

GOSPEL, BAPTISM, ABSOLUTION, EUCHARIST: VARIOUS MEANS OF THE SAME GRACE

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The question is occasionally asked: “If I have the full forgiveness of all my sins through faith in the Gospel, why do I need the same forgiveness given to me over and over in the sacrament of Holy Communion?” Sometimes this question is motivated by an unbelieving heart regarding the nature, benefit and power of Holy Communion, but sometimes the question is motivated by a sincere desire to understand why the Holy Ghost works through more than one means of grace (Word and Sacraments). In trying to answer this question for themselves, there are TWO false moves that people occasionally make:

1) One is to think that God doles out forgiveness, life and salvation piecemeal, or in installments. For example, it is not uncommon for people to suppose that each time they receive Communion they are receiving sufficient forgiveness to cover the sins committed since their last communion. It is as though God doles out forgiveness bit by bit as needed by the recipient.

2) The other false move is when people think that since Christ has purchased and won forgiveness, life and salvation for me once for all on the cross of Calvary, and since I have already repented and come to faith, Holy Communion is merely a reminder of that once for all sacrifice and the benefits that are mine because of it. This idea ultimately leads one away from believing that the sacrament of the altar is a means of grace. We must avoid these two false moves.

In answering the question why God grants me the same forgiveness through various means, we should start by looking at the relationship of universal and personal justification. Justification, of course, means to declare someone to be righteous. It is a judicial act: a “not guilty” verdict, an acquittal.

Universal justification refers to the reconciliation or atonement which Christ has purchased and won completely for all people with His holy, precious blood, and His innocent suffering and death. Christ has, once for all, accomplished fully the work of redemption. Nothing else needs to be done. Forgiveness, life and salvation are already accomplished facts. Sin has been paid for, salvation accomplished. The resurrection of Christ proves it. “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself...” (2Cor 5:19).

Personal justification means that the forgiveness accomplished once for all for me and all people is bestowed and imparted to an individual the moment they come to faith. This is also called justification by faith. Faith doesn’t add anything to what Christ has done, nor does it make forgiveness happen. Faith is the empty hand which receives the free gift already accomplished and offered to us by God in the Gospel. If we refuse to accept the gift, the gift will not benefit us. Where there is no faith, the Gospel does not profit (Heb 4:2). Faith believes the promise of the Gospel, and God mercifully reckons such faith as righteousness (Gen 15:6).

The Augsburg Confessions says:

“That we may obtain this faith, the Office of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who worketh faith where and when it pleaseth God in them that hear the Gospel...” (Book of Concord, Augsburg Confession, V).

The Gospel and the Sacraments are the means by which God the Holy Ghost works faith in us, and sustains faith in us, by imparting to us the benefits and blessings which Christ has purchased and won once for all on the cross.

The mission of the Church is to preach the Gospel, to baptize, to administer Holy Communion, and to absolve the penitent. Wherever these are being done purely and rightly, there the Holy Ghost is proclaiming, offering and delivering the whole of forgiveness, life and salvation. When one is baptized, one

receives the whole package; when one believes the preached Gospel, one receives the whole package; and when one receives Holy Communion, one receives the whole package.

So, returning to the original question: “If I already have the whole package in the gospel, why do I need the whole package again in Communion?” We must remember that while we live in this world, we still have the old sinful nature in us to contend with. We are new creatures in Christ, but the old Adam in us still rises up and wishes to dominate us. The world in which we live is a sinful world filled with ungodly allurements, and the devil is still active tempting us, accusing us and endeavoring to destroy our faith in Christ. A Christian, therefore, feels his weaknesses and his sins and is in constant need of assurance that his sins are forgiven, and that he is the recipient of eternal life and salvation. We need all the assurance we can get! This needed assurance is granted by God in Christ through Baptism, the Word, and Communion, in each of which He gives us “the whole lot, and a whole lot more”.

When we think that in the Word and Sacraments God gives out forgiveness bit by bit as needed, we fall into the trap of papalist sacerdotalism, in which we climb the ladder to heaven, depending on the church, its priests and sacraments for help along the way. And when we think that because we already have the forgiveness of our sins through the Word we don’t need more of it in Holy Communion, we fall into the trap of sectarian protestant fideism (faith in one’s faith). Countless American “Protestants” trust, not so much in Christ and His Word, but in their own faith. They are always talking about “my faith” rather than Christ and His promises and gifts. Such people despise the Gospel and Sacraments; they think that they are beyond that. They eventually gravitate to some form of sectarian protestantism that offers them some form of a new law by which they can adorn “their faith.” Or, if they don’t leave the Lutheran faith, they try to change it into a copy of sectarian protestant fideism. This is what the struggle in our synod is all about: Confessional Lutherans, centered in Christ and the means of grace trying to hold the line against the church growers, contemporary worshippers, and charismatics who want the LCMS to become just one more generic protestant church. God forbid!

