

AlbertMohler.com

Why I Signed *The Manhattan Declaration*

Monday, November 23, 2009

I am not inclined to sign manifestos or petitions. While believing strongly and passionately about many causes, I am not usually impressed with the effectiveness of such statements and I am generally concerned about how such statements might be used or construed by others. I am not reluctant to speak for myself and from my own Christian convictions and consequent judgments. Furthermore, the constant exchange of opposing statements on this or that issue merely crowds the public square as opposing viewpoints compete for attention. So, for reasons perhaps both admirable and not so admirable, I prefer to stand on my own public statements.

Manhattan Declaration

But I signed *The Manhattan Declaration*. Indeed, I am among the original signatories to that statement, released to the public at the National Press Club last Friday. Why?

There are several reasons, but they all come down to this — I believe we are facing an inevitable and culture-determining decision on the three issues centrally identified in this statement. I also believe that we will experience a significant loss of Christian churches, denominations, and institutions in this process. There is every good reason to believe that the freedom to conduct Christian ministry according to Christian conviction is being subverted and denied before our eyes. I believe that the sanctity of human life, the integrity of marriage, and religious liberty are very much in danger at this very moment.

The signatories to *The Manhattan Declaration* include evangelical leaders, as well as leaders from the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches. The statement establishes the priority of the issues addressed:

While the whole scope of Christian moral concern, including a special concern for the poor and vulnerable, claims our attention, we are especially troubled that in our nation today the lives of the unborn, the disabled, and the elderly are severely threatened; that the institution of marriage, already buffeted by promiscuity, infidelity and divorce, is in jeopardy of being redefined to accommodate fashionable ideologies; that freedom of religion and the rights of conscience are gravely jeopardized by those who would use the instruments of coercion to compel persons of faith to compromise their deepest convictions.

Further:

Because the sanctity of human life, the dignity of marriage as a union of husband and wife, and the freedom of conscience and religion are foundational principles of justice and the common good, we are compelled by our Christian faith to speak and act in their defense. In this declaration we affirm: 1) the profound, inherent, and equal dignity of every human being as a creature fashioned in the very image of God, possessing inherent rights of equal dignity and life; 2) marriage as a conjugal union of man and woman, ordained by God from the creation, and historically understood by believers and nonbelievers alike, to be the most basic institution in society and; 3) religious liberty, which is grounded in the character of God, the example of Christ, and the inherent freedom and dignity of human beings created in the divine image.

The Culture of Death looms over our civilization, threatening every human being and the very right of our fellow

citizens to experience life and to be respected at every stage of development. The statement calls for all Christians to “be united and untiring in our efforts to roll back the license to kill that began with the abandonment of the unborn to abortion.” But the issue of the sanctity of human life reaches far beyond abortion, to the threats of genocide, “ethnic cleansing,” euthanasia, assisted suicide, and the destruction of human embryos for medical experimentation.

On marriage, the statement includes a humble admission of our own Christian complicity in its subversion: “We confess with sadness that Christians and our institutions have too often scandalously failed to uphold the institution of marriage and to model for the world the true meaning of marriage.” The declaration goes on to state:

The impulse to redefine marriage in order to recognize same-sex and multiple partner relationships is a symptom, rather than the cause, of the erosion of the marriage culture. It reflects a loss of understanding of the meaning of marriage as embodied in our civil and religious law and in the philosophical tradition that contributed to shaping the law. Yet it is critical that the impulse be resisted, for yielding to it would mean abandoning the possibility of restoring a sound understanding of marriage and, with it, the hope of rebuilding a healthy marriage culture. It would lock into place the false and destructive belief that marriage is all about romance and other adult satisfactions, and not, in any intrinsic way, about procreation and the unique character and value of acts and relationships whose meaning is shaped by their aptness for the generation, promotion and protection of life.

The declaration includes a pledge “to labor ceaselessly to preserve the legal definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman and to rebuild the marriage culture.” Why? “The Bible teaches us that marriage is a central part of God’s creation covenant. Indeed, the union of husband and wife mirrors the bond between Christ and his church.”

The threat to religious liberty is a clear and present danger — not a remote danger on a far horizon. As the statement rightly reminds us:

We see this, for example, in the effort to weaken or eliminate conscience clauses, and therefore to compel pro-life institutions (including religiously affiliated hospitals and clinics), and pro-life physicians, surgeons, nurses, and other health care professionals, to refer for abortions and, in certain cases, even to perform or participate in abortions. We see it in the use of anti discrimination statutes to force religious institutions, businesses, and service providers of various sorts to comply with activities they judge to be deeply immoral or go out of business. After the judicial imposition of “same-sex marriage” in Massachusetts, for example, Catholic Charities chose with great reluctance to end its century long work of helping to place orphaned children in good homes rather than comply with a legal mandate that it place children in same-sex households in violation of Catholic moral teaching. In New Jersey, after the establishment of a quasimarital “civil unions” scheme, a Methodist institution was stripped of its tax exempt status when it declined, as a matter of religious conscience, to permit a facility it owned and operated to be used for ceremonies blessing homosexual unions. In Canada and some European nations, Christian clergy have been prosecuted for preaching Biblical norms against the practice of homosexuality. New hate crime laws in America raise the specter of the same practice here.

