

Why I Signed the Manhattan Declaration

Important for the Church

The central concerns of the Manhattan Declaration – Life, Marriage and Liberty – have been treasured and defended by biblically guided churches throughout history and across traditions. Yet, due to fatigue in a prolonged culture war regarding these concerns, and due to differences regarding how concern should be expressed in a pluralistic society, Christians among all traditions have increasingly shied away from addressing these issues. As a consequence, biblical perspectives either have been marginalized in the market place of ideas or have been left to those of unmeasured zeal for expression. In a sad irony that cannot be ignored, the church's defense of innocents, morality and freedom has increasingly been perceived by the general populace without and within the church as mean-spirited, intolerant and tyrannical.

These perceptions will increasingly become the popular consensus unless Christian leaders stand together and say to one another and to the nation that we will act and speak with the courage and compassion Jesus Christ requires. Biblical faithfulness requires that we not abandon the defenseless or close our eyes to evil. We must not be silenced by fear of association with the shrill nor cowed by the threat of marginalization from the mainstream. Fully aware of the imperfections of any human document, I signed the Manhattan Declaration because it courageously addresses vital issues of our day with principles that are consistent with the best values of the historic church, and also because the Declaration clearly attempts to help today's church speak with a new tone of respectful compassion in the national discourse.

Important for the Nation

The Manhattan Declaration lobbies for no specific legal action and advocates for no political party. This is neither an oversight nor a demerit. The Declaration is a statement of principles not a political action plan. The aim is not to re-unite the Religious Right or muster the church into an alliance behind a legislative agenda. Instead, the Declaration alerts secular leaders and other influences of our culture that Christians of many different traditions are already united in fundamental convictions regarding biblical morality and conscience. While there is a new commitment to civil discourse among us, we remain deeply concerned about legislative and judicial actions that: deny value to the innocent, weak and aged; dismantle historic protections and definitions for families, children and marriage; and, impose legal strictures contrary to the constitutional freedoms long provided for people and institutions of faith in America.

The Declaration reminds the nation as well as the church that the Christian conscience is not bound to a generation, or a political party, or a denomination but to Christ. We cannot love him or our nation well if we refuse to address challenges to morality and liberty that we believe will unravel the social fabric that protects all her citizens. I signed the Manhattan Declaration because of my love for my country and the desire to see her leaders and people exercise informed, principled and responsible citizenship for the sake of our nation's future.

Important for the Generations

Church leaders over age 40 are tired of signing petitions and supporting political agendas that seem to accomplish little. Church leaders under age 40 are suspicious of petitions and supposed political solutions that have stigmatized the church as mean and bigoted. Many in the older generation perceive the younger as cowardly for not picking up the baton of their social concerns, but many in the younger generation perceive the older as callous for sacrificing spiritual authority to gain political advantage. Both stereotypes will damage the church if the generations will not share new understanding of their respective contexts.

An older generation sacrificed reputation and resources fighting its culture wars with the assumption that it was a silent majority able to return the nation to Christian values so long as sufficient numbers in the church could be mobilized to action. Younger Christians see the world very differently. Perceiving themselves to be a minority in a pluralistic culture, contemporary church leaders seek credibility rather than control in order to bring Christ's transforming values to our culture. This generation often thinks that merely assuming an older generation's agenda of compulsion (i.e., pass laws to stop abortion, homosexual expression, illegal immigration, gambling, etc.) is counterproductive. Instead, the younger generation seeks to promote the mission of the church with actions of compassion (i.e., offering help regarding racism, poverty, AIDS relief, Third World Debt, the environment, prison reform, etc.) designed to win hearts rather than votes. The church, of course, must consider biblical principles that support the contributions of each generation and transcend false dichotomies.

The Manhattan Declaration speaks to and for both generations – addressing the moral issues of greatest concern to an older generation (e.g. abortion, marriage, freedom of conscience) and the issues of greatest consequence to the missional interests of a younger generation (e.g., sex trafficking, racial oppression, AIDS). It is possible, even likely, that neither generation will be entirely happy with the Declaration, since all such documents must balance competing priorities. But the Declaration is worded with an imperfect but intentional civility that hopefully will assist the church in speaking more productively to the generations within its ranks as well as to the world. I signed the Manhattan Declaration with the genuine hope that it would help generations of Christian leaders listen to one another with mutual respect in order to further Christ's purposes together. May God give us strength and grace to work faithfully with each other in our world and for this time.

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