

RETHINKING THE TERM *MISSIONARY*: IS EVERY CHRISTIAN A MISSIONARY?

Cecil Stalnaker

Abstract

In order to emphasize the missionary nature of the local church, a new expression has emerged in recent years: “Every Christian a missionary.” Is this valid? Should local churches be instructing and claiming that their church members are all missionaries? Although many mission leaders and writers claim that the Bible never uses the word *missionary*, an examination of fifty-two different English versions of the Bible shows otherwise. In order to respond to the main question, a number of avenues are explored in this paper—the identity, definitions, and origin of the term *missionary*, including old and new paradigms and their analyses. In light of the research, a third or new paradigm is proposed, that of *commissionary*. Lastly, the answer to the question in the title, “Should the local church be teaching that every Christian is a missionary?” will be offered.

Is it true that every Christian is a missionary, or is it only those who leave the country for ministry? Church organizations and individuals have different ideas of what a missionary is. One Mormon organization defines a missionary as “Someone who leaves their FAMILY for a short time, so that others may be with their families for ETERNITY.”¹ A former Japanese missionary identifies missionaries as “anyone who increases by participation the

¹ Deseret Book Company, accessed November 24, 2015, https://deseretbook.com/p/missionary-definition-10x5-plaque-adams-company-91192?variant_id=4562.

concretization of the love of God in history.”² It is not uncommon for the average person in the pew, the Christian clergy, and cross-cultural missionaries to employ the term differently. Most of us have heard of the church that has the words embossed over its inner exit doors, “You are now entering your mission field.” Many of these churches claim that every person in their congregation is a missionary. Many cross-cultural missionaries that are on a home ministry assignment have heard someone voice the question, “Aren’t we all missionaries?” Confusion is often the consequence.

In light of the above, many questions emerge. What is a missionary? How would we define the term? Who is and who is not a missionary? Are people who go for two or three weeks to South Africa to serve the Lord missionaries? Is everyone in a local church a missionary, or is it just those people who go overseas? What about those who stay in the United States but minister cross-culturally to Buddhists and Muslims? Is the Christian who is trying to reach his neighborhood for Jesus a missionary?

This paper attempts to answer the question, “Should the local church be teaching that every Christian is a missionary?” In doing so, the following will be examined: two basic paradigms as related to the definition of a missionary and the arguments for each, the origin of the term *missionary*, the English Bible’s use of the term *missionary*, the concepts of apostle and missionary intentionality, and a new paradigm called *comissionary*.

IDENTITY AND DEFINITION OF THE MISSIONARY: TWO PARADIGMS

Historically, two main paradigms have emerged as to who and who is not a missionary. The first paradigm holds that every Christian is a missionary. The second generally says that missionaries are those who are specifically called by God and go cross-culturally, overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers.

Paradigm #1: Every Christian is a missionary.

Although the famous preacher Charles Spurgeon once declared, “Every Christian is either a missionary or an impostor,” this concept is considered to be the norm today by many church leaders. One person expressed the following:

If you preached to believers, you were called a “pastor.” If you preached to non-Christians in your own culture, you were an “evangelist.” If you needed a passport to get there, you were a “missionary.” If those distinctions were ever helpful, they certainly aren’t

² Kosuke Koyama, “What Makes a Missionary?” in *Mission Trends No. 1: Critical Issues in Mission Today*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (NY: Paulist Press, 1974), 28 in Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 222.

today. Not when “the nations” are moving in next door and going to school with your kids. Not when there is yet to be an expression of Christianity that is truly free from modern rational humanism. We’re all missionaries because there is no “home.” . . . The new paradigm is simple: all Christians are missionaries.³

Emergent church leader Brian McLaren has said, “Every Christian a missionary.”⁴ Other advocates, Alan Hirsch and Lance Ford, state it this way: “The reality is that all Christians are not only called to be missionaries but have already been sent to the people they are called to reach. Christians who earn a living as teachers, accountants, store clerks, mechanics, plumbers, doctors, whatever—you are a missionary!”⁵ “God wants to send people into their own neighborhoods and networks, suburbs and sports clubs, families and friends. If we grasp that vision, we are indeed missionaries.”⁶ Another church leader puts it this way, “All believers must see themselves as missionaries sent by Jesus Christ, sent into the world, and sent on a mission. If your Christian life doesn’t look like this, then you need to ask the hard question, ‘Am I a missionary or impostor?’”⁷

Although the following definitions were not written with the intent to defend the concept that every Christian is a missionary, they do appear to fit that purpose.

One Roman Catholic source describes a missionary as follows: “A person who is sent by Church authority to preach the Gospel, or help strengthen the faith already professed, among people in a given place or region. Essential to being a missionary, whether at home or abroad, is the desire to extend the Kingdom of Christ by preaching, teaching, or other means of evangelization and catechesis.”⁸

“A missionary is a prepared disciple whom God sends into the world with his resources to make disciples for the kingdom.”⁹

³ E. Goodman, “Everyone a Missionary?” posted May 19, 2009, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://missionsmisunderstood.com/2009/05/19/everyone-a-missionary/>.

⁴ Brian D. McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 142.

