

## EVANGELICAL VIEWS ON ILLUMINATION OF SCRIPTURE AND CRITIQUE

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The contemporary evangelical views of illumination emerge through Lutheran pietism. Phillip Jakob Spener replaced the concept of verbal inspiration of the Scriptures with a personal inspiration or illumination of the believing interpreter, fostering a major controversy with orthodox Lutheranism.<sup>1</sup> In 1685, Johann Quenstedt reframed the view as a hermeneutic.<sup>2</sup> In 1707 David Hollanz echoed the view that the Holy Spirit is promised to every Christian so that they might understand the biblical text better.<sup>3</sup> Around 1701, August Herman Franke introduced the illumination

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<sup>1</sup> Philipp Jakob Spener, *Consilia Et Judicia Theologia* (Frankfurt a. M., 1709) 3.700. Cf. K. James Stein, “Phillip Jakob Spener (1635–1705)” and Markus Matthias, “August Hermann Franke (1663–1727),” in *The Pietist Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Seventeenth Centuries* (ed. Carter Lindberg; Malden: Blackwell, 2005) 88 and 105–6; Johannes Wallmann, *Philipp Jakob Spener und die Anfänge des Pietismus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1970) 92–96; Emmanuel Hirsch, *Geschichte der neuen Evangelische Theologie in Zusammenhang mit der allgemeinen Bewegung des Europäischen Denkens* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1951) 2.114; Volker Jung, *Das Ganze der Heiligen Schrift. Hermeneutik und Schriftauslegung bei Abraham Calov* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1999) 100–101.

<sup>2</sup> Johann Andreas Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica* (Wittenberg: Johanne Ludolph Quenstedt, 1685). The relevant portion (chaps. 1–3) of this is available in English as *The Nature and Character of Theology: An Introduction to the Thought of J. A. Quenstedt from THEOLOGIA DIDACTICO-POLEMICA SIVE SYSTEMA THEOLOGICUM* (abr., ed., and trans. Luther Poellot; St. Louis: Concordia, 1986), ch. I “Of Theology in General”: question I “Is Theology Given?” paragraph XI, p. 36; ph. XIV, p. 39; ph. XXXI-Observe (1), p. 54; ph. XXXV, p. 57; Section II “Polemic”-“Sources of Rebutals or Dialysis of Objections”: q. I “Is Theology Given?” 64–65; q. II “Is Revealed Theology Necessary in the Church?” 71–73; q. III “Is Theology a God-Given Practical Aptitude?” exposition III & IV 73–74; rebuttal I, p. 80; ch. III “Of the Sources of Theology”; porism IV 199–200. Stanley Grenz, in *Beyond Foundationalism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 99, claims that this illumination view originated earlier by at least the time of John Hus and cites George Tavard in *Holy Writ or Holy Church: The Crisis of the Protestant Reformation* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959) 47–66 which discusses John Hus’s view of the soteriological transformation in which the Holy Spirit enables the new believer to be applicationally responsive to the Word of God. From my reading of the Hus material I agree with Tavard, contrary to Grenz; Hus does *not* teach this view of the illumination through the Holy Spirit’s aid to cognitively understand the Bible. I have not found the view any earlier than Spener’s, Quenstedt’s, and Hollanz’s pietistic Lutheran systematic theologies.

<sup>3</sup> David Hollaz, *Examen Theologicum Acroamaticum*, published in 1707, is available as *Acroamaticum Universam Theologiam Thetico-Polemiam Complectens* (Lipsiae: B. C. Breitkopfii, 1763).

of the Spirit as a “living” knowledge of the biblical text that will bring about spiritual affection.<sup>4</sup>

Evangelicalism has largely owned Spener, Quenstedt, and Hollanz’s cognitive illumination view, with others in evangelicalism joining Franke’s spirit transformational illumination view. This raises the possibility of an internalist authority of interpretation on the level of a divine intuition. Unlike Spener, and Schleiermacher after him, this pietistic evangelical view attempts to remain orthodox in claiming a legitimate verbal inspirational view for the production of the biblical text.

Liberalism took illumination in the inspirational direction. For example, Schleiermacher developed a psychological side of the hermeneutical process, echoing Spener’s personal inspirational view, including this illuminational inspiration to motivate the reader to depend deeply upon God. This liberal interpretation view of illumination (as inspiration) was championed by Cardinal John Henry Newman through his “illative” (or confident intuitive) sense.<sup>5</sup> Some these days may view this illumination through Michael Polanyi’s tacit intuitional way of knowing. That is, whether conservative or liberal, the illumination from the Holy Spirit is seen as rendering clear the authoritative message of the Word of God.

