

It is human nature to doubt God's wisdom and love. Terrorist attacks, natural disasters, economic downturns, personal problems, family difficulties, congregational troubles, and synodical problems sometimes lead us to wonder whether our Lord knows what he is doing or whether he still loves his people. It is human nature for us to think that we can improve on God's will for our lives. We sometimes even think that we can improve his plan of salvation.

We know such thoughts are foolish. God's wisdom far surpasses our own. He knows what is better for us than we do ourselves. His love for us cannot be doubted because he planned our salvation in eternity and in time he redeemed us by sacrificing his own Son for our sins. In his love he has given us everything we need for faith and life and for carrying out the work he has given his Church to do. God's Word makes that truth plain and clear.

That truth is the focus of the topic assigned for today, a study that is both timeless and timely.

Christ's Love Demonstrated in the Efficacy of the Means of Grace

I. God loved the world so much that he sacrificed his Son for the sins of all. God has forgiven the world in Christ Jesus.

When Adam and Eve fell into sin, they ruined God's perfect creation and brought death upon themselves and all of their descendants. "Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12). Every human being born since the fall into sin has inherited a sinful nature from his parents. Sinful human beings give birth to sinful offspring. "Flesh gives birth to flesh" (John 3:6). Everyone by nature stands condemned because "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

But God loved this world of sinners so much that he planned a way of salvation. He promised to send a descendant of the woman who would destroy the devil's power (Genesis 3:15). He promised that a Savior would suffer and die not for his own sin but for ours. Through Isaiah he declared, "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:5-6). Our Savior suffered and died not only for us but for all people. The Bible tells us, "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

When Jesus died the sins of the world were taken away. When Jesus rose on the third day God publicly declared the whole world justified, forgiven for Jesus' sake. John the Baptist was not lying when he pointed at Jesus and declared, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). If Jesus has taken away the sin of the world, then the whole world is forgiven or justified. The Scriptures assure us of that fact – "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, *not counting men's sins against them*. . . God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:19, 21). "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 5:23-24).

Nevertheless, even though God has reconciled and forgiven the whole world, not everyone will be saved. There is only one way to receive or gain personal possession of forgiveness and salvation—through faith in Jesus.

II. Those who believe in Jesus receive the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. There is no salvation apart from faith in Jesus.

God's love provided salvation for us and his love provided the way for us to receive that salvation. Our Lord in his infinite wisdom determined that salvation is to be received by faith alone. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Faith is not a good work that earns salvation. "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Romans 3:28). Faith only receives what God has promised. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Because salvation is received by faith alone, apart from works or merit on our part, salvation is by grace alone. "Therefore the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham" (Romans 4:16).

But what does it mean to believe? What is saving faith? To believe or to have faith is to trust or have confidence. "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:10). Saving faith is trust in the Savior and God's promises of salvation. The account of Abraham demonstrates that the essence of faith is trust in God's promises. "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised. That is why 'it was credited to him for righteousness.' The words, 'it was credited to him' were not written for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Romans 4:18-25).

Even though God has forgiven the sins of the world in Christ Jesus, those who do not believe in him and God's promise of salvation will be lost forever. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believe sin him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believe in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:16-18). Faith in Jesus saves. Unbelief damns.

III. All of God's Word has the power to accomplish what God wants. The Holy Spirit works through God's law to reveal our sin and the condemnation we deserve. The law does not save us because it always condemns and holds us accountable to God.

God's Word is powerful because it is God's Word. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). Jeremiah writes, "Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (Jeremiah 23:29) The Bible tells us, "The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow" (Hebrews 4:12). Our heavenly Father attaches an important promise to the proclamation of his living and active Word. He declares, "My word . . . will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11).

His purpose in giving us his law is to show us our sin, to demonstrate how far from his perfect standard we have fallen, and to reveal the punishment that we deserve. As a mirror shows us that we have food on our face or that our hair is out of place so God law makes us aware of our sin. “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (Romans 3:20). Apart from the law we would be ignorant of our sin and the depths of our depravity. “Indeed, I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what it was to covet if the law had not said, ‘Do not covet’” (Romans 7:7).

