

This is sermon #11 in our series “Reviewing the Basics.” We are looking at the basics of the biblical message. Last week we considered the fact that those who are saved by Jesus Christ are saved into the body of Christ and the biblical vision for the Christian life is a vision of the building up of the body of Christ. The church is central to the biblical teaching about how we are to live as those who have been made right with God and brought from spiritual death to spiritual life. We live in a culture that emphasizes the personal fulfillment of the individual. In the biblical vision we are fulfilled by dying to self and living for Christ which means living for the building up of the body of Christ. In hearing God’s word from Ephesians 4:11-16, we were reminded that Christian growth is “together growth.” We are profoundly interdependent when it comes to growing as a Christian. And Christian growth means growing in serving one another in love.

Now this evening we will look at this same subject but from a different angle. We are still looking at how we grow as Christians and we will see once again how central the church is to Christian growth, but the question we will consider this evening is what means God uses to produce growth in his people. The subject is actually a little broader than that. We will be looking at the means that God uses both to save and to grow his people.

Now this language assumes that God is involved in both the salvation and the spiritual growth of his people. We have been seeing that at different points as we considered the whole matter of salvation. The Bible teaches that God brings dead people to life spiritually. And it also teaches that Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit produces spiritual growth in his people. No spiritual life or spiritual growth happens apart from the almighty life-giving transforming power of God.

And the question that we will consider this evening is how does God do that? The biblical answer is that God uses means to bring us from spiritual death to spiritual life and then on an on-going basis to nurture the life that he has given us so that we grow in love and obedience and service. God uses certain means for that.

The word “means” is a bit of a stiff, formal word, but I don’t know of any other word that fits exactly. We do use the word in our everyday speech like when we say, “the end does not justify the means.” Another word that is close is the word “instrument.” We are thinking about what instruments God uses to bring about salvation and spiritual growth. That is not exact, but it is close and helps us understand what we are talking about. But I think that “means” is a better word and so we will stick with it.

So we are seeking to understand how God produces change in us – first from spiritual death to spiritual life and then spiritual growth so that we grow in our love for God and for one another and grow in our obedience and zeal and joy and all the other things that are involved in Christian living. The idea that sums it all up is Christlikeness. If we are Christians, God is at work in us to make us more like Christ and he uses certain means to do it.

A key verse here is Acts 2:42 which describes what the people who were saved on the day of Pentecost did. Acts 2:42 says, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of

bread and the prayers.” Why did they do that? Well no doubt they did it because they were told to do it. The first thing that Acts 2:42 says is that they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. And no doubt the apostles’ teaching included what they should do in order to grow now that they had believed in Jesus.

Now the whole story in Acts 2 teaches the central importance of the preaching of the word of God. Acts 2 tells the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the first believers and what happened as a result of that. Jesus had risen from the dead and he had spent some time with his disciples and then he had ascended into heaven, but just before he ascended into heaven, he told them to wait until the Holy Spirit would come upon them. Acts 2 describes what happened when the Holy Spirit came upon the early church. Preaching is what happened. And then thousands of people were saved through that preaching. God used the means of preaching to save a large number of people.

We have read the summary of Peter’s sermon. And we have read the result of Peter’s sermon in the context of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Verse 37 says, “Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” Verse 38, “And Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit....’” Verse 40, “And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this crooked generation.’” And the result? Verse 41, “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.”

Here we see how God used the preaching of his word to save sinners. The Holy Spirit was the one who did the saving, but he did it by means of the preaching of the word of God. And then the first thing that we read about the people who were saved was that “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching....” The first and primary means that God uses to save and grow his people is the word of God and particularly the preached word of God. That is what we see in this passage.

Let me just mention two other key passages here. Romans 10:17 says, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” That is what we see happening on the day of Pentecost. People are saved through hearing the preaching of the word of Christ. The second text is 1 Peter 2:2, “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation.” The pure spiritual milk is the word of God.

It is because of these texts and many more like them that we confess in the WSC A.89, “The Spirit of God causes the reading and especially the preaching of the word to convince and convert sinners and to build them up in holiness and comfort through faith to salvation.”

Why does the Catechism say, “especially the preaching of the word?” Because this is what the Bible teaches and emphasizes. The Bible is full of preaching and preachers. Much of the Bible is messages from people inspired by God which were originally delivered by preaching. The prophets were preachers. Jesus was a

preacher. The apostles were preachers. And they instituted the office of non-inspired preaching to proclaim the inspired word of God.

