

## **A Biblical Mandate for Refugee Ministries: Beginning the Discussion**

God calls the church to deep levels of engagement with refugees and new immigrants that ultimately reveals God's heart of compassion for vulnerable people, his desire for believers to live in right relationship with the "other," his design for creation that includes unity with diversity, and his self-giving love that invites broken humanity into its embrace. *More...*

God gives direction to his newly formed nation about how to respond to the strangers who come to live in their midst which is instructive for us and our relationship with the strangers who come to live among us in this great nation of Canada.

*When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God (Leviticus 19: 33, 34).<sup>1</sup>*

Notice the progression in the level of engagement that God calls His people to as they respond to the strangers who come to live among them in their new nation. He begins with basic humane treatment, moves to a position of human equality and ends with the full biblical mandate to love the foreigners as themselves.

*...you shall not do him wrong...*

The entry point for engaging refugees and new immigrants is to respect their humanity and the image of God stamped upon them, to take seriously their human rights and to not abuse them. The majority of Canadians would probably agree with this directive and do nothing to intentionally harm them. This first level is not a very onerous task and does not require a significant degree of commitment or sacrifice or even much personal involvement. However, God's mandate goes far beyond this minimal level of engagement and leads us through new heights and depths as we seek to fathom God's heart for the stranger.

*...shall be to you as the native among you...*

This next command pushes us forward in our engagement with newcomers by asking us to extend to them the same rights and privileges we enjoy as Canadian-born citizens. Here we have movement toward connection and relationship.

We are tempted to question God and our own laws, "Don't you know that our ancestors tilled this land and made it the country it is today? It is our inheritance." However, it is helpful to remember that God owns the land and we are only his tenants. God says, "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants" (Leviticus 25:23).<sup>2</sup>

Not only are we tenants but God can and does move national boundaries and people around to accomplish a higher purpose. The Apostle Paul declares, “From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the *exact places* where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17: 26-27).

The higher purpose is so that people will seek him and perhaps find him. Experience bears this out. People are more open to the gospel during periods of upheaval because they lose their traditional support network and must look to strangers for help. If help comes in the name of Jesus there is a greater likelihood that they will begin to think about Jesus and perhaps even come to know him personally.

God is sending both harvesters and the harvest to our doorstep. Many refugees arriving in Canada have a vibrant Christian faith that suffering has refined. They have the potential to bring in a harvest and revitalize the church. In addition, people from countries that do not permit the gospel are coming and it is an amazing opportunity for the church to freely bring the good news to these newcomers. For unsuccessful refugee claimants who must return to their country of origin, we have a small window of opportunity to demonstrate the love of Christ and reach them with this life-changing message before they leave Canada.

The fact is that once refugees gain convention refugee status they can become permanent residents and within five years apply for citizenship. At this point, they obtain the same rights and privileges as Canadian-born residents. The issue here is that we willingly, without complaint, support and welcome their right to move into our neighbourhoods and compete with us for jobs, education, resources, and so on. We do it because God has asked us to and because we share His heart of compassion for the marginalized and oppressed.

*...love him as yourself...*

Once we have resolved to extend basic human rights to refugees, welcome them and give them space to live and work among us as one of us, we are moving closer to God’s ideal terms of engagement with foreigners living among us.

Next, God asks us to love the stranger as much as we love ourselves. In reflecting on self-love, we will probably agree that we try to surround ourselves with good things as much as it is in our power to do so. We want our surroundings to be comfortable, attractive, and harmonious. We want others to love and value us. Once we begin to itemize all that we need and want then we can more clearly understand what the stranger needs and wants and begin to meet those needs.

However, we need to guard against any temptation to have a superior attitude and, instead, recognize that we benefit from them. In fact, the benefit we receive is the corollary to God’s purpose in moving people around so that some might find him. We, as Canadians have the opportunity to learn how to share, be generous, and extend grace to others as God has done to us. We need the poor, the marginalized, the stranger and the refugee for our own transformation. We learn from them as well—their courage, perseverance and the good cultural values that they bring with them. It might be surprising to some but we do not have the edge on all that is good and wholesome.

*...for you were aliens...*

It is important to keep in mind that many of us are only one or two generations removed from being strangers ourselves to this nation. Many of us had parents and grandparents who came to this land for a variety of reasons and looked for the citizens of their time to welcome them and provide the opportunity to make a new start. As we stop and reflect on their stories, and remember the thoughts, feelings, experiences, struggles, hopes and disappointments that they have passed down to us, we can then begin to empathize with the current experience of refugees and subsequently respond in meaningful ways.

