

ONE BODY MANY MEMBERS

Part 1: One Body, Similar Members

Bible Studies

Bible Study #1: Name and Gender of God

Exodus 3:13-15;
Isaiah 49:15, 63:16, and 66:13;
Matthew 23:37(Luke 13:34);
John 14:8-11a

Photocopy the suggested passages or write them on a board for participants to look up in their Bibles. Divide the participating body into three groups to share with each other the caricatures of God that are enshrined in the passages.

Group 1 can devote attention to the name/s of God (Exodus 3:13-15)

Group 2 can devote attention to male images of God (Isaiah 63:16b, 66:13, John 14:8-11a)

Group 3 can devote attention to female images of God (Isaiah 49: 15, Matthew 23:37, Luke 13:34)

Ask the groups to:

Identify similar passages that refer to the names and gender of God.

Try to locate the context in which these images of God have emerged.

Discern the possible values and theological insights these portrayals are meant to communicate.

Gather as a large group and invite the three groups to share their findings, insights, questions, doubts and perspectives. Inform them that differing perspectives are bound to emerge on a subject like understanding God. After initial feedback, invite the members to formulate some concluding remarks and statements.

In what ways might the biblical writers' prevailing context have shaped the portraits of God? Are such images relevant for today in the context of North American churches?

Images of God: A Reflection

Use the following reflection as a reference on the themes of the suggested passages. Bible study or group leaders, read it in advance and summarize it for the group if you think that will help. Or you can hand it out to participants to take home for further study.

Belief in God is central to Christianity. The God Christians believe is the one who has been disclosed to humans on God's own will throughout human history as recorded in the Bible. However, the Gospel of John 1:18 categorically states that no human has seen God except his son Jesus Christ. In spite of the general acknowledgement that God is beyond any known or existing materials and living creatures on earth, Christians as well as people of other faiths have portrayed God in a variety of ways. They have projected on God what was familiar to them. Predominantly, people have drawn models from forces of nature and characteristics pertaining to animals and humans.

God as an elderly European male

Such a process has led to projecting racial and ethnic characteristics, gender and age attributes to God. It has contributed to a dominant prevailing image of God within Christianity as an elderly male, ethnically and racially belonging to a European community, and embodying patriarchal values. When such images were picturized through paintings, icons and statues, they received a permanent status within the Christian community. Western Christianity developed an image of God as an elderly white male with special favors towards His chosen people (of European descent).

Such a distorted image of God continues even today. Historic church buildings in the United States are full of such images mounted on walls and decorative stained glass. For example, during Christmas, many nativity scenes are depicted through pictures, arts, artifacts and plays. Most of these--circulated among Christians and even the general public-- subscribe to the ethnic/racial biases that have crept into imagining God. These biases have extended to depictions of Jesus, the Holy Family, disciples and all who are closely associated with Jesus. Unfortunately such depictions continue to contribute

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How can these biblical caricatures be reinterpreted to help in the mission and ministry of the church today?

What new names and images of God can be used to communicate the message and vision found in the Bible, drawing on the suggested passages and others identified in the group sessions? For example, in a number of Islamic nations, Christians use 'Allah' (the generic name in Arabic for God) for God.

toward including and excluding communities, as well as perpetuating discriminations that exist in the larger society.

As communities in North America become more multicultural, Christians belonging to the majority population (of European descent) and others must become cognizant of historical processes that have contributed to the prevailing images and characterizations of God. We must seek new possibilities for imagining God.

Origins in understandings of God

Interest in God or gods is as old as humanity itself. The initial impulses might have emerged for the purpose of dealing with forces of nature, seen and unseen, on which humans had little control. The cumulative results of such probes and searches were the emergence of hosts of gods and goddesses. This was not a one-time venture. Every generation has been formulating its own understanding of God. As human needs keep changing, such a spirit of creativity has to go on. However, the process of religious reforms is often a painful venture. People are seldom open to changes, especially in areas of beliefs and convictions. This is true even when the beliefs have

moved far away from the religious intentions and spiritual paths of the founders of their faith tradition.

In Christianity, absolutizing the select images and caricatures found in the Bible (and developed later in the church tradition) has created some conflicts both among clergy and laity. But there is a healthy awareness and acceptance that the biblical writers (as well as Christians through ages) were shaped by the cultures of their time, despite the fact that they were close to the events they recorded for posterity.

