One Christian Perspective on the Immigration Reform Debate

Steve Cable takes a look at the immigration issue from a biblical point of view. Setting aside all the political rhetoric, what does the Bible really have to say about this topic and how should the church respond with an authenic Christian perspective.

Introduction

Immigration issues have garnered a lot of headlines in recent weeks. Is there a clear biblical position on immigration laws and on how Christians should respond to immigrants?

A January 2006 Gallup poll indicated that "immigration reform" ranked at the bottom of seven national issues behind the war in Iraq, healthcare, and the economy.{1} However, after the large rallies in April, it had moved up into the number two spot behind the war in Iraq. While more Americans are concerned about improving control of our borders than developing a comprehensive strategy for illegal immigrants, over seventy-five percent of those polled consider such a comprehensive strategy "extremely important" or "very important." In part, this is due to a heightened awareness of the approximately twelve million illegal aliens in our country and to the intense interest in the Hispanic community. The concern also feeds on the conflicting desires for low cost labor on the one hand and protection from terrorist infiltration on the other.

At a time when the American public is becoming sensitized to the illegal immigrant issue, the evangelical community has not presented a unified front. As reported in the April 28 (2006) edition of the *Dallas Morning News*, "At a forum . . ., conservative and liberal religious leaders lobbed Bible

verses, unable to agree on what Jesus would do about the nation's nearly 12 million illegal immigrants."{2} Three general positions have emerged among the evangelical community.

One position promotes honoring God through obeying the law, focusing on the responsibility of the government to provide for the security of its people.

A second position focuses on our responsibility to care for the needy, particularly the alien and the stranger.

The third position assumes this is an amoral political and economic issue that the church is wise to stay clear of.

The conundrum was aptly summarized by Dr. Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission:

> *"We have a right to expect the government to fulfill its divinely ordained mandate to punish those who break the laws and reward those who do not. Romans 13. We also have a divine mandate to act redemptively and compassionately toward those who are in need."{3}*

Since we are all created in the image of God, should nations place any restrictions upon our ability to move about and take up residence where we will? Certainly, if we were all Christians, Colossians 3:11 might apply, stating, "there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all." From this verse and others like it, we might argue that we should not make any distinctions between citizens and non-citizens. Yet, the Bible clearly indicates that there will be distinct nations until Jesus returns.

Reasons for Restricted Immigration Policy

As noted above, a simple Christian perspective would welcome everyone to settle in our nation at any time. However, the Bible clearly supports the concept of national sovereignty as a means through which God works in this fallen world. In 1 Timothy 2:1-2, we are called to pray for government officials, not that they would cease to exist, but that they would facilitate a society where we can follow God and share Christ in a secure, peaceful environment. Three common reasons a government may choose to control traffic across its borders and limit citizenship opportunities are as follows:

> *1. **National security**—A nation with enemies has a need to know that those enemies are not dwelling within their land. In Deut. 31:12-13, the foreigners dwelling among the people of Israel were required to enter into the covenant to obey God. Those that did not support God's leadership were not allowed to enter the land. Today, like never before, America must be concerned about enemies attacking from inside her border. The government has a responsibility to protect the security of her people by taking reasonable means to keep threats outside of our borders.*
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> *2. **Economic prosperity**—A perception of limited resources may cause a nation to curtail immigration in order to reserve a greater share of those resources for the existing citizens. They may say, "We have the sturdiest and most well stocked lifeboat, but if everyone abandons their inferior lifeboats and flocks to this one, we will go from prosperity and security to sinking and perishing." Under the same motivation, it is common for nations to import foreign workers to perform low paid, menial tasks. There is biblical support for property ownership and rewards for ones labor. It is balanced by the clear teaching to proactively minister to the needy and to beware of being motivated by greed.{4}*
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> *3. **Cultural integrity**—A people group may want restrictions on*

> *immigration to protect the integrity of their historic traditions and society. Certainly, God directed the nation of Israel to ensure that all members of society worshiped the God of Abraham and did not introduce other forms of worship into society. In Exodus 12:43-49, foreigners are prohibited from participating in the Passover unless their entire household is circumcised and they covenant to obey God. America has thrived with a cultural and religious diversity, while enforcing a uniform acceptance of the Constitution and the principles of democracy, freedom, and equality.*

Although the Bible does not mandate that nations should have laws to control their borders and manage immigration, it is clear that there are biblically acceptable reasons for a national policy in this area. The two that are the clearest are national security from known enemies and protecting common cultural ideals. Greed often plays a role in establishing immigration policies, an attitude clearly prohibited by our Lord.

The Case for Law and Order

Conflicting positions on immigration policy stake their claim on respect for authority at one end and on compassion for the needy at the other. Let’s consider the matter of law and order.

Romans 13 states:

> *Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God. . . . But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath,*

but also for conscience' sake (vv. 1,2,4,5).{5}

Christians are to be in subjection to governing authorities not only to avoid punishment, but also to be able to minister with a clear conscience. Peter expands on the motivation in 1 Peter 2:13-15 where he writes, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men."

Thus, for Christians, obeying the law is one way honor God. God ordains authority with the responsibility to punish "the one who practices evil." For those who take the law-and-order position, these verses are a clear biblical mandate for dealing with illegal immigration. Not only should we personally obey the law, we should support our governing authorities in enforcing it.

