

Article: JAC110

SHOULD CHRISTIANS BE COBELLIGERENTS IN ECUMENICAL COALITIONS?

This article first appeared in the Viewpoint column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 29, number 3 (2006). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

Evangelical Christians who are committed to sound doctrine must distinguish themselves theologically from people who reject fundamental truths of the Protestant Reformation. Those truths must never be discarded so as to achieve a greater unity with nonevangelicals. Are evangelicals forsaking the gospel, however, when they unite with Catholics, Jews, and other religious groups to address cultural issues?

Cultural reform efforts are not primarily about religious doctrine, but social justice. To work, they must be broad and inclusive; for example, cultural reform efforts that were designed to abolish slavery and establish civil rights for all Americans historically were led by large ecumenical coalitions. These coalitions, despite their theological differences, committed themselves to a common goal: establishing a more just society. The same is true regarding the current struggle to abolish abortion: although we must reject religious pluralism (the belief that all religions are equally valid), we must work closely with those who oppose the destruction of innocent human life, regardless of their religious persuasion.

Not all evangelicals agree with this view, however. Steve Camp, a gifted Christian musician, for example, thinks that evangelicals who work with nonevangelicals to reform culture are guilty of cobelligerence and that this behavior compromises the Great Commission. "There can be no real cultural impact apart from the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ," argues Camp on his Web site.¹ Christians, therefore, should focus on preaching the gospel, not on cultural reform:

Evangelical Co-Belligerence is culturally impotent in dealing with the depraved hearts, minds and souls of a pagan world. Satan is pleased when any discourse designed for Christ and His gospel is turned into a political rally to pacify unsaved people in their sin while at the same time creating a superficial morality that is not based upon the salvific work of Christ alone! The tragic result is unredeemed people are left to feel comfortable and safe in a "Christian morality"—yet, they are still lost, still dead in their sins.²

This view, though common, does not stand up to scrutiny. First, it does not follow that because cultural reformers cannot make a culture blameless before God, we shouldn't try to make it better for the weak and oppressed. I do not know of a single pro-life leader, for example, who argues that cultural reform can save souls eternally; only the gospel does that. The fact that cultural reform cannot get a man to heaven, however, does not mean that it cannot (in many cases through political means) save him from injustice here on earth. In short, pro-life advocates like me do not work for change in culture to save the world from spiritual death, but to save the most vulnerable members of the human family, the unborn, from physical death.

Second, the goal of cobelligerent cultural reform is not necessarily to change the hearts of individuals (whether saved or lost), but to restrain their evil acts. Martin Luther King, Jr., put it well: "It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important."³ The purpose of government, according to Scripture, is not to ensure salvation, but to promote justice (Rom. 13:1-4). The primary purpose of the church, of course, is to preach the gospel of Christ, but if Christians, collectively, do not also challenge government to fulfill its duty to protect the weak and defenseless, who will?

Third, the notion that "there can be no real cultural impact apart from the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ" sounds good, but it is simply incorrect. Consider the moral evil of slavery in America, which did not end because of mass conversions to Christ. It ended when believers and

nonbelievers joined forces to stand against it—and paid for it with the lives of 360,000 Union soldiers. Was the abolition of slavery not a “real” cultural improvement? True, it did not make those who participated right with God, but it did take the physical whips off the backs of oppressed people. That is moral and cultural improvement by any reasonable standard.

Fourth, it is not spiritually unacceptable for Christians to mobilize with non-Christians for causes other than preaching the gospel. Prior to the Civil War, Protestant clergy worked with non-Christians and organized the Underground Railroad to free black slaves. Anyone who thinks that God’s people are wasting their time pursuing social justice may want to take a look at how important it is to God: Jeremiah 5:26-28; 9:24; Isaiah 1:16-17, 21-23; 58:6-7; 61:8; Psalm 94:1-23; Proverbs 24:1-12; Matthew 25:41-46.

Fifth, why should anyone suppose that pro-life advocacy detracts from the discipline responsibilities of the local church as outlined in Matthew 28? Simply put, the answer to a lack of evangelical fervor for the Gospel is not to withdraw our political advocacy for the weak and vulnerable; it’s to encourage Christians to do a better job presenting the gospel. We don’t have to stop rescuing the innocent to do that.