In 1 Timothy 5:17 Paul spoke of elders “who labor in preaching and teaching.” In 2 Timothy, Paul told Timothy to “preach the word” to “be ready in season and out of season,” to “reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”

We must remember that in Bible-times people did not have copies of the Bible in their homes. For the most part their access to the Bible was through the public reading and preaching of the Word of God. What this means is that most of the time when the Bible speaks about the word of God it is the word of God publicly read and preached that it is talking about. It is in that light that we must understand one of the key passages about the Scriptures in the Scriptures, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

In the biblical teaching the preaching of the word of God is central to both the salvation and the spiritual growth of God’s people. In our time, we have access to the Bible away from the meetings of the church. And it is a proper inference from the Scriptural teaching that we read and study the Bible in our homes – both individually and in families. But that is never intended to replace the biblical focus on the public reading and preaching of the Scriptures. Which is why answer 89 of the WCF is worded the way that it is. “The Spirit of God causes the reading and especially the preaching of the word to convince and convert sinners and to build them up in holiness and comfort through faith to salvation.”

The preaching of the word of God in the gatherings of the people of God is one of the primary means that the Holy Spirit uses to convert sinners and to build them up. And it is in keeping with that biblical emphasis that the first converts who were saved through Peter’s preaching on the day of Pentecost “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching....” They “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching....” The word “devoted” is very important here. It means that since the primary means that God uses to save and build up his people is the preaching of the apostles’ teaching, we must be devoted to being under the preaching of the word of God.

This is why preaching is such a big deal in the Reformed tradition. This is why historically keeping the Lord’s day as a holy day, largely by having two worship services, has until very recently been almost the universal practice of the Christian church. Preaching is the key means that God has ordained for the salvation and spiritual growth of his people. And when Acts 2 says that the first converts devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, it means, first of all, that they were devoted to being there when the word of God was being preached. This is one reason why being at both worship services should be a priority for us. It is the primary way that we today are to be devoted to the apostles’ teaching.

This is not to say that all the other ways that we expose ourselves or are exposed to the Bible are unimportant. We are blessed to have classes and bible studies and family worship and personal devotions. Being devoted to the apostles' teaching includes using multiple ways to feed on the word of God. But these are all supplements to the main way that the Bible speaks about us feeding on the word of God and that is through the preaching that is based on the apostles' teaching which is the word of God.

Now in its teaching on the means of grace the Reformed Tradition has also includes the sacraments as one of the primary ways that God conveys his grace to us. We see that emphasis in Acts 2. First of all, in Peter's sermon, when he brings his application Peter says, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ...." And in verse 42 we read that the first converts also "devoted themselves" to the breaking of bread which is likely a reference to the Lord's Supper.

On top of this, both the institution of the Lord's Supper and the institution of Christian baptism come at pivotal places in the biblical story. Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper shortly before he goes to the cross and he institutes baptism in the great commission where he commanded his disciples to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19).

So, we see the Lord's Supper and Baptism instituted directly by our Lord at highly significant moments during his time on earth and we see both the Lord's Supper and Baptism prominent in the account of the birth of the NT church on the day of Pentecost. It is because of this emphasis that the reformed tradition has emphasized the sacraments as particularly important for the nurture of God's people. So, the sacraments are given to the church by Jesus as means for our spiritual growth.

This biblical emphasis on the sacraments is important. It is easy for us to de-emphasize their importance. We may think of our own personal devotions when we think of how to grow in grace and perhaps attending a bible study or a conference, but it is likely that we don't give too much thought to baptism and the Lord's Supper when we think of how God grows us in love and obedience. And yet these two sacraments have been given by our Lord to the Church for our nurture and spiritual growth. That is very significant. And it is why our reformed confessions place significant emphasis on the sacraments in their summaries of biblical truth and why the sacraments are mentioned as one of three means of grace that God particularly uses "to bring to us the benefits of redemption."

And so, it is important for us to ask how often we think about baptism and the Lord's Supper. How important are they to us in our thinking as we seek to grow in love and obedience? Do they function in any significant way in our spiritual lives? We are tempted, I think, to neglect the sacraments as being significant means that God has given to us for our spiritual wellbeing and nurture. But we must remember that Jesus gave them to us. We must understand that Jesus knows our needs better than we know our own needs. Jesus is our Saviour and our Lord and our Shepherd and our King and he has given us baptism and the Lord's supper as means for our spiritual growth. And so if we are to be shaped by the word of God in how we pursue spiritual growth we

will take the time to understand the sacraments and to seek to profit from them by pondering what God is saying to us through them and how he intends for them to function in our lives.

Finally, prayer is one of the primary means that God uses for our salvation and spiritual growth. Acts 2:42 says that the first converts after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” This is corporate prayer. The focus here is not on private prayer, but on prayer together with other believers. It is the kind of prayers that we pray in the worship services and in prayer meetings. The first converts of the NT church devoted themselves to praying together.

Again, this is not to say that private prayer is unimportant. Rather it is to say that the Bible emphasizes the importance of corporate prayer. In its entry on prayer in the church, the Dictionary of Biblical Themes says, “Prayer was at the centre of the life of the early church.” Here are some of the texts that it lists besides Acts 2:42.

