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Towards an Adventist Theology of Refugees

Recent political developments have thrust the problem of immigrants and refugees to the front of the public policy agenda in America. Political groups stir up their bases to either build a wall and throw out 11 million undocumented immigrants or set up sanctuary cities and seek for open borders. While this scuffle happens, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents are becoming more aggressive in rounding up undocumented immigrants, some here since infancy, and arresting them for deportation. How should Adventist Christians, many of whom are immigrants themselves, respond in a biblical manner to the public policy and humanitarian issues raised by immigration? What biblical and inspired counsel might we find to inform our theological views on the topic and give a firmer biblical foundation to whatever actions we choose?

The Refugee and Immigration Issue in Context

To assess the biblical or theological approach to an issue or problem, one must be aware of the scope and nature of the issue. Before turning to biblical principles about justice and immigrants, we will first look at the issue of immigration in the United States. Immigrants may not all be fleeing from persecution or fear for their physical safety, but they have made a huge decision to leave what they had to look for something better. They seek refuge in a new place and try to live out their hopes and dreams for life there, even though they may not speak the language and have few family or friends in their new country. In the case of America, they come as immigrants looking for the “American Dream.” In a sense, this is all of our stories, because unless you are a Native American or African American, you or your ancestors are part of this group.

According to the PEW Research Center, in 2017 there were about 49,780,000 people living in the US that were born in other countries (2018). Some politicians would have us believe these people are dangerous, among the worst from their country. A Gallop poll found that 45% of Americans thought immigrants made the crime situation in the USA worse (2018).

The reality is, however, that studies show immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than native born citizens. Illegal Immigrants are 44% less likely to be incarcerated than native-born Americans, and legal immigrants are 69% less likely to be incarcerated (Landgrave and Nowrasteh 2017). Mexican immigrants are a large concern to some people, yet when comparing men 18 to 39 years old, native-born Americans were almost four times as likely to be incarcerated than immigrants from Mexico (Ewing, Martínez, and Rumbaut 2015).

These immigrants come with a goal of finding a better life and to be productive members of society, making them less likely to be criminals. Studies show immigrants are almost as likely as US citizens to have a bachelors or advanced degree (Anderson and López 2018). And while some people raise concerns about immigrants taking their jobs, the truth is that 51% of Americans feel immigrants do not have much effect on job opportunities for them or their families. Additionally, 72% believe that immigrants are taking low paying, menial jobs that most Americans do not and will not seek (Gallop 2018). Most Americans view immigrants as helpful to society: 57% think immigrants improve our food, music, and arts; 45% think they improve our economy; and 69% think they improve or have no effect on our social and moral values (Gallop 2018).

At times the press creates a sense that a majority of Americans view immigration as something needing curtailing, but that is not the case either. In the early 1990s, about 65% of Americans were in favor of decreasing immigration levels, but since then things have changed. Currently, more people still want to decrease immigration (35%) than increase it (24%), but the majority are willing to keep the immigration levels as they were in 2017 (38%). If current trends continue, by around 2022 more people will think we need to increase immigration levels (just over 30%) than decrease it (just under 30%) while the majority will continue to want to keep the levels as they are (40%) (Gallop 2018).

With the ranks of those in favor of decreasing immigration levels falling and those in favor of increasing levels or keeping them the same rising, the current government actions to prevent immigration may be in opposition to the majority's opinion. In 2017, ICE arrests rose 30%. Yet non-criminal arrests rose 146% compared to a rise in criminal arrests by 12% (Bialik 2018). When asked in 2015, only 19% of Americans were in

favor of deporting illegal immigrants. The majority, 65%, wanted them to be able to stay and become citizens, an additional 14% felt that while they should not be citizens, they should be allowed to remain in the US to work (Gallop 2018).

It does not seem that immigrants are as big a *problem* to America as the public currently perceives. Rather, it seems that the immigration problem is one that is primarily promoted by certain political leaders who find illegal immigrants a convenient scape-goat around which aggrieved constituents can coalesce their frustration and anger. Maintaining secure borders and seeking an orderly immigration process is certainly a legitimate goal. But making up for years of haphazard effort and neglect by punishing poor, often disenfranchised, yet hard working immigrant seems unfair. How can Christians think about this topic in a constructive manner?

Christians and Justice

What insights into the issue of dealing with immigrants can Christians gather from the Bible? Micah 6:8 says, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” But what is justice in the context of immigration?

