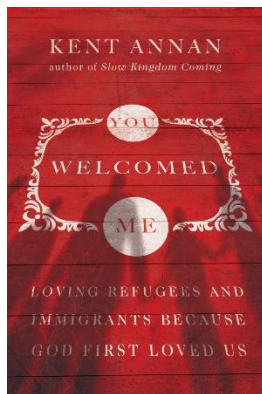


BOOK REVIEW

You Welcomed Me: Loving Refugees and Immigrants Because God First Loved Us

By Kent Annan

Reviewed by Babatunde Oladimeji



Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018. \$13.50

In this troubling and challenging book, Kent Annan explains that the United States has for many years granted legal residency to roughly one million immigrants a year, of which 75,000 have typically been refugees. Now, however, the number of refugees accepted into the US has fallen to only 22,000 a year. Meanwhile, small countries like Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia, and Jordan, have taken in between 650,000 and 2.5 Million refugees (7). Annan helps Christians see how important this issue is and how we must respond to it in love and charity.

Beginning with a vivid and yet frequently ignored picture of the misery refugees and immigrants often face, Annan points out that no one enjoys fleeing their homes and leaving their dreams behind. Refugees flee their homes only because they face grave danger. In light of this reality, Annan argues that we should welcome refugees and immigrants. He insists that, as children of Abraham by faith, we have joined into the story in which, in a sense, we, too, are foreigners. We should therefore be sensitive to those who are displaced and must seek a new home. If we manage to see refugees as children of God who are in need, we must necessarily treat them with empathy and love.

Unfortunately, too often we do not treat refugees and immigrants the way God wants us to. Annan explains that one key reason at the heart of our mistreatment of refugees and immigrants is the prejudice that leads us to think of others as less than human. Such dehumanization begins when we absorb media characterizations that speak unkindly and unfairly about foreigners. These views often lead people to refer to others with derogatory slurs that go uncorrected. We then vote in elections in ways that make our vulnerable neighbors even more vulnerable. Gradually, we no longer see immigrants and refugees as people made in the image of God (19).

Annan takes the position that Christians must counter these pressures and recognize the personhood of refugees. Such a stance leads us to take the time to empathize with their circumstances, and to follow that up by seeking tangible ways to connect with refugees and immigrants on a human level. Such connections allow us to live into a new understanding of our neighbors. Annan points out that people cross national borders to come to the United States, and he strongly believes that “When we move toward them, we have to cross our kinds of borders to genuinely welcome them” (28).

One of Annan’s important accomplishments is his discussion of the major concerns people raise when confronted with helping refugees and immigrants, like fears that they will take our jobs, dangers of higher crime and compromised security, undesirable changes to our cities and neighborhoods, and many more (30-45). One after the other, Annan debunks each point. He concludes by saying, “Our hope is strong enough to overcome the fears and vulnerabilities” (43). In his words, “Our challenge is to find the solidarity that we need by belonging to tribes in our communities, churches, and nations, while also welcoming others who have, as immigrants or refugees, been forced to flee their own tribes and are now disconnected” (34).

Knowing our own stories and becoming part of the stories of others help us become part of the magnificent story of God (60). Annan encourages us to spend time with refugees and immigrants to listen to their stories.

He concludes the book by offering practical suggestions on how Christians can become more welcoming to refugees and immigrants, noting that, as we get to know and care for each other, we become partners with people whom once we didn't trust, but with whom we now build trusting relationships. He is thus surely right in his assertion that our "philosophy should be to partner with people and not for them" (74).

Annan's experiences and interactions with many churches that welcomed refugees are encouraging. He explores different organizations that reach out to refugees and immigrants, in the process presenting some great examples of welcome.

You Welcomed Me is not perfect. For example, I question some of Annan's biblical interpretations, and he is occasionally guilty of proof texting, like when he cites Galatians 3:28 and uses it to conclude that "There is no longer American or Syrian, no longer documented or undocumented" (17). He also relies on the story of Jesus' flight to Egypt to support a policy of open borders, a policy with which some readers who consider geo-political contexts of the biblical text may strongly disagree.

Annan argues passionately and appropriately for Christians to love diversity, because the kingdom of God is diverse with people of every kind (35). Yet he fails to address the issue of people who break immigration laws by crossing borders illegally or overstaying their visas. Many among Annan's readers may actually welcome diversity, but they nevertheless worry about an influx of newcomers who may change their culture and cities and impact the future of their children. Annan needs to address such concerns and make an effort to allay people's fears and point the way to a hopeful future.

I also find myself concerned when Annan says, "We aren't called to first defend our country's border or honor, but to seek the kingdom of God" (39). It is not clear to whom he is referring. Is he thinking of "we" as Americans or as Christians? Clarity here is important, because Annan seems at times to conflate the role of government with the role of the church.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, the book has many strengths. One of its key contributions is the practical steps readers are encouraged to take so they can move beyond the cognitive/intellectual domain into affective and psychomotor domains. This involves feelings and actions that could help readers begin to put the truths and concepts into practice in their daily lives.

Annan provides an important, easy-to-read Christian defense for welcoming immigrants and refugees. His style is free of theological and sociological jargon that often accompanies these themes. He nevertheless provides an instructive Trinitarian view for dealing with strangers. If we see in the immigrant and the refugee another person and a fellow human in

distress, we also realize we could be in the same position. Through the mystery of the other, we meet the divine (16).

You Welcomed Me will be an asset to a variety of audiences. Within congregations it can be used for small group studies and more generally by pastors encouraging the faithful to engage in such issues. Outside church walls, social workers presently involved with refugees and immigrants will find it useful, as will anyone working in relief, development, and advocacy.

The challenge of how to respond to immigrants and refugees has become a global conversation, all the more because the rate of displacement of people continues to grow. *You Welcomed Me* provides an excellent lens through which to examine this challenge and envision a Christian paradigm for engaging the problem. This is a very good and stimulating read.

Babatunde Oladimeji is an Anglican priest from Nigeria and presently pastors with the United Methodist church in Nebraska. He holds multiple master's degrees from Nigeria as well as a DMin in Leadership and a PhD in Intercultural Studies, both from Asbury Theological Seminary. He has been involved in pastoral leadership and community development for over 27 years.

Author email: tunde.oladimeji@asburyseminary.edu
