

**AN INTRODUCTION  
TO THE  
STUDY OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS**

by

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**CHAPTER NINE -  
THE CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSIBILITY? -  
THE MISSIONARY CALL**

AS A MEMBER of the local Church, every Christian has a share in the responsibilities of the Church to missions. But there are some other responsibilities that are purely individual. In fact, each individual's participation in the missionary program of the Church will depend on his personal response to the appeal of CHRIST.

The Christian's greatest responsibility is to do just what Saul did on the way to Damascus, to say, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Until you take this step, it is useless to talk about any other. You can't ease a troubled conscience by offering to support a representative on the mission field if you ought to be there yourself. If you are not surrendered to go to the mission field for CHRIST, you are not surrendered to CHRIST!

But only a small part of those who do surrender will actually be sent. Not every volunteer is acceptable for this work. The requirements of missionary service are such that many of those who are willing to go will have to be ruled out. Still, it is the ones who have such a willing heart that CHRIST can use in every kind of Christian work. Many of our most effective Christian workers at home are those who once wanted to go out as missionaries but were prevented.

This brings up the matter of the missionary call.

**THE MISSIONARY CALL**

When a young person asks about the missionary call, he usually means, "How can I tell whether the Lord wants me on the foreign mission field?"

He may have some interest in Scriptural and philosophic definitions of a call, but it is the answer to this question that he really wants. It is this answer that concerns him, his life and his actions. He will listen patiently to our generalizations if we can make him see just how they apply to his particular case. Otherwise he will turn away in disappointment and perhaps wonder if we really know the answer. Or he may wonder if there is any such thing as being sure of the Lord's will in

the matter.

Perhaps his wondering is fully justified. I have heard explanations of the missionary call, and read others, that impressed me as being rationalizations. They seemed to be attempts to provide some sort of doctrinal basis for a course of action already taken, whose real explanation was only vaguely understood.

Sometimes the one doing the explaining has a fixed idea of what the missionary call ought to be. Then in the light of that idea he tries to view his own actions as a fulfillment of the call. He may have an uncomfortable feeling that his own call has not conformed to the set pattern. Yet he hesitates to acknowledge it, even to himself. After all, it is not an easy matter to analyze our own experience in retrospect and avoid reading into it some of the things we think should have been there.

There are other explanations of the call that, while they do touch certain important aspects, usually leave the young Christian still unsatisfied. "A need; a consciousness of that need; and an ability to fill that need" is perhaps as good a definition as one can put in so few words. Yet it seems to imply that human need alone is the call. It leaves out the Lord Himself and His relation to the one who is called.

Neither does it provide any basis for deciding which of many needs at home and abroad should have the prior claim. Even if we say, "Go where the need is greatest," the matter is still uncertain. Can we measure need just by the number of needy people? Are the savages of New Guinea more needy than the cultured Japanese? Are all foreign fields more needy than any home field?

Perhaps what we have to say may not succeed better than others in clarifying the matter. Yet it is a sincere attempt to treat the matter objectively, keeping in view the authority and the teachings of the Scriptures while acknowledging the validity and the value of Christian experience.

Before we can give a clear answer to the question, "What is the missionary call" there are some false ideas obstructing the way that we must remove. We don't know how some of these ideas began, but they have been repeated so often and are so little challenged that people accept them almost as if they were axiomatic.

First is the idea that we must have some special divine call to go beyond the borders of our own country as CHRIST's witnesses to the lost. That is, we may hear CHRIST's call to devote our life to Christian service, and so long as we don't leave the limits of the United States we may labor anywhere from Maine to California just as we see the need and find the opportunity. But let someone suggest to us that there is an even greater need, and perhaps an open door, just beyond the national boundary, and immediately we begin to talk about not having a "call" to foreign missionary service. It is as if we thought the boundaries of the nations were established by GOD and that a special divine passport must be issued - or rather, that a special divine command must be given, before we dare cross over to the other side with the Gospel. We don't hesitate to move three thousand miles from Miami to Seattle at the invitation of a Church; but to go a few hours across to Cuba we must first have a special "call"!

