

Respectful Witness

Grace and Truth: Toward Christlike Relationships with Muslims: An Affirmation

from a Global Network of Christians who love Muslims, including many who live and serve among them

Jesus calls his followers to experience and live out the love of God. This love is made accessible to all people through Christ, who came to the world “full of grace and truth.” However, because of cultural differences, threats of terrorism and negative stereotypes of Muslims, many of God’s people shrink back from fulfilling Jesus’ command to love all people. Scripture teaches us how followers of Christ can interact with Muslims in a Christ-honoring fashion.

We note that the Islamic World contains significant theological and ideological diversity. The spectrum of Muslim perspectives and practice ranges from secularists, modernists and some traditionalists, to extremist Islamists who promote militant jihad. Recognizing this great diversity, we affirm nine biblical guidelines that can enable Jesus’ followers to serve as his representatives in relationship with Muslims of every persuasion.

1. Be Faithful to God’s Truth — the Whole Truth

We seek to relate to Muslims on the basis of the core convictions of Christian faith, not by hiding or diminishing them. Relating to Muslims with respect, understanding and love includes bearing faithful witness to essential truths of the gospel. Jesus is Lord. Forgiveness, salvation and eternal life are free gifts of God’s grace available to any person through repentance and faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection. We seek to obey the whole will of God, with its implications for every part of our lives in this world (Matt 22:37, 39; 28:20; Micah 6:8).

2. Be Jesus-Centered in our Interaction

Our focus is Jesus because he is the essence of the gospel. God has revealed himself to us by taking human form. We say with Paul: “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2 NIV). We affirm a Jesus-centered approach to Muslims because it highlights the treasure of the gospel. It does not confuse the good news with Christendom, patriotism or our civilization. Jesus is our model, and we seek to embody his life in all we say and do.

3. Be Truthful and Gracious in our Words and Witness

We seek to be accurate when we speak about Muslims and their faith. Overstatement, exaggeration and words taken out of context should not be found among followers of Jesus, for he calls us to be careful about the words we speak (Matt 12:36). God commands us not to bear false witness against our

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neighbor (Ex 20:16) and to do unto others as we would have them do unto us (Matt 7:12). Thus we endeavor to speak truthfully about Muslims, and we seek to be clear and positive in our communication of the gospel to Muslims.

As much as it depends on us, we seek to live at peace with all people, while acknowledging that speaking the truth, even graciously, will offend some. We acknowledge that respectful and gracious witness does not imply naiveté or silence about troublesome issues. We are called to speak the truth in love. At the same time we refuse to project onto all Muslims a violent agenda espoused by only a minority. We choose to relate to Muslims as unique individuals rather than assuming they fit our stereotype of a “Muslim.” Moreover, we refuse to prioritize concerns of political power and self-protection above the commands of Scripture, such as love for neighbor (Matt 22:39). We affirm that proclaiming the Good News of Christ’s love is a higher priority than defending our culture.

4. Be Wise in our Words and Witness
God’s Word calls us to share our faith wisely. “Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity” (Col 4:5). What does wisdom look like in practice? According to James, “the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:17-18 NIV).

In our interaction with articles, books and commentators, we need to discern between those reflecting the wisdom from above and those whose approach is “earthly”. We need to embrace that which is impartial and sincere, neither glossing over vital truths nor telling only one side of a story.

5. Be Respectful and Bold in our Witness

In the spirit of the Prince of Peace, respectful witness focuses on giving a positive presentation of the gospel. It does not attack the other or avoid

presenting truth. As the apostle Peter says: “In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15 NIV). Numerous biblical examples (i.e. Acts 4:31; 9:27-28; 13:46; 14:3; 17:30-31; 19:8) invite us to emulate the boldness of early believers in sharing the good news. In obedience to the Scripture, we seek to be both respectful and bold in our witness.

6. Be Prudent in our Google-ized World

In the past, when leaders in a religious community spoke, it was only heard by their own community. But today our words ricochet around the world. When we try to explain who we are, what we believe, what we do, and why we do it, our words may reach beyond our primary audience and enter the global marketplace of ideas. After saying something controversial, an outspoken leader may try to clarify his statement. But the damage is already done. Words are powerful. Prudence is required. “A man of knowledge uses words with restraint” (Prov 17:27).

