

Sherlock of God:

You're the Detective. How many clues to an ineffective Bible Study can you spot?

By Steve Ray

The Case

Stan filled the fireplace and lit the oak logs to make the living room cozy for the arriving guests. The Bible Study had been announced at Mass, and now suddenly it was here. Stan and Suzie had been Catholics all their lives, but they had never really studied the Bible for themselves, so this was a new venture for them. They had just come home from work and had a few moments to wolf down last night's leftovers and send the kids to the neighbors before prepping the living room.



They both hoped everything would go well. Since Catholics are generally uninterested in the

Bible, they didn't expect many to attend. The doorbell rang. As Stan stepped toward the door, he noticed the large crucifix on the wall and quickly decided to take it down and set it behind the couch. He didn't want to offend the guests.

Greetings were extended and the guests settled into their seats. They had an interesting mix of participants. More than half were from the parish, but there were also a Presbyterian couple, a young woman who had left the Catholic Church and a "non-denominational" couple.

Stan and Suzie thought a good mix of religious backgrounds was good. The pope had encouraged ecumenical activity, so they wanted several Christian traditions represented to keep the study balanced, ecumenical and open-minded. Stan started out, We haven't had much time to prepare for this study, but I hope it'll go well. As agreed, we're all going to use the same translation so we can all be on the same page, so to speak.

We'll use only the Bible, avoiding other materials so the Holy Spirit can lead us." Everyone agreed. Bible study should be fresh and open-minded—unhindered by "dogma" and denominational trappings. Suzie had earlier removed the Catechism from the coffee table. So, with no further ado, they all opened to the Gospel of St. John. "Who would like to read the first verse? Okay, Richard, go ahead."



Richard read and everyone smiled. Stan cleared his throat. Well, who would like to begin? What does this passage mean to you? Let's keep it simple and not offend anyone by being too opinionated. Sarah, why don't you begin? How do you feel about this verse?"

Sarah shared her impressions of the passage and everyone followed in turn. Another

verse was read, and again they went around the room to discover what each person felt about it. Time just flew and before they knew it, they had discussed the whole first chapter of St. John's Gospel. So, after eating the coffeecake, the study came to a close. Stan thanked them all for coming as Suzie retrieved their coats. Stan and Suzie shut the door behind the last guest, hung the crucifix back on the wall and put the *Catechism* back on the table. Without a doubt, they felt the Bible study had been a great success.

The Investigation

Grab your detective hat and magnifying glass, and let's see how many fatal flaws you can find. How should Stan and Suzie have prepared for the Bible study (2 Tim. 2:15)? Was creating a cozy atmosphere adequate preparation for a study of Scripture? Did they pray at the start or close of the Bible study (Ps. 119:17-19; CCC 2653-54)?

Was the Sign of the Cross invoked (CCC 2157)? How did they misunderstand the Church's teaching on ecumenism (CCC 816)? Is being non-offensive to people's denominational sentiments the primary goal of a Bible study (Titus 1:9)?

Is a good feeling and smiling faces proof of a successful Bible study (2 Tim. 4:3)? Should Catholics set aside their Catholic Faith in order to "get along" with others in a Catholic Bible study (Acts 20:27; John 6:60-61, 66). Is biblical truth relative and open to private interpretation, or did the authors have a definite meaning and intent to their writings (2 Pet 2:20-21; CCC 109)?

Which is more important: what we feel about the passage or what the author intended to say (2 Pet 3:16; Mk 12:24)? How important are the cultural and geographic surroundings, original languages, authorial intent and context of the passage (CCC 110)? Does dogma kill Bible study? Does the Holy Spirit work only apart from dogma, facts and authority? (CCC 89; 1 Tim. 3:6-14)?

Is it wise to use only one translation when studying Scripture? Or would several good translations facilitate a deeper appreciation of the text? Is it true that Catholics are not

interested in the Bible (1 Peter 2:1–3)? Should Stan and Suzie have had higher expectations of their fellow Catholics and prayed for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit to create a great thirst for the written Word of God? Is the basis for Bible study an open-minded, democratic approach (CCC 85, 119)?

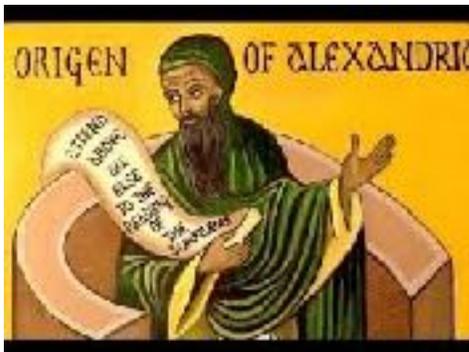


Are the Scriptures always easy to understand (2 Peter 3:15–16)? What is the best way of discovering the Bible’s meaning (CCC 109–119)? Does the use of commentaries and Church documents stifle Bible study? How do these sources protect the student of the Bible (1 Tim 3:15)? Is the Bible opposed to Sacred Tradition (2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6; CCC 80, 120)?

And lastly: Was it wise to send the children away? Maybe, maybe not, but in many instances, well-behaved children and teens would profit greatly from listening to adults intelligently and joyfully discussing the Bible (Deut. 6:6–7; Eph. 6:4).

Expert Witnesses

1) “Although there are many who believe that they themselves hold to the teachings of Christ, there are yet some among them who think differently from their predecessors. The teaching of the Church has indeed been handed down through an order of succession from the Apostles, and remains in the Churches even to the present time. That alone is to be believed as the truth which is in no way at variance with ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition” (Origen [c. 185–c. 254], *The Fundamental Doctrine*).



2) “First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Peter 1:20–21).

3) “So Philip ran to [the Ethiopian eunuch], and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ And he said, ‘How can I, unless some one guides me?’ And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him” (Acts 8:30–31).