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A Christian Perspective on Global Migration

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As he opened the 16th annual Iberian-American Summit in Montevideo in November 2006, U.N. General Secretary Kofi Annan proclaimed:

“International migration is one of the greatest issues of this century....We have entered a new era of mobility.”¹

This was not an overstatement. One hundred and ninety-one million people lived outside of their country of birth in 2005.² As we shall see, “Migration is as old as the Bible,”³ but it has accelerated to an amazing and often confusing extent. We need to understand the current levels of migration, here and abroad, the categories of people on the move, the direction in which migration flows and the forces that influence this phenomenon.

In this forum, we shall look at the fears of Christians and non-Christians, particularly in North America, and the reasons why an old book like the Bible can give us a framework for understanding human movement and God’s agenda in and through it. Understanding reduces fear. Discovering a purpose within a phenomenon like human migration prepares us to engage it rather than ignore or flee from it.

In speaking with Greek philosophers in Athens, the Apostle Paul gave a classic explanation for why people are where they are, spread over the globe. At the conclusion he said: “In him (God) we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28) Our contention is that God is at work in human migration, and those that move, whether they know it or not, are under his providential care. This takes migration out of the world of mere economic, political or environmental dynamics, and puts it into a grander scheme of God’s design and purpose for humanity.

Around the world, Christians are waking up to the reality that the massive movement of peoples in migration presents an unprecedented opportunity for spreading the Gospel. Among the hundreds of thousands on the move to find work or a better life are highly committed Christians. Many are effectively living a life that witnesses to the presence of Christ. Others would be more effective if they had some basic preparation in cross-cultural living, how to share the Gospel and lead small group Bible studies and in fact saw themselves as instruments in the Great Commission calling of the Lord Jesus Christ. They also need pastoral care to maintain their own spiritual vitality while they are away from home.

Global migration in the United States and around the world presents awesome possibilities and perplexing challenges. This afternoon’s forum attempts to show how we can build on the opportunities while resolving the difficulties of global migration and more particularly, migration to the United States. The first order of business is to grasp the size and shape of this phenomenon.

The United States.

There were 35 million foreign-born people in the United States in 2005. The largest percentage, 53.3% were from Latin America and the Caribbean, followed by 25% from Asia, 13% from Europe and 8% from other regions of the world.⁷ Of these, approximately 12 million are unauthorized migrants. They include those who entered without valid documents and those who entered legally but overstayed the expiration date of their visas.⁸

The United States has been in an accelerated period of migration since 1965 when a new U.S. Immigration Act was passed removing the national quota system that had been in place up to that time. From 1965, immigration, which had been predominantly European, changed. Significantly more Asians and Latin Americans began moving to the United States. The foreign-born population now constitutes 11.1% of the population, the highest it has been since the 1950s. Although the actual numbers are significantly greater than at other periods, foreign-born people have historically constituted greater percentages of the total population in 1880 (13.3%), 1900 (13.6%), and 1930 (11.6%).⁹ Immigrants increased by 57.4% between 1990 and 2000.¹⁰

The arrival of approximately one million legal and 1.5 million unauthorized immigrants each year is a great concern to many and to the U.S. government. The pressure is on to enforce existing measures against illegal migrants, and to enact more effective legislation. This is happening at the national and local level. The U.S. Congress in 2006 passed a measure to build a wall 700 miles along part of the southern border with Mexico. Volunteer “Minutemen” are patrolling certain border ranch lands.¹¹ Communities like Farmers Branch, Texas are attempting to pass laws forbidding landlords to rent housing to undocumented persons, require English only in all official documents, and have authorized police to routinely check the documents of any person they believe may be undocumented.

Americans are conflicted over what to do about migration, and more particularly unauthorized workers and their families. Columnist Steve Blow has likened our attitudes over migration to the game “Red Rover” where children form a chain, hand to hand and challenge anyone on an opposing team to break through the chain. If they can, they become part of the chain.¹² In similar fashion, Americans seem united in opposition to the entry of illegal migrants, but expect them to become part of society and provide many services to them once they are here. He and others have pointed out the plain fact that The U.S. needs the labor and benefits from the spending power of migrants, legal and illegal. The combined buying power of U.S. Hispanics alone was over 686 billion dollars in 2006.¹³

Attitudes among Christian church people reflect national patterns. Some see undocumented migrants as a threat and as criminals who have broken the law to enter the country. At the same time, many other Christians believe that the history of God’s people in Scripture and its teaching about the treatment of aliens and the reality of America as a nation of immigrants compels us to deal graciously with those who so desperately want and need to be here. We shall deal more specifically with American public policy response and local church response to immigrants during the forum. Faced with these issues, Christians must use age-old biblical convictions and values rather than cave in to public opinion and apparent pragmatism.

I believe that human migration is guided by God’s hand. It is more than economically and politically driven, neither does it simply exemplify the drive to survive. All of these are factors, and are the way humans perceive their situation, but human movement was, in the beginning, mandated by God. Migration is the way God is fulfilling his creation mandate to “fill the earth” (Gen.1:28).

