



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Spirit in relation to the Word, means in relation to grace

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Abstract

If a strong working concept of the Spirit–Word relationship and the means of grace is lacking in many contemporary churches, part of the solution may be a fresh analysis and articulation of those themes. An adequate doctrine of the means of grace will reflect the complexity of the Holy Spirit’s partnership with the Word, highlight the Word of God as the one essential means of grace, and throw as much light as possible on why the Word is the Spirit’s necessary and perfectly suited instrument for applying redemptive grace in human lives.

Keywords: Holy Spirit; means of grace; ministry; sacraments; Word of God

If every genuinely redemptive change that happens through Christian ministry does so only by the special action of the Holy Spirit, and if the Spirit acts redemptively by using an instrument believers also hold in their hands – a sword that they too must pick up, a seed that is also theirs to sow and plant – then identifying that instrument precisely and articulating how the Spirit’s action correlates with its use should be matters of intense interest. And indeed, they have been. The Spirit–Word relationship and the means of grace have traditionally held an important place in church confessions and systematic theologies. The reception of those doctrines seems partial and inconsistent in many Protestant churches today, however.¹ Many churches barely speak about the means of grace,² others broaden their scope to include almost every area of Christian life,³ and still others affirm the traditional understandings formally but look elsewhere when it comes to shaping their actual ministry practice. So, there may be room for a fresh look at the means of grace and the co-action of Spirit and Word in them. I will

¹This article will focus on the Spirit–Word relationship and the means of grace primarily as those doctrines are conceived within a Protestant frame of reference.

²Credo-baptist churches in particular are often suspicious of the expression ‘means of grace’, because they associate it with sacramental views they reject.

³The Wesleyan tradition broadens the concept to include practices such as prayer, obedience, self-denial, acts of piety and acts of mercy. See Andrew C. Thompson, ‘The General Means of Grace’, *Methodist History* 51 (2013), pp. 249–57; and The United Methodist Church, ‘The Wesleyan Means of Grace’, <https://www.umc.org>.

attempt a few steps in that direction here, not offering radically new ideas so much as developing, clarifying, supporting and highlighting long-standing and largely common-ground Protestant convictions. I will first try to define the means of grace in a way that reflects the complexity and richness of the Spirit–Word relationship, and then delve into the logic of why the Word of God (in all its forms) is the Holy Spirit’s necessary and perfectly suited instrument for applying the blessings of salvation to human lives.

Defining ‘means of grace’

I will narrow my focus to the three ‘objective’ means of grace of Reformation theology: the Word of God, baptism and the Lord’s Supper.⁴ Although there is no inherent reason why the expression ‘means of grace’ could not be used in a broader sense to designate any instrument, activity and response which in any way supports or enables the reception of God’s grace, whether redemptive or common, this more restricted use of the term will allow us to focus more specifically on ministry tools and activities that are directly used by the Holy Spirit in the application of redemptive grace.⁵ The Word, baptism and the Lord’s Supper have often been characterised as ‘objective’ or ‘external’ means of grace as distinguished from subjective conditions for receiving grace (like faith or obedience) or human actions directed towards God (like prayer).⁶ The objective means are God-given instrumentalities that always come to the person they impact from outside themselves, and the Spirit uses them as his own direct instrument for creating faith and effecting transformation. The same cannot be said for an activity like prayer, which believers use, and to which God responds. Furthermore, the Word, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper are *ministry* tools in the sense that pastors (or any Christian in the case of the Word) use them in the very act of engaging with the people to whom they minister.⁷ Both as humanly used tools and as instruments of the Spirit, they touch people directly and immediately.

So, although prayer, faith, obedience, acts of worship and good deeds play an absolutely vital role in relation to the administration and reception of redemptive grace, they do not play the same *kind* of role as the triad of Word, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. For this reason, it is best to treat the instrumental function of the latter as a separate topic, especially when seeking guidance concerning the shape of ministry practice. It is also best to focus on the Word, baptism and the Supper themselves in distinction from the wide range of secondary instruments or activities that support or provide a context for these primary means.⁸ While the ancillary instruments and activities are

⁴Some Protestant confessions also identify prayer as a means of grace. See the Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 88, and the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith, 14.1.

⁵Including both justifying and sanctifying grace. Some theologians speak of the means of grace only in relation to sanctification, and some only in relation to justification. See the discussion in Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1953), p. 672.

⁶See e.g. Herman Bavinck: ‘Moreover, faith, conversion, and prayer are rather the fruits than the means of grace. They are not objective institutions but the subjective conditions for the possession and enjoyment of the remaining benefits of the covenant. Strictly speaking, the Word and the sacraments alone can be viewed as means of grace, that is, as external, humanly perceptible actions and signs that Christ has given his church and with which he has linked the communication of his grace.’ Herman Bavinck, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, vol. 4 of *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), pp. 447–8.

⁷The external character of these means remains true even in the case of personal Scripture reading, or when believers address God’s Word to themselves.

