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Applying Biblical Hermeneutics to Important Issues Facing the Church

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The Manhattan Declaration: An Evaluation

by Dave James

A week ago today, the Manhattan Declaration was released by Chuck Colson and almost 150 other signers at the National Press Conference. Since then there have been countless blogs and articles written about the 4700-word document and the response has been quite mixed.

Predictably, it has been denounced by liberals of all stripes who support the LGBT agenda and who advocate "a woman's right to choose." But neither has it been received well by those who would consider themselves to be evangelicals, but who also challenge the historical view that the Bible condemns homosexual behavior.

In contrast, a significant number of Christians have enthusiastically embraced the Manhattan Declaration. With the number of signers via the internet now at 184,780 and counting. They have joined the original signatories in voicing their concern that as America continues its turn to the left, led by the present administration, they are prepared to take a stand to protect life, marriage and religious liberty.

Yet, another view has been expressed by some Christians who have not signed the Manhattan Declaration. In this view, the Manhattan Declaration is itself a cause for concern, being seen as a misguided ecumenical cooperative effort that conservative evangelicals would do well to avoid. John MacArthur has written a cogent blog from this perspective.

To make matters more confusing for the average evangelical believer, it must be noted that there are good, solid, conservative theologians on both sides of the issue. This would tend to indicate that whatever our personal opinion might be, the "correct" response is probably not as obvious nor as certain as we might hope or desire. So, after a week of reading, talking, thinking and praying, I'm going to take my own stab at evaluating the Manhattan Declaration and developing a framework of principles for responding to this document, as well as the overall situation that precipitated it.

First, I would say that overall the Manhattan Declaration is a carefully crafted, well-worded document. It was obviously written out of both passion and conviction. It would be difficult to fault the drafters in their intentions or desire to make a difference in the "culture wars."

Second, I think all who truly believe in the authority of Scripture should agree with the framers of the Manhattan Declaration concerning the three specific issues it addresses, namely, life, marriage and religious liberty. It affirms that life begins at conception and should be allowed to continue until natural death (Exodus 20:13; Job 1:21; Psalm 139:12, 16; Jeremiah 1:14). It affirms that marriage was instituted by God to be solely between a man and a woman and that sexual relations are to be only within that relationship (Genesis 2:21-24; Matthew 19:5,6; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9). And it affirms the principle of religious liberty

which seems to be legitimately rooted in the truth of Matthew 22:21 ("Render unto Caesar...and to God...") and Acts 5:29 ("We ought to obey God rather than men.")

And third, I believe that as American citizens we have a legal right and a moral responsibility to participate in the democratic process in upholding and preserving the rights we have as guaranteed by the Constitution, as well as the ideals upon which this country was founded.

It could be argued that the Moral Majority, founded by Jerry Falwell in 1979, provides an historic backdrop and precedent for the Manhattan Declaration. The Moral Majority became the politically active extension of the Christian Right, which was riding the wave of the resurging political conservatism that swept Ronald Reagan into office in 1980. The Moral Majority sought to gain an influence in governmental policies and legislation, such that they would reflect or at least not contradict Christian morality - and thereby broadly shape, influence and guide the direction of American society as a whole.

A demographic map of the United States shows that geographically the entire country continues to be overwhelmingly conservative - both politically and socially. And this conservatism is certainly not limited to evangelical Christians. Therefore, it was considered expedient and prudent to be as broadly inclusive as possible to maximize the potential political influence of the movement. This meant that the Moral Majority consisted of not only conservative evangelicals, but virtually all types of conservative Protestants, Catholics, Jews and even Mormons who joined forces for the purpose of advocating common moral values with a unified voice.

Probably the most common argument in favor of evangelicals joining together with those from Catholic and Orthodox traditions in signing the Manhattan Declaration follows that used to defend the Moral Majority in the face of similar criticism. In this view, it is argued that because we share a common moral heritage with other theological traditions within Christendom, we can and should join together as allies in the culture wars against the common enemy of those morals. Therefore, the Manhattan Declaration is hailed as an opportunity for those who name the name of Christ to fulfill a long-neglected obligation to engage and even confront a society and an administration that is increasingly liberal, secular and humanist - and even anti-Christian in its bias. Looking at it this way, it is understandable why, as I noted earlier, many concerned Americans have already signed the document and I would assume that many have been conservative evangelicals.

However, I have not yet signed it myself because I have some questions and concerns about both the nature and the value of the Manhattan Declaration. At the risk of being dismissed, ridiculed or

criticized as being too picky, too narrow-minded, divisive or just overly critical, I am going to present what I believe are some significant reasons why a born-again believer should consider not endorsing or signing the Manhattan Declaration.

