

Illumination

While finishing up a Bible degree at a well-known Christian college I was personally studying through Howard Hendricks' *Living by the Book*, which is a book written for lay persons on basic Bible study principles. You see, though my major was Bible, there were no hermeneutics classes as part of the core curriculum. Therefore, I reached out to my pastor asking him to instruct me in how to study The Scriptures, rather than just relying on the teachings of others. I asked the administration why there were no courses to instruct us how to study the Bible, rather than just learn the Bible at the tutelage of Bible professors. The disheartening reply was, "We no longer offer hermeneutics because that discipline led students away, where they were depending more on science than the Spirit." Such a statement shows the abysmal ignorance of how God enables His children to unpack the meaning of Scripture; through the disciplined use of the rules of hermeneutics, particularly a hermeneutic that is build around the study of the Bible's grammar, as well as the historical setting of its day. Furthermore, such a statement lacks an understanding of the Spirit's ministry of illumination. It is His ministry that causes us to understand, affirm, and apply the message of Scripture.

One can hold to the convictions that the Bible is inspired by God, inerrant, and sufficient, but it takes the Spirit's work to confirm the reliability of Scripture, giving us both the certainty that it is the Word of God and the desire to obey it, though that obedience is partial and imperfect. Some rely on rational evidences to give them confidence in Scripture, relying on archeological evidence, proofs of the empty tomb, or fulfilled prophecy. There are others who would submit to church authority only bowing to it because it is what the church affirms, or maybe that which is upheld by tradition. Yet others base their affirmation of the Word on its existential impact in their lives. In other words, "It speaks to me." However, the Bible study, ie, every follower of the Lord Jesus Christ must affirm the internal witness of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit's illuminating ministry (or internal witness) is what gives the believer, who is no longer hostile towards God, the ability to perceive Scripture's self-convincing proofs. It is through this vital ministry of the Spirit that the believer affirms Scripture's inspiration, inerrancy, authority, and sufficiency. The Westminster Confession of Faith states it this way:

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole, the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the

inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.¹

Thus, the believer affirms the doctrine of inspiration because Scripture says of itself it is inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16). The clearest and least ambiguous text affirming this illuminating ministry of the Spirit is 1 Corinthians 2:4-14. We see therein that the Holy Spirit is the source of the context of Scripture (v10), and that He is the basis of the persuasive power of the words (v4). Our faith is said to “stand” or “rest” in the power of God. Therefore, without the powerful internal testimony of the Spirit, we cannot understand (at least in an obedient and submissive way) the content of Scripture.

This vital doctrine is what empowered and encouraged the apostle Paul to continue preaching and teaching the word of God, as his message went out to the Thessalonians with power and deep conviction of the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 1:5; see also 2:1ff.). This is the best example of believers accepting and affirming the Word of God, due to the Spirit’s illumination.

Unbelievers can teach truths and facts from the Bible, but only believers who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit can know, affirm and obey the teachings of Scripture. They and they alone are not as concerned about understanding facts, but merely use those facts to produce Christlikeness in their own lives and the lives with whom they come into contact. May we pray with the psalmist “Open my eyes (Oh, Holy Spirit), to behold wondrous things from thy law” (Ps 119:18).

To summarize, this is the internal ministry of the Holy Spirit to believers that both affirms Scripture as the truth of God and enables obedience. This ministry of the Holy Spirit is essential to Bible interpretation as the Bible student applies himself to be a diligent workman (2 Tim 2:15). The meaning of Scripture is to be found as one consistently applies the literal grammatical-historical and contextual method of interpretation under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit (Jn 7:17; 1 Cor 2:7-15; 1 Jn 2:20).

Further Reading:

“The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit” in *Inerrancy*-R.C. Sproul
“The Attestation of Scripture” in *The Infallible Word*-John Murray
Institutes, Book I, chapter 7-John Calvin

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¹ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, (1647), Chapter 1, paragraph 5.