⁸See Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 605.

very important (Christian fellowship, for example, or the use of spiritual gifts), such activities are best described as *means* to the means of grace.

As we consider what it signifies to characterise the Word, baptism and the Lord's Supper as means of grace, a preliminary question is whether these instruments should be viewed as three separate means of grace or just one in different forms.⁹ The latter option would mean viewing the Word of God in all its varied forms – written, spoken and visible – as the one essential objective means of grace.¹⁰ Baptism and the Supper would then still be viewed as means of grace, but only and specifically because they are forms of God's Word.¹¹ Adopting this second perspective has two consequences. First, it makes it easy to integrate what we can say about the Spirit–Word relationship with what we say about the means of grace. Second, it calls attention to a conviction that many Protestants would affirm, namely, that the Spirit's way of working through the sacraments corresponds tightly with his way of working through the written and spoken Word.¹² It thus avoids any suggestion that the sacraments are a distinctly different class of means that functions according to rules that differ from those governing the operation of the written and spoken Word. I will adopt this second perspective here and thus speak of the multi-form Word as *the* essential means of grace.¹³

What do we mean, then, when we describe the Word (whether written, spoken or visible) as a means of grace? In approaching that question, it will be helpful to review five significant ways in which Protestant confessions and theologians have described the relationship between the Holy Spirit's redemptive action, on the one hand, and the Word of God (which has typically been viewed as the primary means of grace), on the other. Each of these diverse ways of describing the Spirit–Word relationship calls attention to a different aspect of what is in fact a rich and complex partnership.

⁹Or if baptism and the Supper are grouped together as sacraments, two different forms, verbal and visible.

¹⁰To affirm this is not far from viewing the Word as the means of grace par excellence. See Bavinck's comment on the Reformation stance: 'Not the church but Scripture, the Word of God, became the means of grace par excellence. Even the sacrament was subordinated to the Word and had neither meaning nor power apart from that Word'. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4.444.

¹¹The question, then, is not whether the Lord's Supper is a means of grace but *how* it functions as a means of grace....it does so through the proclamation of the finished redemption of Christ and the promise of the kingdom to come.' Russel D. Moore, 'Baptist View: Christ's Presence as Memorial', in John H. Armstrong (ed.), *Understanding Four Views of the Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), p. 35. Biblical support for identifying the ordinances as forms of the Word comes from 1 Cor 11:26 (where those who partake in the Lord's Supper are said to 'proclaim the Lord's death') and Luke 22:19 and 1 Cor 11:24–25 (where Jesus tells his disciples to partake of the Supper in remembrance of him). Proclaiming Christ and calling him to remembrance are major functions of the Word. Moreover, in Israel's history as well as in Jesus' ministry, symbolic objects and actions were often used to communicate a message from God.

¹²J. Todd Billings speaks of 'the symmetry of God's promise in the gospel and God's promise in the sacraments'. J. Todd Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel at the Lord's Table* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2018), p. 71. Bavinck (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 4.462, 479) describes the conviction that the sacraments offer no benefit that is not also received through the Word as the mainline Reformed position. On the Lutheran side, Francis Pieper insists that all means of grace have the same purpose and same effect, citing the Augsburg Confession, articles V and XIII. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1953), p. 108.

¹³Those who hold that the sacraments function in a distinctly different way from the written and spoken Word may thus find the ensuing discussion of the means of grace incomplete. Little of what I positively argue about the grace-bringing function of the Word depends on a particular view of the sacraments, however.

A first way of describing the co-action of Spirit and Word is simply to say that *the Spirit and the Word work in parallel*. This way of expressing things is sometimes associated with the Second Helvetic Confession, written by the Swiss Reformed theologian Heinrich Bullinger.¹⁴ Some understand that document to depict mere simultaneous action, with no causal or instrumental link between the internal operation of the Holy Spirit and the effects that come from Word or sacrament.¹⁵ Whether the Second Helvetic Confession does in fact reflect *mere* parallel action may perhaps be questioned,¹⁶ but on any reading, it certainly affirms, together with many other Reformation confessions, the necessity of the Holy Spirit acting alongside the ministry of the Word. For our present purpose, we may take that basic affirmation of parallel action as an important Protestant claim concerning the Spirit–Word relationship.

New Testament support for parallel action comes in many passages. John 15:26–27 (‘he [the Spirit of truth] will bear witness about me, and you [Jesus’s disciples] also will bear witness’) and Acts 5:32 (‘we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit’) express the idea of co-action most succinctly, although neither passage offers further explanation concerning its inner logic.¹⁷ When a wider range of passages is taken into account, however, it becomes evident that, in contexts relating to the application of redemption, the co-action of Spirit and Word is a matter of *complementary* rather than merely parallel activity. Three aspects of the New Testament portrayal support that conclusion. First, the Spirit and the Word are shown to function as distinct entities, each with its own status, identity, character and role. Second, they are depicted as working together to achieve a common purpose: that of bringing the redemptive blessings of Christ to bear on people’s lives. Third, each makes a distinctive and necessary contribution towards the accomplishment of that purpose. Taken together, these factors imply a functional partnership that extends beyond mere parallelism.

