

The Success of the Ministry of the Gospel, Owing to a Divine Influence

by Samuel Davies

The success of the ministry of the gospel depends on the concurring influences of divine grace.

Scripture: Isaiah 2:22, Matthew 11:28, John 6:44, Romans 9:16, 1 Corinthians 3:6

Topics: "Divine Influence", "Gospel Ministry"

Description

Samuel Davies preaches about the essential role of divine influence in the success of the ministry of the gospel, emphasizing that the glory of God's name is the ultimate purpose of all works. He explains that while ministers plant and water the seed of the Word, it is God alone who gives the increase through His superintending influence. Davies highlights the necessity of divine grace in converting sinners and nurturing believers, pointing out that without God's agency, all human efforts are in vain. He urges both ministers and congregants to humbly depend on God's grace for the effectiveness of the gospel, cautioning against trusting in man or external means without divine influence.

Transcript

The Success of the Ministry of the Gospel,

Owing to a Divine Influence

Samuel Davies, November 19, 1757

"I planted the seed, Apollos watered it--but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything--but only God, who makes things grow." 1 Corinthians 3:6-7

The design of God in all his works of creation, providence, and grace--is to advance and secure the glory of his own name; and, therefore, though he makes use of secondary causes as the instruments of his operations, yet their efficacy depends upon his superintending influence. It is his hand that sustains the great chain of causes and effects, and his agency pervades and animates the worlds of nature and of grace.

In the natural world, he makes use of the instrumentality of the gardener to cultivate the ground, to sow the seed, and water it. But it is he who commands the clouds to drop down fatness upon it, and the sun to diffuse its vital influence. It is he who continues to the earth, and the other principles of vegetation, their

respective virtues; and without this influence of his--the gardener's planting and watering would be in vain; and after all his labor, he must acknowledge, that it is God who gives the increase.

Just so, in the world of grace: God uses a variety of suitable means to form degenerate sinners into his image, and fit them for a happy eternity. All the institutions of the gospel are intended for this purpose, and particularly the preaching ministry. Ministers are sowers sent out into the wild field of the world, with the precious seed of the Word. It is the grand business of their life to cultivate this barren soil, to plant trees of righteousness, and water them that they may bring forth the fruits of holiness. It is by the use of painful industry, that they can expect to improve this wilderness into a fruitful field; and the Lord is pleased to pour out his Spirit from on high, at times, to render their labors successful; so that they who went forth bearing precious seed with sorrow and tears, return, bringing their sheaves with joy.

But alas, they meet with disappointments enough to convince them that all their labors will be in vain--if a sovereign God denies the influence of his grace. The agency of his Holy Spirit is as necessary to fructify the Word, and make it the seed of conversion, as the influences of heaven are to fructify the earth and promote vegetation! A zealous Paul may plant the Word, and an eloquent Apollos may water it; one may attempt to convert sinners to Christianity, and the other to build them up in faith--but they are both nothing, as to the success of their labors--unless God gives the increase! That is, unless he affords the influence of his grace to render their attempts successful in begetting and nourishing living religion in the hearts of men.

This is the great truth contained in my text: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow." The Corinthians had been blessed with the labors of several ministers, particularly of the Apostle Paul, who had been the happy instrument of turning them from their native heathenism, and planting the gospel among them; and of Apollos, who succeeded him, and watered the good seed which Paul had planted among them.

But the Corinthians, instead of peaceably and thankfully improving the different gifts of different ministers for their spiritual and everlasting benefit, fell into factions, through a partial admiration of the one, in opposition to the other. Some of them were for Paul, as an universal scholar, and a strong reasoner; others were all for Apollos, as an accomplished orator. And thus they considered these ministers of Christ, rather as the ringleaders of factions than as unanimous promoters of the same gospel message. To suppress this party spirit, the apostle asks them, "Who, then, is Paul, or who is Apollos?" What mighty beings would you make us in your idolatrous attachment to us? Alas! what are we, more than feeble ministers of Christ, by whom you believed? We were not the authors of your faith--but the humble instruments of it in the divine hand! And the success that either of us has had, has not been from our own power--but just as God has been pleased to give to every man, (verse 5.) I first planted the gospel among you; Apollos afterwards watered it. This was all we could do: but we could not make it bear the fruits of holiness in one soul. It was God alone who gave the increase, and made our respective labors successful, (verse 6.)

Therefore turn your regard to him alone! "Stop trusting in man, who has but a breath in his nostrils. Of what account is he?" Isaiah 2:22. Do not idolatrously share the honor of your conversion between God the efficient cause, and us, the humble instruments of it; but ascribe it to him alone: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow." He is all in all.

