

# I Was a Stranger: Jesus and the Undocumented Immigrant

BY ALBERT L. REYES

**From a Kingdom perspective, what does it mean that God has allowed us to have over fourteen million undocumented immigrants, primarily from Latin American countries, inside our borders? What kind of Kingdom resource might they become as their lives are redeemed?**

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**O**n September 16, 1898, my paternal grandfather Jose Maria Reyes was born in Encinal, Texas. His parents Pedro and Micaela Reyes, born in Mexico in 1860 and 1862 respectively, had immigrated to Texas without documentation. On my mother's side of the family, Carlos Garcia immigrated to Texas to work on the railroad system in 1925 with documentation and authorization from the U.S. Government. The next year his wife Jovita Garcia and her four children, Concepcion, Maria, Carlos, and Nicolas, came to Texas without documentation and authorization to be in the United States. After she was reunited with her husband, my mother Gloria and seven other siblings were born in South Texas as U.S. citizens. On the paternal side of my family I am a third generation native Tejano born of Mexican descent. On the maternal side of my family I am a second generation native Tejano born of Mexican descent.

In the early 1930s a Baptist itinerant church planter named Reverend Edward P. Gonzalez came across my grandfather and grandmother, Jose Maria Reyes and Francisca Rodriguez Reyes, and their nine children as they made their living as migrant workers in West Texas, particularly on farms and ranches near Snyder, Texas, during cotton season. Rev. Gonzalez preached the gospel to my grandfather's family. My grandmother was the

first to respond to faith in Christ and be baptized. She was followed in baptism by her husband and each of her children over a period of several years. The family later settled in Corpus Christi, Texas, and joined Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana under the leadership of Reverend Ignacio Gonzalez.

My father married Gloria Garcia who was raised in the Roman Catholic tradition. Several years after their marriage my mother professed faith in Jesus Christ as her personal Savior under the ministry of Ignacio Gonzalez at Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana of Corpus Christi. After I was born in 1958, my parents and I moved to California where my mother and older brother Agustin (Gus) were baptized together into the fellowship of Mision Bautista de San Bernardino sponsored by Emmanuel Baptist Church of San Bernardino, California. A few years later our family joined Memorial Baptist Church of Rialto, California. By the time I was nine years old I prayed to receive Christ as my personal Savior and was baptized by Reverend Bill Thornton at Memorial Baptist Church. We moved back to Texas in 1970 and we joined my father's home church, Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana of Corpus Christi, where I answered a call to vocational ministry in 1975 under the leadership of Reverend Rudy Sanchez.

My purpose in reviewing my family's history, especially our faith history, is this: there was a time when we were strangers – not only to the United States, but also to the family of faith. We were strangers and Edward P. Gonzalez announced the good news to us. Texas Baptists made room for us in the family.<sup>1</sup>

I am passionate about the subject of immigration for several reasons. Immigration to the United States is part of my family history and heritage. I am also interested in the ethical and biblical perspectives on this issue for Christians. Finally, I believe there are missiological issues connected to immigration that speak to our role in redemptive history.



Jesus spoke to the experience of the stranger in his parable of the Judgment of the Nations in Matthew 25:31-46. When the Son of Man judges the nations, separating "people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats," the criteria for whether a person's identity in Christ can be authenticated is whether or not that person has demonstrated the agenda of Jesus with regard to the poor, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner.

These criteria are strikingly similar to the five-point agenda in Jesus' inaugural speech in Luke 4:16-30. Jesus said he came to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and release for the oppressed, and to announce the year of the Lord's favor. I like to call this the Jesus Agenda, Jesus' plan for his thousand-day ministry.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus emphasizes this agenda again when he answers a lawyer who asks, "Who is my neighbor whom I should love as myself?" by telling him the par-

able of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). The Samaritan came across a wounded stranger in the road, took responsibility for him, and met his needs. So what happens when we come across the stranger in our midst today?

The core issue at the center of the immigration reform debate is justice. Where is our American sense of decency, the value of basic human rights, our love for children and families, and fairness toward under-privileged newcomers? Texas Baptists have been asking this question for several years. Messengers to the 2003 annual meeting of the Hispanic Convention of Texas with over 1200 congregations and messengers to the 2003 annual meeting of the Baptist General Convention of Texas with over 5,400 congregations and over 2.5 million members approved resolutions advocating compassionate ministry to the "alien" and the "stranger" in our midst, namely the undocumented and documented immigrant. The Hispanic Immigration Task Force of the Baptist General Convention, formed in 2003, raised the issues of the victimization and exploitation of undocumented immigrants, meeting all immigrants' basic human needs, and advocacy regarding pathways for citizenship for undocumented immigrants.<sup>3</sup>

Our challenge is that sometimes we confuse our citizenship in the United States of America with our citizenship in the Kingdom of God. Certainly we must protect our borders and have a functional system of immigration into our country. But we must solve the problem of what to do with nearly fourteen million undocumented immigrants in the United States today. We will not be able to avoid comprehensive immigration law reform to provide justice and liberty for all, even the undocumented. We will need to provide a reasonable means for undocumented immigrants to satisfy requirements for legal residency and even citizenship. Many folks will not meet these qualifications and will need to return home or find a way to satisfy immigration requirements.

