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THE BIBLE ON IMMIGRATION - LARRY VAN ESSEN

Deuteronomy 10:17-20

The attention of the world was captured by the tragic photo of a two-year-old boy's body that had washed ashore. He was a sad victim of the migrations of people throughout our world that so often end with horrific struggle and pain.

"It's time to acknowledge this as a moment of transformation—and not only in Europe," wrote Patrick Smith in *The Fiscal Times*. The BBC puts the number of migrants arriving in Europe from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, North Africa, and South Asia at 350,000 for the January-to-August 2015 period. Michael Ignatieff, the writer and professor at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, wrote in *The New York Times*, "This is a truly biblical movement of refugees and it demands a global response."

Imagine your life being uprooted and tossed into chaos because you have to flee your country for survival. Forced to leave your school, sports teams, friends, families, and neighborhood, what would you do? Find a boat, an airplane, a train, or just plain walk out?

Here in North America we struggle with 12 million undocumented persons already in the U.S. and many more who are trying to cross the border every day. Some would build a "beautiful" wall between the U.S. and Mexico fourteen feet high; not to be outdone, another would build a wall between the U.S. and Canada.

Recently, as I was reflecting on the topic of immigration, I wondered how many characters in the Bible I could name who were actually immigrants, aliens, or strangers. What comes to your mind as you think of biblical immigrants? At first, names came to my mind rather easily: Abram, the people of Israel, Hagar, Ishmael, Esau, Ruth, Naomi, Jonah, Rahab the harlot, the suffering servant of Isaiah, Israel in exile for 70 years, all Christians who are named by the apostle Peter as foreigners and strangers. Before I went much farther into the subject, I thought I should try to come up with a definition of an immigrant. I thought the terms alien, stranger, and foreigner in the Hebrew and Greek language might be informative. I learned that stranger in Hebrew is *ger*. Aliens and sojourners in the New Testament are *paroikous* and *parepidamous*. Stranger is *zenos*.

One thing caught my attention: the Greek words for sojourners and aliens both had the prefix *par* in front of them. I wondered if that was simply coincidental or if there was something significant there. I discovered it meant "something proceeds from this person." It can also mean "near, beside, or at the edge." This led me to think that an immigrant/stranger/alien is someone from whom something (one) proceeds at the edge of their nerves, borders, etc. What proceeds? Children, productive work, schools, churches, taxes, expenses, crime, inventions, good works.

What proceeded from Dutch, Korean, Asian, Hispanic/Latino immigrants into America, Canada, and into our churches? Where would the CRCNA be today without immigrants? So what should be our attitude towards these people from whom “something proceeds and are at their edge?”

What did God teach his Old Testament people? A representative passage giving the general attitude the people of God were to adopt toward the alien resident is Deuteronomy 10:12-21. Verses 12-13 ask and answer one question: “What does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and to observe the Lord’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?”

In answering this question, “What does the Lord your God require of you?” Israel is reminded of who God is. God is not a man, who can and will give you an opinion. God is not a leader or politician like Moses, who can be trustworthy and obedient one day and dishonest and disobedient the next. God is not your favorite radio talk show host or a leading writer for The Wall Street Journal. No. Those are all people who try their best every day but are finite human beings who make intellectual and behavioral mistakes and willfully sin against God and humankind. God is someone far beyond this galaxy. Far beyond all human thought. God is “God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing” (v. 17). Israel is to love God, and they should love the stranger and alien because God loves them. There is no ambiguity here. God loves the alien and Israel should too.

A second reason why they should love the alien is “for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.” Even in Egypt, where Israel had experienced such painful and harsh slavery, needing to produce bricks under near impossible circumstances, God still loved them. Having experienced God’s great love when they were aliens in Egypt, they should remember to love the aliens among them. No other attitude is possible for Israel.

Having experienced God’s great love as aliens they were now to show this love also to aliens. This is the bottom line for God’s people. Nothing else matters in the immigration question. Christians must show the same grace to aliens as God has shown to them.

