

How to Relate to Non-Christians



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *John 14:6; Acts 4:12; Rom. 1:18-20; 2:14-16; Phil. 2:5-11; Rev. 14:6, 7.*

Memory Text: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (*Acts 4:12, NIV*).

Many people today no longer want to hear about absolute truth. The various religions, including the Christian faith, are seen as equally valid ways to reach the beyond. Many claim that, in essence, we all worship the same God—we simply have different historically and culturally conditioned ways of doing so. Everyone should be allowed to have his or her own truth. And no belief system should claim superiority over another.

As Christians, of course, we reject that concept. The very nature of our Christianity demands we do. We maintain that the religion of Christ is unique and that we must continue to call people everywhere to become His disciples.

The question, then, remains for us: How should we relate to those who are not of the Christian faith? This week we look at some broad principles regarding this important topic.

The Week at a Glance: Why, as Christians, must we reject the notion that all religions are valid? How should we treat non-Christians? What's the best way to witness to them? Why should we witness to them? To whom does the three angels' messages go?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 28.*

Incurably Religious

All through human history, in almost every culture, in every age, even in the most adverse and trying conditions, humans have had belief in some sort of god or gods. Through the centuries the question has been asked: Where does this belief come from? Was religion “invented” or “discovered”? Does humanity’s belief in God originate in humanity itself, as a projection of some inner need? Has humankind always been religious? And if so, why so?

As Christians, we believe that religion originated with God, who has revealed Himself to us in various ways, the greatest revelation being that of Jesus Christ coming in the flesh, where He revealed to us the love and self-sacrificing character of the Lord.

Not everyone, though, has heard or known the good news of the love and character of our Lord. And yet, God has not forsaken these people, either. Remember, at the Cross, Christ died for the sins of the whole world (*1 John 2:2*); His death, by default, excluded no one (*John 3:16*); He suffered death for every person (*Heb. 2:9*). No one was left out, not even those who have never heard, nor will ever hear, of Christ’s death, at least in this life. Why would the Lord die in their behalf if they weren’t, somehow, offered the option of salvation?

Read Romans 1:18-20, 2:14-16. What do these texts tell us about those who haven’t heard directly about Jesus and the salvation He offers? Are they still accountable to God, and, if so, why?

Those who consciously turn their backs on God do so at their eternal risk, that’s for certain. But many have always lived in *darkness* through no fault of their own. Yet, even these people have had a limited revelation of God and, thus, will be held responsible only for what they knew in their deepest of hearts.

English poet Samuel Coleridge once suggested that instead of locking criminals in jail, the offenders should be placed in nature, where, seeing the natural world’s “soft influences,” they would turn from their evil ways. However nice an idealized and romantic view of the natural world this is, what are its flaws? What are the limits of what we can know about God, truth, and morality from nature alone?

Key Text: *Acts 4:12.*

Teachers Aims:

1. To capture the essence of Jesus' ministry, which involves selfless service to one's fellow human beings.
2. To understand how we, as Jesus' followers, are to relate to non-Christians.

Lesson Outline:

I. Innately Religious.

- A. Humanity's belief in God and its inner need to worship Him were put within the soul by God at Creation.
- B. Many deviate from true religion to the worship of other gods.

II. There Is Only One God and Savior!

- A. Adventist Christians must reject the postmodern worldview of *different truths for different folks.*
- B. With sensitivity and respect for the differences of others, Christians must seek to introduce the believers in Mohammed, Buddha, and Confucius to Jesus, the Savior of the world.

III. Christ's Methods Worked.

- A. Jesus met people where they were emotionally, spiritually, educationally, and financially.
- B. The methods of sharing the same message often vary in order to make the presentation more relevant to the people being reached.
- C. All nations and all faiths need to hear the truth as it is in Jesus.

Summary: All humans are the result of a loving Creator-God. As such, His desire is that all learn of Him and follow Him. Seventh-day Adventists have humbly accepted Jesus' challenge found in Matthew 28:19, 20 to "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations."

COMMENTARY

I. Christian Uniqueness and Non-Christian Religions.

I have known many people who were raised as Christians, with little or no exposure to what other religions teach and believe. Coming from such a background, it may be a shock to discover: (a) that adherents of other faiths may believe just as strongly in their own religion as the average Christian believes in Christianity, possibly more so; and (b) that these religions often do teach many positive precepts and high moral standards. The adherents of other faiths may even feel it is their duty to convert the Christian to what they see as the true faith

The Universal Claims

Read John 14:6. What is Jesus saying? Why would many people, especially in today’s world, find such words so hard to accept?