Merely to bring such an idea under scrutiny is to refute it. For where can we find any basis to

support it? Certainly not in the Scriptures. The Scriptures present the whole world as the field, with no division into "home" and "foreign" fields. Philip preached the Gospel in Samaria, and the refugees from Jerusalem planted the Church in Gentile Antioch, with no thought of waiting for a special call to those regions. The refugees were fleeing from the first wave of persecution, and wherever they went they spoke of the Saviour. The idea of a special divine call to minister beyond the borders of Judea and Galilee does not seem to have entered their heads. They were witnesses to everyone everywhere.

Of course those who first established the Church in Antioch were not what we would call today "full-time" workers. It may be well to look at those who took the leadership there later and gave full time to a Christian ministry.

First mentioned is Barnabas, who already had some prominence in the work in Jerusalem. It was the Jerusalem Church that sent Barnabas to Antioch. They had heard of the work there and apparently believed that Barnabas would be just the man to look into the situation and establish the new believers in the faith. Barnabas went, found a need for his services, and decided to stay.

But Barnabas saw that another man could be used there, too. He remembered Saul, whom he had first introduced to the believers in Jerusalem and who later had had to go home to Tarsus, in Asia Minor. We don't know what Saul was doing at the time, but Tarsus was not too far from Antioch. So Barnabas went there to get Saul and bring him to help out in the new Church.

We may well assume that both Barnabas and Saul waited on the Lord before agreeing to go to Antioch. But it is perfectly clear, and the Scriptures plainly state, that the initiative in both instances came from other men. The Jerusalem Church "sent" Barnabas, and Barnabas "brought" Saul. Not a word, not even a hint is given that any special divine call, any unusual spiritual experience was needed to overcome their reluctance to leave their own land as ministers of CHRIST. True, Barnabas was a native of Cyprus and Saul of Cilicia, but Antioch was still a foreign field to them both.

As for the other "prophets and teachers" in Antioch, **"Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch,"** it is evident that at least Lucius and Manaen were not from Antioch and so could be called foreign missionaries. But there is no indication of the way in which they had come into the work there. They may have been among the refugees. Or they may have been among the prophets mentioned in Acts 11:27 who came down from Jerusalem at the same time as Agabus. At any rate, the fact that they were ministering in a foreign field didn't call for any special comment.

In all the New Testament account, there is only one instance when a national or geographic boundary seemed to require a special call before the missionaries would decide to pass it. That was on Paul's second missionary journey, when he and his companions reached Troas. There they got a remarkable revelation of GOD's will that they should go on over into Europe.

This unusual experience, generally named the "Macedonian call," is often held to be the typical missionary call. Even some otherwise careful missionary writers and speakers have plainly called it such. They have tried to show how it applies to the situation young Christians face today, when they are confronted with the challenge of foreign missionary service. They

encourage young people to look for some such experience as Paul had there at Troas, before applying for missionary service. And when the experience does not come, the young people are confused and discouraged.

This is really the second of the false ideas that keeps us from a proper understanding of the missionary call. We need to realize that the "Macedonian Call" was positively not the missionary call! It wasn't even a typical call of any sort! It was an unusual experience, and all the more striking because it was so unusual. Perhaps it had to be striking to accomplish its purpose at that time and in the hearts of those men.

It is not at all unreasonable to suppose that on other occasions, even today, GOD may make use of such unusual means to call men to one task or another. Yet in the New Testament this case was the exception rather than the rule. And in Christian experience today such occurrences are still exceptional.

