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P A P E R S
towards a biblical mind

Co-belligerence and common grace:

Can the enemy of my enemy be my friend?

by *Daniel Strange*

Jesus said, 'for whoever is not against you is for you.'

Luke 9:50

'He who is not with me is against me...'

Luke 11:23

*Co-belligerency can make a certain kind of sense, if you have your wits
about you.*

Doug Wilson¹

Summary

Co-belligerence describes the activity of Christians working together with non-Christians for a common political, economic or cultural cause. This paper explores one biblical argument on the legitimacy of co-belligerence: the doctrine of 'common grace'. While common grace can offer a stable foundation for co-belligerence, such activity is not straightforward, and calls for careful reflection, discernment and wisdom.

Introduction

What do the Christian Institute, the Islamic Human Rights Commission, *The Gay Times* and comedian Rowan Atkinson all have in common? Ordinarily, you might think, very little, but all have recently spoken out against the Government's plans to introduce an incitement to religious hatred law. Like other recent campaigns to 'Make Poverty History', to 'Keep Sunday Special', or to march against the war in Iraq, how would we react if such diverse groups decided to organise themselves and pool together their protest for a common cause?

'Co-belligerence' is a political or military term usually meaning an alliance between parties against a common foe. Co-belligerence works on the basis of distinguishing between lesser and greater evils, and of setting short-term objectives to achieve a particular purpose. The Christian version of co-belligerence certainly discerns an all too real battleground. In our contemporary context how do Christians fight to win the war against what Albert Mohler calls 'the death of culture and the culture of death'?² Must we do it alone or are there others who will fight with us? Can we engage in what Timothy George calls an 'ecumenism of the trenches'?³ Within evangelicalism, the use of the term 'co-belligerence' was popularised by Francis Schaeffer who emphasised the importance of falling neither into separatism nor into compromising alliance: 'A co-belligerent is a person with whom I do not agree on all sorts of vital issues, but who, for whatever reasons of their own, is on the same side in a fight for some specific issue of public justice.'⁴ Co-belligerence can manifest itself on many levels and in many contexts: an individual believer, a local church, a denomination, a lobbying group, a political party. Our co-belligerents could range from other Christian groups, to other religious groups, or even anti-religious groups.

For some Christians co-belligerence is a 'non-issue', there is an instinctive and intuitional 'rightness' about engaging in such co-belligerence based on several theological presuppositions which stress commonality between believer and unbeliever: creation and a 'natural law', the *imago Dei*, the call to 'love our neighbour' and 'love our enemies' etc. Biblically there appears to be some precedent for such activity, e.g. Joseph working with Egyptians to alleviate famine (Genesis 41); Daniel in Nebuchadnezzar's court (Daniel 2); Jeremiah's letter to the exiles to 'seek the peace and prosperity of the city...' (Jeremiah 29:7); and Paul's exhortation to do good to all,

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1 www.dougwils.com/index.asp?Action=Search&searchstring=co-belligerency

2 Albert Mohler, 'Standing Together, Standing Apart: Cultural Co-Belligerence without Theological Compromise', *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, Vol. 5 No. 4, Winter 2001, p.5.

3 Quotation attributed to Timothy George in Chuck Colson, 'Modernist Impasse, Christian Opportunity', *First Things*, 104, June/July 2000, p.19.

4 Francis Schaeffer, *Plan for Action: An Action Alternative Handbook for 'Whatever Happened to the Human Race?'*, Flemming H. Revell, 1980, p.68.

especially the family of believers (Galatians 6:10). In a cultural context where Christians by themselves have little influence, co-belligerence is a strategic means to effect societal change.

However, for other Christians there is an equally instinctive/intuitional 'wrongness' or extreme caution about co-belligerence that stresses the difference between believer and unbeliever. First, on the issue of principle, co-belligerence is thought to compromise our beliefs and/or seen to be compromising our beliefs to outsiders with the result of diluting the exclusivity of Christ and the gospel. Second, on the issue of priority, rather than engage in a cultural co-belligerency, we should be proclaiming the gospel, for conversion is the only way we will bring about societal transformation. In pursuing this tactic, we will experience a striking disagreement between ourselves and the world, meaning not co-belligerency but simple belligerency.

