

A Biblical Perspective on Immigration Policy

By James R. Edwards, Jr., PhD

The immigration issue often highlights fissures between faithful parishioners and denominational clerics. Many Catholic bishops have called for amnesty for illegal immigrants, and their conference's lobbying arm works continually with open-borders special interests. Catholic and "mainline" Protestant church officials have decried the federal government's enforcement of immigration laws. Some liberal religious leaders re-initiated a "sanctuary" movement to harbor illegal aliens, including in churches. A Southern Baptist official has sided with amnesty proponents as pragmatism, and the National Association of Evangelicals plans to weigh in, likely on the pro "comprehensive immigration reform" side.¹

Yet such self-described "compassion" among religious elites differs from the perspective of most rank-and-file Christians. The laity generally opposes legalization and supports enforcement of immigration laws.² One may ask: How else could Christians approach immigration policy matters?

This *Backgrounder* examines the immigration issue from the perspective of biblical Christianity. Both policy makers and private citizens who are Christians may wish to consider how Scripture might inform their views on immigration. This report intends to aid those faithful readers.

The faith principles of many Americans inform their politics and public policy. And the United States has a long, historical connection with Christian influence, dating to the country's earliest days. Today, the vast majority (about four fifths) of Americans belong to the Christian religion. Some of the most prominent recent examples of faith-influenced politics are freedom of religious expression in public life, abortion, and same-sex marriage.

On some matters of public policy, the Bible speaks clearly. On other issues, there is less clarity and more room for prudential judgment. The rub comes where there is a lack of scriptural clarity on a particular issue, significant differences between the particular society of Old Testament Israel and the United States, or some other factor. Christianity teaches that God, His word, and His precepts are unchanging, but believers may struggle to find the most appropriate guidance from Scripture for handling a very specific public policy issue for their day and age in their nation. This conundrum of finding and applying the right, timeless principles to a modern policy issue in a specific nation challenges both the laity and clerics. This report attempts to shed helpful light, in the best tradition of reasoning from the Scriptures (Acts 17:2).

First, this *Backgrounder* examines the biblical role of civil government. This includes its weighing justice and mercy, as well as determining which biblical guidance more appropriately applies to individuals and which to society. Second, migration in Scripture is considered. Third, what is the responsibility of immigrants and would-be immigrants? The *Backgrounder* concludes with the application of biblical principles to 21st century American immigration.

Civil Government's Biblical Role

A central question must be answered before a biblically informed immigration policy may be determined: What role does God intend civil government to fulfill? After all, earthly government will be the mechanism through which public policy is formulated.

Scripture clearly indicates that God charges civil authorities with preserving order, protecting citizens, and punishing wrongdoers. A prime passage is Romans 13:1-7:

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*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.*³

Similar teachings, such as I Peter 2:13-17 and Titus 3:1, urge citizens to obey secular authorities, because they hold godly agency, whether the individuals in charge are personally characterized by godliness or not. This conduct of good citizenship is one means of revering God. Earthly governors “bear the sword” on behalf of those under their authority — for instance, preserving law and order, fighting off invaders, and meting out punishment to those who break the law.

The authority God delegates to civil government focuses on justice, not mercy (though this is not to say laws should not be tempered by mercy). Biblical teachings of mercy generally apply to individual conduct, not to civil authorities. Further, standards of justice are not fully moral if they are not accompanied by judgment and punishment. These two elements (judgment and punishment) are integral, or else justice is not just.

In other words, civil government has been delegated authority to use force because government fulfills the role of protector of a specific body politic and the members of that political society. The reason the sword of justice has been delegated to earthly governments is for protection of a defined set of people who live under a government's jurisdiction. It is not power for power's sake, but power to protect and defend a state's own people and resources. Earthly rulers are to guard their own citizens against evil in the world and in the hearts of men. And God holds rulers accountable for their official conduct (e.g., Deut. 17:14-20). Christians understand this delegation of authority to protectors in the civil realm to be a tangible safeguard against the

consequences of the sin nature that inherently resides in every person.⁴ Hence, national defense and police powers manifest the central role given to the government. A given government's responsibility under God is to safeguard its citizens.

These points concerning civil government relate to immigration policy in several ways. One is the implication of national sovereignty, which includes the right to determine the grounds for admitting foreigners into the jurisdiction, and on what conditions. It also leads to the deduction that immigration policies should principally benefit citizens, not harm citizens' well-being. Further, its implications include the prerogative of punishment or expulsion of those foreigners who do not abide by the civil laws, including immigration laws, as well as determining the criteria and conditions for foreigners' admission. These sorts of prudential judgments may change according to the prevailing situation.

Old Testament Principles. Even the passages of Scripture most often cited by religious advocates of mass immigration and amnesty plainly do not argue for open borders. Rather, these writings generally reflect “equal justice under law” principles.

Consider Leviticus 19:33-34: “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” Similarly reads Exodus 22:21: “You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.”