Biblical references to God's name and gender

In this section we refer to the name and gender of God as found in the Bible. A personal name is a significant identity mark. When a name is given to a person, it may have certain historical references, if the family or given names are picked up from persons of past generations. However, such a name is not meant to explain the total personality of an individual. Therefore, for persons of great accomplishment, society gives honorific titles such as Christ to Jesus, Saint to Paul, Mahatma (great soul), to Gandhi.

Exodus 3:14 has recorded an important disclosure by God to Moses about God's own name. "I AM WHO I AM" (which is also translated as "I AM WHAT I AM" or "I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE") (NRSV, 1989). What God has disclosed seems very elusive. At the same time, it offered a possibility of being expansive and inclusive. It allowed generations to follow to engage in an understanding of God as per the demands and needs of their time.

When historically restricted, ethnic and cultural limitations creep into this evasive and yet expansive name of God as expressed in verse 15. "God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.'" God is supposed

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to have failed to mention the spouses of these patriarchs, Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel. The immediate context of liberating the Israelites from Egypt and the patriarchal pattern of the society shaped that particularized focus.

As mentioned above, names always have a relational reference and do not necessarily exhaust the full significance of the individual they identify. There may be different ways of understanding this citing of patriarchs. By citing patriarchs of the immediate past, God is not restricting Godself. Rather, God is indicating close engagement with humans and their histories.

The reference to the gender of God (in the passages read by the group) can be easily explained, as it is rare that any ELCA members will still insist that God possesses any particular gender. Even though Jesus often referred to God as father, Jesus makes it clear in his discourse with the Samaritan woman that “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). The reference to gender is to highlight the quality of parental type of relationship that the people of Israel and early Christians experienced in their faith journey. Their cultural and ideological ethos made them ascribe gender to God more as a pedagogical tool than a gender truth about God. Reference to male or female gender may assist in highlighting a needed characteristic of God, but is certainly not meant to captivate God to any particular gender.

References:

The Holy Bible (New Revised Standard Version). NY: National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A, 1989.

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ONE BODY MANY MEMBERS

Part 1: One Body, Similar Members
Bible Studies

Bible Study #2: Discerning Divine-Human Relationship

Psalms 139:7-10
Romans 11:33-36
John 14:8-11, 15:5-8

Divide the participating body into three groups. Encourage them to read the suggested passages, which may be photocopied for them, or written on the board for them to look up in their Bibles). Invite the groups to discuss the divine and human relationships as expounded in the passages.

Group 1 can devote attention to the inescapable nature of the divine-human relationship (Psalms 139:7-10)

Group 2 can devote attention to the admiration of the divine by the human heart (Romans 11:33-36)

Group 3 can devote attention to the possible meaning of Christian existence “in the Father” and “in Jesus” (John 14:8-11, 15:5-8) `bs2_discerning_divinehuman_relationship`

Ask the groups to:

identify similar passages that refer to divine-human relationships (Group 1)

identify key words and concepts in the passages that refer to the divine-human relationships (Group 2)

discuss some ways of understanding the concepts of Jesus being in the Father and Christians being in Jesus (Group 3)

Gather as a large group.

Invite them to share findings, insights and perspectives that emerged during their small group discussions. Inform them that differing perspectives are bound to emerge on a subject like understanding divine-human relations. After initial feedback, invite the members to formulate some evaluatory and concluding remarks and statements.

Explorations of faith traditions

The primary understanding of God in the Bible is that God is our Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer and Judge. The entire universe is the result of God’s creative action. Among creation, humans are supreme because we were created in God’s “image” and “likeness.” Such an understanding has made Jews and Christians--and people of most faith traditions--to seek a holistic relationship with God.

In discerning the relationship between God and humans, people may expound on it rationally, emotionally, psychologically or mystically, depending on the circumstances. For many believers, their understanding is governed by emotional and psychological criteria shaped by individual upbringing. In multi-religious and multi-cultural societies, there is dialogical-rational probe into the historical and contemporary factors that have contributed to various formulations of divine-human relationships. This probing is a necessity for building avenues of understanding and thereby helping communities to be more tolerant to each others’ views of divine and human.

In the last several decades, interdenominational conversations among Christians and interfaith dialogues have contributed to appreciating the varieties of ways Christians and people of other faiths have formulated their particular understanding of God, and their distinct ways of relating to God through worship, community living and engagement with neighbors.

