

Critical Issues Commentary

A BIBLICALLY BASED COMMENTARY ON ISSUES THAT IMPACT YOU

September/October 2004

Issue Number 84

MEANS OF GRACE

GOD'S PROVISION FOR OUR SALVATION AND SANCTIFICATION

BY BOB DEWAAAY

"And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (Acts 2:42)

A soldier in Iraq emailed CIC a few weeks ago. His message exposes an alarming trend in evangelicalism: to replace the Bible with man-made programs. Here is a portion of the email:

I am currently serving in Iraq. I am in the Army National Guard. "A lot" of PDL [Purpose Driven Life] study groups have sprouted up at various camps around Iraq. The people in my unit have done the PDL study 3 times now! They started for 3 months, then again started again for 3 months, and AGAIN started the "same" study. (continuous back-to-back-to-back) At no time have I EVER seen one of them carry a bible into the study. I finally decided to join them on their 3rd study (I was given the book before we deployed on Dec. 1, 2003 and I have never looked at it until mid-August 2004)...I didn't know anything about the book and I was the only one who brought their bible and used other bible passages that pertained to the chapter that day. It just seems like this "study" is sweeping quickly and people are replacing the ever-living Word of God for a man-made book. A good friend and I have been talking a lot about the principles and teachings of Rick Warren and his 'light' approach to the gospel. It seems no one is preaching the Word of God.

dozens of similar emails from around the world. These emails express alarm that "Bible studies" no longer study the Bible and that sermons are no longer based on sound exegesis of Biblical texts. Literally, the Word of God is too often being pushed aside in Christian circles.

This article focuses on the Biblical means God has provided for all Christians to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. These means may not be flashy, popular, or trendy, but they will always be effectual when practiced in faith. The following are NOT God's means of changing lives: mystical practices, self-help groups, Purpose Driven Life study groups, contemplative prayer, twelve step groups, or going to meetings where people are "slain under the power." These and other popular programs are sad, unbiblical substitutes that eventually lead to spiritual impoverishment.

MEANS OF GRACE IN CHURCH HISTORY

Many evangelicals are not familiar with the expression "means of grace," terminology that is common in Lutheran and Reformed theology. The reason many are not familiar with the idea of "means of grace" is that they have alternatives in their traditions like "spiritual disciplines" often billed as "secrets to a deeper spiritual life." Unbiblical practices such as "contemplative prayer" have found their way into many churches under the ill defined banner of "spiritual disciplines." Alternatively, since they

are defined in Scripture, means of grace do not multiply as innovative spiritual practices are invented. We need to understand means of grace and see that they are God's plan to provide for our growth in conformity to the image of Christ.

The Roman Catholic view of "means of grace" is the concept of sacraments that work "*ex opera operato*" (by the work done).¹ The idea is to do the work according to the prescriptions of the church as administered by the priesthood, and thereby receive grace. The Lutheran and Reformed understanding of "means of grace" developed from the rejection of this idea. The reformers emphasized the Word and sacrament (in that order), and the necessity of faith. They limited the sacraments to baptism and the Lord's Supper. Louis Berkhof explains: "With the Reformation the emphasis was shifted from the sacraments to the Word of God. Luther gave great prominence to the Word of God as the primary means of grace. He pointed out that the sacraments have no significance apart from the Word and are in fact merely the visible Word."² Some Reformed theologians like Charles Hodge added prayer as a means of grace.³ Hodge makes an important statement about means of grace: "All means derive their efficacy from the ordinance of God; as He has ordained the Gospel to be the means of salvation, it must be efficacious to that end."⁴

John Wesley warned about people who despised means of grace because in church history so many had followed the outward signs only without a heart renewed by the Holy Spirit.⁵ Wesley defines means of grace: "By 'means of grace' I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace."⁶ Wesley held to the following as "means of grace": "The

chief of these means are prayer, whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures; (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon;) and receiving the Lord's supper, eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of Him: And these we believe to be ordained of God, as the ordinary channels of conveying his grace to the souls of men."⁷

For those who think "means of grace" are only the domain of Lutheran and Reformed theology, I suggest reading Wesley's sermon.⁸ His understanding of sinners groaning under the weight of sin and alarmed by the wrath of God shows a far greater understanding of the gospel than is common today. He suggests to such ones that though God may providentially work in various ways, they should avail themselves of the means of grace: "And in the mean time, the sure and general rule for all who groan for the salvation of God is this, — whenever opportunity serves, use all the means which God has ordained; for who knows in which God will meet thee with the grace that bringeth salvation?"⁹ Wesley certainly did not hold to the "say this little prayer after me" version of salvation.

