

## The Role of the Holy Spirit in Biblical Interpretation

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### I. Positively considered: What role the Spirit does play in biblical interpretation

#### A. The subjective role of producing reconciliation. Rom. 8.15.

1. Spirit destroys that enmity between rebellious creatures and God, which is the fundamental problem with interpretation (note that 2 Pet. 3.26 says that it is the “ignorant and unstable” who twist the scriptures to their own destruction).

2. While we are no longer fundamentally at enmity with God, the sanctifying work of the Spirit is not yet complete.

#### B. The Spirit’s role in enabling us to *receive* the truths of God [See the discussion in John Owen, vol. 4, pp. 118-235, “Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God.”]

1. Rom. 8:5-8 οἱ γὰρ κατὰ σάρκα ὄντες τὰ τῆς σαρκὸς φρονοῦσιν, οἱ δὲ κατὰ πνεῦμα τὰ τοῦ πνεύματος. 6 τὸ γὰρ φρόνημα τῆς σαρκὸς θάνατος, τὸ δὲ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος ζωὴ καὶ εἰρήνη· 7 διότι τὸ φρόνημα τῆς σαρκὸς ἔχθρα εἰς θεόν, τῷ γὰρ νόμῳ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐχ ὑποτάσσεται, οὐδὲ γὰρ δύναται· 8 οἱ δὲ ἐν σαρκὶ ὄντες θεῷ ἀρέσαι οὐ δύνανται. The unredeemed mind is at enmity to God; it may very well “understand” the things of God well enough to know that it does not like them.

2. 1 Cor. 2:9-15 ἀλλὰ καθὼς γέγραπται, Ἄ ὀφθαλμὸς οὐκ εἶδεν καὶ οὐς οὐκ ἤκουσεν καὶ ἐπὶ καρδίαν ἀνθρώπου οὐκ ἀνέβη, ἃ ἠτοίμασεν ὁ θεὸς τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν αὐτόν. 10 ἡμῖν δὲ ἀπεκάλυψεν ὁ θεὸς διὰ τοῦ πνεύματος· τὸ γὰρ πνεῦμα πάντα ἐραυνᾷ, καὶ τὰ βάθη τοῦ θεοῦ. 11 τίς γὰρ οἶδεν ἀνθρώπων τὰ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου εἰ μὴ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ ἀνθρώπου τὸ ἐν αὐτῷ; οὕτως καὶ τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐδεὶς ἔγνωκεν εἰ μὴ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ θεοῦ. 12 ἡμεῖς δὲ οὐ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ κόσμου ἐλάβομεν ἀλλὰ τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα εἰδῶμεν τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ χαρισθέντα ἡμῖν· 13 ἃ καὶ λαλοῦμεν οὐκ ἐν διδακτοῖς ἀνθρωπίνης σοφίας λόγοις ἀλλ’ ἐν διδακτοῖς πνεύματος, πνευματικοῖς πνευματικὰ συγκρίνοντες. 14 ψυχικὸς δὲ ἄνθρωπος οὐ δέχεται τὰ τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ θεοῦ, μωρία γὰρ αὐτῷ ἐστίν, καὶ οὐ δύναται γινῶναι, ὅτι πνευματικῶς ἀνακρίνεται· 15 ὁ δὲ πνευματικὸς ἀνακρίνει [τὰ] πάντα, αὐτὸς δὲ ὑπὸ οὐδενὸς ἀνακρίνεται. 16 τίς γὰρ ἔγνω νοῦν κυρίου, ὃς συμβιβάσει αὐτόν; ἡμεῖς δὲ νοῦν Χριστοῦ ἔχομεν.

a. The *content* of the Spirit’s revelation—the mysteries of redemption in Christ, i.e. the gospel.

