

Biblical Principles and Middle Axioms on Immigration

By Dr. Michael Kinnamon

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Preface

This theological reflection is an excerpt from my presentation to a Public Forum on Immigration sponsored by University Christian Church in Austin, Texas in the spring of 2007.

– Michael Kinnamon

Prior to his presentation at that forum, Dr. Kinnamon set the stage for the involvement of Christians in public debate on immigration issues by commenting: “Christians...should contribute to public debate on the basis of their understanding of the Gospel. One of the dangers of advocacy, of course, is that politically charged issues have a tendency to split the church...unless we talk together with the aim of discerning the will of God, rather than winning victories over theological opponents.”

A DVD of the entire forum is available on loan from Refugee and Immigration Ministries – see contact information at end of this reflection.

Presentation:

When thinking about immigration (or any such issue), it is important to distinguish between biblical themes or principles, on which Christians should seek agreement, and policy applications of those principles, on which some degree of disagreement is likely, even healthy. With this in mind, I want to name three scripturally-grounded principles that I try to keep in mind when thinking, as a Christian, about immigration. There obviously are others we might identify, but these three are surely foundational: 1) Each person—resident or migrant, documented or undocumented—is of infinite worth as a child of God, made in God’s image, and should therefore be treated with dignity and compassion. 2) The human family, as part of God’s creation, is fundamentally interdependent. No corner of the world should say to another, “We have no need of you” or “You have no claim on us.” 3) Christians have a particular obligation to welcome the stranger, even as God in Christ has welcomed us. The theologian, Miroslav Volf, puts it nicely when he suggests that the Bible has two persistent commandments: have no strange gods and love strangers. This is not a call for tolerance but hospitality, based on a recognition of essential relatedness. It is a reminder that the commandment to love neighbors does not just mean those who are like ourselves, and that the faithfulness of the church is measured by how we treat the “least” among us.

When it comes to a hot button issue like immigration reform, many Christians, I think it is fair to say, think politically rather than theologically (think in terms of our own self-interest instead of seeking the guidance of our faith community); and so it is important to teach and discuss these biblical themes. The problem, of course, is that two Christians can explicitly affirm these points and still reach quite different conclusions about whether to support a particular piece of legislation. So let’s explore the ground in between. What we sometimes call “middle axioms” are affirmations that are more specific than a biblical principle but not as specific as a congressional bill. It is here that I think Christians can have very profitable conversation.

For example, I would propose that the following middle axioms flow from the biblical themes named above:

First, all persons who migrate here legally should be helped to adjust to life in this new setting and treated appreciatively, as fellow residents and, perhaps, as fellow citizens. Even those here illegally have basic human rights that must be respected—whatever our other policy decisions. I think it follows that churches should support the work of community groups to rescue migrants in distress, should urge the government to avoid confrontational tactics as far as possible, and should support the enforcement of laws against treating migrant laborers unfairly.

Second, immigration should not be dealt with as a discrete issue, as if it were not related to the issues that lead to forced migration, including desperate poverty, discrimination, and warfare around the world. Debt relief in Africa is an immigration issue—for us. Peace and political stability in Central America are immigration issues—for us. Since 9/11, the immigration debate has been linked to national security. But Christians know that security is never a matter of unilateral defense but involves attentiveness to the injustice that afflicts others.

Third, human community, including this nation, is enriched by the presence of immigrants. Indeed, if scripture is our guide, we will recognize them as potential bearers of blessing, like Abraham's visitors by the oaks of Mamre. I say this as the proud father of an Asian Indian daughter who entered this country, at the age of eleven months, on a green card.

Such considerations lead me, then, to support policies that provide opportunity for undocumented migrants to become lawful permanent residents and, eventually, U.S. citizens; to support reforms of immigration law that reduce the waiting time for separated families to be reunited; to oppose bills that would militarize the border with Mexico or make illegal immigration an aggravated felony. These positions are consistent with those of various member communions of the National Council of Churches and with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. I want to acknowledge, however, that there are considerations which lead faithful Christians to favor more restrictive policies. I will name only two:

The first is the effect of immigration on workers—especially vulnerable, unskilled workers—born in this country. New immigrants are often a threat to the economic advancement of older ones since the influx of workers desperate for jobs tightens labor markets, makes it harder for workers to organize, and helps to keep wages depressed. The presence of such workers, it is argued, benefits employers and consumers, but not the “least” already among us. There are counter-arguments: that immigrant entrepreneurs create jobs for native-born workers...that bringing undocumented workers “out from the shadows” would allow them to bargain for higher wages, thus driving wages up for others.... But it isn't always clear what is best for the common good.

The picture gets even more complex when looked at globally. It is certainly possible to argue that increased migration to the United States will weaken countries of origin and is a threat to the human future since U.S. residents consume more of the earth's resources than those of any other nation. At the very least, this means that the immigration debate should include a call to reduce our habits of excess consumption.

Discussion:

Responding to a question following his presentation, Dr. Kinnamon also shared the following: “Those who argue for the most lenient immigration policies...will likely contend that the earth belongs to God...and therefore that its resources should be available to all of its people

without border. As they see it, countries like the United States restrict immigration in order to hoard our resources as if those resources were somehow ours and not God's. This vision is universal, that is it sees the whole of the earth truly interrelated, but it's also individualistic. The world as these people see it is a single community made up of persons who should have free access to the earth's resources wherever they can find it.

"My own vision...is more communal. I value the diverse cultures and communities that make up this world and in which people find identity. To use a religious example, I am part of the whole human family but I recognize particular responsibility for and identity with other Christians, and more particularly still with Disciples of Christ. In the same way, I believe that the government of this country has a right and a responsibility to make the care of U.S. citizens a priority while being sensitive to the whole of God's creation.

"But I certainly respect the more universalistic position. Those who would argue against enforcement of boundaries, in general, would value the intermingling of cultures and peoples. I value the particularity of cultures and peoples, even as I try to break down walls between them. They would see the world as a single community. I see it as a community of communities, each of which has responsibility for itself and for the whole."