

Into All the World

Participating in God's Mission

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Meet the Writer

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Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.



To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

Understanding God's Plan

Scripture

Revelation 7:9–12; Galatians 5:22–25

Main Idea

The Bible is the story of our God who sends. God's desire to be with all people begins with the sending of Abraham in Genesis 12:1–4a. As Christians, this sending nature peaks with God's sending of Jesus: "God sent Jesus, and Jesus sends us" sums up what we believe.

Teaching Points

This session invites participants to consider:

1. What it means to be the people of God.
2. To whom the people of God are sent.
3. The purposes for which the people of God are sent.

Resources Needed

Bibles
Participant's books
Hymnals with the hymn "We Are Your People"
Newsprint
Recent newspapers
Scissors
Tape
Colored plastic wrap

Leader Prep

This session may challenge some participants, as its central theme runs counter to much of contemporary North American Christian understanding. The consumer mentality prevalent in our culture has led many to believe that the church (or pastor) is "for them" and if a particular church is unsatisfying, another will do. This easily translates into believing "God is here for me," which is true, but God's presence with us also comes with obligations.

“So shall you be my people, and I will be your God” (Jeremiah 11:4) contains an expectation on God’s part of the kind of people, a sent people, that we will be.

Reformed Christians do not face this expectation fearfully but faithfully. We do not serve God to earn God’s love. Rather, because we trust God’s love for us, we can serve.

In John 17:18 we read Jesus’ words “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” This is the expectation that God has for us, that as the Son was sent on our behalf, we who have accepted him in our lives are sent on behalf of the world.

Imagine the church as an airport. For those who see church as a landing strip, it is a place of comfort—to see friends, to get spiritual rest after a full week. But to be sent means also seeing the church as a runway, launching us to meet new people and hear new stories. Such adventures can include excitement and discomfort.

If it were simply about us and our desires, the choice would be simple: we would do what we wanted to do. It is not our mission, however, but God’s, and we have been invited to take part. In an age of declining church attendance, we are thankful for those who worship weekly and contribute through financial gifts and participation in the congregation. But we cannot be so thankful that we neglect the obligation and opportunity that come with being sent by God for God’s purpose.

Consider inviting an accompanist to lead the singing of the hymn in Gather. Also for Gather, write “Prayer Clippings” at the top of a posted sheet of newsprint.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Sing or read together the first stanza of the hymn “We Are Your People.”
- Our faith calls us to pray for the world. Distribute news sections of recent newspapers. Have each participant cut out a headline or image regarding people in need of love or assistance. Post the clippings on the prepared sheet of newsprint.
- Lead the group in an opening prayer that includes the needs of the people whose stories are posted.

- Explain that group members are invited to bring with them each week a news headline or image that depicts people in need of love or assistance. Each session will begin with an opportunity to pray for the people in the headlines and images.

Head

- Dr. Dawson and Rev. Haddox write that it is “God’s intention that redemptive blessing be brought to all nations or peoples.”
Ask: What stories from the Bible speak to that divine intention? In what ways did Jesus exemplify or incarnate this “redemptive blessing” for all peoples?
- Dr. Dawson and Rev. Haddox write, “God’s plan from the beginning was for his image bearers to fill the whole earth (not just the garden!) with God’s own character, glory, and wholeness.” *Ask: In what ways does this statement confirm your belief about being created in God’s image? In your experience, who has faithfully borne God’s character, glory, and wholeness to the world?*
- Dr. Dawson and Rev. Haddox write, “If we could ‘zoom out’ to the fulfilment of this blessing and see what God had in mind, we would be completely overwhelmed by the beautiful reality of the diverse peoples of the world perfectly reflecting God’s image to one another and back to God in worship.”
Ask: What are the challenges and blessings presented by diversity? How might we live into the God-given gift that diversity is?

