

## Non-denominational, Ecumenical Bible Studies? Catholics are Welcome if they Keep Quiet!

By Steve Ray

Dear Catholic Friend:

I want to try and keep my promise to relay a little information about “Ecumenical” (a.k.a. “Protestant Evangelical”) Bible Studies. I have never personally attended one of the larger Bible study groups such as Bible Study Fellowship or the Community Bible Study though my mother attends and always asks me to help her with the Study Questions.

I have been part of a lot of other Protestant Bible studies—even taught them—and my mother was a long time student of the Bible Study Fellowship. I also have a wide ranging experience in various Bible Studies and the principles behind them.



Knowing the foundational premises and principles in operation at these studies, I discourage Catholics from attending. I will try to touch on a few of these premises and give a few examples to explain why.

Many Protestants are delighted to have Catholics attend, not to hear their differing theological conclusions, but to bring them to the “true Gospel”—to evangelize them, to get them saved. If we are really honest we will see that in many cases, not all, the non-denominational Bible Study becomes the Trojan Horse that infiltrates the Catholic’s mind and often succeeds in drawing them away from the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church—to join a Protestant group. Who doesn’t have a family member or friend who has been effected?

Jehovahs’ Witnesses and Mormons are experts at this tactic. Evangelicals do it too.

First, these so-called “non-denominational” Bible Study groups—to the best of my knowledge—do not allow Catholics to be in the leadership. This is because they do not want Catholic conclusions or influence within the group. Catholics are outsiders.

Catholics have a very different methodology when it comes to understanding the Bible and it would cause tremendous problems if this Catholic methodology were allowed to infiltrate. Protestants think of themselves as people of the Book, not hampered by human tradition. Catholics are viewed as followers of traditions with the Bible as a secondary source of revelation (though this is not true).

There is a huge misconception in this: Protestants are *also* people of tradition. No one

reads the Bible objectively. People who claim to “just read the Bible” -- really read it through the eyes of a tradition they’ve already accepted, whether that be Fundamentalist, Calvinist, Pentecostal, Baptist or one of many others. *Everyone* depends upon tradition – however, some will admit it and others will not.

“Bible Christians” (a misnomer, since Catholics are the real and original Bible Christians), based on their recently devised “Reformation” principle of *sola Scriptura*, study the Bible with the following premises:

- 1. There is no binding authority but the Bible alone;
- 2. There is no official binding interpretation or interpreter; each person ultimately is their own pope;
- 3. The Bible is perspicuous (i.e., easy to understand) and it can be interpreted and understood by anyone.
- 4. An individual can/should read the Bible and interpret the Bible for themselves.

Catholics have a different set of premises that direct their study of the Bible.

- 1. The authority of the Apostles and the Church preceded the Bible and the Tradition of the Church is an equally infallible authority (2 Thes 2:15; CCC 80–83). The Bible is part of the Apostolic Tradition.
- 2. The authoritative interpretation of the Bible is the prerogative of the Catholic Church (1 Tim 3:15; Mt 18:17; CCC 85–88).
- 3. The Bible is not always easy to understand (2 Pet 3:15–16) and needs to be understood within its historical and contextual framework and interpreted within the community to which it belongs.
- 4. Individuals can/should read the Bible and interpret the Bible for themselves—but within the framework of the Church’s authoritative teaching and not based on their own “private interpretation” (2 Pet 1:20–21).

These basic differences place the Catholic and Protestant worlds apart even though they are opening the pages of the same book and accepting it as an authoritative revelation from God. The Catholic position is biblical, and has been espoused from the first days of the Church. The Protestant position is unbiblical (assumed from their tradition) and is of recent origin. The Catholic is in full continuity with historical Christianity; Protestants are in discontinuity.

When Catholics attend a “non-denominational” Bible Study, they have to be very aware of these differences and be ready to filter out not only false conclusions drawn for the false Protestant methodology, but also to guard themselves against the false underlying assumptions (e.g., that everything has to be found and proven explicitly in the Bible).

