



What is the missionary call?

The dictionary's definition

With regard to the term “missionary call,” the meaning of the word “missionary” has already been investigated in the article *What is a missionary?* (found under “Key terms” on the “Missions info” tab of the WMA website). Therefore, here we only need to study the meaning of the word “call,” and then modify that definition according to our definition of “missionary.” *Webster's New World Dictionary* (revised edition of July 1983) defines “call” (among other things) as “to say in a loud tone,” “to shout,” “to summon,” “to give or apply a name to,” “to describe as specified,” “to give orders for,” “a summons,” and “an invitation.” This dictionary also defines “calling” as the “act of one that calls,” “one’s work or profession,” and “an inner urging toward some vocation.” As can be seen, “call” and “calling” can have a fairly broad range of meanings. Of these meanings, “to give orders for,” “a summons,” “an invitation,” “one’s work or profession,” and “an inner urging toward some vocation”

probably best cover the concept of “call” in “missionary call.” In addition, this dictionary also defines “vocation” as “a career to which one feels he is called,” and it defines “career” as “one’s progress through life” (among other definitions). Thus, “vocation” includes the idea of a significant dedication of time to the task. Combining all of these definitions from the dictionary, we can say that the missionary call is *an invitation, a summons, a giving of orders that leads to an inner urging toward missionary work and toward making missionary work one’s vocation or profession (understood as being a serious dedication to this task).*

The Bible's definition

The biblical concept of missionary call is fairly similar to the dictionary concept, except that the biblical concept is much more explicit. Once again, since we have already investigated the biblical meaning of the term “missionary” (in the article *What is a missionary?*) we can limit ourselves here to an investigation of the term “call,” “called,” or “calling” (and

then adapt it according to its application within the context of “missionary”).

As was the case with the dictionary definition, the Bible gives us a fairly broad range of meanings with regard to “call.” Basically, we can divide these into three large groups or genres of meaning.

The common, everyday use. This first group of meanings is the use of “call” with the sense of “to say in a loud tone,” “to shout,” “to summon,” “to give or apply a name to,” “a summons,” and “an invitation.” We can say that this is the Bible’s common, everyday use of this word, and it is used this way quite frequently. Verses that illustrate this usage include: Genesis 1:5; 22:11; Isaiah 45:3; and Acts 4:36.

The technical use, with a general or universal sense. In this second group of meanings, the Bible uses the term “call,” “called,” or “calling” to refer to a summons, an invitation, or the giving of orders to an *entire* group of people to dedicate themselves to a certain activity (in other words, to adopt this as their “vocation”). For example, the Bible calls *every* believer to live according to a biblical life style. It also calls *all* believers to make disciples of all the nations.

We may refer to these calls as technical calls with a general or universal sense. They are *technical* calls because the Bible is using the term “call” in a more technical and special sense of “to summon,” “to invite,” “to give orders to.” And they have a *general or universal* sense because they refer to each and every

member of the group (there is no believer who has not received the call to live according to a biblical lifestyle, there is no believer who has not been called to make disciples of all the nations).

Examples of verses where the Bible uses the term “call” (or its general concept) in a technical manner with a general or universal sense include: Romans 1:7 (we are called to be saints), 1 Corinthians 7:15 (we are called to live in peace), 1 Thessalonians 4:7 (we are called to sanctification or holiness), Galatians 5:13 (we are called to live in Christian freedom), 1 Peter 2:20–21 (we are called to suffering with patience), and Matthew 28:18–20 (we are called to go and make disciples of all the nations).

