

### **The Book of Acts (#12); Conversion to Christ (3)**

We are addressing the role and work of the Holy Spirit in bringing lost souls to salvation in Jesus Christ. We have been focusing, of course, on the day of Pentecost, in which the Holy Spirit is clearly set forth as the one who brings sinners to repent of their sins and to believe, submit, and commit to become disciples of Jesus Christ. But although we are giving emphasis to the role and work of the Holy Spirit, we do not exclude the work of grace on Pentecost that was performed by all three persons of the holy Trinity. The entire Godhead was at work in bringing these people to salvation. What transpired on this remarkable day was the purpose of God the *Father* in sending His *Son* to reconcile the fallen world unto Himself through the power of the *Holy Spirit*. But it is our intention to trace the work of God's saving grace in the lives of these 3,000 converts on the day of Pentecost with particular attention to the role and work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. In doing so we may learn better not only what He has done in our lives, if we are indeed the Lord's true disciples, but it will also assist us in our own desires and efforts to expand the kingdom of God in the world in which the Lord placed us.

However, a word of qualification, perhaps even caution, may be beneficial for us. Although the work of the Holy Spirit is evident in each and all of the lives of these converts on Pentecost, Acts 2 is not a detailed plan of the manner in which we are to bear witness to all lost souls in the world on every occasion. Witnessing to others of Jesus Christ is a dynamic work and process rather than our rehearsal of an invariable message that we give out on every occasion to anyone and everyone we meet. We are to be as the Lord Jesus in His ministry to souls during His earthly sojourn. We are first to assess prayerfully the spiritual condition of the person for whom we have concern--we are to consider where he is before the Lord. Then we are to seek to be used of the Lord to lead that soul to learn the next truth the Lord would have him learn, or to learn the next step the Lord would have him take, that may eventually lead him to become a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

In some ways the event of Pentecost was quite unique and the message that Peter proclaimed was specifically tailored to these Jewish people at this time and in this place. In other words, although we can trace the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of these people to be the same work that He performs in the hearts and lives of all people who are brought to salvation in Jesus Christ, the content of the message on this occasion was rather specialized. When Peter stood before this gathering of people on Pentecost, he knew a great deal about the spiritual condition of them and what they needed to hear regarding the Word of God so that the Lord would bring about their conversion. They were Jews, well informed of the history of the nation of Israel, of God's law that He had given to them, law that they had transgressed. Peter knew that they were in expectation of the promised messianic kingdom, looking for the Son of David their Messiah who would bring them deliverance and would remove from them their transgression before God. Peter could appeal to them that they had both seen and heard the gracious and miraculous words and works of Jesus among them, giving clear and ample evidence that He was their promised King, but that they had unjustly rejected and crucified Him. Peter had but to declare the resurrection and enthronement of Jesus Christ by God the Father and to substantiate his words by quoting the holy Scriptures, in order to convince them of their egregious sin and their total inability to bring about their redemption from sin and reconciliation to their God, so that they might become citizens of the promised kingdom of God. He left them helpless and hopeless apart from calling upon the Lord Jesus alone to be their Lord and Savior.

But the nature and content of this Pentecost sermon may have been wholly inadequate to bring about the conversion of those who had not the background and understanding of these Jewish people. The same work of grace would need to be performed by the Spirit of God in any and all people to whom the church would bear witness, but the blessing of God and the work of the Holy Spirit may only result if other matters were first proclaimed rather than the content of what Peter declared on this day. It would be good for us to

ask, therefore, what message are we to proclaim to sinners in our world in order to bring them to salvation in Christ? Let us ponder this question.

## **I. What message are we to proclaim to sinners in order to bring them to salvation in Christ?**

Let us consider the passage of Acts 17 in which the apostle Paul proclaimed the gospel to the people of Athens, Greece. It is important for us to understand the entire context, so let us read Acts 17:16 through verse 34.

<sup>16</sup>Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. <sup>17</sup>Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup>Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, “What does this babbling want to say?”

Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,” because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.