Dr. Stephen Steinlight has noted that the Hebrew term for “sojourn” means temporary stay.⁵ A related term used in some scriptural translations is “stranger.” One Bible dictionary says, “This word generally denotes a person from a foreign land residing in Palestine. Such persons enjoyed many privileges in common with the Jews, but still were separate from them. The relation of the Jews to strangers was regulated by special laws (Deut. 23:3; 24:14-21; 25:5; 26:10-13).”⁶ This Bible dictionary defines “two classes of aliens: 1) those who were temporary visitors, who owned no landed property; and 2) those who held permanent residence without becoming citizens (Lev. 22:10; Ps. 19:12). Both of these classes were to enjoy, under certain conditions, the same rights as other citizens (Lev. 19:33, 34; Deut. 10:19).”⁷ Again, those rights amounted to equal standing under the law, or having the benefit of the rule of law. Therefore, it is biblically inaccurate to incorporate, automatically and dogmatically, permanent immigration into every such term.

Nor is it reasonable to jump to the conclusions many on the open borders side do about related passages. These activists claim that such passages mandate that a society welcome any and all foreigners presenting themselves. No such passages state or imply overlooking illegality committed on the part of the alien in his entry. Nor is there any requirement of unlimited or uncontrolled admittance of those who are members of another nation or society. Assertions like those are, at a minimum, a wrong reading. Such verses actually indicate nothing about the grounds for alien admission to ancient Israel.

In fact, as Steinlight and others have noted, a fair reading of the relevant Old Testament passages makes clear that foreign residents were to comply with Israelite laws, such as Sabbath observance (e.g., Deut. 16:9-15). Furthermore, the law God laid down for Israel allowed legal distinctions to be drawn between native Jews and resident aliens. For instance, Deuteronomy 15 commands the remission of the debts of fellow Israelites every seven years, but “[o]f a foreigner you may exact” his debts (v. 3). A chapter before, Hebrews receive permission to sell or give foreigners “unclean” **[[non-kosher?]]** food (see Deut. 14:21).

Another theme stands out in the Bible. God regards borders as meaningful and important (see, for instance, Prov. 22:28 and Prov. 23:10-11). Consider Deuteronomy 32:8: “When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.” Ezekiel 47:13-23 details the Promised Land’s boundaries. Numbers 34:1-15 describes the borders the Lord established for each tribe of Israel. Deuteronomy 19:14 commands against moving a neighboring tribe’s boundary stone marking a given tribe of Israel’s inheritance in the Promised Land. Another example appears three months after the Israelites left Egypt. The base of Mount Sinai was made off-limits (see Exodus 19:12ff), under penalty of death, until the people had been consecrated. Resident aliens who had children and settled in Israel (largely because of Israel’s failure to complete the mandate to remove them) were allowed private property in Israel (Ezek. 47:21-23). However, numerous times Israelites are warned against letting the aliens’ pagan practices corrupt God-given moral standards.

God also employed foreigners as instruments of His justice, with invasion as a curse (just as he used the Israelites to exact justice against the pagans residing in the Promised Land). For example, II Chronicles 36 describes the decline of Judah **[[Judea?]]**, the culmination of kingships and continual disobedience by God’s people. This sad passage tells of the Chaldean conquest

of Israel and the judgment meted by the Babylonian captivity. The curse in Deuteronomy 28:43-44 reads: “The sojourner who is among you shall rise higher and higher above you, and you shall come down lower and lower. He shall lend to you, and you shall not lend to him. He shall be the head, and you shall be the tail.” That curse plays out throughout Old Testament history.

In short, the Old Testament teaches fair treatment of resident foreigners, with certain requirements of the aliens related to religious and civil legal standards. It also instructs that aliens were to assimilate to the Hebrew culture. Boundaries are meaningful, as well, and foreign presence among the Hebrews on several occasions was a curse. Few details of immigration procedures, standards, or other policy prescriptions appear. To infer some open-borders or mass-amnesty mandate from what actually appears in Scripture is wrong.

Justice and Mercy. Believers have long grasped the instruction of passages such as Micah 6:8: “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Some translations use the word “mercy” instead of “kindness.” American University Professor Daniel Driesbach has found Micah 6:8 to rank among the most cited scriptures by America’s founding generation.

Justice and mercy, along with a godly life, are fundamental principles of biblical conduct. Justice and mercy are complementary principles. They informed the thoughts of America’s Founders as they fashioned a government for the new nation.

Government’s wielding of the sword of justice is well established, biblically, as discussed earlier. Jesus did not challenge that principle, either toward Rome or other earthly authorities, nor did He question the legitimacy of civil (or religious) government.

Government’s exercise of mercy is more challenging than its role in ensuring justice. Examples of mercy in public policy exist; for instance, granting a criminal a pardon or parole before he serves out his prison sentence, having proportionality for punishment of a crime (e.g., an eye for an eye, rather than a life for an eye). But most such policies aim in a rifle-shot fashion at individual cases, and often they involve some level of merit. U.S. immigration statutes have provided for suspending deportation in certain exceptional hardship cases. The adverse effects of not carrying out the justice due against guilty individuals are reduced somewhat by these acts’ limited scope and infrequent application.

When considering mercy as public policy, however, an important distinction must be drawn. Not

every moral or ethical teaching in the Bible fits cleanly or applies equally to both individuals and societies. This is certainly true with justice and mercy. The case for civil authorities executing justice is much plainer, while their application of mercy in public policies is merely tempering, not predominant. Legislating mercy requires prudence, restraint, and good judgment.