A second common way of describing the co-action of Spirit and Word is to say that *the Spirit makes the Word effective*. According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Word of God is an instrument to be used by Christian ministers for bringing people to faith and spiritual growth, and the Holy Spirit’s role is to make that Word effective.¹⁸ The first part of this formulation, which identifies the Word of God as an instrument for bringing people into the blessings of salvation (‘gathering and perfecting the saints’), is supported by a large number of New Testament passages that depict the Word in

¹⁴According to Brian Gerrish, ‘Bullinger’s parallelism...lacks the use of instrumental expressions; the outward event does not convey or cause or give rise to the inward event, but merely indicates that it is going on.’ Brian Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 124. Cf. Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), p. 179.

¹⁵No explicit reference to instrumentality is found in statements like, ‘God teaches us by his word, outwardly through his ministers, and inwardly moves the hearts of his elect to faith by the Holy Spirit’ (chapter 18), and with respect to the Lord’s Supper, ‘Therefore the faithful receive what is given by the ministers of the Lord, and they eat the bread of the Lord and drink of the Lord’s cup. At the same time by the work of Christ through the Holy Spirit they also inwardly receive the flesh and blood of the Lord, and are thereby nourished unto life eternal’ (chapter 21).

¹⁶The statement about the sacraments in chapter 19, for example, seems to reflect instrumentalism.

¹⁷Interpreting John 15:26 as a reference to the Spirit’s inward testimony and Acts 5:32 as at least including a reference to inward testimony. See Timothy Wiarda, *Spirit and Word: Dual Testimony in Paul, John, and Luke* (London and New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017), pp. 115, 196.

¹⁸See article 25.3: ‘Unto this catholic visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth, by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto.’

instrumental terms (Rom 1:16; 15:18–19; 1 Cor 1:18, 21; Col 1:5–6; Heb 4:12; James 1:18, 21; 1 Pet 1:23–25). Its second component, which relates to the Spirit's role, finds especially strong support in passages that picture the Spirit opening eyes and hearts, or enlightening hearts, or removing a veil from hearts or faces (Acts 16:14; 2 Cor 3:12–17; 4:6; Eph 1:18; 3:15–19).¹⁹ According to these images, the Spirit makes the communication of the Word effective by acting on those who hear the Word in a way that enables them to receive its message.²⁰

A third well-established way of describing the Spirit–Word interplay is to say *the Spirit uses the Word as his instrument*. According to the wording of the Heidelberg Catechism, for example, it is the Spirit himself who uses the Word instrumentally to accomplish his redemptive task in people's lives.²¹ Herman Bavinck echoes this formulation when he says, 'The Spirit who renews is always and only the Spirit of Christ, who works through the means appointed by Christ.'²² The clearest (and most strikingly expressed) New Testament articulation of this aspect of the Spirit–Word relationship comes in Eph 6:17, where Paul urges his readers to 'take up...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God'. In the expression 'sword of the Spirit', the genitive is best understood as indicating possession and use.²³ The Word is thus depicted as an instrument actively used by the Spirit. According to the most natural reading of Paul's words, then, he pictures two distinct agents, the Christian and the Holy Spirit, simultaneously wielding one and the same sword.²⁴ The Spirit's instrumental use of the Word is also strongly implied in passages that speak of the Spirit creating faith by bearing supportive inward witness to the outwardly proclaimed truth about Jesus (e.g. 1 Cor 2:4–5; 1 Thess 1:4–5). How could the Spirit inwardly convince people about the gospel message without the message itself playing an instrumental role?²⁵

A fourth prominent way of describing the Spirit–Word relationship is to say that *the Word functions as an instrument or channel through which God or Christ conveys the Spirit and grace*. Article V of the Augsburg Confession speaks of the Word (together with the sacraments) as means through which the *Spirit* is transmitted: 'through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith; where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel.' Hendrikus

¹⁹The image of the implanted Word in James 1:21, where the implanting agent must be God or the Holy Spirit, might also be cited here.

²⁰Theologians occasionally describe the Spirit's activity of making the Word effective as a matter of working on the Word itself. J. V. Fesko, e.g. speaks of 'the pneumatically charged preaching of the word', saying 'it is this pneumatically charged word that brings salvation, that redeems, and calls into existence things that do not exist'. J. V. Fesko, 'Preaching as a Means of Grace and the Doctrine of Sanctification: A Reformed Perspective', *American Theological Inquiry* 3/1 (2010), p. 41. But while the NT does speak of Spirit-empowered preaching, it attributes the effectiveness of the Word primarily to a work of the Spirit in those who *hear* it.

²¹'It is through faith alone that we share in Christ and all his benefits: where then does that faith come from? The Holy Spirit produces it in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments.' Heidelberg Catechism, Question 65, version approved by Synod 2011 of the Christian Reformed Church. Cf. the Anglican Thirty-nine Articles, art. 25, and the Marburg Articles, art. 8.