Such an illumination aid would be hermeneutical. Usually evangelicalism sees this hermeneutical aid functioning individually. For example, the 1982 evangelical Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics includes as the fifth article: “WE AFFIRM that the Holy Spirit enables believers to appropriate and apply Scripture to their lives. WE DENY that the natural man is able to discern spiritually the biblical message apart from the Holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup> This statement indicates in its denial a cognitive illuminational element while in its affirmation the transformational illumination is highlighted. This statement reflects the emphasis in evangelicalism that the Holy Spirit aids the individual’s use of hermeneutics.

However, occasionally in contemporary evangelicalism this illumination is taken as communal. A contemporary advocate of this communal conservative illumination view is Donald Bloesch. He identifies that the Bible’s revelatory status “does not reside in its wording as such but in the Spirit of God, who fills the words with meaning and power.”<sup>7</sup> This view provides a post-textual subjective meaning. Kevin Vanhoozer also extends this into com-

<sup>4</sup> August Hermann Franke, *Praelectiones Hermeneuticae, ad Exponendi Sensum Scripturae S. Theologiae Studiosis Ostendendam Adiecta est in Fine Brevis et Luculenta Scripturae S. cum Fructu Legendi Institutio* (Halle: Waisenhaus, 1710) 57; cf. Markus Matthias, “August Hermann Franke (1663–1727),” in *The Pietist Theologians* 106–7.

<sup>5</sup> Cardinal John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of A Grammar of Assent* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1870, 1903).

<sup>6</sup> The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics is contained in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* (ed. Earl Radmacher and Robert Preus; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 891.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration & Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994) 27.

munity illumination of the Spirit: “Only a prayerful reading that invokes the Spirit can perceive the true meaning in what is otherwise a dead letter. Such Spirit-led exegesis ‘restores the interpretive activity of the spiritual community as the connecting link between text and reader.’”<sup>8</sup> Within this view, the authority is the Holy Spirit within the corporate communal intuitive process of illumination. Vanhoozer develops the gain and need for this illumination as follows:

The Spirit illumines the letter by impressing its illocutionary force on the reader. Thanks to the illumination of the Spirit, we see and hear speech acts for what they are—warnings, promises, commands, assertions—together with their implicit claim in our minds and hearts. In so doing, the Spirit does not alter but ministers the meaning: “The spiritual sense is the literal sense correctly understood.” The distinction between “letter” and “spirit” is precisely that between reading the words and grasping what one reads. Likewise, the difference between a “natural” and an “illuminated” understanding is that between holding an opinion and having a deep sense of its profundity.<sup>9</sup>

It is my contention that such speech-acts as commands and promises are clearly indicated in the divinely accommodated biblical text itself without the need of an intuitive work of the Spirit to render this clear. Most speech-act theorists would agree that the meaning of the statement is apparent in the contextualized textual statement, rather than through this evangelical appeal to illumination, which is why they place the meaning on the speech-act itself.

In conservative circles these illumination views are often supported through textual appeals to John 14:26; 16:12–15; 1 Cor 2:6–16; and 1 John 2:27. Elsewhere, I argued that these texts do not in fact teach such an illumination view.<sup>10</sup> The remainder of this article explains why I do not think that the Bible teaches illumination as a hermeneutical aid and why it is our responsibility to sensitively interpret the Scriptures.

#### I. JOHN 14 AND 16 AND ILLUMINATION CLAIMS

Jesus’ second-person statements to the disciples in the upper room discourse of John 13–16 appear to have lots of textual particulars indicating that the group of disciples in the upper room are those who are promised and commanded by the second-person statements, most of which are plural and will be reflected in English by the American Southern expression “y’all.” The

<sup>8</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 411.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 413. In contrast to Vanhoozer’s illumination view of Spirit vs. letter, I maintain that the contrast here is instead the Spirit’s applying his qualities and fruit deeply into the life of a believer, like Johnathan Edward’s religious affections, rather than an external performing of the ritual mandated by the Mosaic Law. Cf. Doug Kennard, “Paul and the Law” (paper presented to the Evangelical Theological Society, March 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Kennard, *The Relationship Between Epistemology, Hermeneutics, Biblical Theology and Contextualization* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1999) 139–42.

disciples are the ones who have been with Jesus (John 14:9; 15:27; 16:4, 16–17). The disciples are those to whom Jesus said, “I have spoken to you all” (John 13:19; 14:25, 29; 15:11; 16:1, 4, 12, 15, 25, 33; 17:6). Jesus tells the disciples about his betrayal by one in their midst with words such as, “I am telling you all before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you all may believe that I am” (John 13:19; 14:29; 16:4).

