Lesson 39: Questions 94 and 95

94–95

The preceding lessons have established that faith and repentance are saving graces and that God ordinarily communicates the benefits of redemption through appointed outward means. Yet an important question remains. If many people read the Bible, hear preaching, or participate outwardly in Christian worship without being saved, how can these outward means be called means of salvation?

These outward means possess no saving power in themselves, nor does their effectiveness depend upon the minister's skill, office, or personal holiness. They become effectual only as Christ blesses them and the Holy Spirit works through them. Thus, two people may hear the same Word: one dismisses it, while in the other the Spirit uses it to convict and convert the sinner, or to strengthen and comfort the believer.

Question 94: How is the Word made effectual to salvation?

Q. How is the Word made effectual to salvation?
A. The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching, of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.

The catechism begins with the decisive cause of the Word's effectiveness: "The Spirit of God" ***makes*** it effectual. Scripture is always true, authoritative, and worthy of belief because it is God's Word. Yet fallen sinners do not naturally welcome its truth. Sin darkens the understanding, hardens the heart, and inclines us to suppress the truth. The Spirit must work through the Word if sinners are to be brought from unbelief to faith.

This is not because the Scripture is defective, but because sin twists and warps our minds and our very nature. Scripture is the pure and sufficient Word of God, but apart from the Spirit's gracious work, sinners resist what it reveals. In overcoming that resistance, the Spirit does not lead people away from the written Word into a private religious experience. He opens the mind and heart to understand, believe, and embrace the Word He inspired.

FIRST, the Spirit makes both the reading and the preaching of the Word effectual. **Nehemiah 8:8** presents God's Word being read clearly and its meaning being explained so that the people understand. Reading and exposition belong together. One can be a lifelong reader of the Bible and still miss its teachings, even with a sincere heart and a true faith. We must seek to understand, harmonize, and systematize our understanding of the Scriptures!

Public preaching is especially emphasized because Christ has appointed the preached Word as an ordinary means by which His voice is heard and His church is gathered and nourished. Nevertheless, the catechism does not diminish personal, family, or public reading. Timothy had known the ***sacred writings*** (in his case, the Old Testament; in our case, both the Old and New Testaments) from childhood, and those writings were able to make him ***wise for salvation through faith in Christ***.

> *[14] But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it [15] and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. [16] All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, [17] that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:14-17, ESV)*

This passage describes both the saving and the sanctifying usefulness of Scripture. The sacred writings make a person *"wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus"*, and all God-breathed Scripture equips the man of God for every good work. The Word is not merely the entrance into the Christian life. It remains God's instrument for shaping mature, obedient, and useful Christians.

Romans 10:13-17 explains why the catechism gives special prominence to preaching. Those who call upon the Lord must believe, those who believe must hear, and those who hear ordinarily require someone sent to preach. Paul concludes that faith comes from hearing through the Word of Christ. Preaching does not produce faith by its own power, but it is an appointed means through which Christ addresses sinners and the Spirit brings them to faith.

SECOND, the Spirit uses the Word for "convincing and converting sinners". In older theological usage, "convincing" includes convicting (see **1 Corinthians 14:24** in the KJV and ESV, where the KJV's *"convinced"* corresponds with the ESV's *"convicted"*). The Word exposes the sinner's guilt, reveals the secrets of the heart, and leaves him accountable before God. In **1 Corinthians 14:24-25**, intelligible prophetic speech brings an unbeliever under conviction so that the secrets of his heart are disclosed and he falls down to worship God. The power is not in obscure religious excitement but in divine truth brought home to the conscience.

In **Acts 26:18**, Christ sends Paul to open the eyes of the Gentiles, turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, and call them to receive forgiveness and an inheritance through faith in Christ. Paul's ministry is a genuine instrument in that conversion, but only Christ can accomplish what the commission requires. The preacher speaks the Word; the Spirit gives sight, repentance, and faith.