From a theological perspective, how are we to judge the legitimacy and limits of co-belligerence? More fundamentally, what is the biblical basis for commonality between believer and unbeliever? The situation appears somewhat opaque: the Israelites 'plundered the Egyptians' (Exodus 12:35–36) and yet Paul is very clear that Christians are not to be unequally yoked (2 Corinthians 6:14). The Samaritans were not allowed to help the people of God in the rebuilding of the temple, and yet Phoenician workmanship was welcomed (Ezra 3–4). Being 'in the world but not of the world' suddenly seems quite a messy business! What are the boundary lines that mark out legitimate commonality from an illegitimate compromise, and what are the theological presuppositions underlying such boundaries?

Before thinking about co-belligerence *per se*, we need to lay down some solid theological foundations that will determine our attitude towards it. I would like to argue that two biblical truths will be central in our thinking concerning co-belligerence: the extreme difference between believer and unbeliever, and God's 'common grace' which underlines the shared experiences of believer and non-believer alike in God's world (Matthew 5:45).

Genesis 3–6: the ruin of humanity

The nature and consequences of the Fall are not a promising start for constructing an argument in favour of co-belligerence. While the *protoevangelium* of Genesis 3:15 provides the hope of redemption in the crushing of the serpent's head, God puts enmity between seed of Satan and seed of the woman. From here, two streams of humanity diametrically opposed to one another can be traced through redemptive history. In Genesis this is immediately represented genealogically in the two lines of Adam-Seth (who call upon the name of the Lord in Exodus 3:14) and the Cain-Lamech (Cain who is of the evil one cf. 1 John 3:12). However, increasingly we see this distinction to be spiritual, so that even those who believe themselves to be children of Abraham are in reality children of the devil (John 8:44). This is the extreme opposition or 'antithesis'⁵ between belief and unbelief, light and dark, death and life, those who are blind and those who can see, covenant keepers and covenant breakers, those in Adam and those in Christ. As Jesus says 'He who is not with me is against me' (Matthew 12:30) and 'No-one can serve two masters' (Matthew 6:24). This antithesis is the logical application of the total depravity of mankind seen in its pure form in Genesis 6:5, sin in its unchecked state in which we witness an intensity (greatness in the earth), an inwardness (thoughts), an absoluteness (only evil), and an habitualness (all the time).⁶ It is within this context and spirit that Paul's command to cease yoking with unbelievers makes sense. How can there be a lasting and deep fellowship (of which marriage is but one example) between believer and unbeliever, between Christ and Belial?

However, there is another ingredient we must add to this

anthropological mix. For even in Genesis, at this early nadir in human history, we have to note that it is the murderous Cain-Lamech line who are cultural producers of agriculture, music and craftsmanship (4:17–22). While we acknowledge the depravity of mankind, at the same time we have to acknowledge the progress of cultural development and cultural mandate to fill and subdue the earth given in Genesis 1:28. How are we to explain this paradoxical situation? I would like to examine this from two perspectives: at the exegetical level and then at the systematic level.

Genesis 8–9: the restraint on humanity

If we fast-forward to Genesis 8 and 9, God's dealing with Noah gives some covenantal substance to what has come before. First we learn that God promises to sustain, preserve and restrain the world (8:20–22) through his ordinary works of providence and by preserving and not exterminating creation. What is the basis of this blessing? Comparing Genesis 8:21 with Genesis 6:5, Bavinck notes:

The words used in Genesis 6:5 are in consideration of the extirpation, those of Genesis 8:21 are in consideration of the preservation of the earth. In the first instance the emphasis falls on wicked deeds in which the corrupt heart of ancient man came to expression; in the second instance the stress is on the evil nature which always continues in man... It seems therefore as if the Lord in these last words wishes to say that he knows what to expect of his creatures if he were to leave them to their own devices. Then the heart of man... would again burst out into all kinds of gruesome sins, would constantly provoke him to wrath, and move him to destroy the world another time. And this he does not want to do. Hence he will now lay down fixed laws for man and nature, prescribe an established course for both, by which to limit and hem them in.⁷

