

THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN INTERPRETATION

By Brian Shealy

The Role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation is something that is often mentioned in hermeneutics and exegesis books, but little discussion is devoted to explaining what that role is, where the Bible teaches it, and how we know when it occurs. After much reading on the subject and a study of related passages of Scripture it is the contention of this writer that the Spirit has a multifaceted role in the life of the believer as he interprets Scripture.

The Spirit's work in the interpreter is necessary because of the depravity of man. Due to the effects of sin a natural man, the unbeliever, "does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Cor 2:14). This means that the unbeliever does not see the word of God as wisdom, but rather foolishness. Therefore he rejects it. While he does have a level of cognitive awareness of the signification of the words, He cannot understand in the sense of experientially knowing it as truth in a relationship with God. This is due the fact that it is spiritually discerned. The unbeliever is spiritually dead (Eph 2:1) and consequently has a futile, darkened, ignorant mind, and a hard heart that makes him callous to spiritual things (Eph 4:17-19). He is hostile to God and cannot bring himself under the Scriptures as his authority (Rom 8:7-8).

Therefore, the Spirit's initial work involves turning a person into one who has many of the necessary presuppositions to begin to interpret the Scriptures. The Bible speaks of these changes in terms of the person being "born again" (John 3:3), "born of the Spirit" (John 3:5, 6), and saved by the "washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). When the word is preached the Spirit attends His word and some receive it with joy as the word of God (1 Thess 1:5, 6; 2:13). This is because their spiritual eyes which were blind (Matt 13:15; Rom 11:8) are enabled to see (Matt 13:16). These facets of the changes of salvation give the person a new world and life view. They will then have the necessary preunderstanding concerning beliefs about God and His word for interpreting the word.

At conversion the Spirit also takes up residence in the life of the believer (Rom 8:11). Now he lives, and has the capacity to walk, be led, and filled by the Spirit (Gal 5:16, 18, 25; Eph 5:18). He has the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:9) and thus, the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16). As the believer is conformed to the image of Christ through sanctification by the Spirit, he is given the proper thinking to have a whole hearted understanding and embracing of the Word as truth and gets to understand and know God better. His eyes are enlightened to know the truth more deeply (Eph 1:18).

This indwelling Spirit is the same Spirit of Truth who was promised by Jesus to teach His disciples all things, bring to their remembrance all that he had said, guide them into all truth, and declare the things to come (John 14:26; 16:13). It is difficult to determine how much of the Spirit's work in their lives from these promises was limited to them

and what aspects are normative for believers of all times. John himself includes some examples of how the apostles remembered what Jesus had said and understood the significance after His resurrection (John 2:19-22; 12:16; cf. 20:9). One can certainly see how this perfect memory would be important for writing the Gospels. His teaching them and guiding them into all truth could certainly explain the epistles. Further, declaring the things to come would explain Revelation. So, perhaps this is a promise for the apostles' ministry and the process of inscripturation.

Yet, when the same writer, John, later addresses a church in 1 John 2:20, 27 he tells them that they have received an anointing from the Holy One and as a result they know all things and they do not need to be taught. It would contradict the very letter John is writing if these were absolute unqualified statements. The context would rather indicate that they know the truth about Jesus well enough to not be led astray by those who deny Him. If the anointing here is the Spirit, which is a reasonable conclusion, then believers are presumed to be taught the truth by Him and therefore know the truth, understand it well enough to believe it, and understand the significance of it so that they can obey it. So, the teaching ministry of the Spirit seems to be normative in relation to the truth already revealed.

Another passage that bears on this issue is 1 Cor 2:6-16. There Paul speaks about revelation that has been made known to "us" which they make known. It is possible again that this is intended to refer to the unique role that the Spirit had in revealing the mystery of the Gospel to Paul and other recipients of direct revelation. However, there are some universal truths if one reasons through Paul's words. The very wisdom they received is imparted to others (1 Cor 2:6); it was prepared for those who love God (2:9); the Spirit knows the depths of God (1 Cor 2:10-11); the Spirit was received by them and He enabled them to understand the things given (1 Cor 2:12). So, the things given are revelation of truth, but the understanding of that truth is distinct from the revelation of it. Therefore, there is the revelatory role of the Spirit in Paul's life, but believers who have received this same Spirit should also be able to expect that by the Spirit they too would understand the word. Again the Spirit teaches and gives spiritual discernment (1 Cor 2:16). Second Timothy 2:7 coheres with these ideas since while Paul instructs Timothy he is confident that the Lord will give him understanding of his instruction.

In summary, the Scriptures lead one to conclude that the Spirit who inspired Scripture regenerates a person and enables him to have a spiritual appraisal of the preached word, which He embraces as truth. This internal recognition of the word as truth is sometimes referred to as the internal testimony. As a person grows and is sanctified by the Spirit, as He uses the word, the Spirit guides him to understand and apply truth. While the believer is not promised infallible interpretive abilities, the Spirit does work in his life to have the capacity for the proper presuppositions needed to rightly interpret, embrace, understand, and apply Scripture.