

Do You Know the Holy Spirit? Lesson Nine: The Holy Spirit's Work in Conversion

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Introduction: "Must I Receive a Direct Operation of the Holy Spirit to be saved?"

A. Many teach today that a sinner must first receive a *direct* operation of the Holy Spirit, *separate and apart* from being taught God's word, to be saved.

"A sinner can no more repent and believe without the Holy Spirit's aid than he can create a world." - Charles Spurgeon

1. Due to the influence of John Calvin's teachings (1509-1564), many believe salvation comes *directly* by the Spirit for those elected by God.

"For which reason, also, Peter says, that believers are "elect" "through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ," (1Pet.1: 2). By these words he reminds us, that if the shedding of his sacred blood is not to be in vain, our souls must be washed in it by the secret cleansing of the Holy Spirit... It is **by the Spirit alone** that he unites himself to us. By the same grace and energy of the Spirit we become his members, so that he keeps us under him, and we in our turn possess him... **Faith itself is produced only by the Spirit.**"

- Institutes of Christian Religion, John Calvin, Book 3, Ch. 1, Sec. 1, 3 & 4

B. Many want to "experience grace" – to receive some "better felt than told" event or feel a strong compelling influence directly from the Spirit as proof of salvation.

C. Just what does the Holy Spirit do when convicting and converting a sinner?

1. All three Persons of the Godhead are at work in conversion (**Tit 3:4-7**).
2. Yet, for some reason, it seems that there is much greater controversy on how the Holy Spirit does His work.
3. Some deny His work in conversion by failing to mention Him at all; others come up with sensational theories without evidence from Scripture.
4. The Holy Spirit does in fact play a significant role in the conversion of every sinner who comes to Christ.
5. Let us look to the Scriptures to learn what He does and how He does it.

I. The Holy Spirit Works on Our Heart by the Word of God.

A. The Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the Scriptures (**2 Pet. 1:20-21**).

1. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God (**2 Tim. 3:16-17**).
2. All truth was revealed to the apostles, a complete revelation of God's will (**John 14:16-17, 26; 16:7-13; 17:17; cf. 1 Cor. 13:10; Jude 3**).
3. The wisdom of God, once a mystery, was revealed to "us" - the apostles of Christ (**1 Cor. 2:6-13; cf. Eph. 3:3-9; Col. 1:25-29; Rom. 16:25-26**).
 - a. Paul preached God's message from the Spirit demonstrated in power (**1 Cor. 2:1-5; cf. 2 Cor. 12:12**).
 - b. The gospel is God's wisdom, not man's (**1 Cor. 2:6-9**).
 - (1) "**We speak God's wisdom**" (**v. 6**) refers specifically to "*the holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit*" (**Eph. 3:5**)
 - c. The apostles knew the mind of the Lord Christ because it was revealed to them by the Holy Spirit (**1 Cor. 2:10-16**).

B. The Holy Spirit convicts us by the inspired word of God (the Scriptures).

1. Many people today, in response to Calvinism, believe we are convicted by the Spirit through *inward subjective experiences*.

a. Instead of Scripture as the basis of faith (**Rom. 10:17**), emotional experiences are the standard of authority in religion.

2. This practice is similar to what philosophy calls *Existentialism*.

Existentialism: The belief that it is entirely up to each individual to determine what is truth, what is right and what is wrong, and what their personal responsibilities are. This is determined upon one's own human *existence* and the personal experiences each one has.

a. The consequence of Existentialism is that truth is not absolute (e.g. complete revelation), but *relative*.

b. Each person determines his own truth as he perceives it according to his own experiences in life.

3. Like Existentialism, many believe the Holy Spirit directly operates on us in this way that truth is determined by our emotional experiences.

a. Instead of searching the Scriptures for the truth, it is believed truth is found only from within as the Spirit gives it.

b. Scripture is not respected as the inspired word of God, but only of value as each person receives understanding from the Spirit.

4. In contrast, the Scriptures teach that the Holy Spirit works or "operates" on the heart of sinners **only** through the powerful word of God! (**Heb. 4:12; Rom. 1:16; 2 Tim. 3:16-17**).

5. When the apostles preached the word of God, the Holy Spirit convicted the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (**John 16:8; cf. 12:48**).

Example: On the day of Pentecost, the Jews were "*cut to the heart*" in the hearing of the gospel of Jesus Christ (**Acts 2:37**).

Example: The household of Cornelius was convicted not by a direct operation of the Holy Spirit, but by being taught God's word for their salvation (**Acts 11:13-14**).

