

Holiness and the Holy Spirit

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney emphasizes the essential role of the Holy Spirit in achieving true understanding and holiness through divine illumination of the gospel.

Scripture: John 16:7

Topics: "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "Holiness"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the necessity of the Holy Spirit for true understanding and holiness, arguing that human intellect alone cannot grasp the depths of the gospel. He explains that while people can comprehend the framework of Christian doctrine, it is only through divine illumination that they can experience true sanctification and transformation. Finney warns against relying solely on human means of instruction without the Spirit's guidance, as this leads to spiritual blindness and a lack of genuine holiness. He encourages believers to seek the Holy Spirit actively, as God is willing to provide divine knowledge to those who earnestly ask. Ultimately, Finney calls for a deeper reliance on the Holy Spirit to teach and guide individuals in their spiritual journey.

Transcript

"Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they believe not on me; Of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged. I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit, when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come" --John 16:7-13.

Divine influence is necessary to enlighten and purify the minds of men. But very little knowledge of the gospel is available among men, and it exerts comparatively little influence. The gospel has hardly begun to produce holiness on the earth.

Do we need divine influence to attain the ends of the gospel? And if we do need it, then in what degree do we need it, and why? If our minds are unsettled on this question, we will be unsettled on all the subjects that practically concern our holiness.

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING

The mind of man can understand those abstractions that make up the skeleton of the gospel--the being and character of God, the divine authority and inspiration of the Scriptures, and other fundamental doctrines that make up its framework. It can understand and see the evidence that supports them as true, just as it can theories in science.

A man by his reason can understand the law of God. It requires him to exercise perfect love toward God and all other beings. He can understand this obligation because he is a moral being. He knows by experience what love is, for he has exercised love toward different objects. And he can, therefore, form or comprehend the idea of love to see the reasonableness of the requirement. He can understand the foundation and the force of moral obligation and see, in some measure, the extent of his obligation to love God.

Also, he can see he is a sinner and cannot be saved by his own works. He has broken the law, and it can never justify him. He knows if he is ever saved, he must be justified through mere mercy. Human understanding is capable of knowing the whole circle of theology as a system of propositions to be received and believed, on evidence, like any other science.

But unaided reason cannot attain any knowledge that will produce a sanctifying change. Our knowledge of the things of Christianity is defective without the aid of the Holy Spirit, for human understanding of the gospel lacks certain things to make it available to salvation.

We must distinguish between knowledge that might be available to one who wants to love and obey God, and what will be available to a sinner completely uninterested in holiness. One who is disposed to do right would be influenced by a far less clear and vivid view of motives than one disposed to do wrong. Whether the knowledge attainable by our present faculties would influence us to do right, if there were no sin in the world, is uncertain. The knowledge that Adam had when in a state of innocence didn't help influence him to do right. But we are now speaking of things as they are in this world, and we must show why sinners can't understand divine things that would influence them to love and serve God.

Knowledge must influence the mind. The will must be controlled. To do this, the mind must understand things and excite emotion, corresponding to the object in view. Mere intellect will never move the soul to act. A pure scientific abstraction of the intellect that does not excite any emotion is unable to move the will.

To influence sinners to love and obey God, you must have enough light to powerfully excite the mind and produce strong emotions. The reasons for obedience must appear strong and vivid and must subdue their rebellious heart and bring them voluntarily to obey God. This is helpful knowledge. This men can never have without the Spirit of God.

LIMITATIONS OF PERCEPTION

Our minds are shut up in the body and derive ideas from external objects through the senses. By ourselves we can never obtain sufficient knowledge of spiritual or eternal things to rightly influence our will. Our bodily powers were not created for this. All the ideas we can have of the spiritual world are by analogy--figures, parables, types, etc.--comparing them with the things around us. All ideas conveyed to our minds in this way are extremely imperfect, and we do not get the true idea.

Words are merely signs of ideas. They are not the ideas but the representatives of ideas. It is often difficult, and sometimes impossible, to convey ideas by words. Take a little child and attempt to talk with

him. Often it is difficult to get your ideas into his mind. He must have some experience of the things you are trying to teach before you can convey ideas to him by words.

Imagine you were born blind and had never seen colors. Then suppose I tried to describe a grand and beautiful painting to you. No language I could use would enable you to form a picture of it in your mind. Any subject we must describe using figurative language will come across as defective and inadequate. You have heard descriptions of people or places that you thought you had accurately pictured; but when you saw them, you found that your conception was incorrect.