⁵ Alan Hirsch and Lance Ford, *Right Here, Right Now: Everyday Mission for Everyday People* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 63.

⁶ Kim Hammond and Darren Cronshaw, *Sentness: Six Postures of Missional Christians* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 55.

⁷ “Are All Christians Really Missionaries?” posted by Chris Pappalardo on August 29, 2013, accessed November 24, 2015, http://www.jdgreear.com/my_weblog/2013/08/are-all-christians-really-missionaries.html.

⁸ From the *Catholic Dictionary*, accessed November 24, 2015, <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary/index.cfm?id=34913>.

⁹ Ada Lum, *A Hitchhiker’s Guide to Missions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 21.

Another sees a missionary as merely one who reaches out to those who have not heard the gospel. A missionary is a person, either male or female, who “leaves his or her comfort zone to go to those who have never heard the good news.”¹⁰

The definition of New Testament scholar Eckward J. Schnabel is that “missionaries establish contact with non-Christians, they proclaim the news of Jesus the Messiah and Savior (proclamation, preaching, teaching, instruction), they lead people to faith in Jesus Christ (conversion, baptism), and they integrate the new believers into the local community of the followers of Jesus (Lord’s Supper, transformation of social and moral behavior, charity).”¹¹

Such definitions above involve crossing the sin barrier but have nothing to do with the crossing of linguistic, cultural, or geographic barriers.

The following support for this view is both scriptural and pragmatic.

- Biblically, all disciples of Jesus Christ have been sent into the world (Jn 20:21) and commissioned to make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19–20). Thus, “all of God’s people are sent; all of God’s people are commanded to go. There is no ‘special class of sent ones.’”¹²
- This paradigm eliminates the false distinction created by the older paradigm that only particular, God-chosen people are true missionaries. The old paradigm creates an elite class—distinguishing true missionaries from average Christians, which leads to false honor, esteem, and privilege of missionaries.
- This expression best fits the basic missionary nature of the local church—all are responsible to make disciples of all nations. In principle, every Christian is a missionary because all are fulfilling the apostolic nature of the church. “As a Christian, I must become a true successor of the apostles. I must bear their witness, believe their message, imitate their mission and ministry.”¹³
- The concept makes good sense because “all Christians must know, understand, and practice the Great Commission in their daily lives.”¹⁴
- By applying the term *missionary* to every Christian, all believers will be more apt to see that they are on the “mission field” in their own context and will make attempts to share the good news of Jesus Christ just as any missionary on the field does.

¹⁰ Nathan Rasmussen, “Who Really is an Apostle?” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (July 2013): 331. This writer maintains that an apostle is a missionary and a missionary is an apostle.

¹¹ Eckard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary* (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2008), 29.

¹² J. D. Greear, *Gaining by Losing* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 34.

¹³ Arthur F. Glasser, *Announcing the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 302 citing Hans Kung, *The Church* (NY: Sheed & Ward, 1967), 358.

¹⁴ Greg Wilton, “Are We All Missionaries?” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (April 2013): 150.

- All Christians are missionaries because none are at “home.” “Even if your ministry is to a group of people that you grew up with—a group that looks, talks, and acts just like you— you must recognize that your transformation in Christ necessarily makes you an outsider—a foreigner—to even your own culture. You can’t afford to assume that you are ministering in your own context. You don’t have a context in the world anymore.”¹⁵
- This paradigm is a much better fit for where the mission field is since missions in our modern world is more about going to people, including our nearby ethnically different neighbors and work colleagues, than about going to distant geographical places.

Paradigm #2: Missionaries are specific individuals who have been called by God to cross linguistic and/or cultural barriers for the sake of the gospel, often taking them across the seas.

Opposed to the first paradigm, one missionary internet site put it this way: “Frequently one hears it said that every Christian is a missionary—that is that every Christian ought to be a missionary. The little chorus puts it, ‘Be a missionary every day!’ It sounds good, but this kind of fuzzy thinking only clouds the issue. Every Christian cannot be a missionary, nor should be.”¹⁶

Missiologist George W. Peters identified a missionary as follows: “In the technical and traditional sense of the word, a missionary is a Christian missionary of the gospel of Jesus Christ, sent forth by the authority of the Lord and the church to cross national borders and/or cultural and religious lines in order to occupy new frontiers for Christ, to preach the gospel of redemption in Christ Jesus unto the salvation of people, to make disciples and to establishing and evangelizing Christian churches according to the command of Christ and the example of the apostles.”¹⁷

William David Taylor says that missionaries “are cross-cultural workers who serve within or without their national boundaries,” who “cross some kind of linguistic, cultural, or geographic barriers as authorized sent ones.” He maintains that the term *missionary* (equivalent to an apostolic messenger) is one who has been sent out by the authority of God and the church “on a special mission with a special message,” with a particular emphasis on “the Gentiles/nations.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Goodman, “Everyone a Missionary?”

¹⁶ The Traveling Team, accessed November 25, 2015, <http://www.thetravelingteam.org/articles/is-everyone-a-missionary>.

¹⁷ George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 248–249.

¹⁸ William David Taylor, “Missionary,” *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 644.

