

EVANGELICAL IMMIGRATION **table.**

A Guide to Engaging in Respectful Conversations about Immigration

Few issues in our society are as sharply polarizing as immigration. Many Americans have strong, emotional reactions at even the mention of the topic. Many Christians, who would rather avoid sparking a divisive argument, avoid discussing immigration altogether.

But the topic of immigration is actually much more than a political issue: it's a biblical issue with significant missional ramifications for the U.S. Church. If Christ-followers do not engage in mutually respectful dialogue on this topic – especially with those with whom we disagree – the discourse within the Church will simply mirror the divided state of our society as a whole, devoid of biblical wisdom. As Christians reason together, with the help of the Scriptures and of the Holy Spirit, we believe that more common ground on immigration is possible than many might initially presume.

We've designed this short guide to encourage you to have tough conversations about immigration that are rooted in grace and truth and designed to encourage mutual respect, charitable discourse and understanding. Whether you are engaging family members, fellow church goers or even on social media, we pray that these suggestions will facilitate God-honoring discussions. We pray this guide will help you model Christ-like love not only in the message you are sharing, but in the way you engage.

1. Begin Prayerfully

Before engaging in any potentially contentious discussion, it is wise to begin with prayer. The psalmist David gives us language to invite God to examine our hearts:

*Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*
(Psalm 139: 23-24 NIV)

We should ask God to help us rightly assess our own motivations, ensuring that they are rooted in God's love for both immigrants and those with whom we may disagree, not in a sense of pride or self-righteousness. Our goal should be to "take every thought captive" (2 Corinthians 10:5) to the authority of Christ, not to win an argument or humiliate someone else. While there may be

moments when anger is a natural response to injustice, Scripture instructs us not to allow anger to lead us to a sinful response (Ephesians 4:26).

2. Carefully Choose Whom to Engage

You should not feel responsible to engage in this conversation with everyone you come across. Sometimes the wisest choice is not to engage at all, or at least not very deeply, especially over social media.

Before you decide to discuss immigration with someone, we recommend taking a few things into consideration. What's your relationship with the potential interlocutor? Is it someone with whom you are close enough that they will respect your perspective and be authentic with you? Is it possible to have the conversation in person, rather than online?

Genuinely reflect on your own motivation for having the conversation. Is it to prove a point or to genuinely seek to understand and be understood?

Are you prepared to learn from the other person like you hope they learn from you?

Are you in the emotional space to engage the conversation in a Christ-like way?

Are you willing to "play the long game" with this person and potentially have multiple conversations over an extended period of time?

We recommend only moving forward with the conversation after you've considered some of these things carefully and made a conscious choice to engage in a God-honoring way. Sometimes the best path is to engage later on when the environment is more conducive to a positive conversation.

3. Don't Try to "Win"

Rather than "winning" the conversation, your goal should be to understand the other person's perspective and for them to understand yours. Even if we follow all of the advice in this guide perfectly, the other person might leave the conversation unconvinced by what we say. This is ok! It is far more important to engage with love, empathy and respect than to get the other person "on your side" at the end of one conversation. These efforts often take time and several conversations before people are moved. As followers of Jesus, we put our trust in the Holy Spirit to change people's hearts and minds, which often happens outside of our ideal timeframe!

4. Listen with Empathy

Part of the reason that the topic of immigration can be so difficult to discuss is that it touches on very personal concerns, fears, hopes and dreams. It's vital that we genuinely listen to others – not to form a clever rebuttal so as to win an argument, but to genuinely understand the experiences, underlying fears and assumptions that have shaped another's perspective. We

need not necessarily affirm that we *agree* with their concerns, but if we are to “show proper respect to everyone” (1 Peter 2:17), we must seek to understand. Try to listen longer than feels comfortable before offering a response. Engaging people with empathy helps us bridge divides and break down biases, creating a solid foundation for conversation within relationships. Consider responding with affirming statements like, “Tell me more about that.” “How does that make you feel?” “Why do you think you feel that way?”

5. Ask Questions with Kindness

Rather than responding with your own opinion, try to ask questions that further explore the other person’s understanding and experience. Take care to use a curious and calm tone that communicates your authentic desire to learn more. Some helpful questions might include:

“Have you ever been in a circumstance where you were a newcomer or felt out of place?”

“What factors do you think most influence your perspective? Your personal experience with immigrants whom you know? The media? The Bible?”

“How do you think you might respond if you faced the circumstances that many immigrants were in prior to their decision to come to the U.S.?”

“Can you tell me about an immigrant you know in our community that you’ve worked with, served or learned from?”

6. Emphasize Commonalities

We should prioritize finding common values with our conversation partner as a foundation for dialogue. Use affirming statements like “I know we share many of the same values” or “You are a very compassionate person.” If you make this effort to draw out the best in someone in a genuine way, it will go a long way toward having a productive conversation.

You should also encourage others to recognize commonalities with immigrants; that they are, first and foremost, people, made in God’s image, imperfect like the rest of humanity but probably motivated by the same dynamics and values that guide most U.S. citizens: concerns for their families, safety, the ability to create a better life, and in many cases their faith in God. When discussing immigration with fellow Christians, it’s often helpful to emphasize that many immigrants to the U.S. arrive with a strong Christian faith (and many others encounter Jesus upon arrival in the U.S. – but that’s more likely to be true when they are embraced by Christians). Many non-Christian immigrants also share deeply held family values that can be emphasized.

7. Share Your Own Story and Experience

While there may be a place for sharing statistics or other facts, in an era of “alternative facts,” many people are skeptical of information from news reports or politicians. What’s harder to disagree with is your own personal experience: talk about your own experience with immigrants/immigration, something you learned that changed your perspective and/or (with permission, and/or in anonymized ways) about the experiences of individuals and families whom you have met, who might not fit the negative stereotypes of immigrants that are common in some media outlets. You do not have to have answers to every question or fully understand how U.S. immigration law or policy work, but you can always pivot back to your own experience. If there are certain questions that arise about immigration, we’ve created [this primer](#) that you’re free to utilize/share.

8. Go Back to the Bible

Presuming you’re engaged in discussion with someone who shares your Christian faith, consistently encourage them to ground the conversation and their view of immigrants/immigration not in political points but in biblical truth. The Scriptures are replete with God’s commands to his people to love the “foreigner in the land” and to practice hospitality – literally, the love of strangers. We can and should seek to obey these commands while also acknowledging and respecting the various biblical teachings that compel us to respect governing authorities and their role in maintaining safety and order. More biblical resources are available at www.EvangelicalImmigrationTable.com/resources.

We’d love to answer any questions you might have as you engage in these conversations or to hear stories about how your conversations go! Send us a note at info@evangelicalimmigrationtable.com