

## Illumination Re-Examined

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The illumination of the Holy Spirit is a doctrine that Protestants have been confessing for a long time. With the church universal we confess, “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” Any church that recites the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed, whether that be the Greek Orthodox Church or the Roman Catholic Church, confesses their belief in the Holy Spirit, but as Protestant Christians we take that one step further. We not only confess that we believe in the Holy Spirit, we also confess that we believe in the illumination of the Holy Spirit.<sup>40</sup>

But why, as Protestants, do we go that step further? Why do we also believe in the illumination of the Holy Spirit? We do so not only because this doctrine is thoroughly Scriptural, but also because there are historically sound reasons for doing so. In facing the challenges of the Reformation the Council of Trent (1546) made a solemn declaration. It directed all would-be interpreters of the Bible to “sancta Mater Ecclesia, cuius est iudicare de vero sensu et interpretatione Scripturarum sanctarum.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the prerogative of interpreting the Bible belonged solely to “Holy Mother Church whose right it is to judge concerning the true sense and interpretation of Holy Scripture.” The Roman Catholic Church had taken it upon itself to be the only true interpreter of Scripture.

The Reformers took strong exception to that claim. Against an infallible church they set an infallible Bible, and against the authoritative interpretations of Popes and councils they set the illumination of the Holy

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, the Westminster Confession of Faith 1:6: “. . . we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word.” Almost a century earlier the Scottish Confession of Faith (1560) had embraced the same doctrine in the following terms: “For by nature we are so dead, blind, and perverse, that neither can we feel when we are pricked, see the light when it shines, nor assent to the will of God when it is revealed, unless the Spirit of the Lord Jesus quicken that which is dead, remove the darkness from our minds, and bow our stubborn hearts to the obedience of His blessed will.”

<sup>41</sup> The Council of Trent, Session IV.

Spirit. It is hard to overestimate how revolutionary this doctrine proved to be. It effectively took the Bible out the hands of the church hierarchy (out of the hands of Popes, cardinals and bishops) and placed it firmly into the hands of ordinary believers. That was the great legacy of the Reformation. It gave the Bible back to the people. The illumination of the Holy Spirit was not a blessing for a select few. It was not just for Bible commentators and lecturers at theological colleges or ministers of local congregations. The illumination of the Holy Spirit was intended for all. Everyone who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit can also pray for the illumination of the Spirit and can expect that prayer to be heard. The Reformers had done the church a great service and we still enjoy the benefits of their work today. Bible reading was no longer left to the experts. It was not just the job of the scholars. Reading the Bible and interpreting the Bible now became the task of every believer. Discerning what was said from the pulpit now became the task of every believer. The illumination of the Holy Spirit had been promised not just to some spiritual elite but to every true believer.<sup>42</sup> A great biblical doctrine had been rediscovered and the church would never be the same again.

Yet for all its importance this is a doctrine that raises its fair share of questions:

- How far does the illumination of the Spirit go? Does it cover only the main doctrines or does it penetrate every nook and cranny of Scripture?
- If the illumination of the Spirit is real, why do equally godly and competent scholars so often disagree?
- Can the illumination of the Holy Spirit make a preacher a better preacher and a congregation better listeners?

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<sup>42</sup> The classical formulation of this doctrine came from the pen of the Puritan divine, John Owen (1616-83): “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.” See William H. Goolde (ed.), *The Works of John Owen* (16 vols.; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967 [first published by Johnstone & Hunter, 1850-53]), 4:124-25.

- Should the prayer for the Spirit's illumination be a regular part of the liturgy?
- If as a preacher I have prayed for the illumination of the Spirit, why is my sermon so different to that of another preacher who was equally illumined by the Holy Spirit when he preached on the same text?
- If I have the Holy Spirit why do I have to spend so much time poring over a difficult passage the meaning of which even the best commentators cannot agree on?
- If the illumination of the Holy Spirit was meant to be the panacea for all our exegetical ills, then why as Evangelical Christians can't we, even after all these years, agree on such questions as baptism, the millennium or the exercise of spiritual gifts?
- Finally, if the illumination of the Holy Spirit is all that it is supposed to be, why doesn't it seem to have helped us all that much? Why are there so many divisions among us? Why are there still so many disagreements over the interpretation of Scripture? What does it all mean if it doesn't seem to work?

These are all important questions, to which the exposition of the key passages discussed below should provide some satisfying answers. But before we turn to these passages we first need to make some clear theological distinctions. The doctrine of the illumination of the Spirit needs to be carefully distinguished from two other closely related doctrines:

- (a) The illumination of the Holy Spirit is clearly not the same as the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Inspiration has to do with the writing of Scripture. Illumination has to do with the interpretation of Scripture. Only the Bible writers were inspired. Every Christian can be illumined. The inspiration of the Holy Spirit is his work as the Author of Scripture. The illumination of the Holy Spirit is his work as its Interpreter.

- (b) The illumination of the Spirit is also distinct from the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. This is the work of the Spirit in our hearts convincing us that the Word of God is true. As John Calvin said in his *Institutes*, “For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.”<sup>43</sup> Paul was speaking of the same work of the Spirit when he wrote to the Thessalonians, “. . . when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe” (1 Thess 2:13).