<sup>19</sup>And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? <sup>20</sup>For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean.” <sup>21</sup>For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

<sup>22</sup>Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; <sup>23</sup>for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: <sup>24</sup>“God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. <sup>25</sup>Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. <sup>26</sup>And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, <sup>27</sup>so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; <sup>28</sup>for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’ <sup>29</sup>Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising. <sup>30</sup>Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup>because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”

<sup>32</sup>And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, “We will hear you again on this matter.” <sup>33</sup>So Paul departed from among them. <sup>34</sup>However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them. (Acts 17:6-34)

If we were to consider this passage in detail, we would use the following outline:

1. Paul proclaimed the gospel to everyone when he had the opportunity to do so. (Acts 17:16-18)
2. Paul proclaimed the “unknown” God to them as the knowable God. (17:19-23)
3. Paul declared the “unknown” God as the Creator of all things. (17:24-25)
4. Paul declared that God is the Sovereign Ruler of all things. (Acts 17:26-29)
5. Paul admonished his listeners of their ignorance of the true God and exhorted them to forsake what they had formally believed and practiced. (Acts 17:30-31)
6. The people reacted and responded to Paul’s declaration and rejected his admonition. (Acts 17:32-34)

The Apostle was in his second missionary journey, in which he had ventured into Europe (Macedonia) from Asia Minor (modern day western Turkey). He had travelled across the Aegean Sea to Philippi, which

lie on the coast of Macedonia (Acts 16:11ff), where he began a church with the conversion of Lydia and her household, and the Gentile jailer and his family. Then Paul and Silas travelled westward to Thessalonica, there founding another church. Leaving after a brief period of evangelistic ministry, Paul travelled southward to Berea and then arrived later in Athens, where we find him in the passage before us.

Wherever Paul travelled, he proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ. When he arrived to Athens, he began to preach Jesus Christ in every place to everyone that would hear him. His concern for the souls of the people, even while he was appalled by their gross idolatry, moved him to stand forth and proclaim Jesus Christ openly and boldly. He first proclaimed Christ in the Jewish synagogue, then to the Greeks in the marketplace, and later in the day he preached Christ on Mars Hill in the Areopagus before the more “intellectual” citizens of Athens.

Paul proclaimed the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is not to say, however, that the content and nature of his sermons were always the same, that he preached the identical sermon before every crowd. Rather, whenever and wherever Paul proclaimed the gospel, he did so with consideration given to the background and capabilities of his hearers. After he assessed the spiritual condition and the knowledge of spiritual truth of his hearers, he then brought them to understand who Jesus Christ was, that He had been crucified in order to atone for sinners, and that He was raised from the dead and was enthroned as the Lord of heaven and earth. Therefore, depending on whom he was addressing, Paul would shape the content of his message.

We read in Acts 17:17 that Paul initially reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue of Athens. This was his common practice in the town or city to which he travelled. Paul could assume in the Jewish synagogue that his hearers already knew and believed much of what he would proclaim to them. There were primarily Jews in the synagogue, but there were also probably present some Gentiles, who had heard and believed the Hebrew Scriptures and gathered weekly with the Jews in the synagogue. Again we read of Paul in Acts 17:17, “Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshippers.”<sup>1</sup> Paul knew that this gathering knew of the true God of the Hebrew Scriptures, that the true God is the Creator and the Sovereign Ruler (King) of all of His creation. He knew that they knew God’s law, which reflected and revealed God’s holy nature and which revealed to them their sin and His wrath upon them for their sin. He knew that they knew this true God had promised to send a Savior, even the Messiah, who would redeem them from their sin and restore them unto Himself through an everlasting covenant. Paul could stand before these Jewish people in their synagogue and declare to them: “Jesus of Nazareth is this promised Messiah whom God the Father had sent to die by crucifixion, whom He had raised from death and enthroned as the promised Son of David over the long-anticipated kingdom of God.”

But then we read that Paul left the Jewish synagogue and went into the marketplace of Athens. There he spoke “with those who happened to be there” (17:17b). Paul could not assume that these people were informed of the truth of God’s Word as those in the synagogue a few minutes beforehand. These marketplace people did not have the world view of the Jewish people shaped by the Hebrew Scriptures. These people in the marketplace embraced the worldview and the belief systems of the world in which they lived and moved. Athens was the center of philosophical thinking of the day. It was in the marketplace that Paul encountered “certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.” These were the two most popular philosophies at that time. These people saw and interpreted the world from the perspective advocated by these two philosophical, even religious, thought systems. Paul tailored his message to proclaim God’s Word to these Athenians differently than when he had declared the Word of God to the Jews in the synagogue. **Matthew Henry** made this point:

We have here St. Paul’s sermon at Athens. Divers sermons we have had, which the apostles preached to the Jews, or such Gentiles as had an acquaintance with and veneration for the Old Testament, and were worshippers of the true and living God; and all they had to do with them was to open and allege that Jesus is the Christ; but here we have a sermon to heathens, that worshipped false gods, and were without the true God in the world, and to them the scope of their discourse was quite

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<sup>1</sup> The Gentiles in the synagogue were probably Gentile God-fearers, or the “devout worshippers” in the ESV and a few other English translations.

different from what it was to the other. In the former case their business was to lead their hearers by prophecies and miracles to the knowledge of the Redeemer, and faith in Him; in the latter it was to lead them by the common works of providence to the knowledge of the Creator, and the worship of Him.

