

# Communicating Biblical Teaching on Immigration: The Message, Audiences, and Medium<sup>1</sup>

M. Daniel Carroll R.

Carroll R, M. Daniel. 2014. Communicating Biblical Teaching on Immigration: The Message, Audiences, and Medium. *Common Ground Journal* v11 n2 (Spring): 13-20. ISSN: 15479129. URL:

[www.commongroundjournal.org](http://www.commongroundjournal.org).

## Abstract

A retrospective on the author's journey to understand the complexities of immigration. A first person narrative about issues that swirl around immigration to help the rest of us. Three different audiences are described in terms of their particular perspective on immigration or their situation as immigrants. Insights and recommendations are given as to what the Bible has to say to each audience and how appropriate emphases can be used to elicit constructive responses from each audience.

## Introduction

Several years ago I embarked on a journey; one for which I had not planned but one that has been enriching. I was introduced to the world of undocumented immigrants and began to engage the raging debates about immigration. All of this has affected who I am and my ministry.

On the one hand, perhaps these experiences should not have come as a surprise. I am half-Guatemalan (my mother was Guatemalan married to an American), was raised bilingual and bicultural, and spent time in that Central American country when I was growing up. Eventually, as an adult, I went there with my family to teach at an evangelical interdenominational seminary in the capital city. After fifteen years overseas we moved back to the United States. So, I have lived much of life within and around Latin American culture.

At the same time, all that experience did not involve engaging in any formal way the issues around immigration. When we returned to this country, where I took the post of professor of Old Testament at Denver Seminary, I gradually became acquainted with the Hispanic community in the Denver metro area. At the seminary I taught in the Spanish-language lay-level program we had established, got involved in an Hispanic pastors' association, and started to attend an immigrant church. I began to hear stories of crossing the border and enjoyed fellowship with these immigrants. Even as I taught them basic Bible and theology, I was learning about the vibrant, yet fearful life of the undocumented in the shadows. The immigration debate no longer was about abstract socio-political and economic issues or about a faceless "horde" or "tidal wave" that was "invading" or "washing over" our shores. It was about real people and their families.

I became aware increasingly of a social reality that was profoundly disturbing. The media, especially certain radio talk shows and news outlets, often presented negative stereotypes—even caricatures—of immigrants, especially of the undocumented. Even some people I knew would make derogatory comments about those I now embraced not only as friends, but also as brothers and sisters in the faith. What was

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this essay are drawn from "How To Shape Christian Perspectives on Immigration? Strategies for Communicating Biblical Teaching," in Azaransky, ed., *Religion and Politics in America's Borderlands*, 57-77.

disappointing was that the conversations I had with people who professed Christian faith frequently were in no way explicitly Christian. There were emotional and critical harangues about the economic impact of immigration, possible threats to national identity, the pressures on the school system and hospital emergency rooms, border security, Hispanic gangs, the supposed refusal to assimilate and a reluctance to learn English, and more. Of course, these are all important topics that need to be dealt with at local, state, and national levels.

Yet, I was left wondering about what might be the contribution of faith to these issues? I asked myself, what might an informed Christian perspective on immigration look like? Did the Bible, which Christians hold as the guide for faith and practice, have anything to say on this matter? Could it at least influence the tone of the debate, at least among majority *host culture* (Anglo) Christians? At the same time, the Bible also is the Scripture of the Christians within the immigrant community. Could, and how might, the Bible be a source of encouragement and provide direction to them *as immigrants* within this new, and sometimes suspicious, land?

So, I began to educate myself about the history of immigration into the United States and of its immigration legislation. I investigated what the Bible reveals about God's view of immigration and foreigners. At the time (2006-2007) little with a theological or biblical bent was available.<sup>2</sup> The result of those efforts was *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible*. To my surprise, there is an enormous amount of material dealing with migration and immigrants in the Bible. There are some fundamental theological topics that should frame the discussion, such as the image of God; there are many narratives of God's people on the move and significant Old Testament legislation about the treatment of the outsider. The New Testament's appropriates the sojourner theme to describe the Christian life. I never expected to find so much!

Unexpectedly, since its publication in 2008 this book<sup>3</sup> has generated speaking opportunities across the country in all sorts of venues—local churches (Anglo and Hispanic), regional and national denominational gatherings, seminaries, and universities—on points across the theological spectrum. My journey had begun. This journey has had several dimensions: ecclesial, spiritual, geographic, and political. It has brought me into contact with expressions of the Christian faith that were unknown to me; I have met wonderfully compassionate believers of all kinds, veteran activists, the perplexed, the frustrated, the questioning, and the frightened—all asking what the Word of God might say about immigration.

It has been a challenge to think through *how* to present this biblical message in an engaging way that would be both informative and, hopefully, transformative. What follows is a description of what shape these presentations take and why. Perhaps this first-person narrative might prove useful to those who desire to communicate the Bible's message on migration.