Similarly, Jesus affirmed the place of civil government, the executor of justice. Christ said in Matthew 21:22: “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” And Jesus Christ told the rich young man to sell his belongings and follow Him (an individual act of obedience with merciful effect), yet he never advocated a public policy of extorting or impoverishing the better off. From such facts we may infer certain actions as appropriate by individuals and not by civil government, and vice versa. This principle accords with the idea that not every sin (moral offense) should necessarily be against the civil law in a particular land.⁸

A classic teaching on mercy comes in Luke 6:27-31. In this passage, Jesus says:

“But I say to you who here, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.”

The last sentence readers will recognize as the Golden Rule. Christ’s instruction here applies to individuals instead of governments.

The reason is the difference between actors and agents. As an agent for members of the body politic, civil government acts on behalf of a larger group of people. Civil authorities have no resources other than what citizens entrust to them. Every obligation civil authorities take on they do in their capacity as public agents, not personally (other than, say, as individual taxpayers themselves).

In other words, these agents (or representatives) are delegated to weigh what obligations the body politic will take on, and their decisions obligate individuals living under their jurisdiction to fulfill them. For instance, policy makers may decide to establish a program to provide for the widows and orphans of fallen military servicemen. This may be regarded as a policy on the mercy side of the equation. However, the government

has just obligated individual citizens at large to fund and maintain this program. Thus, the practical consequences of civil government’s “mercy” actually are borne by the citizenry.

Related to this is the familiar passage about treatment of “the least of these my brothers” — the hungry, the naked, the stranger, the prisoner. The passage in Matthew 25:31-46 plainly concerns the eternal reward or punishment of individuals. The judgment here is based on individual acts of kindness, as private persons. It becomes highly problematic to ascribe the specific mercy ministries this passage cites to bodies politic.

It invites skepticism to conclude that feeding the hungry or welcoming the stranger as a matter of public policy at public cost is implied here. And given that immigration policies pit the interests and well-being of citizens of a body politic against those of people subject to other national jurisdictions, laws that privilege foreigners, wealthy elites, and special interests over the welfare of citizens (particularly average and less fortunate members of society) are, at a minimum, morally obtuse. “The least of these” in this context are those with a claim to particular authorities’ protection, not foreigners or native elites.

Similarly, the notion of neighborliness illustrates the individual (versus societal) obligation. The Good Samaritan parable exemplifies the commandment to love one’s neighbor as one loves oneself. It appears in Luke 10:25-37, where the social outcast in the story Jesus tells acts more as a true neighbor than do more outwardly upstanding characters. It shows one’s investing himself in someone in need, taking mercy, as the example of loving neighbor.

While principles from this example may serve in certain public policy areas, the model largely applies to individuals. At the policy level, it would be too easy for the state to demand conduct best exercised voluntarily by individuals, not under compulsion.⁹ Such is not mercy, nor is it motivated by love. The same goes for the state erroneously regarding foreigners as “neighbors” and treating them better in certain ways than its own citizens.

And while the general principles of mercy Christ mentions here may inform certain public policies, it would be wrong to jump to particular policies as justified (or mandated) here (such as U.S. funding of foreign programs that perversely result in dependency and illegitimacy). For each national government, “the least of these” will be native-born sufferers, the less fortunate of its own nation, those who stand to lose if forced to compete for jobs or education, for example, with people who would immigrate from some other nation (whose

own civil authorities are responsible for their welfare). Further, in the United States, federal authorities are constrained by the U.S. Constitution, which limits their authority to certain denominated duties.

It is important to note another element of justice. God brings reward and punishment to human societies this side of eternity. Corporate entities such as civil societies have no existence except in the here and now. Thus, they temporally experience consequences affecting the whole. Scripture teaches that individuals are ultimately responsible for their personal sin or righteousness, but those personal moral dimensions affect the life of the body politic, as well. An aspect of this principle involves God's empowering specific civil rulers over particular peoples (e.g., Deut. 32:8; Prov. 8:15-16; Acts 17:26).

Every ruler acts in accordance with God's sovereignty, knowingly or not, though the reasons for certain political actions may not always be discernable to finite human beings (e.g., Prov. 21:1; Prov. 28:16; Prov. 29:26). Those who rule justly achieve a kind of temporal blessing for their body politic (e.g., Prov. 21:15; Prov. 29:4; Prov. 29:14). National character matters and has ramifications for a people, and the nation characterized by righteousness pleases God (e.g., Prov. 11:10-11; Prov. 14:34; Prov. 16:12).

The Old Testament constantly illustrates this notion of dealing with corporate reward or judgment. Before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, Moses gathered the people and stated the corporate blessings and curses the nation would receive based on whether the people obeyed God's commands. Deuteronomy 28 spells out the blessings and curses. Verses 43-44 list among the Lord's curses the resident alien's rise above the natives: "The sojourner who is among you shall rise higher and higher above you, and you shall come down lower and lower. He shall lend to you, and you shall not lend to him. He shall be the head, and you shall be the tail."