It was in the marketplace that Paul encountered some more “sophisticated, intellectual Greeks. They escorted Paul to Mars Hill, the place where philosophical and rhetorical exposition was commonly made to the intelligentsia of the city.

<sup>19</sup>And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? <sup>20</sup>For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean.” <sup>21</sup>For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

When Paul was before them, he proclaimed a message aimed at the same end—the conversion of souls, but the content of his proclamation was quite different from that which he gave within the Jewish synagogue.

A wise assessment of the ones we are addressing will enable us to present the Word of God to them in an appropriate and understandable manner. We should ask the Lord to help us understand the social and cultural context of those we desire to tell the gospel, and then ask Him to help us apply the Word of God to their mind, affections, and will, trusting the Holy Spirit to bless His Word to accomplish a work of grace in their souls.

The people of the world today, whom we attempt to bring the gospel, are more like the crowds on Mars Hill than those who gathered in the Jewish synagogue of Athens. We cannot assume that people know the nature and ways of the true God. Most know very little about the true nature and character of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And there are some who may be like the Gentiles of Ephesus who responded to Paul’s question, “We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit” (Acts 20:2). The people we encounter in today’s world may have many strange and twisted opinions and perceptions of who God is and what He is like. We should perhaps initially address them as Paul did on Mars hill. We make known to them who the true God is and who He is not—He is the Creator of all things and the Governor over all of history. He is not to be conceived in terms that idolators advocate regarding Him, for God is a Spirit, who is holy in character, who is everywhere in His fullness, who sees and assesses the beliefs, morals, words, and actions of all who dwell on the face of His world. And this God, whom you do not know, has appointed a day for His judgment of all mankind. He will judge and condemn all sinners according to His laws, banishing them from His glorious presence and excluding them from Paradise in which He and His people will dwell together for eternity. This coming judgment will most certainly occur, for God testified of its certainty when He raised His Son Jesus Christ from the dead to be the Savior of His people and the Judge and Executioner of His enemies.

Paul proclaimed to these people the kingdom of God with Jesus Christ as its Lord. But this was, of course, as much as the apostle could proclaim to these people on this occasion. But he did make arrangements to speak later more fully and clearly about these matters to those who were interested and concerned to consider what he had taught them. May our Lord grant us wisdom and grace to know what, when, and how we may declare Jesus Christ before an unbelieving world.

Let us return to Acts 2. In our study of the day of Pentecost with our desire and effort to set forth the work of the Holy Spirit in the salvation of sinners, we first addressed the fact that *the Holy Spirit enables the gospel to be proclaimed in truth and with power*. Let us now give attention more specifically to the grace of the Holy Spirit working through His Word to bring a soul to salvation.

## **II. The Holy Spirit illuminates sinners to biblical truth (2:37).**

As Peter concluded his sermon on Pentecost, he declared, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). What was

the reaction and response of his hearers? We read in verse 37, “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’”

Now these people had been exposed to the teaching and the miraculous ministry of the Lord Jesus throughout His three year ministry and particularly in Jerusalem in the days leading up to His arrest, trials, and crucifixion. But they had been unmoved by all that had been so plainly and obviously displayed before them--witnessing miracles and even hearing the truth of the Word of God will not result in the conversion of souls, unless the Holy Spirit is working in conjunction with the Word of God.

These Jews had openly rejected Jesus as the Christ and had wickedly brought Him to His crucifixion. But something quite remarkable had occurred. Here in Acts 2:37 we see a sudden, incredible transformation in their comprehension and reaction to what had transpired. Here we read that they had an understanding of who Jesus was in truth and they knew that they had so egregiously maligned and crucified Him, and that the consequences of their sinful actions was God’s just damnation of them.