The Manhattan Declaration begins with these words: "Christians are heirs of a 2,000-year tradition of proclaiming God's word." This is a statement of exclusivity, identifying the framers of the document as "Christians" as opposed to adherents of any of the other world religions. It is also intended to reflect Christian values and morals. As such, it must necessarily be viewed as an inherently Christian document.

Consider the following quotes from the Manhattan Declaration:

we claim the heritage of those Christians Christian monasteries preserved not only the Bible but also the literature and art of Western culture It was Christians who combated the evil of slavery Christians today are called to proclaim the Gospel of costly grace, to protect the intrinsic dignity of the human person and to stand for the common good We are Christians who have joined together across historic lines of ecclesial differences to affirm our right—and, more importantly, to embrace our obligation—to speak and act in defense of these truths

Therefore, the writers of the Manhattan Declaration present it as a document by Christians on behalf of Christians. And as a Christian document, it discusses the issues of life and marriage within a framework of Christian morality. It derives its authority to speak about these moral issues from the Bible. The Manhattan Declaration reflects a very specific worldview which is informed by very specific theology. Therefore, not only is it a Christian document, it is first and foremost an inherently theological document - or at least theologically-driven.

This point is extremely important to the discussion because for some, the defense of cooperation with Catholic and Orthodox writers and signers depends largely upon the validity of the argument that the Manhattan Declaration isn't a theological document. If true, then it could be argued that theological differences are irrelevant to the task at hand and cooperation is not an example of unbiblical ecumenism. But, again, it is a Christian document and is therefore a theological document by nature. And being a theological document, not only does theology under-gird the moral argument set forth in the Manhattan Declaration, theology also forms the basis for what the writers consider to be their essential unity as a group. This is clearly reflected in the first paragraph under the Declaration section:

We, as Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical Christians, have gathered, beginning in New York on September 28, 2009, to make the following declaration, which we sign as individuals, not on behalf of our organizations, but speaking to and from our communities. We act together in obedience to the one true God, the triune God of holiness and love, who has laid total claim on our lives and by that claim calls us with believers in all ages and all nations to seek and defend the good of all who bear his image.

It is important to not miss the significance of this statement. When one discusses Judaism, Islam, or Hinduism for example, these are treated as world religions. And, of course, Christianity can be

spoken of as a world religion, as well. But there is an important and fundamental distinction that must be remembered: A Christian in the biblical sense of the term does not merely mean someone who is an adherent of Christianity as a world religion.

For someone to become a true Muslim, a person must simply make a decision to follow the teachings of Islam and live accordingly. However, the same is not true for biblical Christianity. For someone to become a true Christian, they must explicitly place their faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ and thereby be born-again of the Spirit of God. Someone does not become a Christian by merely adopting Christian traditions or by beginning to live a Christian lifestyle - or even by faithfully following the teachings of Christ.

In 1994, Chuck Colson was involved with drafting the first Evangelicals and Catholics Together document. That document blurs and actually eliminates the distinction between Christians in the world-religion sense and Christians in the biblical sense, such that it seems clear that Mr. Colson considers the two as not only intersecting, but as synonymous as indicated by the next three quotes from the first ECT document:

As we near the Third Millennium, there are approximately 1.7 billion Christians in the world. About a billion of these are Catholics and more than 300 million are Evangelical Protestants.

We are Evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics who have been led through prayer, study, and discussion to common convictions about Christian faith and mission.

All who accept Christ as Lord and Savior are brothers and sisters in Christ. Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ.

Some may argue, however, that the two documents are fundamentally different in scope and purpose and therefore should not be compared or evaluated in this way. Yet, the essential philosophical/theological similarities between the two documents cannot be ignored because they reflect the broader philosophy out of which they were formulated:

Manhattan Declaration:

We, as Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical Christians, have gathered, beginning in New York on September 28, 2009, to make the following declaration, which we sign as individuals, not on behalf of our organizations, but speaking to and from our communities.

First ECT document:

We are Evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics who have been led through prayer, study, and discussion to common convictions about Christian faith and mission. This statement cannot speak officially for our communities. It does intend to speak responsibly from our communities and to our communities.

Manhattan Declaration:

We are Christians who have joined together across historic lines of ecclesial differences to affirm our right—and, more

importantly, to embrace our obligation—to speak and act in defense of these truths. We pledge to each other, and to our fellow believers, that no power on earth, be it cultural or political, will intimidate us into silence or acquiescence. It is our duty to proclaim the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in its fullness, both in season and out of season. May God help us not to fail in that duty.

