

The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Hermeneutics of African Evangelical Christianity

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Abstract

The church is faced with numerous heretical teachings and misinterpretations of the Scriptures, which have recently become prevalent. The modern period desperately needs the Holy Spirit's contribution in every arena of Christianity, which fundamentally includes biblical interpretation. Even within the church, various false teachings flourish due to the narrow-minded understanding of Scripture and biblical interpretation among believers and preachers of the gospel. The Bible is the Word of God and God is the divine author; equally, it is the writing of human authors through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The thrust of this paper is to consider unified methodological vigor to arrive at valid and faithful biblical interpretation, which should include prayer, mental engagement, and illumination by the Holy Spirit, which are essential tools necessary for an in-depth study of the Bible, among a host of other factors. Hence, the paper explains the concept of hermeneutics, explores the role of the Holy Spirit and projects a unified means of engaging in authentic biblical interpretation. As a goal, biblical interpretation must always aim at revealing the original meaning of the text, a process that crucially involves the Holy Spirit. Thus, this calls for a closer look at the process of hermeneutics and what is involved in it. The study argues that the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation is not to bring new meaning to the text; but to help the interpreter discover, understand and accept the meaning intended by both the divine and human authors of Scripture.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Illumination, Holy Spirit, Evangelical, Biblical Interpretation, Scriptures.

1. Introduction

The church faces numerous heretical teachings and misinterpretations of the Scriptures, which have recently become a significant concern. The apostolic church and church Fathers equally dealt with vicious challenges of heresies emanating from distorted biblical interpretations. The surrounding philosophical and religious ideas greatly influenced these destructive teachings. Sadly, this threat continues to be present even in the modern church. However, the church still prospers since it is built by Christ (Matt 16:18). Emmanuel Clapsis described the church by stating: “All ministries in God’s church are gifts of the Holy Spirit, originate from Christ’s ministry, and are organically related to each other since their unity reveals the unity of God, while their diversity is an expression of God’s manifold activity for the salvation of the world.”¹ The church belongs to God; hence it will surmount any challenge.

It is becoming increasingly complicated to differentiate an ideal church from the world because of wrong and controversial emerging biblical interpretations. Thus the modern period desperately needs the Holy Spirit’s contribution in every arena of Christianity that fundamentally includes biblical interpretation. In the process of interpretation, translation is vital because it transfers the message given in a particular language and context to another. We can hear and understand what God has for us through a translation.² This paper explores the critical elements in the biblical interpretation, including prayer, mental engagement, and illumination, and how these can function in a unified version for authentic interpretation.

Concerning the work of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation process, Bloesch remarks that by the inner work of the Spirit, we perceive the mysteries of Christ. Church’s proclamation is ineffectual if it consists only of plausible wisdom words: rather, it must occur “with a display of the Spirit and power” (1 Cor 2:4 NRSV).³ He adds that the Spirit enlivens the Word, and the Spirit always directs us to the Word. God sends his Spirit utilizing the testimony of the prophets (Zech 7:12), and the bestowal of the Spirit clarifies this testimony. The Holy Spirit prompts us of all that Christ says to us in Scripture (Jn 14:25–26) and confirms the witness of Christ that we are indeed children of God (Rom 8:16–17).⁴ John Calvin made clear that “there is no profit from the word, except when God lusters in us by the bright of his Spirit; thus, the inward calling, which

¹ Emmanuel Clapsis, *The Holy Spirit in the Church: The Ecumenical Review*, 1989, 341.

² J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word Workbook: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 2012, 23.

³ Donald G. Bloesch, *The Holy Spirit: Works & Gifts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 274.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 274–275.

alone is efficacious and peculiar to the elect, is distinguished from the outward voice of men.”⁵ The Holy Spirit reveals to believers the profound truths in the Scriptures.