They were now seeking and willing to receive instruction and guidance from the ‘Galilean’ followers of the One they had rejected and unjustly condemned. They came to understand spiritual truth and the true nature of their sin that left them desperate and despairing of their sinful condition before God. God had illuminated their souls to the truth of who Jesus was, the truth of what they had done to them, the truth of their own just condemnation before God, and the truth of their own inability to bring about remedy to their damned condition.

The metaphor that the holy Scriptures employ to describe their former condition and their sudden change in belief and attitude toward themselves and the Lord is that of illumination. One of the major works of God in effectual calling is the grace of *illumination* whereby He imparts spiritual truth to His people. In order for God’s chosen people to receive salvation they first need to come to know of their need of salvation and to know of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This knowledge of Who God is, of who we are as guilty, condemned and helpless sinners, of Who Christ is as the Savior of sinners, is a work of God’s grace in us. Apart from the illuminating grace of God wrought by the Holy Spirit, there is no salvation possible for sinners.

#### **A. The need for spiritual illumination**

The Word of God teaches in many places that for a fallen, sinful man or woman to be saved from sin, he must be enlightened to spiritual truth by the Holy Spirit using and blessing the Word of God to his lost soul. The metaphor of light is often set forth as true spiritual knowledge of oneself and of Jesus Christ. Spiritual error and ignorance is often displayed in the Scriptures as *spiritual darkness*, even spiritual blindness. True knowledge of God’s will and ways unto salvation is set forth commonly as *spiritual light*. Because of sin, the fallen world is in *darkness* and cannot see the *light* (true knowledge) of God in Christ so as to be transformed by Him.

The metaphor of light cannot be fully appreciated unless it is contrasted with its opposite, that being *darkness*. For even though Jesus declared that He is the Light of the world, He mentioned it in the context of a dark world. Again we read, “Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in *darkness*, but have the light of life.”

Darkness is a metaphor that depicts lifelessness, aimlessness, confusion, deception, and evil. Light dispels darkness, in that light produces life, gives clear direction to the aimless, clarity of understanding to the confused, truth to the deceived, and exposure of evil by the appearance or presence of that which is good. The only certain remedy for darkness is light. Light dispels darkness. Only Jesus Christ can illuminate our darkened souls to the truth of who God is, what God would have us believe, and reveal to us and enable us to know how He would have us live before Him, and He does so through the blessed Holy Spirit.

It is suggested in John’s Gospel the essential need for people to “follow” Jesus Christ as the Light, and that if they fail to do so, there will be serious, dire, consequences. In John 12 we read our Lord’s exhortation:

“A little while longer the light is with you. Walk while you have the light, *lest darkness overtake you*; he who walks in darkness does not know where he is going. <sup>36</sup>While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.” (John 12:35f)

If we fail to believe, even to follow Jesus by looking to Him and His Word to direct us on what to believe and on how to live, we will be overtaken by darkness, even though we may have walked a while with some benefit of the light that had illuminated our path for a while. We could cite instances of people who seemed to have seen and believed on Jesus, and it had appeared that for a while they had followed Jesus as lighting their way of thinking and living. But then they gave off looking to Him and following Him, and they were again enveloped in darkness. They are again clueless and often care-less about the things of Jesus Christ.

Spiritual darkness is illustrated in the Word of God by those afflicted with physical blindness. When Jesus Christ healed the blind, He enabled them who could only perceive of darkness to suddenly see light. And so it is with all the fallen human race that are born in sin and are spiritually blind, that is, they dwell in spiritual darkness. They need the grace of God to heal their spiritual blindness in order for them to see, or understand spiritual truth regarding themselves and the way of salvation in Jesus Christ alone.

In John 9 we read of Jesus healing a man who had been born blind. Here was a poor blind man. He was afflicted with two evils, for he was *blind*, but he was also *powerless* or *helpless*, for he was *poor*. Had he been poor, but could see, he would have had hope to lift himself from poverty. Had he been blind, but rich, he could have provided a measure of comfort for himself, even in his blindness. But this man was a sad case. He was both blind and poor. We see that he was begging at the entrance to Jericho. But this man, though a poor beggar, had what others of Jericho did not have. He understood who Jesus was and He had faith in what Jesus could do for him. This physically blind man sets before us the nature and condition of spiritual blindness that characterizes all people born into this world. Each of us was born into this world spiritually blind and continue in spiritual darkness unless and until the Lord heals us of our spiritual blindness and enables us to have spiritual sight given to us that we might understand and receive the things of God.