In addition, Jesus discusses items with the disciples in the upper room that have to do with their immediate context, such as the betrayal, denial, and the impending departure of Jesus from them. Jesus said to Judas Iscariot, “What you do, do quickly” (John 13:27). Then Jesus tells Peter, “A cock will not crow until you deny Me three times” (John 13:38). We recognize that these are not promises or commands to the Christian, but to specific individuals in the context. Then Jesus starts talking about his impending departure from the disciples in the near context in second-person statements, “Little children I am with you all a little while longer. You all shall seek me; and as I said to the Jews, I now say to you all also, Where I am going, you all cannot come” (John 13:33, 36; 14:2–3, 18; 16:7, 16–17, 28). All these statements trouble the disciples and the disciples present are those who Jesus comforts with, “Let not your-all heart be troubled” (John 14:1, 27; 16:20, 22).

Now most evangelical traditions recognize that the disciples in the upper room are the audience commanded and that is why most of us do not maintain an ordinance of footwashing when Jesus said, “If I the Lord and Teacher, washed all your feet, you all also ought to wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14).

However, most of our traditions are sloppy in appropriating for ourselves certain upper room statements which appear to be reserved for the disciples in the upper room in the same manner. For example, in the next quote I have italicized phrases that restrict the recipients to be those who actually have been with the Jesus in his discipleship ministry. Jesus promises the Holy Spirit to aid these disciples with him in the upper room, “I have spoken to you all, *while abiding with you all*. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, *he will teach all of you all things, and bring to all your-all remembrance all that I said to you all,*” and again, “*I have many more things to say to you all, but you all cannot bear them now*. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide *you all* 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 all what is to come*” (John 4:26; 16:12–15). Immediately following both of these statements Jesus talks about his impending departure, “*A little while, and you all will no longer behold me*” (John 14:27–28; 16:16–19). Thus the disciples in the upper room with Jesus are the group that has these statements promised to them.

This means that John 14:26 and 16:12–15 are special promises of Spirit revelation to the eleven disciples present in the upper room so that they might remember Jesus’ words in the inspiration of the Scriptures and its communication to found Christianity, and they are not promises of Holy Spirit enablement to help the Christian properly to interpret passages in Scrip-

ture.<sup>11</sup> Now these foundational inspiration promises still have great benefit for Christians in that they reassure us that John wrote these statements accurately by the Spirit's aid.

Notice also that there are several statements in the upper room discourse in the third person which may include us directly but no statements of a Holy Spirit illumination aid including later Christians (John 14:23–24; 15:6, 23; 16:8–11, 21). It seems that there are a few points of our systematic theologies and traditions that need to give way for the warranted truth of the Scripture. This means that if we embrace a methodology of remaining intertextual to our tradition as the governing rubric, we depart from truth and the Bible at certain points. It would be better to exclude any assumptions and doctrinal beliefs inappropriate to the biblical text and remain intertextual with the truth as contained in the biblical text.

These two texts in John's Gospel are deeply contextually developed as promises of inspiration to the disciples, so that as Jesus leaves these disciples, they would be reminded of what Jesus said to them when he was here (John 14:25–27) and that the Spirit would also instruct them about prophetic things that these disciples could not handle that night (John 16:12–16), but these prophecies were yet to be revealed through the Spirit to them. These promises took place to these disciples, and we have the results of these promises in documents such as the biblical Gospels.

## II. FIRST CORINTHIANS 2 AND ILLUMINATION CLAIMS

In some ways the Corinthian church is similar to that of the contemporary American church. For example, there are mature Christians among our churches who recognize the gospel as the wisdom of God while some academics in our fields consider this gospel of ours to be utter foolishness (1 Cor 1:23–24; 2:6–8). Paul instructs and corrects such a church in 1 Cor 2:6–16. In Paul's day rulers had rejected the gospel as demonstrated by their killing of Christ (1 Cor 2:6–8). However, this simple gospel has extensive kingdom benefits prepared for those who love God (1 Cor 2:9).

