

***Illegal Immigration:
The Most Divisive Issue for Evangelicals***
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NOTE: This paper constitutes chapter 6 of my book, "Seven Critical Issues," which was published in 2016.

Juan Francisco Lopez-Sanchez is an illegal immigrant with seven felony convictions who has been deported to Mexico five times. On July 1, 2015, he allegedly shot Kate Steinle as she was walking on a San Francisco pier with her father. She died at the hospital.¹

The prospect of murderers, ISIS terrorists, and other criminals coming into the US as immigrants is indeed frightening. Protecting Americans is one of the US president's highest priorities. At the same time, Scripture calls us to be gracious to the "sojourners" in our midst (see Leviticus 19:33–34 and other biblical texts below). Many illegal immigrants have children and other family members who are US citizens.

Evangelical Christians are divided on this issue. According to a recent survey,² nine in ten want more border security. However, six in ten support a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants. More than two-thirds favor both priorities. Regarding recent immigrants to the US, 48 percent of evangelicals see them as "a drain on economic resources," but 42 percent view their immigration as "an opportunity to introduce them to Jesus Christ."

Here's the most troubling part of the survey to me: When asked which factor most influenced their beliefs about immigration, only one in ten evangelicals chose the Bible. Only 2 percent named the church. Among other influences: 17 percent cite relationships with immigrants, while 16 percent cite the media and 17 percent point to friends and family.

Let's explore what God's word says on this divisive issue. However, I must warn you: Of all the topics discussed in this book, illegal immigration is likely to be the most controversial. You may well disagree with my discussion of this subject.

My objective is not to offer a proposal every evangelical will accept. Given the complexities of this issue, such a position does not exist. Rather, it is to seek objectively to apply Scripture to an issue that affects every American, today and for generations to come.

What is the scope of the issue?

There were 42.4 million immigrants in the US in 2014, comprising 13.3 percent of the total population. For historical comparison, immigrants made up 14.8 percent of the US population in 1890. However, the percentage has risen sharply since 1970, when only 4.7 percent of the population was composed of immigrants.³

Congress abolished national-origin admission quotas in 1965. Between 1970 and 2014, the number of US immigrants more than quadrupled. In 2014, 1.3 million foreign-born persons moved to the US, an 11 percent increase from the year before. Their countries of origin included:

- India, with 147,500
- China, with 131,800
- Mexico, with 130,000
- Canada, with 41,200
- Philippines, with 40,500.

Mexican immigrants are the largest immigrant group in the US, accounting for 28 percent of the 42.4 million foreign-born persons in America. Immigrants to the US and their US-born children now number approximately eighty-one million people, comprising 26 percent of the overall population.

Of the 36.7 million immigrants ages twenty-five and older, 29 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher. This compares with 30 percent of native-born adults. Of America's foreign-born population, 47 percent are naturalized US citizens. In the US, there are 17.5 million children age eighteen and younger living with at least one immigrant parent. They account for 25 percent of the 69.9 million children under age eighteen in America.

An estimated 11.4 million unauthorized immigrants reside in the US. About 3.3 million of them reside with at least one US-citizen child under age eighteen. In total, there are 4.1 million US-citizen children in the US residing with an unauthorized immigrant. There were 679,996 apprehensions of unauthorized immigrants in 2014 and 577,295 deportations.

Regarding immigrants' impact on America:

- The average immigrant contributes nearly \$120,000 more in taxes than he or she consumes in public benefits.
- Illegal immigrants paid \$11.8 billion in state and local taxes in 2012.
- Immigrants are nearly twice as likely as the native-born to become entrepreneurs.
- Immigrants are founders of eighteen percent of all Fortune 500 companies.
- An analysis of 2011 Census data found that, at the county level, there is no statistically significant relationship between unemployment and the presence of immigrants who arrived in 2000 or later.⁴

To summarize:

- There are 42.4 million immigrants in America, 13.3 percent of the total population.
- An estimated 11.4 million of them are unauthorized.
- About 3.3 million of these live with a US-citizen child under age eighteen.

What does the Bible say?

