

The Role of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics

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Hermeneutics, the science and art of biblical interpretation, is of primary concern to evangelicals because of their commitment to the inerrancy and authority of the Bible. The task of Bible interpreters is to seek to ascertain the meaning of Bible passages to their original hearers and readers and to determine how that meaning relates to readers today.¹ Biblical scholars have wrestled and are wrestling with serious hermeneutical issues but comparatively little attention has been given to the Holy Spirit's role in hermeneutics.

Since inaccurate interpretation of Scripture can lead to improper conduct, one must be sure he is interpreting properly. Adequate application of truth builds on an adequate understanding of truth. A distorted meaning of a Bible verse or passage may result in misguided living.

The Holy Spirit, as the ~~σπείρα~~ *σπείρα* ("Helper"; John 14:16, 26; 15:26), is available to help believers ascertain the correct meaning of the Bible's statements, commands, and questions. He is involved in the hermeneutical process because He is "the Spirit of truth" who, Jesus said, "will guide... into all truth" (John 16:13). And as Paul wrote, "We have... the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us" (1 Cor 2:12). John wrote, "His anointing teaches you about all [spiritual] things" (1 John 2:27). Probably "anointing" refers to the Holy Spirit; by metonymy the act of anointing stands for what is given in the anointing, namely, the indwelling Holy Spirit.

However, the Holy Spirit's involvement in teaching believers and guiding them in the truth raises some thorny questions: If true learning comes by the Spirit's inner working, does this mean that one's understanding of Scripture is ultimately a subjective matter? If a person senses the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart, does he automatically know the correct view of a Bible verse? If the Spirit interprets the Word privately to individual believers, how can one determine the correct view among several conflicting

interpretations? If two people profess to be taught by the Spirit and yet hold differing views on some scriptural passage or issue, which view is valid?

As Moule put it, "the blessed Spirit is not only the true Author of the written Word but also its supreme and true Expositor."² But the question remains as to how the meaning of God's authoritative Word can be accurately discerned amid conflicting interpretations. If human interpretations confuse the clarity of the Word, is the Bible no longer authoritative? Is a person inconsistent if he allows the right of private judgment and at the same time claims that his interpretations are right and another's wrong?

Is the Bible not clear in its meanings? Can only a select few have insight into the meaning of Scripture? Are the "deep things of God" and His "thoughts" (1 Cor 2:10-11) understood only by some Christians? Can a Christian claim infallibility for his interpretation of a Bible passage simply by affirming that the Holy Spirit "taught" him that meaning?

In what sense does the Holy Spirit give insight into the Bible's meaning? Does such "light" come suddenly? Or is it the result of study? If insight comes from study, can the Bible's meaning be ascertained by rational processes apart from the Holy Spirit?

How does the Spirit's role in interpretation relate to His work in illumination? Are the two functions the same? If not, how do they differ?

These are vital issues because, as Parker explains, "there is no function assigned to the Spirit more important for us to understand than that by which He assures to the church a profound and correct interpretation of Scripture."³ Eternal truth must be understood and correctly interpreted.

How does the Holy Spirit "guide and direct"⁴ believers in their involvement in the interpretive process?" What does that guidance mean? Fourteen propositions are suggested as a means of speaking to some of these issues.

1. The Spirit's ministry in Bible interpretation does not mean He gives new revelation.

His work is always through and in association with the written Word of God, not beyond it or in addition to it. The Holy Spirit and the Word operate together. The Bible, being God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16), has power to generate faith (Ps 19:7; Rom 10:17; 2 Tim 3:15; James 1:18; 1 Pet 1:23), to sanctify and nurture (John 17:17-19; Acts 20:32; Eph 5:26; 1 Pet 2:2), and to enlighten (Ps 119:105,130; 2 Tim 3:16). The Holy Spirit, along with the Word, is said to regenerate (John 3:5-7; Titus 3:5), to sanctify (2 Thess 2:13; 1 Pet 1:2) and to enlighten (John 14:26; 16:13; 1 Cor 2:10-15). "The written Word... is always indissolubly joined with the power of the Holy Spirit."⁵ The Bible, God's Word, is "living (**ζῶν**) and active" (**ἐνεργῆς**), "operative or effective" (Heb 4:12; cf. 1 Thess 2:13; 1 Pet 1:23). But its effectiveness is evident only when the Holy Spirit is at work in connection with the Word. "The Word of God can have no efficacy unless at the same time the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of the hearers, creating faith and making men's minds open to receive the Word."⁶ In relation to man's

receptivity, Calvin wrote, "The heavenly doctrine proves to be useful and efficacious to us in so far as the Spirit both forms our minds to understand it and our hearts to submit to its yoke."⁷

