

Thinking Theologically Ab

by Dr. Alejandro (Alex) Mandes



out Immigration

OFTEN POLITICS AND ECONOMICS frame the immigration debate in North America. Yet Christ-followers must frame the topic of immigration by wider parameters—by two biblical mandates: the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

Matthew 28:19–20 says to make disciples of all people—not legal people only, but all people. As Christ-followers our focus must shift from nationalism to the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, from politics to the gospel, from winners and losers, to how we can best glorify God.

We must never deny that illegal immigrants are breaking the law. Yet these immigrants' law-breaking is no reason for the church to remain uninvolved in North America's largest mission field today consisting of fifteen to eighteen million people, many of whom tremble in the shadows of our society. Civil law is written on soft paper and constantly evolves. God's law was chiseled on stone tablets and has remained unchanged.

The eighteen million undocumented people living among us present both danger and opportunity. The danger lies only in the sense that the people are outside of the "system." But we have an opportunity in terms of our mission. Many of these people are outside of their home countries, separated from their families, and outside of their own governments' systems. They are prime for the gospel!

Many churches want to do something, but they wonder what they *can* do. And here's where we need some reminders: it is legal to evangelize; it is legal to make disciples; and it is legal to be compassionate. What the law says is that it's illegal for us to hire them. We also cannot provide false paperwork.

So how do we live out our biblical mandates?

- We must remember that immigrants were made in the image of God. That means in all our dealings we must treat them with dignity.
- We must keep in focus the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

- We must emulate Paul's actions in the first century as we walk the fine line between compassion and execution of the law.

Paul's epistle to Philemon mentions the runaway slave, Onesimus. Onesimus was out of his country and running from the law when he encountered the apostle Paul. Knowing the legal system, Paul could have turned him in immediately. Instead, Paul loved him, evangelized him, and disciplined him. This probably happened over the course of months or even years. But as any disciple must be, Paul was also a person of obedience. For that reason Paul ultimately sent Onesimus back to his master. Yet he did not return him empty-handed. He sent him with a letter that told Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother and put his debt on Paul's account. In other words Paul, rather than turning in Onesimus or staying aloof from him, stayed on mission. The result was fruit. And the ultimate result was obedience in all spheres—first to the gospel, then to compassion, then to civil law.

So what must the church do about contemporary illegal immigrants?

- *Speak.* Christian leaders must articulate that the commission and commandment apply even to these modern-day Samaritans.
- *Pray.* Pray for the Lord of the harvest to send forth laborers, and work for a legal resolution on the matter of immigration reform.
- *Love.* Show compassion. Mercy builds bridges to the gospel in ways words cannot.
- *Serve.* Volunteer to teach English as a second language. Serve as a life coach. Counsel the vulnerable.

continued on page 9

*your tired, your poor, your huddled masses
yearning to breathe free,
the wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-
tossed to me.
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”*
—*The New Colossus, Emma Lazarus*

and respect, while He would also urge due respect and honor to governments. When the Holy Spirit works, He does not work differently from what Jesus would do. The first thing the Holy Spirit did at Pentecost in Acts 2 was to make the blessings of God clear so that people from fourteen nations present at that moment could understand. God is interested in all the peoples of the world. He is a global God, and His Spirit is an international spirit. Christ’s immigration policy would stress ministry to migrants and also the responsibility and privilege of Christian migrants to spread the gospel wherever they are.

Incidentally the U.S. is not the only country to which the world’s 191 million immigrants have gone. Thirty-five percent of immigrants globally go to Europe. Only about 23 percent come to the United States.

Whether it is hospitality to strangers (Rom. 12:13), or entertaining those who cannot repay us (Luke 14:12–14), doing good to all persons (Gal. 6:10), or considering all people equally no matter their culture or ethnicity (Col. 3:10–11), the Bible speaks to our attitude toward those of other races and cultures. We should be very careful not simply to go with the conventional wisdom of people around us, nor should we follow racist thinking. We should love our neighbors as ourselves, not intellectualizing nor spiritualizing, but in concrete expression to whomever is in our community on whatever basis. ■

Thinking “Theologically”

Continued from page 5



- *Share.* Spread the gospel. Show the way to Christ. If God put immigrants in our paths, we have the privilege of sharing the message of salvation.
- *Enjoy.* Build relationships without worrying about the language barrier. Love is a universal language.
- *Envision.* Recognize that many illegal immigrants are demographically the future of North America. We have an opportunity for significant outreach in a time of need.

Within three to five years approximately eighteen million North American immigrants will probably come out of the shadows. Those who have shared in their pain have an opportunity to share in a harvest of souls in a magnitude never before seen.

Most evangelicals did not join with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his nonviolent opposition to racial injustice. Now many wish they had. The church today has an opportunity to show compassion, to be missional, to demonstrate obedience to the Great Commandment by reaching immigrants with love.

So here’s the question to ask ourselves about immigration: Will we think only politically or will we think missionally, eternally—like Paul. And ultimately like Jesus? ■



Dr. Alejandro (Alex) Mandes (ThM, 1987; DMin, 2007) is the National Director of Hispanic Ministry and Gateway Theological Training of the Evangelical Free Church of America. He describes himself as “married with five Latina daughters.”