Missionaries are people “who have been called by God to full-time ministry of the Word and prayer (Ac 6:4), and who have crossed geographical and/or cultural boundaries (Ac 22:21) to preach the gospel in those areas of the world where Jesus Christ is largely, if not entirely, unknown (Ro 15:20).”¹⁹

In a more recent publication, a missionary is defined “as someone who intentionally crosses boundaries for the purpose of communicating the gospel to win people to Christ, discipling new believers, planting churches, training biblically qualified leaders, and ministering to the whole body of Christ in holistic ways.”²⁰

Although each of the above vary, the key element in this more traditional paradigm is that of crossing barriers—often linguistic but most commonly cultural. Those supporting this position provide the following biblical and practical reasons.

- Scripture shows that God selects and calls out of the church specific individuals that we would call missionaries. These are unique and different than the average Christian in the church. For example, the church at Antioch was called by the Holy Spirit to specifically set apart two individuals, Paul and Barnabas, for mission work (Ac 13:1–4). The others in the church did not go anywhere. In the Old Testament, there are numerous cases where God specifically called people to accomplish His mission: Abram (Ge 12:1–3), Moses (Ex 3:10, Isa 6:8–13), and Jonah (Jnh 1:1–2; 3:1). Thus, the missionary role is “unique, essential, and divinely appointed.”²¹
- Referring to Paul and Barnabas (Ac 13:4), the verb “sent out” refers uniquely to an authoritative missionary commissioning according to Greek scholars Arndt and Gingrich.²² Such action is indicative of authentic, selected, and unique missionaries.
- By distinguishing who is and who is not a missionary, an important distinction is made—identifying those who fulfill a specific calling and mission, especially to those in other cultures.
- By applying the term *missionary* to particular individuals, the focus can be kept on the unreached and the unevangelized, or least evangelized, demanding for the crossing of linguistic and cultural barriers, especially in going to the 10/40 window.

¹⁹ Hebert Kane, *Understanding Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 28.

²⁰ Zane Pratt, M. David Sills, and Jeff K. Walters, *Introduction to Global Missions* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2014), 3.

²¹ Ott and Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 225.

²² Arthur F. Glasser, *Announcing the Kingdom*, 303 citing William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 647.

“Look at it this way, if every Christian is already considered a missionary, then all can stay put where they are, and nobody needs to get up and go anywhere to preach the gospel. But if our only concern is to witness where we are, how will people in unevangelized areas ever hear the gospel? . . . Many Christian leaders have picked up Ralph Winter’s analysis of world need which states that beyond the one-fourth of the world’s population which is nominally Christian, only one-fourth of the world’s people are being somewhat effectively evangelized by cross cultural contact with Christians. The other half of the world’s people are not being reached effectively because they are isolated from any real contact with Christians. This is hardly fair to those who have never heard! So in reality the idea that every Christian is a missionary is a ‘cop out.’ It avoids responsibility for the about three billion people who are not being effectively evangelized today. It means direct disobedience to the ‘Go’ of the Great Commission!”²³

Making the distinction leads to serious missions and to better prepared missionaries, especially when it comes to the crossing of cultural and linguistic boundaries. This paradigm is important because it shows the true complexity of missions, which demands special expertise and training of the missionary if any effectiveness is to be obtained in cross-cultural missions.

- Only those who satisfy specific missionary qualifications (apostolic passion, spiritual giftedness, consistency of life, certain practical qualifications, and divine calling) can be considered to be missionaries.²⁴ Biblically, this paradigm recognizes the distinctions in God’s gifting and calling of believers.²⁵
- Common biblical sense upholds this concept of the missionary. David Hesselgrave has said that “although all followers of Christ are called to be *witnesses*, it is not true that all are called to be *missionaries*, any more than all are called to be pastors.”²⁶ Further, “as pastors and evangelists are specially called by God for a ministry of the word of God, just so with the missionary! A missionary is specially called of God for a

²³ The Travel Team, accessed December 2, 2015, <http://www.thetravelingteam.org/articles/is-everyone-a-missionary>.

²⁴ Eric E. Wright, *A Practical Theology of Missions* (Leonminster, UK: DayOne Publications, 2010), 166–167; David L. Frazier, *Mission Smart* (Memphis, TN: Equipping Servants International, 2014), 44–45.

²⁵ Ott and Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 224.

²⁶ David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 215. See also George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 249.

distinct ministry.”²⁷ Another has stated this in the following manner: “We are not all called to be apostles, we are not all equipped to be apostles—not everyone is an apostle, so let’s stop saying that everyone is a missionary!”²⁸ Similarly, Stephen Neill, the Scottish Anglican missionary and scholar has said that if everyone is a missionary, nobody is a missionary. The idea that all are missionaries does a “dis-service to the ‘missionary’ by universalizing its use. While all believers are witnesses and kingdom servants, not all are missionaries.”²⁹

- This paradigm is helpful in leading people away from “staying” rather than “going.” The paradigm of “every Christian a missionary” keeps people from going to difficult places, especially where barriers have to be crossed. In fact, it hinders making disciples of *all nations*. This paradigm really helps churches focus on the world and not just the neighborhood.
- The effort, energy, and budgets of churches that teach every Christian is a missionary are paltry, due in part to the fact that their focus is on local missions and not the unreached or least reached.
- Churches that promote the idea that “every Christian is a missionary” are more focused on growing big churches, rather than the making of disciples. Church growth is really their goal.

