

# Immigration

Welcoming the stranger or protecting our culture?

Immigration is a hot political issue. To some critics, migrants are vulnerable people who need protecting. To others, they are hard workers who fill the jobs we cannot or will not. To still others, they are scroungers who take our jobs and benefits, and use our health system without paying any taxes.

**“Vulnerable people who need protecting, hard workers who fill the jobs we cannot or will not, or scroungers who take our jobs and benefits?”**

The difference between these points of view may simply be our choice of newspaper.

For Christians, matters may be more complicated. We are commanded to love our neighbour – but it seems

that love for one neighbour may prevent us from caring properly for another. How are we to respond?



Thinking Biblically About...

# What's the problem?

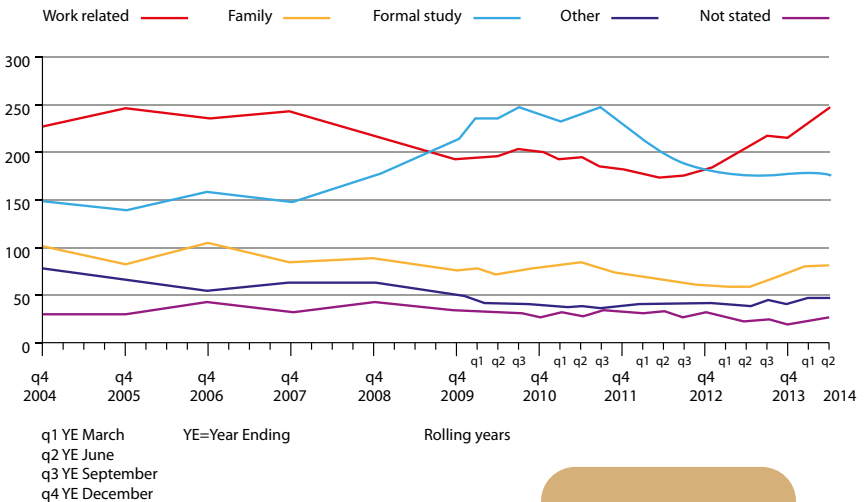
Immigration is a topic that raises strong reactions. It is also one that is highly complex, and poorly understood. Migrants come to the country for many different reasons – including work, study, asylum, and joining family members – for a temporary, permanent or unknown duration. However, the stories behind their journeys are often reduced to simple slogans and assumptions about their motives.

Immigration goes to the heart of our society. It has implications for our national culture, our country's

religious landscape, our economy and employment rates. Perhaps this is why it's also a subject that is surrounded by confusion, misinformation and propaganda. In the UK and across Europe, fears over high levels of immigration have led to the rise of right-wing and anti-immigration political parties. Some of these concerns may be well-founded; others are not. We make very real and far-reaching decisions based on narratives that are constructed or perpetuated by those with very different agendas.

## Long-term immigration to the UK by main reason for migration, 2004 – 2014

Immigration (thousands)



Source: Office for National Statistics

**Q:** When you hear the word 'immigrant', what kind of person springs to mind?

# Misrepresenting immigration

We tend to have strong feelings about immigration, one way or another. Unfortunately, these feelings aren't always based on reliable information.

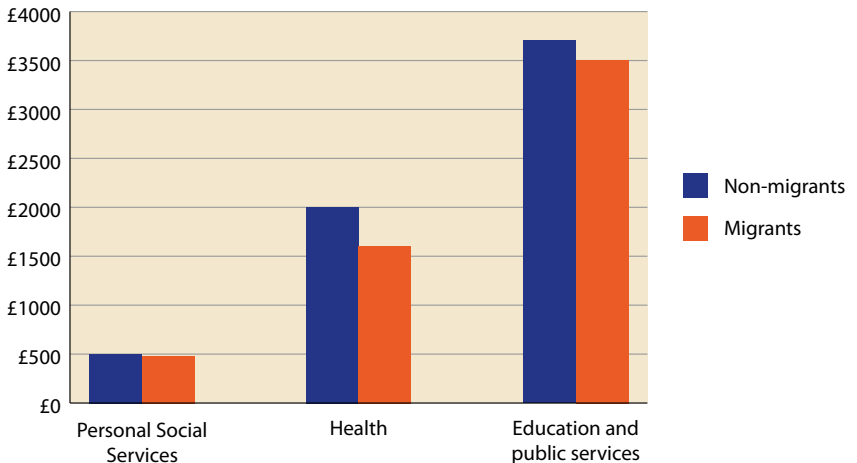
Most people's impression is that almost all UK migrants come from the EU. In fact, nearly half – **47 percent** – came from **outside the EU in 2014** and do not have the same freedom of movement that EU citizens do.