First ECT document:

There is a necessary connection between the visible unity of Christians and the mission of the one Christ. We together pray for the fulfillment of the prayer of Our Lord: "May they all be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me." (John 17) We together, Evangelicals and Catholics, confess our sins against the unity that Christ intends for all his disciples. The one Christ and one mission includes many other Christians, notably the Eastern Orthodox and those Protestants not commonly identified as Evangelical. All Christians are encompassed in the prayer, "May they all be one."

It seems appropriate to suggest that some important linkage does exist between the Manhattan Declaration and the ECT document and that this linkage is intentional and by design. This shouldn't be surprising given Mr. Colson's key role in the formation of both documents. Given that the purpose of the ECT document is inherently ecumenical, it seems reasonable to more carefully explore the potential ecumenical issues raised directly by the Manhattan Declaration. Likewise it seems reasonable to at least examine whether or not those issues might be sufficient to give legitimate reasons for withholding support and participation in the Manhattan Declaration.

Conclusions

The Nature of the Manhattan Declaration

The Manhattan Declaration addresses issues that are a part of the current public debate and symptomatic of the culture wars: life, marriage and religious liberty. The Manhattan Declaration was also designed to speak directly to the present administration because of the increasingly liberal policies it seeks to enact that come into conflict with conservative values.

However, beyond this, the document is designed to speak specifically to conservative Christians to encourage them to take a stand for the moral values that are formed exclusively in the context of their Christian faith. As the document states:

which we sign as individuals, not on behalf of our organizations, but speaking to and from our communities. We act together in obedience to the one true God, the triune God of holiness

The document would not need to be considered as anything but a civil document addressing social issues if it left out explicit mention of Christianity. But by invoking the framers obedience to the Lord and his word as the authority for their moral beliefs, it automatically becomes an inherently Christian document because it is informed by Christian theology.

That this is primarily a theological document is further confirmed

by the following:

Like those who have gone before us in the faith, Christians today are called to proclaim the Gospel of costly grace, to protect the intrinsic dignity of the human person and to stand for the common good. In being true to its own calling, the call to discipleship, the church through service to others can make a profound contribution to the public good.

These are very important statements in the overall evaluation of the Manhattan Declaration. As it does in several places, it clearly identifies all of the writers and original signers as acting in unity as a single group - not a group defined by their individual conservative values or their American citizenship - but rather defined primarily by their identity as Christians. However, this is a very serious issue, because it is inappropriate to simply assume that just because Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians call on the name of Christ and identify themselves as Christians in the world-religion sense, they can all be viewed as brothers and sisters in Christ - born-again Christians in the biblical sense.

And although the above quote makes reference to the call to "proclaim the gospel" - it is widely understood and biblically demonstrable that the gospel proclaimed by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church is what the apostle Paul would label, "a different gospel." Reaction to this different gospel birthed the Reformation. It was this very gospel against which the Reformers preached, for which they were persecuted and which eventually became the foundation of evangelicalism.

If the Manhattan Declaration were a purely civil document addressing social concerns with no theological implications, then anyone who agreed with the tenets of the document could have and arguably should have been included. As a strictly civil document, it could have included conservative Protestants of all kinds, Mormons, Quakers, even Muslims - and actually anyone who might have a conservative moral compass - including possibly even agnostics and atheists.

If it had been that kind of document, that could be signed simply as a morally conservative patriot - then I think I could sign it. As an American citizen with my own personal conservative moral views, I could add my signature to a document that was signed by any other conservative American citizen.

However, that is not the nature of this document. It is not asking me to sign it as an American citizen. It is asking me to sign it as a conservative Christian. But beyond that, by signing it, I would not only be making a statement that I agree concerning the issues of life, marriage and religious liberty. I can't say, "Well, I'm only signing the parts of the document I agree with." If I sign it, I am signing the whole thing - including the statements that form the most foundational aspects of the document, namely that I am joining with other brothers and sisters in Christ. But this isn't true. This isn't what I believe.

If a Roman Catholic firmly believes the official Church teaching concerning the gospel, it would be almost impossible for that person to know enough of the gospel clearly enough to be born-again (it could happen, but it isn't likely and doesn't happen often). But Chuck Colson wouldn't agree with this. His understanding of the gospel is broad enough and inclusive enough that it led him to be one of the

primary leaders in the first Evangelicals and Catholics Together document. The Manhattan Declaration does not stand independent of ECT. In fact, I would suggest that the Manhattan Declaration could never have been written as it was if it weren't for ECT.

