The Role of the Holy Spirit in Biblical Interpretation
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I. Positively considered: What role the Spirit does play in biblical interpretation

A. The subjective role of producing reconciliation. Rom. 8.15.

1. Spirit destroys that enmity between rebellious creatures and God, which is the fundamental problem with interpretation (note that 2 Pet. 3.26 says that it is the “ignorant and unstable” who twist the scriptures to their own destruction).

2. While we are no longer fundamentally at enmity with God, the sanctifying work of the Spirit is not yet complete.

B. The Spirit’s role in enabling us to receive the truths of God [See the discussion in John Owen, vol. 4, pp. 118-235, “Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God.”]

1. Rom. 8:5-8  οἱ γὰρ κατὰ σάρκα ὄντες τὰ τῆς σαρκὸς φρονοῦσιν, οἱ δὲ κατὰ πνεῦμα τὰ τοῦ πνεύματος.

2. While we are no longer fundamentally at enmity with God, the sanctifying work of the Spirit is not yet complete.

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2. 1 Cor. 2:9-15 ἄλλα καθὼς γέγραπται, Ἄρθρον ὁ νόμος οὐκ εἶδεν καὶ οὐς οὐκ ἠκούσεν καὶ ἐπὶ καρδίαν ἄνθρωπον οὐκ ἀνέβη, ἀ ἠτοίμασεν ὁ θεὸς τοῖς ἀγαπαῖσιν αὐτῶν. 10 ἡμῖν δὲ ἀπεκάλυψεν ὁ θεὸς διὰ τοῦ πνεύματος· τὸ γὰρ πνεῦμα πάντα ἑράσκει, καὶ τὰ βαθύτατα τοῦ θεοῦ. 11 τίς γὰρ οὐδεν ἄνθρωπον τὰ τοῦ ἄνθρωπον εἰ μή τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ ἄνθρωπον τὸ ἐν αὐτῷ· οὕτως καὶ τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐδεὶς ἐγνωκεν εἰ μὴ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ θεοῦ. 12 ἡμεῖς δὲ οὐ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ κόσμου ἐλάβομεν ἀλλὰ τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα εἰδὼμεν τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ χαριστῆτα· ἡμῖν 13 ἀ καὶ λαλοῦμεν οὐκ ἐν διδακτοῖς ἄνθρωποις σοφίᾳ λόγους ἀλλ᾽ ἐν διδακτοῖς πνεύματος, πνευματικοῖς πνευματικὰ συγκρίνοντες. 14 ᾑ ἡμεῖς δὲ ἀνθρωπος οὐ δέχεται τὰ τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ θεοῦ, μωρία γὰρ αὐτῷ ἔστω, καὶ οὐ δύναται γνώρισαι, ὅτι πνευματικῶς ἀνακρίνεται. 15 ὁ δὲ πνευματικὸς ἀνακρίνει [τὰ] πάντα, αὐτὸς δὲ ὑπ᾽ οὐδείς ἀνακρίνεται. 16 τίς γὰρ ἐγνω νοῦν κυρίου, ὃς συμβιβάσῃ αὐτὸν· ήμεῖς δὲ νοῦν Χριστοῦ ἑξομείωσα.
a) 1:18-19 'Ο λόγος γὰρ ο ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ τοῖς μὲν ἀπολλυμένοις μωρία ἐστίν, τοῖς δὲ σωζόμενοις ἦμεν δύναμις θεοῦ ἐστίν. 19 γέγραπται γὰρ, Ἄπολω τὴν σωφίαν τῶν σοφῶν καὶ τὴν σύνεσιν τῶν συνετῶν ἀθετήσας.

b) 1:21-25 21 ἐπειδὴ γὰρ ἐν τῇ σοφίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ἔγνω ὁ κόσμος διὰ τῆς σοφίας τῶν θεῶν, εὐδόκησαν ὁ θεὸς διὰ τῆς μωρίας τοῦ κηρύγματος σάσαι τοὺς πιστεύοντας· 22 ἐπειδὴ καὶ Ἰουδαίοι σημεία αἰτοῦσιν καὶ Ἑλληνες σοφίαν ἵπτονται, 23 ἡμεῖς δὲ κηρύσσομεν Χριστὸν ἐσταυρωμένον, Ἰουδαίοις μὲν σκάνδαλον, ἐθνεσιν δὲ μωρίαν, 24 αὐτοῖς δὲ τοῖς κλητοῖς, Ἰουδαίοις τε καὶ Ἑλληνες, Χριστὸν θεοῦ δύναμιν καὶ θεοῦ σοφίαν· 25 ὅτι τὸ μωρόν τοῦ θεοῦ σωφρότερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐστίν καὶ τὸ ἀσθενές τοῦ θεοῦ ἰσχυρότερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων.