When we see a people enjoy the frequent cultivations of the gospel, and the means of spiritual fruitfulness, and yet few new trees of righteousness planted, and those that have been planted seemingly withering and unfruitful, we cannot but conclude that something is lacking: without which all the means they enjoy will be of no service. We should naturally turn our thoughts to an inquiry as to what was lacking--had we cultivated our lands from year to year without a crop. And since we find at present, that notwithstanding all the labors bestowed upon us, we lie in a deep spiritual lethargy, and hardly know what it is of late, to be animated with the news of some careless sinner here and there awakened to serious concern about his eternal state--it is high time to inquire: what is lacking?

There is certainly something lacking, which is of greater consequence than anything we have. Here are the gospel, and its ordinances, which at times have done great things, and sinners have yielded to their resistless energy; here is a minister, who, however weak, has sometimes been the happy instrument of giving a sinner an alarm, and speaking a word in season to those who were weary; here are hearers that crowd our sanctuary, hearers of the same kind with those whom we have seen before now fall under the power of the Word. And what, then, is lacking? Why God, who alone can give the increase, is not here by the influences of his grace! And in his absence, "neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything" together, they are all nothing! We may labor until doomsday, and never convert one soul. "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" Where is he who can do more execution with one feeble sentence, than we can with a thousand of our most powerful sermons? Why, he has hidden his face; and hence there is none who calls upon his name, and stirs up himself to take hold of him. Isaiah 65:7. And until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high--nothing but briars and thorns will come up among us! Chapter 32:13, 15.

Let your thoughts, therefore, with eager attention now follow me, while I am proving, illustrating, and making remarks pertinent to our case, from this affecting truth contained in the text: that the success of the ministry of the gospel with respect to saints and sinners, entirely depends upon the concurring influences of divine grace! Or, that without the divine agency to render the gospel successful, all the labors of its ministers will be in vain.

This truth can give us no surprise as a new discovery, if we have any acquaintance with the present degeneracy of human nature--with the declarations and promises of the Word of God--with the accounts of the different success of the means of grace in various periods of the church--or with matters that might have come within the compass of our own experience and observation.

1. Such is the present degeneracy of human nature, that all the ministrations of the gospel cannot remedy it, without the concurring efficacy of divine grace.

So barren is the soil, that the seed of the Word falls upon it and dies, and never grows up; as though it had never been sown there, until it is fructified by divine grace. It is a soil fruitful only of briars and thorns, which grow up, and choke the Word; so that it becomes unfruitful until divine grace roots them up. Or it may be represented by a rocky or stony soil, where the Word of God can take no deep root, and therefore withers--until it be modified by influences from heaven. Thus our Lord represents the matter in the famous parable of the sowers. Matthew 13.

The metaphors used in sacred Scripture to illustrate this case, sufficiently prove the degeneracy of mankind, and their entire opposition to the gospel. They are represented as spiritually DEAD, Ephesians 2:1; John 5:25; that is, though they are still capable of the exercises of reason and animal actions, yet they are really destitute of a supernatural principle of spiritual life, and incapable of suitable exercises towards

God. And can a Paul or an Apollos quicken the dead with convictive arguments, with strong persuasions, or tender and passionate expostulations? No! None but He can do it--whose Almighty voice bade Lazarus come forth.

Sinners are also represented as BLIND. 2. Corinthians 4:4. Now what can feeble mortals do to give sight to the blind? We can exhibit divine things before them; we can expose the horrid deformity of sin, and its tremendous consequences; we can display the glories of God, the beauty of holiness, and the allurements of redeeming love. But, alas! all this is but like showing pictures to the blind. We cannot open their blind eyes; we cannot communicate such views of things to their minds as are in any measure adequate to the things themselves. What can tender arguments avail--to break hearts of stone? What can the best reasoning do--to overcome headstrong obstinacy to the Gospel? What can hearty persuasions do--to extirpate inveterate, implacable enmity towards God? Romans 8:7. What can the greatest eloquence do--to charm deaf adders that stop their ears? Psalm 58:4. The Israelites might as well pretend to overthrow the walls of Jericho with the sound of rams' horns, as we with our feeble breath to overthrow the strongholds of Satan in the hearts of sinners! It is the divine agency alone--which gives the success in both cases. Clay cannot open the eyes of the blind, except in his Almighty hands, who could form a world out of nothing--and who can work without or against means as easily as with them.