Though there are differences about what is included in means of grace (Lutherans do not include prayer, some Reformed teachers do not, Wesley included prayer but not baptism), there is agreement that there are ordained means through which God has chosen to work graciously. None of the historical positions claims that God cannot work graciously in other ways, but assert that these are the ordained means through which God confers grace to His people. All of the Protestant versions of means of grace deny that grace is inherently in the substance of the means or that it is conferred *ex opera operato* as Roman Catholicism teaches.

GOD'S ORDAINED MEANS THE GOSPEL

In his sermon, Wesley cited **Acts 2:42** regarding "means of grace." This passage explains the practice of the church that God formed on the Day of Pentecost.

The context shows an important pattern of gospel preaching, repentance, baptism, and the practices of the Christian life. Let us consider the practice of the very first church and how they availed themselves of God's ordained means.

First, Peter preached the gospel. Peter's preaching was not at all like the watered down versions of the gospel common in many churches today. After preaching about the person and work of Christ and His resurrection, Peter indicted his audience concerning their sin: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ— this Jesus whom you crucified" (**Acts 2:36**). The Holy Spirit was at work to "convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment" as Jesus promised He would (**John 16:8**). This is the result: "Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?' And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (**Acts 2:37, 38**). God's ordained means for saving the lost is the preaching of the gospel that includes the essential elements of the person and work of Christ, His resurrection from the dead, the wrath of God against sin, and the need for repentance and faith. Peter told them that this gospel promise was for, "as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself" (**Acts 2:39**).

Not knowing whom the Lord will call to Himself, we are to faithfully preach the gospel to all people in all nations. God has ordained that He will save people through the gospel. Those who change the message to make it less offensive show that they have more confidence in man than in the power of God. The very first thing to be understood about God's ordained means is that the gospel **must** be faithfully preached and no sorry substitute for it allowed into our practice. Paul said, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (**Romans 1:16**).

Peter then told them something that

should not be overlooked: "And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation!'" (**Acts 2:40**). The phrase "this perverse generation" is a reference to rebellious Jewish leadership and their followers who had rejected Messiah. These early believers were Jewish and had very strong ties to the leadership in Jerusalem. These were faithful Jews present in Jerusalem from far off areas. They had undertaken the required pilgrimage to the Feast of Pentecost. The idea that "this generation"¹⁰ was facing God's wrath was explained in **Luke 11:49-51**. For those early Jewish Christians to do what Peter exhorted them to do, would mean severing family, social and cultural ties in a most painful way. They were setting themselves up for persecution and rejection.

This fact that becoming a Christian means leaving behind one's old life and entering a new gospel fellowship is rarely explained nowadays. But in Peter's day they understood the cost and willingly embraced it. They were not just joining a church, they were leaving behind their most cherished relationships. Peter had heard Jesus teach this: "Jesus said, 'Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life.'" (**Mark 10:29, 30**). These early Jewish converts were entering a new gospel family, by God's grace.

BAPTISM

The next thing that happens in the Acts account is a description of these people availing themselves of a "means of grace": "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (**Acts 2:41**). Baptism is part of the Great Commission (**Matthew 28:19**). Those who follow the Lord in baptism are showing their faith by their obedi-

ence, are testifying that they have left their old lives behind (Paul speaks of being buried with Christ and raised to walk in newness of life – **Romans 6:4**), and are expressing confidence that they have new life and circumcised hearts because of faith in Christ who is raised (**Colossians 2:11, 12**). One must conclude that baptism is part of God's ordained means and Christians ought to avail themselves of it if they have not.¹¹

Baptism in the New Testament signifies a death: "Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (**Romans 6:4**). If we by faith follow the Lord in baptism we are saying that we do believe in Christ's atoning death and in His bodily resurrection. We are also saying that having believed the gospel, we have died to our old manner of life. No longer do we serve sin, self, and the world, but we are now alive to Christ. The old self is "buried." There is therein an expression of hope and a commitment to the new life in Christ. There is substantial victory over sin now, and full victory when we see Him at His return (**1John 3:2, 3**).

