



# *gospel & culture*

GOSPEL & CULTURE: IMMIGRATION & REFUGEES  
WEEK 4 | MATTHEW SOERENS

# Gospel & Culture: Immigration & Refugees

On Sunday, July 17, Matthew Soerens, U.S. Director of Church Mobilization for World Relief, guided us through a discussion on immigration and refugees. His talk helped us to understand how the number of refugees represents a global crisis and how the church should respond to immigrants and refugees.

## 1) An unprecedented global crisis

With 21.3 million refugees in the world today—and another approximately 41 million internally displaced people—there are more forcibly displaced people than at any time in recorded history. In Syria alone, 4.8 million individuals have fled the conflict, more than any other single country. Last year more than one million individuals (from all countries) sought asylum in Europe. About 70,000 refugees were resettled to the United States, including just 1,682 Syrian refugees. Canada began an ambitious effort to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees in just three months. The vast majority of the world's refugees—more than 85%—remain in neighboring countries to their homelands, often in desperate situations.

## 2) Who are refugees?

Under both U.S. and international law, a refugee is defined as a person who is outside his or her country of nationality or last habitual residence and is unable or unwilling to return to that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion.

## 3) Who are not (quite) refugees?

**Internally Displaced Persons**—more than 40 million people are forcefully displaced in their country of origin.

**Asylum Seekers**—claim to meet definition of a refugee but no government has adjudicated that case. These cases can be difficult to prove.

**Unaccompanied Minors**—children often fleeing gang violence, but courts have been ambiguous if they fit the definition of a refugee.

**Economic Migrants and Other Immigrants**—people fleeing poverty or fleeing a natural disaster. Although their situations can be desperate, they are not technically refugees.

## 4) How does a refugee get resettled?

There are three possibilities for refugees to be resettled. First is through voluntary repatriation, conditions are safe in their country of origin, and they go back on their own. Second, through local integration, refugees flee to the neighboring country that first receives them and allows them to stay as a resident who is authorized to work. The third option is resettlement. This is the least common kind, occurring in less than 1% of cases. This is when refugees go to a third country like the United States, where they can be resettled and start a new life.

## 5) Some troubling statistics

According to recent LifeWay Research polling, 86% of Protestant pastors in the U.S. affirm that Christians should “care sacrificially for refugees and foreigners.” However,

- only 8% say their church is currently involved in serving refugees locally (College Church is in this 8%).
- only 19% say their church is currently involved in caring for refugees internationally
- 44% of pastors acknowledge there is a sense of fear within their congregations regarding refugees.
- 57% of evangelical Christians (and 69% of white evangelicals) say that the arrival of immigrants to their community presents a threat or a burden of some sort, while only 42% say it presents “an opportunity to introduce them to Jesus.”
- Just 12% of evangelical Christians say their views on the arrival of refugees and other immigrants are primarily informed by the Bible.

## 6) Thinking biblically about refugees

First of all, Jesus was a refugee (Matthew 2:13–18) as were many other heroes of the Bible, like Jacob (Genesis 27:42–44), Moses (Exodus 2:15), David (1 Samuel 21:10) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:1–4). In addition, refugees, like all human beings, are made in the image of God and possess inherent dignity and potential (Genesis 1:26–27).

We are commanded to love our neighbors, and Scripture clarifies that our “neighbor” cannot be narrowly defined to exclude vulnerable foreigners (Leviticus 19:18, 34; Luke 10:25–37). God repeatedly says that he loves

and cares for the vulnerable—particularly the orphan, the widow and the foreigner—and commands his people to do the same (Deuteronomy 10:17–19; Psalm 146:9; Zechariah 7:9–10; Jeremiah 22:3; Malachi 3:5).

When we extend compassion to persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ, we do it to Christ himself, and it is a unique opportunity to serve the persecuted church (Matthew 25:31–45). When we extend the love of Christ to those who are not yet believers, we generate opportunities to “give an answer to everyone who asks” for the hope within us (1 Peter 3:15) and to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19).

