

An Exploration of the Missionary Call

By Robertson McQuilkin

Whom shall I send who will go for us? (Isaiah 6:8)

I looked for a man (to) stand in the gap ... on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none (Ezekiel 22:30).

Redemption is indeed God's chief purpose toward this world. His nature demands it. God loved the world so much that He gave the ultimate gift. Unlike His Church, He was not willing that any should perish. One mission leader tells of a conversation with a Christian elder in Lebanon. He asked, "Don't you care that these Arab Muslims are going to Hell?" The elder responded, "Well, brother, between you and me, that's probably the best place for them." When the shock of such a response passes, we know in the depths of our spirit that this is precisely the way the Church of Jesus Christ in each generation has behaved, no matter what our rhetoric.

Not only does God's character put world evangelism central in His purpose, man's lost condition demands it. The population explosion is so great that more people will be born in the last quarter of the century than in the whole history of mankind prior to 1973. This is the scope of the lostness of humanity. Is there no hope? Does not the need so far exceed our resources as to confront us with an impossible mission? No, for God has a viable plan and He has assured us in advance that it will succeed. The only question is: in which generation?

His plan is a certain kind of Christian. God has designated and stands ready to equip those who will be sent by the Church to win to faith people who have not heard, and to establish congregations where they do not exist. These apostles are the only plan God has. Furthermore, they are the only plan He needs. But somehow, no generation in 2,000 years of church history has produced the task force necessary to reach the world. Is this because God has not called adequate numbers? Or is it because someone is not listening?

The evangelical churches of the United States now have about 37,000 career foreign missionaries.¹ About 9,000 of these are engaged in full-time evangelism, some in church starting evangelism. How many would be needed to penetrate the dark half of the world, plant a gospel witness among every people and share the glorious liberating word of redemption with all mankind? Estimates range from five to ten times that number.

Perhaps we do not have a sufficient support base to put an adequate force into the field? Before the days of William Carey, the father of the modern Protestant missionary movement, the Moravians from Herrnhut considered a support base of four adequate to keep one missionary at the front. In such an atmosphere of spiritual vitality, we would need less than one million evangelicals and the single small state of South Carolina could take care of evangelizing the world! But perhaps this is unrealistic. In World War II it was said that fifteen personnel were needed to keep one man at the front. If this proved true in spiritual warfare, three million support "troops" should be adequate and the evangelicals of California could finish the task.

In point of fact, we are told there are not three but forty million evangelicals in the United States. We know that this support base is fully adequate, even at present levels of providing workers and finance. At least a million have responded to the call to some form of full-time Christian ministry. If only ten or twenty percent of these already involved in Christian ministry were dispatched by the churches, the task could be accomplished. But the truth is, less than one percent of full-time Christian workers are engaged in evangelistic ministry among the unevangelized of the world. Is this the way the Commander-in-Chief would assign His troops? Or is someone not listening?

Static

Perhaps more would hear God's call if there were not so much static. Well-meaning advocates of world missions get hold of a truth, strip it of complementary truths and use it to pry loose some of God's frozen people. The intent is good, but the results are bad. Truth made to stand alone rarely stands long and never strands straight, as A.W. Tozer has assured us.

Consider the plight of the earnest believer seeking God's will for his life when he hears the following:

- Everyone should head toward missionary service until God stops him.
- No one should become a missionary if he can be happy doing anything else.
- If you haven't had a call, you must not be listening because Christ gave the call 2,000 years ago. You are already called! The Great Commission is all the call you need.
- Don't move until God gives you a call.
- The need constitutes the call.
- No one has a right to hear the gospel twice until every one has heard it once.
- Grow where you were planted.

Each of these common exhortations is intended to highlight an aspect of God's truth concerning the call to missionary service. Yet by highlighting only part of the truth, well-meaning advocates often produce confusion, frustration, and disillusionment with The Cause. How, then, does one tune out the static and tune in to God's clear call?

