

Convictions and Motivation in Scripture Engagement

Many of our training events in the area of Scripture engagement focus on methods: how to spend personal time in God's Word, how to study a Bible passage, how to start and lead a small group Bible study and so on. This kind of training is crucial for students if they are to become students of the Word. At the same time, we need to ensure that we do not reduce Scripture engagement to a question of methodology. Scripture engagement involves more than certain methods or techniques.

In order to meet today's challenges in the area of Scripture engagement, we need more than good programmes or new methods. We need deep convictions (beliefs) about Scripture and a strong motivation for Scripture engagement to be built into the lives of students. Our convictions and motivation with regard to the Bible are foundational for everything else. They will strongly influence how we approach, engage, and understand God's Word.

I hope that this paper encourages you to reflect on your own convictions and motivation with regard to Scripture and those of students in your context. And that it will help you address these important aspects of Scripture engagement in your student movement – in your local student group and at national camps and conferences. This paper is based on interactive sessions which I have led on convictions and motivation at various trainings and consultations. The topics are closely connected, but my experience is that they are best treated in two separate sessions.

Our Convictions about Scripture

We don't often explicitly talk about our convictions concerning Scripture. My impression is that we often simply assume that our staff and students have clear convictions about Scripture. We have the IFES doctrinal basis and maybe do some teaching on it. But for many Christian students, these are just abstract statements with no content, no life, no relevance for their own Scripture engagement.

It is worth taking the time to talk in depth about some of our central beliefs concerning Scripture. One way of doing this in a group of Christian students or staff is the following:

1. **Each person is given the time to write down some of their key convictions about the Bible (15-20 minutes).** The following questions can help in this process: What are some of your basic beliefs about Scripture? What is the nature of the Bible – what characterizes it? Why was the Bible given to us; what is its purpose?

It is important that everybody actually writes down their thoughts – in their own words.

2. **Each person is asked to share what they have written with a neighbour (10-20 minutes).**
3. **A conversation with the whole group follows (40-90 minutes)** with the aim of clarifying and deepening core convictions e.g. What does it mean to say that the Bible is God's Word? What about human authorship? How can we summarize the content of the Bible – what is it about? Why is God's Word good news? What do we mean by the authority of Scripture? Why is Scripture given to us – to what purpose?

This conversation can take place in a group of up to around 40 people, but a smaller group is preferable. It needs to be led well. The leader should ensure that the conversation is honest and engaging without becoming an abstract theological discussion. Some Bible passages may be referenced and input given as seems appropriate.

It can be helpful to ensure that within the wider conversation, all aspects of the IFES doctrinal statement on Scripture are addressed: *“the divine inspiration and entire trustworthiness of Holy Scripture, as originally given, and its supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.”*

With enough time, one or both of the following questions can then also be discussed together:

4. **Look at your context: Which convictions about Scripture are lacking among Christian students? Which convictions are challenged the most by the surrounding culture?**
5. **How can we help build deep convictions about Scripture among our students? (For some thoughts on this, see the last section of this paper.)**

Within this paper, it is impossible to develop the content of our convictions about Scripture. Yet, this aspect of our faith is well worth reading and studying about; I encourage you to look for answers in Scripture itself and to read good literature on this topic.

That being said, I do want to highlight some convictions about the basic nature and purpose of Scripture:

The Bible is unique, different than any other book in the world. Why? **It is not just a book about God, but from God.** It is not just a book on the topic of God, but God’s Word to us. God has spoken. He has made himself known to us because he wants us to know him. God does not leave us in the dark, trying to figure out our lives and our universe. Instead, he breaks through the limits of our knowledge and perception in order to reveal his reality to us. This revelation is not the result of our work, wisdom, or thinking; it is God’s gracious gift to us.

How does God reveal himself to us? Not by throwing a book from heaven, but by becoming actively involved in the history of our world – through deeds and words. **The Bible testifies to God’s revelation in history.** It tells us the story of our world: our past, present, and future. Scripture is the one authoritative interpretation of our world, inviting us to find our place in God’s big story.

