

Thoughts about The Doctrine of ILLUMINATION

By David A. DeWitt

The reason for this paper is to demonstrate that the doctrine of illumination, as traditionally stated, does not have a biblical or logical foundation. I will also suggest that there is a work of God in the life of the believer based on the word *enlightened* in Ephesians 1:18. I suggest that it should be called the Doctrine of Enlightenment.

The Traditional Definition

The **illumination of the Holy Spirit** is “The process by which God’s Holy Spirit enables us to understand His Word and apply it to our lives” [concisethiology9604.html].

This definition of illumination basically comes from John Calvin, who undoubtedly adapted it from Augustine. What necessitates this doctrine is the first principle of the five points of Calvinism, that of total depravity (the T in TULIP). Total depravity says that man is incapable of anything good, and a correct understanding of Scripture would be something good. So it must come from God.

- John Calvin believed that **the Bible is a closed book to all but the true believer.**
- James Montgomery Boice said, “**The Word without the illumination of the Holy Spirit remains a closed book...**”
- J. I. Packer said, “The knowledge of divine things to which Christians are called...to which Scripture testifies...is **natural to none...** The Spirit, however, opens and unveils our minds and attunes our hearts so that we **understand.**”
- H. C. G. Moule wrote, “The blessed Spirit is not only the true Author of the written Word but also its supreme and **true Expositor.**”

An Atheist’s Understanding

Keeping in mind this illumination definition, which says unbelievers are unable to understand “the knowledge of divine things to which Christians are called,” consider the following paragraph written by atheist Sam Harris in his “Letter to a Christian Nation,” pages 3-4,

The Bible is either the word of God, or it isn’t. Either Jesus offers humanity the one, true path to salvation (John 14:6), or he does not. We agree that to be a true Christian is to believe that all other faiths are mistaken, and profoundly so. If Christianity is correct, and I persist in my unbelief, I should expect to suffer the torments of hell. Worse still, I have persuaded others, and many close to me, to reject the very idea of God. They too will languish in “eternal fire” (Matthew 25:41). If the basic doctrine of Christianity is correct, I have misused my life in the worst conceivable way. I admit this without a single caveat.

If illumination is necessary for understanding the Bible, how is it that this committed unbelieving atheist is able to understand the Gospel, and use Scripture accurately in context?

A Critical Review of “Illumination” By Wayne Jackson

Wayne Jackson points out the following logical problems with the doctrine of illumination:

1. If the Holy Spirit illuminates the mind of the Christian student, is He as infallible as an “expositor” as He was initially in His role of “author” of the sacred message? If not, why not?
2. Furthermore, how would one know if, or when, he has been “illuminated”? If he affirms that he has been illuminated with reference to a particular passage, may he ever alter his view of that text? If so, did the Spirit misdirect him earlier?

3. If one has been illuminated regarding a passage, are all others who take a different view in error? If two people, both of whom claim illumination, differ on the interpretation of a passage, how could one know which of these is correct—or if either is?
4. If the Holy Spirit could not make the Scriptures comprehensible the first time around (by the “revelation” process), how could one be confident that He could do so the second time around (by the “illumination” process)? Note [that] Moule [says] the Spirit is both Author and Expositor of the Scriptures for the believer.
5. And why is it that many of these men, who accept this position, are at such variance with one another in their doctrinal positions?
6. If the Holy Spirit provides illumination to men today, why do scholars, who subscribe to this ideology, write books instructing folks as to the proper methods of Bible interpretation? Such efforts would not be of value to the unbeliever... And they should not be needed by one who has the illuminating Spirit, the alleged “Expositor” of truth.
7. What if one proposed the following. Select two spiritual Christian people and put them in separate rooms. Provide them with a difficult biblical text, with which each person is equally unfamiliar. Let one of them have access to a good library of reference works, and provide the other with nothing but an empty room and the “illumination of the Spirit.” Allow each several hours of concentration. Then have each write his explanation of the obscure text. It can be guaranteed that the person with the library will have a better grasp of the passage than the one who has relied solely on the “presence” of the Spirit.
8. Finally, Paul’s testimony could not be clearer. The inspired Scriptures are: “... profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction, which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The Scriptures alone are sufficient for man’s understanding of the divine will.”
[christiancourier.com/articles/641-the-holy-spirit-illumination-theory-a-critical-review. Brackets mine.]

A Few Additional Problems with the Doctrine of Illumination

1. Why is there a gift of teaching if all believers are illuminated?

Romans 12:6-7—*Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly ... he who teaches, in his teaching...*

Ephesians 4:11-12—*And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.*

2. Since illumination is [supposedly] a gift for the church, which began in Acts 2, how did Old Testament believers understand the written Scripture?

