

# Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion, and Truth in the Immigration Debate

By Matthew Soerens and Jenny Yang

## Chapter 1: The Immigration Dilemma

### Excerpt

“Living in relationships with immigrants, refugees, and other low-income people has forced us to grapple with the question of what it means for us, as followers of Christ, to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. It has also awakened us to the ethically complex questions of immigration and refugee policy—who do we let in, what do we do with those who came in even though our government did not allow them in, and what effect will our policies have on those already here and struggling to get by? Of course, our attempts to address these questions have been shaped by our own personal journeys.” (pg. 9)

### Summary

Chapter 1 sets the stage for the rest of the book, serving the purpose of what a preface or chapter 1 in a more academic book might. It provides anecdotes or quotations from popular press that describe how immigrants—legal and undocumented—are viewed in our society. Chapter 1 provides a sense of some of the changes that have taken place in our cultural and political landscape since the publication of the original edition of *Welcoming the Stranger*. Chapter 1 also describes the complexity of the issue, the need to cross boundaries in conversation about this issue, and the need to learn directly about the things confronting immigrants through our personal relationships with immigrants in our churches and communities. Both Matthew (Soerens) and Jenny (Yang) share their personal experiences with immigrants in their own families and communities, and describe some of the things they wrestle with themselves on this issue.

### Discussion Questions

1. Two views were presented in the quotations at the beginning of the chapter. Which of these views have you heard the most?
2. The chapter says that, “It is these ‘easy’ issues that often prove to be the most complex and the hardest to resolve, since our presumptions keep us from hearing the other side.” What presumptions have you held regarding the issue of immigration?
3. The authors have shared their backgrounds and experiences with immigrants. Spend some time to share in the group your own experiences with immigrants and the debate.
4. C. S. Lewis says that humans are the “holiest object presented to your senses.” How does this quote help us to begin to treat our neighbors in God’s image?
5. Which aspect of the immigration debate either interests or confuses you the most (political, economic, spiritual, etc.)?
6. What is one question concerning immigration that you would like to see answered in your study of this issue?

### Reflection

Since much of Chapter 1 is reflective, I will take some time to reflect and describe why I am hopeful about discussing this issue publicly with fellow believers and others. I think we need to talk about immigration to the United States. Not necessarily the way we’ve been talking about it: “Build the Wall!” vs “Abolish ICE!” But somehow, we need to find a way to talk about the substance and people involved in ways that people feel heard. We need to collectively become more aware of some of the policies our country has in place. Some of the policies our country is, and has been, considering. How migration can be a lifeline or a living hell—or both. How it presents a mirror to our society and our church reflecting the state of our souls. And what does all of this mean for the American church as it continues to undergo profound demographic shifts that, in some ways, are even more dramatic than the shifts in American culture at large?

I, like most Americans on most important issues, was and continue to be very poorly informed about immigration issues. One way in which we can be poorly informed is simply lacking knowledge about basic facts or existence of an issue. Reading books like *Welcoming the Stranger* is a good way to remedy this type of ignorance. However,

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modern life is so complex that we all live in profound ignorance of most things that enable our lives. In fact, immigration is so complex that it is probably impossible for any single individual to be a comprehensive expert. In this sense, I remain poorly informed. I am not a recent immigrant, I am not an immigration advocate or lawyer, and I do not work for a resettlement agency or immigrant support ministry. Nor am I a scholarly expert by any means, so in a practical sense—lacking the personal experience, time, and expertise required to navigate this complexity—I remain ignorant.

However, this topic has captured my imagination and I cannot stop thinking about it. There has not been just one seminal experience, but one thing that made me think more intently about how I could take action on this issue was hearing about the recent no tolerance policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. Hearing of children being taken from their parents and listening to the diversity of responses publicized in the press convinced me that silence is no longer an option on this issue for myself or for the American Church. Like many Americans, I have immigrant ancestors and have also married into a family of immigrants. Moreover, I am friends and colleagues to many immigrants. This is a personal and not theoretical issue. And honestly and frankly, the changes to the way that our asylum and refugee laws are being interpreted angers me.

On most issues, I turn first to the Scripture and to the Church for initial guidance as I form my own opinions and convictions. Although—as we will clearly see in Soerens and Yang Chapters 5 and 6—the Scripture speaks plainly about how migrants should be treated, I was stuck when I tried to turn to the Church for answers about how to move forward as a citizen. My church certainly doesn't preach on this topic. Nor did they preach about the family separations in real-time. My favorite evangelical blogs certainly didn't touch this topic or the family separations in real-time. In the press, the evangelical voices that were most loudly conveyed were supportive of the no tolerance policies—at least until video and audio of the children in detention centers were more widely shared. Then even they could not suffer the shame of supporting clearly racist and inhumane policies disguised as securing the border and were compelled to rebuke the Trump administration. The Catholic Church seemed to have much more to say on this topic—including guidance for welcoming and integrating recent immigrants—but I am not Catholic and wanted something a bit closer to my own theological convictions.

As I began to dig deeper, however, I quickly realized that many evangelicals and Protestants—conservative and liberal—had quite a lot to say about the immigration topic. Not only were the vast majority of voices I read supportive of and compassionate towards the immigrants themselves, but they articulated a complex consensus-based perspective that one does not hear if you are listening only to press outlets. This perspective is rooted in Scripture, and acknowledges the complexity of living under the rule of law and under the rule of Christ. I also realized you are unlikely to hear this consensus Christian perspective without regard to whether the press outlet was mainstream or niche; the loudest microphones were invariably being given to the most divisive voices. This effectively rendered invisible those who were taking their lead on engaging this issue from Christ and the Scripture. For this reason alone, we cannot remain silent.

As I listened closer, to discourse in both the press and in the church, I came to realize that most Americans are not at all familiar with American immigration policies or its systems. There are several misconceptions that we'll discuss over the next few weeks, but the most important one to mention now is that Americans believe that our immigration policies are rationally designed and fair. Many Americans believe there is a "line" or "process" similar to many administrative processes we experience here in the U.S. that immigrants can submit to and gain entry to the U.S. As we will see, there are no such processes available to the vast majority of immigrants, and the system is widely considered unfair; this is why it is the consensus conclusion that our immigration policies are broken. But what do Americans need to know about the system in order provide our representatives with the authority they need in order to fix it?

The first thing we should do is break silence. The updated and revised book *Welcoming the Stranger* by Matthew Soerens and Jenny Yang is an excellent place to start, and I urge you to purchase, or obtain a library copy of, this book and follow this discussion. In breaking silence, we must also pray. We must believe that our prayers are not in vain, and understand that this problem cannot be solved apart from prayer. I hope that you are blessed by this conversation, and see more clearly how God wants you to contribute to a solution to our broken immigration system. Would you share your thoughts, and how you have been involved?

Source: <https://blog.emergingscholars.org/?s=welcoming+the+stranger>

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**Chapter 2: “Aliens” Among You: Who Are Undocumented Immigrants?**

**Excerpt**

“Francisco was up front about his legal status issues, but Alison presumed as they dated and moved toward marriage that, if he married a US citizen, this could be resolved easily. In hindsight, Alison says she was naive about immigration issues, having grown up in an ethnically homogeneous community where she had no real personal interaction with immigrants. If anything, she was confused by why Francisco wouldn’t have just come legally in the first place: “As Americans,” she says, “We have this skewed perspective. Since we can go anywhere, [we presume] anyone can go anywhere; since we can just fill out the paperwork, [we suppose] anyone can just fill out the paperwork” and be given legal status.” (pg. 32)

**Summary**

This chapter focuses on answering the question “Who are the immigrants among us?” Despite being a nation of immigrants, it is very clear from our public conversations that relatively few Americans have meaningful relationships with recent immigrants. The assumptions that we share about the immigration system, the reasons why people migrate to the United States, how people reach this land, and the processes and procedures we have in place to protect our country do not reflect the complexity of the situation.