God's concern for immigrants

Scripture clearly tells us how the Lord feels about immigrants:

- "You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:21).
- "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 19:33–34).
- "[God] executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:18–19).
- "When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this" (Deuteronomy 24:19–22).
- As a result of Job's compassion, "the sojourner has not lodged in the street" (Job 31:32).
- "You shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel. You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the sojourners who reside among you and have had children among you. They shall be to you as native-born children of Israel. With you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe the sojourner resides, there you shall assign him his inheritance, declares the LORD God" (Ezekiel 47:21–23).
- "Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor" (Zechariah 7:10).
- "I will be a swift witness against . . . those who thrust aside the sojourner" (Malachi 3:5).
- "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers" (Hebrews 13:2).
- Jesus taught that the way we treat the "stranger" is the way we treat him (Matthew 25:35, 40).

Mathew Soerens and Jenny Hwang are authors of *Welcoming the Stranger*.⁵ They note that *ger*, the Hebrew word for a "person not native to the local area," appears ninety-two times in the Old Testament. Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and the entire nation of Israel were immigrants. Jesus was an immigrant to Egypt as a child; early Christians were scattered across the Roman Empire as immigrants.

Soerens and Hwang include this statement by theologian Orlando O. Espin:

Welcoming the stranger (the "immigrant," we could say today) is the most often repeated commandment in the Hebrew Scriptures, with the exception of the imperative to worship only the one God. And the love of neighbor (especially the more vulnerable neighbor) is doubtlessly the New Testament's constant command. . . . Whatever the cause of

immigration today, there can be no doubt as to where the Church must stand when it comes to defending the immigrant.⁶

God loves us all, regardless of our country of origin:

In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise (Galatians 3:26–29).

About seven percent of our K-12 students have at least one unauthorized immigrant parent; 79 percent of these students were born in the U.S. Children were especially important to Jesus (Matthew 18:1-6; 19:13-15) and should be to us.

We should also note that the Bible assigns specific responsibilities to immigrants:⁷

- They are to obey the law and customs of the land: "The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer" (Isaiah 56:6–7).
- They are to assimilate into the culture of their host country: Sojourners were required to observe the Sabbath (Deuteronomy 5:14) and the other religious festivals of the nation (Deuteronomy 16:9–15).
- They are not to break the law, no matter how difficult their circumstances: "People do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his appetite when he is hungry, but if he is caught, he will pay sevenfold; he will give all the goods of his house" (Proverbs 6:30–31).
- No one should break US laws to make more money: "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10).

Border security

"Securing the border" is typically the first step promised by any political leader who addresses the issue of illegal immigration. Self-defense is in fact a biblical priority:

- "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe" (Luke 11:21).
- "If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him" (Exodus 22:2).
- "Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked" (Proverbs 25:26).
- As they rebuilt the walls around Jerusalem, "Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built" (Nehemiah 4:17–18).

- "Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (Psalm 82:4).
- "No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house" (Mark 3:27).

In addition, the Bible teaches that we "do not move the ancient landmark that your fathers have set" (Proverbs 22:28; 23:10). Note this important text: "When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples" (Deuteronomy 32:8). The Promised Land's borders are delineated in Ezekiel 47:13–23; Numbers 34:1–15 describes the borders assigned to each tribe of Israel.

Clearly, the Bible affirms self-defense and established borders for nations and peoples.

In 2013, *The Week* published an excellent introduction to the issue of border security.⁸ The report notes that in 2012, the Border Patrol apprehended around 357,000 people at the southwestern border. This represents a 78 percent drop since 2000. However, the Government Accounting Office estimates that only 61 percent of those attempted to cross the border illegally are caught. Only 44 percent of the border is under "operational control."

Estimates from the Customs and Border Protection indicate a cost of more than \$22.4 billion to complete the fence. Maintenance costs would be significant: in 2010, the agency repaired 4,037 breaches in the existing fences. The government would need to expropriate private land. And the border would still need policing, as Israel can testify regarding its West Bank security fence.

The Department of Homeland Security has fenced off 651 miles of the 1,969-mile border between Mexico and the US. These barriers are mostly near urban areas and international bridges. The US Customs and Border Patrol agency uses patrols to guard more remote borderlands in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. The agency spends \$4 billion a year, utilizing 58,000 personnel, 16,875 vehicles, 269 aircraft, 300 watercraft, 300 camera towers, and aerial drones.