²²Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4.442.

²³Wiarda, *Spirit and Word*, pp. 75–6; Jacob Adai, *Der Heilige Geist als Gegenwart Gottes in den einzelnen Christen, in der Kirche und in der Welt* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1985), p. 145.

²⁴A paradoxical and very Pauline juxtaposition of divine and human action.

²⁵Cf. the interplay of beholding Christ (as known through apostolic witness) and being transformed into his image by the Spirit in 2 Cor 3:18.

Berkhof reflects a similar thought when he says, ‘The Word brings the Spirit to the heart.’²⁶ But it is also common for theologians to speak of God or Christ conveying *grace* through the channel or medium of the Word. For instance, Louis Berkhof describes the Word together with the sacraments as ‘objective channels which Christ has instituted in the Church, and to which He ordinarily binds Himself in the communication of his grace.’²⁷

The most direct New Testament support for describing the Word as an instrument that brings the Spirit or through which the Spirit is given is found in John 6:63. Jesus says, ‘The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life.’²⁸ In the light of the surrounding context, the ‘are’ in this verse is best taken to mean ‘bring’ or ‘are accompanied by’.²⁹ The claim that Jesus’ words bring *life* is reiterated in John 6:68, where Peter says, ‘You have the words of eternal life.’ A statement to the effect that Jesus’ words will also bring or be accompanied by the *Spirit* answers a question raised in the immediate context by Jesus’ emphasis on human inability to accept what he says and on the consequent need for the Spirit to act (John 6:63a–b).³⁰ If belief and new life are impossible apart from the Spirit that inevitably raises the question of whether there is anything Jesus’ hearers can themselves do to set the stage or open the door for the Spirit to act. Jesus answers that question in John 6:63c. He points to his words, which are accessible to everyone. In so doing, he implies that his words play an instrumental role in bringing the Spirit, and with the Spirit, life.

Although it is common to depict the Word as a ‘channel’ or ‘medium’ through which the grace-administering Spirit comes and acts, the image of the Spirit flowing through the Word like water through a channel perhaps underemphasises the active and causal aspects of the Word’s role in bringing the Spirit. The New Testament portrayal implies that the externally communicated Word fulfils a necessary condition that allows the Spirit to act, while at the same time creating a positive expectation that the Spirit *will* come and act.³¹ It might therefore be slightly better to say the Word ‘prepares

²⁶Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1964), p. 38.

²⁷Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 604–5. Cf. Charles Hodge, who describes the means of grace as ‘those institutions which God has ordained to be the ordinary channels of grace, *i.e.* of the supernatural influences of the Holy Spirit, to the souls of men.’ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (New York: Scribner’s, 1898), p. 466. Philip E. Hughes describes the means of grace as the ‘media through which grace may be received’ in Philip E. Hughes, ‘Grace, Means of’, in Walter Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), p. 482.

²⁸In John 6:63c, πνεῦμα could be taken as a direct reference to the Holy Spirit (e.g. NIV, GNB; cf. Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, i–xii [Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1966], pp. 295–300), or perhaps to ‘spirit’ in the sense of a new Spirit-produced nature (as may also be the case in the second appearance of πνεῦμα in John 3:6 (see Donald Carson, *The Gospel According to John* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991], p. 96). Even in the latter case, this passage would still refer to a Spirit-given work of grace.

²⁹As in the GNT: ‘The words I have spoken to you bring God’s life-giving Spirit’. The Greek is τὰ ρήματα ἃ ἐγὼ λελάληκα ὑμῖν...ζωὴ ἐστίν. A similar usage of ζωὴ ἐστίν occurs John 12:50, where the sense is ‘his commandment *brings* eternal life’ (GNB; cf. NIV, ‘*leads to* eternal life’).

³⁰See also John 6:44, 65.

³¹Passages like John 15:26–27 lead readers to expect that where the disciples are obedient to their mission, the Spirit will also carry out his; and where the disciples do not bear their outward testimony, the Spirit will not bear his inward testimony. I will not enter the Lutheran-Reformed debates regarding the *absolute* necessity of the Word as a condition for the Spirit’s action, and whether or in what sense the Spirit *always* accompanies the outwardly ministered Word. Those discussions have their place, but to the extent that one foregrounds the practical aspects of a doctrine of the means of grace – the way it

the way for', or 'creates an expectation of', or simply 'brings' the grace-administering action of the Spirit.

A fifth way some theologians have chosen to describe the Spirit–Word relationship is to say that *the Spirit creates a sacramental bond between the Word and the reality it signifies*. For example, Michael Horton explains the Word's role as a means of grace in part by suggesting it has a 'sacramental aspect': 'As with baptism and the Supper, the Spirit creates a bond between the sign (proclamation of the gospel) and the reality signified (Christ and all his benefits).'³² This fifth perspective on the interplay of Spirit and Word stands apart from the previous four in that it lacks their strong grounding in the Protestant tradition and their close connection with specific strands of New Testament teaching.³³ In my judgment, it is questionable whether this use of sacramental imagery is helpful for clarifying discussion of the Spirit–Word relationship. First, it seems to depend on a sacramental theology that would have to be defended in its own right. Second, it is the rich New Testament picture of the Holy Spirit's grace-conveying action through the written and spoken forms of the Word that should inform our theology of the visible Words rather than the other way around.

