

The Mission of God and the “Other”: Moving from Anxiety to Mercy in Response to the Refugee Crisis

Brent Neely (M.Div.)

Assemblies of God World Missions

Current Eurasia Coordinator of outreach to Arab refugees in Europe

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the LORD your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him. (Deut. 10:17-20, ESV)

The tidal wave of refugees fleeing chaos and devastation in the Middle East is a story that has been front-and-center for several years now. For multiple reasons, the issue of Arabic-speaking refugees, most of them Muslims, arriving in “Western” countries has been a divisive and contentious topic. This is as true within the church as it is in the wider culture.

Understandably, here “on the ground,” there are many who worry about the possible threat of terrorists in the midst of the masses of (potentially) arriving refugees. The worry is by no means trivial. But if just the possible threat of harm is enough to exclude any compassionate, positive action on our part, then, in our broken world, we would hardly take any action for any good purpose, at all, ever! If there is to be no action until all risk is eliminated, we will be a paralyzed people in this, and any other arena.

Yes, as with any group of humans from any background, at home or abroad, there is

always the potential for “bad actors” in the midst.¹ But the reality is that, as a group, these desperate migrants are simply fellow-humans suffering the consequences of deprivation, war, and violence foisted on them by co-religionists or fellow countrymen. In most cases, they are innocent victims of the very same dark forces that we, too, are concerned about.

In any case, my purpose here is not to offer a political policy prescription. In fact, I do not aim to write primarily as an American or to Americans (though I am one, and most of my readers are too). My purpose is to call us to engage the issue of these traumatized, migrating millions with our hearts and minds, as Jesus-people—as loyal adherents of the only Kingdom that transcends time and is not bounded by nation, locale, or culture. The call to us is to face up to the challenge of the refugee crisis and to view these “foreign others” not from the filter of our fears, our interests, or our national agenda, but rather from the perspective of God’s Kingdom, of His mission in our world, and of our Jesus. Yes, avoidance or a “fortress mentality” may be an instinctive reaction for many of us when we encounter unsettling change. But the stance of the Creator to human rebellion was not one of avoidance or rejection, but rather of engagement and embrace. As citizens under his rule, we must discipline our loves and passions, and the inclination of our thoughts, to reflect his.

Anxiety and fear of the “strange” or the unknown seems to drive many people’s response to the prospect of the arrival of thousands of new Muslims in our midst.² Such reactions may be very instinctive, very understandable. However, such reactions do not in fact reflect the values, outlook, or purposes God has for His chosen and dearly loved church. God’s renewed community is a people “perfected by a love which casts out fear,” (1 John 4:12-21) a global family of sinners healed by grace, culled from every ethnicity, culture, and line of descent (John 10:16; Rom. 3:28-30; 15:8-9; Acts 15:12-18; Rev. 5:9-10; 7:9-10). Neither fear nor nationalistic fervor are distinguishing qualities of the New Testament church; I would suggest faith, hope, and love as far better distinctive marks of the Spirit-empowered people of God.

So, as Christians, what are we to make of these Arabic-speaking refugees? They are so unlike us, so different in culture and values; they might threaten the patterns of life we so cherish . . . right? Well, Yes, and, No. Certainly, these sojourners from the Middle East stand across a substantial gap from us (“Western Christians”), a gap of culture, language, family patterns, spirituality, etc. Having said this, though, we must not leap from there to the conclusion that most of them are angry, hostile, and hateful towards any of us who may encounter them. Might some of them be? Of course. Might various Americans, British, Germans, or Australians also prove to be selfish, angry, and hostile people? Again, surely, “Yes.” But the appropriate category for these sheltering masses is not fundamentally, “enemies.”³ Are the new peoples pressing upon the shores of Western countries, “different,” “unknown,” and “other”? In many ways, we may say “Yes.”

But, there is also reason to say “No.” Fundamentally, what is an Iraqi man from

Mosul or a little Syrian girl from Idlib? Beyond all the ways we construe the refugee as the “outsider” or the “other,” essentially we are speaking of sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, fallen human beings made after God’s own image. These are people, with all the bundled hopes and fears, possibilities and flaws that entails—no more, no less than Joe Smith from Toledo (apologies if a real “Joe Smith from Toledo” reads this article!). Are they broken, wounded, and sinful beings in need of the limitless mercy of God? Yes they are. Guess who else falls into that category? Well, Brent Neely, for one.

But, again, it is true that many of us will find the culture, habits, and outlook of the Middle Eastern refugees to be rather “foreign” and quite “other.” For some, the arrival of so many strangers is bewildering and intimidating. What, then, are we to make of these strangers approaching our doorstep? What guidance is there for us in God’s Word as to how to engage the “outsider” in need? Let us peer through just a few windows onto the theme from a selection of biblical passages.

