

## **On Immigration: Amnesia in a Jekyll and Hyde Nation and Church**

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When it comes to immigration, we Americans have a short-term memory. Perhaps a better word for it is amnesia. It wasn't too long ago when the Europeans settled in a land not their own. The poor, the rich, the persecuted, the skilled, the unskilled, the educated, the uneducated—came here willingly, except for those who were involuntarily trafficked as slaves. Immigrants came in waves to the new world hoping to make a better life for themselves and their families, even though the land “belonged” to others, to Native Americans.

Initially, some of the native tribes were friendly with the European settlers, forming treaties and alliances with them. Nevertheless, it wasn't too long before the tribes realized they were in the worse kind of predicament and in some cases, hood-winked. They had no concept of land ownership. Instead there was stewardship of the land. And for them, stewardship meant sharing land.<sup>1</sup> A document detailing the history of the Wampanoag people, the people group from whom the legendary Squanto originated, puts it this way:

Squanto devoted himself to helping the Pilgrims who were now living at the site of his old village. Whatever his motivations, with great kindness and patience, he taught the English the skills they needed to survive, and in so doing, assured the destruction of his own people.<sup>2</sup>

It turns out that neither Squanto nor his people were honored and respected. What in some ways started out as cooperation and friendship with Europeans ended in the destruction of the Native peoples. The Wampanoag history records that, “While the Pilgrims usually had paid or asked permission, the Puritans were inclined to take.” And take we did as rising birthrates and increased immigration fueled our expansion westward—our manifest destiny.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, in our effort to have a nation from “sea to shining sea” we annexed, or took Texas, from Mexico and tortured, or killed, untold numbers of Native Americans. The rest, we herded into ghettos called reservations. There they remain to this day, an oppressed people group, languishing away, without so much as a thought—because they have become a burden. Yet our national conscience remains undisturbed. Out of sight and out of mind. Amnesia.

Of course not all of our ancestors had bad motives, or were even cognizant of what was transpiring. Not all were. But looking back, it sure seems like runaway greed, dressed in the garb of nationalism and touted as our manifest destiny, prevailed in determining how we and our government treated and still treat Native Americans and for that matter, others of darker skin (including the mestizos of the southwest and African-Americans who were our slaves).

There is no doubt that America is a great, great nation filled with wonderful people who have and continue to do many good things. Yet, let us not forget that America the beautiful is also America the vile. We fail to acknowledge our collective dark side and guilt. Or, we too easily explain it away.

Even so, our national history begs us not to forget. It demonstrates that we are at once the fairly civilized and well-respected Dr. Jekyll, and the totally depraved Mr. Hyde, a man without a conscience. They were one and the same person. We are one and the same nation. And perhaps most sadly, we are one and the same Church.

Amnesia—even though we are a nation of immigrants—even though all but Native Americans have an immigrant history.<sup>4</sup> Our collective amnesia about our immigrant status has contributed to our wrong stances on prior human and civil rights issues and to ubiquitously grave consequences resulting from being wrong.

For example, do we not remember that throughout history (in addition to the Native Americans) we've mistreated and oppressed the German, Irish, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, and others who immigrated here to make a better life for themselves? And how can we fail to remember that the early American Church supported the status quo, ownership and oppression of slaves, and later on, Jim Crow laws and segregation? Originally, abolitionists were in the minority.

And let us not forget that economic reasons were used as clubs to bludgeon anyone (both here and in England) who might suggest ending the slave trade and freeing African slaves. To do so, it was argued, would spell doom for the economies in question.

Do we recall that in the mid-twentieth century, many Christians actively opposed the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.? Do we know that even now, it is well-documented that evangelical Christians' attitudes towards African-Americans are worse than those of non-believers?

Not only are we a Jekyll and Hyde nation, we are a Jekyll and Hyde Church. But we don't have to continue to be. We don't, if we recall our history, and our historically wrong stances, and vow to change. And we don't, if we realize that based on current immigration laws, our own ancestors wouldn't have made it into our country. When it comes to immigration, for us to be on the wrong side of truth is not only contrary to what Jesus teaches, but incongruous with our immigrant past.

John Perkins, founder of the Christian Community Development Association and civil rights leader, has said that immigration is the new civil rights issue. We are in the midst of a crucial historical moment. We have the opportunity to do right, to be on the right side. No one says that it will be easy. And sometimes doing right is complicated and costly. But we can do it, if we will to, and as we seek God's guidance for this very complex issue affecting millions of human beings including us.

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<sup>1</sup> Wampanoag History accessed at: <http://www.tolatsga.org/wampa.html> on 2/23/11.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/war>

<sup>4</sup> Soerens, Matthew and Hwang, Jenny. Welcoming The Stranger (Downers Grove IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009), 46.