Becoming a Christian depicted in the Holy Scriptures is that of a blind man incapable of seeing or understanding spiritual truths is a common teaching of Scripture. Paul declared that satan has blinded us to our true spiritual condition and to the way of remedy that only can be remedied by the Lord issuing the command to restore spiritual sight (light) to us. Paul wrote,

But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, <sup>4</sup>*whose minds the god of this age has blinded*, who do not believe, *lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them*. <sup>5</sup> For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup>For *it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*. (2 Cor. 4:4-6)

**John Newton** (1725-1807), the converted former slave trader, wrote the hymn, *Amazing Grace*. One of the lines of his hymn expressed this truth in his own life in the first verse. It reads,

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found;  
*Was blind, but now I see.*

Newton became a faithful pastor and his collected works are available today. In volume 1 of his works, there is recorded a letter that he wrote which has the subject title, “I was once BLIND, but now I SEE.” He wrote these words of the spiritual blindness of the human race:

The reason why men in a natural state are utterly ignorant of spiritual truth is, that they are wholly destitute of a faculty suited to their perception. A remarkable instance we have in the absurd construction of Nicodemus put upon what our Lord had spoken to him concerning the new birth. And in the supernatural communication of this spiritual faculty, by the agency of the Holy Spirit, I apprehend the inimitable and abiding criterion, which is the subject of our inquiry, does primarily consist. Those passages of Scripture wherein the gospel truth is compared to light, lead to a familiar illustration of my meaning. Men by nature are stark blind with respect to this light; by grace the eyes of the understanding are opened. Among a number of blind men, some may be more ingenious and of better capacity than others. They may be better qualified for such studies and employments which do not require eyesight than many who can see, and may attain considerable skill in them; but with respect to the true nature of light and colours, they are all exactly upon a level. A blind man, if ingenious and inquisitive, may learn to talk about light, the sun, or the rainbow, in terms borrowed from those who have seen them; but it is impossible that he can have (I mean a man born blind) a just idea of either, and hearsay knowledge he may have acquired, he can hardly talk much upon these subjects without betraying his real ignorance. The case of one mentioned by Mr. Locke has been often quoted. He believed, that after much inquiry and reflection, he had at last found out what scarlet was; and being asked to explain himself, "I think," says he, "scarlet is something like the sound of a trumpet." This man had about the same knowledge of natural light as Nicodemus had of spiritual. Nor can all the learning or study of the world enable any person to form suitable judgment of divine truth, till the eyes of his mind are opened, and then he will perceive it at once.

Newton then gave application to ministers of the gospel.

From hence likewise we may observe the proper use and value of preaching the gospel, which is the great instrument by which the Holy Spirit opens blind eyes. Like the rod of Moses, it owes all its efficacy to the appointment and promise of God. Ministers cannot be too earnest in the discharge of their office; it behoves them to use all diligence to find out acceptable words, and to proclaim the whole counsel of God. Yet when they have done all, they have done nothing, unless their word is accompanied to the heart by the power and demonstration of the Spirit. Without this blessing, an apostle might labour in vain; but it shall be in a measure afforded to all who preach the truth in love, in simplicity, and in humble dependence upon Him who alone can give success... Those who have a lively and pathetic (*sincere*) talent, may engage the ear, and raise natural passions of their hearers; but they cannot reach the heart.<sup>2</sup>

We may cite one more good resource for the biblical teaching of the spiritual blindness of every human being apart from the sovereign mercy and grace of God in Christ. **Jonathan Edwards** (1703-1758) gave a sermon in his church in Northampton, Massachusetts, entitled, "Man's Natural blindness in the Things of Religion." Of course, his use of the word "religion" was a reference to biblical Christianity. Based upon his exposition of Psalm 94:8-11 he wrote these words:

From these particulars we may fairly deduce the following doctrinal observation: THAT THERE IS AN EXTREME AND BRUTISH BLINDNESS IN THINGS OF RELIGION, WHICH NATURALLY POSSESSES THE HEARTS OF MANKIND.-- This doctrine is not to be understood as any reflection on the *capacity* of the human nature; for God hath made man with a noble and excellent capacity. The blindness I speak of, is not merely *negative* ignorance; such as in trees and stones, that know nothing. They have no faculties of understanding and perception, whereby they should be capable of any knowledge. And inferior animals, though they have *sensitive* perception, are not capable of any *intellectual* faculties. God has given men faculties truly noble and excellent; well capable of true wisdom and divine knowledge. Nor is the blindness I speak like the ignorance of a new-born infant; which arises from want of necessary opportunity to exert these faculties.

