

So-Called Missionary Call

All Scripture passages quoted from the
New American Standard Bible

CONTENTS

Introduction	4
The Calling of God	4
Shouldn't I Feel Called?	6
What About Being Called to a Specific Country?	7
The Example of Paul	8
The Applied Wisdom Approach	10
God's Desire & the Global Need	12
So What?	14
End Notes	16



Let me begin by saying outright: I don't believe in the "missionary call." Well, at least as it is classically understood as a special, unique or personal calling that an individual receives directly from the Lord as confirmation that he or she is to become a missionary.

A lot of people expect when you are a missionary that you can provide some elaborate story of how God showed you clearly and specifically that He has called you to be a

missionary. I've heard missionaries tell stories about visions or dreams they have had, or even strange circumstances where they fought with God and He won and then showed them they are supposed to feed orphans in Zimbabwe or start a basketball camp in the Philippines. One missionary writer has shared that a favorite pastime of he and his wife's is to sit around a table with missionaries and discuss how each of them received their special "call." To be sure, this provides for fascinating stories, and I don't want to argue with anyone's experience, but the question must be asked, what does the Bible actually teach on the topic of the "missionary call?"

The Calling of God

We need to begin with the Scriptures. C. Gordon Olson, who wrote the missions textbook What on Earth is God Doing, reminds us, *"How can we find out the reality of the 'missionary call'? Do we take a cross section of missionary experience? Of course not! We must go back to our sufficient authority: the Bible."*¹

We learn from the Scriptures who God is, who Christ is and what He has done for us, who we are in Him and how He wants us to act. In general, as an overarching command from Christ, we also learn that He desires for all believers to participate in the Great Commission. *"Go therefore into all the world and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded*

you.” (Matthew 28:19-20) This is God’s general call for all believers, which led missionary Hudson Taylor to boldly proclaim, “*The Great Commission is not an option to be considered, it is a command to be obeyed.*”

Outside of clear and direct commands scattered throughout the New Testament for all believers, finding anything that supports the idea of a specific, personal “missionary call” is hard to come by. Olson goes on to share the results of his study on the general term “call:”

“The major usage of the word ‘call’ in the New Testament is the call to salvation. It would seem that the Apostle Paul used the word as a comprehensive term to encompass all that pertains to our conversion to Christ: hearing the gospel, believing, and the immediate consequence of the new birth, etc. The Apostle Paul also used this word of his call to apostleship in Romans 1:1 and 1 Corinthians 1:1. But we do not find any reference to a ‘missionary call!’” 2

Walter McConnell in his April 2007 article in the Evangelical Missions Quarterly entitled “The Missionary Call: A Biblical and Practical Appraisal” provides an even more detailed report on the concept of a “call:”

“We must begin by acknowledging that the Bible never specifically mentions a call to missions. Most of the calls mentioned in scripture entreat people either to begin or to live out the Christian life, not to engage in particular forms of Christian service. The call to begin the Christian life is referred to in a variety of ways. It is termed a call to salvation (Acts 2:28-40), a call to repentance (Luke 5:32), a call to belong to, have fellowship with or share in the glory of Jesus (Rom. 1:6; 1 Cor. 19; 2 Thess. 2:14), a call to be saints (Rom. 1:7), a call to be God’s children (1 John 3:1) or a call to eternal life (1 Tim. 6:12; cf. Heb. 9:15). This most basic call is extended to encourage people to live out their Christianity. Thus, believers are informed of a call to holiness (1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thess. 4:7; 2 Tim. 1:9), a call to freedom (Gal. 5:13) and a call to live in peace (1 Cor. 7:15; Col. 3:15). These two aspects of calling—to salvation and for ethical living—are brought together in Ephesians 4:1 where Paul urges his readers ‘to live a life worthy of the calling you have received,’ and then goes on to list things that should characterize their calling. It therefore seems that all Christians are called to be saved and to work out their salvation through service and sanctification, with little said about a call to ministry.” 3

The concept of the “missionary call” as a condition for confirmation that one should be a missionary, or the lack of one as confirmation that one should not become a missionary, is scripturally unfounded. Of course, I understand this may be hard to accept because of how familiar we all are with the concept of “feeling called” whether it be in missions specifically or even to some other form of ministry.

