
“Effectual” versus “Effective”

A reprint from *The ENJOY THE BIBLE QUARTERLY* — 2001, 2nd Quarter

— Keith R. Blades

Many people would probably be hard pressed to describe the difference in meaning between the two words in the above title. By their appearance it seems natural that they would be close in meaning, for there is not much difference in either spelling or sound. And clearly both words are built upon the root word “effect.” Hence it is common to think of them as basically just two forms of the same concept, with “effectual” simply being an older, less common form of the term “effective.” Thinking such, people frequently fail to detect or acknowledge any real distinction in meaning between the two words. They, therefore, treat “effectual” as merely equivalent in meaning to “effective” when they encounter it. And this they also do when they encounter it in God’s word, in places like the following:

6 And whether we be afflicted, *it is* for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, *it is* for your consolation and salvation.

II Corinthians 1:6

8 (For he that wrought effectually in Peter to the apostleship of the circumcision, the same was mighty in me toward the Gentiles:)

Galatians 1:8

16 From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

Ephesians 4:16

13 For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received *it not as* the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.

I Thessalonians 2:13

6 That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.

Philemon 6

There is, however, a distinct difference in meaning between “effectual” and “effective,” and it is not an insignificant or an unimportant one. On the contrary. In fact the difference is significant enough so that the word “effective” was not used by the King James translators of God’s word. They neither used it in the previous citations, nor in any place. Instead they only used the words “effectual” and “effectually,” knowing that in these places God is not referring to or describing something that is merely effective.

The Difference In Meaning

Both words are built upon the root word “effect.” And as such both denote the issue of bringing something to pass; bringing something about; producing a result; accomplishing something. However the distinct difference between “effectual” and “effective” lies in the nature of the effect being described. In particular, in the qualitative nature of the effect.

“Effective” is the more basic of the two words. For it simply denotes the issue of something having a desired effect, producing a result, without necessarily conveying anything about the quality of the effect.

With “effectual,” however, the quality of the effect is the very thing that is being stressed. When something is “effectual” it is more than just “effective.” It brings something about or accomplishes something decisively. It does it in a superior manner, and often with finality. “Effectual” can even denote the only legitimate or acceptable way of doing something.

Wherefore when something is “effectual,” or “effectually” works, it truly is more than just “effective.” It is to be understood and appreciated to be the best at accomplishing something; at producing the desired result. It either exceeds the ability of other ways or methods in bringing something to pass, or it alone possesses the ability, or is the only right and acceptable way to bring something to pass.

In view of this being the case we have the saying, ‘Many ways may be effective, but only one will be found to be effectual.’ Likewise in view of the fact that not every effective means is as good as another, or even as legitimate as another, we have the negative adage, ‘The ends do not justify the means.’ (That is, just because the means employed effectively produced some desired “ends” does not justify those means as being right, legitimate, or proper.)

Simply put, therefore, when something is “effectual,” or works “effectually,” it is better than something that is merely “effective.” In fact, it stands in contrast to other “effective” means or methods because of its superiority. And since it does, something that is “effectual” should not be replaced by some other means or method of accomplishing something. Other means or methods touted as being “effective” should not be sought, or accepted, as substitutes for that which is “effectual.”

The Importance of the Distinction

Now it is important to take note of this distinction in meaning every time God uses the words “effectual” and “effectually.” However it is especially important that we take note of it when God declares the issue of the “effectual” working of His word within us, (as for example in I Thessalonians 2:13 and II Corinthians 1:6), and not the mere ‘effective’ working of it.

The “Effectual” Working of God’s Word

God has not purposed and designed that His word be simply thought of by us as one of a number of ‘effective’ things that can work within us to shape our thinking and influence how we live. God clearly does not want us to look at His word that way. In fact it is downright impossible for us to look at God’s word that way, if we have even a measure of understanding and appreciation for what “godly edifying” is all about, along with “the mystery of godliness” that we are the privileged participants in in this present dispensation of God’s grace.

Indeed in accordance with what “godliness” is all about, God is privileging us with the opportunity to ‘live by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.’ He is privileging us with the opportunity to have the living words of the living God live in us. As such God has provided for His living words to be directly written by the Spirit of God upon the fleshy tables of our hearts, making us “the epistle of Christ,” and so having His living words materially affecting and shaping our thinking, the way we live, and how we spend our time.

In view of this God has purposed and designed that His word exclusively operates within us when it comes to the functions and operations of our inner man. He has designed that His word is to work within us in an unrivaled manner; as the sole and undisputed shaper of our thinking and that which influences how we live. Therefore

God has designed His word to “effectually” work within us, and not merely ‘effectively’ do so.

Naturally, therefore, we should not replace the “effectual” working of God’s word, or substitute for it, with any other means that we might think to be “effective.” In fact, by God declaring His word’s working within us to be “effectual,” He makes it plain that He does not want us to do so.

