

A Biblical Approach to the Ethical Dilemma of Immigration Reform



Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!
--Statue of Liberty plaque

Last year an immigrant's grandson did something that angered many in the debate over illegal immigrants in the United States. What he did captured national media attention (as well as local attention) to the point that he was forced to wear a bullet-proof vest. Louis Barletta, the Republican mayor of Hazleton, Pennsylvania, led the city council to approve the Illegal Immigration Relief Act. This legislation forbids any landlord in the city from renting to an illegal immigrant on pain of a thousand dollar per day fine. In addition, business licenses are revoked for five years if an employer in the city hires an illegal immigrant. Finally, the law makes English the city's official language and legal papers cannot be translated into other languages, presumably for formal use, without official approval.¹ Reactions have naturally been mixed. The American Civil Liberties Union has sued the city claiming that city officials "unfairly demonized undocumented immigrants."² Others obviously believe the stricter law is common sense as evidenced by the fact that thirty cities immediately contacted the mayor for a copy of the law.³

Few issues in modern American culture raise more ethical questions than this heated discussion about illegal immigration. There are many sides to many questions making this one of the most complicated conversations in American politics and life. One serious study noted, "Few subjects are so fraught with misinformation and lack of information, complexity and paradox, political interest and governmental neglect, social concern and human callousness, careful economic analysis and fiscal incertitude."⁴ In light of this overwhelming conundrum, it would be wise for all sides to be thoughtful and not hasty as we formulate our suggestions to solve this knotty problem. Those who are Bible-believing Christians must bring to the table the teachings of God's Word so that, in the final analysis,

¹ Although the city's legislation has received plenty of media attention, I have gathered the details from Michael Powell and Michelle Garcia, "Pa. City Puts Illegal Immigrants on Notice," *Washington Post*, August 22, 2006, A03; available from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/08/21/AR2006082101484.html>; Internet; accessed 26 April 2007. The article asserts that the reason for Barletta's use of the bullet-proof vest is, according to him, the large surge in crime by illegal immigrants.

² "Federal Trial Over Hazleton, PA's Anti-Immigrant Ordinances Concludes," American Civil Liberties Union, available from <http://www.aclu.org/immigrants/discrim/29164prs20070322.html>; Internet; accessed 26 April 2007. A verdict in the federal court case in Scranton, Pennsylvania is expected in May or June 2007.

³ "Towns Take Aim at Illegal Immigration," *USA Today*, August 14, 2006; available from http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-08-14-towns-immigration_x.htm; Internet; accessed 26 April 2007. See also Joel Belz, "Common-sense Solution," *World* (November 4, 2006), 6. Belz argues that beefing up the law while still maintaining a welcoming spirit relative to legal immigration is a "common-sense solution" to be tried.

⁴ David W. Haines and Karen E. Rosenblum, "Introduction: Problematic Labels, Volatile Issues" in *Illegal Immigration in America: A Reference Handbook* edited by David W. Haines and Karen E. Rosenblum, (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1999), 1.

the proposed solutions will truly be a Christian response to immigration reform and not just a collection of political platitudes based upon preconceived notions.

In very broad terms (and risking oversimplification), there are three general responses to the issue of illegal immigration. First, the *amnesty approach* seeks to grant a general amnesty to all or almost all illegal immigrants in the United States. In other words, these advocates want to pardon illegal immigrants now in the country. Most of those who hold this view also favor liberalized policies for future *legal* immigration.⁵ Adherents of such a position are sometimes labeled by opponents as “open-border enthusiasts.”⁶

Second, the *restrictive approach* wants immigration laws in the United States enforced. Usually proponents argue that illegal immigrants should be arrested and/or deported. They should not be allowed to share in the benefits that legal persons (immigrants or natives) in this country enjoy. Of course, this is the intent by the city law in Hazleton discussed above. Many of those who hold this view also favor conservative policies and stronger restrictions for future immigration. One advocate of this would be former presidential candidate Pat Buchanan. He argues that “dying populations and immigrant invasions imperil our country and civilization.”⁷ However, some in this camp would favor an increase of legal immigration into the United States.⁸

Third, the *partial amnesty* approach attempts to deal with illegal immigrants with a kind of middle ground between general amnesty and the restrictive approach. It often argues that the largeness of the problem prohibits the deportation of all illegal immigrants. Conservative estimates of illegal immigrants range from eight to twenty million. This view sees itself as being realistic about the law enforcement problem. On the other hand, it also attempts to regulate the movement of illegals toward citizenship status through recognition of wrong-doing indicated by fines along with incentives toward assimilation. It is, in essence, an attempt to verbalize respect for law with a compassionate spirit toward the illegal immigrants. While many plans of this kind exist, the most well-known is President Bush’s *guest worker* program. On the one hand, it has been hailed by some conservatives as the giving