i. “wisdom” in 1 Cor. 1 and 2--Christ crucified for sinners

a) 1:18-19 Ὁ λόγος γὰρ ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ τοῖς μὲν ἀπολλυμένοις μωρία ἐστίν, τοῖς δὲ σφωζόμενοις ἡμῖν δύναμις θεοῦ ἐστίν. 19 γέγραπται γάρ, Ἐπολω τὴν σοφίαν τῶν σοφῶν καὶ τὴν σύνεσιν τῶν συνετῶν ἀθετήσω.

b) 1:21-25 21 ἐπειδὴ γὰρ ἐν τῇ σοφίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ἔγνω ὁ κόσμος διὰ τῆς σοφίας τὸν θεόν, εὐδόκησεν ὁ θεὸς διὰ τῆς μωρίας τοῦ κηρύγματος σῶσαι τοὺς πιστεύοντας· 22 ἐπειδὴ καὶ Ἰουδαῖοι σημεῖα αἰτοῦσιν καὶ Ἕλληνες σοφίαν ζητοῦσιν, 23 ἡμεῖς δὲ κηρύσσομεν Χριστὸν ἐσταυρωμένον, Ἰουδαίους μὲν σκάνδαλον, ἔθνεσιν δὲ μωρίαν, 24 αὐτοῖς δὲ τοῖς κλητοῖς, Ἰουδαίοις τε καὶ Ἕλλησιν, Χριστὸν θεοῦ δύναμις καὶ θεοῦ σοφίαν· 25 ὅτι τὸ μωρὸν τοῦ θεοῦ σοφώτερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐστίν καὶ τὸ ἀσθενὲς τοῦ θεοῦ ἰσχυρότερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων.

c) 1:30 ἐξ αὐτοῦ δὲ ὑμεῖς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, ὃς ἐγενήθη σοφία ἡμῖν ἀπὸ θεοῦ, δικαιοσύνη τε καὶ ἀγιασμός καὶ ἀπολύτρωσις,

d) 2:1-2 Καὶ γὰρ ἐλθὼν πρὸς ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, ἦλθον οὐ καθ' ὑπεροχὴν λόγου ἢ σοφίας καταγγέλλων ὑμῖν τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ θεοῦ. 2 οὐ γὰρ ἔκρινά τι εἰδέναι ἐν ὑμῖν εἰ μὴ Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν καὶ τοῦτον ἐσταυρωμένον.

e) 2:4-7 4 καὶ ὁ λόγος μου καὶ τὸ κήρυγμά μου οὐκ ἐν πειθοῖ[ς] σοφίας [λόγοις] ἀλλ' ἐν ἀποδείξει πνεύματος καὶ δυνάμεως, 5 ἵνα ἡ πίστις ὑμῶν μὴ ᾖ ἐν σοφίᾳ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλ' ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ. 6 Σοφίαν δὲ λαλοῦμεν ἐν τοῖς τελείοις, σοφίαν δὲ οὐ τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου οὐδὲ τῶν ἀρχόντων τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου τῶν καταργουμένων· 7 ἀλλὰ λαλοῦμεν θεοῦ σοφίαν

- ii. “wisdom” which the world does not have in 1 Cor. 2--Christ crucified for sinners-2:7-8-- 7 ἀλλὰ λαλοῦμεν θεοῦ σοφίαν ἐν μυστηρίῳ, τὴν ἀποκεκρυμμένην, ἣν προώρισεν ὁ θεὸς πρὸ τῶν αἰώνων εἰς δόξαν ἡμῶν· 8 ἣν οὐδεὶς τῶν ἀρχόντων τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου ἔγνωκεν, εἰ γὰρ ἔγνωσαν, οὐκ ἂν τὸν κύριον τῆς δόξης ἐσταύρωσαν.
- iii. “the things God has given us”--2:12 ἡμεῖς δὲ οὐ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ κόσμου ἐλάβομεν ἀλλὰ τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα εἰδῶμεν τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ χαρισθέντα ἡμῖν·

iv. This consistent with the role of the Spirit in bringing glory to Christ. The Messiah is the One who sends the Spirit (Jn. 15.26), which Spirit will in turn bear witness to the Messiah (Jn. 15.27) and glorify the Messiah (Jn. 16.14). He will not bring something distinct from or different from what Christ brought, rather, “He will take what is mine and declare it to you” (Jn. 16.14).

b. The *nature* of the Spirit’s revelation-knowing as receiving (the Reformation’s internal testimony of the Spirit).

