Not long ago I visited a European city that was teaming with people from all over the world. As I watched the amazing variety of people groups represented on the streets it struck me how much Europe has changed during my lifetime. Today, instead of someone like ourselves living next door, we are more likely to find that our neighbor is from another country, speaks a different language, and may be a Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or have no faith at all. Within these differing communities that are now on our doorstep are different ways of understanding God or not understanding him at all, different cultures, logic systems, and thought patterns. So how should we as Seventh-day Adventists relate to this reality that has become part of our everyday life? Does God have a Word for us on the matter from a faith perspective?

A Good Starting Point—A Shared Breath

In Genesis the reality of what happened during the Creation week is there for all to see: God created man (mankind—human species) in his image and placed within them his breath of life (Gen 1:27; 2:7). If we think about this for a moment it has significant implications for us in the way we live out our lives today in a world that has become a global village. The breath that God put within us is also within our neighbor whoever he or she might be or whatever he or she might believe. This commonality alone is a great leveler and a fact that we cannot escape—our Creator God placed the breath of life within us all. Thus we are equal before him in our
humanity, no matter our earthly status, privilege or non-privilege, ethnic or faith background, or family and faith history.

The Implication of God’s Commands in 1 Peter

A second step is to consider the implications of two deeply challenging commands from God as to how the young growing church in the apostle Peter’s day were to relate to others who were different from themselves. First, they were instructed through Peter to honor everyone (1 Pet 2:17). To us, at first sight, this seems a simple command that we can all relate to. Of course we should honor everyone; after all Jesus had clearly outlined the foundation of this command when he said that we should love God and our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:30, 31). However there is a deeply disturbing and challenging depth to the command to honor everyone in 1 Peter. This does not make itself immediately apparent unless we consider the context in which the statement was made. It was given to a scattered, marginalized, mildly persecuted group of Christians who were struggling for survival in an alien environment.

So what were the implications of this radical command given to the church of Peter’s day? To honor everyone meant that the marginalized minority community had to find ways of relating positively to the majority community and to live out the principles of the Kingdom of God in the place where they lived. This is why this command can be considered so radical. Practically speaking, it was impossible for them to honor everyone unless they were involved with them in some way. Furthermore, integral to the concept of honor is respect—a respect characterized by the kind of sacrificial love and gentleness expressed in the beatitudes (Matt 5, 6) rather than aggression or triumphalism. Miroslav Volf gets to the heart of the matter when he says that “just as God’s love is utterly indiscriminate, embracing people of all colors, creeds, and credentials whether they are the most admirable saints or the most deplorable evildoers, so also our respect should be indiscriminate” (2012: Kindle location 4809).

It is hard to imagine how challenging such a command must have been for that marginalized community of faith in Peter’s day that was living out their daily lives in an unfamiliar and toxic environment. The natural human response would have been to demand their rights or engage in a political act of mere tolerance; however, it is clear that God wanted them to move beyond either of those temptations. By commanding them to honor everyone he stretched them into a radical disciplined form of personal spiritually, which would eventually provide the impetus for the gospel to travel into Europe and then into the whole world. They were not to take the easy way out by confronting or merely tolerating (Walzer 1997: 2013, no. 2, Art. 10 111

https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jams/vol9/iss2/10
Kindle location 4707). Both acts would have more than likely distanced them from the community around them. Instead, God was challenging them to be actively and humbly engaged, so that his true character could be demonstrated through their presence in an alien world.

Peter then adds a second command to the first: “Always be ready to answer everyone who asks you to explain about the hope you have. But answer them in a gentle way with respect. Keep your conscience clear. Then people will see the good way you live as followers of Christ, and those who say bad things about you will be ashamed of what they said” (1 Pet 3:15-16 ERV). Once again there is so much depth in this short practical command. To really answer someone’s questions in the way described in this verse, the believers were being challenged to step out of their safe corner and create an environment where spiritual conversations could take place and questions of eternal consequence could be answered. To do this effectively they would need to understand the culture, faith, thought patterns, and logic systems of those whom God was calling them to serve. The only way to do this would be to be part of the community and to think carefully how to share their hope with their neighbors and leaders of the community. This was not to be a distance ministry but an authentic sacrificial presence ministry through building trusting relationships. How else could it be accomplished if not through relationships? It also allowed for difference and distinctness which could be respectfully shared both verbally and through a life lived as God’s ambassadors in a world of difference and confusion.

