

Contemporary Religious Questions

Q: “IF WE MUST BE LED BY THE SPIRIT TO BE SAVED, HOW CAN WE BE GUIDED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT TODAY?”

A: A renewal of interest in the Holy Spirit has come in recent years, producing the charismatic movement. The chief characteristic of this movement is that those involved claim to speak in tongues by the power of the Holy Spirit. Do they, or do they not? That is an important question. But another question about the Holy Spirit is even more important: What part does the Holy Spirit play in our salvation?

The Holy Spirit does have something to do with our being saved. We are born anew of the Spirit (John 3:5); we are justified in the Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:11); and we are saved by the renewal of the Spirit (Titus 3:5). If you would be saved today, you must be saved by the Holy Spirit.

How does the Holy Spirit save? The answer is found in Romans 8:14: “For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” *I affirm that to be saved by the Spirit, you must be led by the Spirit!* Then the question becomes: “If we must be led by the Spirit to be saved, how can we be guided by the Holy Spirit today?” Let us answer that by asking, first, *How* does the Holy Spirit lead us, and second, *Where* does the Holy Spirit lead us?

HOW DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT LEAD US?

How does the Holy Spirit lead us? At least three possibilities can be presented:

By a Miraculous Means?

Does the Spirit lead us *directly and miracu-*

lously into salvation? Does He speak to us in the dead of night? Does He give special revelations? Do people today receive angelic visitations? Does God speak in “a small, still voice”?

Obviously, God has in the past led people in this way. But that alone does not prove that God is leading people in the same way in this age. Why? Because God has dealt with people in different ages in different ways; God has spoken to people at various times in different ways (see Hebrews 1:1, 2). Furthermore, God is not repeating some of the things He has done in the past. He is not, for instance, repeating His creation of the universe, His sending of His Son, or His inspiration of the Bible. Thus, the question is neither, “What has God done?” nor “What could God do?” It is rather: “What *is* God doing *today*?”

Since the Bible teaches that the age of the miraculous has passed, we suggest that God is not leading or guiding people directly or miraculously today. Why do I say the age of the miraculous has passed? Because Paul said it first! Paul spoke of miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12. Then in 1 Corinthians 13, he said that “when the perfect comes,” this system of miraculous gifts would pass away (vv. 8-10). I believe that is exactly what happened! The supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit—including the ability to speak in tongues, the ability to heal, and the gift of miraculous knowledge—passed away. They are no longer needed. They were given to confirm the word spoken by the apostles (Mark 16:17-20; Hebrews 2:2-4), but

that word has now been confirmed. They are no longer in evidence. People are not being healed today as they were in New Testament times (see, for example, Acts 3, and contrast that miracle with so-called miracles today). The maturity of the church, brought about by the completion of God's revelation, marked the end of the age of the supernatural. Since the supernatural gifts have passed away, we no longer expect to receive miraculous or supernatural guidance by the Holy Spirit.

Even *if* the Spirit did deal directly and miraculously with people today, there is no indication that He would save them by this means! In the New Testament, the miraculous guidance of the Spirit generally came to those who were already Christ's disciples, not to those outside the body of Christ. Even *they*—for instance, the inspired apostles—were not always privileged to receive such guidance. Paul and Barnabas argued about whether or not to take John Mark with them on the second missionary journey. Apparently, the Lord did not reveal who was right on that occasion.

The New Testament makes it plain that when the Lord wanted a particular individual to be taught the gospel, He always provided some human messenger to bring the gospel message to him. He sent Philip to the Ethiopian (Acts 8) and Peter to Cornelius (Acts 10). He did *not* save either of these men by direct and miraculous guidance.

If you want to be saved by the leading of the Holy Spirit, do not expect a miraculous visitation by the Spirit. Instead, do as Cornelius did: Look for a messenger who will tell you how to be saved (Acts 11:14).

By Special Illumination of the Word?

We might ask, second, does the Spirit lead us *by special illumination of the Word*? Some believe that, although you do not need a special revelation from the Spirit to be saved, you do need His special illumination to understand the Bible. Is this true?