The Scripture representations of the degeneracy of mankind are confirmed by universal experience. If we form any observations of ourselves or others, we find that the whole bent of our souls by nature is diametrically contrary to the gospel. The gospel is designed to reclaim men from sin; but they are obstinately set upon it. The gospel is designed to make sin bitter to them, and to dissolve their hearts into tender sorrows for it; but we naturally delight in sin, and our hearts are hard as the nether millstone. The gospel is intended to bring apostate rebels back to God, and the universal practice of holiness; but we love estrangement from him, and have no inclination to return. We abhor the ways of strict holiness, and choose to walk in the evil imaginations of our own hearts. The gospel is calculated to advance the divine glory, and abash the pride of all flesh, in the scheme of salvation which it reveals; but this is directly contrary to the disposition of the sinner, who is all for his own glory. This requires no tedious arguments to prove it. Look in upon your own hearts; look back on your own conduct; look round you on the world--and there the evidences of it will glare upon you!

Now, since the innate dispositions of men are thus averse to the gospel, it is evident that nothing but divine power can make it effectual for their salvation and sanctification! Instructions may furnish the head with notions and correct speculative mistakes--but they have no power to sway the will and sweetly allure it to holiness. Persuasions may bring men to practice what they had omitted through mistake, carelessness, or a transient dislike--but they will have no effect where the heart is full of innate enmity against the things recommended. In this case, he who plants, and he who waters, are nothing; it is God alone who can give the increase; as is more than intimated by,

2. The promises and declarations of the Word of God, which appropriate all the success of the gospel--to God alone.

Jehovah is not fond of ostentation and parade, nor wasteful in throwing away his blessings where they are not needed; and therefore if the means of grace were sufficient of themselves to convert sinners and edify believers--he would not make such magnificent promises of the supernatural aids of his grace, nor claim the efficacy of them as his own. He would not assert the insufficiency of them without his influence, nor assign the withdrawalment of his grace as one cause of their unsuccessfulness. But all this he does in his

Word.

Notwithstanding all the miraculous as well as ordinary means of grace which the Israelites enjoyed, there was need of this divine promise. "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants--so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live." Deuteronomy 30:6. And this promise was not peculiar to the Mosaic dispensation of the covenant of grace, which was less clear and efficacious; but we find that one superior excellency of the gospel dispensation is, that it is more abundant in such promises. It is to the gospel church that this promise is more particularly made; "Behold the days come, says the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, etc., not according to the covenant which I made with their fathers, in the day that I took them by the hand, to bring them out of the land of Egypt, etc.--but this shall be the covenant that I will make with them; I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts." Jer. 31:31, 33; Hebrews 8:8, etc.

This is a promise of so much importance, that it is frequently repeated with some circumstantial alteration, as the very life of the New Testament church. "I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever; and I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me." Jer. 32:39, 40. Ezekiel echoes back the same language by the inspiration of the same Spirit, "I will give them one heart; and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh; and I will give them a heart of flesh; and they shall walk in my statutes, and keep my ordinances, and do them." Ezekiel 11:19, 20. See also chapter 36:26, 27.

What was the success of Peter's sermon (Acts 2) in the conversion of 3,000 but the accomplishment of those promises in Joel and Zechariah? "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh." (Joel 2:28, 29.) "I will pour out upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, and they shall look," etc. Zech. 12:10. These promises were substantially renewed by Christ, to encourage the drooping apostles, John 16:8-10. "I will send the Spirit; and when he has come--he will convince the world," etc. All their miraculous powers were not sufficient for the conviction of mankind, without the agency of the divine Spirit; but by this, that promise of the Father to his Son was accomplished: "Your people shall be willing in the day of your power." Psalm 110:3.

I might subjoin many other promises of the same kind; but these are sufficient to show the absolute necessity of divine influence, or the utter insufficiency of the best means without it. And what further time might be allotted to this particular, I shall lay out upon this pertinent and useful remark, which, if rightly attended to, would rectify mistakes, and remove many scruples and controversies upon this point.

The remark is this: That the promises of God to bestow blessings upon us, do not render needless our most vigorous endeavors to obtain them. And, on the other hand, that our most vigorous endeavors do not supersede the influences of the Spirit to work in us the dispositions we are laboring after! Or, that that may be consistently enjoined upon us as a duty, which is promised by God's free favor; and vice versa. This may be illustrated by various instances.

God commands us as strictly to circumcise our hearts, to make ourselves new hearts and new spirits, (Jer. 4:4,) and to cleanse ourselves from moral pollution, (Isaiah 1:16,) as if this were wholly our work, and he had no efficiency in it. In the meantime, he promises as absolutely to circumcise our hearts to love him, to give us new hearts, and to purge us from all our filthiness, and from all our abominations; as though he performed all the work without our using means!

Now we are sure these things are consistent; for the sacred oracles are not a heap of contradictions. And how does their consistency appear?

