

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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The Sin of Signing Ecumenical Declarations John W. Robbins

Today's email brought an invitation from the Acton Institute of Grand Rapids, Michigan, to sign the "Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship." This Declaration is the latest in a long series of ecumenical religious manifestoes issued in the twentieth century. It used to be that only those who considered themselves liberals issued ecumenical pronouncements, but now those who profess to be theological conservatives—such as the signers of Evangelicals and Catholics Together—are issuing ecumenical Declarations as well.¹ The emailman for the Acton Institute, a Roman Catholic organization² located in the heartland of the Christian Reformed Church and funded in large part by nominal Protestants, explained the intention behind the Cornwall Declaration:

Our aim is to launch a nationwide publicity campaign near Earth Day in hope of igniting a grass-roots movement for more responsible environmental stewardship than what dominates the environmentalist movement. Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant leaders will develop, as supplements to this Declaration, their own monographs on environmental stewardship in which their own theological commitments will be explicit. This enables each community to stand to its own theological positions and not be implicated by cobelligerency in the theological commitments of others. After the start of the publicity campaign, we expect to produce articles in the religious press and op-ed pieces to help spread the message. Right now we are looking for endorsements of the Declaration from scholars like yourself. Below is a list of current signers of the Declaration. If after reading the

Declaration you find yourself in agreement, please sign the endorsement form that follows it and send it to the Acton Institute....

Four lists of signers follow: 13 "Jewish Signers"; 21 "Roman Catholic Signers"; 48 "Protestant Signers"; and 16 "Other Signers (religious or otherwise)."³

What is remarkable about the Cornwall Declaration is not merely the appearance of such a varied assortment of religious officials, but the language used in the invitation to sign: "This [the publication of additional monographs] enables each [religious] community to stand to its own

¹ The principals of Evangelicals and Catholics Together, Roman priest Richard John Neuhaus and Southern Baptist Charles Colson, are also signers of the Cornwall Declaration.

² The Acton Institute for Religion and Liberty is not only named for a Roman Catholic, but it was founded and is headed by, not a Roman Catholic layman, but a Roman priest, Robert Sirico, a member of the Paulist order; and the Institute promotes the "economic personalism" of John Paul II. Ironically, its views are opposed to the views of Lord Acton, a nineteenth-century layman who was a bold critic of the Roman Church-State and its pretensions to power and infallibility.

³ The complete list of signers as of February 28, 2000, includes: JEWISH SIGNERS: Rabbi Daniel Lapin, Rabbi David Novak, Dr. Malcolm J. Sherman, Rabbi Clifford E. Librach, Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Fradkin, Rabbi Samuel B. Press, Rabbi Jonathan Ginsburg, Rabbi Dennis Prager, Rabbi Jacob Neusner, Dr. Herbert I. London, Dr. Kenneth R. Weinstein, Rabbi Ron Aigen, Mr. David N. Friedman; ROMAN CATHOLIC SIGNERS: Father Richard John Neuhaus, The Rev. Paul Hartmann, Father Robert A. Sirico, Father Kevin S. Barrett, Father Frank A. Pavone, Dr. Todd Flanders, Father J. Michael Beers, Dr. Charles Baird, Dr. Alejandro A. Chafuen, Dr. Robert Royal, Dr. Margaret Maxey, Dr. Gregory Gronbacher, Dr. Eduardo J. Echeverria, Mr. Michel Therrien, Mr. Michael B. Barkey, Dr. Kevin E. Schmiesing, Dr. Russell Hittinger, Prof. Leonard P. Liggio, Rev. Dr. Alexander A. Di Lella, Mr. Samuel Casey Carter, Mr. Paul V. Harberger, PROTESTANT SIGNERS: Mr. E. Calvin Beisner, Ms. Diane Knippers, Dr. P. J. Hill, Rev. Dr. D. James Kennedy, Mr. Michael Cromartie, Mr. Doug Bandow, Mr. David Rothbard, The Rev. Dr. H. Lee Cheek, J. Render Caines, David W. Hall, Dr. Marvin Olasky, Dr. Ronald Nash, Mr. Stephen Grabill, Mr. Paul Mastin, Dr. Richard Stroup, Dr. Kenneth Chilton, Dr. Thomas Sieger Derr, Prof. Alan Gomes, Dr. George Grant, Dr. Amy Sherman, Rev. Edmund Opitz, Mr. David Noebel, Dr. Paul Cleveland, Dr. Robert G. Lee, Rev. Richard Cizik, Dr. Don Racheter, Ms. Juliana Thompson, Dr. Charles W. Colson, The Very Rev. Stephen H. Bancroft, Mr. Howard A. Ball, Rev. Donald E. Wildmon, Dr. Timothy Terrell, Dr. J. Franklin Sexton, Dr. Jay Grimstead, Dr. Philip C. Bom, Dr. Mark Y. Herring, Dr. Jo Ann Kwong, Dr. Alan Snyder, Dr. Gary Quinlivan, Mr. Tom Minnery, Dr. James Dobson, The Venerable Norman Aldred, Dr. William R. Bright, Dr. Bruce L. Edwards, Dr. Stephen Cox, Dr. Jeffrey L. Myers, Mr. David Ridenour, Mr. William H. Lash, II; OTHER SIGNERS (religious or otherwise): Mr. Paul Weyrich, Dr. Daniel Klein, Dr. George P. Khushf, Dr. John Bennett, Dr. D. Eric Schansberg, Ms. Floy Lilley, Dr. Peter Huber, Mr. John McConnell, Dr. Charles W. Rovey, Mr. Paul Driessen, Mr. Jerry Bowyer, Mr. William T. Devlin, Ms. Laurie Morrow, Dr. Jane M. Orient, Dr. Henry I. Miller, Mr. Len Munsil.

