

On Immigration: A Biblical Perspective

Oxford Dictionaries defines immigration as the “action of coming to live permanently in a foreign country.”ⁱ Only Native Americans are non-immigrants in the United States; everyone else traces his or her ancestral roots to another part of the world. As the nation became more established it set up a legal framework to control immigration in varying degrees.

The Migrant Policy Institute identifies several types of immigrants in the U.S. today – naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents, refugees and asylees (those seeking political asylum), international students and others on long-term temporary visas, and unauthorized immigrants.

In 2013, approximately 41.3 million immigrants lived in the United States, an all-time high for a nation historically built on immigration. The United States remains a popular destination attracting about 20 percent of the world's international migrants, even as it represents less than 5 percent of the global population. Immigrants accounted for 13 percent of the total 316 million U.S. residents; adding the U.S.-born children (of all ages) of immigrants means that approximately 80 million people, or one-quarter of the overall U.S. population, is either of the first or second generation.ⁱⁱ

The Bible has a great deal to say about immigrants and how they are to be treated. The first section of this paper provides an overview regarding treatment of all immigrants. The next section—regarding respect for law—deals with an issue related to unauthorized or undocumented immigrants.

People living in a land not their own

When Scripture addresses issues related to people who are living in a land that is not their own, the wording is usually translated into English as stranger, alien, sojourner, or foreigner.

There is probably no clearer statement regarding God’s view of immigrants than Psalm 146:9.

The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin (NRSV).

God looks upon immigrants as he does other vulnerable people. That God “watches over the strangers” implies not just seeing but also caring for and protecting. It is listed here as the opposite of what God does to the wicked. God brings ruin to the wicked; God looks after the immigrant.

The Old Testament links God’s concern for immigrants to the experience of the Israelites in Egypt, when they were immigrants who crossed a national border seeking better economic and life-sustaining conditions.

He [God] executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt (Deut. 10:18-19 ESV).

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God (Lev. 19:33-34 NRSV).

The Deuteronomy and Leviticus verses make it clear that not only does God look after immigrants, but God expects them to be treated well. The verses approach the issue of justice toward the immigrant from two directions – God executes justice and God’s people are not to oppress immigrants. More positively, God’s people are to love immigrants.

Malachi gets more specific, noting that God’s judgment awaits those who mistreat immigrants.

*And I [God] will come near you for judgment;
I will be a swift witness
Against sorcerers,
Against adulterers,
Against perjurers,
Against those who exploit wage earners and widows and orphans,
And against those who turn away an alien—
Because they do not fear Me,”
Says the LORD of hosts (Malachi 3:5 NKJV).*

The admonition to not “turn away an alien” seems to have special relevance to the immigrant situation in the United States. At least in reference to the Israelites, God’s judgment awaits those who seek to get rid of immigrants. In other words, God’s people should welcome immigrants.

There are other Old Testament passages, but they all express similar sentiments.

In the New Testament, Jesus references immigrants in the famous “least of these” verses about the judgment of nations.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25:34-36 NRSV).

Welcoming the stranger is one indication that people are living in accordance with God’s will. They are more focused on God’s kingdom than on the boundaries of this world.

Jesus also famously said to love God with all of your being and to love your neighbor as yourself. A lawyer then asked, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus responded by telling a story about a “good Samaritan,” which to his Jewish audience at the time may have been seen as a contradiction in terms. A person had been beaten and left for dead on the road, two fellow Jews ignored his plight, but the Samaritan, a despised foreigner, went to great lengths to help the injured man. Jesus asked,

“So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?”

And he [the lawyer] said, “He who showed mercy on him.”

Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:36-37 NKJV).

In other words, being a person’s neighbor knows no boundaries – racial, ethnic, or national. We are to love all people as we love ourselves, including immigrants. And we know from Scripture that loving is more than saying the word; it shows up in our actions.

Jesus, of course, had once been an immigrant. After his birth, his parents fled Palestine for the safe confines of Egypt.

Now when they [the wise men] had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, “Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.”

When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, “Out of Egypt I called My Son” (Matthew 2:13-15 NKJV).

