

THE “ILLUMINATION” OF THE SPIRIT THEORY

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The “illumination” of the Spirit theory is a doctrine quite common in the Denominational religions with more and more of them claiming to possess the power this doctrine represents.
2. This doctrine is making its presence increasingly felt among the people of God; that is, those of churches of Christ in our day.
3. The theory is that the professed believer in Jesus Christ has the promise of a direct “illumination of the Holy Spirit” in interpreting the Spirit-inspired, God-breathed, text of the Bible.
4. The theory suggests that the Scriptures, as they presently stand, though revealed to man by the Holy Spirit by means of the Spirit empowered Apostles of Christ, are incapable of being thoroughly understood or properly interpreted by diligent Bible students without this direct “illumination of the Holy Spirit,” and thus suggesting, therefore, by implication, that the divine message in its present written form is incomplete as far as being able to fully instruct man.
5. Therefore, in addition to the written biblical record that God gave to man by means of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles of Christ, even if and when approached with correct methods of interpretation, it is alleged that there must be a direct working of the Spirit of God upon the heart or mind of the Bible student, thus effecting an “illumination” that brings into proper focus the meaning of the “God-breathed” text.
6. In other words, we must have both the inspired written word and a special, direct “illumination” or power of the Holy Spirit in order to understand, in order to properly interpret the biblical text, so as to please God.

II. DISCUSSION

A. THE HISTORY OF THIS DOCTRINE IS OF INTEREST AND HELPFUL IN OUR STUDY OF THE “ILLUMINATION” THEORY.

1. The “illumination” view is not new. In fact, it is a part of the residue of the old false concept of human hereditary depravity.

- a. That is, the idea that man is by birth since Adam so hopelessly depraved by virtue of Adam's fall, that the Scriptures are, of necessity, incomprehensible to his blighted mind and inherited sinful nature.
 - b. This human dogma though not originated by John Calvin (A.D. 1509-1564), was however systematized and popularized most prominently by him.
2. Long before Calvin's time some of the early "church fathers" introduced the idea that the "guilt" (not just the *effect*) of Adam's sin was contrasted by all of his descendants.
 - a. Tertullian (A.D. 150-222) contended that a person inherits both his body and his spirit from his parents (*De Anima*, chaps 23-41).
 - b. Later, Augustine (A.D. 354-430) taught a similar idea.
 - c. Cyprian (A.D. 200-258) had alleged that new-born infants inherit "the infection of the old death" from Adam (*Epistle lviii*).
 - d. Origen (c.A.D. 185-254) suggested that a child is polluted with sin "though [its] life be but a length of one day upon the earth" (*Homily in Luc. xiv*). On this account he argued that no Christian should celebrate the day of his birth (*Homily in Leviticum*, viii 3).
 3. Therefore, due to man's supposed "corrupted" nature, they contend he cannot understand the Scripture without direct, divine guidance, though they were revealed by Spirit-filled, Spirit-inspired Apostles of Christ, or "God-breathed."
 4. Calvin likely borrowed the "illumination" idea from Augustine, for, as Norman Geisler, has noted, the north African theologian (i.e., Augustine) 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*) (*Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999, p. 331).
 5. Other religious reformers such as Martin Luther of Germany and Huldrych Zwingli of Switzerland, taught similar ideas respecting the need for some direct special power of the Holy Spirit in order that the professed believer might be empowered to comprehend the "God-breathed" Scriptures.

6. This idea originating with men from early times has filtered down to the modern world of sectarianism with little or no change in its concept.
 - a. 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).
 - b. Roy Zuch, a former Bible professor at the Dallas Theological Seminary in his book titled “*Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1991):
 - (1) 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.
 - (2) Zuch also quoted H.C.G. Moule, with approval, who wrote the following: “The blessed Spirit is not only the true **Author** of the written Word but also its supreme and true **Expositor**” (p.23).
 - c. Other present-day teachers of the “illumination of the Holy Spirit” theory could be cited.

B. A BRIEF ANALYSIS AND REFUTATION OF TWO OF THE PROOF TEXTS CITED BY THE ILLUMINATION THEORISTS.

1. The doctrine of the “illumination of the Holy Spirit” is not defensible on a scriptural basis; for their so-called proof texts are mere pretexts, as the following two examples prove.
2. 1Cor.12:3 is one of their proof texts which was cited by John Calvin (Calvin’s Institutes, II,20,21) as proof of the “illumination of the Holy Spirit” theory.
 - a. This passage says: “...and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.”
 - b. But this passage merely asserts that belief in Christ’s lordship is dependent upon the revelatory mission of the Spirit.