theological positions and not be implicated by cobelligerency in the theological commitments of the others.”

This statement demonstrates the concern of the authors that the signers of the Cornwall Declaration would be “implicated by cobelligerency” in the theological views of other signers. Additional publications are needed in order to attempt to avoid such implication, for each signer is indeed implicated by the Cornwall Declaration in the theological views of others. The only way to avoid implication would be to argue that there is no meeting of the minds at all, which would defeat the purpose of the Declaration. The whole point of the Declaration is to implicate—to closely connect—Judaism, Romanism, Protestantism, and Otherism on these issues. Additional publications may discuss differences between the religious groups, but the Cornwall Declaration itself implicates (“closely connects”) the signers and their religions.

The Declaration declares the signers’ “shared reverence for God and His creation” (a statement that seems to suggest the signers revere the creature as well as the Creator); and it describes itself as “this declaration of our common concerns, beliefs, and aspirations.” The Declaration mentions “Our position [singular], informed by revelation and confirmed by reason and experience”; “Our common Judeo-Christian heritage”; and it makes several references to theology. The section titled “Our Beliefs” is seven paragraphs long, and it states “theological and anthropological principles” on which the signers agree. Either these statements are true, or they are disingenuously deceptive.

The signers have not signed as individuals (that would be bad enough); they have signed as members (and officials) of religious groups: Rabbis, Priests, Elders; Jews, Romanists (erroneously called Catholics), Protestants (though they seem not to be protesting Romanism any more), and Others. The Cornwall Declaration is a religious document signed by religious officials. By signing this Declaration, and others like it, Christians sin in several ways:

1. They “share [are implicated] in other people’s sins.”
2. They disclose that making a joint political statement is more important to them than proclaiming the whole counsel of God.
3. They violate the scores of commands in Scripture to “be separate”; to avoid “unequal yokes with unbelievers”; to be “sanctified”; to be “called out”; to have nothing to do with those who profess to be Christians but are not.
4. They speak useless words.
5. They use words that cannot communicate clear meaning.
6. They teach that the Christian worldview is not unique but shares common ground with the worldviews of Romanism, Judaism, and Otherism.

Let us examine these public sins—these scandals.

Scandal Number 1

Real Guilt by Religious Collaboration: “Sharing in Other People’s Sins”

The Bible issues a stern warning to church officers (and to all Christians by presupposition) not to share in other people’s sins: “Do not lay hands on [ordain] anyone hastily, nor share in other people’s sins; keep yourself pure” (*1 Timothy* 5:22). Sharing in others’ sins is a sin of impurity that is always to be avoided. Declarations that are acceptable to and endorsed by unbelievers as well as believers are either so vague as to be virtually meaningless—the useless, idle words that Christ warned against—or so un-Christian that unbelievers can endorse them. Any religious Declaration that contained the Gospel—or even clear definitions of terms such as “God” and “revelation”—could not be sincerely and intelligently signed by an unbeliever. The Cornwall Declaration avoids both the Gospel and clear definitions in order to persuade unbelievers to sign.

Scandal Number 2

Inversion of Christian Priorities: Political Proclamations Are More Important than Proclaiming the Gospel

By issuing joint religious Declarations on political issues with unbelievers, Christians show that they esteem making ecumenical political statements more important than proclaiming the Gospel to those unbelievers. By their action they show that the views that unite them are more important than the Gospel that divides them. Rather than speaking face-to-face to those unbelievers about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Christians who signed the Cornwall Declaration stand shoulder-to-shoulder with unbelievers to issue joint religious statements on political matters. Issuing ecumenical manifestoes is a subtle way of disobeying the Great Commission while posturing as spokesmen for Christianity.

