

Amnesty Inroads Among Evangelicals

By James R. Edwards, Jr.

Research demonstrates that elites and the rank-and-file in many segments of society (e.g., business, religion, organized labor) are split over immigration issues.¹ Elites tend to manifest post-American, cosmopolitan ideologies, while their grassroots members preserve deep-seated patriotic beliefs and attitudes, including with regard to immigration.

This phenomenon has become more pronounced in recent times in religious groups. The views on immigration that are common among elites have spread among more conservative parts of American religion — at least with respect to organized religion's leadership levels. The lobbies of more theologically (and politically) liberal institutions, such as the United Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, plus the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, have long advocated mass amnesty, nonenforcement, and virtually uncontrolled immigration policies. Their biblically suspect immigration positions are now spreading like “the yeast of the Pharisees” as the advocacy positions of certain evangelical denominations.

This *Memorandum* examines recent key developments concerning immigration positions among evangelical Christian groups. Major findings include:

- A handful of evangelical organizations have adopted positions on immigration that approach the open-borders positions of the Religious Left.
- The shift toward promotion of mass immigration and amnesty among several evangelical leaders reflects the same disconnect between elite opinion and mass opinion within other segments of society.
- The leftward movement by the Religious Right on immigration appears driven by a few convinced leaders willing to play internal church politics to forward their cause.
- Achieving adoption of official resolutions favoring amnesty has, in notable instances, involved less-than-honest tactics.
- Liberal politicians have used the evangelical open-borders converts to serve their political purposes and to advance their amnesty/guestworker political agenda.
- The payoff for the evangelical leaders promoting amnesty appears largely to be public approval from those who otherwise oppose them on nearly every other political issue, particularly social and religious liberty matters.
- Other motivations for this development may include federal dollars for refugee work, misguided emphasis on the supposed benefit to aliens, and discounting of the harm to native-born workers, or naiveté regarding immigration policy.

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Leftward, Christian Soldiers

In autumn 2009, the National Association of Evangelicals, whose members include more than 40 Protestant denominations and around 30 million worshipers, adopted a resolution endorsing “comprehensive immigration reform” — amnesty, in plain language. Despite NAE’s publicly implying unanimous adoption by its members, only 11 denominations actually signed the NAE’s pro-amnesty resolution.²

Only 11 of 75 NAE board members signed their names to the amnesty resolution. Reportedly, the NAE and its member denominations heard immediate, significant opposition from their grassroots members. Several member denominations publicly disavowed the amnesty endorsement — including the Salvation Army and the Churches of Christ in Christian Union. The Presbyterian Church in America publicly declared that the NAE position “has not become the PCA position on immigration.” The PCA’s situation is complicated by the fact the denomination’s Stated Clerk, Roy Taylor, chaired the NAE board and has publicly stated his own support for the NAE position.³

The NAE move seems to have been timed so that NAE President Leith Anderson and NAE board member Samuel Rodriguez could testify October 8, 2009, before the Senate in full-throated support of “comprehensive immigration reform.” Senate Immigration Subcommittee Chairman Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) choreographed a hearing intended to give the impression that evangelical America is now as fully supportive of mass amnesty and the importation of unlimited foreign workers as the Religious Left. Others testifying at Schumer’s staged event were former Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson, California megachurch pastor James Tolle, and Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, Archbishop Emeritus of Washington, D.C., and a member of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

World Relief, an agency that provides relief services in poor nations around the world, is associated with the NAE and other evangelical groups. Notably, World Relief also resettles refugees in the United States — a money-making proposition for such outfits. The federal government gives resettlement agencies funding for each refugee that the agency takes under its care.⁴ World Relief receives two-thirds of its funding from federal and state sources, including nearly half its budget from the federal government. The agency operates 23 refugee resettlement offices in the United States and calls itself “the biggest evangelical refugee resettlement agency in America.”⁵ This aspect of World Relief’s work

mirrors that of other religious entities’ refugee activity, such as providing legal services and English lessons and enrolling refugees in welfare programs.

