

The Doctrine of Illumination and the Interpretation of Scripture: Considerations for Recent Creationists

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Abstract

Drawing from the author's personal encounters with misconceptions of the doctrine of illumination among recent creationists, this paper seeks to caution against overextending biblical teaching on the subject. This paper surveys numerous contemporary perspectives on the doctrine, and then discusses exegetical details within relevant biblical texts that impinge on a theological formulation of the doctrine. In going on to offer a synthetic theological view of illumination, this paper concludes that the Holy Spirit's work of illumination enables the believer to recognize Scripture for what it really is (the word of God), to grasp its principle spiritual teachings, and to appropriate the truth of the text; but that illumination does not ensure the correct interpretation of any scriptural passage apart from careful exegetical work involving the application of consistent hermeneutical principles. The illumination of the Holy Spirit does have a relationship to gaining a proper understanding of spiritual truth (which is contained in Scripture), but that understanding resides much more in the dimension of discernment and application of truth, and decidedly less in the dimension of acquiring a cognitive comprehension of that truth. Finally, the paper offers a number of correctives for recent creationists in the interpretation of Scripture.

Introduction: Creationists and the Doctrine of Illumination

Between 2013 and 2017, I worked in the research department at one of the major young-earth creationist ministries in

the United States. While working there, though I was encouraged to see enthusiastic support for defending biblical inerrancy and biblical authority, especially in relation to the early chapters of

Genesis, I was equally discouraged to see the degree of carelessness and sloppiness evidenced in the work of several of my colleagues concerning the application of hermeneutical principles and the interpretation of specific textual issues. In confronting some of these shortcomings, I repeatedly encountered a presumption that the Holy Spirit's work of illumination somehow served to (at least help)

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guarantee that Christians, regardless of their comprehension of the factors pertinent to sound exegetical method, would arrive at the correct interpretation of the biblical text—no matter how complex the passage(s) in question.

On one occasion, after demonstrating through rigorous exegetical arguments that the views of my colleague on a certain interpretive issue simply could not be correct (and thus should not be published), I was informed that the ministry leadership would not reject his perspective. Why? Not because he had presented adequate lexical, grammatical, syntactical, contextual, historical, or intertextual arguments in his favor; but rather because he, as a Christian, had the benefit of the Holy Spirit's ministry of illumination—which supposedly helped to ensure that he had arrived at a sufficiently accurate interpretation. Other exchanges allowed me to see that this perspective was fairly widespread among those working in other creationist ministries as well—especially with individuals not having a background in formal biblical and theological studies.

One particularly intriguing thing about this perspective on illumination is that it seems often to be assumed, but almost never defended textually. This led me to wonder whether the passages in Scripture that outline the doctrine of inspiration actually provide *any* support for the perspective that I commonly encountered. This paper is the result of my studies on the subject.

The Fundamental Problem with the Doctrine of Illumination

In trying to properly understand the Holy Spirit's ministry of illumination, the student of Scripture is faced with several challenges. One significant challenge is the comparative absence of detailed treatments on the subject of illumination in theological literature. Writing in the mid-1980s, Fred H.

Klooster observed, "The illumination of the Holy Spirit is regularly mentioned in theological literature; yet detailed discussion of this subject is rare" (Klooster 1984, 451).¹ Similarly, Carl F. H. Henry observed, "Theologians can write volumes on the Bible with not even a single index reference to the Holy Spirit's work of illumination" (Henry 1999, 273).² In spite of certain recent efforts to reverse this observed trend, it remains true today that the doctrine of illumination has not really received the attention it deserves; it tends to be, of the ministries of the Holy Spirit, one that is rarely well understood. To what may this shortcoming in evangelical theology be attributed?

Kevin D. Zuber charges that there are multiple reasons why illumination has remained so difficult to grasp theologically. First, several divergent definitions of illumination have been set forth, definitions that commonly express disagreement with respect to "that which is legitimately and essentially an aspect of illumination and that which is not" (Zuber 1996, 6).³ This is further complicated by a sometimes imprecise use of the various terms that are employed to define the Holy Spirit's work of illumination, and the relationship that it bears upon understanding the meaning of the written word of God (Zuber 1996, 6–10).⁴ Correspondingly, there has been confusion resulting from disagreement

over the results or outcomes of illumination (namely, what it *does* with respect to the apprehension of the Scriptures), as well as the relationship between illumination and the internal witness of the Spirit (that is, His work of conviction regarding Scripture's authority) (Zuber 1996, 10–15).⁵ However, what Zuber discerns as the greatest concern is that "little attention has been paid to establishing the biblical grounding for this commonly understood concept." Regarding the literature, "those who discuss the topic of illumination have not been particularly concerned to make definite the connection between their own statements about illumination and the biblical data relevant to illumination" (Zuber 1996, 15). Certain verses are commonly used to support particular perspectives on the doctrine of illumination, but often it is not shown from careful exegesis of these verses how they contribute to *developing* the doctrine of illumination (Zuber 1996, 16).⁶ This has led, in some cases, to an overextension of the Scriptures' teachings on illumination: First, it is maintained that illumination enables a believer, by the aid of the Spirit, to gain "insight into the meaning of the text"; it involves the acquisition of "a deeper understanding of the meaning that is there [in the text]" (Erickson 1993,

1 Klooster writes that discussion of the Spirit's "internal testimony" is generally more common and more extensive than that on illumination.

2 That Henry should be so appalled by this is understandable, for his work demonstrates that the role of the Holy Spirit in relation to Scripture is a critical point for consideration.

