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UNDERSTANDING THE MISSIONARY CALL

“NOW THAT GOD HAS called you to missions . . .” Wait a minute! What exactly does “the missionary call” mean? The vast majority of articles and books that address the missionary call begin with an assumption that you know you have received a call and seek to help you take the next step. Many sermons, missions books, and youth group challenges use the term frequently, but without explaining it. To make matters worse, they all seem to have widely differing understandings of what “the call” actually is. The Bible speaks of a call to salvation, calls to serve the Lord, and calls to some specific service. The Bible also gives examples of specific guidance in understanding where and when people are to express their calling, but many confuse this guidance with the call itself. How then should we understand the missionary call?

Many missionaries can testify that they knew when the Lord saved them that it was for some particular service. I was not sure what the Lord would do with my life when He saved me, but I clearly

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remember thinking that I had wasted many years of my life. I wanted the rest of them to count in a sacrificial way for Christ's glory and the advance of His kingdom. I considered continuing as a businessman, being as faithful in the local church as possible, and serving in my free time. However, mission trips began to change my mind and my heart. I knew that a commitment to missions could move my family and me around the world and shatter our comfort zone, but I also knew that God had placed a burden for the nations in my heart. Nothing would do for me but totally sold-out, radical commitment. I knew we had to follow His call to missions.

Many future missionaries were faithfully serving God as deacons, Sunday school teachers, and lay leaders in church positions when God surprised them with a call to missions. Some missionaries had been in thriving pastorates or tenured seminary careers when God called them. Certainly, God has called every Christian to salvation, holiness, discipleship, and service. This is the expected and natural progression in the Christian life. Indeed, it is an encouraging sign of development when the question "Is God calling me to missions?" begins to frequent a Christian's quiet times. Spiritual growth is evident because a sincere desire to glorify God and deny self is beginning to develop. But when considering service in another country or among people of another culture, we begin to ask questions about the missionary call.

Some Christians genuinely wrestle with the missionary call, but come to understand that God is calling them to stay and serve in their current location. For others, this call to go will not go away. They see it written between the lines as they read their Bibles. The question of the missionary call is on their mind when they watch the news or when they examine their career paths. They wonder whether they will finally get to the top and realize that they leaned the ladder against the wrong wall. They ask questions like, "Should I go into missions? Who should go? Is God calling me? What is the missionary call?" Yet, it does not have to be as mysterious as many have made it.

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THE NEED

Some sincere, tenderhearted believers mistakenly assume that a burden for the need is the missionary call. God brings an awareness of the needs in the world to many Christians, but the need is not the call. If you go to the mission field basing your call on the need, you may come to see that the need was not as great as you once thought and begin to wonder why you have come, or why you have stayed. Some missionaries depart with a “calling” based on the need, arrive on the field, and find that there are numerous missionaries and agencies already seeking to meet the need. Perhaps when the need that so motivated you is met, the question of whether to *remain* will quickly replace the old question about whether to *go*.

Still, there are great needs and God often uses an awareness of the need to burden us to action. One-third of the planet’s population, over two billion people, has never heard the gospel.¹ And of that number, over 50,000 die daily, separated from God forever.² As has been said, one definition of a missionary is someone who never gets used to the sound of pagan footsteps on their way to a Christless eternity. The sounds of those footsteps echo in their minds and haunt their waking dreams. One should not go driven by the need alone, but God often uses the need as a starting place to awaken us to His call.

THE COMMANDS OF CHRIST

Of course, an awareness of the commands of Christ motivates every sincere Christian. Jesus commanded us to go and make disciples of the ethnic groups of the world in Matthew 28:18–20. But, aren’t we through with that by now? Haven’t we won people to Christ, trained disciples, and established churches in all the nations in the last two thousand years? We are used to thinking of this command to preach the gospel in every *nation*, as if the geopolitical entities on our world maps were what Jesus had in mind. Jesus said to make disciples in *panta ta ethne* in the original Greek version of

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the Great Commission. *Panta* is a word that means “all,” *ta* is the definite article “the,” and *ethne* is the word we translate “nations”; the word *ethnic* is obvious in it. This word shows up repeatedly in the New Testament and since our Bibles normally translate it as *nations*, many people must assume that God looks down from heaven and sees heavy black lines around large pieces of real estate on the continents of the planet. While this is an exaggeration, of course, many missions strategies and priorities do not reflect Jesus’ emphasis when He spoke in the Great Commission of ethnolinguistic groups.

