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The Holy Spirit and Hermeneutics

*But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God,
for they are foolishness to him;
nor can he know them,
because they are spiritually discerned.¹*

1. Introduction

It is universally agreed by evangelicals that there is a need for the help of the Holy Spirit when interpreting the Scriptures. However, there is vagueness, uncertainty and disagreement as to exactly how this takes place. It is astonishing to discover that most books on hermeneutics give very little, if any space to the topic.² Interpreting the Scriptures is often presented as a technical discipline, not fundamentally different from interpreting any other ancient work. This is not to denigrate the importance of language and cultural studies,³ but to question the emphasis. The most common practice is to include a short “disclaimer” to the effect that although the interpretive techniques described are largely mechanical, it is still necessary to “depend on the Holy Spirit.”⁴ However, hermeneutics has come to occupy such a central place in biblical studies that we need to give far more attention to this question. According to Brown,

¹ 1 Cor 2:14, *The Holy Bible: New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

² A widely used 500 page textbook devotes just over one page to this topic: William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 425. Even a popular book by an author known for his work on the Spirit only briefly alludes to the topic: Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to read the Bible for all its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 26.

³ It is less surprising that there is no mention of the Holy Spirit in works such as Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), and George B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, Duckworth Studies in Theology (London: Duckworth, 1980).

⁴ See §4.1 of this paper for examples.

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“Hermeneutics has now come to dominate theology so much that theologies are often the outworking of particular hermeneutical perspectives.”⁵ Packer echoes this thought, “...every theology stands or falls as a hermeneutic and every hermeneutic stands or falls as a theology...”⁶ The subject also tends to be poorly treated in works on the Holy Spirit, both new and old.⁷

Because correct application is a strictly rational process, most evangelical textbooks on interpreting Scripture say little or nothing about the Holy Spirit... The omission unhappily allows evangelical rationality in interpretation to look like a viciously self-reliant rationalism...⁸

Four writers, to my knowledge, have specifically addressed this topic. John Owen⁹ has given attention to the question with a particular interest in emphasising the ability of every Spirit-filled Christian to understand the Scriptures, over against the claims of the church of Rome to have final interpretative authority.¹⁰ His work is thoughtful, balanced and well worth reading. Roy Zuck has written a paper on this subject.¹¹ The paper consists of fourteen propositions (which will be summarized later) together with some discussion of each proposition. He does not have space for much development of the discussion, but the paper is a very worthwhile contribution. The third work is that by Daniel Wallace, also a paper. In his own words it is a “brief essay” in which “Criticisms and interactions are invited.”¹² Two passages of Scripture are considered (1 Cor 2:12-14 & 1 John 2:20,27) and eight “preliminary conclusions” are drawn. The work is thoughtful and well-written. Recently Paul Brown¹³ has devoted a book to the subject. It is a *tour de force*, going through virtually every

⁵ Paul E. Brown, *The Holy Spirit and the Bible* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 10.

⁶ James I. Packer, “Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics,” in *Scripture and Truth*, eds. Donald A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 325.

⁷ For example, George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, 2nd edition, 1889 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, rep. 1974), 67.

⁸ Packer, 1983, 347-8.

⁹ John Owen, “The Causes, ways, and means of understanding the mind of God as revealed in his word, with assurance therein,” in *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit—Continued*, Works vol. 4; 1677 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), 117-234.

¹⁰ Owen, 121, 124.

¹¹ Roy B. Zuck, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141:562 (Apr 84), 120.

¹² Daniel B. Wallace, *The Holy Spirit and Hermeneutics*, Internet publication (Dallas: Biblical Studies Press [www.bible.org], 1997).

¹³ Brown, 2002.

single reference to the Holy Spirit in the N.T. Although the book does not produce sharply defined conclusions, it is a solid piece of scholarly work and a tremendously valuable contribution to the debate.

2. Five Views

When the subject of how exactly the Spirit functions as part of the interpretive process is addressed, two extremes can readily be distinguished.¹⁴ According to Virkler:

One school of thought maintains that if two people are equally prepared intellectually to do hermeneutics (educated in the original languages, history, culture, etc.), they will be equally good interpreters.