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<sup>2</sup> John Newton, **The Works of John Newton**, Vol. 1 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 2018, orig. 1839), 197f.

The blindness that is in the heart of man, which is spoken of in the text and doctrine, is neither for want of (absence of) *faculties*, nor *opportunity* to know, but from some positive cause. There is a principle in his heart, of such blinding and besotting (*stupefying*) nature, that it hinders the exercises of his *faculties* about the things of religion; exercise for which God has made him well capable, and for which He gives him abundant opportunity.<sup>3</sup>

What may we conclude from this? This account of a physically blind man being given physical sight by our Lord Jesus in John 9 may be seen as an illustration of everyone of us who were born spiritually blind. We have no hope unless and until the Lord in His mercy and grace opens the eyes of our understanding so that we see our wretched sinful condition, that we have no claims upon God, and that only He through His Son Jesus Christ can bestow mercy upon us to save us from our sin.

## B. The grace of spiritual illumination

Spiritual illumination is a work of sovereign grace performed by the Triune God. When God brings salvation to an individual, ***God Himself teaches that person that he is a sinner and that Christ is the Savior.*** This is not to take away from the human instrument of the preacher or Christian witness. But when the individual whom God intends to save hears the Word of God taught or preached, and if it is in God's purpose and timing, God Himself opens the eyes of that person to understand the reality and importance of the truth.

Actually, the Bible describes this act of God's illumination to be the work of all three persons of the Holy Trinity. Illumination is performed by ***God the Father.*** "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall be all taught of God.' Every man therefore that has heard, and has learned of the Father, comes unto me" (John 6:45). Also in 2 Corinthians 4:4ff we read of unbelievers in contrast to true believers:

"In whom the god of this world (satan) has blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. For God (the Father), who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, has shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

Illumination is also a work of grace by ***God the Son.*** We read of this in Luke's Gospel:

In that hour Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. <sup>22</sup>All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and ***the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.***" (Luke 10:21ff)

An example of this is described in Luke 24:45: "Then He (Jesus) opened their minds to understand the Scriptures."

Illumination is performed by the ***Holy Spirit.*** Paul wrote of the Holy Spirit revealing the truth of salvation to sinners who were unable to understand apart from grace. "But as it is written, 'Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him.' But ***God hath revealed them unto us by his (Holy) Spirit***" (1 Cor. 2:9).

## C. There are two forms of spiritual illumination

When the Bible describes spiritual illumination, two forms in which this work of grace may be seen. There is ***external illumination*** and there is ***internal illumination.***

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Edwards, **The Works of Jonathan Edwards**, vol. 2 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 247-256.

External illumination may take place in the elect or the non-elect, for in itself, it does not result in conversion. God gives understanding of His Word, and He does so for His elect and for those who will die in their sins. Some unconverted people may have a great deal of illumination from God and yet remain unconverted. This is a work of the Holy Spirit in which He reveals the reality and the significance of biblical truth to individuals. Either while reading the Bible or hearing the Bible taught, God enables people to understand through His work of illumination. This illumination may be quite remarkable and have quite a significant impact on a person, whether or not it results in conversion. The Holy Spirit opens the eyes of a person to see the truth of what God says about sin, God's righteousness, and the certainty of God's judgment. A person may be made vividly aware of the person of Christ and the way of salvation through Him. This person, because the truth is so vivid may embrace it, or so it would seem, may do many things to show that He "believes" what he has been made to understand. Even King Herod did "many things" after hearing and enjoying what John the Baptist taught and proclaimed on many occasions (cf. Mark 6:20).

***But something more is needed for salvation than external illumination.*** For a person can go so far as even being instructed by the Holy Spirit Himself, and yet be short of receiving salvation. Paul wrote, "And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing" (1 Cor. 13:2). Paul was declaring that one may even have spiritual gifts, but may be unconverted. Peter wrote of false teachers in the church who had been ordained to condemnation, who had, nevertheless, encountered a measure of moral reformation in their lives ***through the knowledge of Jesus Christ***, yet they were still unsaved. We read in **2 Peter 2:20**,

For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning.