The Spirit of God knows the mind of God and revealed to Paul and the Corinthians this gospel message which the spirit of the world considers foolishness (1 Cor 2:10–12). This gospel was supernaturally revealed (*ἀπεκάλυψεν*, 1 Cor 2:10) from the Spirit to these Christians. Such a communication as this we would normally identify with revelation, as in inspiration, rather than illumination.

Paul expresses this gospel in spiritual thoughts and words rather than human wisdom (1 Cor 2:1–2, 13). A "soulish" (*ψυχικῶς*) man does not accept this gospel from the Spirit of God (1 Cor 1:23; 2:6–8, 14) because the gospel

<sup>11</sup> While my argument stands on the sufficiency of Johannine contextual study, it is interesting to note that similar phrases of recalling to memory are used by Homer to claim inspiration (*Iliad* 2.492).

is appreciated from spiritual appraisal or examination (*ἀνακρίνεται*, 1 Cor 2:14). A person who fleshes out this spiritual gospel message is a spiritual or mature person who appreciates this gospel revealed by the Spirit (1 Cor 2:6, *τελείοις*; 1 Cor 2:15, *πνευματικός*). Such a spiritual person will not be appreciated by natural men because these men do not appreciate the message which the spiritual person fleshes out. However, the spiritual person's gospel perspective enables him to examine or appraise all other things. This gospel perspective is the mind of Christ, which the Spirit revealed (1 Cor 2:10–13, 16).

The issue in 1 Corinthians 1–2 is not that the Holy Spirit aids in interpreting Bible passages but that the gospel focusing on Christ is revealed by the Spirit, and unfortunately some reject this gospel as foolishness. This gospel was supernaturally revealed (*ἀπεκάλυψεν*, 1 Cor 2:10) from the Spirit but the “soulish person” (*ψυχικός*, 1 Cor 2:14) rejects this wisdom of God as foolishness (compare with 1 Cor 1:18–24). Furthermore, the Spirit's work to make believers in the gospel spiritual is a transformation of the Christian to think through the Spirit's world view. This is not a hermeneutical promise for understanding the biblical text but rather a transformed life that can serve as the basis for evaluating *everything* in life. For example, the eternal perspective of the gospel serves as a grid for evaluating whether the results of activities will last. Likewise, the non-Christian who rejects the gospel as foolishness will not be able to appreciate a Christian who personifies the gospel's eternal perspective.

### III. FIRST JOHN AND ILLUMINATION CLAIMS

Other passages claimed as support for illumination are like the previous Corinthian example, such as the statement in 1 John 2:18–27 regarding anointing with the gospel. John states that we are anointed (*χρῖσμα*) with truth centering on publicly acknowledging Jesus as the Christ (*Χριστοῦ*, anointed), a truth that is denied by the antichrists (*ἀντίχριστοι*) and their paragon “the eschatological antichrist” (*ἀντίχριστος*; 1 John 1:3; 2:18, 20, 27). This anointing is not tied to a deed, like baptism, but to a message: the gospel. Such a gospel perspective of anointing is evident since the anointing is truth heard (*χρῖσμα*; 1 John 2:21, 24) as a message that publicly affirms Jesus as the Christ, without denying him (1 John 2:22–23). This very message brings about everlasting life (1 John 2:25). This message, centered on Christ and gospel, teaches about all things (1 John 2:27). That is, knowing the gospel puts all other things into perspective. This gospel perspective is evident in the asking of questions such as: “Do these other things properly value Christ and an everlasting perspective?”

None of these passages promise a work from God for the Holy Spirit to cognitively help us understand and interpret biblical passages. In fact, the mention of the “Holy One” in 1 John 2:20 may not clearly refer to the Holy Spirit at all, since John only uses the phrase elsewhere of Christ (John 6:69). These passages actually highlight that the gospel has implications such as:

(1) unity and (2) the Holy Spirit is the guarantor of growth (such as the fruit of the Spirit referred to in Gal 5:22–23 or the spiritual man of Romans 8). These passages promise the Spirit's aid in a kind of application, working virtues into life in conjunction with our choosing these same virtues (e.g. Rom 6:16–23 with 8:4–17, or Gal 5:16–26 including 5:22–23). Hence we reflect the Spirit's qualities, but he does not promise any special aid in cognitively understanding Bible passages. So to me it looks like passages such as these call us to exclude the unwarranted assumption of the Holy Spirit as cognitively aiding the believer in understanding biblical texts, because it is not taught in Scripture.