Second, therefore we learn that God will sustain, preserve and restrain *through various means* (9:1–7). The beginning of Genesis 9 parallels creation and cultural mandate but with a difference – sin has now darkened the scene. There is the call to procreate but also the issue of protection from the animals (now ruled by fear) and protection from fellow man (the embryonic institution of government and societal law). Finally, we begin to discern the divine purposes behind God's preservation and restraint and its inextricable relationship with his plan of salvation. At this point in world history Noah represents both universal humankind and redeemed mankind in particular. God's covenant with Noah is substantially different but related to other covenants within redemptive history. First, Noah is not the second Adam (Jesus Christ is), and the antithesis between belief and unbelief continues through Shem, Ham and Japheth. Second, God's promises to Noah are not spiritual but physical. And yet Noah was saved by God and through Noah's line comes Christ. The point here is that God does not relate to his creation through Noah apart from his on-going programme of redemption. Even the ordinary nature of the seasons must be understood within the framework of God's purposes for redemption. Sin is restrained in order that humanity might continue – allowing the advancement of the church and the coming of Christ. God understands that the sin problem will never be cured by judgement and curse. If the appropriate relief from sin's corruption is to appear, the earth must be preserved from devastating judgements until the appropriate time. So God's covenant with Noah makes the continuance of history possible.

Common grace: meanings and means

From these beginnings let us make some more systematic comments. God's restraint of sin and encouragement to do good is known as the doctrine of 'common grace'. It is common because it is universal and it is grace because it is undeserved and given by a gracious God. The formulation of this doctrine is extremely rich,

5 The term 'antithesis' as used here does not refer to Hegelian thinking but is rather a technical theological term associated with Reformed theology and referring to the difference between believer and unbeliever.

6 Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, Eerdmans, 1956, p.48.

7 Ibid.

complex and controversial and we can only highlight some of the relevant points. The expositions of Murray and Macleod are lucid introductions to the doctrine.⁸ Murray defines common grace as ‘every favour of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God’.⁹ According to Murray common grace has both a negative and a positive function. Its negative function is that of divine restraint: a restraint on sin, a restraint on wrath and its execution, and a restraint on the effects of sin. The positive function is that of divine favour whereby creation receives divine blessing, non-Christians receive divine favour and goodness, ‘good’ is attributed to non-Christians; and that non-Christians receive benefits from the presence of the gospel.

In all of these functions and under the sovereignty of God, there can be a great deal of differentiation in terms of the amount of divine restraint and blessing within a particular society or period of history. The instrumentality of God’s common grace is many and varied. God’s general revelation of himself externally in creation (Acts 14:17; Romans 1:20, 32) and internally, the ‘law written on their hearts’ (Romans 2:14, 15) means that ‘even where there is no gospel and no spiritual enlightenment there are those things which “nature teaches” so that even specifically secular states and avowedly atheistic societies still possess strong ethical structures.’¹⁰ There are structures and organisations in society that can both restrain sin and promote good, for example the family unit, law and government, and public opinion. Finally there is the presence of the church in the world: ‘at one level, the Christian community has an exemplary and illuminative function. It is the light in the world’s darkness...At another level, Christians, individually and collectively, simply by being what they are, restrain and inhibit the depravity, dissoluteness and selfishness of the world around them. They are the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13).’¹¹

While acknowledging the presence of common grace and its instruments, we must also note its limitations. Common grace is not special grace, the grace of God that regenerates the heart, and brings the Spirit-given ability not only to obey but to delight in God’s law. Similarly in terms of quality and quantity, God’s general revelation is not the special revelation revealed in Scripture: ‘In a fallen world where natural revelation is suppressed in unrighteousness, special revelation is needed to check, confirm and correct whatever is claimed for the content of natural revelation... Moreover, there are no moral norms given in natural revelation that are missing from special revelation (2 Timothy 3:16–17); indeed the content and benefit of special revelation exceeds that of natural revelation (cf. Romans 3:1–2).’¹²

Arguing for co-belligerence

Let us now return to the subject of co-belligerence building on our foundations of the antithesis and common grace. A summary proposal may look something like this:

- As Christians we have a divine cultural mandate to obey: to fill and subdue the earth, to transform the world and put everything under the Lordship of Christ until he comes again. This is a command not an optional extra.
- However, as ‘alienated residents’,¹³ and ones who will inherit the earth, we understand the nature and depth of the Fall and ensuing curse, knowing that the liberation from the bondage to decay will only happen when the sons of God are revealed.

8 John Murray, ‘Common Grace’, in *Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. II: Systematic Theology*, Banner of Truth, 1977, pp.93–122; Donald Macleod, *Behold Your God*, Christian Focus, 1995, pp.145–176.