A second school of thought holds that Scripture itself teaches that spiritual commitment, or lack of it, influences ability to perceive spiritual truth. [Romans 1:18-22; 1 Corinthians 2:6-14; Ephesians 4:17-24 & 1 John 2:11.] Based on such passages as these, this view believes that spiritual blindness and darkened understanding hinder a person's ability to discern the truth regardless of one's knowledge and application of hermeneutical principles.¹⁵

He explains the dilemma: if the meaning of Scripture can be determined by carefully following an objective methodology, then where is there room for spiritual insight? But on the other hand, once subjective spiritual intuition is allowed, then we will end up with a "hopeless babble of confusion."¹⁶

To resolve this problem, he argues that to truly *know* the truths of Scripture, we have to submit to them in obedience.

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.¹⁷

¹⁴ The two extremes are painted vividly by A. Berkeley Michelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), 4.

¹⁵ Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 29.

¹⁶ Virkler, 29.

¹⁷ Virkler, 30

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What then, according to this view, is the role of the Holy Spirit? Virkler seems to distinguish between two kinds of meaning. There is a basic (intellectual) meaning, which can be derived by the process of grammatical-historical study, and which does not require the Spirit. The work of the Spirit is to lead us to the *full meaning*.

One of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is the work of illumination, of helping believers understand the full meaning of the words of Scripture. The concept of illumination need not extend beyond the Holy Spirit's work of explicating the full meaning of the text; indeed, if we once extend our definition of illumination beyond this point, we have no logically coherent rationale for discriminating the divinely intended meaning from the intuitions and additions of a thousand different interpreters.¹⁸

One wishes that Virkler would be more precise about what he means by *full meaning*,¹⁹ but the context suggests that it is limited to the believer's *response* to the text (e.g. in obedience, worship, thankfulness or joy) rather than the objective truth contained in the text.

Between Virkler's two extremes there is a spectrum of viewpoints. It is convenient to divide this continuum into five groups, ranging from minimum to maximum involvement of the Spirit.

1. The Holy Spirit imparts a vague "blessing" on the hermeneutical endeavour.
2. The need for the Holy Spirit is limited to the final part of the process of interpretation, that is, the application and internalisation of the message. This is often referred to as *illumination*.
3. Through the indwelling Spirit, the believer has *a new faculty*, capable of receiving and understanding truth, which the unbeliever does not possess.
4. In addition to the new faculty, some Christians are particularly *gifted* by the Spirit in understanding the Scriptures.
5. The Holy Spirit *replaces* the need for disciplined study.

These views will be discussed and evaluated after surveying the biblical data on the subject.

¹⁸ Virkler, 31

¹⁹ Luther spoke in a similar fashion of "depth of meaning." Mickelsen, 39

3. The Biblical Evidence

There is not space in this paper to exegete the relevant passages, but the reader is referred to the excellent work done by Brown and by Wallace referred to above.

3.1 The Synoptics and the Gospel of John

Right from the beginning of Matthew there is an emphasis on how little the religious Jews who know the Scriptures so well, really understood.

Matthew early on shows the extraordinary attitude of the chief priests and scribes when he describes them telling Herod where the messiah was to be born, and yet apparently not taking the slightest interest in the possibility that this momentous event had taken place (2:3-6).²⁰

*Matt 11:25-27*²¹

At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

Jesus makes it clear that God has hidden these things from one group and revealed them to another.²²

Matt 13:11-12

And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

The verses "imply that the disciples themselves would have been dull and unreceptive apart from the ability to know granted to them."²³

²⁰ Brown, 17.

²¹ The verses quoted in this section are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

²² Brown, 19.

²³ Brown, 22.

Luke 24:25-26

And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?”