2. Hermeneutics Explained

Hermeneutics is a science, methodology, and tool to expound the Scripture that instigates valid application. It is principally perceived as a critical tool in theological education and among theologians. Amoran argues that hermeneutics handles biblical issues that must be handled with the utmost sensitivity.⁶ Hermeneutics is a derivative of the Greek word ‘*Hermeneutike*,’ which means “explain, interpret, or translate.”⁷ Hermeneutics is a human and divine effort to interpret God’s inspired Word. Hence, all human efforts to interpret the divinely sourced words (Scriptures) require an intentional interpretation according to the authorship conception, achievable through divine illumination.⁸ For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1: 20–21).⁹ The interpretation process helps the reader to grasp and understand the biblical text. Although hermeneutics originated from ancient Greek philosophy, it received its fresh impetus in the 18th century and discussed biblical interpretation problems posed by developing the historical-critical method.¹⁰ Anthony C. Thiselton argues that biblical hermeneutics involves a “critical reflection upon processes of interpretation and understanding, especially the interpretation of biblical texts or texts that originate from within other cultures.”¹¹ This definition suggests that hermeneutics has to do with critical reflection and, in this context, critical reflection of the interpretation process. Bernard C. Lategan argues that hermeneutics is “the art of understanding.”¹² He further states that when “used in its narrower sense, hermeneutics can refer to the method and techniques

⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans, and ed. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 400–401.

⁶ Samuel Oluwafemi Amoran, “The Role and Importance of an African Christian Educational Philosophy in Biblical Interpretation.” *South African Baptist Journal of Theology* (Hermeneutics: Interpretation of Text and Context 25, 2016): 146.

⁷ L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretations: Sacred Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), 11.

⁸ Amoran, The Role and Importance of an African Christian Educational Philosophy in Biblical Interpretation, 147

⁹ Emiola Nihinlola, *The Task of Biblical Interpretation* (Ogbomoso: The Great Company, 2008), 11.

¹⁰ David Crystal, ed., *The Cambridge Encyclopedia* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 563.

¹¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al., eds., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (London : Grand Rapids, Mich: SPCK ; Baker Academic, 2005), 283.

¹² David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 149.

used to interpret written text.”¹³ The method always answers how an interpreter can understand the Word in different cultures and ages. The term (hermeneutics) is also used in psychology to refer to the psychological methods beyond mere experimentation that attempt to understand the reason behind human actions.¹⁴ As a process of seeking understanding from a different time and context, biblical interpretation should appreciate the role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of the Bible. It must always aim at revealing the meaning of the text through the help of the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, when the right interpretation has been done, the application of the message will be correct. Theologians and Christians in general should beware of the danger of handling biblical interpretation as a mere mental exercise that solely involves linguistic tools. Thus the integrated approach of reason with the Holy Spirit’s connivance that elicits accurate knowledge and application is necessary.

The goal of hermeneutics involves resolving conflicts of interpretation and attaining a better understanding of the Bible.¹⁵ Hermeneutics that does not endeavor to understand the passage’s intended meaning is unhelpful. This concern calls for a closer look at the process of hermeneutics and what is involved in it. Duval and Hays argue that interpreters need a valid, legitimate approach to the Bible that is not based strictly on perception and feelings. There is a need for an approach that derives meaning from the text and crosses over to today’s Christian situation and experience.¹⁶ So the process of biblical hermeneutics should follow what Duval and Hays summarize: grasp the text in their town, measure the river’s width to cross, cross the provincializing bridge, consult the biblical map, and grasp the text in our town.¹⁷ It appreciates that the text had its own original context and hearers and the sensitivity needed to discern the transferrable truths to the modern context. These five processes go along with five probing questions that help the interpreter get to the proper understanding of the text of Scripture. The first one is, what did the text mean to the original audience? Second, what are some differences between the biblical audience and us? Third, what are some of the theological principles found in the text? Fourth, how does the identified theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible? Fifth,

¹³ Ibid. 149.

¹⁴ David Crystal, ed., *The Cambridge Encyclopedia*, 565.

¹⁵ Irene Rima Makaryk, ed., *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms, Theory/culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 92.

¹⁶ Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God’s Word Workbook*, 41.

¹⁷ Ibid., 47.

how should individual Christians today live out the identified theological principle?¹⁸ These processes and questions are what the interpreter needs to follow for an authentic interpretation to occur.