The border with Canada is also a significant issue, especially with regard to preventing terrorists from entering the US. Customs and Border Protection has increased its Border Patrol agents 500 percent since 9/11 to a total of 2,200. Approximately 950 miles along the border from Washington to Minnesota are covered by unmanned aircraft as well.⁹

Of course, border security involves more than building and monitoring physical barriers. The Center for Immigration Studies also recommends:

- Maintain and expand visa investigations.
- Deploy biometrics at airports and seaports to ensure that holders of expired visas depart on time.
- Expand E-verify, the worker authorization program.¹⁰

There is a downside to increased border control as well. From 1993 to 2004, spending for border enforcement nearly quadrupled, spending \$25 billion, yet the number of illegal immigrants

doubled. Border enforcement strategies have resulted in increased fatalities, especially of children and women, a growth in smugglers and drug traffickers, and reduced chances of apprehension.

We should note that 40 percent of the 11 million illegal immigrants in America came here legally but overstayed their visas.¹¹ Enhanced border security would not have addressed this issue. We need a much better system of tracking immigrants on visas to ensure that they leave when their visas expire.

And we should remember that no acts of radical Islamic terror have been perpetrated by illegal immigrants. The 9/11 terrorists, the brothers who staged the Boston bombings, and the San Bernardino shooters were all here legally.

God's concern for justice

Immigrants described in the Old Testament did not enter their countries illegally. They broke no laws when they came to Israel or other nations. As a result, the Bible can address their situation unambiguously, teaching that we should welcome them and provide them every means of ministry. Clearly, this should be our approach with legal immigrants in America today.

But what about the 11.4 million people who are in America illegally?

Scripture is clear about obedience to authority:

- "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed and those who resist will incur judgment" (Romans 13:1–2).
- "Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities" (Titus 3:1).
- "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good" (1 Peter 2:13–14).
- "We know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine" (1 Timothy 1:8–10).
- "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21).

The United States has very specific procedures governing entrance to the country by non-citizens. A person must submit an application—often a series of applications—to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services and the US Department of State. A person wishing to live permanently in the US applies for a "green card." Family members of US citizens make up the largest number of such entrants. Those intending to stay for a limited time (students, tourists, exchange visitors, etc.) apply for a nonimmigrant visa.¹²

There are significant penalties for seeking to enter the US illegally. Many falsely present themselves as US citizens, a felony punishable by up to five years in jail. They commonly make false statements to the government or on official documents, which incurs a fine and up to five years imprisonment. A person who uses a false Social Security number can be imprisoned for up to five years.¹³

We should consider crimes committed by illegal immigrants as well. According to *FoxNews*, illegal immigrants are three times more likely to be convicted of murder than members of the general population. Illegal immigrants comprise 3.5 percent of the population but make up 13.6 percent of all offenders sentenced for crimes committed in the US., including 12 percent of all murder sentences, 20 percent of kidnapping sentences, and 16 percent of drug trafficking sentences.¹⁴

However, we should note that these facts do not apply to immigrants as a whole. According to the American Immigration Council,¹⁵ "immigrants are less likely to commit serious crimes or be behind bars than the native-born, and high rates of immigration are associated with lower rates of violent crime and property crime."

Between 1990 and 2013, the immigrant share of the US population grew from 7.9 percent to 13.1 percent while the number of illegal immigrants more than tripled from 3.5 million to 11.2 million. However, FBI data indicate that during the same period, the violent crime rate dropped 48 percent and property crime fell 41 percent. According to a 2010 study, 1.6 percent of immigrant males age eighteen-to-thirty-nine are incarcerated, compared to 3.3 percent of the native-born.¹⁶ Only 5 percent of the total prison population is comprised of non-US citizens.

The Lord is "a God of justice" (Isaiah 30:18) who cares about every victim of every crime (cf. Amos 1–2). But while we are told to "do justice," we are also taught to "love kindness" (Micah 6:8). How do we balance these priorities?

A biblical response

The **first** biblical priority we should affirm is that legal immigrants must be treated with respect. This is one dimension of the sanctity of human life, a principle all Christians should agree on. The Bible is filled with admonitions to treat the "sojourner" well, recognizing that all people are made in God's image and are the objects of his love. Except for Native Americans, every American reading these words is an immigrant or the descendant of one.

The **second** biblical priority that seems clear is border security. As noted above, Scripture teaches that we should defend ourselves from those who would harm us. This will be a true challenge, as the costs involved in increased security are significant and the unintended consequences of such security must be considered.

