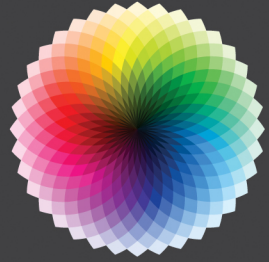


Theodore Hiebert



The Beginning
of Difference

Discovering Identity in God's Diverse World

A CONVERSATION ABOUT DIFFERENCE FOR ALL OF US

A community guide to discussing Theodore Hiebert's *The Beginning of Difference: Discovering Identity in God's Diverse World*

How to Use this Discussion Guide

This guide is a resource for conversations about difference. The guidelines and questions in it can assist groups who are reading and discussing *The Beginning of Difference*. They are designed for book groups, for adult education classes in church congregations, and for any community who wishes to engage these ideas more deeply. In light of all of these different contexts, consider these guidelines flexible. They can be adapted for a single conversation or for multiple meetings. Use what is helpful.

Guidelines for each chapter include a brief summary of the chapter, some suggestions for designing a conversation, and a set of discussion questions. Adapt them or create new versions of them for your interests and needs. Use the questions that most interest you or create new questions.

If you have the time to devote multiple sessions to conversations about the book, you could focus a session on each of the four major chapters of the book. For two sessions, consider focusing on the first and fourth chapters, the stories of Babel and Pentecost. For a single session, you might focus on the Babel story, since it is so familiar and since it provides the foundation for the new perspectives on difference in the chapters that follow.

The Common English Bible translation is recommended for these conversations. It is the most recent translation of the Bible into English, and it avoids some of the overly negative renderings about difference in some past translations of Genesis.

Introduction: The High Stakes of Difference

Chapter Summary

This introductory chapter sets the stage for the four biblical studies that follow by acknowledging the high stakes of difference. Difference can be a source of enrichment and growth or a weapon to divide and conquer. The introduction explains the focus in this book on *cultural* identity and difference, to clarify the meaning of *culture* as it is used here, and to identify the key markers of culture in Genesis: language, land, and descent. These do not include two of the most important markers of difference today, religion and skin color, but the stories of identity and difference in Genesis can be relevant to all of the ways we mark difference. This chapter introduces readers to the three distinct authors, or traditions, present in the book of Genesis.

Designing the Conversation

Consider beginning with question #1 below in order to give group members an opportunity to think about their responses to difference based on their own experiences. This may keep the ongoing conversations experience-based rather than idea-based. The goal throughout this entire

conversation is to examine our own attitudes toward difference, that is, to become aware of the ways we might be suspicious of difference and use it to exclude and demean others, and also to acknowledge the ways difference can contribute to the growth and dignity of everyone. The key value in this conversation is honesty and openness rather than evaluation and judgment. Even if it feels awkward, we must learn to be more self-aware and more truthful about how we view ourselves and others.

Discussion Questions (Choose what fits your group.)

1. When did you remember first experiencing cultural difference? When did this happen and how did you respond? How did this experience affect your emotions, thoughts, behavior, and your sense of your place in your community?
2. How would you describe your own cultural identity? What are its most distinctive markers?
3. In what ways do you encounter and negotiate cultural differences among those with whom you work and socialize on a day to day basis?
4. What examples in the news this past week illustrate the high stakes of difference?
5. Do you use the same or different markers to describe your identity than the authors of Genesis did to describe their identity?
6. Why do scholars think cultural identity and difference are not biologically innate and genetically determined but constructed by communities over time to define themselves?
7. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the three ways of thinking about difference described by Jonathan Z. Smith?
8. What are the distinctive traits of each of the three authors of Genesis?

Chapter 1: Difference Begins at Babel

Chapter Summary

This chapter explores a new understanding of the Bible's classic story of difference, the story of Babel that explains how God introduced cultural diversity into the world after the great flood. It will help you understand how we have come to read this story as a story of pride and punishment, a way of reading the story that has serious consequences for the way we view difference. When this story is read and interpreted as God's punishment for human pride, then God's diversification of the world's cultures is seen as dangerous, a divine curse that brings confusion and conflict into the world. In place of this customary interpretation, a completely different interpretation of this story is presented, one that honors the human impulse toward creating common culture and one that, at the same time, recognizes the world's different cultures as God's plan for the world.

