

*What can
I do to be
a missionary*



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Paul J. Lindell
written circa 1960 (revised 1999)

One day a letter came to our mission office with the following request:

I am a sophomore in college. I plan to spend my life as a missionary in some foreign country. Please tell me how I can prepare myself for this work. What courses should I take in college? After college is there any other training I should have in order to qualify for missionary work?

This is a good letter. But it is a hard one to answer. I do not know the student, and the work of missions is so extensive and so complex today. Therefore, it is hard to advise helpfully without knowing more about the student who wrote the letter.

However, in any case, there are some general, basic qualifications that ought to be a part of the equipment of any missionary. In my answer to the student I noted some of these points:

Get to Know Jesus Christ Personally

This is *the* place to start. Jesus came into the world to save sinners from their sins, from the evil power of the devil and from “the wrath to come,” i.e., from the final judgment of God upon all who are yet in their sins. And the first and most important work of missions is to make known to all people the Good News about Jesus as the Savior of the world.



Know Jesus personally...

You are and always will be a sinner, as long as you live in this world. Your own case is hopeless unless you know Jesus as your Savior. You cannot tell another sinner the way to peace with God unless you are living in God's gracious forgiveness through Jesus Christ. The Scripture says, "He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son has not life" (1 John 5:12).

But of course there is more to it than this. Jesus is also Lord and King, and to be saved means to come under His rule and will. The work of missions is to teach all people to "obey all that I have commanded you" (as Jesus himself said). But to do this you must be His disciple – His servant. You must recognize His voice as the sheep know the voice of the Shepherd (John 10:4), and obey Him gladly in things both great and small. "You are my friends if you do what I command" (John 15:14).

But still more, Jesus is the life of his people. He lives in them. Apart from Him they can do nothing. He is their daily bread, their fountain of joy, their matchless treasure, their all in all. "I have no good beyond Thee," said the Psalmist. St. Paul put it this way: "For His sake I have thrown everything away; I consider it all as mere garbage, so that I might gain Christ, and be completely united with Him" (Phil. 3:8-9 paraphrase).

Thus, until you know Jesus Christ and live and walk with Him, it will be useless to think of being His missionary.

Get a Clear Call From God

One striking mark that was common to Paul, John the Baptist, Moses, David, and even Jesus, was that God called and sent them. They, and others like them, did what they did because God told them to do it.

In our day, many thousands of men and women have left home for distant shores to work as Christ's ambassadors among other peoples for the simple reason that God sent them.

This sense of being called and sent by God comes to people in different ways. When it is genuine, the Holy Spirit sustains this call with persistent assurances all through the years.

Look for God's call and leading to you. Let it come in God's own way, and then treasure it as a most precious gift and trust from God to you.

Many Christians fail to do this. They see only their own place of work and miss the joy of being swept along in the full tide of God's mission in the whole world.

But you will have to work and study to get a broad view. Read all you can about the history of missions since the time of Christ. Read and learn all you can about the missionary movement all across the world today. Go to missionary conferences. Study missionary magazines and reports. Talk to missionaries. Ask questions. Take notes.



Get a clear call...

Discuss what you learn with others who have the same interest you have. And determine to work at this for the rest of your life. There will always be new things to see about missions even if you live to be 80 years old. And the more you see and learn, the more glorious your task will appear to be in the overall view of the whole Christian mission on earth.

Your tool chest, your medicine bag, your textbook, your road map is the Bible. Know your way around in the Bible, forwards and backwards. Get ahold of its content, its teachings, its mind, mood and spirit.

Treat it always with humility, with faith, and with expectation. Let it master your conscience, mind and heart. It is the means God uses to bring saving grace to people. It is your meeting place with God.

Don't argue with the Bible or about the Bible. Hosts of people will try to draw you into controversy over the Bible. Avoid this kind of controversy as you would a hole in the ice on a lake. And if you should fall into this danger, then cry like Peter did when he sank in the waves of the sea, "Lord, save me!"

But preach the Word of God and teach it to anybody who will listen. Do it warmly, faithfully, persuasively, urgently and gladly. Look for the coming of faith as God gives it to those who hear. Then shout for joy and give glory to God, whose Word is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16).

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

Isaiah 6:8

Get To Know the World

That covers a lot. In fact, knowledge about our world and the people who live in it has increased so greatly in recent years that even the combined knowledge of a thousand different experts could not encompass all there is to know about the world.

