



BFC THEOLOGY TEACHER PUBLISHES FIRST BOOK

Tim McCormick on his inspiration and creation of "Confessions of an Ugly-Bible Reader"

BFC: What inspired you to write this book?

McCormick: I read the Bible, and I'm a theology teacher, so that's the obvious answer. My own personal growth in understanding God and my whole prayer is scripturally based. It's a mixture of reading scripture in silence. I get up at 5:15 every morning and I spend time reading the psalms and the new testaments and I sit for 15-20 minutes just silently, and that kind of forms my day. Also being a teacher, I teach freshmen Theology Scripture, so I'm always in the back of mind thinking, 'how do I encourage my kids to read scripture more?' So the book itself has those students in the background, including adults in my Bible study and Bible school-type instruction, so I want to encourage them to get into the scriptures, not in an overtly-academic sense or looking at the Bible as a manual. It's not a manual, either; it's something to live with every day and to struggle with, not always take easy answers. You find different stories in the Old Testament, and you think, 'Oh, the slaughtering of a pig... what do you do with that?' It's there, but you need to struggle with it. I don't think you want to discount all of that, but you also don't want to say, "Oh, they were probably bad people and deserved it." What is the whole point of the story? I think only through regular reading of scripture you come to see the whole narrative; selective picking and choosing is never a good thing.

How long was the process of writing the book?

I turned it in in 2019; I had written an article online which basically became a whole chapter, and I sent it in to the publisher. My wife and I did a Lenten and Advent Devotional through this publisher; I sent it to him because ... I thought he might enjoy reading it, and he said, "Why don't you write a book?" This was towards the end of the school year in ... 2019, I basically devoted a day each week during the summer where I could go off to write. I usually went to Panera. I would go there once a week and spend the whole day there. Through the course of 8-9 weeks, I wrote it out, gave it to some friends to look at, my spiritual director... have them proofread it, give me suggestions. Then you have a day where I just hit "send."

My worst thing is I have a tendency to write as I talk; different people I have read throughout my life have encouraged how I've written, I'm not as good as they are so I probably shouldn't try to write in their style. The whole editing process, we did that in the spring. My wife took the cover photo, and that is the actual Bible that the story is about. All the crazy things I talk about like making the Bible your own, the actual Bible itself, making it something you want to read from... most of the time you look at a Bible and it has these double columns, and it's like, 'who wants to read that?' I was thinking about this as I was writing how books we love, we can almost feel them and we know what they are in a sense. If you read Harry Potter, it has a particular style and script to it, and you know it, and you see the cover... all of those certain things make it when you see it, it brings your imagination to it. Same thing with the Bible, but so many of our Bibles look like reference books, and who wants to read that daily? So I talk about how I have crayon markers in there from my kids, there are stickers... all these different things that are things that I've added, or that they've added. So it's become part of who I am, so when I read different things and see my own notes that I've written in my Bible, I also see the stickers of my kids, it all comes together because it's about life. You're supposed to be reading it not just to gain knowledge but also to be a follower of Jesus, and how you interact with your family and people around you, students, people in your classroom every day.

Could you talk a little about the title and how it came about?

It's funny you mention the hyphenation, because when I first sent the article, I had the title on that, but didn't hyphenate it, and [the publisher] goes, 'I really like this, but... you're not ugly.'" So that is why that's the way that is. 'Confessions' goes back to an idea of just being honest and struggling with the text. The reality is, when you read from your ugly Bible, you're encountering God of the every-day. I start the book by explaining an experience: I was at a prayer group 20 years ago, there was this lady who was probably in her 70s and she had this big Bible. It was held together by ... duct tape and rubber bands. I wrote a blog about Bibles for about 10 years, so I know a lot about Catholic Bibles. I looked through it and it was written in, she had underlined almost the whole thing, clearly had written and read it over 40 years. I said, "Would you ever want a new one? This is going to fall apart," and she said, "No, this my most treasured possession." This is something she had read and communicated with God in for decades. It inspired me; it took about 10, 15 years later for me to understand that. Part of the "Confessions" is that – I would get review Bibles from publishers, \$100, \$200 Bibles, goatskin leather... I've had those, and I was afraid to touch them, it felt like something that wasn't who I was, instead of something that I don't care if I spilled coffee on [my Bible], which I've done once or twice. Part of my Bible has coffee stains on the edges. But every time I see it, I laugh. And that's what the Bible should do. It's a true encounter, because God meets us in the ordinary. You think of burning bush moments with Moses, and those happen, but God doesn't do that most of the time. It's changing my kids' diaper; it's not cussing the guy out who cuts me off when I'm driving to work in the morning. Those encounters. So those are my confessions, moving away from that and meeting God in the ordinary. And try to encourage people to do the same.

Has the process of writing the book impacted your approach to these topics in the classroom?

As a teacher, for me, it's really being honest. My kids struggle and question things in the classroom, and that's something I've grown into. I'm certainly a different teacher than I was five or six years ago. When I first came here, I thought, 'Hey, I'll just preach the gospel and I will convert everybody,'" and that never happens. There are so many kids in here who have so many questions and doubts and fear, and I think sometimes in the church we are afraid of allowing the space for them to talk about that. All of these kids have all these different experiences and different things in their backgrounds, good experiences and also very difficult ones, and I don't think we always let them struggle with that and process that. Maybe it's a fear of giving people doubt, but I believe that when you have doubt, that's the best moment of transformation in your life. We're not going to catechize disciples; we're going to accompany them in the ups and downs of life and provide them the tools and plant seeds so that they can be confident that God is walking with them. There's not a catechism test at the end of life.

Is there anything you learned about your faith or your life through the process?

I bought way too many Bibles! (laughs) My wife will tell you that. When I started to actually realize what I personally needed and not listen to other people, then it became obvious what was meant for me. Talking about what scriptures to read and that sort of thing... also in the context of my own personal life. Being alone with God in the silence of the scripture, it becomes clear how I am fed spiritually, and it can't be the same as somebody else. It's different from how my wife is fed, and it's certainly different from my students, and so I want to give them that opportunity in different ways. I think being okay with that and not worrying about what other people think, that was a big thing for me. There are so many expectations in life. I will tell the kids here, your faith is your faith, and at some point when you leave, it's not your parents faith, and if you're doubting, that's where you're at now, and that's okay. You just have to never settle; keep growing, keep asking good questions, don't settle for cliched answers. Keep searching.

Biggest take-away from your book?

Find your Bible. Allow it to transform you, and engage it, write in it, personalize it, make it a part of who you are, struggle with it, and sit with it in silence. Trust that God is going to work in you. It's not 'Oh, I [have to be the] most perfect Catholic or Christian who is getting direct revelation from God,' and that's not really the way it works at all. God is going to accompany you throughout everything and he wants to talk with you. So just sit and listen, and part of any relationship is actually listening too, it's not always just talking. So that would be the big thing: sit with Scripture, let it work on you, let it transform you, and struggle with it.

Plans for future writing endeavors?

I'd like to! I would like to; I have some ideas. I would like to write more and be a little more vocal, writing and encouraging people. I have some different things I'm thinking about, and most of it is in my head. If you actually put it on paper ... your thoughts and ideas ... you start seeing something organically come out and form, then take a chance. I read a book the Christmas before I sent this in, he was talking about just taking chances, and I was like, "man, I really don't take a lot of chances." When I sent off the article, I thought, "This is taking a chance." And it worked! So I need to do that more.