A person ought to read and study the Bible prayerfully, asking for God's help in understanding. (See, for example, James 1:5.) But what we are talking about is more than that. It is a direct illumination given by the Spirit, without which one cannot understand the Bible, and which,

when it comes, makes all clear in one blinding instant. Is that kind of illumination required?

No, it is not because the Holy Spirit has already given us a book we can understand! The Bible indicates that it was meant to be read and understood. Paul said, "When you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ" (Ephesians 3:4). Paul expected the Ephesians to *understand* what he had written. He did not expect them to need miraculous help, or divine illumination, to understand. Indeed, when we read the Bible, though we will discover there *some* things (not everything or even most things, 2 Peter 3:15ff.) hard to understand, we find that most of the Bible is fairly easy to understand.

Suppose that a special illumination by the Holy Spirit were needed to understand the Bible. Then we have to have the Holy Spirit to interpret for us His own words, since the Holy Spirit gave us the Bible in the first place (see 2 Timothy 3:16, 17; 2 Peter 1:20, 21). What we would require for salvation would be a doubly-inspired message! Is it reasonable to believe that if the Holy Spirit inspired the Bible in the first place, He did such a poor job that He would have to inspire its readers before they could understand it?

No special illumination was required in the first century to understand the words of the apostles. When Peter told the people on the day of Pentecost to repent and be baptized, they understood him perfectly well (Acts 2:38ff.). It was not a matter of understanding or failing to understand; it was a matter of receiving or rejecting the message. That is the problem today: The message is understandable, but some people choose to reject it.

When people claim to be seeking the illumination of the Spirit, they are frequently not really interested in getting help in understanding the Bible. They are rather hoping that something will provide them with justification for what they already believe! They pray, in effect, "Lord, help me to understand it as I already believe it."

Your need, therefore, is not for some special illumination by the Holy Spirit. What you need, instead, is a willingness to accept, believe, and obey the plain statements of the Scriptures.

By the Word of God?

Rather than leading either miraculously or by a special illumination of the Word, the Holy

Spirit leads us to salvation *through the Word of God, the Bible*.

Notice the promise made to the apostles: "And He [the Holy Spirit], when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me" (John 16:8, 9). In order to be saved, we need to be convicted of sin, righteousness, and judgment! But how did the Holy Spirit convict people of sin in New Testament times? In Acts 2 we read that Peter *preached* that Jesus was both Lord and Christ. What was the result? A conviction of sin: "Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:37). Conviction came through the preaching of the Holy Spirit-inspired Word! No wonder Paul said that "the sword of the Spirit, . . . is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17). The Spirit uses His sword, the Word of God, to cut, convict, and convince, as He leads people to salvation.

The Bible says we are, or must be, born of the water and the Spirit to be saved. Therefore, we are *born of the Spirit* (John 3:5, 9). But the Bible also teaches that we are born again *through the Word*: We have "been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Peter 1:23).

Further, the Bible says that we are *sanctified in the Spirit*: ". . . you were washed, . . . you were sanctified, . . . you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). It teaches that we are sanctified *through the Word*. Jesus said, "Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth" (John 17:17).

The Bible teaches that we are *saved by the Spirit*: "Not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). The Bible also says that we are saved *through the Word*: ". . . receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:21).

Therefore, we affirm that what the *Holy Spirit does to lead us to salvation, He does through the Word!* Do you want to be saved by the Holy Spirit? Then be led by the Spirit. If you want to be led by the Spirit, then you must be led by the

Word which the Holy Spirit has inspired.

WHERE DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT LEAD US?

Where does the Holy Spirit lead us? He has inspired the Word of God. He leads us through that Word. But what does the Holy Spirit tell us to do? For the answer, pick up your New Testament and read.

A Belief in Christ

First, He leads you into a belief in Christ. Jesus said that the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, would bear witness of Him (John 15:27) and that He would glorify Jesus (John 16:14). We learn that the Word which the Holy Spirit inspired (2 Timothy 3:16, 17) produces faith: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). The first result of Peter's preaching on Pentecost in Acts 2 was faith. He convinced those who heard that Jesus was indeed the Christ. Then these *believers* cried out: "What shall we do?" (Acts 2:36, 37).