Deuteronomy 6:1-2—*Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the judgments which the LORD your God has commanded me to teach you, that you might do them in the land where you are going over to possess it...*

Joshua 1:8—*This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.*

Psalms 119:97-100—*O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day. Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies, For they are ever mine. I have more insight than all my teachers, For Your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, Because I have observed Your precepts.*

The commandments, the statutes and the judgments God gave to Moses to give to Israel, the book of the law passed on to Joshua, and the commandments that were the meditation of the psalmist required no illumination of the Holy Spirit for understanding.

3. Many Israelites, who were expected to keep the Mosaic Law, were unbelievers.

God gave the Law to the nation of Israel with the expectation that they could understand it and keep it. Many of them, who were individually idolaters and rebellious unbelievers, could not possibly be illuminated by the Holy Spirit. Yet they were held to understand and keep the Mosaic Law.

4. The work of the Holy Spirit is described in the New Testament

The church age is unique in that when Jesus ascended into heaven He sent the Holy Spirit to be our Helper (John 16:7). That help is defined with several terms in the New Testament. None of those terms describe an imposed illumination of the Scripture.

- There is the **conviction** of the Holy Spirit — John 16:8
- There is the **filling** of the Holy Spirit — Ephesians 5:18
- There is the **leading** of the Holy Spirit — Romans 8:14
- There is the **regeneration** of the Holy Spirit — Titus 3:5
- There is the **indwelling** of the Holy Spirit — 1 Corinthians 3:16
- There is the **baptism** of the Holy Spirit — 1 Corinthians 12:13
- There is the **sealing** of the Holy Spirit — Ephesians 4:30

So it would be reasonable to assume that those things describe the work of the Holy Spirit.

5. Faith comes about by hearing the Word, not an illumination of the Word by the Holy Spirit.
Romans 10:17—*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.*

6. Wisdom, teaching, and admonition come from the *Word of Christ* dwelling in you, not the illumination of that Word to you.

Colossians 3:16—*Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.*

7. Understanding the mystery of Christ comes from reading what the apostles wrote.

Ephesians 3:3-4—*that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you **read** you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit.*

8. Jesus assumed unbelievers could understand the Scripture.

Matthew 22:29—*But Jesus answered and said to them, “You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God.”*

If unbelievers cannot understand the Scripture, why did Jesus reprimand the Sadducees for not understanding the Scriptures? The reprimand for *not understanding the Scriptures* assumes a capacity for *understanding the Scriptures* or they could not be reprimanded for not doing so. The same is true when Jesus asked Nicodemus *Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things* (John 3:10)? Five times Jesus asked various Jews the question, *Have you not read* (Matthew 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31; Mark 12:26), with the assumption that their reading should have led to their understanding.

There is an Enlightenment of the Holy Spirit

Ephesians 1:17-18—*that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be*

enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.

First, notice the verb may give. The Greek word is an aorist subjunctive. Aorist is a timeless tense. Subjunctive is the mood of uncertainty. So God may or may not give *to you* believers *a spirit of wisdom*. Paul prays for these believers to get it. So it is always desired, it is a part of a believer's maturity, but it is not a guaranteed answer to prayer (as, for example, Philippians 4:6-7 is).

This passage is not about the Holy Spirit illuminating the meaning of a text of Scripture. But it is about God *the Father of glory enlightening* believers so that they see things from His point of view, the result being they focus, not on the benefits to man, but on the glory of God. Not just on **their** hope, **their** calling, and **their** inheritance but on *the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance*. And that's the *spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him*.

- Wisdom is a firm grasp of the obvious.
- Revelation is a disclosure from God.
- Knowledge is the acquisition of information.

So this is a capacity to grasp revelation, that is, the information that God has disclosed about Himself. Revelation is of two types—**general revelation**, through nature (Romans 1) and our conscience (Romans 2), and **special revelation**, through words written in Scripture and spoken by Christ. This enlightenment of God to believers allows them to see God's perspective through general and special revelation in such a way that it is understood to be true. This would also include back-reading this enlightenment into Scripture, thus allowing the believer a fuller understanding of the character and desires of God through the written Word. This is not the doctrine of illumination, which says the Spirit allows us to understand the meaning of a text, but an enlightenment of God (the Father), which allows us to understand the truth of a text from God's perspective.

To understand how enlightenment differs from illumination, suppose, for example, I am a small boy who has been told at school that toys under the Christmas tree were made by elves at the North Pole. I also see various movies and "Santas" in the mall that confirm this. Then my father takes me aside and tells me, "Son, you need to understand that toys are made by toy manufacturers, assembled in factories, and sold in stores. They are not made by elves at the North Pole." And as I look at what has been disclosed by my father, I understand it to be true. Now I have, from my father, *a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge* of where toys come from.

Next, suppose I get on the Internet and find a Wikipedia article and read about how toys are made. With the *spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge* of toy making, which I received from my father, I can now better understand the Wikipedia article I am reading on toy making. It is not that my father interpreted the article for me. I could understand what it said without him. But I would not understand it to be true, if I understood toys were made by elves at the North Pole. But now with my father's *spirit of wisdom and of revelation*, I can understand the Wikipedia article in such a way that I don't just understand what it says, but I understand it to be true.