Christian missionaries, more than anyone else, should want to know all they can about the world. This is because they have been impressed with the love that God has for all people and for the earth that God has made to be their home.

You have a better chance to know this world than anyone who has ever lived before you. Libraries, universities, magazines and countless other sources are stuffed with knowledge about everything under the sun. Radio, TV, [internet] and movies take you at a flip of a switch to the latest findings anywhere. And in a relatively few hours you can go yourself to the most remote places and see and hear what a few years ago were hidden secrets about peoples and nations, about languages and cultures, about plants and animals, about weather, jungles, diseases and countless other things.

Be always a learner. Be everlastingly curious and inquisitive. Ask questions. Open up your eyes and ears and mind to all you can discover about this complex, wonderful, fearful world. This world is what Jesus called our “field.” As good farmers carefully tend their fields, so good missionaries will study and cultivate their world.



Get to know the world...

Join an active Christian fellowship...



Get a Skill

Learn a trade. Qualify in a profession. Learn to do something useful, something by which you can serve and help other people. Don't be halfhearted about this, and don't stop at partial measures. If you decide to be a nurse, a teacher, a librarian, a social worker, a bookkeeper, a preacher, or a hostess for a mission home and headquarters in some foreign land, then get the best training you can. Give it all you've got.

Be assured that if God has called you and has mastery of your life, He will in time place you where He wants you. There are many openings for service. Listings of such openings are available which show the need for missionaries all around the world and for all kinds of jobs.

Some years ago, it was thought that missionaries had to be either preachers and church workers, doctors and nurses, or schoolteachers. But in a modern rundown of the backgrounds of missionaries you will find anything from booksellers and construction workers to mechanics and farmers. The task today is so complex and many-sided that it offers opportunities for service to people with many kinds of skills.

Join an Active Christian Fellowship

The Christian's faith and life in Christ are intensely personal, but they are not private. They are corporate. And this is true also of Christian service.

St. Paul explained this very well in I Corinthians 12:12 where he said: “For Christ is like a single body, which has many parts; it is still one body, even though it is made up of different parts. In the same way, all of us, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free men, have been baptized into one body by the same Spirit, and we have all been given one Spirit to drink.”

St. Paul follows this up by saying that each member in the body cannot function alone, but only as one of many parts. Each member cannot act purposefully alone, but only in concert with other members of the body.

There have been many missionaries who have not heeded this. They have said about other missionaries, “I don’t need you! I would rather work alone.” However, in time their work falls apart, and the wreckage of such solo work is scattered in broken fragments all across the world.

Jesus did not work alone, but with a team. Paul did not work alone, but with a number of co-workers. Every fruitful piece of missionary work accomplished throughout the earth has been the outcome of some manner of teamwork. This must be learned before you go away to other lands. The place to learn it is in a close Christian fellowship where together men and women pray, hear God’s Word, witness, bear burdens, suffer, rejoice and receive the Spirit’s help.

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:25

Don't think you can get along without this. Don't think that just attending church services and then going home is all the fellowship you need. And don't think that getting active in organizations and programs with other college students or with young people in your church is what is meant by spiritual fellowship. If this is all you have, you won't last long as a missionary.

Get Rid of What Gets In the Way

That's a big order and it sometimes takes quite a while for a missionary to discover what is holding him down and keeping him back from doing his best on the job. But you can save yourself a lot of grief later on by learning now how to clean out and get rid of what is useless to you as Christ's servant. Think over these suggestions:

Get Rid of Your Pride and Prejudices

A number of years ago, a book called *The Ugly American* showed how Americans appear to people in other nations. It reported that Americans are seen as proud, loud-mouthed, prejudiced, selfish, boastful, impatient, unwilling to listen and learn and much more. A magazine on my desk includes an article entitled, "Why Do South Americans Dislike Us?" And there is a sharp treatment here of these same attitudes that make us look ugly to others.



Get rid of what's in the way...

Hebrews 12:1

Get Rid of Your Critical Attitudes

You probably have some of this. We all do. I notice that high school and college folks sometimes have lots of it towards each other, their parents, pastor, church, school and most anybody. They talk people down and not up. If you can't dump this stuff off and get rid of it, you will be one miserable missionary someday.

