

Immigration Basics

Introduction

We are going to try to cover:

- Why are these questions hard to agree on?
- Defining immigrant status (legal/refugee/asylum/illegal)
- The role of government in general
- Arguments for/against more open immigration
- What the Bible legitimately teaches about immigration and the Christian
- How the Bible is misused in the debate surrounding immigration
- Time for some questions

Opening question: How would you rank the following in importance?

- Legal
- Political
- Moral
- Racial
- Social
- Economic
- Religious
- Personal

Why are These Questions Hard to Agree on?

The question in the introduction illustrates very well one reason why it is hard to agree on this issue. You or someone you know may have been impacted by various aspects of this issue (personal, legal, political, social, religious, economic, etc.). We have immigrants and refugees in our church, whose lives are in turmoil and uncertainty due to the various possible ways policy may unfold.

- Because of how it has/may impact you personally.
- Because rhetoric on the issue often highlights and/or sensationalizes situations that are outliers.
- Because we haven't applied Nathan's "evaluate information sources" yet—we may have bad or inaccurate information.
- Because we may have been swayed by inaccurate/misapplied biblical arguments (we will describe some of those later).
- You may disagree about the role of government, or the applicability of biblical principles.

Statistics and Defining Immigrant Status/Issues

Status and titles are related to why someone is seeking to immigrate. Broadly we could put immigrants in two categories: those who are forced to flee their homes (refugees and asylees) and those who voluntarily leave for greater opportunities (migrants).

Refugee (35 million in the world right now – only 1% ever immigrate to be settled in a 3rd country – most stay in the first country they have fled to)

A refugee is someone forced to flee their country due to a well-founded fear of persecution, war, or violence.

- Reason for leaving:** Threats to life, liberty, or human rights.
- Legal status:** Covered under the 1951 Refugee Convention.
- Key right:** Cannot be sent back to danger (**non-refoulement**).
- Must go through a thorough process to be declared a refugee, which includes careful vetting and confirmation of facts. The UNHCR grants refugee status only after careful vetting and verification.
- The USA has their own separate vetting and safety verification process for any potential refugees before they are allowed to immigrate to the US. The President determines the cap for how many people are allowed to immigrate in a year and from what countries. The average number of refugees allowed in the USA was 116,000 during the 1990s. After 9/11 the average dropped to 27,000 a year. Between 2008 and 2017 the average was about 67,000. During the Trump administration the number has dropped again with great fluctuations.

Asylum-Seeker – 9 million asylum seekers in the world

An asylum-seeker is someone who has fled their country and is actively seeking international protection, but whose claim has not yet been legally processed.

- Reason for leaving:** The exact same reasons as a refugee.
- Legal status:** Waiting for a government to officially recognize them as a refugee.
- Key point:** Every refugee starts as an asylum-seeker, but not every asylum-seeker is granted refugee status.
- About 4 million people are waiting to have their hearing about being granted Asylee status. The wait is 4-5 years. While waiting, many are released into the USA. Others are forced to remain in Mexico. The average number of asylum seekers who are granted asylum status in the USA is about 29,000 a year.

Migrant

A migrant is an umbrella term for anyone who moves from their usual place of residence, either within a country or across borders, regardless of legal status or reason.

- Reason for leaving:** Usually voluntary choice, like finding work, studying, or joining family.
- Legal status:** Subject to standard national immigration laws.
- Key point:** They do not face a threat of persecution if they return home.

Internally Displaced Person (IDP) - 68.7 million people

An IDP is someone forced to flee their home due to conflict, violence, or disasters, but who remains within their country's borders.

- Reason for leaving:** The exact same reasons as a refugee.
- Legal status:** Citizens of their own country.
- Key point:** They do not have refugee rights because they never crossed an international border.

Stateless Person – 4.5 million people

A stateless person is someone who is not considered a national or citizen by any country under its law.

- Reason for leaving:** May not have moved at all; statelessness can happen from discrimination or border changes.
- Legal status:** They have no passport, no voting rights, and often lack access to medical care or education.

Legal vs. Illegal Immigration

If you have arrived in the United States legally, you are a Lawful Permanent Resident, otherwise known as being a green card holder. Green card holders have permission to live and work in the US permanently. The next step after arriving as a green card holder is to become a naturalized US citizen. About 1 million people a year immigrate legally to the US.

Illegal immigrants have entered the USA without legal permission to be here. Currently there are estimated to be about 12 million people residing in the US illegally.

How Do People Get Lawful Permanent Resident Status?

1. Family based sponsorship – Green card holders and US citizens can request a green card for their family members.
2. Employment based immigration – the US gives about 140,000 employment based green cards a year.
3. Humanitarian Pathways – Refugees are vetted and declared refugees abroad and then are allowed to legally immigrate and after one year are given a green card. Asylees arrive at a port of entry and are granted asylee status by a court. They can apply for a green card after one year of being an asylee.
4. Diversity Visa Lottery – Up to 55,000 people a year are granted a visa from countries that have historically low rates of immigration to the USA. These applicants must have two years of work experience or a high school education.