Designing a Conversation

The goal of this conversation is to recognize the negative consequences of the pride and punishment reading for our attitudes toward difference and to create conversations about how we might honor, as does the story, both cultural identity and cultural difference. Consider these suggestions:

- Begin this conversation by asking group members to write down their recollection of the story of Babel from memory, including as many detailed images as possible (Question #1 below). Then invite members to share their recollections, in order to compare and contrast them and to discover the shared assumptions we bring to this story. Invariably, these discussions uncover the “pride and punishment” reading that has become dominant in our past. This remembered story can then be placed in relief alongside the argument in this chapter that a more positive perspective on both cultural identity and cultural difference is actually intended by the Babel story.
- Collect art images of Babel online and talk about ways these images have emphasized the “pride and punishment” reading of Genesis 11:1-9. Artists almost always focus on the tower, which has anchored the traditional interpretation.
- Read with the group a contemporary children’s story that interprets Babel in this new way: *God’s Big Plan*, by Elizabeth Caldwell and Theodore Hiebert, illustrated by Katie Yamasaki (Louisville: Flyaway Books, 2019). What difference does it make for our children if we help them hear the story in this new way?

Discussion Questions (Choose what fits your group.)

1. How do you remember the story of the Tower of Babel? What key images do you recall?
2. Does your memory of the story of Babel fit with the traditional “pride and punishment” reading of the story?
3. What are the consequences for our attitude toward cultural difference if we read it as a story of pride and punishment?
4. How does Part 1 of the story of Babel (Genesis 11:1-4) describe the people’s work to create a common culture? How did interpreters turn this positive narrative of cultural identity into a story of pride and arrogance?
5. How does Part 2 of the story of Babel (Genesis 11:5-9) describe God’s intervention to create many different cultures in the world? How did interpreters turn this positive narrative of cultural diversity into a story of curse and punishment?
6. Why did difference become dangerous? Why do you think readers like us have created a tradition of interpretation that sees difference so negatively?
7. How does the story of Babel provide the foundation for the map of the world’s cultural diversity in the book of Genesis that follows?
8. What contemporary lessons can we learn about the value of cultural identity and about the value of cultural difference from the ancient story of Babel?
9. What difference would it make if we would “make difference ordinary, make difference normal,” as Chimamanda Adichie says?

Chapter 2: Noah's Descendants: Biblical Writers Choose Their Family

Chapter Summary

In chapter 1, we discovered the Storyteller's positive approach to both cultural identity and cultural difference in the Babel story. Chapter 2 examines the *relationship* between identity and difference, how the Storyteller, as well as the Priest, understood their own identities as Israelites in relation to the different cultures around them. We explore how Genesis's authors view the world through the lens of family and kinship and how both of these authors selected a founding ancestor, Noah, who would include them, with all other peoples, as part of a single family.

Designing a Conversation

An effective way to start this conversation is to ask members to respond to the first question below. This question makes choosing one's family personal, and it gives members the opportunity to do exactly what Genesis's authors did: choose their own first ancestor. You will probably find that members start with all kinds of ancestors, near and distant, and this variety shows how our choices are related to our senses of our own unique identities. The goal of this conversation is to recognize how in their decision to choose Noah as their first ancestor, Genesis's authors were as inclusive as they could be about their identity. They wanted to claim that they were related as family to all of their neighbors.

Discussion Questions (Choose what fits your group.)

1. To which of your ancestors do you trace the very beginning of your family? Why have you selected this ancestor? What is it about this ancestor that gives your family its particular identity?
2. Having selected this ancestor, who are all of the people included in your family, and who are not?
3. How do we all, including these biblical authors, divide our histories to identify our beginnings and explain our identities?
4. In what ways do the Storyteller and the Priest make Noah, rather than Abraham, the great divide in their history and the first ancestor of their family?
5. How does Noah, rather than Abraham, end the first age of exclusive Israelite history and begin the second age of Israel's history among the nations in Genesis?
6. How does Noah, rather than Abraham, end the first age of Israel's own cultural environment and begin the second age of the world's cultural environment that includes all of the concrete peoples and places with which Genesis's authors were familiar?
7. How does Noah, rather than Abraham, end the first age of failure and begin the second age of righteousness in Genesis?
8. How does Noah, rather than Abraham, end the first age of curse and begin the second age of blessing?
9. In what way does choosing Noah as their first ancestor, rather than Abraham, create a larger family for Israel to belong to?

10. How might thinking of our biblical family as one branch of the entire human family, rather than as a small family distinct from the human family, give us a model for relating to others?
11. What difference would it make if we thought of our neighborhood as “a place where families and neighbors were one and the same,” a place where “you did for your neighbor just as you would do for an immediate family member,” as Linda Sarsour says?