On a spiritual level, we believers at one time were strangers and excluded from God's family. But in his grace he adopted us as his sons and daughters and made us citizens of his kingdom through an incredible act that demonstrates what self-giving love is all about. With such an outpouring of love on us while we were not only strangers to God but also his enemies, it is hard not to respond to outsiders and freely pour out love on them.

There is also the reality that because the Holy Spirit lives within us, we never feel completely at home in our own culture. There is always a sense that we are foreigners and strangers living in one kingdom—this present world that is oppressed by powers of darkness, while citizens of another—the kingdom of light where Christ rules and reigns in righteousness. We too are pilgrim people on a journey to our heavenly home.

We can identify with those on the refugee highway and their experience of leaving behind their childhood community because of a desperate need to search out a place in the world where they could be safe. Their journey is rarely direct and many travel through several countries before finding their way to Canada. Losing their formative community, struggling to survive in different cultures along the journey and trying to find their place in Canada, can leave them in doubt about who they are and where they belong. The message we have is that they can find new identities in Jesus Christ and new community in his body, the church.

Peter reminds us of our own sense of alienation from the culture we live in. He says, "Be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy...live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear" (1 Peter 1: 16, 17) and "Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and strangers in the world...live such good lives...that...they may see your good deeds and glorify God" (1 Peter 2: 11, 12).

*...I am the Lord your God...*

God's laws are a reflection of his character and we can begin to fathom who he is and what he wants his sons and daughters to become by reflecting on what he asks us to do. God asks us to be holy even as he is holy—set apart, different from the world and its ways, reflecting godly character. He puts within us his passions and desires and empowers us with the Holy Spirit to be his hands in this world, instruments of righteousness and agents of transformation. He takes the old laws that were written in stone and writes them on our hearts so that we *want* to do what *he* wants us to do.

Furthermore, Jesus invites us to participate in the nature and work of the Trinity through our involvement with all of humanity; however they may come to us. Jesus asks his Father, “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me...I in them and you in me, May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17: 20-23).

This yearning for unity in the prayer of Jesus reflects the way things were at creation and is the goal of redemption that will ultimately find its fulfillment in heaven. However, in the here and now, God has redeemed us and left us here to show others that they can find this peace and unity in God’s kingdom. God’s peace, or “*shalom*,” embodies in its meaning a much richer picture of God’s design for his creation than the word “peace” does in the way we traditionally use it to mean the absence of war or peace of mind.

Plantinga comments, “In the Bible, *shalom* means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight*”<sup>3</sup> that flows out of God’s just rule. He notes that in the beginning when there was *shalom*, creation was both distinct and unified. He notes, “However, “against this background of original separating and binding, we see the fall as anti-creation, the blurring of distinctions and the rupturing of bonds, and the one as a result of the other.”<sup>4</sup> The cross is the place where God begins to restore creation to what it was originally intended to be and unites people from diverse cultures through his Word and Spirit.

It is at the cross where we recognize that we are impoverished and in constant need of God. At the cross there is no hierarchy, no ownership, no privilege, and no social status. There is only a posture of receiving from a gracious God who pursues us and gives us all of Himself—the God of radical welcome and hospitality.

Jesus went before us and showed us the way. Paul reminds us, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant...he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2: 5-8).

The ultimate demonstration of God’s heart for strangers is the incarnation of Christ and his journey to the cross. Jesus showed us how to live in relation to the “other” who is different from us. He spoke with the woman at the well, healed the unclean and ate with the despised. He pointed out the people of Samaria to his disciples and said, “Open your eyes and look at the fields, they are ripe for harvest” (John 4: 35). The disciples did not like the Samaritans because they were culturally different, although they were geographically close, but Jesus sent his disciples among them to labour for him because he was concerned for them.

As followers of Christ, we must learn from his example. He obeyed the biblical mandate to welcome the stranger—the mandate given as God’s nation, Israel was newly forming, that the Old and New Testament continued to restate and that ultimately will find its fulfillment in the eschatology as people of every tongue and tribe worship the Lamb upon the throne.

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<sup>1</sup> NASB

<sup>2</sup> NIV and all other Scripture are from the NIV

<sup>3</sup> Cornelius Plantinga. 1995. *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. p.10

<sup>4</sup> Plantinga 1995: 29.