These verses suggest that failure to understand is associated with a sinful and unbelieving heart. There is a personal culpability involved.²⁴

John’s Gospel is permeated with the motif of light and darkness (1:4-13; 3:19-21; 12:35-41 etc.), closely connected with knowledge and truth.²⁵ The truth that Jesus teaches is that which he has received from the Father (8:38; 10:18; 12:50). The Paraclete is the one who will guide the disciples into all truth and make known to them the things of Jesus (16:12-15). Waltke summarizes these ideas:

Moreover, the Holy Spirit, Scripture’s divine author, both authenticates it to the saint by his inward witness and opens his mind to understand its meaning. Without God’s supernatural enlightenment, which is granted only to the childlike, his truths about Christ and his kingdom are hidden from the wise and the learned (Matt 11:25-27). Even the apostles, whose eyes saw and whose hands touched the blessed Son of God (1 John 1:1), needed supernatural enlightenment to know his true identity (Matt 16:17). The orthodox Jews, who confessed the infallible authority of Scripture, did not know him (John 5:45-47), because God had drawn a veil over their unbelieving hearts (2 Corinthians 3).²⁶

3.2 Paul’s Epistles

Three epistles will be considered briefly. Romans 1:18-23 describes the effect of sin on the mind. Men “by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” Over against this they are told that, “to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (8:6).²⁷

In Ephesians 1:17-18, Paul prays that God “may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened...” This enlightening results in knowledge, specifically “that you

²⁴ Brown, 39.

²⁵ Brown, 51f.

²⁶ Bruce K. Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Weschester: Crossway, 1988), 263-287, 266.

²⁷ Brown, 73f.

may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints..." Brown comments:

The prayer, then, is asking for the help of the Spirit in enabling the Ephesians, as those already enlightened, so see clearly and to grasp by faith things which they already knew, but which they either did not feel the power and reality of, or whose implications for their lives had not fully dawned upon them.²⁸

This lies at the heart of the illuminating ministry of the Spirit in believers. Things which they already know intellectually or which they can be instructed in, or which they can read from the Old Testament or letter become real and the personal spiritual relevance is brought home to mind and heart by the Spirit.²⁹

1 Corinthians 2

This is probably the most important passage for our discussion. The whole chapter is relevant, and verses 12-14 particularly so:

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

Ridderbos gives a useful example of what is meant by *understanding*: it is possible to understand the facts of Christ's death without appreciating the significance.³⁰ Fee comments that "It is not some obscure secret that has been revealed by the Spirit, but the content of the gospel, God's mystery."³¹ The reason that the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit is not necessarily because they are too hard to understand, but because they seem like foolishness. "...the idea that a man executed as a common criminal, suffering a degrading, humiliating death, could have anything to do with divine wisdom and

²⁸ Brown, 117.

²⁹ Brown, 117.

³⁰ Herman N. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. J. R. De Witt (London: SPCK, 1977), 244-7.

³¹ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 80.

salvation was utter folly.”³² However, the problem is not purely volitional. The effect of sin on the mind is such that there is actually a comprehension problem as well.³³

One cannot escape the broad scope of Paul’s language. “Because they have not received the Spirit, in the sense of v. 12, their view of everything is from the bottom up, twisted and distorted.”³⁴ Further implications of these verses for hermeneutics will be discussed later.

4. Evaluation of the Five Views

4.1 Unspecified General “Blessing”

This is really not a view, but a “non-view.” No writer presents reasoned arguments for the position, it is more of a short “disclaimer” made by an author before launching into a technical discussion of hermeneutics.³⁵ Owen has some strong words to say:

That in particular which lieth before us is, to remove that pretence of some, that we need no other assistance of the Spirit of God for the right understanding of the Scripture but only his blessing in general on our own endeavours.³⁶

4.2 “Illumination”

Many writers want to affirm the role of the Holy Spirit but limit him to the non-technical end of the process. When there is a discussion of what this actually means it is often in poorly defined terms such as *illumination*.³⁷ Ferguson points out this confusion: “Theologians have long struggled with how to distinguish between revelation and illumination, and have often majored on the

³² George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 385.

³³ Wallace, 2f.

³⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 116.