Paul uses other analogies. In **Colossians 2:11-13**, baptism is the outward sign of an inward "circumcision" of the heart (see **Deuteronomy 30:6**). In this section Paul speaks of going from being dead in sins to alive in Christ, which is what having a circumcised heart is all about. In **1Corinthians 10:1, 2** Paul speaks of the Israelites "baptized in the sea." As I write this, I am thinking of yesterday when we baptized some new converts. I used this passage to explain to them part of the implication of baptism. When the Israelites left slavery in Egypt and were miraculously brought through the sea, the sea closed behind them. God was bringing them to Himself at Sinai to make them a people. Likewise, when we are, in faith, obeying the Lord in baptism we are making a public statement that we are no longer going back to our old slavery because we are now and forever the Lord's! Each of the

people baptized yesterday said, "Yes that is what I want."

THE WORD OF GOD

After describing Peter's message and the response of those who believed, Luke describes the practice of the very first church: "And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (**Acts 2:42**). This verse is a good summary of the means of grace.

First and primary is "the apostles' teaching." The early church submitted to the teaching of the apostles who were the recipients of Christ's authoritative teaching. His teachings were theirs; their teaching was God's Word. F.F. Bruce comments, "The apostolic teaching was authoritative because it was the teaching of the Lord communicated through the apostles. In due course this apostolic teaching took written shape in the NT scriptures."¹² Luther, Calvin, and Wesley all taught that God's Word is a key and primary means of grace. During and after the Reformation there was discussion about what is a true church. Calvin offered this definition: "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists."¹³

Any church that has forsaken the pure preaching of the Word at its public gatherings is robbing the people of God's primary means of grace and is showing itself to not be a valid church. Any pastor who fills his pulpit with anything but the exposition of Scripture, carefully explained and applied, has failed his calling before God. The result will be a few true conversions, little growth in the grace and knowledge of God, and a fleshly motivated congregation. Those who are truly converted need God's Word to grow: "Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation" (**1Peter 2:2**). Those who are not converted need the gospel to be converted. This may not be a popular message today, but it is surely what is needed. By the standards of the

Reformation, many churches today would not be considered churches at all. They are more like gatherings of religious consumers.

FELLOWSHIP AND MEANS OF GRACE

The next activity mentioned in **Acts 2:42** is fellowship. Though fellowship is not usually considered a means of grace, it is very much part of how God changes lives. Fellowship is the corporate use of the means. It is sharing in the Word as a body of believers. The Lord's Supper by its very nature is a fellowship meal. We are to pray privately and corporately. Those who forsake fellowship are harming themselves and the Lord's body. God saved us to bring us into fellowship with Himself and one another. The Bible does not envision Christians with no visible fellowship with other Christians. John wrote this: "what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ" (**1John 1:3**). Should his readers respond, "We want fellowship with Christ but not with you"? That is not acceptable. Fellowship means "sharing of a common life together." Fellowship is a gospel fellowship, people who are joined to the Lord and one another in a common faith.

Today many church activities referred to as "fellowship" are not truly what the New Testament understands as fellowship. Those Christians in the Acts 2 were fellowshiping around the means of grace. Bingo is not a means of grace; nor are any number of activities that bring people together for reasons other than a common work of grace. Activities that nominal Christians attend in a building called a "church" may not be fellowship at all any more than joining a fraternity or civic organization. In Acts they had the Word of God, communion, and prayer as their common life together.

THE LORD'S SUPPER

Luke next tells us in **Acts 2:42** that the early Christians "broke bread" together. This signified more than having an ordi-

nary meal together. F. F. Bruce explains: "The 'breaking of bread' here denotes something more than the ordinary partaking of food together: the regular observance of the Lord's Supper is no doubt indicated."¹⁴ The communion meal is all about the gospel and the significance of Jesus' laid down life. Their fellowship included this important means of grace. I am going to take some time to explain the implications of communion because this means of grace is so tied to various church traditions that many Christians are unaware of the Biblical significance of it.

By partaking of communion in faith, Christians are remembering and proclaiming. Paul says this:

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. (**1Corinthians 11:23-26**).

