

The Holy Spirit and Hermeneutics Study

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Preface

This brief essay is a preliminary attempt at articulating the role of the Holy Spirit in relation to the interpretation of Scripture. Criticisms and interactions are invited. (It must be kept in mind, however, that I am addressing evangelicals. Those with a different theological grid will, I am sure, find so much to criticize in this essay that they won't know where to begin!)

Introduction

The relation of the Holy Spirit to hermeneutics is a hot issue among evangelicals today. On a popular level, there has always been a large misunderstanding about the Spirit's role. Many Christians believe that if they simply pray, the Holy Spirit will *give* them the proper interpretation. Others are not so concerned about the interpretation of the text; rather, they are happy to see an idiosyncratic meaning of the text ("What this verse means *to me*. . ."). All of this is the doctrine of the priesthood of the believers run amok. Although each of us is responsible before God for understanding and applying the message of the Bible, this in no way means that a pooling of ignorance or a merely pietistic approach to Scripture meets the divine mandate.

Surprisingly, there is also an increasingly large gap between conservative scholars. James De Young, for example, recently said that "when it comes to scholarly methods of interpreting the Bible, the Holy Spirit may as well be dead."¹ Why is there such a polarity? At least four reasons: (1) Because of the shift toward postmodernism (and thus, from rationalism and logic to experience as the norm for interpretation). (2) Because of the unwillingness to do hard study, as David F. Wells has expressed it. (3) Because evangelical thought has indeed imbibed too much in rationalism. (4) Because evangelicalism is moving toward postconservatism in which tolerance rather than conviction is the proper stance on many issues.

Some Key Issues

1. Any evangelical view of the Holy Spirit's role in interpretation must be based on the text. The fundamental argument over this issue must wrestle with the major passages.
2. Many non-evangelical (even, non-Christian) commentaries are among the best available in terms of lucidity, insight, and understanding of the biblical text. Conversely, many evangelical commentaries are among the worst available. Any view of the relation of the Holy Spirit to hermeneutics must wrestle honestly with this situation. The point for our purposes is this: understanding can take place even among non-believers.
3. It is important to articulate one's position in such a way that we recognize the unique revelatory status of Scripture. That is, we must not say that the Spirit *adds* more revelation to the written Word. This denies the sufficiency of Scripture. Further, it renders such an interpretation non-falsifiable because then the Spirit's added revelation is accessible to me only through *you*. Finally, it comes perilously close to Barth's neoorthodox position that the Bible *becomes* the Word of God in one's experience. One can easily see how, in such a scenario, the Bible can be employed like the proverbial wax nose to mean anything the molder wants it to mean.

Some Key Passages

A key passage for a theological issue is known as a *crux interpretum*. Such a text is a hinge on which one's views depend. Chief among the hermeneutical *crucis* are two passages: 1 Cor 2:12-14 and 1 John 2:20, 27. I will not take time to wrestle with these in a detailed exegesis. But I will highlight the major problems and discuss them briefly.

1 Cor 2:12-14

This text reads as follows:

(12) hJmei'" deV ouj toV pneu'ma tou' kovsmou ejlavbomen ajllaV toV pneu'ma toV ejk tou' qeou', i{na ejjdw'men taV uJpoV tou' qeou' carisqevnta hJmi'n: (13) a} kaiV lalou'men oujk ejn didaktoi'" ajnqrwpivnh" sofiva" lovgoi" ajll ejn didaktoi'" pneuvmato", pneumatikoi'" pneumatikaV sugkrivnonte". (14) yucikoV" deV a[nqrwpo" ouj devcetai taV tou' pneuvmato" tou' qeou', mwriwa gaVr aujtw'/ ejstin, kaiV ouj duvnatai gnw'nai, o{ti pneumatikw'" ajnakrivnetai:

Translations vary considerably, especially in v 13. But for purposes of brevity, the following may be regarded as representative:

RSV: (12) Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. (13) And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit. (14) The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

NIV: (12) We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. (13) This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. (14) The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

ASV: (12) But we received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is from God; that we might know the things that were freely given to us of God. (13) Which things also we speak, not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Spirit teacheth; combining spiritual things with spiritual words. (14) Now the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually judged.