#### IV. ILLUMINATION IS UNSUPPORTED BY SCHOLARLY COMMENTARIES

One way to help reassure some that this broadly evangelical illumination view is foreign to the Scripture is to recognize that my brief summaries of these passages are in line with scholarly commentaries on these passages.<sup>12</sup> This means that, if the Spirit did illumine so many well-informed and godly commentators, then the doctrine of illumination is not a biblical teaching.

The absence of such an illumination aid also makes more sense of two hermeneutical conditions. The first is that rather repeatedly godly commentators disagree with features which other godly commentators may say are within the meaning of a text. If godly Christians were given this illumination aid, then it would unify Christian commentaries, but we find that the Arminian ones repeatedly disagree with the Reformed ones and *vice versa*. The reason for this disagreement is not that some of these commentators are not listening to the illumination of the Spirit but rather each commentator has his own sensitivities to context, grammar, authorial thought forms,

<sup>12</sup> For example, the following sample of commentators support my view: Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John 13–21* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983) 650–54, 707–17; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 662–66, 702–4; Frederic Godet, *Commentary on John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978) 839–47, 871–73; Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody: Henderickson, 2003) 977–82, 1035–43; Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 479–84, 504–6; B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 208–9, 232; James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 574; C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) 66–78; F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 38–41; Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 101–20; F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 62–75; Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) 53–62; William Orr and James Walther, *1 Corinthians* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976) 158–59, 165–67; Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1911) 34–51; Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 218–85; Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982) 341–61; W. Robert Cook, *The Theology of John* (Chicago: Moody, 1979) 121, 150; Robert Law, *The Tests of Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968) 111–16.

and theological construct. Perhaps they are fusing the text to a theological model that allows the secondary authority of tradition to be primarily determinative over the primary authority of the biblical text. They allow tradition to determine meaning rather than textual meaning challenging and modifying a growing and developing tradition. However, even within the same tradition there is still disagreement. Here their sensitivity to these textual features identifies why their interpretations differ.

Finally, illumination also does not adequately account for the presence of superior non-Christian commentaries. If such an illumination aid occurred for Christians then they would always be able to produce superior commentaries, but sometimes non-Christians in fact have produced the best commentaries on a book of the Bible. For example, the best commentary on Leviticus 1–16 is by Jacob Milgrom,<sup>13</sup> who as a Jew is very sensitive to the textual and contextual features in that book. Milgrom accurately and passionately embraces his interpretation; he is not merely working on the level of intellectual assent. Thus such illumination is an impotent aid or no aid at all if mere attention to text in context produces a superior product. Anything that God does not promise to give and is not effective in demonstrating its ability to provide superior interpretation, accuracy, and unity should not be depended upon as coming from God. Thus claims from illumination as authority are not properly warranted.

#### V. READING IN A CONTEXT OF SPIRIT IS NOT ILLUMINATION

Furthermore, reading the Law through the Spirit rather than by mere letter in Paul is not an illumination aid but the Holy Spirit's New Covenant ministry within the believer which transforms them to serve with righteousness and fruit of Spirit (Jer 31:33–34; Rom 2:14–15, 29; 7:6; 8:2, 4–17; 14:17–18; 2 Cor 3:3, 6, 9, 17–18; Gal 5:13–26). This is not a ministry for understanding the biblical text, nor is it actually a ministry of the Spirit to apply the biblical text into our lives. No biblical text actually talks about the Spirit applying the biblical text into a Christian's life. The biblical texts just cited underscore that the Holy Spirit is the guarantor of growth and that he will transform the Christian to think and do the things of the Spirit. No doubt the Spirit will use the Bible in the process as he produces this growth in the Christian, but no text actually promises that Spirit ministry. However, the Spirit's commitment to his revelation is clear in his revealing and fostering the oral restatement of it that it is reasonable to assume that the Spirit will use the Bible, but the Spirit is the guarantor of growth. As Christians mature, they will distinctly reflect the Spirit's qualities through their lives, and the Spirit will witness to believers that they are in fact children of God and co-heirs with Christ.

<sup>13</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991). Of course, with the completion of Milgrom's third volume, this case could be expanded, for Milgrom has the best commentary on the whole of Leviticus.