Tuning In

There is only one place to begin. One who does not acknowledge the absolute lordship of Christ in every choice of life cannot hear any call from God. In fact, for him there may not be any other call from God. If Jesus Christ alone is absolute Lord of my life, He alone has the right to make the greatest of all choices for me: How will I invest my life? Until such an unconditional commitment to the will of God has been made, a person who "tries to do God's will" is only deceiving himself. Or perhaps only trying to deceive his audience.

Once the question is settled as to who is in control, cannot the disciple hold God responsible to get him where he ought to be? Obeying God is never fulfilled through mere passive availability. It demands active involvement. "Eagerly desire the greater gifts," says the

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apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 12:31). It is no accident that he put at the top of his list (v. 28) the apostolic ability, the calling to evangelize where Christ is not known and start the church where there is none.

But our pews are filled with non-combatants, our pulpits with slot-fillers waiting for a jolt from heaven. George Murray, General Director of the Bible Christian Union, tells us that for years he was "willing to go, but planning to stay." Not until he became "willing to stay, but planning to go" did God move him out to Italy.

Acknowledging Christ as Lord must be more than a transient stirring of emotions or a passive believing that we are not the owners and operators of our lives. It demands active pursuit of God's purposes in the world. For those who are not yet certain of God's vocational appointment in life, true discipleship must include complete openness to this most needed and most neglected of all vocations: pioneer missionary evangelism.

Climbing on Course

Even though the initial decision has been made to obey every signal from the Commander-in-Chief, the signal can be distorted through interference. God often sends his signal through fellow combatants and thus we may get mixed signals.

For example, we hear that "every person is either a mission field or a missionary." By calling every true Christian a missionary, the idea is to involve every believer in sharing his faith as a way of life. The intent is good, but confusion reigns because the earnest seeker for God's will is led to believe that there are no distinctions among Christians, that every Christian vocation, if not every vocation, is of equal value. In this view of the cause of world evangelism, role distinction is blurred and all roles appear of equal significance. Perhaps we have been beguiled into accepting this viewpoint through a popular, if misguided, notion that all occupations are of equal value. I received from the headquarters of a major corporation suggestions for a church bulletin insert on "The Dignity of Work Day."

We have failed to recognize that the carpenter and the cosmetologist are just as valuable, just as worthy, and just as much needed as the doctor ...

Most people would not have to reflect much on the relative advantages of living in a town where there were no doctor or where they were deprived of the presence of a cosmetologist. But to hold that all activities are of equal value to society is to reduce the great concept of democracy to a sociological absurdity.

And so in the church!

To say that a believer can serve God in any vocation is one thing; to go on to say that it does not matter what vocation he chooses is something else ... it is foolish to say that one can advance the cause of Christ as much in one vocation as in another ... True, one can serve God in any capacity, and in His sovereign plan everyone has a niche to fill. But we cannot go on to assert that all careers are equally crucial in the advancement of God's Kingdom. (David Kucharsky, "Careers with Christian Impact," *Christianity Today*, September 24, 1971, page 14.)

No, not everyone is a missionary and not all roles are of equal value in fulfilling God's purpose of world evangelization. The crucial role in God's plan of redemption is the evangelistic church starter. To be sure, he must be supported by a complement of support personnel. Perhaps that is one reason 75% of all missionaries sent from the United States

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are actually serving the Church elsewhere, rather than serving full-time in evangelism or church starting. Thus, among "missionaries" there are many vocations.

By lumping together various vocations under the term "missionary" we may add another element of confusion for a person seeking to know God's will for life investment. By "missionary" we have gradually come to mean someone who serves in a culture or country other than his own and is paid for that service, whatever it may be, by Christian people in his sending church. Thus, "the missionary call" has become a call to a location, rather than to a vocation. One may be teaching theological education, pastoring a church, nursing the ill, digging wells, or doing itinerant evangelism. He is a missionary, in our contemporary understanding, so long as he is doing it fulltime and is paid for that activity by Christians in the homeland.

