



HOW THE HOLY SPIRIT CONVERTS SINNERS

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Good day and welcome to Let the Bible Speak. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Godhead and performs an essential role in the conversion of sinners to Christ and thus our salvation. There are different approaches, however, to this aspect of the Holy Spirit's work. God, the Son came and executed the plan of redemption by dying on Calvary's cross as the one and only sufficient offering for sin and rose again that we might be justified through faith in Him. The Holy Spirit came, revealing and confirming this completed scheme and by Him, it was published and offered to the world then and now. We will deny one of the plainest truths of scripture if we deny that the Holy Spirit is the person and the power who brings people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. But how does He do so? Some would argue that we cannot know – that He just does. They posit that the Holy Spirit exerts some inward influence on the mind and heart of the sinner that mysteriously creates faith within their heart. But the scriptures give us clear indication that the Holy Spirit performs this work in a certain way.

In what is sometimes called Jesus' "Farewell address" recorded beginning in John chapter 14, the Lord is describing to the apostles the help they would soon receive after His death and resurrection and His return to heaven. They would not be left alone and powerless in the work He assigned them as His apostles. Rather, according to John 14:16, He would send them "a Comforter" which is translated in other translations "a helper". That's what the original word means. It could mean an intercessor or one who stood next to one and pleaded their case before a judge, but in a broader sense it just simply means one who comes along side to help or assist. The Spirit of God, in other words, would provide the power and resources the apostles would need to publish the glad tidings of salvation and Christ's kingdom after Jesus returned to glory. In chapter 16, Jesus says beginning in verse 7, He tells them: ***"Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment."***

Notice, when the Holy Spirit was given to the apostles, He would convict the world of sin (convince men they are sinners and in need of salvation); of righteousness (God's means of justifying sinners and declaring them righteous); and judgment (convincing men of the downfall of Satan's kingdom and all who follow Him and thus, the triumph of Christ's kingdom). How would this work be performed? It would be done through His work in the apostles.

The work of the Holy Spirit in conversion and salvation has long been misunderstood and usually shrouded in mysticism. The expression some have used to describe His convicting and illuminating work is: "it is better felt than told." In other words we cannot know how the Spirit does what He does, we only know that He has done it. Admittedly, there are many things about all three of the Godhead that we cannot presently comprehend but this is not one of those things. That's because the bible shows us how the Holy Spirit has worked in the Christian age to bring men and women to faith in Christ Jesus. I want to be clear: it is not a question of DOES the Holy Spirit convict and convert sinners. The bible makes it very plain that He does. Our question is: HOW and WHEN does He do so? Is this an abstract event that suddenly happens to someone? Does one hear an inner voice or are we given some kind of inward feeling or leading or is the Holy Spirit's work in salvation more objective than that? Can we know in more definite and provable terms that the Holy Spirit has influenced our hearts to be convicted of sin and to come to obedient and saving faith in Christ?

It is important that we see what the bible shows us regarding this subject because misunderstanding the work of the Holy Spirit's influence upon the human heart has been the seedbed of much confusion and many a false doctrine. One such notion is that people have been led to believe they are under the influence of the Spirit of God when perhaps that are under the influence of their own emotions, or prejudices, or desires. I'm not suggesting that this is intentional, but rather that it is possible to be deceived by false teaching so that we mistake our own will for God's will. Doesn't it stand to reason that God's will for us (saint or sinner) is important and vital enough that it would be in more objective terms than something as subjective and unreliable as the evidence of our feelings and personal experiences? Let's explore that for a little bit today.

There are at least two basic beliefs that people hold today regarding how the Holy Spirit leads people. First, is the belief that the Holy Spirit operates upon the heart by exerting an influence apart from the word He has already given. This view suggests that the Holy Spirit is sent directly to the sinner's heart where He essentially performs a miracle there. Many years ago, it was common to hear people speak of "the mourner's bench". This notion of a miraculous operation of the Spirit on the sinner's heart was the foundation of why people came to a mourner's bench. People would come forward, perhaps at a service, and would kneel and pray for God to send the Holy Spirit to save them. Some would stay there for a long while and never receive an answer and leave disappointed while others claimed that God did send the Spirit and they were saved. That was several generations ago and most people today consider themselves too sophisticated for that kind of thing but the key belief of a direct operation of the Holy Spirit on the sinner's heart is certainly still held by many sincere people. They will contend that you can preach until you're out of breath and one will not be converted until the Holy Spirit comes and mysteriously operates upon that person's heart. This is predominately the influence of Calvinism, a doctrine that has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in recent years.