3. The Role of the Holy Spirit in Biblical Interpretation

The Holy Spirit has been playing an enormous role in the hermeneutical process in the church. The Holy Spirit offers insight into the Scripture so that the church can identify, live out, and confront false teachings and practices. The proper Scriptural Interpretation is vital for orthodoxy and orthopraxy; a correct interpretation will lead to correct doctrines, consequently leading to authentic living. The divine inscribed literature demands a spiritual perception to grasp and apply in life and ministry. In the entire process of having the Scriptures from the mind of God to us, the role of the third Person of the Trinity was vital. The Holy Spirit functioned in the inspiration of Scripture, in the compilation, and has been active in translating the Bible.

The Spirit acts as the communication channel between God and a human individual within the larger part of the OT occurrences. In the Old Testament, the Spirit communicated the message of God through a dream, vision, or Word (Num 11:25–29; 24:2; 1 Sam 10:10; 19:20; Mic 3:8; Hos 9:7; Isa 48:16; 61:1–3; Ezek 11:5–25; Zach 7:12).¹⁹ From the beginning of creation, the Holy Spirit's work supports what God the Father has arranged and what God the Son has started in Genesis 1:2, “the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” And at Pentecost, with the starting of new creation in Christ, the Holy Spirit comes to continue the work of Christ in building the kingdom of God through the church (Acts 10:38; 2:4, 17–18).²⁰ The Holy Spirit guides the church in interpreting and convicting believers that what the Bible says is true and helps the church to believe.

3.01 Illumination

The illumination work of the Spirit is seen in enabling believers to understand the Scriptures.²¹ Illumination is an act of spiritual or intellectual enlightenment that comes as a result of the Holy

¹⁸ Ibid., 48.

¹⁹ T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester, England : Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press ; InterVarsity Press, 2000), 551.

²⁰ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England : Grand Rapids, Mich: Inter-Varsity Press ; Zondervan, 1994), 635.

²¹ Ibid., 645.

Spirit's power in the life of a believer to help him grasp the true meaning of the Word of God. Theologians use the term illumination to refer to the ongoing (revelatory) work of the Spirit.²² The Spirit illuminates biblical passages so that one grasps the message communicated (John 14:26; 16:13). The illumination process of the Holy Spirit makes His role essential in the interpretation and application of the Bible. Illumination leads to judicious exposition, accurate understanding, and proper passage communication. The illumination work of the Holy Spirit cannot contradict the Bible, neither can it bring confusion. Apostle Paul writes, "Now we have received, not the Spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God" (1 Cor 2:12 ESV). By implication, the unspiritual man does not receive the gift of the Spirit of God, "but he who is spiritual appraises all things" (1 Cor. 2:14–15). Therefore, Bible interpreters should always pray to God for illumination by the Holy Spirit to understand and interpret the biblical text.

In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit guided the prophets (Ezk 2:2), lifted and carried them along (Ezk 8:3; 11:1). Apostle Peter reaffirmed the testimony of the prophets regarding the experiences they had, "For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as the Holy Spirit carried them along" (2 Peter 1:21). The origin of prophecy and the biblical message is from God; hence an authentic interpretation should invite God in the process. Bray remarks that if anybody needs to get it the message of the prophets legitimately, the person should get confidence in Jesus Christ, through which he will recognize the divine message.²³ When they ministered, the prophets were not talking to themselves but serving the heavenly Spirit.

The role of the Holy Spirit in the hermeneutical process is crucial because he was the one who was directly concerned with the formation of Scripture. The Holy Spirit inspired the human writers of the Bible, and He is to reveal the inspired truth to the interpreter of the inspired Scripture. Therefore, he cannot lead or illuminate outside context; because he came to lead all into the revealed truth (John 16:12-14).

The Bible is God's Word given to us, and the Holy Spirit is given to help us understand and cultivate a good relationship with God. Grudem affirms that the Bible is "God's written

²² J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Harper Collins, 2005), 226.

²³ Gerald Bray, ed., *James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 141.