Through all these categories, about 1 million people legally immigrate to the US each year. In 2024 we had about 1.4 million legal immigrants.

Biblical Terms for Immigrant (From Google AI search)

גֵר (Ger) – The Long-Term / Integrated Resident Alien

The *ger* is protected by biblical law, and Israelites are repeatedly commanded to provide for and love them.

- **Exodus 23:9:** "You shall not oppress a **stranger (ger)**, for you know the feelings of a **stranger (ger)**, having yourselves been **strangers (gerim)** in the land of Egypt."

תושב (Toshav) – The Temporary Resident / Tenant

The *toshav* is a localized worker or short-term inhabitant who does not fully integrate into Israel's religious or covenant life.

- **Exodus 12:45:** "A **temporary resident (toshav)** or a hired worker may not eat of it [the Passover sacrifice]."

נֹכְרִי (Nokhri) – The Foreigner / Expatriate

The *nokhri* is an outsider passing through or doing business who maintains allegiance to a foreign nation, meaning domestic economic safety nets do not apply to them.

- **Deuteronomy 23:20:** "You may charge a **foreigner (nokhri)** interest, but you must not charge your brother interest..."

זָר (Zar) – The Outsider / Unauthorized Alien

The *zar* represents someone acting outside of their proper boundaries, a hostile invading nation, or someone unauthorized to touch sacred objects.

- **Isaiah 1:7:** Describing a military invasion: "Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being devoured by **foreigners (zarim)** right before you..."

The Role of Government – Biblically and Constitutionally

There is a possible confusion or conflation of personal biblical ethics, and the divinely stated purpose of civil government.

Concepts like these are PERSONAL ethics, and not appropriate for the sphere of government policy: "turn the other cheek" (Matt 5:38-42); "love your /enemy" (Matt 5:43-44); "love your neighbor" (Matt 22:36-40); "blessed are the merciful [and the] peacemakers" (Matt 5:7, 9), etc., are matters of personal ethics. If a government tried to apply those as a rule for establishing public policy (and immigration policy in particular), it would be disastrous. Be careful not to confuse the principles of civil government and personal ethics.

Biblically, God has ordained all civil government and defines its proper role and function.

Romans 13:1-4 – Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established [ordained (KJV), appointed (NKJV)] by God. 2 Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. 3 For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; 4 for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil.

The governments of the world are ordained by God, and their intended purpose (which is often abused or ignored) is to bring about justice, to punish evil and protect the righteous. This is a primary purpose for civil governments—LAW ENFORCEMENT.

This does not mean that all civil governments are good. It means only that government, **as an institution**, was ordained by God for a purpose, and that He remains sovereign over them.

This is GOD'S stated purpose for government. Therefore, the government has a DIVINE MANDATE to wield the sword and to bring to justice those who are responsible in any way for committing crimes against its citizens. Whether people agree with current policies and practices, it is legitimate for the government to enforce the law, and being here illegally is a crime.

What does the Constitution say?

The Preamble reads:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Immigration policy may directly or indirectly impact justice, tranquility, safety, welfare, and liberty for its citizens. Again, people may disagree about the ways and degrees to which these policies may impact the responsibilities defined by the Constitution.

Although the Preamble does not mention immigration specifically, its purposes are often cited in immigration debates. Different participants emphasize different phrases:

- Those advocating stronger border enforcement often appeal to the government's duty to **"insure domestic Tranquility," "provide for the common defence,"** and uphold the rule of law.
- Those advocating more generous immigration policies often emphasize **"promote the general Welfare"** and the Constitution's commitment to securing liberty.

Ultimately, the Constitution assigns the federal government—not the individual states—the primary authority over immigration and naturalization. This authority arises from the Constitution's enumerated powers (such as Congress's power to establish a uniform rule of naturalization and the federal government's foreign affairs powers), rather than from the Preamble itself. The Preamble provides the broad purposes that those constitutional powers are intended to serve.

Arguments FOR More Open Immigration

There are many benefits from immigration which could be an argument for more open immigration. None of these arguments dictate a certain number of immigrants we need to welcome into our country, but they do help us to see the value of considering seriously if we could have more open immigration.

