

IMMIGRATION

A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

A M25i Conversation White Paper



MATTHEW 25
INITIATIVE

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The purpose of this white paper is to briefly introduce a theology of immigration for evangelical Anglican churches in North America. First, the theme of migration within the biblical narrative will be examined. Attention will then be given to the early Christian tradition and how the Church has thought about immigration. Finally, and building on this case, application will be made concerning immigration in the context of the United States-Mexico border and the responsibility of Christians today.

I. IMMIGRATION IN THE BIBLE

The commandments in Scripture regarding God's concern for the treatment of the sojourner abound. Second only to the love of God alone, welcoming the stranger is among the most frequent commands in the Hebrew Scriptures.¹ Natalie Foote, the director at Restoration Immigration, said, "after working with immigrants and asylum-seekers for over five years, I am beginning to understand why there are so many Scriptures that specifically express God's love, care and commitment to protect them. There is a unique kind of loneliness that accompanies the loss of home and country. There is devastation and desolation in finding oneself in a place that is utterly foreign, with no resources, status, power or rights." Israel is repeatedly told not to mistreat the sojourner (Exod. 22:21; 23:9). The Psalms declare that "the Lord watches over the foreigner" (Psalm 146:9). Disobedient and unfaithful leaders of Israel are condemned in Ezekiel for having "oppressed the foreigner and mistreated the fatherless and the widow" (Ezek 22:7). In Zechariah, God instructs the people not to "oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor" (Zech 7:10).

The Israelites were accustomed to having foreigners in their midst. When they fled Egypt, theirs was a "mixed multitude" (Exod 12:38). In ancient Israel, those without land were especially vulnerable. God's law reflects an awareness of this for widows, orphans, hired workers, servants, and the poor, but no less for foreigners. Members of these groups qualified for the gleaning law, which held that those with fertile land should leave the edges and leftovers of their fields unharvested for the sake of those in need (Lev. 19:10).²

The protections in place in Israel for outsiders were unique among other nations at the time. The law codes of the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians do not appear to make any provision for migrants.³ The legislation in the Old Testament stands in sharp contrast to this with its consistent emphasis on care and hospitality for the sojourner.⁴

¹ "Orlando Espín, "Immigration and Theology: Reflections by an Implicated Theologian," *Hispanic Theological Initiative: Perspectives*, 46-47. <https://perspectivasonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/2006-Fall.pdf>. Accessed Feb 2, 2022.

² Karen Gonzalez, *The God Who Sees: Immigrants, the Bible, and the Journey to Belong* (Harrisonburg: Herald Press, 2019), Loc. 324: "Indeed, in the story of Ruth we find this command carried out. Naomi and Ruth's story reveals a vision of a whole community that cares for immigrants and others in vulnerable situations."

³ M. Daniel Carroll R, *Christians at the Border: Immigration, The Church and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, Second Edition, 2013) 99.

⁴ Carroll, 102

Another reason Scripture gives for showing graciousness to the foreigner is found in Israel's own past experience as "foreigners in Egypt" (Deut 10:19).⁵ Whatever prosperity and freedom they might enjoy in the future, they were never to forget their deliverance by God's hand out of bondage and alienation under Pharaoh: "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 19:34).⁶ Failure to do this invited the rebuke of God and the prophets.⁷

At the same time, foreigners were also expected to work and take on certain responsibilities.⁸ They were to be given a place of belonging and opportunity to contribute to the community. The Prophets even anticipate a time when sojourners and foreigners will be able to receive land alongside the people of Israel (Ezek 47:21-23; Isaiah 14:1).⁹

In addition to the high regard for migrants in the Old Testament law, the people of God themselves and many of the Bible's most central characters lived as outsiders and foreigners, oftentimes led or forced away from their homes. Beginning with Abraham, God calls him and says, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you" (Gen 12:1). Along the way, not unlike the experience of countless others throughout history, Abram and Sarai have to seek aid from another country — Egypt — due to a famine (Gen 12:10). Several generations later, history repeats itself when Joseph, son of Jacob, has to live in Egypt for many years under the rule of Potiphar after being sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. Years later, his father and brothers come to Egypt for food as foreigners as well (Isaac, son of Abraham, had to move to Philistine territory because of a famine too (Gen 26:1)). God's goodness is put on display through Joseph's favor with Potiphar and by Joseph's merciful response to his family (Gen 41:57-42:6; 43:1-7). In Exodus, Moses, born a Hebrew slave, leads his people out of Egypt at God's directive and is never himself permitted to settle in the promised land. Any number of other accounts could be cited: from Ruth to David and Esther to Daniel, God works through and watches over his people away from their homeland in the face of threats, persecution, exile, and exploitation.