⁵ Few persons actually espouse a complete pardon for all illegal immigrants. Usually the discussion from that side begins with the idea of immigration in general and the need for the United States to be open and welcoming to third-world workers trying to better their lot in life. In addition, sometimes the middle position to be discussed below is viewed by those holding the restrictive view as akin to general amnesty. Rudy Giuliani, former mayor of New York City, and a Republican presidential candidate, has been accused of changing his position on immigration. As mayor of New York City, he appeared to hold the amnesty view while fighting to keep hospital and other benefits in place for illegal immigrants in the city. Now as a national candidate, he appears to be more conservative. His response is that 9-11 has happened and that this changes the situation. See Marc Santora and Sam Roberts, “Giuliana Shifts His Tone on Immigration,” *New York Times*, April 22, 2007; available from http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/22/us/politics/22giuliani.html?_r=3&hp&oref=slogin&oref=slogin&oref=slogin; Internet; accessed 26 April 2007.

⁶ Ilana Mercer, “The Immigration Scene,” *WordNetDaily*, April 28, 2006, available from http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=49955; Internet; accessed 28 April 2006. Mercer, herself an immigrant albeit legal, largely critiques Ted Kennedy’s stamp of approval for illegal immigrants.

⁷ Pat Buchanan, *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil our Country and Civilization* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002).

⁸ The Federalist Society <fedsoc@radix.net>, e-mail to the author, 6 April 2006. This email sent to this author, who is a member of The Federalist Society, provided a link to a written debate between Professors Margaret Stock and John Eastman. Stock argued for a more lenient view on the immigration question while Eastman followed the more restrictive view of illegal immigration. Nonetheless, Eastman, while holding the restrictive view on illegal immigration, still supported an increase of legal immigration into the United States “capped only by the policy judgment of Congress on the level of immigration that can be absorbed at any given time.” Both Stock and Eastman are members of the Federalist Society, which attempts to advance the notion in American culture of an originalist reading of the U. S. Constitution.

of general amnesty and trifling with the law.⁹ On the other hand, it has been called by some liberals “indentured servitude.”¹⁰

The range of responses to the overall issue as well as the intensity (and even hatefulness) of discussion between the various views informs the Bible-believing Christian that he must be thorough and exact in examination of the various facets of the problem. Unfortunately, the issues can not really be dealt with in the space of one research article. However, the following discussion will modestly try to surface the correct concerns coupled with a preliminary evaluation based upon Scripture. Hopefully, in the end a solution can be proposed that is not just esoteric but practical advice for our churches.

Old Testament Teaching on the Stranger

One starting point for biblical discussion of the issue of illegal immigrants is the Old Testament teaching about the stranger among the Israelites. There are several statements that command a caring attitude and corresponding actions relative to any such foreigner among the people. The gleaning of the harvest was not to be done but left for the “needy and the stranger” (Lev. 19:9; cp. Ruth). It was wrong for any Israelite to oppress or vex any stranger in the land (Ex. 22:1-2). The Israelites were reminded that God brings justice for the orphan and the widow while He gives food and clothing to the stranger (Deut. 10:18; cp. Ps. 146:9). This is said in the context of God’s impartiality (Deut. 10:17) and the command to the Israelites to love aliens in their midst because they were once strangers in the land of Egypt (Deut. 10:19). Following God’s example, the Israelites were to practice justice and mercy toward strangers in their midst (Deut. 24:17-21). Jeremiah suggested that the men of Judah could retain their right to dwell in the land “if you do not oppress the alien, orphan, or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, nor walk after other gods to your own ruin” (see Jer. 7:5-8). God promises judgment to those Israelites who “turn aside the alien” (Mal. 3:5).

One might be tempted in light of such a list from the Old Testament to conclude speedily that Americans should be more than happy to allow illegal immigrants to obtain health care and other benefits within our country. If God wanted Israel to demonstrate love for the alien, surely America can do no less. Some might want to push the application to the point that the United States should have an open borders policy. After all, Jesus said to do unto others as you would have them do unto you (Matt. 7:12). If roles were reversed, how would you feel?

However, the interpreter must be careful at this point, especially with the Old Testament text. There are some problems that arise if one attempts to do a direct application of these texts relative to the modern American situation. First, the United States does not have a covenant relationship with God as a nation in the same way that Israel does. It is not suggested here that these passages have no profit for Christians. Every biblical passage has something for believers today (2 Tim. 3:16-17). However, one should not obscure dispensational distinctions and view these passages as regulatory for the Church Age believer as he sorts out this issue. Another problem is the fact that all of these passages deal with the stranger quite apart from the issue of whether he is in the land legally or illegally. Can it then be assumed that no distinctions are to be made in our modern national

⁹ Joseph Farah, “The Meaning of the Word ‘Amnesty,’” *WorldNetDaily*, April 26, 2006, available from http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=49913; Internet; accessed 26 April 2006. Interestingly, Farah appears to be a first-generation immigrant from Lebanon. See also Les Kinsolving, “Bush Violating Duties on Immigration?” *WorldNetDaily*, April 25, 2006, available from http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/printer-friendly.asp?ARTICLE_ID=49908; Internet; accessed 26 April 2006.