So, in Protestant confessions and theology, the Holy Spirit has been depicted as (1) acting in parallel with the Word, (2) making the Word effective, (3) using the Word to perform a task, (4) coming through the Word and (5) creating a bond between the Word and that to which it refers.³⁴ Setting aside the fifth of these emphases for the reasons noted above, how can we combine or correlate the other four? Each is obviously different with regards to the language it uses and the specific mental image it calls up. Moreover, it is not just the words and metaphors that change, but the underlying subject-and-object structure of what is being affirmed. The Westminster Confession speaks of human agents ministering the Word, with the Spirit making their ministry effective. The Heidelberg Confession highlights the Spirit as an agent of transformation who impacts human hearts by using the Word as his instrument. The Augsburg Confession has God as a sending agent, the Spirit as the one he sends, and the Word as the mediating channel. Here we seem to be dealing with genuinely different concepts – not divergent doctrines, but distinct and noteworthy *aspects* of a complex set of relations involving Christ, the Spirit, the Word, human communicators and human hearts and lives. If that is the case, then a full description of the Spirit–Word relationship – and with it a full definition of what we mean by the means of grace – will have to incorporate them all.

can help practitioners answer questions concerning their ministry responsibilities and expectations – it may be sufficient to simply affirm that Christian ministers must communicate the Word if they expect the Spirit to act, and that when they do use the Word, they should expect the Spirit to act.

³²Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims On the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), pp. 754–5. For a Roman Catholic perspective on this question, see Scott Hahn, 'Scripture is Sacramental', *Crossroads Initiative*, 3 February 2016, <https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com>.

³³*Contra* Horton, *The Christian Faith*, p. 754. Brian Gerrish (*Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993], pp. 85–6) attributes a sacramental view of the Word to Calvin, citing his reference to the 'sacramental word' in *Institutes* 4.14.1. But in its context, that reference carries a very different sense. Calvin refers to the spoken word at the celebration of the sacrament, emphasising how the sacrament is nothing without the attending spoken word which explains it. That is far different from saying that the Word functions in a sacramental fashion or suggesting we can learn how the Word works by looking at how the sacraments work.

³⁴An aspect of the Spirit's role that lies outside of this set of images is his work of instigating and empowering believers to use the Word (e.g. Acts 1:8).

While genuine conceptual differences lie behind the varied formulations found both in the New Testament and the Protestant confessions that should not be taken as an indication that their authors held conflicting or radically different views concerning the fundamental dynamics of the Spirit–Word relationship. The varied depictions of the Spirit–Word interaction found in the New Testament do not reflect discordant ideas, but more likely result from the writers’ wish to emphasise specific points in specific contexts. The same Paul can picture the Spirit removing reception-blocking obstacles from human hearts, the Spirit using the Word as his instrument, and more likely than not, the Spirit being sent by Christ into the midst of gathered believers as a result of their Word-rich worship (2 Cor 3:12–18; Eph 6:17; cf. Eph 5:18–19).³⁵ The structural differences that mark statements about the Spirit–Word relationship in the Protestant confessions have generally not provoked significant interdenominational debate,³⁶ and it is not uncommon for theologians to combine those formulations with no sense of inconsistency.³⁷ Nor is it hard to see how the distinct concepts expressed in Scripture and the confessions can fit together. To say that Spirit and Word work in parallel is not in tension with any of the other claims but rather foundational to them. Depicting the Word as bringing the Spirit and grace correlates easily with depicting the Spirit as the one who opens hearts to receive the Word; as Hendrikus Berkhof puts it, ‘The Word brings the Spirit to the heart, and the Spirit brings the Word within the heart.’³⁸ The idea that the Spirit holds the Word in his hands and uses it as his instrument for creating faith and transforming lives can then also comfortably be added to the mix. The Word brings the Spirit, the Spirit opens human hearts to receive the Word’s message, and the Spirit then uses that received message to transform lives. Each of these concepts is distinct and doctrinally important; together they form a coherent picture of the Holy Spirit’s redeeming action in connection with the ministry of the Word.

Taking each of these descriptions of the Spirit–Word interplay into account, then, the expression ‘means of grace’ might best be defined along the following lines: *the God-given and humanly accessible instruments that bring or prepare the way for the Holy Spirit’s saving influence and become effective when the Spirit works in human hearts – instruments that believers take up, but which then also become instruments*

³⁵On Ephesians 5, see Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), p. 351; Timothy Gombis, ‘Being the Fullness of God in Christ by the Spirit: Eph 5:18 in Its Epistolary Setting’, *Tyndale Bulletin* 53 (2002), pp. 268–71.