VI. ILLUMINATION DOES NOT REFLECT  
HERMENEUTICAL RESPONSIBILITY

We can thank the Spirit for transforming us, but the responsibility Paul places us under when it comes to interpretation is that we should study to show ourselves approved as a workman rightly handling the Word of God (2 Tim 2:15). Interpretation is our responsibility. Likewise, abuse of the biblical text is also our responsibility (e.g. 2 Pet 3:16). The Holy Spirit neither takes the credit nor the blame for our interpretations.

The Holy Spirit nowhere claims to be providing an illumination ministry to help understand biblical passages, and it is presumptuous of us to claim that he will in fact perform this alleged ministry. The ministry does not do any better than an unbeliever who has finely honed skills and is sensitive to the text and, as mentioned above, in some instances the Christian may actually fare worse than a skilled non-Christian in interpreting the biblical text. Therefore there is no legitimate warrant for this illumination view, and the Spirit cannot be claimed as the authority for our interpretations. Furthermore, interpretations claimed to come through this means of illumination are at times just wrongfully abusing the text.

VII. ILLUMINATION AT TIMES IS A COVER FOR  
SLOPPY HERMENEUTICS

Clearly, the Holy Spirit should not be claimed to be illuminating us if in fact when the text is checked it becomes apparent that the interpreter arrives at falsehood. For example, many years at school missions conferences there were appeals from a text like Isaiah 6 to go for God to a mission field. Such approaches can give a lofty view of God as holy. We are seen with Isaiah as benefiting from God's forgiveness. Then the call goes out from God to all of us: "Who shall I send and who will go for us?" to which the speaker wishes we will all emulate Isaiah as a divinely authoritative call: "Here am I, send me!" However, in this move of supposed "illumination" we have become neo-orthodox, disregarding the text for the existential crisis moment in our own reader-response hermeneutic. What does the text go on to say in the context?

And he said, "Go and tell this people:  
Keep on listening, but do not perceive;  
Keep on looking, but do not understand.  
Render the hearts of this people insensitive,  
Their ears dull, and their eyes dim,  
Lest they see with eyes,  
Hear with their ears,  
Understand with their hearts,  
And return and be healed."  
Then I said, "Lord, how long?"  
And he answered,  
"Until cities are devastated without inhabitant,

Houses are without people,  
And the land is utterly desolate.” (Isa 6:9–11)

How many of us desire this to be our ministry? This text has a clear meaning in Isaiah’s context in which he has been offering Israel the opportunity to be healed if they repent, but no longer after Isaiah 6, for Israel is heading for captivity because they have gone too far in their sin. If the “illumination of the Spirit” regularly takes this text as a call to ministry, then it is working at cross-purposes with the clarity of the text the Holy Spirit inspired. The Holy Spirit does not contradict himself. The “illumination of the Spirit” is not warranted; it is merely a cover for a sloppy or reader-response hermeneutic.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, if there is a text elsewhere to support your appeal, then you need to present your appeal from a text that actually supports the point rather than one that does not. The issue is reflecting the Bible’s meaning and authority in our teaching and life, not imposing our views upon a text.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

In my opinion, evangelical illumination is a cover for sloppy hermeneutics and tradition being taken as too authoritative. We need to face up to the issue that the biblical text is the authority. The Protestant Reformation was birthed on this realization and the accessibility of this biblical text to each individual interpreter. If the biblical text does not in fact say something, then we should not claim it from that text. As Paul told Timothy, we are to “[b]e diligent to present ourselves approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). As such, in our handling of the biblical text, we should be as clear as the biblical text is clear and as ambiguous as the biblical text is ambiguous.

<sup>14</sup> An example of the sloppiness of hermeneutic or misappropriation of significance is how Vanhoozer (*Is There Meaning in This Text?* 414) uses Isa 55:11 in the midst of his discussion of illumination as an example of the Spirit convicting, illumining, and sanctifying the reader in order to accomplish the divine purpose. However, this is not what is going on in this context. Rather, there is a repeated theme in Isaiah in which God’s Word goes out to judge the nations (and Israel) in order to eventually re-gather Israel through a new exodus into the land in a new covenant blessed condition (e.g. Isa 40:3–8; 55:6–13). To disregard textual features and to co-opt a text for one’s own theologically traditional agenda can not be rectified by appeals to illumination of the Spirit. The Spirit is not at odds with his inspired clear text.