Heart

- Dr. Dawson and Rev. Haddox write, “The Bible has plenty to say about God’s plan for the world, and in God’s plan we see an invitation to participate with God in that mission.”
Ask: What is the difference between asking, “What is God’s plan for my life?” and “What is God’s plan for the world, and what is my part in God’s plan?”
- Read Revelation 7:9–12. *Ask: What would it mean to you that we stand with “a great multitude” through the power of the Holy Spirit? How does that change your understanding of church? Of worship? Of prayer? Of mission?*

- None of us is perfect. Abraham had infirmities of age, uneven faith, and questionable scruples. But God sent him. Ask: *Where in your life do you need to grow? How might God use your growing edge to fulfill God's plan for the world?*

Hands

- Explain that God called Abraham to be a blessing. Ask: *How have you recognized God's sending you to be a blessing? What barriers have you faced in responding to God's call? What fears have you faced? How has God gifted you to be a light to the nations?*
- Read Galatians 5:22–25. Ask: *Of the gifts of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—which do others identify with you? How have you used your gifts to be a blessing to others? How might you bless people who are different from you?*
- John Calvin compares the Bible to a pair of spectacles that allow us to properly interpret the world. Distribute sheets of colored plastic wrap, and have participants look through the plastic wrap like a pair of spectacles. Ask: *How do things look through the plastic?*
- Have participants ball up the plastic wrap and then flatten it. Have them look through the crinkles of the plastic wrap. Ask: *How do things look now? What does it mean to “look through” Scripture?*
- Encourage participants to wear biblical spectacles, to see people sent to them, and to recognize when they are being sent to others. Ask: *How would living life be different with these spectacles than living life without them?*

Depart

- Invite each participant to say one thing for which he or she is thankful from this time together.
- Offer a closing prayer thanking God for new understandings of Scripture and asking for the courage to go where sent, whether to family, friend, or stranger.
- Remind participants to bring newspaper clippings of people in need of love and assistance to the next session.

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Understanding God's Plan

Scripture

Genesis 12:1–4 God calls and sends Abraham and Sarah.

Revelation 7:9–12 Multitudes from every nation praise God in salvation. From Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, God is in the business of sending and being sent on a mission of redemption for all peoples. The Bible is God's missionary journal.

Prayer

God of all the earth, we praise you, for your sovereign love reigns over all the peoples of the world! In your great love and power, you have been the One who sends grace and redemption into our broken world. As we embark on this study about participating in your mission, give us faith and understanding of your mission in the world. Shape our hearts and lives for your mission that we might participate with you in the work of bringing healing and redemption to all the peoples of the earth. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen.

Introduction

So often we hear young people in the church asking, “What is God's plan for my life?” It is wonderful to see them seeking after what God wants them to do or be. Yet in searching Scripture, they will find no answer to that question. In fact, it seems they have been asking the wrong question! The question ought to be “What is God's plan for the world, and what is my part in God's plan?” The Bible has plenty to say about God's plan for the world, and in God's plan we see an invitation to participate with God in that mission. When we really understand God's plan, we can begin to answer the question about what God wants us to do or be in our individual lives.

In our North American context that is so overwhelmingly focused on fulfilling personal desires, it is very easy to slide into a “God's will for me” pattern of faith. We attend a church we can get something out of. We participate in small-group studies that help us grow in

faith. We pray God to “bless and keep us from all harm.” We even learn to read our Bibles as if we were the primary recipients of God’s Word, reading for our own personal encouragement. We live our life of faith in terms of what it gives to us.

We must begin our study of God’s mission by recognizing it is indeed God’s mission and not ours! With this focus in mind, we will discover that the Bible is not primarily a personal discipleship tool but a record of God’s missionary activity in the world. John Stott has said, “We need to become global Christians with a global vision, for we have a global God.”¹ We worship and serve a God who is sovereign over all the earth and whose plan includes the redemption of all the peoples of the earth. When we live for this larger global vision, we are most alive to what God has in mind for us individually and as the church.

