

How the Holy Spirit Converts Sinners

The question of how the Holy Spirit works in the conversion of a sinner has been generally misunderstood and shrouded in mysticism. The confusion in regard to the work of the Spirit is not concerned with whether or not there is a Holy Spirit, or even with whether or not He works. Usually, there is agreement on these points.

The discussion is not necessarily on what He does for the sinner; we agree that He convicts, produces faith, and leads. The real question has been how He does these things.

Two ideas have been proposed: One is that He operates immediately and miraculously; the other is that He works through a medium, the Word of God. As we discuss this subject, it will be evident which is the true position.

WHO IS THE SPIRIT?

The first fact which must be made plain is that the Holy Spirit is one of the three Persons in the Godhead.

He is mentioned in the material creation in the first of Genesis (1:2). In addition, He is mentioned along with God and Christ in such passages as Matthew 28:19 and 1 John 5:8.

Personal pronouns are often used in reference to the Spirit (John 14:16, 17, 26). Attributes of personality are ascribed to Him. He teaches (Luke 12:12; John 14:26), speaks (1 Timothy 4:1; Hebrews 3:7), and knows (1 Corinthians 2:11). He makes intercession (Romans 8:26) and is capable of being grieved (Ephesians 4:30).

When we understand that the Holy Spirit is an intelligent Person and not a mere ghost-like apparition, the manner of His working becomes more evident. He is able to influence people in much the same way that one intelligent human being would be expected to influence another.

CONVERSION IN THE APOSTOLIC TIME

The best way to determine the manner of the Holy Spirit's working is to examine His part in conversion during the apostolic time. The Book of Acts is a book of conversions. Let us select two cases of conversion from this book and observe how the Spirit operated in each.

Acts 2 records the day the Spirit came to begin His work of conviction and conversion. Three thousand souls were influenced by Him on that one day. How did the Spirit operate upon those in the audience? It can be seen that it was only through *the words* spoken by Peter. He was speaking as the Spirit gave him utterance (Matthew 10:20).

The story of the Ethiopian nobleman is told in Acts 8. Surely, he was genuinely converted, but was

he converted by the Spirit? All will agree that he was. How, then, did the Spirit influence him? Even a superficial reading will reveal that it was through *the teaching* of Philip, who was being guided in his speaking by the Holy Spirit.

These cases reveal that the Spirit worked through *words* and not apart from words. When people heard the preaching of inspired men, they were hearing the Spirit. When they were converted by these words, they were being converted by the Spirit. When they rejected what they heard, they were resisting the Spirit (Acts 7:51, 52). Stephen accused those who rejected his teaching of resisting the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51).

HOW DOES THE SPIRIT CONVERT PEOPLE TODAY?

Does the Holy Spirit do now in conversion what He did during the apostolic time? Yes. We do not have inspired men living today, do we? No. The age of miracles has ceased. However, the Spirit did not guide them only in their speaking. He also guided them in their writing. Thus we have their inspired *words* to “speak” to us today. The Scriptures are the Word of the Spirit.

In Hebrews 3:7 a quotation from the Old Testament is ascribed to the Spirit. Second Peter 1:20, 21 says that the prophecies of holy men of old came by the Spirit. Second Timothy 3:16 likewise claims inspiration for the Scriptures. In Revelation 2 and 3, John admonished the churches to hear what the Spirit was saying to them. They were to do this by giving heed to the message John wrote.

Now we see why the Spirit and the Word so often have the same works ascribed to them. Both

are involved in giving life (John 6:63), the new birth (John 3:5; 1 Peter 1:23), and sanctifying (John 17:17; 1 Corinthians 6:11).

Let us consider sanctification, for example, and see how it clarifies our question. We are sanctified by the Spirit and by the Word. The Spirit sanctifies through the Word. The Spirit is a Person; the Word is an instrument. It is the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17). A man cuts down a tree with an axe. Both have a part in this task, but the man does the work through the instrument. The Spirit operates by use of His sword, and not without it.

CONCLUSION

We must accept everything that the Bible teaches about the Spirit. How does He operate upon the heart of a sinner? It is through His Word. He does not operate in some mysterious manner. When we accept and obey His teachings, we are led by the Spirit. Those who are led by Him are the children of God (Romans 8:14). Are you accepting the Spirit, or are you resisting Him?