

Immigration and Mission Matters: Framing Our Response

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On Monday, May 1st, 2006, thousands of immigrants (not aliens) engaged in a one-day boycott. They stayed away from jobs, schools and stores. Instead of their daily routine, they gathered in public parks, city streets and community centers across the country to celebrate their presence and power in this country's economic landscape.

Koreans, Chinese and Asians stood with Latinos in more than a protest movement. It was a movement for the promotion of citizenship.

Christians are challenged by Jesus' commandments and mission mandates, to weigh in on all matters relevant to faith. The Immigration Movement is such a matter that begs our undivided attention. Each of us must wrestle with the thorny question, "Where do I stand?"

I know it is not easy to answer such a question because in many ways immigration is a very complex issue with numerous tension points.

Some Christian Black-Americans are feeling racial tension because this monumental issue can have long range effects on the future of Black-American employment. The market for service-centered jobs is already extremely competitive due to non-Latino immigrants over the last fifteen years. This reality is compounded by the outsourcing of manufacturing jobs in the last ten (10) years thanks to Globalism.

Some Christians are experiencing tension around their faith. Many are wondering, "What would Jesus say and do?" One must decide between an application of the Law of Moses verses the Law of Grace.

Some Christians are experiencing the tension around the split between right and wrong from a legal/constitutional perspective.

However, as one frames his or her response there are certain guidelines that can assist us in the formulation of a Christ-centered, missional perspective.

We can begin with the Biblical mandate spelled out in **Deuteronomy 29:9-12**, where we read God's will as contained in the Covenant dealing with the Israelites and then expressed through Moses. Standing before God to enter into Covenant were **foreigners** who were Israel's "**hewers of wood and bearers of water**" (**Deuteronomy 29:11**). **God's will was to bring them in under the same covenant promises and privileges that Israel enjoyed as the People of God, as opposed to second class citizens under a "contract for services" as wood hewers and water bearers.**

In **Joshua 9:27**, foreigners that immigrated into Israelite territory agreed to be Israel's "hewers of wood and bearers of water" for the right to live in Israel's territory. Joshua had to decide how to deal with the foreigners that, in a real sense, **snuck over** the borders into Israeli territory for self-survival purposes. Their sneaking over was interpreted by native Israelites as a "**getting over.**"

They were not the first to "**get over.**" In fact, we now sing in memory of our past and in anticipation of our future arrival in the ultimate Promise Land, **How we made it over!**

All we have to do is pull a few pages from Black History and hear testimonies of slaves who managed to **sneak over** into the North, in that famous march to freedom into what they called the Promise Land. And who could blame them? Enslaved Negroes were looking for the dawning of a new day of freedom from tyranny and harsh social and economic conditions. As Van Jones of the Huffington Post wrote in the May 5th, 2006 edition,

"There was once a time when we, too, marched forward together, filled with utter confidence in the new day dawning. There was a time when we, too, believed that America's tomorrow held something bright for us...and for our children."

Unfortunately, in the same edition Van Jones was correct in his commentary on how so many Blacks have co-conspired through poor choices, with national policy makers to diminish their chances of taking advantage of America's rich opportunities.

"But those dreams have been eaten away by the AIDS virus, laid off by down-sizers, locked out by smiling bigots, shot up by gang-bangers and buried in a corporate-run prison yard. Now we cling to Black History Month for validation or inspiration."

When black slaves made their way north into the Promised Land of freedom, they knew that they might get caught in the process. But when they thought about death where they were, versus potential life in the Promise Land, many of them decided to try to beat the system of Southern slavery by hook and by crook.

It was no accident or coincidence that God provided Christ-centered and mission-minded Black and White Christians, as well as, non-Christians to help them "**get over**" and stay in the Promised Land. Many of them never wanted to have their names sketched in the memorial books of history. Others have had their names erased by the erosion of time. **However, a few names remain as a testimony love, mercy and justice, for example, Harriett Tubman, Harriett Beecher Stowe, William Still, John P. Parker, Reverend John Rankin, Thomas Garrett, etc.**

All of these persons were directly or indirectly a part of the Abolitionist Movement: a Movement dedicated to abolishing systems of oppression that give rise to dehumanizing and degrading conditions under which people created in the image of God are forced to live.