By nature we simply do not believe that we deserve God’s eternal punishment. By nature every human being thinks that he can earn his own salvation or at least contribute to it. But the Bible tells us, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of all” (James 2:10). Our Savior reveals that even our thoughts and attitudes condemn us. “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mathew 5:28). “Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (1 John 3:15). St. Paul reminds us that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

God’s Word reveals that we cannot decide to believe or to invite Jesus into our lives by nature because by nature we are dead in our transgressions and sins (Ephesians 2:1, 5). Children in anger sometimes say, “I didn’t ask to be born!” Even though they are being disrespectful, what they say is correct. No one can ask to be born. In the same way those who are by nature spiritually dead cannot ask to be born again.

The Scriptures also inform us, “The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law nor can it do so” (Romans 8:7). The Bible tells us that we cannot understand God’s plan of salvation or believe on our own because God’s message seems foolish to our sinful nature. “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

The law not only reveals our natural condition, it also always condemns us because it demands perfect obedience. “Be holy because I the LORD your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). “Be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law” (Galatians 3:10). The law always condemns because no one, not even a Christian, can keep it perfectly as God demands.

But God also has a gracious and loving purpose in exposing our sin and punishment through the law. For only when we see the enormity of our sin and the punishment we deserve can we truly appreciate his love in sacrificing his Son for our sins. We cannot truly appreciate his forgiveness unless we recognize how much we need to be forgiven.

IV. The Holy Spirit creates faith, strengthens faith, and preserves us in faith through the means of grace, the gospel in God’s Word and the sacraments. No one comes to faith apart from the means of grace.

Since human beings are by nature dead in their transgressions and sins, they cannot come to faith on their own. The Holy Spirit must create new life within them. Paul writes, “Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:4-5). The Holy Spirit works that faith and confidence in our hearts. “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them,

because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). As the Bible tells us, “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3).

How does the Holy Spirit create saving faith? He does not work directly (immediately, apart from means) to bring people to faith. He works *mediately*, through means, the means of grace. In his Great Commission our Savior tells his Church, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). His kingdom is extended through the message he has given us to proclaim. That is God’s perfect plan. As St. Paul writes, “But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this *through our gospel*, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).

We learned to confess that truth as children in catechism class. “I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, nor come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same faith he also calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith” (Luther’s Explanation to the Third Article). The gospel, the good news of the forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus, is God’s power for salvation (Romans 1:16).

Our Savior has also attached those gospel promises to visible elements in the two rites or sacraments he has given to the church.

Through baptism the Holy Spirit brings forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. When the Jews on Pentecost were struck to the heart by Peter’s sermon and imploringly asked, “What must we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). God sent Ananias to Paul in Damascus with the message, “Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins” (Acts 22:16). That same Paul by inspiration writes, “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us by the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:4-7). Because the Holy Spirit works regeneration (the bestowal of new life or faith) and conveys the forgiveness of sins through baptism, it is proper to say that baptism saves. As St. Peter declares, “Baptism. . .now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God” (1 Peter 3:21). Baptism saves not because it is a good work that we do for God but because it is a way the Holy Spirit works or strengthens the faith in our hearts through which we are saved.

Our Savior has also attached his promises to the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper. When Jesus instituted Holy Communion he said, “This is my body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me. . .This cup is the *new covenant* in my blood, which is poured out for you”(Luke 22:19, 20). He gives his followers his very body and blood, the body and blood which procured salvation for us. In his Supper he assures each communicant: This body was given and this blood was shed for you; you are forgiven. Indeed the new covenant is the forgiveness of sins (see Jeremiah 31:31-34). The Holy Spirit uses the promises contained in this sacrament to strengthen faith. God has not intended his Supper, however, for unbelievers (see 1 Corinthians 11:27-29).

Not only does the Holy Spirit work to create and sustain faith through the means of grace, according to God’s revealed will no one will come to faith apart from the gospel. The Bible

makes that very clear. Paul writes to the Romans, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news’ . . . Consequently faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:13-15, 17). The answer to each of Paul’s questions expects and demands the answer, “They can’t.”