Of course, no example is more pertinent than that of Jesus himself who, with Mary and Joseph, had to seek refuge and asylum from King Herod's tyrannical decree (Matt 2:13-18). The incarnation itself, for that matter, as God's coming to humanity in Christ, represents a migratory mission on God's part for the sake of the world. In ways that seem to draw on Thomas Aquinas's idea of *exitus et reditus* (everything comes from God and returns to God),¹⁰ Karl Barth describes the incarnation in terms of "the way of the Son of God into the far country."¹¹ Furthermore, Christians themselves are newcomers to Israel. The promises of God in the Old Testament were not first and foremost directed toward the Gentiles.

⁵ Ibid., 104.

⁶ "The rehearsal at the feasts of their history as immigrants in Egypt and the reminder to be gracious to outsiders and the downcast were exercises in collective memory. All of this, ideally, was crucial for their formation as a people of virtue, especially the virtue of generous hospitality. Stated another way, the arrival and presence of sojourners were not a threat to Israel's national identity; rather, their presence was fundamental to its very meaning" (Ibid, 109-10).

⁷ Ibid., 109.

⁸ Ibid., 105.

⁹ Ibid., 106.

¹⁰ As Groody notes, "Aquinas notes that the basic principle of the moral life, the natural law, and all of creation are dynamic by nature in that everything comes from God and returns to God (*exitus et reditus*). Migration names what it means to be human before God: the movement from God the Creator, the return to God, and the condition of that return in Christ the mediator. See Aquinas, ST 1-2, q. 92." Daniel G. Groody, *Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees*. Theological Studies, Issue 70 (2009). <https://www3.nd.edu/~dgroody/Published%20Works/Journal%20Articles/files/TSSeptember-09Groody.pdf>. Accessed Feb 4, 2022.

¹¹ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation: Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (New York: Continuum, 2004) 157-210.

Finally, Jesus's own teachings are paramount. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) and the inclusion of the category of "stranger" or "foreigner" in the list of "the least of these" (Matt 25:35, 38, 43-44) echoes the law and the prophets, as does the greatest commandment to love God and neighbor (Matt 22:34-40). Practitioner Jason Braun says, "Matthew 23:39 speaks to me every day. Immigrants are our neighbors." However, much like the Old Testament, it is not merely the commands that must be considered, but also the actions and stories themselves. Throughout Jesus's ministry, he is constantly seeking out those who society overlooks, excludes, or shuns. While Jesus is willing to show mercy to anyone who approaches him in humility, it is the outsiders, the powerless, and the vulnerable who are featured most prominently in his ministry.

II. IMMIGRATION IN THE TRADITION

Christian theologians throughout history have often spoken of the whole Christian Church as a "pilgrim people," a people on the move.¹² The early church in particular was comprised of all different types of people and brought individuals together across an extraordinary variety of socio-economic, political, and cultural divides.¹³ Equally, and in keeping with the teaching of the Scriptures, leaders and teachers in the first centuries of the church have stressed the responsibility of welcoming those who find themselves displaced and outcast.

In Origen's commentary on the Letter to the Romans, he speaks of hospitality as a solicitous act.¹⁴ Christians do not merely wait for the person in need to present themselves, in other words. They proactively seek out and prepare to protect and provide for the sojourner. This accords with the writer of Hebrews who instructs Christians not to neglect showing hospitality to strangers (Heb 13:1-2).