- Historical argument for more immigration: We are a nation of immigrants. Most of the first European settlers were refugees coming to the United States of America for religious freedom. Throughout our history, mass immigration has been one of the main ways the USA has been populated. To the extent that those who immigrated to the USA integrated into our country and became contributing citizens, it has been a positive thing for our country. However, it is essential that those immigrating adopt the values of our country, including the commitment to follow our laws and to pursue the flourishing of our nation.
- Biblical argument for more immigration: The Bible says much about generosity and kindness and hospitality. If we focus on the category of "sojourner" or *ger* who immigrates and becomes a part of our society, transferring allegiance to our country, there is much encouragement to show kindness to immigrants. Beyond this, the command to make disciples of all the nations because all people are made in God's image and are being called through the gospel to follow Christ means that immigration has the potential benefit of being an avenue for discipling the nations. *This does not mean we must have open borders, but rather is a positive motivation for considering allowing more refugees and other kinds of immigrants to come legally to our country.*
- Economic argument for more immigration: Refugees and other immigrants become a contributing part of our society most of the time and on average are contributing more to

the economy through the taxes they have paid than they are receiving in initial social services benefits. Beyond this, many immigrants begin businesses and employ more Americans and contribute positively to our nation's wealth. Others come and do jobs that are less desirable and thereby help businesses that would otherwise flounder for lack of labor. Certainly there is a counterargument that immigrants are costing our economy too much in terms of social services or that they are taking jobs that citizens could be doing, creating more unemployment. However, historically that has not been proven to be true, especially in the case of carefully regulated legal immigration.

- Cultural argument for more immigration: Population decline because of low birth rates means that the immigration of more people (if they adopt our culture and values) is a positive thing for the sake of the continuation of our culture. Conversely, if those immigrating do not adopt our culture our low birth rates could mean that the immigrating cultures take over our country and change it fundamentally to something we do not desire. Another cultural positive is the richness that comes from diversity of cultures in one country, if they can dwell together in peace without seeking to impose their cultural idiosyncrasies on others.

Arguments AGAINST More Open Immigration

You would be hard pressed to find people who have a reasonable position for open borders with no restrictions at all. Perhaps very far-left crazies in the street advocate for such things, but not reasonable people wanting to discuss the issues. Almost everyone agrees that we NEED solid immigration policies, and that these policies need to be enforced (reasonably and without prejudice). Every political party has been saying this until very recently (Trump's rhetoric and "wall" have fueled an even greater divide than the one that existed before).

What are the reasons given that suggest immigration should be carefully limited and monitored (stricter immigration laws), and how might those concerns be countered or corrected? I suggest all of these present a caution and concern but are not definitively accurate or decisively an argument against immigration in general.

- The country has limited resources, programs, and money to provide for the needs of an excessive number of immigrants.

This is true to a certain extent. This is why immigration needs to be restricted and well-monitored. Humans have a "habitat" as well, that can only support a certain number of people.

The claims are that illegal immigrants are not eligible for Medicaid, welfare, SNAP benefits, education, etc. (though some left-leaning politicians say they *should be able* to apply and benefit). While that may be true, there are ways that they do receive and benefit from government programs.

- They take jobs away from hard-working Americans

Since around 2021-2022, there have been more jobs than there are people looking for jobs. The job market has cooled, and it sits about even presently. If someone wants a job, they could find one, even if it isn't a job they want.

This point may be true, but generally only in a few depressed areas of the country, where the vast majority of jobs are in the "unskilled" areas of agriculture, mining, etc.

- It generally has a negative effect on the economy.

This is unproven and almost certainly an inaccurate claim. A Wall Street Journal poll revealed that 96% of economists say the net economic impact of even *illegal* immigration was positive for the US.

It is impossible to "grow an economy" with a shrinking population and work force. That is simple economics, and even Japan and China are realizing this.

The fraud being exposed by DOGE and investigative journalism is real, but it remains uncertain if that has a significant overall impact on the country (it isn't like government spending was really responsible five years ago and has only recently been tapped by fraudsters).

- Illegal immigrants commit violent crimes at a disproportionately high rate compared with legal citizens.

This is another myth, fueled by situations that are outliers (like the Tren de Agua "family man," the Russian woman stabbed on the train, and other examples). Overall, immigrants want to avoid the law, avoid the attention that criminal activity gets, and avoid the deportation that is much more likely now than ever.

- Immigrants no longer "integrate" into American culture and adopt Western and US Constitutional Law and values; this creates unsafe areas and demands to reject American culture (demand Sharia Law, for example).

Many of those seeking to enter legally actually identify as Christian and are seeking refuge from persecution and violence. This is a problem in pockets of the country (like Dearborn and Minneapolis), but those local communities need to set and enforce the rule of law. Sadly, the woke, oppressor/oppressed liberation theology has shifted common sense away from law enforcement in some communities. This is beginning to shift and correct course in some places (but not everywhere).

- Illegal immigration is shifting the voter base further and further left (liberal), and this poses a long-term danger/shift in the political climate. Birthright citizenship is only making this worse.

There is a short-term and long-term question here. Short-term, immigrants do not vote (we are not having election debates here), but if they could they would likely vote for increased spending and programs.

