

LESSON

1

HIS NATURE

*Our
Missionary
God*

IN THIS LESSON

Central Theme: The Missionary Nature of God and His Church

Biblical Reflection: Isaiah 6:1-8; Isaiah 61:1-2; Luke 4:18-19; John 20:21

Reading: Capturing a Missionary Vision

Reading Reflection: Being Sent

Missional Action: Seeing and Responding to God's Missional Work

*The Missionary Nature of God and His Church*

The word *mission* is from the Latin *missio*, which means “sending.” It is *the* central biblical theme describing God’s activity throughout history to restore and heal creation. Mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. He is a sending, missionary God who sends a missionary church.

1. What comes to mind when you think of the attributes of God?
2. What do you think about “mission” being *the* central biblical theme of the Bible? How might this change the way you view Scripture?



Isaiah 6:1-8; Isaiah 61:1-2; Luke 4:18-19; John 20:21

1. *Read Isaiah 6:1-8.* What do you learn about God from Isaiah 6? What is significant about Isaiah's response to God's question in this passage? In what ways is God still asking this question today?
2. *Read Isaiah 61:1-2 and Luke 4:18-19.* What specifically did Isaiah say he was sent to do? Reflect on each deed mentioned. Do you think the actions listed in Isaiah 61 could serve as a picture of the gospel? What is the significance of Jesus making an application of the Isaiah passage to his own ministry?
3. How has God called and sent you as a missionary to participate in his mission? How do the actions listed in Isaiah 61 relate to your life and ministry? Do you sense a "sending" call to participate in any of the activities mentioned?
4. *Read John 20:21.* Who is the sender in this passage? Who is Jesus sending in this passage? What do you think they are sent to do?
5. What questions do these passages raise for you?



Capturing a Missionary Vision

When you hear the word “missionary,” what is the first thought that comes to mind? A person going overseas? A foreign country? Maybe Africa? If you were to look up the word “missionary” in the dictionary, you would read something like this: “a person undertaking or sent on a mission.” Well, that isn’t very helpful. Don’t you hate it when a dictionary uses a form of a word to define the word you are looking up? What about that word “mission?” If you were to look up the word “mission” in the dictionary you would read something like, “the act of sending or being sent.”

Initially, this definition may not seem to be overly helpful, either, but it is actually quite insightful. The idea of mission can relate to either *sending* or *being sent*. The problem with this definition is that in the church, we have focused almost exclusively on the idea of *sending* rather than *being sent*.

We think primarily of sending and supporting missionaries in faraway places rather than seeing ourselves, both individually and collectively, as being sent. This reality leads us to the first theological essential that must undergird all of our missional activity—the understanding that God by his very nature is a missionary God, and we as the church, are his missionary people.

The Missionary Nature of God

Mission is the grand narrative of Scripture. The entire Bible is generated by and all about God’s mission. The word “mission” is from the Latin *missio*, meaning “sending.” It is *the* central biblical theme describing God’s activity throughout history to restore and heal creation. While often overlooked, Scripture is full of sending language that speaks to the missionary nature of God.

From God’s sending of Abram in Genesis 12 to the sending of his angel in Revelation 22, there are literally hundreds of examples of God as a sending God. Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of sending in the Old Testament is found in Isaiah 6. In this passage, we catch a glimpse of God’s sending nature, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I *send*, and who will go for *us*?’” To this Isaiah responds, “‘Here am I! *Send* me!’” (6:8).

Later in the book of Isaiah there is a fascinating passage where the prophet recognizes that God’s Spirit has anointed him to “proclaim good news to the poor” and *sent* him to “bind up the brokenhearted” (61:1). In the larger passage of Isaiah 61:1-3 it is interesting to note that there are no fewer than six redemptive deeds that proceed from or are dependent on the verb “sent” or the phrase “he has sent me.” To emphasize the centrality of the sending theme, the passage could be rendered this way:

- He has *sent* me, to bind up the brokenhearted;
- He has *sent* me, to proclaim freedom for the captives;
- He has *sent* me, to release from darkness the prisoners;
- He has *sent* me, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God;
- He has *sent* me, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion;

He has *sent* me, to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. (61:1-3, paraphrased).

