

A call of Christian conscience

BY RUSTY BENSON

From the earliest years of the New Testament church, Christians have attempted to summarize their core beliefs in creeds and confessions. For many believers through the centuries, statements like the Apostles Creed, which dates back to the middle of the second century, have served as a reminder of the central tenets of the faith around which Christians of all denominations and sects can unite.

On November 20, 2009, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican and evangelical leaders issued what may prove to be such a unifying document that deals with what the authors call “the most pressing moral issues of our day.”

Over 150 Christian leaders originally signed The Manhattan Declaration: A Call to Christian Conscience. At press time about 300,000 others had added their names.

Dr. Timothy George, founding dean of Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama, and one of authors of the Manhattan Declaration, describes the 4,700-word document as “a statement of Christian conscience, a confession of religious conviction supported by followers of Jesus Christ from the Orthodox, Catholic, and evangelical families of faith.”

In an op-ed piece in the Washington Post, George wrote that the Declaration “reaffirm[s] fundamental truths about justice and the common good on three of the most pressing issues in our country today – the sanctity of every human life from conception to death, the strengthening of marriage as a covenant union of husband and wife, and the defense of religious liberty and the rights of conscience for all persons everywhere.”

Conversely, the authors of the Declaration, including well-known Christian author Charles Colson and Robert George, McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University, stress that the Declaration is not partisan or political.

“The goal of those of us who drafted and signed the document is not just to get a lot of names on a manifesto, gratifying though that is,” they said in a joint statement. “We are seeking to build a movement – hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of Catholic, evangelical, and Eastern Orthodox Christians who will stand together alongside other men and women of goodwill in defense of foundational principles of justice and the common good. These are people who could expose the lie which so many in our culture have embraced about self being the center of life; and then winsomely present, in the words of St. Paul, ‘a more excellent way.’”

To read the full text, visit www.manhattandeclaration.org. The Web site also includes a form to add your name to the list of supporters, and 10 specific ways to follow your convictions with action. (See graphic above.)

The following is the official summary of The Manhattan Declaration and is reprinted with permission.

A summary

Christians, when they have lived up to the highest ideals of their faith, have defended the weak and vulnerable and worked tirelessly to protect and strengthen vital institutions of civil society, beginning with the family.

We are Orthodox, Catholic, and evangelical Christians who have united at this hour to reaffirm fundamental truths about justice and the common good, and to call upon our fellow citizens, believers and non-believers alike, to join us in de-

fending them. These truths are the sanctity of human life, the dignity of marriage as the conjugal union of husband and wife, and the rights of conscience and religious liberty.

Inasmuch as these truths are foundational to human dignity and the well-being of society, they are inviolable and non-negotiable. Because they are increasingly under assault from powerful forces in our culture, we are compelled today to speak out forcefully in their defense, and to commit ourselves to honoring



Convictions → action

1. Pray.
2. Study and learn about these issues.
3. Visit the FAQ tab at www.manhattandeclaration.org.
4. Invite your e-mail lists to read the Declaration and sign it.
5. Promote the Declaration to your pastor or small group leader in church.
6. Share information about the Declaration with your civic group.
7. Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper.
8. Watch the issues being debated in the public arena and let your representatives know what you think.
9. Tell your Facebook friends and Twitter list about the Declaration.
10. Talk to your neighbors. Movements begin from the bottom up, so learn to advocate in any environment.

ships they judge to be immoral, or go out of business. Attacks on religious liberty are dire threats not only to individuals, but also to the institutions of civil society including families, charities and religious communities. The health and well-being of such institutions provide an indispensable buffer against the overweening power of government and is essential to the flourishing of every other institution – including government itself – on which society depends.

Unjust laws

As Christians, we believe in law and we respect the authority of earthly rulers. We count it a special privilege to live in a democratic society where the moral claims of the law on us are even stronger in virtue of the rights of all citizens to participate in the political process. Yet even in a democratic regime, laws can be unjust. And from the beginning, our faith has taught that civil disobedience is required in the face of gravely unjust laws or laws that purport to require us to do what is unjust or otherwise immoral. Such laws lack the power to bind in conscience because they can claim no authority beyond that of sheer human will.

Therefore, let it be known that we will not comply with any edict that compels us or the institutions we lead to participate in or facilitate abortions, embryo-destructive research, assisted suicide, euthanasia or any other act that violates the principle of the profound, inherent and equal dignity of every member of the human family.

Further, let it be known that we will not bend to any rule forcing 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, marriage and the family.

Further, let it be known that we will not be intimidated into silence or acquiescence or the violation of our consciences by any power on earth, be it cultural or political, regardless of the consequences to ourselves.

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.

Life, Marriage, Justice

them fully no matter what pressures are brought upon us and our institutions to abandon or compromise them. We make this commitment not as partisans of any political group but as followers of Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Human life

The lives of the unborn, the disabled and the elderly are ever more threatened. While public opinion has moved in a pro-life direction, powerful and determined forces are working to expand abortion, embryo-destructive research, assisted suicide and euthanasia. Although the protection of the weak and vulnerable is the first obligation of government, the power of government is today often enlisted in the cause of promoting what Pope John Paul II called “the culture of death.” We pledge to work unceasingly for the equal protection of every innocent human being at every stage of development and in every condition. We will refuse to permit

ourselves or our institutions to be implicated in the taking of human life and we will support in every possible way those who, in conscience, take the same stand.

Marriage

The institution of marriage, already wounded by promiscuity, infidelity and divorce, is at risk of being redefined and thus subverted. Marriage is the original and most important institution for sustaining the health, education, and welfare of all. Where marriage erodes, social pathologies rise. The impulse to redefine marriage 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 law as well as our religious traditions. 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 the unique character and value of acts and relationships whose meaning is shaped by their aptness for the generation, promotion and protection of life. Marriage is not a “social construction,” but is rather an objective reality – the covenantal union of husband and wife – that it is the duty of the law to recognize, honor and protect.

Religious liberty

Freedom of religion and the rights of conscience are gravely jeopardized. The threat to these fundamental principles of justice is evident in efforts to weaken or eliminate conscience protections for healthcare institutions and professionals, and in antidiscrimination statutes that are used as weapons to force religious institutions, charities, businesses and service providers either to accept (and even facilitate) activities and relation-