³⁵ e.g. Mickelsen, 378; Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, revised edition (Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1956), 13; Walter L. Liefeld, *New Testament Exposition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 18; Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 1883 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, rep. 1969), 157-8; Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 1950 (London: Evangelical Press, rep. 1973), 65.

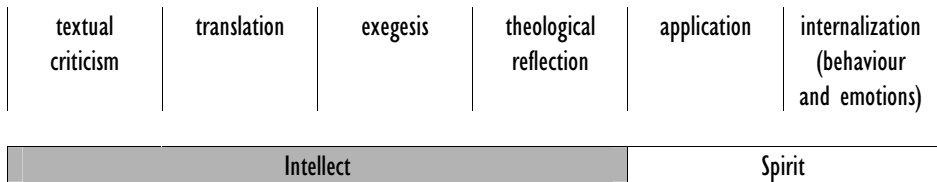
³⁶ Owen, 162.

³⁷ Ramm, 18.

exposition of the former category.³⁸ He offers the following clarification which is worth quoting in full.

Christian theology had generally differentiated between revelation and illumination. The conceptual distinction is a biblical one (Ps. 119:18; 2 Tim 2:7), although the same terminology ('revelation') may be used of both. Revelation is given in a special sense to Paul and the Apostles (Eph. 3:5); yet he prays that the Ephesians will have a Spirit of revelation to know God better (Eph. 1:17; cf. Mt. 16:17). The common terminology denotes not a single concept but either of two related ideas which have certain analogous characteristics. Revelation is used by Paul to refer to both the giving of the truth and the illumination of its meaning. But these are clearly distinct phenomena. A categorical distinction exists between the lasting authority which attaches to apostolic revelation and the subjective 'revelation' or illumination which comes to all the people of God through the Spirit. Systematic theologians have wisely marked this by a semantic distinction between 'revelation' and 'illumination', even though it remains perfectly legitimate for us to pray for the 'Spirit of... revelation, so that you may know him better' (Eph. 1:17).³⁹

This position can be represented with the following chart which moves from the more technical on the left through to the more experiential on the right.



Kaiser would limit the work of the Spirit to that of application, i.e. "using what is known":

But the Holy Spirit is also called the *Spirit of Wisdom*. Knowledge must be accompanied by wisdom, the art of properly using what is known. Involved

³⁸ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 231.

³⁹ Ferguson, 230.

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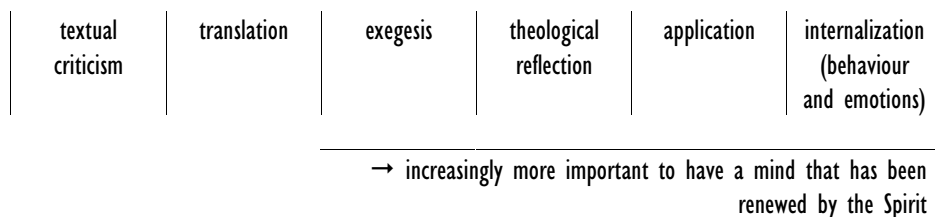
in this art is the ability to apply the text and to place any given truth in its proper perspective without giving undue prominence to it.⁴⁰

This idea is very common, although not often explicitly stated, and leads to an effective dichotomy with two defined spheres of operation. Pink expresses this idea with the phrase “known profitably and practically”:

There never was a more foolish notion or pernicious idea entertained than that the holy mysteries of the Gospel so lie within the province of human reason that they may be known profitably and practically without the effectual aid of the blessed Spirit of Truth.⁴¹

4.3 A New Spiritual Faculty

Christians do not have spiritually neutral intellects, but the Spirit pervades every part of their thinking. All Christians have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them⁴² and renewing their minds.⁴³ Djaballah convincingly argues that the fall has affected every aspect of human thinking, but the effect is greater in those areas in which involve ethical demands.⁴⁴ “The evidence suggests that there is a specifically Christian way of reading and understanding the Bible.”⁴⁵ If this is the case we should re-draw the chart:



the un-renewed mind becomes increasingly less effective →

⁴⁰ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 238.