Anthropological and psychological theories

In addition, a number of anthropologists and psychologists are of the opinion that God/s are in fact projections of humans to meet the felt need of their respective communities (Bingaman, 2003).

On the other hand, as per the recent neuropsychological experiments and findings of some scholars, the human brain in fact is “hard-wired for God” (Newberg, 2001, Alper, 2001). This theory has been proposed as a result of brain scanning of Tibetan monks and Franciscan nuns engaged in deep meditation. What is equally interesting in this experiment is that the finding does not identify such God consciousness with any religious tradition. Whichever position one takes, belief in God assures some crucial social benefits such as inculcating a sense of purposeful-

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ness for human life, assurance of human beings' connectedness with God and fellow humans, and offering of social support beyond what family and friends can offer.

General perceptions of God: the four "isms"

Divine-human relations are conceived in a variety of ways depending on the Christians' perception of God. The most common perceptions are categorized as theism, deism, pantheism and panentheism (Geering, 2002:53-55).

Theism: God creates, sustains, relates, intervenes

The general perception among Christians about God is that of "supernatural theism." That is, God is not only the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists in the universe, but God continues to maintain a personal relationship with creation and provides constant oversight. God intervenes in the affairs of the world when necessary, even with miraculous events. The Bible is full of references to God's personal relationship and direct interventions in the affairs of humans, as it was written at a time when supernatural theism was the prevailing religious view of conceiving God's dealing with humans.

Deism: God as infinite intelligence/the clockmaker who left

Deism is an unorthodox religious attitude, which emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries, as a result of the European Enlightenment tradition. Deism perceives God as an "infinite intelligence behind the creation." God is like a clockmaker who has left the clock to function by itself after its creation. Therefore deism has no place for the supernatural and miraculous intervention of God in human affairs. Even though the views of deism are contrary to Christian teachings, it is still a popular views among Christians. That is, one can be a member of the Christian community without believing in a personal God and a divine savior.

Pantheism: everything is God

Pantheism, on the other hand, perceives God and all that exists in creation in a symbiotic relation, commonly understood as "everything is God." Since God is the ultimate being, all that is created by this ultimate being are in fact part of God. By contrast, a considerable number of Protestant Christians hold a view of radical separation of God and the rest of the creation. That is, God is the holy other, and the created order (humans and the rest) are fallen creatures from the original perfect state through human disobedience and sin.

Panentheism: everything is in God

Panentheism, which means that "everything is in God," is a recent development. German philosopher Friedrich Krause (1781-1832) conceived it as a middle ground between theism and pantheism. God contains the entire universe within Godself. In that sense, God's presence is found everywhere and in all things. However, the universe does not exhaust God. God is more than the universe.

Perception of divine-human relationships from the perspectives of panentheism has been adopted by a number of Christian theologians. It seems to be becoming a much more acceptable position as new explorations are done on the role and place of God in contemporary society. The notion of panentheism opens up new possibilities for Christians relating to people of other faiths and to the entire creation with ecological responsibilities, as nothing in the created order is outside God's care and concern.

Did Martin Luther hold the view of panentheism? Lutheran ethicists, Larry Rasmussen and Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda are of the opinion that Luther had a strong leaning toward panentheism. For example, Luther wrote, "God is 'present in every single creature in

innermost and outermost being . . . ' ” and “God ‘is in and through all creatures, in all their parts and places, so that the world is full of God and He fills all . . . ’ ” (Moe-Lobeda, 2002: 112-113).

Regarding the passages in this Bible study, Psalm 139:7-10 offers a graphic description of the inescapable presence of God, almost supporting the panentheism view of divine-human relations.

Unable to fully grasp God's salvific plan for those Israelites who failed to accept Jesus as messiah (and as such God's plan of salvation), in Romans 11:33-36, St. Paul gives up further speculation. In trust he leaves the matter to God with a reflective utterance of doxology.

In his Gospel account, St. John records that ultimately the fullness of humanity can only be assured by being incorporated to Jesus (“in Jesus”) and thereby incorporated to the Father, since Jesus as human maintained a perfect relationship with the Father.

References:

Alper, M. The “God” Part of the Brain. N.Y.: Rogue Press, 2001.

Bengaman, K. Freud and Faith. Living in Tension. Albany: SUNY Press, 2003.

Geering, Lloyd. Christianity Without God. Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2002.

Moe-Lobeda, Cynthia D. Healing A Broken World. Globalization and God. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002.

