**Worshiping, Working, and Waiting:**
**Exploring Paul's Call to Mission**

by Nancy J. Thomas

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Samuel Medina's[1] call to mission sounds like a Barnabas-Paul story, straight from the book of Acts. While yet in high school and just one year after his conversion to Christ, a local Bolivian pastor took this young man by the hand and said, "Come with me on a mission journey."

It was while traveling to remote villages located along the Amazon River that Samuel, along with a small group of high school companions, experienced God working through them cross-culturally to win men and women for Christ and build his church.

Samuel claims God called him to mission as he worked along side this experienced missionary, saw his faith in action, observed human need, and tasted the fruits of ministry. He recalls one village in particular where the team held a campaign and six people became Christian. Only one of them could read. Samuel asked himself as they left, "Who will care for these people?" He returned after three years to find a stable, growing church in the village. The one man who could read had read the Bible aloud to the church during those years. "I realized that the work is God's," claims Samuel, and his sense of God's calling grew stronger.

Back home, the young disciples of the Bolivian Barnabas formed a missionary association for the purpose of awakening vision in local churches. They continued to organize short term mission trips to ethnic groups in the country. Working and praying together confirmed the call all these young people felt.

Samuel's own local church, however, did nothing to encourage his call. To the contrary, leaders criticized him for neglecting them in all these "outside activities."

During the years following, Samuel attended a four year seminary to prepare himself for mission, married, began a family, and entered upon a successful career as head of the public relations department of a university, all the while pulled by his desire to participate in God's purposes in the world.

Some 20 years after his initial sense of call, Samuel found what seemed to be the perfect opportunity. A Bolivian missionary serving in Mexico invited him to join. Samuel and his wife Silvia tried unsuccessfully to elicit the support of their local church and failing this, decided to go anyway, independently, trusting God.

After selling their possessions and quitting their jobs, Samuel, Silvia and their two young daughters packed their bags and headed off for Mexico. Their adventure turned into seven months of frustration, suffering, and mounting confusion. The missionary who had invited them turned against them, the few people back home who had promised to send money forgot, and

[1] I have changed the names of the people involved in this story.

without the support of agency or church, they were forced to return to Bolivia, broken and embarrassed, to try and re-build their lives.

Today Samuel is still working off the debts incurred by his missionary misadventure. Yet he continues to affirm God's call on his life. Analyzing his experience in Mexico, he notes that they were "invited, but not sent," and he is determined that any future work in mission necessarily involve the local church.

Samuel's experience is both unique and typical of that of the many Latin Americans God is calling out in mission. It is unique in the fact that 20 years of preparation and waiting followed the initial sense of call. It is typical in the haste that precipitated the journey to Mexico. Unfortunately it is also typical in the lack of participation by the local church in confirming Samuel's call, in encouraging him, and in sending and supporting him.

A 1996 study of missionary attrition[2] conducted by the Missions Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF) shows the importance of both a sense of call and the participation of the local church, two aspects of Samuel Medina's story. The extensive study sought to identify causes of missionary attrition, doing investigation in some 14 missionary-sending countries, divided between "old sending countries" and "new sending countries." In the category of the younger missionary sending force in the majority world, the investigation showed that the two top causes of missionaries prematurely coming home from the field are lack of home support and lack of a clear call.[3] Results also showed that sending agencies with a low "preventable attrition rate" consistently insisted that their candidates have a firm sense of call from God.[4] Sending agencies from Brazil, the country with the largest missionary deployment in Latin America, named "a clear calling to mission work from God" as one of the top three factors in preventing missionary attrition. The same Brazilian survey recommended more attention be given to the role of the local church in the personal life of the missionary; this would include the aspect of call and its confirmation.[5]

My husband and I are currently involved in training Latin Americans for mission, and the issue of the missionary call and its confirmation is current and often troublesome to our students, along with the problem of apathy in many local congregations. This essay attempts to study the issue of call in the book of Acts, taking as a model the Apostle Paul himself. I will compare the parallel passages that describe Paul's conversion and call, as well as other passages that detail

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[2] The study considers preventable attrition and defines this as "premature or avoidable return from field service....attrition that could have been avoided by better initial screening or selection in the first place, or by more appropriate equipping or training, or by more effective shepherding during missionary service" (William D. Taylor, "Prologue," in Too Valuable to Lose: Exploring the Causes and Cures of Missionary Attrition, William D. Taylor, ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1997, p. xvii).