In these verses, Paul refers to the words of Jesus at the Last Supper. It is often overlooked that this was a Jewish Passover meal laden with Messianic significance. Jesus proclaimed His body and blood as the true Passover sacrifice that would take away sins. His laid down life would appease the wrath of God against sin. Jesus said, "For this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins" (**Matthew 26:28**).¹⁵

The phrase "blood of the covenant" comes from **Exodus 24:8**: "So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, 'Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.'" The phrase "poured out for many for forgiveness of sins" brings to mind this

passage: "Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, And He will divide the booty with the strong; Because He poured out Himself to death, And was numbered with the transgressors; Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors" (**Isaiah 53:12**). The Passover meal pointed Israel back to God's past deliverance through which He made them a special covenant people, and forward to future Messianic salvation. The Christian fellowship meal (the Lord's Supper) likewise points us back to God's past act that delivered us and made us a people (Christ's laid down life) and forward to God's future act that will bring Messianic salvation to its fulfillment. Paul says we "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." We are looking back in remembrance, looking forward in hope, and proclaiming the gospel in the process.

There is great hope expressed in Christian communion. In a first century Passover celebration, they had four cups of wine during the evening. From what is known about the way Passover was celebrated the "cup of blessing" that Jesus shared with them was the third cup. Edersheim comments: "This was called, as by St. Paul, [1 Corinthians 10:10.] 'the Cup of Blessing,' partly, because a special 'blessing' was pronounced over it. It is described as one of the ten essential rites in the Paschal Supper."¹⁶ Edersheim further comments: "But we can have little doubt, that the Institution of the Cup was in connection with this third 'Cup of Blessing.'"¹⁷ Jesus, after partaking of the "cup of blessing" with his disciples said this: "But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom" (**Matthew 26:29**). The traditional fourth cup has been held in suspension for 2,000 years and awaits the time when Christ will come for His bride and celebrate the marriage supper of the Lamb. Paul says this: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (**1Corinthians 11:26**). We proclaim the reason for our hope (the Lord's death) and the object of our hope (The Lord Himself coming for

us).

When He comes we shall experience the greatest of all Messianic banquets! Here is what Jesus says: "And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven" (**Matthew 8:11**). Unexpected people will participate in the eschatological, Messianic banquet, while many who thought that the kingdom was for them will be cast out: "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth there when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being cast out" (**Luke 13:28**). In Luke 14 Jesus gave a warning to those who thought they would be blessed by "eating bread" in the kingdom of God (see verse 15). He warned that many would not heed the invitation to this Messianic banquet, so that servants would be sent out into the highways to bring people in (see **Luke 14:16-23**). Jesus promised his faithful disciples that they would, "eat and drink at My table in My kingdom" (**Luke 22:30**).

Christians of all types have been faithfully practicing the Lord's Supper since Christ instituted the practice. But, alas, layers of unbiblical church tradition have been added to the practice. Nevertheless that the Lord's Supper is still celebrated shows that God has preserved a meal of remembrance for Christians that serves to preserve the promises, much like Passover has for the Jews up to this very day. It is indeed one of God's ordained means of grace.

Let us summarize what should be true whenever we receive communion. 1) We receive it in faith, trusting not in the act of taking communion, but in the finished work of Christ. 2) We do so in remembrance of the Lord, thus being linked with all of the redeemed who have done likewise since the Last Supper, sharing a common hope. 3) We receive communion as a proclamation of the gospel hope, publicly declaring the reason for our hope. 4) When we receive communion we are longing for the Lord's return to physically share that fourth cup with us. 5) When we receive communion we are expressing

our hope in the future kingdom of God in which all true people of faith are reunited with their Lord and recline in table fellowship together.

The consummation of our gospel hope as expressed at the Lord's Supper is described in the following passage:

And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude and as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready." And it was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. And he said to me, "Write, 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'" And he said to me, "These are true words of God." (Revelation 19:6-9)

Let us, as Paul said, examine ourselves to be certain that we are responding in faith to the invitation and are properly attired (see 1Corinthians 11:28; Matthew 22:12). Let us believe the gospel, turn from trusting ourselves and trust only in the finished work of Christ whose blood was shed for sins, once for all, and who was bodily raised from the dead. Thus properly attired in the righteousness of Christ, we faithfully avail ourselves of the means of grace as He is working through His means to change us and prepare us for the Messianic banquet.