Although there are both strong and weak arguments for the two positions, it will be important to examine other factors to better answer the posed question. For instance, does the origin of the word *missionary* help to give an answer? What about the English Bible translations and their use of the term? Is a missionary the same as an apostle? What about missionary intentionality?

ORIGIN OF THE TERM *MISSIONARY*

Many believe that the actual term *missionary* emerged from the Jesuits. Around 1598, the Jesuits used the word *mission* when it sent some of its members overseas. These words *mission* and *missionary* are derived from the Latin language, specifically from *missionem* (the nominative being *missio*), which refers to the “act of sending” or from *mittere* (a noun of action from the past participle stem), meaning “to send.” The Latin also signifies “a dispatching” or “release.”³⁰ Jerome was commissioned in AD 382 by the bishop of Rome

²⁷ The Traveling Team, accessed November 25, 2015, <http://www.thetravelingteam.org/articles/is-everyone-a-missionary>.

²⁸ “Is Every Christian a Missionary? Yes and No,” posted April 15, 2013, accessed November 24, 2015, <http://www.joyfield.org/2013/04/is-every-christian-missionary-yes-and-no.html>.

²⁹ Taylor, *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, 645.

³⁰ *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed November 24, 2015, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=mission>.

to revise the Old Latin version of the Bible to what is known as the *Latin Vulgate*. Drawing probably on the European type of Latin, he revised the gospels.³¹ He translated the words of Jesus in John 20:21, a key verse related to the missionary, as “*dixit ergo eis iterum pax vobis sicut misit me Pater et ego mitto vos*,” that is, “Peace be to you. As the Father hath sent me, I also send you.”³² John 20:21, in the Greek New Testament, employs *apostello* (ἀποστέλλω) and *pempo* (πέμπω) where the Latin equivalent is *misit* and *mitto*. The meaning of both the Latin and Greek contain the sense of “send” or “sending,” but the translation from the Latin does not help in answering the principal question.

THE ENGLISH BIBLE’S EMPLOYMENT OF “MISSIONARY”

Does the use of the word *missionary* in English Bibles aid in answering the question of who is a missionary? Some have stated that the word *missionary* never occurs in the Bible. However, this is not quite accurate, for it does occur in some English Bibles,³³ with and without a Greek basis.

Of the fifty-two English versions of the Bible that were examined by the writer,³⁴ just nine of the versions contained the term *missionary*.³⁵ Table 1

³¹ William L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 336.

³² *Latin Vulgate*, accessed November 24, 2015, <http://www.latinvulgate.com/lv/verse.aspx?t=1&b=4&c=20>.

³³ This paper is based on the writer’s examination of fifty-two English versions of the Bible found at the website of Bible Gateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/>.

³⁴ The following forty-four English versions of the Bible did not use the word *missionary*: *New King James*, *21st Century King James*, *American Standard Version*, *BRG Bible*, *Common English Bible*, *Complete Jewish Bible*, *Contemporary English Version*, *Darby Translation*, *Disciples’ Literal New Testament*, *Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition*, *Easy-to-Read Version*, *English Standard*, *English Standard Version Anglicized*, *Expanded Bible*, *1599 Geneva Bible*, *Good News Translation*, *Holman Christian Standard Bible*, *International Children’s Bible*, *International Standard Version*, *J. B. Phillips New Testament*, *Jubilee Bible 2000*, *King James Version*, *Authorized King James Version*, *Lexham English Bible*, *Mounce Reverse-Interlinear New Testament*, *New American Bible (Revised Edition)*, *New American Standard Bible*, *New Century Version*, *New English Translation*, *New International Reader’s Version*, *New International Version*, *New King James Version*, *New Living Translation*, *New Revised Standard Version*, *New Revised Standard Version Anglicized*, *New Revised Standard Anglicized Catholic Version*, *New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition*, *Orthodox Jewish Bible*, *Revised Standard Version*, *Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition*, *The Voice*, *World English Bible*, *Worldwide English (New Testament)*, *Wycliffe Bible*, *Young’s Literal Translation*.

³⁵ The following nine English versions of the Bible contained the word *missionary*: *The Amplified Bible* (2x), *New Life Translation* (1x), *The Expanded Bible* (1x), *God’s Word Translation* (2x), *The Living Bible* (11x), *The Message* (1x), *Names of God Bible* (2x), *New Life Version* (20x), and *New Life Version Amplified* (1x).