Why, thus: it is our duty to use the most vigorous endeavors to obtain those graces promised, because it is only in the use of vigorous endeavors, that we have reason to expect divine influences. And yet these endeavors of ours do not in the least work those graces in us, and therefore there is certainly as much need of the promised agency of divine grace to effect the work--as if we should do nothing at all. Our utmost endeavors fall entirely short of it, and do not entitle us to divine assistance; and this we must have a humble sense of, before we can receive the accomplishments of such promises as the effect of free grace alone. But we should continue in these endeavors, because we have no reason to hope for the accomplishment of the promises, in a course of sloth and negligence.

This point may be illustrated by the consistency of the use of the means and the agency of providence in the natural world. God has peremptorily promised, that "while earth remains, seed-time and harvest shall not cease," Genesis 8:22. But this promise does not render it needless for us to cultivate the earth. Nor does all our cultivation render this promise needless; for all our labor would be in vain without the influence of divine providence; and this influence is to be expected only in the use of labor.

Thus, in the spiritual world: the efficacy belongs to God--as much as if we made no use of means at all. And the most vigorous endeavors are as much our duty--as if we could effect the work ourselves, and God had no special hand in it. Were this remark attended to, it would guard us against the pernicious extremes of turning the grace of God into wantonness, and pleading it as an excuse for our idleness; and of self-righteousness, and depending upon our own endeavors. In this guarded manner does Paul handle this point: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Phil. 2:12, 13. But to return:

As we may infer the necessity of divine influences from the promises of God--so we may infer the same thing from the many passages of sacred Writ ascribing the success of the gospel upon sinners, and even upon believers--to the agency of divine grace. If even a well-disposed Lydia gives a believing attention to the things spoken by Paul, it is because the Lord has opened her heart. Acts 16:14. Thus the Philippians believed, because, says the apostle, to you it is given on the behalf of Christ, to believe, Phil. 1:29. Thus the Ephesians were spiritually alive, because, says he, "you has he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins." Ephesians 2:1. Faith is not from ourselves; but is expressly said to be the gift of God, Ephesians 2:8.

Nay the implantation of FAITH is represented as a work of Omnipotence, like that of the resurrection of Christ. Hence the apostle prays, Ephesians 1:19, 20, that the Ephesians might be made deeply sensible of the "exceeding greatness of his power to us who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ when he raised him from the dead."

REPENTANCE is also the gift of God: Christ is exalted to bestow it. Acts 5:31. When the Jewish Christians heard of the success of the gospel among the Gentiles, they unanimously ascribed it to God: "then has God also granted to the Gentiles repentance unto life," Acts 11:18; and it is upon this encouragement that Paul recommends the use of the proper means to reclaim the obstinate: "if God, perhaps, will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth," 2 Tim. 2:25.

REGENERATION also, in which faith and repentance, and other graces are implanted, is always ascribed to God. If all things are made new, all these things are of God. 2 Corinthians 5:17, 18. If, while others

reject Christ, some receive him, and so are honored with the privilege of becoming the sons of God, it is not owing to themselves--but to God. "They are born, not of blood, nor of the will of man, nor of the will of the flesh--but of God." John 1:11-13. He begets such of his own sovereign will by the Word of truth, James 1:18; and every good and perfect gift with which they are endowed, is not from themselves--but from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, who is the great origin of all moral excellency, as the sun is of light, ver. 17.

Hence this change is expressed by such terms as denote the divine agency, and exclude that of the creature; as a new birth, John 3:3; a new creation, 2 Corinthians 5:17; Col. 3:10; the workmanship of God created in Christ Jesus, Ephesians 2:10; a resurrection from the dead, John 5:25; Ephesians 2:1; Col. 3:1. Now it is the greatest absurdity to speak of a man's begetting or creating himself, or raising himself from the dead. Thus we find that the first implantation of grace in the heart of a sinner--is entirely the work of God!

And, lest we should suppose that, when it is once implanted, it can flourish and grow without the influence of God, we find that the progress of sanctification in believers is ascribed to God, as well as their first conversion! David was sensible after all his attainments, that he could not run the way of God's commandments, unless God should enlarge his heart. Psalm 119:32. All the hopes of Paul concerning his promising converts at Philippi depended upon his persuasion, that "he who had begun a good work in them, would carry it out until the day of Christ." Phil. 1:6. Nay, it was upon this he placed his own entire dependence. "We are not sufficient of ourselves," says he, "to think anything as of ourselves--but our sufficiency is from God." 2 Corinthians 3:5. "If I am faithful, it is because I have obtained mercy of the Lord to make me so." 1 Corinthians 7:25. "By the grace of God I am what I am; and if I have labored more abundantly than others, it is not I--but the grace of God that was with me!" 1 Corinthians 15:10. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Phil. 4:13. He was relieved under his despondencies by this answer, "My grace is sufficient for you, and my strength is made perfect in weakness." 2 Corinthians 12:9.