9 Murray, op. cit., p.96.

10 Macleod, op. cit., p.150.

11 Ibid.

12 Greg Bahnsen, ‘The Theonomic Position’, in *God and Politics*, op. cit., p.21. In our Western culture, government and legal system, the distinction between common grace/general revelation and special grace/special revelation is somewhat opaque as it is very difficult to disentangle what comes from Scripture and an echo of the gospel and what comes from common grace and general revelation.

13 I borrow this term from David Bruce Hegeman, *Plowing in Hope: Toward a Biblical Theology of Culture*, Canon Press, 2004, p.88.

Therefore we have a Great Commission to obey: to proclaim the message of the gospel.

- There is reciprocity between the two mandates: the Great Commission serves the cultural mandate by bringing together an army of believers to transform the earth; the cultural mandate serves the Great Commission by attempting to uphold and preserve an ordered environment into which the gospel can be proclaimed.
- There is though, in addition, an asymmetry between the two mandates, not in terms of the physical and spiritual but between the temporal and the eternal. As Macaulay notes, ‘Idolatry and sin remain the root causes of social distress and only the gospel of Christ has power to deal with them adequately. Yet, in the light of the “resurrection” framework, it is important to remember that the gospel priority is one of efficacy not replacement. The efficacy of the gospel in bringing sinners to salvation does not preclude the significance of the creation order, especially our need to care for a broken world. The two must not be separated.’¹⁴
- When talking about the antithesis between belief and unbelief we are dealing in ideal types. The ‘now and not-yet’ of biblical eschatology means that although we can talk of principal differences of drives and commitments between believers and unbelievers, not only do the ‘wheat and tares’ grow together, but the antithesis runs through the believing heart (Romans 7), and the unbeliever is restrained and gifted because of common grace.
- Therefore, for the sake of the Church, Christians ‘may appropriate some non-Christian objects, forms, and texts for their own culturative ends.’¹⁵ With more utilitarian cultural objects which are less expressive of worldview, appropriation will be far easier than with finished cultural products that express an unbelieving worldview: ‘Christians must be on their guard to evaluate – according to scriptural standards (1 Corinthians 2:15; 1 Thessalonians 5:21f; Philippians 4:8) – the ideological bias of the medium and ideological content of the message of non-Christian (and Christian) artefacts.’¹⁶
- From the perspective of the cultural mandate, there are those who are not Christians but who by their inconsistency (because of God’s common grace) may agree with a Christian stance on a certain cultural issue. When this happens there may be the opportunity for co-belligerence. Indeed, far from detracting from the proclamation of the gospel, this co-belligerence may well serve as an opportunity for gospel witness. We must be careful though that we do not become a stumbling block for other Christians, and that our co-belligerence does not communicate to a watching world the possibility of neutrality and the dilution of the exclusivity of Christ and the gospel.

I realise the above statement is tentative, suggestive and pregnant with further questions. But now let us consider some practical issues for those who embark on a path of co-belligerence.

Engaging in co-belligerence

First we must be thankful to God for his common grace. As Murray comments: ‘it means a profound respect for, and appreciation of, every good and noble thing, and it is this philosophy and ethic that has made Christianity in its true expression a force in every department of legitimate human interest and vocation. Christianity when true to its spirit has not been ascetic or monastic. Rather has it evaluated everything that is good and right as possessing the dignity of divine ordinance.’¹⁷ We must also be loving, loving our enemies and loving our co-belligerents who in other contexts may well be enemies of the gospel. Because of this

14 Macaulay, op. cit., p.3.

15 Hegeman, op. cit., p.79.

16 Ibid., p.84.

17 Murray, op. cit., p.117f.

we will be concerned to witness in word and deed to our fellow co-belligerent, not by pretending there is common ground between us, but taking the opportunity to gently demonstrate the fact that any 'true' thing they say is inconsistent with their worldview and the borrowed capital of orthodox Trinitarian Christian faith. Our concern for them will be fuelled by our knowledge of the biblical principle that the greater the revelation spurned, the greater the eventual condemnation (Matthew 11:20–24).

