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## The (Unfinished) Manhattan Declaration

Shortly before Thanksgiving, a coalition of religious leaders released an unusual statement reaffirming “fundamental truths about justice and the common good” and calling upon fellow citizens to join in defending those truths. The identity of the signatories was not so unusual: though much was made of Roman Catholic and Orthodox participation, evangelicals made up the bulk of the signatories. (Their names and the Declaration itself can be found at [www.manhattandeclaration.org](http://www.manhattandeclaration.org).) Nor are the issues unusual: the pro-life position on abortion and the traditional view of marriage are articulated with care, and with a spirit of compassion that is more rare than it should be in such documents. These positions are followed by a strong affirmation of religious liberty: signatories commit themselves to speak the truth and resist any attempt to force persons or institutions to comply with legal injustice.

What is a little unusual is that it’s not clear what the signatories want us to *do* about these issues. There is little guidance, for example, for the citizen who might affirm the traditional definition of marriage but is also troubled by the lack of legal protections for those in other relationships. Similarly bereft is the legislator who is morally offended by abortion, but who must consider the reality of a health care system that does not provide access to basic health care for all. These sorts of complexities may make for poor reading in a Declaration, but they are the stuff of politics, and they require not a lessening of commitment to moral principles on abortion and marriage, but a strengthening of commitment to the particular moral task of the state. On that subject, there is less here than there should be.

Perhaps this helps explain why most references to government, particularly when discussing religious liberty, are negative: “no power on earth, cultural or political, will intimidate us into silence or acquiescence.” The pledge to engage in civil disobedience, if necessary, is a particularly dramatic example. Civil disobedience does indeed have a long and occasion-

ally distinguished history within the tradition of Christian political reflection and the Declaration quite correctly cites Martin Luther King’s eloquent argument that to counsel patient forbearance in situations such as those faced by black Americans was seriously to misunderstand the demands of justice.

Students of King might recall, however, that his argument went beyond an emphasis upon freedom and its defense. Responding to the charge that he promoted anarchy, King insisted that the Christian who would break an unjust law must do so openly and in fact *lovingly*. We pursue public justice not because injustice is wrong simply, but because Christian love compels us to *love the law* and be grieved when it falls away from the norm of justice. King accepted the penalty for disobedience out of his pain for his community, but also out of his pain for the law. The moral framework of justice upon which King depended provided his activism not only its tools, but also its motivation.

The Manhattan Declaration could do with a bit of that civil rights love. Particularly in its concluding statements on religious liberty, the careful tone of the earlier discussions is overtaken by a competing rights-based spirit of “Here, I’ll take my stand.” The result may impress politicians that these Christian voters are determined to protect their views, but it can’t really be described as calling the state to its biblical task. In terms of articulating that clear vision of state responsibility, considering, for example, why certain Christian truths should be entrenched into law and not others, the Declaration is at best incomplete. Before we join the civil disobedience barricades, we need to dig deeper, look farther, and pray harder. Read the Declaration, sign or don’t sign, but be assured either way that there’s still a lot more work to be done.

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