³⁶Lutherans have traditionally preferred to speak of the Spirit working through the Word (*per Verbum*) while Reformed theologians have preferred to say with the Word (*cum Verbo*); although that difference in formulation is not hard and fast. According to Henk van den Belt, the Lutheran confessions ‘maintain that the external Word is a necessary condition for the internal work of the Spirit, while the Reformed confessions say that the internal work of the Spirit is a necessary condition for the effect of the external Word’. Henk van den Belt, ‘Word and Spirit in the Confessions of the European Reformation’, *Religion and Theology* 23 (2016), p. 103.

³⁷A careful exponent of the central Reformed tradition like Louis Berkhof, for example, can describe the Word and sacraments as channels through which Christ communicates grace (in harmony with the fourth formulation discussed above), while at the same time, describing the Word and sacraments as being ‘productive of spiritual results only through the efficacious operation of the Holy Spirit’ (language similar to the second formulation), and speaking of gospel preaching as an instrument through which ‘the Spirit works the beginning of the new life or of faith’ (the language of the third formulation). Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 604–6.

³⁸Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, p. 38.

in the Spirit's hands, used by him to convict sinners, enable faith, create new life, mediate Christ's presence, and transform lives.

Why the Spirit works through the Word

If a doctrine of the means of grace is to serve as an effective guide for ministry practice, those who minister must grasp something of its inner logic. For that reason, we now turn our attention to 'why' questions. Why does the all-powerful divine Spirit require a humanly employed instrument for the task of applying redemptive grace? And if God has ordained that the Word to function as that essential instrument, why the Word as opposed to any other tool or activity? Scripture does not directly answer these questions, so there are limits to how much we can say about why God applies redemption in this way. But we can nevertheless look closely at the nature of the instrument Scripture tells us God has chosen to use, and then, in the light of Scripture, reflect on its fittingness for the task in view. As we do that, seven characteristics of the Word stand out as especially significant. Each can be seen to contribute to making the Word a uniquely suited instrument for the Spirit to use in applying the redemptive blessings of Christ to human lives.

A first characteristic is that God's Word is by nature *a communicated message*. An essential quality of any message is that it connects one mind to another. A message conveys meaning and information, to be sure, but more than that, it is a medium through which one personal being reaches out and reveals themselves to another. As communicated message, then, God's Word is what creates and sustains his relationship with human persons. Throughout the Bible story, from Genesis to Revelation, there is no person-to-person contact between God and humans apart from that which is established by God's Word. If the heart of redemption is a restored relationship with God, redemptive grace simply cannot exist apart from his message-communicating Word. So, the Word is an instrument that fits the very nature of redemption. It sustains the believer's relationship with God in countless ways. It tells the story of God's saving acts in history and discloses the thoughts and disposition of his heart. When the Holy Spirit opens human minds to know God's heart, he does so through the Word (1 Cor 2:8–13).

Second, the message communicated by the Word *centres on Jesus Christ*. This is the decisive factor that enables the Word to function as a means of grace and sets it apart from all other contenders as the Spirit's necessary instrument for applying redemption. The Word in its entirety speaks about things other than Jesus, of course; yet his place in it is so central that 'truth about Jesus' can almost serve as a substitute expression for 'the Word'. To say that the Spirit works through the Word is simply to say that he works through truth about Jesus. It is easy to see that truth about Jesus must play a necessary role in bringing people to salvation and enabling them to grow in it. If salvation comes through faith, and if faith depends on hearing the message about Jesus, as Rom 10:17 so clearly says, how can the Spirit lead people to faith apart from using the Word? If knowing Jesus lies at the heart of Christian discipleship, how can the Spirit enable such knowledge without the Christ-revealing Word being part of the process?³⁹

Third, the Word is *an immaterial entity*. That is important because the New Testament repeatedly depicts the Holy Spirit carrying out his primary redemptive tasks in human hearts and minds (e.g. John 7:38–39; 14:17; Rom 5:5; 8:9–11; 1 Cor

³⁹See Eph 3:14–19 in relation to Col 3:16.

6:19; 2 Cor 3:3, 15–17; Gal 4:6; Eph 5:5; 2 Tim 1:14; 1 John 3:24; 4:4). It is true that the Spirit acts in the physical as well as the non-physical realm, effecting healings and other physical manifestations, and raising bodies to new life (Acts 2:1–4; 10:38; 13:9–11; Rom 6:10–11; 1 Cor 12:9–10; Gal 3:5).⁴⁰ But what we might call the Spirit's core redemptive action takes place in the inner person and involves the Spirit directly touching minds and wills. That observation forces a further clarification about the precise scope of the redemptive grace that is in view when theologians speak of the Word as a means of grace. When we say the Spirit uses the Word to apply and effect redemptive grace, we are referring specifically to his work of enabling faith and repentance, creating new spiritual life, transforming the character of believers, granting them assurance and enabling them to know God's love – in other words, the Spirit's work of bringing into effect all those aspects of redemption that relate directly to a person's relationship with God.⁴¹ Effecting these benefits requires an instrument that can be used to touch not just a person's physical body or outward environment but their most inward self. As an immaterial entity, the Word is well suited to serve in that capacity.