If this passage is familiar it may be because Jesus applies it to his own ministry in Luke 4:18-19 as he claims to be the fleshly embodiment of Isaiah 61:1-2. It becomes, in a sense, the closest thing to a personal mission statement for Jesus.¹

When moving to the New Testament, sending language is found throughout the Gospels, the book of Acts, and each of the Epistles. However, the most comprehensive collection of sending language is found in the Gospel of John, where the words “send” or “sent” are used almost sixty times. The majority of uses refer to the title of God as “one who sends” and of Jesus as the “one who is sent.”

In the final climactic sending passage in John’s Gospel, Jesus makes clear that he is not only sent by the Father, but now he is the sender, “As the Father has *sent* me, I am *sending* you” (John 20:21).

With this statement, Jesus is doing much more than drawing a vague parallel between his mission and ours.² Deliberately and precisely he is making his mission the model for ours, saying, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” Therefore, our understanding of the church’s mission must flow from our understanding of Jesus’ mission.

The Missionary Nature of the Church

The purpose of the previous, very brief survey of sending language is not merely to emphasize the missionary nature of God, but to highlight the importance of understanding the church as a *sent*, missionary entity. God is a missionary God who *sends* a missionary church. That is why the word “missional,” when properly applied, is helpful. The word is simply the adjective form of the noun “missionary.” It is used to describe the church as those who operate as missionaries in their local contexts. At the core of the missional conversation is the idea that a “genuine missional impulse is a *sending* rather than an *attractional* one.”³ In other words, we should be sending people in the church out among people of the world rather than attempting to attract people of the world in among the people of the church. This is a helpful distinction because most people do not think of the church in sending, missionary terms.

In the book *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, theologian George Hunsberger offers three different ways people view the nature of the church.⁴ The first view is what Hunsberger calls the “Reformation Heritage.” He says that Protestants have inherited a particular view of church that emphasizes the right preaching of the Word, the right administration of the ordinances, and the proper exercise of church discipline. This view, he argues, has left us with an understanding of the church as “a place where certain things happen.” Therefore, the church is defined primarily as a *place* a person goes to hear the Bible taught, to participate in the Lord’s Supper and baptism, and, in some cases, to experience church discipline.

Hunsberger calls the second view “Contemporary Variation.” He believes that while the church in North America is not far removed from viewing church as “a place where certain things happen,” a more accurate description of the way many people view the church today would be as “a

vendor of religious goods and services.” From this perspective, members are viewed more as customers for whom the religious goods and services are produced. Churchgoers expect the church to provide a wide range of religious services such as great worship music, children’s programs, small groups, parenting seminars, and so on.

One of the major problems with both of these first two views is that the church is seen as an institution that exists for the benefit of its members.

The third view of the nature of the church is identified as the “Missionary Vision,” or what Hungerberger more often refers to as a body of people *sent* on a mission. Central to this view is understanding the church as a people *called and sent* by God to participate in his mission for the world. The church still gathers together, but the difference is that we don’t gather for our own sake, but instead for the sake of others, or better yet, for the sake of God’s mission. We come together as a collective body of believers to be equipped through prayer, worship, and study in order to be *sent* out into the world. The church is to be a gathered *and* scattered people.

The church is the bearer to all the nations of a gospel that announces the kingdom, the reign, and the sovereignty of God. . . . It is not meant to call men and women out of the world into a safe religious enclave but to call them out *in order to send them back as agents of God’s kingship*.⁵

Why This All Matters

To drive home the importance of understanding the church as a collection of missionaries, or “sent agents,” consider the concept of cultural distance,⁶ a tool designed to assess how far a person or people group is from a meaningful engagement with the gospel. Look at the following scale:

m0 m1 m2 m3 m4
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Each numeral with the prefix *m* indicates a significant cultural barrier to the meaningful communication of the gospel.⁷ Barriers include such things as language, race, history, worldview, traditions, beliefs, political affiliation, and so on.