**Discussion Questions**

1. The rhetoric surrounding undocumented immigrants is particularly fierce. How does the emotional rhetoric change the debate?
2. How do the stories of immigrants help us see the image of God in present-day circumstances?
3. Which story stands out to you as the most interesting story? Why are you drawn to that particular story?
4. In the story of Pedro and Martha, Social Security cards and taxes show the complexity of ethical dimensions in the issue of undocumented immigrants. If most undocumented immigrants pay taxes, what rights should they have under the law?

**Reflection**

This chapter has reminded me how important it is for us to connect with one another and hear each other’s stories. It is one thing to oppose the legalization of 3 million people’s residency in the US. It is another thing altogether to pray for God’s mercy in the lives of the family that sits next to us at church. As a risk analyst, I often think about the work of Paul Slovic. He is a psychologist who often discusses data he collects. His findings indicate that while we believe one death is a tragedy, even hearing about two or three eviscerates our compassion. Ten deaths, and orders of magnitude more, are just a statistic. When we can detach, our dispassionate analysis leads to inaction. But it is as if we need that personal connection in order to give meaning to our actions. We need to know to whom our efforts matter. Let us not forget that our efforts matter to our brothers and sisters.

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**Chapter 3: Nation of Immigrants: A Historical Perspective on Immigration to the United States**

**Excerpt**

“Immigrants today, whatever their manner of entry, come primarily for the same reasons that immigrants have always come to our country. Though immigration policies have changed quite drastically over the last two centuries, immigrants themselves are still pushed out of their countries of origin by poverty, war, and persecution, and are still drawn to the United States by promises of jobs and economic advancement, freedom, and family reunification. These push and pull factors explain most, if not all, of immigration to the United States from the time of the first settlers to today.” (pg. 45)

**Summary**

Chapter 3 is a historical overview of the U.S. immigration system. This chapter has been updated as well, with inserts on “the Church and immigration history,” “the refugee act of 1980,” and a reference to the Undocumented Migration Project. I especially like the addition of the last reference because of the comparison of undocumented migration across the Sonoran Desert with Ellis Island at the turn of the 20th century. Ellis Island, notes Jason de Leon, “was a horrible place if you were Italian or Eastern European. The human rights abuses that were happening when folks were migrating here have largely been forgotten with some historical distance.” Of course at that time, as is captured in Soerens and Yang, or any other book that recounts American immigration history, U.S. immigration law was intended to exclude Italians and Eastern Europeans on the basis of their race. Therefore, our whitewashed memories of Ellis Island do not fully capture the complexity of what happened when migrants reached our shores.

**Discussion Questions**

1. God presents care for refugees as a justice issue while reminding the Hebrews that he was faithful to redeem their situation. How can the church remember its past in a productive way? How can we rehearse our own immigrant history both in a national and spiritual sense?
2. Historian Roger Daniels has proposed that Americans have a “dualistic” view of immigration. What does he mean? Do you think this is historical or hypocritical?
3. What are two or three goals that you find immigrants of the past and present share?
4. What does the ebb and flow of historical sentiment toward immigrants reveal about our country? Is it an encouragement or a discouragement to read the brief historical immigration summary of our nation?
5. In the section titled “The Church and Immigration History,” what surprised you the most about the church’s response to immigration in the past?

**Reflection**

***What Shaped Immigration Law***

What really moved me to anger and action on immigration reform was learning that our country did not have immigration restrictions during its first 100 years. After that, the immigration restrictions that were created were openly racist. Chinese, Italian, Irish, Mexican, and on and on depending on whoever the recent non-Anglo arrivals happened to be. Even in 1965, when we replaced our openly racist restrictions with more subtly racist ones aimed at welcoming skilled populations to the USA, our laws made it far more difficult for new arrivals from Latin America, Asia, and Africa to migrate. This was true even while most arrivals would be coming from these areas of the world.

Other disparities also come out clearly when reading about the options available to people who want to immigrate legally. Investing a relatively large amount of money and making jobs for Americans is one way. Of course, your employer can sponsor your visa, or you may obtain a student visa. You may also obtain a tourist visa, but you must have enough assets, wealth, or status to demonstrate that it would be unlikely you’d overstay your visa. So far, most of what I’ve written involves temporary visits. It is exceedingly difficult to legally obtain lawful permanent

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residence, whether by way of asylum, family reunification, diversity lottery, or otherwise. For example, suppose one wants to apply for lawful permanent residence while still in one's home country. Even if your application is likely to be approved, you will likely face a waiting period of many years. For most persons of modest means—the overwhelming majority—your application for lawful residency is not likely to be approved. For most immigrants, there is simply no legal option.

### ***Immigration is Complex, Not Simple***

I'm not exactly sure what the correct response is to all this. Certainly, I feel a biblical approach to immigration would involve more liberty and generosity—just as our society favors liberty in areas of personal freedom so that a person may respond to God according to their own conscience and not under compulsion. However, reading other books by non-Christian authors on this issue, such as *The Making of a Dream* or *Tell Me How It Ends*, makes one word come to mind: complexity. Maybe this is why everyone tries to keep it so simple. I can hear the simplistic points so often used replaying in my mind:

Love your neighbor.  
Deport the criminals, they broke the law.  
No one needs to know my status, they can't help me anyways.  
We need to protect our jobs and culture, we don't know who these people are or where they come from.  
It's amnesty.  
You cannot break our laws and expect citizenship.  
These immigration laws are racist and unjust.  
Can't folks just be resettled closer to their home country?  
They need to fix the problems in their home country instead of bringing them here.

If only it were so simple, because any one of these factors would be easier to deal with if it stood alone.

Unfortunately, it is not so simple. We have all of these things happening at the same time. Simultaneously, we have an economic crisis happening in our middle and lower classes in this country obscured by economic indicators that hide the devastation. Matters are made worse by division between the urban and rural communities that suffer exactly the same problems—displacement of well-paying work, shifting skill demands with limited retraining support, dissolution of the safety net, drug addiction and hopelessness, and breakdown of the family—yet we cannot come together to address them. Can we deal with immigration too? Or should we save our resources for our own people?

Often, we are in relationships with immigrants without knowing it. Sometimes we know, but then accept them as one of our own. We think of them as different from the others. They become integrated into our community until an unanticipated event brings their status to light. It becomes clear that one cannot care only about the immigrant who is their neighbor. While it is only recently that the public has started to view illegal immigration as a criminal offense, even administrative violations are still violations of the law. Even if one can see the virtue of a migrant's actions—and would likely make exactly the same choice as their undocumented neighbor—how does one satisfy the demands of the law? As Marco Rubio once said, “We cannot deport or detain 11 million people, but we also cannot legalize 11 million people.”

### ***Complexity Requires Responsible Action***

In the face of such complexity, I am reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thoughts on responsible action. Bonhoeffer writes in *Letters and Papers from Prison*:

“Only the one whose ultimate standard is not his reason, his principles, conscience, freedom, or virtue; only the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when, in faith and in relationship to God alone, he is called to obedient and responsible action. Such a person is the responsible one, whose life is to be nothing but a response to God's question and call.”

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If I can paraphrase, I would write: “In faith and relationship to my Sovereign Lord, I must take obedient and responsible action in response to His call.” Bonhoeffer’s ethics were responsive to complexity because they were grounded in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Ethics grounded in incarnation will have us act in ways that may make our earthly alliances unclear as we follow Christ into the complexity of His work. We cannot abscond our responsibility by pointing at the law or hoping someone else will take care of it. We cannot take solace in our social or political relationships because we have been called to lay all that down and follow Christ. We must take responsibility for discerning what we believe God is saying to us in Christ, and then take responsibility for obeying what we hear.