Suppose an individual were to visit this world from another planet, where everything is backwards. If he learned our language and tried to describe the world he had left, we would understand it according to our ideas and experiences. If the analogy between the two worlds is imperfect, our knowledge of things there, from his description, would be imperfect in proportion. So, when we find in the Bible descriptions of heaven, hell, or anything in the invisible world, we can get no true ideas at all of the reality from mere words.

BREAKING DOWN OBSTACLES

The wickedness of our hearts perverts our judgment and shuts our minds to much that we might understand. When a man's mind is so perverted on any subject that he will deny the evidence concerning it, he cannot come to a knowledge of the truth. This is our case in regard to Christianity. Perverseness of heart shuts out the light so that the intellect does not and cannot grasp the ideas it might otherwise gain.

Prejudice is a great obstacle to the reception of correct knowledge concerning Christianity. Take the case of the disciples. They had strong Jewish prejudices respecting the plan of salvation--so strong that all the instructions of Christ Himself could not make them understand the truth. After teaching them for three years, He still couldn't get their minds in possession of the first principle of the gospel.

Until His death, Jesus couldn't make them see that He must die and be risen from the dead. Therefore, He says in His last conversation, "If I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you." This was the very design of His going away from them--that the Spirit of Truth might come and put them in possession of the things that He meant by the words He had used in teaching them.

The general truth is this: without divine illumination, men can understand from the Bible enough to convict and condemn them but not enough to sanctify and save them.

Some may ask, "What, then, is the use of revelation?" The Bible is as plain as it can be. Jesus gave instructions to His disciples as plainly as He could, as a parent would to a little child, But without divine illumination, the unaided reason of man never did and never will attain any helpful knowledge of the gospel.

The difficulty lies in the subject. The Bible contains the gospel as plain as it can be. It contains the signs of the ideas, as far as language can represent the things of Christianity. No language but figurative language can be used for this purpose. And this will forever be inadequate to put our minds in real possession of the things themselves. The difficulty is in our ignorance, sin, and the nature of the subject. This is why we need divine illumination--to get Holy Spirit knowledge of the gospel.

The Spirit of God alone can give us this illumination. The Bible says, "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Corinthians 12:3). The abstract proposition of the Deity of Christ can be

proved as a matter of science. But nothing short of the Holy Spirit can put the mind in possession of the idea that Christ is God. Only He can sanctify the heart.

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, and they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me" (John 6:44-45). Here it is evident that the drawing spoken of is teaching by the Holy Spirit. They must be taught by God and learn of the Father before they have the knowledge of the things of Christianity required to come to Christ.

THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH

Jesus said, "It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you." The word, Paracletos, here translated Comforter, properly means a "Helper" or "Teacher."

"When he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of Sin, because they believe not on me; Of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged. I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come" (John 16:7-13).

And in the fourteenth chapter, the Savior said, "I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him; but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you" (John 14:16-17).

Again, in the twenty-sixth verse, Jesus said, "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you" (John 14:26). Here you see that the office of the Spirit of God is to instruct mankind in regard to the things of Jesus.

None but the Spirit of God can meet this need. No teaching by words, whether by Jesus Christ, by His apostles, or by any teacher coming through the senses can ever put the mind in possession of spiritual things. We need someone to teach us who doesn't have to depend on words or the medium of the senses. We need some way in which the ideas themselves can be brought to our minds, not merely the signs of the ideas. This the Spirit of God can do.

How the Spirit of God does this we will never know in this world. But the fact is undeniable--He can reach the mind without the use of words and can put our minds in possession of the ideas themselves. Types, figures, and words are only imperfect representatives. The human teacher can only appeal to our senses and finds it impossible to possess us of ideas we have never experienced.

But the Spirit of God, having direct access to the mind, can, through the outward sign, impart actual ideas to us. The Spirit of God instantly reveals to us the passage of Scripture which, in all our study and effort, we never could have understood!

Take the case again of a painting on the wall. Suppose that a congregation was blind, and I was trying to describe this painting. Now suppose that while I was trying to make them understand the various distinctions and combinations of colors, all at once their eyes were opened! They could then see for

themselves the thing I was vainly trying to bring to their minds by words. The Holy Spirit opens the spiritual eye and brings the things we try to describe by analogy and signs before the mind and puts it in complete possession of the thing as it is.