This change of focus from an apostolic evangelistic vocation to the entire enterprise of doing good away from home need not prove fatal; these are all ministries which the church ought to provide. But this change of definition and focus of attention from pioneering to interchurch service will prove fatal in a final way to countless millions of people if the almost total lack of pioneer missionary evangelists goes unnoticed because of other good missionary activity. We must recapture the New Testament vision and thrust for world evangelization through those who are called and commissioned to extend God's Kingdom.

But how does one get a "call" of any kind? Here again there are mixed signals from God's people. Some hold that one should not go into any Christian vocation without a Pauline type special word from God. Did not Christ specifically call the twelve to a particular role? Were not the prophets of the Old Testament chosen before birth and set apart by God to a holy vocation? On the other hand, there are those who assure us that the missionary call is no more special than the call to any other vocation, Christian or secular. It is a matter of guidance. Just as the brick mason must be very certain that this role is God's will for his life, so the missionary should be certain of his vocation.

After years of involvement in selecting, training, sending, and deploying missionaries, I am convinced that there is an element of truth in both positions. Certainly there was in both the Old Testament and the New Testament a kind of work that was set apart from ordinary vocations, a holy office, role, or vocation. In the New Testament Church a person was identified by the specific ability or enabling that God gave him, but he was also set aside through the concurrence of God's people. There was an inner conviction and compulsion, and there was also the external validation by the church. Thus through evidence of ability, an inner conviction, and the endorsement of the church, the call is supernatural and special, different from ordinary guidance.

How do these two concepts of "call" and "guidance" come together? Some may begin, like Paul, with a special intervention in life that settles the question of vocational call once for all. Such a person will then embark on a lifetime of seeking to follow God's guiding directions to accomplish that great vision or goal which God has given. On the other hand, others may find themselves following the principles of Scripture and obeying the impulses of the Spirit and the counsel of the elders, taking into account the circumstances of life, until there comes a time when the conviction is settled that God has designated them for some particular ministry. That conviction is just as certainly a call to holy vocation or a life set apart for a special ministry, as though the person had begun with a heavenly vision.

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Destination

No generation of Christians has been fully obedient to Christ's great commission. And yet, no generation of human beings can be reached except by the Christians of that generation. For 59 generations of lost people it is too late. And yet, according to the promise of God, some generation will be able to stand before the Lord and say, "It is finished. The task you have given us to do, we have accomplished."

At the dawn of the third millennium we find a church fractured and weak, preoccupied with many interests other than God's chief interest. And yet, as the Church prepares to give an account, we have, possibly for the first time, the potential for completing the task. The resources of people and finance, coupled with the extraordinary powers of twentieth century technology, are ours. All that is lacking is obedience.

Who's calling? God is. But the more crucial question is, who's listening? With the need so vast and laborers so few, why do we not go? Someone isn't listening.

How come? We have heart trouble. We are so preoccupied with our own interests there is no room for compassion for others; we are so committed to our own fulfillment it is impossible to love God with all our lives. How come? We have eye trouble. Even when we study the Bible we don't see reality from God's viewpoint. How come? We have head trouble. We try to figure out all the mysteries of an infinite God and all the proper destinies of human beings. Then we play God, trying to alleviate the pain of human lostness by arrogantly setting aside the teachings of Scripture in favor of our own logical conclusions. How come? We have knee trouble. We play at prayer when God has put in our reach the most powerful weapon of spiritual warfare. How come? We have ear trouble. God calls, but we don't listen.

What should we then do? Should we not repent of our cold hearts, blind eyes, arrogant minds prayerless lives, and deafness to His call? Let's give ourselves to prayer till He ignites us with His love and scatters us as firebrands throughout the darkness of a lost world.

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¹ 1984 statistics.