Since we must pursue responsible action, let us pray and ask God how he would have us act as Jesus’ agents in this moment.

Does he ask you to serve and support ICE agents? Find out how you can pray for them and encourage them in securing the border graciously.

Does he ask you to call out to him on behalf of the undocumented for greater grace as they bear their circumstances and uncertainty? Then devote yourself to prayer and fasting as he leads you.

Is he asking you to help others see Romans 8:1 in action: “there is now therefore no condemnation...”? Then ask your church how you can participate in the creation of communities of grace that integrate immigrants into our church and society without regard for why they have come.

Or, is he asking you to lovingly apply Romans 13:1: “be subject to the governing authorities...”? Then partner with organizations that provide legal or other counsel for those in deportation proceedings or advocate for comprehensive immigration reform.

Your thoughts, emotions, and responsible actions will not be simple, because you do not face simplicity. We face complexity. And God is asking you to exercise discernment as you follow him into responsible action as we face this moment in our nation.

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**Chapter 4: Immigrating the Legal Way: Our Immigration System Today**

**Excerpt**

“An understanding of the actual waits and costs implied when we suggest that immigrants wait their turn and immigrate the legal way is helpful. It is equally important to acknowledge, though, that many (probably most) of the people who immigrate illegally to the United States did not even have the option to get in line, because they have no qualifying family member who is a U.S. citizen or Lawful Permanent Resident.” (pg. 79)

“That immigrants should wait their turn and immigrate the legal way sounds entirely reasonable, but the realities of our present immigration system complicate this truism. The immigration system, many would agree, is broken. Just how we fix this broken system, though, is a question of heated controversy—in Washington, DC, and even in our churches. As Christians, our response to these challenging issues should be informed by Scripture, which guides us toward how God would have us think about immigration policy and about immigrants themselves.” (pg. 84)

**Summary**

Chapter 4 describes the types of legal status an immigrant can hold, and gives a sense of the choices one finds before them when confronted with the need to come to the US. Chapter 4 is very important, and is mandatory if one wants to contribute intelligently to any discussion of immigration and immigration policy. These statuses and choices are frequently misunderstood, so I'll err on the side of presenting more of what's in the book in this post than normal. This post will be long, so you might consider the next two paragraphs after the key questions the abbreviated version. Of course, I'm including my own reflections so you can assume that the following opinions, misstatements, or misunderstandings of facts are my own and not those of the authors of *Welcoming the Stranger*.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Before reading this chapter, what were some common misconceptions that you either have heard or held with regard to the current immigration system?
2. Many say that undocumented immigrants should just “wait in line.” How does this chapter shed light on this misconception? How has your understanding of the immigration system changed?
3. Have you ever known anyone who struggled with the process of obtaining a visa, whether to visit or to immigrate to the United States? What was their experience?
4. What surprised you the most about the path to legal status in the United States?
5. In your opinion, what role does the U.S. economy have on illegal immigration?
6. Do you believe that the economy and family unity should continue to be the two driving factors for U.S. immigration today?
7. What value do you think family-based immigration has on the United States, either economically or socially?
8. Do you think that economic or environmental hardship should be added to the definition of a refugee? Why or why not?

**Reflection**

This chapter starts out by asserting that one of the greatest points of confusion for many native-born US citizens is why anyone would want to come here “illegally.” I'd say this is high on the list for one of the biggest stumbling blocks for those who understand why people migrate to the US, yet believe we are a nation of laws whose immigration policies must be governed accordingly. Most Americans, as discussed in Chapter 2, are used to policies, procedures, processes, etc. that work. Most public features of American life do not depend on things like wealth or social class, able-bodied status, race, gender, religion, or country of origin. In fact, it is often illegal to discriminate on the basis of these factors and others. Our systems are designed for inclusivity, not exclusivity. Native born Americans are used to “trusting” the system. We generally assume that when something needs to be done, there is an appropriate place or authority to turn to. When we apply for things, generally, our applications go where they need to go, are evaluated by the intended audience, are judged on their merits, and have processes of

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meaningful appeal if the decision did not seem transparent enough. We know this is the case because when the transparency requirement is not met in American life, it becomes a major point of public discussion. Generally, for American citizens, the machinery of government can be assumed to work in the background of our lives except in cases of injustice or incompetence. Writing this as an African-American male, I understand this is a gross and in some ways coarse over-simplification of the true state of things for many American citizens—not just Black ones—but bear with me as I think this generalization is fair enough for this conversation.

Unfortunately, our immigration system does not seem to work like this at all. As we will see momentarily, there are often no processes or procedures in place for normal, middle-class working families who find themselves needing to come to the US. The situation is much worse for those who are poor. The procedures can be assumed to not work for many immigrants. While transparent, it can seem as if our immigration policies are designed for exclusivity, not for inclusivity. Furthermore, while native-born Americans are used to “trusting” the system, many immigrants cannot place such trust in the US immigration system. The option of “getting in line” or “taking the legal route” is in many cases no option at all.



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**Chapter 5: Thinking Biblically About Immigration**

**Excerpt**

“...Scripture suggests that all of us who follow Christ, whatever our nationality, have become aliens in this world, as our allegiances are to lie not primarily with any nation-state but with the kingdom of God. Paul reminds the believers at Philippi that their citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20), while Peter (1 Pet 2:11) and the author of Hebrews describe believers as foreigners and strangers on earth (Heb 11:13).

God used migration throughout Scripture to accomplish his purposes and bring his people to a greater understanding of his will for creation. God, who used migration so vividly throughout the Bible, works today to move his people from one place to another.” (pg. 89)

**Summary**

In Chapter 5, we are the discipleship students and Matthew Soerens and Jenny Yang are our facilitators. They’ve allowed us to speak our minds some in Chapters 1 and 2 as we described what got us interested in this topic. Chapters 3 and 4 helped us to understand a bit more about exactly how large the issue is. Now in Chapter 5, they’re asking us to set aside our opinions for a moment and are plainly saying to us: “Now, what does the Word say?” And on this issue, the Word is profoundly challenging to us. Quoting Orlando Espin, Soerens and Yang point out that “Welcoming the stranger is the most often repeated commandment in the Hebrew Scriptures, with the exception of the imperative to worship only the one God.” (p. 85)

Chapter 5 describes how God frequently—in both Old and New Testaments—commanded his people to migrate from one place to another in doing his will. In one account, Abram is commanded to leave Ur for Haran, and later proceed to Canaan. If only we could imagine just how treacherous and shocking this command actually was! God asked Abram to leave the security of his family and their possessions to go to a land that was not yet identified to him. In order to migrate to this land, they would have certainly encroached on the land of others and have been viewed with suspicion that might have gotten him and those belonging to him killed. In fact, Abram hints at these fears when the Bible describes how Abram lies about his relationship to Sarah in order to avoid attack.

