If the Holy Spirit is Our Teacher Why So Many Different Interpretations of Scripture?

When discussing the Bible with someone who disagrees with you, they will often say: “That’s just your interpretation;” in every area of life there are differing opinions; no one is going to change their mind so people say, “Let’s just agree to disagree;” nowhere is this more obvious than in religion and politics.

You have those who take the Bible literally and those who have a very liberal interpretation of Scripture; you have Arminians and Calvinists; baptismal regenerationalists and those who believe you are saved by grace alone; those who believe in the gifts of the Spirit for today and those who believe those gifts died out with the apostles, etc.

All cannot be right; God’s Word is truth and all spiritual truth is contained in Scripture; truth is not for private interpretation (2 Peter 1:20-21); the source of Scripture is the Holy Spirit and not man; therefore the responsibility of the man of God is to discover the will of the Spirit and not read into Scripture his own personal preferences; the God of the Bible wants to be understood; yet theologians are not in agreement on many doctrinal issues.

At this point the Catholic Church makes a good argument against individual interpretation of Scripture; the Catholic Church believes it has a right to interpret Scripture within the Church; the Holy Spirit guides the magisterium—the pope and cardinals in session, and the pope alone when he speaks from his chair; therefore the Church claims to be the sole interpreter of Scripture, while Protestantism, with its individual interpretation has only divided the Church.

The question: If all believers have the Holy Spirit and one of His functions is giving divine revelation and teaching the believer all things God would have man know (John 14:26) then why don’t we all see Scripture the same? Paul spoke of how the Holy Spirit illuminates our understanding of the Word by opening our
eyes to spiritual truth (1 Corinthians 2:13-16); only the person who has the Holy Spirit can understand Scripture (verse 10).

The Influence of One’s Worldview

Liberalism denies the supernatural in Scripture... Liberalism in the Church is a rejection of biblical inerrancy and Christian fundamentalism; fundamentalism came in response to Darwinism (1859) which taught that life emerged from “random and purposeless change;” following the Scopes trial of 1929, fundamentalists stated that a literal seven day, twenty-four hour creation was now part of being a fundamentalist, making the earth 6,000 years old; in the 1980s the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy did a ten year study and concluded that a literal six day creation was not essential to preserve the integrity of Scripture.

In the late 19th Century with the rise of rationalism and the progress of science, human experience suggested that miracles don’t happen; science, not theology was the way of the future; many theologians got on board with this thinking; the supernatural does not exist.

John Shelby Spong, retired Episcopal bishop of Newark and retired professor of theology at Princeton wrote: Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism in which he wrote that he was not interested in preserving the doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, the infallibility of Scripture; he refers to them as manifestations of idolatry; they do not serve the truth; they serve only to exercise power and control of the ecclesiastical institution; the church must embrace the subjective and relative character of everything it says and does; if the church provides security it cannot provide the truth.

Liberals seek to explain miracles in natural ways: Jesus did not walk on water. He simply knew where the rocks were.

Legalism destroys the spirit of the law... Legalism is a response to liberalism as an attempt to return to Scripture and be totally obedient to God; they make laws where God never made laws; since to lust is equivalent to adultery, therefore dancing is sinful for it causes one to lust; since baptism is for the cleansing of sin, therefore any part of the body that does not get submerged that part will be missing on one’s heavenly body.
The non-instrumental Church of Christ believes that singing with musical accompaniment is wearing the “mark of the beast” and sends one straight to hell.

Legalism interprets scripture by making laws where Scripture makes no laws; they see the silence of Scripture as authoritative as the written Word; if Scripture does not say so then God does not want it; legalism destroys the freedom we have in Christ by following the letter of the law and not the spirit in which the law was given (Romans 2:29).

Existentialism or Neo-Orthodoxy dominates over objective truth... Existentialism is a term from Soren Kierkegaard that places personal experience over objective truth; in a theological sense, one’s claim of an experience from the Holy Spirit is more real and more true than Scripture that might contradict it; an example is seen in the rise of New Apostolic Reformation with its modern day apostles and prophets receiving revelation equal to Scripture; it includes visits to heaven; reinterpreting Scripture; foretelling the future; the possession of immortal bodies in this lifetime as God’s plan for the Church is to conquer the world before Christ can return.

Moral Relativism defies the moral absolutes of Scripture... Those who subscribe to moral relativism teach that truth is subjective; morality is individually determined; they interpret Scripture according to their personal moral values.

The Indicators of Faulty Interpretation

Different views of inspiration... How one views inspiration has much to do with how one interprets Scripture; there are those who believe the writers of Scripture were inspired only to the level of human genius; those who hold that view have a low view of Scripture.

Those who believe the Holy Spirit revealed God’s message to apostles, while allowing individual freedom of expression have a high view of Scripture; they believe Scripture is God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21); “If the literal sense makes good sense, seek no other sense lest you come up with nonsense.”

Misuse of proper hermeneutics... Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpretation; a real student of Scripture will ask a series of questions; Rudyard Kipling identified those questions: “I keep six honest serving men, they taught me all I know; their names are What and Why and When and How and Where and Who.”
Who is the author and to whom is he addressing? Where did the events take place? What is the purpose of the book? When did the events occur and how do they relate to other historical events? Why is this teaching needed? How is the problem to be corrected? How can I apply these timeless truths to my life?

Proper hermeneutics is rightly dividing the Word of God (2 Timothy 2:15).

*Personal biases that force an unnatural interpretation of Scripture*... People have their personal biases and then seek to find a Scripture verse to support it; this is called isogesis—putting your meaning into a text; the Mormons are good at this; they teach that the book of Mormon is validated by a “burning in the bosom” based on (Luke 24:32).

We are to draw out of Scripture its true meaning; this is called exegesis; only by discovering the original meaning can we accurately apply it to our life; misinterpretation comes when we interpret a passage to validate our prejudices.

*Spiritual blindness to the message of Scripture*... Scripture is spiritually discerned and requires the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:13-16); Jesus made it clear that those who misunderstood what He said, the blame was not that the Word of God was unclear; something was wrong with the reader or the hearer (see Matthew 15:16; 16:23; Luke 24:25).

Too many are ignorant of the Word because they have not been properly trained in the Word (2 Timothy 2:15); too many are prideful and refuse to admit they are wrong when confronted with the clear teaching of Scripture (John 8:43); too many are victims of false teaching and have never heard the truth (Acts 17:11); too many are immature and are not ready for the meat of the Word (Hebrews 5; 13-14).

Jesus had similar statements to make about the unbelieving Pharisees and Jews (see John 5:39-40; 8:43; Matthew 13:14-15); Jesus assumed Scriptures to be clear; the problem was with the hearer.

**The Intent of God in Revelation**

*Scripture is to be understood a little at a time*... God did not give His revelation all at once to the prophets; it came a bit at a time (Hebrews 1:1-2); we are to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18); to move from
milk to meat (Hebrews 5:13-14); the more we pray for understanding (Psalm 119:18); the more we rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth (John 16:13); the more we diligently study His Word (2 Timothy 3:16) the more we will comprehend.

*Scripture is sometimes difficult to understand*... Peter admitted Paul’s writings were hard to understand (2 Peter 3:15-16); an example would be those “who were baptized for the dead” (1 Corinthians 15:29).

*Some prophetic Scriptures are sealed until the end times*... Daniel reveals that some prophecy will not be understood until the end times (Daniel 12:4, 9-10).

We may not understand all of God’s Word or be in total agreement in our theology, but of the essentials for salvation we must agree: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called into one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Ephesians 4:4-6). Amen!