

Preparing Souls To Serve The Lord

Volume XXIII

June 2003

Number 11

The Holy Spirit "Illumination" Theory: A Critical Review

[Wayne Jackson, Christian Courier: Feature, Thursday, May 1, 2003]

Description

Many sincere people contend that one cannot understand the Bible without a special "illumination" by the Holy Spirit. What lies at the basis of this theory? Does it have the support of the Bible? Study this interesting theme in this month's Feature article.

There is a doctrine, quite common in the denominational community, that is making its presence increasingly felt among the people of God. It is the notion that the Christian has the promise of a direct "illumination of the Holy Spirit" in interpreting the text of the Bible.

The theory suggests that the Scriptures, as they presently stand, are incapable of being thoroughly understood (and, by implication therefore, the divine message is incomplete; yet see: 2 Tim. 3:16-17). And so, in addition to the biblical record (as approached with correct methods of interpretation), it is alleged that there must be a direct working of the Spirit of God upon the heart of the Bible student, thus effecting an "illumination" that brings into sharper focus the meaning of the divine text.

The History of the Doctrine

The "illumination" view is not new; actually, it is a part of the residue of the old concept of human

hereditary depravity. This is the idea that man is so hopelessly depraved by virtue of Adam's fall, that the Scriptures are incomprehensible to his blighted mind. This dogma was popularized most prominently by John Calvin (A.D. 1509-1564).

Some of the early "church fathers" introduced the idea that the guilt of Adam's sin was contracted by all of his descendants. Tertullian (A.D. 150-222) contended that a person inherits both his body and his spirit from his parents (*De Anima*, chps. 23-41). Later, Augustine (A.D. 354-430) taught a similar idea. Cyprian (A.D. 200-258) had alleged that new-born infants inherit "the infection of the old death" from Adam (*Epistle lviii*). Origen (c. A.D. 185-254) suggested that a child is polluted with sin "though [its] life be but the length of one day upon the earth" (*Homily in Luc. xiv*). On this account he argued that no Christian should celebrate the day of the birth (*Hom. in Leviticum*, viii.3).

And so, due to man's supposed "corrupted" nature, he cannot understand the Scriptures without direct divine guidance. Calvin, cited Paul's statement that "no man can say, Jesus is Lord, but in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3) as proof of this dogma (see Calvin's

Institutes, II,II,20-21).

But this Corinthian passage merely asserts that belief in Christ's lordship is dependent upon the revelatory mission of the Spirit. To suggest that it affirms that each individual must have a direct, personal enlightenment of the Spirit, is to assume more than the text states. The Holy Spirit is the author of the Scriptures; apart of that body of information, no man can declare Christ's lordship. Hence, ultimately, this precious affirmation must be attributed to the Spirit. But this by no means establishes the "direct illumination" theory.

Calvin likely borrowed the "illumination" idea from Augustine, for, as Norman Geisler has noted, the north African theologian not only taught that the Holy Spirit is "the means by which we receive God-written revelation (*Confessions* 7.21), he is necessary [also] for illuminating and confirming its truth" (*Homily VI*) (quoted in: *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999, p. 331).

Other reformers, e.g., Luther and Zwingli, taught similar ideas respecting the need for some special power of the Holy Spirit in order that one might be empowered to comprehend the Scriptures. This

notion has filtered down to many in the modern world of sectarianism.

Henry C. Thiessen, a Baptist writer, wrote: “[T]he illumination of the Holy Spirit ... is vouchsafed to every believer ... [which will] enable us to understand the revelation God has already made of Himself, especially that revelation of Him in the Scriptures” (Lectures in Systematic Theology, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949, p. 45).

Roy Zuck, a former Bible professor at Dallas Theological Seminary (whom this writer highly regards), has authored a book titled *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1991). In this otherwise valuable volume, Zuck contended mightily for the idea that “[n]o one can fully comprehend the meaning of the Bible unless he is regenerate” (p. 22). He further affirmed that even the Christian “must also depend upon the Holy Spirit” for a correct view of the Scriptures. He quoted H.C.G. Moule who wrote: “The blessed Spirit is not only the true Author of the written Word but also its supreme and true Expositor” (p. 23; emp. WJ).

An Analysis

The doctrine of the “illumination of the Holy Spirit” is not defensible – either on a scriptural or logical basis. Consider the following points.

1. The passages that are appealed to as proof for the dogma are grounded either in unwarranted assumptions that are imposed upon them (see the reference to 1 Cor. 12:3 cited above), or else the alleged proof-passages are extracted from their original contexts and misapplied.