¹⁰ The person giving this label to Bush’s plan is Howard Dean, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee. See Ralph Z. Hallow, “Dean Calls the Border Top Priority,” *The Washington Times*, 20 April 2006. See also <http://www.gop.com/News/Read.aspx?ID=6256>. In addition, most union leaders are opposed to the guest-worker plan.

experience? Or should we simply note that these passages really do not directly address the issue of *illegal* immigration in modern America?

In addition, if one is consistent, there are some passages that seem to go other directions that must be taken into account. For example, the Hebrews were not to allow strangers to eat the Passover unless they assimilated to the point of adopting circumcision (Ex. 12:19-49). On such points strangers were kept at a cultural distance if they did not assimilate. In another case, an Israelite could charge interest on loans to a stranger, but not to a brother Hebrew (Deut. 23:20). This makes a sharp distinction between the ways a brother was treated compared to a stranger. On the other hand, strangers were also not allowed to eat blood in their food (i.e., they were to follow some Hebrew practices) if they sojourned among the Israelites apparently whether they were circumcised or not (Lev. 17:10-12). Moreover, strangers were required to follow the same laws relative to immoral relations (Lev. 18:26). In such cases, strangers in the land were to be fully assimilated to Hebrew rather than pagan practices. If one looks at these kinds of passages and thinks of direct application to the American scene today, he might be tempted to believe that the passages suggest the need for strangers or immigrants to assimilate and to allow for some sort of conditional and sometimes unconditional restrictions. While there is value in considering these verses in context relative to the issue at hand, it still must be noted that wisdom applications in the modern world sometimes require quite a bit of sophistication. It remains uncertain that an appeal to these Old Testament texts alone would solve the most significant ethical issues brought forward by illegal immigration in America.

Biblical Teaching about the Poor

Perhaps more fertile ground for discussion is the Bible's teaching about the poor. This takes on added significance since the overwhelming number of immigrants who come into the United States today are poor by American economic standards. The reason they often come is to have a chance to overcome poverty. The Old Testament teaching about the poor is plentiful. In the Pentateuch, God commanded through Moses, "For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land'" (Deut. 15:11). This characteristic passage deals with the treatment of poor "brothers." However, other passages, as we have seen, speak of generous dealings with strangers as well as the needy in general (e.g., Lev. 19:10). Proverbs notes that "He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor, will also cry himself and not be answered" (21:13). Even the sin of Sodom, which included moral wickedness of the most heinous variety, was also described in Ezekiel with these words: "she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food, and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy" (Eze. 16:49). This example shows that God condemned a people outside of his covenant community Israel on the basis of how they treated the poor. In the time of Amos, Israel is said to be judged partly because she "imposed heavy rent on the poor" (Amos 5:11). A number of other Old Testament passages could be marshaled to show this consistent theme.

The New Testament develops the theme of the poor along similar lines. Luke portrays Jesus applying Isaiah's words to his own ministry in this way: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden" (Isa. 61:1; Lk. 4:18). In the early church the poor and needy were taken care of (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35) including specific directions for helping widows (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim. 5:5-16). Remembering the poor was in the heart and mind of the apostles (Gal. 2:10). Helping widows and orphans is taught by James (Ja. 1:27) as is the need to honor the poor (Ja. 2:6).

One can read such passages as those alluded to above from both the Old and New Testaments and understand why someone like President Bush would emphasize the idea of compassion as he

attempts to deal with the mostly poor illegal immigrants in America. The trans-dispensational nature of biblical teaching about the poor highlights it as a trans-cultural concern in the mind of God. Therefore, this consideration must be part of the Christian's thinking process as he examines the issue. To be sure, there are rocky places. One can easily visualize allowing so many immigrants, legal and illegal, into the country that any support system for the poor becomes unviable (similar to negative projections about the future of social security). Even though this is true, it is never justified for a Christian to approach this issue without compassion for the poor. What remains to be seen is the exact ways in which such compassion must be worked out, ways which are partly crafted by other balancing thoughts in Scripture as will be seen later.

God and Racial Diversity

One of the most unpleasant sides to doing research on the question of illegal immigration into the United States can be found in the claims and counter-claims about racism. Is the opposition to illegal immigration (and maybe legal immigration) into the United States racially motivated for the most part due to a dislike of Latinos from south of our border? Is there a white supremacy or ethnocentricity at the core of opposition to illegal immigration? The answer to this question is complicated. Ellis Cose argues

For while it is true America's history is one of absorbing successive waves of immigrants, it is also a history of intermittent outbreaks of anti-immigrant hysteria, and of unremitting friction with racial minorities, whether native or foreign-born.