The second idea of how the Holy Spirit operates in conversion is that He does indeed convict and convert people, but He does so through the medium of His word. That the influence of the Spirit on the human heart should not be separated from the influence of the word that He already has revealed. You may say, does it really make a difference though? It does because beliefs have consequences. If we are

misguided about how the Holy Spirit converts people, how can we know whether we have been converted in the first place? With all the diverse and often conflicting claims that people make about the Holy Spirit's leading, how can we know who the Holy Spirit is really leading and who He is not? We could say by comparing the result with the word, but doesn't that bring us back to the original proposition? Again, the question is, does the Holy Spirit convict and convert by means of His word or does He do so apart from that word? The answer to that question makes a world of difference in what we believe about many other things.

Let's observe some truths about the Holy Spirit and about His influence on the heart. First, we should note that the Holy Spirit is a person and not a thing, a mere force, or a concept or idea. He is just as much a personality as God the Father and God the Son. He is referred to in the same manner in Matthew 28:19 when Christ on earth commanded His apostles to baptize people "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." People, I think, sometimes get the idea that the Holy Spirit is a mystical force instead of a personality just like the other two in the Godhead. He possesses the same divine nature and the same properties as the Father and the Son and is therefore an intelligent being that can and does communicate intelligently. He is not simply some force that inexplicably comes over people. The term "ghost" as the King James translation renders His title or description has a modern connotation that is a little misleading. He is not something spooky or an apparition that does mysterious things as some people mean when they use the word "ghost", it just means spirit, just as Jesus said in John 4:24, that God is Spirit. Well, is God just a force or a power? No! God is a divine being, a personality, in whom man is made in His image. Now, the Holy Spirit HAS power that He bestowed upon the apostles and others in the New Testament, but He, Himself, is a person. In John 16, Jesus used the personal pronoun "He" or "Him" at least nine times to refer to the Holy Spirit. If we would think of the Holy Spirit in the same way we think of God the Father or God the Son, much of the confusion and misunderstanding about His work could be cleared away. We can then see Him as an intelligent personality, and we can then see that would influence our minds in a rational and intelligent way just like God and Christ.

Now, how does He exert this influence? That's the question? In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul is reminding the church that he came to them at the first not preaching the wisdom of the world but the wisdom of God. He then shows them how that wisdom cannot be found in the mere thinking of men, but God has to reveal that wisdom to us. He did do through the agency of the apostles and the work of the Holy Spirit in and through them. He says in verses 9-13: "BUT AS IT IS WRITTEN: 'EYE HAS NOT SEEN, NOR EAR HEARD, NOR HAVE ENTERED INTO THE HEART OF MAN THE THINGS WHICH GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.'" That's not talking about heaven, but rather the plan of God to redeem man which was a mystery known only to God until the revelation of the New Testament. He continues, "But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God." Get what he's saying here! One cannot know what is in another person's mind until that person articulates those thoughts. The same is true with God. We don't somehow divine the mind and will of God through feelings, instincts, hunches, mysterious experiences, and so forth. God has made His mind known. How? He continues, "Now we (the apostles) have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual." Please note how the Spirit of God makes known the mind and thus the will of God. He does so through the WORDS he gave the apostles to speak and write.

Now, this is a pattern that we find all through the scriptures. We find the Holy Spirit convicting, persuading, and converting people through the word He revealed and confirmed in those who were inspired to speak it by miraculous signs and wonders. A study of the bible will quickly reveal that the Holy Spirit has always influenced men for right using divinely inspired but humanly spoken and written words. This was true in the Old Testament. We read in Nehemiah 9:30 where the people confessed what God had done for their people saying "Yet for many years You had patience with them, And testified against them by Your Spirit in Your prophets. Yet they would not listen..." How did the Spirit work to convict them of their sins? He testified through the prophets He inspired to speak the will of God. Yet, THEY would not listen! You see, they chose to resist the Holy Spirit by choosing to resisting the words the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets.

