

# The Vital Role of Tentmaking in Paul's Mission Strategy

*Tentmaking has great potential for contemporary frontier missions that we need to carefully examine the apostle Paul's example and teaching, and note the role that his manual labor played in his ministry. He would not have dedicated so much time and energy to make tents had this not been a vital part of his mission strategy!*

by Ruth E. Siemens

Why did Paul spend so much time doing manual labor when he did not have to do it? The question should concern us because at this turn of the century far more Paul-type tentmakers are needed than ever before in history. The thousands of international jobs my staff and I laboriously researched 20 years ago when we began to help tentmakers go abroad seem like a trickle compared with the ocean of constantly changing openings available today.

The collapse of the U.S.S.R. not only freed the Soviet satellite nations, and produced 15 new Soviet republics, but it turned almost all non-aligned governments to the West. Most of them struggle to implement free market economics, multi-party politics and improved human rights, in order to qualify for scarce international aid. All need tentmakers.

By far the largest demand today is for educators, as it was in the early 1950s when I began my teaching and administration in private, secular schools in Latin America. But in addition to education at all levels, professionals and certified technicians are needed especially in health care, engineering, science and technology, business and finance, agriculture and related fields, and computer science. Openings are fewer, but available, in the social sciences, fine arts, athletics, and in many industries, like construction, petroleum, publishing, food science, travel and tourism. Most positions require degrees and experience, or long experience in lieu of a

degree, because governments protect semi-skilled and unskilled openings for their own people, except in a few sparsely populated, mineral-rich lands. Salaries range from adequate to high, with travel and benefits--if you acquire the job while still in your homeland. Otherwise, you are considered a local hire and usually receive local pay.

Before we examine Paul's example and his teaching, consider briefly nine benefits of tentmaking in today's world.

- 1) It provides entry into hostile countries that forbid missionaries-- 80% of the world's people!
- 2) It provides natural, sustained contact with non-believers in restrictive and open countries (like Japan, less than 1% evangelical).
- 3) It conserves scarce mission funds for missionaries who must have support.
- 4) It multiplies our personnel, as we mobilize the laity for missions.
- 5) It supplements Christian radio and TV by incarnating the Gospel for millions who have never seen a Christian.
- 6) It can reduce the attrition rate of missionaries who do not finish their first term or return for a second one-- about 30%. Tentmakers who have learned the language and culture at their own expense are tried and proven candidates for mission agencies.
- 7) It legitimizes mission agencies before increasingly difficult govern-

ments.

8) It is ideal for new mission agencies in new sending countries which cannot follow our Western model of full donor support or cannot send money out of the country.

9) It makes good use of the vast global job market which God has designed to help us finish world evangelization. Dare we ignore hundreds of thousands of paid jobs all over the world while false religions and cults take advantage of them to spread their heresies?

I will use the term *tentmaker* to mean missions-committed Christians who support themselves abroad, and make Jesus Christ known on the job and in their free time. They are in full-time ministry even when they have full-time jobs, because they integrate work and witness. They follow Paul's model of tentmaking, for the same reasons he did it. How preposterous that any serious Christian should relegate spiritual ministry to free time in the evenings and on weekends!

Because we cannot finish evangelizing the world without a massive force of such tentmakers, I am amazed at the lack of attention that is given to Paul's model. The word *tentmaker* has been co-opted, but Paul's example and teachings on this unique approach are largely ignored.

A major reason is the common belief that Paul usually had church support, and only made tents during financial emergencies. I hope to show that

this is a myth based on proof-texts taken out of context. (We criticize cults for doing this.) To get the whole picture we must examine all the relevant passages and then correlate them, especially, Paul's letters with events in the book of Acts. These passages interpret and limit each other.

We must ask seven basic questions:

1. How much manual labor did Paul actually do? 2. How much did he receive from church or donor gifts? 3. Why did he work at all when he did not have to? 4. How were converts to evangelize? 5. What was Paul's strategy? 6. How effective was it? 7. What practical implications does Paul's tentmaking have for us as we enter a new millennium?

### How Much Did Paul Work?

Did he work on his first journey?

