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False Ideas about the Holy Spirit

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Jesus warned:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves (Matthew 7:15).

False teachers do exist (2 Peter 2:1), and the ideas they advocate are dangerous. In this study, we will direct attention to some false teachings relative to the Holy Spirit.

Holy Spirit Not a Person

One of the most fundamental errors regarding the Holy Spirit is the tendency of some cults to deny his very personality. A Watchtower publication asserts that the Holy Spirit is the active force of God. It is not a person but is a powerful force that God causes to emanate from himself to accomplish his holy will (Reasoning from the Scriptures 1985, 81).

Mary Baker Eddy, founder of "Christian Science," characterized the third person of the Trinity as "Divine Science" (n.d., 55). Parley Pratt, one of Mormonism's original "apostles," once described the Holy Spirit as a force like "magnetism" or "electricity." He further spoke of the Spirit as "a divine fluid" and "impersonal energy" (see Jackson 1993, 26).

Each of these notions is quite foreign to the truth. The Holy Spirit is a divine person, and this is evidenced by the following factors:

The Spirit acts in a personal way. He can speak (Matthew 10:20; 1 Timothy 4:1); teach (John 14:26); bear witness (John 15:26); guide, hear and declare (John 16:13); send (Acts 10:20); forbid (Acts 16:6); search and know (1 Corinthians 2:11); will (1 Corinthians 12:11); help (Romans 8:2); and love (Romans 15:30). Sound biblical interpretation will not allow the view that these references are mere personifications.

Many passages describe the Holy Spirit as being the recipient of actions which are applicable only of a personal entity. The Spirit can be grieved (Ephesians 4:30), lied to (Acts 5:3), spoken against (Matthew 12:32), resisted (Acts 7:50), and insulted (Hebrews 10:29). Can one "lie to" electricity, "grieve" magnetism, or "insult" fluid?

The Holy Spirit is frequently mentioned in contexts in which other persons are discussed. Of the Spirit, Jesus said, "He shall glorify me" (John 16:14). If the "me" (Christ) represents a person, why does not the "he" (the Spirit) likewise denote a person? Certain inspired leaders in the early church wrote, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . ." (Acts 15:28). The Spirit is as personal as the "us."

Holy Spirit Still Works Miracles

Every devout Bible student is aware of the fact that God has employed miracles in the divine scheme of things. By means of miracles, the creation and organization of the universe were effected (Genesis 1; Psalm 33:6-9; Hebrews 11:3). Additionally, when Jehovah commenced his process of progressive revelation, communicating his will to the human family, he documented the authenticity of the message with supernatural phenomena. Miraculous “signs” were designed to validate the written message (cf. Mark 16:17-20). However, the fact of the matter is, God is not exhibiting his power today in a miraculous fashion, and the following line of argumentation demonstrates that.

There is no occurrence in today’s world that even remotely resembles the kind of “signs” that are common to the New Testament record. Where is the person with an amputated body-part that has had such instantaneously and perfectly restored (cf. Luke 22:51)? Where is the individual, four days dead, who has come forth from the grave (John 11:44)? Who pays his taxes these days with funds recovered from a fish’s mouth (Matthew 17:27)? An examination of so-called modern “miracles” will reveal that they have virtually nothing in common with the type of “signs” described in the Bible (see Jackson 1992, 127-134).

The allegation that the Holy Spirit is working miracles today is contrary to the explicit biblical teaching relative to the purpose for which miracles were given. As indicated earlier, signs were designed to validate the revelation of God’s will for mankind (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:2-4). When the revelatory process was concluded with the completion of the New Testament record, miracles were no longer needed, hence, passed away (see 1 Corinthians 13:8-13). No one can consistently argue for miracles today without also contending that divine revelation is ongoing, and the New Testament is incomplete.

The means for the reception of spiritual gifts in the Christian age are not operative today. Gifts, in the first century, were bestowed by means of Holy Spirit baptism (Acts 2, 10), and through the laying on of the apostles’ hands (Acts 8:17, 18; 19:6; 2 Timothy 1:6). Since there is no Holy Spirit baptism today (Ephesians 4:5; Matthew 28:19,20), and as there are no living apostles, it is obvious that, so far as biblical evidence is concerned, no spiritual gifts are being given to believers today.

