

A study guide for:

When Religion Becomes Evil by Charles Kimball

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-- developed by Charles Kimball, Jeff Rogers & Bo Prosser

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INTRODUCTION

Charles Kimball has written a profound book with “earthshaking” impact. The book could not have been published at a more critical time. We are reminded every day that religion is an extremely powerful force in our increasingly interdependent, interconnected world community. In addition to inspiring people to their highest and noblest best, religion has often been used to justify violent and destructive behavior. In this book, Kimball identifies warning signs and dangers of “religion gone bad.” He challenges us all, regardless of faith orientation, to guard our minds and hearts against “narrowness that may lead to violence”! (p.28)

This study guide is designed to help you explore Kimball’s book without being weighted down by or drawn into that “narrowness”. This guide is provided as a way of fostering dialogue among people of faith. Thoughtful and sincere people who read and discuss this book will not all come to the same conclusions or agree with the author at every point. There is plenty of room for honest disagreement. But the issues raised, including fundamental issues around the journey of Christian faith formation and discipleship, can help us frame urgent questions.

For some, the study may generate more questions than answers. For others, this study may generate leaps of faith and action. Still others may be challenged and changed. This guide is designed to give your learners a variety of entry points into this challenging book.

Through our work at CBF, we are trying to provide you with opportunities for dialogue and honest sharing. This is not an attempt to indoctrinate toward any faith stance. This is a vehicle to help you journey, explore, probe, and grow. The faith “umbrella” is big enough for all of us to have a place under it. We agree to differ at points. But we always resolve to respect one another in love. And, we will unite in a sincere desire to serve God.

Your role as leader is crucial. If you enter into dialogue to learn more about your own faith with an openness to why and how others might differ, your study can be a positive, growth experience. The fellowship bonds of your study group will be strengthened. If you “proof text” points of controversy within this book, your study will likely be less constructive. In fact, your study may be negative and hurtful.

Enter into the study knowing that sincere people will not agree on everything. That is okay! Disagreement need not be accusatory and divisive. Engaging the urgent issues thoughtfully may well open peoples’ eyes to new understanding.

The Scriptures challenge us to “study to show ourselves approved.” As we “approve” ourselves in the heart of God, we do well to remember the two greatest commandments: “You shall love the lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.” (Matt 22) Enter into this study striving to be the presence of Christ with one another. Enter into this study in order to be better equipped to be a citizen of the Kingdom. And, above all, pray as you continue to seek God’s revelation!

What follows is a framework for constructive discussion. This is not about any institutional framework or theological stance. Our desire is for you to engage in honest and supportive interaction. Our hope is for you to gain glimpses of faith, hope, and love. So join us in this journey and grow -- in your knowledge of your own faith stances, in your understanding of one another, and in your love of God.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed to be used in small group discussions of 90 minutes in length. The design is focused around eight weeks of study and interaction and an additional concluding “wrap up” session. (Alternative study approaches could be built around a weekend retreat, study series, or learning “immersion”. This might also be used during a Bible Study or Sunday School hour with the number of study sessions extended.) As you begin to engage the material, you may find that you cannot possibly get maximum benefit from the study in the time allotted. We encourage you to be creative in presenting the material for maximum participation and discussion.

Your time each week may vary depending upon the size of your group, the intensity of your discussions, and the approaches you use to facilitate. Provide a comfortable teaching environment for your participants as you begin each session. Help people be “at ease” in sharing before you move to deeper levels of thought and interaction.

REMEMBER, you are NOT expected to be an expert on this book. Your role is to help facilitate the discussions and to keep the thoughts and ideas moving. You are not a referee, you are not a judge. There are NO right or wrong ideas or answers, there is only the opportunity to share. Our design is hopefully to help your participants grow together. People of faith will often come to differing opinions about issues. That is okay. The main purpose is to engage one another in love and grow with one another in understanding.

A KEY premise to remember for each session is:

How should/do people of faith behave with one another?

Keep coming back to this thought! Keep seeking insights from one another. Grow from the personal stories you share with one another. Grow from the insights you glean from one another. Grow for the impact of the presence of God being with you as you study with one another.

