

ILLUMINATION

THE HOLY SPIRIT GIVES SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING

1 Corinthians 2:14

¹⁴ The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

The illuminating work of the Holy Spirit is seen in the fact that he enables us to understand:

1 Corinthians 2:12

¹² We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.

However, the knowledge of divine things to which Christians are called is more than a formal acquaintance with biblical words and Christian ideas. It is a realizing of the reality and relevance of those activities of the triune God to which Scripture testifies. Such awareness is natural to none, even if they happen to be familiar with Christian ideas.

Well what is natural to us? The language of law is natural to people. It is our native language. Gospel is a foreign language we have to learn. Law says, "Do this and live." Gospel says, "This is what has been done. Now live."

Let's consider a definition.

Illumination. The ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the **Christian** person and community in assisting believers to interpret, understand **and** obey the Scriptures. Illumination is a matter of faith **as well as** intellectual assent—the Spirit's goal in illumination moves **beyond a mere understanding of what Scripture is saying to the moving of the human will to trust Christ and obey him.**

So the person who has not received effective calling might read Scripture, understand it, and say "so?" Or they might understand what the words mean but after thinking about them conclude, "I understand what's being said, but I don't believe it nor do I feel compelled to obey or submit to it in any way." They will have a "no" response to Scripture and won't care much about it.

On the other hand, the person who has received effective calling will read Scripture, understand it, **and** believe it and obey it to the best of their abilities. They will have a "yes" response to the Scriptures and if at some point they don't understand, they will ask God to help them as a desire to know him has been placed within them. Where they gain understanding **and** the will to obey and believe, they have received illumination.

As believers, we should pray that the Holy Spirit would give us his illumination and thereby help us to understand rightly when we study Scripture or when we ponder situations in our lives. Although he did not mention the Holy Spirit specifically, the psalmist prayed for such illumination when he asked God,

Psalm 119:18

*¹⁸ Open my eyes that I may see
wonderful things in your law.*

In regards to realizing what God has done in the gospel and receiving the same, only the Holy Spirit can bring about this realization in our sin-darkened minds and hearts. That is why it is called "spiritual understanding." Spiritual means "Spirit-given." Those who, **along with** sound verbal instruction, "have an anointing from the Holy One...know the truth."

1 John 2:20

²⁰ But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth.

The work of the Spirit in imparting this knowledge is called "illumination," or enlightening. It is not a giving of new revelation, but a work within us that **enables** us to grasp and to love the revelation that is there before us in the biblical text as heard and read, and as explained by teachers and writers.

Prior to this happening, sin in our mental and moral system clouds our minds and wills so that we miss and resist the force of Scripture. God seems to us remote to the point of unreality, and in the face of God's truth we are dull and apathetic. The Spirit, however, opens and unveils our minds and attunes our hearts so that we understand.

2 Corinthians 3:14-18

¹⁴ But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵ Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. ¹⁶ But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

As by inspiration he provided Scripture truth for us, so now by illumination he interprets it to us. Illumination is thus the applying of God's revealed truth to our hearts, so that we grasp as reality for ourselves what the sacred text sets forth. This working of the Spirit is necessary because the depravity characteristic of all humans prevents them from grasping God's revealed truth.

Therefore, we can say that illumination, which is a lifelong ministry of the Holy Spirit to Christians, starts before conversion with a growing grasp of the truth about Jesus and a growing sense of being measured and exposed by it. Jesus said that the Spirit would "convict the world" of (1) the sin of not believing in him, of (2) the fact that he was in the right with God the Father (as his welcome back to heaven proved), and of (3) the reality of judgment both here and hereafter.

John 16:8-11

⁸ When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; ¹⁰ in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; ¹¹ and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.

This threefold conviction is still God's means of making sin repulsive and Christ adorable in the eyes of persons who previously loved sin and cared nothing for the divine Savior. These people, the elect, are effectively called. Part of that calling is illumination.

George Ladd remarks that

*the first work of the Spirit is to enable men to understand the divine work of redemption...This (the cross) was an event whose meaning was folly to Greeks and an offense to Jews. But to those enlightened by the Spirit, it is the wisdom of God. In other words, Paul recognizes a hidden meaning in the historical event of the death of Christ ("God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself," 2Cor. 5:19) that is not evident to the human eye but which can be accepted only by a supernatural illumination. The Spirit does not reveal heavenly realities but the **true meaning of an historical event**. He does not impart some kind of "gnostic" esoteric truth but the **real meaning of an event in history**. Only by the illumination of the Spirit can men understand the meaning of the cross; only by the Spirit can men therefore confess that Jesus who was executed is also the Lord (1 Cor. 12:3).*

1 Corinthians 1:18

¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

The way to benefit fully from the Spirit's ministry of illumination is by serious Bible study, serious prayer, and serious response in obedience to whatever truths one has been shown already. This corresponds to Luther's dictum that three things make a theologian: prayer, thinking in God's presence about the text, and the struggle for biblical fidelity in the face of pressure to disregard what Scripture says.

So let's consider some elements of the last three lessons.

Many people have heard and many will hear the good news of salvation in Christ. We call this good news the gospel. All who have heard the gospel have received general calling. The elect (those chosen by God to receive his special grace) hear this same general calling but for them it is shown to be effective calling in that they receive illumination from the Holy Spirit and respond in saving faith. They cannot do otherwise. To God be the glory!

*Most of the foregoing material was taken from "Concise Theology" by J.I. Packer, "Christian Theology" second edition by Millard J. Erickson, "Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms" by Grenz, Guretzki & Nordling, and Systematic Theology by Wayne Grudem.