The Abolitionists' heroic efforts bring to mind the second issue that one may want to consider in framing a missional response to the immigration matter, namely, **who is my neighbor?**



We recognize this question from the New Testament witness. A lawyer wanting to justify his worthiness of being a recipient of eternal life asked Jesus, ***“Who is my neighbor?”***

Jesus’ response blew an enormous hole in the religious man’s definition of neighbor. At a minimum, we glean from Jesus’ answer that our neighbor is the one who is within our capacity to respond to in ways consistent with such spiritual principles as unconditional love, mercy, and compassion. We respond with the application of these principles even if by doing so we cut across the grain of common sense, logic, intuition, cultural, political correctness and even, **racial correctness!**

It is interesting that when Negro slaves were making their way over into the Promised Land they ran into people who responded to their plight in a neighborly way. Beyond the Abolitionists, they ran into Indians and Mexicans. These two groups responded with a level of love and protection that surpassed even that of the Good Samaritan.

Imagine that! It was Indians and Mexicans that provided a safe harbor for our ancestors who were fleeing for their lives and their loved ones.

It was Indians and Mexicans that provided much needed food and clothing, not to mention hope in the midst of despair. They did so at the risk of their own lives and villages. What courage under fire!

Their courage reminds me of what Jonathan Alter had to say in his new book, **The Defining Moment** which highlights authentic leadership. He indicated what made Franklin Delano Roosevelt and other leaders’ great was their capacity to ground their decisions in experience and conviction, elements sorely missed in today’s political landscape of focus-group approved positions and sound bytes.

A third issue we need to face in framing our response deals with the question of blame. Who’s to blame for this divisive issue? It is so easy to blame those who are illegally present within our borders. For many it is an open and shut case of being legally wrong, hand caught in the cookie jar! Case closed! Next?

Was it legally wrong for Negroes to be in the Promise Land as run away slaves? The answer is, yes! The sequel to the question might be, were they morally wrong? The answer is, no!

The precedent has been well established through the Biblically witness of Jesus’ own actions that morality with justice trumps legality with injustice. Jesus was hung out to dry at Calvary because He chose Grace’s moral-correctness over the Mosaic Law’s legal correctness.



Apostles Peter and Paul chose jail time, beatings and ostracism for the same reasons. Dr. Martin L. King, Jr. chose jail cells over the legally sanctioned Jim Crow terror cells of segregation and discrimination.

The question on who to blame must also be answered with respect to decisions made by non-Latinos that have had a disastrous effect on Latinos from Mexico.

Are Latinos to blame for NAFTA and the international politics of Globalism that negatively affect their capacity to remain in their own country as farmers?

Are Latinos to blame for American Businessmen who invite and incentivize their risky trips across the border for exploitative profits?

Are Latinos to blame for America's poorly crafted, unjust, Immigration Policy and implementation strategy?

It's time to wrestle and weigh in on where we stand as Christian Black Baptists.

How shall I respond as a Mission-Minded Christian to this important immigration matter today?

It matters to me, when we can search scripture to find out how our covenantal relationship with Christ can shed light on our missional response.

It keeps us from failing back on the natural reactions of our racial sensitivity; from yielding to a law-and-order – *“throw the book at them”* mentality; from yielding to the dictates of our human flesh over against the better values of the Holy Spirit; and, it keeps us from allowing legalities of the law trump the love of Christ rooted in grace.

John's gospel reminds us that the Law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. In other words, in case someone doesn't get John's drift, when the law of Accountability says *“deportation,”* the law of grace says, *“Let's work things out in an unconditional, loving and compassionate way with justice.”*

When the law says, *“Build a fence and fence them out,”* the law of grace says, *“This is not a zero sum game, and there is a more excellent way!”*

When the law says, *“make them permanent, underpaid slaves for the rest of their lives,”* the law of covenantal grace says, *“your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.”*

When the Law of Moses says, “you have to remember that you are a Christian and therefore have to uphold the laws of Uncle Sam,” the Holy Spirit also reminds us of what Jesus said, *“We are Peacemakers, the Salt of the Earth, and the Light of the world.”*

The Apostle Paul reminds us of a few more titles we wear. As Christ-centered missionaries we are Ambassadors and Reconcilers; and, we have been given the ministry of reconciliation.

In fact, there is one last consideration that might help us to form and frame our missional response to the immigration matter. I don't have to go very far in reaching for it.

The Apostle Paul reminds all of us where we used to live, before grace allowed us to cross over into the Promised Land! In Ephesians 2, Paul writes, *“I would have you Gentiles remember, that for a long time, you lived without Christ being **aliens** from the Commonwealth of Israel, and **strangers** from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.”*

Thanks to what Jesus went through at Calvary, you and I have immigrated over the borders of sin into the Promise Land of Jesus Christ. We, who use to live far away, have been brought in by the blood of Christ. Jesus is our peace, and has made all *“one.”* Jesus has broken down the fence between us and others.

Thanks to our Immigration Savior, we are no more strangers, aliens, or foreigners, only fellow-citizens of the household of God.

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