

THE MISSIONARY CALL

By Alan Patterson (January 22, 2017)

Introduction: The missionary call is one of the most discussed and yet most misunderstood elements of missionary work.

- What do men say about the missionary call?
- What does the Bible say about the missionary call?
- What are some common questions about the missionary call?
- What are some common hindrances to obeying God's call?
- If there is such a thing as the missionary call, why is it important?
- How do you get it?

What do men say about the missionary call?

- “There is no biblical definition of a missionary call; some are surprised, in addition, that no biblical passage explains the necessary components of one.” (*The Missionary Call*¹, by M. David Sills, 55)
- “The missionary call has been understood in a variety of ways through the centuries, and sometimes misunderstood. Extrabiblical definitions of the missionary call have created much confusion. Missiologist J. Herbert Kane goes so far as to say that ‘The term ‘missionary call’ should never have been coined. It is not scriptural and therefore can be harmful.’ Yet, it has been at the forefront of the church for centuries while being understood in various ways.” (*TMC*, 61)
- “A sovereign act of God in the life of a person to bring that person to a point of decision to serve God in a missionary capacity.” -- in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*
- “The missionary call is the Great Commission, plus the assurance in your heart, no matter how it comes, that God wants you to go as His witness to those who do not know the Saviour.” Harold Cook, *An Introduction to Christian Missions*
- Samuel Zwemer, “The effectual call is ‘The work of God’s Spirit, whereby convincing us of the sin and misery of the non-Christian world, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ’s command and loving purpose to save mankind, He so renews our wills that we offer ourselves unreservedly for His service wherever His providence may send us.’” Quoted in Peters’ *A Biblical Theology of Missions*, p. 285.
- “The missionary call includes an awareness of the needs of a lost world, the commands of Christ, a concern for the lost, a radical commitment to God, your church’s affirmation, blessing and commissioning, a passionate desire, the Spirit’s gifting, and an indescribable yearning that motivates beyond all understanding.” (*TMC*, 30)
- “What we can say for sure is that, at the very least, God calls every Christian to live with a missionary heart.” (*TMC*, 55)
- Thomas Hale: “God’s call doesn’t register in a vacuum; only a person who is committed to doing God’s will can receive a call.” (quoted in *TMC*, p. 26)

¹ Hereafter designated as *TMC*.

- Testimonies
 - ✓ My personal testimony
 - ✓ Jan’s testimony (missions’ conference – often being influenced by other missionaries)
 - ✓ Ed Freeman
 - ✓ Mark Batory
 - ✓ John Dreisbach (older brother planning to go and killed by lightning strike and felt should take brother’s place)
 - ✓ Anne Driesbach – knew from when a little girl around 6 or so
 - ✓ Barbara Threlfall (knew from time 4 years old – told this to Jan)
 - ✓ More about this in the next point as we look at some other examples.

- What it is not.
 1. *The call to be a disciple* – all are called to that.
 2. *A purely subjective sense and a strong desire to go.* A necessary part of the call but not all of it. More about this later.
 3. *A Damascus road or Macedonian call experience* – could be this but I know of no current missionary who had such an experience.
 4. *An awareness of need* – needs are great everywhere and it is sometimes difficult to determine which need is greatest (Illustrate – need greater in China or Morocco; more unsaved in China but percentage of unsaved is MUCH higher in Morocco; OW says Muslim is 99.85%; .1% Christian)
 5. *The same for everyone.*
 - a. Illustrate: Paul
 1. Had personal call directly from God.
 2. Had church confirm it in Acts 13.
 - b. Illustrate: Timothy
 1. Paul strongly urged him ([Acts 16:3](#), “*Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.*”)
 2. Others confirmed it with prophetic statements ([1 Tim. 4:14](#), “*Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery.*”)

First, what was the “prophetic message”? It referred to some prophetic indication affirming Timothy’s call. It could have taken the form of a promise, an exhortation, or a prayer. The incident of Acts 13:1–3 provides illustration of such a message. There the Holy Spirit directed that Paul and Barnabas be set aside for special service. The church instantly responded with obedience. Perhaps a similar statement about Timothy’s potential usefulness had been spoken about him.²