The religion of the Bible knows nothing of the notion of relativism, of each person seeking his or her own version of *truth*. There is only one God, one Creator, one Redeemer, one Lawgiver, and one means of salvation. Given the very nature of what we believe as Christians—that *all* the world is fallen into sin and that at the Cross Jesus Christ bore the sins of *all* people upon Himself—it’s hard to see how there can be different *truths* for different folk. The very claims of the Bible regarding Creation, Redemption, sin, are universal, encompassing every human being. Given these claims, then, it’s not realistic to assume that every other spiritual or religious path is valid, as long as those who are on these paths act from a sincere and loving heart.

Look up the following texts. What point do they make about the universality of the claims of the Bible? *Gen. 1:1, Rom. 3:23, 5:12, Heb. 2:9, Rev. 20:13.*

What all this means, then, is that we, as Christians, should preach to non-Christians, sharing with them what we believe. If Christianity is true, then other religions have to be false. This doesn’t mean there isn’t some good in these faiths, and we certainly aren’t in a position to judge the hearts of others, whatever their beliefs. Instead, because of the universal claims of Christianity, we must, in meekness, humility, and love tell others the good news of a loving God who sent His own Son into human flesh and in that flesh ransomed the world from sin. The claims of the Cross included everyone; everyone, therefore, must be told about it.

How do you respond to someone who makes the claim, “Well, your religion is just *your* truth; I have my own truth”? What’s wrong with that statement?

in the same way that Christians feel that they must evangelize the world for Christ.

All of this is very confusing to someone who may have been taught that non-Christians—or even merely non-Adventists—are ignorant of their own religions and are simply waiting for someone to come along and show them the Truth and free them from their dead, dreary legalism. What a shock to find that one’s audience is not applauding; they know their faith and like it. It answers their questions, and they feel they can answer your questions. What does it mean?

First of all, non-Christian religions often contain some very positive things. They have the best—and occasionally the worst, it is true—that humanity has to offer. Compassion can be found in Buddhism. Fierce dedication to the one God can be found in Islam. Nonviolence and vegetarianism can be found in Hinduism. Sublime contemplation of the divine and lofty ethical teaching can be found in all of them. But again, this is the best that humanity has to offer. It cannot offer what humanity does not have.

Human beings can preach higher morality and accurately grasp what it is, but they can’t live according to it consistently. Most human attempts to live a *good life*, according to one of the many moral or religious codes available, end up as hypocrisy to one degree or another, because we simply can’t do it. We also know very well what the problem is, at least in general outline: We are disconnected from the source of goodness. But we can’t seem to reconnect ourselves by means of any of these human-made paths.

So what is it that Christianity has that these other religions and codes don’t have? Christ. It is Christ who enables us to be good and who offers us the only way out of the prospect of eternal death.

II. Useful Quotes on Christian Uniqueness and Other Religions.

“What Christians believe is very different from what is believed by the adherents of other religions. But this element of search in the hope of finding is something they have in common with all others who in any way at all share in the same search, and are sincere in their desire and willingness to learn. It is this common element that makes it possible to speak of Christianity among the religions of the world.”—*Eerdmans Handbook to Christian Belief*, p. 192.

“If you are a Christian, you are free to think that all these religions, even the queerest ones, contain at least some hint of the truth. When I was an atheist I had to try to persuade myself that most of the human race have always been wrong about the question that mattered to them most; when I became a Christian I was able to take a more liberal view. But, of course, being a Christian does mean thinking that where Christianity differs from other religions, Christianity is right and they are wrong.”—C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London, U.K.: Fontana, 1952), p. 39.

Christ—the Only Way *(Acts 4:12)*.

It is often pointed out that other religions also have their heroes, just as Christianity has Christ. And, indeed, we must have great respect for Muhammad, who insisted—in a highly polytheistic society—upon the worship of one God. Who can't help respecting and admiring the Gautama Buddha's compassion and sensitivity to human suffering? And there's much good, too, in the profound teachings of Confucius.

But these people do not begin to compare with Jesus Christ, not in who they were nor in what they accomplished, nor even claimed to accomplish, for the world. To suggest that Jesus and these other people are simply different versions of good men teaching good things is to pervert the basic teaching of Scripture grossly. The Bible teaches that Jesus is the Savior of the world. Either we accept the claim fully, or we reject it fully. It's hard to see, with such a claim, how there can be any middle ground, any compromise.

What fundamental truth must we recognize when comparing Christianity with other religions? *Acts 4:12; see also Isa. 45:5.*

It's precisely because of the universality of what Christ has done that, as Christians—having now been redeemed by Jesus (*Eph. 1:7, Col. 1:14, Heb. 9:12*)—we should be motivated to tell others in order that they, by faith, can share in the promises of God made to them, as well.

