



What is a missionary?

According to the dictionary

Webster's New World Dictionary (revised edition, July 1983) defines “missionary” as “a person sent out by his church to preach and make converts in a foreign country” (noun form), and “of religious missions” (adjective form). To complete this definition, we need to also look up the word “mission.” According to this same dictionary, “mission” means “a sending out or being sent out to perform a special duty,” “a group of missionaries (or its headquarters),” “a diplomatic delegation,” “a group of technicians, specialists, etc. sent to a foreign country,” “the special duty for which one is sent,” and “a special task to which one devotes his life.”

In analyzing these words, a common thread runs through their definitions: the idea of being sent out to perform a special duty. At the heart of “missionary” and “mission” is the sense of being sent out with a special purpose. Other key elements highlighted by these definitions include the concept of being a

delegate (a representative) and of devoting one’s life to the special purpose for which one was sent out. Synthesizing all of this, “mission” (or “missions”) may be described as *the sending out of a representative with a special purpose to which this representative then devotes his or her life*. “Missionary” may be described as *the representative thus sent*.

According to the Bible

The actual word “missionary” does not appear in the text of most common English translations of the Bible. And the word “mission” (or its plural “missions”) only appears seven times or less, depending on the translation. For example, in the King James Version, the word “mission” is never used. In the New American Standard Bible it is used three times (1 Samuel 15:18, 20; Acts 12:25). And the New International Version uses it seven times (Joshua 22:3; 1 Samuel 15:18, 20; 21:2, 5; Isaiah 48:15; Acts 12:25).

Basically, when “mission” is used, it translates one of four words in the original languages of the Bible.

The word most commonly translated “mission” is the Hebrew word *derek* (דֶּרֶךְ), appearing four times in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 15:18, 20; 21:5; Isaiah 48:15). *Derek* basically means “way,” “path,” or “journey.” Two other Hebrew words are also each translated “mission” once in the Old Testament: Joshua 22:3 uses *mishmereth* (מִשְׁמֶרֶת), which basically means “charge” or “ward;” and 1 Samuel 21:2 uses *dabar* (דָּבָר) which broadly means “word,” “thing,” “matter,” or “business.” The one Greek word translated “mission” in the New Testament (Acts 12:25) is *diaconia* (διακονία), which carries the broad idea of “ministry,” “service,” “contribution,” “help,” “assistance,” “mission,” or “charge.”

Unfortunately, these verses do not offer us much additional information about the meaning of “missionary.” The words translated “mission” are used in a very broad sense and don’t touch on the more technical meaning highlighted by the dictionary. So, the search needs to be widened to see if there are *other* words in the Bible to which “missionary” and “mission” could refer. Here we find that the two Greek words *apostello* (ἀποστέλλω) and *apostolos* (ἀπόστολος) are very closely related to the general concept of “missionary” and “mission.”

Apostello. In the Bible, *apostello* is a verb that basically means “to send” or “to send out.” *More specifically, it carries the idea of “to send out with authority, with a specific purpose or mission.” It also includes the idea of authority being delegated to the one being*

sent. Biblical examples of this usage include the following verses (and please note how they demonstrate the different facets of the meaning of *apostello*). “These twelve Jesus *sent out* after instructing them ...” (Matthew 10:5). “And when the harvest time approached, he *sent* his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce” (Matthew 21:34). “And ... He *sent* two of His disciples and said to them, ‘Go into the village opposite you, ... find a colt tied there, ... untie it and bring it here’” (Mark 11:1–2). “But He said to them, ‘I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was *sent* for this purpose.’” (Luke 4:43). “Or else, while the other is still far away, he *sends* a delegation and asks terms of peace” (Luke 14:32). “For God did not *send* the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him” (John 3:17). [Jesus, speaking of the Father] “As Thou didst *send* Me into the world, I also have *sent* them into the world” (John 17:18). “And Ananias ... said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus ... has *sent* me so that you may regain your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 9:17). “And how shall they preach unless they are *sent*?” (Romans 10:15).

Apostolos. The word *apostolos* is the noun associated with the verb *apostello*. In the Bible, we find two basic uses of this word. The first and more frequent is a *technical* use of this word, where it refers to the 12 Apostles and Paul, and perhaps James. These 13 or 14 men were unique people in the history of the world. *They were chosen by Christ for a very special function*

in the early Church. They were His special ambassadors. And, when *apostolos* is used in this technical sense, the English Bible usually translates it with the word “apostle.” Examples include the following. “Now the names of the twelve *apostles* are these ...” (Matthew 10:2). “And the *apostles* gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught” (Mark 6:30). “And when day came, He called His disciples to Him; and chose twelve of them, whom He also named as *apostles*” (Luke 6:13). “And when the hour had come He reclined at the table, and the *apostles* with Him” (Luke 22:14). “Until the day when He was taken up, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the *apostles* whom He had chosen” (Acts 1:2). “And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven *apostles*” (Acts 1:26). “Paul, an *apostle* of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are at Ephesus, and who are faithful in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 1:1). “And the wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve *apostles* of the Lamb” (Revelation 21:14). As can be seen in these verses, the technical use of the word *apostolos* is reserved for a very small group of people, perhaps only 12 to 14 persons.