The key issues here are: (1) the meaning of the last clause of v 13 (*viz.*, the referent of the two adjectives and the lexical force in this context of the participle); (2) in v 14: (a) in what sense the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit, and (b) whether the two clauses are parallel or appositional.

Unpacking these issues a bit, here are some tentative conclusions:

(1) verse 13 means either that Paul and his associates interpret spiritual things to spiritual people or *something else* (there are a variety of options here). Nevertheless, one key point to be made is this: one must not use such an oblique text as the fundamental proof-text of any view. Seek clearer passages to prove your point. (In the least, we can say that the NIV translation is probably incorrect based on the lexical field suggested in BAGD.)

(2) In verse 14: (a) the natural person does not *welcome* spiritual truths. The verb *devcomai* fundamentally has this notion. It is more explicitly tied to the volition than is *lambavnw*. Thus, the natural person has a volitional problem when it comes to the gospel.

(b) If the two clauses are appositional, then the natural person does not welcome spiritual truths and because of this he cannot fully grasp them. If the two clauses are parallel, then Paul is presenting two distinguishable but separate truths here: the natural person has a problem with volition *and* the natural person has a problem with comprehension. The simple *kaiv* that joins the two clauses would normally be unconvincing as an indicator of apposition (although an exegetical *kaiv* is, of course, possible): *prima facie*, the two clauses of v 14 look to be parallel points. However, on behalf of apposition is the fact that Semitic parallels (such as synonymous or synthetic parallels) were often employed even in the New Testament; if Paul is doing so here, he may well have the notion of apposition in mind. The problem with this view is that *ginwvskw* is a rather vanilla term for “know” (in spite of the protestations of some). In other words, if this clause is in some sense appositional to the preceding, we might have expected another word, such as *oida*. The presence of *ginwvskw* seems to indicate that two separate notions are involved: the natural person does not properly understand revelation because of sin’s effects on his *will* and on his *mind*. This latter category involves the *noetic* effects of sin. Such a theological category is consistent with Paul and the NT. Sin affects our wills, emotions, and our minds.

In sum, 1 Cor 2:12-14 is saying that the non-Christian will not accept spiritual truths *and* cannot understand them. These are two distinct though related concepts. Non-Christians do indeed plainly understand the gospel message at times; further, unbelieving exegetes do often offer valuable insights into the text. That is not disputed here. Paul’s point seems to be that the depths of God’s ways and God’s wisdom cannot even be touched by non-believers. There is a level to which they cannot attain.

1 John 2:20, 27

This text reads as follows:

(20) *kaiV uJmei''' cri'sma e[cete ajpoV tou' aJgivou, kaiV oi[date pavnte". . . (27) kaiV uJmei''' toV cri'sma o} ejlavbete ajp ajtout' mevnei ejn uJmi'n, kaiV ouj creivan e[cete i{na ti" didavskh/uJma''' : ajll wJ" toV ajtout' cri'sma didavskei uJma''' periV pavntwn, kaiV ajlhqev" ejstin kaiV oujk e[stin yeu'do", kaiV kaqwV" ejdivdaxen uJma''' , mevnete ejn ajtw'/.*

The key elements in these verses are: (1) v 20: “you all know it” (i.e., you all know that you have an anointing from the Holy One); (2) v 27: (a) “you have no need that anyone should teach you” and (b) “his anointing teaches you concerning all things.”

A few comments are in order: (1) This passage illustrates three of the most important rules of exegesis: CONTEXT, CONTEXT, CONTEXT. Only if we ignore the context can we construe a meaning that universalizes this text. (2) Verse 20 indicates that what the believers know by personal experience (*oida*) is their anointing. I take it that this is the inner witness of the Spirit: they recognize that the Spirit ministers to them in an immediate, non-discursive role, convincing them of their relationship to God (cf. Rom 8:16). (3) If the author is saying that no one should teach them anything at all, why then does he teach them in this letter? Surely, the immediate context suggests something different. (4) The anointing that teaches them about all things also needs to be contextualized. The author is contrasting these believers with heretics who have removed themselves from the believing community (cf. 2:19). The author stresses *what* these believers know: that Christ has come in the flesh, that he will come again, and that they are the children of God. He also stresses *how* these believers discern the *essential* truths of the faith: they have the Spirit of God. He is convinced that they will stay true to the faith—that they will abide (*mevnw*)—because “greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world” (4:4).

