

The Missionary Call: How to Be Sure You Don't Have One

By Joseph F. Conley

A perplexing problem for many Christians is how to discern whether God is calling them to missionary service. As with most serious issues, contradictory advice assaults us from every quarter. One respected voice assures us that a specific call is not prerequisite to service. The command is "Go!" clear and simple, and every Christian should endeavor to go – the argument runs – until God stops him. Those who advocate this approach assure us that the appalling need of a world without Christ constitutes its own imperative, and argue forcefully the dictum of Jim Elliot, "We don't need a call; we need a kick in the pants!"

The appeal of this logic propels the sensitive student over the net and into the racket of the opposing missionary statesman who affirms unequivocally and on Divine authority that "the need never constitutes the call," and that the presence of so many misfits on the mission field and the casualties with whom most of us have some acquaintance are evidence enough that to proceed without a clear call from God is to court disaster. Faced with such warning, and without a compelling sense of guidance, most assume it prudent to avoid blundering into such a spiritual minefield.

They shrug their shoulders and sell insurance.

It is not surprising that questions which generate such contradictory advice produce turmoil in the mind of earnest Christians who want to do God's will. For those who honestly wrestle with these issues, it is helpful to remember that Christian theology is full of paradox, and that opposing truths are not necessarily mutually exclusive. If we accept the premise that both positions are true qualifiedly, we shall be on the right track. Many Christians hide behind the word "call" because they assign to it a definition with respect to missionary work which they fail to assign or apply to other areas of life vocations. As long as overtones of mystery and extra-terrestrial compulsion accompany our definition or "call" it is possible to keep safe distance and remain undisturbed.

The call of God to missionary service may be dramatic, instantaneous, and all-compelling. But that is the rare exception, not the rule. More often, the discovery that God is calling me to give my life in the service of lost men is a dimly perceived awareness which grows by imperceptible degrees into firm conviction in a process which may stretch over many months or even years. This conviction is instilled by the Holy Spirit as a result of a number of identifiable steps. Not every missionary may be able to identify these steps in his own experience or necessarily place them in any specific order. But in every case they are there. Whether God is calling you to a life of cross cultural service, or whether He is not (and it is just as important to know that He is not) may be determined by aligning with these spiritual checkpoints:

1. Examine Your Motives.

Is my life really available to Christ without condition? Failure to supply an affirmative answer to this question is a root cause of our lack of workers. God will not disclose His will to those who insist on prior audit of His plan. "Lord, I will do anything, and go anywhere, except ..." It is usually upon our one exception that consecration is tested. "If any man is willing ... he shall know" (John 7:17).

2. Expose Yourself to the Call of God.

Like a radio transmission, the missionary call is perceived only by those whose receivers are tuned to God's frequency. The existence of thousands of hidden people groups absolutely without the Gospel thrusts the inescapable conclusion upon us that while God must be calling, many are simply not listening. God calls informed people, aware of and sensitive to world need. Frequently guidance comes through reading missionary biographies, listening to other missionaries, attending mission conferences – in a word, through self exposure to the world of missions in the light of Scripture. Do you pray daily and intelligently for unreached peoples? Do you study mission literature, read missionary biographies, associate with men and women whom God has called and used in world evangelism? If not, it is almost certain that God will not call you! More, it precludes the possibility of asserting with good conscience that God has not called me!

3. Offer Yourself Aggressively to God for Missionary Service.

Aggressively is the big word here. Passive willingness will not cut it. Present your body. How? Prepare a resume on your academic and work background. Send it to a dozen mission boards. Ask, "Does God have a place for me in your organization?" You may safely trust God with this test. As you take this action, remind your Lord daily that you are His to command, that you expect His instructions, that you rely upon Him to firmly shut every door upon you but that one which He has prepared you to enter. If all say "No!" you may reasonably assume that God's place for you is not overseas. If the answer is "Yes," then further evaluation will be in order in consultation with other experienced Christians. The reward of this valid exercise is that whether God's reply is "yes" or "no" you will be at peace with yourself and with the Lord of harvest for having unconditionally and actively offered yourself to the work of God.

4. Confer with Mature Christians.

Share with your pastor your desire to know and do God's will. Expect confirmation from your local church. While it is true that many of God's greatest missionaries went in spite of their churches, it is the norm that a spiritually sensitive pastor and board of elders or deacons will be able to evaluate your gifts, and by their endorsement or advice to the contrary will help confirm God's call to you. It is instructive to remember that the first post-Pentecost missionaries were sent out by the local church which recognized their gifts and confirmed God's call to them.

There is no stereotyped pattern of guidance in the Christian life. The experience of others may often provide helpful encouragement and stimulus. From the example of others we may deduce principles by which God guides. But every life is a unique creation, a complex of factors without replica. God has a different path for each. It is clearly wrong to suppose that God will guide me exactly as He has guided another. But for the man or woman who honestly and more than anything else wants to know God's will for him in relations to earth's still unreached people, there will be some basic exercises: He will courageously face the logic of a Keith Falconer who said, "While vast continents still lie shrouded in darkness ... the burden of proof rests on you to show that the circumstances in which God has placed you were meant by Him to keep you out of the foreign field."

He will aggressively gather as much data as possible on unreached people in the awareness that facts are the fingers of God by which He points His way. He will pray over lost men, hidden peoples, and Bibleless tribes until he gives God no excuse to indict him for not being

tuned in. He will in the presence of one of life's greatest decisions make the discovery of the will of God the priority of his prayer life.

Methodical pursuit of God's will in this fashion will produce the growing conviction that we are walking with God, that He is leading us through His Word, through His peoples, and through circumstantially opened doors, through the growing witness of the Holy Spirit within, "this is the way, walk in it." But we will always remember that God seldom provides direction so explicit as to deprive us of the necessity of in some way stepping out into the unknown. The would-be missionary must still walk by faith, and the step of obedience to God's call will never be beyond the assault of doubt. It is usually in retrospect that the overwhelming evidence presses the heavenly imprimatur upon our decision He led me!

This article was written Joseph F. Conley, for RBMU International (now part of World Team) when he was Minister at Large for that ministry, and was reprinted with the author's permission.

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