



Lindy Scott

is the FTL regional secretary for the USA and Canada. He served in Mexico for sixteen years before returning to the United States as a college professor. He and his wife have three grown children.

Mi Casa es Tu Casa: A Biblical Perspective on the Current Immigration Situation

Immigration has been one of the most contentious issues in United States politics this past year. It cuts across the typical liberal/conservative divide. The House of Representatives passed the Sensenbrenner/King Bill (H-4437) in December 2005 that would criminalize both undocumented immigrants and those who help them. Later, in the spring of 2006, the Senate passed the McCain/Kennedy Bill (S-1033) that would permit many of the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants to obtain work visas and provide them with a pathway (albeit long and arduous) to citizenship. The two bills are so far apart that there is little possibility of a compromise bill being passed this



year. The recent approval of a seven hundred mile fence along the Mexico-United States border without reaching an agreement on a comprehensive immigration policy demonstrates the deep polarization that has emerged over this issue.

This article attempts to provide biblical perspectives on immigration in general and, more specifically, on the political impasse at hand. It draws upon Latin American insights into Scripture and their application today. In a pluralistic democracy Christians do not have the right to impose their views on their neighbors, but neither do they have the option of silencing their perspectives. Jesus sends his followers into the world to promote justice and peace.

The theme of immigration permeates the pages of Holy Scripture. That a “theology of immigration” has not been developed by Christian authors is not due to a lack of biblical material.¹ Sadly, this absence of Christian thinking on immigration reflects our prejudices. Nevertheless, it points out the need for us to do our homework and return to God’s Word to find just responses to the challenges of immigration.

*Sadly,
this absence
of Christian
thinking on
immigration
reflects our
prejudices.*

¹ There are some notable exceptions, especially among urban missiologists and those who participated in the sanctuary movement. Ray Bakke develops a theology of immigration in *The Urban Christian* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1987). For a Christian perspective of the sanctuary movement see Renny Golden and Michael McConnell, *Sanctuary: The New Underground Railroad* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1986).

God is the Absolute Owner of the Earth

The Bible opens with a description of the universe. God, because he is the Creator, is the “owner” of everything, including the whole earth. God places humanity (both male and female) on earth to take care of the creation. In no way is humanity the absolute owner of the earth. All people have the calling to represent God on earth as stewards or administrators, and as such all will give an account of their stewardship to God. Therefore, biblical teaching does not totally agree with an extreme form of capitalism where the individual is the absolute owner of “private property” or with an extreme form of socialism where the state is the absolute owner. Within both “isms,” humanity, both individually and collectively, is called to use the earth according to divine principles. The Spanish phrase “*Mi casa es tu casa*” (My home is your home) captures quite nicely the spirit of biblical teaching. Precisely because God is the true owner of everything and he has shared his creation with us, possessions under our stewardship should be wisely and generously shared with those in need.

The affirmation that God is the owner of the earth was frequently repeated in the Hebrew Scriptures with important ethical demands for Jews and Gentiles alike. During their last years as “immigrants” in Egypt, the Hebrews suffered greatly under the unjust policies of the Pharaoh. Moses’ goal, in his various interactions with the Egyptian ruler, was to teach Pharaoh that “the earth is the Lord’s.”² Therefore, even in Egypt where Pharaoh

reigned, God would not tolerate subhuman policies carried out against immigrants.

The affirmation that the earth is the Lord’s also meant ethical demands for Jews. Far from being pampered as God’s holy people, they had to meet a higher code of ethics. Precisely because “the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” only those who have “clean hands” and “pure hearts” will see God’s salvation.³

Every Human Being has an Intrinsic Dignity

As we have seen in the description of creation, human beings occupy a special position of importance. Humanity is the apex of creation because we have been created according to the image and likeness of God Himself (Genesis 1:26). This *Imago Dei* is borne by every human being, male or female, brown, black, white or yellow, rich or poor, old or young. Consequently, every human being has an intrinsic dignity and is worth more than all the possessions in the world. This dignity and immense value of every human being stand in stark contrast with the world’s values. As God’s image, every human being is an official representative and ambassador of God himself.

Even after their fall into sin, humans continue to bear the “image of God” with all of the importance and

*As God’s image,
every human
being is
an official
representative
and ambassador
of God himself.*

² Ex. 9.29. See also Ps. 24.1-2 and 146.9.