Jesus gave us the command, the church as the missionary force, and the promise that He would be with us in the fulfillment of it. His Great Commission is similar to Joshua’s marching orders. After the forty years of wandering in the wilderness, God revealed to Moses he was not going into the Promised Land and told him to appoint Joshua as the next leader of Israel. Joshua’s commission was to lead the people across the Jordan into Canaan and conquer the land. In Joshua 13:1, the Lord spoke to Joshua, “You are old and advanced in years, and there remains yet very much land to possess.” God gave him the command, Israel for an army, and His promise to be with him in the fulfilling of the commission. Israel was not then and is not today a large country. With God’s command, God’s people, God’s presence, and God’s blessings, one wonders why Joshua could not have accomplished what God told him to do in the course of his lifetime. Before we judge too harshly, we should remember that we have had our commission for 2,000 years, and much of “the land” remains to be possessed.

Some might say that this is not a fair comparison and the reason that we have not finished the Great Commission is because we live in a gospel-hostile world where there are many countries to reach. Furthermore, we are few in comparison with the religions of the world. However, it is hard to imagine why we still have not reached one-third of the people in our world with the gospel. In 1896, in Atlanta, Georgia, a man was working in his laboratory

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mixing together water, flavoring, and sugar. He invented a drink that he called Coca-Cola. It cost him about \$70 to develop and market his product that first year and he only made about \$50. To be \$20 in the red in 1896 was a tough financial loss. Nonetheless, he continued to sell his product. A few years later they developed a process to bottle the drink so that people could enjoy it at home or on picnics and the popularity grew. Today, 112 years later, 94% of the people in the world recognize the Coca-Cola logo and product.³ In 112 years, we can reach the world for profit's sake, but we cannot do it for the glory of God in 2,000 years. The keen awareness of the commands of Christ to take the gospel message to the world and our failure to do so are key components of the missionary call for many. Christ's Great Commission is for the church to be involved in reaching and teaching the nations. Every believer is to pray for the nations and support the cause of missions, but not every believer is called to leave his homeland and go overseas. Some will help send and support, and others will go and tell.

A PASSIONATE DESIRE LEADING TO ACTION

This awareness of the needs and the Christian's responsibility progresses to the next step in the lives of many. When the devastating tsunami hit the shores of several Asian countries and took about 250,000 lives in 2004, virtually everyone in the world became aware of the disaster. Compassionate concern joined that awareness in the lives of countless believers and they went on mission trips, raised funds, and organized relief efforts. Likewise, many Christians are aware of the billions who have never heard the gospel and those among them who die without Christ every day. This concern is a constant burden in their lives. Like a stone in their shoe, it is ever on their minds no matter where they go or what they do. Their hearts reverberate with the cries of those who are being born into, live in, and die in darkness. They are concerned for the young girls whose parents sell them into sexual slavery to

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provide for the family. They are concerned for the millions of street children and their hopeless existence. Most of all, they are concerned for the glory of God. Their concern makes them wonder how they can live a holy life in faithfulness to God's commands if they do not live in reckless abandon and radical fulfillment of the Great Commandments and the Great Commission. Of course, not for all, but for many, the concern touches that part of their hearts where radical commitment lives.

In every church, about 20 percent of the people give 80 percent of the funds, about 20 percent of the people perform 80 percent of the work and ministry, and about 20 percent of the people cause about 80 percent of the problems—hopefully, not the same 20 percent! The good 20-percenters are the faithfully committed few. Pastors know the men and women in their churches who can always be depended on to help out in times of need. Their attitude is, “Yes, of course, Pastor, I will help. Now, what is it that you need me to do?” That should always be our attitude when we approach the Lord. It should already be a settled determination to do His perfect will, whatever it may be. Our only desire should be to know clearly what it is. Thomas Hale wrote, “God’s call doesn’t register in a vacuum; only a person who is committed to doing God’s will can receive a call.”⁴ The last question I ask myself each morning as I finish my quiet time is, “What is it that is not being done, that ought to be done, and if it were done, would result in greater glory to Christ and the advance of His Kingdom?”

The people whom God is calling to missions are the ones who have an awareness of the needs of the nations and an awareness of the commands of Christ. They are concerned and burdened for the needs that they see, and they are committed to do whatever the Lord tells them to do. Whether or not to follow Him is never in doubt. They long to make His name known and praised around the world. They are committed to living a holy life for God’s glory. They know that it will require sacrificial living for the lost peoples of the world to become committed to Christ as King. The tsunami

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caused some to change their vacation plans and others to write a check. I know of a number of people on the mission field right now who changed more than their vacation plans.

I can remember some students from when I was in seminary who would not go to chapel on “missions day” for fear that God might call them to missions. They already had their life planned out and their plan did not include missions. When I worked with young people in a local church, I remember some of them telling me that they were nervous about surrendering 100 percent to God. When I asked why, they would respond with something like, “I am afraid that if I do, then God will call me to be a missionary in Africa and I don’t want to be a missionary.” It amazes me that some see God having to force people to live the greatest life imaginable. As seminary graduation approached, a friend in the cafeteria asked me what our plans were after graduation. I told him that we were planning to be missionaries in Ecuador and that I had come to seminary to prepare myself for this service. He began to tell me how impressed he was and how challenged he was by our selfless sacrifice. I was perplexed at first until it became clear that he just did not understand. I told him that he had it all wrong. I was so excited about getting to be a missionary that for me the greatest sacrifice and hardship would be if the mission board turned us down and told us that we could not be missionaries! When God calls His child to live the life of a missionary, He gives him the desire with the calling.