The long and short of Chapter 5 is that God takes special concern for the foreigner and stranger because of their unique vulnerability. The Israelites were to have the same law governing both native and foreign-born. The Israelites were to provide means for assimilation of foreigners into the Israelite society. The Israelites were to ensure provision for the foreigners’ physical needs by being sure to pay their wages in a timely way and not harvesting crops so efficiently as to leave nothing for the migrants or vulnerable to glean from the fields. If this special concern was not extended to the foreigner, the Israelites could expect the judgment of God to fall on them because they themselves had history as foreigners and exiles in Egypt, yet have become perpetrators of the same injustices and oppression they themselves had faced.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Share and reflect on a past experience of turning to Scripture for insight and principles regarding a particular social or political issue. How is the issue of immigration similar or different?
2. How should our heavenly citizenship dictate the way we view and treat immigrants in our churches? How about in our schools and communities?
3. Why do you think that God places special emphasis on the well-being of immigrants?
4. How does Jesus respond when he is asked, “Who is my neighbor?” How does his response inform how we view immigrants?
5. The question of how to respond to immigrants who are present unlawfully in the country is particularly complex for many Christians. How does the Bible inform how you believe we should respond?
6. After reading this chapter, do you agree that there is a biblical mandate to care for immigrants? If so, what is one way you could begin to fulfill this calling during the next week?

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### Reflection

Thinking biblically about immigration is full of challenging questions that will require a large amount of time to master. Also a large amount of courage. For, although immigration is a technical topic with many very arcane details, the popular discourse is full of the expressions of our collective hearts. Our response to the immigration challenge is a test of our discipleship and transformation to Christ's likeness. I say this because the Bible seems to be calling for a type of generosity that would very quickly become unwieldy in practice. As with most things, it becomes exceedingly difficult to lay one's life down on the one hand while seeking to preserve it with the other. Isn't this what we do with so many things in life? I may be talking about immigration right now, but there are so many examples of things we enjoy that God may be calling us to loosen our grip on. We reach out to any and everything to justify holding on tight, when our resistance to the call to let go shows unequivocally how much of a grip our privileges or possessions have on us.

The first thing we do well to remember is to reflect on just how vulnerable immigrants—documented and undocumented, wealthy or poor—often are. As I write this, I'm reminded of how, in *The World Until Yesterday*, Jared Diamond describes how the ease with which we routinely travel across tribal and cultural boundaries—sometimes thousands of miles as I am currently doing while I write this above the Atlantic Ocean—without peril or danger to ourselves has not been possible in most human cultures until very recently. Foreigners could be viewed with suspicion and often killed or treated harshly in order to protect the tribe from outsiders or potential danger. As we read the Bible, context gives clues that allow one to conclude that being a foreigner meant to be dispossessed of most earthly rights and property, and to be almost entirely vulnerable under law or local custom. Even Paul, who apparently sometimes decided not to use his own Roman citizenship to his advantage, was subject to the state of vulnerability foreigners might have found themselves in. In some important ways, many classes of immigrants find themselves in similarly vulnerable situations to varying degree. Many Christians are not quite sure how to respond to all of this, though, because legal and political concerns to which they may be held accountable make it difficult to determine the proper action to take. While there have always been clashes of identity and responsibility, whether taking the form of membership of a tribe or citizenship in a nation state, Jesus calls us to review these boundaries when he asks “Who is my neighbor?”

Suppose we know who our neighbor is. Well, the biblical mandate to welcome the stranger is still very difficult because it is going to cost something. Sometimes, that cost can be great. While immigrants, on the balance, contribute positively to the national economy, undocumented immigrants may increase the cost of local services such as emergency medical care and public schooling. More importantly, it is going to personally cost us in getting to know one another and becoming entangled in one another's affairs. In neighborhoods where immigrants settle, the local culture and social life will change. Those who have lived there before new arrivals will pay a cost as their environs become unfamiliar. Churches will have to do the difficult work of preaching and being the Gospel in increasingly diverse communities. They will need to lead as we seek to answer the question: “How should the biblical commands to care for the stranger and foreigner in the ancient Israelites' midst be applied today?”

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### Chapter 6: Concerns About Immigration

#### Excerpt

“Every year we issue a million green cards to foreign nationals from all the countries of the world, but we do so without regard to whether that applicant has demonstrated the skill that can add to the U.S. economy, whether they can pay their own way or be reliant on welfare, or whether they’ll displace or take a job from an American worker.”  
– Soerens and Yang (2018) quoting Stephen Miller (pg. 102)

#### Summary

While in Chapter 5 Soerens and Yang discuss what the Bible says about “welcoming the stranger,” in this chapter they present some of the concerns that many have when it comes to extending more generous immigration policy. The concerns fall into several broad categories:

- Immigration and caring for the poor already among you
- Immigration, terrorism, and border security
- Family immigration— “anchor babies” and “chain migration”
- Immigrants, crime, and sanctuary cities
- Immigration, identity, and cultural homogeneity

#### Discussion Questions

1. What were some of your primary concerns regarding this debate before reading this book? Who or what was your source for these concerns?
2. Do you think that we have an obligation to the poor living among us that is more important than an obligation to the poor living abroad? What are some possible nuances to that argument?
3. Which argument of those against a more generous immigration policy—poverty already in our communities, creation care, national security, cultural identity, etc.—is most persuasive and compelling to you. Why?
4. Describe or reflect on a time when you were a minority. What was the most uncomfortable aspect of this experience?
5. Are there any immigrants or refugees in your daily path? At the end of your time together, take some time to pray for ways to reach out to immigrants and the foreign-born in your own neighborhood.

#### Reflection

By now, if you’ve read for 6 weeks into this series, you may be aware that I do not believe there is any Scriptural support for a more restrictive immigration policy to the United States. In my opinion, the rationale for restricting legal immigration and enforcing immigration law is almost entirely extra-biblical. This should not be interpreted as saying that there are not good reasons for restricting legal immigration or enforcing borders. What I am saying is that the good reasons for strict enforcement of immigration law derive from social, economic, or political concerns, not biblical teachings. It is my firm opinion that we should attempt to address these social, economic, and political concerns within the framework of a more generous immigration policy, as far as possible.

For example, one political concern that should drive a strict enforcement of immigration policy is security concerns. Consider that there is, in fact, legitimate concern that human trafficking and drug trafficking routes do traverse our borders. However, in enforcing immigration policy, we should make it easier to traverse the border legally so that there would be fewer disincentives to do so illegally. This might possibly increase security by making it more likely that non-citizens would have been screened before entering the U.S. By attempting to keep immigration levels unreasonably low, we may be inadvertently incentivizing behavior that destabilizes communities and families who may not have the option of returning home and waiting for visas to enter the country legally. Since this particular political concern is addressed in greater detail in Chapter 8, I will not elaborate further on this line of thinking.

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Another important reason to enforce immigration law is national sovereignty. Lax enforcement of immigration law provides perverse incentives to other countries in enforcing their own immigration laws and improving social and economic conditions at home. This is a principal way the complexity I alluded to in an earlier post enters the immigration debate. Is the United States fully responsible for conditions in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras? It is naive to say that the U.S. bears no responsibility, and it is flat-out irresponsible and dishonest to deny our country's role in destabilizing the politics and economies of these nations. However, is the United States fully responsible for the continuing violence that pushes their citizens northward? Is the United States responsible for Mexico's failure to enforce their own immigration policies and strictly control their own borders? Obviously not. For example, in *Tell Me How it Ends*, Valeria Luiselli describes the anger and shame that she felt when listening to the stories of some of the unaccompanied minors who had crossed the border and were being interviewed at the non-profit she worked for. As a Mexican citizen, it was clear that there were significant problems that were not the responsibility of the American government that were inescapable by citizens of her home country, Mexico. Even Barack Obama wrestled with how best to enforce our borders and handle the crisis of unaccompanied minors:

During our meeting with DREAMers and veteran immigration advocates about the growing number of unaccompanied minors crossing the border, Obama told them he hadn't slept well the night before. "I'm not just worried about these kids but also in Sudan and other places... It's very unfair that kids in El Salvador live in a very different situation than a kid born in the United States. [But] we live in a world with borders. And I'm president of a country with one, and I need to enforce these borders." – Laura Wides-Muñoz (2018) quoting Barack H. Obama in *The Making of a Dream*, p.257.