At the centre of God’s revelation to us is Jesus Christ: God speaks to us in a very personal way by becoming one of us. In Jesus, we see God the Father (John 14:9). Jesus is the ultimate word of God which cannot be surpassed by any other word spoken in this world (Hebrews 1:1-4). And so we realize that God’s word to us is not primarily a book, but a person. God’s word to us is not primarily the revelation of his will (what he wants us to do), but the revelation of his heart and his saving purposes for our world. In Jesus, God reveals his desire for us to know and trust him personally. This lies at the heart of Scripture. **God’s written word is given to lead us to Jesus Christ, the Living Word of God.**

Our Motivation in Scripture Engagement

When you try and communicate to Christian students that it is important to read the Bible – what do you tell them? How do you try to motivate them?

I meet many students who have heard again and again: *‘As a good Christian you should read in the Bible, you must read in the Bible. It’s what you do as a Christian.’* You should. You must. Then Scripture engagement quickly becomes a duty, a burden. And it becomes an end in itself. But Scripture engagement is not an end in itself. We don’t read the Bible in order to have read the Bible. We don’t read our Bible to fulfil a Christian duty. So, why is it important?

Take a moment to personally reflect: Why do you go to Scripture? Why do you engage with Scripture and believe it is worth it?

If you are doing this in a group setting, have different people share one aspect of their answer each.

That is actually a highly theological question. What we think of God, our understanding of who he is and how we expect him to interact with us will influence our attitude and expectations towards Scripture. And our understanding of what the Bible is, of its nature and purpose – that also will influence our expectations, our motivation.

In the past years, I have led a seminar on “Reading the Bible with Joy” in different countries. Here are some quotes from students who came to this seminar:

- “I long to have a desire for reading God’s Word ... but usually it’s just a duty for me.”
- “I want to love the Bible. I want to enjoy my time with God, when I read it. But it’s missing.”
- “For years now, I have felt guilty – guilty because I believed that I wasn’t doing a good enough job of reading the Bible – not as dedicated as I should be, not as studious as I should be.”

In these seminars, I met many students who know that God’s Word is important, who long to have a positive experience of Scripture engagement – but for whom it has become boring, a duty, a burden. For some of these students, Scripture engagement is linked to feelings of guilt, of not living up to a certain standard. For others, it is linked to frustration because they don’t understand God’s Word. Or they have simply become tired because although they read in the Bible, it doesn’t seem to make any difference in their life. My impression is that among many students there is a lack of deep motivation and joy towards Scripture.

How would you describe the attitude of Christian students in your context towards Scripture?

Many students have very mixed feelings towards God’s Word – positive and negative. I encourage you to find some images which reflect the attitude of your students towards Scripture: images which capture different aspects of how they see the Bible. Here are some examples from different IFES contexts:

_a pile of dirty dishes: you have to wash them. It’s a duty, not something you want to do;

_an old person who doesn’t want to go to the hospital: because they are afraid of the diagnosis;

_a reserved parking space: for the pastors – too hard to understand for normal people;

_digging treasure: it takes hard work to dig deep enough to find it; but when you find it, it’s really valuable;

_a garage for cars: you go there when something breaks and needs repairing.

With what attitude do Christian students in your context come to Scripture? What feelings and thoughts do they associate with the Bible? Find some images which express their attitude towards Scripture. *If you are doing this in a group, first take some time for personal reflection before sharing your images in the whole group.*

Now, take some time to think about the following question: **What image do you want your students to have of the Bible?** *Again take some time to reflect before sharing together.*

No one image is sufficient to capture the role we would like Scripture to have in our lives. So, try and find different images which answer this question and which students in your context can connect with.

One image which I would like students to have of the Bible is that of a gift – a precious gift from God to us. I want them to grasp that Scripture engagement is not something we do for God, but a gift from God to us – revealing himself to us, inviting us into his presence, working in our lives to heal and change us according to his good purpose. Our students need to understand that the Bible is truly good news for us. Life-giving. Life-transforming. Freeing. As Klaingar Ngarial from the IFES Francophone Africa regional team said: ***‘The Bible in my hand is the proof that God loves me.’***

Our images of Scripture are closely linked to our view of God.

Our convictions about God strongly influence our motivation and attitude towards Scripture engagement. The following images from a restaurant setting may help to reflect on this further:

- **Some of us see God like a waiter.** He is there to take care of our needs, to entertain us, to make sure we feel good. We want him to come and serve us, but then to leave us alone again. If this is how we see God, we will come to Scripture when we have a need, only looking for an answer to our questions. This will make it very hard for us to listen to God’s Word, to hear what he wants to say. The result can easily be that we try and use God and his word for our purposes.
- **Some of us see God like a demanding boss.** He is always expecting more from us and condemns us if we can’t live up to his standards. And so we come to him feeling guilty, seeing primarily where we have failed again. If this is how we view God, then we will hear God’s Word mainly in terms of what it demands from us, but not hear the good news of grace and love. We will probably prefer to stay at some distance from God and his word because we are afraid of his demands.