This is more than intimated in his prayers for himself and others: for example, "May the God of peace make you perfect in every good work, to do his will; working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ!" Hebrews 13:21. And indeed all the prayers of the saints for the aids of divine grace, imply the necessity of them; for they would not pray for superfluities, or for what they already have in a sufficient measure. It is the Spirit who helps our infirmities in prayer, and other exercises of devotion, Romans 8:24, and all our preparation for the heavenly state and aspirations after it, are of God. "He who has wrought us for the self-same thing is God." 2 Corinthians 5:5. In a word, it is God who "works all our works in us," Isaiah 26:12; "it is he who works in us both to will and to do, of his own good pleasure." Phil. 2:13. Now the actual communication of divine influence, implies their necessity.

Accordingly we find: that the necessity of divine influences is stated in the plainest terms in Scripture. No man, says Christ, can come unto me, unless the Father draws him, John 6:44. He who has heard and learned of the Father--and he only--will come to him, verse 45. And this influence is not purchased by our endeavors--but it is the free gift of grace. Hence Christ varies his former declarations into this form; no man can come unto me--unless it is given unto him by my Father, verse 65.

And the agency of divine grace is necessary, not only to draw sinners to Christ at first--but also to make them fruitful afterwards. Hence Christ represents even the apostles as dependent upon him--as the branch upon the vine; and tells them plainly, that without him they can do nothing. John 15:4, 5. Through

all the stages of the Christian life, we depend entirely upon him! Without his influences, we would wither and die like a blasted flower, however blooming and fruitful we were before. Hence says God to his people, "in me is your fruit found," Hosea 14. 8. Since then this is the case, it will follow that when God is pleased to withhold his influences--all the means of grace will be unsuccessful.

Accordingly we find: The unsuccessfulness of the gospel is often resolved into the withholding or withdrawing of the influences of divine grace, as one cause of it. Thus Moses resolves the obstinacy of the Israelites under all the profusion of wonders that had attended them, into this, as one cause of it: "The Lord has not given you a heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day." Deuteronomy 29:2-4. If none believe the report of the gospel, it is because the arm of the Lord is not revealed, Isaiah 53:1. If the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven are hidden from the wise and prudent, while they are revealed to babes--it is because God in his righteous judgment and sovereign pleasure, hides them from the one, and reveals them to the other! Matthew 11:25, 26.

Nay, the evangelist speaks in yet more forcible terms, when speaking of the unbelief of the Jews, who were witnesses of Christ's convictive miracles and discourses; therefore they could not believe, because that Isaiah said--he has "blinded their eyes, and hardened their hearts," John 12:39, 40. And in the same strain Paul speaks: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort--but on God's mercy." Romans 9:16, etc.

These passages are so opposite to the prevailing thinking of the age, that they are dangerous weapons to meddle with; and it is well they are the very words of Scripture, otherwise we would be charged with blasphemy for mentioning the truth contained in them!

We must indeed be cautious that we do not infer from the Scriptures any such horrid doctrine as this: that men are compelled to sin, and pushed on to ruin, by a necessitating decree, or the resistless impulse of Providence; or that, though they were disposed to turn to God, they are judicially kept back and hindered by the divine hand. This would be contrary to the whole current of Scripture, which charges the sin and ruin of sinners upon themselves. But these passages mean, that God denies to obstinate sinners those influences of his grace which are necessary to convert them, and which, if communicated, would have subdued their utmost obstinacy; and that in consequence of this denial, they will rush on in sin and irreclaimable impenitence, and perish! But yet that God, in denying them his grace, does not act merely as an arbitrary sovereign--but as a just judge, punishing them for their sin in abusing the blessings he has bestowed upon them, by judicially withdrawing the aids of his grace, and withholding farther influences. And surely he may punish obstinate sinners with privative as well as positive punishment! He may as justly withhold or withdraw forfeited blessings, as inflict positive misery. This we all own he may do with respect to temporal blessings, he may justly deny them to such as have forfeited them; and why he may not exercise the same sovereignty and justice with regard to spiritual blessings, is hard to say.

His hardening the heart, blinding the eyes, etc., of sinners, signify his withdrawing the influences of grace which they have abused, his withholding those additional influences which might irresistibly subdue their obstinacy, and his allowing them to fall into circumstances of temptation. These passages do but strongly and emphatically express thus much: thus much they may mean, without casting any injurious reflections upon God; and less than this they cannot mean--or they would have no meaning at all.

From the whole, then, we find that the doctrine of the reality and necessity of divine influences to render the administrations of the gospel effectual for saving purposes, is a doctrine clearly taught in the sacred oracles. This will receive additional confirmation if we find it agreeable to matter of experience; which leads me to observe,

3. That the different success of the same means of grace in different periods of the church, sufficiently shows the necessity of gracious assistances to render them efficacious. The various states of the church in various ages, are but commentaries upon the sacred pages, and accomplishments of Scripture truths.