Second, we must distinguish who should do what in terms of authority, vocation and gifting. On one hand, I believe there is no secular/sacred split, or even 'two kingdoms' in which the church and the world are subject to different divine revelation, laws, norms and standards. God's special revelation is sufficient to speak into every area of life and should be the authority for every Christian. On the other hand, I do believe that God's word itself makes distinctions between different spheres of life. The church is not the state, they both have different aims and objectives, different areas of authority and different means of enforcing that authority. So too there is one Body but with many members each of whom have their own gifts and vocations. An individual Christian politician and a local church pastor are involved in related but distinct callings with different giftings and should recognise this. While engaging in co-belligerence may well be the main diet of a Christian politician, it is unlikely to be the same for the local pastor or the local church.

Third, our involvement in co-belligerence must be cautious. While we affirm common grace, we are still aware of the depth of the Fall and the principle of the antithesis. We must be on our guard that we are not seduced by the world or conformed to its pattern.

Some practical advice is given by John Langlois in a short paper on co-belligerence.¹⁸ Having argued the need for clarity in our beliefs, unity, principles, purpose, outcomes and language, Langlois notes the dangers of co-belligerence: the danger of losing control, of unacceptable compromise, of the final result being distorted by the co-belligerent and being misunderstood by our own people. He believes that such dangers can be minimized by being always alert to what our co-belligerents are doing, keeping joint control of the process, keeping good lines of communication with both our own people and our co-belligerents, and finally, trusting in God's strength and not our own.

However, while noting this caution in our engagements with unbelievers, I believe that those Christians, like me, who emphasise the antithesis, should be more willing than we have been to unite and ally ourselves with other believers. Although it is proper to talk of levels of consistency in terms of belief, the antithesis is not between more consistent and less consistent believers, but between belief and unbelief. Certainly we should be willing to work more closely with those who believe in the apostolic gospel message, even if we disagree on some secondary matters.

Fourth, we need to be realistic as to what a cultural co-belligerence can achieve. If we are not to become unequally yoked then there necessarily should be a clearly defined focus to our co-belligerence which will be temporary in nature. Schaeffer himself was well aware of this:

Christians must realise that there is a difference between being a co-belligerent and being an ally. At times we will seem to be saying exactly the same things as those without a Christian base are saying... We must say what the Bible says when it causes us *to seem to be saying* what others are saying... But we must never forget that this is only a passing co-belligerency and not an alliance.¹⁹

Another dose of realism is focused on the political sphere. Given that only conversion will bring lasting social transformation to a society and given our current minority status in our society, we need to be realistic about what we can achieve in the political sphere. This does not mean we are to be resigned but rather realistic. Our call is to be faithful wherever God has placed us.

Finally, we have the ability and liberty to think strategically. In terms of co-belligerence how open must we be? One crucial question is the *thickness* or *thinness* of our description. 'Do we speak the rich discourse of our own confessional particularity, and risk being misunderstood or ignored? Or is it legitimate to translate the terms we use among ourselves into a "thin" public discourse that relies upon less specifically... Christian language, to make the case for our policy proposals in a way that might convince someone who does not share our theological convictions.'²⁰

Jesus says we are to be 'shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves' (Matthew 10:16). While we can never set aside the lordship of Christ in the name of neutrality (because the antithesis means there is no neutrality), the nature of relationships are usually that of gradual growth. Gaining trust is not automatic. For example, in building relationships in evangelism do we seek to outline an entire Christian worldview the first time we meet an unbeliever? The same might be said in the political sphere. As Olasky notes, we must:

...choose battles and tactics carefully. Sometimes we have no choice of battleground; if we are ordered to stop praying to God or to bow to idols, we must stand firm wherever we are, as did Daniel and his friends in ancient Babylon. But when we do have a choice, we need to emphasize life-changing questions such as abortion and marriage.²¹

While co-belligerence may be a necessary activity in our current context, it is also an activity requiring constant care, attention and mature theological reflection from those involved. We must be humble to realise that we cannot rely on our own strength in such situations but must pray for God-given wisdom and discernment if and when we decide to engage in co-belligerence.

19 Francis Schaeffer, 'The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century', in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, Vol. 4, Crossway, 1982, p.30f.

20 Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace*, Eerdmans, 2002, p.84.

21 Marvin Olasky, 'The ABCs of Political Involvement', found at www.townhall.com/columnists/marvinolasky/mo20040617.shtml

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18 John Langlois, 'Co-Belligerency: Right or Wrong', online document at Hope for Europe, www.hfe.org/resources/article_details.php?id=21&network_id=1

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