³ Ps. 24.4-5.

responsibilities that correspond to that rank (Gen. 9.6). Actions directed towards a human, are in fact, directed towards God himself. This “*Imago Dei* ethic” is seen throughout both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures (ex. Job 31.13-23, esp. v. 15; Prov. 14.31; James 3.9-10). Nevertheless, the clearest example of this ethical principle is found in Matthew 25.31-46 where Jesus identifies with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger (= immigrant), the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. The Lord’s identification with these needy is so complete that he calls them his “brothers and sisters.” What is more striking is that Jesus affirms that the eternal state of “all the nations”⁴ is decided by how they have treated these “brothers and sisters.”

Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.... Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me. Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.⁵

Immigrants Should Receive a Just and Humane Treatment

Jews and Christians alike consider Abraham to be the founder or “father” of their religions. According to the biblical narrative, God established a special covenant with Abraham in which all of the nations of the earth would be blessed in him.

I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse, and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.⁶

We can see that this “transnational blessing,” that is, the humane and benevolent treatment by foreigners towards Abraham, is the necessary pre-requisite for receiving God’s blessing. In fact, Abraham is the perfect paradigm of an immigrant. He emigrated from his homeland of Haran. After passing through the land of the Canaanites, he lived as a foreigner in the land of Egypt.⁷ He was treated well by the Pharaoh, in spite of having lied to Pharaoh concerning his wife Sarah in an attempt to protect his own life. Nevertheless, he did not learn his lesson and repeated the same lie to King Abimelech in Gerar. Again he was forgiven and treated well. According to the Scriptures, both kings received God’s blessing because they went beyond a narrow definition of justice in their treatment of Abraham and extended mercy to him.



⁴ This reference to “all the nations” is significant because it expresses what God expects of all people in all countries, not just an ethic for his “chosen people,” whether Jewish or Christian.

⁵ Matt. 25.40, 45-46.

⁶ Gen. 12.2-3.

⁷ In biblical times and later, Egypt, due to its fertile lands and the abundant water from the Nile River, has received many foreigners in need. Precisely because God is the owner of all the earth, the natural resources of a “blessed land” are to be shared with others.

Years later a famine spread throughout the land. Abraham's descendants immigrated to Egypt. The Pharaoh received them with open arms and welcomed them through Joseph:

The Hebrews were forbidden to mistreat or oppress foreigners precisely because they themselves had lived as foreigners in Egypt.

The land of Egypt is before you; settle your father and your brothers in the best part of the land. Let them live in the land of Goshen. And if you know of any among them with special ability, put them in charge of my own livestock. (Gen. 47.6)

Such generous hospitality from the Egyptians became part of the normative legislation for the people of God. The Hebrews were forbidden to mistreat or oppress foreigners precisely because they themselves had lived as foreigners in Egypt (Ex. 22.21, 23.9).

The loving hospitality showered upon Joseph and his family did not continue to all of his descendants. The numerical growth of the Hebrews came to be interpreted as a threat to the Egyptians (just like the numerical growth of Hispanics in the United States is sometimes interpreted in a similar manner). Egyptian hostility led to the Exodus. As the Hebrews left Egypt, many people from other races ("a mixed multitude") joined them (Ex. 12.38). These new immigrants were allowed to join the people of God with all of the corresponding privileges and responsibilities. In fact, every foreigner who desired to become part of the Jewish people would receive the same treatment under the law (Lev. 24.22).

After their prolonged pilgrimage in the desert, the Hebrews were ready to enter into the promised land. An interesting episode occurred when the Israelites crossed the Jordan River. The tribes of the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half tribe of Manasseh decided to settle on the eastern side of the Jordan. In order to educate the future generations about the worship of Yahweh, they built an altar near the river. When the other Hebrew tribes heard about this altar, they misinterpreted the construction as a fall into apostasy. The tribes on the western side offered to share their land with their eastern relatives so that they would not abandon the true faith. It is important to point out that for religious and evangelistic reasons the Israelites were willing to live with less property and to share their land with others.

God is the defender of foreigners and demands that they receive the same treatment as citizens.

The Bible recognizes that immigrants, along with orphans and widows, are frequently the victims of various types of oppression. For this reason, God is the defender of foreigners and demands that they receive the same treatment as citizens (Ps. 146.9).