Just as no one will be saved apart from faith in Jesus, so also no one can come to faith apart from the means of grace. The very purpose of the Bible is to reveal God’s plan of salvation to us. We cannot discover his plan of salvation on our own. For “no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’ but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:9-10).

On the basis of God’s Word Luther and his followers have insisted that no one will be saved apart from the *external* Word, that is, the Word which strikes our senses whether through hearing the proclamation of the gospel or reading it. The Bible was written to be read and to bring people to faith. Toward the end of his Gospel John writes, “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

That is why it is so essential to tell our children, our friends and family about our Savior. That is why the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments are so central to the life of our congregations. That is why it is so vitally important to support the work of our synod in sending missionaries throughout our country and around the world. No one can come to faith and no one can remain in faith apart from the means of grace. On the other hand, we can be confident that wherever the gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution, the Holy Spirit will be working to accomplish God’s purpose in his plan of salvation.

V. The means of grace are always efficacious even though the Holy Spirit can be resisted when he works through means. Nevertheless, the proclamation of the gospel always accomplishes what God wants, not necessarily what we want. The Holy Spirit always works through the means of grace whether we see any visible evidence or not.

The Bible tells us that the gospel is God’s power for salvation (Romans 1:16). It is always powerful because it is *God’s* Word. You cannot separate God’s Word from the Holy Spirit. Wherever God’s Word is read or proclaimed the Holy Spirit will be doing his work to bring people to faith or to strengthen faith.

When God works *directly* with his almighty power as he did when he created the universe and as he will when he raises all the dead on the last day, he cannot be resisted. On the last day no one will be able to remain in the grave. Some will be raised to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt (Daniel 12:2). However, when the Holy Spirit works *indirectly*, through means, he can be resisted. As our Savior lamented, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, *but you were not willing*” (Matthew 23:37). Stephen the martyr told the Jewish leaders, “You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: *You always resist the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 7:51).

Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit *always* works through the means of grace and the administration of the means of grace will *always* accomplish what God wants it to accomplish.

Our God declares, “As the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:10-11).

Our Lutheran confessions testify to that truth when they point to the gospel and the sacraments as *marks* of the church. “The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught properly and the sacraments are administered rightly” (Augsburg Confession, VII, 1). Since the church consists of believers and we cannot see into anyone’s heart to see their faith, how do we know where Christians will be found? They will be found wherever the means of grace are being used. The Augsburg Confession adds the words *properly* and *rightly* to emphasize that the Holy Spirit does not work through error or false doctrine or false sacraments. He works through the means he himself has established.

It is so certain that he will always be achieving his purpose whenever the gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments are administered that we can always be confident that Christians are present when we see the marks of the church. Luther was so sure of this fact that he once wrote

Now wherever you hear or see this Word preached, believed professed, and lived, do not doubt that . . . “a Christian holy people” must be there even though their number is very small. For God’s Word “shall not return empty” . . . And even if there is were no other sign than this, it would suffice to prove that a Christian, holy people must exist there, for God’s Word cannot be without God’s people, and conversely, God’s people cannot be without God’s Word.¹

It is important for us to remember that the means of grace are always efficacious because the Holy Spirit works imperceptibly. Jesus tells us, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). In his parable of the growing seed our Savior says, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head” (Mark 4:26-28). We cannot put the Holy Spirit on a timetable or expect him to work according to our schedule. We sow the seed. He produces the results he wants. In the *Augustana* we confess, “For through the Word and sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith *where and when it pleases God*” (Augsburg Confession, V, 2).

Sometimes we cannot see any results from our proclamation of the gospel. At times the church may seem to disappear. The prophet Elijah thought that he was the only believer left in the entire Northern Kingdom of Israel. God had to reveal to him, “Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him: (1 Kings 19:18). Sometimes the faithful proclamation of God’s Word may lead to a visible *decline* in numbers. After Jesus’ great Bread of Life discourse we read, “On hearing it, many of his disciples said, ‘This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?’ . . . From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (John 6:60, 66). At other times the Holy Spirit may grant amazing visible results. After St. Peter’s Pentecost sermon 3,000 were added to the church (Acts 2:41). The wicked city of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah (Jonah

¹ “On the Councils and the Church.” Luther’s Works, American Edition, vol. 41, 150.