3 Zuber gives three contrasting examples of definitions from Fuller, Erickson, and Pannenberg.

4 Zuber points specifically to the words "meaning" and "understanding" as needing

to be more carefully defined in endeavoring to comprehend the doctrine of illumination.

5 For one perspective on the precise distinction between these two aspects of the Holy Spirit's ministry, see Grant R. Osborne (2006, 436). Note also on the internal witness of the Spirit the study by Bernard Ramm ([1959] 2011).

6 This is also an observation arising out of the arguments made by Douglas Kenard (2006, 797–806) and Bill Arp (2011). Ultimately, the basis of the doctrine in the text is of utmost importance to rightly understanding it.

54).⁷ This is then, unfortunately, taken by well-meaning but naïve believers to mean that illumination *ensures* that the interpreter who has the Spirit dwelling within him can be assured of the accuracy of his interpretation of the text.

Against this perspective, this paper will seek to demonstrate that the Holy Spirit's work of illumination enables the believer to recognize Scripture for what it really is, the word of God; to grasp its principal spiritual teachings (namely, the Gospel of Jesus Christ); and to appropriate the truth of Scripture—such that its teachings are received, its promises are depended on, and its commands are obeyed. Correspondingly, this paper will show that neither the Spirit's presence in a believer's life, nor His work of illumination, is sufficient to *guarantee* the proper interpretation (or, for that matter, application) of any passage of Scripture apart from careful exegesis by means of the application of consistent hermeneutical principles. To this end, this paper will overview, in brief, the different perspectives advanced on the doctrine of illumination and the place that it has in the interpretation of Scripture. It will also summarily examine the biblical passages relevant to formulating an understanding of illumination. It will then conclude by offering a basic definition of illumination, followed by some considerations on practical implications that the Spirit's work of illumination holds for the Christian seeking to rightly interpret the text.

Various Perspectives on the Doctrine of Illumination

The views advanced regarding the Holy Spirit's work of illumination can be divided into three basic groups. The first of these perspectives proposes, as

⁷ Erickson's quote is representative of several other writers who will be surveyed in the section to follow.

alluded to above, that illumination helps the interpreter of Scripture to gain—or at least to *better* gain—a cognitive understanding of the biblical text. An example of this perspective appears in Robert L. Plummer's treatment on the subject: "The Spirit brings to the Christian greater cognitive understanding of the biblical text" (Plummer 2010, 144).⁸ In his doctoral dissertation on illumination, Zuber likewise acknowledges that the end results of illumination are "primarily cognitive," and, accordingly, that "illumination enables one to gain a deeper grasp and comprehension of the content of a divine disclosure." Strikingly, Zuber goes on to assert that "One illumined is actually able to 'see,' mentally grasp, more of the content [that is, of revelation in Scripture] than one who is not illumined" (Zuber 1996, iii–iv).⁹ This makes for a sharp distinction in interpretive ability by those illumined by the Spirit versus those not illumined.

Similar views on the doctrine of illumination have been advanced by other scholars. W. Randolph Tate notes that some evangelicals take the term to refer to "the work of the Holy Spirit in elucidating some passage of the Bible for a person while studying" (Tate 2012, 207).¹⁰ This definition is echoed by Paul

⁸ In defense of this perspective, Plummer maintains the fact that nonbelievers are able to understand portions of the text is a testament to the clarity of Scriptures and God's common grace.

⁹ Zuber goes on to illustrate his point through appeal to common experience, saying, "the conceptual insight provided by illumination is like the insight one comes to when a line drawing in which one 'sees' an object is suddenly 'seen as' another object. The onlooker simply experiences a conceptual *gestalt* that enables more of the content to be seen."

¹⁰ It is not clear whether this is Tate's own view, but he does regard it as a noteworthy position.

Enns, who says of illumination that it is "The ministry of the Holy Spirit in enlightening the believer, enabling the believer to understand the Word of God" (Enns 1989, 637).¹¹ Henry Clarence Thiessen likewise notes concerning the Spirit's ministry, "Because of sin and the darkened understanding brought about because of sin, no one can understand Scripture properly (Rom. 1:21; Eph. 4:18). But the Spirit can enlighten the mind of the believer to understand Scripture" (Thiessen 1979, 63).¹² The remarks by Erickson concerning illumination, mentioned earlier, similarly assert that the Holy Spirit gives "insight into the meaning of the text," and that illumination brings "a deeper understanding of the meaning that is there [in the text]" (Erickson 1993, 54; and 2013, 216–225¹³). Charles C. Ryrie also observes that "illumination relates to that ministry of the Holy Spirit that helps the believer understand the truth of Scripture." He goes on to say that "ultimately it is the Spirit who is the direct connection between the mind of God as revealed in Scripture and the mind of the believer seeking to understand the Scriptures" (Ryrie 2001, 590–91; cf. Ryrie 1986, 131–32 and 1997, 198).¹⁴

¹¹ The difficulty that is inherent in this definition is, of course, the fact that there is no express mention of *how* or *to what extent* the Spirit enables the believer to understand the word of God. It is these factors that will play a critical role in the discussion of illumination which will follow later in this paper.

¹² In defense of his view, Thiessen appeals to 1 Corinthians 2:6–16; Ephesians 1:18; and 1 John 2:20, 27.

¹³ The latter of these is perhaps one of the best exegetical treatments on illumination which advances this perspective.

