



Who is a missionary?

To answer this question, we must first understand the difference between “Missionary” and “missionary.” And what is this difference? Obviously, the first is written with a capital letter and the second with a lowercase letter. But this distinction goes far beyond this mere difference of case. As is seen in the article *What is a Missionary?* (found under “Key terms” on the “Missions info” tab of the WMA website), the term “missionary” can have a *special, limited, and technical meaning*, and it can have a *general, broad, and nontechnical meaning*. Therefore, we can say that there are “Missionaries” with a capital “M” (those who are missionaries in the special, limited, and technical sense of the word, thus referring to a *limited* group of believers) and there are “missionaries” with a lowercase “m” (those who are missionaries in the general, broad, and nontechnical sense of the word, that is to say, *all* believers).

Understood this way, there is a very important difference between “Missionary” and “missionary,” and the two must not be confused. It is very similar to what is described in the article *What is a Missionary?*

(location mentioned above) regarding the use of the word *apostolos* (apostle) in the New Testament. The Bible uses *apostolos* in a special, limited, and technical sense to refer to a small group of men that probably included no more than 13 or 14 persons. These were the Apostles (with a capital “A”). They had received the responsibility to represent Jesus Christ in a very special and particular way. Jesus had personally, directly, and specially chosen them for this task. Only they, and no others, were to have this responsibility and privilege. And normally the rest of the believers accepted this fact and viewed them as Apostles (with a capital “A”). But the Bible also uses the word *apostolos* in a more general and less technical way (“apostle” with a lowercase “a”). Silas, Timothy, Apollos, and Epaphroditus were all examples of this nontechnical use of the word. But nobody confused “apostle” with “Apostle,” even though it was the *same identical* word being used. No one thought that Silas, Timothy, Apollos, and Epaphroditus were Apostles. Everyone understood the inherent distinction in the meaning of the word. And it is a good thing, too. Why?

Because the *authority, responsibility, and work* of these two groups (Apostle and apostle) were very different. It would have been a serious error for an apostle (with lowercase “a”) to think and act as if he were an Apostle (with capital “A”), based solely upon the fact that he was called an *apostolos*.

So, what is the great and important difference between “Missionary” and “missionary”? *Both* are sent to represent their sending entities. *Both* are ambassadors, the “hands” and “feet” of these entities. *Both* are responsible to achieve a faithful and adequate representation. *Both* ought to closely identify themselves with their sending entities. *Both* ought to verify the existence of key important similarities that underlie the representation. Then, what is the big difference? *The difference lies basically in who is being represented, in the nature and uniqueness of this representation, and in the call received.* In order to examine this difference, it might help to think of it as a jewel with various facets or polished surfaces. Each facet shows us the same jewel, but each facet also highlights certain unique internal characteristics of the jewel. Here, we will analyze four facets that will highlight key differences between “Missionary” and “missionary.”

Who is being represented. The first facet deals with the entity that is being represented. *The missionary (with lowercase “m”) represents Jesus Christ.* He or she is a voluntary representative of the Lord because of his or her free will they decided to represent Him. Also, he or she is an officially identified and accredited

representative because they have received and have been sealed with the Holy Spirit. And he or she is accountable to Jesus Christ, their Sender, for the representation achieved.

In contrast, *the Missionary (with a capital “M”) represents Jesus Christ plus other human sending entities (such as sending churches).* Therefore, the Missionary (with a capital “M”) has all the attributes that we saw under missionary (with a lowercase “m”), plus these same attributes applied to the other sending entities as well. As such, the Missionary is responsible to represent not only Jesus Christ, but also his or her sending churches. He or she is a voluntary representative of these sending entities because of his or her own free will they decided to represent them. Also, he or she is an officially identified and accredited representative of these churches (many times symbolized or witnessed to by the laying on of hands). And he or she is accountable not only to the Lord but also to his or her sending churches for the representation achieved. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the Missionary is not responsible to represent *all* of the churches, but rather just those that have sent him or her.

The nature of the representation. The second facet deals with the nature of the representation, focusing especially on two elements: the *determination of the specific purpose* of the missionary, and the *selection of the basic activities* required to achieve a proper representation of the sending entity. Due to the nature of being a representative, and due to the

relationship between the representative and the sending entity, it is the responsibility of the sending entity to set the specific purpose of its ambassador and to choose the different basic activities that will be required in this representation. *For the missionary (with a lowercase “m”) that represents Jesus Christ, Jesus Himself will define the specific purposes that this missionary will have. Jesus will also choose what different basic activities will be involved in carrying out this representation.* And this missionary should adhere to and follow Christ’s divine will in these matters. In brief, Jesus is the one being represented here, so He will determine how the desired representation will be fulfilled and within what parameters.