7. Be Persistent in our Call for Religious Freedom

We affirm the right of religious freedom for every person and community. We defend the right of Muslims to express their faith respectfully among Christians and of Christians to express their faith respectfully among Muslims. Moreover, we affirm the right of Muslims and Christians alike to change religious beliefs, practices and/or affiliations according to their conscience (2 Cor 4:2). Thus we stand against all forms of religious persecution toward Muslims, Christians, or anyone else.

8. Be Peaceable and Uncompromising in our Dialogue

Dialogue between Muslims and Christians provides us with opportunities to understand Muslims, build relationships, engage in peacemaking and share our faith. We seek to share the gospel respectfully and boldly, without compromise—as Paul “reasoned with” people

(dialegomai - Acts 17:2, 17). Through dialogue, we work toward mutual respect, graciously bearing witness to our faith and working toward religious freedom. Ultimately, we long to see as many as possible reconciled with God, through the person of Christ.

9. Be Loving toward All

The world’s Muslims are our neighbors, as Jesus used the term (Luke 10:29-37). The command of God to his people stands for all time: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18; Luke 10:27b). How can a follower of Christ take seriously Jesus’ command to love our neighbor, and at the same time address the real threat of terrorism (by those who position themselves as our enemies)? Jesus’ teaching about love of enemy (Luke 6:35) is among the most radical and most ignored commands in the Bible. We do not want to engage in the “hermeneutics of evasion”—figuring out ways to interpret Jesus’ command so it doesn’t apply to our lives.

Both peacemakers and those who love their enemies are described as “sons [or daughters] of God” (Matt 5:9, 44; Luke 6:35). They are called children of God because they are acting like their Father: the God of Peace (Phil 4:9; 1 Thess 5:23). In other words, peacemakers and those who love their enemies demonstrate their authenticity as children of God by their words and acts of peace. Jesus modeled this by loving us and laying down his life for us, “while we were enemies” (Rom 5:10; cf. Col 1:21). Responding to enemies with self-giving, sacrificial love demonstrates the gospel.

Conclusion

We have been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18, 19). The commission to “make disciples of all nations” has not been rescinded. Neither have the commands to demonstrate sacrificial love and to work toward peace. There is no separate gospel for wartime and peacetime. The message of God’s love in Christ is for all times, places and peoples. We affirm the nine biblical guidelines presented here for all followers of Christ, that we may remain faithful to him and become more fruitful in our relationships with Muslims.

We, the undersigned, affirm this statement as a Christ-honoring, biblical approach toward Christian relationships with Muslims.