Shouldn't I "Feel Called?"

One time when Beth & I were being interviewed by a church mission board we were asked how we "felt called" into missions. This is an interesting and common way to phrase the concept of the "missionary call." We answered as best we could that the Great Commission was our calling, irregardless of whether we "felt" called or not. To us, it was simply a matter of obedience, just like any other step in following God's Word in our lives. We shared that we are convinced from God's Word that all believers are commanded to be involved in making disciples. To be sure, how believers participate will look different depending on other practical details, such as personal interests, personality, gifts, etc.

On this topic of "feeling called" Bible scholar Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum cautions in his paper on 'The Spiritual Life and Divine Guidance,' "[S]tatements like, 'I feel led of the Lord.' ...lack... clarity, because impressions can come from many sources. Inner impressions are not a form of revelation, they carry no authority. Furthermore, circumstances also require subjectivity. The problem is that the certainty that one has found God's individual will is impossible apart from having some kind of an objective source of knowledge." ⁴

In this case, Dr. Fruchtenbaum would encourage people to draw from the Scriptures solely and objectively and make wise choices on that basis, rather than subjectively on the basis of "feeling called."

Where do feelings fit in, though? Don't get me wrong, we often feel like being here. Sometimes we don't, though. There have been many times where we have questioned being where we are and have felt like leaving. The answer to those doubts is not found in looking back and remembering a subjective feeling we once had, but rather rests on the plan and simple command of the Great Commission. Our feelings should be interpreted by the truth, not vice versa.

C. Gordon Olsen compares our misunderstandings on the topic of "feeling called" in missions with the idea of "falling in love:"

"Perhaps our western notion of 'falling in love' contributes to the confusion. The Bible says nothing about 'falling in love' before getting married. Isaac's marriage was arranged by his father's servant with a girl he had never seen before. Our western romantic idea of 'falling in love' seems to be a dismal failure because too many Americans seem to be 'falling out of love', and the divorce rate is a national scandal. There may be a parallel with the romantic notion of a 'missionary call'. Just as we

expect to be struck with 'falling in love' before marriage, perhaps we also expect to be struck with a 'missionary call' before becoming a missionary.” ⁵

Herbert Kane also contributes his concern of “not feeling called” when he says, “*The term missionary call should never have been coined. It is not Scriptural and therefore can be harmful. Thousands of youth desiring to serve the Lord have waited and waited for some mysterious 'missionary call' that never came.*” ⁶

“Not feeling called” by the majority of Christians has resulted in a universal imbalance of Great Commission effort, as the Western church naturally focuses most of its resources on the Western world, to the shocking neglect of the unreached peoples of the world; to those who have never had a chance to hear. We will talk more about that below.

One more thing, serving God isn't only for specially called people, its for everyone whether you specifically become a missionary or not. This is why Pastor Chuck Smith has said, “*Emphasizing a call to the ministry tends to exaggerate the distinction between clergy and laity.*” Everyone is called to serve. When it comes to participation in the Great Commission worldwide, Beth & I will often tell people, “Get involved as if you are called, and God will let you know if you're not.”

*“God does not ask for ability or inability,
but rather availability.” -Ben DeJong*

What about Being Called to a Specific Country?

In the second chapter of his book entitled On Becoming a Missionary, missionary physician Thomas Hale, promoting the popular view of the need for a specific missionary call, writes that there is a distinction between God's general call and His specific call. He states that, “*The distinction between God's 'general call' and his 'specific call' is very similar to the distinction between God's 'general will' as revealed in Scripture and his 'specific will' for the individual. God's general will is that I be a witness. His specific will (call) is that I be a witness in Nepal, or Chicago, or wherever.*” ⁷ Unfortunately (but not surprisingly), the author provides no scriptural argumentation for the reader to think on.

