

LD 25; I Cor. 1:18-25; Acts 2:42-47; The Means of Grace I. The Producing of this Faith II. The Content of these Means

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, how would you go about building a church? Not so much the architecture- but the actual process of gathering a people. A popular program that swept many churches in the 90 was the Church Growth Movement. The Church Growth Movement sought to grow churches based on research, sociology and analysis. In other words, if you build it, they will come! All we need is the right programs and the right speakers and the church will grow. Give the people what they want- and your church will be successful. If they want a Starbucks- give them a Starbucks. Just last week I received a magazine here at church offering smoke machines and strobe lights for our church. Is that what we need? I imagine that we all want to see our church grow- but are these culturally influenced mechanisms the right approach? Should we give people what they want- or what they need? So at issue for us today is this- what will draw people into the church? What will bring the people in and keep them here? And perhaps the better question is this? By what means does Jesus build His church? Today we consider this theme: Jesus Christ uses the means of grace to build His church on earth.

### **I. The Producing of this Faith**

The church is made up of those who are born again by the Spirit- those who are joined to Christ by faith and thus are heirs to life everlasting. Those who are right with God- righteous before Him as we saw in LD 23. So then, since faith is so important, we do well to learn exactly where faith comes from! Since we are saved by grace through faith, the origin of this faith should be of utmost importance! So we begin in our first point by considering the producing of this faith. Where does faith come from and how does Jesus produce this necessary faith in our lives? QA 65 gives us the answer- the Holy Spirit produces faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel and confirms or strengthens this faith by the use of the sacraments. The Holy Spirit is the effective cause of our faith- but He uses these means as instrument to produce that faith. Here we are identifying what is called the public or official means of grace. By the

preaching and the sacraments, the Holy Spirit is producing within us what is necessary for our salvation- namely faith that joins us to Jesus Christ. So let's consider what preaching is first of all. Preaching is defined as the official, covenantal administration of the living word of God. This preaching is the announcement of good news- the telling of the message of salvation. Paul says in Rom. 1:16 that the gospel is the power of God for salvation. And again in Rom. 10- faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word proclaimed. So the Holy Spirit produces faith in our hearts when the gospel is proclaimed- or the good news announced in our hearing. There is a specific process that the Spirit uses- in that He opens hard hearts and gives us eyes to see- a mind to understand and comprehend all that Jesus has done for us. So as we understand and embrace the promises of God- we are comforted as we come to see the works of Jesus applied to me. This preaching is not only the planting of the seed- it is also the nurturing of that seed of faith. The Word always comes first and the gospel remains the primary and central means of grace. Although you can have the preaching without the sacraments- you cannot have the sacraments without the preaching. After the preaching of the gospel, we have the administration of the sacraments. The sacraments listed for us are Baptism and the Lord's Supper- and these are designed by Christ to strengthen the faith that has been produced by the preaching. In other words, it is because of our weakness and our doubts that Jesus has given us the secondary means of grace. The sacraments are the gospel made visible- those who know their own weakness but want to have their faith strengthened are the one for whom the sacraments are designed. So the sacraments are called the additional assurances of God. Like a promise placed upon a truthful word. The sacraments are visible reminders and a holy oath! God will do what He says He will- therefore do not doubt! Rather believe! In Matthew 28 we find the Great Commission. Here Jesus tells His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. How exactly? By baptizing them in God's name and by teaching them all that Jesus said. So when we come to Acts 2- what do we find. After the sermon on Pentecost Sunday, 3000 believed and were baptized that very day! So there was preaching followed by baptism. And in our