⁴¹ Arthur W. Pink, *Interpretation of the Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 14.

⁴² Dunn has shown convincingly that all Christians have been baptized in the Spirit: James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), 229.

⁴³ Romans 12:2; 1 Corinthians 2.

⁴⁴ Amar Djaballah, *The Ethical Dimensions of Knowledge*, Toronto Baptist Seminary Winter Lecture series, Feb. 7, 1995 (Toronto: The Toronto Baptist Seminary & Bible College, 1995).

⁴⁵ Brown, 170.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the Chomskian revolution radically transformed the science of linguistics. Previous to that it was believed that human languages are arbitrary and can vary in every respect. Chomsky and others have demonstrated by empirical evidence that the structures of human language are “hard-wired” into the brain, almost like a specialized organ, and that human languages are actually relatively minor variations within a common framework.⁴⁶ The philosophical implications of this discovery are enormous,⁴⁷ particularly in the area of hermeneutics. True communication between two people is possible because of the similar linguistic faculty built in to each of them.

Paul seems to be saying in 1 Corinthians 2, that when a person is saved he or she acquires a new faculty, like a new organ of the body, capable of understanding and processing a new kind of information. This concept of a *new spiritual faculty* provides a starting point which is a key to breaking out of the hermeneutical circle. Garlington expresses it well:

By way of qualification, it must be added that dialogue is only one level on which the problem of the hermeneutical circle can be tackled. However, what is frequently overlooked is that the Holy Spirit imparts at conversion the most important factor of all in our pre-understanding—the knowledge of Christ. Thus, when we go to the Scriptures as the Word of God to find Christ, we find him. If we discover there the Son of God, it is because the Spirit has placed within us the predisposition to find him. Although we have to be careful about how we apply this, there is a legitimate sense in which the Holy Spirit initiates the hermeneutical circle for the Christian by providing Christ as our starting point.⁴⁸

If we change the metaphor to “two horizons” then our goal is to bring together author and reader so that the horizons may be fused. The fact that the same Spirit dwells in each significantly reduces the distance. As Brown puts it:

⁴⁶ For a good introduction to current theory, see Vivian J. Cook, *Chomsky's Universal Grammar* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2nd ed. 1996). It is interesting that the Biblical account of the origin of languages at the tower of Babel would explain very neatly the origin of this mechanism.

⁴⁷ Chomsky gives an excellent introduction to the philosophical implications of his findings in Noam Chomsky, *Linguistics and Philosophy*, Lecture at University of New Hampshire, Durham, April 12, 1995 (Augusta: Radio Free Maine, 1995).

⁴⁸ Don B. Garlington, *Hermeneutics*, Companion book for hermeneutics course (Toronto: The Toronto Baptist Seminary & Bible College, 2001), 22-23.

A hermeneutic which emphasizes the ministry of the Holy Spirit in understanding appears to present certain ways in which the sense of distantiation between the author and readers is at least lessened, and which tend to bring the horizons together.⁴⁹

What then does this look like in practice? Waltke gives an example of where attention to this principle might make a difference in the interpretation of a passage:

The rule that one must first establish what the revelation meant to the original audience is problematic, because to unbelievers it meant one thing and to believers it meant another. All too often evangelicals have interpreted the text wherein God has hidden himself according to its meaning to unenlightened minds. One must look to the Spirit's interpretation of God's thoughts (1 Cor 2:9-16).⁵⁰

So then, to limit the work of the Spirit to what may be broadly called *application* does not seem to do justice to the hardness of heart and blindness attributed to the natural man by Jesus and Paul. It is well said that "...the enlightening grace of the Spirit will often open mysteries to the meek and dependent which remain closed to the most learned and scholarly."⁵¹

4.4 Spiritual Gifting in Understanding the Scriptures

How then does the new spiritual faculty of the Christian relate to the Holy Spirit as a person? If we have a mind that has been renewed, can we function independently from the Spirit? The testimony of the Scriptures is clear on this point—just as the branch cannot function independently of the vine, so the believer, even with a renewed mind, cannot function outside of total dependence on Christ through the Spirit.⁵² The interpreter should not have the attitude, "I am spiritual therefore I can understand this," but rather must be in constant prayer and dependence on the *person* of the Spirit for each step of the exegetical process.