PRAYER

Let's again consider our passage in Acts: "And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). Prayer is the fourth activity, but, as mentioned earlier, not all Protestant traditions include prayer as a means of grace. I see one very compelling reason that it ought to be included. The Scripture explicitly says that it is: "For we do not have a high priest

who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:15, 16). When we go before God's throne through our great High Priest, the Bible says we "find grace." Simon Kistemaker comments, "In Hebrews 4:16 the writer urges us to come near to the throne of grace in prayer, for the only sacrifice a believer can bring is a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17)."¹⁸

As with other means of grace, prayer must be of a certain nature to be valid. Prayers must be offered in faith (James 1:6; 5:15). The New Testament has much to say about prayer; but nothing is more important than a valid faith which comes from the gospel and is solidly grounded on the finished work of Christ. Prayer has lent itself to much abuse over the centuries and does to this day. For example, in the last CIC issue I discussed Christian mystics who use the phrase "contemplative prayer" to teach Christians to turn inward through altered states of consciousness. This is not the type of prayer taught in the Bible.

The Bible states many times that Christ is risen, ascended and sits at the right hand of the Father (Acts 2:33; 5:31; Ephesians 1:20; Hebrews 10:12; 1Peter 3:22). Prayer is not turning inward, but looking upward! Jesus said pray like this, "Our Father who art in heaven. . ." Paul said this, "If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth" (Colossians 3:1, 2). The "throne of grace" is the very throne room of God and it is in heaven, not in the human psyche. As we pray, we know we have access to God in heaven through the risen Christ.

The early disciples gathered in prayer. They sought God's help in their time of need. They doubtless prayed for one another, as Paul later taught in his epistles. There is a very early prayer recorded in Acts 4:24-29. In it the

apostles prayed when they were being forbidden to preach the gospel. They quoted scripture in their prayer, confessed to God that they believed in His sovereignty, and asked for boldness to preach His word. Yes, there is grace to be found in our prayers to God. Prayers are a means of grace, not a means of revelation. The revelation is the "apostles teaching." The prayers are based on that teaching and in accordance with that teaching. The answer to the disciple's prayer in Acts 4 was not personal revelations from God. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke God's word with boldness (Acts 4:31).

Simply gathering together with other believers and uttering prayers of praise and thanksgiving, intercession, and petition (with faith and hope) is powerful in its utter simplicity. God has been thereby sustaining people with a simple Christian faith throughout the nations and throughout the history of the church.

There is no "secret" to prayer. God does not tell us to find spiritual "masters" with secret, esoteric, prayer techniques. God hides things from those who deem themselves "wise and prudent." But he has revealed His glorious Messianic salvation to babes (Matthew 11:25). The "prayer secrets" genre of Christian literature is horrible and useless. Such writings have deceived thousands. No wonder some Christian traditions deny that prayer is a means of grace — it has been abused and misused by so many. Jesus warned us about useless prayer techniques: "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words" (Matthew 6:7).

I have before me a book that contains hundreds of pages of "how to" techniques and utterances for every conceivable need or situation.¹⁹ The author had three visions, and embarked on a many year process of learning an "arsenal" of "field-tested weapons."²⁰ This is typical of the "spiritual disciplines" approach that has deceived so many. Trained spiritual masters learn the secrets of getting close to God and

write “how to” books for others to follow. This is not prayer as a means of grace, but prayer as a means to spiritual elitism. There are no super “holy men and women” who have ascended the heights and know the secrets. This tendency is much like the one warned against in the book of Hebrews.

The early Jewish believers addressed in Hebrews were being tempted to go back to the ministry of the Levites and the high priest. The author of Hebrews uses much of the epistle to explain the high priestly ministry of Jesus who is of the order of Melchizedek. The claim in Hebrews is that Jesus has entered the holiest place, made atonement with His blood once for all, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and ever lives to make intercession for us.²¹ People in their fallenness want a holy person on the earth who can tell them how to get closer to God, or whom they deem closer to God. They want a visible priest of some sort who knows the secret of being close to God. This tendency leads to apostasy, as the author of Hebrews warns many times.

Hebrews 11:1 says that faith is the evidence of things “not seen.” When the Israelites in the wilderness lost sight of Moses, (**Exodus 32:1**), they asked Aaron to make them a god. The Jewish Christians addressed in the book of Hebrews were attracted to the pomp and ceremony of the high priest. They could see him, but this Jesus who is in heaven is unseen. Thus the author of Hebrews extols the reality, glory and superiority of the ascended Christ. If they went back they were surely going to perish in unbelief just like their forefathers did in the wilderness (see **Hebrews chapters 3 and 4**). Are we going to trust the one true High Priest in heaven, Jesus, or are we going to find an elite, human priesthood that we can see?

