

General Editors

MATTHEW BENNETT & JOSHUA BOWMAN

A stylized world map in shades of tan and beige, overlaid with a dashed line representing a travel path. A white location pin icon is positioned over the word 'GO' in the title.

BEFORE YOU GO

Wisdom from
10 Men

ON SERVING INTERNATIONALLY



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From Matt:

To Emily—I'm always riding your coattails.

From Josh:

To Wade Coker—my first team leader who showed me the ropes.

Acknowledgments

AS THIS PROJECT has come together, we have been consistently blown away by the willingness of the various contributors to share their wisdom, allow us to poke and prod their chapters, and to put together some incredible chapters. We want to kick this book off with an acknowledgment of our gratitude for the men who wrote these chapters and made this book what it is. We believe that their contributions have really made this a valuable resource for folks preparing to head to the mission field. As such, we believe the Lord is going to use their words and wisdom to expand the impact of the gospel all over the globe. Thank you gentlemen.

We also want to make sure to thank our wives whose efforts in the companion volume gave birth to this current volume. Thank you for the idea for this type of book, Emily, and thank you Amy for your contribution to the companion volume. This book exists because you paved the way.

Finally, we wanted to thank B&H for their willingness to publish this two-volume set. To Mary Wiley—you've been a joy to work with and your encouragement of both books has been a consistent source of motivation to keep going. We are so grateful for all those who have had a role in making this book a reality.

BEFORE YOU GO

May it serve as a resource to prompt reflection, help preparation, and to point you in a faithful direction as you follow the Lord into what he has in the future. To God be the glory in all of our labors.

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Introduction

Matt Bennett

BROTHER, WE ARE glad that you picked up this book. In fact, we are glad for a couple of reasons. First, if you're reading this book, it is likely that you are somewhere along the path to exploring what God might have for you in missions. Wherever that leads, it is good that you seek the Lord's guidance toward what he would have you do for his glory among the nations. We pray this book will play a part in that discernment and preparatory process.

Second, we are glad you picked up this book because the men who have contributed are some of our dear friends whose wisdom and advice we have admired for a long time. We are glad that you will be able to hear from men who we consider to be some of the cream of the crop. We trust their words will challenge, encourage, and sharpen you.

While many of these guys could write academic tomes of thick theology and robust missiology—and many of them already have done exactly that—the purpose of this book is not to impress or overwhelm you with their intelligence and eloquence. Instead, think of reading each chapter as the chance to sit down over coffee with a guy just a few steps down the road from you. This

compilation is like having an opportunity to hear from them, reflect on their experiences, and let their advice help shape the beginning of your missions journey.

As I reflect on my training for missions, I appreciate various elements. The theological preparation in the classroom as I pursued my MDiv was valuable and necessary. I think the training in cross-cultural living provided was also vital to my family's health on the field. The men and women who shared the good, the bad, and the holy parts of their mission experiences stand out as the most formative for my heart and ministry. The stories that they told illustrated the biblical convictions we learned in class and brought theology to life. Their tenacity in the face of adversity gave examples of holy courage that I aspired to emulate. And their advice along the way—advice won by mistakes, struggles, and victories of their own—helped me avoid many pitfalls.

The education and the training I received was important and essential. However, sharing a meal or a conversation with these men and women afforded me the chance to hear storied examples of how training had come to life in practice. While it would undoubtedly be better for you to have that type of face-to-face exposure to these men and their families, we trust that this book will help provide you access to some of the advice they would give even if you never get the opportunity to spend time together.

The men in this volume have served in various missions agencies, in diverse geographic locations, and multiple leadership capacities. We will introduce you to the authors at the start of each chapter, but for now, just know that they represent faithful brothers leading missions strategy, those with experience on the front lines, and those who train and oversee mission teams. These

INTRODUCTION

men are men of character, missiological wisdom, and significant experience in the areas about which they are writing. Each of them brings unique expertise to the topic they are covering along with some lived experience that gives their words credibility.

CHAPTER 1

Discerning Your Calling

Matt Bennett

From the General Editor

MATT BENNETT'S LOVE for the church first became apparent to me as we sat in a doctoral seminar together at Southeastern Seminary in 2015. In this chapter on missionary calling, Matt navigates this topic that, unfortunately, is often riddled with confusion and mystery. I (Josh) believe this chapter will help you grasp clear biblical definitions and offer practical evaluation tools while reminding you of both the missionary task and the role of the local church—the primary agent of God's mission.

