

Session 4 - Conviction of Sin (Part 2)

Series: Is It So? Reconsidering the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

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Last week we began an exploration of the Holy Spirit's convicting ministry described in John 16:8-11. Building on our previous discussion, we now examine how this passage has traditionally been interpreted and why a fresh perspective may be warranted. Rather than viewing this text as describing a universal work of the Spirit throughout history, we'll consider evidence suggesting it refers to a specific ministry directed toward Israel during a crucial transitional period.

Session 3 focused on three key aspects from John 16:8-11: Israel's rejection of their Messiah, Christ's vindication through His ascension, and the judgment pronounced upon the world system and its ruler. Building on our examination of the Upper Room Discourse from Session 3, we will now explore how the Spirit's work of "reproving" (Greek *elengchō*) was fulfilled in Acts 2-7.

Seeing This At Work: Examples from Acts 2-7

The fulfillment of this convicting work is evident in the early chapters of Acts, where the Holy Spirit reproves Israel of sin, righteousness, and judgment through the apostles' preaching. Let's consider a few examples:

Acts 2:14-41 (The Day of Pentecost)

In Acts 2, we see the Holy Spirit's convicting work through Peter's sermon. First, Peter convicts the crowd of sin by directly accusing them of crucifying Jesus (Acts 2:22-23). Then, he demonstrates Christ's righteousness by proclaiming His resurrection and ascension to heaven, where He was exalted to the right hand of God (Acts 2:24, 32-33). Finally, Peter brings conviction of judgment by declaring

Jesus as both Lord and Christ, implicitly condemning those who had rejected Him (Acts 2:34-36). In the end the crowd is convicted, leading to repentance (Acts 2:37).

Acts 3:11–26 (Peter's Sermon at Solomon's Porch)

In Acts 3, Peter first confronts Israel with their sin of denying and killing Jesus, whom he calls the "Prince of life" (Acts 3:13-15). He then demonstrates Christ's righteousness through the testimony of His resurrection (Acts 3:15-16). Finally, Peter warns of judgment, urging the people to repent to avoid the coming consequences (Acts 3:19-20).

Acts 4:8–12 (Peter Before the Sanhedrin)

In Acts 4:10, Peter boldly rebukes the leaders for crucifying Jesus, demonstrating their sin. He then establishes Christ's righteousness by declaring Him as the cornerstone (Acts 4:11). Finally, Peter pronounces judgment by asserting that salvation is found exclusively in Jesus, thereby excluding all other paths (Acts 4:12).

Acts 5:27–33 (Peter Before the Council)

Peter again confronts the council with their sin of crucifying Jesus (Acts 5:30). He then demonstrates Christ's righteousness by declaring how Jesus was exalted to give repentance to Israel (Acts 5:31). The council's enraged response to these truths shows their resistance to conviction (Acts 5:33).

Acts 7:51–60 (Stephen's Martyrdom)

In Stephen's final sermon, we see all three elements of the Spirit's convicting work powerfully displayed. First, Stephen boldly exposes Israel's rebellion against God and their rejection of Jesus (Acts 7:51-53). Then, his vision of Jesus exalted at God's right hand demonstrates Christ's righteousness (Acts 7:55-56). Finally, the crowd's violent response to his message reveals their hardness of heart and foreshadows their impending judgment (Acts 7:57-60).

The Evangelical View

The traditional evangelical understanding of the Holy Spirit's convicting work, based on John 16:8-11, emphasizes the Spirit's role in bringing individuals to recognize their sin and need for salvation. This interpretation sees the Spirit actively working to convince people of their guilt before God and lead them to repentance and faith in Christ.

"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."

In this evangelical framework, the Spirit's conviction operates in three distinct but related ways. First, the Spirit reveals to individuals their true spiritual condition, particularly focusing on their unbelief in Christ as the fundamental sin. This revelation aims to show people their inability to achieve righteousness through their own efforts, thereby highlighting their need for a Savior.

Second, the Spirit testifies to Christ's perfect righteousness, demonstrated by His ascension to the Father. This aspect of conviction emphasizes the vast gulf between human inadequacy and God's standards, pointing to Christ's finished work as the only sufficient basis for righteousness before God.

Third, the Spirit demonstrates the reality of judgment, particularly as evidenced in Satan's defeat at the cross. This conviction serves to warn individuals about the eternal consequences of rejecting Christ while highlighting God's ultimate victory over evil.

Note that these three aspects of the Spirit's ministry of conviction are similar to, but distinct from, a rightly divided view. The key difference is that the Evangelical view directs this work entirely toward the individual. This interpretation requires a witnessing work of the Spirit for the gospel message to be effectual, making it essentially Calvinistic in nature.