The technical use, with a particular, personal and captivating sense. In this third group of meanings, the Bible uses the term “call,” “called,” or “calling” to refer to summoning, inviting, or giving orders to a particular *individual* to dedicate himself or herself to a particular activity (in other words, to adopt this as their “vocation” or “profession”). As can be seen, this use is similar to the use we just saw, except that this use is more specific and deeper. We are still dealing with a *technical* use of the word “call” because the Bible is using this term in its more technical and special sense of “to summon,” “to invite,” “to give orders to.” But now the term is going to be used in a *particular, personal, and captivating* sense. It will be particular because the call will be made to one person alone or to a small group of people (it will not be

applicable to all believers equally). It will be personal because the call itself will identify to whom it applies. And it will be captivating because the call will end up taking the recipient captive for the task to which they have been called. His or her obligation to the call will be so strong that they will actually become *prisoners* of this call. And they will end up dedicating their very *lives* to this call. For this reason, *this type of a call usually ends up becoming the individual's new vocation or profession.*

As can be imagined, this use of the word “call” is not as frequent in the Bible as the other two uses. But it does appear with a certain degree of frequency. Examples include the following verses: Exodus 31:1–5 (the call of Bezalel), Matthew 4:18–22 (the call of Peter, Andrew, James, and John), Acts 13:1–2 (the call of Barnabas and Saul for missionary work), Romans 1:1 (the call of Paul as an apostle), Galatians 1:15–16 (the call of Paul to preach Christ among the Gentiles), and Ephesians 4:8, 11–12 (which highlights the captivating element of this form of a call).

An examination of these texts

As the reader can probably imagine, the missionary call (understanding “missionary” with a capital “M”) belongs to the third group of uses noted above (the technical use, with a particular, personal and captivating sense). A brief analysis of the verses cited under this use will highlight certain elements of this type of a call.

Exodus 31:1–5. Here we see that this type of a call is very *personal* and *specific* (Bezalel was called “by name”), and that *it comes accompanied by a divine equipping for the task* (“filled him with the Spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all kinds of craftsmanship”). We also note that the call *includes a rather detailed description of Bezalel's future work*, and we may presume (although it is not definitely mentioned) that this *work implied the dedication of this individual to this task.*

Matthew 4:18–22. This passage opens with four individuals involved in their secular employment (fishermen). Christ comes, He calls them, and they “immediately” abandon this employment in favor of the task to which Jesus had just called them (fishers of men). It also is interesting to note that for two of these four persons, their secular employment appears to have been a family vocation, and abandoning this job also meant leaving their father. Therefore, following this type of a call may very well mean *leaving one's previous vocation for a new one*, and it may even mean *leaving one's family in order to be able to fulfill this new vocation.*

Acts 13:1–2. In these verses we see that *it is God who does the calling*, and that *the church recognizes and agrees with this call, and sets apart the recipients of the call for the ministry to which God has called them.* We also note that *this call was not a general call but rather a particular and personal call.* There are no

doubts expressed in these verses as to whom the call should be applied. It was not applicable to everyone, but rather *it was reserved solely for those mentioned by name in the call itself*. Furthermore, please note that *the call was a rather costly one for this church*, because they had to set aside productive personnel and dedicate them to another ministry. Barnabas and Saul (Paul) were two of the five prophets and teachers mentioned in this church, so this call hit the leadership team rather hard. However, *this church was willing to pay the price*.

Romans 1:1. Here we see that the call of Paul coincided with the fact that he was set apart for the gospel of God. When he was called, Paul was “reserved” for this particular task. Therefore, this type of call implies *a dedication of the recipient to the specific task referred to in the call*.

Galatians 1:15–16. In these verses we see once again the fact that Paul was both *called* and *set apart*. We also note that he was *set apart before he was ever born*. And we observe that *this divine calling came through God’s grace*. These verses end with *a brief summary of the specific task* for which Paul was called, namely, preaching Christ among the Gentiles.

Ephesians 4:8, 11–12. These verses show that being an apostle (missionary), a prophet, an evangelist, or a pastor and teacher in the church *is linked to a very special event that has occurred in the life of this*

particular individual. In the words of Paul, *this individual has been taken captive by Christ and then returned to the church as a human “gift.”*