2. The role of the Spirit in interpreting the Bible does not mean that one's interpretations are infallible. Inerrancy and hence infallibility are characteristics of the Bible's original manuscripts, but not of the Bible's interpreters. The manuscripts were inerrant because of the Holy Spirit's guarding and guiding the writers to record what He wanted recorded, word for word. But such a superintending work cannot be claimed for interpreters of the Word. In inspiration the Holy Spirit superintended the authors in order to override any human error. In interpretation the Holy Spirit guides but He does not guard against infallibility. To elevate one's interpretations to the level of infallibility would blur the distinctions between inspiration (a past, now completed work of the Spirit in the recording of Scripture) and interpretation (a present, ongoing work of the Spirit in helping interpreters in the comprehending of Scripture). Also it would ascribe to Protestants a level of infallibility for human leaders which evangelicals reject in Roman Catholicism.

Therefore allowing the right of private (individual) judgment in interpreting the Bible does not mean that all the results of private interpretation are accurate.

3. The work of the Spirit in interpretation does not mean that He gives some interpreters a mental acuity for seeing truths under the surface that are not evident to any other dedicated Bible students. The interpreter, then, if he thinks he finds a "hidden" meaning divergent from the normal, literal meaning of the passage, cannot claim the Holy Spirit's help.

4. The role of the Holy Spirit in Bible interpretation means that the unregenerate do not welcome and apply God's truth, though they are able to comprehend many of its statements cognitively. Obviously unsaved men can mentally grasp something of the objective data of the Bible. Many unbelievers have understood many of the historical facts presented in the Word of God. Some have even followed the logic of certain portions of the Bible. They have cognitively grasped certain objective biblical facts - that certain Bible personalities performed certain tasks, said certain words, went to certain geographical locations, argued with certain points of logic, and so on - yet they do not personally know the God of the Scriptures. "The world through its wisdom did not know him" (1 Cor 1:21). Even with determined and diligent research on a high scholarly level, they are unable to respond to the true divine sense of the Scriptures.⁸ The Spirit's illuminating of Christians, then, must include something more than mental apprehension of the Bible of which non-Christians are capable.

Though the unsaved may mentally observe objective data of the Bible, it remains foolishness to them (1 Cor 1:18; 2:14). Though perhaps able to follow the logic of Paul's reasoning in his epistles, unbelievers do not "take to heart" the truth involved. The grammar of John 3:16 may be clear to the unsaved, but this does not mean that they receive to their hearts the truth of the verse. The unsaved do not welcome God's

truth, because it strikes at the very core of their sinfulness.

Only the saved are able to welcome God's truth. When Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 2:14 that "the man without the Spirit (~~ψυχικός ἀφάνης~~, soulish, unsaved man") does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, "he did not mean that an unsaved person is totally incapable of comprehending any of the grammatical data of the Bible. Rather, Paul meant that a non-Christian does not welcome its truth! The Greek word translated "accept" (~~δέχομαι~~) means "welcome." If "receive" were intended, a different Greek word (~~λαμβάνω~~) would have been used. The verse does not mean that an unsaved person, who is devoid of the Holy Spirit, cannot understand mentally what the Bible is saying; instead it means that he does not welcome its message of redemption to his own heart.⁹ He rejects the message, refusing to appropriate it and act on it. By contrast, people in Berea "received (from ~~δέχονται~~) the message with great eagerness" (Acts 17:11), and the Thessalonians "received (from ~~δέχονται~~) the Word... with the joy of the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess 1:6).

The statement in 1 Corinthians 2:14 that the things of the Spirit of God are "foolishness" to an unbeliever would indicate that he has some understanding of what the Bible says. Otherwise, if nothing were communicated to him, how could he judge such a communication to be foolish? He could not call something foolishness unless he had some cognitive awareness of it.

"But," someone may argue, "this verse also states that an unsaved person cannot even know the things of the Spirit. Does not this argue against the point being made that the unsaved can be cognizant of Bible facts?" No, because the Greek word that is used means "know by experience" (~~γινώσκω~~), as opposed to ~~οἶδα~~ which means "know intuitively or intrinsically." An unbeliever does not know God's truth experientially. He may grasp portions of it mentally, but he does not discern it spiritually nor experience it personally. Virkler summarizes this point well when he writes:

“Thus unbelievers do not know the full meaning of scriptural teaching, not because that meaning is unavailable to them in the words of the text, but because they refuse to act on and appropriate spiritual truths for their own lives. Furthermore, the psychological results of such refusal make them less and less able (and willing) to comprehend these truths.”¹⁰