As Matt's colleague at Cedarville University, I have seen a steady flow of students in and out of his office seeking counsel as they discern God's call. I have witnessed his faithful service as an elder at his local church as he trains and sends those called to reach the nations. The Lord has used Matt's missionary service, writing, and teaching to reach a broad audience, and I am glad you can learn from him as well as you read this chapter. I appreciate our

weekly lunches at the cafeteria with this godly man, dear friend, and like-minded missiologist.

As you seek to discern or confirm your part in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19–20), I trust you will have a clearer understanding of God’s call. I trust this will be a valuable resource to pastors and leaders as you take your role as a sender seriously. And before many of you go, I pray your confidence will not be in an individual, isolated self-affirmation but the corporate blessing of a spirit-filled congregation.

I’M CALLED—NOW WHAT?

As a young man, I remember walking out of the exhibit hall at the missions conference with more fliers, brochures, and ball-point pens than I could hold. My mind was swirling with questions. But, at the same time, I was exhilarated by the prospect of unknown adventures with God. I had come to this conference with a bit of hesitation regarding my future. But I would be leaving with a confidence that I would not have believed possible: God was calling me—and my future wife, Emily—to missions. The only questions remaining were the details of where, when, and with which agency.

Once we had returned home, the hype faded a bit as we surveyed the brochures strewn across my desk. All the agencies we had talked with emphasized the urgent needs their missionaries were meeting. Most promised to equip and deploy us to join God on the frontiers of lostness amidst pressing human suffering. The problem was that they all spoke of different countries, continents, and contexts. My excitement quickly turned to anxiety as I had to

say yes to one—which consequently meant saying no to the others. What if I chose wrong?

WHAT DOES CALLING MEAN?

Can you relate to the story above? Have you ever attended a conference like this or a missions event that moved your heart? Did you also feel paralyzed by all the options? I regularly find myself counseling university students in this type of scenario. While a calling to missions often involves a stirring of the heart with a burden for the nations in general, it also requires deliberation and decisions about specific details.

Before we try to untie the knot of the details and decisions about your calling, though, it is important to make sure we are clear on what the word *calling* means. In Christian circles, calling has come to mean a variety of things. Some use calling to describe a vague feeling they got after reading a missionary biography like *To the Golden Shore*. Others may point to moments in their life where they confidently believe that God concretely and irreversibly told them they would be missionaries.

Despite the breadth of common usage, our primary concern should be to ask, “How does the Bible use ‘calling’ language?” We need to address this foundational issue before assuming our definitions have biblical warrant. Clarifying this biblical understanding of calling will lead to clarification in the details. And, while clarity around the idea of calling is important as you launch, it will also provide ballast on the hard days ahead. In fact, I am arguing that clarity in your calling will help you walk as one who is in Christ,

under the commission of the Word, and according to the communal affirmation of your calling by the church.

CALLED IN CHRIST

The New Testament mainly uses the language of calling in reference to our relationship with God in Christ. There are few more precious words applied to humans than the oft-repeated pair: *in Christ*. Paul talks about being “in Christ” over and over throughout his letters and connects this positional reality with all sorts of privileges, responsibilities, and blessings.

Consider Paul’s exalted language connecting our calling to be “in Christ” throughout Ephesians. For instance, Ephesians 1:3–4 (emphasis mine) begins the letter by saying:

Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens *in Christ*. For he *chose us in him*, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him.

The two places that I have italicized above reinforce the connection between our calling and our position in Christ—we have been blessed and chosen in Christ. The letter goes on in verses 18–19 to articulate Paul’s prayer for the church:

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the

immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the mighty working of his strength.

Here, Paul's continued line of thought connects our calling to hope in Christ with the fact that we have been chosen in and united to him. And again, in Ephesians 4:1–6, Paul makes this holy calling in Christ explicit as he urges the Ephesians along, writing:

Therefore I, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope at your calling—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Note how, throughout the letter, Paul connects our salvation with our calling. Such a calling and salvation is accomplished for and extended to those who have believed in Christ Jesus. And those who believe in Christ are called into his corporate body—a body manifested in local expressions of church.

To be biblically grounded in our understanding of “calling” language, we must start by recognizing the common calling that precedes and shapes any particular callings discerned by a believer. Before speaking about “our calling” in its unique contours or

vocational details, we must realize that its particulars must emerge from this universal call. Called to be in Christ, every disciple is then caught up into Christ's mission. That means that each disciple called to be in Christ is called to be a disciple-maker, as the next section will demonstrate. Such a calling comes to us not mystically, but as we work through the pages of the Bible. The second aspect of discerning our calling, then, must be to consider how God's Word features in our discernment process.