c) 1:30 εἰς αὐτοῦ δὲ ὑμεῖς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ιησοῦ, ὡς ἐγεννήθη σοφία ἦμεν ἀπὸ θεοῦ, δικαιοσύνη τε καὶ ἀγίασμα καὶ ἀπολύτρωσις,

d) 2:1-2 Κἂν ἔλθων πρὸς υμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, ἤλθον οὐ καθ' ὑπεροχὴν λόγον ἡ σοφίας καταγγέλλων ἦμιν τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ θεοῦ. 2 οὐ γὰρ ἐκρίνα τι εἰδέναι ἐν ὑμῖν εἰ μὴ Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν καὶ τοῦτον ἐσταυρωμένον.

e) 2:4-7.4 καὶ ὁ λόγος μου καὶ τὸ κήρυγμα μου οὐκ ἐν πειθοῖς[5] σοφίας [λόγοις] ἀλλ' ἐν ἀποδείξει πνεύματος καὶ δυνάμεως, 5 ἵνα τῇ πίστει ὑμῶν μὴ ἦν σοφίας ἀνθρώπων ἀλλ' ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ. 6 Σοφίαν δὲ λαλοῦμεν ἐν τοῖς τελείοις, σοφίαν δὲ οὐ τοῦ αἰώνος τοῦτον οὐδὲ τῶν ἀρχῶν τοῦ αἰώνος τούτου τῶν καταργουμένων· 7 ἀλλὰ λαλοῦμεν θεοῦ σοφίαν

ii. “wisdom” which the world does not have in 1 Cor. 2: --Christ crucified for sinners--2:7-8-- 7 ἀλλὰ λαλοῦμεν θεοῦ σοφίαν ἐν μυστηρίῳ, τὴν ἀποκεκρυμμένην, ἢν προώρισαν ὁ θεὸς πρὸ τῶν αἰῶνων εἰς δόξαν ἡμῶν· 8 ἢν οὐδεὶς τῶν ἀρχῶν τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου ἐγνωκεν, εἰ γὰρ ἐγνωσαν, οὐκ ἐν τοῖς κύριοις τῆς δόξης ἐσταυρώσασαν. iii. “the things God has given us”--2:12 ἡμεῖς δὲ οὐ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ κόσμου ἐλάβομεν ἀλλὰ τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, ὡς εἰδόμεν τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ χαρισθέντα ἡμῖν.
iv. This consistent with the role of the Spirit in bringing glory to Christ. The Messiah is the One who sends the Spirit (Jn. 15.26), which Spirit will in turn bear witness to the Messiah (Jn. 15.27) and glorify the Messiah (Jn. 16.14). He will not bring something distinct from or different from what Christ brought, rather, “He will take what is mine and declare it to you” (Jn. 16.14).

b. The *nature* of the Spirit’s revelation—knowing as receiving (the Reformation’s internal testimony of the Spirit).

1. “knowing”—This passage refers to knowing a great deal, and, at one level, the world *does* know the gospel; it could not render the opinion that the gospel is “foolish” or “weak” if it had no knowledge of it. Further, this knowledge is, in some sense, correct, because the cross is weak and is foolish by the world’s standards. Paul does not argue, then, that the world is ignorant of the gospel, nor does he argue that the world *misunderstands* the gospel; but rather, that the world’s *evaluation* of the gospel is wrong.

2. “receiving”—Note that Paul does not argue that the worldly man is unable to understand the gospel; but that he is unable to receive the gospel. 2:14—14 ὑιοκές δὲ ἄνθρωπος οὐ δέχεται τὰ τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ θεοῦ, μωρία γὰρ αὐτῷ ἐστὶν, καὶ οὐ δύναται γνωναι, ὃ πνευματικῶς ἀνακρίνεται.