So the illumination of the Spirit should be carefully distinguished from both inspiration on the one hand and the internal testimony on the other. Even so, illumination is very closely tied to these other works of the Spirit. The internal testimony of the Spirit is really the presupposition of the illumination of the Spirit. “The Spirit will not illumine the heart in the study of a document that is not believed.”<sup>44</sup> Those who do not believe that the Spirit inspired the Bible writers can hardly expect their own minds to be illumined by that same Spirit.

But how does this work? How does the Spirit who inspired the Bible now also illumine the message of the Bible? When it comes to inspiration, the Bible as the written Word of God is like Jesus the incarnate Word of God. As the incarnate Word, Jesus is fully God and fully man. As the written Word, the Bible is 100% human and 100% divine. Each Bible book has two authors – the Holy Spirit and the human writer. The Holy Spirit inspired the human writer in such a way as to make full use of that writer’s skills, talents and abilities. The human writers were fully involved in the production of

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<sup>43</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:79; cf. Belgic Confession, Article 5 (on the authority of the Scriptures): “And we believe without a doubt all things contained in them – not so much because the church receives and approves them as such but above all because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they prove themselves to be from God.”

<sup>44</sup> Wilber T. Dayton, “A Response to ‘The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Hermeneutic Process,’” in Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (eds.), *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible: Papers from ICBI Summit II*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 482.

Scripture. They thought, they wrote, they researched, and they did it all in such a way that they produced the authoritative, Spirit-inspired Word of God. This process is known as “organic inspiration.” The human authors and the divine Author were both fully involved. The result was that every book, every chapter, every sentence and every word were both fully divine and fully human.

What is true for inspiration is also true of illumination. Organic inspiration finds its complement in what might rightly be called “organic illumination.” The two are parallel. Just as the Holy Spirit did not “zap” the Bible writers, he does not “zap” the interpreters of what they wrote. As Fred Klooster has pointed out:

Just as the biblical writer used his own talent and investigation, so the biblical interpreter must read and study and struggle to understand the biblical text. The more self-consciously active the interpreter is in that process, the more likely is the Spirit’s illumination. . . . To understand Scripture every believer must read and interpret intelligently. The Holy Spirit does not produce revelational insight that ‘automatically’ provides the meaning of any passage.<sup>45</sup>

So the illumination of the Holy Spirit should be distinguished from two closely related doctrines. It is not the same as inspiration. Unlike the Bible writers we cannot claim infallibility for our interpretations (much as we might like to do that at times!). The illumination of the Spirit is also distinct from the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. It is through the Spirit’s testimony that the Scriptures become self-authenticating. They commend themselves to us as the Word of God. This is different from illumination whereby they are interpreted as the Word of God. So again illumination is not

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<sup>45</sup> Fred H. Klooster, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Hermeneutic Process: The Relationship of the Holy Spirit’s Illumination to Biblical Interpretation,” in Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (eds.), *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible: Papers from ICBI Summit II* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 460; cf. Jeffrey Crofts, *Illuminated Preaching: The Holy Spirit’s Vital Role in Unveiling His Word, the Bible* (Leominster, UK: Day One, 2010), 97: “A clear understanding of illumination will, like a fresh breeze, offer a renewed sense of confidence in disciplined exegetical study coupled with energetic, affectionate, expositional preaching.”

inspiration and it is not the same as the internal witness, but it builds on both. The illumined interpreter believes that the Bible is inspired and the Spirit has testified to him or her that it is the Word of God.

With these distinctions in mind we are now in a position to consider the key passages in Scripture that expound the doctrine of the Spirit's illumination.<sup>46</sup>

## 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

<sup>6</sup> *We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.*

<sup>7</sup> *No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.*

<sup>8</sup> *None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*

<sup>9</sup> *However, as it is written:*

*"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"--*

<sup>10</sup> *but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.*

*The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.*

<sup>11</sup> *For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.*

<sup>12</sup> *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.*

<sup>13</sup> *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.*

<sup>14</sup> *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*

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<sup>46</sup> Other passages that have been appealed to in support of this doctrine include Psa 119:18; John 16:13-15; 2 Cor 4:1-6; Col 1:9. Arguably, however, the three passages selected for discussion provide the most detailed and developed framework for understanding the Bible's teaching on illumination.

*understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.*

<sup>15</sup> *The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment:*

<sup>16</sup> *"For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?"*

*But we have the mind of Christ.*

It is perhaps ironic that one of the main passages underpinning the doctrine of illumination is one for which we would seem to need a lot of illumination if we are to understand it properly! To interpret this passage we therefore need to proceed cautiously.

## **I. Context**

One of the best keys to understanding these mysterious verses is of course the context. But in 1 Corinthians context is not always straight-forward. In the Corinthian correspondence Paul at times tends to digress – a little like an ageing lecturer teaching one of Paul's epistles at a theological college. But unlike an absent-minded professor's, Paul's digressions are not random or rambling. They are very intentional and serve a clear purpose. Perhaps the clearest example is his discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor 12-14. In chapter 12 he lays down his general theology of the spiritual gifts – the Spirit sovereignly dispenses the gifts as he wills and every believer has received a gift or gifts. Then comes the digression – Paul's famous chapter on love in 1 Cor 13. Then in chapter 14 Paul hones in on the gifts of prophecy and tongues, which is really the heart of the issue at Corinth. So his argument follows a pattern. It has a simple A-B-A structure. As Gordon Fee explains, "The first 'A' section puts the matter into a larger, more general theological perspective; the 'B' section is an explanatory digression of some kind, yet crucial to the argument as a whole; and the second 'A' section is the very specific response to the matter at hand."<sup>47</sup>

In the case of the spiritual gifts, chapter 12 puts the matter into a larger, more general theological perspective. It is the first "A" section. Then comes the

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<sup>47</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 16.