“Non-denomination” is usually another term for “non-Catholic”. It usually means “any Evangelical Protestant traditions are welcome”. However, the Catholic, the Orthodox and others of the ancient Church are not included. The Catholic is sometimes invited, but their ideas and influence are rejected since Catholic teaching has no place in Protestant

tradition and in Evangelical Bible studies.

An unwary Catholic who steps into the Protestant Bible Study usually does so with no intention of leaving the Catholic Church. They just want to study the Bible. The Catholic usually has a hard time finding a good and welcoming Bible Study in Catholic circles—but this is changing.

Catholics have not been taught the differences between Catholic and Protestant and they are subtly manipulated until they begin to adopt the Protestant mentality. Soon the unwary Catholic is going back to the Catholic Church questioning everything and trying to prove everything from the Bible using the same insipid methodology they have unknowingly absorbed through their pores from the Protestants. I know many who have been seduced in this manner.

Now for a few examples of how the methods play out in interpretation. Let's take the example of 1 Peter 3:18–21 which states:

“For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; 19 in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, 20 who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. 21 And corresponding to that, *baptism now saves you* not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Notice the words in italics. What does it say? For the Catholic it makes perfect sense because Christians have *always* taught (up until the unfortunate “Reformation”) that baptism is an essential element in salvation. As Catholics, we can draw from a wealth of other biblical and patristic passages, that consistently and continuously teach a seamless garment of doctrine—the constant teaching of the Church, of all Christians.

A few examples:

John 3:5 “*Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”*”

This has *always* been understood to mean water baptism, until descendants of the “Reformation” denied it and had to come up with a new interpretation. The favorites are that water refers to the water in the womb, the word of God, or even a synonym for the Spirit, as in “water, even the Spirit”. Desperate, all of them and no consensus among Protestants. For my extended treatment on “born again”, click [here](#).

Why do they take such desperate measures? Because the Bible contradicts their tradition and assumptions, and they have to change what the Bible clearly says in order to force the text to fit their preconceived Protestant tradition (which by the way, nullifies the

Word of God).

Another example is Acts 2:38 and Acts 22:16. The first says,

“And Peter said to them, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” The second one says, “And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.”

Do these verses agree with the words of Jesus? Do they agree with Titus 3:5 and the rest of the New Testament about the necessity and importance of Baptism? Of course. But many Evangelicals will instantly offer a list of verses that say salvation is by faith (e.g., John 3:16) and then say something like, “Well I don’t agree since I have twenty-five verses that say salvation is by faith, so it can’t be by baptism! I have more verses on my side than you have to support your side so I win.” What nonsense!

Can we cut two verses out of the Bible because we find ten others that seem to contradict? Heavens no! We have to find a way to explain and accept both and harmonize them into a cogent theology. Evangelicals have failed to do this and it is what Catholics have been doing well for 20 centuries.

One of the great reliefs for me as a Catholic was to read the Bible without having to set aside verses that didn’t agree with my preconceived assumptions. I had a good Christian lady say that there are a lot of verses she has to set aside because they don’t fit her Baptist theology. Catholics do not have this problem.

One slight digression: chapter and verse divisions in the Bible are quite recent and they have proven quite helpful in biblical study and finding our way around. But they can also be a great hindrance if people begin to see the Bible as an unrelated collection of wise maxims listed numerically. It becomes quite easy to pluck a numbered statement (a verse) out of its context and quote it as an independent entity. The first sixteen hundred years of biblical study were conducted without verse numbers and it forced the reader to see the book as whole texts and not simply as lists of unrelated sentences randomly compiled.

Now, back to 1 Peter 3:18–21. Protestant commentaries on Scripture come up with a multitude of explanations to make it say something other than what it says. They admit it is one of the most difficult passages of the Bible to interpret. Why? Because they don’t like what it says!

Here is a quote from my book [Crossing the Tiber](#) which demonstrates the extent they will go to explain away a clear statement of Scripture:

“In his new anti-Catholic book *The Gospel according to Rome*, (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1995), James McCarthy says that “when Peter says that ‘baptism now saves you,’ he is speaking of the typological, or symbolic, significance of baptism. . . . It [the word ‘figure’] tells us that what follows, ‘baptism now saves you,’ is a figurative illustration that complements the symbolism of a preceding figure” (331–332). It seems McCarthy is saying that baptism is a figure of a

figure instead of the fulfillment of a figure. He is very mistaken, however, as we see in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, which says that “baptism, which is a fulfillment (of the type), now saves you, i.e., the saving of Noah from the flood is a . . . foreshadowing and baptism corresponds to it [fulfills it]” (p. 75).