Contrary to common mischaracterizations of the Obama approach to immigration, Obama strictly enforced borders and greatly intensified deportation of undocumented immigrants present unlawfully in the United States. One of the key drivers of the Obama administration's approach to immigration enforcement was national sovereignty. But enough on this.

As a Christian, however, the position on immigration that is most difficult to talk about is the objection that immigrants will change the cultural, ethnic, and religious makeup of the United States. First and foremost, on the religious objection I have to ask the question: "What have we done to preserve our own Christian culture and worldview?" The failure of discipleship in the American church has been extensively documented by many authors, including Dallas Willard and Richard Foster, and we have to ask ourselves in all seriousness, "What can immigrants do to the religious makeup in the United States that we have not already done to ourselves by failing to be faithful to Christ within the church?" Many Americans simply do not realize that currently, immigrants to the United States may be at least as likely to be devoted Christians as native-born Americans.

On the cultural issue, there's little I could say outside the context of an in-person conversation that wouldn't be more divisive than productive. Let me just say that this objection rightly foresees some difficult changes that will need to be wrestled with for those who feel immigrants will change the culture. Although I have great difficulty trying to define, exactly, what American culture is—even having never known any other nation as my home—it is nonetheless true that all Americans share some distinctive cultural traits and perspectives. In very important ways, I share much more in common culturally with a white man from Overland Park, Kansas, than I do with a black man from Lagos, Nigeria. However, I am constantly reminded that the culture I have been socialized in is certainly not the dominant culture in the United States. Maybe I feel like this since I have always been a minority, and have never lived—and do not now live—in a situation where I can safely assume that the cultural worldview and unspoken assumptions I was socialized into are shared by the culture I work in and send my children to school in. I have never known a time in my life—with the exception of my undergraduate years spent at Howard University—where my natural idiomatic expressions did not need to be explained, the literary images and cultural metaphors I used and understood did not need to be decoded, and where I could expect that my assumptions about societal power structures and authority would be shared.

Those who object to immigration on the basis of cultural change may see that if things change dramatically they would have to navigate life as a minority in neighborhoods and places they've always felt were familiar. Eric Kaufmann describes this challenge in his excellent essay in *Foreign Affairs*. They anticipate the difficult choices that they might have to make as they renegotiate their lives as the culture changes. For example, as a minority, there are

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many ways that one can respond. Some retreat into their own communities and do not leave those safe spaces. They limit their worlds, their possibilities, the experiences available to them. Some who are more adventurous than me take the risk of continually re-creating themselves as they appropriate, not assimilate, from their experiences features of the majority and sub cultures in the United States and abroad. Others simply assimilate to the dominant culture. All of these choices are compromises, and none of them are easy. I think that the reason that many folks bristle at the allegation of racism when someone challenges opposition to immigration on cultural grounds is because they may be starting to realize all of the ways in which their lives will get more complex, and object to the fact that acknowledging this complexity could be labeled as racism. At the same time, I'm not sure that it is racism when someone expresses opposition to immigration on cultural grounds. Instead, I think we might find it more productive to understand these concerns as part of the difficult work of identifying those things that might make it difficult to accept that God is once again using migration do his sovereign work.

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**Chapter 7: The Value of Immigrants to the United States**

**Excerpt**

“What effects do people like Guillermo, who come to the United States to pick our produce for a low hourly wage, have on the overall economy? Does immigration hurt the American worker? Are foreign workers even needed? What about the costs of providing education, healthcare, and other public services to these people? Can our country afford to welcome so many immigrants? Could we afford not to have them here?”

From a Christian perspective, these questions ought not to be primary: the scriptural witness is that we are to care for the immigrant stranger living among us, without any caveat that exempts us from this responsibility if it is not in our individual or national economic interest. Furthermore, immigrants contribute much to our society that is not easily quantified, and we err if we reduce the immigration dilemma to one of mere mathematics. God created and delights in cultural diversity, and immigrants have added richly to our communities through their different cultures. Nevertheless, economic considerations are among the most common concerns raised in the ongoing immigration debate in our country, and they need to be addressed.” (pg. 124)

**Summary**

Chapter 7 deals in detail with the economic value (or costs) of immigrants to the United States. I appreciate that Soerens and Yang do not make economic claims central to their book, but I also appreciate that they have examined some of the most common economic claims related to immigration. The quote above indicates some of the questions explored in Chapter 7:

- Do immigrants hurt the economy?
- Do immigrants hurt American workers?
- Do immigrants cost taxpayers?

It can be tempting to look at this topic only through the lens of costs, but in the excerpt above, Soerens and Yang also hold out the possibility that immigrants are indispensable and that it may not be possible to measure the true value of immigrants to the nation. Could we afford not to have them here? Would we be the nation that we are if they were not here?

**Discussion Questions**

1. What do you see as the impact of immigration on your local community? What are the benefits? What are the costs?
2. Do you think God’s instructions to “welcome the stranger” trump any negative effect that immigrants might have on the economy? Why or why not?
3. How does recognizing that immigration is a global issue—not just something that is impacting the United States—affect your thinking about this topic?
4. Over the last fifty years, immigrants have increasingly moved to more economically developed countries. What are the implications for the sending and receiving countries as well as for the immigrants themselves?
5. In your personal experience (or in those of your family or community), how have you observed the economic impact of immigrants?
6. Brainstorm together some of the possible root causes of why there are so many undocumented immigrants in America today.

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### Reflection

Over the last few weeks, I've provided several long summaries, so I'll keep my reflection short—at least until next week when Soerens and Yang discuss “Immigration Policies and Politics” in a thoroughly updated chapter 8 . . .

This chapter was difficult to review, for reasons related both to its content and to major shifts in demands on my time as the semester has started. This week, my students will be taking their first exam in one of my courses, and here in Baltimore the first days of fall have been accompanied with a very noticeable drop in temperatures. I love fall, but this year I was sick as the fall season came in. Even with all of the distractions, I'm continually reminded that immigrants are everywhere present and everywhere hidden at the same time. And although this chapter is, on the surface, about the economic value of immigrants to the United States, recent events and movements in my life have reminded me about the immeasurable ways that immigrants have enriched my life and our nation.

First off, while immigrants may have a short-term negative effect on the economy, their children will be citizens who directly contribute to our nation economically and culturally. My wife and I had the privilege this week of hosting a group of InterVarsity students from a local university in our home for dinner and fellowship. Although the students were not selected from the InterVarsity international student group on that campus, every one of the students were from families whose international roots were still reflected in their names, diction, the types of food we discussed, and cultural traditions such as marriage ceremonies. As my wife and I reflected on our visit with them, we thought about how we wanted our own children to resemble these men and women in many ways. We thought about their future careers. And we also thought about their futures in Christ.

Even if at my work at GW I am not directly engaged in traditional Christian ministry, I am aware that many of my students are international students. Many of the undergraduates I teach are domestic, but descendants of recent arrivals to the United States. I often look around at my GW students and try to imagine the ways that they have come to this place in their lives that we now share together. I never imagine thinking of any of my students in economic terms or how they can become assets to our nation. In my work, I assume that every one of my students will do profoundly good things that will enrich our lives and our communities. I do, however, hope that if any of them do become exceptionally wealthy, that they would provide an endowed chair for me to work from.