However, World Relief also involves itself in “advocacy for immigration and refugee policy.”⁶ As a practical matter, that has increasingly meant working in tandem with liberal, open-borders religious groups and taking on a political role in immigration issues that would likely be opposed by most American evangelicals. For instance, in 2005, World Relief signed onto an “Interfaith Statement in Support of Comprehensive Immigration Reform” along with usual suspects from the Religious Left.⁷

The National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference has escalated its call for mass amnesty. Its president, Samuel Rodriguez, who, as mentioned above, sits on the NAE board, has insinuated himself into social and religious conservative circles to build support from the Right for amnesty, just as he has done with moving the NAE on immigration politics. The NHCLC describes itself as “sister organization” of the NAE, and claims 25,434 member churches with 16 million parishioners.⁸ Rodriguez does not appear to be a “movement conservative;” rather, he seems more a practitioner of ethnic identity politics.⁹ He is on one of President Obama’s advisory panels, attended his American University amnesty speech, and prayed at the March 2010 amnesty rally on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.¹⁰

Rodriguez has reportedly been instrumental in swaying Mat Staver of Liberty Counsel not only to enlist his conservative organization in backing Rodriguez’s version of “immigration reform,” but also to co-opt the social conservative ad hoc coalition Freedom Federation to the amnesty cause. The latter coalition includes adamant amnesty foes such as Eagle Forum, as well as many member organizations that take no position on immigration, such as Faith and Action. Liberty Counsel played a role in forming Freedom Federation, whose primary mission involves more mainstream social conservative issues. Reportedly, Staver’s and Rodriguez’s heavy-handedness and devious approach to pushing amnesty have caused internal discord and jeopardized the coalition’s cohesion.

A number of evangelical officials have taken increasingly public stands advocating mass legalization and immigration expansion. For example, Rodriguez, Anderson, Staver, Gerson, Sammy Mah of World Relief, and Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission jointly signed a newspaper advertisement calling for amnesty.¹¹

The House immigration subcommittee has held two hearings featuring witnesses from the faith community, in May 2007 and July 2010. Both clearly seem to have been designed to give politicians religious cover for legislating “comprehensive immigration reform.” And both hearings featured witnesses from evangelical organizations. The 2007 hearing heard from an official of World Relief’s refugee and immigration programs. The 2010 hearing took testimony from Mat Staver and Richard Land, as well as an Arizona Catholic bishop.

Land, under the auspices of the Southern Baptist Convention, has collaborated with the likes of Rodriguez, Staver, the NAE, and others. He secured political cover when the SBC adopted an immigration resolution at its annual convention in 2006.¹² The resolution is sufficiently vague to not call overtly for amnesty, and it includes more specific language on immigration enforcement and border security. Land participated in a March 2007 news conference of open-borders groups organized by Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), at the time a ringleader in pushing the Senate to consider the Kennedy-McCain amnesty bill.

Land has escalated his pro-amnesty activity representing the SBC, adding to the confusion of many observers about where Southern Baptists stand on immigration.¹³ For instance, President Obama invited Land to attend his speech calling for amnesty. Land has also coauthored a “draft” white paper and posted it on the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission website.¹⁴ The ERLC white paper reflects greater depth and biblical grounding than what Land typically says to news media or Congress or in the 2006 SBC resolution. Still, the paper glosses over the adverse consequences of mass legalization and increasing importation of foreign workers on the most vulnerable Americans. And it attempts to represent its version of amnesty (with the usual things open-border types call for, such as a background check, paying back taxes, “learning” English, and getting in the back of the nonexistent line of immigrants) as the moral policy solution.

Conclusion

This evangelical leadership activity, in support of mass legalization and loosened immigration controls, seems largely to be another manifestation of the elite-grassroots disconnect.

There is much danger in this development. It could well introduce discord into the church — something at odds with Scripture (e.g., I Cor. 14:33).

The unnecessary upheaval over this politicization will have ramifications for the church’s ability to carry out its core mission: sharing the Gospel and making disciples of Christ.

The ease with which a growing number of Christian leaders invoke ugly name-calling against those who disagree with them on immigration issues — invoking such terms as “racist,” “xenophobe,” and “bigot” in ad hominem assaults, including against brethren in Christ — diminishes public discourse and damages their own witness for Christ. Open immigration has almost become an article of faith with these people; they allow their fellow Christians no freedom of conscience and no opportunity to exercise their own prudential judgment, apply biblical principles themselves, and arrive at different conclusions where immigration policy is concerned.