Relationships are the key as you share in this study. Evangelism is about witness. Witness hinges on relationships. Don’t indoctrinate or manipulate. RELATE! You are not in this study to CHANGE the minds of the others in your group. You are here to think about and possibly change your own approach to relating to others. You will grow as you engage in this study. You will find your faith maturing. Trust God to lead you in this journey of relationships and learning.

Additional Thoughts

The following teaching ideas may help you organize your presentation each week. The suggestions are by no means prescriptive but are simply ideas to help you engage your participants more fully. The suggested framework may also not work in your setting and is intended only as an idea for shaping your teaching.

Sample Schedule:

Gather – Wear Name Tags – Refreshments if appropriate	3 - 5 minutes
Call to Prayer for Study and Understanding	3 - 5 minutes
Opening Question – Generally, one of the first two questions in each chapter discussion below is “lighter” and designed to help the learner move to a level of comfort before going deeper.	10 - 15 minutes
Moving Deeper – Possibly share one of the author’s quotes or share a “mini-lecture” on some of the material and use other questions in the session for discussion and dialogue.	20 -30 minutes
BREAK – for catching your breath	3 – 5 minutes
Continuing Deeper – Continue sharing content and questions with a mix of lecture, dialogue, and interaction. Perhaps focus here on the “Key Question” as outlined in each Session below.	30 - 40 minutes
Call to Prayer for Fellowship	3 -5 minutes

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Be aware that adults learn in various ways. Pay attention to using a variety of teaching approaches, give time to think and reflect, use questions, and allow dialogue. Discussion tends toward argument; the point of dialogue is to get information out. Don’t assume that everyone “gets it”! Keep working towards clarity of information and balance of participation. Don’t allow any one person to monopolize the group, to polarize feelings, or to sermonize on ideas. This study is intended for group interaction and community learning.

Suggestion 1: Use visuals

There are lots of ways to introduce this book symbolically:

- A globe - A compass - A sextant – A fruit tree – A flower are all positive visuals.
- Post quotes from the book on flip charts, chalk boards, or newsprint.
- Use pictures of positive religion, or people of diversity engaged in hospitality.

Suggestion 2: Get participants’ attention

Ideas - Ask pairs to dialogue about these questions:

- With what sorts of religious prejudices were you reared?
 - What was their source? How have you dealt with them?
 - What truths/misconceptions have you confirmed in them?
- (This may reveal how prejudice still lives!)

Suggestion 3: Lay a Foundation

Provide background on Kimball’s presuppositions as articulated in the introduction:

1. There are five warning signs of human corruption of religion (p. 6).
2. The inclination toward these corruptions is strong in the major religions (p. 6).

3. Out collective failure to challenge presuppositions, think anew, and openly debate central religious concerns affecting society is a recipe for disaster (p. 7).
4. We all have filters, some of Kimball's might be ... some of mine are... what might some of yours be?
5. Religion may do us in ... but it is our Best Hope

Use Chapter One to lead participants to consider their own presuppositions (see the last paragraph, p. 24, as an example).

Turn this statement into a question (p. 25): "Freedom *of* religion is a good thing. So is freedom *from* the religion others may wish to impose on those who differ."

Ask: How so? What examples from your own experience can you cite?

Suggestion 4: Lead a lecture/dialogue on subsequent chapters using frequent questions to hold attention and to stimulate reflection.

For example, cite quote on p. 74 and ask for historical or contemporary illustrations.

Another example: read the last sentence of second paragraph, p. 170.

Ask: How does this strike you? What partnerships might we consider and what (if any) would just be "off-limits?"

One more example, "Which of the suggested guidelines for peacemaking (p. 184) are the easiest to implement? Most difficult? Any you consider impossible?"

Suggestion 5: Focus on implications by drawing participants to consider examples of Kimball's warning signs in our own times (and our own faith traditions).

The days are ripe with examples of religion "gone bad". Don't ignore current events that may be occurring around you in the midst of your study. Pay attention to your own faith group, to what's happening in your church and community, to world events. Talk about your joys and your fears as these relate to Kimball's writing.