C. The Word of God is *already* revealed by the Holy Spirit to be understandable.

1. God promises us that when we read His word we can understand it! (**Eph. 3:3-4; cf. 2 Cor. 1:13**).

a. Jesus said that we can "*know the truth*" (**John 8:32**); God desires all to "*come to a knowledge of the truth*" (**2 Tim. 2:4**).

2. God commands us to understand His will (**Eph. 5:17**), thus the Scriptures are **not** beyond our ability to understand.

a. The Bereans understood this and they were commended for their diligent search of the Scriptures (**Acts 17:11**).

b. We are to study to show ourselves approved of God, rightly dividing the word of truth (**2 Tim. 2:15**).

3. The New Testament is not a "dead letter" that we cannot understand without Divine assistance, but is living and powerful today (**Heb. 4:12**).

4. In contrast, many today **falsely** teach that no one can understand the Scriptures *unless the Holy Spirit directly operates on his heart* to "**illuminate**" the Scriptures, to give him a complete understanding.

5. Many believe, just as Calvin taught, that the Spirit must directly operate on the heart to give us understanding of God's will.

“But I answer, that the testimony of the Spirit is superior to reason. For as God alone can properly bear witness to his own words, so **these words will not obtain full credit in the hearts of men, until they are sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.** The same Spirit, therefore, who spoke by the mouth of the prophets, must penetrate our hearts, in order to convince us that they faithfully delivered the message with which they were divinely entrusted.”

- Institutes of Christian Religion, John Calvin, Book 1, Ch. 7, Sec. 4

“... That **Spirit of understanding opens the intellectual eye**; so that he himself may be properly termed the key by which the treasures of the heavenly kingdom are unlocked, and **his illumination, the eye of the mind by which we are enabled to see**: hence Paul so highly commends the ministry of the Spirit (2Cor 3:6), since **teachers would cry aloud to no purpose, did not Christ, the internal teacher, by means of his Spirit, draw to himself those who are given him of the Father.** Therefore, as we have said that salvation is perfected in the person of Christ, *so, in order to make us partakers of it, he baptizes us "with the Holy Spirit and with fire,"* (Luke 3:16), **enlightening us into the faith of his Gospel**, and so regenerating us to be new creatures.” - Institutes of Christian Religion, John Calvin, Book 3, Ch. 1, Sec. 4

6. Here is one “proof text” that is offered for this doctrine:

1 Corinthians 2:14 “*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.*”

7. Clearly, the acceptance of the gospel requires that a person be *spiritually inclined*, but does this prove we need “Spirit illumination (i.e., direct operation of the Spirit upon our heart) to understand the Scriptures?

a. **Who is a natural man?** This man is *opposite* to the spiritual man. This person does not have God; he is resistant to the wisdom of God and *relies on his own human reasoning*.

- The “natural” (PSUCHIKOS) man is a person who allows self to be governed by the physical appetites of his body without regard to the desire of the Spirit or will of God.
 - (1) He refuses to listen to the revelation of God as given to the apostles, regarding it as foolishness (**1 Cor. 1:18, 23**).
- If the Corinthians had not been carnal or “natural” in their attitude, the apostle Paul could have regarded them as “spiritual” (**1 Cor. 3:1**).
 - b. **Who is the spiritual man?** He is inclined to spiritual things because he **chooses** to be. He submits to the things of the Spirit of God, to God’s revelation as given to the apostles.

(1) He is willing to be taught of God, unlike the stubborn “natural man” who listens to human reasoning.

8. If the “natural man” (**1 Cor. 2:14**) is to become spiritual in his attitude toward revelation, he has to *choose* to stop evaluating God and His gospel by human wisdom or reasoning (**1 Cor. 1:18-25**).

9. A person must humble himself when listening to the gospel; otherwise he will not be able to accurately examine spiritual things (God’s word).

D. Like Lydia we *choose* to open our hearts and humbly receive God’s word.

1. The Lord did not “**force** her heart open” nor did God open Lydia’s heart separate and apart from the word of God (**Acts 16:14**).

2. If Lydia had not had a “*good and honest heart*” (**Luke 8:15**) to begin with, the Lord could not have opened her heart by His word.

3. To receive God’s word, we must choose to be *meek* meaning we must control our own will and be willing to yield to His will (**James 1:21**).

4. The Lord opened Lydia's heart *while she was listening to* the preaching of God's powerful word, the gospel (**Heb. 4:12**).
 - a. Only by means of the gospel does the Lord "**open** our heart."
 - b. "Opened" (DIANOIGOO) (**Acts 16:14**): "to open by dividing or drawing asunder." *This is exactly what the word of God does!*
5. Lydia gave "*heed*" to the gospel as the truth (**Acts 16:14b; cf. 1 Tim. 4:13**) meaning Lydia *paid serious attention to it*.

