

A Biblical Ethic for the Treatment of Strangers and Aliens
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The great immigration debate roars along. Most of the time the debate gives more heat but sheds little light. Christians too fall into several different camps, for different reasons. Some argue for no immigration at all—close the borders to all from every country. Some argue for no obstacles at all, or very few—remove virtually all legal barriers. Most fall somewhere between these two ends of the spectrum. They would call for a legal process leading to citizenship, after which the immigrant would become a full-fledged citizen of the United States. The process of course would vary depending on who is asked. Where should we as Christians come down on the most volatile of issues? Let's clear away some brush before going to the heart of the argument.

First, no Christian ought to denigrate an immigrant merely because he or she comes from another nation. That indicates an inappropriate lack of compassion and a certain absence of logic—after all, virtually all of us are descended from immigrants. But by the same token, it should not be thought that because one opposes immigration, legal or illegal, he is somehow evil incarnate or racist. There may well be good reasons to oppose at least some kinds of immigration and to erect certain barriers to those wishing to enter this country. Third, for the Christian who takes the Bible seriously, interpretation is also serious business. No one should pretend this issue is a matter of “throwing” out a few bible verses. It demands some hard slogging and serious theological reflection. Finally, we must recognize that in part the immigration issue involves defining terms such as “citizen,” “citizenship,” “immigrant,” and illegal immigrant” precisely. Definitions are often ignored, but usually at peril of bad argument.

Let's begin with the Old Testament, in which the words “alien” and “stranger” are used fairly frequently. To whom do they refer? Once we know that, the way forward is easier. In nearly every text using the word “alien” the words “who sojourns among you” (or similar phrases) follow immediately after. In addition, the term “alien” and “native” always appear in contrast and together (see Ex. 12: 19; Lev. 18:26 for example). Thus the alien is apparently not a Hebrew. This would make him the equivalent of a non-citizen (to use a term yet undefined). We also see that the alien is not prohibited from living in the land God has given to the Hebrew people. He is assumed to live there “legally” (according to the Mosaic law). But in addition, and crucially, he is held to the same standard of the Law as the native peoples (see Lev. 18: 26, 20: 2, 22: 18, 24: 16; especially Numbers 9: 14).

The term “stranger” is more or less equivalent to alien. So in Leviticus 19: 34, the people are told “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as a native among you, and you shall love him as yourself....” The stranger/alien then is to be accepted and not denied residency among the new nation of Israel, but they are also clearly to abide by all laws of that nation, as if they were natives themselves.

What then about conditions, if any, for admission into the nation? On the surface, the one condition of continuing residency is obedience to all laws. There is no mention of pre-qualifications, a process. Does this mean there was (or could be) no process for initial entry? Does this also mean that there existed no idea of citizenship in any modern sense at least? If there was no notion of citizenship in the sense of a process leading to formal and legal admission into the commonwealth of Israel, with all the rights and duties that would entail, then it would certainly make sense within a Christian worldview, to

eliminate any and all legal and physical barriers hindering entry into any nation today (unless of course one thinks of Israel as unique, in which case laws today may differ in form if not in spirit). In answer to the questions raised above, the first thing to note is that the alien was required to operate under the same set of laws as the Hebrew. If that isn't some sort of "marker" of "belongingness" then nothing is. But it still isn't any entry process. It assumes one is already in the commonwealth. How does he "get" in? Apparently, based on an argument from silence regarding the Mosaic Law (dangerous admittedly), since there are no legal pre-qualifications, then anyone could freely enter or exit the commonwealth at any time. This gives fuel to the pro-immigration school of thought. But only to an extent. Once in, the alien (who remains an alien under the Mosaic Law) is bound to all laws of the commonwealth, including payment of taxes, obedience of civil and criminal laws, due obedience to the government, etc. Conversely, the Hebrew people are not to oppress the alien, but to treat him equally under law—though there is never any requirement of any extra benefit by virtue of his status.

The immigration debate could be considerably simplified by following—at least roughly—the model implicit in the Old Testament. On the one hand, anyone can enter this country freely. This satisfies those who favor open borders. On the other hand, at that point, every person is bound to all laws, including our own fundamental law expressed in the Constitution, as well as all federal, state and local laws in effect. There are no exceptions. There is no favoritism, no matter the economic status. Nor is there any illegal discrimination under law. Such a solution would partially satisfy the anti-immigration school. But anti-immigrationists still have a legitimate concern. Wouldn't open borders place an intolerable burden on welfare, public education, and other governmental services? Yes, it might, but there are two solutions. One is to re-examine the existence and level of support for all such services. Must education be public? Must we dole out welfare to more and more people in all sorts of direct and indirect ways, based on some misplaced notion of equality of outcome? The other solution is to devolve all welfare and education, as well as other localized services, to the states. If they choose to fund these services at unsustainable levels, then let them pay the costs. People may then—and do—vote with their feet.

A final point to be made is that all the above does not necessarily rule out actual pre-qualifications for a real citizenship status. After all, if one is bound, for example, to obey all laws of the land in which one lives, then isn't a citizenship process designed in part to keep out those who habitually refuse to obey laws? This would only move the principle back in time. Therefore such a process for citizenship would not conflict with the principles outlined in the Mosaic Law. Admission would be contingent on, for example, proper documentation, background checks of certain degrees, criminal records from the immigrant's country of origin, etc. Once again, however, it remains an issue whether the Mosaic Law is still valid in governing this issue. If it is, then so is every other aspect of the Law, in respect of civil/political affairs, valid and binding. One cannot validly be selective.

I have not proposed this solution out of false compassion or out of any desire to agree with most of the arguments used by the political Left or Right, but out of a simple desire to model the principles derivable from the Scriptures. I do not welcome immigrants because they are "cheap labor" or because they may (and probably would for a time) constitute a solid and reliable voting block for a given political party. I simply offer this analysis and its implications from the Bible itself, the ultimate source of Christian thought and practice.