

A Note on Christians and Immigration Laws

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Part of the holy life we are to present to God in this overlap of ages, this time between Christ's first coming and his return, is our obedience to the law of the land in which we are located (Rom. 13:1-5; Tit. 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13-17; see also, Prov. 24:21). We must submit to the governmental authorities because they have been established by God. To oppose them is to resist God's directive, his grant of authority to them, and those who do so will receive judgment (Rom. 13:1-5).

The Christian's submission to governmental authority does not depend on the goodness of those in office. It depends only on the fact they occupy the position of authority within that society. Nero was the Emperor (A.D. 54-68) when Paul wrote Romans and Peter wrote 1 Peter, and he certainly was an evil man, though the full extent of his wickedness was only later to be displayed.

An exception to this duty to obey the governing authorities is when doing so would mean disobeying God. As Peter and the other apostles declared to the Sanhedrin in Acts 5:29, "We must obey God rather than men!" Otherwise, we would be placing government over God, which is idolatry.

There are notable examples in Scripture of this kind of civil disobedience. When Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill the newborn boys, they refused to obey (Ex. 1:17). When Nebuchadnezzar ordered all his subjects to fall down and worship his golden image, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to obey (Daniel 3). When King Darius decreed that for thirty days no one should pray to any god or man, except himself, Daniel refused to obey (Daniel 6). And when the Sanhedrin banned preaching in the name of Jesus, the apostles refused to obey (Acts 4:18-20).

Some apparently believe that complying with the U. S. immigration laws requires one to disobey God and that Christians therefore are free to violate those laws and are duty-bound to aid others who do so. This is a serious claim that needs to be set forth clearly and defended. Frankly, it strikes me as an attempt to rationalize disobeying laws one dislikes, an attempt to wrap a personal political preference in the mantle of divine obligation.

God made the nations (e.g., Deut. 26:19, 32:8; Job 12:23; Ps. 86:9; Acts 17:26), which are entities that have borders (e.g., Num. 20:23, 21:13-15, 34:1-12; 2 Ki. 3:21; 2 Chron. 9:26; Isa. 26:15), and the right of the governing authority of a nation to prohibit foreigners from entering its territory is taken for granted in Scripture as an inherent aspect of nationhood (e.g., Gen. 47:4-6; Num. 20:14-21, 21:21-23; Deut. 2:26-30; Judg. 11:17-20; Neh. 2:7). As pointed out by James Hoffmeier, an Old Testament scholar and the author of *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009):

- Borders were a serious matter in the ancient world.
- Wars were fought to settle border disputes.
- Clearly defined borders were the order of the day.
- Border forts and lookouts monitored movements of peoples & controlled entry.
- Permission to enter or pass through territories was normally required.¹

Hoffmeier states (*The Immigration Crisis*, 156):

Nowhere in the Old Testament is there any sense that a nation had to accept immigrants, nor was being received as an alien a right. That permission was required for a foreigner to reside in another land is illustrated in the case of Jacob's family who via Joseph (an official in Pharaoh's court) received permission to sojourn in Egypt (Gen. 45:16-20), which was followed by Joseph's brothers asking Pharaoh for authorization to bring their families and flocks to the eastern delta (Gen. 47:1-6).

There are multiple, complex, and competing factors that governing authorities must balance in setting an immigration policy. The United States admits over a million immigrants per year and makes additional provision for asylum-seekers and refugees, but like every other country, it excludes from entry some foreigners who are seeking to improve their economic situation. Christians must obey such laws, must refrain from entering or remaining in the country contrary to that law, because obeying the law does not require one to disobey a command of God. God does not require a Christian to enter another country or to remain there after doing so, so one can comply with the law without defying God. However difficult it may be to apply, the truth of the matter is that simple.

Perhaps the principle can be seen more clearly in the context of laws protecting the killing of preborn children. The laws of various jurisdictions prohibit one from blocking physical access to an abortion clinic. Christians have a moral duty to seek justice for the weak and powerless, which certainly includes opposing the killing of babies in the womb, but God does not require the discharge of that duty to include blocking physical access to abortion clinics. For example, one can oppose abortion by praying for its demise, by teaching and counseling others about the immorality of the action, by voting for those interested in justice for the preborn, and by encouraging or supporting financially those committed to being the Spirit's vessel in convicting the society of its sin. Since Christians are not commanded to block access to abortion clinics, they can comply with the law without disobeying God and thus are morally obligated to do so.

Christians who believe an immigration policy's current level of exclusion of economically distressed foreigners is not sufficiently kind or compassionate should work to change the policy, just as Christians who believe an abortion policy is immoral should work to change that policy. But until that is done, a Christian cannot disobey the relevant law. In encouraging them to do so, we encourage them to sin, which is a serious matter indeed (Mat. 18:6 and parallels).

¹ James Hoffmeier, [What the Bible really says about immigration – part 1 of 3](#).

It should be noted that the cities of refuge prescribed for ancient Israel had nothing to do with illegal immigrants. They were designated locations to which one who killed someone could flee so as to be protected from the family members of the person who was killed, who would be seeking to administer the law of retribution, until a hearing could be had on the merits of the case. If the killing was determined to be premeditated, the killer was handed over to be executed. If it was not premeditated, the killer's life was spared from the avenger of blood, but he had to remain in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest (Ex. 21:12-14; Num. 35:9-29).

It also should be noted that there is a distinction between the Hebrew synonyms *gēr* and *tôšāb*, commonly rendered "stranger," "sojourner," or "alien," and the Hebrew synonyms *nēkār* (adj. form *nākrî*) and *zār*, commonly rendered "foreigner" or "outsider." As Hoffmeier documents, they refer to two different categories of people. The *gēr* was a resident alien who had abandoned his homeland and taken up a permanent or prolonged residence in another community with the permission of a host. The classic example is Jacob's family who were given permission by Pharaoh to reside in Goshen (Gen. 47:4-6). The *nēkār* or *zār* typically "were those passing through the land with no intention of taking residence, or perhaps they would be temporarily or seasonally employed. [They] could be a trader, merchant, worker, or mercenary" (Hoffmeier, 51). The *gēr* is analogous to a *legal* immigrant, one admitted as a guest, and it is the *gēr* who had special rights and to whom such well known texts as Ex. 22:21, 23:9, Lev. 19:33-34, and Deut. 10:19 apply. Those texts address how one is to treat the *gēr*, those who have been allowed to enter the land, not who should be allowed to enter.

And finally, it should be noted that there is a difference between an individual's duty to welcome and care for the poor and needy and a government's immigration policy. The former requires one personally to bear the costs of one's decision to extend hospitality and mercy, whereas the latter imposes the costs on the entire citizenry, regardless of an individual's desire to bear them, and reduces the funds available in the society for other competing works of compassion and social welfare. Governments are not individuals. In setting policy, they cannot judge issues in isolation but must weigh the ramifications of their decisions on the net welfare of the nation. It is a difficult task that seems rarely to be done well, but it is one God has given the governing authorities.