

Commentary: Pleas for border justice are aimed at the wrong end of Pennsylvania Avenue

June 20, 2018

(RNS) — To their great credit, most American faith traditions view migration across borders as a complex issue with imperatives and tensions that change as you look through different lenses: economic, political, humanitarian, and theological.

Amid news reports about children separated from their parents at the border and sex abuse victims being denied asylum, religious leaders have spoken out this week in new, significant, and surprising ways.

This list includes almost every variety of mainline and black Protestants, as well as minority faiths and other groups whose religious and cultural history is closely tied to the migrant experience.

But this week, white evangelical leaders—traditionally the holdouts from the ecumenical consensus on immigration—joined the chorus. Elite evangelicals have often spoken out in favor of comprehensive immigration reform, a politically elusive fix to the current broken system, but not in recent memory have they joined the denunciations from more liberal church bodies and leaders.

So what's new?

For one thing, the Trump administration is matching its nativist, anti-immigrant rhetoric with ever crueler policies. In April, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced his intention to remove sexual assault as a legal justification for seeking asylum.

Last month, in an effort to deter illegal border crossings, the government announced it would enforce a rule, waived by previous administrations, that mandates detained parents and children be separated.

Americans are already seeing heartbreaking stories from the border. One distraught father took his own life after he and his children were separated and jailed.

In the bleak light of these policy “innovations,” conservative faith leaders are changing their stands.

Even Franklin Graham, son of the late Rev. Billy Graham and one of Trump’s earliest and strongest supporters, rebuked the family separations.

It’s reassuring to know that Graham, normally such a cheerful apologist for Trump and his administration, draws the line somewhere.

But perhaps most interestingly, Graham, in his critique, spared Trump and Sessions, saying, “I blame politicians for the last 20, 30 years that have allowed this to escalate to the point where it is today.”

It’s Congress’ inability to pass decent immigration legislation that makes Sessions’ position tenable.

In 2013, the Senate passed a bipartisan immigration bill. If that bill had come up for a vote in the House any day in the past five years, it would have passed easily.

Unfortunately, nativist hardliners in the Republican Party have the power to thwart any legislative solution. They have exercised that power for years, as House Speakers John Boehner and Paul Ryan (both Catholics) cowered.

The problem that has brought us to this point on immigration is the GOP’s decision to stake its survival on being a white identity party.

Due to the complex psychology of race and voting choices, they may profit from that decision far longer than most of us think possible. A 2014 study by Northwestern University psychologists Maureen Craig and Jennifer Richeson found that the greater the perceived racial threat to the white minority, the more white voters — even Californian, independent white voters—will lean Republican.

So while the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution at its annual meeting in Dallas this week that calls on politicians “to do everything in their power to advocate for a just and equitable immigration system,” the likely future House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, a Republican Southern Baptist from California, will be unmoved.

If you doubt this dynamic, note that this week, as faith leaders passed resolutions and preached sermons against the injustice at the border, nativist Republicans delayed action on immigration reform yet again.

We may seem to be near a breaking point. Rip a baby from its mother’s arms, and few preachers will stay silent.

But the conservative Christians in Congress stopped listening a long time ago.

A contributing editor at RNS, Jacob Lupfer is a writer and consultant in Baltimore. His website is www.jacoblupfer.com. Follow him on Twitter at @jlupf. The views expressed in this opinion piece do not necessarily reflect those of Religion News Service or the Baptist Standard.