

Missionary Marriage Issues: Not Called, But Willing

Mary said, “I feel like God is calling me to teach in an international Christian school overseas.”

“That’s wonderful, Mary” you exclaimed as you turned to her husband and said, “What about you, Bob?”

Bob replied, “I don’t have a missionary call, but I’m willing to go along so that Mary can obey God’s call.”

Though such conversations commonly occur today, they would have been quite meaningless a little over two hundred years ago when William and Dorothy Carey became missionaries. During the late eighteenth century, nearly everyone interpreted the “great commission” in the final chapters of Matthew and Mark as being given to the apostles who heard it and carried it out. That command was for them alone and did not apply to anyone since then.

It was William Carey and other English Baptists who began to reinterpret these passages in the 1780s. On May 12, 1792, his radical book, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, was advertised in the *Leicester Herald*. In that book he asked whether or not the Great Commission was still binding, surveyed the book of Acts, presented detailed data on the state of the world relative to the gospel, and countered objections to the missionary enterprise.

That book and William Carey’s life brought about major changes in the way Christians viewed people in other countries who were not likeminded. Today people around the globe commonly talk about having a missionary

call in which individuals feel they must go into another culture and tell the Good News.

Who is called?

This question has had a broad spectrum of answers during the last two centuries.

- No one. The Great Commission was given to the people who were there when Jesus spoke, and it applied only to them.
- Everyone. The Great Commission applies to everyone, even people today. Thus, everyone is responsible to spread the Good News to every people group.
- Only people who receive some kind of “call” from God. People who receive this special summons from God are to leave their culture and to spread the Good News as God has directed. Other people remain in their passport cultures as supporters.

Why is the “call” a marriage issue?

It is not an issue if no one is called or if everyone is called because everyone is the same. However, if or when one spouse feels called to leave the passport country to spread the Good News and the other sees no reason to leave home, this becomes an issue. If they stay at home, the first spouse is frustrated because he or she may feel guilty for not obeying God. If they go to another culture, the second spouse may resent it when he or she gets beyond “vacation mode” to the time when culture shock and the stress of living in another culture set in.

What does the Bible say about a call?

The Bible does not mention a specific “missionary call” as such, but it is helpful to

consider how the first people to serve cross-culturally in the book of Acts came to do so.

- An angel told Philip to go to a particular road (Acts 8:26).
- While Philip was on his way, the Spirit directed him to the chariot (Acts 8:29).
- As Saul (Paul) was traveling along a road, a light flashed around him, and Jesus told him to go into the city (Acts 9:3-6).
- In a vision the Lord told Ananias that he had chosen Saul (Paul) to go to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15).
- While they were worshiping and fasting, the Holy Spirit told the church in Antioch to set Saul (Paul) and Barnabas apart for the work to which God had called them (Acts 13:2).
- During the night Paul had a vision of a man who begged him to come and help (Acts 16:9).

Note the variety of times of day, settings, people involved, spiritual beings involved, senses involved, and so forth. God does not “call” people in any one way. He does so through many different means.

How are people called today?

Since there is disagreement about who is called and God calls in such a variety of ways, there is no generally accepted definition of how people are called. However, the following are often found in descriptions of one’s call.

- Following some crisis experience some people have an inner persuasion that God has chosen them for some particular purpose they feel compelled to fulfill.
- Church leaders, mentors, mission leaders, and peers who know persons well verify that these individuals are people God is likely to call into service, often

considering the attributes listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

- Often individuals can point to particular passages of Scripture that support their calls into cross-cultural ministry. God uses Scripture to affirm the call and guide them in decisions made after the call.
- Called people have ongoing ministries in the local church in evangelism, discipleship, education, counseling, or other such areas. People who do not do these things within their own culture are not likely to do them in another culture. The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.
- Preachers preach, teachers teach, and the called person has some idea of how he or she as a missionary will “mish.” They will know what they are to do.
- Called people are eager to prepare in terms of education and experience to fulfill their call. Paul went to Arabia for three years of preparation after his call and before his active ministry.
- Called people have a great concern over others being lost in sin. Though humanitarian service is good, the essence of missions is the salvation of the lost.
- Called people usually are called to some particular task, people group, place, and so forth rather than just seeing great needs in other places.

Of course, no one is perfect in all of these respects, but research has shown that people who have definite calls are much more likely to serve for a longer time than those who go for other reasons.

Are there false “calls”?

People have a variety of reasons for thinking they should become missionaries,

and some mistake these for a “call.” Here are some of those reasons.

- Earning God’s love. People who believe that they are not loved may think that sacrificing to become a missionary will win God’s approval.
- Penance. People feel guilty and try to pay for their sin by serving in difficult or dangerous places.
- Family pressure. Parents who feel guilty for not obeying their call may encourage their children to become missionaries.
- Travel. People who want to see the world or have adventures may seek these through missionary work.
- Going home. People who grew up overseas may be looking for a way to get “home” and find it through missions.
- Quotas. Some churches or mission agencies set goals to send a certain number of missionaries in the next year, and people may go to meet that “quota.”
- Meeting needs. Some people are concerned about meeting needs of poor people overseas and go on the basis of a purely humanitarian motive.

The list can go on and on, but people who go for these reasons often do not last long on the field. Many return home, but others remain and become “high maintenance,” taking up the time of those really called.

What can a couple do?

Making sure that both husband and wife have genuine calls before beginning missionary service is a good way to avoid this conflict and stress in their marriage. It may also prevent their causing problems in the missionary community in which they work.

Two misunderstandings are possible. First, the one who feels called may have a

“false” call, and after a brief period of time may become a casualty. Second, the one who does not feel called may have a genuine call and become an effective missionary. Thus, couples need to consider both of these.

The couple should examine carefully the “call” of the person who claims to have it. People who have the false calls mentioned above are not evil people trying to sabotage the missionary enterprise. Many of them are sincere in their desire to serve. They really do want to please God, to atone for their sins, to please their parents, and so forth down the list. However, when difficult times occur, their lack of a genuine call makes it impossible for them to weather the storm. Then they have problems themselves and/or become problems to others.

Likewise, people who do not believe they have a call may really have one and not recognize it. These people may have heard missionaries tell of their dramatic call to service or have read in Scripture about the calls of Philip or Paul. Though they may have prayed for missionaries and given to missions, they have never seen a vision, heard from an angel, or been blinded by a light and heard from Jesus as they traveled down the road. Their burden for the lost and compassion for those who have never heard may be part of God’s call.

Since people may not be conscious of some of their motives, talking with a counselor who knows about God’s call on people’s lives may be helpful. Talking with an understanding missionary who can help sort things out may be even more helpful. In no case should they go until both have the same call or one has a specific call to service and the other is called to serve wherever his or her spouse is called.

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