The Bible frequently speaks of justice as being of great importance and value, and something that the believer should pursue on behalf of others and society. In the Hebrew, the most frequent word for this is *mishpat*, meaning literally a verdict or legal decree. A Greek word often translated justice is *krisis*, meaning judgment or decision. The 6th century Roman Law, *Institutes of Justinian*, defined justice as “the constant and perpetual will to render to each his due” (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 2017). But there are many theories and concepts of what justice looks like in practice. This article will cover three: Commutative/Personal Justice, Procedural/Legal Justice, and Distributive/Social Justice.

Commutative/Personal Justice is honesty in personal agreements and contracts with friends and strangers. The philosopher Thomas Aquinas explained commutative justice as fair buying and selling: “one person should pay back to the other just so much as he has become richer out of that which belonged to the other” (*Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). That is, people should be paid for the value of what they sold.

Procedural/Legal Justice is fairness in the rule of law. Things like non-discrimination and fairness in courts and legal procedures, not favoring race, class, or social status. The philosopher John Rawls broke procedural justice down further: with perfect procedural justice—if it is followed a just outcome is guaranteed; imperfect procedural justice—following it is

likely, but not certain to produce a just result; and pure procedural justice—there is no independent way to assess the justness of the outcome, for example, a coin toss (Floyd).

Distributive/Social Justice is how the goods, services, and resources are divided up or distributed to begin with, both in society and the world, and the laws that decide these divisions. Thomas Aquinas defined distributive justice as laws that goods “are [fairly] apportioned among people who stand in a social community.” Not that everyone will receive the same portions, but that they will receive what they are due (Floyd).

To give a simple illustration of these different forms of justice, consider a basketball game. A justice-ruled basketball game would include not cheating or committing flagrant or technical fouls, instead showing good sportsmanship (Commutative/Personal); the referees should not favor one team or player but should call fouls and rules fairly (Procedural/Legal); teams should be balanced and fair—a men’s college team playing a girl’s high school team would be a grossly unequal distribution of talent and basketball resources (Distributive).

Unsurprisingly, the Bible affirms all three versions of justice, but seems to pay particular attention to distributive justice. Personal and procedural justice can be found in Lev 19:35, “You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. You shall have just balances, just weights,” and Deut 1:16-17, “And I charged your judges at that time, ‘Hear the cases between your brothers, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the alien who is with him. You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike.’”

But there are limits to procedural justice. The French poet, Anatole France, wrote, “The law, in its majestic equality and might, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges at night” (France 1894). But does a law like this actually equally impact the rich and the poor alike? How many of the rich want to or need to sleep under a bridge? So a law that appears neutral on its face can in fact create a far greater burden on a certain class of people than on others. Thus, “equal treatment” can be used as an argument to continue to enforce very unequal circumstances. Rules against begging in the subway may be enforced equally against rich and poor, but who do they primarily impact? Equal protection of the laws tends to preserve the status quo in a fair way. But what if the status quo is unfair?

The Bible, Distributive Justice, and the Immigrant

Distributive/Social Justice seeks to create a more level playing field for all citizens. Many Adventists believe that distributive justice should be a matter for private charity, for example, this is what we do when we donate

to the United Way or the Salvation Army or our local charity. Reactions by many Christians to political attempts to seek a fairer distribution of resources range from cries of *socialism* to *communism*, which is what many Evangelicals said about the Obamacare health plan and similar programs.

But the Bible has much to say about distributive justice. It talks about *mishpat* (justice) versus *tsedaqah* (righteousness). While these are overlapping ideas, there can be bad laws (*mishpat*), but not bad righteousness (*tsedaqah*). A just system of laws and procedures aims at the end to have a righteous society. We are not just concerned with fair procedure, but fair outcomes, a righteous society, and indeed a righteous world.

There are frequent references in the Old Testament to the state acting on behalf of the poor, the alien, or immigrant. The laws of harvesting and gleaning stated that the edges of fields should remain unharvested for “the poor and the sojourner” (Lev 19:10). Part of yearly tithes were to benefit the Levite, “the sojourner,” widows, and orphans (Deut 14:29). There was a third-year tithe that was laid up for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow (Deut 14:28-29). Every seventh year, the fields were to lie fallow, and the poor, which would include strangers, were allowed to harvest and reap (Exod 23:10-11). The weekly Sabbath rest was to be extended to the “sojourner” and the “stranger” within one’s gates (Exod 20:8-11, 23:12).