A century or so later, John Chrysostom singles out hospitality as well: "Think of this, then, regarding Christ. He is wandering and a pilgrim, needing shelter; and you spend your time adorning the floor, the walls, and the capitals of the columns, and hanging lamps with golden chains ... All of these treasures can be taken away ...; what you do for your brother who is hungry, an immigrant, or naked, not even the devil himself can take from you."¹⁵

Saint Augustine, for his part, warns against the pride that can arise for welcoming the stranger, but in doing so takes for granted that Christians will be welcoming: "Let no one become proud because he welcomes an immigrant: Christ was a migrant. Christ, welcomed and aided, was greater than those who welcomed and aided him ... Let no one then, my brothers, be proud when he helps the poor, not even in his spirit."¹⁶ St. Augustine even questioned whether migrants should be labeled so if the world human beings inhabit belongs to all.¹⁷

¹² Orlando Espín, "Migration and Human Condition: Theological Considerations on Religious Identities and Unexpected Inter-Religious Dialogue." In: R. Fornet- Betancourt, ed. *Migration und Interkulturalität: Theologische und Philosophische Herausforderungen* (Aachen, Germany: Wissenschaftsverlag Mainz, 2004), 177-188.

¹³ Origen, *On First Principles*, 257. <https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/1873/rel11origen.PDF> Accessed Feb 3, 2022.

¹⁴ Jesuit Alberto Ares, "Refugees in Tradition and the Magisterium" in *Aleteia: Issues and Implications* (January 12, 2018). <https://aleteia.org/2018/01/12/refugees-in-tradition-and-the-magisterium/>. Accessed Feb. 2, 2022.

¹⁵ St. John Chrysostom, *Homily L*. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf110.iii.L.html>. Accessed February 4, 2022.

¹⁶ Jesuit Alberto Ares, "Refugees in Tradition and the Magisterium."

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

This is very close to what the contemporary Hispanic theologian, Orlando Espin, has said: “No one can hope to participate in the Reign of God without first admitting that he/she is an “immigrant” in that Reign.”¹⁸ Expounding on the notion that all belong and all are immigrants, Espin stresses the theme of the catholicity of the church.¹⁹ The church is catholic in the sense that it knows no humanly constructed boundaries along the lines of culture, race, class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, or geography. Though always particular and local, the church is also universal. The barriers erected by political and socio-economic forces are transcended by the Spirit and by the Eucharist, which establishes a global community and identity in Christ.

One of the earliest Christian apologetic documents, *The Epistle to Diogenes*, describes Christians this way: “They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers.”²⁰ This is arguably one of the most distinctive aspects to Christianity in its history, namely, its capacity to attract people, be transmitted, and to adapt itself across a multitude of social, cultural, and geopolitical borders. Indeed, ethnic and national diversity in the church is a chief characteristic, rather than an obstacle, to its catholicity.

In light of this catholicity, Espin raises two rhetorical questions that seem appropriate for churches in North America to consider:²¹

1. First, he asks, “can we be “catholic” without recognizing in ourselves and in our immigrant neighbors the “pilgrim” condition so emphatically taught by the Scriptures and required of all who hope to participate in the Reign of God—thereby making immigration the contemporary definition of “pilgrim Church”—with all that the latter implies (or should imply) in ecclesiology?”
2. And secondly, “can we discover in the immigrant (and in the experience of immigration) the very dimension of catholicity that defines Christianity, thereby making the fair treatment of the immigrant, and our understanding of the experience of immigration, necessary to Christianity (not just pastorally but dogmatically)”?

In order to gain further perspective on the potential responses to and applications of these questions, we now turn to the contemporary U.S.-Mexico border context.

