

Voices: Immigration and the church's witness

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Christians were a strange sect in the eyes of second- and third-century Romans. They did strange things, things that didn't make sense.

For example, if a Roman couple had a baby they didn't want, it was socially acceptable (and common) to leave the baby outside to die of exposure. Christians would often go around areas where babies were left to die and collect them and raise them, incurring a huge financial cost to support a person they had no relationship to.

Likewise, Christians often took care of the bodies of people who died in cities without any family around, making sure that the corpses received a proper, respectful burial, usually at the expense of the Christian taking care of the body. This was also incomprehensible to Roman culture: Christians were giving up their time and resources to assist a person they had no connection to and who would obviously never pay them back.

What made early Christians, so willing to break from the rest of their cultural setting, able to see what so many were missing?

Because they knew Jesus, they knew God. And because they knew God, they knew something the rest of the world didn't.

The church as a witness

The great 20th-century theologian Karl Barth wrote that the church served as a "witness" to the state. Because the church is a community of people gathered around a revelation — that is, truth given by God unobtainable

any other way — the church knows things that the rest of the world doesn't. The church's responsibility to society, wrote Barth, is to tell the world what it knows, to show the world what it's missing.

This is what the early Christians were doing when they rescued infants left to die and took care of the bodies of those who died alone. Because of their relationship to God, they knew all people were endowed by their Creator with dignity and a right to life. They knew something society didn't and acted accordingly.

The church and immigration

Immigration has been at the forefront of political discussion in America in the past week, culminating in the recent [government shutdown](#) because of the debate. The sticking point in budget negotiations right now is immigration. Most Americans want some form of extension of the DACA program protecting immigrants brought into the US without documentation as a child. As this program is negotiated, a segment of Republicans is calling for larger changes to the United States immigration system, largely [restricting immigration](#) from less wealthy areas.

Questions about immigration policy are complicated; claims to the contrary, either from the right or left, are unhelpful. Precisely because of how difficult and important the issue is, we have to think through it *Christianly*. We have to what we as Christians know that society doesn't.

Paul, writing to the Galatian church, tells us that all social identities are relativized and made unimportant in Christ: "[There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.](#)"

Jesus abolishes ethnic identities like "Jew" and "Greek." We might say the same thing about "American," "Mexican," "Syrian," and so on. Because of

Christ, *ethnic and national identities lack any significance*. We are no longer allowed to think of “Americans” and “Haitians” as different kinds of people. Christ has abolished those differences by giving us something much more important in common.

If we encourage a change to the United States immigration system on the basis of either restricting who has access to our national resources based on ethnicity or keeping out people who don’t look and act like us, we’re denying a fundamental reality enacted by the gospel: that because of Christ, there is only one kind of people, regardless of nation or race.

Paul tells us that the gospel affects how we think about different categories of people. Because immigration is fundamentally related to how we think about people, what we say about immigration relates to our Christian witness.

The “America is for Americans” attitude that lies beneath much of recent anti-immigration sentiment is incompatible with the gospel, which makes the concept of nationality ultimately unimportant and renders Americans with no more of a right to peace and happiness than any other person.

Immigration isn’t just a theoretical debate. We’re discussing the ability of people, in many cases, to live their lives in safety and freedom. Let’s take that responsibility as seriously as we can, and let’s remember what we know because of the gospel.

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