

# How the Church Must Respond to Immigration Reform Amid Cry for Justice

Demonstrators gathered across the nation this past weekend to voice their concern over immigration reform, but outside the United Nations headquarters in Manhattan, New York, the scene was a microcosm of where our nation stands on this vital hot-button issue.

On one side of the street, protesters held signs urging officials to “Deport Illegals” and “Protect Our Borders Now.” Across the street, pro-immigration reform demonstrators urged those same government officials to rectify a system that’s obviously broken but still unresolved after years of national debate.

More than 2,000 miles away the shouts were deafening as buses loaded with babies in their mothers’ arms, toddlers, teens and tweens moved past long lines of yet more protesters draped in American flags, wielding “Return to Sender” signs and screaming verbal assaults. Most on the bus had traveled hundreds—if not thousands—of miles trying to escape the violence or poverty of their home areas.

On every side of this culture war comes a cry for justice. Yet while the church has for the most part remained silent, our nation seems further today from grasping the meaning of justice than any time in its history.

What is justice? And who determines what it looks like? Both questions need answering in light of so many issues today being branded as issues of justice.

By its very definition, *justice* is the understanding and application of moral rightness based on ethics, rationality,

law, religion, equity and fairness. It is, according to the American philosopher John Rawls, the first issue of social institutions. Yet today we profoundly struggle with understanding what justice looks like and how it is to be applied in our lives.

America was founded upon a Judeo-Christian belief system in which both justice and mercy are governing concepts that are ultimately derived from and held by God. Therefore justice is intrinsically linked to the very nature of God. In fact, the psalmist David describes God's expressed rule by saying, "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; mercy and truth go before Your face" (Ps. 89:14).

Apart from knowing God and his character, humanity is hopelessly lost in a sea of confusion when it comes to justice. In the early 1830s the French thinker Alexis Tocqueville said after touring America, "I sought for the key to the greatness and genius of America in her harbors; in her fertile fields and boundless forests; in her rich mines and vast world commerce; in her public school system and institutions of learning. I sought for it in her democratic Congress and in her matchless Constitution. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power."

Tocqueville's conclusion was simple yet profound: "America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great." He went on to say, "The safeguard of morality is religion, and morality is the best security of law as well as the surest pledge of freedom." In other words, there is no justice and freedom apart from morality, and there is no morality apart from a vibrant faith in the living God!

Tocqueville said of this nation at that time, "The Americans combine the notions of Christianity and of liberty so

intimately in their minds that it is impossible to make them conceive the one without the other. Christianity is the companion of liberty in all its conflicts—the cradle of its infancy, and the divine source of its claims.”

Justice begins in the human heart. Hearts darkened by the depravity and twistedness of our own sinful, selfish nature must be enlightened by an encounter with God’s truth. The Bible makes it clear that the reason God gave Israel the law was so they could understand His character and nature and put into practice His standards of justice and moral rightness. God explained this when revealed why He chose Abraham, the father of faith: “For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him” (Gen. 18:19, ESV).

At the forefront of today’s social justice issue in America is the ever-increasing problem of immigration. Our borders are flooded with people, most of whom have endured the worst kind of journey to come to this country. While many may differ on the long-term solution to stemming the flow of immigrants to our nation, the Bible is crystal clear about our response after their arrival: “The Lord watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked” (Ps. 146:9, NIV).

How much does God value protecting the immigrant? In Isaiah 58 the prophet describes a people who, by all appearances, were profoundly spiritual. As a nation, they sought God daily, which is more than we can say for America today. Yet in all their spiritual zeal, God rebukes them for their sin and even calls it rebellion. What was this sin that evoked such a visceral response from God? It was their tall stack of injustices: the way they treated the needy and hungry, their stubborn refusal to clothe the naked, and their mistreatment of the immigrant. For all of their religious fervor and zeal

God's people had missed the point. God was expecting action—not a cosmetic faith or a theoretical faith, but an active, applied faith. A faith so filled with the compassion of God that it feels the pain and plight of the vulnerable and satisfies the needs of the weak and broken.

Micah 6:8 puts it this way: "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?" (ESV).

Today the lines of partisan politics have sharply divided the body of Christ. We have allowed our theology to be hijacked by our politics rather than inform it. We're driven down a road further away from the place of compassion and true moral rightness. Yet God's word admonishes us to "learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (Is. 1:17). It is easy to draw the parallel between walking with God and receiving His blessings. His Word is plain: Stay close to Him and His righteous standards, and the result is that justice reigns and blessings flow; drift from Him and the consequences are dire.

We are God's people, His church. As Christ's ambassadors, we are the hope of the world. May God help us during this immigration challenge to stand up for true moral—and biblical—rightness. May we be His hands, extended to fulfill Amos 5:24: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

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