

WHAT DOES “ONLY THROUGH THE WORD” MEAN?

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Through the years two opposing views on how the Holy Spirit operates in the conviction, conversion and sanctification of sinners have been held and taught.
2. There has been no disagreement among professed Bible believers over the fact that the Spirit of God operates in conviction, conversion and sanctification, but the how of his operation has been and continues to be viewed differently and debated often by those of opposing views.
3. One view that has been and continues to be widely held is that, “in conviction and conversion the Holy Spirit exercises a power or an influence over the human spirit distinct from and in addition to the written or spoken word; in other words, the Spirit operates, influences or leads the human spirit in a direct manner separate and apart from the word of God,” which is the view held by the majority in the Denominational religions.
4. The opposing view is that, “in conviction and conversion, the Holy Spirit operates on or influences the human spirit only through the word of God,” which, through the years, has been the position held and defended by the faithful brethren in churches of Christ.
5. But since the position “only through the word” has been both misunderstood and grossly misrepresented by those of the opposing view and even by our own brethren who have been digressing from the truth over the years, we are forced to raise and discuss the question: What does “only through the word” mean, when we affirm that in conviction and conversion the Spirit of God operates only through the word?

II. DISCUSSION

A. 1ST, HOW THE “ONLY THROUGH THE WORD” VIEW HAS BEEN MISUNDERSTOOD AND MISREPRESENTED.

1. Some, including some of our own brethren, misrepresent it, saying it means “through the word only,” that is, that the one

who holds the “only through the word” position is saying or teaching that “the Holy Spirit influences through the word only;” when, in fact, we teach “the Holy Spirit influences only through the word.” There is quite a difference!

- a. Or it may be for prejudicial purposes that some will falsely charge all who so teach as being “a word only advocate.”
2. Some also misrepresent the “only through the word” view as being a position that scripturally and logically denies the operation of the Spirit of God in prayer and providence, or that the consequence of holding the “only through the word” view is a denial of the Spirit’s operation in prayer and providence.
3. Whether intentional or not both ideas are gross misrepresentations of the “only through the word” view of the Spirit’s operation in conviction and conversion.

B. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN “ONLY THROUGH THE WORD” AND “THROUGH THE WORD ONLY” EXPLAINED.

1. While these two expressions may sound similar they are quite different in meaning.
 - a. The expression “through the word only” implies that the word of God is the only thing influencing and this leaves out the Holy Spirit’s part in conviction and conversion.
 - b. While the expression “only through the word” implies that the Holy Spirit is working through his instrument (the word of God, the sword of the Spirit, Eph.6:17).
 - c. Wallace correctly stated: “On the subject of spiritual influence there are two extremes of doctrine. There is the word alone system, and there is the Spirit alone system. I believe in neither.” – Foy E. Wallace, Jr. (1967) *The Gospel for Today*. Nashville, TN: Foy E. Wallace, Jr. Pub. (pg.610).
2. The placement of the adverb “only” in a sentence is very important in what you intend to say or what you mean. For the adverb “only” in a sentence changes the meaning of the sentence.
 - a. Example: “Only Jack liked Jill. (No one else liked her.) Jack only liked Jill. (Jack did not love her.) Jack liked only Jill. (Jack liked no one else.)

- b. Cf. 1Tim.6:16, speaking of the Lord: “Who only hath immortality...” (there is nothing mortal about him).
- 3. In the Campbell-Rice Debate (1844), Lexington, Ky., Nathan Rice continually portrayed the position taken by Alexander Campbell as “Through the Word only” (pp.611-758). To which Campbell continually objected and replied:
 - a. “The proposition before us is – ‘In conversion and sanctification the Spirit of God operates only through the word of Truth.’ or *always* through the Word of Truth. Mr. Rice admits it sometimes so operates, but not always; sometimes operating without the Word of Truth. The proper difference between us is the difference between sometimes and always.” (Campbell and Rice, p.663).
- 4. Thus, the word “*only*” in our proposition means “*always*.”
 - a. Thus, when the Spirit of God saves a sinner or sanctifies a Christian, he always uses the Scriptures to do it.
 - b. Or to say the same thing in other words, he operates only through the truth of God’s word.
 - c. That is why the Word of God is called “the sword of the Spirit.” (Eph.6;17)
 - d. Wherever and whenever men are converted, the gospel of Christ is always there as God’s power unto salvation to everyone that believes (Rom.1:14-17).
 - e. For every single convert is chosen by God “to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2Th.2:13,14).

C. THE “ONLY THROUGH THE WORD” VIEW NOT ONLY DOESN’T DENY BUT HARMONIZES WITH GOD’S PROVIDENTIAL ACTIVITIES AND PRAYER.

- 1. We readily acknowledge that what might be called “secondary causes” or “subordinate instrumentalities” (such as, prayer and providence) have a role in converting sinners or in sanctifying saints, but that none of them has any power whatsoever in and of themselves without or separate and apart from the preaching of the gospel to save sinners or sanctify saints.
- 2. To illustrate: Christian “A” is praying for the salvation of his/her friend “B.”

- a. Is “**B**” saved at this point?
 - b. No. But God may providentially open a door for “**A**” or someone else to teach “**B**” the Gospel.
 - c. Has God’s providence or the friend’s prayer saved that sinner?
 - d. Not yet. But, as a result of their Bible study, the Holy Spirit through the word, “the sword of the Spirit,” convicts “**B**” of his sins, he obeys the gospel and is saved (Mk.16:15,16; 1Cor.15:1,2; 2Th.1:6-10).
 - e. Did prayer and providence have a role in converting “**B**”? Yes, of course, but not separate and apart from the teaching of the truth, the gospel of Christ, God’s power to save the believer!
 - f. Furthermore, note well: Not one time did God act directly upon “**B**” to save him, but always through means – the Spirit through the word.
3. Now extend the illustration to the sanctification (or spiritual growth) of “**A**” and “**B**”.
- a. Does the Holy Spirit have a role in this?
 - b. Certainly, 1Pet.2:1,2; 2Th.2:13-15; Col.1:9-11, etc.
 - c. Do we need the edification that comes from worship and fellowship with the saints? Yes!
 - d. But do any of these things, however many they may be, have any power to sanctify and strengthen us spiritually separate and apart from the truth of God’s word? No!
 - e. Jno.17:17,19; Ac.20:32.

II. CONCLUSION

1. There is simply no divine authority to teach that the Spirit of God directly converts and sanctifies anyone.
2. The Holy Spirit revealed the Scripture to man “that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work,” See 2Tim.3:15-17; 4:1-5.
3. Any doctrine which affirms the direct operation of the Holy Spirit undermines the sufficiency of the Holy Spirit inspired Scriptures.
4. Does a sinner need saving? How did Jesus authorize that to be done?
5. Does the Christian need to grow? How did Jesus authorize that to be done?
6. Why then the need for a direct operation of the Spirit to influence the heart of man separate and apart from the all-sufficient word?