

# Am I a Missionary or a Wife?

By Susan Bixby

Introduction: (Story of Rachel and Mike)

Does a missionary wife need her own call to missions? Is something wrong with a missionary wife who struggles? This is a very important issue because many missionary families have returned from the field after a term or so, never to go back. And it can often be traced to the wife—her attitudes, her struggles, her discouragement and loneliness. Let's look at what the Bible says (and in some cases, DOESN'T say) that can help us sort this out.

## 1. Am I “called”? And to what exactly?

I have received emails and facebook messages, and been questioned in person about what I think about this issue of whether a missionary wife needs her own calling or whether a single girl should date a guy called to missions if she doesn't have her “own calling.” I have read or heard different opinions on the matter, and I do not necessarily believe there is a “catch-all” answer. But I do believe that the Bible HAS answers. God doesn't always give us answers laid out in black and white, but if we study the principles the Bible teaches us as believers, we will discover what His will is for us in any given situation.

- a. **The Great Commission—the call every believer receives.** “Go and make disciples.” (Matt. 28:19-20) No matter who I am, where I am, who I'm married to, what stage of life I'm in, this is my calling.  
Jesus said, “As my father hath sent me, even so send I you.” (John 20:21)  
You will be my witnesses. (Acts 1:8)  
“Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Matt. 9:38

If a Christian woman believes, internalizes, and prays about these passages and commands, she will have no doubt that God wants her somehow involved in the proclamation and spread of the Gospel and in disciple-making, and this will develop within her a willingness and openness to accomplish that in whatever way God desires for her.

The woman who is not burdened for the people around her, and is not interested in or involved in disciple-making now, will not develop a burden for or feel a true “call” to poor people in India or Africa.

- b. **Helpmeet—the call every Christian wife receives.** It will help us to remember the original motivation for the creation of woman. The first time the idea came up was when God “noticed” that Adam had no helper. Genesis 2:18 says, “Then the Lord God said, it is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helper fit for him.” Then he let Adam name all the animals and notice they all had partners, and come to the realization that there was not a helper found for him. THEN, God created woman. Understanding and accepting this is very helpful for me as a missionary wife. *I believe that a wife's call to be a helpmeet to her husband is second only to her call to glorify God and enjoy him forever.* “Meet” means fit, suitable, customized—the kind of help needed by that particular man. As a missionary wife in Mexico with a husband whose primary

duties are training men for the ministry and working with a small church plant, will my “helpmeet” profile look different than a missionary wife living in a primitive area of Africa with 8 children and a husband who has an itinerant ministry in the villages within a 30 mile radius? Yes! Is she less of a “missionary” or more of a “helpmeet” than I am based on any of those factors? No! If a missionary wife seeks to model her “helpmeeting” after the commands of scriptures that she knows and understands, she can trust the Holy Spirit to use her and give her ministry opportunities that he has ordained for her. What does the Bible say? What is says to every wife:

- i. Love husband (Titus 2:4)
- ii. Respect & honor him (Eph. 5:33)
- iii. Submit to him (Eph. 5:22)
- iv. Meet his needs (I Cor. 7:3-5)
- v. Do him good and not evil (Prov. 31:12)

The fact that the Bible does not make any differentiation for ministry and missionary wives is significant to me as a missionary wife. This tells me that my desire to be able to participate more in the ministry and feel more like I’m “doing something” as a missionary should never be fulfilled at the expense of first meeting the needs of my husband as determined by Scripture and by him.

- c. **Calls never conflict.** God never asks me to do conflicting things. He always gives me the ability and resources to fulfill his commands and purposes in my life. Do you “feel called” to missions, but the guy you’re interested in doesn’t? Get on your knees! Either you’re labeling a burden or interest as a “call” that isn’t necessarily God’s call for you, or you’re interested in the wrong guy! Maybe you don’t feel called to missions, but you believe the Lord might have a certain guy for you who is called to missions. Start practicing Matt. 9:38—start praying for the Lord to send forth laborers and for a greater understanding of your part in the Great Commission! He just might send you to the mission field alongside that guy.

Thomas Hale in his book “On Being a Missionary” said, “Funny, but for those who are totally yielded to God, discerning his will isn’t such a big thing. It’s only when our will gets in the way that we have to ‘struggle’ to know God’s will.” If the idea of marrying a missionary and moving far away causes you to balk, ask the Lord to show you what is wrong. What are you holding back from Him? What is more important to you than Him? Are you materialistic? Are you too much of a comfort creature? Is your heart not moved with the great need of unreached people around the world? Do you not trust a sovereign, loving God? Are you “with” God’s program? (I recommend “Idols of the Heart” by Elise Fitzpatrick for understanding the extent to which our own hearts can get in the way of obeying God and fulfilling His purpose for us.)