“B” section, the great poem about love in chapter 13. It is a digression to be sure, but crucial to the argument as a whole. Then in chapter 14, where Paul discusses prophecy and tongues, he is giving his “very specific response to the matter at hand.”

The same pattern can also be detected in Paul’s discussion of the question of meat offered to idols in chapters 8-10. The first “A” section is chapter 8 where he lays down some basic theological principles. Chapter 9 forms the “B” section where he considers the rights that he has as an apostle but that he was willing to forego for the sake of the Corinthians. Then in chapter 10 we have the second “A” section where he returns to the question of eating meat offered to idols. So once again, chapter 9 is not some rambling, absent-minded digression, but it is crucial to Paul’s point that the Corinthians need to give up some of their rights for the sake of their weaker brethren.

This discussion on the later chapters in 1 Corinthians sets the stage for the interpretation of the passage at hand. In the early chapters of 1 Corinthians we also have an A-B-A pattern. The NIV has some helpful headings here. In chapter 1 it gives the heading, “Divisions in the Church,” to cover vv. 10-17. Then in chapter 3 it has a very similar heading, “On Divisions in the Church,” to cover the entire chapter. Hence the pattern discovered in chapters 8-10 and 12-14 can be found here as well. Chapter 1:10-17 is the first “A” and chapter 3 is the second “A” to yet another A-B-A pattern. This time the problem Paul is dealing with is not spiritual gifts or eating meat offered to idols but divisions in the church. And what is the solution to the divisions within the Corinthian church? The answer lies in the “B” section, which stretches all the way from 1:18 to 2:16, from about the middle of chapter 1 to the end of chapter 2. In Paul’s scheme of things this is a unit, and it is best kept as such. Here chapter divisions and even NIV headings can safely be ignored. As far as Paul is concerned, this is all one unit and it provides his answer to the divisions besetting the church at Corinth.

So what is Paul’s solution to this problem? It is the message that he preached when he was with them. It is Paul’s gospel, the message of the cross. That is what he is talking about from beginning to end in this first “B” section in his letter (1:18-2:16). In this section he covers three main points:

- (a) The **content** of the message is stated in 1:18-31. It is the message of the cross, a message that is “a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (v. 23).
- (b) The **delivery** of the message is described in 2:1-5. Paul “did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom . . . but in weakness and fear, and with much trembling” (vv. 1-3). The message of the cross was a demonstration of God’s foolishness and God’s weakness not only as to its content, but also as to its delivery.
- (c) The **reception** of the message is Paul’s point in the remainder of chapter 2 (vv. 6-16). If Paul’s message was a stumbling-block to some and foolishness to others, and if it was delivered in weakness, fear and trembling, why did the Corinthians respond to it? If the message and its delivery were both so counter-cultural, if it was all so counter-intuitive, then why did it have the impact it did? How could it have been received by anybody? There is only one explanation. It was the work of the Holy Spirit.

## J. Exposition

When it comes to the interpretation of this passage it is helpful to follow the NIV which very neatly divides it into two paragraphs. The first paragraph is from v. 6 to v. 10b. This paragraph concludes with a quote from the Old Testament followed by a statement beginning with “but”:

vv. 9-10a: “However, as it is written, ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’ – **but** God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.”

Then the second paragraph begins with v. 10b and goes through to v. 16. This paragraph ends in a way that is parallel to the first. It too concludes with a quote from the Old Testament followed by a statement beginning with “but”:

v. 16: “For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?” **But** we have the mind of Christ.”

From everyday conversation we know that the most important part of a sentence always follows the word “but.” “I hear what you are saying, but . . .” “I am sorry that I offended you, but . . .” In our dealings with other people we have learned to attune our ears to the words that follow the “but”. They are usually extremely important. The same is true here. Note the words that follow the “but” in v. 10 and again in v. 16. Paul is making quite a claim here: “God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (v. 10) and “we have the mind of Christ” (v. 16). These two statements form the punch line to each of the two paragraphs. They are the conclusion to which Paul has been moving in each case. They are also synonymous. If God has revealed a matter to us by his Spirit, then surely it means that we have the mind of Christ on that matter. Paul and the Corinthians have the mind of Christ because God has revealed it to them by his Spirit. This can also be taken one step further. Believers today also have the mind of Christ because God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

To appreciate what Paul is driving at, we also need to go to the statements that come before the “but” in each case. Paul is drawing a contrast. He is contrasting himself, the Corinthians and us to the original recipients of the Old Testament verses that he quotes. Of them it could indeed be said that “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (v. 10). But that can no longer be said of us. Our eyes have seen. Our ears have heard. Our minds have conceived what God has prepared for those who love him. Likewise when Old Testament saints read the question posed by the prophet, “Who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?” (v. 16), there was only one possible answer: “Nobody has known the mind of the Lord.” But for Paul, the Corinthians and ourselves that answer is no longer valid. We do know the mind of the Lord because we have the mind of Christ.