¹⁴ Ryrie appeals in his argumentation to John 16 and 1 Corinthians 2–3. He does include a caveat about nonbelievers being able to comprehend the meaning of the biblical text. Still, it seems he regards illumination

Such a position easily leads to the incorporation of illumination into the hermeneutical process, which is what Roy B. Zuck argues for in his article on hermeneutics: “The Holy Spirit... is available to help believers ascertain the correct meaning of the Bible’s statements, commands, and questions. He is involved in the hermeneutical process because He is ‘the Spirit of truth,’ who, Jesus said, ‘will guide into all truth’ (John 16:13). And, as Paul wrote, ‘We have... the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given to us (1 Cor. 2:12)’” (Zuck 1984, 120).¹⁵ Since “meaning” is imbedded in the text, the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit helps in the hermeneutical process by “repeating [i.e., reinforcing] the grammatical sense of Scripture” (Henry 1999, 283).¹⁶

This understanding of illumination carries over into practical areas of the believer’s life, such as preaching and prayer. John MacArthur submits that “Illumination is the work of the Holy Spirit that opens one’s spiritual eyes to comprehend the meaning of the Word of God. It involves the preacher of Scripture and his audience” (MacArthur 1992, 103). Also, MacArthur argues that “God’s objective and historically past revelation cannot be understood accurately apart from the present, personal, and subjective work of the Holy Spirit” (MacArthur 1992, 103). Illumination “causes enlightened understanding of doctrine and how it should be applied

as substantially cognitive; it is a matter of aid in “understanding.”

15 In this role, the Spirit, says Zuck, helps to guard the believer against making inaccurate interpretations—with the result being an incorrect application of the text and, thus, misguided living.

16 Henry makes a critical contribution at this juncture, stating that in this, the Holy Spirit “in no way alters or expands the truth of revelation.”

to life” (MacArthur 1992, 103). Regarding illumination and prayer, Wayne Grudem notes that, in the light of 1 Corinthians 2:12, 14–15, “We [Christians] should pray that the Holy Spirit would give us his illumination and thereby help us to understand rightly when we study Scripture or when we ponder situations in our lives” (Grudem 1994, 645).¹⁷ Grudem contends that illumination is that for which the psalmist was seeking when he offered up to the Lord his petition in Psalm 119:18, “Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law” (NASB).

While surely there can be no objection to praying for God’s aid in rightly interpreting the Scriptures, the question remains whether this actually falls within the purview of illumination as the Spirit’s work is described in the New Testament. Additionally, this outlook on illumination is problematic, for it does not account for how nonbelievers are able to understand the biblical text, sometimes with a level of competence far beyond the average believer.¹⁸ Furthermore, this view is altogether vague in explaining *how* precisely the Holy Spirit is involved in the interpretation of Scripture. It seems to extend beyond the promises of Scripture to suggest that the Spirit interjects Himself into the

17 It may be noted as a caveat that Grudem is not altogether clear on what he means by “understand.” This appears to be a real challenge in the works of a number of theologians on this point.

18 This is especially the case with various Jewish exegetes who, despite not accepting the Gospel of Christ and not having the indwelling Holy Spirit, have regularly produced outstanding commentaries on the Scriptures that (aside from being masterful treatments of the text from a literary standpoint) tend to exhibit a mature awareness of the authors’ theological messages, as well as of the implications of Scripture’s meaning for life.

believer’s practice of the interpretation of the text.

An alternative view on illumination is that the Holy Spirit’s work involves enabling the believer not to understand the meaning of the text cognitively, but to understand it experientially. It concerns more the “receiving” (as true) the teachings of Scripture than having a mental grasp of what they teach (see especially Fuller 1997, 91–92). In this perspective, the Holy Spirit’s role in illumination is not to enlighten the mind to what Scripture is saying (for that much is clear to anyone who is willing to put forth the necessary effort in careful exegesis, applying proper hermeneutical principles); instead, His role is “to change the heart of the interpreter, so that he loves the message that is conveyed by the historical-grammatical data” (Fuller 1997, 92). Only a believer who has already had his heart inclined to the one true God by the Spirit’s work of regeneration (see Titus 3:5) can be receptive to illumination, so defined. Daniel P. Fuller insists that illumination involves God, working through the Holy Spirit, to replace the believer’s (natural) foolish desire for “ego-fulfillment” with the “reasonable, well-advised desire to find peace and joy in depending on God to stand by his promises” (Fuller 1997, 94). Thus, the Holy Spirit’s work of illumination enables the believer to receive the word of God as true and to respond to it in a way consistent with it being authoritative revelation.

Clark H. Pinnock expresses similar ideas, though sometimes using language that might make some conservative evangelicals uncomfortable. He maintains that the goal of illumination is for the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of believers to shed light on the Scriptures and thus to “deepen [their] friendship with God” (Pinnock 1993, 493). Illumination causes the Christian to be “drawn closer to God’s heart”; illumination ought to produce change in the life of the believer, with the principle

emphasis being on “areas of growth and discipleship” (Pinnock 1993, 494, 496). The focus of this paper does not permit for a full investigation of the theological underpinnings of the perspective advanced by Pinnock and Fuller; however, it is fair to say that their view makes some meaningful contributions. Most significantly, though, as it concerns the Spirit’s work of illumination in relation to understanding Scripture, the question may be asked whether what is described in this perspective is really what Scripture means in the passages that concern illumination. Surely, the place of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer to bring about spiritual growth through submission to the word of God is not in question. However, is this really *illumination*, strictly speaking? Or does this fall under the broader work of the Holy Spirit in *sanctification* (Rom. 8; Gal. 5)? Also, is the idea of a changed heart really in primary focus in the biblical passages concerning illumination?

