

When the State Opposes the Church

Well, at the risk of beating on a dead horse, I'm writing again on the topic of immigration, this time to address a specific piece of legislation, House Resolution 4437. HR 4437 is most likely dead in the water, as it seems the United States Senate will never pass it. So why would I take time in a church newsletter to talk about politics at all, especially a non-issue like a dead bill?

The immigration debate affects people among us and people among whom we minister. We are not a pro-immigration or anti-immigration church, and we are certainly not advocates of illegal immigration. We're a pro-Gospel and pro-compassion church. As Christians we support laws which promote justice while fulfilling the state's obligation to protect its citizens. But when it comes to issues of justice the Church *must* speak when the issues are biblical (abortion, marriage, civil rights, slavery). Now the government is considering forbidding ministry which the Church has practiced for 2000 years, I'd be sinning if I didn't speak to it.

While much of the Christian right has lined up behind the anti-immigration movement (I've been receiving anti-immigrant emails from the American Family Association, slogan: "We're NOT the *Mexican* Family Association"), the issues for Christians are not as simple as many political statements. Whenever the Church lines up completely with a political party, either the party or the Church has become an idol. The Church can never line up completely with a political party (and never should try) because the Church has as its calling the advancement of the Kingdom of God. Political parties have as their calling the advancement and improvement of the Kingdom of this world. And "friendship with the world is enmity with God."

I hope you caught that. The Church and the State both have legitimate obligations. But often those obligations compete. If the State gives up her obligations in order to support the mission of the Church, she is irresponsible, and the Church becomes polluted. If the Church gives up her obligations and becomes a pawn of the State or a Party, then she is a whore. Christians should strive to be good citizens inasmuch as doing so does not compromise the mission of the Gospel. The State should attempt to be friendly to the Church inasmuch as she can do so without becoming the Church.

At no time in my recent memory has a clearer example of this arisen than the recent immigration controversy. I know that some of you might protest that the abortion debate is more weighty, but in the abortion debate the line between the State and the Church is more clear and the State has not attempted to bind the Church to the degree which the House of Representatives has in immigration.

Many consider this a cut-and-dried law-and-order issue. It is against the law for people to enter this country without proper documentation and permission, therefore Christians should support law-keeping and law-enforcement. Likewise, Christians should not support any scheme which encourages law-breaking, dishonors those who kept the law at great effort or expense, or weakens the intent of law. All of these are arguments which Christians have made against amnesty programs and offering guest-worker status to aliens here in the US illegally.

The problem is that Rome was a law-and-order empire. They were all about law-and-order. And if Christianity was simply a law-and-order religion, Christians would never have been persecuted and Jesus would likely have not died on the cross. Rome had

a law-and-order religion, Stoicism. One of the greatest Stoic teachers, Marcus Aurelius, was also a persecutor of Christians. John and Peter stood before the Sanhedrin as Peter thundered, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right to obey men rather than God." Christianity recognizes that there is always a higher law above the laws of men. If you make abortion legal, it is still murder. If you pass "Jim Crow" laws, they are still unjust. Plenty of laws are a stench in God's nostrils. Christians are not obligated to keep all laws, and some laws they are obligated to actively resist.

Currently we have an immigration problem in our country. At least 12 million people are living in this country illegally. Terrorism is a growing global problem and the government cannot adequately protect its people if it cannot secure its borders. Our country's population is not growing with the demand for workers, largely because we've murdered 40 million children *in utero*.

According to our current laws, an immigration violator is guilty of violating immigration code but is not a criminal any more than you are a criminal by local standards if you don't mow your lawn. That is why police departments don't round up "illegal aliens," they have no jurisdiction. This means that our immigration laws, which ostensibly exist to control the flow of desperately poor people into the US, have about as much effect as setting a cold glass of water in front of a person dying of thirst, saying, "Don't drink this," and walking away. Central Americans know that the US doesn't really enforce its laws, and know that they are not technically criminals, so they come seeking economic opportunity. They want to eat well, have good health care, and want their kids to have the same opportunities that we do.