Note: "Heed" / "Attended" / "Respond" (PROSECHO) (**Acts 16:14**): "to hold the mind towards, i.e. pay attention to, be cautious about, apply oneself to, adhere to" (Strong's Lexicon).

- a. Because Lydia gave the gospel a fair hearing, the Lord opened her heart and she gave heed to the gospel.
 - b. As a result of accepting the gospel as the truth, Lydia and her household obeyed the gospel to be baptized (**Acts 16:15**).
- E. We can stubbornly resist the Holy Spirit by refusing to listen to the word of God with an open heart (e.g., **Acts 7:51-52**).

1. The "*natural man*" (**1 Cor. 2:14**) is stubbornly proud in his own wisdom, therefore he cannot understand the word of the Spirit of God.
2. The Spirit cannot work on hearts that are *hard*, hearts that are stubborn, unyielding, and refuse to listen to God's word (**Zech 7:11-12**).
 - a. Those who refuse the truth also refuse salvation (**2 Thes. 2:10**).
3. We, in fact, "*insult the Spirit of grace*" when we know the truth, but continue in our sins (**Heb. 10:26-29**).
4. Without a humble heart, God cannot teach us nor save us by His grace (**Ps. 25:9; James 4:6**).
5. Each person must *choose* to listen to God's word and the Holy Spirit will not force anyone to listen! (**Mat. 13:14-17**)

II. The Holy Spirit Converts People by the Word of God (**2 Thes. 2:13-14; 1 Pet. 1:2**)

- A. The process of conversion is seen when people with good and honest hearts receive the powerful seed of the Spirit, *God's word*, into their hearts (**Lk 8:4-15**).
- B. People are *born of God* by the word of God.
 1. God begets us through the word of truth (**James 1:18**).
 2. We are born again by the *living* seed, the word of God (**1 Pet. 1:22-25**).
- C. The Holy Spirit works to bring our new spiritual birth at baptism (**John 3:1-5**).
 1. To be "born again" refers to a new, *spiritual* birth (**John 3:3**).
 - a. It is the *exact* moment in time when a person becomes a child of God or a Christian.
 - b. To receive Eternal life, *every* person needs to be born again:
"**Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**"
 2. Just as every baby, without exception, is born of a man and a woman, so every child of God is born of water and of the Spirit (**John 3:5**).
 3. Many people erroneously teach that being "born again" is *entirely* a *passive* event, that God does everything and we do nothing to be saved.

"New birth? Inconceivable. God handles the task, start to finish... *Born* again. Birth, by definition, is a passive act. The enwombed child contributes nothing to the delivery."

- Lucado, Max (2007). 3:16 Numbers of Hope, p. 8. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc.

4. The “new birth” is **not** a passive event that “just happens to us”, but an event we *actively* take part in as we respond to the gospel in obedient faith.
 - a. Just as the baby does his or her part in the birth process, we also are actively involved when we are born again spiritually (**Jn 3:3**).

"Your baby actually helps you during labour. Although it is widely accepted that it is the uterine activity which propels the baby forward, it is also fetal activity which helps labour progress smoothly. **The baby, with its head movement, wriggles out of the birth canal and with foot movement, pushes against the uterus and hence away from it.**" - "The Baby's Birth Experience" by Sonali Shivlani, an internationally certified (CAPPA) childbirth educator.

5. God does “the real work” in saving us (**2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:5**), we cannot earn our salvation, yet we must do *our part* in “the new birth.”
6. Only those that have been “born again” belong to God’s kingdom (**John 3:3, 5**) and to enter that kingdom, *we must obey God’s will* (**Mat. 7:21**).
7. Jesus gave two conditions that must be met for the new birth (**Jn 3:5**).

- a. “Born of **water**”: Baptism in water into Christ.
 - (1) Baptism is for penitent believers (**Mark 16:16; Acts 2:36-38; 8:12-13, 35-39; 10:34-38; 16:25-34; 18:8; 19:1-5; 22:16**).
 - (2) Baptism is when every person is “born again” or saved (**1 Pet 3:21**), when their sins are forgiven (**Ac 2:38; 22:16**).
- b. “Born of the **Spirit**” – *The Holy Spirit is at work at baptism!*
 - (1) The water of baptism is **joined** with the work of the Spirit to bring about our “new birth” (**John 3:5; Titus 3:5**).