### Matching the Message with the Audience

If one is involved with immigrants and immigration reform, it is not enough to write a book about what the Bible says about immigration and then let it lie. The goal must be larger, to communicate effectively that material to whomever might listen. In other words, to the content of the biblical message

<sup>2</sup> That situation has now changed. See the list of sources at the end of this essay.

<sup>3</sup> *Christians at the Border* is now in a second, revised edition. The first edition was translated into Spanish. An abridged version of the biblical material is available in *Immigration and the Bible*. See the bibliography.

must be added matters pertaining to audiences and strategies. What might be effective ways to transmit scriptural teaching to Christians, no matter their present convictions, in order to season their understanding, attitudes, and actions? Once these Christians begin to rethink their stance on the matter, what impact can their views have on the broader society? These are questions about formulating a sensible approach that is sensitive to the different positions in order to win hearts and minds.

As I have traveled around the country to teach on immigration, I have encountered, in very general terms, three basic types of audiences. First, there are audiences who are *suspicious* of these recently arrived outsiders. They are witnessing dramatic demographic shifts in their neighborhoods and are taken aback by the sudden appearance of ethnic restaurants and grocery stores; they hear other languages being spoken where they have always shopped and on the radio and television; they see signs and billboards directed at foreigners with words they do not recognize. The world as they know it is changing. Naturally, this change is hard to grasp and hard to accept. Normal fears and uncertainties can override faith commitments; or commitments are defined narrowly, in patriotic fashion, as the obligation to be exemplary law-abiding citizens. Immigrants, especially the undocumented, are perceived as violators of that 'rule of law:' "What is it about 'illegal' you don't understand?"

A second audience is Christians who *seek* biblical foundations in support of immigrants. They are found among mainline Protestants, evangelicals, and Roman Catholics, who are coming together for a common cause. This constituency feels a deep Christian impulse to reach out to these newcomers, but they sense their need for more extensive biblical and theological foundations. Some are able to appeal to a few passages in support of immigrants (e.g., Leviticus 19:33-34, Matthew 25:31-36), but they are eager to expand and deepen the scriptural roots of their convictions.

Third is the audience that is *scared*. These are the immigrants themselves. They worship in Christian churches, often renting space on Sunday afternoons from majority culture congregations that sometimes are ambivalent about their presence on the premises. Immigrant churches often function as extended family and are a viable alternative social network to that of the society in which they live, a society that marginalizes them. Prayers are offered for those who have been detained, for those looking for employment, or who are sick; they share funds to pay for medical bills, because insurance is not available to them, and they share a meal together after the service to solidify their bonds of friendship. Worship times are full of praise, and congregants can relish release from the pressures and fears that haunt their daily lives. Rarely, though, does the preaching focus on their immigrant status. The Bible is applied to general human and familial needs, and they are encouraged to celebrate the goodness of God—this is all very human, of course—but there is little teaching on migration in the Bible or about God's commitment to the sojourner. It is ironic that this group, too, is uninformed about what the biblical text says about immigration.

Each of these three audiences has a particular perspective and a set of experiences to which the Bible can respond. The first group, which can be negatively disposed toward immigrants, needs exposure to how much both the Old and New Testaments offer in relation to immigration issues. For many, introduction to this vast material yields an "Aha!" moment: "Wow! I never knew all that was in the Bible!" As the presenter, my obligation is to offer a gracious invitation to these Christians to ground opinions along biblical lines. Allegiance to a contrary political stance and inappropriate ethnic responses must be reevaluated in the light of Scripture. The aim is not win the biblical argument or berate those who might disagree, but rather to offer another viewpoint in a civil manner so as to model the courteous discourse all sides should pursue. On the other hand, as the second group surveys that biblical teaching, they are confirmed and empowered in a fresh way. God indeed is in this! They appreciate that their efforts are not in vain even if the wider culture does not agree.

For immigrants, the Bible takes on a new significance. As they encounter narratives of the people of God, who also migrated in search of food or who were forced into exile by war, they find themselves in the pages of Scripture: "*¡Allí estoy yo!*" ("There I am!"). The text is relevant to their feelings and to the pressures that can remain unspoken in church. It describes similar situations and can spur them to deeper faith in their circumstances today. The Bible also presents case studies of the lives of those long ago who were strangers in strange lands. There they see vignettes of frustration, failure, humiliation, worry, persecution, and triumph. In all of this *el texto nos acompaña en el camino de migrar y en la vivencia en tierra ajena* ("the text accompanies us on the immigration journey and as we live in a land not our own."). The Bible can be embraced as a uniquely immigrant book!<sup>4</sup>

In sum, the presentation of the biblical material on immigration should have appropriate emphases geared to elicit constructive responses from each audience. How can this be done?

