

# Six Biblical Themes on Immigration

By Jennifer Riggs

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These days, people of faith are engaged in many conversations about immigration (undocumented immigration in particular). However, the nature of those conversations changes when people of faith come together to look at immigration from a faith perspective, rather than from a political perspective. Because of my responsibilities in the Disciples of Christ, I have spent years reflecting on what scripture has to say about immigration, and I've come to the conclusion that there are at least six themes that relate to immigration issues.

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**I. God's people are sojourners** – The Old Testament is a story of movement and change as people and nations grow, mix, and take on various characteristics. It is a story of people on the move seeking a better future. Yet, it is also a story of God intervening and sending people out in new directions when life begins to look too settled or too weighed down by sin. Adam and Eve were sent from the Garden; Noah and his family were flooded out; Abraham and Sarah were sent out to occupy a new promised land; Joseph was sold into Egypt; Jacob and his sons fled famine; and when their descendants became slaves, God called Moses to lead them out of their oppression into a new period of wandering. In each of these periods, as the structures of society were put in place, or as prophets spoke about God's will for society, a recurrent theme was concern for the welfare of three groups unable to be self-sufficient – foreigners, widows, and orphans. Over and over, Israel was told to remember the sojourners and treat them with justice and compassion, remembering that their own ancestors had been in the same situation.

In the New Testament we find God, once again, amidst those who are uprooted. Jesus became a refugee while still an infant, fleeing with his parents to Egypt. As an adult, he became an itinerant preacher, wandering with his disciples from place to place, living at times by gleaning from fields those extras that the ancient law ordered left for sojourners. In Jesus' life and in the missionary work of Paul, both men reached out to those defined as "strangers." Jesus combated prejudice against Samaritans. Paul affirmed the Gentiles as people of God, people for whose sake he was willing to go to prison.

Today, most of us have lost touch with our true nature of being pilgrims on this earth, just passing through. We cling to our property, jobs, health and the stability of our lives. Only when that stability is lost do we pause to remember the forces in this world that cause people to be sojourners. We need to reconnect with the fragility of human life, so we can affirm that we are a part of the sojourners on this earth. It's not just immigrants who are sojourners among us – we all are sojourners in a journey toward God.

**II. God's people offer hospitality** – The culture and history of the people of the Bible led to the presence of a stranger being seen as an opportunity for hospitality and the sharing of one's

home and resources. Over and over, we find stories of visitors being welcomed. Abraham welcomed the strangers who turned out to be messengers from God who blessed him with the promise of a son. God commanded Moses to set aside cities of refuge in Canaan so that people could seek asylum from those who sought to kill them. The widow of Zarephath welcomed Elijah into her home when she had only one meal to offer, but God filled her pantry as fast as it was emptied and Elijah remained for many days.

Mary, Martha, Lazarus and Zacheas welcomed Jesus. When Jesus sent out his disciples to teach and heal in his name, he instructed them to take little with them and trust in the hospitality of those they would meet along the way. Sojourners, at times, stayed for months or even years. Moses and Jacob are examples of persons who contributed their labor to their hosts, and each found a wife in their host's family. Hospitality involved the offering of food, drink and shelter to the stranger in need, but it was much more than that. Hospitality was an attitude of the heart, out of which generous actions naturally flowed.

Today, we have lost sight of what it means to provide true hospitality. Hotels take care of travelers. Self-sufficiency is thought to be divinely inspired. We say that "God helps those who help themselves," thinking it is a quote from the Bible rather than from Ben Franklin. Those who seek help are perceived as of lesser worth, as failures in the business of pulling up their own bootstraps. However, those who choose to offer true hospitality often find scripture fulfilled – the strangers we welcome turn out to be angels that bring a blessing into our lives.

**III. God's people work with God to respond to human need** – On the sixth day of creation, God created human beings and told them to care for the world. Soon there was division of labor with some working in the fields and others with animals. Later, people learned to construct cities and, with God's help, devised structures for societies. The people made mistakes at times, misunderstanding God or simply diverging from God's way by following their own sinful inclinations. But the theme was clear. God and people worked together in creating and caring for society.