The family escaped the threat of death and lived as foreigners until it was safe for them to return to their homeland.

The Bible ends on a note about the oneness of God’s people.

“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands” (Revelation 7:9 NRSV).

Before God, there is no difference between the people of the world’s nations and tribes. There is a oneness to the human race that transcends all categories that might separate them.

Respect for law

As noted above, unauthorized immigration presents a challenge. Undocumented persons simply do not have the necessary legal documents required by the United States government to be in the country, and this is because they entered the country in illegal ways.

The Apostle Paul famously wrote:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment (Romans 13:1-2 NRSV).

In short, government authority is allowed by God, and people are to respect that authority. That authority is expressed in a number of ways, including the laws a government passes. To break a government's laws is to resist authority, which Paul says will bring judgment.

The laws being violated by undocumented immigrants are not to be taken lightly. It is a serious matter for a person to knowingly flaunt a government's laws. If the Romans passage is taken alone, the Christian citizen of the United States has a challenge in balancing the Bible's words about proper treatment of immigrants with Paul's injunction to obey laws.

Romans 13:1-2 seems, however, to require greater interpretation because there can be ungodly laws and even evil governments. Scripture attests to God's use of evil regimes, such as Assyria, to punish Israel, God's chosen people. But evil governments are not the issue in the immigration debate; it is a matter of laws.

We should never allow one biblical passage alone to shape our ethical response to the world around us.

Paul also wrote:

When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to court before the unrighteous, instead of taking it before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels — to say nothing of ordinary matters? If you have ordinary cases, then, do you appoint as judges those who have no standing in the church? (1 Cor. 6:1-4 NRSV)

Genuine believers have a unique wisdom that far exceeds the understanding of the "unrighteous" state. Followers of Christ should not need the state to tell them what is right and wrong.

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:6-8 NRSV).

Paul dismisses the wisdom of "the rulers of this age" and reminds his readers that the rulers of his time and place, Rome, "crucified the Lord of glory."

How do we bring together Romans 13 with 1 Corinthians? It is the same writer referencing the same authorities.

Paul seems to be saying this:

- 1) Respect governmental authority because . . .
 - a) God has allowed it in His providence.
 - b) It serves an important function of bringing order.
 - c) The state should not be resisted flippantly.
- 2) Followers of Christ have a wisdom that is above that of rulers.
 - a) Do not be surprised when rulers are unwise or even evil.
 - b) Understand how important your role is.
- 3) Governments rule only for a certain time; they are doomed to perish.
- 4) A government crucified our savior.

Paul is mixing respect for governmental authority with the reality that it is limited both in time and in wisdom.

The words of Jesus may be helpful here.

“. . . Bring me a denarius and let me see it.” And they brought one. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” Jesus said to them, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” And they were utterly amazed at him (Mark 12:15c-17 NRSV, see also Mt. 22:21).

Jesus said to give Caesar, the government, what is Caesar’s. In simple terms, Jesus is saying taxes or money belong to the government. But what of the other side of the equation – give unto God what is God’s, your life.

Conclusion

Immigration in the United States today presents a challenge to American Christians. The biblical message is clear about how we are to treat immigrants, but the Bible also implores us to respect law and this creates problems in relation to unauthorized immigration.

It is possibly most helpful to remember that the whole world belongs to God. National boundaries, while useful for ordering society, are not part of God’s good creation but, rather, have emerged over time. God gave the whole world to the descendants of Adam and Eve, and God is working across those borders.

People who cross national borders to flee from poverty and danger today are seeking the same things as earlier immigrants – opportunity and safety. They are our neighbors even if not authorized to be here, and they are in need. They are loved by God, and we can show that love to these new neighbors.

The government of the United States needs to form appropriate policies to support national interests, but those of us who follow Christ can see a bigger picture – one of humanity and of the need to share and show the love of Christ.

ⁱ Oxford Dictionaries, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/immigration (accessed October 6, 2015).

ⁱⁱ Migration Policy Institute, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states> (accessed October 6, 2015).