
Study Guide for *A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity*

By Cynthia M. Campbell

Study Guide by Stephens Lytch

Introduction

This study guide for *A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity* by Cynthia M. Campbell provides plans for five sessions. Sessions are designed to be one hour in length, although they can be extended to ninety minutes by allowing more time for discussion.

Although people of all faiths or of no faith can participate profitably in this study, it is designed primarily for American Christians who are trying to understand how to live in an increasingly diverse society while affirming both God's universal love for all people and the particular saving grace of Jesus Christ. It is important that the leader provide an atmosphere where participants feel comfortable asking challenging questions—both of the author and of themselves.

Toward the end of the book (pp. 91–93) the author states that one “new duty” that may emerge from a better understanding of religious diversity is a renewed emphasis on Christian practices. If our theological discussions are to be more than a “head game” and thus deepen our relationship with God, they must be grounded in worship, prayer, and Scripture. Therefore it is important that each session begin and end with a time of prayer. Suggestions for opening and closing worship are offered in each study session.

Following a brief time of worship, each session provides an activity that invites participants to reflect on their experiences as a way of preparing to engage the topic. Then key ideas are summarized, and each idea is followed by questions or topics for discussion. The leader is encouraged to invite participants to summarize the key ideas. The

sessions close with reflections on what has been learned and how that connects to the lives of the participants.

The leader should read the entire book before the first session. Having an overview of the book's movement helps the leader keep the discussions focused and productive.

Each participant should have access to a copy of the book and read the assigned chapter before each session. Each participant should read the preface and chapter 1 before the first session.

Is This “My Father’s” World or Not?

Goal: Participants will reflect on their own experiences of religious diversity, explore the author’s framework for a theological discussion of religious diversity, and be invited to enter into a covenant that will guide their discussions.

Opening

- 1. Read from Scripture.** Ask for members of the class to take turns reading the verses of Psalm 90.
- 2. Sing a hymn.** Invite the group to sing “All Things Bright and Beautiful.”
- 3. Pray.** Lead the group in the following prayer:

*O Lord our God,
you are always more ready to bestow your good gifts upon us
than we are to seek them.
You are more willing to give
than we desire or deserve.
Help us so to seek that we may truly find,
so to ask that we may joyfully receive,
so to knock that the door of your mercy may be opened for us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

(Book of Common Worship, p. 18)

- 4. Make introductions.** Ask members of the group to introduce themselves by stating their names and, if they are comfortable doing so, answering these questions: Why are you interested in exploring a Christian approach to religious diversity? Is it an issue in your workplace (as it was for the bank vice president described on p. 4) or in your family? Are you seeking a deeper understanding of world events? Do you hope to gain a clearer understanding of your own faith? Make sure participants keep their responses concise.

Engaging

- 5. How do we do theology?** There are many ways we could talk about religious diversity. This book addresses religious diversity as a theological issue. Its goal is “to show how it is possible to affirm the Christian confession that God has made Godself uniquely known to humankind in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and at the same time to affirm that the religious diversity of human history is part of God’s providential care for all of humankind” (p. 2).

Whenever we do theology, we must be aware of our context or “social location.” In other words, we don’t do theology in a vacuum. What we understand about God and how God relates to the world is influenced by our experiences and our situation.

For discussion: Think about ways your understanding of God has changed over the years. How have your life experiences shaped the way you think about God?

- 6. Discuss three perspectives on diversity.** Cynthia Campbell describes three major positions from which Christians have addressed religious diversity:

- a. *Exclusivism* (pp. 10–13) is what might be called the “traditional” Christian position. “Jesus is the one and only way to God and to salvation, and it is the task of Christians to bring this saving faith to all people” (p. 11).
- b. *Inclusivism* (pp. 13–16) sees religious diversity as a temporary feature of human life. Eventually it will be clear how all religions are part of God’s overall plan for humanity.
- c. *Pluralism* (pp. 16–18) argues that there is no one right way to be religious. We should try to understand and respect each religion on its own terms.

Ask the participants to cite some of the problems the author identifies with each of these positions.

- 7. Discuss the perspectives.** Ask the participants which of the three perspectives on religious diversity is closest to their point of view. Has anything you have read in the book so far caused you to question your point of view? Why or why not?