This example from the Evangelical website Got Questions illustrates this idea:

The influence of the Holy Spirit in an unsaved person's life will lead that person to the realization that he is guilty, that God is just, and that all sinners are deserving of judgment. Once a sinner has been awakened to his soul's great need, the Spirit will point him to Christ, the one and only Savior and Refuge from judgment ([John 16:14](#) ESV) [1]

GotQuestions.org, "What does it mean that the Holy Spirit will convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment?", accessed November 30, 2024, <https://www.gotquestions.org/convict-world-sin-righteousness-judgment.html>

Evangelicals typically view this convicting work as essential to both conversion and ongoing spiritual growth. Before conversion, the Spirit's conviction is seen as preparatory work, making the heart receptive to the gospel message. In evangelism, believers are encouraged to proclaim the gospel confidently, trusting that the Spirit will bring conviction to their hearers. Even after conversion, this conviction continues as part of the sanctification process, with the Spirit exposing sin and guiding believers toward greater holiness.

Evangelical theology distinctly emphasizes the Spirit's personal and active role in conviction, setting it apart from simple conscience or rational recognition of wrongdoing. According to this view, the Spirit's work is crucial for genuine repentance and saving faith. However, as we will see, my interpretation rejects this individualistic and mystical understanding of the Spirit's conviction.

If My View Is Correct

That the conviction in John 16:8–11 is a transitory and specific work of the Spirit toward Israel, the following implications arise:

The Nature of Conviction:

The nature of conviction is of truth. Conviction is not a mystical or emotional experience but arises from an informed understanding of the truth revealed in God's Word. As individuals are confronted with the clear teachings of Scripture,

they are naturally compelled to compare their beliefs, actions, and spiritual condition to the reality of God's standards. The Word of God, as the "sword of the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:17), pierces the heart and reveals the thoughts and intents (Hebrews 4:12), leading to a rational recognition of sin and the need for a Savior.

This conviction is grounded in the objective truth of Scripture. For example, Romans 3:23 declares, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God"—a statement that exposes humanity's universal dilemma. When the Word is faithfully preached or studied, it illuminates the reality of our spiritual condition. Since faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (Romans 10:17), we can see that conviction stems from God's Word itself—which is God-breathed—rather than from subjective experience.

By comparing the truth of Scripture with the realities of life, God's Word persuades individuals of their need for salvation. This approach underscores the sufficiency of the Bible in revealing sin, pointing to Christ, and instructing in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Rather than relying on an emotional or mystical sensation, conviction leads to a reasoned and deliberate response to the gospel, founded entirely upon the truth of God's Word.

Evangelicals have become so accustomed to a mystical doctrine of conviction that they may bristle at any view that considers the Word of God alone sufficient for conviction. Indeed, Calvinism depends on a mystical convicting and regenerating work of the Spirit in addition to the proclamation of the Word of God. However, in all the biblical testimony prior to Acts 2, the Word of God was sufficient, with no hint of mystical conviction being necessary to convince hearers of their sin or need for repentance.

For example, when Nehemiah and Ezra read the Law of God, the people were convicted solely on the word:

"So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the Lord your God; mourn not, nor

weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law." (Nehemiah 8:8-9)

This truth of the convicting power of the word is further seen in: Psalm 19:7-8

"The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes."

If the Word of God was sufficient in itself for conviction prior to Acts 2, and it testifies to its own sufficiency for conviction in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, why are we so hesitant to reject the mystical view of conviction taught within Evangelicalism? Perhaps, it is because we are too fond of the mystical experience to accept the biblical testimony.

Practical Implications:

In light of this understanding, the centrality of Scripture teaching becomes paramount. Since conviction stems from the truth of God's Word rather than feelings or mystical experiences, ministry must prioritize clear and faithful biblical teaching. This means moving away from emotional appeals and manipulative techniques, focusing instead on careful explanation and rightly dividing Scripture.

While emotional and subjective experiences can be compelling, they must always remain subordinate to biblical authority. Feelings are inherently unreliable, being easily swayed by circumstances and personal biases. When any experience contradicts or attempts to supersede biblical teaching, it must be firmly rejected.

This perspective emphasizes our confidence in Scripture's sufficiency. We need not depend on external phenomena or mystical experiences to convince people of their sin or their need for Christ. Clear, precise biblical teaching is entirely adequate for this purpose. Churches should confidently present objective truth, recognizing that God's Word itself carries the power to bring conviction. This approach stands in contrast to the evangelical tendency to mix conviction with

emotionalism, reminding us that genuine transformation comes through the Spirit's work through Scripture, not through human manipulation.

I must add that many churches have become overly reliant on "seamless worship"—where music, drama, lighting, atmosphere, and timing are meticulously orchestrated to elicit specific emotional responses. We should recognize this as manufactured, manipulative conviction and return instead to simple, heartfelt singing and clear biblical teaching.

In churches that have a time of invitation (altar call), preachers feel pressured to intensify the "Holy Spirit's" conviction. Entire books have been written on how to "draw the net" during this invitation time. Most of these practices have their roots in questionable methods that began during the Second Great Awakening in the United States. In my opinion, preachers should return to the old adage "trust the Lord and tell the people." When we preach the Word, we can simply dismiss the people and let the Word do its work.