Nontechnical use of the word *apostolos*. The Bible also uses the word *apostolos* in a much broader and less technical way. And this use is not reserved for only a small group of people. For example, we have already seen in John 17:18 that every believer has been

sent by Jesus just as Jesus was sent by the Father. All believers are representatives of Jesus Christ, we are His apostles. He has sent us into the world to represent Him and communicate His message. *We are His delegates. We are His ambassadors.*

Other verses that highlight this nontechnical use of *apostolos* include the following. “But when the *apostles*, Barnabas and Paul, heard of it, they tore their robes ...” (Acts 14:14). Please note that Barnabas was not an apostle in the technical sense of the word. He was not part of the small group of 13 or 14. “Now these things, brethren, I [Paul] have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, ... for, I think, God has exhibited us *apostles* last of all, as men condemned to death; ...” (1 Corinthians 4:6, 9). Apollos was not an apostle in the technical sense of the word, either. “For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed ... nor did we seek glory from men ... even though as *apostles* of Christ we might have asserted our authority” (1 Thessalonians 2:5–6). A quick study of Acts 17:1–14 shows that this group of apostles that began the work in Thessalonica included Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Silas and Timothy were apostles only in the nontechnical sense of the word.

Taking into account these verses and the biblical meaning and use of the verb *apostello* (“to send out”), we can say that *apostolos*, in the broad and nontechnical use of the word, has the meaning of *an ambassador, a delegate, a messenger, a representative sent with authority and with a specific purpose or mission.*

This meaning fits very well with, and amplifies significantly, the dictionary definition of “missionary.”

And who does this “nontechnical” apostle represent? The majority of the times when the Bible uses “apostle” in the New Testament (both in its technical and nontechnical senses), it is referring to a representative of Jesus Christ. Luke 11:49; John 17:18; Acts 1:2; 1 Corinthians 1:1; and 1 Peter 1:1 are all examples of this type of use of the word “apostle.” But there are also times in the Bible when the apostle represents other entities as well, especially a church. For example, Philippians 2:25 says “but I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your *messenger* and minister to my need.” The word translated “messenger” here is *apostolos*. Epaphroditus was an apostle, an ambassador, of the church in Philippi, and he represented the Philippian brothers as he ministered to Paul in his needs. And the representation that Epaphroditus gave was so closely linked to this church that he literally fulfilled what was lacking in the *Philippians* ministry to Paul. As Philippians 2:30 says, “because he [Epaphroditus] came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life *to complete what was deficient in your service to me.*” In other words, Epaphroditus was the ambassador of the church in Philippi, and through his ministry to Paul (that is to say, *through his representation of this church*), this church reached out and ministered to Paul in his needs.

Another example of the word “apostle” used in connection with a church is found in 2 Corinthians

8:23 which says, “as for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brethren, they are *messengers* of the churches, a glory to Christ.” Once again, the word here translated “messengers” is the plural form of word *apostolos*. These brothers were apostles, ambassadors, of these churches. And please note what is said in verses 18 and 19 of this same passage, regarding one of these brothers: “and we have sent along with him the brother whose fame in the things of the gospel has spread through all the churches; and not only this, but he *has also been appointed by the churches to travel with us in this gracious work ...*” Apparently, these churches had appointed at least one of these brothers to serve as a traveling companion of Paul. In this appointment, please note the elements of authority exercised by these churches (as evidenced in their *appointment* of this individual) and the specific purpose that this appointment had (to be a traveling companion of Paul).

The laying on of hands

Another biblical element that offers us some additional information with regard to the meaning of the word “missionary” is the practice of the laying on of hands. We read in Acts 13:2–3 that “... while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, when they had fasted and prayed *and laid their hands on them*, they sent them away.” What does the laying on of hands

mean? What additional information can it give us with regards to the meaning of the word “missionary”?

The laying on of hands is a symbol rich in content, and it speaks of, among other things, *the importance and authority of the local sending church*. This church, as a sending authority, lays its hands upon the missionary. And the missionary, in his or her submission to this laying on of hands, *recognizes, accepts, and submits to the authority of this church*. The laying on of hands also *demonstrates the creation, identification, and accreditation of an official representative of this church*. In Leviticus, chapters 3–4, we find an example of how the laying on of hands was used to create, identify, and accredit an official representative for the person who deserved punishment for his or her sins.

Therefore, *the laying on of hands underscores the element of representation inherent in the word “missionary.”* So, when a church lays its hands upon its missionary, it is recognizing that it has *created* an office of official representative, that it now *identifies* this individual (or family) as one of these official representatives, and that it officially and formally *accredits* this individual (or family) to exercise this representation. The laying on of hands is not simply a nice, thoughtful gesture. At the same time, the missionary, in his or her submission to this laying on of hands, recognizes his or her *identification* with this church, their *submission* to the general leadership and direction of this church, and their firm *commitment to be a true and faithful representative of this church*.