Closing

8. Examine three key concepts. The chapter ends with the question that will guide the rest of the book: “Is it possible to affirm that God seeks and is found by human beings through the many religious ‘ways’ that have been and are followed, and still affirm the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ?” (p. 19). Three core values will guide the discussion (p. 19):

- a. “Peace is to be valued above conflict, violence, and warfare.”
- b. “Christians should respect and attempt to understand the religions of others on their own terms.”
- c. “Religious and philosophical differences do make a difference; beliefs matter.”

Write these words on a flip chart or whiteboard so the group can see them: *Peace, Respect, Beliefs Matter*. Spend a few minutes at the end of the session discussing how the group can let these three concepts guide their discussion in the coming weeks. Invite the group to make a covenant that will guide them by these values as they work together.

9. Pray. Say this closing prayer:

*Great God, you are one God,
and you bring together what is scattered
and mend what is broken.
Unite us with the scattered people of the earth
that we may be one family of your children.
Bind up all our wounds,
and heal us in spirit,
that we may be renewed as disciples
of Jesus Christ, our Master and Savior. Amen.*

(Book of Common Worship, p. 521)

10. Prepare for the next session. Remind participants to read chapter 2 in preparation for the next session.

2

Many Faiths—One Family

Goal: In this session participants will look at some familiar Old Testament stories from new perspectives. They will learn how God has made new covenants without abolishing old ones.

Opening

- 1. Read from Scripture.** Ask for a volunteer to read aloud Romans 11:33–36.
- 2. Sing.** Lead the class in “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.”
- 3. Pray.** Offer the following prayer:

*Everlasting God,
in whom we live and move and have our being;
You have made us for yourself,
so that our hearts are restless
until they rest in you.
Give us purity of heart and strength of purpose,
that no selfish passion may hinder us from knowing your will,
no weakness keep us from doing it;
that in your light we may see light clearly,
and in your service find perfect freedom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. **Amen.***

(Book of Common Worship, p. 17)

- 4. Review the themes.** Briefly remind participants of key themes covered in the first session:
 - The way we understand God is affected by our social location.
 - Three main ways that Christians think about other religions are exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. We identified problems with each approach.

On a flip chart or chalkboard write these words so they are visible to the participants: *Peace, Respect, Beliefs Matter*. Remind

the participants of the importance of those words to these discussions. If they made a covenant to guide their discussions, review the covenant.

- 5. Prepare to engage the topic.** Ask the participants to think of different groups to which they belong and identify some of the things those groups do to foster their unique identity. Why are those things that set the groups apart important to the group? How can they be detrimental?

Engaging

- 6. Examine the creation stories.** Human beings are made in God's image. The dominant view in the Old Testament holds that there is only one God and one "chosen people." Nevertheless, this "exclusivist" view is not the only one in Scripture. The creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 affirm that all human beings have a common origin and are thus members of our family.

For discussion: What implication does the affirmation that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26) have for the way we think about those who are called our enemies?

- 7. Remember God's covenant with Noah: a covenant with all people.** The covenant God made with Noah was for all humankind. We are to understand each covenant in light of the ones that preceded it. The new covenant in Jesus Christ does not replace the covenant God made with all humanity through Noah.

For discussion: The author quotes Irving Greenberg: "Every religion that works to repair the world—and thus advance the triumph of life—is a valid expression of this divine pact with humanity" (p. 24). Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

- 8. Read the story of Babel: obedience through diversity.**

The author invites us to read the story of Babel in light of the story of creation and God's covenant with Noah to be fruitful,

multiply, and fill the earth. Instead of obeying God, human beings tried to consolidate in one place. At Babel God dispersed human beings and gave them different languages so they would fill the earth and fulfill God's design for them. Pentecost, rather than being a reversal of punishment, fulfills God's intention that each language and nation hear good news in its own unique context and language. The problem addressed by the stories of Babel and Pentecost is not the diversity of human beings but their unwillingness to reach across the boundaries of difference.

For discussion: Think about encounters you have had with people who are different from you, for example, of a different race, nationality, gender, or ethnicity. How have those differences made it hard to relate to one another? How have those differences enriched you?

- 9. Affirm that God's grace is not confined to the chosen people.** Invite participants to list examples from the Old Testament of "outsiders" God used to accomplish God's purposes. "While in no way denying the specificity of God's covenant with Israel, a fuller reading [of Scripture] suggests that this covenant of particularity exists within God's larger plan for the whole of creation, which includes the variety of human nations, cultures, and religions" (p. 41).