Given that, one can expect America's latest wave of immigration to be a magnet for conflict and hostility for years to come—despite a widely held belief that America has put the worst of her ethnic turmoil behind her. Optimistic forecasts notwithstanding, racial animosity has proven to be both an enduring American phenomenon and an invaluable political tool. Rather than a fire that flares up and burns itself out, it has more resembled a virus that at times lies dormant but can suddenly erupt with vengeance—particularly during periods of stress.¹¹

The way that some have described the problem and its solution lends itself to the charge of racism, thus confirming this sentiment. For example, Peter Brimelow's book *Alien Nation* (1996) argues that post-1965 immigration policy in the United States has favored non-European peoples and discriminated against the predominately white European emigration causing instability in the United States.¹² Like others in his camp, he has defended racial commonality as one component among many that defines and strengthens nations. One harsh critic of this approach notes, "*Alien Nation* forces us to think hard about the possible consequences of different ways of framing the immigration debate. The most inflammatory approach—and, I shall argue, the most dangerous—is one that combines an apocalyptic vision of the decline of 'our' civilization with a race-based diagnosis (whether implicit or explicit) and a race-based solution."¹³ To be sure, no Christian should harbor any racial prejudice. To do so sins against God and man. God has made of one blood all the nations of the world (Acts 17:26).

¹¹ Ellis Cose, *A Nation of Strangers: Prejudice, Politics, and the Populating of America* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1992), 219.

¹² Peter Brimelow, *Alien Nation: Common Sense about America's Immigration Disaster* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996).

¹³ Daniel Kanstroom, "Dangerous Undertones of the New Nativism: Peter Brimelow and the Decline of the West" in *Immigrants Out! The New Nativism and the Anti-Immigrant Impulse in the United States* edited by Juan F. Perea (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 302.

Paul said this to a prideful civilization. Jesus cared deeply about Samaritans (Lk. 10:30-37) as he did for all people. We must follow our Lord's example in this matter and not waver, even inadvertently, by voicing any form of racism.

On the other hand, one must not sin in the opposite extreme. It is equally sinful to impugn the motives of honest people who are uncomfortable with lenient views about immigration. There are those who are too quick to use the race card to produce an emotional response in their favor. A better approach to the question comes from Dana Wilbanks, who, while criticizing Brimelow's position mentioned above, asks and answers the question in this way:

Is it possible to be a restrictionist without also being a racist? Is it possible to favor strong measures to prevent illegal immigration from Mexico without being driven by xenophobia? I believe it is. There is a morally credible case to be made for more restrictive policies. This position should not be branded as inherently racist. The restrictionists raise legitimate concerns that must be carefully addressed, not simply dismissed out of hand. Many Hispanic Americans favor greater restrictions along the U.S./Mexico border. Some restrictionists maintain that the first responsibility of the United States is more effectively to open opportunities to its own people of color in the underclass rather than to expand further their numbers.¹⁴

Wilbanks' refusal to label a strict view a form of racism should be applauded. Two factors help to reinforce the conclusion.

First, Wilbanks is quite right in pointing out that many non-whites in America hold a restrictive view on illegal immigration. I was surprised in my own research to find some of the most vocal attacks of lenient views came from first-generation immigrants into the United States. In particular, I am thinking of the Christian-Lebanese Joseph Farah, founder of WorldNetDaily, one of the top Internet news sources in the world. He has for the last year or so produced several editorials attacking President Bush's guest-worker program.¹⁵ No one can accuse him of a position based upon white supremacy. In addition, one can mention the controversial journalist Michelle Malkin. Malkin is a first generation American of Filipino descent who vigorously opposes the laxness of the enforcement of current immigration laws. Her main concern is the allowing of criminals and terrorists into the country.¹⁶ In short, motivations for any view can be varied. For example, most union leaders are opposed to illegal immigration because of the potential loss of jobs for their workers. This argument may or may not be misplaced, but one should not accuse them of racism because of their position.

Second, a review of the history of past episodes in U. S. immigration reveals that the focus of opposition, especially from a Christian perspective, has often been religious in nature and not racial. One example worth noting is the political "Know Nothing Party" or "American Party" that arose in the 1850s in response to immigration into the United States. The similarities of the arguments used in that day to our own time are quite striking.¹⁷ However, one element that is sometimes glossed over is the anti-Catholic fervor that drove this particular response. Immigration into the United States at that time was largely Roman Catholic while America had been overwhelmingly Protestant. By the 1850s,

¹⁴ Dana W. Wilbanks, *Re-Creating America: The Ethics of U. S. Immigration & Refugee Policy in a Christian Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 83.

¹⁵ See footnote 9.

¹⁶ Michelle Malkin, *Invasion: How America Still Welcomes Terrorists, Criminals, and Other Foreign Menaces to Our Shores* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2002).

¹⁷ Terry Coleman, *Passage to America* (Norwalk, CN: Easton Press, 1972), 218-235.