King David provides us with another pertinent example of unjust treatment of foreigners. He raped Bathsheba, the wife of the Hittite Uriah. When she became pregnant David tried to hide his sin in various ways. He gave orders for Uriah to be killed⁸ so that he could keep Bathsheba

⁸ David did not literally kill Uriah, but he did order Uriah to be left alone on the front line in order to be killed by the enemy army. This action is a clear example of structural sin. God held David responsible for using structures to implement his sin (2Sam. 11).

for himself. This story tells us that David was willing to cause the death of one foreigner so that he could obtain another foreigner (Bathsheba) who was more valuable to him. Something similar happens today. Many countries in the “global north” are willing to provide visas for talented and highly educated foreigners (athletes, medical professionals, the rich, etc.) but not for poor or illiterate foreigners. Although these policies that encourage “brain drain” are understandable, it does not adequately express the truth that all people are created in God’s image and are worthy of profound respect.



A Tale of Two Women

The two books of the Hebrew Scriptures that bear women’s names, Ruth and Esther, include solid defenses in favor of immigrants. It seems that women, who are frequently oppressed in society, are more sensitive to the suffering of other oppressed people, including immigrants.⁹

The Book of Ruth cannot be properly understood without an awareness of Jewish legislation in favor of immigrants. Elimelech, a Jew, had immigrated to Moab with his family when a famine occurred in Israel. His two sons each married Moabite women. All three men died. One of the daughters-in-law, Ruth, upon becoming

a widow, insisted on living with and providing for her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi. They immigrated to Bethlehem because Ruth had made a promise to Naomi:

Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. (Ruth 1.16)

In order to support both herself and her mother-in-law, Ruth began to harvest barley in the fields. During this process she met Boaz; they married (and lived happily ever after?) and formed part of the messianic genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1.5). The immigration legislation that forms the vital background for this book is found in Leviticus 19.9-10 and 23.22. Based on the truth that God is the owner of the whole earth, Moses had implemented the following legislation:

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God. (Lev. 19.9-10)

In order to make sure that his audience had captured the importance of this commandment, Moses repeated it four chapters later:

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the Lord your God. (Lev. 23.22)

¹⁶ The Deuterocanonical book of Judith also has strong teaching regarding immigrants. See also Prov. 31.4-9.



Far from persecuting foreigners or oppressing them, God had established legislation that would guarantee immigrants the right to feed themselves with the harvest of the Jewish lands.

If the Book of Ruth defends the rights of foreigners in Israel, the Book of Esther demonstrates the rights of Jews living in foreign lands. Jews were living in Persia, exiled and far from their homeland. On one occasion the Persian king Xerxes became furious with his wife and subsequently deposed her from the throne. To find a new wife, he sponsored a kind of “Miss Persia” contest in which beautiful young women from throughout the empire participated. A Jewish woman Esther won the competition and became the new queen. Many Jewish immigrants were suffering persecution. An especially anti-Jewish cabinet member schemed against them and successfully maneuvered Xerxes to issue a decree “to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children” (Est. 3.13). Esther had the courage to place her own life at risk to intercede on behalf of the Jewish people. She succeeded! The decree was annulled and in this way the Jewish immigrants obtained legal protection for their lives.

Prophets over Profits

The prophet Amos is very relevant for our contemporary discussion of immigration. He begins his

prophetic denunciations by describing the sins of the countries that surrounded Judah and Israel. Although God judges his own people with higher ethical criteria, the Lord requires all nations to live according to basic moral standards of human interaction. In particular, the sins of Gaza, Tyre, Edom, and Amon dealt with the oppression of immigrants. Their unjust treatment of foreigners received the prophet’s severe denunciation.¹⁰

The modern world is quite complex with many institutions (governmental, business, religious, etc.) that mediate actions between individuals. These institutions are not morally neutral. They also get evaluated according to God’s ethical principles. They may be structures of virtue and blessing or perhaps conduits of structural sin and injustice. In the world in which Amos lived, human institutions came under his scrutiny. In chapter 4, Jewish wives were held co-responsible for the actions their husbands committed on their behalf. Their demands for more and more possessions incited their husbands to oppress the poor. Their insatiable demands seem all too similar to contemporary stockholders’ demands that CEOs provide more and more profits, even at the expense of workers.

*The unjust
treatment of
foreigners
received the
prophet’s
severe
denunciation.*

Jesus: The Immigrant *Par Excellence*

The New Testament opens with the genealogy of Jesus. It is no accident that many of his ancestors were

¹⁰ J. A. Motyer, *El día del León: El mensaje de justicia del profeta Amós* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Certeza, 1980), 35-47.

foreigners, like Ruth the Moabite and some of ill repute (like Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute). Although Matthew was the most Jewish of the four evangelists, he frequently denounced the hyper-nationalism of his countrymen (Matt. 4.12-16, 8.5-13, 15.21-28, and 28.16-20).