A fourth quality fitting the Word to serve as a means of grace is that it is *humanly accessible*. This is a rather obvious point, but one that should nevertheless be mentioned. Viewed from the perspective of believers and their need, the whole point of Christians being given a means of grace is that it be something they can freely *use* – in other words, something at their disposal and under their control.⁴² The Word has that quality. God has placed the Word fully in human hands. It is not out of reach. The Holy Spirit is not under human control, but the Word that prepares the way for him is. It may be helpful to note in this connection that a healthy conception of the means of grace serves as a counter to any doctrine of the Word that would deny its objective character or make its use and interpretation dependent on a special endowment that only some Christians possess. The Bible makes no distinction between the humanly communicated Word (Scripture, preaching and ordinances) and God's actual communication. The Word that functions as an instrument of grace thus remains the same everywhere and always; it conveys a humanly accessible message in humanly understandable terms.

A fifth vital property of the Word is that, in its character as apostolic testimony and teaching, it *extends the revelatory mission of the incarnate Christ during the period following his ascension*.⁴³ As an extension of Christ's mission, the Word stands as a uniquely appropriate instrument to be used by the Spirit for bringing the living Jesus to believers during the period between his ascension and the Parousia – for putting them in touch with the real presence of Christ. This claim needs unpacking, and it takes us into an area tinged with the mysteries of incarnation, trinitarian coinherence

⁴⁰I am assuming a distinction between the Word as immaterial message and the physical organs and objects that might play a role in its transmission and reception. I am also assuming a distinction between a person's mind or heart and their physical brain.

⁴¹To put this in another way, the Word's function as a means of grace pertains especially to the reception of justification, the experience of adoption, and the outworking of sanctification. There are also aspects of human redemption that the Holy Spirit effects without using the Word as his instrument; these include raising the bodies of believers, giving spiritual gifts, effecting physical healing and other physical manifestations, and perhaps effecting some kinds of emotional healing.

⁴²That is, the decision to read and listen to the Word, or to minister it to others is under human control. Of course, the Word is not under human control in the sense that we are free to change it or make it mean whatever we want.

⁴³The apostles' testimony and teaching is the form of God's Word that stands directly behind the New Testament and affirms and interprets the Old.

and divine indwelling. First, consider what it means to describe the testimony of the apostles as an extension of Jesus' revelatory mission. As the incarnate Word, Jesus displayed his glory in the world, but especially to his disciples, who were eyewitnesses of his majesty; his disciples saw, heard and touched him (2 Pet 1:16; 1 John 1:1–3). Moreover, Jesus specifically prepared, commissioned and authorised this group to bear testimony about him during the period following his departure, a task which they fulfilled by preaching, teaching and writing. So, although no one today has the same direct physical contact with Jesus that the apostles experienced, through their eyewitness testimony and recorded memories people today can come to see and know the same Jesus the apostles knew face to face. They can learn everything about him that is significant for his revelatory mission.

But Christian believers are promised a knowledge and experience of the living Jesus that goes a step beyond anything that can result from even the most detailed and faithful human reporting. Various New Testament passages speak of believers experiencing real and mystical contact with the living Jesus himself, even during the period of his physical absence. Perhaps the most striking of these is John 14:18, where on the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus tells his disciples that he will not leave them orphans but will come to them. In the context, it is quite clear that Jesus was referring to a personal and ongoing presence with his followers during the period between his ascension and the Parousia, a presence that would be mediated by the Holy Spirit in the same way that the Father's presence was mediated by Jesus.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Jesus indicated that the Word would play a role in his coming and presence: he said he would manifest himself to the one who has and keeps his words.⁴⁵ Moreover, in John 10, Jesus says three times that his sheep will hear his voice, with specific reference to the period following his ascension (see especially vv. 3, 16, 27).⁴⁶ In contrast to texts like Acts 18:9 and 2 Cor 12:11, this passage does not seem to refer to individualised words of revelation relating to specific situations, but to Jesus speaking to his followers through the basic and commonly held Word of apostolic testimony and teaching, yet addressing them in an immediate, personal and living way.⁴⁷

We can thus affirm that through the co-action of Spirit and Word believers are brought into a real and living communion with Christ himself. But that raises a question. If Christ has bodily ascended into heaven and is no longer physically present on earth, how can he be personally present with believers during the present age, not just in a vaguely spiritual or metaphorical sense, but in the fullness of his incarnate Person? For an answer, we must look first to the mystery of the Trinity and the relations between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Just as the Father is present in and through the Son, so the Son is present in and through the Spirit.⁴⁸ But we must also look to the specific nature of the Word that serves as the Spirit's instrument in mediating Christ's presence on

⁴⁴Rom 8:9–11 and Eph 3:14–17 likewise speak of Christ's real indwelling presence with believers and link that reality to the action of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

⁴⁵See John 14:21–24.