The third major view on the Holy Spirit’s work of illumination—which arguably stands somewhere between the other two perspectives—is that illumination concerns the Holy Spirit’s role in giving to the indwelt believer “a dynamic comprehension of the *significance* of Scripture and its *application to life*” (Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard 2004, 139).¹⁹ Thus illumination results in the believer being able to take a full and solid grasp of the significance of spiritual truth. It works in tandem with, and not apart from, the application of a sound exegetical method in order for the text to achieve its ultimate purpose in the life of the believer (which involves trust in the truth of Scripture and obedience to it). The Spirit, in His ministry of illumination, works to enable the

19 Emphasis original. This simple definition of illumination shows a balance between emphasis on the cognitive and the spiritual, comprehension and application.

believer to “embrace” what Scripture teaches and to rightly apply the truth of the text (note Kaiser and Silva 1994, 168). This does not cut off the mind from the work of biblical interpretation, but it does suggest that the Spirit’s work in illumination is not mainly cognitive. Such helps to account for why there are so many skilled interpreters of the biblical text who are not believers and who do not have the indwelling Holy Spirit (Kaiser and Silva 1994, 168).

In this perspective, the Spirit does indeed help the believer to “understand” Scripture; but the word “understand” in this view should not be regarded as merely the ability to mentally grasp the linguistic content of God’s word; instead, it goes beyond having a cognitive understanding of the text to *also* being able to recognize its existential value.²⁰ In this view, “knowing” the truth of Scripture is tied to an appropriation of its significance. As such, “According to Scripture, persons do not truly possess knowledge unless they are living in light of that knowledge. True faith is...knowledge acted on.” Thus, it is correctly observed that “The unbeliever can *know* (intellectually comprehend) many truths of Scripture using the same means of interpretation he would use with non-biblical texts, but he cannot *know* (act on and appropriate) these truths as long as he remains in rebellion against God” (Virkler and Ayayo 2007, 28).²¹ The

20 Graham A. Cole (2007, 266) notes that “understanding” is a problematic term in the discussion of illumination. It can be taken in different ways in order to advance different positions.

21 Virkler and Ayayo (2007, 28) likewise note a *cognitive* aspect of this problem: “Scripture teaches that yielding to sin causes an individual to become enslaved to it and blind to righteousness (John 8:34; Rom. 1:18–22; 6:15–19; 1 Tim. 6:9; 2 Pet. 2:19).” Unfortunately (but quite commonly) “the truth principles in Scripture, available

Spirit’s work of illumination thus chiefly concerns the efficacy of the word of God; He “brings home” the literal meaning of the text to the reader, impressing on him “the full force of a communicative action” (Vanhoozer 1998, 427; see also pp. 428–29). To state it succinctly, “The Spirit thus opens readers’ hearts and minds so that the words [of Scripture] can produce all their intended effects: effects of illocutionary understanding and effects of perlocutionary obedience” (Vanhoozer 1998, 428). Osborne observes that passages like 1 Corinthians 2:14 and 2 Corinthians 4:4, which concern the blindness of the unsaved to spiritual truths, do not mean that unbelievers “cannot understand the *meaning* of the text but rather that they will reject the *implications* of it.” He goes on to say, “The Holy Spirit deals in this latter realm [regarding implications], enabling readers to separate truth from falsehood and to apply the Word properly in their lives” (Osborne 2006, 437).²² Accordingly, J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays give this

through application of the same skills of textual interpretation used with nonbiblical texts become progressively less clear to one who continually rejects those truths.” As such, “Unbelievers do not *know* the full meaning of scriptural teaching, not because that meaning is unavailable to them in the words of the text, but because they refuse to act on and appropriate spiritual truths for their own lives.” Ultimately (and sadly) “the psychological results of such refusal make them less able and willing to comprehend these truths.” So it is fair to say that while the *principle thrust* of illumination is not cognitive, the absence of the Holy Spirit’s involvement in biblical interpretation leads to terrible cognitive *and* spiritual consequences.

22 This, Osborne observes, comes “through the mind and study of the interpreter” (Osborne 2006, 436). Thus, the mind is not bypassed; however, more is involved in “understanding” than just the reader’s mental faculties.

summary: “When it comes to biblical interpretation, the Spirit appears to work *little* in the cognitive dimension, *more* in the area of discerning truth, and *most* in the area of application” (Duvall and Hays 2005, 208).²³ As such, within this perspective, illumination is a complex work of the Spirit related to the believer’s apprehension of the biblical text in the most meaningful way possible.

Exegetical Evidence Regarding the Doctrine of Illumination

This overview of the different views on the Holy Spirit’s work of illumination necessarily leads to a consideration of the handful of texts appealed to in the discussion of the subject. Those on all sides of the discussion recognize that a theological understanding of illumination, however it is to be defined, emerges out of a relatively limited number of critical passages: John 14–16, 1 Corinthians 2, Ephesians 1, and 1 John 2 (and possibly Ps. 119:18, Luke 24, and 2 Tim. 2). These texts’ significance for the doctrine of illumination has already been examined by Cole (2007, 263ff.), Arp (2011, 4–27), and Kennard (2006, 799–803). As such, this paper will aim to survey and summarize the contributions of these passages rather than giving a detailed exegetical treatment of them.