Beyond this, isn't just a matter of joining together with a few friends of other faiths to actively work on a common political cause. It is joining together with some of the most prominent leaders in their respective denominations - pastors, teachers, theologians, who are leading untold numbers astray with false doctrine. This would almost certainly fall into the category of being unequally yoked with unbelievers - which Paul clearly forbids.

And I would suggest that the theology of the issue is also important to everyone who might sign - although many might initially say that it's all about the issues. To test that, let's suppose there were another document that is identical concerning the issues of life, marriage and religious liberty - but those who are identifying themselves as Christians are Mormon, and it was written and signed only by Mormon leaders. Would there be very many conservative evangelicals who would sign the Manhattan Declaration - even if they agreed with everything it said about the issues? My sense is that there would be almost none - and the reason would be purely theological.

So, by signing the Manhattan Document which identifies evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox all as Christians, then we're saying that the theological differences are not as great as they would be if it were a Mormon Document - and that these differences aren't really important. The question then becomes, if I wouldn't sign it because the Mormons are theologically wrong and preach a false gospel - then why would we join with anyone else who has the same problem?

The Value of the Manhattan Declaration

In practical terms, what is actual value of the Manhattan Declaration. Exactly what is it going to accomplish - and how?

Again, here's what the document says:

We, as Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical Christians, have gathered, beginning in New York on September 28, 2009, to make the following declaration, which we sign as individuals, not on behalf of our organizations, but speaking to and from our communities. We act together in obedience to the one true God, the triune God of holiness and love, who has laid total claim on our lives and by that claim calls us with believers in all ages and all nations to seek and defend the good of all who bear his image.

So, one of the document's purposes is to "speak to" our communities - to us. But in reality, how many sincere, committed Christians are presently going around violating God's laws in order to obey Caesar? How many spiritually mature Christian doctors are violating their consciences and performing abortions? And how many of them would not be willing to go to jail rather than be forced to take the life of an unborn child?

How many pastors of conviction would perform a homosexual marriage - or even allow one to be held in their church? How many would be willing to give in to governmental pressure to stay far from violating hate-crime laws and not condemn homosexuality as sin

when teaching on Romans chapter 1?

Do we need to sign a document that says we are going to do exactly what we are already doing? The government and everyone else knows what most mature believers are going to do and what punishment they are willing to face if there must be a choice between the Lord and "Caesar." Why compromise the very theology that informs my worldview to simply confirm publicly what is already public knowledge concerning that worldview and its morals?

Then there's the value of the Manhattan Declaration with regard to those who don't agree with it. Who in our society is going to be influenced by even hundreds of thousands of signatures such that they won't get an abortion, or avoid extra-marital sex, or stay out of homosexual relationships? If they are not persuaded by the Word of God, they won't be persuaded by the content or the number of signers of what is essentially a petition.

And finally, what is the value of the Manhattan Declaration with regard to public policy? I can't imagine any lawmaker being influenced to change his position because of this document. Those who agree will continue to vote the way they would have anyway - and those who disagree will do the same.

I can't see that this document will ever have any political force. I don't think it will save one unborn child. I don't think it will prevent a single homosexual relationship or marriage. And if I thought signing the document would actually accomplish these goals, I might have to reconsider. But I don't think that is what is going to happen.

I can imagine that despite the best of intentions and hopes that it might make a difference, in six months the Manhattan Declaration will be nothing more than a brief footnote that generated some interest for a few weeks.

I don't think it will ever be a second "95-Theses" as Mike Huckabee speculated last week. And if it might, we must remember that Luther's document was theological - and it made a theological difference. If the Manhattan Document has any effect, it will not be that of changing society, but rather, it will be just another contribution in the long process that has been underway for quite some time - that of undoing the Reformation. The Manhattan Declaration encourages us to act as if the Reformation never happened and that the theological reasons for the Reformation were really inconsequential.

If we're going to get involved with things like the Manhattan Declaration now or in the future, we should sign something that calls on us only as concerned American citizens with common moral values - but not as "Christians" in the world-religion sense - and let it include anyone, regardless of religion. Or alternately we should join together with others of same like faith so that we can remain true to the Word of God and to our Spirit-guided consciences.

But let's be very careful to be consistent in how we obey the full counsel of God if we find it necessary to resist or even challenge the law of Caesar. Let's not do things which give the appearance of minimizing, overlooking or discarding the Word of God - something that always leads to negative consequences in the present generation and assures deep troubles for the next.