

THE DOCTRINE OF ILLUMINATION

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Introduction

To what extent is the Holy Spirit needed to understand a Biblical text? Can an exegetically skilled non-believer arrive at the same meaning of a particular passage of Scripture as an equally skilled believer? In this brief space, I would like to discuss the doctrine of illumination. Particularly, the aspect of the Holy Spirit's role in the interpretation of Scripture. This doctrine argues that, our sin nature hinders our ability to see the truth of Scripture (Eph. 4:17-18; Col. 1:21), the Holy Spirit is necessary to lift the scales from our eyes and illumine the word of God to and for us (Jn. 14:26, 16:13-16; 1 Cor. 2:14; Eph.1:8). Daniel Fuller writes, "...the message which Paul and others were inspired to transmit can be "received" and known only by those who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit" (91). Every believer has the ability to be illumined by the Spirit (Eph. 1:13, Jn. 16:13-16) allowing them to receive the teachings of scripture, with humility and discipline, and apply these teachings to their lives. I would like to address the need for illumination, what it is not, and what I find to be the role of the Holy Spirit when it comes to interpreting God's word.

The Need for Illumination

John Calvin's analogy in his commentary of *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* is blunt, stating that a person "...with all his shrewdness is as stupid about understanding by himself the mysteries of God as an ass is incapable of understanding musical harmony" (Colsar 173). There are moral and spiritual qualities needed for correct understanding. The New Testament writers habitually state that the ability to understand Scripture accurately is more of a moral and spiritual than intellectual aptitude. Though the Bible in itself is written clearly, the New Testament authors also affirm that it will not be understood properly by those who are unwilling to receive its teachings and instruction. 1 Cor. 2:14 reads, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to

understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” There is a need for illumination because of spiritual blindness and moral antipathy.

Moral antipathy is truth that is known, but rejected. Fuller asserts that, “The meaning (1 Cor. 2:13-14) is that apart from the Holy Spirit, a person does not accept what the Bible teaches with pleasure, willingness, and eagerness. In other words the natural man does not welcome the things of the Spirit of God” (92). In his gospel John writes, “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil” (Jn. 3:19). The natural man possesses the mental faculties to understand what the Bible is saying, for, “...how can a man hate something without having some knowledge of it?” (Fuller 92). The refusal to welcome the teachings of the Bible does not mean that the natural man lacks cognition of that teaching. When speaking of folly, Fuller asserts that it doesn’t mean the teachings are unintelligible like something spoken in a foreign language, but rather, “Foolishness applies more appropriately to what is understood and yet regarded as false” (92). Take the biblical character Festus, a Roman procurator, for example, in Acts 26. After hearing Paul’s defense of himself and the gospel, Festus says, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.” Lacking the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the natural man has no ability to see the worth, or value, of biblical teachings (Fuller 92). Essentially the natural man is incapable of grasping reality.

Larry Pettegrew writes,

“Scripture is clear enough for the simplest person to live by. Scripture says, ‘The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple’ (Ps 119:130). Wayne Grudem comments, ‘Here the ‘simple’ person (Heb. peti) is not merely one who lacks intellectual ability, but one who lacks sound judgment, who is prone to making mistakes, and who is easily led astray. God’s Word is so understandable, so clear, that even this kind of person is made wise by it.’ (214)

It is not a lack of intellectual ability that keeps one from seeing what makes one wise for salvation (the Scriptures i.e. 2 Tim. 3:15). Rather it is our sin. McKinley comments, “Sin has a profound, negative influence on the human mind, the will, and the desires. Because of sin's sway in these areas, individuals are held in ignorance concerning spiritual truth” (97). In addition, Pettegrew asserts that, “...the point is not that an unsaved person cannot understand what the Scripture is saying or teaching. The point is that he cannot have a spiritual understanding. At best, Scripture is insignificant to him; at worst, it is incredible” (215). Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor. 2:14 does not mean that unsaved people cannot understand the Bible. Unsaved man, “will be judged for rejecting that which Scripture itself declares should be abundantly clear to them, because they refuse to receive it” (Kaiser 123). This is what the apostle Paul is speaking of in Romans 1:18-32. Truth known but rejected. Wayne Grudem is helpful here,

“In a day when it is common for people to tell us how hard it is to interpret Scripture rightly, we would do well to remember that not once in the Gospels do we ever hear Jesus saying anything like this: ‘I see how your problem arose—the Scriptures are not very clear on that subject.’ Instead, whether he is speaking to scholars or untrained common people, his responses always assume that the blame for misunderstanding any teaching of Scripture is not to be placed on the Scriptures themselves, but on those who misunderstand or fail to accept what is written. Again and again he answers questions with statements like, ‘Have you not read . . .’ (Matt. 12:3, 5; 19:14; 22:31), ‘Have you never read in the scriptures . . .’ (Matt. 21:42), or even, ‘You are wrong because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God’ (Matt. 22:29; cf. Matt. 9:13; 12:7; 15:3; 21:13; John 3:10; et al.) (106)