Word that he commanded us to study. The man is blessed who meditates on God's law day and night (Ps. 1:1–2).”²⁴ Speaking about the work of the Holy Spirit, Erickson lists some of the ministries of the Holy Spirit as “Teaching, regenerating, searching, speaking, interceding, commanding, testifying, guiding, illuminating, and revealing.”²⁵ He is involved in every area of Christian life. In addition, the Holy Spirit “helps us in our weakness” (Rom 8:26). By themselves, human beings cannot understand God's message but through the illumination work of the Spirit true understanding of God and his Word is possible. The divinely initiated script is impossible to grasp if individuals do not cooperate with God. One of the demerits of the non-believers and heretical preachers is that they have shortcomings in arriving at the appropriate interpretation of a text. New Testament apostles who wrote New Testament Scripture were also guided into all the truth by the Holy Spirit (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit declared to them “the things that are to come” (John 16:3; Eph 3:5).

Biblical interpretation first begins with the witness of the Holy Spirit regarding the authenticity of Scripture; the reader must conform to this witness. Calvin thought that the Spirit works in recovery to light up the intellect to get the benefits of Christ and seals them within the heart. By the Spirit, a man's heart is opened to the entering control of the Word and holy observances.²⁶ Without the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, there cannot be proper observation and interpretation of God's Word. The Holy Spirit remains and plays a vital role in the hermeneutical process. The divine beginning of the sacred writing is certified by the witness of the Spirit; the sacred writing is the Word of God given by the Spirit's direction through restricted human discourse. A regenerated heart has the privilege to tackle biblical passages properly because it can listen to the Spirit. Scripture is God's inspired Word that necessitates the involvement of the Spirit for proper perception (2 Tim 3:16–17). The Spirit plays a pertinent role in Jesus' interpretation of the Scripture (Lk 4:17–19; 7:22; Mt 11:15). The early apostles benefited from the Holy Spirit's inspiration and illumination to get the credible meaning.

²⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 51.

²⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1998), 878.

²⁶ David G. Benner, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology*, [Baker reference library 2] (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1985), 525.

3.02 Enhancing Believer's Understanding through Illumination

The need and necessity of the Holy Spirit's involvement in understanding Scripture are paramount. The work of the Spirit in inspiring the Bible is complete; what remains is his work of bringing believers to appreciate and receive the truth of Scripture. Theologians use the term illumination to refer to this ongoing exertion of the Spirit. This assertion is supported by Christ's promise to his followers that the Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth (John 16:13). Likewise, the Holy Spirit shines light to clarify the Bible (Lk 4:1–22; Mt 3:2–3). The illuminative work of the Holy Spirit is also concerned with bequeathing relevant words as the disciples face trial so that they can defend the truth themselves with the divine-instilled wisdom and Word.²⁷ Those impacted with God's Word are imbued with spiritual power and wisdom for perceptive response to challenges (Lk 12:12; Matt 10:20; Mark 13:11). The Word of God is the most precious ingredient for an authentic Christian life and refutes any twisted and false accusation.

The covenant people of the Old Testament experienced the Spirit's illumination of His Word (Ps 119:18, 27), which, of course, is not lucid like the new Testament. So, it is fair to say that there is an organic connection between the two testaments in God's enlightening work of his people that instigates accurate explanation, which elicits righteous living. God's Spirit enables people to discern things beyond mundane understanding, which a natural person does not experience. The Holy Spirit bestows wisdom and knowledge to determine spiritual matters saturated in the Bible, for instance, the epic hope and glorious inheritance awaiting Christians (Eph 1:17–19).

Scriptural delineation withholding divine connivance is a means to deceive oneself and others. The divine illumination of Scripture touches the soul and heart and brings transformation (Lk 4:21–22). Jesus' teaching ministry is incredible not because of his posture and gesture; he is totally allied with the Holy Spirit so that the divine illumination and power flow over his heart and mind. One of the problems for the Pharisees was that they lacked spiritual insight during the ministry of Jesus; as a result, they did not recognize God's Messiah. According to Jesus, the Sadducees' error was because they lacked the divine conviction to read the Scripture and understand it (Mt 22:29). The darkness in unbelievers blurs the mind that prompts them to need

²⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (2007; Reprint, Nottingham: IVP, 2010), 645.

the enlightenment of God. It sets well with me to say, “Jesus hears and speaks the word of God because the Father gives him the Spirit without measure (John 3: 34-36).”²⁸ Jesus conducted his teaching with the Spirit, imbued with the divine wisdom of exposition. Spiritual understanding is thus needed for the mortal mind, and it entails the consultation of God.