John 14:26. In John 14:26, Christ promised His disciples that He would send the Spirit, who would “teach [them] all things,” and would “bring to [their] remembrance” all that He said to them. This passage has been used to argue that the Holy Spirit’s work in illumination has an effect on the believing reader’s ability to understand (cognitively) the word of God (see, e.g., Gru-

dem 1994, 645; cf. Erickson 2013, 219). However, it must be noticed that this promise of Christ is given to the Apostles (less Judas) and it concerns the teachings that Christ had communicated to *them*. It bears a connection to the Apostles being enabled to receive and proclaim new revelation (cf. John 15:26–27). Yet there is nothing in this passage which suggests that this promise is transferrable to all believers generally;²⁴ additionally, there is no indication that this promise has anything to do with the *written* word of God. Indeed, that would be too much to infer from the literary and historical context of John 14:26, especially since the Gospels had not—at the time of the promise—been written. It is therefore erroneous to maintain that this verse promises any help to the believer in cognitively understanding Scripture; it is arguably not even directly relevant to the discussion of illumination (Kennard 2006, 800).²⁵

John 16:13–15. John 16:13–15 contains the promise of Jesus Christ to His disciples that the “Spirit of truth” would come and “guide [them] in all truth.” The promised Spirit would not speak on His own initiative, but would speak in accordance with “whatever He hears”; so too, it is promised that He would “disclose to [them] what is to come.” This is, like the preceding

24 That this promise is specifically for the Apostles is indicated by the fact that the verse’s two clauses are linked. It is illegitimate to take the first statement (“He will teach you all things”) in reference to all believers, but to regard the second statement (“He will bring to remembrance all that I said to you”) as it surely is intended, that is, in reference to the Apostles alone. Such is inconsistent.

25 Kennard argues, however, that this verse (along with John 16:12–15) still has “great benefit for Christians in that they reassure us that John wrote these statements accurately by the Spirit’s aid” (Kennard 2006, 801).

verse, used to argue for the Spirit’s aid to believers to cognitively comprehend the words of the text. In particular, backers of this view home in on the promise that the Spirit will guide the recipients of the promise “into all truth” (Ryrie 1986, 132; cf. Erickson 2013, 219). Plummer goes so far as to claim on the basis of this passage that “All Christians are assured the supernatural presence of the Holy Spirit, who will teach them and protect them from all error” (Plummer 2010, 180). It is bewildering how Plummer justifies this understanding in light of how prone many believers are to theological error; but a discussion of that issue is beyond the purview of this paper. In any case, attempts to use this passage to endorse a particular outlook on the Spirit’s work of illumination—especially one in which the Spirit aids the believer to develop a correct cognitive understanding of a given passage—run up against the same concerns as those expressed in relation to the preceding passage. Plainly, this promise is for the disciples, and there is no hint (much less a guarantee) that the promise extends to all believers (Arp 2011, 10). As with the preceding passage, it is illegitimate to separate the components of the promise—making some out to be for just the Apostles, and making some out to be for all believers. John 16:13 plainly links the disclosure of things to come (which certainly concerns prophetic revelation) with the promise to guide the recipients of the promise into all truth. Again, this promise is for the Apostles, not believers generally, and it likewise does not have in view the interpretation of written revelation.

1 Corinthians 2:6–16. In 1 Corinthians 2:6–16, Paul speaks about the revelation of God’s wisdom—a work in which the Holy Spirit is active (see especially verse 10). In verse 12, the text indicates that believers have received “the Spirit who is from God” so they “may know the things freely given to [them] by God” (emphasis added). Verse

23 It follows, therefore, that there are multiple (legitimate) answers to the question “Can a nonbeliever understand the word of God?”

14 states that the “natural man,” that is, the nonbeliever, “does not accept the things of the Spirit of God” and indeed “cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (emphasis added). The contrast, therefore, between the Christian and the non-Christian is that the former has the Spirit who enables understanding of truth about spiritual matters, whereas the latter does not. While the *written* text is not mentioned explicitly, such is a natural implication: the Holy Spirit enables believers to receive Scripture for what it really is—the true word of God (cf. 1 Thess. 2:13) (cf. Cole 2007, 265–66). However, it may still be asked what bearing this has on biblical interpretation. Some expositors appear to connect 1 Corinthians 2 to the idea that unbelievers unaided by the Spirit have some lack of cognitive ability to understand the truth of Scripture (Plummer 2010, 147; cf. MacArthur 1992, 102, 105–06; Walvoord 1991, 220). However, this does not seem to be the real thrust of Paul’s teaching. By saying that believers are taught to *know* the things of God, while unbelievers *cannot understand* them, Paul is focusing on an *understanding* pertaining to significance for life—not the ability to cognitively grasp the meaning of the message. The unbeliever rejects the things of the Spirit of God (namely, the truth of the Gospel) as “foolishness” (verse 14), which implicitly assumes that the nonbeliever may cognitively grasp the things which Scripture teaches (Stein 1994, 66–67).²⁶ Obviously, this does have import for the study of Scripture; yet it is not a promise concerning the believer’s ability to be able to draw from the Scriptures the meaning of a given text. The promise that the “spiritual” man will be able to

²⁶ Likewise, in the context of 1 Corinthians 1–3, it can be seen that God Himself *understands* the “wisdom” of the world, but rejects it as foolishness. This parallel in Scripture is quite striking.

appraise all things because he possesses the “mind of Christ” (verses 15–16) does indicate that the believer may, in dependence on the Holy Spirit, discern and embrace the truth as it concerns spiritual things; but it does not promise the enablement to correctly interpret and apply a given passage of Scripture. It is not a *hermeneutical* promise (cf. Kennard 2006, 802).

