

A Biblical Perspective on Immigration

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A Biblical Perspective on Immigration

Introduction

How does the Bible shape our views on immigration?

For many Christians, the answer is "Hardly at all." Immigration feels like a political issue. The Bible seems irrelevant in a conversation focused on law and fairness and economics.

For other Christians, the Bible shapes their view on immigration in very specific ways. Specific verses sharply poke their way into conversation. A handful of words from Romans or Leviticus settle the matter.

But I long for a better, more rigorous, more thoroughly biblical way of thinking and talking about immigration. The Bible has to be relevant. It must do more than give us single-shot ammunition for political skirmishes. This is true about all issues, but blindingly obvious when it comes to immigration.

Over the last year, I have had a dozen or so extremely meaningful conversations about immigration. I've taught two seminars, dialogued with several InterVarsity Staff, and spent time with immigrant college students. And I've been digging through the Bible. I don't have all the answers, but I've found myself looking for them.

Whatever you believe about the politics of immigration, if you follow Jesus, you probably seek to submit yourself to God's Word. This will not automatically twist your politics in a specific way. Christians can in good conscience vote a variety of ways. What we can't and don't want to do is to view immigrants (or anyone else) without the lens of Scripture in place. But then, that's what I write about next ...

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There is More to Immigration Than Documents

*"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*
- excerpt from "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus

Perhaps you recognize this poem from the inside of the Statue of Liberty. What a spectacular image. Lady Liberty shining her light back to the Old World, a beacon for hopeful travelers, new hope in the New World.

This poem was written in 1883 to raise funds for the pedestal on which the statue stands. Millions of immigrants sailed into the New York harbor and received a welcome to the United States. My family fits that category.

But just a few months before Emma Lazarus crafted her poem for the Statue of Liberty, the U.S. Congress passed The Chinese Exclusion Act. This legislation was the first major restriction on immigration in the history of the United States. The law was racially motivated and gave rise to a new wave of human trafficking in the post-Civil War United States.

So, which is it?

Are we welcoming or exclusionary?

What values do we carry to the conversation? As we lay a foundation for a thoroughgoing biblical perspective on immigration, we must surface our predispositions. This is a core principle to engaging with biblical thought.

The dance of exclusion and embrace is woven throughout the Scriptures. In one breath, God's people are commanded to kill the natives in the Promised Land. In another, they are commanded to go out of their way to care for the stranger in their midst.

As we submit ourselves to Jesus' teaching and ethics, we find ourselves in an odd place with Scripture. Some parts resonate with us and excite us. Others disturb us and tempt us to pass them by without much examination.

Whatever you believe about immigration, your predispositions show up when you start studying what the Bible has to say on the subject.

For me, I struggled when I realized that there was more to immigration than documents, that is to say that the immigration conversation is not merely a question of the law.

In the United States, we currently host over 37,000,000 immigrants. Less than a third of them are here without documents. The vast majority came to the United States legally, live here legally and are completely ignored by most conversations about immigration.

But these immigrants are not ignored by the Bible.

In fact, the Bible does something fascinating when it comes to immigration: **The Bible does not assume there will be legal and illegal immigration, just that there will be immigrants.** The biblical ethic doesn't provide one set of guidelines for people with documents and another for people without. God's people never built border fences. It would have been a foreign concept to them.

The Bible doesn't talk much about **immigration**, though it does have a lot to say about **immigrants**.

This is just one gap that I've had to jump across as I've attempted to think in a rigorously biblical way about immigration. The Bible was not written with my cultural moment in mind. Though the Bible is relevant, if I don't question my presuppositions, I'll miss what it has to say.

What presuppositions do you bring to the Bible when you try to construct a biblical perspective on immigration for yourself?

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Immigration is Not Primarily Political

The immigration conversation often gets framed politically.

Honestly, I'm hesitant to share what I'm learning about immigration for fear of political fights. When some people hear that I'm teaching on immigration, they make assumptions about where I'm coming from and what I'll be saying.