Humanity is hopeless in and of themselves. Apart from regeneration, man does not welcome the sensibleness of the teaching that, “...fulfillment for their deepest yearnings comes from delighting in God’s goodness by trusting his promises and thereby rendering him honor. People prefer instead to accomplish things that supposedly provide reasons for delighting in themselves” (Fuller 94). This inclination to delight in ourselves rather than in God is, “...the root cause for our antipathy to such biblical doctrines as the substitutionary atonement of Christ, and faith alone as the way to receive God’s forgiveness and make progress in living the Christian

life” (Fuller 94). The Holy Spirit must illumine the mind of the reader or hearer of Scripture if they are to understand the significance of Scripture. As Robert Wall comments, “Scripture is the place where 'illuminated intelligence' discovers the knowledge of God” (51). The Holy Spirit works on the mind to change attitudes and thoughts so that the truth known, but rejected is transformed into the truth known and accepted.

Scripture also speaks of spiritual blindness. Truth not known. 2 Cor. 4:4 reads, “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” Therefore, the truth can be known and hated, yet it can also be unknown due to the god of this age (Satan). Some are unable to see the truth and find no beauty in the gospel, because they are living in sin and chasing after their own desires (2 Cor. 4:3; Mat.23:16-17, 26; Lk. 4:18; Jn. 9:39; 12:40; Rom. 11:7). They are unable to see truth. Thankfully though we have a God who reveals himself to man and does not leave us where we are.

In Luke 4:18 Jesus unrolls the Scroll of the book of Isaiah the prophet in the midst of the synagogue, and reads, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.” In Acts 26:17-18 Paul is recounting to Agrippa his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, and says these words quoting Jesus, “I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” Coslar comments,

“The reception of the revelation is a miracle. Operating in and with the preaching of the cross, the Spirit unravels the web in which ‘the language of worldly wisdom’ has trapped people. They are brought into a world constituted by the language of crucifixion, into a

new world where God's wisdom, God's power, God's righteousness are understood in rather unusual ways.” (173).

What Illumination is Not

First, the Holy Spirit's role in biblical interpretation does not entail granting the interpreter cognition of what the Bible is saying, "...which would involve dispensing additional information beyond the historical-grammatical data that are already there for everyone to work with" (Fuller 92). The Holy Spirit does not teach us something new outside of the bounds of Scripture. The Spirit does not alter biblical meaning (Vanhoozer 233). Kevin Vanhoozer illustrates this point well, "The Spirit does not alter the semantics of biblical literature. Locution and illocution inscribed in Scripture remain unchanged" (155). To clarify, a locutionary act is the expressing of words or the writing of symbols or words on a page. An illocutionary act is what we do in saying something, what we are communicating. What Vanhoozer is saying is that the Spirit does not alter the content of Scripture in any way. From punctuation to commands, the Holy Spirit likes what he inspired the original authors to write. In other words, the Holy Spirit will not take himself out of context when helping us to interpret his word. God does not change his mind, therefore, the Holy Spirit as the third member of the Trinity does not change his mind (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam, 15:29).

It seems to me that it is safe to say that the Spirit knows best what his own words mean. We are not Gnostics, searching the Word of God for hidden meaning and new truth, the 'secret stuff' of Scripture. Scripture does not mean whatever we want it to mean. It means what God says it means, which he graciously gave us in written human language inspired by the Holy Spirit. We also corrupt its message when we lose the doctrines of inspiration, perspicuity, and do such things as allegorical interpretation. This is not a new issue by any means. Illumination led

church father Origen to allegorize the Bible, for its “spiritual meaning” beyond the text (Fuller 91). As Daniel Fuller notes,

“The problem with this understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation is that the words of the text can play no essential role in conveying its intended meaning, even though it is these very words which the writers were inspired to use in transmitting God’s message to men.” (91)

Illumination is not magic. One must do the hard work of exegesis. Jesus calls us to love God with all our heart, soul and mind (Matt. 23:27). To be faithful interpreters we must use our minds not just our feelings. It takes effort, and the Scriptures are to be handled with care. This is very encouraging though. It takes the guessing out of interpretation. What does the text mean? It means what the original author under the guidance of the Holy Spirit wrote (2 Pet. 1:21). And the Spirit will use the word to correct, guide, and encourage according to what He has already said. So what is illumination?