Roman Catholics represented the largest religious grouping in America.¹⁸ It did not help matters when the Pope issued his *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) condemning the American way of life, especially freedom of religion as expressed in the first amendment.¹⁹ Those in the Know-Nothing Party literally felt endangered. In hindsight, they were quite wrong and appear to be silly. At the present time, a pagan America sets the table somewhat differently. Immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries are more conservative in many areas than the elites of America. Bible-believing Christians may have some political reasons to welcome them even if they are predominantly Roman Catholic.²⁰

To summarize our thoughts to this point about immigration and racism, we have asserted that racism can never be justified in the behavior of Christians, restrictive views of immigration do not necessarily entail racism, prejudice can be religious and not racial, and examining motives for positions can be a tricky business. Before leaving the topic, one more point must be made. God has declared his heart about the races of the world by ensuring that someone from every race is included in His coming kingdom.²¹ This is evident in his promises given in Daniel 7:14 (all the peoples, nations, and men of every language) and throughout the rest of the Bible. The follower of Jesus must share this heart of God. God loves diversity and so should the Christian. To do otherwise is to open oneself up to the temptation to devalue others. As far as the immigration discussion is concerned, this means that any arguments from the restrictive side of the debate must studiously avoid any inclinations that are opposed to immigration on the grounds of disdain for diversity.

Immigration and Evangelism

Bible-believing Christians who currently live in America have an opportunity that many Christians never see. The foreign mission field is emerging all around us. The diversity that immigration brings can be seen in a positive light from the vantage point of the church's mission. This does not mean that Christians should necessarily favor lenient views of dealing with illegal immigration. It does mean that the missiological impulse that God has given the church should help us see the current state of affairs as an opportunity for the gospel and not just an ethical problem to be solved.

Again, Christians can learn from the past. North American Protestants who opposed immigration in the late 1800s initially kept a distance from the immigrants. However, as time progressed they were forced to acknowledge the necessity of deliberate ministry to them, especially if they were going to maintain any Christian influence in the urban centers of the country. Slowly but surely the call to missions began to replace the tendency to separate.²² The dispensationalist Arno C. Gaebelein, an associate editor of the *Scofield Reference Bible* and editor of *Our Hope* magazine, ministered to the social and spiritual needs of Jewish immigrants in New York City during the 1890s.

¹⁸ Edwin Gaustad, *A Religious History of America* (New York: Harper Row, 1966), 209.

¹⁹ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 426-27.

²⁰ A similar spirit can be blamed for some Protestant responses to immigration (1880-1925) that stemmed from dashed expectations relative to a Christian (Protestant) civilization in North America. Most likely later Catholic immigration was one factor among many that dismantled the postmillennial expectations of the time. See Lawrence B. Davis, *Immigrants, Baptists, and the Protestant Mind in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 2-3.

²¹ I refer here to the Messianic eschatological kingdom that begins at the Second Coming of Christ.

²² Davis, *Immigrants, Baptists, and the Protestant Mind in America*, 131ff.

He viewed this opportunity as part of a personal call from God to do missions overseas, but God had changed the venue by sending the people to him.²³

The sowing of the gospel seed throughout the world is a clear command of God as well as reaching out to show social compassion to those in need as discussed before. The Gospel of Matthew lays out clearly the transition from a racially limited ministry (“rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”—Matt. 10:6) to a Gentile mission encompassing all peoples (Matt. 13; 28:19-20). The latter describes the nature of ministry in the Church Age. Thus, if in the Providence of God, He has brought the world to our door, believers should have a measure of excitement when thinking about intentional evangelistic outreach to immigrants. Even if a believer holds to the restrictive view of immigration, he should still seek the opportunities to deal with the people whom God has sent.²⁴

The Pursuit of Honesty

Whatever else is said of a Christian, it must be said of him that he tells the truth. Although differences of opinion in the analysis of historical records cannot be avoided, there exists in the American immigration debate a kind of shallowness that comes across as either dishonesty with respect to American history or sloppiness in framing the questions. What I mean by this is that the arguments from some (not all) conservative and liberal restrictionists sound like this: “America is being overwhelmed at the present moment by millions of illegal immigrants. This has never happened before. We are in danger of losing our very way of life. Therefore, we must act quickly to deal with illegal immigrants and be strict regarding future immigration into the country.” Such statements do not bear any truth value unless they are strongly qualified. As they stand in the popular imagination, they make the one saying these things appear to be unreasonable to those who know better.