1. “knowing”-This passage refers to knowing a great deal, and, at one level, the world *does* know the gospel; it could not render the opinion that the gospel is “foolish” or “weak” if it had no knowledge of it. Further, this knowledge is, in some sense, correct, because the cross is weak and is foolish by the world’s standards. Paul does not argue, then, that the world is ignorant of the gospel, nor does he argue that the world *misunderstands* the gospel; but rather, that the world’s *evaluation* of the gospel is wrong.

2. “receiving”-Note that Paul does not argue that the worldly man is unable to *understand* the gospel; but that he is unable to *receive* the gospel. 2:14-- 14 ψυχικὸς δὲ ἄνθρωπος οὐ δέχεται τὰ τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ θεοῦ, μωρία γὰρ αὐτῷ ἐστίν, καὶ οὐ δύναται γινῶναι, ὅτι πνευματικῶς ἀνακρίνεται.

3. Conclusions about the nature of the Spirit’s revelation from Clement Read Vaughan, *The Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, pp. 236-37: (Vaughan mentions the analogy of the knowledge of a piece of music by a non-musician and a musician, and the analogy of the knowledge of a law by a merchant and by a statesman) “In the line of these analogies why should any one doubt that there should be an intellectual knowledge of religious truth, and a different kind of spiritual knowledge of the very same truth, the one knowledge making him acquainted with the fact that there is such a truth, with its intellectual limitations and relations; the other, with its deep and true significance--its moral weight--its profound appeal to the whole affections of the soul. It is absolutely certain as a matter of fact in a human experience...that there is such a difference in the apprehension of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in all the

distinct truths embraced in the system. One man may know and honestly believe the fact that God so loved the world as to send his Son to redeem it,...yet he sees nothing in these ideas to move his feelings or to induce him to action. His knowledge of the glad tidings of great joy brings no joy to him; he remains unmoved and uncheered by it....But another man, who apprehends his personal need of an effectual relief, may so see into the real nature and significance of the gospel remedies that he catches the joy that is in them; he realizes that his sin may be forgiven him; his knowledge now acquaints him with the power that is in these glorious conceptions.”

John Owen, op. cit., p. 134: “But there is an internal subjective revelation, whereby no new things are revealed unto our minds, or are not outwardly revealed anew, but our minds are enabled to discern the things that are revealed already.”

p. 156: “The things revealed in the Scripture are expressed in propositions whose words and terms are intelligible unto the common reason of mankind. Every rational man, especially if he be skilled in those *common sciences and arts* which all writings refer unto, may, without any especial aid of the Holy Ghost, know the meaning of the *propositions* that are laid down in, or drawn from the Scripture; yea, they can do so who believe not one word of it to be true, and they do so, as well as the best of them, who have no *other help* in the understanding of the Scripture but their own reason, let them profess to believe what they will. And whatever men understand of the meaning of the words, *expressions*, and *propositions* in the Scripture, if they believe not the *things* which they declare, they do not in any sense *know the mind and will of God* in them; for to know a thing as the mind of God, and not to assent unto its truth, implieth a contradiction.”

C. Conclusions: The Holy Spirit plays a subjective, not objective, role in biblical interpretation. In reconciling our sinful hearts to God, he promotes within us a similar desire to love and serve God as we have to love and serve our natural parents. Further, he particularly gives us the desire to *embrace* and *receive* the things of God. In doing this,

he makes us willing to work hard to understand scripture, and willing to embrace the conclusions of our study of scripture.

Our view is distinct from the view of Rome. Rome argued that the difficulty of understanding scripture aright was due to scripture's obscurity and perplexity; Protestants responded by saying the difficulty was due to *our* obscurity and perplexity.