We must also consider the issue of immigration from a Kingdom perspective. Let me put it another way: What does it mean for redemptive history that the Lord of history has allowed us to have over fourteen million undocumented immigrants, primarily from Latin American countries, inside our borders?

Think with me from a Kingdom perspective for a moment. Let me remind you of a picture and a vision that we will all see. When John the Revelator glimpsed eternity he saw "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the

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**In addition to the ethical and biblical perspectives on the issue of undocumented immigration, for Christians there is a missiological perspective that speaks to our role in redemptive history.**

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throne.... They cried out in a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb’” (Revelation 7:9-10). Will it matter on that day if people had legal documents authorizing them to be in our country? I guess it depends on who you ask. If you ask the Master who separates goats from sheep, I think he will say what mattered, in light of eternity, is whether or not we gave food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, ministry to the prisoner, and caring to the sick. He will say, if you did it to the least of these, you did it unto me.

If we were to think missiologically for a moment, we would have to wonder why God has allowed fourteen million undocumented immigrants to come to our country to live, work, eat, and have a good life. We would have to ask ourselves what kind of Kingdom resource undocumented immigrants might become as their lives are redeemed for the Kingdom. We would have to deal with the Latino-Arab connection for missions and consider that the missionary force best poised to share the love of Christ with our Arab friends is believers from the Latino community. Latinos and Arabs share a common language, history, culture, and similar physical features that translate into an ease of sharing the gospel message. There are 7,000 words in Spanish that have Arabic roots, and 21,000 words in Spanish that are pronounced similarly.



Buckner International, the ministry where I serve, has sought to do the Jesus Agenda since 1879 among children at risk, orphans, and the elderly. It is estimated that 3.1 million children who are U.S. citizens might be abandoned in this country if their undocumented immigrant parents were deported today.<sup>4</sup> Undocumented immigrants who want to straighten out their legal status with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) fear they will be deported or taken advantage of when attempting to work through proper documentation. This is why the Baptist General Convention of Texas and Buckner International created the Immigration Service and Aid Center (ISAAC) Program, under the leadership of Richard Muñoz. ISAAC exists to provide assistance to congregations that want to become accredited with INS to provide counsel and legitimate support to all immigrants needing help.

I cannot think of a better place to help the “stranger” than the local church. In this way, the local church continues to remain at the cutting edge of redemptive reality.

## NOTES

1 For additional information on my family history and the history of the Hispanic Baptists in Texas, see Albert L. Reyes, “Unification to Integration: A Brief History of the Hispanic Baptist Convention of Texas,” *Baptist History and Heritage: The Baptist Community*, XL:1 (Brentwood, TN: Baptist History and Heritage Society, Winter 2005).

2 For more information on the Jesus Agenda see Albert L. Reyes, "Pursuing a Jesus Agenda: Remarks from the President of the Baptist General Convention of Texas to the Executive Board of the BGCT" (March 1, 2005), available online at [www.bucknerchildren.org/Reyes%20Blog/execboard-mar05.pdf](http://www.bucknerchildren.org/Reyes%20Blog/execboard-mar05.pdf).

3 Much of this paragraph is from Albert L. Reyes, "Does Jesus Still Have a Mission to the Poor, the Prisoner, the Blind, and the Oppressed? Toward a Biblically Informed Debate on U.S. Immigration Reform" (San Antonio, TX: Baptist University of the Americas, April 5, 2006), available online at [www.bua.edu/docs/Does%20Jesus%20Still%20Have%20a%20Mission%20to%20the%20Poor\\_white%20paper.pdf](http://www.bua.edu/docs/Does%20Jesus%20Still%20Have%20a%20Mission%20to%20the%20Poor_white%20paper.pdf).

4 Neil Conan, interviewing journalist N. C. Aizenman on "The Politics of Enforcing Immigration Law," *Talk of the Nation* (Washington, DC: National Public Radio, August 22, 2007), available online at [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=13867625](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=13867625).



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