One of the few episodes of Jesus' infancy narrated in Scripture portrays him as an international, political refugee.

The well-known story of Jesus' birth mentions that there was no room in the inn for Mary and Joseph. Christmas sermons today frequently chide the residents of Bethlehem for their inhospitality and then urge us to make room for Jesus in our hearts. But if Jesus was right when he affirmed that what we do unto the "least of these his brothers and sisters" (Matt. 25.31-46) we do unto him, then it is worth arguing that we make room for Jesus in our hearts by making room for immigrants in our nation.

One of the few episodes of Jesus' infancy narrated in Scripture portrays him as an international, political refugee. In order to escape the infanticide ordered by King Herod, Jesus was taken by his parents to Egypt (again the country of hospitality). Jesus the Asian was well received in the African continent when his life was in danger. Although many immigrants migrate for economic reasons, some do so under dire circumstances when their lives are at stake. For example, during the 1980s many Central Americans came to the United States to escape the dangers of civil war in their own countries, in part caused by the North American government.

One of the best known conversations Jesus had took place with a Samaritan woman (Jn. 4). The Samaritans

and the Jews did not normally interact with each other. Nevertheless, Jesus purposefully led his disciples into Samaria in order to challenge the political and racial barriers that divided the two groups. He affirmed that people from all nations would be received by God if they worshipped him in Spirit and truth.

The gospel rapidly expanded throughout the Roman Empire, largely due to great immigration movements. The gospel spread out past Jerusalem due to the persecution that took place there (Acts 8.4ff). Later, Priscilla and Aquila, together with many Jewish Christians, were forced to abandon Rome, but they carried the seed of the gospel to the four corners of the Empire. Without a doubt, the missionary work of the Apostle Paul would not have reached as far as it did if he had not possessed the freedom to travel as a Roman citizen. (It is not much speculation to affirm that if Paul lived today, he would prefer not to have to wait in line for visas that are never approved nor to get past 700 mile fences along borders. He might argue from experience that the gospel spreads more rapidly when borders do not restrict travel.)

We end this quick overview of New Testament examples of immigration with two references in the general epistles. Recall the words of the Apostle Peter. He recommended that Christians consider themselves as "foreigners and exiles," that is, as people without a country, but who have become the people of God (1Pet. 2.9-11). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews is even more explicit. The "heroes of the faith" recognized that they were "foreigners and strangers on earth" who longed for a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared



“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

a special place for them. If believers in biblical times placed their earthly possessions in God’s hands, to be shared with their neighbors, we are also called to follow their example.

The History of the United States

From an ethical perspective the history of the United States leaves much to be desired: the oppression of Native Americans and the taking of their lands, the slavery of Africans, the invasion of Mexico and the unjust acquisition of half of the Mexican territory.¹¹ The tragic irony of this infamous history is that the perpetrators of these injustices were themselves immigrants (or the descendants of immigrants) who had escaped from Europe to establish a more just nation.

Nevertheless, in its better moments the United States has practiced enlightened policies towards immigrants. These policies are reflected in the Statue of Liberty. She is a woman, the “Mother of the exiles.” Her shout

for liberty expresses well the biblical teaching for current immigration policies.

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

May US citizens today promote the sentiments of this Declaration of Liberty.

A Consistent Capitalism

The United States of America considers itself to be the great defender of capitalism. Nevertheless, a consistent capitalism would promote the free flow of capital, products, and *labor*. According to pure capitalism theory, whenever a government restricts any of these free flows, efficiency and other benefits of capitalism are reduced. Most free trade agreements (such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA) do allow for freer flow of capital and products, but labor does not enjoy the same ease of movement. This unequal legislation creates huge distortions in the market system. For example, minimum wages in the United States are about ten times higher than those that exist in Mexico. It is not surprising that Mexican workers would want to cross over the border in order to make ten times the wages as in their own country. This crossing is precisely what true capitalism would recommend for improving the efficiency and well being of all.

Scapegoating is the unfair blaming of specific ethnic groups for the ills of society, and it often shows up in the

¹¹ Abraham Lincoln was one of many who considered the Mexican-American War to be totally unjust. He was able to pass an amendment condemning the war as “...unnecessarily and unconstitutionally begun by the President of the United States.” The amendment passed, but the bill never reemerged from committee and was never finally voted upon. He later proclaimed on the House floor that the “...God of Heaven has forgotten to defend the weak and innocent, and permitted the strong band of murderers (led by President Polk) and demons from hell to kill men, women, and children, and lay waste and pillage the land of the just.”

