

Bible Study: Playground or Minefield?

By Steve Ray

Imagine children running and tussling in the grass. Picture the playground unsupervised and lurking with deadly surroundings: a sharp cliff dropping down a thousand feet to one side, a field of landmines, poisonous snakes in the sand, and a bog of quicksand on the other sides. With anguish you observe the number of children rapidly diminish, decimated as they fall prey to the dangers around them.

Now imagine the same children playing, but now they are carefully supervised and surrounded by a secure chain-link fence. To be in danger now a child would have to disregard all the rules and protective measures. You relax, a sigh of relief passes your lips, and you begin to chuckle at the children's antics.



Two recent misconceptions have plagued Catholics. Ask around and find out for yourself. The average person in the average parish frequently accepts two unhappy fallacies. *First*, that Catholics aren't supposed to read the Bible for fear they will invariably misinterpret it and end up confused; or *second*, they may associate Bible study with Protestantism. Well, isn't the Bible hard to understand? Aren't Catholics forbidden to read the Bible? Shouldn't we leave Scripture study to priests and religious? If laymen study the Bible, don't they interpret it incorrectly and go off the deep end?

I had just written the above paragraph and mentioned "Bible Study" to a parish priest visiting our home who lamented, "Oh, if I could only get my parishioners over the deepseated fear that if they study the Bible they will somehow become Fundamentalist Protestants!" This sounds strange to us ex-Protestants because it was the love and study of the Bible that brought us *into* the Catholic Church. Yet, this subtle fear prevents many Catholics from dusting off the family Bible and making a go at personal study.

Our imagined playground, fraught with dangers, illustrates the situation nicely. *Are* there real dangers associated with studying the Bible? Do pitfalls lie to the left and right? Yes, of course. The fear is not without foundation. Survey the landscape of Christian history and you will see well-meaning individuals and groups strewn in every direction. The carnage and division brought about by the "Bible-only"

theology is apparent for everyone to see. Yet we also see many who have loved the Bible deeply, studied it studiously, and have done so without casualties. They have reached the dizzying heights of biblical study and through it have grown to love Jesus and the Catholic Church with ever deepening ardor. What differentiates the two? Why do some stumble and fall by the wayside, while others “play” with a joyful, utter abandon-almost carefree in their study of Scriptures and, seemingly, with no fear of falling?

The *fence* and the *supervision* make all the difference. They provide a barrier between the children and destruction. They allow the child to frolic with carefree abandon. What are they in our illustration? The *fence* is the basic understanding of how to study the Bible, and the *supervision* is the Tradition and teaching of the Catholic Church. These two things-readily available to any who desire them-are what makes the difference. The dangers are real, but the protections and guidance are just as real. Those who follow the simple guidelines and avoid forays into the quicksand will study the Scriptures with great benefit, and I may add, with deep joy and pleasure.

It is high time that Catholics wake up and discover the riches that have been deposited in their account. Their treasure is ready for withdrawal! Dust off the Bibles, cast aside paralyzing fears, learn the basic rules of biblical interpretation, observe the protective parameters of Church teaching, and frolic to your heart’s content!

The Investigation:

What does the Church teach about personal Bible study (CCC 133)? What kind of access or restriction should be placed on Catholics regarding the Bible (CCC 131)? How does the Bible speak of itself and its use by God’s people (Rom 15:4; 2 Tim 3:14-17)? Read Psalm 119. What is the Psalmist’s theme and passion? What value does the Psalmist place on the Scriptures in Psalm 19:7-11? Is the Bible the only source of God’s revelation (1 Thes 2:13; 2 Thes 2:15; CCC 80-82)?

Even though the Sadducees studied the Scriptures assiduously, what did Jesus say of them (Mk 12:24)? Do the Scriptures always have a plain meaning and are they always easy to understand (2 Pet 3:15-17; Acts 8:29-31)? Based on these verses, is everyone’s understanding of Scripture equally valid? Does everyone have the same ability to understand the Scriptures (Heb 5:11)?

Should individuals research the Scriptures for themselves (Acts 17:11)? Is the interpretation of the Bible ultimately left up to each individual and what place does “private interpretation” have in the interpretation of Scripture (2 Pet 1:20)? Where does authoritative interpretation of Scripture have its source (CCC 84, 85, 95)? Who has the ultimate right to protect and interpret the Bible (CCC 119; Acts

20:27-31; Titus 1:9)? What is the “pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim 3:14-15)? Who or what has judicial authority over a believer (Mt 18:17)? How are the faithful to respond to the protective teaching authority of the Church (CCC 87, 88).

Expert Witnesses:

St. John Chrysostom

“ ‘I am not,’ you will say, ‘one of the monks, but I have both a wife and children, and the care of a household.’ Why, this is what hath ruined all, your supposing that the reading of the divine Scriptures appertains to those only, when ye need it much more than they. For they that dwell in the world, and each day receive wounds, these have most need of medicines. So that it is far worse than not reading, to account the thing even ‘superfluous:’ for these are the words of diabolical invention. Hear ye not Paul saying, ‘that all these things are written for our admonition’.” (Endnote 1).

Pope Gregory I

“The Emperor of Heaven, the Lord of men and angels, has sent thee his epistles for thy life’s behoof; and yet, glorious son, thou neglectest to read these epistles ardently. Study then, I beseech thee, and daily meditate on the words of thy Creator. Learn the heart of God in the words of God, that thou mayest sigh more ardently for the things that are eternal, that your soul may be kindled with greater longings for heavenly joys” (Endnote 2).

Second Vatican Council

“The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord Easy access to sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful... Since the Word of God should be accessible at all times, the Church by her authority and with the maternal concern sees to it that suitable and correct translations are made into different languages, especially from the original texts of the sacred books” (Endnote 3).

Catechism of the Catholic Church 113

“Read the Scripture within ‘the living Tradition of the whole Church.’ According to a saying of the Fathers, Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church’s heart rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God’s Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture (‘...according to the spiritual meaning which the Spirit grants to the Church’).”

Resources

Steve Ray’s [Recommended Bible & Catholic Software](#)

Test Drive Logos Bible Software, click [here](#).

Visit [Budget Scripture Software](#) for the latest and best software at the guaranteed lowest prices. The goal is not to make money but to get Catholics using Bible software.

[Catholic Resources on Logos](#)

Steve on Catholic Answers Live: Electronic Bible Study Interview on [RealAudio](#).

[Jimmy Akin's Comments](#) on [Logos](#) and [Harmony Media](#). I agree--Logos is fabulous for Bible study, Harmony is fabulous for Catholic study. The two make a great team.

Read Steve's Article [St. Jerome Would Be Shocked St. Francis de Sales Delighted! Bible Study & Catholic Software](#)

To find a real Catholic Scripture Study (CSS) in your area-or to start one with all the material and training provided—click [here](#).

Steve's Recommended [Books for Basic Bible Study](#)

** Endnotes:

1. Second Homily on Matthew, AD 370. Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series: Volume X*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1997.

2. Page: 4
Epistle 31, before AD 604. Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, *Nicene and PostNicene Fathers, Second Series: Volume XI*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1997.

3. Page: 4
Dei Verbum, 21, 22.