

## Preliminary Remarks

- The volatility of the issue
  
- The need for compassion
  
- The misuse of Scripture
  
- The priority of Scripture

## Introduction

According to recent estimates, illegal entries into the United States totaled 3.7 million in fiscal year 2021, 4.8 million in 2022, then rose to 6.2 million in 2023.<sup>2</sup> During 2023, there were a record 169 terror watchlist encounters by Border Patrol between the ports of entry at the southern border, a number that exceeded 2022's record-setting total (98) by the last six years combined.<sup>3</sup>

On a political level, controversy centers around how illegal immigration should be better regulated, and how the government should respond to the immigrants who are already here. On an economic level, experts debate how the influx of immigrants has affected the American economy.

As Christians, our primary concern is neither political or economic. Rather it is theological and pastoral. **From a biblical and practical perspective, how should pastors and church leaders respond to this issue?** As those who minister in Los

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<sup>1</sup> This study adapted from: [thecripplegate.com/a-pastoral-perspective-on-illegal-immigration/](https://thecripplegate.com/a-pastoral-perspective-on-illegal-immigration/), by Dr. Nathan Busenitz, Grace Community Church. This study is also a part of the pastoral distinctives of Grace Community Church ([gracechurch.org](https://gracechurch.org)).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/illegal-immigrant-population-soars-under-biden-government-data>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/border-patrol-encountered-17-people-terror-watch-list-southern-border-november>

Angeles, this question is not hypothetical for Grace Church. Nor is it hypothetical for a growing number of churches across our nation.

Though not an exhaustive response, below are ten biblical considerations (organized under four headings) concerning illegal immigration.

## **Illegal Immigration and U.S. Law**

### 1. The laws of government

In keeping with the Word of God, Christians are to submissively obey the laws of the government (Rom. 13:1; 1 Pet. 2:13-17; cf. Titus 3:1). The exception to this general rule would be if a government mandate requires believers to disobey God (Dan. 3:16-18; Acts 5:29). Nothing in current U.S. immigration law requires Christians to disobey God, thus U.S. immigration laws are to be submissively obeyed by believers.

If a believer is illegally residing in the United States, he should take active steps to rectify that situation. This may involve seeking legal residence through whatever means are available to him (for which we would recommend consultation with an immigration lawyer), or it may necessitate leaving the United States until such a time as immigration can legally take place.

### 2. The violation of God's Word

In light of the biblical commands (noted above), Christians who reside here illegally should understand that doing so constitutes sin, and that such sin remains until their law-breaking status is resolved.

Staying here illegally also brings with it additional temptations – to lie and deceive (about one's status), to steal (by avoiding taxes and other fees), to worry (about getting caught), and so on. When known sin continues without repentance, the believer's relationship to God is seriously hindered (cf. Ps. 66:18; Prov. 28:9).

Like any sin, breaking the law in this regard can be forgiven through confession and repentance before God (cf. 1 Sam. 15:22; Psalm 32:5; Prov. 28:13; 2 Cor. 7:9, 10). Repentance will manifest itself in a proactive attempt to make the situation right – either by attaining legal status through the appropriate means, or by leaving the country until such time as a legal immigration status can be obtained.

3. The inconsistency of the U.S. government

In all of this, we acknowledge that the U.S. government has been inconsistent in its enforcement of immigration law, resulting in widespread contradiction and corruption (cf. Prov. 29:12). Even from state to state and city to city, the enforcement of immigration policies differs widely. Nonetheless, the government still retains the right to enforce its policies, even if it does so inconsistently (Rom. 13:1-7).

Although mixed signals (on the part of government) do not excuse illegal behavior (on the part of individuals), they can create confusion. As a result, the issues involved in specific cases are sometimes complex, and must be handled with patience and compassion as biblical commands are applied to real-life circumstances.

Church leaders should become familiar with whatever state and regional laws apply to them and their congregation, perhaps even meeting with an immigration attorney to discuss such matters. Doing so will safeguard pastors from giving counsel that unknowingly violates current legislation (and the biblical commands noted above).

4. The responsibility of government

God is superior to and in authority over all government and political rule (Ps. 2:10-12; 103:19). He has prescribed in his word various responsibilities of every governing authority (Rom. 13:3-4; 1 Pet. 2:14). As such, all governing authorities have a responsibility to honor God and rule in a way that conforms to his word. Any failure to do so is sin against God.

Two responsibilities stand out. The first is to bear the sword against evil, as God defines evil (Rom. 13:3-4; 1 Pet. 2:14). A second responsibility of political rulers is the “praise of those who do right” (1 Pet. 2:14). This includes protecting its law-abiding citizens from evil and those who seek to do harm. Any political ruler who fails to punish evil and protect its citizens from such evil has failed in their task and sinned against God.

This is applicable to illegal immigration. Some who illegally enter to a nation are not planning evil and some are. This, along with the fact that illegal immigration violates God’s word of obeying government, requires political rulers to protect its citizens by forbidding it.

## Illegal Immigration and Pastoral Counseling

### 5. The church's responsibility

We do not believe it is the church's responsibility to police the immigration status of individual church attendees. Rather, the role of the church is to faithfully proclaim the truth of Scripture, trusting the Holy Spirit to prick the consciences of those believers who are in sin (cf. Ps. 19:7-14; John 16:8; Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12).

The church may also provide private counsel to those who are struggling with how to submit to the government in their given circumstances (cf. 1 Pet. 5:1-3; Heb. 13:17). However, the pastor's role is not to give legal counsel, but rather biblical counsel, encouraging believers to honor the Lord by living according to what Scripture teaches. If legal counsel is requested, pastors should direct counsees to the appropriate channels (such as immigration attorneys).