On the face of things, the numbers are quite telling. The statistics from the U. S. Census Bureau show that there is currently one birth every 8 seconds, one death every 13 seconds, and one international migrant entering the country every 27 seconds for a net gain of one person being added to the U.S. population every 11 seconds.²⁵ These are the facts on the ground so to speak. Furthermore, in the twenty years from 1840 to 1860 around 4,300,000 immigrants entered into the United States.²⁶ According to government records, the population in 1860 stood at 31,400,000. As a percentage of total population, immigration (here presumed legal) was 13.6%. If we take the higher side of conservative estimates for 2007, we can assume 20,000,000 illegal immigrants (not taking into account legal immigration). Comparing that to a current population of 301,000,000, the percentage is 6.6%. If a high estimate is made of legal immigration into the United States over the last twenty years and added to the numbers for illegals, the percentage is around 13.3%, similar to the 1860 numbers.²⁷ Therefore,

²³ Michael D. Stallard, *The Early Twentieth-Century Dispensationalism of Arno C. Gaebelin* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2002), 15-23.

²⁴ There is the potential for problems when evangelizing illegal immigrants. A case study will be presented later in the article to address to demonstrate this hazard.

²⁵ See “U.S. POPClock Projection,” available from <http://www.census.gov/population/www/popclockus.html>; Internet, accessed 28 April 2007.

²⁶ The numbers I am using are estimates based upon Mark Noll et al, *Eerdmans' Handbook to Christianity in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 234.

²⁷ According to the Center for Immigration Studies, the United States admits between 700,000 and 900,000 legal immigrants each year (see <http://www.cis.org/topics/legalimmigration.html>; Internet; accessed 28 April 2007). Therefore,

it simply will not do to suggest that we are presently experiencing waves of immigration unseen of before when seen in this light. This is not to diminish the significance of social, political, and legal problems related to the issue of illegal immigration. However, we are saying that the presentations about the problem should not be exaggerated by those interested in the value of truth.

Fortunately, even conservatives who have strong restrictionist tendencies with respect to illegal immigration have set the record straight about the history of immigration in the United States. One of the best resources I found in researching this topic was Michael Barone's *The New Americans*.²⁸ In a fascinating analysis of the history of immigration he notes comparisons (along with some contrasts) between Irish and Blacks, Italians and Latinos, and Jews and Asians. The earlier immigrants can help provide insights on how to approach the immigration of the later ones in the comparison. Barone points out that immigration has always been a major part of American life except for the period from 1924 to 1965 when the United States adopted a somewhat isolationist stance in the world.²⁹ We must "discard the notion that we are at a totally new place in American history."³⁰ Lessons from the past can inform the present: "Many savants predicted a hundred years ago that the immigrants of their day could never be assimilated, that they would never undertake the civic obligations and adapt to the civic culture of the United States. History has proven them wrong."³¹ Whether this optimistic tone for our day is valid is not the point. Barone's history lesson provides a basis for accuracy about America's past. Such truthfulness should be part of every Christian's speech when confronting this issue.³² Perhaps the sentiment is captured best by another writer who notes, "A century ago, many native-born Americans viewed newly arrived eastern European and southern European immigrants with fear and loathing, as 'repulsive creatures' who menaced the very foundations of American civilization. These negative attitudes have long been forgotten in a haze of history, replaced by images that glorify the past."³³

Multiculturalism versus Assimilation

While knowledge of America's past is necessary to prevent overstating the problem of immigration in the present time, it would also be wrong not to acknowledge issues today that are unique and potentially harmful to America and perhaps to overall Christian witness. Barone launches the introduction to his book *The New Americans* in the following way: "In January 1994, speaking in Milwaukee, Vice President Al Gore gave a speech in which he translated the national motto *E pluribus unum* as 'out of one, many.' One might guess that this was an inadvertent error, or evidence that Gore

for sake of argument, assuming one million per year (rounding up), over the last twenty years the percentage of legal and illegal immigration combined would be around 13.3%, very close to the 1860 numbers.

²⁸ Michael Barone, *The New Americans: How the Melting Pot Can Work Again* (rev. ed., Washington, D. C.: Regnery Publishing, 2001).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 279.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

³² Another valuable resource for understanding immigration is Thomas Sowell, *Migrations and Cultures: A World View* (New York: Basic Books, 1996). Sowell, an eminent black, conservative historian, and syndicated columnist, treats not American immigration, but world wide migration patterns showing how various immigrants have benefited the lands to which they came. Such works provide the big picture and gets one outside the box of immediate petty politics.

³³ Nancy Foner, *In a New Land: A Comparative View of Immigration* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 207.

did not take Latin at St. Albans or Harvard. Except that in the words that followed he made it clear that the words had come out as intended.” The national motto *E pluribus unum* actually means the opposite of how it was used by Al Gore. Its legitimate translation is “out of many, one.” The difference is often described in literature on immigration as the difference between the old notion of the *melting pot* and the new notion of a *tossed salad*. The melting pot goes with the national motto. Contrary to what some say, it does not preclude the honoring of individual traditions from the old land. What it does suggest is the old picture of Americans from different backgrounds pulling together as a team as they make a contract with each other about the central features of the American government and way of life. The word for this is *assimilation*.

