Jesus the Immigrant: A Biblical Worldview on Asylum Seekers

Antwan D. Brown

Omega Graduate School

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Dr. David Ward

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Historically, a myriad of individuals and families have been forced or felt they had no other choice but to seek refuge or asylum in countries beyond the borders of their homelands. The reasons for their forced migration are nearly as innumerable as the people themselves. Many have sought asylum due to war (civil or enemy invasion), persecution, gang/cartel control, economic instability, etc. While there is much focus on the "immigration crisis" that is happening at the southern border of the United States, the issue of asylum-seeking has been and is a global concern. For sensible discussion around immigration and immigration reform (I will use asylum seekers and immigration interchangeably throughout this paper), they must be addressed with compassion and seen as a humanitarian effort. Global leaders, in general, and American leaders, specifically, will not achieve this new perspective or viewpoint without the voice or engagement of the Church.

The Church presents a worldview and position rooted in the theological idea that all humanity is the Imago Dei or image bearers of God. God is not silent on the matter of immigrants or asylum seekers. The Bible is replete with scriptural references to protecting the vulnerable, welcoming the stranger, extending mercy to the needy, and establishing justice for the disenfranchised. Jesus Himself and His family were political refugees, and they sought refuge in Egypt from the tyrannical decree of King Herod (Matt 2:13-16). In this paper, I will examine the topic of asylum seekers and immigration reform (specifically in the United States) from the vantage point of the Biblical worldview, providing a proper response or solution that hinges on the commands and examples of Christ and those who adhered to His teachings.

**Biblical Worldview**

The biblical narrative, both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament, has affirmed that God cares deeply for immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers. Markus Zehner would identify two biblical terms in the Hebrew scriptures that speak to those who immigrated to Israel: ger and nokri. He would state that ger would refer to a 'sojourner' andnokri to a 'foreigner.' The difference in terms would be ger referred to a person of foreign origin who sought asylum in Israel because of war, famine, poverty, or impending debt slavery. They would often seek permanent residence in Israel and assimilate to Israelite culture. Nokri,on the other hand, might refer to a merchant who sojourned with Israel temporarily to conduct business (Zehner, 2021). Similarly, in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he uses the Greek words xenoi and paroikoi, referring to strangers and aliens. The difference in the term would be nearly like those of the Hebrew language cited by Zehner; xenoi would refer to those with no affiliation to Israel but had merely a transactional relationship, and paroikoi would refer to those who had taken up residence and assimilated to Israelite culture (Eph 2:19, NASB 1960/1995).

These two examples highlight that migrants and the subject of immigration were common among the people of God, and their outlook was positive toward those who came to live among them. The ancient people of God did not develop this outlook towards migrants themselves but directly reflected how they knew God responded to and received migrants. If we, then, are to be disciples of Christ and live and pattern ourselves after the Word of God, it becomes our duty to welcome migrants and be fully supportive of the cause of immigration. We do this knowing that, as the Apostle Paul would state in the text mentioned above, we, being Gentiles, were once "separate from Christ, ... and strangers to the covenants of promise..." (Eph 2:12, NASB 1960/1995).

**History of the Issue**

The conversation of immigration, to and within the United States, has been a "hot-button topic," especially within the last fifteen years. The ebbs and flows of the rhetoric around the topic are often dictated by whichever political party has the majority within the political sphere. While the political climate usually drives the conversation surrounding immigration, the motivation for massive migration waves to the United States has been as vast as the number of migrants themselves. The motivating factors for many people seeking asylum within the United States have been economic opportunities, political persecution and upheaval, gang and drug wars, and other social issues and changes experienced in their countries of origin.

Migration to the United States has been consistent since the early 17th century. Major migrant moves to the United States include early Europeans seeking refuge from oppressive religious ideologies, forced migration of Africans in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Irish settlers seeking to escape famine, Chinese laborers seeking to take advantage of the California Gold Rush, and the building of the Transcontinental Railroad, to the 20th and 21st century of immigrants looking to escape corrupt regimes and drug cartels of Mexico, Central, South America, and the Caribbean islands. South et al. (2023) substantiate the claim of those escaping violence in their article where they write, " Exposure to violent crime has also been thought to stimulate emigration as Mexicans attempt to escape violence by fleeing to ostensibly safer communities in the USA (e.g., Arceo-Gómez, 2012; Orozco-Aleman & Gonzalez-Lozano, 2018; Rios Contreras, 2014). Journalistic reports frequently note a concern with real or potential violent victimization among Mexicans and Central Americans who are attempting to immigrate to the USA (Gamboa et al., 2018; Hernández, 2021; Semple, 2019; Villagran & Carranza, 2020)".

The significant issues that led to migratory movements to the United States shape immigration patterns through sociological and theological processes. The processes often contrast, but at times, they find a healthy balance in their approach to conversation and policy concerning immigration. Patterns of migration identified through sociological processes would be economics. When asylum seekers sense that the US is experiencing a tremendous economic boom, they seek to take advantage of the prosperity because they believe job opportunities are plentiful. At the same time, if politicians feel a recession is rising, they will seek to develop policies restricting immigration. As is evident in our current context, many within the US expect immigrants to assimilate and adopt US culture, while our Canadian neighbors fully embrace a multicultural view of immigration.