A Conviction of Sin

Second, the Holy Spirit leads you into a conviction of sin. That is the way it happened on Pentecost (Acts 2). After believing in Jesus, the people were "pierced to the heart." They were convicted of sin. They understood that they had been guilty of crucifying, not some sinful blasphemer, but the very Son of God, the Messiah. They should have felt guilty! But they were not alone. We, too, need to understand that we were guilty of Christ's crucifixion; He died because of our sins as well as theirs. We need to be convicted of sin! If we have not been convicted of sin, we have been refusing to hear that Word!

Repentance

When you read the New Testament, you will discover, third, that the Holy Spirit leads you into repentance. When men had believed and had been convicted of sins, Peter told them to repent (Acts 2:38). This repentance is not conviction of sin; rather it results from such conviction. It is a determination not to sin any longer. This is God's message for all people today: "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent" (Acts 17:30). Since *all* must re-

pent, consider that this is a message directly from the Holy Spirit: You must repent!

Immersion for Forgiveness

Next, when you read the New Testament, you find that the Holy Spirit leads you into immersion for forgiveness of sins—baptism in water for the remission of sins. This immersion has always been connected with the Holy Spirit. Remember John 3:5: Jesus said that we must be born of water and of the *Spirit*. The “Spirit” is surely the Holy Spirit; the “water” is the water of baptism. Thus, to be born again by the Spirit, one must be baptized in water. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached the words the Holy Spirit gave him to say. What did he tell others, by the power of the Holy Spirit, they had to do to be saved? “Repent . . . and be baptized . . . for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). The Spirit led people on the day of Pentecost to be baptized. Likewise, the Spirit led others who became Christians in the Book of Acts to be baptized; in every conversion about which we have details, Acts specifies that the people were baptized. If the Holy Spirit led men then to be baptized to be saved, the Spirit urges you today to do the same thing: Be baptized for the forgiveness of sins!

Christ’s Church

Fifth, when you read the New Testament, you will learn that the Holy Spirit leads you into Christ’s church. This was the result of the events on the day of Pentecost. Those who accepted the Holy Spirit’s message were baptized and so were “added” to those who preached it (Acts 2:41). In Acts 2:47, we read that the Lord was adding to the church daily those who were being saved (KJV). The word for “church” is not in the original, but the idea is. From this point on, a church in its existence, and those who are baptized are added to it. Paul refers to this in 1 Corinthians 12:13: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. . . .” The body is the church (Ephesians 1:22, 23). What body or church is

that? It is the one church (Ephesians 4:5). It is not some manmade church; it is Christ’s church! (Matthew 16:18). When you are led by the Spirit to be baptized for the remission of sins, you are also led by the Spirit into the Lord’s church. In that church, you have additional blessings provided by the Holy Spirit and additional responsibilities. You have the responsibility to worship and work faithfully all your life. But you can be assured that here you are in the realm of the saved, and, by the grace of God, if you continue to be guided by His Word, you can be assured of a home in heaven.

At this point someone may object: “The Spirit led me into something different from that.” Perhaps you believe that He led you to do something different to be saved, or He led you into a different body or church or denomination.

Maybe you are right in saying that a spirit led you in another direction. But the question is: Was it the Spirit of God? Remember the Bible says: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). There are lying spirits, false prophets, in the world.

How can you know whether or not you have been led by a false prophet or by the Holy Spirit? By asking whether or not whoever led you taught you to do those things the Holy Spirit led men in New Testament times to do! I insist that, regardless of whether or not you accept any of the other arguments, you must accept this fact: If you have been led to do something less than, or different from the five things enumerated, you have not been led by the Holy Spirit!

CONCLUSION

Will you be led by the Holy Spirit? If He were here in human form, He would tell you to do no more or less than what the Bible teaches on these important matters. His message has been relayed to you. Will you hear it? And will you obey it?

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