Suggestion 6: Conclude with dialogue around Kimball's use of a compass (p. 191ff) and his use of the roots metaphor (p. 199).

Point out, particularly, that the purpose of study is to build roots. Roots are invisible. However, roots must result in branches – above ground and visible. Branches put forth fruit (that's at the heart of the New Testament). Otherwise, the cultivation of the roots is a waste of time!

Suggestion 7: Pray to begin each session and to end each session.

Prayer unites us in the goodness of God. Some of the information in this study may be difficult for some persons. Prayer settles us, reminds us of our unity in Christ, and leads us to understanding. Prayer makes a difference in each of our lives.

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THE STUDY GUIDE

SESSION 1 - INTRODUCTION

1. Main Street has changed. Main Street is now local and global. What changes have you noticed in the “Main Street” of your locale? How is religious diversity evident in your area? How has your place of living changed since September 11, 2001?
2. Family ... Academics ... Vocation ... These have all had a tremendous impact on the author and his life/faith journey. How have these three areas influenced YOUR life?
(see pp. 9-11)
3. Read the first statement of the book on page 1 and the ending statement on page 13. How do you react to these statements? When have you seen “religion” as a powerful force for “good”? As a powerful force for “evil”? How have you been transformed positively through your faith experiences? How has your community been impacted positively by the faith groups in your city?
4. Have you ever been in a “we versus they” situation? What were the circumstances? What was the outcome? Have you ever witnessed a “they” being transformed into an “us”? What happened?
5. Your experience is not Charles Kimball’s experience, but your experience is valuable! How has your life been formed by the communities in which you’ve lived? How would your life be different if you had been born in Cairo, Baghdad, or Jerusalem?

KEY QUESTION

What does it mean to be a person of faith with integrity?

SESSION 2 - CHAPTER 1 – Is Religion the Problem?

1. What is religion? Write your definition and share with the group. Then debrief ...

What was easy about defining religion? What was difficult? What is the difference between religion and faith? What similarities of thought exist about religion and faith in your group? What differences of thought exist about religion and faith in your group?

2. Understanding religion where it exists ... read p. 21 first two paragraphs ... (See note 3 expanded on p. 216) What matters MOST about your faith?

Make a list of your top 5 priorities and share with the group. Have you ever had a similar conversation (to the one you've just experienced) with a person of another faith? Why/why not? What were the results?

If you've not had a conversation with a person of another faith, how comfortable do you think you'd be having such a conversation? Would you be willing to have such a conversation? Why/why not? What points in your faith stance are you NOT willing to even discuss?

3. On p. 23, Kimball talks about 4 commonalities of faith perspectives ...

The Calendar Key points of Living Social Organization Analysis of the Human Predicament

How are these experienced in YOUR faith perspective? Have you ever wondered about these commonalities? Why do you think these are evident in all faiths? Can there be other days of "faith expression" other than Sunday? Why or why not? What other commonalities can you think of? How do these commonalities bring you into a closer relationship with people of other faiths? Do these commonalities create any distance between you and others? How?

4. Read from pp. 24 -- 25. What criteria do YOU say is acceptable and what is not acceptable in any religious perspective?

KEY QUESTION

"When religion becomes evil, there are always corruptions present!" (p. 39)

How does your faith lead you to love your neighbor as you love yourself?

SESSION 3 - CHAPTER 2 – Absolute Truth Claims

1. What does the author say about the absolute claims of “truth” by people of faith? What does your faith perspective say about “absolute truth”? Do you agree with these claims? Why/why not? What roles do sacred texts play in teaching about absolute truth? (p. 61)
2. What do you KNOW about God? Take some time to discuss individual views of God. Examine pp. 46 -- 47 and share what Kimball says about knowing God. Do you agree or disagree? Why/why not?
3. What do you mean when you say “God” or talk about “God”? Do others agree with your thoughts? How do you reconcile your meanings with the meanings of others? What does “Allah” mean? What does “Yahweh” mean?
4. What is dangerous about “narrowing” our perspectives of God? (p. 51) How do narrow truth claims lead to dangerous and even destructive consequences? (p. 56)
5. Read the section on p. 59. This section leads us to ask critical questions about our sacred texts and our personal beliefs. Discuss -- Does your faith perspective encourage critical thinking? Why/why not? How have you been encouraged to think critically in your life? Do you apply these similar approaches to your faith? Why/why not? As you consider the major faith groups of the world, which group is more likely to “think” critically? Why? What can you learn from this?