And then we read in the book of Hebrews of some who had been enlightened by the Holy Spirit, and yet they were lost. **Hebrews 6:4-8** records of some apostates,

<sup>4</sup>For it is impossible, in the case of those ***who have once been enlightened***, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, <sup>5</sup>and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, <sup>6</sup>and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. <sup>7</sup>For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. <sup>8</sup>But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned. (Heb. 6:4ff)

So you see that God must do more than merely help people to understand the truth intellectually and emotionally. The ***internal illumination*** of God is necessary, in which God gives understanding of His Word so as to ***transform*** a person. The one thus illuminated sees the reality and the relevance of what God says respecting his sin, his need for salvation, his need for repentance, and his remedy that is in Christ alone. This internal illumination is evident when the knowledge of the gospel produces a true turning from sin unto Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This person is convicted of personal sin. This person comes to understand that Christ is more than just "a" savior. He comes to see and then to confess, "Jesus is my Lord and Savior."

#### **D. The nature of spiritual illumination**

Spiritual illumination is more than a knowledge of biblical words and theological ideas. The essential message of the Bible may be understood by all apart from God's grace of illumination. We may speak of the ***perspicuity*** ("clarity") of the Scriptures. The reason that the Protestant Reformers desired greatly that the Bible be translated into the language of the common people is that they believed strongly that the common people could understand the Bible. This does not negate the need for teachers of the Word, but it does mean that reasonable readers of the Scripture may understand its message because God has put it in an

understandable form in our Bibles. People may obtain knowledge of biblical ideas and theological concepts of sin, salvation, the person and work of Christ apart from the work of the Holy Spirit.

But something more is needed, for the natural man (i.e. the non-christian) still needs the work of the Spirit to reveal truth to Him. “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). The unsaved man needs the Holy Spirit to give to him “spiritual understanding.” The reality and relevance of spiritual truth is made known to individuals through the work of the Holy Spirit. Unless the Holy Spirit works, the Word of God will seem irrelevant, uninspiring, and unintelligible. A person who is void of this spiritual illumination is ignorant and unconcerned about the Word. He may think that he understands. He may give you some answers that seem to suggest that he might know some things quite well. But it has no real impact on his thinking or his living. In reality he knows little or nothing of which he speaks. ***“Illumination is the application of God’s revealed truth to our hearts, so that we grasp as reality for ourselves what the sacred text says.”***<sup>4</sup>

#### **E. Our need and reliance upon the Holy Spirit to use His Word to convict and convert souls to Christ.**

Since only the Holy Spirit can open and instruct the true understanding of the mind so as to affect a change of heart, how dependent we are to pray and rely on the blessed Spirit to bless His Word when we teach and proclaim it to ourselves and to the lost of the world. Until the spiritual power of the Holy Spirit illuminates the truth of the gospel, the truth of Jesus Christ as the crucified, risen, and enthroned Lord, no change will be wrought in the souls of those to whom we speak.

I can instruct the mind, but I cannot instruct or move the heart. **John Flavel** (1627–1691) wrote,

Christ’s opening the understanding, implies the insufficiency of all external means, how excellent soever they are in themselves, to operate savingly upon men, till Christ by His power opens the soul, and so makes them effectual. What excellent preachers were Isaiah and Jeremiah to the Jews? The former (i.e. Isaiah) spake of Christ more like an Evangelist at the New than a Prophet of the Old Testament; the latter was a most convictive and pathetic preacher: yet the one complains, “Who has believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” (Isa. 53:1). The other (i.e. Jeremiah) laments the successlessness of his ministry. “The bellows are burnt, the lead is consumed of the fire, the founder melteth in vain” (Jer. 6:29). Under the New Testament, what people ever enjoyed such choice helps and means, as those that lived under the ministry of Christ and the apostles? Yet how many remained still in darkness? “We have piped to you, but ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, but ye have not lamented” (Matt. 11:27). Neither the delightful airs of mercy, nor the doleful ditties of judgement, could affect or move their hearts. And indeed if you search into the reason of it, you will be satisfied, that the choicest of means can do nothing upon the heart, until Christ by His Spirit open it... So that when you see souls daily sitting under excellent and choice means, and remain dead still, you may say as Martha did to Christ of her brother Lazarus, “Lord, if thou hadst been here they had not remained dead. If thou hadst been in this sermon, it had not been so ineffectual to them.”

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<sup>4</sup> R. C. Sproul, gen. ed., note in the **New Geneva Study Bible**, p. 1801