For discussion: Give examples of people you know who are "outside the faith" or of no religious faith through whom God's grace has been at work.

Closing

- 10. Ask the following questions:**

- Did you receive any new and refreshing insights from the study of this chapter?
- Do any of the ideas introduced in this chapter trouble you? If so, why?

- 11. Prepare for the next session.** Invite participants to volunteer to present a brief summary of the three responses to the ques-

tion, “Who can be saved?” Ask one volunteer to summarize the “subjectivist” view (pp. 58–59), one to summarize the “participationist” view (pp. 59–60), and another to summarize the “objectivist” view (pp. 60–61).

12. Pray. Say the following prayer in closing:

*Almighty God, you are the one true God,
and have called forth people of faith
in every time and place.*

Your promises are sure and true.

We bless you for the covenants you have made with your people.

*We rejoice that you have brought us into covenant with you
by the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ.*

We praise you that you are faithful to covenants you have made.

Together with all people may we serve your will,

*and come at last to your promised peace. **Amen.***

(Book of Common Worship, p. 815, adapted)

3

At the Name of Jesus

Goal: In this session participants consider how God’s universal love for all people is made known in Christ.

Opening

- 1. Read from Scripture.** Have a member of the group read Ephesians 1:3–14 aloud.
- 2. Sing.** Lead the group in singing “In Christ There Is No East or West.”
- 3. Pray.** Say the following prayer:

*O Lord Jesus Christ,
the Way, the Truth, and the Life:
Do not let us stray from you, the Way,
nor to distrust you, the Truth,
nor to rest in anything other than you, the Life. Amen.*

(Book of Common Worship, p. 22)

- 4. Review the key themes.** Make sure the three watchwords that guide these discussions—*Peace, Respect, Beliefs Matter*—are displayed where all can see them.

Briefly review key themes covered so far:

- The way we think about God is affected by our context.
- When God makes new covenants, they do not supersede or replace old ones.
- The Old Testament testifies to God’s love for all people.

Engaging

It is a challenge to hold as true two ideas that seem to be at odds with each other. As a way of experiencing how we live with things that seem to be at odds with each other, invite the participants to do this exercise:

Inhale and hold your breath for five seconds. Then exhale and hold your breath for five seconds. Which is better, inhaling or exhaling? The answer is neither. We cannot inhale and exhale at the same time, yet we cannot live unless we do both. Some of the things we know about God—such as God’s universal love for all people and God’s particular saving grace in Jesus Christ—seem at odds with each other, yet both are essential to our understanding of God.

5. Discuss exclusivism as a response to a particular situation.

The context in which much of the earliest Christian theology was done led to exclusivism becoming the dominant view of Christianity in relation to other religions. Nowadays conditions call for us to look at religious diversity in a new way. (Three new conditions are identified on p. 45.)

For discussion: Ask participants to identify ways the general understanding of God has changed in the United States over the past few generations. In your opinion, have those changes enhanced our understanding of God or diminished it?

6. Read John 14:6. In John’s Gospel, Jesus often speaks on a spiritual or metaphorical level and his hearers understand him literally. (An example of this is in John 3 where Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born again and Nicodemus thinks Jesus is talking about obstetrics.) We have to be careful that we do not make the same mistake.

In John 14:6 (“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”) Jesus is talking about his identity. This is “an affirmation of how Christians understand the person of Jesus Christ and the way in which that fundamentally changes our understanding of God. But that is not to answer the question of whether this is the *only* vision of God humanity can or will ever have” (p. 48).

For discussion: Give participants an opportunity to react to Campbell’s interpretation of John 14:6 (pp. 46–48). Request that they not enter into a debate at this point, just listen carefully to one another’s reactions.

7. Discuss the scope of God’s love: God is not confined. Ask participants to give examples of New Testament outsiders who show God’s grace.

From these New Testament examples we learn the following:

- God's grace is not confined to Israel or the church.
- Knowledge of God is not confined to Israel or the church.
- God's compassion is not confined to Israel or the church.

8. Who can be saved? If participants have volunteered to present the three views that address this question, ask them to make their reports now. The three views are

- *Subjectivist*, which emphasizes the faith or commitment of the individual and his or her response to Jesus Christ
- *Participationist*, which balances God's initiative and the individual's response
- *Objectivist*, which leaves the question of who is saved completely up to God

For discussion: After the three views on salvation have been presented, ask the participants these questions:

- What is appealing to you about each of these views?
- What problems do you have with each of them?