At the same time, though I interact with, and am influenced by, immigrants every day of my life, I know that many lives will never be recognized or brought into the light. When I was visiting Belgium earlier this month, I thought about how migration is a global problem, and how a very large proportion of those who have been driven from their homes may never receive the human rights of citizenship, liberty, or justice. Many who are seeking peace and security may never receive peace and security, while many who are seeking freedom of conscience may never experience that freedom. Even here at home, I am reminded of the many ways that being undocumented restricts one's life and keeps people in the shadows. For example, my wife and I have been looking for different ways to serve our local church, and one of the things we considered requires a background check and driver's license. Because of the required documentation, this opportunity for Christian service would be out of reach for many undocumented people. In important ways that may be invisible to many of us who are not undocumented, the logistics of modern ministry keeps many people in the shadows.

Thank you so much for your patience with me, and your willingness to engage with this important issue. In some ways, our politics and news cycles have moved on from immigration, but I pray that you have been able to prayerfully consider many of the arguments and ideas that Soerens and Yang have brought together in *Welcoming the Stranger*.

# Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion, and Truth in the Immigration Debate

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### Chapter 8: Immigration Policies and Politics

#### Excerpt

“Our national immigration laws have created a moral, economic and political crisis in America. Initiatives to remedy this crisis have led to polarization and name calling in which opponents have misrepresented each other’s positions as open borders and amnesty versus deportations of millions. This false choice has led to an unacceptable political stalemate at the federal level at a tragic human cost.”

— Soerens and Yang (2018) quoting the Evangelical Statement of Principles for Immigration Reform (pg. 150)

#### Summary

Chapter 8 is a thoroughly revised documentation of current immigration political debates and policy proposals. It is one of the longest and most complex chapters in the book. As with many of the other chapters I’ve already described on the blog, including especially Chapters 4 and 6, much of what is here is very technical and also subject to contentious controversy. So, I’ll provide a brief description of what’s here, and provide a list of some of the immigration policy solutions that could be helpful in addressing our immigration problem.

The United States is in dire need of comprehensive immigration reform: “The United States spends more on federal immigration enforcement than on all other federal criminal law-enforcement agencies combined. The budget for immigration enforcement in fiscal year 2012 was 24 percent higher than the combined spending on the FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration, Secret Service, U.S. Marshals Service, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives.” (p. 167) During the Obama and Trump Administrations, the number of people deported has been many times higher than the historic norm.

As the authors write: “the premise of comprehensive immigration reform is that to truly solve the issues around immigration, legislation could not focus on just [border security or legalization of the undocumented] but had to be comprehensive, addressing each element of the immigration issues simultaneously or in coordination.” (p. 171)

Comprehensive immigration reform would make three fundamental changes to our existing immigration laws:

- Improved enforcement policies consistent with humanitarian values.
- Reforms to our visa systems.
- Earned legalization of undocumented immigrants.

While some might be tempted to label these policies as amnesty, neither the comprehensive immigration reform bills brought to the floor in Congress nor the three pillars proposed above constitute amnesty because undocumented immigrants would be required to admit their infraction and earn their status. They also must be solved in the context of other challenging economic and social needs we have as a nation, including entitlements reform, employment and underemployment, poverty reduction, perceived trade imbalances, etc. We face a great and urgent challenge, but hopefully after you have read Soerens and Yang, you will be prepared to engage the comprehensive immigration debate from whatever perspective your conscience demands.

#### Discussion Questions

1. Do you think that the issue of immigration has been used for political gain by members of Congress and those running for President?
2. Do you think that a path to earned legalization with appropriate penalties is a fair consequence for the legal infraction of unlawful presence in the United States?
3. How do you think the moral voice of the faith community can shape the immigration debate?
4. What factors have made immigration a hot topic in political circles?
5. After reading about various debates Congress has had on immigration, what are the core elements that you believe immigration reform should include?
6. What further information would you need to know in order to advocate on behalf of immigrants?



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### Reflection

This week, I actually wrote the reflection before I wrote the summary. It's been well over 10 weeks since I decided to write this blog series, after finally reading my copy of the original edition of *Welcoming the Stranger* before the Fourth of July holiday, and then learning about—and reading—the new edition. When this series was conceived, immigration was on every major news channel around the clock, with the cries of children my own children's ages after having been recently separated from their parents, or video of various Republican politicians quoting from Romans 13 in order to justify the Trump Administration's zero-tolerance policy.

Then, it was hot outside, and public attention and polarization on this issue was hot. Now, cool winds of early fall mornings make training enjoyable, while public attention has greatly cooled on immigration and has moved on to how #MeToo will influence the Supreme Court nominee's hearings. While I'm editing this post in the train station before my commute, the TV screens' tickers are attuned to how the statute of limitations might impact any criminal investigation of the allegations against Kavanaugh, and photos of an Indonesian earthquake/tsunami that has affected nearly 2 million people. It seems like immigration "was so long ago..."

I guess that's how it's been since I've been able to vote, though. Just enough concern whipped up to attract votes—say, scaring the public that immigration will change our country or that everyone here illegally will be deported—but not enough that anyone might actually pass some laws. All of this to say that political expediency may obstruct political solutions to this issue from flowing through the House and the Senate. And while that's the way it's been for a long time in the United States—saving immigration for when it is politically convenient to “whip up the base” whether liberal or conservative—I am reminded by Soerens and Yang that our failure to address this crisis politically leaves real lives hanging in the balance. It keeps real people, who hold real jobs that perform needed work, in the shadows unable to challenge unfair work practices or demand justice. It keeps real people, many of whose only transgression was obeying their parents, from pursuing education, serving in their churches, or being employed to the maximum of their capability. It keeps real children wondering whether or not their fathers or mothers will be reunited with them, or whether they will not be kissed and sent to school by their parents again. I have long thought that the only reason this issue is not more forcefully addressed is because immigration affects “those people,” and that the politicians families and friends are not affected.

I know saying that may not be completely fair to the politicians, and that there are many issues where politicians' interests are divided or conflicted. But when we look at immigration policies and politics since the late 1990's, one cannot help but come to this conclusion. As Soerens and Yang in this edition and the previous one, and other authors, point out, there have been several times when bipartisan solutions have been proposed that would pass the Senate, but not the House, and vice versa. For me, the fact that comprehensive immigration solutions have been proposed that are acceptable to both sides, but will not be passed only for craven political reasons — this fact is the most frustrating thing about our current immigration system. I am also aware that this is one symptom of a broader problem in our politics where short-term political interest may make it much more difficult to pursue compromises in this environment. Let us pray that no matter the politics on this and other issues, God's wisdom might prevail.

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**Chapter 9: Immigration and the Church Today**

**Excerpt**

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put [Jesus] to the test, saying, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered right; do this, and you will live.”

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

—Luke 10:25-29, RSV

**Summary**

Chapter 9 describes how immigrants affect the demographics, culture, worship styles, spiritual life, and work of the church. While re-reading this chapter to prepare for our discussion, I found it overwhelming. While on the one hand Soerens and Yang challenge us, I’d argue that most of the chapter is focused on the opportunities that immigration presents the Church for revitalized ministry. The American Church has the opportunity to experience a deeper joy as it serves immigrants as fellow family members and not as strangers or even neighbors. I found it difficult to write a summary for this chapter, and have decided that this week, my post will be almost completely reflection. I will guide you through some of the thoughts that rose up in me as I was led by Soerens and Yang through thinking about how immigration to the United States affects the American church. As with everything on this blog series, charge all offense to me and not to Soerens or Yang—unless you have read their words for yourself! This week, I’m coming from the heart because much of what they bring to our attention provoked an emotional and not detached reaction from within me.

