

HOW DO I KNOW I'M CALLED TO MISSIONS WITH THE IMB?

We do not serve overseas as missionaries because it was our own idea. God chooses our assignments for us. He decides what spiritual gifts He will give to each believer, and He decides what role each of us will play in His service (1 Corinthians 12:11, 18).

For this reason, churches and mission agencies look for evidence that a missionary candidate is called by God before appointing that candidate for missionary service. Furthermore, countless missionaries have testified to the role their sense of calling played in keeping them on the field when things got tough.

It is vitally important that anyone who wishes to serve as a missionary gain an accurate, biblically-grounded understanding of the call of God on their lives, and that churches and mission agencies see reliable evidence of that calling as well.

Every Believer is Called

However, in contemporary Christian culture, calling has taken on a highly subjective and even mystical sense. The problem, of course, is that subjective feelings can change and mystical impressions may or may not be from God. How can you know that God has called you into cross-cultural missions?

The place to go for understanding is the Bible. The words "call" and "calling" are

used hundreds of times in the New Testament. When God is the subject of the verb (that is, when God is the One doing the calling), the overwhelming majority of the verses refer to the call to salvation. God calls undeserving rebels to repent of their sin and believe the gospel. In this sense, every believer is called.

This is the foundation of everything else about calling in the Christian life. We did not take the initiative in our relationship with God. All of us owe our salvation completely to God. By the power of the Holy Spirit He called us to trust in Jesus Christ, and every other calling in the life of a Christian flows from this. (See, for example, Matthew 4:21, 9:13, Mark 2:17, 3:13, Luke 5:32, Acts 2:39, Romans 1:6-7, 8:28-30, 9:24, 11:29, 1 Corinthians 1:9, 1:24-26, Galatians 1:6, 1:15, 5:8, Ephesians 1:18, 4:1, 1 Thessalonians 2:12, 5:24, 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14, 1 Timothy 6:12, Hebrews 3:1, 9:15,)

This call to salvation comes as a package deal. When God calls people to Himself, He also calls them to live a holy life (Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:2, Ephesians 4:1, 1 Thessalonians 4:7, 2 Thessalonians 1:11, 2:13-14, 2 Timothy 1:9, 2:22, 1 Peter 1:14-16, 2 Peter 1:3-11). He calls them to freedom in Christ (Galatians 5:13). He calls them to their station and situation in life, so that things like marriage or singleness, location, and vocation are no longer seen as incidental or random, but as holy callings from God (1 Corinthians 7:17-24). He calls all believers to

suffer for the sake of Jesus (1 Peter 2:21; see also Philippians 1:29, 2 Timothy 3:12).

Finally, God calls all who are saved to His service (Matthew 4:21, Mark 1:20, Luke 22:26, Acts 13:1-2, Galatians 5:13, Hebrews 5:4, 1 Peter 4:10). We are to serve one another by exercising our spiritual gifts in the church (1 Corinthians 12:4-31), and we are to serve the lost by sharing the gospel with those around us (1 Corinthians 9:19) and by obeying the Great Commission to take the gospel to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:16-20, Luke 24:44-49, John 20:21, Acts 1:8). Every believer is called simultaneously to salvation, to holiness, to freedom, to station and situation in life, to suffering, and to service in the church and to the world.

This means that there is no such thing as an un-called Christian. Every believer, without exception, has been called to all the things listed above. The question, then, is not whether someone has been called to fulfill the Great Commission, but rather how and where they have been called to do so.

This is the essential starting point for any consideration of the subject of calling. All believers are called. Some send and some go overseas, but everyone goes to their neighbor, everyone gives to the support of missions, and everyone prays for the global advance of the gospel. Role and location may vary, but the call to obey the Great Commission does not. It extends to every Christian.

Internal Conviction & External Affirmation

So how do I know if I am supposed to go to another culture as *my* role in fulfilling the Great Commission? There is both an

internal and an external dimension to understanding your calling.

The internal dimension is based on the objective truths of the teaching of the word of God and the realities of the world. God's word tells us that every person in the world is a condemned sinner apart from Christ. There is no salvation apart from hearing (or reading, or seeing signed) the gospel and believing it. God has commanded His people to take the gospel into all the world, and He has a plan to redeem a people for Himself from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation on earth. This is what Scripture teaches. The reality of the world is that there are still billions of people who have never heard the gospel, and a huge percentage of those people live among people groups with no access to the gospel – which is the only message that can save them from eternal condemnation.

Every believer needs to wrestle with these two realities: the clear teaching of the word of God and the desperate state of the world. Every believer must diligently seek from God what his or her role should be in God's global mission. Every believer should be willing to go where the gospel is least known unless God directs otherwise. Those believers should also seriously examine what God has given them in life – health, gifts, obligations, interests, abilities, relationships, passions, and the like – and ask God how He wants them to steward these things for His glory and for the advance of His gospel. All these considerations, examined in deep prayer, give input to the internal dimension of calling.

There is also an external dimension to calling. No one should ever trust themselves alone to make any serious decision. Others

will see things in your life that you cannot see. In particular, it is the role of your local church to pray with you, question you, counsel you, and ultimately either affirm or redirect your sense of calling. These internal and external dimensions work together. Others in the church help you understand the word, and the world, and yourself, better. Together with the body of Christ in prayer, fasting, study, and worship (Acts 13:1-4), we are in the best position to be sent out by the Spirit and the church.

The sending agency has a role to play as well. Those seeking to serve as missionaries with the IMB go through a process of examination to make sure that there is a good fit between the candidate, the organization, and the specific job on the field. The IMB has concerns and requirements in areas such as health, finances, marriage or singleness, parenting, training and skill sets, church involvement, evangelism and discipleship experience, relationship skills, biblical knowledge, and theology.

The field team receiving the new missionary also needs the opportunity to speak into the decision. Based on these considerations, the IMB decides whether the fit with this organization, the fit with the specific field assignment, and the timing all line up.

Emotions Change, God's Word Doesn't

Different people are wired by God to process decisions in different ways. For some, the objective realities of the teaching of the word, the lostness of the world, the gifts and abilities God has given them, the providential circumstances of their lives, and

the affirmation of the church are accompanied by deep emotion as they commit themselves to pursue missionary service. Others are less emotional but more cognitive in concluding that this is what they should do at this point in their lives. Some come to this commitment in a single moment in time, and others reach that point through such a gradual process that they cannot identify exactly when it became a settled conviction. There is no one pattern everyone's experience should follow. However it happens, these two dimensions need to be in place: internal conviction driven by the word of God and the state of the world, and external affirmation from the body of Christ.

One final word. Feelings come and go. Every cross-cultural worker can testify that the feelings they experienced when they first embraced God's call on their life are not permanent. In the throes of culture shock, almost everyone starts to wonder if they heard God wrongly when they moved to their new home. At times like that, it is never safe to reach a unilateral conclusion that your calling has changed. The word of God is still the same, and so is the condition of the world. In moments of doubt, the input of the body of Christ where you live is invaluable. You need others to help you see honestly what is going on in your heart and mind. Just as no one should conclude that they are called to missions without the affirmation of their local church, so also no one should leave the field or move to another field of service without the affirmation of the body of Christ in the location where they live.