[3] William D. Taylor, "Introduction: Examining the Iceberg Called Attrition," in Too Valuable to Lose: Exploring the Causes and Cures of Missionary Attrition, op.cit., p. 10; Peter W. Brierley, "Missionary Attrition: The ReMAP Research Project," in Too Valuable to Lose: Exploring the Causes and Cures of Missionary Attrition, op.cit. p. 99. This data reflects a survey of 203 sending agencies in eight majority world countries.

[4] Detlef Blócher and Jonathan Lewis, "Further Findings in the Research Data," in Too Valuable to Lose: Exploring the Causes and Cures of Missionary Attrition, op.cit., p. 118.

[5] Ted Limpic, "Brazilian Missionaries: How Long Are They Staying?" in Too Valuable to Lose: Exploring the Causes and Cures of Missionary Attrition, op.cit., pp. 153-154.

Paul's response to God's call from the time he received it to the beginning of his first missionary journey. Paul's model may provide guidelines for the women and men God is raising up to go from Latin American out to the uttermost parts of the earth.

**A. Paul's Missionary Call**

The story of Paul's conversion and call to mission is recounted four times in the New Testament, something that in itself says, "Take notice. This is important stuff." The account first is Luke's version of the story, told in Acts 9. This is repeated, as Paul himself speaks to the Jewish mob in Jerusalem, recounted by Luke in Acts 22, and again as Paul tells his story to the Roman court of Agrippa in Caesarea, recorded by Luke in Acts 26. The final version occurs in Paul's letter to the Galatians, written at the end of his first missionary journey. I also look at related passages in Acts 11, 12 and 13. I look at the nature and description of the call, how God chose to communicate it, and how Paul responded.[6]

First, it would be helpful to list and date the events between Paul's conversion and his first missionary journey. I base the following chronology on New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce's conclusions after comparing passages in Acts with the Epistles and other historical records.[7] Not all the facts are available, and the order and dating are therefore necessarily tentative:

| **Event** | **Date** | **Reference** |
|---|---|---|
| Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus; hears missionary call for first time through Ananias; testifies in Damascus | A.D. 33 | Acts 9:1-22; 22:3-16; 26:12-18 |
| Spends time alone in Arabia; goes back to Damascus | Between 33 and 35 | Galatians 1:15-17<br>Acts 9:21-25 |
| First postconversion trip to Jerusalem; call reconfirmed directly from God in a worship experience in the temple | 35 | Acts 9:26-29; 22:17-21<br>Galatians 1:18 |
| Travels to Syria, Cilicia, Caesarea, Tarsus | 35-45 | Acts 9:30<br>Galatians 1:21-2:1 |
| Joins Barnabas for ministry to Greek church at Antioch | 45 | Acts 11:19-26 |
| Famine-relief visit to Jerusalem; call confirmed by church leaders | 46 | Acts 11:27-30<br>Galatians 2:1-10 |
| Call conveyed by Holy Spirit to local church | 47-48 | Acts 13:1-3 |

[6] I use the New American Standard version of the Bible.

[7] F. F. Bruce, "Acts of the Apostles," in The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. 1, G. W. Bromiley, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979, pp. 33-47); "Paul the Apostle," in The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. 3, G. W. Bromiley, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979, pp. 696-720).

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|---|---|---|
| leaders; church at Antioch sends Paul and Barnabas out on first missionary journey | | |

**A. 1. Nature and description of Paul's missionary call**

The verb translated into English as "call" (the Greek kaleo) occurs 148 times in the New Testament with a variety of meanings, including the general call to follow Christ and live godly lives ( e.g., Ro, 8:28-30; 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 4:1; Col 3:15). I am looking specifically for references to a call to special service, to what is known in Christian circles as "the missionary call." The passages I study use a variety of words in describing God's call to Paul.

Only once in these passages is the general verb for call, kaleo, used, and that is in Galatians 1:15 where Paul writes that God "called me through His grace."

Luke uses other, more specific, terms. In Acts 9, the Lord tells Ananias that Paul is "an instrument of choice" (9:15). The noun "choice" (ekloge) comes from the verb eklegomai, "to choose, elect, pick out for oneself," with the noun form "used unambiguously and exclusively for God's act of election."[8]

Luke uses the verb proskaleo (built on kaleo) in Acts 13:2, as the Holy Spirit speaks to the church at Antioch. This term connotes a call to service and the perfect tense "emphasizes the divine decision was made before it was announced."[9] In this same passage, Luke uses a term translated as "set apart," repeated by Paul in Galatians 1:15 (aforizo) with connotations of being marked off from others with a boundary, set aside for special purpose.[10]

