

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—
Lesson 45—How is the Word made effectual to salvation? Q. 89

The Holy Spirit makes it effectual

- I. The efficacy of the Word in the hearts and lives of men is not in the Word itself—or in the messenger—but only in the work and blessing of the Spirit of God.
 - A. Without the blessing of God, the Word can do no more good than spit on the mute man’s tongue and mud in the blind man’s eyes, Mk 7.33; Jn 9.6.
 - 1. Sometimes the Word of God is unfruitful or a stumbling-block or a savor of death, Mt 13.19-22; 1Cor 1.18, 23; 2Cor 2.16.
 - 2. Sometimes the Word is misused by false teachers to work their own ends, Mt 4.6; 2Cor 2.17; 2Pet 3.16; 2Tim 3.5-7.
 - 3. And sometimes it is the means of raising the dead and sanctifying the living, Rom 10.17; Jn 17.17; 2Tim 3.15-17.
 - B. The difference is in the sovereign use the Spirit makes of it, Eph 6.17.
 - 1. The Word is the Spirit’s sole means of bringing the lost to faith, Rom 10.17; Mt 28.18-20; Lk 2.46-47; Acts 1.8; 1Pet 1.22. [In the case of the elect saved in infancy, we witness the *monergistic nature of salvation*; but in the case of those able to respond, we witness the *adaptation of God’s monergistic work to our nature*.]
 - 2. Thus the Spirit of the living God alone is the agent of salvation and sanctification, Ezk 36.25-27; Jn 3.3, 5-8.
- II. This means the Word of God carries its own authority and confirmation because it is the very Word of God in the very hands of the Spirit of God.
 - A. The Word refuses to be subjected to external human proofs for authorization and confirmation. It’s self-authenticating by virtue of the fact that it is the very Word of God. And when the Spirit of God brings it home to the heart of a sinner, He doesn’t use outside, rational evidences to convince him, but merely penetrates his heart with the truthfulness and efficacy of its inspiration, convincing him that it is the Word of God and true. “Scripture, carrying its own evidence along with it, deigns not to submit to proofs and arguments, but owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to the testimony of the Spirit.” Calvin. Cf. WCF 1.4-5.

The Spirit primarily uses the preaching of the Word

- I. The Word of God has been appointed to be read by all because the Holy Spirit makes the reading of the Word an effectual means of saving and sanctifying the elect.
 - A. The Word is to be read corporately and publicly in worship, Neh 8.2-3, 8; 1Tim 4.13; Col 4.15-16.
 - B. The Word is to be read in families, Dt 6.6-9; Ps 78.5; Gen 18.17-19. Every family is to be a little church; and as they are to speak to God by prayer so they are to hear from God by reading His Word.
 - C. The Word is to be read privately, Dt 17.18-19; Pr 6.20-24; 7.1-5.
- II. The Word of God has been appointed to be preached in public worship as the primary means of grace which the Spirit uses, 2Tim 4.1-5; 1Cor 1.17, 21; 2.1-5; Rom 10.14-17.
 - A. Preaching was the first means of grace and will ever be the primary means of grace, for both Noah and Enoch were preachers of the truth before there ever was a Bible to hold it, 2Pet 2.5; Jude 14.
 - B. There is no ordinary possibility of salvation outside the church because to the church has been committed the ordinances and means of grace which the Spirit uses to save sinners, WCF 25.2-3.
 - C. Commentaries, the sermons of the forefathers, and a passionate heart may all help a preacher prepare and preach his message, but if ever his sermon is to be a means of grace, what he needs, must have, and cannot do without, is the anointing and unction of the Spirit of the living God.
 - D. Preaching will ever be *foolishness* in the eyes of the world, but until Christ returns it will ever be the *primary means of grace* to both save and sanctify.

- E. The power and efficacy of preaching is not found in the man, but only in the blessing of the Spirit upon it by virtue of the office, authority, and blessing of God upon the men appointed by God to preach it, Mt 28.19-20; Acts 1.8.
- F. This is why public worship is nothing if it's not the context provided by God for the preaching of the Word of God. The sermon is the central and principal matter in public worship. Without it, the whole thing is reduced to little more than a ceremonial routine of rote forms. Nothing in worship has the power and blessing and divine tendency to so instruct men's minds, move men's hearts, and direct men's wills as the faithful preaching of the Word of God. Take away preaching from public worship and you leave a withered carcass of forms that can make the people feel good but can produce not real and lasting change in their lives.

The Spirit uses the Word to save, sanctify, and comfort

- I. The Spirit *saves* the lost by the Word, Rom 10.17; 2Tim 3.15.
 - A. By the Word, the Spirit convicts of sin, 2Sam 12.7; Heb 4.12. When the preacher seems to know what only God and your conscience know, it's the Spirit bringing the Word home to you. The Spirit shows you sins you never saw before, the heinousness of them you never knew before, and your misery as a lost sinner.
 - B. And then He graciously uses that Word to convert you, Ps 19.7; Acts 26.18. By the law and the gospel the Word drives you outside of yourself to Christ for refuge and outside of your sins to Christ for holiness, Acts 2.37-38; 20.21.
- II. The Spirit *sanctifies* the saved by the Word, Acts 20.32; Eph 4.11-13; 1Pet 2.2; 2Tim 3.16-17.
- III. The Spirit *comforts* believers by the Word, Rom 15.4. The Word puts all our troubles into the right light, brings us real peace in every hardship, and affords us remedies for every condition. It is a glorious *catholicon*, a universal *panacea*.

Inferences

- I. Prize your Bible. Read it daily, entirely, and believingly. Read it to feel it. Engage it as a means of grace, as the Spirit's favorite tool, and turn it into prayer, asking for its effectiveness and blessing in your life. "The dust of many people's Bibles will be a heavy witness against them on the Great Day." Boston.
- II. Prize the preaching of the Word and attend upon it conscientiously. Neglecting it and despising it is not so light a thing as may appear when you consider the One utilizing it for your spiritual good.
 - A. *Whatever a church may offer you, if there's not a faithful ministry of the preaching of the Word, it can but offer little of what you need. Because we need nothing in all the Christian life like we need faithful, powerful preaching of the Word of God. Don't ever despise it. Don't ever trade anything for it. Don't ever turn your back on it.*
- III. Don't pit reading and preaching against each other. The one is not the other and nor can the one replace the other. You need both.
- IV. The Word of God is just as necessary for sinners and for saints. You'll never outgrow it. Those who think they've grown beyond the reading and preaching of the Word of God are self-deceived and in great trouble.
- V. Look to God for the efficacy and blessing of His Word—not to the man or the church or to the duty itself, but only to God. Read and hear in faith and with dependence upon the Spirit or you'll get no benefit by it.