3:5; see also Matthew 12:41). Through Word and sacraments the Holy Spirit “effects faith *where and when it pleases God.*”

At least one person seeing the declining numbers in our Wisconsin Synod has lamented that we are a dying church. That statement cannot be further from the truth. We draw our life from the means of grace. So long as the gospel is rightly proclaimed in our midst and the sacraments are rightly administered the Holy Spirit is sustaining our life and extending it. A church dies when it no longer proclaims the gospel and administers the sacraments. A synod is in trouble only when it no longer treasures the means of grace or doubts the efficacy of Word and sacraments. American ideas of progress and success center on visible results. God’s definition of success is faithfulness to his Word and the work he has given us to do (Revelation 2:8-11; 1 Corinthians 4:1-4).

Faithfulness requires that we always do our best and try our hardest to communicate the gospel clearly. For the means of grace are always efficacious, but they do not work magically.

VI. The means of grace work supernaturally but not magically.

The means of grace work supernaturally because it is God’s power that works through them in a unique way to make believers out of unbelievers. The gospel is God’s power for salvation (Romans 1:16). God “chose to give us birth through the word of truth” (James 1:18). By nature we are spiritually dead but we are born again through water and the Spirit (John 3:5-6). Through the means of grace he makes us alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:5). His message of salvation seems like foolishness to us by nature but he leads us to understand and believe it (1 Corinthians 2:14-16). Through the means of grace he takes people who are hostile to him by nature and cannot please him (Romans 8:7-8) and makes them his children. For “you are all the sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who have been baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ” (Galatians 3:26-27).

Nevertheless, the means of grace do not work magically. God has condescended to reveal his plan of salvation in human language. God’s Word has meaning. His words are not empty syllables that we mumble as if they were some hocus pocus or magical incantation. Rather God has directed his Word toward the human mind in language that can be understood. God’s Word is not the outer shell of the syllables or sounds that are made but the meaning that is in those words. We do not preach in Greek or Hebrew, the languages of the Bible, but we translate those words into languages that the people we are trying to reach can understand. We convey the meaning to them. That is God’s Word.

As St. Paul explains, “Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is not without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me” (1 Corinthians 14:6-11).

In our world mission fields we strive to understand the local language and culture so that nothing we say or do hinders the clear communication of the gospel. We cannot expect to gain converts if people do not understand the language we are using. We train our pastors and teachers to speak God’s word clearly and intelligibly so that the people they serve will grow in

grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For God's Word does not work magically. It comes through our ears and eyes to strike our minds in language that we can understand.

God's Word is not a magic talisman or charm that we hang on our walls or around our necks to ward off evil or bring us good luck. God's Word addresses our minds in language we can understand to bring us God's blessings.

When we read the Bible or come to worship or hear a sermon or receive the Lord's Supper we are not simply to go through the motions as if simply going through the right motions guarantees God's blessings. Concerning God's Word St. Peter tells us that we "will do well to pay attention to it" (2 Peter 1:19). Jesus warns, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' Jesus called the crowd to him and said, 'Listen and understand'" (Matthew 15:7-10). The Bible tells us, "Guard your steps when you go into the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong" (Ecclesiastes 5:1). We cannot expect our worship to be a blessing if we daydream through the reading of Scripture, the proclamation of the sermon, or the singing of the hymns.

Participation in the Lord's Supper dare never be a mindless act. We do not come forward simply because it is our Christian duty and by doing our duty we will receive favor from the Lord. Rather we come with repentant hearts eager to receive our Savior's true body and blood and the forgiveness they won for us. St. Paul writes, "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until h comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Corinthians 11:26-29).

