

Me and the Good Book

I began attending K Street Baptist Church in Ardmore, Oklahoma at age sixteen at the urging of my oldest brother and his wife. The church met in a newly constructed, white wooden building furnished with homemade pews. Every person in the congregation was encouraged to bring a Bible to church. The Bible was the center of every sermon.

In my mind's eye, I can still see Rev. Ross Hughes gripping the sides of the pulpit with both hands, bringing to life the story of Gideon and the Midianites. Gideon, instructed by God, was ordered to pare his army down to a small handful of men; then, to our great relief, with God's help, his small band routed the Midianite oppressors.

I “courted” the Bible. We were a couple, me and the Bible. True, God was everywhere, and so was the Bible. God and the Bible, like Siamese twins, were vitally connected. Everything I knew about God came from the Bible. The words I used to describe one worked equally well with the other. Both were holy and without error. In the Bible lay eternal life and truth, just like God.

During my days at Oklahoma Baptist University, I “married” the Bible—not a formal church wedding—more like a common-law marriage. “All scripture is inspired by God.” (II Timothy 3:16). To me, the logic was clear. All Scripture was inspired; the Bible is the Scripture; therefore, the Bible is the inspired word of God.

Billy Graham had just come on the scene. He was one of us. His devotion to the scriptures was a model for us. I felt confident we Baptists followed the Bible more closely than other Christians. We were the “people of God,” loving our Bibles—the Word of God.

I was on automatic pilot to become a denominational hack, following the party line like a sheep. However, after a long marriage to the Bible, a breakup occurred—not overnight, but gradually, like the turning of an oil tanker. A pivotal step was my leaving the professional ministry at age 40. Moving outside denominational boundaries, I felt free to ask questions I would probably never have asked if I had stayed in the profession. Being an insider stifled inquiry.

An early wake-up call came when I discovered not a single original copy of any writing in the Bible exists today. We make do with handmade copies, separated by centuries from the originals. Among the more than 5,000 manuscripts of Bibles and pieces of Bibles in existence, no two are identical. That means there is no single “Bible.” There are 5,000 “Bibles” which scholars comb in search of the original documents. Maybe the originals were inspired, but no living person has ever seen one.

Another turn came in a Presbyterian Bible study. I was secure in my view that the only way a human can relate to God, as delineated by Paul in Ephesians, is by faith. Humans cannot gain God’s favor by simply living a good life. My view was challenged by the group’s leader who suggested I read Jesus’ account of the great judgment as told in Matthew.

In Matthew’s story, the king separates the people as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. He invites one group to enter the kingdom, giving as His reason they had cared for him.

Surprised, they asked, “When did we help you?”

The reply was, “When you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” With no mention of grace, faith, or even Jesus, I faced the possibility that Paul in Ephesians described one way into the kingdom; while Jesus, in the gospel of Matthew, described another.

Encountering apparent contradictions, like Paul’s message of salvation by faith alone versus James’ message that “faith without works is dead,” I adopted Paul’s view and rationalized James’ view away.

I never thought I was worshipping the Bible, yet I used it as a representation of God, something most people would call an idol. I had held the Bible in the air and begun a sermon with the words, “God said,” as if the Bible were the voice of God.

If God wrote the Bible, I began to wonder why He used writers who were bad spellers and who used poor grammar and rhetoric. And why did it take centuries to pull it together? Why not just deliver the finished product? Further, if an all-powerful God took the trouble to write the Bible, why didn’t He also preserve the original copies, so there would be no question about what they said?

When I raised these questions in my favorite online chat room, they rebuked me sternly. The charge invariably was if I only “had the Spirit,” and therefore “discernment,” then I wouldn’t be asking questions. They said, “Those who aren’t Christians can’t understand or accept the Bible because they are not taught by the Holy Spirit.” Translation: If you don’t interpret the Bible as I do, then you must not know God. To some in the chat room, my questioning was proof I was not a Christian. Luckily, the people who charged me with not having discernment seemed to have it in abundance.

Another change of direction in my life came when my men’s Friday Bible group studied “Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism” by the renegade Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong. Without endorsing any of his views, I felt relieved to discover at least one other soul in the world besides me was asking questions.

Spong, as it turned out, was a member of the infamous Jesus Seminar who vaulted Biblical criticism into popular culture for a couple of decades. The Jesus Seminar produced its flagship book, “The Five Gospels,” based on the assumption we can study scriptures as historical documents.

My attachment to the Bible was deeply rooted in my psyche. The thought of ending my “marriage” to the Bible brought a torrent of questions. If I divorced the Bible, would I still be a Christian? Would other Christians shun me? Should I abandon the Bible altogether? Had I lost my faith? Was there a place where I might discuss my feelings? Would I sit in judgment of friends who were unwilling or unable to ask similar questions? Were they idolaters? Could we even discuss it?

The idea that God is everywhere and therefore ever-present had long sat undisturbed in my mind. When I least expected it, it quietly slipped over the threshold and dropped into my heart. A light dawned. I “knew” God in a different way. The Bible was off the throne. God occupied it fully.

As I saw it, I had substituted a marriage certificate for marriage, a cookbook for a meal, a beautiful oil painting for a sunset. I had settled for Biblical descriptions of others’ experiences of God without thinking of my own. But that was no longer necessary.

Attempting to describe my coming to know God, I coined the word *GodPresent*. However, explaining religious experiences is like trying to describe the taste of ice cream. For the person who has never tasted ice cream, no description is adequate. And the person who has tasted it needs no description.

Now, as for "Me and the Good Book," I enjoy what I call a "friendly divorce." As part of my "divorce settlement," abandoning the traditional doctrine of inspiration, I learned to read Scriptures without filtering them through my theological upbringing. I weaned myself from inserting, even subconsciously, words like 'literal' or 'inerrant' or 'authority.' I eliminated the use of phrases like "The Bible says . . ." or "It says . . ." in favor of "Leviticus says . . ." or "Paul wrote . . ." or some other phrase indicating the primary source.

To my surprise, as soon as I began to let them speak for themselves, studying the writings became a delight. The Bible is a remarkable collection. I respect Biblical accounts of experiences of God, related numerous times in Bible stories. I also respect records of experiences of God outside the Bible. I have equal respect for people who have had no experience of God nor any desire for such an experience. How humans think about God makes no more difference than the way we feel about air makes a difference.