So Luther: "In a word, if the Scripture be obscure or ambiguous, what need was there for its being sent down from heaven? Are we not obscure and ambiguous enough in ourselves, without an increase of it by obscurity, ambiguity, and darkness being sent down unto us from heaven?..."

But I fear I must already be burdensome, even to the insensible, by dwelling so long and spending so much strength upon a point so fully clear; but it was necessary that that impudent and blasphemous saying, 'the Scriptures are obscure,' should thus be drowned. And you, too my friend Erasmus, know very well what you are saying, when you deny that the Scripture is clear, for you at the same time drop into my ear this assertion: 'it of necessity follows therefore, that all your saints whom you adduce, are much less clear.' And truly it would be so. For who shall certify us concerning their light, if you make the Scriptures obscure? Therefore they who deny the all-clearness and all-plainness of the Scriptures, leave us nothing else but darkness." (*Bondage of the Will*, pp. 108,9).

On the other side of the Reformers, battling from another direction, were the anabaptists, who joined Rome in claiming scripture to be intellectually unclear and in need of further revelation and information. Calvin, with Luther, understands the scriptures to be clear, taken in their plain sense: *Against the Libertines*, Farley, 222: "In fact, they have so deformed it (scripture) that they give about as much honor to the Word as if they denied it altogether. For they consistently maintain this principle: that Scripture, taken in its natural sense, is but a dead letter and only kills. Thus they abandon it in order to come to the life-giving Spirit... Although this sect is certainly different from the papists', inasmuch as it is a hundred times worse and more pernicious, nevertheless both of them together hold this principle in common: to change Scripture into allegories and to long for a better and more perfect wisdom than we find in it. And together both as a coverup appeal to Saint Paul's statement that 'the letter kills' (2 Cor. 3.6)."

Thus, the Holy Spirit is *most* necessary in removing sin and love of sin that effectively prevent us from embracing and receiving the things of God.

II. Negatively considered: What role the Spirit does *not* play in biblical interpretation. The Holy Spirit does *not* give us insight into the correct interpretation of a given biblical passage. (Caveat: in saying the Spirit does not do this, we are not saying He is *incapable* of doing this, nor are we denying that, in some extraordinary circumstance, He *might* do so, or even *has* done so. What we are denying is the propriety of *expecting* Him to do so. We are denying that it is a regular part of His role in the present church-order to reveal to individuals the meaning of a biblical passage.)

A. Insights are a common phenomenon

1. Common to redeemed and unredeemed
2. Common to all fields of endeavor

B. Insights are a natural phenomenon

1. In saying “natural,” we do not mean insignificant. Many natural phenomena are breath-taking; rainbows, sunsets, a child’s first steps or words, child-birth, Yitzak Perelman playing the violin, et. al. In their beauty, in the delight they bring, these events all seem sublime; yet we know they are in fact “natural.” These events are the natural consequences of a magnificent Creator’s having made the world this way.
2. In saying “natural,” we mean that insights are nothing other than the mind doing what it most naturally does, thousands of times daily, yet doing it in a circumstance where we were temporarily befuddled. “Association” is the most natural capacity of the human mind; in dreams, for instance, the mind continues its associative acts, even though it ceases from its critical acts. When we are working on a problem of some sort, our minds make many associations, most of which do not assist in solving the problem. When a particular association pops into our head, that appears to solve the problem, we call it an “insight,” and we say, “I’ve got it!”

C. Insights are exhilarating. Because the problem/confusion is so disturbing, when the insight arrives, we experience great delight and satisfaction. Every pious person wants to attribute this to God, as the Author of every good and perfect gift. And, of course, the God of Creation and Providence ought to be thanked and praised for every such true insight.

D. Insights are sometimes wrong. On occasion, the “insight” that appeared to be so exhilarating, and so manifestly a solution to a problem, turns out to be not a solution at all. Upon further reflection, or testing of the thesis, we find it to be wrong.