Even when we baptize infants we must be careful not to think that we are performing a magical rite. We are not simply going through the outward motions. We are trusting in God's promises. We know that every child is born with original sin, spiritually dead, and outside of the kingdom of God. Each child needs to be born again through water and the Spirit (John 3:3-6). Baptism is the washing of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5) through which a child receives the forgiveness of sins (Acts 22:16). Babies are included in our Savior's Great Commission (Mathew 28:19). The Bible teaches that babies can have faith. Jesus speaks of little ones who believe in him (Mark 9:42). When people were bring their babies (Greek = infants) to him to touch them, Jesus' disciples rebuked them. But Jesus told them to let the little children come to him because the kingdom of heaven belonged to such as these. In fact, "anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Luke 18:15-17). The only way anyone can enter the kingdom of heaven is by faith in Jesus.

We cannot explain how infants can believe any more than we can explain how an adult for whom God's message is nothing but foolishness can be brought to faith. Those who reject infant faith and infant baptism often misunderstand what faith is. They see faith as an act of the will, a decision that an individual must make, rather than trust which the Holy Spirit works in the heart. Nor do we know what an infant can understand. But we do know that St. Paul reminded Timothy that from infancy he had known the Holy Scriptures which were able to make him wise for salvation (2 Timothy 3:16).

We are not treating baptism as a magical rite when we baptize infants. We only treat it as a magical rite or a talisman if we fail to keep telling our children about their Savior and reminding them of their baptism and its significance.

VII. *In carrying out the work God has given the church to do we will want to avoid two extremes: 1) doubt in the power of God that leads to substituting personality or human methods or efforts for the means of grace; 2) a careless attitude that fails to treasure the means of grace in our own lives or that leads to laziness, lack of effort, lack of preparation, lack of planning, or lack of interest in proclaiming the gospel to others.*

The power of the gospel is not dependent on the moral character, winning personality, brilliance, or eloquence of the one administering the means of grace. When the Corinthian congregation was divided by factionalism St. Paul reminded them, “What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants through whom you came to believe—as the Lord assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow” (1 Corinthians 3:5-7).

Paul trusted in the power of the gospel, not in his own eloquence. “When I came to you brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on man’s wisdom, but on God’s power” (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). In his next letter to the Corinthians he reminded them, “For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. . . But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Corinthians 4:5, 7).

The power of the gospel does not lie in the person proclaiming it. It is always powerful because it has God’s power. The person administering the sacraments does not add anything to them. The sacraments are efficacious because of Christ’s institution and the promises he attached to them. The efficacy of the means of grace is not dependent on us or our planning. The means of grace are always efficacious because the Holy Spirit always works through the means of grace to accomplish his purpose. We cannot make them more effective by anything that we do.

Luther expressed a correct understanding of this fact and a correct understanding of the distinction between the role God has given to us and the role he has reserved for himself when he wrote:

It is not in my power or hand to fashion the hearts of men as the potter molds the clay and fashion them at my pleasure. I can get no farther than their ears; their hearts I cannot reach. And since I cannot pour faith into their hearts, I cannot, nor should I, force anyone to have faith. That is God’s work alone, who causes faith to live in the heart. . . We should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God’s good pleasure. . .

Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26-29] or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses on it.²

² “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg, 1522,” Luther’s Works, American Edition, vol. 51, 76-77.

Unfortunately, human beings in their frustration over lack of results or desire for outward success often seem to be looking for some sort of magic bullet that will guarantee numerical success or growth in sanctification. In a pragmatic culture like ours in contemporary America with its emphasis on advertising and marketing and in which business models are constantly being changed in an attempt to improve the bottom line or increase market share, we sometimes begin to think that the gospel is a *product* which we must *sell* instead of a *powerful message* we are to *proclaim*.

American pragmatism led the revivalists of the 19th century to substitute their methods for the means of grace. Because the revivalists did not understand the means of grace or how the Holy Spirit works faith in a human being who is by nature spiritually dead, they developed methodology that would bring about the kind of crisis emotional experience that they considered conversion. One of the leading proponents of revivalism, Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875), once wrote that there was nothing miraculous or supernatural about such conversions. He wrote that a revival “is not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means—as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means.”³ Finney was not referring to the means of grace but the methods for arousing the natural excitability of human beings. Because American Protestants in general do not understand the means of grace, sectarians to this day continue to confuse their methods with the means of grace.