Newberg, A.B. et al. Why God Won't Go Away. Brain Science and the Biology of Belief. N.Y.: Ballantine Books, 2001.

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ONE BODY MANY MEMBERS

Part 1: One Body, Similar Members Bible Studies Bible Study #3: God's Intention for Diversity and Unity

Genesis 11:1-9 Acts 2:1-15

Divide the participating body into three groups. Encourage them to read the suggested passages, which may be photocopied in advance or written on a board for them to look up. The groups will discuss diversity and unity of the human/Christian community on the basis of the passages that are read.

- Group 1 can devote attention to the issue of diversity on the basis of the Tower of Babel story – Genesis 11:1-9 (Refer to Genesis 10:5 which records the plurality of languages.)
- Groups 2 and 3 can devote attention to the issue of unity on the basis of Pentecost story – Acts 2:1-15

Ask the groups to

- identify other biblical passages that refer to God's intention of diversity (Group 1)
- identify other biblical passages that refer to God's intention for unity (Groups 2 and 3)
- discern the implications of biblical teachings on diversity and unity for Christian faith and practices (all groups)

Gather as a large group and invite the sharing of findings, insights, criticisms and new possibilities. Inform them to be attentive and respectful of differing perspectives and proposals. After feedback, invite the members to formulate some concluding observations and statements.

- What are the societal visions and commitments for honoring diversity in North American society? In what ways can churches critically engage in such visions and commitments?

God's Intention for Unity and Diversity: A Reflection

Use the following as a reference. Bible study/group leaders may read it in advance and present a summary to the group if this is helpful. Otherwise, hand it out to participants for further study at home.

Great world religious founders lifted up universal values

The religious founders of the great world religions were visionaries. Even though they grew up in a particular cultural community and were shaped by a religious tradition, they exemplified values of universalities in their teachings and actions. They emphasized the importance of cherishing a common humanity with all its creative diversity, and voiced the interconnectedness of human life with the rest of the creatures in creation. They often directed their followers from rigid anthropocentric to an ecocentric approach to life. Judaism and Christianity as world religions share such an ethos.

Christianity and Christ grew up amid pluralism

Christianity evolved in a world of multiple religions, philosophies and contending political systems. As a faith tradition, Christianity emerged in the bosom of Judaism, which in the first century C.E. consisted of persons with different religious affiliations like Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes, Zealots, Samaritans and proselytes. Christianity even existed for a while as a Jewish sect. Therefore, diversity and plurality was not alien to Christianity.

Jesus grew up in such a pluralistic society. The twelve disciples that were selected by Jesus had different personalities and gifts, which were valued by Jesus. In addition, Jesus had numerous disciples who were women or men with diverse gifts, drawn from different communities. When the account of the life and work of Jesus was compiled, the disciples did not produce a singular monograph. Instead they produced a number of gospels (four of which are included in the New Testament canon) honoring the diverse needs of the existing Christian communities. Even the subsequent attempts to consolidate the four gospels into one gospel narration were rejected by Christian leadership. Thus, plural and diverse existence was a core component of Christianity.

Unlike most other religions of the world, Christianity as a

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- How can churches benefit from the increasing diversity in North American society? How can they utilize it for regaining its authentic nature as a “Pentecost fellowship”?
- What are the hurdles for accomplishing a healthy balance of unity in diversity in the Christian communities of North America?
- What are some further resources that the ELCA needs to cultivate for greater inclusivity in its membership?

new faith tradition came into being in a burst of ethnic and linguistic plurality on the day of Pentecost. In the context of communities torn and segregated by ethnic and linguistic differences, the occurrence on the day of Pentecost was a miracle. It was a sign and symbol of how Christian communities should be, locally and globally.

Multicultural Christianity vs. Monocultural Patterns

As Christianity spread out of Jerusalem, the monocultural pattern of most of the then existing world communities did not allow the multicultural, multilingual and multiracial experiences of Pentecost to multiply, except in select commercial and imperial cities and towns. Even in and around Jerusalem, early Christians had to struggle with issues of inclusivity soon after Pentecost--for example, if circumcision as necessary for gentile converts (Acts 15:1-30). The Jerusalem Council had to resolve the issue by not insisting circumcision for gentile converts. When seeds of division crept in, St. Paul had to advise against the division among Christians in the city of Corinth (I Corinthians 1:13-18) and in churches in Galatia. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

In spite of the miracle of Pentecost, monocultural existence became a reality for a long time including in European societies and nations. The multicultural and plural thrust got lost among large sections of Christianity, giving rise to eventual ethnic, racial, class, color and gender segregations and discrimination. One unfortunate development within Christianity was the misconceived claim of superiority of western Christianity along with western civilization. This was a result of political and economic superiority vastly acquired through European colonial hegemonic means. Also, modern missionary outreach--beginning in the 16th century by the Roman Catholic Church, and from 18th century onwards by the European and North American Protestant churches--spread the false image about Christianity around the globe as a western religion.