Long-term, the majority of immigrants are social conservatives (Latino Catholics in California, for example). The long-term impact, as these immigrants naturalize and get to vote, may actually sway things back toward more conservative values and policies. It remains to be seen what may even be true in places like California in 20-30 years.

What the Bible Teaches about Immigration and the Christian

- Every human being is created by God in His image – Genesis 1:26-27 – The reality of the creation of nations (Genesis 11, tower of Babel) and the reality of sin does not change this truth. Each person, no matter where they were born, is made in the

image of God. As an image bearer, we should desire that they be treated with respect and that they have opportunities to live in peace and to know Christ. This does not demand that we have open borders or that we permit illegal immigration. However, it should encourage us to see every person as God sees them, as in image bearer, and to not see them with racism or hatred.

- Love sojourners - Deuteronomy 10:16-22, Leviticus 19:33-34 – God loves the sojourner and cares for them by commanding Israel to provide food for them by letting them harvest the edges of their fields (Deuteronomy 24:19-21) and by commanding Israel to give to them (Deuteronomy 26:12-13). So, Israel is commanded to love the sojourner in their midst. This is a principle that Israel was to obey that shows us God's heart. The principle of caring for those who have been displaced from their own countries (i.e. refugees) and who have come to live in your country is a helpful principle for us to consider as we form national policy and as we live out our own personal and congregational ethic.
- Make disciples of all the nations – Matthew 28:18-20, Revelation 5:9-10 – We have a heart for people from every nation to come to worship Christ. When we find people in our community, in our country, who have immigrated from other places, we should seek to love them and to share the gospel of Christ with them. This does not tell us anything about what our national policy on immigration should be, but it certainly informs our ethic in terms of how we relate to people who we encounter in our community, regardless of where they are from. We should have hope that perhaps this person who has immigrated will join us around the throne described in Revelation 4 and 5 as a worshipper of Jesus Christ.

How the Bible is Misused in the Debate

- Confusing the principles of civil government and personal ethics, particularly that “love” requires Christians to welcome.

There is a little known principle "ordo amoris" (first, Augustine, followed by Reformers), an order to how love is to be understood and applied. Justice and mercy are not mutually exclusive (Mic 6:8).

Franklin Graham once summarized, “Why do you lock your doors at night? Not because you hate the people on the outside, but because you love the people on the inside so much.”

- Misapplying passages like the Good Samaritan, “love your enemy,” etc.

Racial and religious prejudice, however evil it may be, is not a call for changing immigration policy. Though policy that is defined and dictated by racial and religious prejudice ALONE would be wrong (and we have examples of "Christian Nationalists" in the extreme who have called for such things).

- Bad hermeneutics applying how to treat the "sojourner" [Heb., *gar*], "foreigner" [Heb., *nekar*], and "stranger" [Heb., *zar*].

These words are not interchangeable. Because God calls for justice and equal treatment under the Law for the "sojourner," does not mean the same for the "foreigner" or the "stranger." Sojourners were legal residents (lawful resident aliens) who had committed to the obligations and jurisdiction of Israel. Thus, having incorporated into the life and customs of Israel, God made provision to ensure they have equal treatment under the Law.

In contrast, the "foreigners" (*nekar*) were visiting foreign nationals, whose loyalties lied elsewhere. They did not integrate or participate in the life/laws of Israel, and were not given the rights and privileges of the permanent and committed "sojourners."

The "strangers" (*zar*) were even less committed and incorporated into the life and traditions of Israel. The word literally means, "someone who does not belong."

- Bad hermeneutics regarding the purpose and practice of "sanctuary cities" in the nation of Israel.

Old Testament cities of refuge were very different than "sanctuary cities" today. The cities of refuge were a provision to ensure that vengeance was not taken on those who were guilty of some form of negligent homicide (accidental killing of another). They were a provision to ensure a fair trial, not a place where guilty criminals could hide and avoid the penalty for their crimes indefinitely.

It was closer to putting someone in "protective custody" than what is being practiced in "sanctuary cities" today.

- Some might suggest borders are unbiblical, if there is truly one human race, neither Jew nor Greek (Gal 3:28); but borders are biblical (Acts 17:26-27).

The Bible speaks favorably and consistently about distinct nations of people (see, e.g., Gen 18:18, Num 32:17, Psalm 67:2, Matt 28:19, Rev 5:9, 7:9), and about borders and walls that are built to guard and secure people, property, and jurisdictions (see, e.g., Deut 19:14, 27:17, 32:8, Acts 17:26). When Nehemiah heroically led the Jewish remnant to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem after their enemies had destroyed those walls, he was doing the noble work of God (Neh 1-6).

Maintaining a secure border is not an offensive measure, but a wise, defensive one to prevent chaos and safeguard innocent life.

Questions?