As good Americans we can be tempted to judge success by the bottom line and to think that if only we discover the right method or do things in the right way, numerical success must follow. Our synod does not seem to be growing. Church attendance and Bible class attendance are not breaking any records. Even though we live in a wealthy nation, our congregations and synod do not seem to have enough money to do the work we would like to do. We set goals and don’t reach them. We work hard, yet don’t see the results we hoped for or the success we anticipated. We hear a lot of grumbling and complaining. And it is easy to become frustrated.

We will therefore want to be careful that in our frustration over the apparent lack of visible success in our congregations and synod we lose confidence in the power of the gospel. Sectarian authors often offer new methods to ensure success and can even point to visible results. However, we will always want to examine their methodology and its presuppositions before adopting or adapting what they offer. Sectarian authors as a rule do not understand the means of grace or how the Holy Spirit works. Their methodology may be based on false presuppositions. The first question that a confessional Lutheran will want to ask when considering methodology is not “does it work?” but is “is it faithful to God’s Word?”

Salvation comes from our Triune God. Because we could not save ourselves he planned our salvation in eternity. He sent his Son to live a perfect life in our place and to suffer the punishment we deserved. He has determined to give us forgiveness of sins and salvation through faith. Since we cannot come to faith on our own he sends his Holy Spirit to work faith in our hearts through the means of grace. It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace that we can be preserved in faith unto the end. Our God accomplishes salvation for us from beginning to end.

Yet that fact does not lead to spiritual laziness or complacency. The believer wants to please the One who has accomplished everything for him. “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all that those who live

³ Finney ‘Lectures on the Revival of Religion.’ In *A Documentary History of Religion in America to the Civil War*. edited by Edwin S. Gaustad (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993) 337.

should no longer live for themselves but for his who died for them and was raised again” (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

Believers now live as if everything depended on them even though they know that their salvation is entirely in God’s hands. The sainted Prof. John Meyer put it this way:

But, someone might say, will not the fact that God, and God alone, grants faith and that he does so just when and where he pleases tend to make us careless? If there is nothing we can contribute toward our own faith or toward that of others, why then make any effort?

The very opposite. It will drive us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. So St. Paul says. He encourages the Philippians to work out their salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12) and then added this reason: “For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (v. 13).

This reason may seem odd: You work out your salvation because God is doing it for you from A to Z. Yet this is the very nature of the faith which the Holy Spirit works in our hearts that on the one hand rejoices in the great gift of God, and at the same time begins to work as if the whole matter rested in our own hands.⁴

Those who understand the importance of the means of grace will want to read the Scriptures and come to worship to “grow in grace and the knowledge of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). Those who understand their sinfulness and are burdened by their sins will treasure every opportunity to come to the Lord’s Supper and receive Jesus’ true body and blood and the forgiveness he won for them. Those who understand that they were by nature children of the devil will want to remember their baptism every day. For in baptism they were made God’s children, adopted into his family, and were clothed with Christ (Galatians 3:26-27). In baptism they were made partakers of Jesus’ death and resurrection, given new life and power over their sinful nature (Romans 6:3-11). Knowing the power of the means of grace and the blessings we receive through the gospel in Word and Sacrament will not lead to laziness but will lead to a desire to remain connected to that source of faith and life.

We will be eager to bring up our children “in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). We will be filled with the zeal expressed by the Psalmist Asaph, “We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands” (Psalm 78:4-7).

We understand that only the Holy Spirit can produce godly children, but our Lord has given us the means through which the Holy Spirit works and has commanded us to apply those means to our children. We will want to work to strengthen Christian families and support our Sunday schools, Lutheran elementary schools, Lutheran high schools and whatever other structures and forms for Christian education the gospel may create among us so that God’s law and gospel will be applied to our children in a regular, intentional, and systematic way.