III. IMMIGRATION TODAY

Globally and regionally from Mexico to the U.S., the sheer volume of migrant movement in the last half century or so is historically unprecedented.²² Nearly 250 million people, or one out of every 30 people around the world, are living away from their homelands.²³ Even with the proportion of the population

¹⁸ Espin, 46-7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *The Epistle to Diognetus* 5: 1.5. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0101.htm>

²¹ “Orlando Espín, “Immigration and Theology: Reflections by an Implicated Theologian,” 46-7

²² <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trend/archive/summer-2016/global-migrations-rapid-rise>; Some of the most important sources on migration statistics come from the World Bank (<http://www.worldbank.org>), the International Organization of Migration (IOM, <https://www.iom.int>), the International Labor Organization (ILO, <http://www.ilo.org/global/lang-en/index.htm>), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, <http://www.unhcr.org>). Accessed Feb. 2, 2022

²³ International Migrant Stock, 2015. <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates15.asp>. Accessed Feb 3, 2022

taken into consideration, the increase continues.²⁴

While often judged to be a problem on its own, immigration is usually a symptom of bigger human crises like poverty, persecution, war, and natural disasters.²⁵ Additionally, one of the major developments in the world over the last century or so has been what could be called the phenomenon of globalization. Globalization has largely been brought about by the seemingly unlimited reach of the global economy and the ability of transnational corporations to overwhelm local markets with outsourced labor and through new trade agreements in their favor. There are both benefits and costs as a result of this, and whether the benefits outweigh the costs is greatly disputed. Whatever the case may be, for the so-called developing world, a common short-term consequence of this process is the disruption of labor markets and the push and pull of workers and families across borders. These forces also tend to open the door to illicit industries like drug and human trafficking for recruiting new workforces and expanding business. Whatever the causes of unemployment, underemployment, or other kinds of insecurity may be, though, there is little question that these things are a leading cause of migration.

Overall, the poverty in the South and the affluence of the North — while these simplistic characterizations fail to tell the whole story — do amount to a kind of immigration tug-of-war. Many new jobs have indeed been created in the U.S. over the last several decades that do not require extensive, formal education (in agriculture and hospitality, for example). However, the immigrant visa quotas in the U.S. at present, many of which were set in 1965, do not provide enough visas to meet the demand of the labor market.²⁶ Mathew Soerens and Jenny Yang summarize the political situation this way: “Because the consequences of fully enforcing the law — deposing all those who are unlawfully present — would be cataclysmic both on an economic and a humanitarian level, few political leaders seriously support mass deportation of all undocumented immigrants, but they have also not found the consensus to create the mechanism to remedy their status.”²⁷

The concept of legal or illegal immigration probably does not exist in the biblical time period, but neither does it exist for much of the early history of the United States. Virtually all immigrants were considered legal by the government for the first 150 years of US history.²⁸ This officially changed in the early-to-mid Twentieth Century, but even then, illegal entry was rarely prosecuted. Things did begin to shift in the late 1990s.²⁹ However, it wasn’t until after September 11, 2001, that the political climate took a significant turn. Still, deportations were not consistently carried out. They accelerated after 2008 and have continued in the last decade, including the highly controversial practice of separating children from parents. This practice was halted due to strong public outcry in 2018.³⁰

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Jason Braun says of his ministry: The most common misconception about our ministry is from people that have a single source of information regarding immigration. They believe the people ‘flooding’ the borders are here to take jobs and are only coming to the United States for a better life. The journey to the United States is as harrowing as what they are fleeing in the first place. They know before they make the trip that being robbed is almost a guaranty, a high probability of being kidnapped and extorted, sexually assaulted and killed. Yet, they still come. That speaks volumes to what they are fleeing. They are not coming simply for a better life but because they face imminent death.

²⁶ Matthew Soerens and Jenny Yang, *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion and Truth in the Immigration Debate* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2018 (Revised Edition)), 99.

²⁷ Soerens, 99.

²⁸ Ibid., 94.

²⁹ Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, United States Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/104/crpt/hrpt828/CRPT-104hrpt828.pdf>

³⁰ Family Separation Under the Trump Administration: A Time Line,” The Southern Poverty Law Center, June 17, 2020. <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2020/06/17/family-separation-under-trump-administration-timeline>. Accessed Feb. 4, 2022.

