



President Donald Trump visits the border wall prototypes in San Diego on March 13, 2018, with Department of Homeland Security officials, who listen to the president explain why walls are important to border security. By Ralph Desio. Source: US Customs and Border Protection.

Does God Want Nations To Exist?

By Lyman Stone

Are nations legitimate?

The question is a strange one on its face; on some level, nations simply *exist* in the modern world. Asking about their legitimacy can seem similar to asking if grass or the sunrise is legitimate. There is no extant policy platform which can or even proposes to bring about the end of nations in any absolute or final sense. Nations—that is, people groups who recognize themselves as a coherent community with a political meaning, and are generally larger than tribe or clan—do exist, and are likely to continue existing for as long as there are people.

But in a more restrictive sense, the question of the legitimacy of nations is of pressing relevance: is it legitimate for a nation to enforce some kind of rule about who is included in its numbers, and who is not? More bluntly, living in a modern political dispensation when most nations have their own governments, thus forming nation-states, the question becomes whether it is morally legitimate or acceptable for a nation-state to deny entry to foreigners for reasons other than physical security. Is it morally legitimate or acceptable for a nation-state to deny membership in the group, meaning voting and other political rights, to outsiders? At the end of the day, the moral question of the legitimacy of nations is about the politics of immigration.

For most of the history of Christianity, the question of immigration was moot because states lacked the capacity to meaningfully regulate the flow of people. And even since the advent of modern states and immigration controls, the authority of the state to legitimately regulate migration has not usually been in contest. But in recent years, some readers of scripture have read the numerous injunctions to treat foreigners, aliens, “sojourners,” and “strangers” charitably as dispositive divine commands regarding state policy. That is, a number of progressive Christians advocate for the view that a biblical perspective on immigration essentially requires open borders, or something formally close to it. Aside from numerous Old Testament passages demanding charitableness to foreigners, these advocates are also fond of Pauline statements that “there is not Greek and Jew...barbarian, Scythian.” Some very creative advocates will even place the origin of nationhood with the fall of Babel and label nationality as a piece of the divine curse. In other words, some progressive Christians have begun to argue that the abolition of all national differentiation is a key, biblically-supported part of building a Christian political order.

While I am not a theologian by training and so cannot speak with any final authority on the question, this interpretation seems like a baleful misreading of scripture. Furthermore, the view that Christianity is somehow incompatible with nationality has the dual consequences of causing advocates to miss out on the many blessings of nationhood while also eliding the far more powerful and painful demands scripture makes on our ideas of nationality.

NATIONALITY WILL PERSIST & BE REDEEMED

The first and most essential place to start with the question of nationality is, oddly enough, at the end. While Christians of various stripes may debate numerous eschatological issues and read the Revelation of St. John in various ways, there’s one simple point we all agree on: people of every *ethnos*, *phylon*, *laon*, and *glos-son* will be saved, confessing the lordship of the Lamb. Most translations render these words fairly literally: nation or ethnic group, tribes or kindreds, peoples or crowds, and languages or tongues. In other words, in the final enumeration of the Redeemed, there will be languages, plural and confessing. There will be peoples, plural and confessing. There will be nations,



A Border Patrol vehicle sits along the border fence line separating San Diego and Tijuana, Mexico, while watching for illegal crossings on March 20, 2016. By Donna Burton. Source: US Customs and Border Protection.

again plural and confessing. The nations show up again in the description of the new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21, when John says of the illuminating glory of God that “by its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.” Indeed, Revelation 22 goes on to assert that the renewed tree of life is for the *healing* of the nations!

Being neither a pastor nor an expert in eschatology, I don’t want to base too much belief on statements from apocalyptic literature. But certainly there is no hint from St. John that God intends to eliminate national distinctions in the resurrection. And if I’m correct in reading these passages to suggest that God does not promise to eliminate national distinctions, there are other passages to suggest that he may in fact be using national distinctions quite providentially. Paul, in the sermon at the Areopagus, says that “[God] made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him” (Acts 17:26-27a). Put plainly, Paul’s argument is that God establishes nations, even their boundaries, as communities of spiritual search. Again, context matters here, so we shouldn’t make Paul’s apologetical sermon too strict a grounding for doctrine. But again, the general tilt of scripture seems, by a plain reading, to bias in favor of the idea that nationality

has some kind of moral legitimacy to it.

These New Testament verses stand in contrast to the Babel account. Scripture makes clear that division of language (and ultimately of ethnicity) is indeed a kind of reprimand for the hubris of man. But we should not forget that God rarely works by a simple *undoing* of sin. The redemption of humanity did not come about by removing the sword from the gates of Eden and returning us to the green grass. We abandoned the garden, but will be given a *city* in the resurrection. The new Adam is not merely an undoing of the old Adam's sin, but a redemption, a making-right, a reclaiming, an ultimate repurposing-for-the-good of what began as sin. In the same way, while national divisions originate in the pride of humankind, God's providence would seem to be, if St. Paul and St. John can be taken in their plain sense, sufficiently great that even these divisions are redeemed. National distinctions today result in a flowering of dress, tongue, art, music, attitude, worship styles, and even a person's appearance: a diversity worthy of heartfelt celebration! Far from longing for an end to nationhood or seeing the resurrection as a great leveling force, we should see in it the *healing of the nations*.

Indeed, the idea of the nation or the people is the Old Testament's central theme, along with the idea of the "land." God worked providentially through Israel for generations, and through that nation brought about a savior. Is it not, then, quite reasonable to think that God might use our contemporary nationalities for some good purpose?