⁴⁹ Brown, 180.

⁵⁰ Waltke, 266.

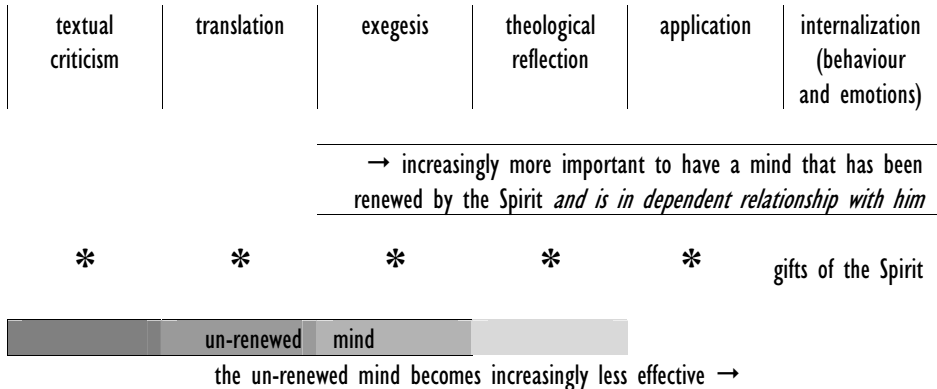
⁵¹ Pink, 23.

⁵² 1 Cor 2:9 speaks of the Spirit actually *teaching* us. See also John 15:1, 5, 7; 1 Cor 2:4-5; Rom 8:8-11; 2 Tim 1:14

However, the N.T. is clear that the Spirit does not give the same gifts to each person, but there is a diversity of giftings in the body.⁵³ Every Christian has a new spiritual faculty, capable of grasping and internalizing spiritual truths, but not everyone is a gifted exegete. This fourth position *includes the third view* (above), but adds to it another kind of operation of the Spirit, that of special gifts of skill and wisdom that may be active in *any part* of the exegetical process, from textual criticism through to application. For example, one Christian might have a special gift in the biblical languages. Packer sees the Spirit working in every stage of the process:

Scripture's ultimate author, as the great hermeneut who by leading and enlightening us in the work of exegesis, synthesis, and application, actually interprets that Word in our minds and to our hearts.⁵⁴

The chart can be expanded to include this concept:



Where do the Scriptures speak of these gifts? Calvin identified them with the gift of prophecy:

I am certain, in my own mind, that he means by prophets, not those endowed with the gift of foretelling, but those who were blessed with the unique gift of dealing with Scripture, not only by interpreting it, but also by the wisdom they showed in making it meet the needs of the hour. My reason for thinking so is that Paul prefers prophecy to all the other gifts, because it is a greater source of edification, a statement that can hardly be

⁵³ Rom 12; 1 Cor 12.

⁵⁴ Packer, 1983, 347-8.

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made to apply to the prediction of future events. Again, when he defines the work of the prophet, or at least deals with the main things which he ought to be doing, he says that he devotes himself to consolation, encouragement and teaching.⁵⁵

While not going quite as far as Calvin, Packer would like to make some kind of connection between prophecy and interpretation of Scripture. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 12-14, he writes, “Prophecy seems to include insights both into Old Testament scripture and into present needs. Moreover prophets and spiritual people will recognize that Paul writes the commandments of God.”⁵⁶

Probably a better suggestion is that the gifts of utterance of knowledge and wisdom (1 Corinthians 12:8) relate to understanding and application of truth. There is not space here to do a full study of *gnosis*, but in 13:2 this gift is linked with the understanding of mysteries, i.e. knowledge of objective truth.⁵⁷ This meaning is in harmony with the rest of Paul’s usage of the word. Keener comes to the same conclusion in his study of the gifts, and writes that it “undoubtedly means imparting knowledge about God; in other words, the gift of teaching...”⁵⁸ Owen uses similar language:

There is an especial work of the Spirit of God on the minds of men, communicating spiritual wisdom, light, and understanding unto them, necessary unto their discerning and apprehending aright the mind of God in his word, and the understanding of the mysteries of heavenly truth contained therein.⁵⁹

There is, therefore, a *gift of spiritual wisdom* and understanding necessary hereunto, that we may discern the “wonderful things” that are in the word of God.⁶⁰

If the ability to understand Scripture is, in part, a spiritual gift,⁶¹ how does it relate to natural ability? Turner argues that many of the gifts have a natural as

⁵⁵ John Calvin, *First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, Calvin’s Commentaries; 1546; trans. John W. Frazer (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1960), 271.

⁵⁶ Brown, 102.

⁵⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 889.

⁵⁸ Craig S. Keener, *Gift & Giver: The Holy Spirit for Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 116.

⁵⁹ Owen, 124-5.

⁶⁰ Owen, 141.

⁶¹ Poythress would classify this as a “discursive gift,” analogous to Apostolic preaching: Verne S. Poythress, “Modern spiritual gifts as analogous to apostolic gifts: affirming extraordinary

well as a spiritual component.⁶² Also, skills that are not particularly “spiritual” can be gifts of the Spirit, as, for example, Bezalel was given “the spiritual gift of fine workmanship” for the carving of the tabernacle furniture.⁶³ How much more then can God give gifts such as expertise in Hebrew or Greek, ability to translate, understanding of genres and recognition of literary forms.

This gift might well take the form of an enhancement of a natural ability, but there can also be a blessing on the actual *performance* as well as on general ability. The account of Joseph does not specifically mention the Spirit, but we read that “the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper.”⁶⁴ As well as having the supernatural gift of interpreting dreams, Joseph was blessed in the practical details of running a household and a prison. How much more will the Christian be blessed in even the most mechanical aspects of the process of exegesis if there is a continual dependence on the Holy Spirit!

It is extremely important that we never accept an interpretation whose sole claim to validity is that “it was given to me by the Spirit.” The Spirit may plant in our minds the solution to an exegetical problem, but the fact that an idea comes to us spontaneously gives it no extra authority as being “from the Spirit.” It must be subjected to the same testing of logic and hermeneutical principles as any other idea before it is accepted. Most ideas in the scientific world have come as sudden flashes of “inspiration” followed by years of painstaking empirical verification. No one would listen to a scientist who said, “this must be true because it came to me in a flash.” The same caution should exist among Christians.

In terms of how this might work out in practice, the Spirit may put an idea in our minds or bring to mind a connection between two passages of Scripture which solves an exegetical problem.⁶⁵ Another example might be that of spotting literary structures. Brown discusses the importance of understanding how each part of a text functions within the whole, and concludes:

works of the Spirit within cessationist theology,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (March 1996), 71-101.

⁶² Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts: Then and Now*, 1996 (Paternoster Press: Carlisle, Cumbria, rev. 1999), 271.

⁶³ Exodus 35:30.

⁶⁴ Gen 39:23, NKJV.

⁶⁵ The present writer was struggling with how to interpret Ps. 44. I turned to God in prayer and immediately the connection of v.22 with Rom. 8:36 sprang to mind, which proved to be very important in understanding the Psalm.