Yet justice for the immigrant was not limited to just the state’s part. The individual was also to show justice to the sojourner: “The stranger that sojourneth with you shall be unto you as the home-born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were sojourners in the land of Egypt: I am Jehovah your God” (Lev 19:34). “[God] executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Deut 10:18-19). “Cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow” (Deut 27:19). “Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against . . . those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien and do not fear Me,” says the LORD of hosts” (Mal 3:5).

Immigrants were not only to be cared for but were given the same rights as citizens. Ezek 47:21-23 says, “So shall ye divide this land unto you according to the tribes of Israel. And it shall come to pass, that ye shall divide it by lot for an inheritance unto you and to the strangers that sojourn among you, who shall beget children among you; and they shall be unto you as the home-born among the children of Israel; they shall have inheritance with you among the tribes of Israel. And it shall come to pass, that in what tribe the stranger sojourneth, there shall ye give him his inheritance, saith the Lord Jehovah.”

The Bible and the Case of the “Illegal” Immigrant

You may ask what about the “Illegal” alien? Does justice still apply? There are many examples of people in the Bible who emigrated or immigrated secretly or against the will of the civil authorities. In the era of families and tribes, the patriarch of the family or clan was the local civil authority. Yet the Bible has a number of stories of people fleeing their families, apparently with God’s approval. Think of Jacob fleeing home and the oversight of Isaac, and then returning having escaped the authority of Laban (Gen 28, 31).

And even in the ancient world, there were nations that guarded their borders with care, and required permission to pass in or out. Think of Moses’s flight into Midian (Exod 2), and then his return to Egypt (Exod 4). And of course, there was the flight of the children of Israel from Egypt, which was very much against the will and command of the Pharaoh (Exod 12, 14). Certainly their entry into Canaan was against the wills of the people already in the land (Num 13). In the story of Israel and the Gibeonites (the tribe that lied about their location), it is revealed that the existence of trickery does not justify treating a people group with injustice or inhumanity (Josh 9). In the story of David, we see him leaving Israelite territory against the will of the King, and enter into Philistine territory, not always with the permission of the Philistine leaders. Finally, Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus exited Israel, entered Egypt, and returned to Israel without the permission, and even against the will, of the Judean civil authorities (Matt 2).

Understanding the morality behind this *illegal* behavior requires us to understand the differences between various types of laws. Not all crimes are the same. There are two kinds of laws, *Malum in Se*, the thing is wrong itself (theft, murder, perjury), and *Malum Prohibitum*, the thing is only wrong because it is prohibited (speed limit, zoning codes, immigration law). Obviously, violations of *Malum in Se* are generally more serious, and should be punished more severely than the latter. Indeed, moral reasons, such as preserving life, safety, or health, can provide justification for violation of *Malum Prohibitum* laws.

Immigrants who have entered illegally, have been used by us for their labor and efforts to build our country, and benefit our businesses and homes. There is a case to be made that after a time, we have a moral relationship to treat them fairly, as a matter of *Malum in Se*, which outweighs their violation of the *Malum Prohibitum*. Further, proportionate justice requires that the punishment should fit the crime.

Almost all these laws involved state-supervised and directed redistribution of resources to both the poor and the alien. Did these principles of

redistribution and openness to strangers apply only under the theocracy of Israel? Obviously, the laws do not apply directly, but the principles, it would seem, are universal. Israel's captivity was based in failure to follow these laws. Also, other nations are chastised and punished for ill treatment of the poor and strangers—including Sodom and Gomorrah.

Ellen White on Immigration

Ellen White wrote that Israel's laws for the poor were examples for the nations: "The plan of life that God gave to Israel was intended as an object lesson for all mankind. If these principles were carried out today, what a different place this world would be!" (White 1905:188).