- Dr. Martin Accad*, Associate Professor of Islamic Studies, Fuller School of Intercultural Studies
- Amos Aderonmu*, International Director Calvary Ministries (CAPRO) Lagos, Nigeria
- Dr. Tokunboh Adeyemo*, Executive Director of the Centre of Biblical Transformation, General Editor, *Africa Bible Commentary*
- Devine Amattey*, Author
- Dr. Leith Anderson*, President, National Association of Evangelicals
- Rev. Johnson Asare*, National Director, Markaz Al Bishara, Ghana
- Sami Awad*, Executive Director, Holy Land Trust
- Chris Baars*, Amsterdam
- James A. Beverley, Ph.D.*, Prof. of Christian Thought and Ethics, Tyndale Seminary, Toronto Associate Director, Institute for the Study of American Religion, Santa Barbara, CA
- David Bok*, Independent Bible teacher, The Navigators, Singapore
- Gary M. Burge, Ph.D.*, Professor of New Testament, Department of Biblical & Theological Studies, Wheaton College and Graduate School, Wheaton, Illinois
- Brother Thomas Bruce*, Founder and Spokesman, Adopt a Terrorist for Prayer (ATFP.org)
- Juan C. Cardenas*, Lecturer, Islamic Studies IIbET, Granada, Spain
- Rev. Colin Chapman*, formerly lecturer in Islamic Studies, Near East School of Theology, Beirut, Lebanon
- Bill Christensen*, Associate Pastor, Vineyard Columbus, OH
- Dave Davis*, Muslim Ministries Coordinator, TEAM
- James Ehrman*, Executive Director, World Christianity Initiative at Yale
- Ajith Fernando*, National Director, Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka
- Stefan Henger*, SIM
- Dr. David P. Gushee*, Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics, Mercer University
- Jim Haney*, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia
- Craig Heselton*, Executive Pastor, Vineyard Church of Columbus
- Edward J. Hoskins, MD, Ph.D., FAASFP* Physician and Quality Improvement Coordinator at a major Midwestern university, Associate Staff with an International Non-Demoninational Christian Organization, West Lafayette, Indiana
- David L. Johnston, Ph.D.*, Adjunct Lecturer, University of Pennsylvania and St. Joseph's University
- Mark Kim*, Korean Representative, Islam Ministries Network
- Dr. Dietrich Kuhl*, Former International Director, WEC International
- Dr. Renate Kuhl*, Germany
- Warren F. Larson, Ph.D.*, Director, Zwemer Center for Muslim Studies
- Bill Leick*, Church Based Teams Coach
- Rev. Phil Linton*, Associate Minister, Ward Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Northville, MI
- Bob Lopez*, International Director Philippine Missions Association
- Rick Love, Ph.D.*, Consultant for Christian-Muslim Relations, Vineyard, USA
- Dr. David Lundy*, International Director, Arab World Ministries
- Peter Maiden*, International Coordinator, OM
- Dr. Douglas K. Magnuson*, Bethel University
- Mazhar Mallouhi*, Director, Al Kalima
- Allan Matamoros*, International Director, Pueblos Musulmanes Internacional
- Don McCurry*, Professor of Missions, New Geneva Theological Seminary, Colorado Springs, CO
- Carl Medearis*, Founder and President of International Initiatives, Author of *Muslims, Christians and Jesus*
- Pei Medill*, Insurance agent for Good Neighbor Insurance
- Charakat Moucary*, World Vision, International Director of Inter-Faith Relations
- Danny Mullins*, Associate Pastor, Vineyard Church, Gilbert, AZ
- Salim Munayer, Ph.D.*
- Rich Nathan*, Senior Pastor, Vineyard Church Columbus, OH
- S. Kent Parks, Ph.D.*, CEO, Mission to Unreached Peoples Lausanne Senior Associate, Least Evangelized Peoples
- Phil Parshall*, SIM Missionary at Large
- Neal Pirola*, Director, Emmaus Road International
- Keith Rascher*, International Leader, MENA
- Steve Robbins, Ph.D.*, Director, Vineyard Leadership Institute
- Leonard Rodgers*, Executive Director, Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding
- Rev. Dr. Nabor Samaila*, Dean, Student Affairs ECWA Theological Seminary Jos, Nigeria
- Rev. Juan J. Sarmiento*, PM Internacional, US Director
- Glen G. Scorgie, Ph.D.*, Professor of Theology, Bethel Seminary San Diego, San Diego, CA
- Joey Shaw*, Minister of International Outreach The Austin Stone Community Church, Austin, TX
- Dr. Imad Shehadeh*, President and Professor of Theology, Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary
- David W. Shenk*, Consultant, Eastern Mennonite Missions
- Bruce Sidebotham, D.Min.*, Director, Operation Reveille
- Ronald J. Sider*, President Evangelicals for Social Action
- Craig Simonian*, Pastor, Vineyard Community Church, Morristown, NJ
- Wilbur P. Stone, Ph.D.*, Program Director and Lead Faculty, Global and Contextual Studies Bethel University/ Seminary, St. Paul, MN
- Steve Strauss*, Director, SIM USA
- J. Paul Tanner, Ph.D.*, Theological Educator, BEE World
- Steve Tollestrup*, Director of the World Evangelical Alliance Peacebuilding and Reconciliation Initiative, Director of TEAR Fund, New Zealand
- Jamie Wood*, Director, Pioneers New Zealand
- J. Dudley Woodberry*, Senior Professor of Islamic Studies and Dean Emeritus of Fuller School of Intercultural Studies
- Dr. Christopher J. H. Wright*, International Director, Langham Partnership International Chair, Lausanne Theology Working Group
- Jan Zwart*, International Speaker, The Netherlands