Here is one of the most important passages in Hebrews that addresses this issue: “Hence, also, He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (**Hebrews 7:25**). One cannot get any closer to God than drawing near to Him through

our great High Priest, Jesus Christ. I have asked people why they go to prayer seminars that teach the secrets of deeper meditation techniques. The usual answer is, “I want to get closer to God and have a deeper walk with Him.” That is a noble desire but at the heart of it is the very unbelief that the book of Hebrews is warning about. It is saying, “Even though Jesus died for my sins, even though I have access directly to the Father in heaven through Him, even though I have access through Christ to the holiest place that even the Jewish high priest could not enter (the one in heaven), and even though Jesus has granted me full access to the throne of grace to find help in any and every need, I want more. I do not believe that these things are sufficient.” This is sinful unbelief that will lead to worse deception. One does not get closer to God by a journey inward when one has access to the holiest place through Jesus Christ who is at the right hand of God. The secrets of deeper prayer are leading people away from God not to Him! These mystical practices are rooted and grounded in unbelief.

Prayer is a means of grace but only when understood and practiced Biblically and in faith. What the Bible tells us about prayer is sufficient. The simple prayer of any humble Christian goes directly to the Father in heaven through the high priestly ministry of Jesus Christ. God promises to give us grace through this changeless, Biblical means. God will never withhold His answer because we failed to learn some secret words or secret technique to get Him to give us what we want. That conception of prayer is decidedly pagan. Jesus said of the pagans, “Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him” (**Matthew 6:8**).

NEGLECTED MEANS

The Word is God is not purely preached from many pulpits because the pulpit has been turned over to “forty days of purpose” or now “forty days of community.”²² The gospel is not preached as it was by Christ and His apostles because it offends “seekers.” Prayer has

been redefined to be techniques to gain mystical experiences which are much more relevant to post modern religious consumers than simply praying to the Father in Jesus’ name. The Lord’s Supper is sometimes neglected and rarely explained as it was understood in its Biblical context. Thus it becomes either a rote religious ritual that does not face us with the truth of the gospel or a mystical experience based on substance theory. Baptism for some has become more of an initiation rite than an understanding of the radical implications of being dead to a life of sin and alive, by faith, to the resurrected Christ.

The great tragedy of the contemporary evangelical church is that many have removed the means of grace as the central practice of the church. Not only are they de-emphasized, but in some cases they are also belittled. For example, Ed Smith begins one of his books telling the story of a lady who, “tried to pray more, to read her Bible, and to be faithful in attending the ladies’ group at her church each week, yet she was struggling.”²³ Fortunately for her, her pastor had been trained in Theophostic Ministry and this lady found her help through it. The means of grace “failed” and Theophostic Ministry “succeeded” in removing her emotional pain. It is no wonder, given this pragmatic approach, that God’s means are laid aside for modern spiritual technology which is apparently much more efficient and effective.

CONCLUSION

The story of Naaman the leper aptly illustrates why the means of grace are so neglected. Naaman came to Elisha hoping to find healing. Elisha told him, through the word of the Lord, to wash in the Jordan River seven times (**2Kings 5:10**). This infuriated Naaman who was expecting something more spectacular. He found his healing when he decided to obey because of the simple logic of his servants. For Naaman, going to the Jordan was God’s ordained means, because an authoritative prophet told him so. We have authoritative apostles (the Biblical ones) who have spoken once for all what God’s ordained means

are. They seem mundane to many, so they are neglected. This is spiritually fatal!

It seems rather exciting to go to a Benny Hinn meeting and “get slain under the power.” It seems invigorating to join a forty days of purpose campaign and find out your purpose with other seekers. It feels like a powerful experience meeting Christ in your subconscious mind through contemplative prayer rather than appealing to Him in heaven where He cannot be seen, touched, or heard. It seems liberating to get rid of emotional pain through Theophostic ministry when ordinary things like Bible study, prayer and fellowship “failed.” Why come to God by His means and have pain when we can have a mystical experience and be done with our pain? The array of alternatives to God’s ordained means are many, powerful, popular, and apparently effective. The means of grace have little place in many churches for one huge reason: they are deemed irrelevant by modern religious consumers.