E. Insight into the meaning of the text at least could be accounted for on the basis of the fact that this is the way our great God has made the world.

F. Despite this, many people believe that the Holy Spirit does give them insight into the correct interpretation of the biblical text, because the natural, common human phenomenon of insight is *mis-labeled* by their ministers and spiritual leaders as a supernatural phenomenon.

III. Evaluation of those misunderstandings of scripture which suggest that the Spirit does give supernatural insight into the interpretation of texts of scripture.

A. John 14:25-26--Ταῦτα λελάληκα ὑμῖν παρ' ὑμῖν μένων· 14.26 ὁ δὲ παράκλητος, τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον ὃ πέμψει ὁ πατήρ ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί μου, ἐκεῖνος ὑμᾶς διδάξει πάντα καὶ ὑπομνήσει ὑμᾶς πάντα ἃ εἶπον ὑμῖν [ἐγώ].

1. To whom is this addressed? The disciples in the Upper Room. The twice-repeated ὑμᾶς of v. 26 has the same referent as the ὑμῖν at the end of 25 and the end of 26.

2. What is promised to the disciples? The Holy Spirit.

3. What will the Holy Spirit do? He will teach-remind (note the parallel διδάξει πάντα καὶ ὑπομνήσει ὑμᾶς πάντα). His “teaching,” even among the disciples, is not new information, but a remembrance of the many things which Jesus had already said.

4. What will be the content of the Spirit’s teaching-reminding among the disciples? What is the referent of the πάντα ? This is answered by the relative clause, ἃ εἶπον ὑμῖν [ἐγώ]. This clause is almost certainly further defined by the first clause of 25, Ταῦτα λελάληκα ὑμῖν παρ' ὑμῖν μένων.

5. Conclusions from John 14.25,26. This text records a special promise of the Holy Spirit to the disciples guaranteeing that they will be helped to remember what Jesus taught them while he was with them. A number of other texts affirm that this is precisely what happened.

a. Jn. 2.20-22-- εἶπαν οὖν οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, Τεσσεράκοντα καὶ ἕξ ἔτεσιν οἰκοδομήθη ὁ ναὸς οὗτος, καὶ σὺ ἐν τρισὶν ἡμέραις ἐγερεῖς αὐτόν; 2.21 ἐκεῖνος δὲ ἔλεγεν περὶ τοῦ ναοῦ τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ. 2.22 ὅτε οὖν ἠγέρθη ἐκ νεκρῶν, ἐμνήσθησαν οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ ὅτι τοῦτο ἔλεγεν, καὶ ἐπίστευσαν τῇ γραφῇ καὶ τῷ λόγῳ ὃν εἶπεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς.

b. Jn. 12.16-- ταῦτα οὐκ ἔγνωσαν αὐτοῦ οἱ μαθηταὶ τὸ πρῶτον, ἀλλ' ὅτε ἐδοξάσθη Ἰησοῦς τότε ἐμνήσθησαν ὅτι ταῦτα ἦν ἐπ' αὐτῷ γεγραμμένα καὶ ταῦτα ἐποίησαν αὐτῷ.

B. John 15:26-27 --“Όταν ἔλθῃ ὁ παράκλητος ὃν ἐγὼ πέμψω ὑμῖν παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς, τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς ἀληθείας ὃ παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκπορεύεται, ἐκεῖνος μαρτυρήσει περὶ ἐμοῦ· 15.27 καὶ ὑμεῖς δὲ μαρτυρεῖτε, ὅτι ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς μετ’ ἐμοῦ ἐστε.

1. To whom is this promise addressed? To the disciples again (same discourse context, and also, 27 defines the 2d person plural as those who ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς μετ’ ἐμοῦ ἐστε).
2. What is promised? A special capacity to testify about the Christ. Note the difference between the denying, weeping Peter, and the emboldened Peter subsequent to the resurrection appearances and outpouring of the Spirit.