Later on, God brought judgment upon the Hebrew people, corporately, and other nations and kingdoms, corporately, such as through the Babylonian conquest of Israel. Temporal entities cannot be rewarded or punished in the hereafter; that realm is reserved for reward or judgment of individuals. Civil government should therefore heed the lesson that public conduct carries corporately shared consequences.

Getting back to Christ's pronouncement to Christians in Luke 6, government can only exercise mercy through its agency. Compassion and mercy, when individuals exercise them, amount to their decision willingly to bear an injustice. It is merciful when a

private person turns the other cheek, gives up his tunic, and gives to a beggar. However, the government cannot do any of those things; it only can obligate the members of its society to do so.

A compassionate act, when exercised by an individual, often becomes an injustice when compelled by civil government — the agents who are supposed to be the guardians of justice and protectors of the innocent, "the least of these," the citizens or subjects of their jurisdiction. Thus, for example, writing into the U.S. Constitution a prohibition against cruel punishment (e.g., torture, which European governments had instituted, such as in the Spanish Inquisition or the English Star Chamber) is an appropriate adaptation of the biblical standards of mercy; freeing thieves and batterers from facing imprisonment, restitution, and accountability to society is inappropriate and not merciful.

How might this concept apply in U.S. immigration policy? Take amnesty, for example. Forgiving foreigners for entering the country illegally or staying when their visas expire might be seen as "merciful" or "compassionate," at least in its effect on the people gaining legal status without having to suffer the consequences the law otherwise would require of them. However, the government, as agent, has acted in such a way that coerces innocent citizens and law-abiding immigrants to suffer the consequences.

In recent amnesty proposals, 12 million or more illegal aliens would be legalized. These amnestied lawbreakers would tie up the immigration bureaucracy; introduce through chain migration millions of relatives into an already clogged system; qualify for scarce public resources such as Medicaid, welfare, and other public assistance; and the costs of all these things would be borne by American taxpayers. Furthermore, the scale of such "mercy" would do harm to many Americans and communities, and lead to more illegal immigration by the signal such policies would send (and indeed have sent with previous amnesties).

Migration in the Bible

While movement of people spans the Old Testament from Adam to Abraham to Moses to Ruth, no immigration policy (the terms and conditions for admission or expulsion of aliens) is spelled out. Moreover, Scripture provides no uniform immigration policy mandate intended to apply to every body politic throughout human history.

Each instance of migration in the Old Testament is different. These movements span hundreds of years and diverse conditions. It would be foolish to assert an

immigration policy for the United States based on such passages. The best Christians can do today is to identify the principles that aptly fit their particular society's circumstances.

Most instances of migration in biblical history are particular to the individuals involved. For instance, God ordered Adam and Eve to flee the Garden of Eden or face certain death (Genesis 3:23-24). This forced migration occurred because of their disobedience.

God Himself led certain individuals or households to move to different locations. Each move recorded in Scripture helped fulfill His purpose in biblical history. None appears to have involved illegality. Each segment of the biblical narrative and the people in that historical line have a unique, specific purpose leading toward the coming of the Messiah and the subsequent spread of the Gospel.

More routine human movement in biblical times was governed by each particular destination. City-states had walls and gates and thereby controlled entry and exit. Much migration was temporary or nomadic. For example, traders, shepherds, and others traversed open spaces. Sojourners would move from location to location, in different city-states and kingdoms, to ply their trades and made a living on the move. Craftsmen would spend periods away from home hiring themselves out. At all times, the local governments or rulers held ultimate control over admission, expulsion, and the terms of stay (see, for example, Nehemiah 13:15-22).

During the Israelite journey, Moses sought permission for the Hebrew people to travel into Edom. He petitioned the Edomite king (Numbers 20:14-21). The king denied permission; Moses appealed, and the king again denied entry. Edom sent its army out to enforce its borders. While this action by Edom was not "hospitable," it was legitimate. The Canaanite king of Arad (Numbers 21:1-3) launched a preemptive military strike against the Hebrews. That aggression resulted in the Lord's favoring Israel in a counterstrike, in which the Hebrew army defeated Arad.

Similarly, Moses petitioned the Amorite king, Sihon, to pass through his territory (Numbers 21:21-31). Sihon, too, sent out his army, initiated combat, but lost the battle and consequently his life and his land. Israel stopped short of neighboring Ammon (v. 24) because of its fortified border. Israel similarly won possession of Bashan, when its king, Og, deployed troops and engaged the Hebrews. In none of these or similar instances does the securing of one's border per se appear to have provoked God's wrath. Where exercising border security in a defensive posture, local kingdoms escaped punishment.

Of course, forced migration occurred as a result of national conquest. In many of these instances, God used pagan nations as instruments of punishment. Occasions such as the Babylonian exile of Israel in 586 B.C. (II Kings 24:10-25:21) illustrate God's hand of judgment against the offending party to the Mosaic Covenant (see Exodus 20:1-17, 24:1-12). This mass migration was unwanted by the deportees.

New Testament times involved changed political circumstances. The independent Israelite kingdom was no more. Palestine had become conquered territory of the Roman Empire. Hence the Jewish religious leaders' seeking Jesus' political entrapment when he replied to "render to Caesar" one's temporal, public duties (Matt. 22:15-22). Caesar maintained local authorities (e.g., King Herod) with Roman governors (e.g., Pontius Pilate) (see Luke 3:1-2). The imperial regime's Pax Romana in certain ways eased travel and increased safety, as well as extended the privileges of Roman citizenship.