Ephesians 1:17–19. Ephesians 1:17–19 (especially verse 18) is often critical to the case of those seeking to support a view of illumination in which the Spirit enlightens the believer to a better understanding of Scripture (see, e.g., Grudem 1994, 645). In this passage, Paul prays the “eyes of [believers’] hearts” would be “enlightened” so that they would know (1) the hope of God’s calling, (2) the riches of the glory of God’s inheritance in the saints, and (3) the great magnitude of God’s power toward those who believe, which is in accord with “the working of the strength of His might” displayed in the resurrection and ascension of Christ (verses 18–21). Though it is important to note in this passage the gift of enlightenment that God grants (verse 18), it is inconclusive whether this may be linked with the Spirit’s work.²⁷ Admittedly, it is *logically viable* that the indwelling Spirit be involved in this enlightenment, and Paul does say later in Ephesians 3:16–19 that God’s Spirit is involved in granting to the believer a comprehension of the love of Christ—an important spiritual truth. And yet, there is no *exegetical* connection to be drawn between this work of the Spirit and the task of biblical interpretation. This is therefore not a promise concerning the Spirit aiding the

²⁷ Harold W. Hoehner, on the basis of the two genitives that follow the mention of the word “spirit” in Ephesians 1:17, declines to take the verse as a reference to the Holy Spirit, but rather reads it as referring to a disposition or attitude (Hoehner 1983, 620).

believer in the hermeneutical process or granting insight in interpretation.

1 John 2:20, 27. The promises concerning the Holy Spirit in 1 John 2:20, 27 are generally used in a way that is similar to those passages previously discussed in support of an illumination that concerns the believer’s ability to understand Scripture. For example, Plummer connects this passage with John 16:13–15 in arguing, “All Christians are assured the supernatural presence of the Holy Spirit, who will teach them and protect them from all error” (Plummer 2010, 180). The Apostle John, in this passage, identifies an “anointing” (χρῖσμα) believers have received from “the Holy One.”²⁸ This anointing “teaches” believers “all things,” to the end that they would continue to abide in Christ. The surrounding context indicates that what is at stake in this passage is discernment between the truth of the Gospel and the false messages of deceiving antichrists (verses 18, 22). Accordingly, the point is that believers are equipped to hold on to the truth of the Gospel in the face of the lies of those who would twist the Gospel message and deny the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a theological leap to move from the principle of spiritual discernment highlighted here to an argument for the Spirit’s aid in the hermeneutical process (Cole 2007, 265–66). The “anointing” does teach believers about all things, such that, in view of the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, they can look at all other things with a correct

²⁸ Bruce (1970, 71) offers argumentation that the “anointing” spoken of by John is the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 1:21–22). Kennard (2006, 802) says that the Spirit is not in view, but rather the anointing is “truth heard”—truth that centers on Christ and the Gospel. It may be granted that Kennard is correct that the doctrine of illumination has been overextended, but it seems equally an overextension to deny a reference to the Spirit here; such is an *appropriate* inference.

perspective and avoid being susceptible to Gospel-denying lies; but there is no specific promise about the Spirit helping believers to cognitively understand the text (Kennard 2006, 802).

Other Passages. Psalm 119:18, Luke 24:45, and 2 Timothy 2:7 are also appealed to in the discussion of the doctrine of illumination. While the two New Testament verses do speak about a sort of enlightenment of believers' understanding from God, it is noteworthy that neither passage mentions the Holy Spirit. As for Psalm 119:18, in which the psalmist prays that God would open his eyes, so that he could behold the "wonderful things from [God's] law," the Spirit is likewise not in view.²⁹ This is not to say that the prayer of Psalm 119:18 is inappropriate for believers today to pray; indeed, it is good to ask the Lord for His help in grasping the meaning and significance of His word, especially for the purpose of applying it rightly, which is the thrust of the context in Psalm 119 (see, e.g., verses 1–16). However, Psalm 119:18 does not provide an exegetical basis for claiming that the Spirit interjects Himself into the hermeneutical process.

Developing Conclusions Concerning the Doctrine of Illumination

The preceding summary has shown that the biblical basis for asserting that illumination involves the Holy Spirit's work to help the believer cognitively understand the text of Scripture is very marginal. That said, the disagreement on the subject is excusable, for, as Carl R. Trueman observes, "The relationship of the theological concept of illumination to biblical interpretation is not straightforward" (Trueman 2005, 318). Still, in light of the (lack of) biblical evidence, and in view of the fact that nonbelievers *are* able to understand the

literary and exegetical meaning of the text—sometimes with far greater insight and hermeneutical competence than believers—the idea that illumination is the Holy Spirit's work in helping the believer to gain a special cognitive understanding of the Bible must be rejected as inconsistent with both Scripture and experience.³⁰

What then *can* be determined from the biblical data as to the work of the Holy Spirit in illumination? First, the Holy Spirit is involved in God's work of enlightening a believer, so that the Christian is able to appraise spiritual truth (1 Cor. 2:12, 14–15; cf. 1 Thess. 2:13). The Spirit, correspondingly, enables the Christian to embrace and appropriate grand spiritual truths—truths which are central to the message of Scripture, such as the power of God and the love of Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:18–19; 3:16–19). In this, the Spirit as "teacher" equips Christians to be on guard against the lies spread by enemies of the Gospel message, discerning truth from error (1 John 2:20, 27). Because the Spirit's ministry concerns truth, there is a connection to be drawn between it and the Scriptures—but not such that it may be claimed the Spirit interjects Himself into the process of biblical interpretation. Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest express this conclusion with a great deal more eloquence, and they deserve to be quoted at length:

The witness of the Spirit attests the objective truth and meaning of spe-

30 The great competence of some nonbelievers in understanding the literary meaning of the biblical text is showcased in an illustration provided by Kaiser and Silva, in which they note that a nonbelieving teacher expounded with marked excellence the message of the Gospel from Romans. The teacher, although having a superb grasp of the meaning that Paul intended, did not accept the meaning as true to reality (Kaiser and Silva 1994, 167–68).

cial revelation, beginning at its heart, the gospel. The Spirit inspired the content of the gospel in the Scriptures, and now the Spirit persuades sinners of its truth objectively for all and internally for themselves. In this persuasion the Spirit may use different amounts of the relevant exegetical, historical, literary, and cultural data discovered by long hours of hard study by the inquirer or the ones ministering the Word to him. Hence the gospel appears no longer as foolishness or a stumbling block. The mind, desires, and will are opened to Christ and then makes the commitment to him as Savior and Lord (1 Cor. 2:14; 12:3).