The **third** biblical priority is dealing with illegal immigrants justly yet compassionately. Here we face the most difficult challenge for constructing a biblical ethic on this issue.

One million children under eighteen are illegal immigrants. Nearly half of all illegal immigrant adults are parents of minors, many of whom are citizens. There are 5.5 million children in America with at least one undocumented parent, 4.5 million of whom were born here and are thus US citizens.¹⁷ About 7 percent of K-12 students had at least one illegal immigrant parent in 2012.¹⁸ Scripture clearly teaches that God loves and welcomes all children, regardless of their immigration status (cf. Matthew 19:14; Psalm 127:3).

If we uphold the rule of law (1 Timothy 1:8–10) by deporting all immigrants who are here illegally, our decision affects children who are illegal immigrants as well as children of illegal immigrant parents. Neither group chose to be in this situation. Scripture teaches that the person who sins should be punished (Ezekiel 18:20), but the Lord hates "hands that shed innocent blood" (Proverbs 6:17).

On the other hand, if we provide all illegal immigrants a path to citizenship, we condone their illegal behavior and could privilege them over those who are engaged in the process of obtaining citizenship legally. We also encourage others to enter our country illegally. The Bible calls those who break the law to repent (cf. Acts 3:19).

As noted earlier, the biblical "sojourner" was not in the land of Israel illegally, so God's word requiring hospitality for immigrants does not address directly the issue of illegal immigrants. I can find only one biblical example that seems to align with our dilemma.

As they entered the Promised Land, the people of Israel were to drive out all the Canaanites lest they infect the Israelites with their paganism and other sins (cf. Deuteronomy 18:9–14). In Joshua 9, the "inhabitants of Gibeon," a people-group in Canaan, heard how Joshua and the people of Israel had destroyed the cities of Jericho and Ai. So they pretended to be sojourners from a distant country and appealed to the Israelites for shelter. Joshua and the elders believed their ruse and made a covenant with them.

When they learned that they had been deceived, they let the Gibeonites live. However, they "made them that day cutters of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of the LORD, to this day, in the place that he should choose" (Joshua 9:27).

This text obviously does not apply directly to the question of illegal immigrants today. But there may be a principle here: Joshua did not kill or deport them, but he did not grant them full rights or status as Israelites.

If we apply this decision to our dilemma regarding illegal immigrants, we could come to this response: Do not seek to deport them, but do not grant them citizenship. Rather, create a category by which they can stay in the US and make them eligible for jobs Americans do not want. In this way they are not taking jobs from citizens or legal residents.

This approach is very similar to an proposal announced by President George W. Bush on January 7, 2004.¹⁹ His strategy specified:

- Undocumented aliens would pay a fee to enter "temporary worker status." This status would be granted for three years, with an opportunity for one-time renewal. In this status, the person would be free to travel in and out of the country and would not need to hide from the Immigration and Naturalization Service or law enforcement.
- If employers cannot find an American to fill a job, they could then consider this "temporary worker."
- The person in this status could apply for citizenship, but would be placed in line behind those who have already taken such legal initiative.
- America would contribute to the retirement program and tax-preferred savings programs of their native country, as an incentive to return home when the work period ends.

As the president noted, his proposal is not amnesty for illegal immigrants. Amnesty by definition is "an act of authority (as of a government) by which pardon is granted to a large group of individuals."²⁰ James Edwards's statement is instructive: "As for mass amnesty, by legalizing millions of illegal immigrants, government does not show mercy. Rather, it obligates its citizens to bear the injustices aliens have committed against the body politic."²¹

This plan does not pardon those who are in our country illegally. It does not overlook the fact that illegal immigrants broke the law in the way they entered the US or overstayed their visa. Nor does it allow them to take jobs from Americans.

However, this proposal could encourage more illegal immigration. That's why border security is vital to comprehensive immigration reform. Of course, those who view any approach other than deportation as amnesty will argue that it does not go far enough.

The Bible calls us to hold all life sacred, defend ourselves, and obey the rule of law. When faced with a choice between biblical mandates, we should try to obey them all. This is the intention behind my proposal. If there are other ways to reconcile our biblical priorities, I am of course open to them as well.