That's the world we live in. But that's not the world of the Bible.

The Bible doesn't assume immigration is a political issue, at least, not primarily.

But this is where we often start. We often start with these verses ...

"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer." - Romans 13:1-4¹

At first glance, this seems a solid starting place. "Submit to the governing authorities." Obey the law and it will be like you are obeying God himself. Obey the law and you will have no reason to fear.

We hear that we are a nation of laws. Our laws, for the most part, are clear and easy to follow. Law-abiding people are welcomed. Break the law and face the consequences. It seems simple. It even seems biblical.

But it isn't.

Simple, that is. It isn't simple. And it isn't exactly or strictly biblical.

Look at the author. Paul obeyed the law. Except when he didn't. He preached illegally. He bucked the governing authorities at great cost. The authorities wielded the sword to use it to remove Paul's head.

Paul isn't an isolated example. The apostles resisted the governing authorities, claiming "we must obey God rather than men." And they paid the price.

¹ Unless indicated, all Bible quotations are taken from the New International Version (NIV) translation.

Jesus also paid that price.

In the bigger narrative, strict adherence to law was not the example we were set. We follow a tradition and a God who resisted authorities, who toppled them and triumphed over them.

So what do we do with verses like this? And what does this mean for our conversation about immigration?

The context provides a clue.

I find it fascinating to read the verses that come right before these verses in Romans 13. Do you know what they say?

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." - Romans 12:21

Think about this. "Overcome evil with good." How is evil conquered? Mysterious and terrible, evil ultimately met its match as Christ died on the cross and triumphed in the resurrection. Christ submitted to the governing authorities. In a miscarriage of justice, he overcame evil with good.

The good Paul is talking about looks like submitting to the governing authorities, accepting the consequences of living a Christ-like life in a Christ-created community.

And that life looks like this ...

"Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited." - Romans 12:9-16

What do you notice about this life, this community? Deep relationships. Others-centeredness. Commitment to the Lord. Hospitality. Shalom. Humility.

It is wonderfully difficult to have abstract political conversations with real people in your vision, people you are called to love, to show hospitality toward to live in harmony with, to be willing to associate with ... despite the politics of it.

Political conversations often ignore the human reality. But the Bible doesn't allow for that.

Here's the human reality in the immigration conversation:

- Immigrants are people
- The children and families of immigrants are people
- The natives and locals are people
- The recent arrivals are people
- The Minutemen guarding the border are people
- The ICE agents are people
- People with documents are people
- People without documents are people
- Democrats and Republicans ... they're people too

Throughout the Bible, you see a clear trend: people come before politics.

The real call of God is to love real people and to love the real God who makes real love possible. Love can eventually lead to a variety of political postures and positions. But we must start with love.

We have to start with people.

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Immigrants in the Bible

Have you noticed how many biblical people have immigrant experiences?

Adam and Eve

As a consequence of sin, they live in exile, in a place where hard labor and pain feature prominently in their day-to-day lives. They were immigrants.

Abraham, Sarah and Lot

In response to God's call they pick up everything and head to a new country. They struggle to maintain their unique identity and compromise with the host culture with fiery consequences. They were immigrants.

Joseph

Despite his brothers' evil intentions, Joseph finds himself fulfilling God's good purposes after being sold into slavery, trafficked to another country and working his way to a place of influence. He was an immigrant.

Moses

Though his people served as cheap labor, his host country took steps to subdue and control the growth of his family. Supported by miracle after miracle, Moses led his people from a land where they were foreigners to a place they could call their own. He was an immigrant.

Ruth

Married to an immigrant and loyal even after she entered widowhood, Ruth left her home and her people, her culture and her support systems to travel to a new country. She worked on the edges of society and within the law to provide for her mother-in-law. She was an immigrant.

Jesus

He left the comfort and glory of heaven to experience the pain and death and cold of our world. Our missionary God, he accepted displacement for the sake of our salvation. He is an immigrant.