Again, the question is not, “What do I think is right” or “What makes sense to me” or even “What makes sense when submitted to the experiences of others,” but rather “What does the Bible actually say about the subject?” And again, I believe that the Bible does not anywhere support the notion of a specific “missionary call” as the expected norm for missionaries today.

As many of you know, Beth & I were actually headed to another country in southeast Asia before moving to Papua New Guinea and then on to Mexico. We felt strongly that God had led us in that direction and found after nine months of support raising that the door had been closed through our organization. We were frustrated and confused at what the Lord was doing. Had we misunderstood His leading?

We were torn with what we should do. Should we continue to go to the same country with another organization or should we stay with our organization and go to a different country? We asked, “What had the Lord led us to: the country or the organization?” Thankfully, in the midst of our confusion, the Lord provided the answer through a former mentor of ours, who told us, “He didn’t call you to a country or an organization. He called you to make disciples.” His conclusion was to go make disciples, wherever that was and whatever organization it was with. The answer was a relief, as it was based on the objective teachings of Scriptures rather than on a subjective feeling of called to a place or an organization.

Echoing this experience, C. Gordon Olson shows, *“There are many serious problems with relating a missionary ‘call’ to geography. ...[W]e find that some of the greatest missionary pioneers did not end up in the country that first caught their attention. William Carey was interested in going to the South Seas but ended up in India. Adoniram Judson was expelled from India and ended up in Burma after trying to go elsewhere. David Livingstone was waiting to get into China but the Opium War hindered and he went to Africa instead.”* ⁸

I remember my late Great Uncle Les Pederson wrote me an email following the news of our change of direction and shared with me that he and his wife, who were also retired career missionaries, had their decision of field to serve in changed four different times by the Lord.

The Example of Paul

At this point some might wonder about certain experiences in the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul as validation for the “missionary call.” Of course, Paul is an example



of someone who actually was specifically and uniquely called by God. While it is true that Paul was called specifically by God to take the Gospel to the Gentiles, there is no Scriptural basis for believing that this would be the norm for all would-be missionaries throughout the church age. We also never read Paul teaching any churches or even mentoring his disciples Timothy or Titus along

those lines. This fact specifically leads me to believe that not only would it not be the norm, but that it shouldn't be expected. In fact, even in Paul's very own life, God's special and direct intervention in direction wasn't the norm.

Kevin DeYoung, author of an excellent book on the broader subject of knowing God's will called Just Do Something: A Liberating Approach to Finding God's Will writes, *"Take Paul, for example. On occasion, God directly told him to go somewhere, but most of the time Paul made decisions like the rest of us. He used rather tentative phrases like, 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us' (Acts 15:28-29). In almost every case, he simply decided where to go and how to get there (Acts 20:16). In 1 Corinthians 16 he laid out his plans very prosaically, basically saying, 'When I arrive, I will make introductions. Then some people will accompany me, if that seems good. Once I've gone through Macedonia, I will come to you. I'll stay awhile, maybe even the winter. I want to take my time if the Lord permits. Then I'll go to Ephesus because there is a good opportunity there.' ...With few exceptions, Paul planned, strategized and made his own life decisions about the nonmoral matters of his life."*⁹

This leads us into our next section, offering what I believe is a more biblically balanced and objective approach to the subject.

The Applied Wisdom Approach

If there is no such thing as a specific and personal missionary call, then how are people supposed to think about and weigh out the direction of their lives? Should everyone become missionaries then? Not believing in a specific “missionary call” does not mean there is no direction or guidance from God for the course of our lives. God has given us His word and His Spirit, but He has also given us a mind with which to make wise choices.