We have a unique missional opportunity. According to Dr. Albert Mohler of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, “For the first time in American history this immigration wave is touching not just the coast and not just the major cities, but much smaller areas as well...Right here in the United States, right in our own towns, we’ve never faced such a Great Commission responsibility. **We have never faced such a Great Commission opportunity.**”

On a similar note, Dr. Timothy Tennent of Asbury Theological Seminary states that “86% of the immigrant population in North America are likely to either be Christians or become Christians. That’s far above the national average...The immigrant population actually presents the greatest hope for Christian renewal in North America...We shouldn’t see this as something that threatens us. **We should see this as a wonderful opportunity.**”

However, it seems that many American Christians have overlooked this missional opportunity. Among people of non-Christian religious traditions in North America—most of them refugees or other immigrants—60% say they do not personally know a Christian. On the flip side, just 27% of white evangelicals in the U.S. say they personally know a Muslim, and even fewer know a Hindu or a Buddhist. Dr. J.D. Payne of the Church at Brook Hills (AL) argues that “Something is missionally malignant whenever we are willing to make great sacrifices to travel the world to reach a people group but are not willing to walk across the street.” We are also reminded of the words of Christ that “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few” (Luke 10:2 ESV).

We are commanded to “practice hospitality” (Romans 12:13), which literally means to practice loving strangers, and by doing so, we may be welcoming angels (Hebrews 13:2).

## 7) But, wait, I thought that...

***“most refugees are Muslims.”***

Reality: Among refugees admitted to the U.S. in recent years, more have been Christians than any other religion. Even from the Middle East, 39% of refugees have been Christians. Still our faith compels us to love and welcome Muslims and those of other faiths, just as we would Christians.

***“these people were here illegally.”***

Reality: Anyone resettled to the US as a refugee has work authorization and indefinite legal status from the day they arrive. But, there are many who have fled violence, persecution, poverty, or hunger who are not designated as refugees. World Relief has called for reforms to our immigration system that would make it harder to immigrate unlawfully, make it easier to immigrate lawfully and establish a process by which those here unlawfully now could earn permanent legal status if they are willing to pay a fine and meet other requirements. According to LifeWay Research, 68% of evangelicals support policies along these lines

***“admitting refugees creates a drain on the economy.”***

Realities: Overall, economists almost universally agree that immigrants have a net positive impact on the U.S. economy. While less research focuses specifically on refugees, one study from the University of Texas finds that, long-term, those resettled as refugees actually fare better than other immigrants to the U.S. While there is a short-term fiscal cost to refugee resettlement, in the long-term refugees contribute more in taxes than they receive in services and benefits. Refugees are about twice as likely as native-born U.S. citizens to start a small business.

***“refugees might actually be terrorists infiltrating our country.”***

Realities: Refugees admitted to the U.S. undergo a screening process that generally takes 18 months to three years, involves the U.S. Departments of Homeland Security, State and Defense, as well as the FBI and National Counterterrorism Center. The process includes multiple in-person interviews and biometric background checks and is more thorough than the screening to which any of the other 70+ million visitors to the U.S. are subjected. With more than three million refugees admitted through the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program since the late 1970s, zero have successfully perpetrated an act of terrorism in the U.S.

## 8) A Christian response

### **Prayer**

- “Pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

### **Listening**

- To Scripture
- To refugees themselves

### **Empowering Churches Abroad**

### **Advocacy**

- “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves” (Proverbs 31:8)

### **Serving Locally**

- Good Neighbor Teams and other volunteer opportunities
- English Language Instruction
- See [www.worldreliefdupage.org](http://www.worldreliefdupage.org) for more information.

### **Evangelism**

- “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15).
- In serving refugees—many of whom were persecuted because of their faith—it is vital that we make a clear distinction between proselytism and evangelism.
- Proselytism, to quote John Stott, is “unworthy witness,” when our motives, our methods, or our message are unworthy, involving any element of coercion.
- “While the nature of our faith requires us to share the gospel with others, our practice is to make an open and honest statement of it, which leaves the hearers entirely free to make up their own minds about it. We wish to be sensitive to those of other faiths, and we reject any approach that seeks to force conversion on them” (Lausanne Movement, Manila Manifesto).

## Further Resources/Bibliography:

*Seeking Refuge: On the Shores of the Global Refugee Crisis* (Moody Publishers, 2016)

Small Group Discussion Questions

Download for free at [www.SeekingRefugeBook.com](http://www.SeekingRefugeBook.com)

A Church Leader’s Tool Kit on the Syrian Refugee Crisis

Download for free at [www.worldrelief.org/refugee-crisis](http://www.worldrelief.org/refugee-crisis)

*Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion & Truth in the Immigration Debate* (InterVarsity Press, 2009)

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

<http://evangelicalimmigrationtable.com>

<http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Pastor-Views-on-Refugees-Final-Report-January-2016.pdf>

UNHCR Global Trends Report 2014 (<http://www.unhcr.org/556725e69.pdf>)

<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

<https://www.wrapsnet.org>