3. Conclusions about the nature of the Spirit’s revelation from Clement Read Vaughan, *The Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, pp. 236-37: (Vaughan mentions the analogy of the knowledge of a piece of music by a non-musician and a musician, and the analogy of the knowledge of a law by a merchant and by a statesman) “In the line of these analogies why should any one doubt that there should be an intellectual knowledge of religious truth, and a different kind of spiritual knowledge of the very same truth, the one knowledge making him acquainted with the fact that there is such a truth, with its intellectual limitations and relations; the other, with its deep and true significance—its moral weight—its profound appeal to the whole affections of the soul. It is absolutely certain as a matter of fact in a human experience…that there is such a difference in the apprehension of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in all the
distinct truths embraced in the system. One man may know and honestly believe the fact that God so loved the world as to send his Son to redeem it,….yet he sees nothing in these ideas to move his feelings or to induce him to action. His knowledge of the glad tidings of great joy brings no joy to him; he remains unmoved and uncheered by it….But another man, who apprehends his personal need of an effectual relief, may see into the real nature and significance of the gospel remedies that he catches the joy that is in them; he realizes that his sin may be forgiven him; his knowledge now acquaints him with the power that is in these glorious conceptions.”

John Owen, op. cit., p. 134: “But there is an internal subjective revelation, whereby no new things are revealed unto our minds, or are not outwardly revealed anew, but our minds are enabled to discern the things that are revealed already.”

p. 156: “The things revealed in the Scripture are expressed in propositions whose words and terms are intelligible unto the common reason of mankind. Every rational man, especially if he be skilled in those common sciences and arts which all writings refer unto, may, without any especial aid of the Holy Ghost, know the meaning of the propositions that are laid down in, or drawn from the Scripture; yea, they can do so who believe not one word of it to be true, and they do so, as well as the best of them, who have no other help in the understanding of the Scripture but their own reason, let them profess to believe what they will. And whatever men understand of the meaning of the words, expressions, and propositions in the Scripture, if they believe not the things which they declare, they do not in any sense know the mind and will of God in them; for to know a thing as the mind of God, and not to assent unto its truth, implieth a contradiction.”

C. Conclusions: The Holy Spirit plays a subjective, not objective, role in biblical interpretation. In reconciling our sinful hearts to God, he promotes within us a similar desire to love and serve God as we have to love and serve our natural parents. Further, he particularly gives us the desire to embrace and receive the things of God. In doing this,
he makes us willing to work hard to understand scripture, and willing to embrace the conclusions of our study of scripture.

Our view is distinct from the view of Rome. Rome argued that the difficulty of understanding scripture aright was due to scripture’s obscurity and perplexity; Protestants responded by saying the difficulty was due to our obscurity and perplexity.

So Luther: “In a word, if the Scripture be obscure or ambiguous, what need was there for its being sent down from heaven? Are we not obscure and ambiguous enough in ourselves, without an increase of it by obscurity, ambiguity, and darkness being sent down unto us from heaven?…

But I fear I must already be burdensome, even to the insensible, by dwelling so long and spending so much strength upon a point so fully clear; but it was necessary that that impudent and blasphemous saying, ‘the Scriptures are obscure,’ should thus be drowned. And you, too my friend Erasmus, know very well what you are saying, when you deny that the Scripture is clear, for you at the same time drop into my ear this assertion: ‘it of necessity follows therefore, that all your saints whom you adduce, are much less clear.’ And truly it would be so. For who shall certify us concerning their light, if you make the Scriptures obscure? Therefore they who deny the all-clearness and all-plainness of the Scriptures, leave us nothing else but darkness.” (Bondage of the Will, pp. 108,9).

On the other side of the Reformers, battling from another direction, were the anabaptists, who joined Rome in claiming scripture to be intellectually unclear and in need of further revelation and information. Calvin, with Luther, understands the scriptures to be clear, taken in their plain sense: Against the Libertines, Farley, 222: “In fact, they have so deformed it (scripture) that they give about as much honor to the Word as if they denied it altogether. For they consistently maintain this principle: that Scripture, taken in its natural sense, is but a dead letter and only kills. Thus they abandon it in order to come to the life-giving Spirit… Although this sect is certainly different from the papists’, inasmuch as it is a hundred times worse and more pernicious, nevertheless both of them together hold this principle in common: to change Scripture into allegories and to long for a better and more perfect wisdom than we find in it. And together both as a coverup appeal to Saint Paul’s statement that ‘the letter kills’ (2 Cor. 3.6).”

Thus, the Holy Spirit is most necessary in removing sin and love of sin that effectively prevent us from embracing and receiving the things of God.
II. Negatively considered: What role the Spirit does not play in biblical interpretation. The Holy Spirit does not give us insight into the correct interpretation of a given biblical passage. (Caveat: in saying the Spirit does not do this, we are not saying He is incapable of doing this, nor are we denying that, in some extraordinary circumstance, He might do so, or even has done so. What we are denying is the propriety of expecting Him to do so. We are denying that it is a regular part of His role in the present church-order to reveal to individuals the meaning of a biblical passage.)