However, those who take a different position argue our imperative to follow Christ's example takes precedence over any laws. Certainly, Jesus and the apostles did not always obey the strict direction of the ruling authorities. One notable example is found in Acts 4:19-20. When commanded not "to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus," Peter replied, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." Not only did they refuse to submit to the command, they encouraged others to follow their example. However, one should be careful about using these examples as a trump card to justify ignoring any laws that one believes are contrary to the teaching of Christ. Both Jesus and Paul direct us to pay our taxes, knowing full well that some of those tax dollars may be spent in ways that do not honor Christ.

As believers, we are called to obey laws that do not require us to directly disobey God.

The Case for Compassion

Another important consideration is whether Christ's directive to show compassion to the needy should be our primary concern in establishing and enforcing immigration policy. Those who promote this case point to two primary principles in the Scriptures:

> *1. Treat the alien in our midst with fairness, remembering that we too are aliens.*
>
> *2. Minister to the least of these as unto Jesus Himself.*

Deuteronomy 10:18-19 states, "He . . . shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." Remembering their history as aliens dwelling in Egypt, the children of Israel were to show love for the aliens in their midst. We, too, should remember that most of us did nothing to deserve being born in America. We could just as easily be the person seeking a better life by becoming an alien in America.

Does this passage mean that we have a responsibility to care for any person who is able to cross our borders?

The Hebrew word most often translated as "alien" is *ger*. According to Vines, a *ger* "was not simply a foreigner or a stranger. He was a permanent resident, once a citizen of another land, who had moved into his new residence."{6} The Jewish law was clear that these aliens should be afforded equitable treatment under the law (e.g., Num. 15:16, Deut. 1:16). However, special provisions were also in place for the alien. Not being a member of one of the twelve tribes, the alien could not own land. Consequently, the alien was grouped

together with widows and orphans to receive a portion of the tithe (Deut. 14:28-29), access to the gleanings in the field (Deut. 24:19-22) and justice (Deut. 24:17-18). However, these provisions did not apply to the foreigner temporarily in the country for work or other purposes. These temporary visitors did not receive a food allotment and were not allowed to fully participate in society.

We know that God wants us to treat aliens fairly, but the biblical example shows a greater responsibility to those who meet the requirements to become residents.

Compassion is a emphasized in Jesus' command to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," in the parable of the Good Samaritan, and in us observation in Matt 25:40, "to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me." We are called to demonstrate sacrificial love in meeting the needs of both friends and strangers. Each person we meet is created in the image of God, worthy of our love and our concern for their spiritual and physical needs. Whatever our position on immigration policy and enforcement, Christians should be at the forefront of ministering to people far from home.

Responding to Our Current Situation

Is it possible within our current immigration laws to be compassionate *and* to be subject to ruling authorities at the same time? One way to answer that question is to apply the biblical guidelines reviewed earlier to the different roles in the immigration debate.

First, let's consider a *potential immigrant*. Barring a direct threat upon your life, abide by the laws of your current country and America. If you have a desire to work in America, apply through appropriate channels and use all legal means to expedite the process. Desiring more opportunity for your

family is commendable. However, choosing to break the law to achieve that goal is telling God that He cannot be trusted to provide.

Now assume you were an *illegal immigrant*. Report yourself to the appropriate authorities to obtain a hearing and abide by the results. Some argue that it is cruel to separate families. Current laws do not normally force families to be separated. Separation is the result of family members choosing to stay in the U.S. when a person is required to leave the country.

What attitude should be taken by an *employer*? Obey the employment laws. Do not knowingly hire illegal aliens *and* take steps to prevent accidentally hiring illegal aliens.

Finally, consider a *Christian citizen*. Reach out in love to all people regardless of their immigration status. Help them find help in dealing with the process and caring for their family. Counsel those in your flock to come into compliance with any laws they are breaking. Ask your representatives to support legislation which balances security with generosity and compassion. Most Americans desire to protect or improve their standard of living. Doing this at the expense of others is clearly contrary to biblical teaching. At the same time, lowering our standard of living by being less productive is not good stewardship either. We should promote policies that reflect a willingness to reduce our consumption to benefit others while promoting improvements across the board. What might this look like?

- Increased legal immigration for a variety of skill and educational levels, believing that we have the ingenuity to utilize these additional resources productively.
- Fair pay for all jobs with strong penalties for employers who break the laws.
- Requiring immigrants to maintain a record of gainful employment.
- Rapid deportation for those who enter illegally.

- While there is a real terrorist threat, making it difficult to enter our country surreptitiously.
- Pressuring other countries not to exploit their labor force.

Although there is no simple scriptural prescription to “fix” the immigration issue, Christians can model how to reach out in compassion and submit to authority at the same time. Prayerfully consider how God wants you to respond in this area.

Notes

1. “Halting the Flow is American’s Illegal Immigration Priority”, Lydia Saad, *Gallup News Service*, April 13, 2006
2. Todd J. Gillman, “Christians ask: Can you love thy neighbor but deport him, too?” *Dallas Morning News,* April 28, 2006.
3. Ibid.
4. Luke 12:15
5. All Scripture references from the New American Standard Bible, 1995.
6. Vine’s Expository Dictionary of biblical Words, Copyright (c)1985, Thomas Nelson Publishers

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