Psalm 19:8 likewise says that the Lord's commandment is pure, enlightening the eyes. God uses His truth to dispel moral and spiritual darkness. The Spirit's illumination is not new revelation added to Scripture. It is His gracious work enabling sinners to see the truth and glory already revealed in Scripture, supremely the glory of Christ.

Thus Paul calls the gospel *"the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes"* in **Romans 1:16**. The gospel is not merely advice about how sinners might improve themselves. It announces the saving work of God in Christ, and God works through that message to create and sustain faith. Its effectiveness is divine, while its saving benefits are received through faith.

THIRD, the Spirit uses the Word for "building [believers] up in holiness and comfort". Paul commends the Ephesian elders to God and to *"the word of his grace"* (**Acts 20:32**), which is able to build them up and give them the inheritance among all who are sanctified. The Word that converts also strengthens. It corrects error, exposes remaining sin, renews the mind, supplies promises for faith, and directs believers in grateful obedience.

Romans 15:4 particularly explains how the Word builds believers up in comfort. The Scriptures were written for our instruction so that, through their encouragement and the endurance they cultivate, we might have hope. Biblical comfort is therefore grounded in God's revealed truth and promises. It strengthens believers to persevere rather than merely relieving present distress.

Holiness and comfort must remain together. Biblical comfort is not reassurance detached from repentance, and biblical holiness is not anxious moral striving detached from grace. Through the Word, the Spirit shows us both the seriousness of sin and the sufficiency of Christ. He teaches us to put sin to death, to trust the promises of God, and to persevere in hope.

The 1689 Confession similarly teaches that saving faith is ordinarily brought about by the ministry of the Word and is then strengthened through the Word, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, prayer, and the other means appointed by God (**2LBCF §14.1**). Faith does not rest upon the eloquence of a preacher or the emotional force of a meeting. It rests upon Christ as He is offered in the gospel.

We should therefore reject two opposite errors.

- The first treats preaching as if right methods, personality, or atmosphere produce conversion.
- The second treats preaching and reading as unnecessary because only the Spirit can save.

Scripture permits neither conclusion. The means cannot save without the Spirit, but the Spirit does not save apart from the means Christ has appointed.

Question 95: How is the Word to be read and heard that it may become effectual to salvation?

Q. How is the Word to be read and heard that it may become effectual to salvation?
A. That the Word may become effectual to salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.

Question 95 turns from the Spirit's sovereign efficacy to the hearer's responsibility. These are not competing explanations. Because God works through His appointed means, we should use those means earnestly. Dependence upon the Spirit does not encourage ***passivity***; it produces ***prayerful diligence***.

FIRST, we must attend to the Word with diligence. Wisdom pronounces the person blessed who listens daily and waits attentively at her gates (**Proverbs 8:34**). Applied to the reception of God's Word, this excludes careless and merely occasional attention. We should place ourselves regularly under faithful preaching, read Scripture consistently, listen carefully, and resist mental drift.

Diligence does not mean that every reading or sermon will feel equally memorable. Fruitfulness is often gradual. No one yells at an apple tree for taking a season to produce fruit. The question is whether we honor God's Word by sustained attention or treat it as background noise that must compete with every distraction. You may not remember every point — or even every sermon — but attentive listening is, slowly but surely, shaping you according to the Scriptures.

SECOND, we must attend with preparation and prayer. **1 Peter 2:1-2** connects longing for the pure spiritual milk of the Word with putting away malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander. We do not prepare for the Word by making ourselves worthy of grace. We prepare by recognizing and rejecting the sins that obstruct humble reception.

Prayer is equally necessary. The psalmist asks God to open his eyes so that he may behold wondrous things out of His law (**Psalm 119:18**). This prayer confesses both the objective excellence of Scripture and our dependence upon divine illumination. Before reading Scripture or hearing it preached, we should ask the Spirit for understanding, conviction, faith, and obedience.