Now we find that religion has flourished or declined, not so much according to external means--as according to the degree of divine influence. Alas! what could Noah, that zealous preacher of righteousness, do, during the one hundred and twenty years of his ministry? He might warn, he might persuade, he might weep over a secure world in vain; as they would rush upon destruction before his eyes! And he could only persuade his own family; and even among them there was a cursed Ham.

How little could Moses, the favorite messenger and intimate of God, prevail to make his people dutiful? Alas! after all the astonishing wonders he wrought before their eyes, they continued obstinate and rebellious; for the Lord had not given them a heart to understand, etc., Deut 29:4. This Moses mentions, as what was beyond his power, and could be effected by Omnipotence only.

What small success had that zealous prophet Elijah, the eloquent Isaiah, or that tender-hearted, mourning, weeping prophet Jeremiah! Surely, many feeble servants of Christ, in all respects inferior to them, have been crowned with more extensive success! Nay, when the Son of God descended from heaven, a divine teacher to the world, who spoke as never man spoke, who carried omnipotence along with him to attest his doctrine by the most astonishing miracles--how few, during his life, were brought seriously to regard his doctrine? He was pleased to defer the remarkable effusion of his Spirit until his return to his native heaven. And when it was poured out, what a glorious alteration followed! then Peter, a poor fisherman, is the happy instrument of converting three thousand with one short sermon; which is more, perhaps, than his divine Master had done by a hundred sermons!

Then, in spite of the united opposition of earth and hell, the humble doctrines of the cross triumphed over the nations, and subdued millions to the obedience of faith. Then the doctrines of Jesus, who was crucified at Jerusalem like an infamous malefactor, between two thieves, became the mighty, all-conquering weapons, through God, to demolish the strongholds of Satan. 2 Corinthians 2:4.

And whence this strange alteration? It was from the more abundant effusion of the Spirit upon the minds of men; upon their minds, I say, for, as to the external evidences from miracles, prophecies, etc., they were sufficiently clear before this happy season. But there was not the same degree of internal illumination by the Spirit.

It is often intimated by Christ, in his last discourses with his disciples, that the Holy Spirit was not yet given; and hence it was that he and they labored so much in vain. But upon his ascension, he performed the promise he had so often repeated, and sent the Spirit both upon them and their hearers; and then the aspect of affairs was happily altered; then the Word had free course, and was glorified. Then the world was convinced of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment!

This point might be illustrated farther, by a history of the various periods of the church, from the apostolic age to the present time; but it would be too tedious; and what has been offered is sufficient to convince us

that it is not by power, nor by might--but by the Spirit of the Lord Almighty, that the interests of true religion are carried on. Zech. 4:6. Especially if we add,

4. Our own experience and observation, which furnish us with many instances in which this great truth has been exemplified.

Our observation furnishes us with such instances as these:

Sometimes a minister, who is a great bible scholar, a masterly reasoner, and an accomplished orator, and withal, sincerely engaged for the conversion of sinners--labors in vain, and all his excellent discourses seem to have no effect! While another plain minister, of much inferior accomplishments, is the successful instrument of turning many to righteousness. This cannot be accounted for without ascribing the distinction to the peculiar concurrence of divine grace; for if it depended upon the instruments, it would be quite the reverse!

Sometimes a clear, convicting, and withal, solemn and warm discourse, has no effect; while, at another time, the same doctrines, given by the same minister, delivered in a weak, incoherent manner, have strange efficacy and reach the heart!

Sometimes the mere reading of a plain sermon has been the means of awakening careless sinners; when, at other times, the most solemn and argumentative preaching has been in vain.

Sometimes we have seen a number of sinners thoroughly awakened, and brought to seek the Lord in earnest; while another number, under the very same sermon, and who seemed as open to conviction as the former, or perhaps more so--have remained secure and thoughtless as usual.

And whence could these differences arise--but from special grace?

We have seen people struck to the heart with those doctrines which they had heard an hundred times before, without any effect! And indeed there is something in the manner of people being affected with the Word, which shows that the impression is not made by the Word itself, or by any other power, than divine. The truths that make such deep impressions upon their hearts, are no new discoveries; they are the old common repeated truths of the gospel, which they had heard before a thousand times; and the manner in which they are represented by the minister, may not be clearer than usual. But, to their surprise, these familiar doctrines flash upon them as new discoveries; they appear to them in a quite different light, as though they had never heard them before! And they reach the conscience, and pierce the heart with such amazing energy, that the sinner is cast into a consternation at his own former stupidity, that he never had such apprehensions of things before. He was accustomed to regard the Word as an idle tale, or a pleasing song--but now he finds it living and powerful, etc.; the secrets of his heart are laid open by it, and he is obliged to own that God is with it of a truth.