D. “By one Spirit” we are taught that baptism is necessary for our salvation.

1. Every person who was baptized into the body of Christ did so because they were instructed “*by one Spirit*” (**1 Cor. 12:13; e.g., Acts 2:41**).
 - a. The apostle Paul emphasized that only by the Spirit (**by His direction**), would one be inspired to say “*Jesus is Lord*” (**1 Cor 12:3; cf. Eph 3:5; Mat 22:43**), rather than “*Jesus is accursed.*”
 - b. Similarly, all who are baptized into the body of Christ does so because the Holy Spirit instructed it *as revealed in the Scriptures* (**1 Cor. 12:13; e.g., Acts 2:38, Gal. 3:27; 1 Pet. 3:21**).
 - c. Baptism is given in the name (authority) of the Spirit (**Mt 28:19**) and by His instruction- “*by the Spirit of our God*” (**1 Cor. 6:11**).
 - d. *Every Christian, without exception*, has been baptized and added to His body (**Acts 2:47**), the “*one body*” (**1 Cor. 12:13**), which is the church (**Col. 1:18**), a membership shared together in unity.
2. Man, not the Spirit, administers this baptism for the remission of sins.
 - a. Some believe that the Holy Spirit does the baptizing, confusing Holy Spirit baptism (**Acts 1:5**) with water baptism (**Acts 2:38**).
 - b. Yet, not even “*baptism with the Holy Spirit*” was administered by the Spirit, but by Christ Himself (**Mark 1:8; Review Lesson 4**).
 - c. In 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks of baptism being carried out by man, even sometimes by Paul himself (**1 Cor 1:14-17**).
 - d. *The truth is there is no record in the Scriptures of the Holy Spirit ever administering any type of baptism to anyone.*

3. When a person obeys the gospel to be baptized, he is “*made to drink of one Spirit*” (1 Cor 12:13) or receives the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ac 2:38).

III. How Can I Know for Sure That I Have Been Converted by the Holy Spirit?

A. By *choosing* to **listen** to the word of God.

1. The Holy Spirit draws us to the Heavenly Father as we choose to listen to the Spirit inspired word and be taught of God (John 6:44-45).
2. The Holy Spirit inspired Word is what produces faith in those who hear it leading to their salvation (Acts 4:4; Rom. 10:17; cf. John 5:24).
3. Hearing the gospel is what turns a person to the Lord, not a direct operation of the Holy Spirit or a push by “*the hand of the Lord.*”
 - a. “*The hand of the Lord*” describes the Lord’s providential care for His people as they preach the gospel (Acts 11:19-21).
 - b. “*A large number who believed turned to the Lord*” because they heard them “*preaching the Lord Jesus.*”
4. God does not “twist our arm” or force us by His “irresistible grace” to obey Him (Ps. 110:3).
5. It is up to us to listen to **what the Spirit says** as revealed in the Scriptures: “*And the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ ...*” (Rev. 22:17; cf. Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 14:13; 1 Tim. 4:1).

B. By *choosing* to **believe** in the Lord.

1. While hearing God’s word has the potential to create faith in us (Rom. 10:17), we still have to *choose* to believe in what we hear (Heb. 4:2).
 - a. Not mere hearing, but listening with respect for the Scriptures as the actual word of God is essential to gaining faith (1 Thes. 2:13).
 - b. Such faith comes by an honest examination of the Scriptures (e.g., Acts 17:11).
2. Eternal life is given by the Spirit to those who believe in the words of the Lord Jesus (John 6:63-64).

C. By choosing to obey the word of God.

1. To be born again (John 3:3, 5) we must obey the truth (1 Pet. 1:22-23).
2. When we obey “*the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus*” we will be set free from “*the law of sin and of death*” (Rom. 8:2).
3. Those who are converted by the Holy Spirit have just begun to truly live! “*If we live by the Spirit, let us walk by the Spirit*” (Gal. 5:25).

Conclusion: Through the Holy Spirit, We Can Be Confident that we are the Children of God! (Romans 8:16-17).

- A. The Holy Spirit “*bears witness*” or speaks to us through the written Word.
- B. “*Our spirit*” may bear witness of the fact that we have believed and obeyed what the Spirit said to do in the Bible on how to be saved.
- C. The Holy Spirit may also “bear witness” that we are children of God because He knows we have obeyed God’s word.
- D. Both our spirit and the Holy Spirit may bear witness together of our salvation when they are *in agreement* with one another.
- E. Only when a person has obeyed the gospel can a person truly be confident that he or she is a child of God!