Ultimately, our biblical commission is to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Evangelicals should seek ways to respond to illegal immigrants that enhance our ability to lead them to Christ and minister to them in his name, while doing the same for all others in the US. We should view immigrants coming to America as our opportunity to share Christ with them and, through their influence, with the nations of the world.

Our Declaration of Independence states that "all men are created equal," with "inalienable rights" to "life" and "liberty." When our immigration strategy reflects our founding declaration, we will bridge compassion and justice today.

¹ Steve Almasy, Pamela Brown, and Augie Martin, "Suspect in killing of San Francisco woman had been deported five times," *CNN*, July 4, 2015 (<http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/03/us/san-francisco-killing-suspect-immigrant-deported/>), accessed 6 August 2016).

² Bob Smietana, "Bible Influences Only 1 in 10 Evangelicals on Immigration Reform," *Christianity Today*, March 11, 2015

(<http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/march/bible-influences-only-1-in-10-evangelicals-views-on-immigra.html>, accessed 6 August 2016).

³ The date for this section comes from Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, "Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States," *Migration Information Service*, April 14, 2016 (<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states>, accessed 5 August 2016).

⁴ "Giving the Facts a Fighting Chance: Addressing Common Questions on Immigration," *American Immigration Council* (<http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/special-reports/addressing-common-questions-on-immigration>, accessed 6 August 2016).

⁵ Matthew Soerens and Jenny Hwang, *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion & Truth in the Immigration Debate* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2009).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁷ For more, see the perceptive essay by James R. Edwards, Jr., "A Biblical Perspective on Immigration Policy," *Center for Immigration Studies*, September 2009 (<http://cis.org/ImmigrationBible>, accessed 6 August 2016).

⁸ "What would it take to secure the U.S.-Mexico border?" *The Week*, March 16, 2013 (<http://theweek.com/articles/466628/what-take-secure-usmexico-border>, accessed 5 August 2016).

⁹ "Border Security Results," *Homeland Security* (<https://www.dhs.gov/border-security-results>, accessed 5 August 2016).

¹⁰ Janice Kephart, "Should the United States tighten its border security?" *Center for Immigration Studies*, September 27, 2013 (<http://cis.org/OpedsandArticles/Border-Security-Kephart>, accessed 5 August 2016).

¹¹ Alan Gomez, "Nearly 500K foreigners overstayed visas in 2015," *USA Today*, January 20, 2016 (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/01/19/immigration-visa-overstays-department-of-homeland-security-report/79026708/>, accessed 5 August 2016).

¹² "U.S. Immigration Basics," *NOLO* (<https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/us-immigration-basics-29507.html>, accessed 5 August 2016).

¹³ Jon Feere, "The Myth of the 'Otherwise Law-Abiding' Illegal Alien," *Center for Immigration Studies*, October 2013 (<http://cis.org/myth-law-abiding-illegal-alien>, accessed 5 August 2016).

¹⁴ Malia Zimmerman, "Elusive crime wave data shows frightening toll of illegal immigrant criminals," *FoxNews*, September 16, 2015 (<http://www.foxnews.com/us/2015/09/16/crime-wave-elusive-data-shows-frightening-toll-illegal-immigrant-criminals.html>, accessed 5 August 2016).

¹⁵ Catherine E. Shoichet, "Immigrants and Crime: Crunching the numbers," *CNN*, July 8, 2015 (<http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/08/politics/immigrants-crime/>, accessed 5 August 2016).

¹⁶ "The Criminalization of Immigration in the United States," *American Immigration Council* (<http://immigrationpolicy.org/special-reports/criminalization-immigration-united-states>, accessed 5 August 2016).

¹⁷ "Undocumented Americans," *American Psychological Association* (<http://www.apa.org/topics/immigration/undocumented-video.aspx>, accessed 6 August 2016).

¹⁸ Jens Manuel Krogstad and Jeffrey S. Passel, "5 facts about illegal immigration in the U.S.," *Pew Research Center*, November 19, 2015 (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/19/5-facts-about-illegal-immigration-in-the-u-s/>, accessed 6 August 2016).

¹⁹ "President Bush Proposes New Temporary Worker Program," *The White House*, January 2004 (<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2004/01/20040107-3.html>, accessed 5 August 2016).

²⁰ "Amnesty," *Mirriam-Webster* (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/amnesty>, accessed 10 August 2016).

²¹ Edwards.