Enabled by the Spirit, believers trust and experience God's purposes of redemptive grace (1 Cor. 2:12). They are no longer in bondage to the values of the natural man (v. 14) and grow in evaluating things according to the revealed mind of Christ (v. 15–16; 1 John 2:20–22, 27).

God's Spirit abides with believers, enabling them to receive the things that come from him (1 Cor. 2:14). That applies particularly to the Spirit-revealed and Spirit-inspired Scriptures. (Lewis and Demarest 1996, 168)³¹

To summarize again, the Spirit's work of illumination enables the believer to recognize Scripture for what it really is (the word of God), to grasp its principle spiritual teachings, and to appropriate the truth of the text. But illumination does not guarantee the correct interpretation of any scriptural passage apart from careful exegetical work involving the application of consistent hermeneutical principles. The doctrine

31 Notably, Lewis and Demarest also draw a connection between the Spirit's work of illumination and His work of granting the believer assurance of salvation (cf. Rom. 8:15–16; Gal. 4:6).

29 See discussion on page 226, above.

of illumination is not a safeguard against sloppy Bible study! The illumination of the Holy Spirit does have a relationship to gaining a proper understanding of spiritual truth (which is contained in Scripture), but that understanding resides much more in the dimension of discernment and application of truth, and decidedly less in the dimension of acquiring a cognitive comprehension of that truth. There is therefore a need for balance in how believers talk about illumination. Trueman perceptively observes that “Too much emphasis on illumination as providing the content of Christian belief [that is, making out illumination to be the primary key in the process of interpreting/understanding the Scriptures] can render biblical interpretation an essentially gnostic activity, which places the views of those who have been ‘illuminated’ beyond the criticism of those who have not” (Trueman 2005, 318). However, to ignore the doctrine of illumination altogether, and to dismiss the Spirit’s role in enabling believers to rightly approach and receive the truths of Scripture is also hazardous. As Mike Stallard observes, “The theological task [and the exegetical component thereof] is not just an academic discipline but a spiritual enterprise. It involves spiritual gifts (Eph. 4, Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12–14) given by the Holy Spirit not just intellectual skills. Therefore, practices such as prayer ([which] involves the Holy Spirit, see Rom. 8:26–27) are not out of place as part of the theological task” (Stallard 2009, 6).

In conclusion, a few words deserve to be said regarding the application of this outlook on illumination. First, because the Holy Spirit’s work of illumination does not function primarily on a cognitive level, giving the believer insight into the details of the biblical text in the interpretive process, the Christian should be careful never to presume upon the Spirit’s work of illumination so as to excuse sloppy hermeneutics

(cf. Kennard 2006, 805).³² Rather, the Christian interpreter must invest himself fully in the hard work of biblical interpretation, using all of the exegetical tools which are available to him in the process. The interpreter must heed the words of 2 Timothy 2:15 to “accurately handle” or “rightly divide” the word of truth. Creationists, in particular, must not presume that just because they are starting with the correct macro-theological perspective on protology (i.e., recent, supernatural creation) they are immune to error in the particulars of textual interpretation. More specifically, creationists with a background in the scientific disciplines must be especially sensitive to the nuances and challenges pertaining to the disciplines requisite to textual interpretation (e.g., hermeneutics; Hebrew lexicography, grammar, and syntax; ancient Near Eastern history and culture; biblical and systematic theology; etc.)—disciplines in which they very rarely have any substantive formal training.³³

32 It should be noted that none of those named above who suggested that the Holy Spirit interjects Himself into the cognitive aspect of biblical interpretation by helping the reader to “understand” the text argued that careful exegetical work should be sacrificed. The Holy Spirit, in all of their discussions on illumination, was to be regarded as working in and through the normal process of biblical interpretation, not against it or apart from it.

33 Inattentiveness to the principles and nuances of these disciplines results in skewed interpretations that can become ingrained in the collective thinking of the creationist movement. An example of this concerns scientists in the early days of the modern creationist movement (including Henry Morris and Emmett Williams) who read “very good” in Genesis 1:31 to preclude the existence of the second law of thermodynamics. I have since shown that this is not a valid inference from the language of Genesis 1:31 (“very good” entails the

Second, relatedly, the believer should never claim illumination as a basis for being overly dogmatic in his interpretation of specific passages, especially where it concerns the finer details of the text (Zuck 1984, 122). In recent years, creationist resources have become much more focused, moving from being (typically) general defenses of biblical history and biblical authority related to the early chapters of Genesis, to being interpretive guides on specific textual issues. Whereas creationists often excelled in the former, where broad-based theological arguments were concerned, they have struggled with respect to the latter, often showing ineptitude where detailed exegetical work is required.³⁴ As

concepts of completeness, fulfillment of purpose, and moral excellence—it does not require the absence of entropy; see Anderson 2013). Danny Faulkner, similarly, has written addressing the physical complications of Morris and Williams’ view (Faulkner 2013). However, these correctives would have been unnecessary if more care had been taken to accurately interpret the biblical text in the first place, applying a working understanding of Hebrew lexical study.