- c. 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, or even implies.
 - d. The Holy Spirit is the Author of the Scriptures; apart from that body of information, no man can declare Christ's lordship.
 - e. Hence, ultimately, this precious affirmation of faith must be attributed to the Holy Spirit.
 - f. But this by no means establishes the "direct illumination" theory.
 - g. To contend that one cannot come to a knowledge of the identity and nature of the Son of God by carefully considering the evidence of the N.T. is an absurd position.
3. Jno.16:13 is another passage frequently cited by Denominational scholars to prove the idea of a present-day special, direct "illumination of the Holy Spirit".
- a. Roy Zuck, a former Bible professor at the Dallas Theological Seminary, in his book Basic Bible Interpretation, p.24, quoted the first part of Jno.16:13 for that purpose.
 - b. This text refers not to present-day disciples, nor preachers of today, but to the Apostles of Jesus Christ as they were being prepared for their mission as his Apostles.
 - c. This text must be understood and interpreted in context both immediate and remote; such as: Jno.14:15-18,25,26; 15:15-20,26; 16:1-15; Cf. Mt.10:16-20.
4. Moreover, no N.T. passage referring to spiritual gifts of a miraculous nature bestowed upon believers in the days of the Apostles in the early church can be used to defend the doctrine of a present-day special, direct "illumination of the Holy Spirit" because "spiritual gifts" have ceased, 1Cor.13:8-13.
- a. Furthermore, the spiritual gifts received and exercised by early N.T. saints were bestowed upon them by the laying on of the Apostles hands.
 - (1) Spiritual gifts were promised to baptized believers, Mk.16:15-18.
 - (a) Here Jesus said *what* as to spiritual gifts.
 - (b) But he didn't say *how*.

- (c) We have to go elsewhere to learn ***how***.
- (2) Spiritual gifts were also promised to baptized believers in Ac.2:16-18,38.
 - (a) Again, Peter, as Jesus did, said ***what*** as to spiritual gifts.
 - (b) Once again, Peter didn't say ***how***.
 - (c) We have to go elsewhere to learn ***how***.
- (3) The ***how*** we learn from Ac.8:12-16,17-19. Cf. Ac.19:5,6; Rom.1:11; 2Tim.1:6.
- b. Not only has "spiritual gifts" ceased because there is no longer any need for them; but the means by which to receive them no longer exists: there are no living apostles of Christ who can impart them to believers by the laying on of their hands.
 - (1) With the exception of Cornelius and his household, as well as the Apostles themselves, no believers received spiritual gifts except through the laying on of an apostle's hands.
 - (2) With the case of both the Apostles and Cornelius their reception of the Spirit in a direct manner was for a special purpose explained in each case – a special purpose that did not pertain to believers in general!

C. SOME SERIOUS QUESTIONS TO PONDER REGARDING THE "ILLUMINATION" THEORY.

1. If the Holy Spirit illuminates the mind of the Christian student, is He as infallible as an "expositor" of the Scripture as he was initially in his role of "author" of the sacred message?
 - a. If not, what is the difference?
 - b. If so, then each one so illuminated by the Spirit would be absolutely accurate in his interpretation of any and all passages considered.
 - c. Each one so illuminated could never be wrong in his interpretation of a passage.
2. How would one know if, or when, he has been "illuminated"? If he affirms he has been illuminated with reference to a particular passage, may he ever alter his view of that particular text and offer another interpretation of it?

- a. If so, did the Spirit misdirect him earlier, or the first time?
3. If one has been illuminated regarding a passage, are all others who take a different view of the passage in error?
 - a. If two people, both of whom claim illumination of the Holy Spirit, differ on the interpretation of a passage, how could one know which of these is correct – or if either is correct?
4. Since those of the “illumination of the Holy Spirit” theory believe the Holy Spirit is an infallible interpreter of Scripture, how do you account for the existence of different religious organizations each claiming the “illumination” of the Spirit and yet holding to and guided by different doctrines?
5. Also, if the Holy Spirit could not make the Scriptures understandable the first time (i.e., by the “revelation” process), how can we be confident that He could do so the second time around (i.e., by the “illumination” process)?

D. SOME OBVIOUS, GLARING INCONSISTENCIES NOTED.

1. Note the following inconsistent concession from Professor Zuck, where he says that the Spirit’s role in illumination “does not mean that one’s interpretations are infallible” (p.24).
 - a. How inconsistent can you be? If the Holy Spirit empowers one to interpret a passage, how could it be anything but an infallible interpretation?
 - b. Besides that, this statement of the professor is woefully inconsistent with his endorsement of Moule, whom he had quoted, who said that the Spirit is both “Author” and “Expositor” of the Scriptures for the believer.
2. Moreover, if the Holy Spirit provides illumination to believers today, why is there any need for, and why do scholars, who subscribe to this theory, feel called upon to write books instructing people as to the proper methods of Bible interpretation (as professor Zuck has done)?
 - a. Isn’t that highly inconsistent on their part?
3. Their inconsistency is quiet obvious when you consider that the writing of such books would not be of value to the unbeliever, who according to them has “no spiritual capacity of 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!

III. CONCLUSION

1. The doctrine of direct, special illumination of the Holy Spirit for present-day believers contradicts and denies the clear testimony of the Scriptures which explicitly affirms that the devout Bible student is able to understand the Word of God as given originally by the Spirit-filled, Spirit-empowered, Spirit-guided Apostles of Jesus Christ who received and revealed all truth thereby, Eph.3:1-12; 5:17; 2Tim.2:15.
 - a. There is no way to justly read into these passages the idea that the apostle is possibly suggesting that “reading” what he had written – **PLUS** a special, direct intervention and illumination of the Holy Spirit – would be required in order for the readers to understand Paul’s “knowledge in the mystery of Christ.”
2. Finally, according to 2Tim.3:14-17, Scriptural testimony could not be clearer as to the possibility of the understandableness, the ability and completeness of the Scriptures.
3. Without a doubt “God-breathed” written word, the Scriptures, alone are sufficient for man’s understanding of God’s will for us.

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