### Matching the Media with the Message

In a visually stimulated culture images can be used to great effect. This also holds true in the immigration debate. In presentations on immigration I usually begin with a series of pictures. The choice of the pictures in a presentation has a two-fold purpose. The first is to provide something of an historical perspective to the present situation. Debates over immigration are not new, and that fact (of which almost no one is aware) can lower the tension in the room. We have been here before. The second is to demonstrate how caricatures and generalizations have never been, and never will be, either fair or productive. Some of the images I show are amusing, and that bit of humor can lighten the mood of an audience before I move on to the biblical material. A smile can open people up to explore that uncharted territory.

The first four images I show are scenes of immigrants from the nineteenth century. The first is a drawing of Castle Garden, through which some eight million people came between 1855 and 1890.<sup>5</sup> Castle Garden was replaced by Ellis Island (1892-1954) as the major port of entry on the East Coast and is a name most people recognize.<sup>6</sup> Some twenty-five million came through the facility there. The next image is a photograph taken of a boat that is arriving at Ellis Island. What is striking in both images is the sheer number of people. Mass migration is not a recent phenomenon. The third picture is of a poor Italian family (How many in the audience come from an Italian background!). The hardships of poverty and hunger always have been major reasons why people migrate. The same is true today.

Another way to provide historical perspective is to read things written by important figures in this country's history. It is not difficult to demonstrate that immigration has long been a volatile issue. For example, one of the largest populations to migrate to the United States in the first decades of the republic's

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the United Bible Societies has recently published a special edition of the Spanish Bible called *Dios Camina con el Inmigrante*.

<sup>5</sup> Because of the nature of this article, I do not include the images, but all of them are available on the Internet. I will reference the title and source of the images, so that readers can pursue them if they would like. The first drawing shows the interior of Castle Garden and appeared in *Harper's Magazine* 1971. The second image is a photograph taken by Edwin Levick in December 1906. It shows the crowded deck of immigrants on an Atlantic liner. The third picture is of an Italian immigrant family arriving at Ellis Island circa 1910.

<sup>6</sup> On the West Coast the major entry point was at Angel Island in San Francisco harbor (1910-1940).

founding was the Germans. They actually began to arrive much earlier, in the seventeenth century, and sometimes were not welcome. Listen to Benjamin Franklin's sentiments about their presence in Pennsylvania in 1751: "Few of their children in the country learn English . . . The signs in our streets have inscriptions in both languages . . . Unless the stream of their importation could be turned they will soon so outnumber us that all the advantages we have will not be able to preserve our language, and even our government will become precarious." He goes on, "Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the *English*, become a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs, any more than they can acquire our Complexion."<sup>7</sup> He complains that the Germans have their own schools, stores, churches, and newspapers. These words find an easy echo in contemporary rhetoric about bilingualism and threats to culture!

This country's history is strewn with suspicion and rejection of immigrants. When the Irish began to arrive in the United States as they fled the Great Potato Famine (1845-1852), the Know Nothing Party sprung up to preserve what was felt to be the true heritage of this country and to protect it from the dangers of Catholicism. Prejudice against the Irish continued through the early twentieth century, when it was coupled with intolerance toward the Italians—again, largely for religious reasons—and led to the establishment of quota systems. Another dark story is the history of Chinese immigration. Brought in as laborers during the California Gold Rush to help build the railroads that were coming west and to work the mines, they soon faced a racial backlash that culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This Act effectively barred almost all Chinese from entering the country until its repeal in 1943. At this point I show a political cartoon from *Harper's Weekly*, 1870.<sup>8</sup> It depicts a high wall built to keep the Chinese out, with those on top of the wall pushing the ladder away so that the Chinese cannot come over into the United States. Then, the wall was a metaphor; not so today. It is a multi-billion dollar reality to stem the flow of immigrants from south of the border.

The emotional level in the national discussion means that those with different opinions usually talk past each other. Historically, as in the present, little listening or thoughtful exchanges occur. A well-known line from a telephone provider is apropos: "Can you hear me now?" The answer most of the time would be "no!" in such a climate it is easy for stereotypes to flourish, and, indeed, as I show my audiences, foreigners have been caricatured for over a century. These representations reveal nativist antagonistic feelings, to be sure, but they also express deep fears about the other. A cartoon from 1896 is illuminating.<sup>9</sup> It exemplifies the co-existing contradictory stances toward the immigrant presence. In this drawing, Uncle Sam stands at a gate that announces "Admittance Free," "Walk In," and "Welcome." At the same time, paradoxically, Uncle Sam holds his nose as he looks disdainfully at the immigrant. This dirty, ragged newcomer holds bags labeled "poverty" and "disease," and on his back he carries barrels of "Sabbath desecration" and "anarchy." Whereas the barrels clearly reflect the late nineteenth-century context, immigrants have always been accused of bringing in those two bags of poverty and disease. The figure trying to gain entrance perhaps was from Eastern Europe, maybe a Jew.

