

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

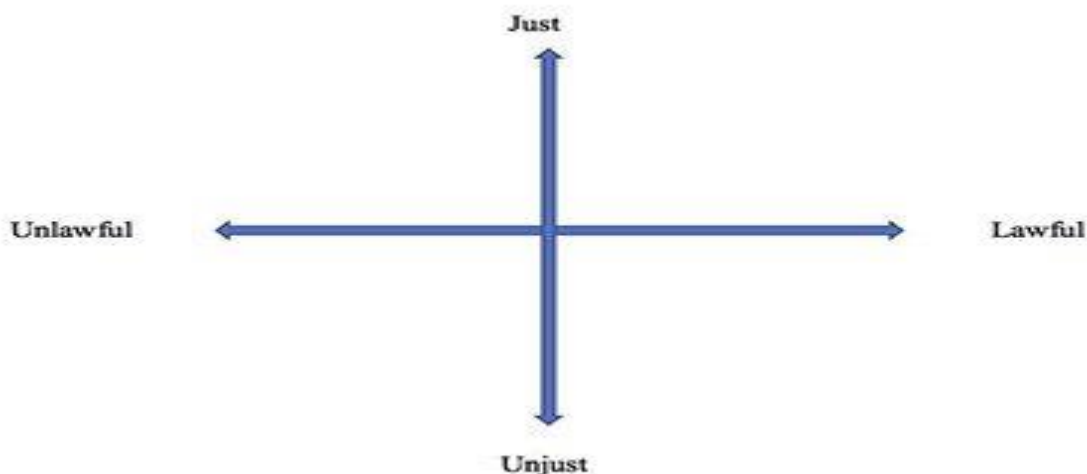
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Thinking About the Immigration Debate

Of all the issues facing American civilization today, none is more controversial and volatile than that of immigration. It is a legal issue, a social issue, a political issue, and it is a spiritual issue. In this *Perspective*, I hope to focus on the legal and the spiritual issues informing the immigration debate. Even as I set the boundaries, I am not naive. What I say will upset some Christians, but I am going to do my best to raise the important legal and biblical themes that deal with this issue.

Dr. Ralph Enlow, President of the Association of Biblical Higher Education, has recently written some helpful essays on the topic of immigration. Ralph is a close personal friend of mine and he and I have worked on a number of issues relating to biblical higher education in the United States and Canada. I am going to quote liberally from his recent essays as I frame this discussion about immigration.

1. In dealing with immigration policy, it is necessary to establish that there is a distinction between *law* and *justice* (i.e., what is truly *right* in the eyes of God). The diagram below illustrates that some things are both *lawful* and *just* (upper right quadrant), some things are *lawful* but *unjust* (lower right quadrant: e.g., slavery in the past, abortion in the present), some things are both *unlawful* and *unjust* (lower left quadrant: e.g., murder, robbery) and some things are *just* but *unlawful* (upper left quadrant: e.g., distributing Bibles, “proselytizing” in some countries).



Most governments attempt to make laws that are just, but, as a civilization moves away from God's ethical standards as revealed in His Word, laws may no longer be just in the eyes of God. Thus human law and justice are often not equivalent. "Few things provoked Jesus more than the tendency of Jewish legal scholars and political functionaries to interpret and apply the *law* (both moral and ceremonial) in *unjust* ways. One of the core attributes of the Eternal Kingdom God has promised and is preparing for His people is that there will be no distinction between *law* and *justice*."

2. "Whatever else you want to say about the massive reality of *illegal* immigration (and 11+ million undocumented—25% of all immigrants—is indeed massive), there is no denying that that much of the underlying nature of the problem may accurately be described as *injustice*."
 - On the one hand, it is unjust to the 32+ million immigrants who entered the US legally to accord equal status to the 11+ million who entered by circumventing immigration laws.
 - On the other hand, the fundamental reasons we have 11+ million illegal immigrants do not stem from the lawlessness and nefarious intent of most immigrants. So, what really drives illegal immigration?

Consider these factors:

- Some immigrants are seeking *refuge* from oppression, even danger—be it political, criminal, military, religious, or otherwise
 - Some immigrants are seeking to escape poverty
 - Some immigrants are seeking to be reunited with family members who have legal residential status
 - Some immigrants are *recruited* to serve as agricultural, industrial, domestic, or service industry laborers
 - No doubt, a very small number are criminals or radicals who intend criminal harm or terror.
3. We must grant that there is a significant degree of economic hypocrisy in the immigration debate. Our current immigration morass is due less to lawlessness and more to economic and political hypocrisy. For example, in the agricultural, industrial, domestic, and service industries, our economy is built on massive hypocrisy. Cursory compliance with the law for too long permitted employers to look superficially and sideways at the personal identification credentials of prospective employees in exchange for their silence and complicity in accepting lower wages and waiver of employee benefits. Dishonesty and discrimination reign when convenient, yet many of the worst offenders in the labor market are the most vociferous in support of immigration restrictions and withholding of taxpayer benefits. Both employers and consumers prosper by means of a substantial volume of undocumented labor. "At least some of the laborers who work for my lawn care company, service the hotel rooms I stay in, and install roofs and fences at my home are entirely likely to be here 'illegally' but I benefit from their labor without having to—or even being in a position to—take direct responsibility for their unlawful status. Only when they show up in

the local hospital emergency room or their children show up in our children's classrooms speaking foreign languages do we take notice and take umbrage."

4. I invite you to consider the Evangelical Immigration Table's [*Evangelical Statement of Principles for Immigration Reform*](#) as a commendable set of basic elements of a biblical posture relative to immigration. The Statement's introduction reads as follows:

Our national immigration laws have created a moral, economic and political crisis in America. Initiatives to remedy this crisis have led to polarization and name calling in which opponents have misrepresented each other's positions as open borders and amnesty versus deportations of millions. This false choice has led to an unacceptable political stalemate at the federal level at a tragic human cost. We urge our nation's leaders to work together with the American people to pass immigration reform that embodies these key principles and that will make our nation proud. As evangelical Christian leaders, we call for a bipartisan solution on immigration that:

- *Respects the God-given dignity of every person*
- *Protects the unity of the immediate family*
- *Respects the rule of law*
- *Guarantees secure national borders*
- *Ensures fairness to taxpayers*
- *Establishes a path toward legal status and/or citizenship for those who qualify and who wish to become permanent residents.*

My friend, Ralph Enlow, acknowledges that "the above principles leave a chasm that can only be bridged by a commitment to engagement and compromise. But we 'strangers' who through the blood of Christ have been reconciled to God and to one another (Eph. 2:11-22) must take the courageous and costly initiative to:

- lead our fellow citizens in repentance for our collective hypocrisy and cultural hubris;
- reach out on a personal level to embrace the despised and disenfranchised; and
- advocate within the sphere of our citizenship responsibility for the rectification and re-framing of immigration's legal apparatus."

A most helpful book that can guide Christian leaders in this effort is *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion and Truth in the Immigration Debate*. It presents an important historical overview of immigration in the United States, a thorough investigation on "Thinking Biblically About Immigration," and offers insights into the economic and legal aspects of this complicated issue. In the Appendix are valuable discussion questions for groups and for churches that are serious about thinking through and leading the church in this immigration debate. I highly recommend this resource.

See Ralph Enlow, "Immigration: How Do We Get Out Of This Morass?" *4ThoughtLeaders, Biblical Higher Education, Perspectives* (6 and 21 January 2018 and 4 February 2018); and Matthew Soerens and Jenny Hwang, *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion and Truth in the Immigration Debate*.