

The many contexts of immigrants—and evangelicals

By [Matthew Bowman](#)

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Last week, evangelical congregations across America began screening a documentary called *The Stranger: Immigration, Scripture and the American Dream*, produced by a group called the Evangelical Immigration Table. Among EIT's advocates are a host of uncommon bedfellows: [Mathew Staver](#) of the Liberty University School of Law and [Jim Wallis](#) of Sojourners, Leith Anderson of the [National Association of Evangelicals](#) and [Russell Moore](#) of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, and popular pastors [Max Lucado](#) and [Wilfredo de Jesús](#).

Immigration reform has attracted such a spectrum of advocates that it shows how, in a way, it is a fortuitous issue for American Protestants. Christianity has always been political, because by its nature it makes claims upon how people should live. Yet today the word "Christian" seems less political than partisan.

There is an assumption by many on the American left that Christianity is shorthand for the Republican party platform, and far too many Christians hasten to confirm the suspicion. Thus, it is refreshing that *The Stranger* works so hard to break down polarizing rhetoric in a genuine attempt to understand the problem in terms other than those of contemporary American politics.

The film follows three groups of immigrants: Maria, a single mother from Mexico, and her family; Liuan, a Chinese-American whose mother became undocumented when her parents divorced; and the Stewarts, a South African family whose application process for permanent residency has lasted longer than their work visas. The intent, transparently, is to show that there is no single profile of an undocumented immigrant. And, whether intended or not, the film also highlights that there is no single evangelical Christianity.

The most important insight of *The Stranger* comes both in the film and [its study guide](#) when Anderson of the National Association of Evangelicals says, "Church historians will look back to the beginning of the 21st century and say that

immigrants saved American Christianity from decline. And they will observe that Hispanics were the majority and epicenter of that historic renewal.” The opening of the film echoes Anderson’s perspective: Barrett Duke of the Southern Baptist Convention reflects on the difference between thinking about immigration as an “offended citizen” and as a Christian. Wilfredo de Jesús describes the difference between the body of Christ as a theological concept and the United States as a political organization. The filmmakers are working hard to detach their advocacy of immigration reform from any particular political agenda and instead to frame it in terms of evangelical understanding of the nature and future of Christianity. More, they are gently reminding evangelical Christians who are white, middle-class, and politically conservative Americans that what they assume is simple Christianity is actually shaped by all those cultural qualifiers.

This in itself is an accomplishment that mirrors somewhat the crises that evangelical Americans faced at the turn of the 20th century, when they were confronted with a flood of immigration as well as academic challenges to the historicity of biblical narratives. Some evangelicals, mostly pastors such as Henry Sloane Coffin and Harry Emerson Fosdick, worked hard to present to their congregations a Christianity that remained loyal to the essentials of evangelicalism as they conceived of them while recognizing that much else in the faith was conditioned by place, time, and context.

Of course, neither Fosdick, Coffin, nor *The Stranger* achieved a transhistorical Christian perspective, because religion is never independent from context. But, in some sense, the larger point of the film is to illustrate precisely that. *The Stranger* is an evangelical film and as such presumes an evangelical perspective on issues such as the authority of scripture and the nature of the church. But the film also warns U.S.-born evangelicals that the face of the faith they hold to is rapidly evolving, that the very immigrants many of them are suspicious of are the future of evangelical Christianity, and that the Procrustean bed of U.S. politics is a poor place to settle the future of their religion. That message, about the contextual contingency and historical conditioning of any human effort, makes *The Stranger* a fine work of history.

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