Understood this way, the laying on of hands also

underscores the fact that these two parties (missionary and sending church) are truly in adequate conditions to achieve this representation. Otherwise, what sense would there be in officially naming somebody as ambassador and accrediting them as such, knowing all along that they are not really going to be able to fulfill this representation with excellence? Therefore, the two parties involved, prior to constituting this individual as an official and accredited representative of this church must confirm the existence of broad mutual similarities and responsibilities that underlie and make possible a faithful and adequate representation. *To the degree that these similarities and responsibilities are missing, these parties are running the risk of weakening this representation and even obstructing it completely.*

Conclusions

What conclusions can be extracted from this study?

◆ The word “missionary” can be employed in a “nontechnical” or general and broad sense. We have all been sent by Jesus Christ (John 17:18), therefore, every true believer is an “apostle” (a sent one) of Jesus. We are all His representatives, His ambassadors, sent into the world. We are all His missionaries. Because this sense is very broad and general, referring to all believers across all generations, it is an acceptable but *nontechnical* use of the word.

◆ The word “missionary” can also be employed with a more “technical,” special, and limited definition (a

definition that refers to a much smaller group of individuals). This is its use when it is employed to refer to representatives of human entities (such as churches). Not all believers are these representatives or delegates. Not all have been identified, constituted, and accredited as the official representatives of these entities. This definition or use is true only of a particular and limited group of individuals, and because of this, this special and limited use is an acceptable but *technical* use of the word.

◆ By definition, a “missionary” is an individual that has been sent with authority to fulfill a specific purpose on behalf of the sending entity. As such, the missionary is an ambassador, a representative, a delegate of the entity or entities that have sent him or her.

◆ Thus, the missionary is under the obligation to respect and submit to the will of his or her sending entities. *A missionary is not an independent entity.* A missionary has no more freedom to do or say what he or she may want to do or say than any other political ambassador of any country. The missionary exists to officially represent the sending entity and accomplish the specific purpose for which that entity sent him or her. Within these parameters, a fair degree of liberty may be given to adapt the ministry to the specific context and needs of the mission field, but these liberties do not produce an independent entity. The missionary must always give account to their sending entities for the representation achieved.

◆ A missionary is responsible to faithfully and adequately represent the entity or entities that have sent

him or her. Since Jesus Christ has sent His Church into all the world, then *all* believers are responsible to faithfully and adequately represent Jesus. Since some are also missionaries in the more technical, limited, and special sense of the word, and have been sent by other human entities (such as local churches or groups of churches), then they also carry the *additional* responsibility to faithfully and adequately represent these additional entities.

◆ The representation achieved by the missionary should be so faithful and so closely related to his or her sending entities that wherever he or she happens to be, it is as if his or her sending entities were actually there. Just as a government is always present in the person of their political ambassador, so also the sending entities ought always to be present in the person of their missionary. And whatever the missionary does, it is as if his or her sending entities were physically present, doing this activity with their own hands. *In a very real sense, the missionary is the “hands” and “feet” of his or her sending entities.*

◆ Therefore, it is only through their missionaries (*using the special, limited, and technical sense of the word*) that the local churches can personally and bodily fulfill the Great Commission. It is impossible for them to *physically* (as a congregation) go to all the world and make disciples of all the nations. But, through the person of their missionary, and *through the representation that this missionary offers them*, these churches can bodily go to all the world and personally fulfill their role in the Great Commission.

◆ A missionary is a willing, official, accredited, and authentic representative of his or her sending entities. By his or her own choice, they achieve an accurate and authentic representation, and are officially and formally constituted by these entities as their representative.

◆ A missionary identifies with his or her sending entities, submits to their general direction and leadership, and commits to be a true and faithful representative of these entities. A missionary understands that he or she has a very serious responsibility and a very key role to play in the fulfillment of the Great Commission by the *sending entities*. He or she understands that they are the hands and feet of *others*. And they understand that in the body normally neither hands nor feet tell the brain what to do, but rather the brain (the sending entities) tells the hands and feet (the missionary) what to do.

◆ A missionary recognizes and respects the need to

attain and maintain the conditions necessary to achieve a faithful and adequate representation of his or her sending entities. *The missionary understands that his or her ministry flows from this representation.* Therefore, they understand the importance of achieving a faithful, adequate, and reliable representation of their sending entities. And they recognize that this type of representation is built upon certain key elements held in common with their sending entities (such as: missionary purpose, missionary vision, doctrine and theology, concept or philosophy of ministry, ministry focus (or priorities), geographical and ethnic focuses, and expectations regarding time commitment, spiritual support, logistical support, financial support; and communication. *They recognize that to the degree that these key elements are missing; a faithful, natural, and adequate representation is jeopardized (and perhaps completely obstructed).*

