

Callings to Mission –

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The 'missionary call'

For many years we have talked about the 'missionary call', but it is rather difficult to define what we actually mean and the whole concept has often been unhelpful.

In the past, many people often spoke of dread at receiving the 'missionary call' thinking that God was going to put his hand on their shoulder and force them to do something, go somewhere, give up friends, all completely against their will, gifting or desire. Those who got the 'call' were held in high regard, rose to the top of the spiritual elite, and were surrounded by some mystery if not awe.

Calling is very important for every Christian. We became Christians because we responded to the call of God on our lives. Every Christian is then called to live their lives, earn their money, carry out their responsibilities, to the best of their ability - 'Serving wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men.' (Ephesians 6:7)

The world around us is concerned about status, but for us there should be no better calls or more spiritually up-market professions. Every Christian should feel called to the task, paid or unpaid, within the church or outside it, to which they feel God has called them. If God is calling you to be a teacher, don't be a minister. If God is calling you to serve the church overseas, don't be a brain surgeon in the UK.

This does not mean, of course, that God can't surprise us. The Bible has numerous stories of people who were 'called out' of what they expected to do to serve God in another way. That may happen to you. Knowing with confidence that God has called you to do what you are doing can be a great support in times of crisis. That is true for the church-planter many thousands of miles from home and the teacher in an inner city school when lack of discipline makes life uncomfortable.

The call to be an apostle

The word 'apostle' is used in two different ways in the Bible. The primary way it is used is to identify a group of unique people who had a key role in the early days of the Christian church. They were –

- The 12 disciples or apostles of Jesus, minus Judas and plus Paul
- Witnesses of the resurrection (Acts 1:21-22)
- Guardians of gospel truth (Acts 2:42)
- And several were writers of the New Testament

When Paul claims to be an apostle he is usually claiming an authority based on a very special and restricted divine commission.

But the word is used in another way too. Barnabas is called an apostle (Acts 14:14) and it is likely that he was in Cyprus for the whole of Jesus' ministry. In Romans 16:7 Paul talks warmly about Andronicus and Junias as apostles, but we know almost nothing about them. Ephesians 4 implies that there were other apostles recognised by the early church.

'Apostle' means sent one. The apostle Barnabas was one of the first bands of church-planters. He travelled with Paul and started churches. When churches were established they handed them over to the oversight of 'elders' and moved on to start other churches. So, in general terms, the church leaders were called 'elders' and the church-planters were called 'apostles'.

Of course, Paul was an apostle in both uses of the word, but today we still need apostles, who like Barnabas and others travel the known world, sharing the gospel and establishing churches.

You won't be called to be an apostle in the first and primary use of that word in the Bible, but you might be called to be a church-planter and you probably know others who have been called to be apostles in that sense.

Pray for the apostles you know, in the UK and worldwide.

The call to GO

There is no getting away from it. The call to mission is the call to GO. The word for 'mission' comes from the Latin word 'to send' and the active response to being sent is to GO. Mission involves moving out, changing your outlook, leaving your comfort zones, moving into the unknown, accepting risks and taking up the role of a pilgrim. Mission is never static, comfortable and risk free.

God started it all. The triune God sent himself to the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve had disobeyed (Genesis 3:8). God sent himself again to Babel when people demonstrated their pride and self-reliance (Genesis 11:5). The character of God is intrinsically bound up with going in mission.

So it is not surprising that those who are God's people are called to GO. Abraham was called to leave all that was familiar and secure. "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and GO ..." (Genesis 12:1). Moses was called to go to the land of his upbringing although it was scary with unhappy memories. "So now, GO, I am sending you to Pharaoh ..." (Exodus 3:10). Jeremiah was young when he was told, "You must GO to everyone I send you to ..." (Jeremiah 1:7). Jonah reacted very strongly against his calling. "GO to the great city of Nineveh ..." (Jonah 1:1). Going is an essential characteristic of mission, the God of mission and those who follow the God of mission.

Two verses in 1 John 4 tell us that the mission of Jesus required him to GO. "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent (or missioned) his one and only son into the world that we might live through him." (v9) "And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent (or missioned) his son to be the Saviour of the World." (v14)

Mission always involves going, but does not specify how far you have to GO physically. Going in mission is a matter of mindset not miles.

