An Evangelical Perspective on Immigration

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Several years ago, World Relief, the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals, started receiving calls from pastors who—in ministering to immigrants in their congregations—had suddenly come upon legal questions they could not answer. The pastors turned to us because they knew we had been serving immigrants for over thirty years. Some asked whether undocumented immigrants could serve in leadership in the church. Others asked to what extent the church could help immigrants resolve their legal status issues. These pastors’ questions reflect a question the broader evangelical community is grappling with: how do we balance compassion and mercy toward immigrants with the rule of law?

Evangelicals are committed to the authority of Scripture over all of our lives, and World Relief started addressing these questions not from an economic or political perspective, but from a distinctly biblical point of view. By grounding our response in the common values of our community, we knew we could change the hearts and minds of those in our faith community, especially since Scripture has so much to say about how to treat immigrants. We knew that while immigration is often viewed as an economic or political issue, for people of faith, immigration reform is an urgent moral crisis that has fissured the many families and communities who have lived in the shadows of the United States for years.

As we started this journey of education, we knew it would not be an easy task because polls showed that few evangelicals thought biblically about immigration. The Pew Research Center, for example, found in a 2010 survey that only 12 percent of white evangelicals say that their views on immigration are primarily influenced by their Christian faith. Over the years, however, there has been a shift in evangelical understandings of immigration and attitudes toward immigrants for several reasons.

The Bible’s Call to Love the Stranger

First and foremost, there is a biblical mandate to show compassion to and care for immigrants. The Hebrew word for an immigrant, ger, in fact, appears ninety-two times just in the Hebrew Bible. In Leviticus 19:34, God says “Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself.” God also repeatedly references immigrants along with widows and orphans as particularly vulnerable groups of people who deserve special attention (this happens in Psalm 146:9, Malachi 3:5, and Jeremiah 7:6, among others). In the New Testament, the idea of philoxenia (the love of strangers) is a call by Jesus Christ to his followers. Jesus suggests that by showing hospitality and loving the stranger, we may actually be welcoming him (Matthew 25:31-45).

Many Christians point to the passage in Romans 13:1 that says to “submit to the governing authorities” as a reason why Christians should not support immigration reform, but in fact this passage calls to mind the need to ensure our laws are working for the common good. When they are not,
they need to be changed. The status quo—in which some laws have been selectively ignored for decades and our legal immigration system is out of touch with the needs of our labor market—is unacceptable.

For evangelicals, immigration reform is not an issue about them, but rather an issue about us. Studies have found that immigration accounts for the fastest—and, in some cases, the only—growth in U.S. evangelicalism today. Immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa are now leading the evangelical church in unprecedented numbers. Evangelical leaders are thus coming to see immigration not as a threat, but as an opportunity to “share the Good News.”

As pastors and community members build relationships with immigrants, they suddenly encounter a broken immigration system in which many cannot get right with the law even though they would like to. Immigration has become not just an abstract political or economic discussion but a personal and moral issue for the evangelical community. It is about friends and real people in our community whom we have come to know in our church services and at our schools.

In order to be faithful to Scripture, the evangelical community has started to ask whether we are suffering along with other parts of the body that suffer (1 Corinthians 12:12-26) and have become active in speaking up and insisting that our elected officials address the structural issues of injustice that have left millions of people on the margins of our society.

Building Momentum for Immigration Reform

Our vision for reform is outlined in the Evangelical Immigration Table’s statement of principles, signed by more than 150 prominent evangelical leaders in June 2012. The principles reaffirm our commitment to an immigration system that respects human dignity and upholds the rule of law, keeps families together, strengthens our economy, recognizes our nation’s tradition as an inclusive nation of immigrants, and establishes a path toward legal status and citizenship for undocumented immigrants who qualify and wish to remain in the United States.

We stand at a moment in time when Republicans and Democrats alike recognize that our conversation about immigration must change. But elected officials often are swayed to take action when the people make their voices heard. In order to continue to build momentum for immigration reform, World Relief—as a member of the Evangelical Immigration Table, which includes the National Association of Evangelicals, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Christian Community Development Association, and the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, among others—launched an initiative called the “I Was a Stranger” challenge in which we asked individuals, churches, campuses, and legislators to read forty Scripture passages that relate to immigrants. A simple bookmark reminds people to read through Scripture and to pray that God would give us His heart and mind as we think about and respond to the realities of immigration in our country. A video available at evangelicalimmigrationtable.com also features a wide range of national evangelical leaders (including Bill Hybels and Max Lucado) reading the words of Matthew 25.

Our primary goal for this challenge is to encourage other evangelicals to base our response to immigration upon Scripture, both in terms of how we interact with our new immigrant neighbors and how we approach immigration policy as participants in a democracy. Our goal is to ensure that we “take every thought captive” to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).

We are hopeful that the challenge will help mobilize thousands of individuals to continue to “speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves” (Proverbs 31:8). Immigration may well be the issue through which the American people’s confidence in the political process is restored. But more than that, our response to the immigrants among us tests what we believe about our faith and our commitment to uphold the values that shape our country.