Thus a believer also discerns the doctrines of the gospel in a quite different light at one time than at another: he sees new glories in them. Hence one sermon leaves him cold and hard-hearted, while another, no better in itself, sets him all on fire! Hence also, one receives advantage from a discourse, which had no effect upon another: and from this proceeds the difference in judgment about the excellency of sermons, which we may observe among Christians. Every one forms a judgment according to his own sensations, and not according to the discourse in itself. And indeed when we hear an exercised Christian expatiate in praise of a discourse, it is a happy sign that it came with special grace and power to him.

Many such instances as these familiarly occur in the sphere of our observation; which prove, by matters of fact, that the success of the gospel depends upon the influence of divine grace. But we need not look about us to observe others. Turn your eyes inward upon what has passed in your own minds, and you shall find, that your own experience proves the same thing!

Have you not found that the very same Scripture truths have very different effects upon you at different times? Those truths, which at one time leave you dull and sleepy--at other times quicken all your powers to the most vigorous exercise! Do you not return from the house of God at different times--in very different frames, though the service there has been substantially the same? At one time you sweat and agonize under a sense of guilt, and make many resolutions to change your course of life; and at another time, there is a stupid insensibility within, and you have no concern at all for spiritual realities.

Some indeed have lain so long under the rays of the Sun of Righteousness, that they are hardened like clay, and hardly susceptible of any deep impressions at any time, after they have murdered their conscience, and silenced all its first remonstrances. These may go on serene and placid, until the flames of hell give them sensation! And this is most likely to be their doom; though it is not impossible but that this gospel, this stale, neglected gospel, which now makes no impression on their stony hearts--may yet be endowed with almighty power to break them into the tenderest contrition!

I pray God this may be the happy outcome. I pray God, oh sinner, that you may yet fall under the resistless energy of those crucial truths which now appear but trifles to you.

But until people are thus become armored against the gospel, they generally feel a variety of dispositions under the ministry of it--and this variety is to be principally ascribed to the various degrees of divine influence upon them at different seasons.

And you, saints, you also experience a like vicissitude. Sometimes, oh how divinely sweet, oh how nourishing is the sincere milk of the Word! How does the Word enlighten, quicken, and comfort you! How exactly it suits your very case! Yet at other times it is tasteless; it is a dead letter, and has no effect upon you! At times a single verse seems almighty, and carries all before it: and you experimentally feel it to be the Word of God. At other times you perceive only your feeble fellow-mortal speaking to you, and all his words are but feeble breath; as different from the former as chaff from wheat. See Jer. 23:28, 29.

Your own memories can supply my deficiency under this head, by recollecting such instances as these perhaps during your whole life; and the time urges me to make some remarks upon what has been said. These are so numerous and copious, that though I had them principally in view, and chose this subject for the sake of them, yet I can but superficially touch upon them.

Hence we learn,

1. How essential and important, the doctrine of divine influence is to the church of God. The very life, and the whole success of the gospel depends upon it! And since this necessarily supposes the utter depravity and spiritual impotence of human nature in its fallen state, that doctrine also must be frequently and plainly inculcated.

Alas! the great defect of the system of theology too fashionable in our days, and one great cause of the languishing state of religion in our age, and of the prevalence of vice and impiety! Since it has been the mode to compliment mankind as able to do something very considerable in religion, religion has died

away. Since it has been the fashion to press a reformation of men's lives, without inculcating the absolute necessity of divine grace to renew their nature--there is hardly such a thing as a thorough conversion to be seen; but mankind are evidently growing worse and worse.

Since men think they can do something, and scorn to be wholly dependent on divine grace--the Lord, as it were, looks on and allows them to make the experiment; and, alas! it is likely to be a costly experiment to multitudes. God withholds his influence in just displeasure, and lets them try what mighty things the boasted powers of degenerate nature can do without it! And hence, alas! they lie all secure and asleep in sin together! Sermons are preached; the house of God is frequented; the ordinances of the gospel administered; yet vice is triumphant; carnal security almost universal; and so few are earnestly seeking after God. Thus, alas! This spiritual deadness will continue, until ministers and people are brought to the dust before God, to acknowledge their own weakness--and entire dependence upon him. Therefore, hence we learn,

2. That when we enjoy the ministrations of the gospel in the greatest purity and plenty, we should not place our trust upon them--but wholly depend on the influence of divine grace for the success. We are apt to think, if we had but such a minister among us--how much good would be done! It is true, that faithful and accomplished ministers are singular blessings to the places where they labor, because it is by their instrumentality that the Lord is accustomed to work: but still let us remember, that even a Paul or an Apollos are nothing, unless the Lord gives the increase.