In the light of the Old Testament context of these quotations, Paul’s point becomes clearer still. The second quote will be considered first, as it is the more straightforward of the two. “Who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?” is almost a verbatim quote from Isa

40:13.<sup>48</sup> The context is significant. Scholars have rightly referred to Isaiah 40-66 as “Isaiah’s New Exodus.” The Lord is going to redeem his people from captivity and bring them back to the Promised Land. It is also in these chapters that Isaiah mentions the gospel (Isa 40:9; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1). Nowhere in the Old Testament is the gospel presented more clearly than in Isaiah 40-66. This is where the four Servant Songs are found. This section also contains the clearest foretelling of Jesus’ death, in the fourth Servant Song in Isaiah 53. The Jews’ redemption from Babylon becomes the foreshadowing of our salvation through Christ. This is the gospel in the Old Testament par excellence. As Isaiah begins to present this breath-taking gospel he asks, “Who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?”

Yet that is not all that Isaiah says. Paul also quotes Isaiah in v. 9, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” This quote is much harder to trace. Paul seems to be paraphrasing some verses from Isaiah. To the careful reader Isa 64:4 may ring some bells: “Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.” Paul may be linking this verse to the last part of Isa 52:15, which leads right into Isa 53, “For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.” What immediately follows is a prediction of the sufferings of the Servant of the Lord.

Obviously there are still problems with Paul’s quote in v. 9. It is not easy.<sup>49</sup> But at least we can say this: Paul is bringing together passages from Isaiah’s New Exodus section, from Isaiah’s presentation of the

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<sup>48</sup> A literal translation of Isa 40:13 (LXX) would read: “Who has known the mind of the Lord, and who has become his counselor, to instruct him?” On two occasions Paul quotes from this verse in an abbreviated way: “Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” (Rom 11:34) and “Who may know the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?” (1 Cor 2:16). In each case Paul cites the LXX with only minor variations.

<sup>49</sup> D. Moody Smith, “The Pauline Literature,” in D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson (eds.), *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture. Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 266, claims that this quote is “a rare instance in which Paul’s citation is not clearly identifiable from our OT,” and that its source therefore remains unknown or obscure.

gospel if you will, and he is making an astounding claim. Isaiah's eyes didn't see, Isaiah's ears didn't hear, and his mind didn't conceive what God prepared for those who love him. For all his amazing prophecies he did not know the mind of the Lord (cf. 1 Pet 1:10-12). This can be said even of Isaiah who made some of the most precise predictions about Christ in the Old Testament. In the final analysis even he did not see or hear or understand.

What was true of Isaiah, however, is no longer true of New Testament believers. As Jesus said to his disciples, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it" (Luke 10:23-24; cf. Matt 13:16-17). What was true of Jesus' early disciples is by extension also true of believers today. As far as revelation is concerned, we live in an era of greater privilege than was enjoyed by any of the Old Testament saints.

Yet what is it, above all else, that we have so distinctly seen and heard and understood? It is the cross of Christ. What Isaiah clearly foretold but only dimly foresaw was the cross of Christ. Think again of Isaiah 53. How privileged we are! But not all have understood. Not all have grasped the significance of the cross of Christ. It is only those to whom God has revealed it by his Spirit. The cross of Christ is God's secret wisdom, a hidden wisdom that the rulers of this age have not understood (vv. 7-8). This wisdom is what Paul calls "the deep things of God" (v. 10). Again he is referring to the message of the cross. This message is understood by the mature (v. 6), by the spiritual man (v. 15) who has received the Spirit that is from God (v. 12). These words describe not some spiritual elite, but every true believer in Christ. Because of the illumination of the Holy Spirit even the humblest believer understands the meaning of the cross.

### **K. Application**

If what has been argued above is a correct interpretation of this difficult passage, then it has some brilliant application to preaching. What is it that preachers want most from their preaching? If they are serious about preaching the gospel, it is that their hearers will understand the message

of the cross and see the burning significance of the cross of Jesus for their own lives. This will not happen because of the preacher's own eloquence. Neither will it happen because of the depth of his scholarship or the incisiveness of his application, as necessary as those things may be. It will only happen when the Spirit applies the message to the hearts of the hearers in a most powerful way.

In v. 14 Paul says, "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." Paul is still talking about the message of the cross. It is simply foolishness to those who are perishing (1 Cor 1:18). John Calvin famously said that an unbeliever listening to the gospel is like an ass at a concert (" . . . atque assinus ineptus est ad symphoniam").<sup>50</sup> There is no understanding.<sup>51</sup> Or such a person is like a dog looking at the Mona Lisa. There is no appreciation. This can sometimes be seen in unbelievers who have come to church against their will. Out of a sense of social obligation they are attending a baptism, funeral or wedding. The preacher preaches his heart out, but their eyes glaze over and their minds are a million miles away. Sadly they illustrate the truth of what Paul is saying. The preacher's words "are foolishness to him" (v. 14).

