



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Loving Our Neighbors,
Both Far and Near
(*Immigration*, pp. 11-19)

Suggested Article:

📖 Back to the Basics of
Immigration
(*Immigration*, pp. 84-88)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Loving Our Neighbors, Both Far and Near

There may be no single “Christian” immigration policy, but by directing us to weigh the needs of outsiders against the defense of the life we share with our fellow citizens, Christian ethics illuminates the appropriate moral framework for understanding, and conducting, our immigration debates.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Acts 17:22-28

Meditation†

For Christians, the claims and interests of nations should always be evaluated by reference to the God whose love and justice is the center of astonishingly inclusive relatedness.

The second part of a Christian’s perspective is that human particularities are valued.... We are culture-creating and culture-bearing peoples. We develop a sense of who we are by being related to particular communities, whose identity we come to share....

God is the creator of all human beings through their common ancestor Adam. Indeed, all of us are relatives. Yet nations with their boundaries also reflect God’s ordering activity.

Dana W. Wilbanks

Reflection

“The history of immigration to America can be described, without undue distortion, very simply: first a rise, then a fall, then a rise again,” writes Peter Meilaender. After what we now call the First Great Wave in the last decades of the 1800s, the increasing number and diversity of newcomers had citizens worrying about “competition for jobs, strains on urban services, immigrants not learning English, the fraying of our cultural fabric.” Today we live during the Second Great Wave with historically high levels of immigration to the United States—33 million people, about 12% of the population, are foreign born—and we are hearing the same concerns of a hundred years ago.

The public debate about reforming America’s immigration laws is becoming ever more urgent and rancorous. How should we respond with love and justice to the new immigrants whom Scripture commends to our care as the “strangers...who live among you” (Deuteronomy 16:11), even as we care for our fellow citizens? When we pass laws to manage immigration, “we are in effect exercising state force in order to preserve the particular way of life that we share with our fellow citizens,” Meilaender points out. The key moral questions are: “On what basis might we restrict access to this life that we share? Are we entitled to show this kind of preference for our own compatriots?”

Restrictions on immigration need not be selfishly motivated; they “can and should be defended in moral terms, consistent with commitments to equality and love of neighbor,” suggests Meilaender. “Because we share in a common life, involving a range of shared institutions and practices, we develop obligations towards one



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another that we do not have, or not to the same degree, towards outsiders – not because we do not love those outsiders, or because we think that our fellow citizens are somehow better than folks elsewhere, but simply because these are the people with whom our lot has been cast.” So, when we evaluate immigration policies we should ask if they “serve our neighbors who will face competition for their jobs; or the children whose education will suffer in overburdened schools; or those fellow citizens in communities whose ways of life will be disrupted by a continuing influx of immigration at current levels; or indeed our own grandchildren, to whom we hope to pass on a cultural and political heritage.”

Countries should not limit legal immigration by anyone without good reason. Yet, Meilaender admits, reasonable people may disagree about “the thorniest but most important question of all: determining appropriate levels of legal immigration.”

Study Questions

1. As Dana Wilbanks notes (in the meditation), Paul recognized both “the unity of the human family in God and the diversity of the peoples of the earth” in Acts 17:22-28. How does this relate to Peter Meilaender’s reminder that we must balance love for all our neighbors, both far and near?
2. Why is the United States experiencing a historically high level of immigration today, according to Meilaender’s article?
3. Meilaender defends a special obligation to ‘near’ neighbors this way: “That citizens share a common life, shaping and being shaped by one another through their mutual encounters, appropriately gives rise to expectations for treatment different from that accorded strangers.” Do you agree? How is this special obligation compatible with God’s call for us to love all people?
4. How might we apply Meilaender’s insights to granting residency that leads to citizenship for various types of immigrants – e.g., people who need asylum, relatives of current citizens, illegal immigrants already residing in the country, or people who have economically valuable skills?

Departing Hymn: “O God, In Whom We Live and Move” (vv. 1, 2a, and 4a)

O God, in whom we live and move,
your love is law, your law is love;
your present Spirit waits to fill
the soul that comes to do your will.

Unto your children’s spirits teach
your love, beyond the powers of speech;
with faith, O God, our spirits fill,
that we may work in patience still.

Samuel Longfellow (1864), alt.

Suggested Tunes: GERMANY or OLD 100th

† Dana W. Wilbanks, *Re-Creating America: The Ethics of U.S. Immigration and Refugee Policy in a Christian Perspective* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 120.