TABLE 1

Term *Missionary* Employed Without Greek Language Equivalent

Reference	Bible Version	Insertion Comments
Acts 16:3	<i>Amplified Bible</i> <i>New Life Translation</i> <i>New Life Version Amplified Bible</i> <i>New Life Version</i>	The term <i>missionary</i> is employed to describe Timothy.
John 7:35	<i>Living Bible</i>	Jesus is identified as a “missionary” by the officers sent to arrest him.
1 Corinthians 9:4	<i>Expanded Bible</i> <i>The Message</i>	Speaks of “missionary work.” Speaks of “missionary assignments.”

notes the English versions where the word *missionary* was inserted into the biblical text but without any Greek New Testament word. The *New Life Version*, for example, translates Acts 16:3 as “Paul wanted Timothy to go with him as a missionary,” yet there is no word in the Greek that represents the word *missionary*. The word is merely inserted in the text, attempting to identify Timothy as a missionary.

Table 2 shows the various English translations that actually translate a Greek term as “missionary.” However, there are only two English versions, *The Living Bible* and *New Life Version*, that carry this translation of the Greek word *apostolos*, meaning apostle, as missionary.

Based on an examination of the fifty-two English Bible translations, outside of the original twelve disciples, there are just five individuals who are given the title of “missionary”—Timothy,³⁶ Philip,³⁷ Paul,³⁸ Peter,³⁹ and Matthias⁴⁰ (who replaced Judas). Of the nineteen individuals who were Paul’s travel companions, only one of these is called a “missionary” in these fifty-two versions, and that is Timothy.⁴¹ Paul’s travel companions are rather called “fellow-worker,” “fellow-soldier,” “helper,” “servant,” “fellow-prisoner,” “partner,” and so forth. None of these were called “missionaries.”

In reality, the English Bible employment of the term *missionary* does not help in answering the posed question since the English translations provide no consistency. Even those who traveled with Paul were not classified as missionaries.

³⁶ Acts 16:3—*Amplified Bible*, *Amplified Bible-Classic Edition*, and *New Life Version*.

³⁷ Acts 21:8—*God’s Word Translation* and *Names of God Bible*.

³⁸ Prime example is Romans 1:1 in the *Living Bible* and the *New Life Version*.

³⁹ 1 Peter 1:1—*Living Bible* and *New Life Version*.

⁴⁰ Acts 1:23 with 1:25—*New Life Version*.

⁴¹ The following traveling companions of Paul not labeled with the term *missionary* are Aquilla, Aristarchus, Barnabas, Epaphras, Gaius, Justus, Luke, Mark, Onesimus, Philemon, Priscilla, Sedundus, Silas, Sopater, Tertius, Titus, Trophimus, and Tychicus.

TABLE 2

Greek Word Translation as “Missionary”

Reference	Bible Version	Translation Comments
Acts 21:8	<i>God’s Word Translation Names of God Bible</i>	The word <i>missionary</i> is the translation of the Greek term for evangelist (<i>euangelistes</i> , εὐαγγελιστής) in its identity of Philip.
2 Timothy 4:5	<i>God’s Word Translation Names of God Bible</i>	The word <i>missionary</i> is the translation of the Greek term for evangelist (<i>euangelistes</i> , εὐαγγελιστής) in its identity of Timothy. The translation is “do the work of a missionary.”
Romans 1:1 1 Corinthians 1:1 Galatians 1:1 1 Timothy 1:1; 2:7 2 Timothy 1:1, 11 1 Peter 1:1 2 Peter 1:1	<i>The Living Bible New Life Version</i>	The Greek word <i>apostolos</i> (ἀπόστολος) has been translated by the term <i>missionary</i> , which applies to Paul and Peter.
Romans 11:13 1 Corinthians 9:1, 2; 15:9 2 Corinthians 1:1; 12:12 Ephesians 1:1 Colossians 1:1 Titus 1:1	<i>New Life Version</i>	The Greek word <i>apostolos</i> (ἀπόστολος) has been translated by the term <i>missionary</i> . All of the references relate to Paul.
Romans 15:16	<i>New Life Version</i>	Missionary is the translation of the Greek word <i>leitourgos</i> (leitourgos), which is normally translated “minister.”
Acts 1:25	<i>New Life Version</i>	Translation of the word <i>apostole</i> (ἀπόστολη), apostleship is “missionary.” The reference is to Judas.

THE CONCEPT OF APOSTLE

Does the apostolic concept help in answering the question? Some missionaries, missionaries, and churches equate the term *missionary* with that of an apostle.⁴² Others refine it by likening it to an apostolic messenger.⁴³ The

⁴² See for instance Steve Bern, *Well Sent* (Fort Washington, PA: CLC Publications, 2015), 53; Harold E. Dollar, “Apostle, Apostles,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 73.

⁴³ Taylor, *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, 644.

noun term *apostle*, *apostolos* (ἀπόστολος), occurs seventy-nine times in the New Testament. By the time of the New Testament, this term signified the sending of someone who had been given authority to deliver a message or carry out a mission, kind of like a person who has been sent to a country as an ambassador or envoy.⁴⁴ Biblically, this would refer to those appointed, authoritatively sent, and commissioned for making disciples of all nations. Interestingly, Barnabas is not labeled a missionary in the English Bible translations, but he is identified as an apostle in some of them. He had been set apart by the Holy Spirit and authoritatively sent by the church at Antioch along with Paul.