A. Insights are a common phenomenon
   1. Common to redeemed and unredeemed
   2. Common to all fields of endeavor

B. Insights are a natural phenomenon
   1. In saying “natural,” we do not mean insignificant. Many natural phenomena are breath-taking; rainbows, sunsets, a child’s first steps or words, child-birth, Yitzak Perelman playing the violin, et. al. In their beauty, in the delight they bring, these events all seem sublime; yet we know they are in fact “natural.” These events are the natural consequences of a magnificent Creator’s having made the world this way.
   2. In saying “natural,” we mean that insights are nothing other than the mind doing what it most naturally does, thousands of times daily, yet doing it in a circumstance where we were temporarily befuddled. “Association” is the most natural capacity of the human mind; in dreams, for instance, the mind continues its associative acts, even though it ceases from its critical acts. When we are working on a problem of some sort, our minds make many associations, most of which do not assist in solving the problem. When a particular association pops into our head, that appears to solve the problem, we call it an “insight,” and we say, “I’ve got it!”

C. Insights are exhilarating. Because the problem/confusion is so disturbing, when the insight arrives, we experience great delight and satisfaction. Every pious person wants to attribute this to God, as the Author of every good and perfect gift. And, of course, the God of Creation and Providence ought to be thanked and praised for every such true insight.

D. Insights are sometimes wrong. On occasion, the “insight” that appeared to be so exhilarating, and so manifestly a solution to a problem, turns out to be not a solution at all. Upon further reflection, or testing of the thesis, we find it to be wrong.

E. Insight into the meaning of the text at least could be accounted for on the basis of the fact that this is the way our great God has made the world.
F. Despite this, many people believe that the Holy Spirit does give them insight into the correct interpretation of the biblical text, because the natural, common human phenomenon of insight is *mis-labeled* by their ministers and spiritual leaders as a supernatural phenomenon.

III. Evaluation of those misunderstandings of scripture which suggest that the Spirit does give supernatural insight into the interpretation of texts of scripture.


1. To whom is this addressed? The disciples in the Upper Room. The twice-repeated ὑμῖν of v. 26 has the same referent as the ὑμῖν at the end of 25 and the end of 26.

2. What is promised to the disciples? The Holy Spirit.

3. What will the Holy Spirit do? He will teach-remind (note the parallel διδάξει πάντα καὶ υπομνήσει υμᾶς πάντα). His “teaching,” even among the disciples, is not new information, but a remembrance of the many things which Jesus had already said.

4. What will be the content of the Spirit’s teaching-reminding among the disciples? What is the referent of the πάντα? This is answered by the relative clause, ἢ εἶπον ὑμῖν [ἐγώ]. This clause is almost certainly further defined by the first clause of 25, Ταύτα λελάληκα ὑμῖν παρ’ ὑμῖν μένων.

5. Conclusions from John 14.25,26. This text records a special promise of the Holy Spirit to the disciples guaranteeing that they will be helped to remember what Jesus taught them while he was with them. A number of other texts affirm that this is precisely what happened.

a. Jn. 2.20-22--εἶπαν οὖν οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, Τεσσεράκοντα καὶ ἐξ ἔτσιν οἴκοδομήθη ὁ ναός αὐτός, καὶ οὐ ἔν τρισίν ἡμέρας ἐγερεῖς αὐτόν; 2.21 ἐκεῖνος δὲ ἔλεγεν περὶ τοῦ ναοῦ τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ. 2.22 ὅτε οὖν ἠγέρθη ἐκ νεκρῶν, ἐμνήσθησαν οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ ὅτι τοῦτο ἔλεγεν, καὶ ἐπίστευσαν τῇ γραφῇ καὶ τῷ λόγῳ ὅν εἶπεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς.

B. John 15:26-27 --"Neither give ye the children of the bridegroom wine to drink till I come; and when I come, I will give you up that you may drink the new wine of my Spirit." 15.27 as "the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees it nor knows it. But you know it, for it abides with you and is in you. 1. To whom is this promise addressed? To the disciples again (same discourse context, and also, 27 defines the 2d person plural as those who "are" "do" "are doing" "do doing" the going of the Spirit).