KEY QUESTION

It is much easier to “know” the truth than to “seek” it. (p. 68)
Do you agree/disagree? Why? What are you doing to continue your search for the truths of your faith?

SESSION 4 - CHAPTER 3 – Blind Obedience

1. What does “authentic religion” engage that “blind obedience” does not? What warning does Kimball give about this? What does blind obedience seek to limit? How can charismatic leadership rob us of our ability to think?
2. What is the difference between a sect, a cult, and “a majority” faith community? What three major elements are usually evident when a sect moves towards evil? Of what “majority” faith community was Christianity a sect?
- 3a. What makes charismatic leadership dangerous? How does this happen? What role does “power” play?
- 3b. Impulse to withdraw from society:
What is “Armageddon?” What is “apocalyptic writing”? What are some examples of religious groups embracing these teachings? What are some religious groups that support “evil” or deplorable behavior? How does authentic religion keep faith focused?
4. Unwavering commitment to compelling ideas:
How can we live in the world and not be conformed to it? How are we to behave in a world in which most others don’t share our belief system?
5. What is a “Mega” church? What is its purpose? What can be its downfall?
6. Who were David Koresh and the Branch Davidians? What were their beliefs? Why were they denied religious freedom according to Kimball? Do you Agree/Disagree? Why? What does Kimball say about bizarre and/or self-destructive behavior? What two key issues determine whether withdrawal might be evil or not?
7. What is our responsibility as individuals? What “hopeful” message do major religions give us? What does Kimball think are the results of honest inquiry? What do his critics think? Who is right? What are the solutions to acquiring “truth?”

KEY QUESTION

“You have to learn to think for yourself!” (p. 95) Why is learning to think for oneself so crucial? How does your church encourage or discourage this? React to the Buddha quote on page 99. With what parts do you agree/disagree? Why?

SESSION 5 - CHAPTER 4 – Ideal Time

1. What is the “Dome of the Rock?” Where is it? Why is it so controversial? What factors keep this controversy so inflamed? How does Matthew 5:9 relate to this issue?
2. What are some names for “ideal time?” What is our challenge in the “meantime?”
3. What makes the Taliban so dangerous? Why do Taliban and Al-Qaeda hate America? How does the U.S. constantly aggravate the Muslim world? What should we do?
How does the Muslim world constantly aggravate its own people? What solutions are available to us?
4. What special challenges face Israel? What special challenges face a Christian America?
According to Kimball, “What role has the arrogance of right wing Christianity played?”
5. On pp. 124 -- 125, Kimball offers several suggestions for “hopeful” approaches to building positive relationships. What do you think? What are YOU willing to do?

KEY QUESTION

“The challenge facing governments today is to address both the interdependent dynamics of nation-states and the pluralism within each nation.” What is pluralism? What is the Christian’s responsibility towards pluralism?

SESSION 6 - CHAPTER 5 – The End Justifies the Means

1. Do the ends justify any means according to the author?
2. “The ultimate focus of religious liberation or salvation cannot be disconnected from life in this world.” (p. 129) Do you Agree/Disagree with this statement? Why?
3. What are some obvious signs of corrupted religion? What can we do to be more open to others? What are the boundaries (or non-negotiables) of your faith and practice? How do these “non-negotiables” keep you grounded in your faith?
4. What does “sacred space” have to do with faith? What is the role of violence in responding to “sacred space?”
5. What do “group identity” and “outsiders” have to do with faith and practice? What or who are some convenient targets to help us unify our identity? How has Christianity been “evil” through history?
6. What does Kimball suggest as approaches for preserving the connection between the “means and the ends”? Do you agree or disagree? Why? What are you willing to do?

