

WHAT IS A MISSIONARY?

This question comes up sometimes when debating the proper method of missionary activity. If the believer is ever to understand missions they need to understand the concept of missions and the missionary. These two words are not Bible words. They occur nowhere in the Bible. Does this make them an extra biblical concept? Not necessarily. The word “Trinity” does not occur in the Bible yet we have a theological/biblical understanding of what the word trinity means. The doctrine of the Trinity is a major position of biblical Christianity.

The word “mission” or “missions” has become a household word in American culture. For instance early in aviation history the word “mission” meant (and usually still does) “to dispatch a military aircraft on a military operation.” This idea was carried over to the modern space exploration program and the word has many uses. For instance the trip into outer space is called a “mission.” The people in NASA (National Aeronautical and Space Administration) call the work done in Houston in connection with the sending of an exploration crew to outer space and directing their work as “mission control.” Businesses have developed the idea of having a “mission statement” in order to communicate to the public what they are about and what they plan to do as a company in relation to the people of the public. Thus we find the word “mission” and “missions” has moved beyond the local church and the Bible to the commercial and operational world.

The idea of missions actually comes from the Latin verb “*missionem*” (noun *missio*) which means “the act of sending.” This idea is directly related linguistically to the Greek word στελλω (*stello*) which means “to send.” The word *apostle* is a combination of two words one of them being *stello*. The other is a preposition, απο (*apo*), which means “away” or “from.” The word *apo* in conjunction with *stello* gives us the English word “apostle.” Thus we could say that an “apostle” is literally a “sent one.” This is where the modern idea of missionary comes from.

If the reader will examine the use of this word *apostle* they will discover some interesting applications. The word “apostle” is widely used in the New Testament. There are three applications of this word used there. They all have to do with the matter of “sending.”

1. **The Apostle of God The Father.** Jesus Christ is referred to as an “apostle” in Hebrews 3:1 which says, “Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus.” We know that God “sent his only begotten son” (John 3:16-17) and the idea of sending is inherent in the word “apostle.” There are other passages to verify the *sending* of Jesus Christ by God the Father.¹ This discussion could be expanded, but the fact is clear that Jesus Christ is the “sent one” from God and the *Apostle* of the Father.
2. **The Apostles of Jesus Christ.** The word *apostle* is first used in Matthew 10:2 where the twelve “apostles” are named. Just three verses later (Matt. 10:5) Jesus sent the twelve out. He told them in Matthew 10:16, “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.” There are other passages which verify the “sending” of the twelve by the Lord Jesus Christ.² Much more could be said about the training aspect of the twelve but that is not the purpose of this study. The twelve were *sent* by the Lord Jesus Christ as the verse above indicates and thus apostles of the Son.
3. **The Apostles of the Holy Spirit/Church.** Most have never considered this aspect in the present day. There are those who have distorted the apostolic nature of the church/believer today. No one can be an *apostle* in the nature that the twelve were. The apostles of Jesus Christ were a select group and to enter that group and be identified with them one had to meet certain requirements. This is found in the process of replacing Judas by the early disciples of the church. They followed what was believed to be the proper and biblical responsibility of choosing someone to take the position held by Judas. They even quote Psalm 109:8 as justification for their action (see Acts 1:20). The requirements of their selection are found in Acts 1:21-25. No one alive today can qualify to be an Apostle of Jesus Christ in this sense. Yet one can be an *apostle* of the Holy Spirit.
 - a. **The Sending of the Holy Spirit.** Paul and Barnabas are both called “apostles” (Acts 14:14). They were *sent* by the church in Antioch

¹ John 3:17; 8:42; 10:36;17:3; Acts 3:26; Galatians 4:4; 1John 4:9-10.

² Mark 3:14; 6:6. Compare Luke 10:1ff where Jesus sent seventy out two by two. It is evident the band of disciples was growing, yet it is evident that Jesus was using the twelve in Luke 10 to train the others.

according to Acts 13:1-3. We must not neglect the role of the Holy Spirit in this process. Notice that in Acts 13:2 we read, “As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, **the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.**” [Emphasis added.] These men were *sent* not only by the church but **first** by the Holy Ghost. This is where we establish the idea of *missionary* and the role of *missions*. The role of the Holy Spirit in the church and believer today cannot be ignored.³ A *missionary* in the present day context is one sent by the Holy Spirit and commissioned by the local church. There must be a sending into the world which is initiated by the Holy Spirit and implemented by the local church.

- b. The Sending by The Local Church.** We do know that there is the responsibility of the New Testament believer to obey the command of Matthew 28:19-20 which says we are to “go” and “make disciples.” These are the two main verbs of this verse. This passage is central to the mission responsibility of the church. Romans 10:14-15 says, “¹⁴ How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? ¹⁵ And how shall they preach, except they be sent...” Sending is vital to the effectiveness of missions. The local church is to promote involvement in missions and develop the *missionary enterprise*. The church should exhort its member to the responsibility of missions as found in 2Corinthians 8:16-17. In addition the church is to develop and disseminate information as well as educate the church in the need of the lost world that does not have the truth. The church is to develop an acceptance and understanding of the responsibility of the church to finance the missionary endeavor and support the missionary and the mission (see 3John 5-7). The Christian today has the responsibility to participate in *missions* even though not everyone is to be a *missionary* in the biblical sense. We all have the burden of witnessing (Acts 1:8) and can participate in the missionary enterprise by praying and giving. The thesis of this article is to verify the **sending** aspect of the missionary.

³ Note the following verses: John 14:16-18; 16:7; Acts 1:8; 2:4; Romans 8:9-11; 1Corinthians 3:16; 6:19. The Holy Spirit has sent believers today.

The missionary and the mission must not be neglected by any believer. As we are all to witness according to Acts 1:8, some can witness in Jerusalem (the local responsibility), some can witness in Judea and Samaria (the national responsibility) and some can witness in the uttermost part of the earth (the worldwide/international responsibility).

The very word *apostle* (Strong's # G652) is curiously translated "messenger" in 2Corinthians 8:23. If you read that verse "messenger" refers to "the brethren." It is again translated "messenger" in Philippians 2:25. This gives a conclusion that cannot be overlooked, avoided or ignored. The believer today is a messenger of the Gospel of Jesus Christ where they are. A missionary is one sent and carrying a message, thus a messenger to the regions beyond (2Corinthians 10:16).

[1,386 words]