Early in human history, a conspiracy developed against spreading out. It was called “Babel.” Gen. 11:1-9 records the motives of the builders: “Let us build ourselves a city...so that we make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the earth.” We know the end of that story. God stopped that effort and made it impossible for the builders to do anything else but move out. “From there, the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.”

Immediately following the Babel incident, we see God beginning a particular people who would be his vehicle for spreading the knowledge of himself and through whom he would bless every people on earth. He chose Abraham, at the time a migrant” Iraqi” ironically, from Mesopotamia. (Gen 12:1-3) God developed Abraham and the Patriarchs as they moved from place to place around the Fertile Crescent. He preserved them from famine in Egypt, formed them into a nation during the Exodus journey, led them back to the Land, and later disciplined them by taking them

back to Mesopotamia in the Exile. The Bible shows God develops his people in the context of movement. Even the movements of other peoples like the Persians, Greeks and Romans is seen by God to be under his providential control. We can see the extent of international and interregional movement in the New Testament. People from fourteen nations and languages were present in Jerusalem at Pentecost (Acts 2) where the Holy Spirit showed that God's Good News was for every people and intelligible to every people.

What God ordains, he also sustains. So much of what God originally intended has been rendered painful and violent by human sin, introduced after the original creation mandates. What could have been a calm and orderly movement, became much more complicated. In the midst of this, God provided for his people, was present among his people, and used his people to bless other nations even in the midst of their own trials. Joseph rose to ministerial prominence in Egypt, Daniel and others in Mesopotamia. Syrians came to Israel for healing, the Queen of Sheba for Wisdom.

Because God's people were found, as it were, in the desert, and rescued from slavery, and found refuge in other countries, they are repeatedly told to extend grace and help to aliens "because you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Deut.10:17-19) The Hebrew people were repeatedly exhorted to allow the poor and aliens to glean their fields, and in fact to be sure to leave them something to pick up. One the most delightful accounts in the Bible is that of Ruth, a desperate, widowed foreign woman who found favor with Boaz. He allowed her to glean in his harvest fields, instructed other workmen not to interfere or abuse her and eventually took her into his own household. Ruth and Boaz became eventually the progenitors of Jesus himself. (Mat.1:5)

We need to act more like Boaz as Christians, and less like Nabal who refused to give assistance to David and his men when they were refugees in the Judean wilderness. (I Sam.25: 10-11)) Nabal was pragmatic: "Who is this David? There are many servants who break away from their masters. Why should I take my bread... and give it to men who are coming from who knows where?" His own wife later told David: "May my lord pay no attention to that wicked man Nabal. He is just like his name, his name is Fool, and folly goes with him."

As we think about migration issues, we need to ask ourselves who we are dealing with. It is not simply foreigners desperate for work. We may be dealing with God who is trying to care for his creatures through us. The grace and compassion of the Lord Jesus who for our sakes was made poor, and lived like a migrant among us, should be the model for our response to those who work so diligently among us and would love to do so more openly and without fear. The question is, how can America have an immigration policy that respects the dignity and needs of both Americans and immigrants? That is what we are here to talk about today. The nature and background of more conservative views on immigration than my own, and my own recommendations will come out during our discussions.

1 Annan, Kofi, "Opening Address: 16th Annual Ibero-American Summit" Nov. 16, 2006. _
HYPERLINK "http://presszoom.com/story_120578.html"
_ http://presszoom.com/story_120578.html_ accessed Nov. 28, 2006.

2 United Nations, 2006. "International Migration Facts and Figures," U.N. International Migration and Development Commission-Factsheet. _ HYPERLINK "<http://www.unmigration.org>"
_ www.unmigration.org_ accessed Nov. 28, 2006.

3 Anne Kershen, London: The Promised Land? The migrant experience in a capital city (Brookfield, VT.: Avebury Press.) 1.

7 Luke J. Larson, "The Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 20 W03." Current Population Reports, U.S. Census Bureau, issued 2004. 1.

8 Jeffrey S. Passel. "The Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the U.S. Estimates based on the March 2005 Current Population Survey." Pew Hispanic Center, March 7, 2006. 1.

9 Wikipedia "United States Immigration," _ HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_to_the_United_States_of_America"

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_to_the_United_States_of_America_ Accessed 11.30.06.

10 Ibid.

11 "Thirty Days to Change a Mind," Editorial, Dallas Morning News, (July 29, 2006). 24A.

12 "Migrant Policy is a Puzzler," Dallas Morning News ,(July 16, 2005).

13 Selig Center for Economic Growth, U. of Ga. Cited by Juan Tornoe, "Hispanic Buying Power 1999-2009," <http://juantornoe_blogs.com> acc. 4-18-07.

Recommended Reading:

Maruskin, Joan. "The Bible as the Ultimate Immigration Handbook: Written By, For, and About Migrants, Immigrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers." _ HYPERLINK "<http://www.churchworldservice.org/Immigration/bible-as-handbook.html>"
_ <http://www.churchworldservice.org/Immigration/bible-as-handbook.html>_ Joan Maruskin is the Representative of the Church World Service Im. migration and Refugee Program. Contact _ HYPERLINK "<mailto:joanmaruskin@churchworldservice.org>"
_ joanmaruskin@churchworldservice.org_ with questions.