In illumination the Holy Spirit's work is not only to show what the Bible means, but also to persuade Christians of its truth. Illumination is the Spirit's work, enabling Christians to discern the meaning of the message and to welcome and receive it as from God. Hodge states that obedience in the believer's life is the inevitable result of the illuminating work of the Spirit.¹¹

To receive God's truths fully, one must first understand them and then appropriate them. Bromiley expresses this fact when he says that the Holy Spirit, who has given the Word of God, seeks to "open the eyes of the readers to perceive its truth and receive its light."¹² Klooster puts it this way: "Understanding Scripture requires more

than an intellectual grasp of the historical setting of the text or the literary structure of the passage". Heart-understanding demands the heart response in the totality of one's being to the living, triune God."¹³

5. The Spirit's role in hermeneutics does not mean that only Bible scholars can understand the Bible. The Bible was given to be understood by all; hence its interpretation is not in the hands of an elite few. (cf. 1 John 2:20, 27). And yet believers ought not to neglect the interpretive helps that can be afforded by biblical scholars.

6. The Holy Spirit's role in interpreting Scripture requires spiritual devotion on the part of the interpreter. Thomas Aquinas used to pray and fast when he came to a difficult passage of Scripture. Most of the scholars whose Biblical studies have blessed the church have mixed prayers generously with their studies."¹⁴ "A deep religious experience has enlightened many an otherwise ill-instructed mind as to the meaning of much of the Holy Writ."¹⁵ "Apart from the quickening of the Spirit, the interpreter will have only words and phrases. Only through the Holy Spirit can he enter into the meaning of the biblical writers..."¹⁶

However, this is not to say that prayer automatically guarantees that a person's interpretations will be accurate. Spiritual devotion, depth, and sensitivity make correct interpretations more possible, but does not assure their accuracy. More is involved, as other propositions indicate.

7. The Holy Spirit in interpretation means that lack of spiritual preparedness hinders accurate interpretation.¹⁷ A worldly Christian, one who is not obeying the truth and is not yielded to the Lord, is unable to understand the Word fully (1 Cor 3:1-3) and "is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness" (Heb 5:13). A Christian who is in sin is susceptible to making inaccurate interpretations of the Bible because his mind and heart are not in harmony with the Spirit. As Chafer wrote, "Carnality of life excludes [believers] from understanding, or progressing in, the deep things of God."¹⁸ God reveals His truths by the Spirit only to spiritual Christians. "The spiritual man" has greater depth in his discernment of spiritual truths (1 Cor 2:15).

8. The role of the Spirit in interpretation is no substitute for diligent study. With a heart sensitive to the Spirit, the interpreter must study the Word intensely. The point here is that the Spirit does not make study superfluous. "The more self-consciously active the interpreter is in the process, the more likely is the Spirit's illumination."¹⁹ The Holy Spirit works through the efforts of the individual as he reads the Bible, and studies it, meditates on it, and consults other works about it. In the inspiration of the Bible the Holy Spirit was working but so were the human authors. In a similar way in the interpretation of the Bible, human work is involved.

9. The Spirit's work in biblical interpretation does not rule out the use of study helps such as commentaries and Bible dictionaries. "It is often asserted by devout people that they can know the Bible competently without helps."²⁰ They assume they can go to

the Bible and that the Holy Spirit interprets it for them directly. This seems to them more spiritual than relying on man's writings. Ramm answers this view by stating that no one has either the right or the learning to bypass all the godly learning²¹ of other Bible scholars both past and present. He suggests that such an affirmation is "a veiled egotism."²²

Of course commentaries can come between a person and the Bible. It is possible to rely on others' interpretations to the neglect of one's own personal study of the Scriptures. Rather than using commentaries and other study helps as a crutch and accepting others' views unquestioningly, one should consult them and evaluate the views suggested in the light of his own study of the Scriptures (cf. Acts 17:11). This should be done prayerfully and humbly in dependence on the Spirit's guidance.

Chafer addresses this point well.

“No student of the Scriptures should be satisfied to traffic only in the results of the study of other men. The field is inexhaustible and its treasures ever new. No worthy astronomer limits his attention to the findings of other men, but is himself ever gazing into the heavens both to verify and to discover; and no worthy theologian will be satisfied alone with the result of the research of other theologians, but will himself be ever searching the Scriptures.”²³

10. The ministry of the Holy Spirit in Bible interpretation does not mean interpreters can ignore common sense and logic. Since the Spirit is "the Spirit of truth" (John 14:17; 15:26 ; 16:13), He would not teach concepts that failed to meet the tests of truth. (In a correspondence theory of truth, truth is what corresponds to the actual state of affairs.²⁴) The Holy Spirit does not guide into interpretations that contradict each other or fail to have logical, internal consistency.