“How then should we relate to those of other religions? First of all, we must treat them as fellow human beings—with respect and honor. . . . We need to approach them with openness, ready to listen and learn. In our finiteness we do not have all that we need at any point in our experience. Different points of emphasis may help to strengthen our own experience. Nor should we apologize for what we believe or our conviction that we have truth in having Jesus Christ. Never should we hesitate to witness to another. But our efforts must always reflect humility and avoid a spirit of triumphalism or a subtle attitude of imperialism.”—S. Kubo, *The God of Relationships* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Pub. Assn., 1993), p. 138.

How do you show respect for people and for their personal faith and integrity, while at the same time rejecting their beliefs? Or can you?

III. The Bible on Christian Uniqueness.

“ ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’ ” (*John 14:6, NIV*).

“Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: ‘Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To an Unknown God. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you’ ” (*Acts 17:22, 23, NIV*).

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Matthew 7:22-24; Acts 17:23, 28; 1 Corinthians 2:2, 8; 9:21-23.*

- ① Is it possible for someone to attain eternal life in the total absence of knowledge about Christ? If so, why should we attempt to acquaint people with Christ?
- ② Some people consciously reject Christ. But how might it be possible to reject Christ unconsciously, while still thinking we are following Him?
- ③ The very nature of Christianity teaches that it is not sufficient for someone to believe sincerely in something that is wholly or partly false. Why is sincerity not enough? Should it not be what is in someone’s heart that counts?
- ④ What should our attitude be toward teachers and prophets of other religions who taught good things and held high moral standards? Were they inspired in any real sense, or were they uniformly deceivers? What, if anything, can we learn from them?
- ⑤ To some extent, we have to meet people where they are in order to share the gospel with them. To what extent can we do this before we compromise our beliefs?
- ⑥ Acts 17 is about fitting the method used to preach the gospel to the methods of communication in a particular society. Have your class discuss why or why not the following methods of soul winning are effective for your part of the world: passing out tracts on a street corner; holding revival meetings in a church; conducting a series of health seminars; sponsoring an evangelistic series on TV; sponsoring a marriage seminar in the community; conducting Bible studies in homes; doing house-to-house visitation; putting *Jesus Saves* bumper stickers on your car; conducting a Vacation Bible School program.

All Things to All Men

Though the truths of what we believe are eternal and unchanging, the context in which we spread those truths is always changing. The approach one would take with an Indian shaman wouldn't be the same as with a New Age German banker; the witness to a Canadian Inuit living in the far end of the Yukon wouldn't be the same as with a Singaporean business executive. Though the message is the same, the methods often vary.

How did the apostle Paul apply this basic principle in his ministry? *Acts 16:1-3, 1 Cor. 9:19-23*. **How** does that explain his actions in Jerusalem? *Acts 21:17-26*. **What** principle of ministry do we see here by Paul's words and actions? Remember, too, that he is the same man who wrote Galatians 1:8, 9.

“More than 2 billion of the world's population will hear the gospel only if cross-cultural missionaries will make themselves servants and become all things to them. From tribes in Africa to heavy-metal rockers in the ‘jungles’ of New York City, from the sophisticated professional to the troubled teenager next door, people desperately need to hear the gospel in a context they can understand. Who will humble themselves and become incarnate as slaves for the sake of these souls? Who will go through the hard, risky business of contextualization so others may clearly hear the gospel?”—Jon Dybdahl, “Cross-Cultural Adaptation: How to Contextualize the Gospel,” *Ministry* (November 1992), p. 17.

In what perfect way was this principle of reaching people where they are realized in the ministry of our Savior? *Phil. 2:5-11*.

Christ came to meet us where we are. He assumed human form. He expressed Himself in human language. He became one of us. If, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the church wants to reach the modern world with the message of Christ, it will have to meet people where they are and speak the language of the people of today and not of a century ago.

Witnessing

Jesus was always aware of the people around Him and of the influence He had on them. Every act, word, glance, and even His silence was designed to point them to the truth. Christ met people where they were. He sought to meet their needs, whether those needs were physical, emotional, social, or psychological. Once their personal needs had been met, He could then reach them spiritually. If they were hungry or sick, He fed and healed them. (*See Mark 8:1-8, Luke 8:40-55.*) If they were bereaved, He comforted them. (*See Luke 8:49, 50.*) If they were lonely, He befriended them. (*See John 4:4-42.*) If they were tormented, He delivered them. (*See Mark 9:14-29.*) He also wove everyday experiences into stories that conveyed the truth. (*See Luke 15, 16.*) People could relate to these stories, because they were part of their own experiences.