We have said that the "Macedonian call" was not the missionary call. Even a superficial reading of the preceding chapters in the Acts should make this abundantly clear. Paul was already a missionary; he had been a missionary for some years. Actually this incident took place in the midst of his second great missionary tour. He was already in a foreign land when the vision came. And it came, not to call him and his companions to missionary service, but to call them to extend their operations beyond Asia Minor to Europe. If we can remove from our thinking the idea that this was a typical call to foreign missionary service, we shall clear the way for a better understanding of what such a call really is.

A third misunderstanding that needs to be cleared up is the notion that the missionary call necessarily is associated with some definite field. Some young people are greatly perturbed because, while they are sure that the Lord wants them to go forth as foreign missionaries, they find it difficult to know precisely to what field they should go. Here again the common idea is inconsistent with the Scriptural examples.

When Barnabas and Saul started out on their first missionary journey together, they knew the work they were to do, for the SPIRIT had said to the Church, "**Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.**" But it is doubtful that they knew just in what places they were to carry on this work. Note carefully their itinerary. Cyprus was nearby, it was unevangelized, and it was the homeland of Barnabas. So it was natural that they should go there first. From western Cyprus the next logical step was the mainland of Asia Minor. Here the evangelization continued until they reached the border of Paul's own province of Cilicia. Presumably he had carried on work there before going to Antioch. To establish better the work they had done, they now retraced their steps and finally returned to Antioch with their mission completed. Maybe the trip had been planned ahead of time, but various details, such as Mark's leaving them when they entered Asia Minor, seem to show otherwise.

But whether or not they knew just where they were going on that first trip, Paul certainly didn't know in advance the itinerary of his second journey. He started out to revisit the churches they had established before. But soon he was trying other doors. Finding some of them temporarily closed, he pushed on in the only forward direction that was open, until he reached Troas. From there, the Macedonian vision gave him a clear enough call to the next place. But Macedonia was

only a stepping-stone, for without any other vision Paul moved on westward and southward into Greece until he came to the city of Corinth.

On the return from Corinth, Paul visited the province of Asia. The Lord had forbidden him to preach there earlier on this same tour. He spent only a brief time there in the city of Ephesus, but later on he returned for a much more extended ministry.

Paul's great trip to Rome was not the result of any vision or special revelation. In writing to the brethren there before he went, he said that he had desired for many years to make the trip and see them. Since his apostolic ministry had now been completed where he was, he would soon be ready to visit Rome on his way to Spain (Romans 15:23).

So, as we review the career of the great missionary to the Gentiles, we see that he seldom enjoyed a special revelation to direct his movements. Only twice after his conversion do we hear of such an experience. Once was when the Lord told him to leave Jerusalem, since his mission was to be to the Gentiles (Acts 22:17-21). He was told to leave but wasn't told where to go. The other occasion was when he received the Macedonian vision. Here only the important initial step was revealed. In fact, he had only two alternatives - either to go on across to Europe or to go back along the road he had come. It was not a question of choice of field but a question of advance or consolidation. And the Lord directed advance.

To sum up: (1) a special divine call is not necessary to witness for CHRIST beyond the national border; (2) the striking vision that Paul received at Troas, the so-called "Macedonian call," was not his missionary call, nor is it typical of such a call; and (3) the call to missionary service is not necessarily associated with a definite field at home or abroad.

It might seem from this that we have completely ruled out the idea of a call. But this is not so. We have merely tried to clear the ground in order to construct a more Scriptural and sound doctrine of the missionary call. The call is not lacking, in fact it is fundamental. No one should go to any mission field without a sense of call if he expects to enjoy GOD's blessing on his ministry. But to wait or look for an experience that at best is quite unusual is to open the way for disappointment and frustration.

There are two aspects of the missionary call, one general and one particular. For clearness of thinking we usually do well to distinguish the two. We must recognize also that the first is fundamental to the second.