**Discussion Questions**

1. How do you see your church ministering to “the least of these” in the United States?
2. How should ethnic-majority churches respond to the rise in immigrant churches?
3. If your church were to create a statement on immigration, what would it say?
4. In his daily life, Jesus showed personal hospitality to outcasts, both ethnically with the Samaritan woman (John 4), religiously with the Roman centurion (Matthew 8), and socially with the woman caught in adultery (John 8). What can we do to show Christlike hospitality both personally and corporately?
5. Do you agree with the authors when they state that God is using cultural diversity to accomplish his greater purposes here on earth?
6. How does the fact that the immigrant church is the fastest growing evangelical church in America change the missions strategy of the church?
7. After reading this chapter, what do you think is essential to God’s heart in the midst of the immigration debate? What do you think God may be asking you of you as you read this book?

**Reflection**

Partway into this chapter, Soerens and Yang describe Prof. Soong-Chan Rah’s book, *The New Evangelicalism*, and point out that he argues that it is not enough for the church to move from hostility toward immigrants to hospitality, welcoming them as guests:

Ultimately, we must live into the biblical vision of the church as the family of God, with brothers and sisters of different backgrounds living within the same household under one Father. “Hospitality only takes us so far,” he writes. “How do we move from being simply hospitable to one another to actually becoming a family?... You will have kimchi on the table for that one meal when you entertain me as a guest. But what if you have to stock kimchi in your refrigerator every single day?” (Soerens and Yang, p.186)

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We are reminded in Chapter 9 that we must move from seeing each other as strangers to recognizing neighbors and, ultimately, to recognizing family when these strangers become fellow believers (p.186).

This is so difficult to do, because we must relinquish control of our communities in order to recognize one another as family. We must recognize that, just as with our earthly families we do not choose who our brothers and sisters are, our family composition is determined by who our Heavenly Father is and whom he has brought near to us. We must admit that our worship is culturally influenced—just like the worship styles of every other culture—and we must be willing to give up what is familiar to us in order to follow God our Father into what he is doing among those who are living among us and being brought to us. This is true not just for White Americans, who have been on the receiving end of this criticism most often, but this is true for all Americans who are finding themselves responsible for responding biblically to this moment in our Nation's life.

I decided to begin this blog post not with a quote from the book, but quoting the introduction to the story of the Good Samaritan, because it is crucial to establishing one's heart's orientation towards these issues. The beginning of the account starts with a lawyer asking Christ what is required to inherit eternal life. You'll notice that Christ is satisfied with his original response, but watch what the young lawyer says next: "Who is my neighbor?" And why did he ask this? Well, the Scripture tells us that the lawyer sought to justify himself.

This is why I find reading Scripture such a harrowing experience. From Old to New Testaments, my experience with reading the Bible goes something like this:

I read something fascinating or inspiring;

I learn that that fascinating or inspiring thing would have been profoundly shocking or challenging to the original hearers;

I reflect on why that thing would have been shocking or challenging;

I realize how I am now supposed to understand and be challenged by God's impossible demand on me;

I leave the Scripture somewhat unsure about how I am supposed to do what is commanded. When we realize how much it will cost to do what is commanded, I seek to justify myself by excusing myself from the cost.

In this passage, I don't think many folks would have any issues with the original response to Jesus about what is to be done to inherit eternal life. Nor would anyone have any trouble understanding what events occurred in the story that follows. But for me, the main point of the passage is that the young lawyer sought to justify himself. I think this is the most important point of the story, and the point that everyone skips over. It is our default response to everything God asks us to do that directly threatens us with major cost.

The desire to justify ourselves is so strong I can point to two examples of interpretations of this passage as illustration. One prominent pastor whom everyone reading this would know if I'd named him said that the main point of the Good Samaritan story is to give a model for personal evangelism, not social justice. While I've heard this story used many times—by Christians and non-Christians alike—to motivate concern for social justice, I have never once heard this story interpreted as primarily about personal evangelism in any other context. It is so costly to recognize that Christ clearly indicates that everyone is our neighbor, that it is preferable to interpret the story as about sharing the gospel—which, incidentally, most of us also find too costly. Another prominent evangelical seminary president whom everyone here would be familiar with referred to this story in his discussion of immigration. He said that while we are to care for our neighbor, our neighbors don't have to come near to us. They don't have the right to come into our midst. Again, I'd never before heard this story interpreted in order to restrict rights or to narrow the definition of our neighbor, only to expand our responsibilities to our neighbors. These examples show that, although we have no problem in principle with showing love to our neighbors, Jesus' implicit command to show no limit to whom this love is due is simply too hard for us. It costs too much.

To me, this is the main issue in the American Church as it relates to the immigration issue. Integrating immigrants is directly connected to our willingness to allow the Holy Spirit to control our lives and sacrifice even important aspects of our culture if that's what we perceive it would take to follow Christ. Is there a limit to the cost you will suffer to follow Christ? As long as we see our own cultural expressions of Christianity as the "right" way to worship, it will cost us too much to see immigrants as even neighbors, much less family. Fortunately, many churches have

Source: <https://blog.emergingscholars.org/?s=welcoming+the+stranger>

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counted the cost and thought it worthwhile to make great sacrifice to follow Christ in serving immigrants. This chapter is rich with details on how churches are currently serving immigrants. There is much on the prophetic voices calling to the church to serve refugees and reach out to immigrant communities. And, as I said at the beginning of this series, those who are doing this work are getting on with it without fanfare or media attention.

However, reading Chapter 9 has also raised so much of the pain and frustration I've felt with the American Church. More often than we'd like to admit, American Churches view the cost as too great. Consider the following quote from Chapter 9 describing one of the biggest challenges to the American Church concerning immigration:

Less than half of American evangelicals surveyed told LifeWay Research in 2015 that the arrival of immigrants to their communities presented "an opportunity to introduce them to Jesus," while most (including about 70 percent of white evangelicals) believed the arrival of immigrants presented a "threat" or "burden" of some sort. (Soerens and Yang, p.187)

We—and I do mean we Americans and not White Americans—are likely to view immigrants as a threat rather than an opportunity. We are so willing to send someone else to foreigners in their own homelands, but what might our response be if God begins to send them to us right here at home? What if we don't have to send missionaries to the 10/40 window? What if God is commanding us to receive these people groups here at home by way of refugee resettlement and "forced" migration? Does the threat of terrorism deter you? How about the fact that they come from cultures that are not Judeo-Christian? Are you afraid that they might irreversibly change our culture for the worst? We pray for revival and lament the state of discipleship in the American Church. What if God is sending missionaries from abroad into our midst by way of migration—documented or undocumented—of people groups who are more likely to be devoted Christians than native-born Americans? (see quotation of Timothy Tennent on p.181) Are you offended that God views men and women from abroad as the instruments He will use for His glory among us? Are you ashamed to admit that we are failing the mission of Christ here at home and are becoming a mission field for non-Westerners? Or are we rejecting our missionary responsibilities and Spirit-driven revival by seeing immigration as a threat?