Now God does serve us and cares for our needs. We will experience that through Scripture engagement. But God is not there to revolve around us and our problems – we are called to enter into his perspective and concern for our life and this world.

And God is our Lord who wants us to live in a way which is worthy of him. Scripture has a lot to say about God’s will for our lifestyle. But we are called to obedience not as slaves, but as God’s beloved children – who can be sure of God’s patience, forgiveness and empowerment in our daily lives.

God wants us to come to Scripture **as we might go to a restaurant to meet a beloved friend or family member.** Scripture invites us to spend time in a deep and intimate conversation with Jesus – the one who gives us life and meaning.

Our view of God will deeply influence our attitude towards Scripture and what we hear when we read Scripture. And so, as we think about the images of Scripture which students have in our context, it is worth asking: What do these images reveal about their view of God? How does this correspond to God’s self-revelation in Scripture? As we seek to help students reflect on their image of God, we need to be aware of both the theological and pastoral dimension of this topic.

Growing Convictions and Motivation in Scripture Engagement

How can you help grow deep convictions and strong motivation in students today with regard to Scripture engagement? I encourage you to talk and pray about this question together with others who are involved in student ministry.

There will be no easy answer, no recipe, no ten-step program that will automatically lead to convictions and motivation. Each student will need his/her own personal journey for this to happen. And yet, it is worth asking how we can help others on this journey. Here are some suggestions to help complement your own reflection on this question:

Praying. It needs the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts for convictions and motivation to grow. And so, let us specifically pray that students would grasp the nature and purpose of Scripture, that they would meet Jesus in his word, that they would develop a deep hunger and love for God's word.

Nurturing our own relationship with Jesus and his Word. Our own convictions and lifestyle will shape others more than the programmes we organize for them. Students need role models who are passionate about Scripture: deeply convinced that it is reliable; approaching Scripture with love and joy; making space in their lives to hear and respond to God's Word. And who, in the midst of this, are honest about their ongoing journey, including their struggles and questions.

Creating a culture of honesty. Students need safe places where they can voice their questions, negative experiences, and doubts. The problem isn't when we struggle with Scripture engagement, but when we never talk about it. Too many students and staff think they need to hide their struggles in order to appear spiritual. But this prevents growth. If we are honest with our struggles, we will help others to talk openly about their journey. This will allow us to journey together.

Inviting students into rich and relevant experiences in God's word. The experiences of Scripture engagement which students have will affect their view of Scripture. As we help them enter deeply into Bible passages and discover the content for themselves, they will grow in their convictions and motivation. Let's especially help students to discover Jesus and his beauty in Scripture!

Encouraging students to take steps of faith. Our convictions don't just grow by thinking, discussing, and reflecting – they grow as we dare to take steps of trust and obedience based on God's word. As we start to live out our convictions about Scripture, we will experience God. As a result, our convictions and motivation will deepen.

Communicating our view of Scripture explicitly and implicitly. What does the Bible mean to us? What makes it so precious to us? Why do we read in the Bible? In the conversations we have with students, we can talk about our view of God's Word in order to help shape new images of Scripture. We can also convey our convictions implicitly by the way we handle Scripture and by the place we give to Scripture e.g. in our student and staff meetings, in our friendships, etc.

Including sessions on convictions and motivation in our programs. It can be very helpful for students to explicitly think about and discuss these aspects of Scripture engagement. One purpose of this paper is to inspire student leaders and IFES staff to lead such sessions in the programs (evening meetings, camps, conferences) which they run.

Closing Comments

Why is it worth engaging with Scripture? Why is it worth investing so much in order to grow the conviction and motivation of students for Scripture engagement? It is worth turning to the Bible itself for an answer to these questions.

The Bible is full of statements about why God has given the Bible to us and what he wants it to accomplish in our lives. Here are just some of them:

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. John 20:30-31

To the Jews who had believed in him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.' John 8:31-32

I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. Psalm 119:11

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:14-17.

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. Matthew 7:24-25.

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