And what can we say about David or Daniel, about Jacob or Joshua, about Ezra or Nehemiah, about Peter or Paul or Priscilla, about the Exile or the Great Commission? The theme of immigration is woven throughout the entire Bible, as immigrants play starring roles.

How does God feel about immigrants? That will be our next topic.

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God Shows Special Concern for Immigrants

What sort of religion does God our Father accept as pure and faultless?

James 1:27 has the answer: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

These are core concepts in biblical ethics: God's people are called to live holy lives and God's people are supposed to take care of the vulnerable. It's this idea of "care of the vulnerable" that I want to focus in on tonight.

The Bible doesn't just leave us with a vague prescription to care for the vulnerable (though the principle can be expanded later, if you want). The Bible gets specific with three classes that God singles out for special charitable attention.

What are those three classes?

Widows and orphans, to start off with. #1 and #2. Right off the bat.

So, what's #3?

You've read the title to this section. You know the answer.

Widows and orphans and immigrants.

Now, we often ignore this third protected class. In part, this is because of the above-mentioned verse. If God has a special concern for immigrants and wants his people to go and do likewise, why do we hear about widows and orphans but not immigrants in James 1:27?

The answer is quite simple: James 1:1. James address his entire letter to "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." People debate whether this means that this letter was only written for Jews or for Jewish Christians or whether the "twelve tribes" language is metaphorical for the church.

Whatever you believe, James was writing to people who were scattered. James was writing to people living "among the nations." I think he was writing to immigrants.

In fact, throughout the Bible, God seems to pay a lot of attention to immigrants. He noticed the oppression of a group of immigrants in Egypt and set them free (through immigration). He arranged the laws of Israel to protect immigrants. He intervened in the lives of immigrants to bring healing and life.

But why? Why does God care about immigrants?

The immigrant experience resonates with the bigger story of humanity. We are all living in exile, refugees, trying to make our way in a dry and thirsty land. The frame of the biblical narrative tells a story of a people who left their home and returned to it after many, many generations. Your ancestors may have left Cuba or Mexico or China, but before that it was Eden. We fell and how great was that fall!

This idea extends to all of the protected classes: a woman separated from her husband, a child separated from parents, a person separated from home. These all stand in for the human condition: separated from relationship with God, from his protection and from his presence.

Few, in our society encourage the abandonment of widows. Instead, we extend the category to include single moms and folks who have experienced divorce and abandonment. We go out of our way as a community to take care of them, to show them love and compassion.

Likewise with orphans. You'll never hear a pastor say "Let those orphans take care of themselves." Instead, we have Orphan Sundays and celebrate adoption.

And all this is good and pleases God. Because God cares for these people.

What would it look like for us to go and do likewise with immigrants?

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God the Immigrant

Another reason God shows a special concern for immigrants is that, in the fullness of time, he became one himself.

God the Son entered our world in the flesh as Christ Jesus our Lord.

Christian theology claims that God the Son has existed since before the beginning of the world in community with God the Father and God the Spirit, three persons yet mysteriously one God. Their dwelling place - the eternal dwelling place of God - has been called "heaven."

The God of heaven has also been present in our world. God made the world and sustains it continually. He is fully present in all places and at all times, even if human beings are not aware of his presence. He intervenes in history for our good and his glory.

Yet, in the incarnation of God the Son, God became human and entered the world in a new way. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, it is fair to say that God immigrated.

No cultural divide is greater than that between heaven and earth.

On the one hand, you have an eternal and pure realm, where God's presence is plainly seen and all acknowledge his rule and reign.

On the other, you have a world created perfectly but broken by sin and death, where stories of God are filled with static and none look to him with love apart from his intervention.

No immigrant has been more unwanted than God the Immigrant.

Humanity erected a wall of sin, attempting to keep him out. Yet he still entered our world. It took a miracle to get him here, bending the very laws of nature, but he came anyways.