The call to GO miles

Going in mission is a matter of mindset not miles. But some have been called and other people, just like you, are still being called to GO across national frontiers, continental barriers and international time zones in the cause of mission. Is God going to use them? – probably! Is God going to teach them? – almost certainly! Is it going to be a great adventure? – without a doubt!

Today, hundreds of Christians are being called to go thousands of miles **from** home **to** the UK and Europe. Latin Americans are here in probably the largest numbers, but there are a number from Africa and Asia as well. Some of these folk feel the call of God and just come, but several UK churches are beginning to invite Christians from around the world to come and share their experience, enthusiasm and passion for the gospel among the residents of this country.

Although we Brits are often embarrassed by the colonial aspects of our gospel proclamation, those from Africa are coming with the message, “Stop apologising for what you did; you may not have got it all right, but at least you did it, God used you and we have come the UK to repay a debt.” The UK church needs to send and go, but also invite and welcome so that mission becomes from everywhere to everywhere.

The number of Christians ‘going’ in mission is likely to grow in the coming years. Christians in China are planning to send 10,000 workers out along the ‘Old Silk Roads’ in their ‘Back to Jerusalem’ initiative.

Most people going from this country start with a short-term assignment. Remember short-term mission is not just for the young. Retired people from the UK are increasingly making a contribution around the world. The next trend is likely to be mid-career ‘gap years’ – people in the mid to late 40s taking a year out when their children can cope without them for a while. Employers are already granting ‘exchange assignments’ to well-established staff. Pressure for ‘gap years’ will surely follow. Yet another opportunity to go in mission – are you ready?

The call to GO nowhere

Going in mission is a matter of mindset not miles. There are Christians around who are always thinking about people the other side of the world. They are constantly in touch. They pray for church fellowships whose language they don’t understand. They know about the poor living conditions that so many people experience in the shantytowns outside major cities. They sponsor a child and help provide for their education. They write letters to our Foreign Office about justice issues around the world. But all the time they are physically located in a standard 1930s semi-detached house in the UK.

Mission is about going. To be a Christian is to be involved in mission and the call to mission is the call to GO, but going is more a matter of mindset than miles.

Today there is so much more information to help you go than there was in the past. The TV News regularly brings the world into our front room. If you have access to satellite or cable TV then you are likely to be able to receive Euronews and probably clear BBC World Service Radio reception as well. The Internet allows you to access information from all over the globe.

Going is a matter of mindset not miles. But maybe it would be more accurate to say, going is a matter of heart and not hectometres, but then that phrase does not trip off the tongue so well, does it?

The question is, Where is your heart? What do you care about? The crisis in Darfur, Sudan is in the news as I write. By the time you read this, the media may have forgotten about Sudan, although the conflict that brings so much grief and death there has been going on for nearly 20 years. If you are a Christian go-er, then other individuals, prisoners, pastors, converts, churches and countries around the globe will cause you to cry, rejoice, smile, pray, give and maybe move your location.

So then fellow Christian, where are you going this week?

The call to 'international business'

In Acts 16:11-16, we read a delightful story about Lydia. She was a business woman from Thyatira in Asia, but we are introduced to her when she is on a visit to the continent of Europe.

She may not have been involved in mission when she arrived in Philippi to sell her purple cloth, but she quickly became involved. She was willing to open up her home and share her life with those around her. I suspect it was a great surprise for Lydia to find herself involved in international mission. Many Christians in business today are also not aware of the opportunities they have for mission as they cross international boundaries.

Business personnel travelling around the world are making a growing contribution to the work of mission. Some live and set up businesses overseas which form links with the local community and provided employment for other expatriates and new converts. Others are based in the UK and during their short visits overseas can encourage the church, act as couriers for resources more available here and share their faith with international colleagues. Teams of Christian professional people have also been involved in advising governments and teaching at training seminars in some countries.

Paul worked during some of his travels in mission. One reason, he tells us, was to provide an example of integrity to new Christians (1 Thessalonians 3:7-8). Cross-cultural business may not be easy, but the work of mission rarely is!

The church in Thyatira is mentioned in Revelation 2. I think that the church probably benefited from what Lydia shared when she got home. Business personnel have various and sometimes unexpected opportunities overseas, but they can also be an encouragement and have lots to share when they come home.

Do you know Christians who travel overseas on business? Do they see themselves as involved in mission? Do you pray for them and support them in their mission opportunities?