There seems something Pharisaical about such evangelical leaders. Recall how Jesus famously went toe to toe with the religious leaders of his day, drawing attention to their hypocrisy and blindness of pride and arrogance (for instance, Matt. 16:6, Matt. 23:3-33, Mark 7:6-8). Perhaps those evangelical leaders now honored by pro-amnesty politicians and favored by news media that otherwise regard them as anti-intellectual, hateful troglodytes are in danger of “[loving] praise from men more than praise from God” (John 12:43) where the politics of immigration are concerned. Spiritual blindness is a common malady of the soul. Such pride and idolatry would carry more fundamental consequences — both temporal and eternal.

On the lighter side, the policy prescriptions emanating from not only evangelical clergy, but all religious leaders who typically promote immigration policies, fail to measure up. They generally come across as naïve and simplistic, and at the same time heavily influenced by open-borders policy specialists who know what they are doing. Such attempts at immigration policy bring to mind C.S. Lewis’s fabulously apt quotation from *Mere Christianity*:

“The clergy are those particular people within the whole Church who have been specially trained and set aside to look after what concerns us as creatures who are going to live forever: and we are asking them to do a quite different job for which they have not been trained [when we seek their political counsel]. The job is really on us, on the laymen. The application of Christian principles, say, to trade unionism and education, must come from Christian trade unionists

and Christian schoolmasters; just as Christian literature comes from Christian novelists and dramatists — not from the bench of bishops getting together and trying to write plays and novels in their spare time.”

America can do a lot better addressing her immigration problems through the established political process and the efforts of those whose calling is public policy — not through policy prescriptions from the “bench of bishops getting together and trying to write” immigration laws “in their spare time.” Hopefully, evangelical worshipers will jerk the reins on their leaders, who more closely resemble the blind leading the blind than enlightened and enlightening public policymakers.

End Notes

¹ See, for example, Steven A. Camarota and Roy Beck, “Elite Vs. Public Opinion: An Examination of Divergent Views on Immigration,” Center for Immigration Studies *Background*, December 2002, <http://www.cis.org/ElitevsPublicOpinion-ImmigrationViews>; and Steven A. Camarota, “Religious Leaders vs. Members: An Examination of Contrasting Views on Immigration,” Center for Immigration Studies *Background*, December 2009, <http://www.cis.org/ReligionAndImmigrationPoll>.

² Mark Tooley, “Evangelicals and Immigration,” *American Spectator*, October 21, 2009, <http://spectator.org/archives/2009/10/21/evangelicals-and-immigration>. In addition, Tooley has reported elsewhere the NAE’s steady decline, following the same pattern as so-called Mainline Protestant denominations a half-century ago moving further into left-wing politics and away from biblical Christianity.

³ Tooley, “Evangelicals and Immigration.”

⁴ Refugee Resettlement Watch estimates that refugee resettlement agencies collect from the State Department on average \$1,900 to \$2,200 per sponsored refugee. See <http://refugeeresettlementwatch.wordpress.com/refugee-resettlement-fact-sheets/>.

⁵ From <http://worldrelief.org/us>.

⁶ From <http://worldrelief.org/immigrantservices>.

⁷ From <http://worldrelief.org/Page.aspx?pid=1524>.

⁸ From <http://www.nhclc.org/who-we-are>.

⁹ For instance, see Bruce Wilson, “Hispanic Karl Rove’ Helps Shape ‘Third Way’ Democratic Party Platform,” Talk To Action website, August 13, 2009, <http://www.talk2action.org/story/2009/8/13/5511/49602/>.

¹⁰ Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Migrating Focus,” *Christianity Today*, March 22, 2010, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/marchweb-only/22-11.0.html>.

¹¹ From http://www.nhclc.org/files/nhclc/u38/NAE_Advertisement_immigration051010.pdf.

¹² From <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=1157>.

¹³ For instance, see Tom Strode, “Evangelical leaders: Immigration reform bill needed this year,” Baptist Press, June 10, 2010, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=33118>. Also, Jim Galloway, “Southern Baptists, Obama and immigration,” Political Insider blog, July 7, 2010, <http://blogs.ajc.com/political-insider-jim-galloway/2010/07/07/southern-baptists-obama-and-illegal-immigration/>.

¹⁴ Available at <http://erlc.com/article/a-white-paper-principles-for-just-immigration-reform/>.