Jesus also sought human co-workers. The disciples and other followers of Jesus learned from him new dimensions of obedience to God. They were especially taught the meaning of love for God by loving all people. There are many passages throughout the New Testament that expound on what it means both to receive God's love and to be mediators of God's love for others, such as the parable of the Good Samaritan, the feeding of the 5000, and the advice to the rich ruler to sell all he had and give it to the poor. Matthew 25, explicitly links love of God with action on behalf of the needy – the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoners. It goes even one step further by condemning those that do not meet human need or welcome the stranger to "go away into eternal punishment." Welcome the stranger or go to hell – a pretty clear statement. The early church set itself up in such a way that all who were in the community had their needs met, and Paul constantly helped the younger churches comprehend how far the love of Christ extended.

Today, this is the scriptural principle that we probably best carry out. Except for a few members of the U.S. Congress that tried to make humanitarian assistance to the undocumented a criminal offense, most people understand that meeting desperate human need is important. Where we stumble in meeting the needs of immigrants is in the area of working on the systemic change that is needed to prevent people from being in need in the first place. Meeting need is always easier than changing systems to prevent need. Meeting need is more popular than advocacy on political issues. Meeting the need of a stranger in our community is more popular than advocating for immigration reform that is compassionate.

**IV. God's people are faithful to God's authority** – The Bible challenges God's people to accept the authority of human institutions in I Peter 2:13, pray for the leaders of the land in which they live in I Timothy 2:1, and be subject to the governing authorities in Romans 13:1. But there are many Bible stories that show God's people disobeying the authorities in order to be faithful to God. For every scripture that counsels obedience to civil authority, there is another that encourages defiance of civil authority when it is unjust. The Bible even teaches that we must be willing to lose our lives, if commanded by legal authorities to perform an unconscionable act, such as burning incense at a pagan temple.

I believe that when Paul writes that the government's authority comes from God and that we should be subject to the governing authorities, he is not calling for automatic obedience; he is calling for participation in the social order that God has appointed. Governments serve a valuable function providing protection and a stability that makes life bearable. However, governments, made up of imperfect and sinful people, are also fallible and unfair at times. Rulers often abuse their powers. Legislatures enact foolish and unfair laws. Judges make wrong decisions. While God appoints the institution of government, God does not appoint specific governments or specific laws. Sometimes governing authorities go beyond their role of upholding good and punishing bad conduct to demand total allegiance. They then become idolatrous against the will of God. Pharaoh exceeded his God-given authority when he ordered Hebrew babies killed. King Nebuchadnezzar overstepped his authority when he required everyone to worship his golden statue.

God's people must make prayerful choices about how to respond to laws that call them to harm others, block them from efforts to protect people's lives, and prevent them from worshiping only God. Biblical passages on obedience to civil authorities occurred in the context of monarchies and empires, not today's context of democracy. In today's world it is the people who are sovereign, not the government, and the people have the right and the responsibility to change their minds about immigration policy. In a democracy it is expected that citizens will call for changes in the law, according to their individual beliefs and convictions.

Immigration policy should allow for participation and the full development of human beings in society – including newcomers. However, many citizens put their whole focus on the law, rather than on the consequences the law can have on people. Today, the ability to see obedience to the rule of law as being dependent on the law's ability to treat people humanely is not an issue that most people understand. Most say: "It's the law, and that's that." However, when law mandates things that hurt human beings or when legislatures fail to pass laws that can help meet the needs of persons, God's people cannot stand back and watch it happen. They must intervene to provide help and to advocate on behalf of those in need. The point is that while God is both just and merciful, God's mercy overrides God's justice. We have all been treated with mercy by God, so we need to extend mercy. In Philippians 3:20, Paul describes Christians as living in this world but carrying the passport of another world.

**V. God's people overcome fear by trusting in God** – Throughout scripture, when people were in fear, God offered a word of comfort – fear not! As both Abraham and his son Isaac doubted God's promise to make Abraham the father of a great nation, God told them to fear not for God was with them, would bless them, and would make their offspring numerous. As the Egyptians approached the Red Sea, Moses told the people not to fear, to stand still and to see the salvation of the Lord as the waters parted. And after all their wondering, Moses again told them to fear not as they entered into the land that they were taking over from others, because God had promised it to them.

