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# 'American Bible Challenge' a fun way to gather around the Word

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**The American Bible Challenge**
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When I first heard of the Game Show Network's [1] idea for a new game show, I wondered: How is it no one ever thought of it before? There is so much material in the scriptures that if the producers play it right, they could have many seasons. It could be a way to bring Christians together around the Word.

This hourlong show that tests Bible knowledge is hosted by comedian Jeff Foxworthy ("Are You Smarter than a 5th Grader?"), who told journalists in July he has been teaching Bible classes for years. I asked him: What Bible character is most like Shrek? Jeff knew the answer. (Both the Bible character and Shrek had a talking donkey that annoyed them with the truth.)

The format of "The American Bible Challenge" is framed to be lightly competitive: three teams of three people compete to answer questions that are presented in a variety of ways. The teams all play for charity. The contestants move around the set, go out for a Bible study and take turns answering in lightning rounds. The contestants are not so restrained (or straight-laced) as in "Jeopardy," where people stand rooted to one spot. This show should appeal to people who want to test their own knowledge of the Old and New Testaments.

There's always a threat to a respected topic when popular television gets hold of it, and what is sacred can become profane. In "The American Bible Challenge," ordinary folks, dressed in casual down-home attire, get genuinely excited every time they know the answer. There is a warmth about the show that reverences the Word of God and living the Word in charity. The Word is prominent -- the contestants stand behind lecterns made in the shape of large Bibles. In the pilot episode, it was very moving to see the reaction of the winning team and to imagine the good that will be done with the prize money. The fact that the money is for others rather than the players sets the show apart from the start and is the reason Foxworthy agreed to host the show after initial misgivings.

Last spring when the show was announced, it asked for applications from teams of three. So three of us sisters formed a team we named "The Real Sister Act." We sent in our application, went to the audition (it was fun), and our backgrounds were vetted. As the weeks ticked by, it seemed we did not make the cut. And then we got a call to come in for a "run-through," or a dry run, a way for the network to figure out the kinks. We had a very good time. We met a man in the elevator who looked rather serious. I asked, "Are you a reverend? Coming for the Bible show?" He said yes, and I looked at the other nuns and said, "We are so dead." Protestant Christians do know Bible details better than most Catholics, I think. Alas, we did not make it on the show this time around. If "The American Bible Challenge" is picked up for another season, maybe we will.

A team from the Chicago area, "The Horns of Jericho," is made up of three brothers of an Italian-American Catholic family. They are playing for the American Cancer Society [2]. Some of the other charities the teams play for include food pantries, a performing arts academy, an organization that provides aid to victims of human trafficking, and a camp for children in foster care. A team of firefighters from Los Angeles plays for St. Baldrick's Foundation [3], which funds research to discover cures for children's cancers. For a list of the teams and their charities visit the show's website [4].

I don't know how many Catholic groups sent in applications. But when I asked around, in view of forming other teams, there was reluctance from Catholics because of two things. First, most ordinary Catholics didn't feel they could compete with Protestants when it comes to Bible knowledge and trivia. Second, there was a lack of trust that Hollywood could produce a reverent show about the scriptures.

Our "Real Sister Act" team's one concern when we applied was which translation of the Bible the show would base the questions on. This is because some biblical names are spelled differently from one translation to another, and the number of books -- and the verses in a book -- can vary. As of this writing, I think it is the King James or the New International Version, but I was unable to find out this information despite repeated queries. However, from what I observed, anyone with slightly above-average Bible knowledge would be able to answer most questions. I cannot give any details about the run-through (we had to sign a release form), but I was very impressed at how important the Bible was to the teams, how much they knew, how fast they could hit that red button, and how genuinely friendly everyone was. The competitive spirit kind of fell away because everyone was happy when anyone got the right answer.

I think the Game Show Network has produced a show that honors the Bible and how believers can and do put their faith into practice. It will seem simplistic to some. Indeed, the nature of television prevents much depth using this format. It might spark interest, however, in those who do not know the answers. The show might provide an entry point into learning more about God and Christianity. From the pilot and the day I spent on the set, I don't think our Jewish brothers and sisters would consider themselves included unless the network plans a special based on the Jewish scriptures we have in common. I don't know if word got out to Orthodox Christians, either. Maybe next time.

Jeff Foxworthy is host and the producer for the show. He is the champion of American "redneckism" and has raised being a redneck to an art form. He once said, "If you've ever made change in the offering plate, you might be a redneck," and he brings a folksy flavor to "The American Bible Challenge" along with layers of southern

Americana and a touch of patriotism that I hope doesn't go overboard. Each program begins with some footage about the teams and the charities they are playing for. Teams were made up of men or women who were all white, African-American or Asian-American. Ordinary people.

Will they ever have a celebrity Bible Challenge? Could they find nine celebrities who know as much about the Bible as the contestants I saw? I'm not sure, but it would be fun to find out.

Nick Stuart and Maura Dunbar of Odyssey Networks [5] are consulting producers for the show. Odyssey Networks is the country's largest multifaith coalition dedicated to producing and distributing media that creates understanding between people of different faiths, beliefs and perspectives.

The best thing about "The American Bible Challenge" (one journalist from Canada wondered why it is not called the "North American Bible Challenge"; it was not clear if anyone thought about that) is that generations raised on quiz programs and who love the Bible can test their knowledge and yell out the answers just like they do for other shows. As with "Jeopardy," the contestants won't listen to us; they never do.

The questions are designed to show the influence of the Bible in faith, life and culture.

I believe the show is interesting and it brings the Bible into our living rooms or wherever we watch television. But will testing our knowledge via this format inspire us to become better people? To be faithful to *lectio divina* ? To listen more attentively to the proclamation of the Word? To live the Word; that is, to do something more for our neighbor? To participate in society? To learn more about the scriptures and theology?

That remains to be seen. Certainly the possibilities are there.

"The American Bible Challenge" moves along at a nice clip, and Foxworthy is entertaining. We all want Christian unity, and this show makes a positive contribution to this effort as long as the emphasis stays on the Bible and not necessarily on American. The Bible belongs to everyone.

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