McCarthy then adds:

“This verse is part of one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament to interpret. Nevertheless, this much is clear: it does not support the Roman Catholic doctrine. . . . Admittedly, the passage is difficult” (331–332).

The Roman Catholic interpretation explains the passage quite comfortably, without twisting the text from its clear meaning, accepting the literal meaning of the text, and complimenting the rest of New Testament teaching. It is difficult for McCarthy to interpret because he comes to the passage with an insurmountable handicap: *his preconceived Fundamentalist bias*.

Protestant scholar J. N. D. Kelly explains, the water of baptism is not the identical water which saved Noah but the sacramental water [of baptism] to which it pointed forward” (*A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*; [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982], 160). In Scripture Paul tells us that Adam is a type of Christ; Christ is the anti-type, or the fulfillment of the type. In the same way, Noah and the flood are a type of baptism; baptism is the anti-type, or the fulfillment of the type and baptism now saves us. Is McCarthy being dishonest or just making a honest, but desperate attempt, to defend Protestant innovations?”

The Evangelical Protestant does not deal with these passages objectively but must manipulate them to fit their tradition. I often ask a “Bible Christian” “How would you advise Peter to reword this passage to make it clear and fit your tradition?” Baptism is just one example and we have only scratched the surface. Other examples of passages that are extremely difficult for Evangelicals are John 20:23; Colossians 1:24; James 2:24; Matthew 16:18–19; John 5:28–29.

There are several ways Evangelicals will deal with such material. They may say that Paul (or Jesus) couldn’t have meant the obvious since that goes against the Evangelical tradition so they come up with obscure and farfetched solutions. It is actually quite comical for me now as a Catholic to read some of the commentaries and explanations. The Protestant gyrations and tap dancing around these verses are entertaining.

The unwary Catholic attending the Protestant Bible study may not be astute enough to catch the different methodologies and conclusions. After discussing the texts on Baptism the attendee may go back and begin to question the Catholic teaching and eventually leave the Church. In this way, “non-denominational” Bible studies are often the Trojan Horse that sneaks in and takes unwary Catholics out of the Catholic Church.

One last aspect of these Bible Studies that is very appealing and disarms the Catholic is the often warm, serious, loving, and family-like environment. Protestants are welcoming and chatty and the Catholic, used to a normal Catholic Church with its reverence and quiet devotion, may be overwhelmed by the love and warmth of a bunch of “Bible believing” Christians trying to draw them in. “We love, love, love you!”

I don't think there is such a thing as an Ecumenical Bible Study unless knowledgeable Catholics are allowed to participate in leadership and the Catholic perspective is equally presented and discussed with respect, not with disdain as it usually is. If Protestants really want “ecumenical” they will accept the Catholic interpretation and teaching without treating it as substandard or heretical.

Also, the Catholic Church is not a “denomination” (which means “to take a new name”); She is the Church. Those who are in schism, who break away or subsist apart from Her are denominations or sects. She, the Church, is not. She is the Church.

I hope this helps. I provide Catholic Bible Study material but there is a long way to go to get Catholics to the point of Scriptural study that Protestants seem to have achieved. But it is happening and within the next few years most parishes will have Bible Studies available. We must begin working in our parishes to start Bible Studies (see my article on [Starting a Parish Bible Study](#)).

We must remember that the Bible is all the Protestant has. He has reduced his faith to *sola Scriptura*. He has rejected tradition, the saints, devotions, and all Catholic distinctives. *Sola Scriptura* is totally unhistorical, impractical, unbiblical, and brings about spiritual anarchy. I deal with this issue quite extensively in [Crossing the Tiber](#).

To find a good Catholic Bible Study in your area, visit [Catholic Scripture Study International](#) with over 10,000 members.