Just about every time the Greek word for *apostle* is used, a reference to those that the Lord Jesus had personally appointed is made—the twelve and Paul. The few outside references relate to Jesus (Heb 3:1), Barnabas (Ac 14:14), Epaphraditus (Php 2:25), Silvanus (1Th 1:1 with 2:6), and others that remain unnamed (2Co 8:23). However, the unnamed carry a unique title, “apostles of the churches” (ἀπόστολοι ἐκκλησιῶν). Even though the Greek word is clearly *apostle*, most English translations do not translate it as such.⁴⁵ The majority employs the term *messengers*, and a few use *delegates*, *representatives*, and *emissaries*. Although some may object that these renderings do not adequately convey the idea of the Greek New Testament, which is “apostles of the churches,”⁴⁶ they may be the best terms to describe what many of these individuals actually did. For example, people like Timothy, Epaphras, Erastus, and Mark, who traveled with Paul, did assist him in the ministry but may not have actually been sent with apostolic authority like Paul and Barnabas. They were merely considered assistants to the apostles. Thus, they may not have been apostolic in the true sense of the term.

To equate apostle and missionary is misleading for two main reasons. First, the apostles were unique since they were personally called by Jesus (Lk 6:13). He met and traveled with them throughout his earthly ministry (Lk 24:36ff; Ac 1:3). One of the unique factors that qualified an individual as an apostle of Jesus Christ was that the person must have been “a witness to his resurrection” (Ac 1:22). These were “the apostles of the Lamb” (Rev 21:14).

Second, apostles in the New Testament, for the most part, had an authority that was equivalent to prophets in the Old Testament. Old Testament prophets spoke and wrote in the name of God, speaking and writing the very words of God. The apostles of the New Testament carried divine authority like the prophets of the Old Testament. For example, the apostle Peter calls on believers to remember “the command of the Lord and Savior through your apostles” (2Pe 3:2). In lying to the apostles, Ananias was

⁴⁴ Hesslegrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 216.

⁴⁵ Only seven of the fifty-three English versions translated the *apostolos* as apostle.

⁴⁶ Hesslegrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 217.

doing so to the Holy Spirit (Ac 5:3). Their words were divinely authoritative in an absolute sense. Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, their written words became divine Scripture. After Pentecost, the new believers devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching (Ac 2:42), thus recognizing their authority. "To disobey or disbelieve them was to disbelieve or disobey God."⁴⁷ Apostolic authority was also demonstrated when the apostles commissioned the seven "deacons" (Ac 6:6) in the Jerusalem church and confirmed the breakthrough decision in Acts 15 related to the salvation of the Gentiles. Needless to say, it would be very difficult to equate any modern day missionary with an apostle of the New Testament era,⁴⁸ except possibly as an "apostle of the church." However, that, too, brings confusion and seems inappropriate and unhelpful to the local church.

From a historical perspective, "no major leader in the history of the church—not Athanasius or Augustine, not Luther or Calvin, not Wesley or Whitefield—has taken to himself the title of 'apostle' or let himself be called an apostle."⁴⁹ This would also be true for the great missionaries of the past—Patrick, Columba, Boniface, John Eliott, David Brainerd, William Carey, Adoniram Judson, Alexander Duff, Robert Moffett, David Livingston, Mary Slessor, Hudson Taylor, Amy Carmichael, C. T. Studd, Samuel Zwemer, William Cameron Townsend, and so forth. None were appointed apostles. Thus, it would be both biblically and historically difficult to conclude that there are missionaries or Christian leaders today who could be truly classified as apostles. Missionaries, yes; apostles, no.

THE CONCEPT OF MISSIONARY INTENTIONALITY

In answering the posed question: "Should local churches be teaching that every Christian is a missionary?" one other major factor must be seriously considered—that of missionary intentionality.

It seems unrealistic to consider someone a missionary unless s/he has grasped the idea that s/he has been sent and commissioned by the Lord to make disciples of all nations. Jesus has indeed "sent" and "commissioned" his church to make disciples of all nations. However, this is not a reality for many Christians. An extensive study carried out in Europe by EMRG—

⁴⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 906.

⁴⁸ The apostle Paul, although not of the original twelve, appears to meet the criteria of an apostle in the same sense of the twelve apostles since he was personally selected by Jesus (Ac 9:5–6; 26:15–18), and he saw the Lord after his resurrection (1Co 9:1; 15:7–9). In addition, it appears that Barnabas was considered an apostle like Paul (Ac 14:14), and it is implied that James the brother of Jesus (not one of the twelve apostles) was also an apostle like Paul, according to Galatians 1:19. Paul was the last of the appointed apostles.

⁴⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 911.

a strategy research group for church multiplication—found that 72.7% of Europeans identified with Christianity. Sadly to say, a miniscule 4.12% of them have any concern about the spiritual condition of those near to them—friends and neighbors.⁵⁰ A study carried out by the Barna Group in the United States found that although more than three-fourths of Christians believe that they are to share their faith in Christ with others, only 52% did so in the last year.⁵¹ Of course, this means that 25% did not even see the necessity of sharing the gospel. In another study, 80% of Christians believe that they have a responsibility to share their faith with others, yet 61% had not done so in the last six months.⁵² Thus, how can it be said that every Christian is a missionary if they do not “go” in obedience to their sending and commissioning?