No one but the Spirit of God knows the things of God well enough to give us the idea of those things correctly. "What man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man that is in him?" (1 Corinthians 2:11). I can speak to your consciousness--being a man and knowing the things of a man. But I cannot speak these things to the consciousness of a beast, and a beast can't speak of these things.

Similarly, the Bible says, "The things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 2:11). The Spirit of God, knowing from consciousness the things of God, possesses a different kind of knowledge of these things than other beings can possess. He, therefore, can give us the instruction we need, which no other being can give.

THE DIVINE INSTRUCTOR

The needed influence of the Spirit of God may be possessed by men, freely, under the gospel. God is more willing to give His Holy Spirit to them who ask Him than parents are to give their children bread.

"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Matthew 7:7).

"And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (Matthew 21:22).

"Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mark 11:24).

"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him" (James 1:5).

If God has made these unlimited promises to all men, then anyone who asks Him may have as much divine illumination as they ask for.

But men don't have as much divine illumination as they need. They don't ask for it in the manner or to the degree that they need it. They ask amiss or from selfish motives.

The apostle James says, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it on your lusts" (James 4:3). When an individual has some reason other than a desire to glorify God, he shouldn't expect to receive divine illumination. If his object in asking for the Holy Spirit is happiness, wisdom in the Scriptures, importance as a Christian, remarkable experience, or any other selfish motive, that is a good reason why he doesn't receive what he asks for.

Suppose a person neglects his Bible but asks God to give him knowledge. That is tempting God. God gives knowledge through the Bible, preaching, and the other appointed means of instruction. If a person will not use these means--when they are in his power--no matter how much he prayed, he shouldn't expect divine instruction. "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17).

A person may learn the gospel and receive supernatural illumination if he is deprived of the normal means. If he was on a desolate island, he might receive direct illumination from the Spirit of God. And he might receive it in any other circumstances where he absolutely could not have access to any means of

instruction. Some very remarkable cases of this kind have occurred.

When I was an evangelist, I participated in a revival in a neighborhood where there were many Germans. Many of them could not read. When the gospel was preached among them, the Spirit of God was poured out, and a powerful revival followed. If a meeting was appointed at any place, the whole neighborhood would come together, fill the house, and listen intently to the preacher, who tried to fill their minds with gospel truth.

One poor German woman could not read. In one of these meetings, she told this story, which was supported by her neighbors. With many tears and a heart full of joy, she said, "When I loved God, I longed to read the Bible, and I prayed, 'O Jesus! You can teach me to read Your holy Bible,'" and the Lord taught me to read! There was a Bible in the house, and when I had prayed, I thought I could read the Bible. I got the book and opened it, and the words were just what I had heard people read. The Lord has taught me to read my Bible, blessed by His name for it."

Although I don't know anyone involved except a teacher who heard the German lady read, she was a woman of good character among her neighbors. Some of the most respectable of them afterwards told me they didn't doubt the truth of what she said. I have no doubt it was true.

GRIEVING THE HOLY SPIRIT

Many people don't receive illumination from the Spirit of God because they grieve Him. They grieve, or offend, the Holy Spirit so that He cannot consistently grant them His illuminating grace.

They rely on the instructions they receive from ministers, commentaries, books, or their own powers of research. All these things, without the Spirit of God, will only kill but can never make alive. It can only damn but never save. It seems the whole Church is in error on this point--depending on means for divine knowledge. No means are available without the Spirit of God. If the Church felt this--if they really felt that all the means in creation are useless without the teaching of the Holy Spirit--how they would pray, cleanse their hands, and humble their hearts until the Comforter would descend to teach them the things they need to know.

Men are responsible for what they could have of divine illumination. This is a universal truth and is acknowledged by all men. A man is just as responsible for what light he might have as for that which he actually has. Common reason admits that no man who breaks the law is to be excused from ignorance of the law, because all are responsible to know what the law is.

If your children could know your will and misbehave, you consider them all the more blameworthy. So it is in Christianity: men have both the outward means of instruction and the inward teachings of the Holy Spirit absolutely within their reach. If they sin in ignorance, they are not only without excuse on that score, but their ignorance is itself a crime and is an aggravation of their guilt. All men are plainly without excuse for not possessing all the knowledge available for their perfect and immediate sanctification. (See Romans 1:20-21).

Without the Holy Spirit, instruction may convince the Church of duty, but it will never produce holiness. It may harden the heart but will never change it. Without divine influence, it is but a savor of death unto death.

