

Mahabba Network
Position Statement

Responding to Muslims with ‘grace & truth’ ^(John 1:17)

- *facing facts not fuelling fear*

1. *The national context*

‘You can safely assume that you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.’ (1)

The changing political climate (on both sides of the Atlantic) is making British society more abusive towards minorities – including the Jewish community; gay people; non-white sportspeople; the police; MPs (especially female and non-white); those with opposing political views; and not least towards Muslims. (2)

Of special concern to the *Mahabba Network* is that some Evangelical Christians are exhibiting strident attitudes; often based on media stereotyping and political rhetoric from some pulpits and online. *Mahabba* exists to see ministry among people of Muslim heritage become a normal part of church life. It does this by encouraging prayer; envisioning the Christian community about the opportunities; and enabling all Christians to engage well with Muslims.

Mahabba is a movement of Evangelicals who interact with Muslims in the workplace; through their local church; community initiatives; academia; work with refugees; local politics; and Christian organisations. The interaction is out of civic duty as well as Christian witness. *Mahabba* embraces all interaction that is as faithful to the spirit of Jesus as it is to the gospel truth – the *kerygma* (the technical term for the historic Christian ‘message’ and ‘method’ of conveying it). (3) We therefore affirm interaction which avoids being unethical; ineffective for cultural reasons; that is not biblically permissible; or that doesn’t desire (where possible) an ongoing relationship. *Mahabba* refers to this sort of interaction as ‘grace and truth’. This paper defines; describes and justifies it more fully – with particular reference to faith-based interaction.

2. *Defining ‘grace and truth’*

‘The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we saw his glory...full of grace and truth’ (Jn.1:14).

The expression ‘grace and truth’ was first coined by the Apostle John who described it as who Jesus is; not just what he did or said (Jn.14:6). It is not something Jesus merely believed but what he was ‘full of’ (Jn.1:14). “Truth” is not merely accurate information, but also what is “real”. Jesus modelled this by “**being**” good news (i.e. in *heart* by his attitude); “**doing**” good news (i.e. in deeds with his *hands*); and “**telling**” good news (i.e. in proclamation from his *head*). In this way, ‘being’, ‘doing’ and ‘telling’ fuse into one seamless ‘grace and truth’ whole (i.e. ‘wholistic’ gospel ministry).

The ‘apostles’ doctrine’ includes witness with ‘grace and truth’. The Apostle Paul urges: ‘Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.’ (Col.1:28; 4:5-6).

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The *Mahabba Network* recognizes ‘wholistic’ gospel witness because the Apostle John said, Jesus:

- was the ultimate model of ministry with ‘grace and truth’ (Jn.1:14,17)
- was “enfleshed” in humanity (Jn.1:14a) i.e. ‘incarnational’ ministry
- ‘made his home among us’ (Jn.1:14b) i.e. ministry in our ‘proximity’
- was ‘in closest relationship with the Father’ (Jn.1:14c) i.e. ‘relational’
- ‘made the Father known’ (Jn.1:17) i.e. ministry making God understandable
- used “word” (verbal); “wonder” (supernatural) and “work” (practical) (Jn.21:25)

3. What Christian witness with 'grace & truth' looks like

'Our love grows soft if it is not strengthened by truth, and our truth grows hard if it is not softened by love.' (John Stott) (4)

A "Christly" attitude is a courtesy to Muslims who – for cultural reasons – need us to convey spiritual issues within the context of relationship. The *Mahabba Network* therefore affirms statements such as the *Ethical Guidelines for faith witness*, as devised by the Christian/Muslim Forum and endorsed by Lambeth Palace (5) and *The Affirmation of a Global Network of Christians* (6).

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The *Mahabba Network* believes the aim of a 'grace and truth' disposition is to:

- i) hold in creative tension, the *Great Command* of Christ to 'love' (i.e. grace) (7) and the *Great Commission* of Christ to 'reach out with a message' (i.e. truth) (8)
- ii) witness in the 'spirit' of *Beatitudes*, Jesus' "beautiful attitudes" (Mat.5:3-11; Is.42:3).
- iii) retain ongoing relationship, rather than win a one-off "victory".
- iv) aim to make the only offense we cause, that of the Cross.
- v) avoid intentionally insulting a Muslim's psychological "mother" (i.e. the *Oumma* or community).
- vi) avoid violating the honour code by 'shaming' Muslims into believing the gospel.
- vii) befriend as a cultural "courtesy", rather than a tactical "deception".
- viii) say: 'I'm not your friend so you will follow Jesus, but I want you to follow Jesus because you're my friend; and even if you don't follow Jesus, I'll still be your friend.' (9)
- ix) be part of the answer, rather than part of the problem.
- x) be a peacemaker not just "nice" (10)
- xi) pour 'oil on troubled waters' rather than 'petrol on fire'. (see The Prayer of St. Francis)
- xii) not happy to 'bear false witness against our neighbour' (Ex.20:16) by irresponsibly using unsourced statistics; unsubstantiated media claims; nor to exaggerate or sensationalise.

4. How we understand the word "Evangelical"

'An Evangelical is not merely someone who believes what the Bible teaches, but they are truly an Evangelical, who believes whatever else the Bible may be shown to teach' (John Stott) (11)

The *Mahabba Network* is orthodox Evangelical in belief and practice. We understand an "Evangelical" to be someone, who is a follower of Jesus Christ; believes and personally embraces the gospel; takes the Bible seriously; and seeks to 'walk as Jesus walked' (1 Jn.2:6).

We affirm the core characteristics of the Evangelical heritage as a commitment to being: "biblicist" (Bible-centred); "cruci-centrist" (Cross-centred); "conversionist" (belief in regeneration) and "activist" (social engagement for Christ). (12) We see this as being most effectively lived out in whole-life engagement; balancing 'verbal proclamation' with 'works of service' to the whole person.