It is the usual thing in today’s religious scene for congregations to have long lists of people on their rosters commonly referred to as inactive. These are people who were confirmed and were once communing members, but who have either stopped coming to church, or come only on Christmas Eve and Easter. Now, one of the things that pastors are required to do is to try to get these people back into a right relationship with Christ and His church. But this effort is almost never successful. Why? Well, it’s interesting that few of these people claim to be unbelievers. Few are openly wicked reprobates. No. They mostly claim that they still have faith despite their persistent neglect of Christ’s Word and Sacraments. “I still have my faith,” they protest. They claim to love Christ, but have no interest in His Word or in His body and blood in the Sacrament. They are deluded into thinking that their assent to the Christian faith, their prayers, and their good works make them Christians despite their persistent violation of the third commandment, etc. They have faith in their faith; they are good generic protestants, but terrible Lutherans.

Genuine Christian faith, in contrast, does not have faith in faith. Orthodox Lutheran Christians are not always talking about their faith and their gifts. They occupy themselves with Christ, His Word, His gifts, His promises. Their faith lies in what is outside of themselves, in God. Such people feel the weight of their sins; they feel the allurements of the world; and they know the devil’s accusations and temptations. They need all the assurance they can get, but they don’t seek it in their faith, their decision for Christ, their good works, or what have you. Rather they seek it where Christ is giving it abundantly: in Baptism, in the Gospel, in Holy Communion, in each of which He offers and gives all that He purchased and won for us with His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death.

We need all the assurance and the strengthening of faith that we can get. And God gives us all we need and more in the means of grace (Word and Sacraments). This is what Dr. Martin Luther was talking about when he wrote:

“We will now return to the Gospel, which not merely in one way gives us counsel and aid against sin; for God is superabundantly rich in his grace. First, through the spoken Word by which the forgiveness of sins is preached in the whole world; which is the peculiar office of the Gospel. Secondly, through baptism. Thirdly, through the holy sacrament of the altar. Fourthly, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren, Matt.18:20 – ‘Where two or three are gathered together,’ etc.” (Book of Concord, Smalcald Articles, III, IV).

Francis Pieper, one time LCMS theologian and Synodical President, wrote concerning the various means of grace for the same blessing:

“Men who feel the weight of their sins find nothing harder to believe than the forgiveness of their sins. Hence repetition of the assurance of the forgiveness of sins in various ways through the means of grace meets a practical need of Christians.” (Christian Dogmatics, Vol. 3, p. 114)

One time LCMS professor Edward W. A. Koehler wrote:

“Forgiveness of sins is given us in the Sacrament not in the sense as though we did not have any before, because the Sacrament was instituted for Christians, and these have complete forgiveness the very moment they believe in Christ and as long as they continue in this faith. Besides this, forgiveness was announced and assured to them in Absolution, which commonly precedes Communion. Nor do we receive a new supply of forgiveness every time we go to the Lord’s Table; for remission of sins is not offered in parts and portions, as our daily bread is; we either have forgiveness for all sins, or we have none at all. Our faith in Christ comprehends the forgiveness of all our sins (Psalms 103:3). But in the Holy Supper this full forgiveness is emphatically assured and confirmed to us personally, and thus our faith in this forgiveness is strengthened. And this is what we need. For under the impact of our sins, which we daily commit, our faith weakens, and may finally die; and losing faith, we lose what we held by faith, namely the forgiveness of our sins. For this reason we should frequently go to the Sacrament.” (Luther’s Small Catechism with Annotations, pp. 304f.)

Those who trust their own faith, their “decision” for Christ, or their works in some way, shape or form, build their house upon the sand. That house will fall with a great crash (Matt 7:27). But those who look to Christ, His atonement, His promises and gifts are continually strengthened in faith through the work of the Holy Ghost in the Word and Sacraments. Their faith looks up to and clings to Christ who came that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly (John 10:10). It is He who is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God by Him (Heb 7:25). And He assures us of this again and again in Baptism, Gospel, Communion, Absolution, so that in our warfare we may stand firmly in the armor of God, assured of victory, and strong in Christ.