34 I have sought to confront and correct some of these exegetical missteps in my earlier published works. For example, in a 2017 paper (Anderson 2017a), I show that the Tablet Model (the view that the sections of Genesis divided by the word *tôlēdôt* were written by prominent figures appearing in the respective narratives, and that these sections were later compiled by Moses) is lacking on exegetical grounds. The Tablet Model (1) ignores the compositional unity of the book of Genesis that defies the notion of it being a compiled document, (2) dismisses the internal evidence of Genesis pointing to its composition in the 15th century BC, and (3) misreads the *tôlēdôt* markers as colophons rather than transitional headings, among many other problems. The solution, I maintain, is for creationists to return to the traditional view of Mosaic authorship, in

such, creationists must be exceptionally careful about being rigidly dogmatic where minute details of Scripture are concerned; and they certainly ought never to appeal to illumination to excuse such unjustified dogmatism.

Third, though the Holy Spirit is the believer's teacher (1 John 2:27), the believer must be careful to take into account the teaching of other godly Christians, whether this comes in the form of direct teaching in a sermon, or "vicarious teaching" in, for example, quality literature. (The teaching that comes through commentaries and other Bible study tools is a very important part in the task of biblical interpretation.) Creationists, in particular, must not be dismissive of (scholarly) work on Genesis (or other pertinent sections of the biblical text) set forth by biblical scholars. Many recent works on textual issues by those involved at the major creationist organizations have shown a grave lack of attention to technical writings by dedicated biblical scholars.³⁵ This needs

which Moses (*perhaps* using oral or written source material for portions of his work) actually *writes* (rather than compiles) the book of Genesis. The critical point in this discussion is that our view of Genesis' composition needs to be determined by detailed *exegesis* of the relevant portions of the biblical text, and not by (as with the Tablet Model) an artificial paradigm imposed on the text's structure and narrative.

³⁵ An example of this shortcoming in the creationist literature is exposed in my response to Jonathan Sarfati's letter to the editor "Toledots and Creationist Positions," entitled "A Response to Sarfati: Omission of Source Deliberate" (Anderson 2018). In particular, I observe that any creationist work that presumes to address the compositional origin of the book of Genesis really must interact with Duane Garrett's magisterial treatment on the subject, *Rethinking Genesis*. Similarly, in my critique of John Hartnett's writings on time dilation cosmological models, I observe that

to be corrected. Additionally, *creationists must not neglect pertinent biblical scholarship by evangelical scholars who reject recent creation*. For while these scholars err in this critical matter, they still often have much to offer with respect to the exegesis of particular passages and the resolution of certain difficulties in the early chapters of Genesis.³⁶

he does not, in any of his writings defending his more recent perspective on the matter, "engage in robust, methodical lexical, grammatical, syntactical, structural, contextual, or theological analysis of the biblical text. Nor does he consult any commentaries, Bible dictionaries, lexicons, grammars, or other appropriate theological resources. Indeed, such interaction may have led creationist scientists to take a more nuanced approach to this issue in the first place" (see Anderson 2017b, 204, emphasis added; note also on page 210 the accompanying list of Hartnett's publications on time dilation cosmological models). As scholars dedicated to upholding a biblical view of origins, we who are within the modern creationist movement need to stop taking our own written contributions so seriously (as if they were all there is to say about the topics they address) and learn to responsibly interact with the broader scope of literature from the biblical disciplines—even if we find that our own views are sometimes challenged or dismissed.

³⁶ Consider, for example, the work of Kenneth A. Mathews (1996) who, though apparently rejecting recent creation (p. 149), provides exceptional insight on Genesis 2:4ff. concerning the theological reason for the use of the otherwise rare combination יהוה אֱלֹהִים (*Yahweh Elohim*) (pp. 192–93). Likewise, C. John Collins, who stands strongly opposed to recent creation, offers much help in tracing out the theological significance of Genesis 2:24 as it concerns the doctrine of marriage (Collins 2006, 142–45). His handling of this verse and its intertextual connections to other Old and New Testament passages is superb. In both of these cases, it would be regrettable to dismiss out of hand the respective

Fourth, the believer should reject the urge to presume that, because of the indwelling Holy Spirit, his own interpretive conclusions—or those of another believer—are *necessarily* better than those of a non-Christian interpreter. While it may be true that non-Christians have produced interpretations of virtually every passage in the Bible, often twisting the words of Scripture so as to make them read contrary to the author's intended meaning, the fact remains that there are many works by nonbelievers—especially Jewish works on the Old Testament—that handle the text admirably well and that offer profound insights into the meaning of the Scriptures. Notably, creationists' works have evidenced a conspicuous lack of interaction with premier Jewish source material (such as, e.g., the detailed exegetical commentaries by Cassuto and Sarna), thereby missing the helpful insights they so frequently offer. Yes, errors in their overarching theological perspective (especially as it relates to Christology) cannot be ignored. But the fact remains that their interpretive work in Genesis ranks among the best produced to date.

With respect to these areas of application, the point advanced in this paper is plainly evident: nonbelievers can, with the proper application of consistent hermeneutical principles, attain to a correct understanding of the biblical text. However, the fact remains that only believers, all of whom have dwelling in them the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9), are able to *truly and fully understand* the profound significance of Scripture so as to embrace it for what it is—the word of God—and apply it rightly to life. Illumination does not substitute for careful exegetical study, nor does it guarantee the correct interpretation of Scripture apart from

author's perceptive treatment of the verse/subject addressed due to disagreement with him on the interpretation of Genesis 1 and the age of the earth.

the proper application of sound hermeneutical principles. However, only by the Holy Spirit's work in illumination will the believer properly appropriate the truth of Scripture such that, ultimately, its teachings are accepted, its promises are depended on, and its commands are obeyed. Creationists who know the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior (and indeed all believers) may rejoice in this certain truth.

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