For example, John 16:13 frequently is employed to prove the idea of special “illumination” (see Zuck, p. 24). “Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth....” But this text

refers to the apostles (and, by implication, others who were to be endowed with miraculous teaching powers). Those so empowered would be proclaiming the gospel in that time-period preliminary to the completion of the New Testament canon. This promise from the Lord does not have a direct application to Christians today (see 14:16-17; 26; 15:26-27; 16:12-16; cf. also Mt. 10:19-20; Lk. 21:14-15). It is a travesty to misuse these contexts in such an irresponsible fashion.

2. If the Holy Spirit illuminates the mind of the Christian student, is he as infallible as an “expositor” as he was initially in his role of “author” of the sacred message? If not, why not? Furthermore, how would one know if, or when, he has been “illuminated”? If he affirms that he has been illuminated with reference to a particular passage, may he ever alter his view of that text? If so, did the Spirit misdirect him earlier?

If one has been illuminated regarding a passage, are all others who take a different view in error? If two people, both of whom claim illumination, differ on the interpretation of a passage, how could one know which of these is correct – or if either is? If the Holy Spirit could not make the Scriptures comprehensible the first time around (by the “revelation” process), how could one be confident that He could do so the second time around (by the “illumination” process)?

Note Zuck’s concession. He says that the Spirit’s role in illumination “does not mean that one’s interpretations are infallible” (p. 24). This is woefully inconsistent with the esteemed professor’s endorsement of Moule, namely that the Spirit is both Author and Expositor of the Scriptures for the believer. And why is it that many of these men,

who accept this position, are at such variance with one another in their doctrinal positions? Common sense says that something is seriously wrong with this theory.

3. If the Holy Spirit provides illumination to men today, why do scholars, who subscribe to this ideology, write books instructing folks as to the proper methods of Bible interpretation (as professor Zuck has done)? Such efforts would not be of value to the unbeliever, who has “no spiritual capacity for welcoming and appropriating spiritual truths” (Zuck, p. 22). And they should not be needed by one who has the illuminating Spirit, the alleged “Expositor” of truth.

4. What if one proposed the following. Select two spiritual Christian people and put them in separate rooms. Provide them with a difficult biblical text, with which each person is equally unfamiliar. Let one of them have access to a good library of reference works, and provide the other with nothing but an empty room and the “illumination of the Spirit.” Allow each several hours of concentration. Then have each of them write his explanation of the obscure text. It can be guaranteed that the person with the library will

The Harvesters

Published Monthly
Florida School of Preaching
1807 South Florida Avenue
Lakeland, Florida 33803
(863) 683-4043

Editor: Jackie M. Stearsman
Board of Directors

| | |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| Gordon Methvin, President | George K. French |
| Paul Thornhill, Vice President | Scott Gerherdt |
| J. H. Blackman, Jr., Secretary | Greg Littleton |
| Allen Gardner, Treasurer | E. Robert McAnally |
| Glenn Burgess | John D. Smitherman |
| Elmer Burgett | Jackie M. Stearsman |
| Maurice Davis | Ted Wheeler |

TRAINING PREACHERS SINCE 1969

have a better grasp of the passage than the one who has relied solely on the "presence" of the Spirit.

If someone should object to such a test, one need only appeal to the admonition of Christ's apostle.

"Beloved, believe not every spirit [i.e., every person making a religious claim], but prove [test – ESV] the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 Jn. 4:1).

Indeed, and some of them are teaching that the Spirit directly "illuminates" them!

5. The doctrine of special illumination contradicts the clear testimony of Scripture, namely the explicit affirmation that the devout student is able to understand the Word of God as given originally.

When Paul wrote to the Ephesian brethren he affirmed that "when you read, you can perceive my understanding in the mystery of Christ" (Eph. 3:4). The apostle did not suggest that "reading" – plus a special intervention of the Spirit – would be required.

Later, he admonished these saints: "Wherefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:17). If the theory under review is true, and if the Christian does not understand the will of the Lord – even though he studies diligently – the responsibility must be laid at the feet of the Holy Spirit.

6. Finally, Paul's testimony could not be clearer. The inspired Scriptures are "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction, which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

The Scriptures alone are sufficient for man's understanding of the divine will.

Conclusion

We have no doubt but that many of those who advocate the theory of "special illumination" are sincere. But sincerity does not guarantee accuracy (Acts 23:1; 26:9).

Moreover, it should be a matter of great concern to church leaders that so many of our people are beginning to use this sort of language, reflecting unsound beliefs that they have adopted regarding the Spirit's operation.

The problem is this. We have numerous Christians these days who have a most superficial knowledge foundation in New Testament doctrine. Combine this fact with the reality that many constantly are feeding themselves (or are being fed by others) on sectarian literature that is rank with such ideas. There is an inevitable result in the wake of such a course.

Surely it is time for some serious teaching in the church of the Lord on matters pertaining to the Holy Spirit.