The tossed salad moniker goes with Al Gore’s intentional misinterpretation of the national motto. The word for this approach is *multiculturalism*. One should not assume that this simply refers to a positive recognition of diversity in American culture. It goes far beyond this. It implies the enshrining of the maintaining of cultural distinctions without the pulling together of the various factions for an American commonality. It is in essence, an attempt to prevent Americanization of any form. Barone encapsulates this well:

The main threats to assimilation come not from the immigrants themselves, but from American elites who flinch at the mention of Americanization and who find European-style multiculturalism more appealing. There are the educational elites, who support so-called bilingual education—which in practice is too often neither bilingual nor education—in which children are taught in bad Spanish and kept from mastering the English language, the first rung on the ladder of upward mobility. There are the political elites, who persist in requiring foreign language ballots even though immigrants who wish to become citizens are required to show that they have learned English. There are the governmental elites, who allow Wahhabi imams to serve as prison chaplains and preachers of terrorism to teach in Middle Eastern studies programs. There are the academic elites, who pride themselves on admitting as a student at Yale a spokesman for the murderous Taliban regime. There are the highly educated moral-relativist elites, who regard our civilization as a virus and hostile immigrants and multiculturalism as the cure.³⁴

Such a harsh assessment is heightened by actual events such as the Spanish television station in Los Angeles that put up billboard advertisements for a news program that referred to Los Angeles, CA with the CA crossed out and Mexico written instead.³⁵ Two newscasters from the station are seen sitting in front of the Los Angeles skyline with the insertion of a Mexico City landmark. The tension is similar to that felt when May Day last year saw thousands of immigrants (probably both legal and illegal) march in protest waving Mexican flags.



What is the Christian to make of this multiculturalism versus assimilation debate? On the face of it, there are many anti-Christian, anti-church, and anti-Bible dimensions to the multicultural movement in the United States. Believers would do well to take these into account and oppose the movement at the philosophical and political level. In addition, it is doubtful that the peace in society that Christians are to support and pray for (1 Tim. 2:1-2) can be accomplished if multiculturalism leads

³⁴ Barone, *The New Americans*, x. To capture the spirit of assimilation in earlier immigrants, see Peter Morton Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews: In Their Own Words* (New York: Checkmark Books, 1997).

³⁵ “LA Now in Mexico?” *WorldNetDaily*, April 25, 2005; available from http://worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=43973; Internet; accessed 28 April 2007.

to an unfruitful fragmentation of American culture. Also, what is really best for immigrants, legal and illegal, if they are to remain on American soil? America is not the devil incarnate in spite of her many faults down through history. The best of the American experience, including its Judeo-Christian heritage, would be good for any immigrants to be exposed to even if they choose not to embrace it philosophically. If we sought less for them than we have, could we really say that we love them as God wants us to? On the other hand, the unity of *E pluribus unum* should not be thought of as forced with no allowance made for others to enjoy their own past cultural heritage. However, assimilation has never in practice been an obscuring of past culture. For example, Irish-Americans have maintained much of their past heritage and brought it with them over into an expanding American experience. They have become part of the American *nation* while loving their past along the way. Such assimilation should be supported by Christians over against multiculturalism that embraces an anti-Christian and anti-American posture. This position should govern the goals that believers should support relative to both legal and illegal immigration.³⁶

The Christian and the Rule of Law

One of the defining keys for how to deal with illegal immigration from a Bible point of view relates to biblical instruction on obeying the law. Both Jesus and Paul were clear that believers are to obey the government authorities (Matt. 22:21; Rom. 13:1-7). To be sure, there appear to be some exceptions or allowances in a fallen world for civil disobedience. When lives are at stake, apparently it is right to disobey authorities (Ex. 1:15-22). If the government commanded me to kill an illegal immigrant, I would not do it. It also appears that disobedience is allowed when the gospel itself is at stake (Acts 4:18-20). If the government ordered me not to share the gospel with illegal immigrants, I would disobey that order, too.

However, would illegal immigration be a justifiable act of civil disobedience? I do not believe so. Certainly, a government can choose to be merciful in some cases and the vast numbers of illegal immigrants cause a rather selective approach to enforcement in the short term. However, in light of the Bible's insistence of obedience to the government, churches should not hide illegals from the INS. Christian businessmen should not hire illegals to work in their businesses unless the government specifically allows it. If I were a businessman in Hazleton, I would obey the local ordinance. The fact is that few nations of the world have the same pressure put on them as that put on the United States to be "open" to illegal immigration. Notice that what I am talking about is illegal immigration, not legal immigration.