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Sensitivity to the functions of a writing is something which would certainly come within the sphere of the ministry of the Holy Spirit as this is described in the New Testament.⁶⁶

Knollys tells of how the message of grace in Romans 8:1 came to his mind in a most unusual way, but he immediately studied the passage to verify that this was indeed the correct interpretation. Having done so, he preached it and many souls were saved.⁶⁷ Wallace points out that “*Experiential* knowledge has a boomerang effect back on intellectual comprehension.” He give the example, “...if someone has never been in love, he/she has a more difficult time in understanding fully all that romance involves.”⁶⁸ He makes the point that:

Sympathy with the biblical author opens up understanding. The most sympathetic exegete is the believer. An unsympathetic interpreter often misunderstands because of the lack of desire to understand.⁶⁹

A “gifting” for understanding Scripture will not then be purely intellectual, but will involve a living relationship in which the Spirit leads the exegete through experiences that open up the understanding. Wallace describes a poignant example of how God took him through a humiliating experience which improved his understanding and even his translation of 1 Peter 5:7.⁷⁰

4.5 The Spirit replaces the need for disciplined study.

The fifth view, that the Holy Spirit replaces the need for disciplined study, will not be considered in detail, since it was not possible to find a single writer who seriously advocates it. This is probably because advocates of this view are unlikely to write books or theological papers on hermeneutics! There is universal agreement, even among writers who emphasize the Spirit, that God intends us to use our minds.⁷¹

5. Conclusions

At this point it would be useful to summarize Zuck’s propositions:

⁶⁶ Brown, 174.

⁶⁷ James Culross, *Hanserd Knollys* (London: Alexander & Shephard, 1895), 20f.

⁶⁸ Wallace, 4 [italics his].

⁶⁹ Wallace, 4 [italics his].

⁷⁰ Daniel B. Wallace, *1 Peter 5:7—A Brief Comment and a Special Request*, Internet publication (Dallas: Biblical Studies Press [www.bible.org], 1997).

⁷¹ e.g. Owen, 125; Pink, 14.

The Holy Spirit's role in interpreting Scripture does not mean:

- that one's interpretations are infallible.
- that he gives some interpreters access to a "hidden" meaning divergent from the normal, literal meaning of the passage.
- that interpreters can ignore common sense and logic.
- that all parts of the Bible are equally clear in meaning.
- that believers have a comprehensive and completely accurate understanding of the entire Scriptures.

On the positive side, the Holy Spirit's role in interpreting Scripture *does* mean:

- that one does not have to be a Bible scholar to understand the Bible.⁷²
- spiritual devotion is required on the part of the interpreter.

To this should be added that every reader of the Bible should recognize that the Spirit is a *person* with whom we have a *relationship*, and that the relationship should be characterized by moment-by-moment dependence. Finally it should be recognized that although through the Spirit every Christian can read the Scriptures, understand them and be blessed, the Spirit has given a variety of enhanced *gifts* of teaching, wisdom and understanding to many members of the body of Christ. These gifts need to be recognized by local church leadership and stirred up through a process of training, exercise, and spiritual maturation.

Evangelicals are quick to defend the "sufficiency of the Scriptures," but without the Spirit, the Scriptures are *not* sufficient. Packer says, "*...just as the Word is insufficient without the Spirit, so the Spirit is insufficient without the Word.*"⁷³ There needs to be a change in the way that hermeneutics is taught! Waltke pleads that:

...evangelical teachers of every persuasion, including this writer, need to repent for their brash attempts to find God, who veils himself in Scripture from the proud, through merely scientific exegesis which they control.⁷⁴

J. I. Packer expresses the same sentiment, but in a more positive manner:

⁷² "And yet believers ought not neglect the interpretive helps that can be afforded by biblical scholars." Zuck, 126.

⁷³ James I. Packer, "The Holy Spirit and His Work," in *Applying the Scriptures*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 51-76, 73, [italics his].

⁷⁴ Waltke, 266.

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Evangelicals have in fact more to say than anyone else about the Spirit's work of enabling us to see, grasp, love, and live by God's revealed truth, just because they have more to say than anyone else about the spiritually blinding effect of sin on our minds. It is to be hoped that future evangelical treatments of biblical interpretation will not fall short here.⁷⁵

This truth should be a stimulus to biblical scholars and teachers to make use of the vast resources of wisdom available to us in the Holy Spirit, and an encouragement to every Christian that word and Spirit do not oppose one another, but work together in our lives to produce maturity, fruitfulness and an intimate relationship with the Author.

⁷⁵ Packer, 1983, 347-8.