

Come Down, O Love Divine

Bianco da Siena (1350–1434); tr. Richard Frederick Littledale (1833–1890)

Come down, O Love divine,
seek Thou this soul of mine,
and visit it with Thine own ardor glowing;
O Comforter, draw near,
within my heart appear,
and kindle it, Thy holy flame bestowing.

O let it freely burn,
till earthly passions turn
to dust and ashes in its heat consuming;
and let Thy glorious light
shine ever on my sight,
and clothe me round, the while my path illuming.

Let holy charity
mine outward vesture be,
and lowliness become mine inner clothing:
true lowliness of heart,
which takes the humbler part,
and o'er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.

And so the yearning strong,
with which the soul will long,
shall far outpass the pow'r of human telling;
no soul can guess its grace,
till he become the place
wherein the Holy Spirit makes His dwelling.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

The Need for Illumination

Kevin T. Bauder

Of the various doctrines related to Scripture (revelation, inspiration, canonicity, etc.), perhaps the most misunderstood is the doctrine of illumination. Most Bible believers agree that illumination is a work of the Holy Spirit in helping people (particularly believers) to understand Scripture. In many cases, however, illumination is taken to be a shortcut to understanding the Bible. People imagine that the Holy Spirit somehow communicates the meaning of the text directly to the reader's mind, so that the reader does not need to do the hard work of studying the Bible. Whatever sense (or, often, nonsense) enters the reader's mind after looking at a passage is taken to be its true meaning, taught by the Holy Spirit. For such a reader, what the text means is whatever it means "to me."

The Bible contains passages that are hard to understand (2 Pet 3:16). A faithful pastor may spend weeks or even months preparing to preach one of these passages. He might translate the verses, parse the verbs, locate the nouns, look up word meanings and chase their parallel usages, study the grammar, create both sentence and exegetical diagrams, and consult multiple translations and commentaries. He may labor to discover the best way of communicating the actual meaning of the text to his listeners. At the end of his sermon, he is as likely as not to be greeted at the door by some dear saint who will say, "Pastor, thank you for your sermon, but the Holy Spirit has told me that this verse means..." Whatever comes next will almost certainly *not* be what the verse really says.

Yet the doctrine of illumination must mean something. The question is not only what illumination is, but also why it is necessary and how it works. The reason it is necessary is because, in the first place, "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14). In other words, at some level the unsaved do not receive or welcome (the verb is *dechomai*) spiritual truth.

The problem is not that an unsaved person is unable to read the Bible and to understand it at the verbal level. When it comes to interpreting the text, unsaved students of the Bible are just about as skilled as believing students.



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In fact, some of them may be skilled enough to write useful commentaries on the text.

The problem is not with grasping the Bible's verbal meaning. The problem is that, to the unsaved person, to the person who is living life outside the biblical frame of reference, the teachings of the Bible simply seem preposterous ("they are foolishness unto him"). To such a person, the Bible's instruction appears to have no relevance. It seems like moral nonsense. According to Paul, unsaved people have no capacity to know spiritual things, which would include the way of salvation.

This incapacity for grasping the significance of spiritual truth is hardwired into unsaved people (or the "natural man," as Paul calls them). It is not that people *become* disabled from welcoming spiritual truth; on the contrary, this is the state into which they are born. It is the direct result of the fall—theologians refer to this disability as the *noetic effect* of the fall. Unless God does something to open their unsaved minds, people will never see the significance of spiritual truth, including the gospel. They will never perceive its significance for their lives. And if they do not grasp that, then they cannot believe it.

This disability is compounded by the fact that "the god of this world hath 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" (2 Cor 4:4). In addition to the natural blindness caused by sin, Satan has imposed an additional layer of spiritual blindness. This blindness specifically affects people's ability to understand the gospel. If they do not understand the gospel, however, then what further spiritual truth can they ever understand?

Again, this lack of understanding does not mean that the unsaved are incapable of hearing and grasping the gospel message. Rather, the message, even if understood at the verbal level, seems absurd to them. What makes sense to them is not the biblical God, sin, salvation, and Christ, but a different kind of God, a different kind of sin problem, a different kind of salvation, and a different kind of savior. This inability to credit the true gospel is the reason that unbelieving people have created so many false gospels.

Thus, unsaved people (the "natural man") are hindered by two kinds of spiritual blindness. One is their own natural blindness, which is the direct result of the fall. This natural blindness covers all spiritual things. It is compounded by another blindness, one caused by Satan, and it is a blindness specifically toward the gospel. This double blindness is one reason people cannot save themselves. Furthermore, it is the reason they will not allow God to save them on His terms.

God has made spiritual truth, including the gospel, clear in His Word. As long as this truth does not match the world in which unsaved people imag-

ine themselves to live, however, they do not and will not welcome it. They will find some alternative belief to be much more credible. The alternative will seem more plausible: it will make better sense to them.

If any people are ever going to be saved, God needs to do something to open their spiritually blind eyes. He has to do something to shine a light into the darkness of unsaved minds. He has to grant illumination, and illumination is the work of the Holy Spirit.

How does illumination work? And what does it mean? Scripture answers those questions. We shall turn to those answers in the next essay.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