In contrast to the general public, politicians will often lean toward having an open border policy and whether to institute restrictive immigration policies frequently based on the idea of "national security." Much of what is seen through the societal and political lens is in stark contrast to how immigration is viewed through a theological lens. This difference in viewpoint is striking since many people in politics and society are the same people who make up the religious community. Theological (or faith) communities, irrespective of political ideologies, have historically been supportive of immigration policies and have devised plans to offer aid and advocate for these migrants. Faith communities understand that the influx of migrants here in the US brings the mission field to them instead of the Church having to go beyond the borders of the US. These different perspectives within the past two election cycles have seen that the political leanings of members within the faith community have influenced the historically apolitical stance of the faith community on immigration. Within the faith community, nationalists stand in juxtaposition to the theological perspective of universalism (or "come whosoever will").

**Exemplars of Religion and Society Integration**

The Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s is one example of a movement that was the integration of religion and society. In the 1980s, the Central American countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua were experiencing civil wars, which led to many citizens of those nations facing displacement. Ironically, many of the displaced citizens would seek asylum in the U.S. despite the common belief that much of the unrest in these countries was due to U.S. policies regarding Central America and U.S. involvement in the civil wars (Ward-Bucher, 2023). Ward-Bucher (2023) stated that with the enactment of the 1980 Refugee Act, many of the Central American diaspora would be refused entrance because of the unfair enforcement of the Act. These asylum seekers, especially Guatemalans and El Salvadorans, would be declared as economic immigrants; therefore, they were "generally undeserving" of entrance.

Due to this neglect by the U.S. government and "following the death of 13 Salvadoran asylum seekers in Arizona's Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Rev. John Fife, then minister of Tucson's Southside Presbyterian Church, was called to action..." (Uhlmann, 2024). Ulhmann would recall Fife's initial efforts were not working as many of the "asylum seekers' applications were being denied at a rate of about 98%. She would record Fife as stating, "We'd take in guys who had torture marks, and the judge would order them deported the next day." Jim Corbett, a fellow volunteer, and collaborator with Fife, would state that their current system was ineffective and that they would have to assist the asylum seekers across the border without being captured. To convince Fife, Corbett would mention the Church's involvement in the Underground Railroad and their failure to act during the Holocaust. It would soon be the opinion of the Southside Presbyterian Church in March 1982 to declare themselves a sanctuary for Central American refugees.

These two men were convinced to do the morally and biblically right things, being led by the Holy Spirit and by the Word of God, for the people created in God's image, that the Sanctuary Movement was born. Upon this foundation, the U.S. has seen a reemergence of the Sanctuary Movement, often labeled, rightly, the New Sanctuary Movement. This new movement has been primarily due to the immigration policies enacted by the new presidential administration and is seeing a collaboration between the Church and many cities.

**Applicable Principles**

In our current context, the Church can make its mark in the 21st century as the disciples before us. We, too, must be willing to stand girded with the Armor of God in the face of despotic regimes, would-be autocrats, and unjust executive orders that seek to expand the fringes of society and disenfranchise the marginalized. We must be willing to defy those who seek to enter our sacred spaces and remove the undocumented. The Church must be the voice of the voiceless and be a beacon of hope for those who seem hopeless. The contemporary faith community must take up the mantle of Jesus' ministry "to set at liberty those who are oppressed..." (Luke 4:18, NASB 1960/1995). Aid and comfort must be readily available to immigrants and those seeking asylum. The faith community must come in the vein of the first-century Church, historical Israel, the pro-abolition Church of the 18th and 19th centuries, and the Church heavily involved in the Civil Rights era of the 50s and 60s. The 21st century must be willing to declare their sacred spaces as cities of refuge where asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants feel welcomed and can freely worship God. They must know that in those walls is peace, created by God and freely given to them.

**Conclusion**

The 21st century Church has the technology, resources, and gifts available to influence policy favorably for the migrant and asylum seekers to be treated as image bearers of God. The issue of immigration and asylum seekers must be treated as a humanitarian policy instead of political fodder and partisan wrangling. The Church has to be a place where peace and freedom can be experienced. It is only in bondage that people experience unrest. If the Church is to be in submission to her Head, then she must be concerned about His work and life.

As I had the pleasure and privilege of researching this topic, I am further compelled that the people of God I lead can do more to be vocal, present, and active to ensure that we provide cover for those who stand in fear of being returned to environments they fled in the hopes of having a better life for themselves and their descendants. I cannot take the stance that their issue is not mine because if all of us are not free, none of us are free. However, I read, "If the Son of Man makes you free, you are free indeed" (John 8:36, NASB 1960/1995). It is time to ensure that all can experience spiritual and physical freedom.

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