Closing

9. Pose some final questions.

- Did you receive any new and refreshing insights from the study of this chapter?
- Do any of the ideas introduced in this chapter trouble you? If so, why?

10. Say a closing prayer.

*How great is your love, Lord God,
how wide is your mercy!
Never let us board up the narrow gate that leads to life
with rules or doctrines that you dismiss;
but give us a Spirit to welcome all people with affection,*

*so that your church may never exclude secret friends of yours,
who are included in the love of Jesus Christ,
who came to save us all. **Amen.***

(Book of Common Worship, p. 804)

11. Prepare for the next session. Remind participants to read chapter 4 for the next session.

4

Everywhere That We Can Be: The Holy Spirit and Religious Diversity

Goal: In this session participants will deepen their understanding of the Holy Spirit. They will see how the doctrine of the Trinity helps us understand religious diversity.

Opening

- 1. Read from Scripture:** Ask for a volunteer to read aloud John 16:12–15.
- 2. Sing.** Have the class join in singing “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty.”
- 3. Pray.** Lead the class in this prayer:

*True and only Light,
from whom comes every good gift,
send your Spirit into our lives
with the power of a mighty wind.
Open the horizons of our minds
by the flame of your wisdom.
Loosen our tongues to sing your praise,
for only in your Spirit
can we tell of your glory
and acclaim Jesus as Lord. Amen.*

(Book of Common Worship, p. 542)

- 4. Review key themes.** Make sure the watchwords that guide these discussions—*Peace, Respect, Beliefs Matter*—are displayed where all can see them.

Briefly review the key themes discussed in the last session:

- Our situation in North America invites us to discover themes in the New Testament that proclaim God’s inclusive love of all people.
- Sayings of Jesus (such as John 14:6) that are often interpreted as exclusivist tell us something important about Jesus,

but they do not address the question of what happens to those who follow other religions.

- We reviewed three different answers to the question, “Who can be saved?”: subjectivist, participationist, and objectivist.

- 5. Prepare to engage the topic.** Ask participants this question: Have you ever looked back on your life and realized that God has been at work in ways you did not comprehend at the time? Invite participants briefly to tell of such a realization in their lives.

Engaging

- 6. Identify the work of the Holy Spirit.** The chapter begins by reminding us that in both Greek and Hebrew the words translated as “Spirit” also mean “wind” or “breath.” God’s Spirit is as uncontrollable as the wind and as essential as breath. After reviewing some Old Testament passages that tell about God’s Spirit, Campbell reviews the more prominent role of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. She discusses three passages from Acts.

For discussion: Identify how the Holy Spirit was at work in the Ethiopian eunuch, Cornelius, and the Athenians before they ever heard the gospel.

- 7. Discuss the unity and diversity of the triune God.** The doctrine of the Trinity explains how God is one yet has three ways of being God simultaneously. “God is not three static ‘things’ or even three ‘beings.’ God *is* a dynamic relationship or relatedness. . . . Creation is the result of the overflowing or superabundance of the love among the three persons of God” (p. 74).

The Trinity shows us that God is known in the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Since God is one yet known in the relationship among the three persons of the Trinity, it is possible that human beings know God in different ways. Rather than “asking about the validity (or lack of it) of other traditions,” our understanding of the Trinity refocuses the question of other religions “on what Christians can legitimately say about how God is at work in a variety of ways to accomplish

God's will and work" (p. 79). There are things Christians can learn about God from the religious life of others.

Allow time for participants to ask questions for clarification about Campbell's discussion of the Trinity.

For discussion: Invite the participants to respond to this question: "Might the idea that God is one and also three suggest that God can be experienced by human beings in markedly different ways and still be the same God?" (p. 75).

Closing

- 8. Pose a final question.** Invite participants to reflect together on what they have learned in this session. What are some of their lingering questions? The concepts introduced here are difficult, so assure them that it is okay to leave with more questions than answers.

Leave time at the end of the session to discuss this question: How does a realization that the Holy Spirit is already at work affect the way your congregation carries out its ministry of evangelism?

- 9. Say a closing prayer.**

*Almighty and ever-living God,
you have given us grace, by our confession of faith,
to acknowledge and worship the eternal Trinity
in the majesty of the Unity.
Keep us steadfast in this faith and worship,
and bring us at last to see you in our eternal glory,
one God, now and forever. Amen.*

Invite participants to continue this conversation before the next session. Ask if anyone would like to set up an Internet chat room where the discussion can take place.