Unfortunately this doesn't apply only to rank outsiders. It can also be true of people who attend church regularly. A minister once received the best criticism of his preaching from a member of his own congregation: "Why do you always have to relate everything to the cross? It doesn't matter whether you are preaching on sex or politics or evangelism, you always keep coming back to the cross." It is sad but true that there are people who may have been sitting under gospel preaching for years who have never really caught on. They have missed the significance of the cross. A pastor was once visiting a young man who had just left home and had

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<sup>50</sup> John Calvin, *Opera quae supersunt omnia* (Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke, 1863-98), 49.325. Cited by Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Some Epistemological Reflections on 1 Cor 2:6-16," *WTJ* 57 (1995): 114.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. John Owen, "it is most irrational to imagine that we can comprehend and understand *the mysteries of the gospel* without especial *spiritual illumination*; for the original light and abilities of our minds were not suited or prepared for the receiving or understanding of them" (Goolde, *Works of John Owen*, 137-38).

moved in with his girlfriend. He had been raised in a very devoted Christian family and he still loved and admired his parents; but then in the course of the conversation he said something that explained everything, “When I went to church they were always on about the cross and I could never see what that had to do with anything.” The pastor spent the rest of the evening trying to explain the gospel, but the young man still did not understand<sup>52</sup>.

What does all this tell us? We need the illumination of the Holy Spirit. We need to pray for the illumination of the Spirit in our studies, in our pulpits and in our pews. Yes, we need to do our sermon preparation. We need to do the hard work of exegesis. We need to read and study and agonise over our sermon texts. But by themselves these activities won’t cut it, good and necessary though they may be. As Klaas Runia has said, “Human work always remains work in the service of the Spirit and it also remains dependent on the sovereign activity of the Spirit.”<sup>53</sup> Therefore we need to pray for the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit because without it not much will happen. It has been said that all we have to do is proclaim the truth and the truth will speak for itself. In response let it be said very respectfully that that is a lot of one-sided nonsense. The Word of God needs to be accompanied by the Spirit of God if it is to do the work of God.<sup>54</sup>

## 1 John 2:18-27

*<sup>18</sup> Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.*

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Gaffin, “Epistemological Reflections,” 111: “God’s wisdom-revelation, focused in the cross of Christ, is beyond the human competence and capacity to grasp and determine, whatever the means – reason, intuition, observation, or feeling.”

<sup>53</sup> Klaas Runia, “Preaching and the Work of the Holy Spirit’ (Part 2), *RTR* 60 (2001): 37.

<sup>54</sup> This point is made strongly by Stuart Olyott, “Where Luther Got it Wrong – and Why We Need to Know about it,” *The Banner of Truth* (December 2009): 28: “Although the Word can bring new spiritual life to birth and visibility, it can never bring about the generation of that new life. God *himself* must do that, by a direct action of his Spirit within the human soul.” On this basis Olyott pleads with his readers to “storm the throne of grace, determined that by sheer impurity they will persuade God to accompany the word to be preached” (29).

<sup>19</sup> *They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.*

<sup>20</sup> *But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth.*

<sup>21</sup> *I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth.*

<sup>22</sup> *Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist-- he denies the Father and the Son.*

<sup>23</sup> *No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.*

<sup>24</sup> *See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father.*

<sup>25</sup> *And this is what he promised us-- even eternal life.*

<sup>26</sup> *I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray.*

<sup>27</sup> *As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit-- just as it has taught you, remain in him.*

## **A. Context**

Just as the context was a crucial factor in interpreting 1 Corinthians 2, the same is true for 1 John 2. Like 1 Corinthians, 1 John is a pastoral document. John is addressing problems in a local church, but John is not addressing divisions in the church as Paul was for the church at Corinth. Here the divisions have already occurred and there has been an open split within the congregation. The secessionists have already walked out of the church. “They went out from us,” says John, “but they did not really belong to us” (v. 19). But even though they had officially left the church, the secessionists were still a problem. They were an unsettling influence, and the faith of the congregation needed some positive reassurance.

But what was it that had gone wrong and who were these secessionists anyway? It is hard to describe them precisely, but it is probably fair to say

that some kind of Gnosticism was involved. One of the basic tenets of Gnosticism was that only the spirit is good and that matter is evil. Those who hold that kind of view will soon have problems with the incarnation of Jesus. If these Gnostics were of the Docetic variety they would have held that “the divine Christ-spirit was too holy to have been united with human nature.”<sup>55</sup> For them Jesus would have been a spiritual being who only seemed to be human. Jesus was nothing more than a phantom. If, on the other hand, these Gnostics were followers of Cerinthus, they would have believed that the Christ “came on the man Jesus at His baptism and empowered His ministry but left Him before His crucifixion, and only a man died on the cross.”<sup>56</sup>

Whatever the precise identity of these secessionists, John regarded their views as the height of heresy. He doesn't mince his words. He calls them false prophets and even antichrists. They were so dangerous because they undermined the very basics of the Christian faith. Not only was the incarnation of Jesus seriously jeopardized, so was the doctrine of the atonement. According to the errorists the Jesus who died on the cross was just a man or, even worse, a mere phantom. Either way you have lost the doctrine of the atonement. If these heretics were to get their way, even after they have left the church, they could do a great deal of damage to those who remained.