This inversion of Christian priorities has been a persistent and prevalent error of the twentieth century, espoused first by liberals and modernists, and now by conservatives. By adopting liberal tactics, conservatives convey a liberal message, no matter what they say.

Can the reader imagine the Apostle Paul signing a joint religious Declaration with Jews, Judaizers—who apparently believed the “fundamentals of the faith” (but not justification by faith alone; for teaching that unbelief Paul damned them)—and dissident Pagans against the policies of the Roman Empire? Can the reader imagine Jesus issuing a joint religious Declaration—the “Jerusalem Declaration on Imperial Stewardship”—with the Sanhedrin, condemning the oppressive policies of Caesar? If the reader can imagine that, it shows only how far the reader is from the mind of Paul and Christ, who determined not to know anything among us but Christ crucified, to speak only the words of divine wisdom, not of human foolishness, and to be friends of God, not friends of the world: “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be

a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (*James* 4:4). Signing ecumenical Declarations for political purposes demonstrates that Christians do not know or do not accept the priorities of Jesus and Paul.

Furthermore, the Cornwall Declaration discloses a misunderstanding of the theological foundation of Western civilization, which emerged only from the preaching of the Gospel, not from the doctrines of other religions, and certainly not from the tyranny and foolishness of the Roman Church-State. The Cornwall Declaration obscures the role of the Reformation in the development of Western civilization, not only by not mentioning it, but also by using misleading language such as “The past millennium brought unprecedented improvements in human health, nutrition, and life expectancy...” It was not “the past millennium” that brought these improvements, but the past 500 years,⁴ during which God has blessed the bold proclamation and belief of his Word. That Word had been suppressed for a millennium by the Roman Church-State. The Cornwall Declaration ignores and thus obscures the indispensable role of the Reformation in the development of Western civilization, apparently because to tell the truth might offend some prospective signers.

Scandal Number 3

Compromise with the World: Accepting Human Foolishness as Wisdom

When God gave the Israelites the Promised Land, he forbade them to compromise with the inhabitants of Canaan. God instituted many laws to impress upon the Israelites the absolute necessity of their being separate, sanctified, and holy: They were not to intermarry, nor to adopt the customs of the Canaanite people, nor to eat their food, nor to worship their gods. They were not to wear garments of mixed fabrics nor to plant crops of mixed seed. All these laws were designed to impress upon the Israelites the absolute necessity of remaining separate, pure, unspotted, and uncompromised. The ancient Israelites did not learn the lesson, and they were destroyed; neither have many professed Christians of the twentieth century.

By entangling themselves in such Declarations, Christians hope to gain something—media attention, fame, influence, respectability, the honor of the world, power—but they endanger their own souls and the souls of others. The invitation to sign the Cornwall Declaration reports that

Our aim is to launch a nationwide publicity campaign...in hopes of igniting a grass-roots movement.... After the start of the publicity campaign, we expect to produce articles in the religious press and op-ed pieces to help spread the message.

Christians who have signed this ecumenical Declaration have made a fool’s bargain. In order to gain publicity, they

⁴ The effect of the words “the past millennium” is to credit the Roman Church-State with these improvements and to obscure the role of the Reformation.

have compromised the Word of God. Orange juice gains nothing by being mixed with strychnine, but poison mixed with orange juice gains more victims. Christians gain nothing by issuing joint religious Declarations with unbelievers, but unbelievers and unbelief gain much by the confusion such pronouncements engender in people’s minds. Truth gains nothing by being mixed with falsehood, but falsehood gains much by being mixed with truth: It can deceive more people more effectively. The honest man gains nothing by collaborating with the shady character, but the shady character gains much by collaborating with the honest man: He obtains credit and an undeserved reputation for honesty. Only falsehood, unbelief, and dishonesty can gain from such collaboration—from such ecumenical Declarations. That may be one reason so many unbelievers are willing to sign these Declarations: They understand better than Christians do exactly who gains and who loses from such alliances. “For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light” (*Luke* 16:8).

Scandal Number 4

Fatal Locution: “Idle Words”

Christ made several statements about the importance of words. His teaching directly contradicts the common contemporary notion that words are relatively unimportant; that only actions and deeds matter. His teaching also contradicts the premise upon which ecumenical manifestoes such as the Cornwall Declaration rest, that unbelievers are able sincerely and intelligently to say good words. For example, Christ said:

Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle [useless] word men may speak, they will give account of it in the Day of Judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned (*Matthew* 12:34-37).

The Cornwall Declaration assumes and teaches that those whom Christ called evil can sincerely and intelligently say good things.