Far from being illegitimate or divisive barriers to human sanctification, national communities may be vehicles that God uses to mold us, shape us, and call us in our vocations.

NATIONALITY CREATES UNIQUE MORAL BURDENS

But if I am right that God uses nationality providentially, we may then wonder *how* he does so. To what end? What does this providential use of nationality really look like?

The simplest answer is to reconsider the passages that started this whole line of questioning, those about charitableness to foreigners, or about Jews, Greeks, and Scythians. If not an

abandonment of nationality, to what are these passages actually calling the Christian?

The simplest explanation is to consider these passages as descriptions of Christian vocation or station in life. The Bible establishes many special stations in life with special duties. For example, the office of the pastor is generally considered to be "ordained." Likewise, the roles of husband, wife, parent, or child are all vocations with special duties and responsibilities. The Pauline epistles envision unique vocations for teachers, preachers, evangelists, masters, slaves, elders, youths, married people, deacons, older women, widows, orphans, apostles, rulers, and numerous other roles. That is to say, much of the moral content of scripture is not there to provide us broad quasi-philosophical guidelines for human behavior, but to inform us regarding specific moral duties, special vocations, in which we may at some point find ourselves. For example, it is possible that a person might find himself in the vocation of a slave. Scripture says a Christian slave should be a faithful slave, serving dutifully, to bring his master to Christ. On the other hand, it is possible that a person might find herself in the vocation of a master of slaves. The entire book of Philemon amounts to an exhortation that the slave Onesimus should be manumitted, a truth Christians recognized early on and established in law in the Middle Ages, prohibiting, at a minimum, the taking or holding of other Christians as slaves. Would that this rule had held in the American context! Our forefathers could have spared themselves from the stain of a great national sin.

Christians are familiar with exhortations regarding husbands and wives, that there should be submission between them. They often know the exhortations regarding the vocations of deacons, that they should be men of good character and enduring faith. They may know the fun fact that the commandment concerning the vocation of children to honor their fathers and mothers is the first commandment attached to a promise.

But all too often, Christians seem to forget the vocation of citizenship in respect to non-citizen neighbors. Far from abolishing nationality, scripture seems to use the lines of nationality to draw our eyes to our special and additional duties toward foreigners. Foreigners may not understand our laws, may not have good representation or speak our language, may be poor or destitute. And scripture calls us to open our doors to them. This probably does not mean

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scripture calls us to open our *borders* to immigrants and allow some foreign nation to capture our national government. But it does mean that we have specific moral duties toward whatever foreigners do live among us. For example, we must take care that they are not exploited or mistreated on account of their foreign-ness. It seems to me that, in practice, the straightforward interpretation of this is a recognition that Christians living out their vocation of citizenship will defend the rights of foreigners on our soil to due process and the full protection of the law.

When Deuteronomy 27:19 says “cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow,” it does not mean that *immigration* restrictions are unjust. It means the *treatment of immigrants* must be just. And while there may be debate about what constitutes “just treatment,” certainly it is sensible to suggest that representation by a lawyer, reasonable bail, freedom from unlawful search and seizure, and other perfectly normal protections that American law promises should be included as “justice due to the sojourner.”

Beyond duties to strangers among us, national ties create special moral duties for Christians as well. Paul painfully aches for the salvation of *his people*, the Jews, in Romans. A few minutes of conversation with an Arab Christian will give modern readers a flashback to those verses: national ties cause people to feel a kind of kinship with individuals they have never met. This feeling of kinship causes them to desire the best for those anonymous co-nationals, and can motivate great effort and sacrifice on their behalf. This may be political, with a shared sense of nationality boosting support for universal national programs, or spiritual, with a sense of nationality lending personal or familial urgency to evangelism. Luther’s love for the German people, and his partly nationalist anger at seeing them exploited by the sale of indulgences, lent his writing a lucidity, zeal, and credibility with his fellow Germans which more cosmopolitan figures, like Erasmus, could never muster. With the speedy rise of specifically *German* commit-

ment to Protestantism, the Reformation project “stuck” in a way previous attempts at reform had not.

But while national feeling can motivate great feats of cooperation, it can indeed create divisions. And this brings us to Paul’s injunction concerning Jews, Greeks, and Scythians. In Colossians 3 where this verse comes from, Paul is instructing converted believers in what it means to be alive in Christ, to have a renewed self. But the context is interesting. Having explained that they have died and been raised up in Christ, Paul enjoins the church in Colossae, “But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another.” The context is rather clear: Paul is advising the church in Colossae concerning how Christians should treat each other, *especially* in the church. Indeed, he goes on in verse 12, “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts... bearing with one another and...forgiving each other.” This whole passage is not intended to suggest that national identity is *actually transient*, but rather to urge Christians not to divide the church along cultural lines.

Alas, this exhortation is little-headed. Race, national origin, and political culture deeply divide American churches. Indeed, for many churches old fissures along these lines are a sectarian bedrock. My own Lutheran denomination all too often falls into the trap of being defined by old northern European immigrant roots. Some denominations still map neatly onto the national divides of 1861, and others clearly track with the presidential election results of 2016. The reality is that American Christianity knows *many* distinctions between “Jew and Greek, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free.” Taking this command seriously doesn’t mean opening the borders. It means doing church better. ■

Lyman Stone is an economist and advisor for the consulting firm Demographic Intelligence. He writes about economics, population, and related issues for *The Federalist*, the Institute for Family Studies, and *Vox*. He is married to Ruth, a fellow Kentuckian, and they currently reside in Hong Kong, where they are serving as missionaries for the Lutheran Church-Hong Kong Synod.