At Jesus birth, the angel said: “Fear not, for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.” Jesus extended words of comfort on many occasions. He told the Disciples not to fear the storm-tossed sea, and then he calmed the waves. He told them not to fear because they had more value than the sparrows which were looked over by God. When he returned to the Disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane he roused them from their sleeping and told them to have no fear about what was to come. When the women went to the tomb, the angel told them fear not. In I John we read: “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear has punishment. He who fears is not made perfect in love.”

Today, we live in a culture of fear. We fear the stranger. In the news media, immigrants are equated with potential terrorists or, at the very least, takers of jobs. Throughout the history of our country, we have welcomed immigrants in periods of expansion and optimism and reviled them in periods of stagnation and economic downturn. A weak economy contributes to anti-immigrant attitudes. We also fear the loss of our traditional culture and fear that America will become something other than what it has been. We see assimilation as a moral virtue and fear immigrants because they might change our national identity. We also believe in scarcity. There is never enough time, money, or things. We have to do more, produce more, spend more, and consume more. Our sense of never having enough makes it possible for us to resent anyone we perceive to be in competition for the limited resources we have. On the other hand, our faith is a faith of abundance that calls us to share with all out of the abundance that God has given us. The reality is that we live in a land of abundance, not scarcity. We have enough, especially when we share it, rather than consuming it on unimportant things.

**VI. God’s people are one** – The concept of oneness within scripture focuses both on the oneness of God and the oneness of God’s people. Just as there is only one God, there is only one people of God. While the Old Testament emphasizes the oneness of God and of God’s people Israel, it is within the New Testament that we see an expansion of the oneness of God’s people reaching out beyond Israel. This is especially so in the Gospel of John where we find Jesus talking about one flock with one shepherd (10:16), where we find the high priest saying that Jesus will die in order to gather into one the dispersed children of God (11:52), and where we find Jesus praying that they might become completely one (17:23). In the early church, the oneness of God’s people is shown in Romans 5:18 where Paul talks about Christ’s act of righteousness leading to justification and life for all, in Ephesians 2:14 which describes the dividing walls being broken down, and in Galatians 3:28 where Paul says there is neither Jew nor Greek but all are one.

In today’s world, the oneness of God’s people gets defined in two ways, depending on different theological beliefs about the salvation that God offers to human beings. Those who believe that salvation is for those who have faith in Jesus Christ see the oneness of God’s people including only those who are Christian. Others who believe that salvation is for those who receive grace because of the faithfulness of Jesus Christ see the oneness of God’s people including all of God’s creation.

If you believe that grace comes through faith in Jesus, then we are one with all Christians wherever they are in the world; there is and should be no separation between us. Our role is to embrace them and open ourselves to experiencing the love of God together. Although we come from different countries and different cultures, we are spiritually one. We are one with all the undocumented Latin American Catholics and evangelicals who now live in the United States.

Before his crucifixion, Jesus agonized over the unity of his disciples and those that would believe in him through the word of the disciples (John 17). For us to remain indifferent about the unity of the Church for whom Jesus prayed is a betrayal. The Church in the United States and Canada is organically part of the Church in Latin America and the rest of the world. The Church sees immigration from both sides of any border because it is transnational. It transcends all borders. While recognizing that governments can establish policies about their borders, the Church has an open border policy, because borders are an invention of humanity, not of God – who is one God of one people, God's Church.

If you believe that grace comes through the faithfulness of Jesus, then we are one with all people for whom Christ died, whether they are Christian or not. Today we live in a global society. What affects someone in another country, often affects us. Jobs travel around the world; goods travel around the world; only people have barriers to their travel. The oneness of God's creation opens us to learn new things about God as we learn new things about others in God's creation. The differences in gifts, in spiritual dimensions, and in cultures that we all bring make us better as a whole than we can possibly be in our segregated nations, cultures, and religions. From a faith perspective, the true "aliens" are not those who lack political documents but those who have so disconnected themselves that they fail to see themselves in the stranger, fail to see the image of Christ in the other, and fail to see God's call to human solidarity – the one God is God of one people on earth.