

Christians, Foreign Languages, and the Immigration Debate

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Christian professors and students of modern foreign languages have a unique and privileged position to grasp two very important characteristics of Jesus: He is God Incarnate and He is the Immigrant par excellence. We who learn a second language have acquired the possibility of traveling the globe and conversing with people in their own languages. As we struggle to communicate with our global neighbors on their terms and on their turf we begin to appreciate God's great love when He took on human flesh in Jesus Christ. In addition, anyone who has learned another language also has the privilege of helping immigrants who speak that language receive a genuine welcome. Jesus, in his great sermon in Matthew 25:31-46, proclaimed that our treatment of the least of these his siblings, was, in fact, directed towards him. Foreign language acquisition enables us to show hospitality in ways that help us to better understand our God.

The topic of immigration, nevertheless, is highly controversial. During 2006 immigration became one of the most polemical issues of the midterm elections. It was a topic that did not cleanly break across partisan lines. President Bush, Republican free-marketers, and most Democrats favored a comprehensive immigration policy with a pathway to citizenship for many of the roughly 12 million undocumented immigrants that currently reside in our country (along the lines of the McCain/Kennedy bill). Most Republicans, as well as some Democrats, favored a more restrictive policy that would place a fence along some six hundred miles of the Mexican-US border and would require undocumented immigrants to return to their country of origin and apply for an appropriate visa.

In spite of the importance of the controversy, Christian leaders have not provided much biblical reflection on the topic of immigration. It is

helpful to go back a decade and rediscover an important document produced by the Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA). The 1990s were very similar to our current political situation, especially with regard to immigration policies and proposals. In 1994 the citizens of California voted and passed Proposition 187, a measure that would reduce educational and medical benefits for undocumented immigrants and for their children. Although this proposition was challenged in the courts and never implemented, similar legislation began to appear in many states. In response, the Social Concerns Committee of the EFCA proposed the following resolution which was unanimously passed at their General Conference in 1996. It is presented below in its entirety and is recommended as a place to begin Christian reflection on this vital issue.

A Stranger at Our Gates: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON IMMIGRATION

Resolution adopted at General Conference, 1996
The Evangelical Free Church of America

During periods of rapid change and economic uncertainty, it is often the vulnerable and marginalized people who are blamed for the misfortune that everyone else experiences or expects to experience. Today a significant amount of attention and blame for a perceived threat to the American way of life is being directed at immigrants. As Christians, we must ensure that our response to the issue of immigration is directed by a world view that is shaped by biblical principles rather than secular rhetoric.

A number of themes relevant to immigration run through the Bible. The first theme is that we ourselves, as Christians, are aliens on this earth. "...And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth" (Heb. 11:13). Our status as aliens and strangers forms the basis for our attitudes and responses towards those people who live outside our society.

A second theme is that our material possessions do not really belong to us. The Promised Land belonged to the Israelites only in the sense that as host, God allowed the Israelites to dwell in the Promised Land as His guests (Lev. 25:23). Similarly, as aliens and strangers in the world, the material resources of the world do not belong to us. We have what we have because God, as host, has distributed material resources to us, His guests. As recipients of God's graciousness and generosity, we need to guard against selfishness and possessiveness which would cloud our attitude toward immigrants.

A third theme is protection for the alien. As non-citizens working in their country of residence, aliens exist outside the social and political network of the society they are residing in; thus, they are rendered powerless. Aliens are very vulnerable to exploitation. As Christians, we should recall our roots as aliens and, thus, identify with their plight (Ex. 23:9).

A fourth theme is that, for Christians, no one is ever to really be considered an outsider. "...The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself..." (Lev. 19:33-34). The Great Commandment is to apply to the alien, because he or she is our neighbor.

A fifth theme is that, in serving the outsiders of society, we encounter Jesus. Because Christ identified with the stranger, we are to extend the same treatment to the alien and stranger that we would extend toward Jesus (Matt. 25:35).

Historically, immigration policies of the United States appear to be directed more by racism and economic self-interest than compassion. Immigration quotas favored people groups already established in the United States (western and northern Europe) while limiting immigrants from Asia and Africa.¹ Sometimes certain people groups were allowed to immigrate only when they were needed as menial labor for a specific task, e.g., Chinese railroad builders. Today immigration policy favors those who bring technical expertise or financial resources with them.²

The present debate over immigration policy and immigrants is often based on stereotypical falsehoods. Immigrants do not displace American workers. They usually fill a shortage of skilled labor or do the menial task that citizens refuse to do.³ Immigrants' rate of employment is higher than the general population, and they work longer hours.⁴ They receive less general assistance than the general population.⁵ Immigrants pay more in taxes than the social services they receive.⁶ The reason state governments are financially burdened by immigrants is that only one-third of the federal income tax paid by immigrants is returned to the state governments who provide public services such as education and emergency medical care.⁷

As we engage in our society's debate on immigration through forums such as the voting booth, community discussion groups, political parties and church in light of the preceding discussion, we need to raise the following issues:

A. To what extent are our attitudes towards immigration shaped by racism? To what extent do we assume that American culture is identified

with northern and western European culture; and are we attempting to protect those cultural roots of America from corruption by "foreign" cultures? Are we afraid that this existing cultural dominance will be overcome by the "strangeness" of strangers? Are we denying that other cultures bring gifts that add to rather than detract from our society's culture? Does our cultural identity take precedence over our Christian identity so that we fail to recognize that we are fellow aliens with these immigrants?

B. To what extent are our attitudes towards immigrants shaped by materialism? As aliens and strangers in this world, what is the theological basis for acting as though America were our property and we can hence deny access to it? Are we being overly possessive of our lifestyle or standard of living?

C. Is the fear of running out of limited resources justifiable? How can we say that there is not enough to go around in America? Are we more concerned with the pursuit of affluence than meeting the basic human needs of all human beings?

D. What are the implications of Proposition 187-type legislation (as in the state of California)? Does denying or reducing "safety net" and other public benefits to illegal immigrants and their American born children imply that in our society some groups of people are not regarded as being equally human as others even though they participate in the economic functioning of our society? Are some groups of people not deemed worthy to receive the minimal goods and services we consider essential for a very basic level of human existence?

E. What about immigration policy? To what extent are we responsible for the living conditions in other countries that motivate people to emigrate? Do the policies of the U.S. government and the U.S. trans-national companies contribute to pressures on people to emigrate to the U.S.? Does an immigration policy that favors the immigration of highly skilled people drain other countries of the skills necessary to improve their standard of living and hence reduce the pressure to emigrate to America?

As evangelicals, we are called by God to aid the vulnerable. Therefore, we must see the alien and the stranger as individuals made in the image of God, the object of Christ's love and as people of intrinsic worth who are in need of our affirmation and support.

¹ Tim Stafford, "Here Comes the World," *Christianity Today*, (May 15, 1995), 20.

² Diane Drachman, "Immigration Statuses and Their Influence on Service Provision, Access and Use," *Social Work* 40, no. 2 (March 1995), 190.

³ Stafford, 21.

⁴ Frank Sharry, "Myths, Realities, and Solutions," *Spectrum: The Journal of State Government* 67, no. 1 (Winter 1994), 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24

⁷ *Ibid.*