God’s Intent

From the beginning, God’s intent was to have a good, blessed creation to relate to in love. God created the earth and all that is in it and created humankind in “the image of God” (Genesis 1:27). And God blessed the humans and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28a). If we could “zoom out” to the fulfillment of this blessing and see what God had in mind, we would be completely overwhelmed by the beautiful reality of the diverse peoples of the world perfectly reflecting God’s image to one another and back to God in worship. The colors and sounds of the diverse cultures, the life-giving relationships between people, and the resounding unity of worship would be awesome to behold. God’s plan from the beginning was for his image bearers to fill the whole earth (not just the garden!) with God’s own character, glory, and wholeness.

From the beginning, God’s intent was to have a good, blessed creation to relate to in love.

As we imagine this global shalom, this unity within our diversity as well as perfect relationships and worship, we might jump to the vision of the worship scene in God’s throne room given to John. We envision the “great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Revelation 7:9).

1. John R. W. Stott, “The Living God Is a Missionary God,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, 4th ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), p. 9.

Dressed in white robes they all cry out together in worship (v. 10), experience the shelter of God's protection from all harm (v. 16) and the provision of life-giving water from the Lamb (v. 17). John was given this revelation of the final fulfillment of God's mission, when all peoples would gather peacefully in jubilant worship and a life of wholeness in the presence of God.

Of course, this has not happened. While humanity has multiplied, filled the earth, and diversified into various cultures, we have not done so with God's image perfectly reflected in our relationships. Because of the power of the evil one to tempt and lure us away from our created potential, we have fallen under the curse of sin and death. We can no longer relate to one another or to God with the fully intended blessing of God's image in us. Rather, we experience pain and suffering, hard labor and adversity, and finally death (Genesis 3:14–19).

However, this curse of sin and death cannot thwart God's plan to bless all the peoples of the earth. Rather than let the man and woman hide in shame, God goes on a mission journey and enters the garden personally. God calls out, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9), seeking to restore the relationship with them. Before sending them out of the garden, in a great act of sacrificial mercy God makes clothing of animal skins for Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:21).

Our God is a missionary God, sent into God's own creation. By God's sent-ness, we can say that God is indeed missionary in nature. After all, the word *mission* is derived from the Latin *missio*, which means "to send." In Genesis, we witness God's intention to be sent. This is God's mission, the *missio Dei*.

God's Plan for All Nations

When all the peoples of the earth gather at Babel in protest of God's mandate that they fill the whole earth, God comes down to see the tower and thwart their plans by confusing the languages of the people (Genesis 11). In an act of judgment and mercy, God causes the people to diversify and spread out over the face of the whole earth.

It would seem from a human standpoint that this judgment of confusing the languages of the people makes mission much harder. Doesn't it complicate God's work that now there are thousands of different languages and cultures? Wycliffe Bible Translators has identified 6,900 languages currently spoken in the world, of which almost 2,100 have no access to Scripture.² Our commission to "make

2. wycliffe.org/About/Statistics.aspx

disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) becomes very complex because of the diversity of cultures and languages in the world.

Yet God’s merciful wisdom put a stop to the self-destructive uniformity of the people at Babel. And it was apparently God’s design for the people to develop different languages and cultures, so no one human expression can adequately reflect God’s image. If people had obediently spread out over the whole earth, the peoples would have naturally developed diverse languages and cultures over time. The creation of culture is part of God’s plan, to bring about human diversity around the whole earth.