One thing that HR 4437 would do is increase security at the borders. There is nothing inherently wrong with this. The government has a responsibility to protect its citizens. Some liberals wail about the idea of a wall, but there's nothing Scriptural against it. All nations in the ancient world had walls, some around cities, others around whole nations, and the Bible never says a word about it. There is some question about whether or not it would work.

Another part of HR 4437 is the changing of the status of violators. Under HR 4437, they become felons, and not just the violators who enter after the passage of the law, but *all* who are currently in the United States. The framers of HR 4437 have denied that this is an *ex post facto* provision (forbidden by the Constitution) saying that there would be a "grace period" wherein people could return to Mexico (or elsewhere) without penalty. The biblically questionable part of this has to do with justice and compassion. These people have built lives here. Consider an analogy. The city you live in has a law that you need a building permit to add on to your house. The permits are expensive and City Hall grants so few that you know it's not worth it to try. You know that if you get caught, they'll fine you a small amount and let you go. So you build without the permit. After living in the addition for a few years, the city passes a law making it a felony to build without a permit. The law will effect everyone retroactively. You complain that you've already build the edition and the city replies that you have a "30-day grace period" to tear down your addition. Would you think it just? Maybe, but probably not.

HR 4437 would also tighten down on employers who hire aliens illegally. The first effect would be to move most of these aliens out of tax-paying work (and yes, most of them currently pay taxes, just with fake Social Security numbers) and into a completely underground economy (even the most ardent anti-immigrant activist admits

that the US doesn't have the infrastructure or money to detain or deport 12 million men, women, and children). While not explicitly an evil move, there is certainly room to question the judgment of such a scheme.

The other consequence is the vast need this would create for legal workers. Since our unemployment is pretty low in most areas (especially in areas with undocumented workers, they go where the jobs are), this law creates an immediate vacuum while the country waits for the legal guest workers to make it through the INS. Conservative columnist Mark Steyn notes that if you wait for the INS to approve Mary Poppins to nanny your newborn, Ms. Poppins might make it over to the US in time for your kid's college graduation. Will the jobs stay in the US long enough to process the guest workers? This isn't really a biblical issue, because people in Indonesia need jobs too.

The long and short of it is that strengthening borders, giving or not giving amnesty, building a fence, requiring people to learn English, starting a guest worker program, changing the law for future violators, etc. are all *POLICY* decisions. These kinds of policy decisions can be informed by Scripture, but the Bible doesn't speak to them directly. Christians can fall on different places in the debate. But HR 4437 steps into an area where no Christian should waver, the role of the Church in showing hospitality to the alien and stranger.

HR 4437 would make it a felony for any people to feed, clothe, educate, treat, transport or house any person in the United States illegally. It would be a felony to buy a little Guatemalan girl an ice cream cone. I'm not kidding. ESL programs would be illegal if they did not confirm immigration status. Even providing medical help would be felonious. There is no provision exempting people who do so as charity (the bill explicitly makes this kind of charity illegal). There is no provision exempting churches or religious workers. The Federal Department of Homeland Security would be responsible for rounding up Christians who defy this law. This is all under section 202 (a) of HR 4437. You might ask, How could they do this? The authors, many self-identified Christians, say that if you help a felon commit a felony, you are a felon. Christians shouldn't help people break laws. The problem is that violating immigration law (which Christian missionaries do routinely) is not the moral equivalent of bank robbery. And while Christians don't have an obligation in most instances to assist people in crossing borders (and probably shouldn't, in most instances), Christians do have an obligation to show all aliens and strangers kindness and charity and hospitality, regardless of their status with the United States government. The Roman Catholic Cardinal of Los Angeles has publicly stated that he has pre-emptively ordered his thousands of priests to disobey this resolution, should it become law.

You don't have to be a right-wing nut to believe the United States should do something about her borders. You are not violating Scripture to promote stronger laws and better enforcement. You are not a racist to think that immigrants should learn English and United States history. But if you forbid Christians to do what God commands, you are committing an act of evil.

-Travis Hutchinson