In addition, the Lord gives a spiritual gift to every true believer (I Corinthians 12). However, in addition to the gift itself, I believe that each believer has a passion area for the exercise of his gift. A young man may have the gift of teaching and find great freedom and affirmation as he teaches young adults. Yet, when he has the opportunity to teach preschool children or senior adults, he finds this expression of his gifts taxing and tedious. In the same way, for instance, someone could thoroughly enjoy the evangelism opportunities of international contexts much more than going on cold calls during

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Tuesday evening outreach at church.

Psalms 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the LORD, and He will give you the desires of your heart." I think that this verse teaches at least two important truths. One is that the source of the desires in the heart of a person who is delighting himself in the Lord is God Himself. When we are delighting ourselves in Him, He places desires in our hearts that He wants to fulfill. When our hearts are right, He guides us by giving us godly desires. The second truth is that God gave us the desire because He wants to fulfill it. So, one can legitimately say that God guides us by our desires when we are delighting ourselves in Him. Of course, a person who is delighting himself in sin cannot claim this verse. Therefore, in discerning this missionary call, the question is often, "What do you desire to do?"

While a passionate desire and commitment to be a missionary is an indicator of God's guidance in that direction, a true call will have other markers. The believers in your home church should also see God's leading in your life. A passionate desire and commitment to serve overseas may be present for other reasons. Godly counsel and discernment is needed to know God's will.

CHURCH SUPPORT

In addition to the awareness, the commands, and a passionate desire and commitment, those who have a missionary call should also have the blessing of their local church. When you become a believer, you should unite with an evangelical church where you can enjoy the fellowship and counsel of that congregation. These fellow believers in your local church will recognize the gifts and calling in your life if God is calling you to missions. A pastor in Venezuela told me that his convention of churches had some concern about a couple of men who went out from their country as missionaries to Asia. The first one returned after a few months having decided that God had not called him to missions after all. After a few more months, the second young man did the same. The pastor told me that their new policy is to ask missionary can-

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didates who say God has called them to China, for instance, to work with the Chinese in Caracas for a year. If they still feel that God has called them there and their local church sees the gifts and affirms the calling, then the convention will send them. Many mission agencies have learned that if someone does not have a missions heart at home, nothing magical happens when they buckle the seat belt on the airplane. They will get off the plane the same person they were when they got on it. A missionary candidate's home church should be able to see a desire to share the gospel, an interest in internationals, a willingness to learn new languages, and an unceasing burden for the lost around the world. Yet, there is still more to the missionary call. Those with the awareness of the need and Christ's commands, a concern for the lost, and a commitment to God's will should also be overwhelmed with a desire for it.

In light of everything discussed above, we should understand the missionary call as a combination of all of these aspects: an awareness of the needs and commands, a passionate concern for the lost, a commitment to God, the Spirit's gifting, and your church's affirmation, blessing, and commissioning. In addition, one must include another essential aspect of the missionary call: an indescribable yearning that motivates beyond all understanding. Defining this yearning is virtually impossible. It is tantamount to describing how you know that you are in love. How would you explain to an eight-year-old the differences between liking someone a lot, loving someone, and being "in love"? To make the definition even more elusive, the truth is that no two calls are exactly the same.

I have traveled around the world and known many missionaries, taught many missions students, spoken at many missions conferences, and counseled many people seeking God's will for their life regarding missions. I have never heard two calls to gospel ministry that are identical or two calls to missionary service that are the same. God seems to call some to a particular kind of missions service, others to a people group, others to a region, others to a

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country, others to a city, and others to a life purpose (such as rescuing young girls from prostitution) or some combination of these. With married couples, rarely does God call both spouses at the same time and they frequently consider the missionary call because of completely different motivations. Missionary callings, like snowflakes, are each unique and when combined with others, cover the land as the waters cover the sea. Amazingly, God uses people like us to take His saving gospel message to a lost world and is pleased to save souls through our preaching.

So what is the missionary call? How are we to understand it? 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. In the rest of this book, we will examine the missionary call and try to find our place in God's plan for the world.

I believe that God has called every Christian to the task of international missions. Of course, I do not think we are all to sell the farm and go. If we all did, there would be none left to send. Romans 10:13 is a verse that we love to preach and hear preached, "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." We say, "Amen!" Yet, Paul goes on to say something just as important in 10:14–15, "But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?" Some of us are senders and some are goers. Neither is more important than the other. Neither is possible without the other. The lost cannot be born again without the gospel, and missionaries cannot go preach unless we send them. We all have a role to play in international missions. That means we all have a missionary call of some sort. What is yours?