Preparation may be simple and practical: praying before the Lord's Day, reading the sermon passage beforehand when possible, arriving ready to listen, and refusing to nourish distraction. These practices cannot ***force*** God's blessing, but they are ***fitting expressions*** of hunger for His Word.

THIRD, we must receive the Word with faith and love. The wilderness generation heard good news, but the message did not help them:

> *[1] Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. [2] For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. (Hebrews 4:1-2, ESV)*

Hearing sounds is not the same as ***receiving*** God's testimony. Faith ***accepts*** His promises as true and ***rests*** upon Christ as sufficient. It also ***receives*** His warnings, commands, and corrections as the words of the One Who is perfectly wise and good.

The Word must also be received with love. **2 Thessalonians 2:10** describes those who perish as refusing to love the truth and so be saved. Saving faith does not merely admit that Christian claims are factually correct. It welcomes the truth because it reveals the God Who saves. A person may admire biblical language, enjoy theological argument, or appreciate a preacher's ability while resisting the truth itself.

FOURTH, we must lay up the Word in our hearts and practice it in our lives. The psalmist says that he has stored up God's Word in his heart so that he might not sin against Him (**Psalm 119:11**). To lay up the Word is to retain, treasure, and recall it. This may include memorization, meditation, notes, discussion, and repeated reading, but the goal is ***more than information***. It is ***transformation***. The Word is stored in the heart so that it governs desire and conduct.

In the parable of the soils, the good soil represents those who hear the Word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience (**Luke 8:15**). The evidence of genuine reception is enduring fruit, not a brief emotional response. **James 1:25** makes the same point from another direction: the blessed hearer looks into the perfect law, perseveres, and becomes a doer rather than a forgetful hearer.

These duties must not be turned into a technique for controlling the Spirit. Diligence, preparation, prayer, faith, love, remembrance, and obedience do not give Scripture a power it otherwise lacks. Nor do they merit saving grace. They describe the humble posture of one who recognizes that God addresses us through His Word and that His truth must not be received casually.

At the same time, the doctrine of divine efficacy must never become an excuse for unbelief or neglect. Scripture does not permit the careless hearer to blame God for his refusal to listen. We are ***commanded*** to hear, believe, keep, and obey.

When the Word bears saving fruit, all praise belongs to God.
When the Word is rejected, the guilt belongs to the hearer.

Conclusion

Questions 94 and 95 teach us that the saving effectiveness of the Word depends upon the sovereign work of God, yet its hearers remain responsible for how they receive it. We must neither treat Scripture as though it works automatically nor use our dependence upon the Spirit as an excuse for careless hearing. God has joined His powerful work to His appointed means, and we should therefore receive His Word with humble expectation.

94. ***The Spirit makes the Word effectual***: He uses its ***reading*** — and especially its ***preaching*** — to convince and convert sinners and to build believers up in holiness and comfort.
95. ***We must receive the Word rightly***: We attend to it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; receive it with faith and love; treasure it in our hearts; and practice it in our lives.

Take this with you in three ways:

- ***FIRST***, pray for the Spirit's work whenever you come to the Word.
  Ask Him to open your eyes, expose your sin, and strengthen your faith.
  Do not assume that familiarity with Scripture removes your need for divine illumination.

- ***SECOND***, give the Word your ***deliberate*** attention.
  Prepare to hear it preached. Read it consistently.
  Resist the distractions that encourage careless reception.
  We carefully attend to many voices that cannot give us life.
  How much more should we attend to the Word of God?

- ***THIRD***, receive the Word with the intention of keeping it.
  Treasure what you hear, meditate upon it, and put it into practice.
  The goal is not merely to finish a reading or remember a sermon.
  The goal is to ***know and believe*** what God has said, then to ***obey*** it.

Come, then, with an open Bible, a praying heart, and a life ready to obey.
The Spirit Who inspired the Word is able to make it fruitful unto salvation.