

The Bible in first person: The Bible as it stands or as we understand it?

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Many Christians like to think that they take the Bible as it stands, but in reality they take the Bible as they understand it. What we get out of the Bible often has as much to do with what we bring to the text as with the text itself. Differing biblical interpretations often arise from the different theological grids that are imposed on scripture. For instance, conservatives tend to look at an issue like homosexuality through the prism of the holiness of God, whereas progressives tend to approach it with a focus on the justice of God. One approach tends toward an exclusive reading of the text, the other toward an inclusive reading.

It is right that we argue over our readings of the Bible, for it is the charter document of our faith. Much better to argue over scripture than to ignore the texts that give us our identity as Christians and our orientation for life.

But since how we read the Bible and even how we argue about it is shaped by its place in our own faith development, it would be good to take some time out from contentious debates about the Bible to reflect on our personal experience with the Bible. In other words, each of us has a story to tell about our journey with the Bible from childhood on. For some, the Bible has been a freeing and life-giving text; others are painfully aware of ways that the Bible has been used as a hammer or wedge—to put some people in their supposed place (“a woman’s place is in the home”) or to drive people apart (“practicing homosexuals don’t belong in the church or pulpit”).

In telling our stories, we might ask ourselves: What aspects of the Bible did we absorb from our families? Who influenced the way we think about scripture? What were the formative experiences that led us to approach the Bible as we do? What parts of scripture have spoken most deeply to us? In what ways have we made the biblical story our own story? How has our view of scripture changed over time?

To tell such stories, people need a safe space, a place where they won’t be judged or censured. A helpful model of such storytelling is found in *Telling Our Stories*:

Personal Accounts of Engagement with Scripture, edited by Ray Gingerich and Earl Zimmerman (Cascade). Telling individual stories honestly won't dissolve the differences that divide us, but it can lead to a better sense of why and how people reach the conclusions they do.