In contrast, *the Missionary (with a capital “M”) does all this plus he or she also applies it to his or her sending churches.* For the Missionary, since he or she represents not only Jesus Christ but also his or her sending churches, both (Jesus and these sending churches) define the specific purposes that the Missionary will have. And Jesus plus the sending churches also determine what will be the basic activities that this Missionary will do in fulfilling the representation of these entities. And this Missionary should adhere to and follow the will of both these sending entities (Jesus and their sending churches).

But, if the Missionary has to adhere to and follow the will of both Jesus and their sending churches, doesn’t this Missionary run a significant risk of having a clash of wills here? Although it might appear likely, it rarely ends up this way if: 1) the sending churches

are sensitive to the plans that God has for them, 2) the Missionary is sensitive to the plans that God has for him or her, and 3) both (*Missionary and sending churches*) *have verified the existence of deep and broad similarities in critical areas* (for more information about nine areas where broad similarities are extremely important, please see the article *How to Choose a Good Representative*, found under “Key concepts” on the “Missions info” tab of the WMA website). God is the General that guides His army. He also is the One who assigns missionary responsibilities to the sending churches and to the Missionaries. And in God, there can be no contradiction. Then if all are sensitive to His direction and aligned with His will, there should be no contradictions because God will not assign contradictory missionary responsibilities to entities that He has planned to work in harmony.

The uniqueness of this representation. The third facet deals with the uniqueness or particularity of the representation of the sending entity. *For the missionary (with a lowercase “m”) that represents Jesus Christ, he or she accomplishes this representation along with a huge group of other representatives.* Why? Because all believers are representatives of Jesus. Therefore, although the actual representation that this missionary achieves may be unique (he or she may be the only believer in the world doing this particular activity), this missionary is not the unique representative of Jesus Christ. He or she shares this office with hundreds of millions of other missionaries around the world.

Furthermore, all these missionaries have something in common with this particular missionary. For example, to a large degree, they all share the same basic conditions that underlie a faithful and adequate representation of Jesus Christ. Yes, there are differences between these missionaries, but they are secondary in comparison to the great similarities that are rooted in sharing the same general office.

In contrast, *the Missionary (with a capital “M”) has some of this same sense of unity and working together with a large group of co-representatives (since the Missionary also is a representative of Jesus Christ), but in addition there is a special sense of uniqueness and particularity in the Missionary. Given the fact that he or she also represents certain sending churches, his or her representation is unique (he or she may be the only one in the world doing this particular activity) and his or her position or office is also unique (of all the believers in the world, he or she may be the only person responsible to represent this particular church in this particular activity).* Among other things, this places a greater responsibility on the Missionary’s shoulders when it comes to representation. In a very real sense, it is likely that the responsibility for the total representation of his or her sending churches in this particular ministry rests solely and exclusively on the shoulders of this Missionary. There may be no one else chosen by these churches to do this particular activity. This Missionary may be the only ambassador that these churches have in this area. Thus, *if he or she does not accomplish this ministry, these churches will not be*

able to accomplish what God has called them to do. To a certain degree, this gives greater weight and seriousness to the representation achieved by this Missionary. Furthermore, since their position or office is unique (he or she may be the only Missionary that this church has in this ministry), then this Missionary does not necessarily share with all other Missionaries the same critical similarities that underlie a good representation of this church. Sure, all Missionaries will share certain similarities with regard to their common representation of Jesus Christ, but the similarities will tend to end there. Due to the Missionary’s representation of *unique* sending churches involved in *unique* missionary ministries, the similarities existing between Missionary and sending churches will vary greatly from Missionary to Missionary, just as they do from sending church to sending church. One may be Pentecostal, the other Baptist. One may work in China, the other in Europe. One may evangelize and plant churches, the other may work in community development. Each Missionary is unique in the qualities that make them a good representative of unique sending churches.

The call received. The fourth facet that helps distinguish between Missionary and missionary deals with the call that this individual has received. Is it a general call, or is it a special, personal, particular, and captivating call? See the article *What is the Missionary Call?* (found under “Key terms” on the “Missions info” tab of the WMA website) for additional information. Here we will only point out that *a missionary (with a*

lowercase “m”) has received a general call, made to all believers, to go into all the world, evangelize, and make disciples of all nations. Every believer has received this call. Every believer has this responsibility. And there are thousands of ways that they may fulfill this responsibility (ranging from a *direct and personal* fulfillment through the evangelization of their neighborhood to a *delegated* fulfillment through helping to send and support a Missionary working in a distant country). And even though this individual will take this responsibility very seriously, they normally will not dedicate their life to its fulfillment. In other words, they have not been *captivated* (taken prisoner) by this general call.