Further:

In recent decades a growing body of case law has paralleled the decline in respect for religious values in the media, the academy and political leadership, resulting in restrictions on the free exercise of religion. We view this as an ominous development, not only because of its threat to the individual liberty guaranteed to every person, regardless of his or her faith, but because the trend also threatens the common welfare and the culture of freedom on which our system of republican government is founded.

Finally, *The Manhattan Declaration* ends with a statement of public conscience and conviction. These words are meant to send a very clear message — we cannot and will not abandon or compromise our Christian convictions:

Because we honor justice and the common good, we will not comply with any edict that purports to compel our institutions to participate in abortions, embryo-destructive research, assisted suicide and euthanasia, or any other anti-life act; nor will we bend to any rule purporting to force us to bless immoral sexual partnerships, treat them as marriages or the equivalent, or refrain from proclaiming the truth, as we know it, about morality and immorality and marriage and the family. We will fully and ungrudgingly render to Caesar what is Caesar’s. But under no circumstances will we render to Caesar what is God’s.

I signed *The Manhattan Declaration* because I believe it is an historic statement of conviction and courage that is both timely and urgent. Over the course of the next few months and years, these issues will be reset in our culture and its laws. These are matters on which the Christian conscience cannot be silent. There are, of course, other issues that demand Christian attention as well. The focus on these three issues is forced by the circumstances of current threats as well as the awareness that the time of decision on these questions has come. Though Christians struggle to understand the extent to which our convictions should be incorporated in the law, we must now recognize that the very respect for these convictions — and the freedom to follow and obey these convictions in our own lives, families, and ministries is now at stake.

I signed *The Manhattan Declaration* because I lead a theological seminary and college, serve as a teaching pastor in a church, and am engaged in Christian leadership in the public square. Thus I see the threats to Christian liberties that now stare us in the face. The freedom not to perform a same-sex marriage is one thing, but what about the freedom to hire employees according to our Christian convictions? What about the right of Christian ministries to conduct their work according to Christian beliefs? What about the freedom to preach and teach against the grain of the nation's laws (for example, after the legalization of same-sex marriage)? When do hate crimes laws slide into definitions of "hate speech?" The threats to our religious liberties are immediate and urgent.

I signed *The Manhattan Declaration* because it is a limited statement of Christian conviction on these three crucial issues, and not a wide-ranging theological document that subverts confessional integrity. I cannot and do not sign documents such as *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* that attempt to establish common ground on vast theological terrain. I could not sign a statement that purports, for example, to bridge the divide between Roman Catholics and evangelicals on the doctrine of justification. *The Manhattan Declaration* is not a manifesto for united action. It is a statement of urgent concern and common conscience on these three issues — the sanctity of human life, the integrity of marriage, and the defense of religious liberty.

My beliefs concerning the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches have not changed. The Roman Catholic Church teaches doctrines that I find both unbiblical and abhorrent — and these doctrines define nothing less than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But *The Manhattan Declaration* does not attempt to establish common ground on these doctrines. We remain who we are, and we concede no doctrinal ground.

But when Catholic Charities in Massachusetts chose to end its historic ministry of placing orphaned children in good homes because the State of Massachusetts required it to place children with same-sex couples, this is not just a Catholic issue. The orphanage could have easily been Baptist. When Belmont Abbey college in North Carolina is told by federal authorities that it must offer abortion services in its insurance plans for employees, this is no longer just a Catholic issue. The next institution to be under attack might well be Presbyterian. We are in this together, and we had better be thankful that, in this case, we are not alone.

Finally, I signed *The Manhattan Declaration* because I want to put my name on its final pledge — that we will not bend the knee to Caesar. We will not participate in any subversion of life. We will not be forced to accept any other relationship as equal in status or rights to heterosexual marriage. We will not refrain from proclaiming the truth — and we *will* order our churches and institutions and ministries by Christian conviction.

There will be Christian leaders, pastors, seminaries, colleges, universities, denominations, churches, and organizations that will abandon the faith on these issues. They *will* bend the knee to Caesar. Far too many already have. The signatories to *The Manhattan Declaration* pledge that we will not be among them.

I want my name on that list. I surrendered no conviction or confessional integrity to sign that statement. No one asked me to compromise in any manner. I was encouraged that we could stand together to make clear that to come for one of us on *these* issues is to come for all. At the end of the day, I did not want my name missing from that list when folks look to see just who was willing to be listed.

I am always glad to hear from readers and listeners. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.