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## FAMILIES, NATIONS, AND IMMIGRATION: WHO COMES FIRST?

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### Family Matters in the Deportation Discussion: A Theological Orientation

M. Daniel Carroll R.

**M. Daniel Carroll R. (Rodas)** is Blanchard Professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College. He is the author of *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* (sec. ed.; Brazos Press, 2013). He writes and speaks regularly on topics related to immigration and the Bible.

Over eleven million undocumented immigrants live under the constant specter of deportation and, under current U.S. law, there are almost no avenues available to them for normalizing their status. This figure represents millions of families, where one or both parents and all or some of the children do not possess proper documentation for residing in this country.

Sociological studies show that these families constantly deal with the stress triggered by the fear of being stopped by police and of having immigration authorities appear without notice at their homes or their places of employment to remove them to detention centers and begin the process of expelling them. These daily pressures bring additional tension to the normal, yet complex cultural adaptations that all foreigners have to navigate. For some, this increased strain within immigrant families results in problematic dysfunction, even substance and physical abuse, as parents and children desperately try to cope with steering between survival and some sense of normalcy.

These pressing realities have motivated Christian groups from across the theological and ecclesial spectrum—from the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy to the Evangelical Immigration Table to mainline denominations—to protest indiscriminate deportation in the name of family unity, as a key pillar in reforming immigration legislation.<sup>1</sup> This commitment to the family finds solid grounding within the Bible,<sup>2</sup> and this scriptural orientation should be play an important role in how Christians engage this dimension of immigration policy. I base my theological argument against indiscriminate deportation and the subsequent separation of the family on three concepts: the person of God, the centrality of the family, and the concern for widows and orphans.

*The Person of God.* The significance of the family in God's sight is clear in the most basic fashion. One of the many ways that God is presented in both the Old and New Testament is as a parent. God is

portrayed as the father of Israel (Deuteronomy 1:31; Isaiah 64:8; Hosea 11:1), who cares and provides for them (Psalm 103:13) and, as a parent, even will discipline them (Deuteronomy 8:5). Jesus constantly refers to God as his Father (Matthew 11:25-27; John 5:19-23). He instructs his disciples to pray the “Our Father” (Matthew 6:8), and he and the New Testament writers encourage believers to envision their God as *Abba*, father (Matthew 6:26, 32; Galatians 4:4-7; Hebrews 12:5-11). In fact, God is the father of all peoples (Acts 17:26, 29). Maternal imagery also is used of God (Isaiah 49:15; 66:12-13; Matthew 23:37). In other words, in his very being God is the ultimate parent of all.

Interestingly, the relationship between God and his people also is portrayed as a marriage. God is the husband of Israel, and Israel is his wife (Isaiah 54:5). In the New Testament, the church is called the bride of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7-9), whose love for her is the exemplar for earthly husbands to sacrifice themselves for their wives (Ephesians 5:25-33).

In sum, the concepts of parenting, marriage, and family are intrinsic to the person of God and to how he connects with humanity. Families matter in God’s economy. This truth gives great significance to the topic of the family and family unity within the deportation debate. For Christians, the splitting up of families is not simply another political taking point, and it is more than a humanitarian issue. It touches the very heart of the faith.

*The Centrality of the Family.* The Bible begins with the account of the creation of humanity, and this is inextricably connected to the beginning of the family. Humans are called to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28) and in marriage set themselves apart as distinct family units (Genesis 2:24). In Genesis 4, the first child is born. Much of the Old and New Testaments is taken up with the stories of families, from those of the patriarchs to the narratives of Jesus’ childhood.

Children are a gift from God (Ps. 127:3-5), and their birth always is celebrated with great joy. The family is the special place where life in relationship begins and matures. Parents are charged with the responsibility to raise their children well, nurturing wisdom in their hearts and minds, moderation and kindness in their speech, impeccable character in their actions and relationships, a strong work ethic, and faithfulness to God. The book of Proverbs is the best extended example of this teaching (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4-9). In the New Testament, a key qualification of leadership in the church is the testimony of a stellar family life among local believers and in the broader community (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).