2. What is promised? A special capacity to testify about the Christ. Note the difference between the denying, weeping Peter, and the emboldened Peter subsequent to the resurrection appearances and outpouring of the Spirit.

C. 1 John 2:19-27-- ἐξ ἡμῶν ἐξῆλθαν ἄλλα οὐκ ἦσαν ἡμῶν ἐξ ἡμῶν-- εἰ γὰρ ἐξ ἡμῶν ἦσαν, μεμενήκεισαν ἐν μεθ' ἡμῶν-- ἄλλα ἤνα διανοηθῶς ὅτι οὐκ εἰσίν πάντες ἡμῶν. 2.20 καὶ ὑμεῖς χρίσμα ἔχετε ἀπὸ τοῦ ἁγίου καὶ ὑμᾶς πάντες. 2.21 οὐκ ἔγραψα ἦμιν ὅτι οὐκ οἴδατε τὴν ἀληθείαν ἄλλα ὅτι οἴδατε αὐτὴν καὶ ὅτι πᾶν ψεύδος ἐκ τῆς ἀληθείας οὐκ ἔστιν. 2.22 Τίς ἐστιν ὁ ψεύτης εἰ μὴ ὁ ἀρνοῦμενος ὅτι Ἰησοῦς οὐκ ἐστιν ὁ Χριστὸς; οὔτος ἐστιν ὁ ἀντίχριστος, ὁ ἀρνοῦμενος τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὸν υἱὸν. 2.23 πᾶς ὁ ἀρνοῦμενος τὸν υἱὸν οὐδὲ τὸν πατέρα ἔχει, ὁ ὁμολογῶν τὸν υἱὸν καὶ τὸν πατέρα ἔχει. 2.24 ὑμεῖς ὅ ἦκουσατε ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, ἐν ὑμῖν μενέω. ἐὰν ἐν ὑμῖν μεινῃ ὁ ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ἦκουσατε, καὶ ὑμεῖς ἐν τῷ υἱῷ καὶ ἐν τῷ πατρὶ μενείτε. 2.25 καὶ αὕτη ἡ ἔπαγγελια ἢν αὐτὸς ἐπηγγέλατο ἡμῖν, τὴν ζωὴν τὴν αἰώνιον. 2.26 Ταῦτα ἔγραψα ὑμῖν περὶ τῶν πλανώντων ὑμᾶς. 2.27 καὶ ὑμεῖς τὸ χρίσμα ὅ ἐλάβετε ἀπ' αὐτοῦ, μένετε ἐν ὑμῖν καὶ οὐ χρείαν ἔχετε ὅνα τις διδάσκῃ ὑμᾶς, ἄλλῳ ὡς τὸ αὐτοῦ χρίσμα διδάσκῃ ὑμᾶς περὶ πάντων καὶ ἀληθείας ἔστιν καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ψεύδος, καὶ καθὼς ἐδίδαξεν ὑμᾶς, μένετε ἐν αὐτῷ.

1. No teachers? John knows that among the gifts given by the Spirit are those of teaching (Eph. 4.11; 1 Co. 12.28). Indeed, in this very letter, John himself teaches the church. Thus, these verses cannot be claiming that the believers do not need the very gifts that God has given, that are being exercised in the very process of the writing of the letter. Rather, the “teaching” must be, contextually, confined to the issues at stake, respectively.

2. What is the issue? What is at issue is those who are wandering astray, denying Christ (περὶ τῶν πλανώντων, οὕτως ἐστιν ὁ ἀντίχριστος, ὁ ἀρνοῦμενος τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὸν υἱὸν.). Regarding this particular wandering, the believers need no teacher to tell them this is wrong. The indwelling Spirit is adequate guide to prevent one from denying Christ.
3. “All things” (27). The anointing does not teach Calculus, or world geography. Nor does this anointing dispense with the Spirit-gifted teachers in the Church. Rather, the Spirit’s activity is sufficient to prevent the Church from being led astray by those who deny the Father and the Son.

D. Conclusions from these texts. Although frequently cited in defense of the “inspired insight” theory, these texts in fact teach no such thing.

IV. Conclusions of our analysis. What may we, as Bible interpreters, rightly expect from God the Holy Spirit? That He will increasingly take away our innate rebellion and hostility to the ways of God, which is the primary obstacle to our “receiving” God’s truths. In this way, He will “illumine” us, not by adding content to the objective revelation in scripture, but by subduing the rebellion that subjectively prohibits the truth from being received and embraced.