Loving Our Neighbors, Both Far and Near

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 3 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To sketch a Christian moral framework for conducting immigration debates.
2. To center attention on the key moral issue in immigration policy, which is whether and why citizens are permitted to restrict access to the life that they share.
3. To examine the moral ground and the limits of special obligations we have toward fellow citizens.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Immigration (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “O God, In Whom We Live and Move” locate the familiar tune GERMANY or OLD 100th in your church’s hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Observation

Why did Paul expend his life as a missionary on behalf of others? “The love of Christ urges us on,” he explained to the Corinthian Christians, “because we are convinced that one has died for all” (2 Corinthians 5:14). This motive is a recurring theme throughout *The Love of Christ Toward Migrants* (2004), which calls us to assist both immigrants and the nations that welcome them:

The love of Christ towards migrants urges us (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:14) to look afresh at their problems, which are to be met with today all over the world. In fact nearly all countries are now faced with the eruption of the migration phenomenon in one aspect or another; it affects their social, economic, political and religious life and is becoming more and more a permanent structural phenomenon. Migration is often determined by a free decision of the migrants themselves, taken fairly frequently not only for economic reasons but also for cultural, technical or scientific motives. As such it is for the most part a clear indication of social, economic and demographic imbalance on a regional or world-wide level, which drives people to emigrate....

The challenge confronting us in today’s migrations is not an easy one because many different spheres are involved: economics, sociology, politics, health, culture and security. All Christians must respond to this challenge; it is not just a matter of good will or the personal charisma [or, gifted calling] of a few.

Erga migrantes caritas Christi [The love of Christ towards migrants] (Vatican City, Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, 2004), online at www.vatican.va.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to give the group discernment as you prayerfully study the key moral issues in immigration policy.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 17:22-28 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study lays the groundwork for understanding and debating immigration policies through the biblical command to love our neighbors as ourselves. Peter Meilaender assumes we must care for immigrants – the “far” neighbors in his article title – by defending their opportunities to migrate for a variety of good reasons. He develops a case for drawing proper restrictions on legal immigration, for in this way we may care for fellow citizens – our “near” neighbors. He offers no simple guideline for balancing care for immigrants and fellow citizens. But in the love for all neighbors, both far and near, our reflection on immigration must begin.

Study Questions

1. Paul’s speech on the Areopagus (or, Mars Hill) in Athens points at once to both the wonderful unity of the human family (“From one ancestor [God] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth”) and the value and integrity of specific human cultures (“and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live”) (Acts 17:26). We might restate Peter Meilaender’s framework in these Pauline terms: we care for immigrants because they are our brothers and sisters in one human family, and we care for fellow citizens not only for this reason, but also because God chooses to shape and bless us through them in a particular community whose identity we come to share.
2. Meilaender briefly outlines the recent history of U.S. immigration in the following way. (For more information, see Roger Daniels’s *Coming to America*, which Viviana Triana reviews in “Back to the Basics of Immigration” in the *Immigration* issue.) Immigration slowed dramatically when restrictive laws were passed in 1921 and 1924. Numbers rose slowly in the mid 1950s because of “growing awareness of the consequences of countries’ not having accepted Jewish refugees during the Holocaust; the gathering civil rights movement, whose focus on racial equality was hard to square with immigration quotas based on ethnicity; and a Cold War desire to attract immigrants fleeing the communist bloc.” The Immigration Act of 1965 loosened restrictions by eliminating national origins quotas and allowing current citizens and legal residents to sponsor their relatives for immigration, sometimes in excess of the new annual cap on the number of immigrants. “Without changes, there is no reason to expect immigration levels to decline in the near future,” Meilaender concludes; “even were illegal immigration to vanish tomorrow, legal immigration would continue to be at historically high levels.”
3. Meilaender believes God “gifts” us with the particular circumstances of our lives, including the specific “near” neighbors for whom we should care in “the national communities into which we ‘happen’ to be born.” He does not believe “God must wish everything to be precisely as it is,” but only that “we should not regard the circumstances of our lives as mere biographical data of no moral significance.... Human charity is necessarily filtered through the prism of time and place.” He gives an analogy of loving the particular person who is his daughter, gifted to him and his wife for their special care.

Encourage members to explore the limits of Meilaender’s point. For instance, what do we owe to people who were born in less fortunate national communities?

4. Divide members into groups to review Meilaender’s proposals about these four categories of immigrants: people who need asylum, relatives of current citizens, illegal immigrants already residing in the country, and people who have economically valuable skills. He notes that asylees make strong claims on our care based on their need; he favors the second and third groups because they (or their relatives) are “nearer” neighbors living among us.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.