

How to Benefit from the: **Means of Grace**

The corporate means of God's grace to His church are four-fold: preaching, prayers, fellowship and the Supper.

Acts 2:42:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

The church doesn't always reap the benefits of the Spirit's ministry to us in corporate worship. It is my hope this little booklet will assist us. This is designed to accompany the preaching of *Acts*.

Beloved, each Lord's Day, the Spirit of Christ condescends upon us in love to give more of the saving and strengthening grace of the covenant. Do avail yourselves of this amazing ministry and be blessed!

Heaven soon,
Pastor Gabe

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To Benefit From Preaching

In the Reformed faith, we have believed the biblical preaching of God's word *is* God's very word to us. The emphasis of preaching in the Lord's own ministry (Mark 1:38¹) and that of His servants (e.g., the book of Acts) indicates it is very important that when we come to corporate worship, we are **ready to hear from God** through His preached word. John Calvin, in commenting on Isaiah 55:11 wrote:

The word goes out of the mouth of God in such a manner that it likewise goes out of the mouth of men; for God does not speak openly from heaven but employs men as his instruments.

Calvin observed the people of his day (the mid-16th century) that if a sermon was preached to 100 people, only 20 would receive it by faith and be edified by it. The rest would dismiss, ignore or be distracted by other things. In the mid-16th century!

So, how can we in our time be prepared to be most greatly edified and God most glorified?

First, we must have a **prepared** spirit. As saved human beings, each Sunday we bring our souls *and* our flesh to worship—that means we bring the war to worship. In Romans 7:15-16, Paul makes it clear the soul saved by grace wars against the old man that remains.² This is true at all times but *especially* in corporate worship so we must be ready for it: we *will* have moments of distraction, of fatigue or disinterest. These are normal but they must be battled—God speaks to us in preaching: He sets forth the path of life and we must hear it.

¹ And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out."

² ¹⁵"For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate..."¹⁷So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me."

A prepared spirit, therefore, is a praying one, a realistic one, one that desires to hear from God. But also, we recognize our spirits come in physical bodies that need adequate *sleep* beforehand and proper *nourishment* for the moment. Beloved, be intentional and prepare.

Second, we must have a **perceptive** ear. The biblical preaching of God's word is God's word to us. As the Scriptures are unpacked, we must be listening to it. We must strive to follow its logic. We need to pay attention to the key words, Bible references and sermon points. Each passage in God's word was specifically selected by the Holy Spirit so that when the preaching of *that* word happens, the Spirit intends for each of us to be impacted.

Each of us has a need to be taught by the Spirit (informing our minds), moved by the Spirit (impacting our affections)—even if the preacher's work is less than it could be the Spirit is *still* at work.

- That is, there is something for us to hear no matter how challenging it might be to discern. Stand ready with pen and paper to hear His instruction.

Third, we must **practice** what is preached. It is the charge of the preacher to lead the congregation from the meaning of God's word to its application. Yet, each of us must be committed to put what is preached into action whether the preacher leads us there or not.

Why would God preach His word to us through the preacher if He did not want us to apply what we hear? Applying the text is the Spirit's work and His goal yet it is ours to partner with Him to see it done. He will give us the insight and the power to do so—He is committed to the glory of Christ and He will lead us.

To Benefit From Corporate Prayer

Those in Christ have access to the throne room of God's grace—can you believe it? The Lord Jesus ever lives to make intercession for us (Hebrews 7:25³) which means He is constant in prayer for His people (see also Romans 8:34). Add to that the groanings of the Holy Spirit who joins Christ in praying for His people (Romans 8:26⁴), we are well covered in prayer!

Still, the Lord commands us to pray (Romans 12:12⁵; Colossians 4:2⁶; 1 Thess. 5:17⁷). Why? To **invigorate** our relationship with Him. Like exercise invigorates blood flow and health improves, prayer deepens our connection to the Lord allowing Him to pour out more grace upon us. The Bible clearly calls each individual Christian to a life of prayer—indeed, the Psalms are rich in leading us in this exercise (e.g., Psalm 54:2⁸).

However, the Lord never intended His people to be isolated in prayer, that is, confining our prayer lives to what is done in secret or in families. The many exhortations to pray in the Bible include private prayer, but the Bible also tells us God always gathered His people together to pray corporately. Moses did this (Exodus 15). The high priests in Israel did this (Leviticus. 16:21). The nation under threat did this in Judges (e.g., Judges 3:9). The psalmists called the people to pray (see the Psalms of Ascent: Pss 120-134). King Solomon did this when the Temple was dedicated (1 Kings

³ “Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”

⁴ “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

⁵ “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.”

⁶ “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

⁷ “...pray without ceasing...”

⁸ “O God, hear my prayer; give ear to the words of my mouth.” The phrase “my prayer” occurs 21 times!

8). And this was the practice of the early church (Acts 1:14, 2:42, 4:31⁹).

The power in God’s saving covenant is uniquely accessed in corporate prayer—in His covenant of grace through Christ, God is saving *a* people not simply *some* people.

When the people assemble themselves to pray, we demonstrate to God the magnitude of His salvation. You understand? By our united praying hearts, we reveal the extent of His love and His power—that it has gone to all nations, tribes and tongues. When the people of God pray in union with each other, we display the extent of the union Christ earned in His blood.

Therefore, in corporate worship, we should expect our praying to be heard by our Lord. That when we come together in thanksgiving, He is well pleased—are the applause of 500 greater than the applause of 50? When we join in supplication, He is moved—is the unified will of 100 greater than the isolated hopes of 1?

When we pray corporately, our community is built stronger—it is what the Lord returns upon His praying people. (Consider the impact of the corporate prayer meetings in Acts 2:42 and 4:31 [see the footnote on this page].)

