

Do All Paths Lead to the Same God?



Session 1



Isaiah 25:6–8; Luke 10:25–37; Romans 10:12

Session Objective

Participants will learn that all of us, whatever religious beliefs we hold, were made in God’s image. They will investigate what it means that God loves and pursues all of God’s children, even though we may understand and worship God in very different ways.

Faith Statement

God is the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of our world. God’s Spirit works in surprising places throughout creation and is found even among people who are unaware of the Spirit’s presence. The Creator endows all persons with God’s own image.

—*Presbyterian Principles for Interfaith Dialogue, Part 2*

Session Overview

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For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Genesis 1:27 says that humankind, *all* of humankind, is made in the image of God. Spend some time thinking about what this implies about different people, their different types of faith, and the one God.

- Does being part of a religion make one's prayer and worship more sacred or worthy? Why or why not?
- As Christians, how should we interact with people of different faiths? How should we respond when people of different faiths disagree?
- How can we determine a true, better, or best religion?

Spend some time meditating on Genesis 1:27 before praying for the participants in your group.



Understanding the Scripture

Luke 10:25–37 is the well-known Parable of the Good Samaritan. We often read it as moral inspiration—how to be a good neighbor—but it is also a clear statement about Jewish-Samaritan interfaith relations. Samaria was a neighboring state, with its own separate religion that shared many stories, texts, and values with the Hebrew people. Generally, first-century Jews did not regard Samaritan faith with respect, similar to how Catholics looked down on Protestants during the Reformation. Jesus, however, uses the example of a Samaritan to answer a Jewish lawyer's question about inheriting eternal life. If Jesus could tell the story today, would he tell about a "Good Muslim" or a "Good Atheist"?

The book of Romans is Paul's most complete argument for why Christ matters. Chapters 10–11 especially focus on why Christ is important to Jews and non-Jews alike. Spiritual equality between these two groups was a common theme for Paul (e.g., Romans 3:21–31, Galatians 3:23–29). In Chapter 10, the discussion progresses from the uncontroversial point that God is one, to Paul's special emphasis on equality in God's sight, to the theologically interesting notion that God's message to both Jews and Gentiles is from Christ. That is, despite the fact that Abraham and David lived centuries before Jesus, Paul says that God called them, and they heard and responded "through the word of Christ" (v. 17). Paul has laid a foundation for us to consider the status of all non-Christians. Has God called Buddhists "through the word of Christ"? Will God "graft" or elect people from primitive tribes who never have heard of the person of Jesus?



Understanding the Faith Statement

The *Presbyterian Principles for Interfaith Dialogue* were adopted in 1999, partly in response to the fact that in our modern world, religious traditions come into contact more than ever before. There are still many more Christian believers in the world than those of any other single religion, but global mobility ensures that we will meet and work with people from many faith traditions. Instead of hiding from or fighting against this fact, we must live and work with our neighbors with grace and respect, as these principles suggest and Scripture commands. Whether or not we know anything about our neighbors' faith traditions, or whether they know anything about Christianity, an awareness of religion as a shared phenomenon expressed in different ways can help our relationship.



Teaching Today's Question

For some young people, the very idea of an interfaith world is theoretical at best, because they have few, if any, non-Christian friends. Others may know more Jews or Hindus than Christians. However well your group can grasp the fact that more than two of every three people on earth are *not* followers of Christ, be aware of how familiar they are with actual interaction and sensitivity to real people of other faiths. It may help in your conversations to use biblical words such as *neighbor*, *brother*, and *sister*, rather than labeling people according to their religion.

Also, help your group be aware that understanding religious differences and other people's faith is important to their own spiritual journey. On one hand, a better understanding of religion will help them understand their own religion and how to worship God. On the other hand, interreligious dialogue (positive and negative) is a common biblical theme, from which they should be prepared to learn in order to share their own faith with others.



Enter

Option A: Interfaith Balloons

- Balloons, tape, pool noodles

Divide participants into two equal groups, give each person a pool noodle, and tape two inflated balloons to each person's back. Have each team try to knock the other team's balloons off, while keeping their balloons from being knocked off. After a few minutes of play, explore the following questions together:



- Did your group win or lose the game because of skill and strategy, or did luck have something to do with it?
- Why are you a Christian? Was it your own wisdom and faith that brought you to God? Did God pursue you, or were you ever just in the right place at the right time?
- In terms of people from other faith traditions, did they choose their religion? Did God lead them there, or were they in their place at their time?
- Does God hold it against people who were born in a country in which Christianity is uncommon or oppressed? Does God expect people who never hear the gospel to commit to following Christ?