<sup>7</sup> *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Volume 4, ed. Leonard W. Labaree (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 234.

<sup>8</sup> "Throwing Down the Ladder by Which They Arose," *Harper's Weekly: A Journal of Civilization* 1870.

<sup>9</sup> Stranger at the Gate by Frank Beard, 1896. The Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum.

Sometimes the caricatures are tongue-and-cheek critiques of these fears and facile generalizations. Some worry that the newcomers, if they have come in large numbers, will radically change the (idealized) character of the majority culture. One of the enduring images of Americana is Grant Wood's 1930 portrait of a farming couple from Iowa. "American Gothic" is one of this country's most famous paintings, and over the years it has been spoofed many times. A recent twist shows the couple wearing ponchos and Mexican sombreros. The man (now with a mustache) has a guitar, instead of a pitchfork, in his hand. This is a humorous warning of where the United States might be headed as the deluge of Hispanic immigrants continues unabated!

A patent illustration of unfortunate generalizations of the "other" is the term "Hispanic." It came into common parlance via the U.S. Census Bureau, which created a catch-all category to cover the broad swath of people groups from Spanish-speaking nations in the hemisphere. Anyone with basic knowledge about Latin America and the Caribbean, however, is aware of just how inadequate the label is. There are around 30 countries, with a range of ethnicities and cultures (and languages), which fit under this rubric. These people groups include, for instance, the indigenous descendants of the great pre-Columbian civilizations, the *mestizo* (or *ladino*) mixtures from their intermarriage with the Spanish, blacks descended from slaves brought from Africa by Spain and Portugal, and immigrant populations from Europe and Asia. There is no "one size fits all" category for Hispanics in the U.S.

Showing these images to an audience is designed to inform and to cause people to begin to recognize that the immigration debate is more complex than most realize. Interspersing a little humor also can lower the emotional quotient. Get people laughing and they may be more open to new ideas. For the native born, this brief historical review communicates that these tensions are perennial and that working through difficult emotions on the way to integrating new population groups is something that the nation always has struggled with. Perhaps some of their own ancestors were part of that awkward and hard process! For the immigrant, the survey reassures them that this process is inevitable. It has never been easy. Every immigrant group has had to experience the difficult "dance" with the host culture. Eventually the situation improves. It will again.

These images also serve as a transition to a survey of the biblical material. If this is how this country has reacted to the millions of immigrants in the past and today, what might the Bible teach us about the topic? Here I present some Old Testament narratives of migration, explain its gracious and compassionate laws for immigrants, point to Jesus' experience as a refugee in Egypt, and highlight the biblical call to be hospitable to strangers. What is amazing, too, is that the New Testament uses migration as a metaphor for the life of the Christian (1 Peter 2:11; cf. Phi. 3:20; Heb. 13:14). Believers are sojourners, strangers in a strange land who serve another king and have a different citizenship. That is, migration is a fitting metaphor of what it means to be a Christian. Perhaps the more we can learn about migration and get to know immigrants, the more we can learn about what it means to be a Christian! For most of us the migration idea is simply a metaphor, but for immigrants it is a lived reality. There is much to learn from them about being marginalized as the outsider from a different place and with a different set of values. If we are brutally honest, many native-born Christians no longer feel strange in this culture; we have become acclimated and take it as our home. It has lost its strangeness, and now many want to keep the strangers out. Maybe the immigration debate will allow native-born believers to think through their ultimate loyalties afresh and reconsider their obligations to the sojourners in our midst, even as the Bible encourages immigrants about the presence and support of God in their new land.

### Where Do We Go from Here?

I close my presentations with this final thought. At the end of the day, as Christians we stand before two borders: one physical, one metaphorical. There is the physical, national border to the south. Complex socio-economic, political, and security issues exist that must be dealt with as the country tries to move toward a viable solution to the immigration situation. Everyone has opinions on these matters and acts on them in conversations and at the voting booth.

For Christians, there is another border, or line, before which we stand. What are we to do with what the Bible teaches? Are we willing to cross over into what it says, no matter where it might lead us? How do we relate its teaching to our political views? In other words, are we willing to step across this spiritual border as a decision of faith to let the Scripture establish our commitments and values? That is a hard choice, but one that each Christian must face.

The logic of my presentations on immigration is to move audiences from an expansion of their understanding of immigration through a brief look at history, with the help of images, to a serious reconsideration of the relationship of their faith to the topic by a survey of the Bible's teaching. The goal is to inform the opinions of the majority culture in a constructive fashion and to encourage the hearts of the immigrant. By God's grace and by the prayers and actions of the Christian church this country might become a more welcoming place to the sojourner.

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