Paul’s language in v. 14 is more an apt description of a special service that recognized and affirmed Timothy’s gift. Paul’s statements in 2 Tim 1:6–7, 14

² Lea, T. D., & Griffin, H. P. (1992). *1, 2 Timothy, Titus* (Vol. 34, p. 139). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

made clear that the Holy Spirit, not merely a group of elders, was the source of his gift. The affirmation Timothy received through “laying on hands” allowed him the freedom to minister with greater effectiveness among the Ephesians.³

In all probability, this refers to what had happened at Lystra on Paul’s second missionary journey. It was then that Timothy by the operation of the Holy Spirit had been amply endowed with this gift. Of this and of the character of his task he had been made aware *through* (διὰ) *prophetic utterance* of inspired bystanders⁴

- c. Illustrate: Thomas Hale -- Two days after saved read a pamphlet describing opening of Christian medical work in Nepal.
 - d. Illustrate: David Livingstone – planning to go to China, but ended up in Africa.
 - e. Illustrate: William Carey – “My attention to missions was first awakened after I was in Moulton, by reading the *Last Voyage of Captain Cook*.” Studied about the needs of the world and made a globe.
 - f. Illustrate: John Paton – read Captain Cook’s book.
 - g. Illustrate: For most it is a gradually deepening and increasing conviction of God’s plan to send him/her to a particular people or at least to a particular location. It is a desire. It is also the sense that not going would be disobedience. Thomas Hale: “God’s call doesn’t register in a vacuum; only a person who is committed to doing God’s will can receive a call.” (quoted in *TMC*, p. 26)
6. *An emotional response to a message*. The call will likely include this and may begin with this but it is more than this.
 7. *A sense of guilt and responsibility*, though we ought to feel an obligation to the world – Paul calls it a debt in *Romans 1:14 -- I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise. 15 So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also.*
- My suggested definition: **A personal desire and conviction, based on God’s peace in the heart, a sense of the need and one’s fitness for meeting the need, and on the confirmation of mature believers, that one should serve a particular people or in a particular location in a missionary capacity.**

What does the Bible say about the missionary call?

- The term “missionary” does not occur in the Bible! But, the terms send and call are used often. The term “missionary” comes from the Latin word mission which means to send.
- Both terms, send and call – suggest divine initiative, not personal choice. Personal choice comes in with obedience to God’s sending and God’s calling.
- The divine initiative implies God’s choice, and it is incontestably clear that God does not send everyone into special missionary service (more on this later as we look at God’s call of OT prophets and His calling of men into

³ Lea, T. D., & Griffin, H. P. (1992). *1, 2 Timothy, Titus* (Vol. 34, p. 139). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁴ Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953–2001). *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles* (Vol. 4, p. 159). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