And, despite regular stories in the newspapers to the contrary, migrants as a whole contribute **more taxes**, collect **fewer benefits**, commit **fewer crimes** and **use the NHS less** than native-born Brits. (NIESR)

The average person estimates that **almost a third** (31 per cent) of the UK population are immigrants. The true figure is actually **13 per cent**. (Ipsos MORI)

Without an accurate picture of immigration, it is impossible to respond meaningfully. This is also true for Christians, who are called to be prophetic voices in their culture. What are the issues we should *really* be concerned about?

## Public spending per head, migrants and non-migrants



Source: NIESR (2011) Impact of migration on consumption of public services

# What does the Bible say?

Although there were no border agencies, passports or deportation orders, the Bible has plenty to say about immigration. The Old Testament, in particular, includes many laws about how migrants are to be treated by native Israelites. (In the New Testament, the emphasis was more on Jews and Gentiles understanding how Christianity superseded their previous identities.)

Rather than looking at the purpose of migration – work, study, asylum, accompanying a family member – as we do, the Old Testament is more interested in the migrant’s personal circumstances and attitude towards their host country. Were they willing to become a part of Israelite culture and religion? Or were they a threat to it?

## Gēr and nokri

There are two main categories of immigrant in the Bible: the *gēr* and the *nokri*. The word *gēr* is translated ‘alien’, ‘resident alien’ or, in older versions, ‘sojourner’. The *gēr* is almost always mentioned alongside other vulnerable

groups of people such as hired workers, orphans and widows. Without land or family support, these people often lived on the margins of society and were prone to poverty and exploitation. The Israelites were warned not to mistreat them.



*‘Cursed is anyone who withholds justice [mišpat] from the foreigner [gēr], the fatherless or the widow.’*  
(Deuteronomy 27:19)

A *gēr* could either integrate fully, adopting Israelite religion and customs – which many did – or remain separate to some degree. Those who did integrate were treated the same as any native Israelite, and welcomed into the nation’s religious life (Exodus 12:47-48; Deuteronomy 26:11-13).

Regardless of which they chose, the vulnerability of the *gēr* was recognised and the Israelites were called to treat them with generosity and compassion. Israel, after all, had first-hand experience of being displaced and oppressed.

Gēr	Nokri
‘Resident alien’, ‘sojourner’	‘True’ foreigner
Willing to integrate	Does not integrate
Often vulnerable	Financially independent
Welcomed and supported	Treated with caution
Treated like native Israelites under the law	Some protections did not apply (e.g. ban on charging interest)

**Q:** Should we treat people differently if they choose not to integrate with British society?



*'The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.'*

(Leviticus 19:34)

The *gēr* was quite distinct from the *nokrî*, who is presented as a 'true' foreigner – someone whose loyalties typically still lay in their country of origin, who were temporary visitors to Israel and who were generally economically independent. The word is frequently used of the foreign gods (e.g. Deuteronomy 31:16) that threaten to ensnare the Israelites throughout their history.

Later in Israel's history, after the Temple had been destroyed and the Israelites had been

exiled to Babylon by king Nebuchadnezzar, their attitude towards the *nokrî* shifted. After the return from

## "We tend to think of immigration in terms of justice, or fairness"

exile, there was both a greater openness to foreigners who genuinely wanted to follow Israel's God, and greater concern to protect their faith from harmful outside influence (particularly seen in Ezra and Nehemiah).

### Justice and righteousness

We tend to think of immigration (and many other public issues) in terms of justice, or fairness. We talk about the injustices of the immigration system, and the ways that asylum-seekers and other vulnerable people are treated. Alternatively, we complain that migrants unfairly take our jobs or collect benefits at the expense of the taxpayer. In each case, our arguments are framed in the language of justice.

Justice is a major concern in the Bible: it is one of God's own attributes.



*'He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.'*

(Deuteronomy 32:4)



**Q:** How does an emphasis on loving-kindness instead of justice change your approach to immigration?

However, if we are looking for an overarching ethic for the Bible, justice is not enough. Neither is righteousness, which is broadly the outcome of justice – the state that should result if justice is widely practised. In the Bible, these two terms, justice and righteousness, often go together and have the meaning of something like ‘social justice’.

