

Does a person need to “have the Holy Spirit” in order to interpret the Bible? And does the Gospel of John give a historically accurate accounting of the teachings of Jesus? These are the two questions I will be dealing with on this week’s Readers’ Mailbag. If you have any questions, simply ask them as a comment to any of the posts on the blog, and I’ll add them to the list.

QUESTION:

How do you respond to those who say “you can’t correctly interpret the bible unless you have the Holy Spirit”

RESPONSE:

I’ve never found it at all convincing that a person needs the Holy Spirit in order to interpret the Bible. As an agnostic, of course, I don’t believe in the Holy Spirit (since I don’t believe in God). But even when I did believe in the Holy Spirit, I thought that it was silly to claim that a person could not interpret the Bible correctly without the Spirit - for a couple of reasons that have always struck me as virtually irrefutable.

The first is this: if it’s true that the Holy Spirit is the one who provides the correct interpretation of Scripture, then why is it that so many people who claim to have the Holy Spirit cannot agree on what the Bible means? This is simply an empirical fact that is not open to dispute. Different Christian interpreters of the Bible, all of them claiming to be guided by the Holy Spirit based on humble prayer, come away with diametrically opposed interpretations of major important passages, of minor less important passages, and of major biblical themes and doctrines - just about everything.

I saw this vividly when I was myself a fundamentalist Christian: clear and hard-core different interpretations of major issues, by devout and spiritual Christians, based on how the New Testament was being read. As a poignant example: I had come out of a charismatic background where we believed that “speaking in tongues” was the clearest manifestation of God’s spirit, based on our reading of Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. At Moody Bible Institute, on the other hand, we were taught that charismatic activity, and especially the speaking in tongues, was a demonic activity and that the charismatic group from which I had come was misinterpreting these passages. Well, which is it? Both groups claimed to be representing the views of the Holy Spirit that had guided their reading of Scripture.

I could point to passage after passage after passage where well-meaning and clear headed Christians who claim to be given their understanding by the Spirit provide two, three, or four contradictory interpretations of the passage. So what is the evidence that the Spirit assists in interpretation?

The second reason I’ve never bought this is that as a complete agnostic who does not believe in the Holy Spirit, I have studied passages and come to the very same conclusions as those who claim the Spirit has told them what the passages mean. If I “need” the Holy Spirit to interpret these passages, why have I interpreted them in the same way that people who have the Holy Spirit has interpreted them? Seems like I’ve done all right without the

Spirit.

And there's a reason for that. Whatever you think about God, the Holy Spirit, or the Bible - the Bible is written in human languages following human rules of spelling and grammar and coming out of completely human situations lived in by human authors. To interpret the Bible you need to be a human, one who can read words and understand sentences. Even if the Bible is inspired, it is inspired in human words and is, therefore, susceptible of human understanding. My view is that the Spirit does not contribute to the process.

QUESTION:

I believe you wrote that you were convinced that the current version of the beginning of John's gospel is an accurate version of what the author actually said. You may be right, but I doubt that this gospel has very much if anything to do with Jesus' actual teachings. In John's gospel Jesus, the humble Galilean, speaks like a Greek philosopher—a very pompous Greek philosopher. He also attacks the Jews as if he were not one himself. In general, the gospels may be regarded as historical fiction, but this one is sheer fantasy.

RESPONSE:

I think it is important to differentiate between two questions. A lot of people confuse these questions, but they need to be understood as clearly different and, in fact, virtually unrelated. The first question is whether we can know what the authors of the New Testament wrote. The second is whether what they wrote is correct. In this case, the first question has to do with John's Gospel. Can we know what John wrote about Jesus' teachings? The second question is whether what John wrote about Jesus' teachings is accurate with respect to what Jesus (the man himself) actually taught.

I'm not sure if the questioner confused the questions or not. He doesn't seem to have done so but I'm not sure - if he didn't, I don't know why he would raise both issues (as related) (since they're unrelated).

On the first question: my view is that we cannot know with 100% certainty what John originally wrote, but we can know with virtual certainty about much or even most of what he wrote. We may be wrong, but that doesn't mean we can't be pretty certain in places (even as we are pretty uncertain in other places). I am pretty certain that the author of John began his Gospel in its final, published form, whether he was one author, or several authors, or a later editor who put together a combination of sources at different times, or several editors who put together their various sources at various times - however you slice it, whoever published the Gospel as we have it today, started his book by saying: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (I may not know what the original wording of John 1:3 was, or John 1:18, or John 20:31, or many verses in between, but I'm pretty certain about 1:1).

I'm about as certain of that as I am that Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address. I may be wrong, but I'm pretty certain. (I may be wrong about Lincoln too!)

So that's one thing. Does that mean then the author correctly relates the sayings of Jesus? No, it has no bearing on that question, one way or the other. I personally don't think at all

that most of things on Jesus' lips in John's Gospel are things he really said. I think we have very good reasons indeed for doubting that he had the conversation with Nicodemus recorded in John 3, the conversation with the Samaritan woman in chapter 4, the conversations with his Jewish opponents in chapters 5 and 8, the conversation with Mary and Martha in chapter 11, the Farewell Discourse with his disciples in chapters 13-17, and so on. Do I think we know what John said Jesus said in all these chapters? Pretty much, although there are places where we simply probably do not know. Did Jesus really say these things? He said some of them, but not most of them, in my considered judgment. But those are different questions!

And they have to be decided on different grounds. The first set of questions is answered by studying the surviving manuscripts of the New Testament (that's called textual criticism), the second set of questions is by analyzing the teachings of Jesus in light of other sources and our historical knowledge of the period, and related matters (that's called historical criticism). Two different things! And vital to keep them straight!

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