First of all, the community ideal God lays out for His people Israel in the Old Testament remains strongly instructive for the renewed people of God, the church, in our day. When one considers the very real threat that Israel’s powerful pagan neighbors posed to the fledgling community of the One True God; when one considers the spiritual seduction represented by the pagan worship of the dominant powers of the Ancient Near East; then the call for Israel to be a “Kingdom of Priests,” shedding abroad God’s covenant light to the surrounding nations is quite remarkable (Exod. 19:6; 2 Chron. 6:32-33; Ps. 67; 86:8-10; 87; 117; 148:11-13; Isa. 42:6; 49:6; Rev. 1:5-6; 5:9-10). Equally remarkable, against the backdrop of ancient brutality and inter-

ethnic hostility, is the command to the Israelites that they are to apply the same standards and rules to the foreigners in their midst as to themselves (Lev. 24:22; Num. 9:14; 15:15-16, 29); or the charge that God will hold Israel accountable to compassion for the strangers in her midst (for she, too, was once a stranger in a far land, Exod. 22:21; Lev. 19:34; cf. Isa. 56:3f.). These dynamics from ancient Israel, and the expectations God had for His people, are no mere historical curiosities. For better or worse, our world has not altered much; more importantly, our God has not changed, nor have His purposes for all the peoples of His world.

These days there is room for debate when categorizing the various needy populations on the move; terms range from “refugee” to “migrant,” from “asylum seeker” to “immigrant.” But, whatever the terms, there is a remarkable presence of wanderers, fugitives, exiles, and displaced people throughout the story of Scripture. We may think of Moses seeking refuge in Midian, Israel in her long years of migration and then exile, Jacob and his sons in Egypt, and so on. We may think of the anointed king, harassed by his own, wandering for years, displaced and pursued; of course I refer to David, but that also leads us directly to the consideration of his greater Son, Jesus.

If the reader will allow a free application of terminology, Jesus’ incarnation, the Glory of God in our midst—this “becoming human”—is the ultimate migration, the most wrenching crossing of boundaries, and that for our sake and our salvation. The biography of Jesus virtually opens with a story of traumatic displacement—the holy family following in the steps of ancient Israel, seeking refuge in the land of Egypt. The eternal King begins his human story caught up in the insecure existence of a refugee. Indeed, even in his Galilean

ministry, the Son of Man had no place to lay his head, a man of sorrows acquainted with grief.

Based on the model of Abraham, of Israel, of Jesus our Lord, the people of the New Covenant are also “strangers, exiles, and aliens.” Let us remind ourselves once again, we are the people of God before we are Americans or Arabs, Kurds, or Kiwis. We are to love our world, to engage our societies, to be agents of hope, healing, and peace. But we are not ultimately rooted in this world, or this life. Our loyalty lies with the Ruler to come. Our citizenship lies elsewhere (Phil. 1:27; 3:20-21). And so, we, too, hold our ties here lightly; we live now as holy migrants and foreigners—even “refugees”—as we look for another City in God’s dawning New Creation (1 Cor. 7:29-31; Heb. 11:8-16; 1 Pet 1:1, 17, 2:11-12).

A dominant theme of the Bible is God’s universal mission of restoration and healing for the nations (e.g., Rev. 22:2). In both testaments, in choosing a family, a people, to be the vehicle of His grace to the world, God limits so as to extend; he excludes so as to include (Gal. 3:7-9; Rom. 9:23-26; 11:28-32). The God of Israel shockingly extends His love across lines of cultural exclusion, across boundaries of expectation, to the unlikely, the unworthy, the pagan, the outsider. God’s agenda is not the raising of walls, but the razing of walls (Eph. 2:14). Ultimately, in Christ, the grace of God has reached even . . . us!

God calls out to Adam, to Israel, and even to the “foreign and far.” He calls us all to His side, to be His chosen and beloved people in Jesus the Messiah. Through the paradox of the cross, God has upended evil for the redemption of Jew and Gentile—remaking us together as one New Humanity, a people called to holy lives and mercy-full living; a people redeemed and called into His mission

in his world (John 20:21; Eph. 2:11-22; Titus 2:11-14; 1 Pet. 2:9-10). This grace of God surely must flow through us then, not least to those refugees who were once far across boundaries from us, but have now been brought near.

Finally, in this context, what might we say of Abraham, our father in the faith? We may think of Abraham as the paradigmatic “displaced person,” displaced by none other than God himself. Called out into the unknown, into insecurity and risk, by faith, for the redemption of us all. Yes, in the descendant of Abraham, God has kept His promises to Israel and the world, and in him all families of the earth are blessed. That is God’s founding mission; His mission has not changed; His mission applies to the struggling and suffering peoples of the Middle East. Their worlds have been shaken. They are in pain. Many of them are disillusioned with the religious oppression

under which they have lived. Their cry goes up before heaven. These days, our days, clearly are evil, but grace also abounds. Now is the day to redeem the time (Eph. 5:16). Our Father’s heart is inclined to the refugees. So, where are our hearts?

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. (Heb. 11:13-16, ESV)

¹ Imagine, if one were to take a random group of, say, two million Americans; is there not a high likelihood of some unsavory characters appearing in the mix?

² When I speak of the “arrival” of the refugees, I actually use that term broadly, if not loosely. In terms of this particular wave of refugees, the primary “arrival” in the West has been in Europe, not America. However, some are coming to the U.S., and, beyond that, a number of American Christians view the whole situation with a good deal of trepidation; in that sense, the refugees have already “arrived” for us emotionally and psychologically.

³ And, even if it were, Jesus has given us some fairly bracing directives when it comes to how we respond to our “enemies.”