

Does The Holy Spirit Supernaturally Bestow Faith?

Bible Answers About Denominations

What does the Holy Spirit do in the conviction and conversion of a sinner, and how does He do it? The only intelligent means of ascertaining the answer to these questions is to resort to the teaching and authority of the New Testament Scriptures on this subject. However, many in the religious world turn to John Calvin's teaching on this subject.

The entire system of Calvinism is based on the false doctrine of Total Hereditary Depravity. This is the idea that, because of Adam's sin, man has inherited a corrupted, sinful nature that makes it impossible for him to do good. Because of this depravity, man is incapable, of himself, to will to do right and come to God. He is in spiritual darkness, dull of hearing, and incapable of receiving the word of God. He must first have his nature changed miraculously by God in order to make it possible for him to understand and accept God's word and to make him willing and able to respond to it. This change in his nature, which enables him to believe and accept the truth, is called regeneration, and—according to Calvin—is accomplished wholly by God apart from any effort on man's part. This regeneration is brought about by a power of the Holy Spirit, which works directly and mysteriously upon the mind of man, which includes illuminating the Scriptures to him, directly opening his mind to the word of God. This illumination is allegedly required not only because of man's corrupt nature, but because the spiritual things of God are too lofty for carnal men to comprehend and know for certain by the mere exposure to truth and the exercise of the intellect. Without a direct operation of the Spirit to penetrate and enlighten the mind man is unable to accept the truthfulness of God's word and is left plagued by doubt. Note Calvin's own words from his work in Institutes of the Christian Religion:

"No, even though they try, he can do nothing ... Because these mysteries are deeply hidden from human insight, they are disclosed solely by the revelation of the Spirit. Hence, where the Spirit of God does not illuminate them, they are considered folly."

Calvin's notion of a direct operation of the Holy Spirit is a dominant theme that runs as a common thread through most, if not all, Protestant sectarian creeds. Some hold to a modified form of Calvin's position wherein they claim a direct operation of the Spirit of God is necessary to enable a person to respond to God, but that the individual must freely respond to that operation. Ben Bogard, representing the Missionary Baptist position, in a debate with N. B. Hardeman, defended the following position:

"We by nature are spiritually dead and mere words will not bring the dead sinner to life ... It takes enabling grace to get the attention of such a man. Hence, the need of power in addition to the word ... God draws, but does not force ... His drawing is to enable the sinner to act, and on their own free will."

Though he attempts to work man's free will into the process, he still maintains, as most denominationalists do, that because man is dead in sin a "direct, immediate touch" is required to convict the sinner. Those of Bogard's persuasion claim this is not done totally independently of the word but in conjunction with the preaching and hearing of the word. This satisfies for them the questions of why, if the Holy Spirit works directly on the heart, God has commanded us to preach the gospel and why there are no converts where the word has not gone.

There are many passages of Scripture that teach clearly that the Holy Spirit operates through the word, and the word only, in the conviction and conversion of sinners. Please consider the following:

Jesus said, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life" (John 6:63 NAS). The word is spirit and life, and it is so without a direct operation of the Holy Spirit, separate and apart from the word.

Jesus also said, "He who rejects Me, and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day" (John 12:48 NAS). This statement makes no reference to a sinner's rejecting a direct operation or drawing of the Holy Spirit. We will be judged by the word.

The Hebrew writer said, "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12 NAS). This statement of the power and quality of the word is quite contrary to the conception that the word is a dead-letter influence on the heart of a sinner until such time that the Holy Spirit exercises a special influence on him, an influence that is over and above and separate and apart from the word.

An angel of Jehovah instructed Cornelius to "Send to Joppa, and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; and he shall speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household" (Acts 11:13-14 NAS). Cornelius was to be saved by words – not by a direct operation of the Holy Spirit separate and apart from the word.

Peter declared that the Jews of the dispersion had been "born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, {that is,} through the living and abiding word of God.... But the word of the Lord abides forever." And this is the word which was preached to you" (1 Pet 1:23, 25 NAS). The case was that the incorruptible seed, the word of God, was the means of the conviction of those Jews of the dispersion – rather than a direct operation of the Holy Spirit in addition to, over and above, and separate and apart from the word.

The fact that the Holy Spirit does operate in conversion is clear. Therefore, it is not a question of the power of the Holy Spirit to operate; rather, it is a question as to how the Holy Spirit operates. It is not a question of whether or not the Holy Spirit influences sinners in conviction and conversion (Jno. 16:8-11); rather, it is a question of how the Holy Spirit influences sinners; and that "how" is through the word of the Spirit (Acts 24:25, Paul reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come and Felix trembled at the spoken word of the Spirit, not because of a supernatural influence of the Spirit).

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