Caesar Augustus ordered a census (Luke 2:1-3). Thus, people like Mary and Joseph traveled to the hometown of their lineage. The couple later fled to Egypt for protection against King Herod (discussed below). The Jewish religious leaders persecuted followers of Jesus, recorded in the first several chapters of Acts. Acts 8:1-3 relates that the crackdown in Jerusalem scattered believers to other parts of Judea and Samaria. After Saul the Pharisee persecutor became Paul the apostle of Christ, he traveled throughout the Mediterranean region, from Jerusalem to Damascus to Crete to Athens to Rome. His missionary journeys were integral in spreading the faith, planting and growing churches. Acts 21 and 22 record that Paul was a Roman citizen by birth, and he relied on the rights of a Roman (see especially Acts 22:25-29).

The point here is that those subject to Roman rule, citizen or not, Christian or otherwise, benefited in tangible ways, such as lawful travel within the empire. And temporal citizenship served both God's and early Christians' interests, affording individuals such as Paul certain civil rights and privileges. Despite a less than perfect or moral civil authority, Christians of the early church "rendered unto Caesar the things that were Caesar's." There is no evidence here that early Christians broke any laws when crossing borders.

Humanitarian Migration. Some people mistake examples of fleeing persecution in particular instances in the lives of biblical characters with a broad mandate of open borders, where none exists. These examples most closely match modern refugee and asylum policies. Today, nations will accept foreigners as temporary or permanent residents, depending on the circumstances,

because of warfare, natural disasters, or political or religious persecution in their homelands that makes it impossible for these people to continue residing there without exceptional danger.

Perhaps the most notable example comes in Mary and Joseph's flight to Egypt. They fled King Herod's murderous decree to kill all male Hebrew children under age two, after the Magi from the East failed to inform him who and where Jesus was. Matthew 2:16-21 recounts this event in the life of the very young Jesus. An angel warned Joseph of the danger and specified Egypt as the family's destination. Verse 15 gives the scriptural reason for that destination, which was the fulfillment of prophecy pertaining to the Messiah.

Misguided modern misinterpretation notwithstanding, this act did not constitute illegal immigration. Nothing indicates that the holy family broke any Egyptian laws. Their intent was finding temporary humanitarian relief. They stayed only until they could return to Israel.¹⁰

Another example comes when David fled King Saul's attempts to kill him. The book of I Samuel records Saul's growing hatred of David, how David's popularity as a war hero outshone his own military reputation (popular slogan at that time: Saul has slain his thousands and David his ten thousands), and his self-imposed exile. First, David sought asylum with King Achish of Gath (in Philistine territory). This was hometown to David's old archenemy, Goliath. David resorted to acting insane there, for safety, before returning to Judah [\[\[Judea?\]\]](#) to take refuge in a cave.

David fled — to his former enemy's nation — to seek sanctuary (his destination maybe not the best judgment call, and apparently not specifically directed by God). But there was no illegal immigration involved. Nor was he punished for any sort of illegal entry (Achish's advisors worried for national security reasons, though).

Instances such as the migration of Abraham (who fled to Egypt to escape famine; Genesis 12:10) and of Jacob's entire household (invited by Pharaoh to Egypt, as Joseph's family, to gain relief during a famine; Genesis 45-46) do not provide modern-day immigration or refugee policy prescriptions. They simply exemplify times in which ancestors of Christ sought humanitarian help and God provided it through governing authorities.

No illegal immigration occurred here. The rulers of the receiving states were aware of the visitors' presence. Importantly, Christians believe that God is sovereign over everything. Thus, if or when, in His providence, a state denied a believer entrance into its territory, God provided another means for meeting his needs. On occasion, Scripture shows the refusal to be part of God's

discipline or judgment. The answer, for the true faithful, is not to take matters into one's own hands.

Something else should not be missed. Because Abraham lied about his wife's marital status and the consequences that followed, Pharaoh ordered Abraham and Sarah (called Abram and Sarai at this time) to be deported from Egypt (Genesis 12:20). And the circumstance of the Hebrew people residing in Egypt soured as their stay became increasingly permanent and their presence became an internal security threat. Settlement by invitation led to enslavement and harsh measures, such as the killing of their offspring (Genesis 50:8ff).

Therefore, instances of migration chronicled in Scripture provide no sanction for open borders. These movements of people across territories generally deferred to the national sovereignty of the local authorities regarding whether or not to grant entrance. The theme given the Hebrews of fairly treating aliens and sojourners resembles "equal justice under law" more than an admonition to take all comers without conditions. Even humanitarian migration (fleeing persecution, etc.) did not trump national sovereignty, as preserving law and order even as it relates to immigration is a duty of governing authorities and a manifestation of general blessing (under common grace) of all lawful residents of a jurisdiction.