There are two other "calling verbs" in the passages under consideration, and both are translated as "appoint." The word used in Acts 22:10 ("all that has been appointed for you to do") comes from a military verb (tasso) with a primary meaning of "command."[11] In both Acts 22:14 ("The God of our Fathers has appointed you"--proxeirizomai) and Acts 26:16 ("I have appeared to you, to appoint you"--proxeirizo), the verbs combine the words "before" and "hand" and carry the connotations of "plan, purpose and determine" with anticipation.[12]

In all these passages, not only is the variety of verbs noteworthy, but especially significant is the emphasis on God's sovereignty. In each case, God is choosing, commanding, planning, and appointing. The note of divine determination is strong. The passage in Galatians 1 emphasizes this aspect as Paul testifies that God set him apart even before his birth.

The passages also give insight into what God's purposes were. To what end did God appoint Paul? What was Paul's divine job description? In Acts 9, the Lord calls Paul "to bear my name" (9:15), to carry and spread forth the person and message of Jesus. In Acts 26, the Lord appoints Paul to be "a minister and a witness" (26:16) in order that people repent, be converted, receive

[8] L. Coenen, in The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Vol 1., Colin Brown, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971, p. 540).
[9] Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976, p. 291).
[10] Ibid., p. 502.
[11] Ibid., p. 324.
[12] Ibid.

forgiveness, and join with the people of God, His church (26:18). In Galatians 1, Paul records his call "to preach Him" (1:16). These job descriptions are all presented in general terms, without specifics.

The version in Acts 22 gives additional insight when Ananias informs Paul that God has appointed him to know God's will and to see and hear Jesus (22:14). It is a call first to relationship and intimacy with the result being that "you will be a witness for Him to all [people] of what you have seen and heard" (22:15). The Galatians 1 version also has Paul's preaching flowing from the revelation of Jesus.

Several of the passages provide brief glimpses of other aspects of the missionary call. Only in Acts 9 do we find suffering mentioned as an aspect of the call to mission (9:16), almost as though it were an integral part of the job description. And only in Galatians is the concept of grace connected with call (1:15). Both the concepts of grace and suffering and their connection with the missionary call open up areas for reflection and study beyond the scope of this essay.

The passages, combined and compared, show the whole Trinity involved in calling Paul to mission. The Lord Jesus chooses him (Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:16), the Father appoints him (Acts 22:14; Gal. 1:15), and the Holy Spirit calls him forth (Acts 13:2). Paul's call to mission is the sovereign work of the triune God. God takes the initiative and calls Paul specifically and uniquely to be an agent of the divine purposes in the world.

The passages also show the destination of the call. All four narratives state that Paul was called to the Gentiles. Acts 9 gives a broader perspective as the Lord informs Ananias that Paul would bear the divine name "before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel" (9:15). Acts 22 records the call "to all [people]" (22:15), and later adds the detail that Paul would go "far away to the Gentiles" (22:21). In the aspect of destination, Paul's call was both specific (to the Gentiles) and general. God apparently did not supply Paul ahead of time with details as to geography, any more than He did with the specifics of what he was to do whenever he got to wherever he was supposed to go. Paul would discover the details on the road, as he partnered with God in mission. The call provided the general boundaries, the panoramic vision.

**A. 2. How God communicated the call to Paul**

In the last section I looked at the nature and description of Paul's call to mission. In this section I explore the same passages to see how God communicated His call to Paul. I take a chronological approach.

Both Acts 9 and 22 record that God first communicated the call through the means of a human agent. Although the Lord Jesus spoke directly to Paul on the Damascus road in his conversion experience, He ordered Ananias to deliver the message of the missionary call. Two items of interest stand out: first, that Paul's missionary call came so soon after his conversion, and secondly, that God chose to use another person to deliver the message rather than speaking it directly to Paul.[13]

[13] In the Acts 26 version, the Lord appears to speak the call directly to Paul on the Damascus road. But in this version, as Paul recounts his experience to the Roman court of Agrippa, he purposefully leaves out details that

God's choice of Ananias as the message bearer is significant. This disciple of Jesus knew how to listen to and speak with the Lord, and he was apparently accustomed to obedience even in the face of risk (Acts 9). He was also a devout keeper of the Law and a person highly respected in the Jewish community of Damascus (Acts 22). This would give the call credibility not only to Paul himself but to the wider community.