How can we meet non-Christians where they are? Have your class discuss specific ways to find common ground with others, ways to help them fulfill their needs and their pure desires and interests.

Also discuss the role that our lifestyle, words, and acts of kindness have in witnessing to non-Christians. So often we think of lifestyle as what we eat, wear, etc. However, what does Romans 12:9-21 include in the area of Christian lifestyle? What principle underlies these verses, and how can that principle in itself be a witness to non-Christians? Each verse in this section contains one aspect of the Christian lifestyle. Discuss each one of these aspects as it relates to witnessing to non-Christians.

Christ's Method Alone

We've tried to show this week a crucial point regarding the universality of our faith; we can't be true to what we believe without believing that these truths that offer us so much hope offer that same hope to every other human being. The nature of the claims cry out for us to tell them to others. Indeed, that's an essential component of who we are as Seventh-day Adventists. It's also why, through the grace of God, we are in almost every country of the world.

Read Revelation 14:6, 7, the first angel's message. What does it tell us about whom we are to preach to?

That's every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, which would include those of every faith. Our commission is set before us in no uncertain terms.

At the same time, we must remember that no matter where people live, no matter their religious faith, no matter their beliefs, we are all the same, beings created in the image of God, beings who are sinners, beings who have basic needs. As Seventh-day Adventist Christians, we believe that the light that God has given us can help meet those needs better than anything else the world has to offer. The better we seek to meet those needs, the more we can reveal to the non-Christian world the love and character of God, and the more effective our witness will be.

Look at this quote from Ellen White: "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me.' "—*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 143. Why would an approach like this be effective for whatever people group we were seeking to reach?

The bottom line is that we live in a world filled with hurting, suffering people; the good news is that we worship and know the Lord, who cares about these people and their suffering. As Adventists, we can minister to them, even from our own personal sufferings, and point them to something better in this life, as well as to the only One who can give them eternal life. This is our calling; to do anything else would be unfaithful to that calling.

Talk to those in your church about ways to reach out to the non-Christian faiths in your own community. What practical things could you do to make a positive impact for the Lord?

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: A wood tick waits months for a feeling of warmth, the signal to attach itself to a food source. “How long the people of the world wait for the warmth of Jesus’ love—the presentation of which can come only from His followers living His life and spreading His warmth throughout the world.”—James A. and Priscilla Tucker, *Glimpses of God’s Love*, vol. 3, Aug. 15.

The difference in Adventists reaching out to non-Christians is that we supply the warmth while they feed not upon us but upon Christ.

Thought Questions:

- ❶ How different would be the attitude and effect of Adventist witnesses if they really understood their role in the spiritual food chain for the world?
- ❷ How can a person honor someone he or she does not respect?
- ❸ Ignoring a child is one of the cruelest forms of abuse. How would you spiritually nurture one of God’s untidy adult children? Also address the physical, mental, and emotional needs.

Application Questions:

- ❶ How can you be the instrument for correcting myths held by Christians of other faiths and draw them closer to the truth?
- ❷ Use the following activity to check your outreach options: Trace the outline of your hand on a piece of white paper. On the palm you drew, list your spiritual gifts and talents. On each finger write ways of making connections with non-Christians that are open to you because of your spiritual gifts. On the thumb write your prejudices that could sabotage what you have written on your fingertips. Write the words of James 1:5 beneath the hand. Include these words of wisdom in your daily prayers.

Further Study: “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.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 638.

“There is need of coming close to the people by personal effort. If less time were given to sermonizing, and more time were spent in personal ministry, greater results would be seen. The poor are to be relieved, the sick cared for, the sorrowing and bereaved comforted, the ignorant instructed, the inexperienced counseled. We are to weep with those that weep, and rejoice with those that rejoice. Accompanied by the power of persuasion, the power of prayer, the power of the love of God, this work will not, cannot, be without fruit.”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, p. 458.

Discussion Questions:

- ① **Look at that last quote from Ellen White. How can your church, as a whole, better manifest those principles in your community?**
- ② **To what extent do believers hold the eternal destiny of non-believers in their hands? Why did God choose to involve human beings in His plan of salvation?**

Summary: As Christians, we do not believe that our faith is just one path of many that ultimately leads to God. The Bible makes it clear that there’s only one path, and that’s through Jesus. Thus, it becomes crucial that we witness to those of every other faith, and the most effective way to do that is through kind, loving, self-sacrificing service. That’s how we are to relate to non-Christians. It’s also the essence of who we should be as Seventh-day Adventists.