

Systematic Theology for the Local Church

#20—Bibliology—Part XI¹

Illumination: Help for Our Understanding

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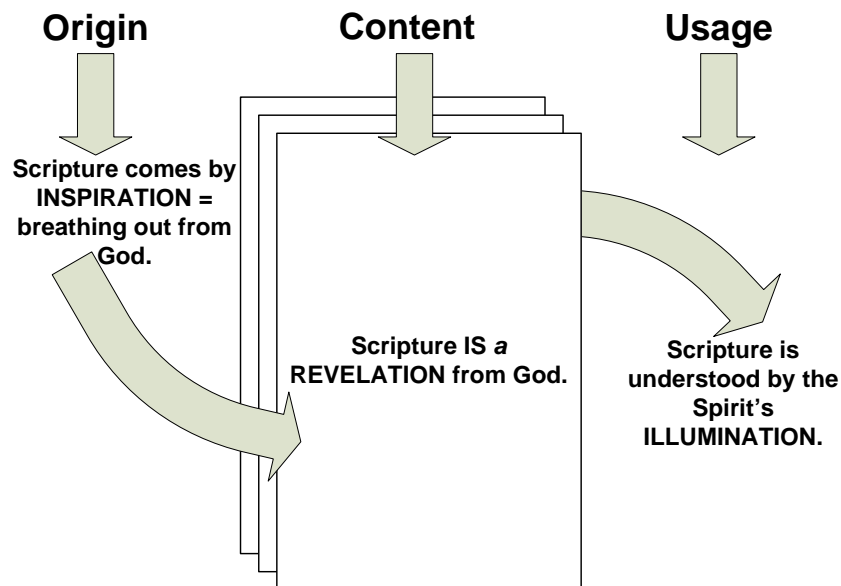
September 2, 2007

For the upcoming studies in Theology Proper: Become familiar with Sections 13-26 in House's *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*. Also, read Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, ch. 6, Introduction to the Doctrine of God, ch. 7, the Names and Nature of God, ch. 8, God as Trinity, ch. 9 (except for the sections on Christ and the Holy Spirit), The Trinity in the Creeds, ch. 10, The Eternal Decree of God. Later in the section on Theology Proper we will suggest readings in Wayne House's *Charts on Open Theism and Orthodoxy*. If you have the book, you should begin reading Bruce Ware's *Their God Is Too Small*.

Up to this point in our studies we have not spoken about how we can interact with the Bible. The ministry of the Holy Spirit to provide enablement for us to understand the Bible is called *illumination*.

Illumination is the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God that imparts understanding of the message of Scripture to the believer; not to be confused with inspiration, which in the Bible is used of the work of God in giving Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16); 1 Jn. 2:20; Jn. 16:13.

We need to draw some distinctions at this point. *Revelation* concerns the material, the information, the content that God has communicated in the form of the Bible. *Inspiration* is a term that describes the process (in which the writer is controlled) of writing down that disclosure. *Illumination* is the Spirit's work in providing understanding of that written message. This diagram depicts these distinctions.



We can look at this another way: the information is revealed; the writers are controlled as they write Scripture; the reader is illuminated.

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The need for illumination

Human beings need illumination because of our finiteness and our sinfulness. This two-fold problem is stated in 1 Cor. 2:11-14:

¹¹ 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. 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

The unsaved person does not have the Spirit of God and so will not accept truths from God and cannot understand them. Even the person with the Spirit—someone who is born again—still has the limitation of finiteness and so needs the Spirit's illuminating ministry.

The person without the Spirit can understand many facts in the Bible and even do interpretation of the text. He might be very interested in it and memorize it in its entirety. But he can never understand its spiritual significance without illumination. He will always be biased against Scripture because he does not want to come under its authority. Because of this he will never be completely objective in letting the Bible speak for itself. We cannot expect an unregenerate person to understand the things that the believer can.