How can a church survive by offering its members gospel preaching, Bible teaching, fellowship, prayer, baptism and the Lord’s Supper? Many pastors have decided that their churches cannot survive unless they adopt new practices and put the means of grace on the back shelf if not out of the church all together. Here is a sobering thought for those who think that way: by the Reformation’s definition of the church, you cease to be a church at all when the means of grace are absent or abused. Even worse, you cease to be a church by Biblical definition.

The next issue of Critical Issues Commentary will address the re-defining of the church. I will argue that many churches have been transformed into mass marketed organizations that meet the needs of religious consumers. In so doing they have no resemblance to the “little flock” (Luke 12:32) that Jesus rescues from the world and brings together through the gospel. They are no longer the “called out ones.”

END NOTES

1. The Roman Catholic church has seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony; [from *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (New York: Image, 1995) 315 – section 1113. *ex opera operato* is explained on page 319 – section 1128. The Roman church claims that the sacraments work through the ordained priesthood which is supposedly linked through successors back to the apostles (page 317 – section 1120).
2. Louis Berkof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1938, 1996 edition) 607.
3. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* Vol. III; (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995 edition of the 1873 work) 466.
4. *Ibid.* 467.
5. John Wesley, *The Works of Wesley*, Vol. 5; *Sermons on Several Occasions*, sermon 16; “Means of Grace” 251; AGES Software, version 8.0 [CD-ROM] (Rio, WI: The Master Christian Library Series, 2000). Wesley describes the issue: “Are there, under the Christian dispensation, any means ordained of God, as the usual channels of his grace? This question could never have been proposed in the apostolical church, unless by one who openly avowed himself to be a Heathen; the whole body of Christians being agreed, that Christ had ordained certain outward means, for conveying his grace into the souls of men. Their constant practice set this beyond all dispute; for so long as ‘all that believed were together, and had all things common,’ (Acts 2:44,) ‘they continued steadfastly in the teaching of the Apostles, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers’ (Verse 42.)”
6. *Ibid.* 253.
7. *Ibid.* 254.
8. It is available online here: <http://gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/serm-016.stm>
9. Wesley Means; 266.
10. See CIC issue 77 for a thorough discussion of the phrase “this generation” as used in the Bible: <http://www.twincityfellowship.com/cic/articles/issue77.htm>
11. I am guessing that the reason Wesley did not include baptism in his sermon on means of grace was because in his day infant baptism was the common practice. Those who promote this practice usually claim that baptism is the Christian replacement for Jewish circumcision, thus it is to be done to children of believers. This tenuous claim rests solidly on church tradition and has dubious Biblical merit. Means of grace are means whereby individuals, in faith, put themselves with hope and obedience under God’s provision. The many New Testament teachings about baptism, including Romans 6 and Colossians 2 assume that believers are baptized, not infants. I say this with all due respect to my Lutheran and Reformed friends; but I have to disagree with their practice.
12. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts in The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 79.
13. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Vol. 4, chapter 1, section 9.
14. Bruce, *Acts* 79.
15. I am purposely not entering into the historical debate about substance theories that surround the doctrine of the Lord’s supper. These arose in church history and for the most part are far removed from anything Paul had in mind. There are good resources that discuss these matters: Gordon Fee *The First Epistle to the Corinthians in The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 545-560 is excellent. For the differences between the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, and Zwinglian understanding of sacraments see Hodge, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 3, 485-525. Any good book on systematic theology deals with the historical schools of thought about sacraments.
16. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* Vol. 2; book 5, chapter 11; 393; (AGES Software, version 8.0 [CD-ROM] (Rio, WI: The Master Christian Library Series, 2000).
17. *Ibid.* 394.
18. Simon Kistemaker, *Hebrews in New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 126.
19. Sylvia Gunter, *Prayer Portions*, (Atlanta: The Father’s Business, 1995)
20. *Ibid.* introduction 3.
21. See Hebrews 7:21; 8:1, 2; 9:12; 10:12.
22. See <http://purposedriven.com/home.aspx> for Rick Warren’s campaigns that now claim to have over 15,000 churches participating.
23. Edward M. Smith, *Healing Life’s Deepest Hurts*, (Ann Arbor: Vine Books, 2002) 11.

Critical Issues Commentary

copyright © 2004

Twin City Fellowship
 P.O. Box 8068
 Minneapolis, MN 55408
 612-874-7484
www.twincityfellowship.com
pastorbob@twincityfellowship.com

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture taken from the New American Standard Bible, © Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995 The Lockman Foundation.