WHEN THE BLIND LEAD THE BLIND

We use all the appropriate means of instruction in our power as the medium through which the Spirit of God conveys divine illumination to the mind.

No reason exists why we should not use the means in our power to acquire knowledge as faithfully as if we could understand the whole subject without divine influence. If we don't use the means within our power, we have no reason to expect divine aid. When we help ourselves, God helps us. When we use our natural faculties to understand these things, we may expect God to enlighten us. To turn our eyes away from the light and then pray to see is to tempt God.

Blind leaders of the blind attempt to teach the things of Christianity without being themselves taught by God. No theological degree will ever make a successful teacher unless he enjoys the illuminating powers of the Holy Spirit. He is blind if he thinks he understands the Bible without this, and if he undertakes to teach, he deceives himself and all who depend on him--both will fall into the ditch together.

If an individual teaches the gospel with the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, he will be understood. He may understand the gospel himself yet not make his hearers understand it, because the Holy Spirit is not on them as well as himself. But if the Spirit of God is on them, precisely in proportion as he himself understands the real meaning of the gospel, he will make his hearers understand it.

In preaching the gospel, ministers should never use texts unless its meaning has been taught by the Spirit of God. It is presumption. And there is no excuse for it, for they can always have the teachings of the Spirit. God is more ready to bestow divine illumination than an earthly parent is to give bread to his child. If they ask, they will always receive all the light they need. This is applicable both to preachers and teachers. If any of them attempt to teach the Scriptures without being themselves taught, they are no more fit to teach than the most ignorant person in the streets is fit to teach astronomy.

I fear that most ministers and teachers have understood very little of their need of this divine teaching or the necessity of praying over their sermons and Bible lessons. If this was done as it should be, their instructions would be far more effective than we now see them.

Do you Bible and Sunday school teachers believe this? Are you in the habit of seeking the true idea of every lesson on your knees? Or do you go to some commentary and then come and peddle out your dry stuff to your classes without the Holy Spirit? If you do this, let me tell you, you had better be doing something else.

What would you say about a minister who never prayed over his texts? You might as well have Balaam's donkey for a minister: the dumb beast might speak with a man's voice and rebuke the madness of such a man. He could give just as much available instruction to reach the deep fountains of the heart as such a preacher. And this is just as important for a Sunday School teacher as for a minister. If you do not pray over your lesson until you feel that God has taught you the idea contained in it, beware! Never be satisfied with anything from a book until you are satisfied that God has put you in possession of the very idea He would have you receive.

THE AUTHOR OF HOLINESS

When I studied theology, I spent many hours on my knees--perhaps I might say weeks--with the Bible before me, laboring and praying to understand the mind of the Spirit. I don't say this boastfully but as a matter of fact to show that the sentiment here advanced is no novel opinion with me. And I always get my

texts and sermons on my knees. Yet I am conscious that I have gained little knowledge compared with what I might have had if I had taken hold of the source of light as I ought to have done.

How little knowledge most Christians have respecting the Word of God! Ask them, for instance, to read the epistles or other parts, and they probably won't be able to give an opinion as to the real meaning of one-tenth of the Bible. No wonder the Church is not holy! They need more truth. Our Savior said, "Sanctify them through thy truth" (John 17:17). This means of holiness must be more richly enjoyed before the Church knows what entire sanctification means. They don't understand the Bible.

They have not gone to the Author to have it explained. Although they have the blessed privilege every day--just as often as they choose--of carrying the book to the Author for His explanation, yet how little they know of the Bible they are sure has been taught by the Holy Spirit! Read the text again, or read similar passages, and then try and tell me that Christians are not responsible for understanding the Bible.

We must all study the Bible under divine teaching. I recommend several books for you to read, such as Wesley's Thoughts on Christian Perfection and the memoirs of Brainerd, Taylor, and Payson. I have found that, in a certain state of mind, such books are useful to read.

But I only study one book. I read the others occasionally but have little time or inclination to read many books because I have so much to learn in my Bible. I find it like a deep mine--the more I work it, the richer it grows. We must read, pause, and pray over it verse by verse. We must dwell on it, digest it, and get it into our minds until we feel that the Spirit of God has filled us with the spirit of holiness.

Will you lay your hearts open to God and give Him no rest until He has filled you with divine knowledge? Will you search the Scriptures? I have often been asked by young converts and young men preparing for the ministry what they should read. I give the same answer every time: Study the Bible!

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/charles-finner/holiness-and-the-holy-spirit/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net