- There is evidence that God calls people to specific “work” (ministry).
Acts 13:2, “While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work [to which I have called them.”
- The believer’s responsibility is to fulfill/accomplish that work. *Acts 14:26*, “and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled [for].”
- Men in the OT were especially called/sent into the prophetic ministry.
 - **Samuel** (1 Samuel 1-3, note especially 2:11, 18-21, 26; 3:19-20)
 - **Elisha** (1 Kings 19:16-21)
 - **Isaiah** (Isaiah 6:1-13)
 - **Jeremiah** (Jeremiah 1:4-10)
 - **Ezekiel** (Ezekiel 1-3)
 - “In some points, the calls of the vocational prophets of the Old Testament sharply contrast with the call of the man to the Christian ministry. The prophets received their commissions by direct revelation involving verbal, visual, and tactile contact with God. None of the vocational prophets are used specifically in the New Testament as examples of the call to the ministry, though they are cited as a group as examples of faith for all Christians to follow (Hebrews 11:32-34). These Old Testament heroes were called to not only preach but to write revelation and foretell the future. Their ministries were sometimes international in nature and tended to be dominated by warnings of judgment rather than good news.
 - On the other hand, they serve as helpful examples (II Timothy 3:16-17) of what may be expected in a call to the ministry since the New Testament provides mainly precepts rather than examples on this issue. In several cases, they anticipate the New Testament idea of the power or early spiritual influence to incline a boy to the ministry. They underscore the importance of humility as a prerequisite for God’s call and lend weight to the importance of exposure to the glory of God which renders a soul willing to obey God’s commission to service. **The calls of these prophets emphasize that a man called to the ministry must see it as a call to preach only the Word of God, with courage in difficulty, faithfulness in spite of unresponsiveness, and a great sense of personal responsibility. The prophets were men of the Word, and so must men of God be today.”** (Stephen J. Hankins, *A New Testament Theology of the Call of the Christian Ministry: Analysis of Its subjective and Objective Elements*, p. 97)
- NT
 - *1 Cor. 7:20*, “Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called.”
 - 4x **K** refers to a call to ministry
 1. Paul was *called* by God to be an apostle (Romans 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1).
 2. The Holy Spirit *called* Paul and Barnabas to a specific missionary service (Acts 13:2).
 3. Paul and his coworkers were *called* by God to take the gospel to Macedonia (16:9-10).
 - The fact that we are to pray for God to *cast out* laborers into the harvest (Mat. 9:36) indicates that God moves on hearts in a definite way that almost compels them to go. The other implication is that not every believer is thrust out in this way. This is a special calling, so to speak. “Such laborers as the Lord of the harvest does put forth,

we may endeavor, with his blessing, to train for the better performance of their work (see on 10:1); but they must be his laborers, not ours, called into his work, and urged to the performance of it, by himself.” (Broadus)

- The concept of being sent as a preacher indicates a special impetus and selection by the Lord (Rom. 10:14-15).
- Paul’s exhortation to the Ephesian elders indicates that God (not simply the church) *places* (🎵) men in the ministry. This is a personal issue – not every man is placed by the Holy Spirit as an elder. A similar point can be made from the fact that God gives gifted men to the church.

Acts 20:28, “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.”

Eph. 4:11, “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers.”

- Summary: “The record of the New Testament shows that God takes great initiative in directing certain men into His special service. This initiative is described in considerable detail in the New Testament documents. The call to the ministry is described in a limited sense by the term **K**. It is also described as *a sending* by God, as *an act of the Holy Spirit*, and as the process of *God’s giving a gift to the church* in the person of the man that is called. In each point of description, the initiative God takes in the process should be observed. The call of the ministry is not simply a human choice. It is divinely initiated.” (Hankins, p. 126).

“Over and over the New Testament provides examples of God’s call of men into the ministry. His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ is no exception. The call narratives of members of the twelve and Paul provided an impressive accumulation of evidence that when God wants a man in the ministry He will seek that man and extend the call through a variety of means.” (Hankins, 166)

What are some common questions about the missionary call?

- Does the wife also need a call?

“When a couple goes to the mission field without a common missionary calling, one spouse often goes out of guilt, a desire to go along to get along, or because ‘I don’t want to be the one who keeps our family from following God’s will.’ When the emotional honeymoon of the tourist stage wears off and culture shock begins to take over, even the deepest sense of call begins to be questioned and reexamined. The missionary without the call is already mentally packing their bags. When the ‘called’ spouse begins to express the inevitable doubt, frustration, depression, and introspection, the spouse who does not share the missionary call will not be pulling up, but rather pulling down. Jesus wisely sent the disciples out in pairs, not only for accountability and team synergism, but also for encouragement.” (TMC, 122-123)

- Do single women need a call?

- Some evidence that God places women in special service: Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah, Anna, and Philip’s daughters were prophetesses.
- Some of Paul’s designated coworkers were women: Priscilla, Euodias and Syntyche (Paul says they “strove together” with him in the gospel – Phil. 4:3).