One pragmatic factor that stiffens my resistance to disobedience on this point is the fact that the unity that was discussed earlier as part of the assimilation versus multiculturalism debate appears to be destroyed at the outset. To give an amnesty to lawbreakers as the starting point for their assimilation seems to me to be somewhat contradictory. Assimilation to the American way of life is largely an adoption of and commitment to American laws starting with the U. S. Constitution. I am not sure that forgiveness for breaking the law is a good starting point for this process. Beyond this, it will probably

³⁶ I have not dealt here with one of the motives for avoiding the fragmentation that is possible under multiculturalism and its usually lax views on immigration reform. The issue is terrorism. The attacks in September 2001 have put a shadow over the entire discussion. In particular, the examples of Western European nations and their struggles with an Islamic sub-culture give one pause especially since Moslems in those countries might have intentions for trouble when greater strength is achieved. In other words, a strategy is being voiced by some Moslems to take over the West through immigration. I believe Christians should encourage our government to carry out its function of defending the nation. Therefore, caution, energy, and resources should be brought to bear to resolve the tensions that exist in the immigration scenario that we are now facing. For a discussion about nationhood in general, see Brent A. Nelson, *America Balkanized: Immigration's Challenge to Government* (Monterey, VA: American Immigration Control Foundation, 1994). For a discussion of the crime and terrorism question relative to immigration see Malkin, *Invasion*.

encourage further illegal immigrants who would expect a similar amnesty down the road. In other words, there will more than likely be some unintended consequences for an attempted good act of mercy.

Before leaving this topic, a word is in order about President Bush's guest-worker plan. I consider the President's plan a noble effort to bring together realistic enforcement of the law and compassion for the many which are in this country illegally but otherwise living lives of hard work and value for the American economic and cultural situation. Certainly if this plan or any other plan for immigration reform is passed into law, Christians should be obedient to the plan. This is not open to question. However, the low fines or fees given to illegal immigrants as part of his plan and the question of placement of illegals in line for immigration approval may in the end have the same unintended consequences as general amnesty. In the final analysis, disagreements here do not seem to be on a matter of principle as much as on the implementation details for dealing with the problem. In short, I would say that the President's plan is consistent with the principles laid out in this paper for a Christian response to immigration reform although I would do some things differently.³⁷ In general I would agree with the President in favoring increased *legal* immigration into the country as long as national security issues are considered as well.

A Case Study in a Local Church

The issue of illegal immigration is not some theoretical issue that only provides fodder for library books and television news. It is also not isolated to the southwest portion of the United States. Latino immigrants have prominence throughout the country, including northeast Pennsylvania where an example occurred in the church where I serve as one of the pastors.³⁸ A young Spanish-speaking man from Honduras started attending our church through the contacts made by our Spanish outreach ministry.³⁹ This young man came to faith in Christ and was baptized. He was learning English at the time. Through a Spanish interpreter the lead pastor held Bible studies with the man and he began to grow as a Christian. This led to a tension in his own life when he came to discover the biblical teaching about obedience to the government. He was an *illegal* immigrant. He had entered into the United States unlawfully.

How should the pastor counsel such a man? Humanly speaking, the present experience offered fruitful days ahead in his personal growth if he stayed with our congregation to continue his discipleship into a mature believer. He had other friends and family that had come into the country also. The evangelistic opportunity was there for them. However, our lead pastor correctly counseled him to be obedient to the government and return home to Honduras. We did not turn him into authorities (I know of no law requiring such action). We let him sort things out for a time and he made his own decision. Sure enough when he got back to Honduras, he tried to get back into the United States, but was denied entry because he had previously been in this country illegally. Now he remains in Honduras and is hopefully growing in Christ. We have contact from time to time with him but are no longer part of his regular day to day life. We must trust the Lord to bless his obedient servant without our help.

³⁷ For a complete presentation of President Bush's announcement of his plan, go the current White House web site available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/01/20040107-3.html>; Internet; accessed 28 April 2007.

³⁸ The church is New Life Baptist Church of Scranton, Pennsylvania, formerly called Southside Baptist Church.

³⁹ This ministry was headed up by Mark Rubin (a Baptist Bible Seminary graduate). Mark and his wife Jen serve presently as missionaries to Chile with the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism.

Conclusions

To summarize what has been said, Christians must (1) learn to love the stranger in the land, (2) show compassion to the poor and needy, (3) expect and value racial diversity, (4) pray for and pursue immigrants as a mission field for Christ, (5) pursue brutal honesty relative to the historical facts of American immigration, (6) opt for a form of assimilation which honors past heritage but values unity under the one nation that is the United States, (7) avoid a multiculturalism that is bent on divesting America of its Christian foundation, and (8) obey the laws of the land, even when it is contrary to our own desires. At the beginning of this article, I placed a picture of the Statute of Liberty and the famous words from an inscription on the base of the monument. The words have the Statue of Liberty, representing America, crying out to receive the poor and downtrodden of the world into the nation. The modern attitude seems to be reversed. Today, at least among the elite multiculturalists, America is what is received into the downtrodden masses. America as a nation is to receive nothing. A better approach is voiced by Barone: “We Americans have the advantage of a heritage and a history that has combined the best of immigration and assimilation. We should neither retreat into a posture of isolationism nor embrace multiculturalism, but continue, improving as we go, in the American way.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Barone, *The New Americans*, xi.