Before the coming of Christ, the Hebrew writer makes clear that God communicated with the people through the words of the inspired prophets. "God spoke in times past by the prophets and now has spoken to us by His Son..." (Hebrews 1:1) Peter said that "prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:21) David said, "The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me, And His word was on my tongue." (2 Samuel 23:2) We find this again and again. The Spirit convicted and instructed the people, not through things mystical and better felt than told, but rather through human language He inspired the holy prophets to speak and write down, which we know as the Old Testament scriptures.

When we turn to the New Testament, we find the same pattern. Jesus, in the farewell address we took our reading from at the beginning, told those He would send out as His 12 apostles, that they would be furnished with the help they needed by the Spirit to complete the task they were appointed to perform. The Spirit, for example, would teach them all things and bring to their remembrance all things He had said unto them. (John 14:26). Why would He do that? Because these mere human men could not remember all the things Jesus had said during His three and a half years with them and Jesus had not yet revealed all of the New Covenant truth to them. There was more to come after He left them here upon returning to heaven in the ascension. But the Holy Spirit would come alongside them and give them the words to speak and the power to prove that God was speaking through them. And according to John 16:8, it would be by this process that the Holy Spirit would "convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment:"

People (particularly those of a Calvinist viewpoint) say the preaching and hearing of the word and the convicting operation of the Holy Spirit are two different things. But no, you see, the Spirit of God convicts by means of the word when it is preached. Friend, the Holy Spirit gave and confirmed the word. Does it not thus have the power to do what it was sent out to do, which according to Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16 is to teach (doctrine), to reprove, to correct, and to instruct in righteousness? The bible itself says that it does. Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart." No, the word is not the Holy Spirit, but what I am saying is that the Holy Spirit is operating with and through the word when that word is preached, heard, believed, and obeyed.

That's why such emphasis is placed upon the preaching and hearing of the word as people were converted to Christ and the kingdom spread in the book of Acts. Yes, the Holy Spirit performed special operations at times to confirm certain newly revealed truths or the fact that prophecy had been fulfilled such as in Acts 2 and Acts 10. And yes, the Holy Spirit endowed people in the early church with miraculous gifts to edify the church and confirm the faith until the revelation of Jesus Christ was

completed. But people were not brought under conviction and brought to faith and obedience by an abstract, mysterious act of the Holy Spirit. It happened when they heard the word of God and received it as opposed to rejecting it.

There are numerous things that bible says the Spirit of God does to the heart and mind of man and ironically, the bible says the word the Spirit revealed does the same things. That does not mean the Spirit is the word or the word is the Spirit. That's just as false of a doctrine. It means the Spirit of God works through the word He gave to accomplish His purpose in the life of the person. The Spirit dwells within the heart of the believer. The bible plainly teaches that. And the Spirit may be involved in heaven's plan in ways heaven has not chosen to reveal to us. We would never want to deny that. But when you separate the influence of the Holy Spirit on the heart and mind of human beings from the influence of the word of the Holy Spirit, you are quickly launched into a dangerous and unfounded realm of speculation and subjectivism.

Thank God Christ returned to heaven and sent forth the Spirit because though Him and His work, the plan of redemption was made known and that plan (and the Person of that plan) is preached, it has the mighty power to convict us of our sins, teach us of Christ, and lead us to righteousness in Him. As Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes." The Spirit not only tells you in the bible that you are a sinner and that Christ is the Savior from sin and God's anointed Ruler and King, He also tells you if you place your faith in Christ Jesus (Acts 16:31), repent of your sins (Acts 17:30), confess Christ (Romans 10:10) and be baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of your sins (Acts 2:38) that you will be saved and be numbered among the redeemed, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The bible teaches that the person of the Holy Spirit can be resisted, grieved, and quenched. This is done when we reject the overtures of the Spirit made to us through the preaching of His word. Do not reject the call of the Spirit by rejecting the truth but yield to Him by yielding to His divinely inspired and written word and be saved.

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