His entire generation was persecuted, as Herod slaughtered children right and left attempting to stave off a shift in the balance of political power. Jesus' parents then were forced to leave Israel and spend years as refugees in Egypt, later settling in Nazareth (away from home) for fear of persecution.

All his life, Jesus was labeled as an outsider, from Nazareth, a Galilean.

He was denied access to the standard means of authenticating a ministry: an honorable family history, a formal education, a stamp of approval from the religious elite.

And ultimately, he was executed without justice, the most horrible deportation ever.

No immigrant has ever had a harder experience.

But the Bible says Jesus did what he did for the joy set before him.

God became an immigrant because he loved the world.

God became an immigrant for us and for our salvation.

God became an immigrant to enter into the story of Israel.

God became an immigrant.

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Immigration and the Justice of God

There has been a lot of fabulous work done on Old Testament laws that protect immigrants. I would highly recommend you check out Daniel Carroll's book [Christians at the Border](#) and Matt Soerens and Jenny Hwang's [Welcoming the Stranger](#).

Without repeating their excellent work, I want to point out one idea when it comes to immigration.

God desires that immigrants be treated justly.

Our temptation with "justice," is to define "justice" as "behavior within the law." To treat immigrants with justice, then, may look like protecting them from abuse and arresting them if their documents are out of line.

But the justice of God doesn't assume the law. At least, the justice of God doesn't assume the human law.

When God formed and re-formed and re-re-formed his people, he gave them a new set of laws. The laws God gave his people looked a lot like the laws they already had, the laws of the surrounding culture. Moses has a lot in common with Hammurabi. Paul has a lot in common with Philo. But the law of God always pushed the edges of local law.

Jesus was famous for this.

In his teaching on divorce, he shifted the conversation from "When **can** a man divorce his wife?" to "When **must** a man divorce his wife?" In his teaching on neighborliness, he shift the conversation from "To whom **must** I prove neighbor?" to "To whom **can** I prove neighbor?"

We can see God's values from his law. When Jesus teaches on the law, he always pushes people to consider the heart and the Person behind it.

This comes through with blinding clarity in Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25:31-46. Jesus teaches that a long list of kind and generous deeds, done for a certain set of people, will be considered as though they had been done for him. See how deeply he identifies with these people. These deeds are done for him. Even if the doers don't realize it.

This principle of identification, which I wrote about in the last section, lies behind and beneath, as a foundation for Jesus' ethic of generosity. Jesus doesn't just tell people to be generous. He tells them why. **Be generous to these people because I so closely identify with them that everything you do for them will be, in some mysterious way, done for me.**

What does this have to do with immigration?

Buried in the center of this list in Matthew 25 is this phrase: "I was a stranger and you invited me in."

The word "stranger" reverberates back through the Old Testament. In Genesis 15, God's people are called out to be strangers. This is re-affirmed later in Leviticus 25 as they are reminded that they live in the land as strangers. And a few breaths later they are called to help their fellow-strangers.

But the Why behind all this lay obscured in shadow until the right time. When God revealed himself in Christ, the reason behind his legal command for justice for immigrants finally became clear.

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The Immigrant Church

Every church is called to be an immigrant church.

The concept of an immigrant church may be foreign to you (pardon the pun). Immigrant churches are everywhere. Sometimes they're organized around a non-majority culture language. Sometimes they form around a persecuted community. Sometimes they form around people who have a common formative going-out experience.

In your neighborhood, look for a Korean Presbyterian Church or a Chinese Baptist Church. Look for a church whose services are not in English. They're not too hard to find, if you look carefully.

Immigrant churches have existed through history. German Christians set up shop in England and Spain (Bonhoeffer actually pastored German congregations in both countries). British Christians fled to the Netherlands before they moved to Massachusetts, "befriended" the locals and gave us Thanksgiving. Immigrants formed churches in Persia and China. Immigrants from Jerusalem planted most of the early Christian churches.

These immigrant churches are easy to identify. **Immigrant churches act and look and speak in ways that are distinct from the world around them.** And, yet, there's more to being an immigrant church than this.