- Does one have to think his call is to only one place for a lifetime?
 - No, many missionaries have changed locations. For example, consider Paul's life.
 - "Missionaries believe that God leads them to their fields of service. However, they must keep in mind that He can, and often does, lead them to subsequent fields of service during their career.... His call is for life, but the ways and places where we fulfill it and live it out will change throughout our lives as He guides." (TMC, 100, 101)
- Does every mission agency require that the missionary have a call?
 - "Agencies like the IMB have found through experience with thousands of missionaries that the requirement of a missionary call is one of the keys to missionaries staying on the field when times get tough. Articulating a missionary call, defending it before family and churches, and persevering through a long appointment process results in a profound sense of call that will sustain you through the difficult days of language study, international living, and proclaiming Christ in a place where most of the people do not want you to be." (TMC, 132-133).
 - GFA basically does require this. Dr. Rupp asked me specifically about it. We do not always phrase it that way but we ask probing questions.

What are some common hindrances to obeying the missionary call?

- **Fear of failure**
- **Complaints of family and friends.** Not many will encourage it – family will often discourage, even Christian family (Isobel Kuhn's mother, head of ladies' missionary, but said "over my dead body will she go to China).
- **Fear of poor living conditions**
- **Fear of danger**
- **Offers to do work in the states.** (Contrast David Brainerd who was offered large pastorates in Boston area and New York)
- **Fear or dislike of deputation.** Requires persevering through deputation.
- **Lack of sticking with it.**
- **Family** -- Begin to have children and those responsibilities distract from the calling.
- **Comfortable in job and home**
- In a nutshell – it is hard to be a missionary. Think again of Paul's life.
- Hale – "Biggest hindrance to the missionary task is **self**. Self that refuses to die, to sacrifice, to give, to go."

If there is such a thing as the missionary call, why is it important?

- Because without it people do not overcome the hindrances. I usually ask for commitment based on scale of 1-10.
- It gives peace that you are in the will of God.
- It gives strength to persevere in difficult times.
- It gives stability in difficult times.

How do you know you have it? (PCC – personal and corporate and circumstances)

- A. Personal sense of leading. Personal sense of preparedness and giftedness for that ministry. A subjective unease to do anything else.
 - 1. “The evidence of the New Testament indicates that the presence of spiritual desire growing into constraint, the leadership of the Holy Spirit, and peace wrought by the Spirit of God as a guiding factor in decision making do combine to effect a real, internal call to the Christian ministry that will be perceived by a man of God that God wished to place in the ministry.” (Hankins, 236)
 - 2. “The most perplexing part of the call to the ministry is the subjective dimension of it, namely, what goes on in the heart of the man who is called. While the precise natures of every man’s experience may not be identical, the accumulation of the evidence in the New Testament suggests that an eventual, intuitive certainty that a man is called of God is normative for men being called into the ministry.” (Hankins, 275)
- B. Corporate confirmation by other believers, particularly the leadership of the home church.
 - 1. Note: If you do not have the confirmation of other mature Christians, then wait. should have the confirmation from a number of wiser, older, mature Christians.
 - 2. “My contention is that God works through the man himself and through the voice of the church. It is the same Spirit operating in both; and when there is agreement and consensus of opinion you are right in assuming that it is a call from God.” (Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, p. 114).
- C. Circumstances that allow it.
 - 1. E.g., no debt, adequate health, open door or way to enter the country)
 - 2. Circumstances include meeting the qualifications for ministry.

Conclusion:

- “Let us not hurry until the call has matured. Too many are running, not necessarily without a call of God, but without a matured call of God. It is wise to observe that many obstacles are coming in the way of an outgoing missionary. They may be viewed as frustrations and make us unhappy and warp our personalities. They should be viewed as divine opportunities for saturation and maturation and thus enrich our lives.” (George Peters in *A Biblical Theology of Missions*, p. 285.
- “It amazes me that some see God having to force people to live the greatest life imaginable.” (TMC, 27)
- **Jim Elliot – “Wherever you are, be all there.”**