During the earthly ministry of Jesus, the disciples were not privileged to experience the outpouring and filling of the Spirit, as substantially manifested in the book of Acts. As a result, they had minimal perception though they had been with Christ. However, this reality changed after the Pentecost event in Acts 2. They now experienced the “climax of the life-giving pneumatic wisdom/understanding they have already tasted in Jesus’ ministry.”²⁹

The apostles and early Christians benefited from the intense presence and filling of the Holy Spirit, who actively partakes in interpreting the Scripture. The divine initiated mission necessitated apt teaching and preaching of the gospel that elicited the Jews and Gentiles’ converts and the church’s growth. The first message preached in the book of Acts was efficiently declared by Peter after the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts. 2:14–36). Though a personal study of the Old Testament passages is entailed, the Spirit plays a pivotal role in discerning the correct meaning and relevantly expounding Scriptures.

There was a perennial clash between the Pharisees and Sadducees on the one hand and the apostles on the other; the latter were enlightened to delineate Scripture acutely. Stephen’s speech in Acts 7 depicts an apparent distinction in handling Scripture between the Jews and followers of Jesus. It is a confrontational address that refutes the Jewish leaders since they failed to interpret and fittingly apply the divine message. Stephen corrects the corrupted hypothesis and lifestyle of the Pharisees. The misuse and neglect of a biblical text is a terrible practice that can be a ground for someone to detach from the Savior. This is still true today, “The Spirit continues communication of truth in his function as an illuminator and makes operative in the church what Christ the definitive truth of the Father-has already effected through his life and saving death.”³⁰

Christian education, in its most classic sense, biblical teaching entails discernment and wisdom (Col 1: 28). The efficiency of a Christian ministry lies under scrutiny as long as we hold back the Holy Spirit. Scriptures “have an animating and uplifting effect as the Spirit of God uses

²⁸ T. D. Alexander and others, eds. *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (2000; repr., Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2003), 555.

²⁹ T. D. Alexander and others, eds. *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (2003), 556.

³⁰ Victor Zinkurature *et al*, eds., *The African Bible: Biblical Text of the New American Bible* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1999), 1814.

their truth in the lives of the faithful.”³¹ The illumination of the Spirit makes teaching authoritative in line with the truth, which the Bible inspires. Spiritual maturity comes through an apposite interpretation of the Scripture.

Theologically, illumination functions in the repentant and genuinely believing heart. Klein cogently states that illumination is associated with the work of the Holy Spirit that operates in the obedient heart to grasp the truth inscribed in a text. It is rightly put that “once people have committed their lives in faith to Jesus as Lord, the Bible speaks of a work that God performs in them.”³² A stubborn heart cannot discern God’s will. A believer in Christ enables a person to submit his life to God so that the Spirit ceaselessly functions in their life; “This internal operation enables believers to perceive spiritual truth, an ability un-available to unbelievers.”³³ The essential requirement for spiritual wisdom is faith, not the level of intellect (1 Cor 2:8). Robert and Stein argue that “The Spirit was involved in the interpretation of Scripture; they (authors) spoke of the Holy Spirit’s inner work of illumination and conviction. This view is also expressed at times by saying that apart from the Spirit, we cannot “fully” or “truly” understand the Bible.”³⁴ They further say that “the Spirit helps the reader understand the principle that the author willed and convinces the reader as to the truth and personal relevance of that teaching.”³⁵ Without the Holy Spirit in the life of an interpreter of the Bible, the truth in the Word of God will not be discovered. The Spirit connects the interpreter’s mind to God and that of the human author in the passage and makes the text clear and precise.