Scandal Number 5

Garbling God’s Word: “An Uncertain Sound”

The Apostle Paul, a model for Christians, repeatedly prayed that he would proclaim the Gospel boldly as he ought: “that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the Gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak” (*Ephesians* 6:18-20).

Paul and other Biblical writers also emphasized the importance of clarity:

But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching? Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played? For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself for battle? So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air (*1 Corinthians* 14: 6-9).

Paul's fear was not that words spoken by Christians might be hard to hear, but that they would be impossible to understand because they have no univocal meaning or definite significance. Paul condemned words that are not definite and clear. Even things without life must make distinctive and definite sounds; otherwise no one can understand their significance. If harps, pipes, and trumpets must speak clearly, how much more so Christians? Hearers will not understand their meaning if their words are equivocal, vague, ambiguous, and indefinite. They will understand only if their words are univocal, clear, unambiguous, and definite.

Ecumenical manifestoes such as the Cornwall Declaration are not clear and unambiguous; they not only omit essential ideas and include misleading ideas, but they also deliberately use words in an equivocal fashion so that persons of various religions can sign them. This equivocation is not a minor feature of the Cornwall Declaration; the Declaration depends on using important terms ambiguously and indefinitely. Take, for example, the phrase "shared reverence for God." Not only is the term "God" used equivocally so that Protestants, Romanists, Jews, and Others, each with a different definition of the term "God," may sign the Declaration, but the impact of the document turns on these fundamental equivocations. If a reader object that the various religions' definitions of the term "God" are not different, then the reader has missed the lessons of Scripture: The Apostle Paul disposed of the natural theology of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas (that is, the Roman Catholic conception of God): "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God..." (*1 Corinthians* 1:21). Jesus himself disposed of both the Greek and the Judaic conceptions of God in these words: "All things have been delivered to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son and he to whom the Son wills to reveal him" (*Matthew* 11:27). Furthermore, since Jews reject the Trinity, their god is obviously a different god. And who knows what definitions of the term "god" flit about the brains of those who classify themselves as "Other"?

Not to belabor the point, but what on Earth can the Cornwall Declaration mean by its appeal to "revelation"? Is this personal or propositional revelation? Is it the 66 books of the Bible, or the 73 books and additional scattered fragments of the Roman Church-State? Does it include infallible encyclicals, or is it merely the Old Testament? And what does that group that calls itself "Other" think the term "revelation" means? The *Koran*? The *Book of Mormon*? Martin Luther King's *Letter from a Birmingham*

Jail? The Cornwall Declaration is a tissue of equivocations.

Scandal Number 6

Adulterating the Word of God: Syncretism

All these scandals culminate in the last and most serious scandal: syncretism.

If it is appropriate for Christians to take public positions on economic and political issues—and it is—then they are required by God to do so as Christians, not as builders of an ecumenical Tower of Babel. The real and effective message delivered by ecumenical pronouncements such as the Cornwall Declaration—the message delivered irrespective of what the Declaration itself says—is that Christianity has nothing uniquely true or important to say to the world on these matters, that Christian ideas are interchangeable and fungible with the ideas of Judaism, Romanism, and Otherism. By making joint religious Declarations with unbelievers, Christians implicitly deny the uniqueness of Biblical, propositional revelation; they implicitly assert, contrary to Scripture, that men's foolishness is as good as divine wisdom; they unavoidably teach that Christianity shares important ideas and principles with unbelieving systems of thought. Christians who sign such statements fail to realize that Christianity does not have a single proposition in common with systems of unbelieving thought. That is the philosophical lesson that must be drawn from the many Biblical statements and injunctions about purity, separation, sanctification, and holiness. Those terms do not apply, in some pietistic fashion, merely to one's behavior; they apply even more strictly to one's ideas and thoughts. Ideas are not neutral, nor are they common to various systems of thought. Ideas are to be "taken captive to the obedience of Christ":

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ... (*2 Corinthians* 10:3-5).

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind... (*Romans* 12:2).

Some Christians obviously think they gain something by signing such ecumenical Declarations: In this case, they hope to gain publicity. But what exactly is being publicized? It is not Christianity; it is not even Christian economics. What is being publicized is a religious document that says that whether one thinks as a Jew, a Romanist, a Protestant, or an Other really does not matter: Jews, Romanists, Protestants, and Others all agree on these principles. They share common ground. These important matters are not the exclusive domain of Christ Jesus; they are Everyman's Land. Christians may have something distinctive to say on secondary matters, but on these fundamental "theological and anthropological principles," to use the language of the Cornwall Declaration, Christianity and Judaism, Christianity and

Romanism, Christianity and Otherism speak with one voice.

This is the language of unbelief.

Those Christians who have signed the Cornwall Declaration have obscured the clear message of Gospel, compromised the Christian worldview, and opposed the advance of the Kingdom of God.