To establish his “little children” in the faith, John gives them three tests:

- (a) The moral test – do they strive to keep the commandments of God?
- (b) The social test – do they love their fellow Christians?
- (c) The doctrinal test - do they believe that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh?<sup>57</sup>

In his letter John keeps recycling these three tests in different ways. He goes

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<sup>55</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, “An Exposition of 1 John 2:18-28,” *BibSac*146 (1989): 86.

<sup>56</sup> Hiebert, “1 John 2:18-28,” 86.

<sup>57</sup> See John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale, 1964), 55.

over them three times and in the last chapter he brings them all together. His epistle is like a spiral staircase that goes round and round but also higher and higher. The first application of these three tests is in chapter 2:

- (a) The first application of the moral test is found in vv. 3-8: “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands” (v. 3).
- (b) Next comes the social test in vv. 9-11: “Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness” (v. 9).
- (c) In this first application of the tests the one that is by far the most extensive is the doctrinal test in vv. 18-27.

## **B. Exposition**

This first application of the doctrinal test has two sections:

- (i) Verses 18-19 “in which the author speaks of the coming of antichrists and identifies them as the secessionists.”
- (ii) Verses 20-27 “where he warns his readers of the secessionists’ attempt to deceive them and seeks to arm them against it.”<sup>58</sup>

It is significant that this second section begins and ends in the same way, with references to the anointing (vv. 20, 27). Whatever this anointing may be, it is mentioned only here in the New Testament, and three large claims are made for it:

- (a) “You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth” (v. 20).
- (b) “The anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you” (v. 27a).
- (c) “His anointing teaches you about all things and that anointing is real and not counterfeit” (v. 27b).

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<sup>58</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 97.

For John this anointing must be very important because it will arm his readers against the false teaching of the secessionists. The Greek word for “anointing” is *chrisma* (χρῖσμα). It is very similar to the better-known Greek word *charisma* (χάρισμα). The only difference is an additional *a* (or alpha!) in *charisma*. The two are remarkably similar. Just as every Christian has a *charisma* or a gift of the Holy Spirit, so every Christian has received this anointing or *chrisma*. But that was not always the case. In the Old Testament the word *chrisma* is applied only to one group of people, namely the priests (Exod 29:7; 30:25). Under the New Testament the priesthood is extended to cover all believers. Now all are priests and all are anointed. Like Jesus himself they are anointed not with oil but with the Holy Spirit.

This is perhaps the place to sound a small note of caution. The word *chrisma* is now commonly translated “anointing”. The King James Bible also uses the word “unction” (1 John 2:20). Amongst contemporary Christians these terms are sometimes used in an unbiblical way. In some circles you will hear that “Pastor X has an *anointed* ministry.” In other circles the more old-fashioned word is used when it is said that “the Reverend So-and-so always preaches with *unction*.”<sup>59</sup> This kind of language goes against the grain of the New Testament. Under the Mosaic law the priests had a monopoly on unction. If it is used today that kind of language can sound a little elitist. Under the Old Testament unction and anointing were for the priestly elite. Since Pentecost all of that has been completely democratised. Every believer has the anointing and every believer has unction.

This brings us back to 1 John 2:20: “But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth.” More literally this verse reads: “But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know” (NASB). Some ancient manuscripts make that even stronger, “and you know all

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<sup>59</sup> Concern about the contemporary use of this kind of language is shared by Michael Raiter, “The ‘Holy Hush’: Biblical and Theological Reflections on Preaching with Unction,” in Paul A. Barker, Richard J. Condie and Andrew S. Malone (eds.), *Serving God’s Words: Windows on Preaching and Ministry* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011), 174: “. . . the attempt to biblically justify, and demand of preachers, preaching with unction understood as a kind of ‘holy hush’ is questionable. The NT simply does not describe the experience that I, and many others, bear witness to. This does not invalidate the experience but it does, at least, suggest that we should be more temperate in our remarks about unction.”

things.”<sup>60</sup> But all of these translations raise some important questions – the truth about what? You all know about what? You all know what?

Surely John is not suggesting that these people know everything. Again the statement has to be qualified by the context. The context is the first round of tests and this is the first time we have the doctrinal test. This test is stated very simply but also very negatively. In v. 22 John asks, “Who is the liar?” He gives a blunt answer, “It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ.” If the denial is the lie, then the confession must be the truth, “Jesus is the Christ.”

In his next round of tests John builds on this basic confession, “This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every Spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (4:2). He emphasises the incarnation.

Then in the final cycle of tests he develops this even further: “Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. This is the one who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth” (5:5-6). Here John seems to be tackling the heretics head on. It is not as though the divine Christ came upon the human Jesus at his baptism and left him at the cross. Throughout his life Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God from beginning to end.

That is what the anointing or unction of the Holy Spirit is all about. It has to do with the truth of the person of Jesus and the confession of that truth.<sup>61</sup> It is the work of the Spirit that protects believers against false Christologies and against the seduction of the antichrists. Those who have that anointing don’t

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<sup>60</sup> The neuter plural “all things” (πάντα) was probably a correction introduced by copyists who felt the need for an object after the verb “know”. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1994), 641.