Near as I can tell, there is no way to know how God enlightens His saints to have *a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him*. We can only know that it exists, that it is a good thing to pray for, and that it is part of Christian maturity, granted by *the Father of glory*.

Appendix

Passages Often Used to Defend the Doctrine of Illumination

- **Luke 24:45**—*Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.*
This refers to the apostles' use of the Old Testament in the New Testament. For example, Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:23.
- **John 16:13**—*But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.*
This is the Holy Spirit guiding the apostles to the **revelation** of the truth, which we have in the New Testament.
- **1 Corinthians 2:14-16**—*But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ.*
This passage has nothing to do with the illumination of a text of Scripture, or the work of the Holy Spirit. This is about what the natural man **does not receive**, not about what he **cannot perceive**. And he does not *receive the things of the Spirit of God*, because *they are foolishness to him*. If they are foolish to him, then he must understand them in order to reject them. Then Paul says, *he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised*. Let's go back to Sam Harris, the atheist quoted above who gave an accurate presentation of the Gospel and its application. What is it about the Gospel that Sam Harris does not *understand* or *know* or *recognize* or *perceive*? Obviously, he doesn't *understand* that it's true. I understand the message of evolution, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, but I don't understand them to be true. Paul said, *he who is spiritual appraises* [ἀνακρίνω (*anakrino*), literally, *judges* or *examines*] *all things*. The things of the Spirit are understood by believers because we look at them from Christ's point of view, *we have the mind* [mentality or perspective or worldview] *of Christ*.

I understand the story of Santa Claus. But I don't understand it to be true. But I am a believer in toys being made by toy manufacturers and sold in stores. I not only understand this idea, but I understand it to be true. Having this mentality, I can accurately judge where toys come from, even if they are under a Christmas tree. Once we have the mind of Christ, we can spiritually appraise all things.

- **1 Corinthians 12:3**—*Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is accursed"; and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.*
This has nothing to do with understanding Scripture. Nor does it have to do with saying certain words. This means no one speaking while filled or guided by the Holy Spirit would say *Jesus is accursed* and no one can truthfully say he believes that *Jesus is Lord* except by the filling or leading of the *Holy Spirit*. The point is, when we speak, **filled or led** by the Holy Spirit, we speak the truth about Christ.
- **2 Corinthians 4:3-4**—*And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*
There is nothing here that suggests a work of the Spirit to understand a text of Scripture. Satan works to blind the minds of the unbelieving, which is why they need the **conviction** of the Spirit to accept (receive) the Gospel. This is about a conviction to believe, not the understanding of a text or message.

- **2 Corinthians 3:14-18**—[I shall quote it with my comments in brackets.] *But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant [the Mosaic Law, which the Jews considered to be a permanent way to relate to God] the same veil [the idea that the Law is still in effect] remains unlifted [it still dominates their thinking], because it [the 613 commandments, statutes, and ordinances of the Mosaic Law] is removed [done away with] in Christ [in the understanding that Christ ended the Law (Romans 10:4; Galatians 3-4).] But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil [the idea that the Law is still in effect] lies over their heart; but whenever a person turns to the Lord [not just for salvation but also the understanding that Christ ended the Mosaic Law], the veil [the idea that the Law is still in effect] is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face [realizing that faith in Christ, not the Mosaic Law, is the way to get to God], beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord [that God’s revelation was for the glory of Christ, not the good of Israel], are being transformed [progressively, experientially, sanctified] into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.*

That veil over the Jews is an understanding that the New Testament revelation is not true. It is not that they cannot understand what it says. The fact that they crucified Christ and persecuted the apostles proves they very well understood what it said.

- **Ephesians 3:14-19**—This passage is divided into two parts. The part God does and the part we (His saints) do. I have separated it accordingly.

1. What God does

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man.

What God does is to *grant you...to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man.* The Greek verb translated *would grant* is an aorist subjunctive of the word *δίδωμι (didomi)*, *to give*. Aorist is a timeless tense. Subjunctive is the mood of uncertainty. The prayer is that God might give the readers this power. The power is strength from *the Father* through *His Spirit* in the *inner man*, which is probably the *new man* (of Ephesians 4:22; Colossians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 5:17; and Romans 6:6). This sounds very much like the **enlightenment** of Ephesians 1:18 discussed above. The additional information here is that *the Father* does it *through His Spirit*.

2. What we do, because of what God does

... so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

What we do is place our faith in Christ to dwell in our hearts, so we will be *rooted and grounded in love*. This allows us *to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth*. There is only so much I can learn about anything if I do not accept it as true. It becomes very hard to build on knowledge I do not believe. Let’s go back to the toys-at-Christmas example. Because I don’t believe they are made by elves at the North Pole, it is hard to comprehend the extent of how that toy building process would be. But because I have been *enlightened* to the fact that toys are made in factories by humans and machines, I can comprehend an article describing *the breadth and length and height and depth* of toy making.