In 1 Cor. 9:6 Paul asks, "Are Barnabas and I the only ones who cannot refrain from working for a living?" This suggests strongly that he worked on the first journey, the only time the two men traveled together. They must have supported themselves as they went through Cyprus and Galatia, and continued to do so after they formed separate teams.

On the second journey, he almost certainly did manual labor in Philippi. (2 Cor. 11:12 was written from Philippi.) Both of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians say he worked "night and day," that is, early morning and late afternoon shifts, with the usual long Mediterranean siesta break during the midday heat. In Corinth we find Paul house hunting and job hunting, and he finds both with Priscilla and Aquila, who are recent Jewish refugees whom Claudius had expelled from Rome, and who shared Paul's trade, the making and repair of animal skin tents. (They were not weavers of tents. Acts 18:3-5). He almost certainly wins them to the Lord because if they were already Christians, Luke would have called them that instead of Jews.

On the third missionary journey, Paul spent almost three years in Ephesus. Acts 19 gives a poignant description of Paul teaching over the long noon hour in the school of a man named Tyrannus. F.F. Bruce in *Paul and His Converts* considered the Western Text accurate on this point. Paul is preaching in his work clothes. Probably his audience is similarly dressed. Listeners take away his apron and the sweat rag from his brow, in the hope of healing ailing friends.

Then on Paul's farewell meeting with his elders, he reminds them that he had earned his own support with his own hands and he expects them to continue his example. (Acts 20:33-35) Paul approved of pay for pastors only after the pioneer stage.

The first proof-text to give us trouble is Acts 18:5. It says that when Timothy and Silas arrived from Macedonia they found Paul totally involved in ministry. It is generally assumed that they brought money from Macedonia and so he quit his manual labor to give full time to preaching. (A couple of N.T. paraphrases actually say that.) The men probably did bring gifts. But whatever change Paul made (if any) had occurred before the men appeared. The words in Greek suggest that they were surprised that he was already so deeply into his ministry. The larger context also show convincingly that he did not quit his manual labor.

Paul spent most of his third journey in Ephesus, either the second or third largest city in the Roman empire. Near the end of that time, messengers from Corinth came to say that Judaizers had come with their legalistic teaching, and the congregations had split into factions. Worse, the visitors insist that Paul is no apostle. That is why he cannot get church support and has to do manual labor! In their minds, how could anyone with shabby clothes and blistered hands be important?

So Paul writes 1 Corinthians in Ephe-

sus and sends it with Timothy. We know the Judaizers' charges from Paul answers. They criticized his message and his oratorical style. Paul says he preaches Jesus Christ and him crucified, and that he does not follow the oratorical fads of the day. But the Judaizers' most serious charge by far was Paul's manual labor. They could never have made this charge if Paul had quit tentmaking when Silas and Timothy arrived! The charge would stick only if he did manual labor most of the time.

In Chapter 9 Paul makes his formal defense regarding the main charge. He begins by defending his apostleship. He speaks approvingly of Peter and James and others who did receive church support.

You will recall that Jesus himself had called Peter away from his two-family fishing business in order to give all his time to fishing for people. When Peter briefly returned to his business, Jesus asked him to promise three times that he will not go back to fishing for fish. (Lk. 5:1-11, John 20:21) Two decades later Peter and his wife still received support for their missionary travels.

But Paul says that he and Barnabas have just as much right to financial support. Then he gives a long list of arguments in favor of church or donor support. It is the strongest defense of supported ministry in the Bible. Paul is proving his own right to financial donor support. This list is another reason why it is assumed that Paul was mainly supported and made tents only when money was scarce. However, no one seems to notice what follows.

Paul says three times in the same chapter (1 Cor. 9) that he has never made use of his right to financial support. Never! That must include all three journeys, and probably the prior period as well. Then he gives his reasons for insisting on self-support when he could have lived on donor support. This passage occurs in the middle of the letter,

which in ancient writings usually contains the most important section for the main purpose of the writer. It also comes in the middle of a larger section about the need to give up all kinds of rights for the sake of the Gospel. But before we consider why Paul chose this course of action, we must look at another passage of Scripture that seems to contradict this conclusion.

### Paul's Financial Support

How much support did Paul actually receive? Paul writes that he even "robbed churches" in order to serve the Corinthians. (2 Cor. 11:8, 9) He refers to money received from Macedonia—money that Silas and Timothy probably brought. But "robbed" is hyperbole—exaggeration for emphasis. In reality Paul is shaming the Corinthians.