Having said this, it is likely that these verses of Ephesians 4 will probably require some additional clarification. First of all, please note that we have cited verses 8, 11, and 12, jumping over verses 9 and 10. This is because verses 9 and 10 form a separate clarification that Paul makes in the middle of his more general explanation (as if this clarification has been placed in parenthesis). Therefore, in order to more directly follow the “thread” of Paul’s thinking, it is helpful to jump over the parenthetical clarification and go directly from verse 8 to verse 11. In verse 8, Paul tells us that Christ led captive a host of captives and gave gifts to men. But, what are these gifts? Verse 11 answers this question when it says “and He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers.” So, joining these two verses, *apostles (missionaries), prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers are the gifts referred to in verse 8*. They are persons whom Christ has taken captive and then returned to the Church “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ” (as Paul continues in Ephesians 4:12). In other words, they are the *necessary tools* given to the church so that the saints (the members of the congregation) may be properly equipped for the work of the ministry, resulting in the building up of the body of Christ.

And please note how well this interpretation of

Ephesians 4:8, 11–12 fits with Paul’s own description of himself just a few verses earlier in Ephesians 4:1, where he refers to himself as “the prisoner of the Lord.” Literally, the original Greek text says “prisoner in the Lord.” Given the context of Ephesians 4, I do not believe that Paul was referring here to his time in *Roman* prisons. Rather, I believe that he was referring to the fact that he himself had been taken captive by Christ (that he was, very literally, a prisoner in the Lord), and then returned to the Church for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry. In other words, Paul himself was one of these human gifts that Christ had given to the Church.

Basic conclusions

So, what kind of basic conclusions can we reach with regard to the “call” (in its technical use with a particular, personal, and captivating sense)? We have seen that this call:

- ◆ Proceeds from God, from His wisdom and from His plans which have been formed from before the very birth of the individual being called.
- ◆ Comes through the grace of God.
- ◆ Is personal and specific (there is no doubt with regard to whom the call refers).
- ◆ Is particular (it does not refer to all believers, but rather to a limited group, whose composition is decided by God and communicated through the call).
- ◆ Is accompanied by a divine equipping for the task involved in the call (gifts, abilities, and skills).

◆ Means setting aside the individual for a ministry that has been especially chosen for him or for her (not everyone has been called to this ministry).

◆ Should be recognized by the local church, which should then respond by taking the called individual or individuals and setting them aside for this ministry (even when this individual may be a very productive part of this church’s current ministry program).

◆ Frequently means, on the part of the recipient of the call, abandoning his or her previous employment to dedicate themselves to a new vocation as indicated in the call.

◆ Sometimes means that the recipient of the call will need to leave their parents in order to carry out the call.

◆ Many times comes accompanied by a description of the task to which this individual is being called. Sometimes this description may be very well defined (as in the case of Bezalal), and sometimes the call will only include the basic idea (as in the case of Peter, Andrew, James, and John). Also, please note that this description is not *always* present in the call (as in the case of Acts 13:1–2).

◆ Captivates the recipient of the call for a special ministry. The recipient of the call has been captivated by Christ for this ministry. He or she is now a prisoner in the Lord. *Fulfilling this ministry is now obligatory. They have no choice. They must do this ministry. It has become their very reason for living.* They have been captivated for this very purpose. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:16, “for if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under *compulsion*; for *woe*

is me if I do not preach the gospel.”

◆ It is permanent and long-lasting. This aspect of the call is seen especially in the life of the Apostles. It would appear that *none* of them (including Paul) ever returned to their previous vocations or professions. It appears that their calling was for life. Christ had taken them captive for this ministry, and they dedicated their very lives to this cause. Yes, it is true that Paul did

make tents occasionally (see Acts 18:2–3), but there is no evidence that he did it as a *vocation* again. Rather, Paul seems to have done it to support himself from time to time, *so that he could continue with what was his vocation, taking the gospel to the Gentiles*. And as soon as his need to support himself disappeared, so did his job making tents.

© 2013 William F. Ritchey. Extracted from *Missions: Renewing our Perspective in the Light of Scripture*, © 2006 William F. Ritchey, p. 28–32 (available in the basic level of the WMA's texts and materials). Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, © Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

world missions academy – basic missions training, rooted in the local church
Developing churches committed to and equipped for carrying out the Great Commission

www.worldmissionsacademy.com