<sup>61</sup> In his exposition of this passage Owen is quick to recognize the limits of what is being promised: “However they may mistake in things of *lesser moment*, and be ignorant in the doctrine of some truths, or have but mean degrees of knowledge in any thing, yet shall they all know the mind and will of God as revealed in the Scripture, in all those things and truths which are necessary that they may believe unto righteousness and make confession unto salvation” (Goolde, *Works of John Owen*, 4:146).

need to be taught by false teachers. They know what they need to know about Jesus because they have been taught by the Holy Spirit.

### **C. Application**

There is again some valuable application here for preachers. One of the main concerns of preachers should be that people come to know Jesus better through their preaching. People need an accurate knowledge of Jesus and also need to be protected from false views. There is sadly no shortage of such false views today. There may be no Gnostics or Cerinthians doing the rounds, but in the current market place of ideas there is a veritable smorgasbord of opinions about Jesus. Over the last 200 years there have been three major Quests for the Historical Jesus. These Quests have usually been conducted by liberal theologians looking for a more up-to-date version of Jesus than what we find in the Gospels. In the mid-nineties the Evangelical scholar Ben Witherington did an evaluation the latest Quest.<sup>62</sup> Some of his chapter headings tell the story:

- “Jesus the itinerant Cynic philosopher”
- “Jesus, man of the Spirit”
- “Jesus the eschatological prophet”
- “Jesus the prophet of social change”
- “Jesus the sage”
- “Jesus the marginal Jew”.

And so it goes - opinion after opinion of Jesus that falls short of the high view of the Gospels. Why is this? Because there are antichrists out there doing their sinister work. Is our preaching guarding our people against it? Are we praying for the illumination of the Holy Spirit so that our people grow in their appreciation of who Jesus is? Are we praying that our people may know him better and love him more? Are we praying that our preaching

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<sup>62</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 304pp.

will present him clearly for what he really is – the Christ and the Son of God?

### **Ephesians 1:15-23**

*<sup>15</sup> For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints,*

*<sup>16</sup> I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.*

*<sup>17</sup> I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.*

*<sup>18</sup> I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,*

*<sup>19</sup> and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength,*

*<sup>20</sup> which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,*

*<sup>21</sup> far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.*

*<sup>22</sup> And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,*

*<sup>23</sup> which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*

#### **A. Context**

The context here is much easier to figure out than was the case with 1 Corinthians and 1 John. Very early on in all of Paul's letters to the churches there is a thanksgiving and prayer section. Almost before he does anything else Paul thanks God for his readers and prays for them. He does this for all the churches except the Galatians. He was so exasperated with those churches that instead of giving thanks and praying for them he launches into a severe rebuke (Gal 1:6-10). But that is certainly not the case in Ephesians. After the opening greeting in vv. 1-2 he breaks out into a beautiful eulogy to God for

his electing and saving grace in vv. 3-14. In the Greek this is one long sentence. In fact, it is the longest sentence in the New Testament. Paul can't help himself. Words of praise just keep tumbling from his lips. He stands in wonder and awe at the goodness of God and the beauty of our salvation.

From praising God he moves very naturally into thanksgiving. After all, the Ephesians belong to those whom God chosen in love and saved by grace. So Paul can't help but give thanks for them, and that's how our passage opens in vv. 15-16: "For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers." In the exposition that follows, these prayers will need to be the focus of our attention. Paul often prays like this but never as specifically as he does for the Ephesians. What he prays for is the illumination of the Holy Spirit (vv. 17-19a).

## **B. Exposition**

<sup>17</sup> *I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.*

<sup>18</sup> *I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,*

<sup>19</sup> *and his incomparably great power for us who believe.*

These are difficult verses to translate, and on the whole the NIV does a good job of it. One of the best things it does is to give the word "Spirit" a capital "S" in the expression "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation." The NIV is one of the few English translations to do so, and it's an excellent decision. While a created spirit might be called "a spirit of wisdom," only God's Spirit can be referred to as "the Spirit of revelation." Revelation always comes from God. So the NIV has an excellent translation at this point.

However, any English translation is also up against some massive obstacles in this passage. For a start, this passage is again one long sentence in Greek. The previous sentence was twelve verses long and this one is nine verses long. That in itself would have to be a translator's nightmare. Obviously you

have to break it up in English. But where? How do you do it without losing some of the meaning?

Then there's another problem. The grammar is very complicated and the syntax extremely involved. This combination makes these verses almost impossible to translate accurately. A very literal translation of Paul's prayer in vv. 17-19a would read something like this:

“(I pray that) the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, **the eyes of your heart having been enlightened** in order that you may know the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints and what is the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe.”

The main difference between this translation and the NIV lies in the expression indicated in bold, “the eyes of your heart having been enlightened.” The NIV reads, “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened.” But that is not exactly Paul's meaning. In the Greek the verb “enlightened” is a perfect passive participle.<sup>63</sup> The eyes of their hearts were enlightened at a point back in the past and the effects of that remain in the present. On some previous occasion they were enlightened in their knowledge of God and that enlightenment is still with them. That illumination of course first dawned on them when they became regenerate, when they were born again. Regeneration is that moment in time when illumination begins. It is then that the eyes of our hearts are opened to the knowledge of God for the first time. It is then that we first understand the significance of the cross and begin to appreciate the person of Jesus for who he really is.

