Evangelicals and the redemptive symmetry of immigration reform

By Randall Balmer
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The scene at the Church of the Reformation several weeks ago—just a couple blocks from the U. S. Capitol—was a mixture of resolve and celebration, equal parts political rally and family reunion. People milled about on the front steps posing for photographs, greeting old friends and making new acquaintances.

No gathering of evangelicals is complete without music, which generally means a praise band. The congregation was strikingly well dressed and multicultural, a mixture of Hispanics, African Americans and Anglos. A few raised their hands and waved their arms to the music.

The congregation sang "The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor," inspired by Psalm 34. "Let the lowly hear and be glad," the lyrics read. "The Lord listens to their pleas."

The pleas on this day revolved around immigration reform. A poster outside the church quoted Jesus' words about caring for "the least of these": "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in."

A growing and diverse number of evangelicals are taking these commands seriously. The Evangelical Immigration Table, the umbrella organization for the initiative, includes such groups as Liberty Counsel on the right and Sojourners over toward the left. A church van across the street from the Art Deco church read "Love Memorial Baptist Church, Goldsboro, NC."

Willow Creek founder Bill Hybels addressed the group, as did Templo Calvario pastor Lee de Leon. They made the case for immigration reform, including a path to citizenship. Orlando Findlayter, pastor of New Hope Christian Fellowship in Brooklyn, prayed that God would touch the Congress: "Take away their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh."

Even Southern Baptist lobbyist Richard Land, one of the more reliable shills for far-right policies, threw his support behind immigration reform. For too long, Land said,

our government has had two signs at the border: “No Trespassing” and “Help Wanted.” He added that this is a propitious moment.

Gabriel Salguero, president of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, delivered the call to action, alternating smoothly between Spanish and English. “The time has come,” he told the gathering. “Nothing changes without courageous people demanding it.” Salguero led the congregation in one of the standards of the civil rights movement, “Ain’t Gonna’ Let Nobody Turn Me Around,” and he issued a rallying cry: “We’re going to be walking the halls of Congress, and they don’t know what’s coming.”

One of the activists working behind the scenes for immigration reform is Ali Noorani, who is not part of evangelicalism but recognizes its political potential. “The faith community is the most important voice in this conversation,” he told me, because of the close relationships between pastors and their congregants. “That relationship doesn’t exist anywhere else in society.”

As this gathering in Washington suggests, evangelical political activism may finally be coming of age. Evangelicals in the 19th and early 20th centuries crowded toward the left of the spectrum. They worked for the abolition of slavery, equal rights for women and the formation of public schools. Evangelicals opposed dueling as barbaric, marched in the vanguard of peace crusades and advocated for labor rights. Many prominent evangelicals, from Charles Grandison Finney to William Jennings Bryan, excoriated the ravages of unbridled capitalism.

The aberration in evangelical political behavior emerged with the rise of the Religious Right in the late 1970s. In their quest for political influence, leaders like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson cast their lot with Ronald Reagan to defeat Jimmy Carter, a fellow evangelical. Over the ensuing decades, the Religious Right marched in lockstep with the Republicans and became, the party’s core constituency. Politically conservative evangelicals supported massive increases in military spending, for example, while opposing equal rights for women—positions utterly at odds with their evangelical precursors. Opposition to abortion and to same-sex marriage became their signature concerns.

Beginning with the 2008 election, however, a younger generation of evangelicals began to discern a much broader spectrum of “moral issues,” including war, poverty and the environment. The evangelical groundswell for immigration reform suggests

a maturing of these concerns. Decades after the emergence of the Religious Right, many evangelicals are pushing for a realignment of evangelical politics. They seek to move away from hard-right policies to reclaim the mantle of 19th-century evangelicalism, which invariably took the part of “the least of these.”

The evangelical embrace of immigration reform represents a kind of redemptive symmetry. Just as a path to citizenship allows immigrants to emerge from the shadows and seek a better life, so too evangelical advocacy on their behalf allows evangelicalism to reclaim its noble legacy.

After a box lunch in the church basement, the group fanned out for meetings with elected officials and their staffs. Despite Land’s earlier characterization, this would not be a propitious day for congressional action—this was the afternoon the Senate voted not to vote on expanded background checks for gun sales.

Still, organizers of the Evangelical Immigration Table remained confident, in part because of the range of people lending their support. “Left, right and middle are all pushing for reform,” Noorani said. “Evangelicals see immigration reform as their fight right now.”

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