Although this topic is worthy of extensive study, I do not have the expertise or time in this session to deal with it further. I believe it is a fundamental issue for every missionary wife (or potential one) to settle, and it will help her when challenges come on the field. As we have already briefly touched on, our own hearts can get in the way of properly

carrying out our role as missionary and wife, so I would like to mention a few common areas of struggle to maintain biblical perspectives.

## 2. **Unbiblical Thinking Patterns**

“Lean not on your own understanding.” (Prov. 3:5) Our problem as fallible human beings is that our own understanding is often anti-biblical. We so easily deceive ourselves or are deceived by the enemy.

a. **Failure to empathize with my husband’s call** as it plays out on a *daily* basis. It is possible to be too entrenched in our responsibilities as helpmeet and mother that we come to resent our husband’s dedication to his calling and what that means for us and our family. I need to pray for and develop an ability to truly share in his purposes and burdens and calling. Even if I’m not able, for practical reasons with the home and family, to participate in ministry activities as much as I might like, if I share his burden and do not resent the implications of the work he needs to be doing, I am being a helpmeet to him. The heart attitude is key here—this is not resignation, or “he has his thing, I have mine.” This is a true empathizing and sharing of his call.

b. **“My needs are not being met.”** One of the missionary ladies that I surveyed said, “The biggest obstacle I have ever faced on the field is myself.” In the same book I mentioned earlier, Hale says something similar. “The biggest hindrance to the missionary task is self. Self that refuses to die. Self that refuses to sacrifice. Self that refuses to give. Self that refuses to go.” We are all selfish creatures, and it can be hard to take our eyes off of ourselves. This is true for every human being! But when a woman leaves her home culture and is dropped into a culture she is not used to, and probably never completely understands, areas of selfishness are revealed in her that likely would never have shown up back home. We do not realize how much our culture affects our view of what we “need.” To a typical American Christian, there is any number of physical, practical and emotional things that she may even be taught from the pulpit that she needs. These can be some of the most difficult things for missionary wives. Based on my own and my family members’ experience, in addition to some surveys I did of other missionary wives, the following points may be some of those things. My next point has to do with pressures the missionary wife may experience from her host culture, but these things are specifically related to the selfishness of our heart and how we can be inflexible because we want things our way.

i. *Time (or schedules)*

Many cultures have a completely different concept of time—what it’s for, and how it should be used, who it belongs to.

Schedules are often non-existent or completely different from American ones.

There may not exist any “too early” or “too late” to call or stop by.

Family time—we may have a night reserved just to be with our own family.

But to turn someone away or turn down an invitation because it’s “family night” may be considered very rude.

If I am not careful, I can convince myself that I “need” my husband to be home in the evenings, or that we “need” to have family time every Friday evening without interruptions, or that I “need” to have a regular schedule and

not have to always be going with the flow and changing things around. If we stop and think about how Jesus carried out his earthly ministry—attending to needs at the moment, dropping one thing to go off and heal somebody, taking opportune moments to teach his disciples—we can also accept interruptions and crazy schedules as part of God’s way of using us and working in us.

ii. *Privacy.*

In certain cultures, this can be an area of great difficulty for missionaries—particularly wives. I have a friend who was a missionary in Africa. She said you pretty much just had to constantly be checking over your shoulder to see if anyone was in the house. No knocking, no respecting privacy. If they used their generator at night to have light, the entire village would be in their house. For me, it’s just the questions people dare to ask, but for some missionaries this goes very deep and threatens to shake the core of their sense of well-being and security even in their marriage. The missionary wife must guard against the wrong thinking that “my needs are not being met.”

iii. *Fellowship.*

Many missionaries have the privilege of working with other missionaries, and this is a big blessing in part because of the fellowship and companionship this provides. But some missionaries do not have this privilege. It is easy to develop a mentality of “I need good Christian fellowship with someone who understands me and speaks my language.”

God has used several personal experiences in my life to remind me that He (and my husband) truly are all that I need. The mutual dependence and need for fellowship with each other that missionary couples have as a result of only having each other is wonderful. It is good for my husband to know that I need him and enjoy fellowship with him! And it is good for me to be constantly reminded that my heavenly Father is my constant companion.

iv. *Money or material goods.*

Even for Americans who did not grow up in wealthy homes, the level of living and number of comforts we have are enormous compared to many places. It’s easy for us to think we “need” air conditioning or heat, hot water, carpet or tiled floors, a washing machine, running water, cable to keep up with the U.S. news and events, a bed for each person who lives in the house, a vehicle that runs, presents at Christmastime, enough support to not wonder where next week’s groceries are going to come from, etc., etc. The Bible says we should be content with food and clothing, but this is extremely difficult for us spoiled Americans. What a blessing to see missionaries who are so happy in the Lord and the ministry He has for them, that bathing with cold water or walking miles and miles to preach the Gospel doesn’t even faze them anymore. They have truly changed their parameters when it comes to their “needs.” Contentment is a wonderful reflection of a heart that lives only to know God and enjoy Him forever!