One text of Scripture, one verse, will do more execution, when enforced by divine energy, than all the labors of the ablest ministers upon earth without it! For this divine energy therefore let us look; for this let us cry, "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD!" When we depend upon the instruments, we provoke the Spirit of God to leave us! If we are fond of taking ministers in his stead, we shall make the trial, until both they and we wither away for lack of divine influences. This provokes the blessed Spirit to blast the gifts of his ministers, to allow them to fall into sin, or to remove them out of the way--when they are set up as his rivals--that their idolaters may see they are but men. This provokes him to leave the hearers fruitless under the best cultivations, until experience sadly convinces them that they can do nothing without him! Therefore let not ministers trust in their own abilities--nor people in their labors; but all must trust only in the Lord.

That we should ascribe all the success of the gospel to God alone, and not sacrilegiously divide the honor of it between him and the instruments of it, or between him and ourselves, the ministers of Christ are ready to answer you, in the language of Peter. "If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed!" Acts 4:9, 10. Why do you look so earnestly upon us--as if by our own power or holiness we have done this? chapter 3:12. It was a very shocking compliment to them--to be accounted the authors of your faith.

Good ministers love to be humble, to be in their proper sphere, and would have God to have all the glory, as the great efficient cause; and when we ascribe the work of God to the instrument, we provoke him to withdraw his influence, that we may be convinced of the mistake.

Let us also take care that we do not assume the honor of the work to ourselves. Alas! we had no hand in it--but opposed it with all our might; and, therefore, "Not to us, O LORD, not to us--but to your name be the

glory, because of your love and faithfulness!" Psalm 115:1. The Lord has done great things for us in this place, for which we are glad. One can name one person, and another another person, as his spiritual father, or the helper of his faith; but still remember, these only planted or watered; but it was God who gave the increase; and therefore to him alone ascribe the praise for his own work!

3. Hence also we may learn, where we should look for grace to render the gospel successful among us. Let us look up to God. Saints, apply to him for his influences to quicken your graces, and animate you in your Christian course. Sinners, cry to him for his grace to renew your nature and regenerate you. Not all the men, nor all the means upon earth, can be of any service to you--without God! Carefully attend upon the gospel, and all its institutions; but still be sensible, that these alone will not do; more is necessary; even the supernatural agency of divine grace!

How dangerous a thing it is to grieve the Spirit, and cause him to withdraw! In that cursed moment when a sinner has quenched the Spirit--all the means of grace become useless to him. Our salvation depends entirely upon the divine agency; and therefore to forfeit this, is to cut ourselves off from all hope! Let us then indulge every good motion, entertain every solemn thought, cherish every pious resolution, and so, as it were, invite the blessed agent to accomplish his work, instead of provoking him to leave us! Alas! how natural is it for mankind to resist him! how averse are they to receive his motions, and submit to his operations! And are not some of you guilty in this respect?

4. We observe that whatever excellent outward means and privileges a church enjoys, it is in a most miserable condition, if the Lord has withdrawn his influences from it. And whether this is too much our own condition, I leave you to judge. Some of you, I doubt not, are even now, flourishing in the courts of the Lord, and feel the dews of heaven upon you--when others are withering around you! But in general, it is evident that a contagious lukewarmness and carnal security have spread themselves among us. Matters would not be thus still and quiet, if there was any considerable number of sinners among us anxiously seeking after salvation. The violence of their concern would constrain them to unbosom themselves to their minister, and to Christians around them. Our public assemblies would not wear so stupid and unconcerned an aspect, were they generally pricked to the heart by the Spirit!

And what is the cause of this declension? Why, the Lord denies the increase; the Lord withholds his influence. This complaint has become fashionable among us, and often upon our lips; but, please consider what you say when you utter this complaint. And is the Lord indeed withdrawn from us? Then all is gone! Then saints will languish, and sinners may perish! And there is no remedy! We may indeed have preaching, sacraments, societies, etc.--but, alas! what will all these avail--if God denies the increase? They will not save one soul; nay they will but aggravate our condemnation!

Let sinners take the alarm, and consider how sad their case is, who have outlived the season of remarkable divine influences! The harvest is past, the summer is ended--and you are not saved! And what do you think will become of you? How poor a chance, if I may so speak, have you for life, when the Spirit is thus restrained! You hardly know one careless sinner, in the compass of your knowledge, that has been made seriously pious, within these two or three years. If men were pressing into the kingdom of heaven, you might be helped forward, as it were, in the crowd; but now all lies as a dead weight against you; and is it not time for you to cry mightily to God--that he would pour out his Spirit upon you?

Source:

<https://sermonindex.net/speakers/samuel-davies/the-success-of-the-ministry-of-the-gospel-owing-to-a-divine-influence/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net