### **Loving-kindness**

If there is one word that sums up God’s character and the way we are to treat each other, it is ‘love’. Jesus summarised every command in the Bible in terms of love:



*‘Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*  
(Matthew 22:34-40)

The word for ‘love’ used in the verses that Jesus quotes (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18) is a broad term, used of many different types of love – of God for his people but also between friends, family members and between husband and wife. In nuancing what love means, another word is useful: *hēsed*. This is often translated as ‘mercy’ but means something more like ‘loving-kindness’ or Covenant loyalty. It is a steadfast love that encompasses many other qualities: grace, compassion and faithfulness, as well as embodying or bringing about justice, righteousness and holiness.

It is no coincidence that this requirement for mercy is often mentioned in the context of the immigrant and other vulnerable groups. ‘Administer true justice; show mercy [*hēsed*] and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner [*gēr*] or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.’ (Zechariah 7:9-10)

**“At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, how many great things we have done. We will be judged by: ‘I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was naked and you clothed me, I was homeless and you took me in.’”**

Mother Teresa of Calcutta

# Where do we go from here?

**The biblical perspective suggests we should rethink our attitudes towards immigration, shifting our focus from justice to loving-kindness, and looking more at immigrants' circumstances and own attitudes than their nominal reasons for entering the country. As 'aliens and strangers in the world' ourselves (1 Peter 2:11), Christians should understand what it is like to be 'dual citizens'.**

The Bible required that migrants integrate into Israelite life if they were to receive full support – though regardless of this, there was the requirement to look after the vulnerable (including aliens, orphans and widows). Integration brought unconditional welcome and the foreigner was treated the same as any native Israelite.

## **The need for a vision**

Israel's approach to immigration worked because there was a strong sense of national and religious identity. The Israelites were God's people and they lived by his laws. They were supposed to be 'a light to the nations' (Isaiah 49:6), a community that would attract others. Those who were willing to follow the Lord and live by the same laws were welcomed; those who were not, were seen as a potential threat to Israelite faith and culture.

One of the problems when it comes to immigration is that we lack an attractive vision of what it means to be a part of our society. Since the rejection of multiculturalism as a national narrative, there has been no convincing overarching vision for immigration put forward by the government. In the absence of governmental initiative here, churches have a more important role to play. They are involved with and have opportunities to shape the character of local and even national communities in a way that few other organisations enjoy.

## **Church action**

Properly informing ourselves should be a first step. Beyond that, we need to shift our framework of thinking away from mere justice, towards loving-kindness – thinking of and treating others as God does us.

Churches are in an excellent position to put this loving-kindness into practice, since they are often closely involved with their local communities and know their needs. They are able to welcome newcomers, providing a vital first, friendly contact with the host community that migrants often lack.

Churches can also help migrants to access and engage with the structures and services that many people take for granted – helping them to register with GPs and book appointments, organising school places, accompanying them to court hearings, assisting with paperwork surrounding asylum, taking them to a Citizens Advice Bureau, and even just introducing them to people and helping them to familiarise themselves with the local area.

Lastly, being part of a community – whether a church or another group – is also about giving back, as well as accessing services. Migrants will bring many unique experiences and talents with them, but may find no way of using these without encouragement.

Jubilee Centre's booklet 'Immigration and Justice: how local churches can change the debate on immigration in Britain' provides a deeper analysis of the topic from a biblical perspective, and presents a range of projects that local churches can develop to engage missionally around immigration.

# What does the **Bible** tell us about **Immigration?**



- We see immigration primarily as a matter of justice, whether that means 'fair' treatment for the immigrant or the host community.
- The Bible views *hesed* – loving-kindness or Covenant love – as an overarching ethic for how we should treat others, and how God relates to us.
- We need a clearer vision of the society we want to be and that others can see, and as a result are either attracted to it or decide not to join.

**Thinking Biblically About...** is a series of 2,000-word guides that unpack modern-day issues from a biblical perspective. The **TBA** series aims to give Christians a firm foundation for engaging with some of the most difficult questions of our times: money and debt, sex and marriage, how we spend our time, how we treat the environment and what the role of government is.

You can also read our **Long Distance Christian** series, a collection of 10,000-word booklets looking at key issues in more depth including *Immigration and Justice*.

**The Jubilee Centre** is a Christian social reform charity based in Cambridge, UK. We believe that the Bible's teaching applies to every area of modern life and has enduring relevance for Britain and the world in the 21st century. At the heart of this social vision is a concern for right relationships, expressed by Jesus in his summary of the Old Testament, *'Love the Lord with all your heart... and love your neighbour as yourself.'* (Matthew 22:37-40)

**Find out more at [www.jubilee-centre.org/immigration](http://www.jubilee-centre.org/immigration)**