The unsaved person experiences the effects of sin on his *mind* and his *will*. With his impaired mind he cannot think God's thoughts because he is at enmity with God, hates Him, runs from Him, sees the content and implications of Scripture as foolishness and needs the Spirit's teaching work. Furthermore, his will always makes him want to turn from truth in Scripture. Even if he could understand it cognitively, he would push it away because of the implications Scripture presents for his life.² Reymond refers to this condition as "spiritually blind, spiritually hostile, and spiritually dead."³ This is an important starting point for understanding presuppositionalism, which we will begin to discuss in the next study.

When God calls an unbeliever to come to Christ, the Spirit begins to show him biblical information and convicts him of his need for a savior. Speaking of this convicting work of the Spirit, Jesus says in Jn. 16:8-11

⁸ When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; ¹⁰ in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; ¹¹ and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.

Illumination is for the believer and is only available to the unbeliever as the Spirit is working in him to lead him to respond to the Gospel. When the unsaved person exercises saving faith, he receives the permanent presence of the Spirit and along with him his ongoing, always available, teaching ministry.

² For an interesting study comparing two contemporary views of illumination with those of 17th-century theologian John Owen, see David J. McKinley, "John Owen's View of Illumination: An Alternative to the Fuller-Erickson Dialogue," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 154:613 (Jan 97) pp. 94-104.

³ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 148.

How it happens

In Jn. 14:16-17 and 25-27 our Lord predicted the coming teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit, a work that would continue Jesus' teaching to His sheep:

¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever— ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

²⁵ “All this I have spoken while still with you. ²⁶ But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

Actually, Jesus first carried out this ministry of illumination Himself. This is recorded in a beautiful account in Lk. 24:13-35, where in a post-resurrection appearance He thrilled the hearts of two discouraged disciples on the way to Emmaus:

¹³ Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. ¹⁵ As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; ¹⁶ but they were kept from recognizing him.

¹⁷ He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?”

They stood still, their faces downcast. ¹⁸ One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

¹⁹ “What things?” he asked.

“About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. ²⁰ The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; ²¹ but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. ²² In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning ²³ but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. ²⁴ Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.”

²⁵ He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

²⁸ As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them.

³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. ³² They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

³³ They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together ³⁴ and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” ³⁵ Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

According to vv. 24-25 the disciples could not make a connection between His death and the teachings of the Old Testament. So He first expounded the Scriptures (v. 27), explaining how they pointed to Him. As a

result, they possessed a desire to know more, recognizing the importance of what He said (v. 32). Finally, He opened the understanding of all the disciples for a very specific purpose—to understand the Scriptures, particularly concerning His death, burial, and resurrection (vv. 44-46):

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

So Jesus’ ministry was a forerunner of that of the Spirit in this age to individuals concerning Scripture. The Spirit continued His work because He was no longer present in the flesh. Notice that while the disciples were eyewitnesses of the resurrection and certainly must have known much of what the Old Testament said, they could not put the two together. It took Jesus’ opening their minds for them to understand what the Old Testament meant. Although they were believers, they still needed this illuminating ministry.

The illuminating work of the Spirit is described in 1 Jn. 2:20 and 27 as an ‘anointing.’

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. ²¹ 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. ²² 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. ²³ No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

²⁴ 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. ²⁵ And this is what he promised us—even eternal life.

²⁶ I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. ²⁷ 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.

In looking at this passage some have quickly concluded that there is some special work of the Spirit that is to be sought and brings some special blessing. But v. 27 shows clearly that the anointing is a ministry of teaching. The context tells us that this task of the Spirit is needed to keep us from falling for error (vv. 20, 26-27). And what is most important is that every believer has this ministry (v. 20). No limitations of time or frequency are placed on it. We conclude, then, that it is always available—it remains in us! But the existence of the Spirit’s ministry of illumination does not mean that we do not need human teachers. Clearly God gives gifts to individuals to enable them to carry out teaching ministry. Illumination helps us to understand Scripture ourselves and discern true from false teaching that comes from others.

The apostle Paul underscores the crucial role of illumination in Eph. 1:17-18:

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. . . .

Wisdom, revelation and *know* here refer to gleaning information from Scripture through illumination and are crucial components of spiritual growth. The apostle Paul would be the last one to say that we should look for God to give us special revelation directly.