My Proposal

Illumination is the work of the Holy Spirit by which he makes possible the understanding, for application, of the truths and teachings of Scripture to the believer. As Fuller asserts, “the Holy Spirit’s role is to change the heart of the interpreter, so that he loves the message that is conveyed by the historical grammatical data.” (92). The Holy Spirit must illumine the mind of the reader or hearer of Scripture if they are to comprehend the significance of it (Pettegrew 216). The great Puritan theologian John Owen spoke of what he called “salvific illumination.” That is, “...the Spirit’s work in regeneration and the ensuing acceptance and conviction of the fact that Scripture is God’s authoritative, written Word” (McKinley 97). Part of the work of the Holy Spirit in us is to make us wise for Salvation through the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:15).

The Spirit is also responsible for the perlocutionary aspect of God's Word, what God is bringing about by what he says. Essentially, what the result of hearing God's word should mean for our lives. He helps in understanding the point and the force behind the illocution and how to apply it. The Spirit convicts the reader, bringing consciousness and assurance that the illocutionary point of the text merits the proper response. For example, there is more weight behind a command when it comes from a father than a sibling. The Spirit presses in on our hearts and forces the weight and authority of the text on us. The Spirit does not alter the meaning or change the semantics of the text. The Bible is inspired by the Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21; 1 Cor. 2:13). Therefore, it says what God wants it to say, the way he wants it to be said and it accomplishes what he desires for it to accomplish. Isa. 55:10-11 says,

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

God accomplishes things with his speech, and that achievement is inevitable, “Ultimately, the goal of God in his speech acts is to change who I am, how I think, and how I behave” (Todd Miles). Vanhoozer asserts, “The Spirit sanctifies us and so helps us to accept what is in the text, instead of preferring our own interpretations. The Spirit progressively disabuses us of ideological or idolatrous prejudices that prevent us from receiving the message” (234).

I believe that a skilled unbeliever could read a biblical passage, do an accurate historical/cultural background study, know the genre it is written in, and understand the argument that is being made through grammar and semantics. I believe they could be taught Greek and Hebrew the same as a believer. The problem is not understanding in the intellectual sense, but rather the ability to, “...embrace things as they really are” (Fuller 92). Romans 3:23 says, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Most people walking the street

could tell you what this says and means. It's not complicated in its plain sense, (implications are more complicated perhaps but one doesn't get there without the Spirit). Paul plainly tells you the state of man. Jesus says in John 17:3 that this is eternal life, "...that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." What is eternal life? Knowing God. John 14:6 reads, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." How do we get to God? Through Jesus. All one has to do is read. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." What must I do to be granted eternal life? Know God and know Jesus. The Holy Spirit does not have to show the reader these things for them to understand what the text is saying intellectually. I believe a non-believer could come to the same conclusions put forth above. However, they lack the ability without the Holy Spirit to see why this makes any difference in their lives, and it holds no weight on their hearts. It is simply another ancient writing with some words of wisdom. One of many world views.

For my undergraduate degree in religious studies, I attended the University of Redlands. Most of my courses in the religious studies department had a very prominent liberal, postmodern view of Scripture. Brilliant minds who graduated from Ivy League divinity schools with multiple masters and doctoral degrees made up the staff. They understood Paul's arguments, Peter's presentation of the gospel, and the teachings of Jesus. Perhaps better than many in the church. But they refused to believe that the words written in Scripture were true, and in many cases they were hostile towards it. This brings us back to where we started. As mentioned earlier I believe Daniel Fuller to be accurate in his assertion regarding 1 Cor. 2:13-14 that, "Not being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the natural man has no ability to see the worth, or value, of biblical teachings; and this is why he does not 'know' them" (92).

As Paul states, “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18). He goes on to say, “...the world through its wisdom did not know him...” (v.21) and, “It is because of him (God) that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption” (v.30). One does not come to know God on their own. Paul tells us that, “None is righteous, no, not one;” (Rom. 3:10). And the prophet Jeremiah says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (17:9). We need a new heart and a renewed mind to understand the Scriptures and Who God is. As believers and children of God we cannot boast in anything, but the cross. We did nothing to be saved, for salvation is from the Lord and it cannot be bought or bargained for. For election is God’s sovereign, free choice of the sinner according to his own purposes apart from any abilities or conditions related to those persons (Acts, 13:48; Rom. 9-10; Eph. 1:3-14; 2 Tim. 2:10). He has, out of his abundant goodness, love, and grace, chosen the elect from all eternity, and he saves from sin all who come to him through Jesus Christ (Ps. 145:8; Jn. 3:16, 6:44, 14:6, 17:3; Rom. 3:23, 5:8, Eph. 1:3-14).

Conclusion

Without the Holy Spirit we do not have the ability to take the truths of Scripture and apply them to our lives. We lack the ability to see reality, and see God for who he is. We are unable to comprehend the depths and thoughts of God in any way. Without the illumination of the Spirit we fail to see the implications of Scripture on our lives. Illumination is the work of the Holy Spirit by which he makes possible the understanding, for application, of the truths and teachings of Scripture to the believer. The goal is not to master the Word, but to be mastered by it.

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