The Spirit comprehends everything and reveals to us about God (1 Cor 2: 10); the divine Spirit knows the depth of God’s essence. Therefore, one can rightly understand God’s message based on spiritual enlightenment (1 Cor 2: 12). However, accentuating human wisdom may result in pride, arrogance, weak perception of God’s Word and salvation. It is absurd to neglect the illumination work of the Spirit, yet he is the Person who authored the message. Also, neglecting the Spirit would bring controversial biblical interpretations that can confuse and mislead believers. Interpreters should emulate apostle Paul’s approach, “the message Paul

³¹ William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, JR, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Kermit A. Ecklebarger (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), 91.

³² *Ibid.*, 84.

³³ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁴ Robert H Stein and Hoopla digital, *Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible, A: Playing by the Rules* (United States: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 88.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

proclaimed was expressed in words given by the Holy Spirit. Thus, spiritual truth was aptly combined with fitting spiritual words.”³⁶

4. Human Reason, Prayer, and an Integrated Approach

Human Reason

Human reason in biblical interpretation has excellent value as long as it works in compliance with the precepts of the Scriptures. It is true that “This illuminating work of the Spirit does not circumvent nor allow us to dispense with the principles of hermeneutics and the techniques of exegesis.”³⁷ The interpreter should also be diligent and actively engaged in the hermeneutical process.

Although affected by sin, human rationality can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, become fruitful. Human reason is a gift from God and is useful in investigating a passage. It should be utilized for God’s glory. However, being cognizant of the noetic effects of sin, we should be able to avoid the temptation of thinking that we can use pure reason to understand the Bible. Intelligence is one facet that confirms we are superior to all creatures, but this should not lead to pride and self-sufficiency. Exegetical work and illumination rely on one another since the Spirit illumines exegesis. Neither procedure nor the Spirit functions in isolation from the other. Neither is sufficient in itself.³⁸

Prayer

Prayer is simply communicating with God. It is a necessary component to rely on God for the Spirit to give us wisdom and understanding of the Scripture. The interpreter prays for spiritual wisdom and knowledge from God to comprehend the Scriptures. Prayer, in its most accurate perception, genuine request, puts one in the position to hear and understand. For the Christian, prayer is an indispensable ingredient to the proper understanding of Scripture.

Nonetheless, prayer should not be deemed a magic formula; the interpreter ought to do due diligence to study the text within its context. As we study the Bible, we should ask God, the author of Scripture, to speak, reveal, and enable us to understand and comprehend the biblical

³⁶ Kenneth Barker and others, eds., *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 1739.

³⁷ William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, JR, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Kermit A. Ecklebarger (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), 84.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 84.

truth. Duvall and Hays argue that interpretation, reading, and practicing the Bible cannot substitute prayer. Communion with God, the divine author, through prayer, is the means to help us understand the Bible.³⁹ In John 15:5, Jesus instructed, “Apart from me you can do nothing.” Remaining in the presence of God in prayer will bring a revelation that the interpreter could not see, and God will do this through the Holy Spirit, who is the revealer of biblical truth.

The role of the Holy Spirit is not to bring up new meaning to the biblical passage, but He helps the readers and interpreters to understand and accept the meaning intended by both the divine and human authors. Relating prayers to the church, Douglas argues that “The church was born in the atmosphere of prayer (Acts 1:4). In answer to prayer, the Spirit was poured out open her (1:4; 2:4). Prayer continued to be the church’s native air (2:42; 6:4, 6).”⁴⁰ Faithful interpreters of the Bible must embrace prayer since it is a means they use to connect with the divine author of the Bible. God has already revealed his Word to humans, and humans need God for proper interpretation; this happens through prayer, and God the Holy Spirit will direct our minds. Thus, the interpreter must connect to the author to arrive at a proper interpretation.

Illumination, prayer, reason, and methodology are the integrated forces to arrive at a proper understanding of the Scripture. Prayer is a channel through which the interpreter communicates with God as he studies the biblical text. Again, this process cannot be achieved without the Holy Spirit’s work. He intervenes in our human weakness (Rom 8:26–27). Grudem comments that the word “help” in verse 26 does not mean that the Holy Spirit prays and we do not, but that the Holy Spirit takes part with us and makes our weak prayer effective.⁴¹ An intelligent man employs every instrument, which, however, does not prejudice the interpretation. The Holy Spirit does not function in humankind to denigrate the rational nature of humanity. He does not substitute human participation; rather, he enables and guides the process to the desired end. Although spiritual perception never relies on scientific tools or hermeneutics, a holistic approach is necessary to grasp the biblical message.