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The *Mahabba Network* believes the following is true of 'Evangelicalism'. Clearly, no one sector of Evangelicalism has a monopoly on truth. We are all learning (Ac.17:11). However, the *Mahabba Network* can affirm that, based on the model of Jesus (Jn.1), Christian witness is not just about "telling" good news (i.e. verbal proclamation) but also "being" good news (i.e. attitude) and "doing" good news (i.e. works of service).

5. How we understand the Bible

'We believe the issue is not how faithful we are to our 'theological tribe', but – how faithful our 'theological tribe' is, to the Bible.' (13)

The *Mahabba Network* understands the term "biblical" to mean issues supported (directly or indirectly) by the teaching of the prophets of the Old Testament and in Jesus and the Apostles of the New Testament. We recognise that our Western understanding of the sweep of Scripture is influenced by Western European scholars who bring their own culture to the Bible, even though it came from a Middle Eastern context. So, we don't assume that the Western understanding of the Bible is definitive and infallible.

We try to avoid conveying the gospel to Muslims, using Western forms and assumptions, because that could, arguably be tantamount to "theological imperialism". We are, however, committed to finding culturally appropriate ways to communicate the truth of the timeless and global gospel. Let's aim to be 'conservative on Scripture but radical on everything else.' (14)

TO READ MORE>>>

The *Mahabba Network* affirms the following about the Bible:

- i) 'All theology is contextual.' (John Stott)
- ii) The centre of gravity in world Christianity, has shifted from the Western 'Christianlands', to the southern continents. While Western theology is important to Westerners, any scholarship can only speak into the setting in which it was produced. (15)

6. How we understand Islam

The 'grace and truth' response to Muslims is somewhere 'between naivety and hostility'. (16) The *Mahabba Network* recognizes the access-points for the gospel in the Islamic tradition. For example, Islam affirms many peripheral elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition, while contradicting the core non-negotiable elements of the gospel.

We try to avoid a binary analysis seeing everything as 'black or white'; choosing instead to account for the nuances of both 'light' elements (e.g. prayer, giving, fasting) and 'dark' elements (e.g. rejection of the deity and passion of Christ). History shows all "religion" (Christianity included) as being capable of being both a conduit for devout 'heart-hunger' after God, as well as for coercion, manipulation, abuse and even violence (i.e. 'dangerous religion'). (17)

Given that Islam has Semitic roots and 25% of the Qur'an is a direct reference to the biblical text (18), we recognize the considerable Christian scholarship, which identifies Islam as borrowing heavily from ancient Judaism (e.g. Abraham and circumcision; Moses and law; adopting of the Hebrew prophetic tradition, holy war). This makes it ethically and theologically an 'Old Covenant' oriented religio-political phenomenon, as demonstrated by its teaching on the nature of God; revelation; gender arrangements in marriage and society; a religious legal code; and holy war. To this extent Islam is chronologically AD in its founding, but theologically BC in its thinking (i.e. it remains un-informed by the New Covenant of divine grace in Christ, as attested to in both testaments).

We realise we must not be complacent; nor should we forget that our priorities are to be shaped by the 'Great Commission' and the 'Great Command' of Christ to love (Mat.22:37). Islam's roots provide multiple access points for Christian witness; focusing less on Islam the religion and more on a Muslim's experience of it, as a person. We see the Muslim presence less as a threat and more as a missional opportunity (Ac.17:26-27).

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The *Mahabba Network* acknowledges that Islam is a Semitic phenomenon. This yields many points of contact or bridges for the *entre* of the gospel.

- i) The Judaic elements are widely recognized in Christian scholarship where some scholars and analysts have even referred to Islam, as an Arabized form of ancient Judaism. (19)
- ii) With regards to the International Charter of Human Rights, Islam is a mediaeval tradition that is being challenged to find its way in the modern world, while an enforced “reforming” process is arguably at work in an increasingly globalised world.
- iii) “Islam” and “Muslim” are not the same thing, as a “Communist” is not “Communism”. Many (so called) ‘Muslims’ are actually non-religious – identifying as secular; gay; even atheist. We distinguish between the minority of militants engaged in ‘dangerous religion’ and the many fair-minded Muslims, with a heart after God as they understand him.

7. How we understand the immigrant community

The *Mahabba Network* recognises the scope of the Great Commission (20) as including our own ‘Jerusalem’ (locally); our own ‘Judea’ (nationally); and to the ends of the earth (globally) (Ac.1:8). Jesus added the category of ‘Samaria’ (i.e. immigrants who are ‘foreign’ but local). This takes us out of our comfort zone to engage in the cross-cultural transmission of the gospel.

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The *Mahabba Network* takes the following view of the Great Commission in a multi-cultural society:

- i) We note how Jesus turned Samaritans, from being a mental ‘stumbling block’ and threat, into a missional ‘stepping-stone’ to the nations. Today, the reverse is happening in that all four locations are reflected among the immigrant communities now living in our postcode (Ac.1:8; Ac.8:14).
- ii) The Great Commission involves “word” (proclamation), “work” (works of service) and “wonder” (healing and deliverance). Word and work are a *polarity* (i.e. two opposites, which need each another), rather than a *dichotomy* (i.e. two opposites, which fight each other).
- iii) Jesus warned about people denigrating the gospel or abusing us; instructing us to respond graciously when people ‘...revile and persecute you and say evil against you falsely,’ (Mat.5:11-13). Paul says: ‘It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His name.’ (Phils.1:29; Jn.12:2)

The Trustees of *Mahabba Network*

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