The number of those who are coming to the United States as of early 2022 has risen sharply since 2020, but it is still difficult to say that historical highs have been reached. Moreover, misinformation and highly charged rhetoric about a crisis at the border picked up long before these numbers began to rise. The language of invasion and chaos has been invoked, while in reality, the primary difference in immigration in the last few years from the past has been the growing number of families and unaccompanied minors crossing the border and seeking asylum at legal ports of entry — not the total number of people crossing.³¹

IV. CONCLUSION

To conclude, while the specific circumstances in which immigration takes place should certainly be taken into account, a Christian understanding of immigration begins and ends with the recognition that everyone who belongs to Christ is an immigrant in this world. Followers of Jesus do not derive their primary political identity from their national citizenship but rather from their belonging to the Kingdom of God. Thus, when questions are raised by U.S. government officials and by the non-Christian voting population about what “we” should do about “them,” Christians who are U.S. citizens should be the first to differentiate their thinking from this framing. Instead, as those who have been naturalized and adopted into the family of God by his grace and mercy of Christ, we strive to see ourselves in the immigrant other and seek to enter into solidarity with their social status. As Natalie Foote puts it, “God is near the broken-hearted and close to those who are crushed in spirit. God is with those who have no worldly protections. This is God’s nature and who He is. When we care for and protect the sojourner, we join God in the work He is already doing, and has been doing from the beginning.”

Until somewhat recently, the U.S. and its European counterparts in the West have generally responded with sympathy to refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in the world who have been displaced by various geopolitical conflicts. While the change has been gradual, the question of who should be received has become very contentious and polemicized in the last two presidential election cycles.³² Understandably, many Christians live in the tension between the natural desire for safety and security, on the one hand, and the supernatural desire to show compassion to the vulnerable, on the other hand. Nonetheless, fear and the influence of partisan media has clearly played a disproportionate role in shaping political imagination in churches. A LifeWay Research survey of American evangelical Christians in 2015 showed that only 12 percent are forming their perspective on the issues of immigration from the standpoint of the Bible.³³ Recent studies have also shown that white evangelicals are more opposed to immigration reform, and have more negative views about immigrants, than any other religious demographic.³⁴

Old Testament Scholar Danny Carroll boldly asserts that: “How the law is structured, the kinds of privileges and protections it offers, the demands and limits it imposes, and the institutions it establishes reveal

³¹ Jessica Bolter, “It’s Too Simple to Call 2021 a Record Year for Migration at the US-Mexico Border”, Migration Policy Institute, Oct 2021 <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/2021-migration-us-mexico-border>

³² Stephan Bauman, Matthew Soerens, Issam Smeir, *Seeking Refuge: On the Shores of the Global Refugee Crisis* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016), 18-19.

³³ “Evangelical Views on Immigration,” the Evangelical Immigration Table and World Relief, February 2015 <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Evangelical-Views-on-Immigration-Report.pdf>. Accessed Feb. 2, 2022.

³⁴ HollBetsy Cooper et al., “How Americans View Immigrants, and What They Want from Immigration Reform: Findings from the 2015 American Values Atlas,” Public Religion Research Institute. <https://www.prri.org/research/poll-immigration-reform-views-on-immigrants/>. Accessed Feb. 2, 2022.

that society's system of values and priorities. It discloses what that society understands to be correct and good."³⁵ Churches in North America may not always be able to substantially influence public policy or affect changes to current laws that seem unjust, out-dated or contradictory. And Christians are certainly called to respect and cooperate with government authorities. Furthermore, the particularities of each case should determine *how* immigrants will be defended and protected. From a Christian point of view, however, *whether* they should be defended and protected, even if at significant cost or with much struggle, is not in question. Scripture is clear on this issue, and so are the voices of the saints. Beyond this, a close look at the U.S.-Mexico context also reveals the stronghold of an unwelcoming spirit extended toward migrants. By whatever means available that conform to Christ and his teachings, the Church is called to stand with immigrants.

³⁵ Carroll, 99.

⁶ *“Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?*

⁷ *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?*

⁸ *Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.*

⁹ *Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’*

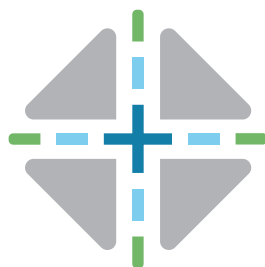
*If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,*

¹⁰ *if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.*

¹¹ *And the Lord will guide you continually
and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters do not fail.*

¹² *And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to dwell in.*

ISAIAH 58:6-12



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