If the law given by God for the benefit of the poor had continued to be carried out, how different would be the present condition of the world, morally, spiritually, and temporally! . . . The principles which God has enjoined, would prevent the terrible evils that in all ages have resulted from the oppression of the rich toward the poor and the suspicion and hatred of the poor toward the rich. While they might hinder the amassing of great wealth and the indulgence of unbounded luxury, they would prevent the consequent ignorance and degradation of tens of thousands whose ill-paid servitude is required to build up these colossal fortunes. They would bring a peaceful solution of those problems that now threaten to fill the world with anarchy and bloodshed. (White 1890:536)

Ellen White even says that the immigrants are brought to us by God: "God in His providence has brought men to our very doors, and thrust them, as it were, into our arms, that they might learn the truth, and be qualified to do a work we could not do in getting the light to men of other tongues" (White 1918:20).

She encourages us to evangelize among these people: "Many of these foreigners are here in the providence of God, that they may have opportunity to hear the truth for this time, and receive a preparation that will fit them to return to their own lands as bearers of precious light shining direct from the throne of God" (White 1910:1). "In our own land thousands of foreigners—representatives of many nations, kindreds, and tongues—have settled. . . . The hand of God has been directing them to our shores that they might be brought under the enlightening influence of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and become partakers of the divine nature. How many among us have been stirred by the spirit of the Master to go forth and labor for this class of strangers who have been brought to our very doors through the providence of God, that his work might be hastened in the earth?" (White 1892:1, para. 2).

Theology Meets Activism Today

It would seem to be clear that as Christians we have an obligation to look after the immigrant within our gates and that God is even sending them to us for us to minister to. When asked in 2006 if the government should make it a crime for US citizens to aid people they knew were illegal immigrants, 52% of Americans said yes (Gallop 2018). If the government were to have made it a crime, should we not still help people? In our current situation it is not a crime to help these people, yet what actions are we taking?

Regardless which side people find themselves on concerning the topic of immigration, most feel that the system is broken and in need of a more comprehensive overhaul. This brings up the question: How should our immigration policy be changed? At the United Religious Community 2018 Prayer Breakfast which took place on April 20 in South Bend, Indiana, which Janna Quetz attended, Ali Noorani the Executive Director of the National Immigration Forum, suggested that at the core of the immigration issue are three questions that people are attempting to answer. The first refers to culture: Are immigrants integrating or isolating? The second deals with security: Do the immigrants pose a threat to us or will they be protective? The final question discusses the economy: Are the immigrants givers or takers?

Based on the OECD data for 2001-2010, the US had on average the highest national inflow of immigrants of any country, with 1,050,000 immigrants moving here each year (Ozimek 2012). However, while we may accept the most people, we only accept 0.4% of our population making us the 22nd ranking country by population percentage (2012). So, how could our policy change? If we go the way of Canada and Australia, there could be a switch to a merit-based point system, however skills do not always mean there is an available job that matches (Bui and Dickerson 2018). Within the European Union the borders are fairly open, if we moved to that system we could easily expand searches for work to Mexico and/or Canada, but we would also compete against Mexicans/Canadians for jobs in the US (2018).

Japan and South Korea have a strong emphasis on protecting their culture, and hardly let any immigrants in. Those who are let in to Korea have strong family ties, take a language test, and an exam on Korean customs (Bui and Dickerson 2018). The Gulf States have a lot of immigration to keep up with the demand for cheap labor, but these immigrants are temporary and do not have many rights (2018).

Immigration reform is complicated and multiple factors must be weighed. But what can we practically do about the factors of prejudice and

bigotry against the unknown outsider? Familiarity seems to help break down walls of prejudice. As Ali Noorani said at the United Religious Community 2018 Prayer Breakfast, “People love the Muhamad and Maria they know, but fear the Muhamad or Maria they don’t.” People are more likely to fight for the rights of someone they know than to advocate for a stranger; meeting an immigrant for the first time and hearing their story can change one’s perspective. Ali has a method he calls “Bibles, Badges, and Businesses.” He encourages preachers, police, and business owners to speak to their local groups about immigration, dispelling various myths and fears. Insofar as the fears of the community can be addressed, and people can be introduced to the real stories of actual immigrants, policy can be made on a factual, rather than reactionary, basis.

The Bible encourages God’s people to help immigrants, and does not leave it up to just the state, but says the people of God should personally help them. Whatever path is taken in the future it is important to keep in mind that Christ calls us brothers, and we too should call the sojourner within our gates brother. Immigration policy is complex, and there may be no clear guidance from God’s Word on parts of it. But whatever policies are arrived at, the Christian has a role to advocate for the creation and implementation of a humane and moral policy that respects the image of God in all people of whatever nationality, race, or religion.

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