Frankly, it is difficult to imagine any Christian who does not intentionally make the long-term effort to share the gospel with people to be considered a “missionary.” Intentionality is essential to being a missionary. Practically, missionaries have a recognized mission field, goals, and plans to make disciples no matter if nearby or across the seas. Of course, this is nearly impossible without some type of long-term commitment. Is it realistic to go, baptize, and teach disciples to obey the teachings of Jesus in a few weeks?

Missionaries intentionally go, living out their “sentness” and commissioning. If not, they have either erased from their memory, ignored, disregarded, or disobeyed what Jesus sent them to do. Missionaries intentionally and purposefully leave their personal comfort zones for the sake of the gospel. “We are to take the message of the gospel to the whole world. It’s not something we *might* do; it’s something we *must* do. It’s not an option; it’s an obligation.”⁵³ However, many seem to see it as an option. Instead of accomplishing the Great Commission, they practice the “Great Omission.” Therefore, a person really cannot be called a missionary if s/he does not see him/herself as sent and commissioned. Jesus “sends each of us somewhere, to some group, to make disciples of those who don’t know him.”⁵⁴ Although space does not permit, it also goes without saying that the local church is involved in recognizing the person’s sending and/or commissioning.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ “European Spiritual Climate: Top-line Report,” January 4, 2006, submitted by S. Scott Friderich for EMRG, 1, pdf file.

⁵¹ Barna Group, “Is Evangelism Going Out of Style,” report December 17, 2013, accessed December 3, 2015, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/648-is-evangelism-going-out-of-style#.VmDtNpZdHpA>.

⁵² Jon D. Wilke, “Churchgoers Believe in Sharing Faith, Most Never Do,” LifeWay study, accessed December 3, 2015, <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/research-survey-sharing-christ-2012>.

⁵³ Steve Bern, *Well Sent* (Fort Washington, PA: CLC Publications, 2015), 51.

⁵⁴ J. D. Greear, *Gaining by Losing* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 34.

⁵⁵ For example, see Acts 13:1-4, 15:22-23; Philippians 4:18; 3 John 8.

In reality, the response to the posed question is, no. Some Christians, but not all, can be considered missionaries.

A NEW PARADIGM: COMMISSIONARY

Although these two above paradigms serve good purposes, should we not consider a third paradigm, that of “commissionary?”⁵⁶ Such a neologism makes good sense since it arises from the Lord’s teaching of “The Great Commission.”⁵⁷ Although the origin of the expression is unknown,⁵⁸ it may be the best way to identify those who are messengers of the gospel, whether they cross cultures or not. The term truly identifies those who take on the personal responsibility for making disciples of all nations. Some of them would certainly cross cultural and linguistic barriers, while others cross no barriers (except the sin barrier) in walking across the street to reach out to their neighbor. There are some good reasons for using “commissionary” rather than “missionary.”

First, this paradigm avoids the confusion of the identity of who is and who is not a missionary, eliminating much of the debate that surrounds the term *missionary*. No distinction needs to be drawn, for all are to make disciples whether crossing cultures or not.

Second, and as mentioned, the expression *commissionary* corresponds well with the Great Commission, for all Christians have been sent and commissioned. Jesus clearly said to his disciples, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (Jn 20:21). We know from the perfect tense which is expressed by the translation “has sent” (of *apostello*) that the sending by the Father did not end when Jesus ascended to the Father. It indicates an action where the effects continue. “The Son’s sending by the Father is still continuing in the Son’s sending of His followers.”⁵⁹ Thus, the Father sent Jesus. Jesus sends his disciples. Such sending flows to the church of every generation, which is ongoing.

Not only have those who follow Jesus been sent, but they also have been “commissioned” by him. Matthew 28:19–20 states, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son

⁵⁶ The writer was first introduced to the term *commissionary* through an EMQ article by Greg Wilton, “Are We All Missionaries?” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (April 2013): 148–154.

⁵⁷ This expression encompasses Matthew 28:18–20, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:44–49, John 20:21, and Acts 1:8.

⁵⁸ Some would attribute it to Pope Paul III in 1537. Others say that it might have come from Dutch missionary Justinian von Welz (1621–88), but that it was Hudson Taylor who popularized it (“Great Commission,” *Wikipedia*, accessed December 10, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Commission).

⁵⁹ W. Edward Glenny, “The Great Commission” in *Missions in a New Millennium*, eds. W. Edward Glenny and William H. Smallman (Grand Rapids: Kregel Books, 2000), 110.

and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Such a mandate involves exercising the Lord’s authority for, in behalf of, and in place of him to accomplish the task of disciple making. It was Matthew’s intent “to provide guidance to a community in crisis on how it should understand its calling and mission.”⁶⁰ “The task given by Jesus to the Church through the disciples authorizes them to carry the gospel everywhere so that all peoples might have the opportunity to believe on Jesus as their Savior and become life-long followers of him.”⁶¹ The church of Jesus Christ is still under the same commission.