Opening Prayer

God of all people, be a constant reminder that our special place in your heart is because you chose us, not because we choose you. Inspire our faith and our respect for those who don't share the faith you have given us. Amen.

Pray the opening prayer.

Option B: Imagining

- Newsprint, markers, recording of "Imagine" by John Lennon, music player

Before the participants arrive, write each of the following phrases on a separate posted sheet of newsprint:

- Imagine that no one argues about heaven and hell.
- Imagine that countries never fight.
- Imagine that no one is greedy.
- Imagine that people of different religions get along.
- Imagine the world living as one.

As participants arrive, play the recording of "Imagine" and give each person a marker. Invite each person to write on the newsprint what they think the world would be like if the posters' imaginations were true. Pray the opening prayer.



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

Lead the participants in a conversation that engages the question for this session, “Do all paths lead to the same God?” Encourage participants to ask and discuss their own questions that relate to this question or use the following questions to guide the discussion:



- What are some different paths to graduating high school? (*attending public or private school, being valedictorian or taking remedial classes, attending summer school, changing schools . . .*)
- Are any paths better or worse? In what respect are they better or worse?
- How is religion like or unlike graduating high school?
- Are there many paths to experiencing God? If yes, are any paths or denominations better or worse? In what respect are they better or worse? If no, can some paths get you somewhere, but not quite to God? Where might they get you?

Option B: God-Quest



Map of your community, markers

Before the session, display the map, and draw a cross on the map at the location of your church.

Call the participants’ attention to the map, and invite each participant to use a colored marker to sketch one or more paths from his or her house to your church. Encourage them to create the shortest and most scenic routes or even routes that go past their favorite hangouts. Explore the following questions:



- Are any paths better or worse? If so, how are they better or worse?
- How is religion like or unlike this map?
- Are there many paths to experiencing God? Why or why not?
- Can some religious paths get you somewhere, but not quite to God? Why or why not?

Option C: Listening and Responding



Recording of “I Love You and Buddha Too” by Mason Jennings, music player

Listen to “I Love You and Buddha Too” together before exploring the following questions:



Consider watching a performance of this song together on YouTube.

- What is the message of this song?
- How is religion like or unlike the imagery in this song?
- Are there many paths to experiencing God? Why or why not?
- Can some religious paths get you somewhere, but not quite to God? Why or why not?



Explore

Option A: Romans 10:12

Bibles, copy of "Sanctuaries" (Web Resource 1a)

Before the session, post the images from "Sanctuaries" (Web Resource 1a) around the meeting space.

Invite the participants to move to the posted image that best answers the question "Where do you experience God?" before exploring the following questions together:

- Why did you choose that particular image?
- Do you think other Christians would choose a similar image? Do you think any non-Christians would choose a similar image? Why or why not?
- Why do people experience God in such different ways?
- Even if we have similar spiritual experiences, do we all describe them in the same way? Why not?

Make sure each participant has a Bible. Read the first half of Romans 10:12 together. Explore the following questions:

- What does the first half of the verse mean?
- What do you have in common with non-Christians? With nonbelievers?
- What distinctions (such as Jew or Greek) are made in your culture?
- What distinctions does God make among people?

Read the second half of Romans 10:12 together before exploring the following questions:

- What does the second half of the verse mean?
- By what names do you call God?
- By what names do people of other religions call God?
- Do different names for God describe the same reality? If so, how do you feel about other people praying to the same God with a different name and worshiping the same God in such different ways? If not, how do you know you are worshiping the "right" God? How might someone of another religion answer that same question?