At the same time, Grace Community Church ([gracechurch.org](http://gracechurch.org)) does require all of our lay ministry leaders and church staff to be legal U.S. residents – actively inquiring as to their residency status if it is in doubt. The qualifications for spiritual leadership require individuals to be above reproach (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). Someone willfully continuing in unrepentant law-breaking would be disqualified from any position or office of spiritual leadership. Moreover, in the spirit of Matthew 18:15-17, we would begin steps of private admonition and shepherding with that individual once his situation became known to us.

### 6. Sin prior to conversion

We recognize that there are many believers who entered the United States illegally, but did so before their conversion. Now, having come to faith in Christ, they have also come to realize that obedience to His Word means submission to the laws of the land (John 14:15, 21; cf. Luke 20:25).

Compassionate and confidential counsel can be given to such individuals; yet pastors must not compromise the biblical standard. Though it may be difficult, pastors should encourage counsees to do what is right and trust God for the results (cf. 1 Sam. 24 and 26, where David obeyed the law by sparing Saul's life and trusted God with the outcome).

Pastors should also explain to counsees that living in accordance with God's will starts by living in accordance with His Word (Ps. 119:105; Rom. 12:2; Eph.

5:17-18; Col. 3:16). To persist in disobedience is to put oneself outside of His will (cf. Col. 1:9-10).

Counselees can be confident that God, in His sovereign purposes, is fully aware of their struggles and concerns (Rom. 8:28; cf. Matt. 6:25-34). Through prayer and supplication, they can rest in His parental care and trust Him as they seek to obey what the Bible teaches (Ps. 55:22; Php. 4:6).

#### 7. The conviction of sin

If a believer, being convicted of his sin in this area, determines the need to return to his home country, the church should do its best to make the transition as easy as possible. This may include financial help with travel and relocation costs, as well as an attempt to connect the individual with a church in that country.

Because the individual was likely not a Christian when he left his native country, it is crucial that (with the church's help) he find a solid group of believers in his homeland with whom he can now fellowship and enjoy regular worship (cf. Heb. 10:25). Though he came as a stranger, he leaves as a beloved brother in Christ, and the church must send him off accordingly (Eph. 2:19; cf. Phm. 1:16).

### Illegal Immigration and Evangelicalism

#### 8. The priority of the gospel

As evangelicals, we embrace the opportunity to preach the gospel to those who come to us, whether they come through legal channels or otherwise. Los Angeles, for instance, is home to people from over 140 countries speaking more than 220 languages and dialects. In a very literal sense, the nations have come to this city. Thus, Grace Church has a unique opportunity to fulfill the Great Commission without going far from home (Matt. 28:18-20; Luke 24:47).

In evangelistic encounters with those who are here illegally, if such is even possible to determine, the **Christian's focus should be on reaching them with the gospel** and not on confronting their immigration status.

It may be that, in embracing Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, they immediately recognize their need to make amends in this area. Or, more likely, conviction may come later through the hearing of God's Word, as the Spirit applies what is faithfully taught each week in the church.

9. A biblical balance

Those who oppose illegal immigration run the risk of viewing illegal immigrants as enemies, rather than as a mission field (cf. Matt. 9:36). On the flip side, those who advocate increased immigrant rights must be careful not to promote attitudes of insubordination or contempt toward the government (1 Tim. 2:1-4; cf. Rom. 13:1-7).

In both cases, the mission of the church becomes blurred when political issues overshadow biblical preaching and gospel-centered ministry. Evangelicals must take special care to remember that we are first citizens of heaven before we are citizens of earth (John 18:36; Php. 3:20; cf. Heb. 11:9-10).

Biblical Christianity is not defined by political agendas, but rather by the truth of the gospel (1 Cor. 2:2; cf. Gal. 2:20).

10. All made in God's image

We denounce any perspective that would oppose immigration (either legal or illegal) on racist or prejudicial grounds. As Christians, we affirm that all men are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), and that there are no ethnic or economic barriers to full fellowship in the church, since all the redeemed are equal in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:22; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11-22). We recognize that Christians are aliens and strangers in this world (1 Pet. 1:1), and we look forward to the day when men and women from every tribe and tongue will join together in worship around the throne of Christ (Rev. 5:9-14).

## **Illegal Immigration and Employment**

11. Christian employers.

On a final note, Christian employers ought to carefully comply with all state and federal regulations regarding the employment of illegal immigrants. Employers sin if they knowingly violate the law, and may also be subject to legal penalties (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-20).

Though submitting to government requirements may cost more economically (due to higher wages and taxes), employers who do so should trust the Lord for the results. They can likewise rest in knowing that God is pleased.

If an employer needs to terminate an employee, based on the employee's immigration status, the employer must treat the employee with dignity and fairness (Col. 4:1). Moreover, Christian employers must never take advantage of

any employee whom they learn is illegal – abusing or mistreating him because he is desperate to find work or afraid to report such abuses to the authorities.

One day, employers will stand before Christ for how they have conducted themselves and their enterprise here on earth (Eph. 6:9; cf. Lev. 25:43). To that end, they must manage their business in a way that is neither contrary to Scripture or to their own conscience (cf. Rom. 14:10-12).

## **Conclusion**

Illegal immigration is a real issue affecting millions of people currently living in the United States. Though it is a debated political topic, pastors and church leaders must not allow controversy or public opinion to determine their strategy for ministering to those affected. Rather, their approach must be governed by biblical principles as they seek to uphold the clear teaching of Scripture without compromise, while also extending pastoral kindness and compassion to those who need it. In the end, their primary concern should be the spiritual condition of every soul under their care – regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, or citizenship. When the nations come to us, we ought to be faithful to greet them with the good news of salvation, and upon their conversion to graciously shepherd them in a way that honors Christ.