CALLED BY THE WORD TO MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS

You have probably heard the well-worn pastoral quip that goes: "If you want to hear God speak, read the Bible. If you want to hear God speak audibly, read the Bible out loud." While there is a sense in which this adage is a cheeky pastoral reminder of what we have in God's Word, the truth of the matter is more profound than cheeky.

While the Lord uses the events of our lives to get our attention or attune us to certain things we are otherwise prone to miss, the events of our lives are not self-interpreting. Nor do they explain the beautiful mystery of our calling in Christ. Therefore, we begin looking for our calling in Christ and the myriad implications of that calling by consulting Scripture. At the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus called his disciples to a task that stretches across the ages and extends to present-day disciples in what many refer to as the Great Commission.

In the Great Commission, the task given to the church is a command from the One to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given (Matt. 28:18). It is a task that is undertaken

by the empowering of his presence with his people. It is not some optional add-on, but something at the very core of a disciple's identity and purpose.

The Great Commission calls all disciples to be involved in making disciples, teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded, and receiving new believers into the community by practicing baptism in the name of the triune God (vv. 19–20). More than merely a missionary text, the Great Commission calls all disciples to be disciple-makers irrespective of where they find themselves.

However, the part that becomes uniquely relevant for considering the calling to missions is that phrase that follows the command, “make disciples *of all nations*” (v. 19a, emphasis mine). While many disciples will make disciples in the places and among the people who are their immediate neighbors, friends, and family, some nations are outside the reach of disciples and churches. If all nations are the target of our global mission, then some will not only be *called* to be disciple-makers, they will also be *sent* to be disciple-makers.

As I noted above, I often counsel students who are discerning their calling to the mission field. After asking them about their testimony and church involvement, I ask, “Who are you discipling today? Where are you sharing the gospel today?” You will not establish these skills and habits simply by getting on a plane. And, from the perspective of your church, do you really think they should send you somewhere else to do what you are not doing at home? In fact, the final stage of discerning the details of your calling is to recognize that the local church is integral to affirming your aspiration.

CALLED BY THE CHURCH

This is perhaps where things get most interesting for determining the calling to missions. Previous generations of Christians have been raised in churches where one's spiritual gifts—and often the subsequent service they pursue in the church—are determined by the results of a quiz taken individually online or in a magazine tear-out somewhere. As it pertains to missions, often someone individually becomes interested in and passionate about missions due to some conference or exposure to the plight of the lost. So they begin to refer to themselves as being called to missions. The common factor in these approaches to discernment is that it often remains an individual assessment.

At the beginning of this chapter, I told my own story of trying to discern my call by myself. I had been exposed to the need for missionaries to take the gospel to those lacking access. I had offered the Lord my willingness to say yes to whatever he would ask of me. And I had surrendered my vision of what I wanted my life to look like. I walked out of that exhibit hall sure that I could say, “I am called to missions.”

But if we look at what Paul said in 1 Corinthians, my calling in Christ also calls me into a body of believers. I am not called to be a hand or a leg independent of a body (12:12–27). Therefore, it is probably too soon to say, “I am called,” if no one else has yet affirmed that calling.¹ To put it starkly, those aspiring to the role of a missionary should not refer to themselves as *called* to missions until their church has *sent* them. Prior to being sent, it is probably better to simply say something like the following: “I think that the Lord is burdening my heart for the nations. In order to discern

what the Holy Spirit might be doing in my life, I am seeking the counsel and affirmation of my church.”

This is not just a preferred way to approach missions, though. It has a precedent in Scripture. In Acts 13:1–5, we see Barnabas and Saul gathered with the saints in the church at Antioch when the Spirit confirmed that he was setting them apart for a specific task. The church affirmed this, laid hands on them, and sent them out as the first missionary team commissioned by the church in the New Testament. Not only does the church have a role in the discernment of this calling, but they also help to maintain accountability to that calling. When they returned after their first missionary journey, Barnabas and Saul gathered the church elders in Antioch to give an account of the work they had been faithful to fulfill (14:26–28).

The church helped discern the calling, affirmed it through sending, and kept Barnabas and Saul accountable. Of course, as with much of the material in Acts, this is a descriptive account. It does not contain a set of imperative instructions that would be definitively binding upon the contemporary church. But still, this is the example that we have, and it is an example that fits with the vision of the church given throughout the rest of the Bible. I believe we are on good ground to derive our sense of calling to a specific task from our church’s affirmation and sending to that task. Still, you might be asking some practical questions about how to invite the church into that discernment process. Let me offer a few practical examples of ways you can invite your church into the discernment process.