Pro-life advocacy, in fact, often serves an important preevangelistic function because it reawakens people’s moral intuitions. A skilled Christian apologist knows how to utilize this for the sake of the gospel. For example, once the man next to me on the plane concedes that right and wrong on these issues are real things and not just matters of personal taste, he’s now ready for me to ask, “So where do these moral rules come from?” They can’t just exist in a vacuum. If objective morals exist so does an objective moral lawgiver. At this point, I can implement apologist Gregory Koukl’s line of questioning and ask, “Have you ever committed moral crimes? And do you think that people who commit moral crimes deserve to be punished?”⁴ I may not persuade my conversation partner to convert on the spot, but I likely will get him to think about his moral culpability within the context of a Christian worldview.

It is not morally wrong even for Christians to focus, for example, on saving human lives rather than primarily on spreading the good news. The fire department, for example, is not “distracted” when it spends time putting out fires rather than preaching the gospel. The purpose of the fire department, clearly, is not theology, but rescue. Its job is to save lives. The same is true of the pro-life movement. Its primary goal is not to save souls, though we rejoice when that happens. Its mission is to protect lives. We don’t need a theological litmus test to do that.

Sixth, the theological claim that cultural reform efforts hinder the gospel because they leave unredeemed people feeling “safe” (falsely) in “superficial Christian morality” is misguided. Are we to conclude that God’s ability to save His elect decreases when cultural morality increases? That is counterintuitive and hardly consistent with the notion of God’s sovereignty. The fact that a person thinks that he is moral (like Saul of Tarsus once did) in no way limits God’s ability to save him. Most sinners, in fact, think that they are good prior to God granting them the gift of repentance. Following the critics’ logic, if an increase in cultural morality means fewer souls make it to heaven, shouldn’t Christians pray for evil to abound that more may be saved (cf. Rom. 3:8; 6:1-2)?

I’m often told that getting people to realize that certain acts are wrong only treats the symptom; it may well coerce them into living a more moral life, but without Christ, it will only serve to deaden their sense that they have sins that require forgiveness. Using this logic, one could argue that doctors who cure people of cancer are only treating a symptom and, in reality, are giving unsaved patients a false sense of security about their eternal states. One also could argue that evangelical leaders in the Sudan are wrong to partner with Catholics and Jews in reforming a militant Islamic culture (one bent on butchering its wives and children), because their cobelligence only creates a superficial morality, one that leaves unregenerate men dead in their sins.

Koukl writes, “When someone tells me that laws can never change a fallen person’s heart, I ask them if they apply that philosophy to their children. Does the moral training of our children consist merely of preaching the Gospel to them? Wouldn’t we consider it unconscionable to neglect a child’s moral instruction with the excuse that laws can never change a child’s rebellious heart?”⁵

Seventh, why shouldn't evangelicals work with Catholics or nonevangelicals against abortion? Gregg Cunningham of the Center for Bio-Ethical Reform affirms that many Christians are inconsistent on this point. For example, if a critic of evangelical cobelligence had a two-year-old daughter who stumbled into a swimming pool and needed immediate medical attention, he would gladly work with Catholic paramedics to save her life. If she were injured and needed surgery, it wouldn't matter for a moment if the best surgeon were a Catholic operating out of a Catholic hospital. If the critic of cobelligence will work with Catholics to save his own child, what's wrong with working with them to save somebody else's (unborn) child?

Cunningham points out, "The Good Samaritan did not preach salvation to the beating victim; he risked his own life to save a fellow traveler. Jesus used this example to illustrate our duty to love our neighbor. It is cold comfort to a dead baby that we allowed him to die to avoid working with Catholics."⁶

Finally, critics of cobelligence need to substantiate their claim that evangelicals are spending too much time on cultural reform. What is their evidence for this? Can they list even 10 churches in the United States with 1,000 members or more who systematically train their members to persuasively defend a biblical worldview on social justice issues? If not, perhaps we need to spend more time on cultural reform, not less.

— *Scott Klusendorf*

NOTES

1. Steve Camp, "Are We Playing Politics with God?" <http://a1m.org/page.php?page=template1.php&pageid=f7b69a48e099e9e5825c44bda6624425>.
2. Ibid.
3. Taken from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s address at Western Michigan University, December 18, 1963.
4. Gregory Koukl, "Am I Going to Hell?" <http://www.str.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5098>.
5. Gregory Koukl, "No Hint of Politics," Stand to Reason, <http://www.str.org/>.
6. Gregg Cunningham, personal correspondence with author, May 2001.