Additionally, particular movement on the part of certain individuals and of the Hebrew people to the Promised Land were elements of God's carrying out His will through the affairs of men. They should not be generalized beyond their context of time, place, and actors. Absent perfectly clear direction by God, such as leading His chosen people by pillars of cloud and fire, believers after the age of Christ should default to immigration standards that particular states may enact, within their delegated sovereignty. That would seem the most in keeping with the will of a God whose character includes the quality of order.

The Immigrant's Responsibility

Advocates for illegal immigrants like to blur moral lines. They offer up illegal aliens who purport to be Christians.¹¹ Yet, wrapping their lawbreaking in Christian terms stands at odds with the clearer teachings of Scripture. It becomes all the more curious when a supposed Christian justification overlooks conduct that might be regarded as inconsistent with biblical standards. For example, purportedly Christian illegal aliens set the poor example of a criminal life, often abandon their young children to grow up without a parent's daily guidance, and leave

their community back home without the influence of “salt and light.”¹²

Thus, what is the biblical position relating to those who would be immigrants? Have they the right to impose themselves on a sovereign nation, an established society?

First, the biblical standard for immigrants is that they obey the laws of a nation (the general standard for all, discussed above). Obviously, this relates to abiding by a nation’s decision whether or not to admit an alien, and on what terms and conditions. It also includes an assimilationist ethic. Foreigners duly admitted into a particular society are expected to assimilate, not impose their own customs, language, etc. and remake the receiving society in their own image.

Scripture passages such as Deuteronomy 16:9-15 illustrate the biblical assimilation ethic. Here, the Lord establishes for the Israelites the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles. These were religious observances, but also civil laws. In both cases, these laws required resident aliens to participate in the observance of these holidays. Likewise, the Fourth Commandment, calling for observance of the Sabbath day, also binds the resident alien (Deut. 5:14). Thus, in their public life, those aliens granted permission to reside in a nation owe a moral duty to the accepting nation to abide by its laws and assimilate to its customs. Such is morally responsible individual conduct in the context of immigration.

Second, forcing oneself on an existing nation is both unjust and unjustifiable. In other words, illegal immigration is morally wrong. Lawbreaking aliens bear moral responsibility for their unlawful actions.

Even desperate circumstances do not justify illegal immigration. Proverbs 6:30-31 says, “People do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his appetite when he is hungry, but if he is caught, he will pay sevenfold; he will give all the goods of his house.” The New International Version (NIV) translates the terms as “hunger” and “starving.” Here, a man steals food to keep from starving. Everyone can understand the desperation that led to his lawbreaking. But despite his sympathetic circumstances, the fact remains that he stole. He took what belonged to someone else. Caught for stealing, he now faces punishment. He has to make restitution, even to the point of his own bankruptcy.

Could we not make an exception for a starving man? The private owner can; civil government cannot. The larger principles in this example involve his willfully breaking God’s commandment against stealing. The man in this proverb could have looked for other, lawful options to satisfy his need. He could have asked people for bread. He could have prayed and asked God to

supply his need. Even this desperate man was not at liberty to take matters into his own hands with unlawful acts. Scripture does not leave him free to become a law unto himself.

Even this understandable, but lawless, act wars against the peace of society. Civil government exists to preserve the peace. Were the government not to hold lawbreakers accountable, that laxity would send the wrong message to others who might not be in quite as dire circumstances. The forgiven lawbreaker might take the government’s mercy as lack of will to enforce its laws. In other words, the actions here of both the government and the lawbreaker have consequences for the rest of society.

Obedying a nation’s immigration laws (this applies to employers, as well as aliens) is a practical application of the two paramount commandments, loving God and one’s neighbor (e.g., Matt. 22:37-40, Mark 12:29-31). It also follows Christ’s directive to “render unto Caesar” matters in the temporal government’s jurisdiction (Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25). Such obedience shows one’s trust in God’s promised provision and faith in His ability to meet one’s needs. Jesus taught such contentment and trust in God in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:25-34; 7:9-11) and elsewhere (Matt. 19:29-30; Luke 12:22-34).

Almost no illegal aliens to the United States are fleeing starvation or physical danger. A Pew study found that most illegal aliens quit a job in their home country in order to break U.S. immigration laws merely to make more money here.¹³ Thus, illegal immigration is at its core principally a matter of greed and envy on aliens’ part.

Those illegal aliens and those purported Christians who defend their illegality, advocate mass amnesty, and argue against the lawful enforcement of U.S. immigration laws particularly veer far from what would seem a more sound, biblical position. Illegal aliens who claim to be Christians especially would do well to own up to their responsibility under God to be content in their home nation.

Instructive are such passages as I Timothy 6:6-10; “Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment,” verse 6 reads. Hebrews 12:1-13 notes how the difficulties each person faces serve a purpose; for the believer, that purpose is conforming one’s character to Christ’s. “It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons” (v. 7). James 1:2-18 expands on this theme: “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (v. 2-3). So too states James 5:7-11.

Foreign lawbreakers’ envy toward Americans’ material and political blessings may bring upon

themselves eternal consequences: “It is through this craving [love of money] that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” (I Tim. 6:10b). Violating immigration laws, just as violating other civil laws, manifests one’s failure to trust God to meet His people’s needs. Illegal aliens and their activists must ask themselves what the cost of such sin is worth to their souls. “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?” Jesus asks in Mark 8:36. The NIV translates the word as “soul” instead of “life.”