As suggested earlier, the New Testament explicitly affirms that the early church’s endowment with miraculous gifts was to be temporary; when revelation was completed, supernatural signs were to pass away (Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Corinthians 13:8-13; see Jackson 1990, 114-124).[For a more complete discussion of this topic, see our article Miracles.

Direct Operation in Conversion

Denominationalists frequently contend that the Holy Spirit, in a direct and mysterious fashion, operates upon the sinner in the process of conversion. In his debate with N.B. Hardeman, the celebrated Baptist preacher, Ben M. Bogard, affirmed: “The Bible teaches that in conviction and conversion the Holy Spirit exercises a power or influence in addition to the written or spoken word” (1938, 7). If the Holy Spirit operates upon the soul of the sinner independent of the written Word of God, why is it that not a solitary Christian has ever been discovered in those locales where the gospel has not been proclaimed? Why is it that tribes in primitive regions know nothing regarding the Lord Jesus, apart from the influence of biblical revelation? This circumstance is inexplicable in light of the foregoing theory.

Certainly, it is true that the Holy Spirit is instrumental in the regeneration of those who are lost. However, his influence is exerted through his revelation, the Holy Scriptures (see Ephesians 6:17), and not apart from these documents. For example, it is by the Spirit that one is led to be immersed into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). Correspondingly, it is through the word that this identical result is effected (Ephesians 5:26). In the conversion process, which is symbolically designated as being “born anew” (John 3:3), it is by the agency of the Holy Spirit that the “begetting” is initiated. Yet note this affirmation:

Seeing ye have purified your souls in your obedience to the truth unto unfeigned love of the brethren, love one another from the heart fervently: having been begotten again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, through the word of God (1 Peter 1:22, 23).

James declares, “Of his own will he begat us with the word of truth” (James 1:18). With this fact, Paul agrees. The apostle describes the Corinthians as those who had been washed, sanctified, and justified by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:11); and yet, he could declare in the same epistle, “I have begotten you through the gospel” (4:15). Clearly, the Holy Spirit, in leading honest people to the Lord, exerts his influence through the gospel message. To affirm that something additional is needed for salvation, is to rob the gospel of its power in the redemptive process (Romans 1:16).

Special Spirit Illumination

It is commonly argued that the Bible is not sufficiently lucid to lead men in the pursuit of the godly life. We should study the Scriptures, it is contended, but in order to understand them, we also need the special illumination of the Spirit of God. Roy Zuck of the Dallas Theological Seminary has written, “The [Bible] interpreter must also depend on the Holy Spirit.” He cites H.C.G. Moule: “The blessed Spirit is not only the true Author of the written Word but also its supreme and true Expositor” (Zuck 1991, 23). If this view is correct, here is an interesting query. Is the Spirit as infallible in his exposition as he was in his initial revelation? If the answer is yes, then all who are illuminated by the Spirit should be flawless in their exegesis of the Bible, and totally united in their understanding of Scripture. However, such is not the case. Numerous scholars claiming Spirit illumination are constantly disagreeing in their theological opinions. Moreover, it is the epitome of inconsistency to argue for “supernatural illumination,” and then produce a textbook setting forth the rules for correct biblical interpretation—as Dr. Zuck has done. The fact is the Bible clearly teaches that one can read and understand the testimony of the sacred Scriptures (Ephesians 3:4; 5:17).

However, we are told that Paul taught that the “natural man” (i.e., one not illuminated by the Spirit) cannot “know” the things of God (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:14). The illumination theory imposes upon this context a notion that simply is not there. In this text, Paul is suggesting that the natural man (i.e., one not taught of the Spirit by means of God’s appointed spokesmen—v. 10) receives not the things of God (i.e., spiritual truths). Such things are foolishness to him, and he cannot “know” (*ginosko*—to know experimentally) them. Such matters must be discerned spiritually (i.e., they are communicated by the revelation process—ultimately embodied in the Scriptures). The “natural man” is not privy to spiritual truth intuitively. No one, naturally (i.e., apart from revelation) can know the mind of God.

There is no reference in this context to the Spirit’s “illumination” as a requisite to understanding the Scriptures. Rather, the emphasis is upon the fact that truth is received by divine revelation, not human intuition.

Sources/Footnotes

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