Thus, on the one hand, 1 John 2:20, 27 does not indicate that the Holy Spirit circumvents the interpretive process. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit does work on our hearts, convincing us of the essential truths of the faith. One who does not have the Spirit of God cannot believe such truths and hence cannot know them experientially.

The Relation of the Holy Spirit to Interpretation

My preliminary conclusions are offered here. I believe that there are at least seven or eight ways in which the Holy Spirit relates to interpretation. Many of these are overlapping; some folks might want to organize them differently.

1. The Spirit’s work is primarily in the realm of *conviction* rather than cognition. At the same time, even this area needs some nuancing. One’s convictions do impact one’s perceptions. Thus, it seems that the Holy Spirit may be said to aid our interpretation, even if his role were limited to that of conviction. How?

2. *Experiential* knowledge has a boomerang effect back on intellectual comprehension. In several areas, to the extent that an interpreter has experienced what is being proposed, he/she can comprehend it. For example, if someone has never been in love, he/she has a more difficult time understanding fully all that romance involves.

3. To the extent that one is disobedient to Scripture, yet respects its authority (at least with his lips), he will twist the text. Cf. 2 Pet 3:15-16. Conversely, to the extent that one is *obedient* to Scripture, he/she will be in a better position to understand it and deal with it honestly.

4. *Sympathy* to 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. This can easily be illustrated in the political arena. Those who are vigorous about the rightness of a particular party tend to vilify all that is in the other party. Even among Christians there is often a “canon within a canon.” That is, some books/authors are respected more highly than others. To the extent that we do not cultivate sympathy for all the authors of Scripture we close ourselves to the full impact of their message.

At the same time, if one is sympathetic to the divine author while ignoring the human author, several tensions in Scripture will be overlooked. Thus, ironically, when inerrancy is paraded along docetic bibliological lines (as it often is today), one’s interpretation is often more a defense of a supposed harmony than an honest investigation into an author’s meaning. Progressive revelation gets flattened out; human authors become mere stenographers. Tensions go unobserved, only to be raised as flat-out contradictions by those who do not have much sympathy for Scripture, leaving evangelicals in a position of having to do damage control. Recognizing the tensions in Scripture as well as the progress of revelation—and that the Bible is *both* a divine book and a very human book—avoids such problems.

5. Those who embrace in principle a belief in the *supernatural* are in a better position to interpret both miracles and prophecy. These elements of Scripture simply cannot be treated adequately by non-believers. This goes beyond mere sympathy to world-view. If one steadfastly disbelieves that prophecy can take place, then he will have to explain the prophetic portions of Scripture as other than real predictions. They will either be discredited as unfulfilled or else treated as *vaticinium ex eventu* (or prophecy after the fact). Miracles also need to be rewritten so as to be demythologized. C. S. Lewis’ critique several decades ago still stands as a valid indictment against this treatment of Scripture: to treat Scripture—especially the NT—as full of fables presupposes a timeline that is demonstrably untrue. The gap from the time of the events to the telling of the tale is simply too short, finding no parallels in any purportedly historical literature. Lewis concludes that those who call the NT fable-filled have never really studied fables. Or as Vincent Taylor, the British NT scholar, noted, to regard the NT documents as full of myth presupposes that all the eyewitnesses must have vanished almost immediately after the events took place. In short, when it comes to miracles and prophecy, the believer is in a far better position to understand the message. This bears some similarities with Jesus’ indictment of the Sadducees for not embracing the resurrection: “You do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.”