Get Rid of Unnecessary Possessions

Learn to live without much that other people regard as necessary. Some years ago I traveled across the Pacific to Asia with a missionary who told me he was going to China for a third term of service. On his first and second trip he took very little with him, but this time he felt he should live better. So he had six tons of baggage with him. I later learned that it took him a year and a half to get all his stuff out to West China where he lived. And then the Communists took his city before he had time to open even one box. He fled and never saw his goods again.

I have a big bagful of stories about the troubles and losses that missionaries have had with their possessions. These stories all end up needful of the same firm advice – keep and hold only such things as you need for your work, and even these things should be held with a loose grip.

Hudson Taylor, the pioneer missionary to China, is said to have made an inventory of his books and other belong-

ings once a year. Over each item he asked the question, "Is this necessary for the work God has given me to do?" If the answer was, "no," he got rid of it.

Get Rid of Entertainment

Oh, not all of it, but about 90% of it anyway. America is flooded with entertainment. Movies, radio, TV, books, magazines, and even advertising are all designed to entertain the American. And we fall for it. Our spare time between college classes or work shifts and our evenings is surrendered to entertainment. It's taken for granted, and we don't even think to question it.

But if you go to live with poor people, to be the servant of Christ among them in some yonder village, you will leave almost all of this behind. Better start discarding a lot of it now or you will have a hard time of it later.



Get Love

Get it for real. “Let love be genuine,” it says in the New Testament. Evidently there is spurious love, only pretended, and this does no good.

The love the Bible talks about is not something emotional. It is convicting. It is an attitude that leads to action. No doubt feelings and emotions will play a part because we are made up this way. But basically love is an attitude. It is to have God’s attitude towards all other people.

If love were merely an emotion or feeling it could not be commanded, for you cannot require a certain emotion in someone else. But you can demand that there be a particular attitude. And this is what God does when He tells us to love one another – even our enemies!

God is love and love comes from God, says the Apostle John (I John 4:7-8). The nature of this love is displayed in Jesus. It is merciful, forgiving, redemptive and healing. God acts this way, always, and His attitude and His saving deeds are called love.

I Corinthians 13 puts love, like light, through a prism and shows the beautiful spectrum of its matchless colors. “Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous, or conceited, or proud; love is not ill-mannered, or selfish, or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; its faith, hope, and patience never fail” (verses 4-7).

Whatever you do, get love. Without it you had better not be a missionary. There will be burdens to bear, sorrows to live with, pains to suffer, disappointments to endure, sins to forgive, needs to fill, wrongs to make right. These are things only love can handle successfully.



Get love...

You may be gifted to speak foreign languages; you may have great powers for preaching and teaching; you may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; you may have all the faith needed to move mountains; you may make great sacrifices of your time and possessions, even giving away all you have, even giving up your body to be burned; but if you don't have love, says the Apostle, you are no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell. In fact, you are nothing at all, and what you do is worthless (I Corinthians 13:1-3 paraphrase). So, above everything else, get God's love until you are filled with it.

And Now Get Going

Get going on all of this right now, today, right where you are. Crossing an ocean won't make you a missionary. Getting an advanced university degree won't make you a missionary. One man with a half dozen degrees came to China years ago to be a missionary, but in a short time he packed up and went home. He didn't start out right because he did not know Christ as his Savior. He himself told me this years later.

But if you get going now with what I have been saying, in your dormitory and on your campus, you will be Christ's missionary starting today. And later on when the Holy Spirit sends you off to some other corner of the world, you will be ready for it, an experienced missionary, and what you meet will not seem strange to you at all.



About the author: Paul J. Lindell, born in China, served as General Director of the World Mission Prayer League from 1941-1973. Mr. Lindell died of cancer in 1974. During the course of his lifetime he visited mission work in many parts of the world. His skills as a counselor and conference speaker were widely appreciated both in the USA and abroad.

About the Prayer League: The World Mission Prayer League was established in 1939, an outgrowth of the South American Mission Prayer League begun in 1937. The earliest concerns of the Mission were to start Lutheran work where none existed and to give opportunity for qualified lay people to do it. Today the same tradition guides mission activity in 15 countries, backed by the prayer and support of several thousand Prayer League members. Prospective missionaries should agree to trust God for the supply of all their needs, be able to abide by the principles which regulate the affairs of the Mission as spelled out in the Handbook and be approved for appointment by the Mission Council. Inquiries for missionary service will be treated with great care and assistance. Emphasis is given to the placement of workers in the areas of evangelism and church planting.

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