A global view on pluralism

With new awareness and greater interactions between Christians in the western and non-western world, recapturing the primal/Pentecost vision of Christianity as an egalitarian fellowship is pursued with greater intensity around the globe.

Missionary outreach and the migration and mobility of people (Christians and others) began in a small scale with the European colonial enterprise. The movement was perpetuated in recent decades by commercial enterprises, and due to natural and human caused disasters like famine, earthquakes, wars and genocides.

World communities have become increasingly multicultural and more pluralistic than ever before. Such mixing of communities has created numerous conflicts in various parts of the world. In a number of countries, the issue of diversity and plurality has become key in election agendas. Meanwhile the involvements of international organizations (including churches), political bodies, and various programs of education, liberation and empowerments have contributed to the greater awareness and acceptance of plurality and diversity.

The United States as laboratory for diverse Christianity

The United States was built on immigration and the principle of being open to new immigrants from around the globe. Among the nations of the world, countries like the United States have a unique opportunity to recapture the spirit of Pentecost in its Christian and secular life.

In fact, the United States is seen as a laboratory for multicultural Christianity, as the nation is home to the largest Christian population (235 million at present) in the world, and is expected to remain so in the foreseeable future. With the unique situation of having Christians from among all the major denominations and church traditions, and almost all the countries and communities around the globe, the U.S. situation resembles what is recorded in Acts 2:5: "Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem."

Scottish missiologist Andrew Walls has articulated this expectation (the United States as a laboratory) from Christians and Churches as follows:

The great issues of twenty-first century Christianity . . . will be about how African and Indian and Chinese and Korean and Hispanic and North American and European Christians can together make real the life of the body of Christ. The principal Christian significance of the United States may now be in the fact that--thanks to the immigrant law of the 1960s--nearly all the main Christian disclosures have functioning congregations there. More than in any other nation in the world, the body of Christ could be realized--or fractured--in the United States. (2002:69)

Recapturing the Pentecost ethos anew should be possible without much difficulty. It is the same Holy Spirit that created the Pentecost miracle that is guiding the church today. The challenge is whether Christians are open to the prompting and guidance of the Holy Spirit as on the first day of Pentecost. The greatest need in the churches in the United States is the embodiment of the spirit of Pentecost, not just in the spiritual realm but also in day-to-day community life.

Tower of Babel liberation

The two passages selected for study record God's intervention in human affairs. Although the account of the Tower of Babel gives an impression that the whole of human-ity was speaking the same language, it may be referring to only the community that moved to the plain in Shinar (Genesis 11:2). In fact the preceding chapter, which gives a "Table of Nations," indicates that the people of different clans spoke their own languages (Genesis 10:5). The focus of the Tower of Babel was that a select group of persons tried to impose a single language (perhaps a commercial language) on a multilingual community to achieve their goal of building a city.

Cities in predominantly pastoral and agricultural communities stood for power and privilege. Cities were centers of trade and commerce. Cities were homes for people who exploited the villagers and smaller communities. God intervened on behalf of the exploited and challenged the values of reducing people into tools of labor to fulfill the megalomaniac ideas of city elites. As a strategy, God confused the language of the workers and liberated them from the clutches of the elite. The different languages helped the liberated people to articulate their own priorities and values and to celebrate diversity.

Pentecost charter

In Acts 2:1-15, we have the record of how the Church (messianic community) began. The miracle of Pentecost is a charter for Christian fellowship. It is a mandate for honoring people's cultures and traditions and finding a rightful place for them within Christian fellowship in healthy interaction.

The foundational commitment to diversity found in the life and teachings of Jesus, and affirmed at the inauguration of the Church at Pentecost according to the Scriptures, will also be the status at the end of time. (Revelations 7:9).

Reference:

Andrew Walls The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History. (Orbis, 2002)

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Continue to Deeper Conversations



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