God made men to want to provide for their family. A discontented missionary wife can cause anguish in the heart of her husband, and a real confusion over whether he did the right thing in taking his wife to the field and whether he is

truly providing for her the way he should. A contented heart is one of the best gifts you can give your husband.

v. *Seeing extended family.*

For a girl who has been very close to her family all of her life, being apart from them for years at a time can be very difficult. It is easy to develop patterns of thought in which we convince ourselves that we “need” to see our family more. Modern technology is a big help in this area, and praise the Lord for providing this resource to missionaries. But from the very beginning of the process of preparing to go to the field, a missionary wife should ask the Lord to prepare her for this separation and help her to have the right mindset.

c. **Comparing ourselves among ourselves.**

Co-workers are a wonderful blessing on many levels. But I just wanted to make a quick point here about the temptation to compare myself, my husband, my circumstances, our support level, or anything else to those of our co-workers. I must trust my husband to make decisions that are best for our family, including how he spends his time, how much support we need and how we spend the resources that we have, how we adapt (or not) to the host culture, or any number of other things. Other families will make different choices, have different standards of living, spend their time differently, even choose to minister in different ways. Comparing my husband to the one that stays home a lot to help with the home-schooling and household chores, or comparing our financial situation with the family that has money to go home for frequent visits and furloughs, or any number of other things I could mention here, is not a thinking pattern that is pleasing to the Lord or helpful in my spiritual growth. My husband answers to the Lord for me and for our family and the choices we make. I can trust in my husband because I trust in my God.

d. **I have to solve everyone’s problems.**

Ministry can be emotionally draining—more even for women than for men. The problem is that our husbands need our emotional support even more than the people we minister to. Particularly in cultures where people come and go to your house at all hours of the day and night with great needs, it is easy to begin to take personal responsibility for solving everyone’s problems. I can let those burdens drain me emotionally. Then I have nothing left with which to help and support my husband in his needs. This is one reason why it is important for a missionary wife to make her husband her primary ministry—even in her emotional energy. I believe the key in this area is to understand God’s plan—He is working in each person’s life to bring them to Himself. Am I one of the agents he wants to use to bring that about? Possibly, yes, even likely. But am I the one really doing the work? No—his Holy Spirit does that. So I do what I can, trusting Him to do what He will do. Despair and hopelessness are extremely draining emotionally. If this is what we feel when we deal with someone who, humanly speaking, seems hopeless, we will be drained and not be able to help our husbands adequately. We must trust each case to the Comforter who is working in our behalf as well as in theirs.

We've addressed the question of our call as missionary wives, and some unbiblical thinking patterns we can easily develop in our unique role, but often there are also some things beyond our control that put pressure on our marriage and family life.

### 3. **Host Culture Pressures.**

Because of the nature of differing cultures, a missionary wife can find herself pressured to be a certain way or do certain things. Some of these things may be harmless annoyances, but others, partly because those cultures often develop based on pagan religions and practices, may actually be wrong or definitely not in the best interest of the family. A missionary wife must be careful not to develop a negative or condescending attitude toward the host culture or view the people as ridiculous, dumb, or un-educated just because they do certain things. I believe that as much as possible, the missionary wife should adapt to those things which she knows affect her testimony or ability to minister among the nationals. What might some of those things be?

- a. **Good wives/mothers do certain things.** (These things vary greatly by country, of course.) Keep a very neat or clean house, eat meals at a certain time, constantly have people in the home (this is where the husband and wife together must evaluate and model love and flexibility), sweep the street or water the dirt☺, stop to talk to a neighbor on the street even when she's in a hurry (because they may never be in a hurry), learn the language so she can communicate, wear make-up or not, treat children a certain way in public, show interest in something that may be of no personal interest to her, etc.
- b. **Good wives/mothers don't do certain things:** speak up when men are present, interrupt a conversation, drive the car, take a baby out without a hat on, show affection to her husband in public, etc.
- c. **Missionary/pastors wife should do everything.** In some situations (even in the U.S.), the expectations on the missionary or pastor's wife can be great. I need to trust in my husband's wisdom and try to train the nationals to participate.

Conclusion: The best helpmeet for a missionary husband is a missionary helpmeet. If I have Biblical priorities in my personal life, marriage, and home I will be a true helpmeet and a true missionary. I and other missionary wives have found that if our priorities stay in order, being the helpmeet our husbands need never conflicts with being a missionary. If I keep my relationship with my Father as first priority, then being the help that is MEET for my husband as my second priority, my husband helps me determine what order the other priorities should be. In other words, my priorities are not my own—they are my husband's. This helps me say "no" when it's the right thing to do, and it increases my trust in the work of the Holy Spirit because He shows me that He is doing the real work in me and in others. I will leave you with a quote from a missionary friend who has been on the field for a long time now. Regarding this subject, she said, "There were many times when I went to bed happy that my hubby was happy and my kids' needs were met." And that is enough!