

The Effectiveness of God's Word

If God does not reveal himself to us, we cannot know him. God reveals himself generally to everyone through his creation, but he reveals himself by his Spirit specifically (regarding salvation) to his chosen people, but to no others. We are his precious possession, his portion. This is a reformed view of Scripture. I'm going to explain here the difference between this and a competing view that is also widespread in the church.

God revealed himself in the OT to the prophets who recorded his words (2Pet. 1:20-21). God revealed himself in the NT through Jesus Christ, whose words were recorded by the apostles. Today, God's revelation comes to us through the Bible, but the bible itself is not the revelation. It is only the *content* of the revelation. Now that's a little confusing. So let me expand on that.

The text of the Bible will not reveal God apart from the illumination of his Spirit (1Cor. 2:10-11). Non-believers who read the Bible do not come into his presence there. They are not *persuaded* by it. They consider it interesting historical or mythological literature. They may even consider it wisdom literature, an interesting "take" on morality and self-sacrifice. But they do not encounter the living God in its pages. They do not believe it to be *true* even if they believe it to be accurately recorded; and many do not even believe that.

Now, there are two competing views in the church as to the effectiveness of God's word. Some say that God's word is sufficient of itself to alter the hearts of men, to reveal God, and to bring anyone to Christ who hears it and wants to come. God's word itself removes their blinders, and opens their ears to see the truth and hear the call of God (or else they say that Christ's sacrifice on the cross enabled all men to see and hear it). After all, they say, God's word is a living and active thing. I suppose this view is saying that the Spirit acts through God's word, while the reformed view would say that God's word acts through his Spirit. The following two verses tell us that the word of God is powerful indeed:

Jer 23:29 "Is not My word like a fire?" says the LORD, "And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?"

Heb 4:12 For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

God's word is a hammer, and it's piercing, but the reformed view is that God's Spirit must first "quicken" or enliven a person, before he is capable of being hit by the hammer, or pierced by the sword. To put it another way, apart from the preparatory actions of the Holy Spirit, acting directly on us, God's word falls on deaf ears; its truth cannot be seen or understood.

If God's words were effective on their own then, when Christ spoke them directly, *everyone* who heard him would believe him; *everyone* he touched would be healed; *everyone* would recognize him as the Son of the living God, just as Peter did. But Jesus said that the only way Peter could know who he was, is that God *revealed* it to him. He was "blessed" by God (Matt. 16:16). It is clear that not everyone is blessed, nor was everyone healed by Jesus, especially in his home town. And not everyone accepted him as the Christ. Why? Because there are apparently two types of people in the world. The Pharisees asked Jesus flat out, "Tell us plainly if you are the Christ" and Jesus responded, "I did tell you... but you didn't believe me. And you didn't believe me because you are not my sheep... My sheep hear my voice." Jn. 10:24-27 They could not hear his words, and so they were not changed by them. They were not Spirit-enabled to receive them. God did not reveal himself to them. They remained blind, deaf, and hardened without God's Spirit first enabling them to see, hear, and receive. Or to use another metaphor from Scripture, the good seed of God's word fell on unprepared soil.

When do we obtain God's Spirit so that we may discern spiritual things?

The first view is that reading or hearing God's word will draw you to God in such a way that you may freely accept or reject Christ. If you accept him, then you will receive his Spirit *after* your conversion. In this view, you may reject Christ after your conversion, and thus lose the Spirit you received.

The historic reformed view is that God's Spirit comes to you *first*; he enables you to understand the things of God, and then you *will* freely come to Christ. In the reformed view, you have been chosen in Christ since the foundation of the world, not since your conversion (Eph. 1:4). You were put there by the hand of God; no one can take you out of God's hand, not even you (Jn. 10:29). The Spirit is the deposit *guaranteeing* your inheritance (Eph. 1:14; 2Cor. 1:22; 5:5). And that bit of knowledge, that revelation, is where your comfort and assurance comes from in this life... God loves you specifically, personally, and particularly. You are his, and you have always been his, even though when you were apart from Christ you were a child of wrath (Eph 2.3) – but having been united to Christ by faith (Rom 6.5), and being baptized into his Body by the Spirit at your conversion (1Cor 12.13), you will *always* be his. Praise God for that!