Two believers may be spiritual, but one or both may be wrong in their understanding of a Bible passage because of failure to think through the Bible logically. Two contradictory views may both be wrong, or one may be wrong, but they cannot both be correct. The Spirit seeks to aid the Spirit-filled learner to think clearly and accurately. The interpreter "must employ principles of reasoning in making inductions, deductions, analogies, and comparisons."²⁵

Bible students recognize that while the Bible is a unique book - inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore infallible and authoritative - it is a written means of communication (from God to man), which suggests that it must be understood in that light. As with any written communication the interpreter seeks to expose the meaning of the passage in its original setting, as it was understood by its original hearers. The Bible was written in languages unknown by most modern readers today, in cultural environments that differ from those in Western culture, in geographical settings that are distant from most present-day readers of the Bible, and in literary styles unlike many common literary forms today. These gaps - linguistic, cultural, geographical, and literary - are often hindrances to communication. Removing these hindrances or

closing the gaps is much of what is involved in properly interpreting the Bible.²⁶

Just as one uses common sense in seeking to bridge communication gaps within his own culture, so he should use common sense in interpreting the Bible. A reader normally gives an author the benefit of doubt if the author makes a statement that seemingly conflicts with a previous statement. The same should be granted the Bible. Also a reader normally uses principles of logic in seeking to understand an author's writing. He does not read into the writing a meaning that is foreign to the material. The same should be granted with regard to the Bible.

Though spiritual truths often supersede man's reasoning ability, they do not contradict or conflict with reason. Clear thinking, then, along with normal procedures followed in comprehending written communications is essential in Bible interpretation and harmonizes with the Holy Spirit's role.

11. The place of the Holy Spirit in interpreting the Bible means that He does not normally give sudden intuitive flashes of insight into the meaning of Scripture. Though many passages are readily understood, the meaning of others may come to light only gradually in the arduous process of careful study (as stated earlier in proposition 8). Still other times an interpreter may concentrate on a passage a long time with its meaning still eluding him. But later, after leaving the passage for awhile, the meaning may seem to jump to his mind suddenly. "The interpreter's struggle to understand always precedes that... experience, it does not occur in connection with a text on which one has expended no effort."²⁷ This sudden insight, if it occurs, does not come without his having studied the passage earlier.

To speak of the Spirit's part in hermeneutics is not to suggest some mysterious work that is beyond verification or validation. Lee argues against the view that the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation and religious instruction means that His activity is a "mysterious and unfathomable" work²⁸ so that learning activity is unexplainable, unpredictable, or unverifiable,²⁹ or that teaching and learning are "miracles magically wrought by... zaps of the Holy Spirit."³⁰ Though Lee stresses this valid point about learning not coming by sudden impulses of the Holy Spirit, he then goes too far in ruling out the Holy Spirit's work altogether.³¹ To depend on the Holy Spirit is, Lee says, to "spookify" religious instruction as if it were "an ethereal, mysterious, nonterrestrial affair which is fundamentally beyond the regular workings of nature."³² But while some educators may seek to overemphasize the Holy Spirit, an equally dangerous direction is to neglect His work completely.

12. The Spirit's ministry in interpreting the Bible is included in but not identical with illumination. Illumination, as stated earlier, is the Spirit's work on the minds and hearts of believers that enables them not only to discern the truth but also to receive it, welcome it, and apply it. In interpretation a believer is aided by the Spirit to ascertain the meaning of a passage. This is the first step in illumination. But illumination is not complete until one has appropriated it to his life. Interpretation involves perception;

illumination includes it but also involves reception.

13. The role of the Spirit in scriptural interpretation does not mean that all parts of the Bible are equally clear in meaning. Some scholars claim that the entire Bible is equally perspicuous, that its meaning is clear and plain. However, perspicuity does not mean that all parts of the Bible are equally clear. Even Peter said that Paul's epistles "contain some things that are hard to understand" (2 Pet 3:16). Perspicuity means, instead, that the central message of the Bible, the message of salvation, is clear to all.

14. The Spirit's work in interpretation does not result in believers having a comprehensive and completely accurate understanding of the entire Scriptures. The exact meaning of many passages still eludes many Bible scholars, even after a lifetime of study in the Scriptures. The precise meaning of some verses will not be known until believers see the Savior "face to face" (1 Cor 13:12). Students of the Bible, even though they are devout and are Spirit-taught, must admit that the correct interpretation of at least some passages simply cannot be fully ascertained this side of heaven.

These propositions suggest that at least five elements are necessary for properly interpreting the Bible: salvation, spiritual maturity, diligent study, common sense and logic, and humble dependence on the Spirit of God for discernment. Clearly the Holy Spirit needs to be much involved in the process of a believer's efforts to comprehend and interpret the Bible.

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