The question each of those vocal advocates of illegal immigrants and those who have perpetrated this offense must face up to is where their true love lies. I John 2:15-17 warns believers of exactly this: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (v. 15). “World” here refers to enticing things that become objects of desire, including material, sensual, and prideful things. The point is that someone has put temporal treasures ahead of loving God. Those misplaced treasures may include breaking civil laws regulating immigration in a nation’s interest in order to make more money, accumulate more material goods, and live outside the bounds of laws adopted by God’s agents of justice within a certain nation.

Similarly, apologists for immigration law-breaking and mass amnesty tread on hazardous ground, because their words blur moral lines that are brighter than they admit. But their tactics fall under sobering light from passages such as Isaiah 5:20-21: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight.”

Thus, breaking immigration laws flouts God’s provision for each person’s well-being, because civil authorities made those laws and, as seen earlier, those authorities act under God’s delegated authority. “But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler,” I Peter 4:15 reads. In context, this passage means Christians should only suffer in righteousness for the cause of Christ, not as those who disobey civil laws that should be accorded with. Except in the rarest of instances, disobedience of duly adopted laws, therefore, dishonors God; it displays hatred toward one’s neighbor. I John 5:20 says, “. . . [F]or he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.” In the context of members of nations, one’s neighbors are those people who share one’s citizenship, patriotic allegiance, and sacred duty to the body politic.

Conclusion

We may fairly conclude that it displays questionable judgment to rigidly construct an immigration policy for 21st century America based on a handful of Scripture passages taken out of context or from particular instances of migration spanning centuries, vastly different nations and kingdoms, wholly different circumstances, etc. found in Scripture. Rather, carefully discerning applicable principles better fits the situation.

Further, obeying civil laws is the normative, biblical imperative for Christians, as discussed above. National sovereignty is part of the authority God has delegated to civil authorities. Whatever the immigration laws of a particular nation, determining the policies of how many immigrants to admit and the terms and conditions applying to immigrants are the prerogative of the national body. Each society may set or change its nation’s immigration laws. Those decisions rest within the society, and outsiders have no legitimate voice in that exercise of national sovereignty.

The Reformer and statesman John Calvin wrote of the sovereignty of the state. The duty of its lawful authorities is to dictate the course of justice and the sword. This extends to individuals crossing sovereign borders:

If they [civil authorities] ought to be the guardians and defenders of the laws, they should also overthrow the efforts of all whose offenses corrupt the disciplines of the laws. . . . For it makes no difference whether it be a king or the lowest of the common folk who invades a foreign country in which he has no right, and harries it as an enemy. All such must equally be considered as robbers and punished accordingly.¹⁴

Though varying in manner in different jurisdictions, Calvin noted that civil laws have the same general end in mind, including such offenses as murder, theft, and false witness. “But they [states] do not agree on the manner of punishment. Nor is this either necessary or expedient. There is a country which, unless it deals cruelly with murderers by way of horrible examples, must immediately perish from slaughters and robberies. There is a century which demands that the harshness of penalties be increased. There is a nation inclined to a particular vice, unless it be most sharply repressed.”¹⁵ In other words, different places rightfully may craft laws that deal with their unique circumstances of time, place, and character. This is a matter of the sovereignty delegated by Heaven.

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The immigration laws of the United States have been adopted through lawful, legitimate, democratic processes. None of us may agree with every policy represented in the laws on the books, and many of us might advocate certain changes in U.S. immigration law. But this nation is blessed with a republican process for making laws. There is a just and fair way, through the political process, to modify statutes. Thus, the will of the Congress, as manifested in U.S. laws, represents the collective wisdom of the people's representatives, and the will of the American people as a whole as it informed lawmakers' decisions throughout the political process. This is how "the consent of the governed," a solemn principle in American life, operates — as messy and unsatisfying as that at times may be.

As for mass amnesty, by legalizing millions of illegal immigrants, government does not show mercy. Rather, it obligates its citizens to bear the injustices aliens have committed against the body politic, as discussed earlier. This fact stands all the clearer in light of Calvin's point above.

An instructive understanding of the temporal allegiances of each person comes from Francis Scott Key, a lawyer and the author of "The Star Spangled Banner." A Christian himself, Key explains how believers appropriately, biblically fulfill their calling as citizens of both the City of God and the City of Man.

. . . Finding himself associated with numberless fellow-creatures, "framed with like miracle, the work of God," he has been solicitous to learn his relation to them. He is told that they are his brethern, that he is to love them, and that it is to be his business to fill up the short measure of his life by doing good to them. Engaged in this work, he has perceived himself peculiarly connected with some, who are brought nearer to him, and therefore more within the reach

of his beneficence. He has observed that he is a member of a particular social community, governed by the same laws, exercising the same privileges, and bound to the same duties. His obligations therefore to this community, are more obvious and distinct. His own country, to which he is immediately responsible, by whose institutions he has been cherished and protected, has therefore a peculiar claim upon him (*emphasis added*).¹⁶

Today, Americans find immigration policy causing their nation to suffer unnecessary consequences. Legal immigration is four times the historic average. Legal and illegal immigration are interrelated through distant relative (chain migration) visa categories, source countries, and enabled by the ease of modern travel and communication.¹⁷ The failure to require adequate educational, literacy, skills, and other qualities in prospective immigrants results in the significant subsidization of immigrants by American taxpayers.