Chapter 3: Biblical Peoples Live with Difference

Chapter Summary

This chapter gets much more specific about the realities of living with difference. It explains how the writers of Genesis thought about their relationships with their closest neighbors, the Ishmaelites and the Edomites, and how they thought about the relationships among the different tribal groups that made up their own people of Israel. Genesis’s writers are realistic about the conflict that difference can cause and about the threat of harm that it may generate. But, ultimately, Genesis’s writers are optimistic about relationships across difference. They have imaginations that see the genuine humanity of all. These imaginations are able to enter others’ experiences, they can feel their pain, and they hope for the survival and flourishing of all.

Designing a Conversation

One way to focus a conversation about this chapter is to select one of the four family stories as a case study, make the biblical text of that story available to all members, and answer the questions below in terms of the concrete details of that story itself. While this chapter describes each story in some detail, rereading one of these stories and discussing its details will make the argument in this chapter about all of these stories more vivid and concrete. It’s probably been a while since most of us have read these stories closely! You might consider inviting the members to think of their conversation about the story you’ve selected, or about the chapter as a whole, in light of their own family experiences or in light of rhetoric in the news about the relationship between different peoples today. This personalizes the ideas presented in this chapter and keeps them from getting distant or abstract.

Discussion Questions

1. How do the family stories in Genesis speak both to the family level of experience and to the national level of experience, the relation between peoples?
2. What are the three key elements in the plot of each of these family stories?
3. What important question do these stories all try to answer?
4. How does each of the four family stories follow this three-part plot line and respond to this question?
5. By telling stories about the relations between their own ancestors and the ancestors of other peoples, how do Genesis’s authors view the ancestors of other peoples and God’s relationship to them?

6. Would you agree that Genesis's authors had imaginations that were realistic, generous, and optimistic about difference? What can we learn from them about being realistic, generous, and optimistic ourselves?
7. "Do we make enough space for the people who are different from us" as Tarell McCraney asks?

Chapter 4: Pentecost: The First Christians Embrace Difference

Chapter Summary

For centuries, the Pentecost story has been read as the event that reversed Babel. Whereas, according to its traditional reading, Babel introduced difference, division, confusion, and conflict into the world, Pentecost restored the world to unity and harmony. This reading of Babel, of course, assumes its old negative interpretation that was challenged in Chapter 1. Thus both stories (Babel and Pentecost) were read as stories suspicious of difference. If we read the story of Babel as embracing difference as God's intention for the world, and if we entertain the possibility that Pentecost's author read the Babel story in this way too, then we can explore the idea that Pentecost builds on Babel and celebrates difference. Just as God introduced difference as the reality of the world at Babel, so God introduced difference as the reality of the church at Pentecost.

Designing a Conversation

Consider reading the texts of the stories of Babel and Pentecost side by side in order to discover their links and parallels. Note how they both begin with a small group of people in one place speaking a common language and end with people from every nation in the world speaking many languages. Pay particular attention to the ways in which the themes of land and language dominate both stories and are used both similarly and uniquely by each author. Finally, move toward a conversation about whether the church today reflects the story of Pentecost and how that might influence our attitudes toward difference within Christianity itself.

Discussion Questions

1. Why might we think of the story of Pentecost as the church's charter?
2. How is the theme of one place handled in the stories of Babel and Pentecost?
3. How is the theme of language handled in the stories of Babel and Pentecost?
4. How is the theme of culture handled in the stories of Babel and Pentecost?
5. How has our interpretation of Pentecost through the centuries contributed to the notion that difference is a problem to be overcome rather than a gift to be celebrated?
6. How does translating the gospel into many languages honor indigenous cultures, critique the dominance of any one culture, and respect difference fully?
7. How can we see "human differences not as obstacles to unity to be transcended but theologically vibrant sites for God's action in the world," as Eric Barreto says?

Conclusion: New Conversations about Difference

To engage this book's brief conclusion, consider discussing the three general perspectives on difference that these new interpretations of Genesis have uncovered:

- Difference is normal
- Difference is always viewed within a network of relatedness
- Living with identity and difference requires an imagination big enough to combine realism, generosity, and optimism about living with difference.

The Introduction describes this as a “radical book.” In that light, consider the following questions:

1. How has this study of Genesis enlarged your understanding and thinking about difference in Genesis?
2. What are the implications for us of living with difference respectfully, wisely, and with a generous spirit and heart?
2. How might we need to change our thinking and living to embody the three core perspectives a above?
3. What new conversations about difference do you and your community need to have?
4. In what ways do you think we need to change our thinking and living to embody Michael Atkins's appeal, “Don't ignore color or gender—that's ignoring my identity. Let's celebrate those things and let's celebrate those differences”?