However when it comes to the issue of what God says His word is designed to “effectually” do for us, both the world and the Satanic policy of evil against us offer to us a number of their own “effective” substitutes for us to make use of instead. And it is indeed easy for us to accept and operate upon one of these substitutes, rather than the “effectual” working of God’s word. In fact, the policy of evil is actually counting on us doing so.

God’s Word vs. Substitutes and Imitations

Even a cursory examination of this issue will show that for just about every identifiable effectual working of God’s word within us, there is a substitute or poor imitation provided by this world and/or the policy of evil. Briefly consider the following, as just a sample of this:

“Peace” for the inner man in times of trouble.

Even during the climactic stage in God’s program with Israel the Lord made sure that His disciples knew the difference between the peace that He was providing for them to have, and which He expected them to operate upon, from that which the world offered to them.

27 Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.

John 14:27

The world indeed does offer its own brand of peace. And it can be found in many different forms ranging from various psychological therapies to humanistic philosophies of optimism

and positive-thinking to mood-altering drugs, alcohol, and the like.

However none of these are God’s means or method of providing for and producing peace for His people, whether it be in Israel’s program or with us today in this present dispensation.

In particular with us today God has provided specific doctrines designed by Him to effectually work within us to produce His peace for our inner man. For example, for any of “the sufferings of this present time” we have the comforting, peace producing doctrines of Romans 8:18–39. For the additional issue of “the sufferings of Christ,” we have the comforting doctrines set forth in II Corinthians. Which, as Paul declares, God gives to us being “the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort.”

“Godly sorrow.”

In II Corinthians 7, the apostle Paul makes a clear and sharp distinction between “godly sorrow” and its effectual working in a Christian’s life, and “the sorrow of the world” and what it produces.

10 For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.

II Corinthians 7:10

“Godly sorrow” is the result of the effectual working of God’s word within us when it reproves us and corrects us for ungodly thinking or conduct. And it itself effectually works to produce the following fruits of repentance:

11 For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, *what* clearing of yourselves, yea, *what* indignation, yea, *what* fear, yea, *what* vehement desire, yea, *what* zeal, yea, *what* revenge! In all *things* ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

II Corinthians 7:11

However “the sorrow of the world,” though effective at producing “sorrow,” only “worketh death.”

“Zeal of God.”

Can there be an unacceptable “zeal of God,” or an imitation of true zeal? There sure can be. And it can easily be operated upon, both by ones in God’s program with Israel and by us in this present dispensation.

2 For I bear them (Israel) record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.

Romans 10:2

17 They zealously affect you, *but* not well; yea, they would exclude you, that ye might affect them.

18 But *it is* good to be zealously affected always in a good *thing*, and not only when I am present with you.

Galatians 4:17–18

True “zeal of God” is the product of the effectual working of God’s word within. It is not the issue of trumped up emotions or passions, nor any performance of the flesh. Instead it is the product of the operating of specifically identifiable “knowledge” that God gives to us concerning something that He Himself is zealous about. And through the effectual working of that knowledge it produces godly zeal in us for being involved in what God Himself is zealous for.

Unfortunately fleshly zeal is not only easily produced, it is also easy to cater to it. For this cause we can have such things as:

— a zeal for evangelism, but without the proper grace motivation for it as set forth in II Corinthians 5:17–6:2.

— a zeal for good works, but not as the result of the effectual working of the doctrine of our sanctified position “in Christ” as set forth in Romans 6–8.

— a zeal for the ministry of, and involvement in, a local church; but not because of the provision for, and the effectual working of, “godly edifying” as set forth, for example, in Ephesians 4:7–16.

“Godliness” itself.

Can even “godliness” itself be counterfeited? Can there be an imitation of the true that operates on an entirely different power and principle from what genuine “godliness” operates upon?

5 Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.

II Timothy 3:5

Obviously an imitation does exist: a highly deceptive “form of godliness” posing as the real thing, but not the real thing at all. And not only so, but as Paul makes clear in II Timothy the imitation will actually predominate throughout the duration of this present dispensation of God’s grace.

In “denying the power thereof,” the “form of godliness” rejects the power that God says produces true “godliness” and it substitutes for it another power, which it claims to be the power of God.

These are but a few of the many substitutes and imitations that there are for the “effectual” working of God’s word in our lives. Each of them is effective, as well as attractive, and often even very popular. But none of them are “effectual” to God.

Accept No Substitutes Or Imitations

When it comes to the “effectual” working of God’s word within us, the ends do not justify the means. In giving to us His word and in providing for it to live and work within us, God has not simply given to us another just-as-good or acceptable thing to operate in our inner man. Rather He has given to us the only thing that is “effectual” in His sight. And we ought to

understand and appreciate it to be so, just as He does. In fact, “godliness” demands that we do.

Hence for the sake of “godliness,” we should accept no substitutes for, or imitations of, “the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.” — *K. R. Blades*