C. 1 John 2:19-27-- ἐξ ἡμῶν ἐξήλθαν ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἦσαν ἐξ ἡμῶν· εἰ γὰρ ἐξ ἡμῶν ἦσαν, μεμενῆκεισαν ἂν μεθ’ ἡμῶν· ἀλλ’ ἵνα φανερωθῶσιν ὅτι οὐκ εἰσὶν πάντες ἐξ ἡμῶν. 2.20 καὶ ὑμεῖς χρίσμα ἔχετε ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀγίου καὶ οἴδατε πάντες. 2.21 οὐκ ἔγραψα ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐκ οἴδατε τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἀλλ’ ὅτι οἴδατε αὐτήν καὶ ὅτι πᾶν ψεῦδος ἐκ τῆς ἀληθείας οὐκ ἔστιν. 2.22 Τίς ἐστὶν ὁ ψεύστης εἰ μὴ ὁ ἀρνούμενος ὅτι Ἰησοῦς οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ Χριστός; οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἀντίχριστος, ὁ ἀρνούμενος τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὸν υἱόν. 2.23 πᾶς ὁ ἀρνούμενος τὸν υἱὸν οὐδὲ τὸν πατέρα ἔχει, ὁ ὁμολογῶν τὸν υἱὸν καὶ τὸν πατέρα ἔχει. 2.24 ὑμεῖς ὃ ἠκούσατε ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, ἐν ὑμῖν μενέτω. ἐὰν ἐν ὑμῖν μείνῃ ὃ ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς ἠκούσατε, καὶ ὑμεῖς ἐν τῷ υἱῷ καὶ ἐν τῷ πατρὶ μενεῖτε. 2.25 καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἐπαγγελία ἣν αὐτὸς ἐπηγγείλατο ἡμῖν, τὴν ζωὴν τὴν αἰώνιον.

2.26 Ταῦτα ἔγραψα ὑμῖν περὶ τῶν πλανώντων ὑμᾶς. 2.27 καὶ ὑμεῖς τὸ χρίσμα ὃ ἐλάβετε ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ, μένει ἐν ὑμῖν καὶ οὐ χρειᾶν ἔχετε ἵνα τις διδάσκῃ ὑμᾶς, ἀλλ’ ὡς τὸ αὐτοῦ χρίσμα διδάσκει ὑμᾶς περὶ πάντων καὶ ἀληθές ἐστὶν καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ψεῦδος, καὶ καθὼς ἐδίδαξεν ὑμᾶς, μένετε ἐν αὐτῷ.

1. No teachers? John knows that among the gifts given *by* the Spirit are those of teaching (Eph. 4.11; 1 Co. 12.28). Indeed, in this very letter, John himself teaches the church. Thus, these verses cannot be claiming that the believers do not need the very gifts that God has given, that are being exercised in the very process of the writing of the letter. Rather, the “teaching” must be, contextually, confined to the issues at stake, respectively.
2. What is the issue? What is at issue is those who are wandering astray, denying Christ (περὶ τῶν πλανώντων, οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἀντίχριστος, ὁ ἀρνούμενος τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὸν υἱόν.). Regarding this *particular* wandering, the believers need no teacher to tell them this is wrong. The indwelling Spirit is adequate guide to prevent one from denying Christ.

3. “All things” (27). The anointing does not teach Calculus, or world geography. Nor does this anointing dispense with the Spirit-gifted teachers in the Church. Rather, the Spirit’s activity is sufficient to prevent the Church from being led astray by those who deny the Father and the Son.

D. Conclusions from these texts. Although frequently cited in defense of the “inspired insight” theory, these texts in fact teach no such thing.

IV. Conclusions of our analysis. What may we, as Bible interpreters, rightly expect from God the Holy Spirit? That He will increasingly take away our innate rebellion and hostility to the ways of God, which is the primary obstacle to our “receiving” God’s truths. In this way, He will “illuminate” us, not by adding *content* to the objective revelation in scripture, but by subduing the rebellion that subjectively prohibits the truth from being received and embraced.