It is a widely believed, yet unsubstantiated, fallacy that undocumented immigrants pay no taxes for the benefits that they receive.

current discussions on immigration.¹² For example, it is affirmed that “illegal immigrants” are lazy. It is claimed that they are an economic burden on the system because they receive many benefits (public education, medical treatment, etc.) without paying taxes. On the other hand,

some accuse the immigrants of working so hard (sometimes holding down two fulltime jobs or even more) that they take jobs away from US citizens. It is a widely believed, yet unsubstantiated, fallacy that undocumented immigrants pay no taxes for the benefits that they receive. In fact, whenever they make purchases, they pay the same sales taxes as US citizens. If they own a home they pay real estate taxes or if they live in an apartment, the taxes are incorporated into the rent that they pay. If they own a car, they pay the same gasoline tax and tolls that their neighbors pay. If they have utilized false documents to obtain a job, their employers automatically deduct the appropriate income tax (if they get paid “under the table,” their employers are probably paying them wages that are less than the legal minimum wage). The ironic yet tragic truth is that many undocumented workers are paying Social Security taxes, but because they have utilized false numbers, they may

¹² The immigration declaration of the Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) begins with a denunciation of scapegoating. It then develops a solidly evangelical theology of immigration. The similarity of conclusions reached by this conservative North American denomination and by my own biblical analysis seen through Latin American eyes is a sign of hope. Christians from different latitudes can search the Scriptures and find common ground and solutions for a polarized world. The EFCA declaration is included at the end of this article as an Appendix.

never receive any Social Security benefits at all. In fact, the immigrants are subsidizing North American citizens with their Social Security contributions yet are scapegoated as lazy parasites.

We Reap What We Sow

Although international immigration has occurred in every age, it is a dominant characteristic of our twenty-first century. Many immigrants flee their countries because of war, famine, unemployment, or a lack of political or religious freedom. Some of these problems are due to corrupt government officials in their countries. Nevertheless, the United States government and North American-based international corporations have not been neutral spectators of this international immigration. For example, it was hypocritical to contribute to the militarization of Central America in the 1980s (through the funding of the Contras) and at the same to complain about the arrival of Central American immigrants to the United States.

Given that Mexico is the origin of more immigrants to the United States than all other countries combined, the Mexican experience deserves special analysis. In 1988 Governor Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas broke with the ruling PRI political party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*) to run for president under the banner of a new party (the PRD). Most international observers agreed that Cárdenas won the election. Nevertheless, even before all the



Diego Rivera
“El maíz” (The maize) - 1940

votes were counted, the United States recognized the fraudulent “victory” of the PRI candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, thus eliminating any possibility of a transparent recount. To compensate the United States for its recognition, Salinas de Gortari agreed to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Towards the end of his six-year administration, Salinas lied to the Mexican people about the state of the economy. He was forced to make unwise political decisions that produced an economic crisis. The combination of a thwarted democratic process and extreme unemployment forced millions of Mexicans to immigrate north of the border. More recently, the presence of Canadian and North American agrobusinesses in Mexico has transformed the Mexican landscape. Corn-growing peasants could not compete with these large foreign agricultural corporations. 1,800,000 *campesinos* have been forced off their land and the overwhelming majority of them have migrated to *El Norte*. The United States government needs to recognize its complicity in the electoral fraud committed in Mexico, the ensuing loss of agricultural jobs due to NAFTA, and the consequential increase in the number of immigrants. Sooner or later, we reap what we sow.

Proposals for the Current Political Situation

We have seen that the Bible provides both illustrations and solid ethical teaching regarding immigrants. Although there is no easy straight line that goes from biblical teaching to contemporary immigration policies, Scripture’s overwhelming thrust is quite clear. We

desperately need a comprehensive immigration policy in the United States that respects the immense dignity of every human being. It should include border control but also provide humane treatment of all people, regardless of documents. It needs to honestly recognize the presence of some twelve million undocumented immigrants in the United States and provide a pathway for them to step out of the shadows and into active citizenship. And above all, it needs to recognize that God is the true owner of the whole earth, including the territory of the United States, and that we will give an account to him of how we have administered his land.

God is the true owner of the whole earth, including the territory of the United States.

Mi casa es tu casa is an expression of Latino hospitality. It seems very much in keeping with God’s nature and grace. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2Cor. 8.9).