Option B: Luke 10:25–37

Newsprint, markers

On a posted sheet of newsprint, have the participants brainstorm a list of all the religions and belief systems they know. The list could include: atheism, Baha'i, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Falun Gong, Hare Krishna, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Jehovah's Witness, Judaism, Mormonism, Native American religions, New Age, Rastafarianism, Scientology, Shinto, Sikhism, Taoism, Unitarianism, Wicca, Yoruba, and Zoroastrianism. Explore the following questions together:



- What do you know about each of the religions and belief systems on the list?
- Do you know anyone who practices any of the listed belief systems? If so, which ones?
- What do you know about their beliefs, practices, or religion?
- How would you describe them as people? How would you describe their religion?

Make sure each participant has a Bible, and read Luke 10:25–37 together before exploring the following questions:



- What does this parable tell you about the potential morality of other religions?
- What does this parable tell you about judging different religions and people of different faiths than yours?
- Can someone who acts like the Good Samaritan get closer to God on a *wrong* path than someone who acts like the priests on the *right* path? How or why not?

Option C: Isaiah 25:6–8

Bibles, treat for each participant

Give your group some kind of treat, mentioning that they didn't do anything to deserve the treat and it's just something that you wanted to do for them. Make sure each participant has a Bible, and read Isaiah 25:6–8 together. Explore the following questions together:



- To whom does this passage refer? (*all people*)
- What does the passage say the Lord will do for all people?
- What does the passage imply about God's care for you? What does it imply about God's care for Christians? What does it imply about God's care for non-Christians?
- How do you feel about this message that God cares and has plans for people who do not believe what you believe? Is that fair? Why or why not?



Express

Option A: Defining Religion

- Paper, pens, newsprint, marker

Divide participants into groups of two or three and give each group a sheet of paper and a pen. Challenge each group to create a definition of religion, such that no non-religion matches it and no religion is excluded by it. After a few minutes, give each group an opportunity to share their definition with the rest of the participants. As a group, combine the various definitions of religion into one definition that everyone agrees with, and write it on newsprint. Explore the following questions together:



- What does the definition on the newsprint say about God?
- How do you define God in order to include all religions in the definition?
- What does your definition say about worship? About morality? About salvation?
- Is religion more about definitions and principles, or stories, or what?

Option B: Image of God

- Bibles, copy of "Faith Statement" (Web Resource 1b) for each participant, play dough

Have each participant make a sculpture out of play dough that represents himself or herself. Make sure each participant has a Bible, and read Genesis 1:27 together before exploring the following questions:

- How are you personally made in the image of God?
- How is your neighbor made in the image of God? How is a nonbeliever or atheist made in the image of God?
- If everyone is made in the image of God, does God love any particular people more or less than others? Why or why not? Does God appreciate some people more or less than others? Why or why not?

Distribute copies of "Faith Statement" (Web Resource 1b), and read the information on the page together. Invite the participants to reshape their sculptures into a representation of what God wants from them.



Exit

Option A: Story of Faith

Gather the participants in a circle and give each person an opportunity to respond to the question “How does your personal faith fit into your religion?” Pray the closing prayer.

Option B: Praying for Each Other



Index cards, pens, small basket

Have each person write a prayer request on an index card before placing the card in the basket. Shuffle and distribute the completed cards so that no one has their own card. Lead a prayer in which each person has an opportunity to voice the prayer request written on his or her card and then pray the closing prayer. Ask the participants to take their card home to continue to pray for that request until your group gathers again.

Closing Prayer

Creator God, you have made us all so different. We know that you want all of our hearts, but our path there is not always an easy, obvious, or straight line. Help us to focus on what we can do to get closer to your love. Lead us to find a path to you and to be models of your grace. Amen.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

“Family Connections” (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for families to discuss for each of the four sessions in this course. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Web Connections

Send participants to religionfacts.com/big_religion_chart.htm to learn more about different religions. Consider e-mailing the participants daily questions that you create based on information on the chart. Offer a prize to the participants who correctly respond to each of your questions in a timely manner.

Presbyterian Connections

Send participants to the Presbyterian Interfaith Relations Web page, gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/interfaith, to learn about the most recent efforts in our denomination in working with our interfaith neighbors. Spend time exploring the resources that are available under “Other resources of note.”

Diversity Connections

Encourage participants to have a conversation with someone who practices another faith. Tell them to be respectful, to learn about another religion, and to be prepared to answer any questions the other person may have about Christianity. Invite your participants to report what they learned in the next session.

Do we have any visitors with us this morning?