Third, the term *commissionary* may be a better term to use than *missionary* in light of the broad spectrum of the mission field. Because “missionary” is often associated with passports, crossing cultures, learning new languages, and travelling to new world locations, the term *commissionary* fits well with what is described as the mission field in Acts 1:8. Accordingly, the mission field is culturally and geographically near (Jerusalem and Judea), somewhat distant culturally and possibly linguistically (Samaria), or really far geographically, culturally, and linguistically (remotest parts of the earth). The mission field is both here and there.

In addition, Acts 1:8 presents a focus on the world that avoids the notion that one area of the world is more important than another. The passage “presents the expansion of the Christian witness from the center of Judaism to the center of the Roman Empire, from the mission to Palestinian Jews to the mission to Jews and Gentiles of the diaspora”⁶² and is not to be understood and interpreted sequentially. The fact that the verse uses the Greek *kai* (καί) four times, separating the geographical areas, appears to impress upon us that all geographical locations are to be an outreach focus simultaneously. The passage does not say, “be witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea, then Samaria, then to the end of the earth.” Thus, churches are not necessarily to give priority to their local Jerusalem and then only to other places in the world according to Acts 1:8. The focus is the world. It avoids the imbalance of focusing entirely on places such as the 10/40 window or on a focus on the local community only. A one or the other approach does not honor and respect the Lord’s teaching that “all” peoples are to be reached, whether they be near or far. However, priority seems to become prominent if specific people groups remain neglected in light of those reached.⁶³

⁶⁰ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 57.

⁶¹ Marvin J. Newell, *Commissioned: What Jesus Wants You to Know as You Go* (n.p.: ChurchSmart Resources, 2001), 16

⁶² E. Earle Ellis, “The End of the Earth (Acts 1:8),” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 1 (January 1, 1991): 123.

⁶³ We must take seriously “access to the gospel,” for many places in the world still have no Bible, no gospel preaching churches, no Christian radio programs, and no Christian literature. Thus, there is an urgency in light of the needs in the world.

Fourth, and closely linked to the third point, is that the term *missionary* corresponds well with the concept of ethnic people groups. We must remember that missions is all about making disciples of *panta ta ethne*, which is found in all nations. The more important and strategic question to ask is not, “What country are you going to?” but “To what people group are you going to reach out?” Formerly, it was assumed that missionaries went to foreign countries to reach out to unreached people groups, but this has significantly changed in the last fifty years. Today, hundreds of ethnic people groups can be found in the most unlikely places—Los Angeles, New York, Amsterdam, Brussels, Oslo, Cologne, and so forth. Many unreached people groups are found in the backyard of western countries. Europe, for example, contains 382 unreached people groups, and the United States has 59.⁶⁴ Although it might be somewhat an exaggeration, there is certainly some truth to the idea that “God is at work in the world, shaking countries up, scattering people of the world to every corner of the globe. Geopolitical and water boundaries are not crucially important in missions anymore.”⁶⁵ Geography is certainly still important, but it is a reality that everyday Christians might be able to go next door to reach someone from an unreached people group. However, it may be that some of these people, even living next door, are not reachable unless cultural and linguistic barriers are crossed. The greater the cultural and linguistic barrier, the more demanding the disciple-making task. In any case, the term *missionary* is well suited for both distant as well as near unreached people groups.

CONCLUSION

In summary, “Should the local church be teaching that every Christian is a missionary?” The response is, no. First, it must be said that the reasons behind each of the paradigms appear to have a logical sense, yet they do provide a defining answer to our question. Second, the usage of the term *missionary* in English Bibles is not consistent and is not helpful in responding to the question. Further, missionaries cannot be equated with apostles in the true sense of the term. Although the expression *missionary* is a better fit for what is happening in missions today, it, too, does not solve the problem. However, it does lead away from confusion related to geography and rightly focuses on the Great Commission. Whether a person is called a “missionary” or a “commissionary,” the crucial element in answering the question is the intentionality of the missionary. Do Christians obey their “sentness” and commissioning? Does their local church send them out in

⁶⁴ Jason Mardryk, *Operation World*, 7th Edition (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica Publishing, 2010), 73, 42.

⁶⁵ David L. Frazier, *MissionSmart* (Memphis, TN: Equipping Servants International, 2014), 48.

recognition of the Lord's sending and commissioning? To where do they go? What is their disciple-making plan? Otherwise stated, missionaries (or missionaries) willingly submit to being sent and commissioned by the Lord. The local church recognizes this, and they intentionally go to their specific mission field, whether near or far, with goals and plans for disciple making. These factors define who is and who is not a missionary in our modern world.

About the Author

Cecil Stalnaker was chair and is professor emeritus of Intercultural Studies and Practical Ministries at Tyndale Theological Seminary, the Netherlands. He serves as the West Coast mobilizer for Greater Europe Mission. He has MDiv and ThM degrees from Talbot School of Theology, an MA from Fuller Theological Seminary in missiology, and a PhD from the *Evangelische Theologische Faculteit* (Heverlee/Leuven, Belgium) with a specialization in missiology. He served for thirty-four years as a field missionary in French-speaking Belgium and the Netherlands. He can be reached at cecil.stalnaker@gmail.com.