A DECISION-MAKING VENN DIAGRAM

I am convinced that a good old Venn diagram will help solve most of the problems in life. This may be an overstatement, but you remember these from grade school, no doubt. A Venn diagram has two or more overlapping circles with a focal point created at the intersection in the center.

As I counsel students who ask what they should do with their lives, I often draw a Venn diagram and label the circles as follows: Passions & Desires, Skills & Abilities, Needs & Opportunities. It is worth explaining each of these categories for clarity. So, let's begin by unpacking what might fall into the category of each of these circles of our example. The goal is to see where the three overlap, helping the students begin to discern how the Lord might lead them.



Passions & Desires

God has made each of us unique. This means that some of us love the outdoors and adventure, while others love staying inside in a climate-controlled environment. Some of us love music, while others prefer sports. The list could go on and on. Sometimes, however, in determining our calling, we can fall into one of two ditches as we assess the role passions and desires play in discerning our calling.

One of the ditches we can fall into is to be of the persuasion that God wants us to be happy doing *only* what we love to do. Thus, we assume he would only call us to tasks involving the things we love. Sacrificing our preferences is not on our radar. This can be detrimental for those asked to take on the discomfort of traveling to a new country, learning a new language, eating new foods, and observing new cultural norms. Nevertheless, there are certain aspects of our preferences that we will have to lay down if we are to follow Jesus. After all, Jesus said that following him would require taking up our cross (Matt. 16:24).

The other ditch we can fall into, though, is assuming that *everything* we like to do must be put to death if we are to follow him. Believing that following Jesus should feel like a sacrifice in every way, we assume that our natural inclinations must be leading us away from God's will for our lives. This can be dangerous because it assumes that God did not, in some respect, give us these passions and desires to be used for his glory. It can cause us to assume that God's will cannot cohere with how he has shaped us and fashioned our passions and desires.

Instead of falling into either of those ditches, I think it is wise to consider what tasks and activities bring you joy and can be leveraged to God's glory. Is there something about the unique passions and desires the Lord has given you that can help determine where you might consider going as a missionary? Is there something about your passions and desires that helps to make you a fit for a specific missionary task and approach? These questions, asked in concert with people in your church, can help you start to discern how the Lord has shaped you for ministry. Then, once you have determined some of your passions and desires, it is good to think through how those passions and desires translate into skills and abilities.

Skills & Abilities

In addition to your passions, it is necessary to consider what skills and abilities you have. I usually tell my students that sometimes there is a distinct difference between what they like and what they can do. For example, I like music and singing in the shower. But due to my complete lack of skill and gifting musically, it is obvious that it is not a part of my calling to use music as a means of ministry.

In this sphere, the goal is to reflect on and ask others to speak into areas of your life that they would identify as specific areas of natural talent, acquired skill, or even formal credentials. These skills and abilities may open doors for you to participate in a particular task or vocation. Basically, this circle inspects things that you can do well that can contribute to clarifying your calling to a specific type of ministry.

For example, if you have a passion for exploring culture and worldview and have acquired a degree in linguistics, these factors will play into your decisions. It may be that Bible translation is the type of work that you and your church decide that you should explore. On the other hand, if you grew up on a farm and have a green thumb, you may find that the Lord is calling you to explore agricultural inroads into isolated, rural communities for gospel proclamation, disciple-making, and church-planting.

While you can reflect on each of these issues for yourself, I think having your church weigh in on this assessment is essential. There are certain things that we know better about ourselves than anyone else does. At the same time, those observing us in the covenant community of the church can also provide insights that we may not have identified in ourselves. In addition to that, the church can be an important help in narrowing the field of possible missions assignments.

Needs & Opportunities

This brings us to the final circle. Where are the strategic needs for missions work that align with our passions and abilities? Where might we plug into the ongoing work that our church is doing? Where might our church be strategically looking to start a new work? These questions, asked in concert with your local church, can help narrow your options sufficiently enough to help you avoid that sense of paralysis from knowing there are needs everywhere.

As you and your church discern your shape and fit for missions, it is helpful to begin by asking whether or not any of your church's existing missionary partners might have a specific need

for someone with your skill set. Likewise, your church may know of expressed needs in other fields that match your gifts and passions. Or, as was the case for my wife and me, your church may already be gathering a team to engage a new field of ministry where your skills and gifts would serve well.