If you decide to deport all the undocumented 12 million aliens now living in your borders, even to the point of leaving children born in America behind, you need to figure out a way to do it all in a loving manner. I’m not sure I could find a loving way to do that. If you require that undocumented aliens learn English, work, pay taxes, pay fines for violating the law, commit no crimes on their pathway to citizenship, great, but you must be sure that the demands of God’s love are fully met in the process. If you cannot do these things without breaking God’s love command, then those things simply may not be done.

All that matters to us as Christians and as a church is that we have experienced God’s love when alienated from him by our sin, even being enemies of his. Peter drills into this vein of thought with his comments in 1 Peter 2:10: “Once you were not a people, (all of us) but now you are the people of God (all of us in Christ); once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” No human, no nation, no race has an exclusive claim on God. In fact, no human, no nation, no race has an exclusive claim on any property on this earth, “for the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (Ps. 24:1).

It is only God, the God of all gods, who has a claim on us as Christians. Paul followed Peter's lead when he said to the people in Athens,

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times sent for them and the exact places where they should live (Acts 17: 24-26).

This insight into immigration is a wonderful gift of God which he has provided us in his Word. We should treasure it, proclaim it, advocate for it, and celebrate it.

People such as immigrants who live on the margins of society are loved, protected and included in the embrace of God. That is why the church also should love them, enfold them, and give them an opportunity to flourish.

This is the Word of God on immigration both for the people of Israel and for the new people of God, his church. (Lev. 19:33-34; Deut. 1:16, 5:15, 15:15, 16:12, 24:18-22, 27:19; Ex. 23:9; Isa. 1:15-17; the book of Ruth; Phil. 2:5-11; 2 Cor. 8:9; Rom. 12:13; 1 Cor. 16:1; James 1:27, 2:1-7; Matt. 25).

Yet there is one more thing that needs to be said in light of the Bible. What I have not yet mentioned is the role of the government as the guardian of the country's borders, biblical justice, and the duties of a country's citizens to obey the state. The key passage, of course, is Romans 13:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves."

In a democracy such as ours, where we are invited and encouraged as citizens to participate in the governing of our society, we have a two-fold responsibility. We must obey the laws as they presently exist and change the laws where they may not be upholding biblical justice, which is the government's primary function.

If a person is undocumented and has a job in the U.S., we should do what we can to get the matter rectified. But in light of previously considered passages, our attempt at getting immigrants to comply with existing law (or, if necessary, to change the law) must be saturated with love. We may not function as Christians without loving God and our neighbor. And we must obey the government's immigration laws.

In the 2010 Migration of Workers report to synod, the following was insightfully stated:

Who today is more vulnerable than those persons who find themselves forced to seek a better life in a country where they have no standing and where most of the legal protections and social safety nets that the rest of us rely on are not available? . . . If there ever was a group in need of the embrace of a loving God and all the hope and joy that the gospel represents, it would be this group of strangers in our midst (p. 24).

Christian Reformed people should be listening to their Bibles and church leaders when they vote regarding immigration, and they should advise their political leaders accordingly. One such document is the Migration of Workers report to Synod 2010.

Evangelicals should listen to their Bibles and the National Association of Evangelicals as they make up their minds on voting and what to advocate for regarding immigration.

Catholics should listen to their Bibles and the Pope, Vatican II, and the bishops as they seek God's will on this difficult issue.

United, Christians can share these biblical insights with the public.

Conclusion

Jesus once said: "I was a stranger and you invited me in." When? "When you saw one of the least of these brothers and you invited them in."

Ed Stetzer, a writer for Christianity Today, quotes Kelly Rosati, a fervent pro-life Christian and the vice president of community outreach for Focus on the Family as saying this:

Proverbs 31:8 says 'speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves.' When this verse burns in our hearts we join God in His redemptive work on behalf of pre-born babies, victims of human trafficking, war refugees, orphans, those with disabilities, racial minorities, those without access to clean water, families living in extreme poverty, the homeless, dying and lonely elderly neighbors and many others that qualify as to what Jesus meant by "the least of these".

Jesus boiled the entire law and prophets down to this: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second like it is: Love your neighbor as yourself."

This is God's will for us as we struggle with how to respond to our immigration challenges. Let us make this truly a moment and movement of transformation.