In contrast, the *Missionary* (with a capital “M”) has received a special, personal, particular, and captivating call that generally obligates them to dedicate their very life to this ministry (in other words, they literally live for this ministry). They can do nothing else. According to Ephesians 4:8–12, they have been taken *captive* by Christ and returned to the Church as an apostle (Missionary with a capital “M”), in order that the saints (missionaries with a lowercase “m”) may be properly equipped for the work of the ministry. In other words, the Missionary is a gift from Christ to the local church in order that the members of the congregation may be equipped to fulfill their responsibility to the Great Commission in areas beyond their normal range of impact. How? Through the *representation* that this Missionary offers to the local church. This Missionary goes in their stead, and they fulfill

their ministry through this Missionary. *This is the missionary call*, in its technical sense and based on Ephesians 4:8–12. And this doesn’t happen with every believer, but rather only with a small minority. This minority are Missionaries (with a capital “M”).

Missionary or missionary? Having seen all of this, who is a “Missionary” and who is a “missionary”? The answer to this question rests on two points: 1) who is being represented by this individual, and 2) the type of call that this individual has received. *If the individual is a representative of Jesus Christ alone, without also being an official and accredited representative of other human entities (such as sending churches), and if they have received only a general calling to their ministry, then this individual is a missionary (with a lowercase “m”).* And we all are missionaries, understood this way. But, *if the individual is a representative of Jesus Christ plus other human entities (such as sending churches), and if they have received a special, personal, particular, and captivating call that obligates them to dedicate their life to this ministry, then this individual is a Missionary (with a capital “M”).* Only a small minority are Missionaries, understood this way.

And remember that these differences do not mean that one is better than the other, or of greater value than the other. Before God, the missionary and the Missionary are equal. Neither is more important than the other, *but both have different responsibilities.* If this is not taken into account, there will be much confusion.

Why is this so important?

What's the big deal whether someone is a "Missionary" or a "missionary"? Aren't we just playing word games? Actually, the answer is "no," this is not merely a matter of semantics or word games. It is important that we be able to differentiate between Missionary and missionary. Again, it is like what we saw with the difference between Apostle and apostle. Confusing or blurring the two can create serious problems.

For example, if a church cannot adequately distinguish between Missionary and missionary, then *it will have difficulties adequately distinguishing between the everyday members of its congregation (who are all missionaries) and its special ambassadors who should be examined, identified, and accredited to officially represent this church in areas and in ministries where it cannot go without the help of this ambassador.* A church with this difficulty may very well find itself facing one of two basic options due to this confusion: either try to send out all of the everyday members of its congregation into all the world and make disciples of all the nations (not a very viable option, nor necessarily a healthy one), or simply not examine, identify, and accredit any special ambassador to do this task (a more likely option). If the church happens to opt for this second option, due to not understanding the special role and function of a Missionary, then its achievements with regard to the Great Commission probably

will be rather limited.

And a church that cannot adequately distinguish between Missionary and missionary *is also more likely not to distinguish adequately between Missionary work (the work achieved through its official and special ambassador) and missionary work (the work achieved through the everyday members of its congregation).* Both of these works are very important, and every church should be involved in each. But, without a good understanding of the difference between the two, there probably will be a strong tendency for the church to gravitate toward missionary work (with a lowercase "m"). After all, this is the easier of the two works to accomplish. It also tends to be the more economical of the two. It is a lot more visible to the average member of the congregation. It allows for greater direct participation by a larger percentage of the congregation. It doesn't require crossing cultural, linguistic, and geographical barriers. And so forth. All of this can combine to make a church tend to concentrate on missionary work to the detriment of Missionary work. And, if the confusion between the two is great enough, the church might even see itself as being a great, missionary church, because all of its congregation is involved in missionary work (evangelism, Bible studies, community service, etc.), *and it may not even notice that its "missionary" activities may be very lacking in the area of Missionary work.* It may even think that it is fulfilling the Great Commission, because it is heavily involved in missionary work, when really it may be making very few contributions toward *going*

into all the world and making disciples *of all the nations*. In short, this church may very well be blind to the fact that it is not as missionary-minded as it may think it is.

In summary, a church that cannot adequately distinguish between Missionary and missionary *is not really adequately equipped for fulfilling the Great Commission. The command to go and make disciples of all the nations cannot be achieved solely with missionaries (with a lowercase “m”).* The church needs Missionaries (in the special, particular, and technical sense of the word) in order to fulfill this task. The

church needs official ambassadors who will go where the church cannot, and who will fulfill the ministries that the church is unable to do alone.

So, is it important to make a distinction between Missionary and missionary? Yes. And is it a serious error to confuse Missionary and missionary? Yes. And this error can lead to seriously weakening the *entire* Missionary thrust of a church due to not adequately recognizing the true *nature* of Missionary work, and not seeing and utilizing the special *resources* that Christ has taken captive and then given back to the church to equip it for this task.

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