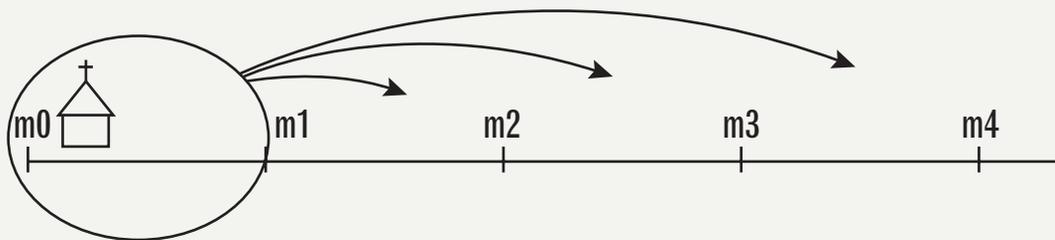
In *The Forgotten Ways*, author Alan Hirsch offers a description of how each section of the scale might look in a local church context, assuming that the church “stands” at the m0 on the above scale:

- m0–m1 Those with some concept of Christianity who also speak the same language, have similar interests, most likely share the same nationality, and are from a similar class grouping as you or your church. Most of your friends would probably fit into this bracket.
- m1–m2 Here we would include the average non-Christian in our context: A person who has little real awareness of, or interest in, Christianity and is somewhat suspicious of the church. This category might also include those previously offended by a bad experience with church or Christians. Just go to the average local pub/bar or nightclub to encounter these people.

m2–m3 People in this group have absolutely no idea about Christianity. Or they might be part of some fringy subculture or an ethnic group with different religious impulses. This category might also include people marginalized by Christianity – e.g. the gay community. But m2–m3ers are also likely to be described as people actively antagonistic toward Christianity as they understand it.

m3–m4 This group might be inhabited by ethnic and religious groupings with a bad history of the church – e.g., Muslims or Jews. The fact that they are in the West might reduce some of the distance, but just about everything else gets in the way of a meaningful dialogue. They are highly resistant to the gospel.⁸

The reason this discussion is important for the missional conversation is because the church in the U.S. operates *almost exclusively* in the sphere of m0–m1, as shown in the following illustration.



The attractional approach to church is *generally* effective at connecting with those in the m0–m1 realm. However, there are two very significant problems with this approach. First, the population in the U.S. is increasingly defined by the descriptions of those in the m1 to m4 categories. More and more people find themselves further away from the influence of the church.

Second, the attractional posture of most churches requires those outside the reach of the church to do the crosscultural work to find Jesus. In other words, we are asking those who are far away from God to become like missionaries and cross over the cultural barriers to come to us. But it is the church that comprises the missionary people of God. *We* are the ones who are sent!



Being Sent

1. How would you describe the difference between *sending* and *being sent*?
2. What thoughts do you have about the missionary nature of God?
3. Do you find Hunsberger's three views of the church helpful? Why? Which of the views best describes your perspective of the church?
4. What thoughts do you have on the church being both called *and sent*, or *gathered and scattered*?
5. What thoughts do you have on the concept of cultural distance? How does this help you understand the importance of the missionary nature of the church?
6. How does this lesson influence the way you think about your own life?
7. What questions do you have about this lesson? How does this lesson challenge or convict you?



Seeing and Responding to God's Missional Work

1. Identify at least two people groups or geographical locations in your city or neighborhood to which God is looking to “send” someone.

2. List areas in your life that may need to change for you to be able to say “Here am I. Send me!” What is the first step you will take to overcome each hindrance?

How might you respond to these same questions from the perspective of your church?

1. Identify at least two people groups or geographical locations in your city to which God is looking to “send” your church.

2. List areas in the life of your church that may need to change for the church to be able to say “Here are we. Send us!” What is the first step your church might take to overcome each hindrance?