The Roman Catholic system asserts that to understand God's will people must depend on the traditions and decisions of its leaders over the centuries. The possibility that individuals can grow spiritually through the Spirit's work of illumining them concerning biblical truth is a key component of Reformed theology. God's purpose for human beings is that they might learn of him directly from the Bible, and he graciously provides us help to do that.

Important caveats

Some cautions are needed at this point:

1. We cannot expect the Spirit of God to teach us what the Bible means, if we do not work and study. It would make learning the Bible easy if God put us in a trance and poured into us everything He wanted us to know. He could do that. But all the biblical evidence points to the fact that He expects us to put forth effort. The simple fact that we are commanded to study is proof enough of that (2 Tim. 2:15).

2. Every time we look at the Bible we need illumination. That constant ministry of the Spirit must exist to meet constant need. It is not presumptuous to ask God to teach us whenever we study. Such dependence reminds us how much we need God's help and that we are venturing into spiritual territory, where we cannot operate effectively without the Spirit's ministry.

3. We should realize that while the Spirit teaches us what is in the Bible, illumination does not mean that we can or will understand all spiritual truths. For example, during this life we cannot fully understand all the features of the plan of God for the ages or the meaning of the Cross or the Trinity.

4. Many things in our lives can suppress the Spirit's illumining ministry. J. Hampton Keathley III makes some valuable points about this:

Several things can hamper the Spirit's ministry of illumination. Carnality (1 Cor. 3:1-3), indifference (cf. Heb. 5:1f with 1 Pet. 2:2), tradition and preconceived ideas (Mark 7:7-13), ignorance (Mark 12:24; Luke 24:25-32; "foolish" in vs. 25 is the Greek, *anohtos*, "not understanding"), and poor methods of Bible study or interpretation (cf. Paul's exhortation in 2 Tim. 3:15).⁴

5. Because the Spirit's ministry always has the purpose of glorifying the Son, any interpretations that detract from this cannot claim to have the Spirit's illumining ministry.

6. We must be careful not to confuse inspiration and illumination, as some do, supposing that God gives us the same supernatural help that the authors of the Bible possessed. Keathley has a perceptive summary of this problem, which he sees as a false mysticism⁵:

⁴ J. Hampton Keathley, III, "The Bible: Understanding Its Message" at www.bible.org.

⁵ J. Hampton Keathley, III, "Attitudes or Viewpoints Toward the Bible" at www.bible.org. I am aware that there are many definitions of 'mysticism,' which is used most often to refer to direct communication with deity apart from mediating agencies such as Scripture. In Keathley's summary his use of 'true mysticism,' which is supported by Walvoord, refers to communication with God that is based on Scripture. This use of 'mysticism' is probably not found very often, but insofar as it includes God's speaking to individuals, leading and convicting them, it describes direct interaction with God, a component of mysticism in general. Notice also that in the first paragraph Keathley initially speaks of false mysticism in connection with errors in relation to the Bible. False mysticism can be found, as he later says in that paragraph, in all kinds of spiritual 'systems.' His identification of the revelation claims of some non-cessationists, however, is very important.

Mysticism also falls into a two-fold classification, a false mysticism and a true mysticism. The fundamental premise in false mysticism is that divine revelation is not limited to the Bible, but that God continues to give new truth beyond the Bible. In the final analysis, false mysticism makes human *experience* supreme; one's personal experiences become the final authority rather than the Bible. If it fits with one's experience, then it is accepted as valid; but if it does not fit one's experience, it is rejected as invalid. For this kind of mystic, the Bible is not complete or final. God is still in the business of giving truth if one is only receptive to its revelation. Those holding to some form of false mysticism believe spiritual truth is being added beyond the Scriptures. This type of false mysticism is seen in the ideas of pantheism, theosophy, modern-day spiritism, Seventh-day Adventism, new thought, Christian Science, Swedenborgianism, Mormonism [sic], Quakerism, and Millennial Dawnism (Jehovah's Witnesses).