First, let us observe 8-points that I refer to as “The Biblical Basis of Missions.” These are simple truths that we can observe from the Scriptures that will help us develop our theology of mission:

1. All Mankind is Stands Rightly Condemned Before God

Rom 3:10 *...There is none righteous, not even one...*

Rom 3:23 *All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God...*

2. God Desires All to be Saved

1Ti 2:3-4 *For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*

2Pe 3:9 *The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.*

3. Jesus Died for Everyone

1Jn 2:2 *And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.*

4. The Holy Spirit is Convicting the World

Joh 16:8-11 *And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.*

5. The Unbeliever is Urged to Believe

Joh 3:16-18 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

6. The Believer is Implored to Offer Life to God for Use

Romans 12:1 Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

7. The Church was Given an Order to Go Out

Mat 28:19-20 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

8. Those Who Do Not Hear and Believe Will Not Be Saved

Rom 10:13-15 For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved." How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?"

In summary, mankind stands rightly condemned before God, separated because of sin. But God, in His grace, has made away for fallen man to be reconciled to Himself through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. God has chosen to use the bride of Christ acting in obedience, through the convicting work of the Word of God as illuminated by the Holy Spirit, to bear witness into all the earth, so that those, who hear the good news and respond in personal faith (relying exclusively on the finished work of Christ on the cross as the sufficient payment for sins) would be graciously justified in God's sight, saved and secure for all eternity.

Next, observe how Olson sees this played out in the book of Acts:

“Once missionary outreach was set in motion by the Holy Spirit in Acts 13, all subsequent decisions related to missions were made on the basis of applied wisdom... In the actual practice of the New Testament church, the decisions concerning timing, destinations and personnel were all made by the appropriate people with a view to obeying God’s moral will in the most effective manner possible. There is remarkable absence of any reference to the call of God beyond Acts 16.” 10

In our experience, we know certain things to be true, like the Great Commission and Paul’s example of going where the gospel has never been, and we choose to participate in that way. Its as simple as that. Instead of waiting for God to show us what he wants us to do specifically, we should see what God is already doing and choose to participate.

No matter the circumstance, we should always choose to move ahead towards the goal of seeing people come to know Christ and be built up in Him. Why? Because it is what we know He wants from Scripture. We are pleased when He confirms this direction through the wise counsel of shepherds and mentors, as well as the corporate body of believers. Even so, I wouldn’t call this confirmation a “missionary call,” but rather simply believers validating that, yes, what we are heading into is something that God desires in the world and we can trust Him in it to carry us throughout.

Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum, again in his paper entitled “The Spiritual Life and Divine Guidance” shows us how the Apostle Paul practiced this applied wisdom approach:

“The best biblical example is found in Romans 1:8-13, from which five things can be learned: first, Paul made plans (v. 13); secondly, he prayed about his plans (vv. 8-10); thirdly, he submitted his plans to the sovereign will of God (vv. 10-13); fourthly, his plans were based upon spiritual goals; such as, wanting to minister to believers in Rome (v. 11), wanting to establish and encourage the church (vv. 11- 12), and wanting to win unbelievers to the Messiah (vv. 13-15); and fifth, his plans were based upon priorities (Rom. 15:20-29). Paul’s desire was to go first to Greece; secondly, to Jerusalem; thirdly, to Spain; and fourthly, to Rome. He wanted to go to Greece to complete evangelism; to Jerusalem to deliver the funds; and to Spain because there was no gospel.” 11

God’s Desire & The Global Need

Paul said, *“And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named...”* (Rom. 15:20)

We know that God desires that all mankind come to know Him, trust Him and worship Him for who He is. This is what it means to be glorified. As the universal church (encompassing all believers worldwide) it is our mandate to take the knowledge of Christ to the whole world, so that everyone has an opportunity to hear. This is what God desires. ¹²

The statistics regarding world missions is staggering. The church as a whole, after 2,000 years since the ascension of Christ, has as of yet failed to reach the entire world with the gospel. Over 2,500 of the world's people groups have yet to hear the gospel in their own language. There are still billions of people on this globe isolated from the Good News. On the topic of those who have yet to hear, Paul argues logically in Romans, *"For 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?"* (10:13-14)

In the States, most people have ready access at anytime to the gospel, via churches, Bibles (we have numerous English translations), books about the Bible, online sermons available, mp3 sermons, gospel tracts, and millions of people who identify themselves as Christians. We have Bible colleges and Seminaries that are pouring people out into mainstream America to reach the lost.