The **general** missionary call is synonymous with the "**great commission**." It is expressed in various ways: "**Go ye therefore and teach all nations . . . Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel . . . As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. . . Ye shall be witnesses unto me . . . unto the uttermost parts of the earth.**" But the message is the same. It is the call of CHRIST to those who follow Him to go out and witness for Him everywhere. It includes all of His disciples; not one is omitted from its scope. The Christian who fails to bear witness to his Saviour is disobedient to this call, which is meant for him.

This call is general because it includes all Christians as prospective missionaries. But it is general also because it includes all unbelievers as the missionary field. It is not a question of

home missions or foreign missions, of city missions or missions on the frontier. This is a call to be CHRIST's ambassadors to lost sinners without regard to the places where they may be found.

There is no use trying to talk about a special call to the foreign mission field until the matter of this general missionary call is settled. It is just as useless as it would be to discuss the call to missionary service before the issue of putting one's faith in the Saviour has been settled. It has been well said that a trip across the ocean doesn't make a missionary. But neither does failure to go abroad keep a man from being a missionary.

Lest you should be tempted to discount the importance of this general missionary call, take time to observe how similar it is to your call to salvation. In fact, if you look carefully through the New Testament you will find that the word "call" is most often used in connection with salvation rather than with service.

Note that the call to salvation is a general call issued to all sinners. It is a call to "**whosoever will.**" Occasionally the Lord speaks to an individual and says, "**Follow me**"; but usually His invitation is "**Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden.**" Wasn't that the kind of call you answered when you came to CHRIST to receive His salvation? Wasn't it a general invitation you accepted, but one that you realized was sincerely intended to include you? Did you wait for a special divine invitation, an audible voice to call out your name? Did you wait to be drafted?

Clearly the general call to salvation is enough when the sinner hears it and realizes it is meant for him. But the call is not complete, is not effectual, until the sinner responds "Lord, I believe!" In the same way the general call to witness for CHRIST is enough when the believer hears it and realizes that it is meant for him. But to make it effectual he too must say, "**Here am I, LORD; send me!**" When GOD calls and man responds, then the divine call is complete.

Actually, for foreign missionary service as for any other, it is not *essential* to have any other call than this general call. CHRIST's missionaries are those who have a deep and compelling sense of their obligation to obey His command and make known His salvation to all men.

Many missionaries are mentioned in the New Testament besides the apostles, some by name, as Titus and Apollos and Epaphras; and others anonymously, as the Thessalonian believers. But so far as we have information, the majority carried on their ministry in obedience to this general call. With the living CHRIST in their hearts, they were constrained to be His witnesses everywhere.

Still, there is an individual aspect to the call, and in some cases a separate individual call. We have spoken of the response to CHRIST's general commission. This of course is an individual response. No one can answer for another, not even a father for his son, much as he may want to. It is in this response that we see clearly the hand of the HOLY SPIRIT. He who opens the eyes of sinners to behold the Saviour and moves them to accept His invitation to receive life in Him, is the same one who illumines the understanding of the saints and opens their ears to the call to make the Saviour known in every land. The way in which He does this we may understand as little in the one case as in the other, but it is just as effectual. "**Whereas I was blind, now I see,**" may be all the testimony we can give. But it is enough.

It is in this individual aspect of the missionary call that we run into the question of fields of service. Shall it be the foreign field or the home field? If the foreign field, which one? Such questions are constantly asked and should be answered.

Hardly ever are they answered with a vision or some other such striking experience. But we shouldn't think that this is impossible. Still the normal way is otherwise.

In this matter friends may counsel and preachers exhort, and missionary speakers may even resort to scolding. But the final decision is between you and GOD. Sometimes, in order to see the matter in its proper relationships, we might do well to drop the word "call" and speak of this as a matter of guidance. There may be a special call, but more often the young Christian is simply waiting to be shown where he is to serve.

The general principles of guidance certainly apply here: a recognition of the need of guidance, a willingness to be led, a deliberate renunciation of self-interest, a close walk with GOD so as to be sensitive to His wishes, as well as a constant use of the Word of GOD and earnest prayer.