⁴⁶In Rom 10:14, Paul quite possibly depicts those who hear the gospel as not simply hearing about Christ but hearing *him*. See the ESV alternative translation: 'How are they to believe in him whom they have never heard.'

⁴⁷for the Reformers the proclamation of the Word is not simply teaching concerning Christ, but the personal address of Christ himself through which the Spirit delivers Christ to us and unites us to him'. Horton, *The Christian Faith*, p. 758.

⁴⁸Note the correlation between the Father–Son relationship underlying John 14:7–11 and the Son–Spirit relationship underlying John 14:16–20.

earth. To be sure, the apostolic Word is only a record of Jesus' appearance on earth and not the person of Jesus himself. But of all instruments we might possibly imagine the non-incarnate Spirit using in the process of bringing the incarnate Jesus to his followers, surely the Christ-centred apostolic Word is the most fitting. The testimony and teaching of the apostles provide our reliable and revelatory picture of Jesus' earthly life and ministry. Their testimony emerges from human history and communicates in human terms, just as the Son of God himself appeared in human history and communicated in human terms. Reflection on the nature of the Word as apostolic testimony cannot close all the gaps in our understanding of how the non-incarnate Holy Spirit can bring believers into real contact with the whole and undivided person of the physically absent Jesus, but it can at least help us to see that no other instrumentality could be as appropriate as the Word to play a role in that process.

A sixth factor that fits the Word to serve as a means of grace is that it always *demand*s a personal response. It addresses the human will. It can be received or rejected, loved or hated, obeyed or not obeyed. This response-demanding quality is entirely appropriate to the Spirit's task of applying redemption, because a restored relationship with God lies at the heart of that redemption, and personal responses are an essential component of personal relationships. The Christ-centred Word that serves as a means of grace should therefore not be confused with what has sometimes been called God's 'creative Word' – that is, his pronouncements that simply call things into existence. Nor should the Word of God that functions as a means of grace be confused with the kind of raw divine command that make things happen totally apart from any human thought or decision, such as when Jesus commanded a storm to cease or told a leper, 'Be clean' (Mark 1:41).⁴⁹ An important corollary of this point is that no tool or action that lacks the property of demanding a response can function as an instrument for dispensing redemptive grace. The physical actions and elements of the sacraments, for example, when considered in and of themselves and apart from their role in communicating the Word, do not function as instruments of grace. Nor can redemptive grace be dispensed by an act of direct power that bypasses the heart and the will. While the latter issue has not received much attention in the mainline western theological tradition, it is a matter of some concern for Christians in many parts of the world. In certain types of charismatic ministry, for instance, laying hands on people who then fall down or experience other physical and emotional manifestations has been viewed as a means of spiritual renewal. In a similar way, various sins are sometimes attributed to demons, which are then cast out as a route to sanctification. The vital question with regards to such ministries is not whether the Holy Spirit effects physical manifestations or demons must be commanded to depart, but whether sanctification and spiritual growth can ever be achieved by an exercise of sheer power that bypasses a person's mind and the will. In contexts where that question arises, churches may welcome a doctrine of the means of grace that explains why the Spirit effects such renewal only through the Christ-centred and response-demanding Word.

Finally, the Word *functions at a human as well as divine level*. The outward Word makes sense as normal human communication. It has its own inherent beauty, power and impact; it can attract, provoke fear and persuade. These qualities make

⁴⁹Cf. e.g. Ps 33:6; Heb 11:3; Mark 4:39. On the distinction between God's creative word of power and the Word of God as contained in Scripture and preached in the church, see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 676. Theologians sometimes cite passages like Ps 33:6 when discussing the role of God's Word in redemption, but this is potentially misleading.

the Word a fitting instrument for the Holy Spirit to use in accomplishing his redemptive purposes, because what the Spirit does at a supernatural level correlates with what the Word already does, at least in part, as an act of communication embedded within the matrix of natural human life. Because redemption renews rather than replaces our humanness, it is appropriate that Spirit should effect that renewal with an instrument whose impact in his divine hands harmonises with its natural impact at a purely human level.

Conclusion

The Word of God in Scripture, preaching and the ordinances is the one true means of grace. It is humanly accessible, bears testimony to Jesus Christ, and, in the Spirit's hands, mediates his living presence to believers. It fits our human nature, fits the nature of redemption, enables a restored relationship with God, and is compatible with the internal locus of Spirit's central redemptive activity. The Holy Spirit comes where the Word is present, makes the Word effective and uses it as his necessary instrument for applying the redemptive work of Christ to human lives. While these themes have a long history in Protestant theology, they are nevertheless worth clarifying and highlighting in fresh ways. A strongly articulated doctrine of the means of grace and the Spirit–Word relationship has the potential to influence many aspects of contemporary church life.