Although his initial understanding of God's call to special service involved another human being, Paul himself emphasizes the personal nature of God's communication to him. In his letter to the Galatian Christians, he writes that after his conversion and call, "I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus" (1:16-17).[14] We don't know what happened in Arabia, but Paul apparently was alone with God. The call to know God's will, to see and hear from Jesus, must have been part of the scene. God would have continued to reveal His person, His message, and the role Paul was to play in a communication that was intensely personal.

The next chronological reference to Paul's reception of his call takes place during his first visit to Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts 22:17-21. Paul is alone, praying in the temple, and, as he later testifies to a Jewish audience, he falls into a trance and converses with the Lord Jesus. In this intensely personal encounter, the Lord warns Paul of imminent danger, gives specific instructions to leave Jerusalem immediately, and confirms the missionary call: "Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles." It is important to note that it was as Paul was in an attitude of worship that God spoke to him.

Two other passages narratively show God confirming to Paul the call to mission, and both these events involve the community of faith. They both take place roughly 13 or 14 years after Paul's conversion and initial reception of the missionary call. In Galatians 2:1-10 we see the leaders of the church in Jerusalem (and of the whole early Christian movement) recognizing and affirming the calls of Barnabas and Paul to the Gentiles.[15] The next scene takes place in Antioch where local church leaders are gathered, ministering to the Lord and fasting. The Holy Spirit speaks to these leaders, confirming the calls to Barnabas and Paul, and saying, in effect, "Now is the time" (Acts 13:1-3). Again, we note that God spoke as the church was gathered for worship.

It's significant to note that God communicated the call to special missionary service communally and personally. God spoke directly to Paul. God spoke to Paul through other people. And God told the church, for its own sake, that Paul was to be set apart for the divine

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would not be pertinent to his Roman audience, including the whole incident with Ananias. His speach in this context synthesizes several events that took place at different times and in different places.)

[14] F. F. Bruce places Paul's sojourn in Arabia after his conversion and before the first trip to Jerusalem. The Arabia trip, not mentioned in either Acts 9 or 22, would have taken place in the middle of the "many days" spent in Damascus (Acts 9:23). The conversion, time in Damascus and Arabia, and back again to Damascus correspond to the "three years" of Galatians 1:18 (Bruce, "Acts of the Apostles," op.cit., pp. 41-42; Bruce, "Paul the Apostle," op.cit., pp. 709, 712).

[15] Bruce connects this passage with the trip for famine relief recorded in Acts 11:27-30 and 12:25 (Bruce, "Paul the Apostle," op.cit., p. 713).

missional purposes in the world. God used different means, at different times, to communicate the missionary appointment to Paul and to the church.

**A. 3. How Paul responded to the missionary call**

Having discussed the nature of Paul's call to mission and how God communicated that call to him, I now look at Paul's response. Three things stand out during the 14 years between Paul's initial reception of the missionary call and the first missionary journey: obedience, active preparation, and growth in relationship.

Paul testifies to the Roman court that "I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision" in preaching to Jews and Gentiles in expanding geographic circles (Acts 26:19-20), and Luke notes that this response of active obedience to God's call was immediate (Acts 9:20).

Paul responded in obedience directly to God, but he also responded by submitting to God's agents. Ananias urged him not to delay an instant, but to be baptized and call on God's name (Acts 22:16). Paul followed the instructions of the church at Jerusalem in leaving that city and returning eventually to his hometown of Tarsus, effectively disappearing from the scene for some 10 years (Acts 9:30). Barnabas mentored Paul, bringing him from Tarsus to Antioch for a time of team ministry. Paul submitted his call and ministry to the elders of the Jerusalem church (Gal. 2:1-10), and he submitted to the local church leaders at Antioch, not embarking on his first missionary journey until the church, through God's bidding, sent him (Acts 13:1-3). Paul responded to God's missionary call in obedient submission, directly to God and to the faith community.

We don't know everything that happened during the fourteen years between call and realization in the first journey, but the Scriptures testify that Paul did not idly sit by, waiting for the green light. As we noted earlier, after becoming a follower of Jesus, Paul "immediately began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues," and he "kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus" (Acts 9:20, 22). In his first visit to Jerusalem he was "speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews" (Acts 9:28-29). We don't have a record of the 10 years Paul spent in the regions of Syria, Cilicia and his hometown of Tarsus, but we know that during this time he developed a ministry among Gentiles and that his reputation among Christians in Judea was growing, sight unseen (Gal. 1:21-24). In Acts 11-13, we get glimpses of Paul's ministry, in team with Barnabas, at the new Gentile church in Antioch. The picture is one of growth in active ministry. Paul probably would not have seen these years merely as preparation for future service; he was serving God and fulfilling his calling, even without travel to distant lands. He responded to his missionary call by entering into ministry where he was.