For the Ephesians that has already happened. The eyes of their hearts have already been enlightened. But now Paul is praying for further enlightenment. Paul is praying that the Holy Spirit will give them wisdom and revelation (in the sense of illumination) in three main areas:

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<sup>63</sup> In Greek the expression reads: πεφωτισμε,νου του, οφθαλμου, τη καρδι,α Qumwv. Taken as a whole it forms the grammatical construction known as the accusative absolute which, while frequent enough in classical Greek, was rare in the New Testament (cf. Acts 26:3; Rom 8:3; 12:1). See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 177.

- (a) Firstly, that they know the hope of God's calling. Now what is the hope to which God has called us? In the New Testament hope is always that aspect of faith that is directed to the future. So what has God called us to in the future? What is the end-goal of our salvation? It is nothing less than life in the new heaven and the new earth. It is life in the presence of God. But how often do we think about that? How often does the person in the pew think about that? We live in a generation that reflects too little on the future and almost never on eternity. That mindset has also infiltrated the church. Hence we need the illumination of the Holy Spirit to be able to know the hope to which we have been called.
- (b) Paul wants the Ephesians to know the riches of God's glorious inheritance in the saints. Paul is not referring to our inheritance but to God's inheritance. It is not that we will inherit glory, true though that may be. Here Paul is referring to God's glorious inheritance in the saints. In other words, the saints are his inheritance. Back in v. 14 Paul had referred to his readers as "those who are God's possession." They are his inheritance.

Now how does that work? How could God possibly inherit anything? Doesn't he own everything already? Yes, but he inherits us through the death of his Son. Let me put it like this. Recently my wife received an inheritance, not as large as she had hoped for, but still she received an inheritance. She claimed an inheritance because her father died. The inheritance Paul is speaking about is akin to that situation, except that it is reversed. God received an inheritance because his Son died. As Paul said in v. 7, "In him we have redemption through his blood." We have been redeemed, we have been bought back through the blood of Christ. It is only when the testator dies that the inheritance can be claimed. So the redeemed, the saints, are God's glorious inheritance through Christ. Elsewhere Scripture teaches that God is our inheritance but here the point is that we are his inheritance. As Peter O'Brien has said, "God's people, comprising both Jews and Gentiles, are his inheritance, his own possession, in whom he will display to the universe the untold riches

of his glory.”<sup>64</sup>

- (c) The third blessing that Paul wants his readers to know about is in v. 19 where he speaks of God’s “incomparably great power for us who believe.” If we underestimate how precious the church is to God, what we underestimate even more is his power in our lives. Paul is so emphatic when he speaks of God’s power. Literally the Greek reads, “What is the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe.” In the verses that follow, Paul gives two examples of that kind of power - the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension to the right hand of God. In other words, the divine power that raised Jesus from the dead and that took him back to heaven is the very power at work in our lives. The resources that are available to us as believers are astounding. The same power that raised Jesus and took him to heaven is now working in us.

### **C. Application**

The challenge of the first two passages was directed primarily to preaching. This passage from Ephesians challenges us first and foremost in the area of prayer. What Paul has done here in Ephesians 1 and elsewhere is to leave us model prayers that we can make our own. Compared to Paul we often pray so superficially. We pray for people’s physical health, for their family life and perhaps even for their spiritual growth. But how often do we pray for the kinds of things Paul prays for here?

- How often do we pray that people may know the hope to which God has called them?
- How earnestly do we pray that people may know the riches of God’s glorious inheritance in the saints?
- How fervently do we pray that they may know God’s incomparably great power for those who believe?

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<sup>64</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*; Pillar New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 136.

- And how unceasingly do we pray that the Spirit who has already enlightened the eyes of their hearts will give them further wisdom and illumination to know all these things?

## Conclusion

From the above discussion the illumination of the Holy Spirit may have turned out to be a somewhat different doctrine to what some readers may have expected. Illumination is not a magic wand that the Holy Spirit waves over some obscure passages of Scripture to make them perfectly clear to us.<sup>65</sup> Neither is it some form of infallible guidance by which the Spirit leads the church to the correct position on some knotty and controversial issues. It is not that mystical moment in sermon preparation when a preacher sees something in a passage that no one has ever seen before. The illumination of the Holy Spirit is far more glorious than all of that. It is a work that is grand and majestic. While this article could consider only the most central passages that deal with this grand theme, there are still some significant conclusions that can be confidently drawn from our discussion. The illumination of the Spirit has to do with:

- The message of the cross
- The person of Jesus
- The hope of God's calling
- The riches of his inheritance
- And the incomparable greatness of his power.

The Spirit's illumination is therefore a great and glorious gift which every church needs to fervently ask for in prayer.

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. Owen's comment on John 16:13, "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth": "The mysteries of the gospel, of the kingdom of heaven, the counsel of God about the salvation of the church by Christ, and concerning their faith and obedience, are the truth which he is promised to guide us into" (Goolde, *Works of John Owen*, 4:142). He further affirms that it is the Spirit's "work to give us a useful, saving understanding of all sacred truth, or the mind of God as revealed in the Scripture" (4:144).