Acts 1:14, “All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer....” Acts 4:23-31 – I’ll just read verse 31, “And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.” Acts 12:12 - when Peter had been put in prison. After he was released, “he went to the house of Mary ... where many were gathered together and were praying.” Acts 20:36 “And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.” Colossians 4:2-3 “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ....” Ephesians 6:18-19, “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel....”

“Prayer was at the centre of the life of the early church.” And a great deal of this prayer was corporate prayer. The early Christians prayed a lot, and a lot of the time they were praying together. Acts 2:42 says that on the day that the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church, one of the results of that was that the members of that church devoted themselves to prayer which included corporate and private prayer. They devoted themselves to the prayers. They made them a priority. When there was a gathering for prayer, they were there. The prayer meetings were not sparsely attended. They understood that prayer was one of the primary ways that God brings us the benefits of redemption.

Acts 2:42 also mentions fellowship. Since that was the burden of the last sermon which emphasized the togetherness of spiritual growth, I won’t get into that now.

What I have been showing in this sermon is how church-based God’s primary means of grace are. According to the Bible, the primary instruments that God uses for our salvation and spiritual growth are church-based –

they are preaching, sacraments and corporate prayer. The primary means that God uses for our salvation and spiritual growth is organized religion. The Christian life as the Bible describes it is centered on the church and the means that God has provided for our growth are largely church-based means. I suspect that most of us do not naturally think along these lines. We tend to give much more weight to what is informal rather than formal and what is personal rather than corporate. But what we need to see is that that way of looking at things comes from our culture rather than from the Bible.

It is fascinating and very important that the confessional teaching about the means of grace emphasizes corporate church life of preaching, sacraments and prayer. We have seen how these documents faithfully reflect the biblical teaching. The difference between the perspective of our confessional statements and how we tend to think about the Christian life alerts us to the profound and subtle ways that we are shaped by the time in which we live which affects how we read and interpret the Bible.

Michael Horton has written an article called "Reformation Piety" which traces some of the historical developments that have shaped the emphasis on the personal at the expense of the church-based piety of the Bible which is reflected in the piety of the reformation. He shows how a movement called pietism and early American revivalism has moved the emphasis away from the church and the means of grace to more informal and personally based methods of spiritual nurture.

He writes, "At least in its American version, pietistic revivalism has generated a completely different conception of proper Christian piety. Instead of God's blessings cascading down from church to family to individuals, it tries to work the other way around. But, then, just as the focus of salvation falls almost exclusively on the individual, piety is largely regarded as a private affair. One's person relationship with God is too intimate, too personal, to be regarded as mediated within ordinary social structures- even if they are structures such as family and Church, which God himself has founded." (Modern Reformation July 2002)

This is very significant. It means that the emphasis has changed from the church-based piety of the Bible to the individually based piety of much of the church today. And it goes hand in hand with our society's disdain for organized religion. But the result is a minimizing of the God-ordained means of grace of preaching, sacrament and prayer and the maximizing of the personal, informal religious exercises of personal devotions and private religious activities.

This is not to say that personal religious activities are unimportant. This is rather about giving the biblical weight to the organized corporate life of the church and the means of grace that are primary in the biblical teaching about the Christian life. The means of preaching and sacraments and prayer are the primary means that God has given to nurture our inner and outer life. The goal is spiritual growth and spiritual growth involves growth in love and devotion and zeal and love and sacrifice for God and others.

One of the hallmarks of our culture is a disdain for the past. But that mentality is an arrogance which believes that those who have come before us have nothing to offer us in terms of wisdom and insight. We are blessed to belong to a rich tradition of Christian doctrine and practice. That does not mean that we are locked into everything that is old and that there is no room for change and new insights. But it does mean that learning from our tradition helps us to discern blind spots and ways in which we are shaped by our present that seem so natural, but are in fact departures from biblical teaching and emphasis.

The Christian life as the bible describes it is certainly personal, but at the same time profoundly corporate. Jesus loved the church and gave himself for the church. The Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church. We are members of the body of Christ. We are members of the household of God. We are fellow-citizens with the saints. We are a holy temple. We are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22).

When the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church, the people who were saved through Peter's preaching "devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." That describes a word based and a church-based piety. That is a model for us, and that model is part of the basis for the biblical teaching of the means of grace – the word of God, especially preaching, the sacraments, and prayer.

Let us prioritize what God has prioritized. Let us devote ourselves to the means that God has given us for our spiritual growth. Let us glorify God by trusting his wisdom in the means that he has given to us for our spiritual growth. May this be reflected in the attendance at the worship services morning and evening, at the prayer meetings and at the other church activities.

The Lord has promised to bless us using these means. They are a reflection of his love for us and his desire for our wellbeing both in this life and our preparation for the life to come.