The separation of family members, especially parents, through deportation (and the fear of deportation) violates this divine institution. Immigrant children are deprived of their parents, those who are to prepare them for the various dimensions of life and help them persevere through the trials and tribulations of acculturation. Parents, who are deported, are torn from their flesh and blood, the children whom they have received as a gift from God. **Severing family bonds through deportation should be resisted, because it causes incredibly deep pain and trauma to the parents and their children, but even more significantly, because it strikes against the core of the meaning of our life as humans in God’s world.** Families matter.

*The Concern for Widows and Orphans.* Across history, widows and orphans have been one of the most vulnerable of all social groups. In the ancient world, where premature death was not uncommon due to disease, war, and natural disasters, widows and orphans were particularly at risk from the loss of the head of the household, who was crucial protecting and to providing for the family.

In the Old Testament, God repeatedly voices special compassion towards widows and orphans. He hears their cries (Exodus 22:22-23; Psalm 68:5) and demands justice for them (Deuteronomy 10:18; Psalm 10:17-18). Accordingly, in Israel there was legislation to meet the familial and societal crises of widows and orphans—for instance, provisions for gathering food (Deuteronomy 24:19-22) and benefitting from a special triennial tithe (Deuteronomy 14:28-29).

There are several narratives in the Old Testament that depict the extreme suffering that widows and orphans could endure (1 Kings 17:8-24; 2 Kings 4:1-7). The book of Ruth recounts the move of two widows, Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth, from Moab to Bethlehem in Judah and the alleviation of their plight through Ruth's marriage to Boaz. The book of Esther is the story of an orphan girl, who is raised by her kinsman Mordechai and who eventually becomes queen of Persia. Care for widows and orphans was a mark of a righteous person (Job 29:11-12; 31:16-23), and good kings were expected to care for them (Jeremiah 22:3). To turn a blind eye to their needs was to bring the severest of rebukes from the prophets (Isaiah 1:17, 23; 10:1-2).

This concern for widows and orphans continues into the New Testament. Jesus echoes the prophetic denunciation of those who mistreat widows (Mark 12:38-40), and with great empathy he raises from the dead the only son of a widow (Luke 7:11-17). A poor widow in the Temple precincts becomes for the disciples a model of selfless faith, as she gives an offering from what little she has (Luke 21:1-4). The early church organized its members to serve needy widows in their midst (Acts 6:1-6) and, in a letter to Timothy, the apostle Paul gives instructions about ministering to widows (1 Timothy 5:1-16). James 1:27 is a foundational text. It reflects the sentiment (and demand) of true faith in God: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (English Standard Version).

It is important to locate the discussion on the impact of deportation on families within this consistent biblical framework of responding to the liabilities that widows and orphans face. To deport one or both parents of undocumented children actually *creates* a new unprotected class of "widows and orphans"—that is, of spouses and children who, in addition to the unavoidable troubles to which all vulnerable spouses and children are exposed, now must face alone the precariousness of their own irregular legal status.

Deportation that separates families once more flies in the face of a fundamental biblical principle, in this case to provide for widows and orphans. It results in the very predicaments that the biblical injunctions were trying to help avoid. And, like with the previous two points, it is counter to the person of God and his design for the family.

## **Conclusion**

The government's right to arrest and deport undocumented immigrants can find legitimate justification when the targets are those with serious criminal records and associations, or if national security is truly threatened. Validation of deportation policies becomes problematic, however, when they call for, or allow, indiscriminate detention and removal, whether this is stated formally or reflects the concrete practice of law enforcement.

Deportation that separates members of peaceful and hardworking families of undocumented immigrants contradicts at least three essential theological and biblical principles. First, it fails to

recognize that parenting and marriage are important to understanding the person of God and how he relates to humanity in general, and to his people in particular. Second, humans are designed for family life, with all of its joys and challenges. **Deportation disrupts and is destructive of the family as ordained by God.** Third, the inescapable product of deportation and the separation of families is the presence of more widows and orphans, something that exacerbates a set of problems that God abhors and calls for society to remedy. On these grounds, for Christians, unnecessary deportation that negatively affects immigrant families is unacceptable.

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<sup>1</sup> Family *unity* is to be distinguished from the related topic of family *reunification*, which involves petitioning for the admission of qualified relatives into the country.

<sup>2</sup> I will cite only key biblical passages. The goal is not to be comprehensive.