Ministering in Today’s Global Community

The radical commands that God gave to Peter and the young church to honor everyone and the spiritual framework he provided for sharing the hope that they had applies just as much to us as to the believers of Peter’s day, even though our circumstances may be different from theirs. It is interesting to note that Peter did not spell out what it meant to honor everyone. In other words God did not prescribe what that meant in every detail. Apparently God wanted them to figure it out through committed, incarnational engagement with strangers. Just as God did in Peter’s day God is inviting us to be part of his great mission to reveal his character in all its glory and truth through presence ministry. It is my belief that today God not only wants us to figure out what it means to honor everyone (particularly the strangers within reach in our communities), but to also make it our priority.
Challenges and Possibilities: Faith in Action

Although much could be said, I will outline four practical applications. Many of the people moving to the West at this time are Muslims, so I have chosen to share these practical applications in the context of this particular people group. Finally I will finish with a quote from Ellen White.

Love in Action

Adventists believe wholeheartedly in Jesus’ words that the law rests on the double command: love God and your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:30, 31). This universal truth is treasured by us as a faith community. Attaching this to the double command in 1 Peter helps us not to reduce this to an abstract concept of loving everyone (something to be believed from a distance) but rather combines love and sacrificial action towards the Muslim who lives next door to us, who runs the local store, picks up our garbage, sits next to us in a university class, our teacher or doctor, or the Imam who runs the local mosque.

Meeting Needs

We are currently witness to significant shifts in population from one part of the world to another. Muslims arrive on our door steps in the West traumatized by change (often having fled from areas of the world where there is war and conflict). They find themselves without family support in a strange land and often do not fit well into existing networks, even within their own faith system. It is a challenge to us to know how to relate to them. A leader of one local community center, which has been set up specifically to serve the community, told me that Muslims who come there have expressed that it is the only place they really feel “safe” and able to be themselves in a foreign country. As unconditional love has been offered in a safe environment, opportunities have emerged to answer questions which inevitably arise as natural mutually-beneficial relationships have been fostered.

Ambassadors for Peace

Often there are negative reactions to global people movements in the face of shrinking resources, economic instability, and fear of radicalism. On the one hand, this can have the effect of strengthening ethnic and faith boundaries and, consequently, resulting in further separation and distance from host communities. On the other hand, it offers Adventists a unique opportunity to become ambassadors of peace between communities in conflict. I know of one team of Adventists who have done much to bring
understanding and cooperation between Muslims in their area and the local population with significant results. Contacts have been made with leaders in the Muslim community and mutually beneficial relationships have been developed. Where there was fear and suspicion there is now understanding and cooperation. When a hurricane hit the area, both Christians and Muslims worked together to restore the community to normality. This is just one example among many of what has happened in this particular community.

Focus on Spiritual Growth and Transformation of the Heart

I have noticed that Christians and Muslims can very quickly begin to argue over doctrinal points with an aim to “convert” the other as both are missionary faiths. Before long battle lines are drawn and chances of long-term spiritually beneficial relationships are lost. When conversing with Muslims it is important to shift attention away from points of doctrinal conflict to a shared conversation that stresses the fact that our deepest spiritual heart need is to be ready to meet our Creator on the judgment day. Later, as God leads, doctrinal questions of eternal consequence which need to be answered, will arise naturally through the work of the Holy Spirit and we can be ready to answer these questions with gentleness and respect.

Finally, I am continually strengthened and informed by what Ellen White has to say to us. Her words inspire the humbling and provoking thought that while God invites us to join with him and that he will work through us, in the end it is his mission, not ours.

Those whom Christ commends in the judgment may have known little of theology, but they have cherished His principles. Through the influence of the divine Spirit they have been a blessing to those about them. Even among the heathen are those who have cherished the spirit of kindness; before the words of life had fallen upon their ears, they have befriended the missionaries, even ministering to them at the peril of their own lives. Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God. (1940:638)
Notes

I am indebted to Miroslav Volf for bringing my attention to 1 Peter in his chapter “‘Honor Everyone!’ Christian Faith and the Culture of Universal Respect: Abraham’s Muslim Children,” in Clark 2012.

*Strong’s Concordance:* the Greek word utilized for honor is τιμάω timaō tim-ah’-o (from G5093) meaning to prize, that is, fix a valuation upon; by implication to revere: honor, value (downloaded from E-Sword digital version of the King James Bible).

Works Cited


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