When you and your church find that these three circles overlap—that your gifts, your passions, and the strategic opportunities are made known—I think you are justified in taking steps forward in that direction. Just be sure to do so prayerfully, asking the Lord to keep the door shut if this is not where he is leading.

THE CHURCH SENDS THE CALLED

At the beginning of the chapter, I led with the story of my wife and me standing over a desk strewn with brochures for various agencies and a dizzying sense of uncertainty about how to proceed. However, one thing that became clear to us was that missions seemed to be defined differently for each agency. Some saw the task as mere evangelization, while others prioritized humanitarian efforts—hoping that one might name Jesus as the reason for our compassion.

As we reflected on Scripture and the Great Commission, we realized that what we wanted to be a part of was the strategic work of bringing the gospel and its implications to bear on places and people lacking access. This would likely require crossing geographic, language, and cultural barriers and boundaries. Once having crossed those barriers and boundaries, though, we saw the Great Commission as requiring us to engage in more than mere evangelism, but fully-orbed disciple-making and church-planting.

And in the end, we wanted to not only make disciples, but to train disciple-makers. We didn't want only to plant churches, but to plant churches that would plant other churches and send their own missionaries.

Our church's leadership realized that we would need further preparation to do that. We figured that if we wanted to be medical doctors in another country, we would need to know what medicine we were injecting into our patients' veins. How much more so, we reasoned, would we need to be adept in diagnosing and applying the gospel and doctrine to the souls of those among whom we would minister? After all, if we were in a pioneer missions setting, what we taught and modeled would set the trajectory for the church in that place. So, we found a seminary that would allow us to prepare and engage in missions.

We went to seminary with a vague attraction to the continent of Africa and with our home church's blessing to pursue this direction for our lives. Upon enrolling, we discovered that our cohort was designed to focus on Muslim communities. In addition, we joined a church that had a passion and dedication for missions. Within a year of joining, our church began a missionary training pipeline and announced that they were starting to pray that God would raise a team to go to one of two Muslim-majority nations in North Africa. So we joined the cohort, and the Lord connected our hearts and lives with three other people. As we progressed through the training pipeline, our church continued to affirm our fit for this ministry.

It was seven years between that day that we stood over the pile of brochures and the moment our feet first hit the ground in North Africa. But all along the way, the Lord used his church to

affirm aspects of our ministry, shape and direct our preparation, lay hands on us, and affirm our aspiration to the mission field as a calling.

There is much more I could tell you about our time and our church's role in our lives. But when we had hard days, it was helpful to look back to that commissioning and recognize that we had been sent by brothers and sisters and not merely by our own whims. Likewise, when we had joyous days, it was an incredible privilege to share the fruit the Lord allowed us to see with our church. And even as we transitioned off the field, it was our church that affirmed for us that it was the right path.

Brother, I would plead with you to engage your church in this process. Don't let your idea of calling be something that is just between you and the Lord. Lean into the brothers and sisters in Christ who are part of your church to evaluate, commission, and support you as a corporate affirmation of your calling.

DISCUSS AND REFLECT

1. As you consider your role in missions, where do the Bible, your internal desires, your external circumstances, and the church's affirmation all align? Where might they not align?

2. What counsel does your local church give you as you prayerfully consider where and how to serve? How have you sought to be known and evaluated in your sense of calling by the church?

DISCERNING YOUR CALLING

3. What character traits should you seek to develop as you prepare to serve as a missionary? How can you begin demonstrating the skills of a disciple-maker now?

4. Who in your sending community will be willing to remind you of the church's affirmation of your calling on difficult days? Who can you reach out to in order to let your church celebrate the work the Lord is doing through you?

ARE YOU PREPARING TO TAKE THE GOSPEL TO THE NATIONS?

You've said "yes" to God's call to go, and now you will pack up your things and step into the unknown of a new location, people, and culture. The following years will likely include great joy, frustration, homesickness, difficulty, and excitement. In this book, **ten men who have served in missions in various ways share what they wish they had known before they began.**

THIS HANDBOOK FOR ENTERING THE MISSION FIELD INCLUDES ESSAYS ON:

- Discerning your calling
- Prayer and evangelism
- Leaving what you love
- Going single
- Identity and task
- Family and mission
- Integrity and accountability
- Suffering and the missionary life
- Serving well as a team
- The spiritual life of a missionary

Alongside our editors, contributors include Ryan Robertson, Jeff Kelly, D. Scott Hildreth, Joe M. Allen III, Matt Rhodes, Brian Harrell, Brooks Buser, and Zane Pratt.



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