I believe that the Holy Spirit is moving in the American Church towards revival through the influx of immigrants from across the globe. While there are certainly churches here that send missionaries to the nations, the primary move of God in our churches will be sending believers, and non-believers who will receive the gospel, from abroad into our American church communities, thereby revitalizing our churches and our devotion to Christ. I would hesitate to make such an unequivocal statement, but I believe God is speaking too clearly about this to ignore it. I first read about this nearly two years ago in *The End of Protestantism: Pursuing Unity in a Fragmented Church* by Peter Leithart. I've seen the unique challenges of receiving the missions field being brought to our doorstep when I visit the church my wife and I were married in. At Bethel Gospel Assembly in Harlem, NY, they weekly welcome busloads of tourists for multiple services per week into their churches. Many of these visitors—who would have previously only been reached through a foreign missions trip—receive the gospel and confess a faith in Christ. At the same time, their presence creates unique challenges for the current members who may feel displaced or uncomfortable. I've experienced this personally by attending a Catholic worship service as my relationship with one of my current students has evolved. I visited the Catholic church near my workplace and have seen a full Mass filled with people from different nations and people groups. There was no dominant ethnicity in participation or ministering of the service. Finally, as Chapter 9 shows, the statistics bear it out. All of our American Christian denominations are declining among Whites, and the younger generations of Americans do not affiliate with Christian traditions at the rates they have in the past. Much of the growth of the congregations that are growing is the direct result of immigration. Moreover, this is not just an American move of the Spirit; it is global:

One pastor in Jordan said he was praying for revival for the Middle East for years. As his church has welcomed Syrian refugees into their midst and tangibly met their physical needs, this pastor realized God was answering his prayer for revival through the refugee crisis. Many of these Syrian refugees had entered the church and met Christians for the first time. As the Jordanian Christian community was loving their refugee neighbors, God was answering their prayer for revival. (Soerens and Yang, p.193)

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Many other examples are provided in the box titled “The Church Beyond the United States” on p.193-194. Just as migration is not only an American issue, the move of God to revive and build His church in part through migration is also a global issue. Immigrants and ethnic minorities are stabilizing our churches and injecting them with new life through the Spirit.

The last quarter or so (p.194-200) of Chapter 9 describes how, in the decade since the original *Welcoming the Stranger* was published, evangelical advocacy for immigrants has qualitatively and quantitatively changed. There are many more American evangelical Christians advocating for immigration reform, seeking out ways to serve immigrants and refugees, and establishing or supporting organizations such as the Evangelical Immigration Table to “encourage distinctively biblical thinking about immigration issues” (p.199). In view of all this, will you consider how you and your church can avoid the temptation to justify yourself? What can you do to join what God is doing through migration in His Church today?

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**Chapter 10: A Christian Response to the Immigration Dilemma**

**Excerpt**

We have argued that Scripture makes repeated and clear calls for us to take special concern for the stranger, to love them as ourselves, and to welcome them as if serving Jesus himself. God commands us to obey, which is primary if we are to truly follow Christ. ‘There is no other road to faith or discipleship,’ Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, except ‘obedience to the call of Jesus.’ We dare not dismiss God’s instructions to us, but rather should move from reflection to prayerful action. Serving and loving immigrants can take on different expressions, and each are vitally important in the broader Christian witness. (pg. 203)

**Summary**

This week we have now completed the book. This final chapter is a call to action, recommending several possible ways you as a Christian can become involved in the immigration dilemma. In lieu of a reflection and training update this week, I will provide a short closing post post-race reflection on Saturday evening. Below, you will find a summary of the ways Soerens and Yang suggest you can get involved in the immigration debate from a Christian perspective.

I hope that you have been blessed by this book as I was. I found it very frustrating to listen to the news and the media, when I knew that godly guidance would be quite different from what I was hearing. At the same time, some of the perspective shared in this book is quite challenging, and demands quite a lot from us as believers. I hope that some of what you’ve read in the book might encourage you to get involved in your church communities and watch for what God is doing in your local congregation related to immigration.

**Discussion Questions**

1. The authors argue that we cannot really understand the immigration issue until we personally know and interact with immigrants in our communities. How could you begin to do this?
2. Is there a church or organization in your community that is actively serving the foreign born? How could you get involved?
3. What could you (individually or as a group) do to help educate your larger church community about this issue?
4. Many Christians are wary of meddling in politics. Why do you think this is? Do you think that there is a place for the church to be involved in political advocacy?
5. How could you (personally and as a church community) help your congressional representatives understand your position(s) on this issue?
6. What do the authors argue are some of the root causes of immigration? Do you agree? What part of the way that you live might contribute, either positively or negatively, to these situations?
7. What response do you believe that God is calling you to with this important and controversial issue? How will you respond to that call?

**Reflection**

*Potential Christian Responses to the Immigration Dilemma*

**Prayer.** The first thing we can do is to pray for immigrants, for our elected officials, and for policies that honor God and reflect his justice. Soerens and Yang write: “Many of our elected officials are people of faith themselves and are in positions of making incredibly difficult decisions that affect many people. They need godly wisdom, guidance, and counsel to make the best decisions for the common good.” Moreover, since this issue is so complex, there is no other way to address the factors involved. Immigration is driven by things happening “in some of the most difficult places on earth, where strongholds and bondage exist, and evil flourishes.” As we pray, God strengthens our love for those involved in these issues as we also acknowledge He is the only one who can change these circumstances.

## Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion, and Truth in the Immigration Debate By Matthew Soerens and Jenny Yang

**Knowing and Learning from Immigrant Neighbors.** “Only when we begin to personally know our immigrant neighbors can we begin to contemplate the biblical mandate to love them.” We must show the love God is building up in us in prayer through our actions by building relationships with our immigrant brothers and sisters. As we come to know one another, we stop being stereotypes to one another. The debate then has the potential to be less about statistics and more about our brothers and sisters.

**Serving.** Many organizations that work with immigrants and refugees have a constant need for volunteers. In addition, as we build relationships with others, we begin to anticipate and serve them in their specific points of need.

**Giving.** Any ministry needs financial support. This is also true for ministries serving the needs of immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants. “Many organizations and ministries that serve the poor are prohibited from serving undocumented immigrants, even if they would like to, because their funding sources—especially government grants—specifically state that funds should not be used to provide services to undocumented individuals.” Consequently, the church can bridge the gap and support these ministries if individual Christians are willing to invest their resources.

**Educating our Churches and Communities/Advocacy.** In the book, these two classes of action are not put together under the same category. However, I have put them together here because to someone on the outside like myself, they look very similar. Soerens and Yang describe how many Christians have never developed—or even been taught—a biblical worldview on immigration. Many evangelicals would welcome a sermon on biblical principles for immigration, or even appreciate teaching at the intersection of missiology and immigration issues. However, these resources and teachings are just not available to most evangelical Christians. As a result, the media has a greater influence on the average evangelical’s thinking on immigration than the Bible or even their local church. Advocacy is different from education since it involves, roughly, “speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves,” but from a Christian perspective, education and action are not separate. As we understand what is true, we are expected to walk in the truth. Therefore, as we understand a biblical perspective on immigration, hopefully we will be motivated to engage in advocacy, defined as “multiplying the voices of those who are marginalized, standing in the gap to present the realities of injustice around the world to those in positions of influence who can help change the situation.” Several specific actions are provided as a starting point including:

- Finding out the positions of our local congresspersons on immigration issues;
- Writing a letter to our local congresspersons stating how we feel about the immigration issue—highlighting the biblical basis for welcoming the stranger;
- Scheduling a meeting with our congresspersons to discuss our position on immigration issues;
- Writing an editorial in our local newspaper about our personal experiences with immigrants;
- Identifying church leaders who support immigration reform and provide forums for them to speak about their positions;
- Arranging a panel of speakers and asking people to pray and fast on behalf of immigrants in our local community;
- Staying up-to-date on advocacy issues related to immigrants and refugees by signing up for World Relief’s advocacy updates by emailing [advocacy@wr.org](mailto:advocacy@wr.org).

**Addressing the Root Issues.** Perhaps the most difficult of all, we can recognize and address the root issues driving immigration around the world. Migration is traumatic, and it is ideal for people to be able to live in dignity in their home countries and communities. Sometimes the trauma and sacrifice involved in migration is clearly forgotten by those involved in the immigration debate. What can also be forgotten sometimes is the combined effect of our lifestyle choices on the environment, trade, and foreign policy, for good or bad, as drivers of global demographic changes.