Throughout the Scriptures, it is clearly God’s intention that redemptive blessing be brought to all nations or peoples. In the

covenant call of Abraham, we see God’s desire that through Abraham’s seed “all the families on the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). In the exodus, we see God’s call to Israel to be a “priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6a) among the Gentiles. In the conquest, we see the nations recognizing God’s sovereign power over all other nations, as in Rahab’s confession of faith (Joshua 2:9–11). In the period of the judges, we see people like the Moabite woman Ruth coming into the redemptive blessing (Ruth 1:16). It was King David who sought for God’s name to be famous in all the earth (1 Samuel 16:46) and who wrote psalms declaring God’s plan for all peoples (Psalm 67 and many others). Under King Solomon, the temple was dedicated as a place for foreigners to pray (1 Kings 8:41–43). In the exile, God’s people had a witness among the nations; consider Daniel’s life and testimony (Daniel 6:25). Even before Jesus gave the Great Commission, God’s plan was for all nations.

Throughout the Scriptures, it is clearly God’s intention that redemptive blessing be brought to all nations or peoples.

The biblical terms here are *gôyim* in Hebrew and *ethnē* in Greek, both of which have been translated as “Gentiles,” “peoples,” or “nations.” To best understand God’s plan for the world, we must realize the plan includes all the *gôyim*; each distinct *ethnē* in the world is created, loved, and sought by God. God’s plan for the nations includes a plan for a glorious display of diversity, unified by the redemptive love of Jesus Christ and drawn together by the One Spirit.

The Mission of God

What is God's plan for all the nations, now separated from God by sin and death and from one another by language, culture, and geography? When we "turn the page" to chapter 12 in Genesis, we can find the "good news" of God's plan in the call of Abraham: "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham saying, 'All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you'" (Galatians 3:8). The good news is that God's plan to redeem all peoples is to work through the blessing and covenant relationship with one particular people, Abraham's descendants.

In the covenant with Abraham, we see God's mission take an exciting shape as God clearly intends to send Abraham on a mission among the nations. The call to "go and leave" to "be a blessing," for in Abraham "all the families on the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:1–3) is clearly a missionary calling. Abraham has to place his faith and trust in God to lead him and bless him in this covenant relationship. Abraham is to go on a journey among other nations with the intention of bestowing blessing on them.

It is astounding to think that something as important as the salvation of all peoples was given as a mission to one person. Abraham, old in years, without an heir, and largely inconsistent in his faithfulness to God, is the primary plan God has for bringing blessing to all the families of the earth. This is how God works—through unlikely, seemingly powerless people to demonstrate God's great love and power to bless. This call for Abraham was much more than a task to fulfill or a command to obey. It was a covenant made with God in the form of a promise. The emphasis is on what God will do through Abraham, not what Abraham would actually do.

Through the Bible, we see God's redemptive work throughout history to bless and keep covenant with Abraham's descendants, despite their inability to keep God's laws. Even though Israel was not able to keep the law or to live fully into the promise to be a blessing to all the families of the earth, God did not lose faith in them. It was through Abraham's line that God would send a Son, to reveal by Jesus' life, death, and resurrection the power of God's promise to save us from death and make us ready for a mission to the nations (Matthew 28:19–20).

Now we, who are Abraham's descendants by faith and "heirs according to this promise" (Galatians 3:29), through faith in Christ, are brought into the blessing of covenant relationship with

God. Through us, God intends to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). God’s plan is for the salvation to come to all nations, tribes, tongues, and languages (Revelation 7:9), and God intends to bring this about by God’s power at work in the church.

God’s plan is for the salvation to come to all nations, tribes, tongues, and languages (Revelation 7:9).

Spiritual Practice

Read Revelation 7:9–12 aloud, and envision the great multitude in their diverse array of languages and cultures. Use the words of praise in Revelation 7 to worship God for God’s great love and purpose to bring all peoples together in worship of Jesus Christ.

Questions for Reflection

Have you ever considered Abraham’s call a missionary call? Why or why not?

How does this missionary view of Abraham’s call shape your understanding of God’s plan?

Consider and discuss the importance of seeing Abraham’s call as a covenant promise rather than a simple command.

Have you asked God to reveal God’s plan for your life? How does this understanding of God’s plan shape your own life and ministry?