

## Christian Ethical Perspectives on Illegal/Undocumented Immigration Policy

The issue of illegal immigration policy presents a multifaceted ethical dilemma, particularly for Christians striving to reconcile obedience to laws with compassion towards the marginalized. Rooted in both principles of obedience to ruling authorities and love and hospitality, the Christian faith today stands divided on this complex issue.

The differing views of deontological and consequential lenses cause extreme division over immigration policy. By examining these perspectives alongside U.S. immigration statistics, we aim to foster a deeper understanding of how Christians can ethically engage with illegal immigration policy.

### “What’s going on?” - H. Richard Niebuhr

Estimates suggest that there are approximately 10 to 12 million undocumented immigrants **(Pew)** entering the United States through unauthorized means, such as crossing the U.S.-Mexico border or overstaying their visas after entering legally. With a record high of nearly 250,000 U.S. Border Patrol encounters in December 2023 **(PEW2)**, there has been much talk about policy enforcement. This enforcement of policy has led to questions of humanitarian concerns, family separation, labor exploitation, national security, impact on communities, and human rights. **(DHS)**

How are we, as Christians, to respond to this issue? The answer to that question has much to do with our ethical perspective.

### Deontological Perspective:

Deontology, meaning “duty or that which is binding, is grounded in Immanuel Kant’s philosophy, underscoring moral duties and intention more than the outcome. **(Marshall 44)** Christians may perceive obedience to immigration laws as a moral obligation, highlighting Romans 13:1-2 **(NIV)** “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.” H. Richard Niebuhr, in “The Responsible Self,” assigns the metaphor of “citizen” to the moral agent in a deontological system,” and Christian deontologists tend to think as those law-abiding citizens who advocate for a just society governed by moral principles. **(Marshall 44)**

Those who follow this ethical mindset would make sure to use the word “illegal” when describing undocumented migrants. They would focus on the law. However, strict adherence to laws must be tempered with recognition of moral complexity. Ellen Ott Marshall states that “the central question of ethics—how to live a good life... involves embodied knowledge, conversation with others, serious engagement with multiple sources of knowledge, shared actions and mutual dialogue, participation in the life of a faith

community and involvement in the institutions of society.” **(Marshall 16)** This complex ethic entails more than pointing at the legal code.

Plato acknowledges the limitations of laws in addressing ethical dilemmas, noting, "Good people do not need laws to tell them to act responsibly, while bad people will find a way around the laws." **(Plato)** The good life is impossible to legislate. Instead, Christians must discern the spirit behind laws, advocating for policies rooted in justice and compassion and, by this, provide greater access to the good life.

### **Consequential Perspective:**

Unlike Deontology, Consequentialism, also called teleology, evaluates actions based on outcomes rather than strict adherence to rules. ‘Teleo’ means “end,” as in a final goal or completed purpose. **(Bible Hub, Marshall 93)** From the perspective of the end result, Christians may argue prioritizing the well-being of individuals forced to leave their nation in order to seek safety in America over the laws on the books.

Marshall emphasizes the process of justice, saying, “Those working in conflict transformation understand reconciliation to be a goal and also a journey, meaning that we cannot separate our considerations of teleology from discussion of the processes that move us from where we are to where God calls us to be. **(Marshall 94)** Teleology causes one to think beyond the current rules or situation and toward the end result.

Jesus' teachings of compassion towards the marginalized inform this perspective, as seen in Matthew 25:35-36 **(NIV)** "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 consequentialist would look beyond the current situation and policy and dream toward the end result of embracing the stranger.

Consequentialist considerations compel Christians to assess the broader social, economic, and humanitarian consequences of illegal immigration policies. Because restrictive policies exacerbate family separation, exploitation, and cycles of poverty and violence, a teleologist may be emboldened to address the good life by supplying sanctuary beyond the bounds of the law.

### **3 Questions:**

Navigating the ethical complexity of immigration policy requires an awareness of deontological and consequential perspectives. We must understand the perspectives of others and approach one another while considering personal moral frameworks. When talking to a consequentialist, a deontologist should be prepared to discuss the goal. When talking to a deontologist, the consequentialist should likewise be prepared to discuss principle and the rule of law. Both viewpoints have value, and our discussion as Christians should be to treat everyone with value.

As we approach the dilemmas of conflict, Marshall provides three crucial questions we should ask. (**Marshall 125**)

1. What should I do?

This is the go-to question of deontology. What is something within the boundaries of legality that I can do to solve the issue? This is an important question for a Christian to ask because, as Christians, we should care about law and order.

There are plenty of illegal acts to avoid in the situation of immigration. We should not smuggle people across the border or tear down walls that are not on our property. There are also plenty of legal acts that we can achieve, such as supporting ministries along the border and giving benevolence to migrants in need in our local community. It is possible to help those who have come into the country illegally to achieve legal citizenship.

2. What is my goal?

The go-to question of the consequentialist is an excellent query to investigate. This is important for Christians to consider as we look forward to the end result goals of God's Kingdom.

As we keep the laws, we may ask if the laws are adequate and fair. As we examine our goals, we could unroot unjust systems that are the antithesis of the good life. Our goals can be small or large. Our goals can be small or large. We may create a single goal for the one person we can help in our community or choose to aim for statewide, national, or even international change.

3. Who am I becoming?

This is the question of the virtue ethicist. This person has wrestled with the extremes and come out balanced. They have integrated and grown from the perspective of others and are becoming someone who balances duty and purpose.

By asking these questions and integrating these perspectives, Christians can advocate for immigration policies that uphold justice, compassion, and human dignity.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the ethical dilemma of illegal immigration policy challenges Christians to navigate tensions between obedience to laws and compassion towards the marginalized. The hyper-extreme perspectives can cause us to yell angrily and refuse to listen to one another. However, by integrating deontological and consequential perspectives, Christians can wisely foster policies rooted in justice and love and become Christ's ambassadors. (**2 Corinthians 5:20**)

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