In 1 Peter 2, the Apostle calls the church to live as foreigners and aliens in the midst of the pagan culture. They are to live distinct lives, present but separate. This distinctiveness is difficult to maintain. This is why Stanley Hauerwas jokes that the church doesn't have to make the world more just, but instead has to make the world the world.

Who knows this better than immigrants? **As immigrants struggle with assimilation, they live out a metaphor for every Christian community.** Distinct in language, composition and behavior. The distinctiveness that emerges en la idioma que hablamos, also emerges in the way we speak the truth in love and speak the truth to power. It emerges in the make-up of our community. It emerges in how we live our lives.

Immigrants are a gift to the church because the church is called to be an immigrant church. Yet many of us are not immigrants. We live in the places where we grew up. We feel comfortable in the culture. And when God calls to live as foreigners and exiles, we don't know where to begin.

Thank God for immigrants. **Whether they know it or not, they teach us what it looks like to be the church Jesus calls us to be.** Without them, we'd be lost. By God's grace, we will always have immigrants in our midst. By God's grace, our churches will be immigrant churches.

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Campus Applications Concerning Immigration

Many of our Christian students have had their thinking about immigration shaped by everything but their faith. Personal experience gets a say, as does upbringing and environment and culture and politics. But faith? What happens when our faith begins to shape our engagement with the immigration conversation?

Here are four campus applications ...

1) We need to reach out to international students

If God has a special concern for immigrants, so should we. Every year, students come to campus on visas, move here for school, many knowing no one. They should be on our radar. They should be on our hearts.

Practicing hospitality is a key activity. Opening up your life and your schedule to international students makes a huge difference. Many schools have programs designed to connect international students with local hosts. We can offer ourselves to them. Who knows what God will do?

2) We need to reach out to undocumented students

Whatever you believe about the politics around immigration, undocumented students are some of the most vulnerable students on campus. They struggle to have access to resources that citizen-students and visa-students enjoy. A compassionate response to them honors Jesus, who in wild grace experienced compassion for us when we were trapped in disobedience and rebellion. How can we not, like him, show love to these students?

Educating yourself is a key activity here. I can't more highly recommend [Welcoming the Stranger](#) by Matthew Soerens and Jenny Hwang. This is an excellent book. A must-read as you educate yourself and your community about undocumented students in your midst.

3) We need to share this material

It saddens me to see how rarely our faith communities engage in the conversation about immigration. A few good talks could make a big difference. A voice at the right moment helps people use a biblical lens. A passionate advocate creates a ripple effect, a community of advocacy.

Conversations like these happen frequently on college campuses. Yet these conversations often remain abstract and political. And though the political realm has to engage the immigration conversation, God was talking about it first. We can inject a dose of deep God-reality into the conversations about immigration that are already happening on campus. And we can offer

students advocacy and ministry experiences that help them to put some action behind their thinking around the immigration conversation.

4) We need to pray

Our campuses face a deep and seductive temptation when it comes to immigration: to welcome only the privileged immigrants to our campuses. Economic demands and historic protocol have paved a pathway of immigration for the wealthy, the already well-educated, and the well-connected. And we need to welcome them. It is wonderful that they can be with us.

But there are immigrants who struggle to access our campuses and struggle to thrive there. And the power that creates these struggles is so deeply entrenched. This kind can only come out by prayer and fasting. And this we can do.

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Sources & For Further Reading

These essays were originally posted on my blog from October-November

- www.yosteve.blogspot.com The complete series can be found [online](#).

Throughout these essays, I refer to the following books:

- ***Christians at the Border*** by R. Daniel Carroll M.
- ***Welcoming the Stranger*** by Matthew Soerens and Jenny Hwang

I would also recommend:

- **The Evangelical Immigration Table** (<http://evangelicalimmigrationtable.com>).
The Evangelical Immigration Table published the "I Was a Stranger" Challenge and The Evangelical Statement of Principles for Immigration Reform which many leaders including InterVarsity President, Alec Hill has signed.