The adverse effect of immigration today on the economic well-being of our most vulnerable fellow Americans, particularly blacks and those with a high school education or less, results in economic injustices that advantage the foreign worker over the American in the American's own nation. Mass immigration, exacerbated by large-scale illegal immigration, distorts the U.S. labor market and drastically inhibits the ability of the market to regulate itself into the "virtuous circle" that makes for a "win-win" situation for both labor and business owners. And both a criminal and a national security threat exist as a result of overly liberal immigration policies and lax enforcement of the laws on the books.

Therefore, it is time for Americans, particularly those who are Christians, to "be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matt. 10:16) about this country's immigration policies at the start of the 21st century.

End Notes

¹ For example, see Karen Lee Ziner, “Across U.S., church leaders have been calling for reform,” *Providence Journal*, August 22, 2008; Ray Henry, “RI bishop wants U.S. to halt mass immigration raids,” Associated Press, Aug. 21, 2008; Randy Hall, “Liberal Christians call for end to immigration hate speech,” CNSNews.com, Nov. 16, 2007; Julia Duin, “Safety under the steeple,” *Washington Times*, May 27, 2008; John Dawson, “Defining immigration,” *World*, May 13, 2006; Jaqueline L. Salmon and Michelle Boorstein, “NAE’s Cautious Look at Immigration Reform,” April 2, 2009.

² For instance, see “Catholic bishops to left of flock on immigration,” *Washington Times*, April 17, 2006; Ruth Melkonian-Hoover, “Christian views on immigration policy: Are laity following leaders?” paper presented at Midwest Political Science Association, April 3-6, 2008, Chicago, Ill.

³ All Bible citations are English Standard Version, <http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=Romans+13%3A1-7>.

⁴ See, for example, Genesis 3’s account of the Fall, Psalm 53:1, and Romans 5:12-17. Also, see commentary on the God-given authority of the state to execute justice in G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1964), p. 242.

⁵ Stephen Steinlight, testimony before the U.S. House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, May 22, 2007, <http://www.cis.org/articles/2007/steinlighttestimony052207.html>.

⁶ T.A. Bryant, et al., *Today’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1982), p. 596.

⁷ Bryant, et al., *Today’s Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 29.

⁸ For a more detailed look at this concept, see Gerald R. Thompson, *The Lawgiver: A Study of Biblical Jurisprudence* (Annandale, Va.: Christian Legal Society), 1995.

⁹ See Arthur C. Brooks, *Who Really Cares: America’s Charity Divide; Who Gives, Who Doesn’t, and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2006) for a fascinating study of charitable giving and conduct in the United States, and how certain quarters of the population tend to withhold their own money and resources and feel they are being magnanimous when they advocate for taxpayer dollars and public resources to be allocated in “charitable” ways. The principle would seem to hold that those segments of society that define charity as government action funded by taxpayers are likely also to be the ones who regard liberal immigration policies as generous and merciful, despite the fact they personally bear little actual impact of such policies.

¹⁰ See Mark D. Tooley, “Jesus Christ: Illegal Immigrant?” *FrontPageMagazine.com*, September 15, 2006, www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/Printable.asp?ID=24407.

¹¹ See, for instance, Associated Press, “Second Illegal Immigrant Takes Refuge in Chicago Church,” January 29, 2008; Jennifer Riley, “Hispanic Christian Groups Split on Illegal Immigrants, U.S. Census,” *Christian Post*, April 24, 2009; or Julia Duin, “Safety Under the Steeple.”

¹² This phrase comes from Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5:13-16 and reprised in Luke 14:34, regarding Christians having a positive influence upon society.

¹³ Rakesh Kochhar, “Survey of Mexican Migrants, Part 3: The Economic Transition to America,” Pew Hispanic Center, December 6, 2005, p. 4, www.pewhispanic.org/files/reports/58.pdf.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Ford Lewis Battles, translator (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), p. 214.

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, p. 217.

¹⁶ Edward S. Delaplaine, *Francis Scott Key: Life and Times* (Stuarts Draft, Va.: American Foundation Publications, 1998), pp. 114-115.

¹⁷ See James R. Edwards, Jr., “Two Sides of the Same Coin: The Connection Between Legal and Illegal Immigration,” Center for Immigration Studies, February 2006, <http://cis.org/node/263>.

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A Biblical Perspective on Immigration Policy

By James R. Edwards, Jr., PhD

The immigration issue often highlights fissures between faithful parishioners and denominational clerics. Many religious have called for amnesty for illegal immigrants and decried the federal government's enforcement of immigration laws.

Yet such self-described "compassion" among religious elites differs from the perspective of most rank-and-file Christians. The laity generally opposes legalization and supports enforcement of immigration laws. One may ask: How else could Christians approach immigration policy matters?

This *Backgrounder* examines the immigration issue from the perspective of biblical Christianity. Both policy makers and private citizens who are Christians may wish to consider how Scripture might inform their views on immigration. This report intends to aid those faithful readers.

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