about the Lord from when he was a toddler. Even before you understand anything much your parents took you to church because they wanted to be there and wanted you to get used to it. What I am saying is that the things of God have surrounded many Christians for years. It's the way of the covenant. You continually heard God's Word, became familiar with it. And God used all that to plant and grow the seed of faith in you.

Let me use an illustration here. Some of you young fellows like working on cars. Maybe your Dad likes to tinker with cars and you learnt a few things from him. The shed or the garage was the workshop. When you were old enough for your driver's licence you probably knew how to take an engine apart and put it back together again. Now the Christian home, the Christian church and the Christian school are God's workshops where you become familiar with the Bible and Christ. Growing up in a home with prayer and Bible reading, where you are encouraged to have your own devotions, and where everyone tries to do things the Christian way, is a wonderful environment for God to prepare your heart for a personal faith in Him. And the same goes for the church and the Christian school. In all of that you are exposed to God's Word. You become familiar with it and unless you rebel against it, the Lord will produce faith in your heart. And not only produce it but also strengthen that faith as you continue to be around in God's workshops, the Christian home, church and school.

2. Also through the Sacraments God's Spirit strengthens faith.

God's Spirit does not use the sacraments to produce faith. The purpose of the sacraments is to strengthen faith. But the Roman Catholic Church has always maintained that faith enters the heart also through the sacraments. Hence the emphasis given to the sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church is often greater than that given to the Word. In a Roman Catholic Church building you see up front, in the centre, the trappings used for the celebration of the Mass. The pulpit from where the Word is preached is stuck to the side somewhere. Regrettably some protestant church buildings also have the pulpit on the side somewhere.

The Reformers rejected this and maintained that the Lord wanted His Word to be in the centre and therefore that's where the pulpit should be. The table of the Lord's Supper and the font for baptism were given a secondary place. Liturgically speaking, the pulpit symbolises the importance and centrality of the Word. Some churches have put the pulpit away altogether and sometimes the minister as well. In his place has come the worship leader and he uses the stage and the aisles for his performance. But showmanship is a poor substitute for true preaching. In a public worship service the minister's duty is to preach the Word and let the Word of God through the Holy Spirit work its power on the hearts of the people present.

Now the important thing to remember about baptism and the Lord's Supper is that they were given to the church to strengthen the faith of the members who are already believers. For this reason the church must not give the sacraments to unbelievers. The sacraments are signs and seals to believers of what Jesus has done to save them. Water is the sign in baptism and the bread and wine are the signs in the Lord's Supper. Sometimes children ask if you can use something else than water in baptism and perhaps potato chips and soft drink in the Lord's Supper. Well, you can't. Water is used in baptism because water cleans away stains and dirt from the body. In baptism the water is symbolic of Christ's blood that was shed to wash away our sins. In the Lord's Supper the bread is symbolic of Christ being the bread of life. As such He is our food for our spiritual life. The wine or the grape juice is a symbol of Christ being the vine and the Bible says that like branches must remain in the vine in order to produce fruit, so also must believers remain in Christ in order to produce good works. It is God Himself who has decided on water for baptism, bread and wine in the sacraments, and we should stay with that.

But how do the sacraments also seal? Well, they confirm what they point to. The water *points* to Christ's blood cleansing us from sin and the bread and wine *point* to Christ sustaining our faith with the sacrifice of His body and blood on the cross. But as they do that then at the same time the sacraments also *seal* those truths to us.

It's a bit like a road sign. You see the sign pointing in the direction of the town you want to go to. But at the same time the sign also seals that fact. It confirms, or guarantees that the direction you're pointed to is indeed the right one. You have been reading the road atlas and worked out where to go to reach your destination. But then you also see the sign. It further confirms what you already know from the map. God's Word is like the roadmap and the road signs like the sacraments. You've read the Word and someone has explained what it all means. But then there are also these very visible sacraments. They give additional confirmation of what you already believed the Word to be saying.

In His wisdom God has decided that we become more sure about Christ and our salvation when we see these visible sacraments. Therefore He has commanded the church to have them. The sacraments are not essential to salvation, like the Word is. With a good map we can find our way to the place we're going, even if there are no road signs. But road signs are a great help just the same. Especially if you don't read the map right. So whilst the sacraments are not as important as the Word, they are still a great help. They make very clear what the Word is teaching us.

The sacraments are symbols we can see, touch, eat and taste. All the worshippers in a church service should see them. We don't take those involved in a baptism in a separate room and do it there whilst the rest of the congregation waits until they re-emerge. And we don't have a curtain between those who go to the Lord's table and those who don't.

The sacraments are God's visual demonstration to the whole congregation of what Christ means to believers. Think on that. In the New Testament God has commanded His church to preach the Word and administer the two sacraments, baptism and Lord's Supper. He did not command the church to explain the teachings of the gospel with drama, skits and plays. There was plenty of that going on in the time of the apostles. You can still see the ruins of amphitheatres of the Greek and Roman world. But the apostles did not go there. They were eye and ear witnesses of all what Jesus did and taught. They had Jesus' parables to work with, as well as His mighty miracles, and in preaching and teaching the Word they used them as wonderful illustrations and demonstrations of God's saving grace and almighty power. They preached in the synagogues, in houses, halls, and in the open air, and relied on the power of God working through the preaching of the gospel and confirming the truth about Jesus through the use of the sacraments. Amen.

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