KEY QUESTION

What is the danger in preserving the “institution” of the church? What happens when we are so focused on preserving the institution that we ignore the ministries of healing and reconciliation? What are the options available to us?

SESSION 7 - CHAPTER 6 – Declaring Holy War

1. Kimball gives several examples of governments sometimes labeling actions as “evil” and at other times actions as “good”. At times governments remain allied but refuse to label a “clear demarcation between the forces of good and evil”. (p. 155) What determines how we label forces as “good” and “evil”? What is dangerous about “shifting” lines of determination? Do you think that “religion and war are inextricably linked?” (p. 156)
2. Why is declaring a conflict as “holy” a sign of corrupt religion? What characteristics are at the center of authentic religion according to Kimball? Does Kimball suggest that there may be a time when the use of force is warranted? What condition does he put on this? (p. 156) Do you agree or disagree? Why?
3. What three attitudes or approaches have been distinctly identified throughout history? What are the characteristics of each? Why are these important to note? What Scripture passages does Kimball use to give alternatives to “war”? What happened in the 4th Century and following to entwine Christianity with military actions and “just” war?
4. What are the basic criteria that are listed as a “just war”? To what actions did these lead? What is significant about the Crusades? Are those who believe differently from you actually your enemies? Share the quote of Pete Wilson, Pentagon spokesman, “There is no nice way to kill people.” (p. 168) How do you react to this statement?
5. What is the relationship between patriotism and Christianity? What is the Biblical mandate for Christian citizenship?
6. What are the basics of Islam as outlined on pp. 170 -- 173? What did you learn from this overview? What is the meaning of “Jihad”?

KEY QUESTION

How are we to pursue “Peace with Justice”? Is holy war really holy? How can we initiate “just peace” rather than just war? Examine the 10 Key Practices outlined on p. 184. Rank order these based on your personal approach to peace. Share these with others in your study group. Which of these do you think can lead most effectively to peace? Why?

SESSION 8 - CHAPTER 7 – An Inclusive Faith rooted in Tradition

1. Briefly review the 5 tell-tale signs of corruption in religion. Which do you think is the most dangerous? Why? Why does Kimball say that we need to be aware of these signs? What do you think? What does the author mean, "... progress is best defined as taking one step back." (p. 186)? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
2. What are some resources available that can help you and your church support "peacemaking rather than war, reconciliation rather than retaliation". (p. 189)?
3. What is the metaphor of the "inner compass" (p. 190)? What three core values (or guiding principles) does Kimball add to Stephen Covey's list? What does Kimball say is the value of faith, hope, and love? Does Kimball believe that "people of faith" can make a difference in the world? Why? How?
4. William Sloane Coffin is quoted on p. 199. Share this quote and interact with your group. What do you think about this challenge? What can you do to seek unity while celebrating diversity?
5. What options exist for Christian thinking? Which of these three approaches do you think Kimball embraces as most beneficial for reconciliation? Which of these do you embrace? Why?

KEY QUESTION

"Religious traditions do not determine who we are, but they are a part of the givenness of most people." (p. 197) Do you agree or disagree with Kimball? Why? What do you think is the purpose of YOUR religious tradition? If your religious tradition is only part of who you are, what other factors determine your identity? How do you choose your priorities?

OPTIONAL FINAL DISCUSSION

This is an optional gathering for reviewing the reading and gathering your thoughts around major points that have emerged.

1. What are the five key signs of religion becoming corrupt? How do you feel about your own faith system based on these signs?
2. What can you do in your local faith congregation to keep religion authentic?
3. How has this study changed you? What is the MAIN TRUTH that you have gained from this study? How will you be different for having joined in this study?
4. What have you learned about Islam and other religious traditions? How have you been inspired to learn more about the world's major religions? How are these traditions increasingly important in our respective communities?
5. How has this study helped you grow in your faith practices?
6. What comment or question would you like to communicate to the author? You may communicate with him via regular mail or e-mail at the following address:

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