Report

Gene Burgett

April and May were exceptionally busy and fulfilling months for me on many different levels. Brian Kenyon and I both taught at Weeki Wachee Christian Camp during a retreat sponsored by the Orange Street church in Auburndale. The brethren at Orange Street have been loyal supporters of the Florida School of Preaching for many years. They supply both financial support through generous monthly contributions, as well as making two houses available in which students may live while they attend the school. I look forward to speaking at Auburndale June.

The last day of the youth event coincided with the beginning of a gospel meeting sponsored by the Northside church in Brooksville, Florida. Brian spoke three times on Sunday at the Brooksville meeting

and I preached Monday through Wednesday. Each night there were people present who had not obeyed the gospel, and we bid the Northside brethren godspeed as they continue to teach those who need further instruction in the word of God.

I was in Sarasota, Florida May 18 at the Midway church of Christ. Mike Elledge, the evangelist for the Midway church, is a graduate of the Florida School of Preaching. The Midway church has been a valuable source of support for the School for many years. Their former evangelist, Gene Stillwell, taught a class in Lakeland when he labored with Midway congregation, and Mike Elledge currently teaches satellite classes at the Midway building. I was privileged to address the adult Bible class. Garrett Russell, who will begin attending the Florida School of Preaching in the fall, spoke during the morning worship assembly. This was only the second time Garrett, who graduates from high school the end of May, had preached, and he did a wonderful job. I am still raising support for Garrett, and I hope the Midway brethren will be able to help with this need.

Also, over the past month I have had the honor for which there is no equal, of baptizing three people into Christ. I consider myself one of the most blessed individuals on the planet as my work with the Florida School of Preaching allows me to labor in the kingdom of God among many congregations, while God has also permitted me to serve in the Alachua church in a number of different ways, but most especially as a Bible class teacher.

I appreciate all of the opportunities I have had to speak on behalf of the School. I especially want to thank the alumni for the opportunities they have made possible for me to speak. The circumstances under which I speak vary. But whether it is a youth event, gospel meeting, lectureship, Bible

class, or worship assembly, I am seeking opportunities to talk to people about training preachers. I do this without apology because training preachers is the work of the Lord's church. For this reason it is among the churches of Christ I seek men who desire to preach. It is also among the churches of Christ I seek the funds necessary to train preachers. I urge any readers of the Harvester that are able to provide me a venue to speak to contact me through the School office. You may also get my attention via e-mail at: burgett@atlantic.net.

Schedule
2003

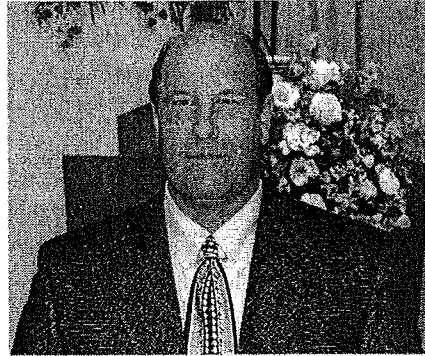
May 23-25 Christian Evidences
Workshop, High Springs, FL
June 1 Auburndale, FL
June 29 Hazel Green, AL
July 9 Central, Clearwater, FL
Sept. 14-17 Jasper, AL
Oct. 1 Wesconnett, Jacksonville, FL
Oct. 10-15 Roundhouse,
Birmingham, AL
Oct. 26-29 Meeting, Alachua, FL

Nov. 9-13 Denton Lectures

2004

Jan. FSOP Lectures

Feb. 17-19 Central church of Christ,
Okeechobee, FL



**Scott Gerhardt
Added to Board of Directors**

Brother **Scott Gerhardt** has been added to the added to the Board of Directors of the Florida School of Preaching. Brother Gerhardt has been serving as an elder for seven years with the

Central church of Christ in Clearwater, Florida.

Before moving to Clearwater, he resided in Texas. He is a contract market manager for Milliken and Company.

He preaches on occasion and is a regular Bible class teacher for the Central church, especially enjoying the field of apologetics. He and his wife, Debbie, have three children.

His oldest Son, Justin, graduated from the Florida School of Preaching in 1999. Justin went on to graduate from Freed-Hardeman University, and is now preaching for the church in Hazel Green, Alabama.

Both Scott and Justin are scheduled to speak on the 2004 Lectures. The date is January 19-22, 2003. The Theme: is "Do You Understand the Grace of God?"

Return Service Requested

WEB SITE: www.fsop.net
E-MAIL: fsop@gte.net

FAX: 863-683-0750

PHONE (863) 683-4043 (800) 320-9780

LAKELAND, FLORIDA 33803-2653

1807 SOUTH FLORIDA AVENUE

FLORIDA SCHOOL OF PREACHING

Nonprofit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Lakeland, FL
PERMIT #236