It is true that only the Holy Spirit brings people to faith and preserves them in faith. Nevertheless that does not minimize the importance of our ministerial education system. The

⁴ John Meyer, *Studies in the Augsburg Confession* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995) 82.

means of grace do not work magically. Our Lord has given us the responsibility to communicate the gospel as clearly as possible. That takes thorough training. As Paul wrote to Timothy, “The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2). Paul charges those who serve in the public ministry of the gospel to “do your best to present yourself to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). To be able to handle the word of truth correctly takes study and training. Those who serve in the public ministry must know and understand God’s Word and know which doctrine to apply to the needs of people and when to apply it. “Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 2:25). He must be able to “teach what is in accord with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1) and in his “teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned” (Titus 2:8). “He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9).

Those who serve in the public ministry must be “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2). To be able to teach one must not only understand the subject to be taught but also know how to communicate it clearly. He must know how to teach. He will use those teaching methods that are most likely to help the people he serves to learn.

Those who understand the important responsibilities God has given to those he calls into the public ministry will want the best ministerial education system and training possible. Historically we have tried to provide that in our synod. In our world mission fields we try to establish Bible institutes and seminaries as soon as possible because we understand the importance of well-trained national pastors.

Recognizing the privilege of serving in the ministry and the importance of the work God has given them to do, pastors and teachers and other called workers will always strive to improve. We cannot know God’s Word too well. We will not hesitate to make every effort to communicate the gospel as clearly as possible. We will plan as carefully as we can. We will analyze the problems our congregations are facing so that we can do our best to solve them. We will work as if everything depended on us even though we know that all of the results are in God’s hands.

In our local congregations, home and world missions we will want to understand the people among whom we live and work so that we might know the best way to reach them. Although we cannot enhance the power of the means of grace, we can stand in the gospel’s way by poor planning, careless leadership, insensitivity to the lost or disregard for those who are perishing. We will examine the way we carry out the work of the church so that we can do everything in the best way possible. For what was a wise way of doing things in the past may no longer be wise today. Prof. Meyer explains:

Even the most ardent traditionalists cannot stem the progress of the times. In recent years we frequently heard the phrase about the “horse and buggy” days. Methods that were very effective in those horse and buggy days do not bring results in the day of the auto and the telephone. It would be folly to retain them just because our fathers used them successfully in their time. Let them go out of use, and let them be replaced by better ones in keeping with the progress of the times. Here a double caution is place. For the first, consciences must be instructed that we observe any ordinance, not as necessary for salvation, but in the

free exercise of our Christian liberty. When an ordinance no longer serves its purpose, *no harm is done consciences* if it goes *out of use*.⁵ (emphasis his)

St. Paul did not hesitate to make plans or make his plans known even though sometimes God overturned his plans (Romans 15:24-28, 2 Corinthians 1:15-17, Acts 16:6-10). He told the Corinthians that he had laid the foundation among them as a master builder and warned that they should be careful how they built on it (1 Corinthians 3:10). St. Paul did not take a lackadaisical approach to the work that God had given him to do. He wrote, “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16) His tireless labor and suffering for the sake of the gospel are legendary (2 Corinthians 23-29). He was careful not to put a stumbling block in anyone’s way (2 Corinthians 6:3). He understood the people he was trying to reach and found points of contact to present to them the good news (Acts 17:16ff). He structured his life in such a way that would not cause anyone offence in matters of *adiaphoron* (things which God has neither commanded nor forbidden) whether he was working among Jews or Gentiles (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

Like Paul we will not let the difficulties of doing mission work deter us. We will strive to carry out the work God has given us to do to the very best of our ability. We will not let apparent lack of results discourage us because we know the power of the means of grace and trust God’s promise that his Word will never return to him empty. We will make every effort to reach the lost because we know that every person in this world is a precious soul for whom Jesus died. We also understand from Scripture that it is no greater miracle of the Holy Spirit to convert an atheist, an agnostic, an animist, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Hindu, a Mormon, a Jehovah’s Witness, or a Jew than it was for him to convert any of us.

We know our Savior’s love in saving us. We know his love in giving us his powerful Word and sacraments to preserve us in faith and to accomplish the work he has given us to do. And we know his encouragement and promise, “Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

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⁵ Meyer, *Studies in the Augsburg Confession*.349.