6. The *inner witness of the Spirit* (cf. Rom 8:16; 1 John 2:20, 27, etc.) is an important factor in both conviction and perception of the central truths of Scripture. From my tentative study, I would say that the Spirit’s witness is an immediate, non-discursive, supra-rational testimony of the truth of the central tenets of the faith. The Spirit convinces us of their truth in an extra-exegetical way. What exactly does he convince us of? Some of these things are: (1) our filial relationship to God; (2) the bodily resurrection of Christ; (3) the humanity of Christ; (4) the bodily return of Christ; (5) the deity of Christ; (6) the nature of salvation as a free gift from God. The Spirit’s testimony may, indeed, be broader than this. But how broad? It is doubtful that the Spirit bears witness to the time it took for God to create the universe, or whether dispensationalism or covenant theology is the better system, or whether inerrancy is true. I doubt that he bears witness to what form of church government is to be preferred, the role of women in leadership, or how to define spiritual gifts. There are so many matters in Scripture that are left

for us to examine using the best of our rational and empirical resources! But this does not mean that we cannot come to some fairly firm conclusions about them. It does mean, however, that these are issues that are more peripheral than others regarding salvation. I do believe that these ‘negotiables’ are important areas of investigation. Proper conclusions about many of them (but not all) are necessary for the *health* of the Church, but are not essential for the *life* of the Church.

Three final comments on the inner witness of the Spirit: (1) That I have even offered a preliminary taxonomy of doctrine may be startling to some. The alternative is to view all doctrine as of equal importance. But this is problematic historically, exegetically, and spiritually. Such a ‘domino’ view of doctrine results either in unsupportable dogma coupled with smug arrogance, or a crashing of virtually all one’s doctrinal beliefs (because if one falls down, they all fall down). (2) That several areas are apparently not witnessed to by the Spirit does not mean that they are not important. Rather, it means both that the less central they are to salvation and to the health of the Church, the more freedom and tolerance we should allow to those who disagree with us. This requires a measure of humility in such matters—even on issues that are currently hot topics (such as spiritual gifts and the role of women in leadership). Part of the real challenge of grappling with these issues is to determine how much the health of the Church is impacted by our exegetical decisions. But the presentation of one’s findings must always be accompanied by a spirit of charity. Be careful not to elevate your own non-central beliefs to the first level of conviction that is reserved for those truths which the Spirit bears witness to. (3) The inner witness of the Spirit can be suppressed to a degree. One must keep a warm heart toward God (through prayer, worship, community, humility, obedience, etc.) and a nuanced vigilance over the preciousness of these central truths (through study of both the Scriptures and the history of the Church), in order to cultivate the apprehension of the Spirit’s inner witness.

7. *General illumination* is also an area in which the Spirit helps our interpretation. By *general illumination* I mean his work in helping us to understand *any* area of life and the world. This needs more exploration. In general, I believe that the Spirit helps us in clearing our minds as we wrestle with many things—from paying taxes, to finding car keys, to taking exams. Why would we exclude Scripture from this matrix? Certainly Scripture is not outside the purview of the Spirit’s general aid offered to believers. Admittedly, this area of investigation needs more work. My thoughts are merely preliminary.

8. *Corporate and historical illumination*: Via the whole body of Christ—both in its current manifestation and throughout history—believers have come to understand God’s will and God’s Word better. We dare not elevate either consensus opinion or tradition to the status of infallible authority however! But such areas ought not to be relegated to disdain either. After all, the Holy Spirit did not start with you when he began teaching the Church; he’s been in this business for a few centuries.

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I conclude this paper with three caveats:

1. Don’t view the limits of exegesis as the interpretation of a text. Ultimately, the goal of exegesis is not interpretation, but transformation.

2. Don't assume that because you pray, are spiritual, etc., that your interpretation is right. Laziness in the study is no excuse for a poor interpretation. Further, even if you are not lazy, an inaccessible interpretation must still be judged an improbable interpretation.

3. Don't isolate your study from your worship. Those in seminary especially should take very seriously the mandate for those who would be ministers of the Word: *Study!* Exposition that is not borne of hard study produces a warm fuzzy feeling that lacks substance. It is candy for the soul. At the same time, if your study is merely a cognitive exercise rather than a part of the worship you offer up to God, it will have a cold and heartless effect. Eating a rock may be a way to get your daily minerals, but who would want to take their minerals in such an indigestible form?

1 James B. De Young, "The Holy Spirit—The Divine Exegete: How Shall We Be Able to Hear Him?" (Evangelical Theological Society national meeting, Jackson, Miss [11-21-96]) 1.