Beloved, actively join in the corporate prayer during worship. Agree out loud or in your minds with what is prayed. Squeeze your mind so that each word prayed becomes your prayed words; concentrate on them; respond to them; join them. As God’s beloved people, He hears. He is pleased. He will act.

⁹ “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.”

To Benefit From Fellowship

Our corporate fellowship is a means of grace. Have you ever considered that? From the dawn of human history, God judged isolation as “not good” (Genesis 2:18¹⁰). Interestingly, man was *not* alone—God was there. Still, God created us to be in community with each other.

The implications of this are beyond the scope of this short note.¹¹ However, in Acts 2:42, “fellowship” is listed alongside the three other means of grace (preaching, prayer and the Supper). Since this is true, let’s consider the purpose and the practice of corporate fellowship.

The **purpose** of fellowship.

For the six days prior to the Lord’s Day, we choose with whom we associate. Life requires we associate with some we do not choose (e.g., janitor, policeman or barista) but for the most part, we order our week around relationships we choose. Then the Lord’s Day arrives and we are thrust in the midst of the people *God* has chosen.

These people may have some history with you, but not like the intimates you choose. Because God has chosen how He constitutes the church’s population, we are in the midst of those with widely varied personalities, backgrounds, interests, fears, joys and hopes. These are incredibly important to our individual spiritual lives. The Lord has worked providentially in the lives of all His people and then He puts us all together in a mish-mash that doesn’t seem to make much sense to us but is purposefully done by Him.

When we embrace this holy mish-mash as God’s providential plan for each of us on the Lord’s Day, we open

¹⁰ “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone...’ ”

¹¹ Ecclesiastes 4 reminds us, “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow.... Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

ourselves up to be both *helped* and *helper*. These are the two sides of every Christian: the need to be helped (2 Corinthians 1:6¹²) and the obligation to be helper (Hebrews 3:13¹³).

Only the Lord knows what each of us truly needs and the person who shall assist us in that time—this we find in the fellowship of the saints. As the Spirit works in the corporate gathering, He orchestrates the help we need and those we need to help. In the fellowship of the Lord’s Day, the grace and mercy we must have in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16¹⁴), God provides *through* the ministry of His people.

The **practice** of fellowship.

Corporate worship is where God arranges you to be helped and for you to help. This is accomplished when we make coming to corporate worship a priority. Then, when we greet each other; when we ask about each other’s weeks; when we seek ways to engage in prayer; when we share our own requests; when we smile at each other; when we are honest with each other.

Beloved, we mustn’t treat corporate worship as just any other gathering of people! Christ’s Spirit is active in our intentional pursuing each other. When we’re joyful in the Lord, be prepared to share encouragement. When we’re struggling, be prepared to be honest and ask for prayer. Recognize that if you belong to Christ, then you are His Spirit’s agent to bring grace and mercy to another—take advantage of this on the Lord’s Day; it is the Day He has chosen to do this. In *Acts*, each time the early church gathered with intentionality, wonderful things happened (see Acts 2:43-47 and 4:31).

¹² “If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.”

¹³ “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

¹⁴ “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

To Benefit From The Supper

The Lord's Supper is an indescribable gift that He uses to impart His grace to His people. He does this by communing with us as we eat the Supper. Consider Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 10 as we seek great benefit from the Supper:

First Corinthians 10:16-17:

¹⁶The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?

¹⁷Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Two things to note. First, when we eat and drink by faith, we “participate” in Christ. The word also means “communion,” “close association” and “sharing.” In the context, Paul exhorts the church not to “participate” in the meals dedicated to demons because it is a joining with them—a close association with them; a sharing with them. As an analogy, in chapter 6, Paul warns the church not to “join” with a prostitute, to become “one” with her. He is warning them similarly here on a spiritual level.

To eat and drink at the Supper, we are participating in, sharing in, communing with Christ—again. In this sharing by faith, He gives us fresh outpouring of His grace by His Spirit—not to save, but to comfort, to strengthen, to revive. He refreshes the *sign* of our salvation and reinforces the *seal* of it. This work happens in our souls when we eat by faith, that is, eat trusting He is acting on our souls, giving us grace.

This is part 1 of what it means to “discern the body.”

- We are awakening ourselves to the reality that we are communing with the Risen Christ through His Spirit in which He gives us more of Himself. Am I prepared for this? Have I cleansed myself anew in His blood—seeking forgiveness that I might enjoy full fellowship? Am I eager for a fresh outpouring of His Spirit—looking for it?

But secondly, in verse 17, Paul reminds the church we eat of the same loaf. In that moment, we who are many, are one—one body, one people, one holy nation: the Body of Christ.

He anchors this truth in the fact that there is only one loaf—a figurative reference to the one Bread of Life, Jesus Christ (John 6:35, 48¹⁵). Because we are united to Him by faith, that we are a Body and *not* just bodies in the same room, when we eat the Supper we must reckon with our engagement with our brothers and sisters.

This is part 2 of what it means to “discern the body.”

- Have I joined this body of believers? Do I take an active part in her worship and work? Am I giving my time, talents and treasure to uphold her mission? Am I reconciled with others? Have I asked for forgiveness as I should’ve? Have I granted it when asked? Do I speak well of her and invite others to join her? Do I treat the Body in ways the Lord does (e.g., Ephesians 5:25-27¹⁶)?

Engaging in “discerning the Body” like this will open the gates for the fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit by the Lord of the church.

We do both of these things—commune with Christ and with each other—by faith. And when we do, we open ourselves up the blessed ministry of the Spirit. Therefore, we must ask the Spirit to help us believe and trust that as we eat and drink, He acts on our souls.

¹⁵ “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.’”

¹⁶ “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”