In addition, it can be seen in the beliefs of some forms of the modern-day charismatic movement. Some non-cessationists believe all the gifts mentioned in the New Testament are operative today. Some believe that God is still speaking through present day prophets, and some even go a step further and claim that the revelation coming to and from these prophets is equal in authority with the Bible. This is a growing movement within some circles of the evangelical church. In the conclusion of the chapter, "Does God Speak Today Apart from the Bible," E. Fowler White, one of the contributors in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, writes:

Some present-day evangelicals, Jack Deer and Wayne Grudem among them, believe and teach that God speaks today apart from the Bible. According to these teachers, God gives words of personal or ministry direction to His people using all the same means that He used in the past. Yet, when we consider the evidence for these views, we find that their resemblance to what the Bible actually depicts is more apparent than real. Whatever else Deer is teaching, he is not teaching the model of hearing God's voice as practiced in the Bible itself.

In my judgment, what these teachers and their disciples fail to appreciate is that, in the Bible, God's activity of speaking apart from the Scriptures occurred at a time when those documents were still being written. Interestingly, during that long history of Scripture writing, God's people did live by a "Scripture plus" principle of authority, and, in keeping with that principle, God employed various means to speak His extrascriptural words to them. But today the church is faced with a new situation; now, with centuries of Christian orthodoxy, we confess that the writing of Scripture is finished, and that the canon is actually closed.⁶

There is, however, a form of true mysticism which stems from the indwelling and teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit illuminates the minds of believers to enable them to grasp and apply the truth of the Scripture. As Hebrews 12:25 affirms, God is speaking today, but He does so through the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit to the truths of the completed canon of Scripture. This is the work of illumination, leading, and conviction, but this must be distinguished from the Spirit's work of revelation. Speaking of this ministry of the Spirit, Chafer/Walvoord writes:

By contrast, true mysticism is the proper approach of systematic theologians who believe the Bible. It involves the fact that all believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and therefore are able to be enlightened directly by the Spirit in their understanding of divine revelation. Such revelation does not exceed what the Scriptures reveal; it consists in making known divine truth recorded in Scripture. True mysticism extends to what may be called normative revelation, but it does not exclude God's application of scriptural truth to an individual

⁶ John H. Armstrong, editor, *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, Moody Press (Chicago, 1996), 86.

seeking guidance. Guidance is always in keeping with the Scriptures themselves (John 16:13; 1 Cor. 2:9-10).⁷

A true mystic in the biblical sense believes that the Bible is our final authority and seeks to always judge personal experience by the Bible. He does not allow experience to either take precedence over the Bible nor does he judge the Bible or what is biblical by his experience.

The existence of an accepted canon and the historical and biblical indications of the cessation of miraculous revelatory gifts indicate that God has not been giving Scripture since the close of the apostolic age in the first century. In other words, He is not giving new revelation, breathing out information that is on a par with canonical Scripture. He illumines us concerning the information he gave long ago.

Those groups that put their authority on a par with Scripture suppose that God will show them today information equal in authority to what is in the Bible. The biblical writings were *inspired*, breathed out by God; readers of the Bible are *illuminated*, taught to understand what has already been written, information that takes precedence over their insights. Because God is no longer giving information on a par with the Bible, no one should look for special revelation from God. Our responsibility is to depend on illumination to understand what is in the 66 books of Scripture.

⁷ Lewis Sperry Chafer *Systematic Theology*, Abridged Edition, Vol. 1, John F. Walvoord, editor, Donald K. Campbell, Roy B. Zuck, consulting editors, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1988, p. 42.

Study questions

1. Here are three theological positional differences:
 - a. Miraculous spiritual gifts have ceased; miraculous spiritual gifts have not ceased.
 - b. God knows the future perfectly; God does not know what is going to happen in the future (Openness of God theology, which we will cover in upcoming studies)
 - c. Jesus will return to set up a kingdom on earth; Jesus will return after the kingdom period on earth; Jesus will return and there will be no kingdom on earth before or after that.

What bearing does illumination have—if any—on these and similar opposing positions? Shouldn't we all come to the same conclusions? How can there be differences in theology if there is such a thing as illumination?

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning "standard"; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).
12. Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.
13. Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.
14. Illumination is the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God that imparts understanding of the message of Scripture to the believer; not to be confused with inspiration, which in the Bible is used of the work of God in giving Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16); 1 Jn. 2:20; Jn. 16:13.