

## Looking to the Bible to inform our conversation about immigration

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# Sojourners in a Strange Land

Discussions about immigration can quickly become heated. Stories of criminal activities or economic burdens from those who want to slow the flow of newcomers into the country or force many who are already here to return to their home countries compete with accounts of suffering by those who risked much to come. Both sides marshal data either to discount or defend the contributions that immigrants make to society.

These impassioned exchanges inevitably do nothing more than confirm already settled positions. There is little give and take, not much effort to seek common ground. Emotionally laden sound bites are no substitute for reasoned thinking about the multiple challenges that immigration poses to the United States.

What are Christian citizens to

think? How are we to sift through opposing points of view and move beyond the rhetoric?

The economic impact of immigration on schools, health care, and the environment, the presence of gangs, or the change in the demographic makeup of the workplace are important topics that must be dealt with. As Christians we need to approach the issues from a *self-consciously Christian point of view*.

What does the Bible say about immigration? Is there anything in God's word about the migration of peoples, a worldwide phenomenon throughout all of history? In fact, both the Old and New Testaments have much to offer about immigration.

### The Place to Begin

As we approach the subject, we must remember that immigration is about real people with real worth. Genesis

1:26-28 declares that all human beings are made in the image of God. Even though there are different ways of understanding what exactly the image of God entails, each individual has great value in the eyes of God and has unique potential. If discussions on immigration can begin with this fundamental truth, then we can avoid the demeaning language and unkind labels that sometimes appear in the media and in conversation.

Christians must remember that every immigrant is God's creation, made in God's image. Whatever the feelings about economic issues and questions related to legal status, immigrants are individuals who should be treated with dignity and respect. What is more, a very large percentage of the millions of recent immigrants are practicing Christians. They are brothers and sisters in the faith.

## The People of God on the Move

People have been on the move since the beginning of time. They move (or are forced to move) for different reasons, such as hunger, war, and natural disasters. This is as true today as it was in ancient times. The Old Testament is full of accounts about displaced people and their lives in foreign lands. When we read these stories, it is easy to pass over the fact that we are reading about foreigners living in a strange land.

For some, migration is about survival. In Genesis Abraham goes to Egypt, even as years later Jacob would send his sons there, to find food (Genesis 12, 42-43); likewise, Isaac moved

a foreign country. She came to Bethlehem and worked in the fields to sustain herself and her mother-in-law. Her demeanor and efforts caught the eye of Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi. Eventually this Israelite marries this Moabite immigrant. Their son Obed becomes the grandfather of David, Israel's greatest king and forefather of Jesus. How mysterious are the ways of God!

Other biblical characters are taken away from their homes and must build a new life else-

their stories is different: Esther, an orphan, becomes queen and never thinks about returning to her country; Ezra is a priest and leads a contingent

back home to resettle; Nehemiah, cupbearer to the Persian court, goes home to Jerusalem for a time before heading back to Persia to resume his post.

These men and women were immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Their integration into their adopted country and culture was different—

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into Philistine territory because there was a famine in the land (Genesis 26).

A powerful tale of migration is found in the book of Ruth. Naomi and her family left Bethlehem, again because food was scarce, and crossed the Jordan to Moab. There her two sons married Moabite women, one of whom was Ruth. When Naomi's husband and sons died, she decided to return home, and Ruth opted to go with her. This young woman, whose people had welcomed an Israelite family, now became an immigrant in

where. Consider Joseph. He was sold into slavery in a foreign land but rose to be second to Pharaoh and helped save Egypt from famine (Genesis 39-41). Daniel was taken to Babylon, and there he served kings of two empires with wisdom and integrity. He and his friends were given new names and were taught Babylonian language, culture, and literature as part of their training for government service (Daniel 1).

Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah all were born and lived in exile. Each of

look carefully at how each one negotiated language, customs, social status, and social and political involvement. There was integration in every case. Interestingly, almost all maintained some level of connection with life in their ancestors' homeland.

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to flee Bethlehem because of Herod, they lived in Egypt for a time before moving back to the land of Israel and settling in Nazareth (Matthew 2).

When Peter writes his first epistle, he addresses the Christians as “aliens” and “strangers” (1:1; 2:11). There is a good chance that these believers had been expelled or exiled from another part of the Roman Empire. Not only were they religious outsiders in that new society because of their Christian faith, they also were literal sojourners in the eyes of the law.

### **Old Testament Legislation**

There are a number of passages in the Law that deal with sojourners. This concern for the outsider can be understood if we consider what life was like back then. To begin with, most people lived in villages and small towns made up largely of extended families—they had a built-in support system when they encountered difficult times. Outsiders were far from home and far from the support of kin.

Also, for the most part, ancient Israel had an agrarian peasant economy. Owning land was critical, and in that society property was passed to each successive generation primarily through the sons. Those who migrated to a new area were at a disadvantage. They were excluded from the inheritance system. Because they could not own land, many worked as day laborers for those who did own fields and flocks. They were at the mercy of the Israelites.

The Law appreciated their precarious situation and provided a safety net, as it were. There were stipulations that workers be granted rest along with everyone else (Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14) and that they be paid a fair and timely wage (Deuteronomy 24:14-15). Other laws provided for food (Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 24:19-21). The outsider also could have been defenseless in legal proceedings, so there were warnings about partiality and unfairness (Deuteronomy 1:16-17; 24:17-18). Even more commendable is that Israel allowed outsiders into their feasts.

That is, Israel opened up the most precious part of their national life—their religion—to them.

Why was Israel gracious to outsiders? There were two reasons. First, the nation was to remember that they had once been mistreated as foreigners in Egypt (Leviticus 19:33-34). They were to never forget their immigrant roots. More important, they were to be generous to outsiders because God loves the vulnerable (Deuteronomy 10:17-19). The Law pointed other nations to God; it put into concrete legislation the desires of God’s heart (Deuteronomy 4:5-8). Israel’s treatment of the sojourner demonstrated how well they truly grasped the grace of God.

### **Moving Forward**

There are many lessons here for us. The United States is a country populated by immigrants and descendants of immigrants. Nearly everyone can trace their ancestry back to someone who migrated here from somewhere else; those immigrant histories should not be forgotten.

Today, those who come looking for a different life often are the day-laborers in the fields and meat-packing plants, service people in restaurants and car washes, construction workers and landscape hands. Life is risky and work is hard in this new land. How are Christians to respond? What kind of laws should Christians champion in the name of our God?

Although the Bible does not offer us specific guidelines for immigration in the United States in the twenty-first century, it should shape in profound ways the attitudes of Christian citizens and residents toward those newcomers. A change in tone and suggestions for more gracious consideration of the sojourner in our churches and in our laws may be the kind of important contributions that Christians can make to the national debate.

The challenge for Christians is to craft initiatives that more closely approach the heart of God. May the word of God take pride of place in our deliberations. ■