reading from Acts 2:42 we read, and they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers. How does the church grow? By what means is the church established? Apostolic preaching and teaching followed by Baptism and the Lord's Supper. This is the most basic definition of the early worship service- apostolic preaching followed by the Lord's Supper- with prayers and fellowship. And what was the result of these early worship services? As we found in Acts 2:47- the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. So let's get back to our opening question. How should we seek to build the church? What programs or mechanisms should we implement? Well, how did Jesus build His church in Acts? He added to the church as the church proclaimed the gospel and administered the sacrament! This is surprisingly simple- and instructive. What is Jesus doing today? He is gathering His sheep and building His church. So I ask, what is the calling of our church? It is to make disciples of Jesus from all nations. To disciple those inside and outside of these walls. How should we go about doing this? By teaching- both in the formal and informal sense. By preaching the good news- both in the official pulpit preaching and the unofficial conversations we have. So to make this abundantly clear- it is Jesus who must, who does, and who will build His church! How does He do this? By making disciples of all nations. How does Jesus make disciples? Well, He uses earthly means- people- like you and me. In both official and unofficial ways. In the public preaching that takes place every Sunday we all learn the gospel- and the Spirit produces faith in our hearts. But also in the teaching that takes place in the home and at the work place- where you tell others about Jesus and you invite them to come to church and be a part of your life. This is also a way in which Jesus gathers the lost into His fold. So yes, Jesus alone is the one who builds His church- but He has chosen to use earthen means- people- to carry out this task. These means are very ordinary- very simple and unornate! Preaching and sacraments- teaching by which disciples are made. But do not despise the day of small things! God does not need all the flashy things of the world- only the simply preaching of the truth! All

God wants is for us to worship Him in Spirit and truth! That is what is pleasing to Him- and that is how He is pleased to work!

## II. The Content of these Means

So God chooses to use small things- ordinary means for an extraordinary purpose! Now that we have considered the two, official means of grace, in our second point we consider the content of these means. In other words, what is to be the content of the preaching and the sacraments? Is there a unified message seen in both? As we have seen, true faith is a faith that trusts in God's Messiah- a trust in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation. It stands to reason then, that the means used to strengthen that faith would have a shared focus as that faith! So, as QA 67 asks, do preaching and the sacrament have a shared focus? Yes, both preaching and the sacraments reveal Jesus Christ! As we read in I Cor. 1:23, we preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Although it is possible to hear a message that has little to do with Jesus; the fact remains that all true preaching must reveal Jesus Christ and His work. That is not to say that every sermon must specifically be about the cross of Jesus, but every sermon must either show the need for Jesus' work- or reveal some aspect of the work of Jesus by calling us to trust in Him. Every sermon should be elevating Jesus. Why? Because as we read in I Cor. 1- although the word is folly to the world, it is this same word of Christ that is the power of God to those who are being saved. God is pleased to use the folly of what we preach to save those who believe! So God uses the preaching of the word of Christ to reveal His power to save us- which He does through the death and resurrection of His Son. So it is in preaching that learn that we are sinners who are saved by Jesus who died in our place. And as a reminder, we must never grow tired of this old story of Jesus and His love! Now this content of preaching is also the content of sacraments. The faith that is formed within us is also strengthened and fortified through the sacraments- which again are used to magnify the sufficiency of Jesus' sacrifice. As we saw with baptism a few weeks back- the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all our sins- turning us from scarlet red to white as snow. Rom. 6:3 says that we are baptized into Christ's death. And with the Lord's

Supper as well- we are fed by the Lord- our souls are nourished by His body broken and blood shed on the cross. I Cor. 10 says that the Lord's Supper is a participation in the body and blood of Jesus. So both Baptism and the Lord's Supper are designed to focus our eyes on Jesus and His sacrifice. So as we participate in the sacraments and mediate upon their meaning, we are being pointed to Jesus once again. The Holy Spirit then uses these means to strengthen our faith as we learn and see the gospel made visible. Remember, the production of faith is a work of God the Spirit. Our faith must not only come from God- but it must also be focused on God! And in order to receive the sacraments rightly, the very faith that is necessary is produced within by the Holy Spirit. Sadly, it is possible to see the sacraments being used without truly benefitting from them. For example, it is possible to see and even partake of the Lord's Supper without thinking about Jesus sacrifice or placing your faith in Him. That is why we must come and celebrate in remembrance of Him. Christ must be the center of all that we do here today!

To conclude, the problem with so much of what is going on in the churches today is that what takes place tends to focus on specific people or human inventions. Celebrity pastors and entertaining productions that have replaced the simple, spiritual worship that is pleasing to God. Sermons do not need to be complex- as the Greeks said in John 12- "Sir, we would see Jesus." So the Means of Grace in specific- and the entire worship service in general- should be all about praising God as He revealed Himself in His Son! Jesus Christ and Him crucified! When we keep the worship service about Christ- then we are following in the footsteps of those who have gone before. Jesus Christ uses the means of grace to build His church on earth. So may we continue to use these means as our Savior has designed- to bring our God praise and to produce faith in our hearts!