The other aspect of this time between call and fulfillment is Paul's obviously growing relationship with God and with the church. The passages under study only indirectly hint at this growth. The time alone with God in Arabia, early in Paul's Christian life, certainly contributed to intimacy with his Lord. The times spent with Barnabas, and with church leaders in Jerusalem and Antioch show a man who had learned to work in a team, be part of a local church, and

follow the leadership of those in authority. When Paul began his first missionary journey, he was not an isolated heroic individual, bravely striking out alone to follow God's call. He was a person intimate with God and in close relationship with God's people. The intimacy and relationship were part of the call and part of the preparation for mission.

**B. Applications to Latin American involvement in the missionary movement**

Samuel and Silvia Medina, as well as a growing number of other Latin Americans eager to participate with God in the divine mission in the world, have much to learn from the example of the Apostle Paul. In conclusion, I will draw applications from the biblical narratives to the Latin American missionary scene.

1.) The bedrock of the missionary call is the sovereignty of God. In answer to questions many young Latin Americans are asking, "Yes, God does call persons forth to His mission in the world." This is important to remember in the emotional appeal of the missionary movement. Call is more than emotion. It is the sovereign choosing of an almighty God who beckons as He will, according to His own criteria.

2) We also learn from the narratives that God intends to communicate the call to missionary service. He doesn't leave us guessing. Many young Latins ask, "How can I know if God is calling me?" An excellent question, and an important one because it is crucial to be sure of a call before embarking on a missionary adventure. Paul's experience shows that God uses different means, even with the same person, and that after an initial communication of call, God confirms and reconfirms. We need to be open to visions, words from mature Christian friends, the leadings of our local church, as well as means not mentioned in the Pauline narratives, such as Scripture and preaching. The passages hint at a connection between worship, both on a personal and on a commuity level, and the communication of call. Paul's story lets us know that through whatever means, when God calls to mission, He also communicates that call.

3) A missionary call, as experienced by Paul, can be a process, often taking considerable time. Paul's experience of call took 14 years. It involved many steps, and Paul's obedience along the way seemed to lead to new evidence of call and fresh confirmations. The process involves God's communication to us and our response back to God. It's a process of growth in obedience, intimacy, relationship and ministry. Preparation is part of the process, but a preparation involved in active ministry.

It's a process that involves considerable faith, as the specifics aren't always revealed, whether of geography or job description. The details seem to come as we're on the road, walking with the Savior in active ministry. Therefore, it's a process that calls for patience, something that challenges many Latin Americans, especially young people who want to get started now. The Mexican peasant asleep under a cactus, sombrero over his eyes, kept by a "mañana mentality," is a cliché that does not even approach reality. Impatience and fiery enthusiasm better characterize young Latins, and it is this characteristic that needs to bend to the process of call.

4) God's call to mission is intensely personal. God knows each person individually and uniquely, even before birth, and communicates intimately with that person. Relationship with God is a part of the missionary call. Just as God called Paul to know Him and understand the divine will, so He calls His servants today, first to intimacy and worship, and then, as a result, to witness and mission. A missionary call is a very personal experience.

5) God's call to mission involves the community of faith. This is the other side of the coin. As persons, we are part of a family, and God seems to delight in using other members of the family to communicate and confirm the missionary calling of its members. In Paul's experience, God used mature Christians who mentored Paul, the key leaders of the whole Christian movement, and leaders in the local congregation. Especially noteworthy in Paul's experience is the importance of the local church and the fact that, after waiting 14 years, it was through the local church at Antioch that the final recorded confirmation of the call took place. It was the local church that, finally, sent Paul and Barnabas out on the first missionary journey.

Latin American missionary candidates need to submit to local church authority in confirming their call, in preparation for missionary service, and for discernment as to the timing. Local church leaders need to be sensitive to the role God would have them play in shepherding the potential missionaries in their congregations. This was the missing link in the case of Samuel and Silvia Medina, and it continues to be a weakness generally in the Latin American missionary movement.

Samuel and Silvia have not given up. They continue to sense God's missionary call. They are currently part of a local congregation that is actively seeking ways to cooperate in mission. The church's advocacy and mentoring of Samuel and Silvia is giving this couple new hope.

May this study of the experience of Paul, and of others throughout Scripture who received God's call to special service, lead to a theology of call that would help the church in the majority world participate wisely and effectively in God's mission among the nations.

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