A Wideness in God's Mercy

Goal: Participants will identify practical consequences for Christian faith and life that arise from a positive assessment of religious diversity as part of God's work in the world.

Opening

- 1. Read from Scripture.** Have a class member read aloud Isaiah 55:6–9.
- 2. Sing.** Ask the group to join you in singing “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy.”
- 3. Pray.** Pray the following prayer responsively:

Leader: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

Group: **It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

Leader: Gracious Father
giver of all good things;
For our home on earth
and for your unfailing mercy,

Group: **we give you thanks.**

Leader: Christ, our Redeemer:
For your sacrifice on the cross
and rising from death that we might live,

Group: **we give you thanks and praise.**

Leader: Holy Spirit, giver of life:
For your abiding presence in our lives
and for comforting and guiding us,

Group: **we give you thanks, praise, and glory.**

Leader: O triune God:
To you be glory and praise
now and forever.

All: Amen.

- 4. Review.** Keep the guiding words of this study—*Peace, Respect, Beliefs Matter*—displayed where all can see them.

Ask the participants to state the most significant insights they have received so far in this study. Review these points if the participants do not mention them:

- The truth of God’s universal love stands side by side with the truth that Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord.
- The truth that God reveals Godself in Jesus Christ does not necessarily mean that is the only way God relates to humankind.
- The doctrine of the Trinity can help us understand how the unity of God and diversity of religions can be compatible.

Engaging

- 5. Discuss the topic of humility with respect to truth.** Ask participants to recall three reasons why Christians might be modest with respect to how we understand theological truth claims (pp. 85–89). The reasons are:

- a. The Bible is not a book of doctrines. Doctrines are theological reflection on Scripture.
- b. Human beings will never be able to understand God fully.
- c. Many aspects of human experience do not fit neatly into categories of truth or falsehood as we usually understand those categories. To know the truth of Jesus is to know him in the context of a personal relationship, not to assert a doctrinal proposition.

For discussion: Give some examples of occasions when bold affirmation of the absolute rightness of one’s beliefs might be

important. Give some examples when such zeal might be harmful.

- 6. Compare and contrast *respect* with *tolerance*.** Ask participants to identify the difference between respect and tolerance (pp. 89–91). Tolerance means you don't care what others do or believe as long as it doesn't bother you. Respect has to do with acknowledging the integrity of another person even without agreeing with the position that person holds.

For discussion: Cynthia Campbell suggests that one way we can show respect for the religions of others is to teach in public schools about all religions that are practiced in the United States. Do you think this is a good idea? Is it a good alternative to posting the Ten Commandments or allowing school-sponsored prayers?

- 7. Bear witness.** Acknowledging that religious diversity may be part of God's plan for humankind does not excuse Christians from bearing witness to Jesus Christ. Ask participants to recall some of the theological principles we have discussed in this study that can guide us as we share our faith with others (pp. 93–96):
- We assume that others are already loved by God.
 - We acknowledge that the Holy Spirit has already been present and at work in the lives of others.
 - We proclaim a positive vision of what God has in store for humankind. A proclamation rooted in fear or threat is incompatible with the message of God's mercy and grace and God's freedom to save all whom God chooses.

For discussion: Churches sometimes set numerical goals for conversions or membership gains. Are such goals compatible with Campbell's statement, "Telling the story is our job; redeeming or saving the world is God's, because salvation belongs to God alone" (p. 96)?

Closing

- 8. Discuss things we can do.** Spend some time at the conclusion of this session discussing some practical things we can do as

individuals and as a community of faith as a result of this study. Some examples given in the book are greater attention to Christian practices (pp. 91–93), working together for the common good (pp. 96–98), and interfaith dialogue (pp. 98–101).

9. Say a closing prayer.

*We thank you, God of the universe,
that you call all people to worship you
and to serve your purpose in this world.
We praise you for the gift of faith
we have received in Jesus Christ.
We praise you also for diverse faith
among the peoples of the earth.
For you have bestowed your grace
that Christians, Jews, Muslims,
Buddhists, and others
may celebrate your goodness,
act upon your truth,
and demonstrate your righteousness.
In wonder and awe
we praise you great God. **Amen.***

(Book of Common Worship, p. 798)