The fact that illumination is dynamic in Christian life does not deduce there is no human endeavor to develop glowing meaning. It is worth noting that interpreters sometimes struggle to find authentic interpretation through divine discernment. It is captivating that “scholars possess

³⁹ Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God’s Word Workbook*, 232.

⁴⁰ James D. Douglas, ed., *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Completely rev. and reset). (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press [u.a.], 1982), 960.

⁴¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 383.

an arsenal of methods and techniques to interpret variety of the biblical texts. Interpretation is acutely limited without the brilliance of the Spirit.”⁴² The methods and approaches of the Bible are far from adequate to deal with scriptural passages. Again, illumination does not set aside hermeneutical effort and basic tenets and study methods. The techniques and rules of interpretation have a critical role in attaining informed understanding. Laws and skills have a prodigious impact on exegesis and exposition; these laws and regulations guard the text against any presupposed idea. Those who attempt to belittle hermeneutical principles, advertently or inadvertently, misrepresent the hermeneutical process. It is critical to understand the principles involved; a “correct understanding, like logical thinking, is an art, and therefore rests partly on a half-unconscious preparation.”⁴³ Understanding entails objectivity. The perennial subjective approach may disparage rationality. A mere mental appraisal may also be a dangerous trend as it impinges on assessing any subject, including the spiritual matter, with just the connivance of the mind.

It is discreet to neglect the role of the Holy Spirit in the Bible translation and interpretation. It is valid to ask, “If the Bible is God’s word, can it ever be subject to scientific search in quite the same way as we would examine an animal or a plant.”⁴⁴ The nature of the text at hand needs to be considered since it is both a human and divine text. God is the ultimate author behind the human authors. There is no reliability to heightening mental probe over spiritual discernment. There is no concrete and compelling hypothesis to annul that “The reading of scripture itself enables the Holy Spirit to *enlighten* {italics mine} us and to do his work in us.”⁴⁵ The Holy Spirit does not work in segregation to the Word of God, but He uses the Word to transform lives. Rightly, “as we read the Word of God, the Spirit assures us that the Father is benevolent to his children. Thus, those who have the Spirit hold that God’s promises are fundamental and that our works, though essential, can never be foundational or the basis of our right standing with God.”⁴⁶

⁴² William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, JR, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Kermit A. Eckleberger (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), 84.

⁴³ Philip August, “Philosophical Hermeneutics,” in *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum Publishing Co., 1985), 132.

⁴⁴ Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Science and Hermeneutics: Implications of Scientific method for Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Moises Silva, vol. 6 of *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 11.

⁴⁵ Billy Graham, *The Holy Spirit: Activating God’s Power in Your Life* (WACO, TEXAS: Word Books, 1978), 45.

⁴⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Ed, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Baker Academic: Baker book, 2005), 121.

5. Conclusion

The essential role of the Holy Spirit is crucial in all forms and processes of hermeneutics. Biblical interpretation cannot be authentic without a deliberate reliance on the power and influence of the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of truth. The Spirit of God was not just involved in the inspiration process but also in the illumination of the Scriptures for the interpreter to discover the intended meaning of the text. It is important to employ prayer in the hermeneutical process as part of surrendering to God’s guidance and acknowledging our human limitations. In addition, the biblical interpretation process should take into consideration the techniques, methods, and interpretation rules that lead to a proper understanding of the text. The human mind is a gift from God; however, the extremes of using pure reason in biblical interpretation should be avoided. The paper proposed a unified approach where the role of the Holy Spirit, prayer, and diligence of the interpreter are embraced. Distinctively, the Bible is the Word of God communicated to human beings; hence its interpretation should be handled with the sensitivity it requires. Bible study demands a holistic approach, both mental and spiritual facets. A robust investigation is necessary to align with the discernment and guiding presence of the divine Spirit of the living God (the Holy Spirit). Such investigation does not collide with the notion that all believers can understand the Bible.

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