This is not meant to communicate there is no need in the States, of course. There are certainly lost people there needing to be discipled! It would be amazing if every believer in the States actively pursued the lost to reach them, in obedience to Christ. What I am saying, however, is that the resources for reaching the unsaved in the United States are plentiful and access to the truth is plentiful when compared to the unreached of the world.

What about the unreached? The organization we serve with often receives requests from villages that desire missionaries to come and teach them. The problem is, there aren't enough missionaries.

"The missionary speaker in the Bible college missions conference was very blunt: 'The need constitutes the call.' He went on to illustrate it by having ten students try to lift a piano by positioning nine at one end and one at the other. He made his point by saying that the fact nine out of ten Christian workers are ministering to the one-tenth of the world which is most evangelized while only one out of ten workers are thinly spread through the nine-tenths of the world which has the greatest need; this is appalling." ¹²



I firmly believe that as a universal church, we need to be united in our prioritization of the unreached in our endeavors. We need to contribute towards it, whether that be financially or in other practical ways, or relating to our time or even life direction. If you yourself cannot “go” practically this means you could become advocates for those who do. Encourage them, help them gain support, do what you can to help keep them thriving and going in the direction they are... and dare I say, help them

STAY where they are going! That is yet another problem with the needs of the unreached world, this job is so difficult and people are often unable to remain on the field for many reasons, some avoidable with the right support. In order for this job to be done well, missionaries need to stay, and we can all be a part of helping them to do that.

Paul made it his ambition to “go where Christ has not already been named.” This should be our goal. Really, it is the Scriptures that constitute our call generally, but the need of the unreached specifies the focus of our call, and God uses ordinary people like you and me in extraordinary ways if we will let Him.

So What?

In my mind, the Biblical basis for the “missionary call” is highly questionable. The belief that God calls people specifically into missions and not others is hard to prove from the Scriptures. I think that the belief in and propagation of the so-called “missionary call” has been more of a hindrance to the church’s global mission endeavors than it has been a help. Because of it, many people have not been properly challenged with the need to go or to give more sacrificially towards that end. Though many people find comfort in not having had a call, or comfort in feeling like they have been called, the question we need to ask is “Is it Biblical?” I personally find it

both freeing and sobering to understand the responsibility that God has given us in choosing how to use our lives. It is a great honor and privilege.

Beth & I chose to be a part of reaching the unreached because we were young and had all our options open to us. There was no better way we could imagine expending our lives in service to the Father. Why not? We find it a great privilege to be a part. We eagerly encourage anyone and everyone to consider going overseas as missionaries or giving sacrificially towards missions among the unreached. Being involved in missions, however it looks, whether you go yourself or send others, isn't for an elite group of specially called people, its for everyone willing to be a part of what God is doing worldwide.

Don't wait for a call. Get involved as if you are already called.

End Notes

- 1 Olson, C. Gordon, What on Earth is God Doing, p. 76 ↩
- 2 Ibid, p. 76 ↩
- 3 McConnell, Walter, “The Missionary Call: A Biblical and Practical Appraisal,” Evangelical Missions Quarterly April 2007 ↩
- 4 Fruchtenbaum, Arnold, “The Divine Life and Spiritual Guidance,” p. 12 ↩
- 5 Olson, C. Gordon, What on Earth is God Doing, p. 80 ↩
- 6 Kane, Herbert, Understanding Missions, p. 41 ↩
- 7 Hale, Thomas, On Being a Missionary, p. 17 ↩
- 8 Olson, C. Gordon, What on Earth is God Doing, p. 77 ↩
- 9 DeYoung, Kevin, Just Do Something: A Liberating Approach to Finding God’s Will Kindle Edition, location 740 ↩
- 10 Olson, C. Gordon, What on Earth is God Doing, p. 82 ↩
- 11 Fruchtenbaum, Arnold, “The Spiritual Life and Divine Guidance,” p. 15 ↩
- 12 Olson, C. Gordon, What on Earth is God Doing, p. 79 ↩