CHRIST's own command to "**look on the fields**" should lead us to contemplate their needs and feel the compassion that such needs should inspire. A careful study of the fields, such as William Carey made, may open the way for GOD's guidance. Listening to missionaries from various fields is helpful. At first it may seem confusing, because of the vastness of the task and the needs. But after a time it often happens that one of those fields begins to stand out in your consciousness as the place where GOD can use you to the greatest advantage.

Consider carefully the question whether you should serve CHRIST in the home country or on some foreign field. To think that unless GOD calls you specially to some foreign land you ought to take up work at home is the worst possible attitude to take. There are too many Christian workers who have drifted into some position in the homeland simply because they have not been called to anything else.

How do you dare to stand in any pulpit as a minister of CHRIST without the clear conviction that He has called you there? The call of the pulpit committee or of the Church is no substitute for CHRIST's call. What makes you think that it is any less necessary to feel an overpowering divine compulsion to give your life to a ministry in Middletown, U.S.A., than in a Congo forest? If a call is necessary for the one, it is just as necessary for the other.

Should you serve at home or abroad? Don't expect a satisfactory answer to this question until you have answered first a couple of others. Are you sure GOD wants you in full-time service for Him? Your answer to this question may mean service on the foreign field; it often does. But perhaps just as often the Lord calls a man to his ministry first, and perhaps even gives him a time of service at home, before He sends him abroad as His messenger to other peoples. At all events it is important to know whether you should be set apart exclusively for Christian service.

Too many of us take it for granted that full consecration necessarily means going into full-time Christian ministry. Such an idea tends in the same direction as the idea held in the Middle Ages that for a really devout life one had to withdraw from the world and enter some monastery. It

may take out of the workaday world those very elements that are needed to keep it from ever increasing corruption. It fosters the all too commonly held notion that "business and religion don't mix." As a matter of fact, there is no good reason why a laborer or a businessman may not be as earnest a Christian witness and as truly spiritual as any minister. Many are.

But even if you are sure that the Lord wants you in fulltime service, there is still another question to be answered. Are you ready to surrender your own will to His and gladly do whatever He wants you to do? Such a surrender is not easy. Neither is it as complete oftentimes as we suppose at the moment. Yet, is it right to expect GOD to lead you to the field of His choice, when you have already determined in your own heart where you want to go? If you really want His guidance you have to be ready to put yourself in His hands and gladly follow His directions, wherever He may lead.

Does selfish ambition enter into your plans, the desire for recognition and praise from other Christians? It is better to please GOD than men; it is even more satisfying to your own soul. Are you afraid of privations, and do you shrink from a venture that means a radical change in your way of living and brings you into contact with strange, unfamiliar people and circumstances? Your Saviour Himself has promised to be with you all the days until the end - if you go! That promise is connected with the command to go!

On the other hand, there are some for whom other fields always appear greener than those close at home. There is for some a purely human attraction in strange lands and people. They need to ask themselves, "Can I be happy to stay at home and minister in an unromantic field, if that is where CHRIST wants me most?" For some the decision to stay is fully as difficult as for others the decision to go. But the call to stay may be just as definite and the results of obedience just as joyful.

Now if you have answered these two preliminary - questions in the affirmative, if you are sure the Lord wants you to dedicate your whole life to His service and are confident that your greatest desire is to fulfill His will, whatever that will may be and wherever it may lead, **the main question** becomes much easier to answer. Not that anyone can answer it for you. You should not accept their answers even when they urge them on you. This is between you and GOD. It is He who must guide you.

But it may be of help to know how at times He has led others. If the testimonies of those who have experienced salvation are honored of the Lord in leading others to an enjoyment of that same experience, then the testimonies of those whom the Lord has called and blessed in missionary service may be used in revealing GOD's ways of guidance to other puzzled young Christians.

We shall give some of these testimonies in the next chapter.

~ end of chapter 9 ~

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