But that passage is usually taken to mean that Paul was mainly on donor support. Phil. 4:15, 16 seems to indicate the opposite. Several years after the third journey Paul was in Rome in Nero's palace prison. The state did not provide the basics for prisoners, so friends had to bring in food and clothing, etc. The Philippians (Macedonians) graciously send Paul a gift. In thanking them, he reminds them that in the early days they were the only ones who had ever given money toward his ministry. How often had they given? A time or two. This passage would seem to preclude gifts from other sources.

But there is more. When we examine 2 Cor. 12:16-18 in its larger context it seems clear that the Judaizers also suggest that Paul's boast of self-support was not entirely true. Surely, he must be getting money secretly from some source. Paul replies that he receives no funds from any source, and he will not allow anyone to silence his claim to self-support. It would destroy the model he was so carefully providing for his converts, and which was so crucial to his whole strategy. He was not just pretending self-support. Several passages suggest that his team members also

worked, presumably when they were not traveling. Paul's team was self-supporting. They were all dependent on what they earned. Paul says that in the pioneer stage he does not even accept free hospitality. He paid for his food and lodging (1 Thess. 3:6-16). So Paul had three options:

- 1) To charge his listeners, as lecturers did all over the empire.
- 2) To receive money from churches or from wealthy patrons.
- 3) To earn his own living—the option he chose.

Paul's self-support had facilitated his pioneering work in Corinth. But now the crisis that the Judaizers caused proved difficult to resolve. Timothy takes Paul's letter to the Corinthians, but comes back to say that the congregation was not convinced by it, and they had lost confidence in his authority as an apostle. Since so much is at stake (in all the churches) Paul makes an emergency journey to Corinth. He is rebuffed. He refers to this as his "painful visit," Then he writes another letter, no longer extant—which he refers to as his "severe letter." He sends it with Titus, an experienced senior partner—and then wishes he could get it back. He fears it is too severe, maybe counterproductive.

Meanwhile, he planned to remain in Ephesus a few more weeks and then to await Titus in Troas. But Demetrius the silversmith incites a riot, and Paul barely escapes with his life. Hiding in Troas, he is so worried about the Corinthians, that he travels on to Philippi to intercept his co-worker there. Titus brings good news. Most of the Christians, but apparently not all, are repentant and have sided with Paul.

So from Philippi, Paul writes 2 Corinthians, ostensibly about the offering for Jerusalem (in the center of the letter). But most of the letter is related in one way or another to the tentmaking issue. He says he is at that time earning his support in Philippi and plans to continue this same policy on his forth-

coming third visit to Corinth. For Paul, his manual labor was not negotiable, even if it jeopardized his apostleship. Why did he continue to insist on his tentmaking when it had become so controversial and he could have had church support?

### Why Did Paul do Manual Labor?

*Credibility.* Paul says twice that he works in order to put no "obstacle" in the way of the Gospel, so that his message and motivation will not become suspect (1 Cor. 9:12, 2 Cor. 6:3ff). It appears that donor support was not a problem for Jewish people, but it raised suspicions among the Gentiles. It is important that Paul should get no pay for his preaching, although it cost him dearly in weary labor and in frequent risk of his life. It proved he was not a "peddler of God's Word" nor a "people-pleaser," preaching what the audiences wanted to hear so they would give fatter contributions. He did not want to be identified with the unscrupulous orators who roamed the empire sponging off of their listeners. He wanted to be free of obligations to donors, not beholden to anyone—no mysterious church, no wealthy patron, no social clique. Paul says "Owe no one anything." If he had taken money from the Corinthians, who would have paid? Probably the wealthy members. Everyone else in this quarrelsome church would have believed that he had to do what the wealthy demanded.

Even today in most countries people think that religious workers have to say religious things because that is what they are paid to do. But they are more open to listen to peers. Non-believers sometimes suspect religious workers of being spies because there is a mystery about receiving support from a variety of donors and a few distant churches. In the pioneer stage of missions Paul wanted nothing to diminish the credibility of his message or his motivation or to interfere with his adapting to the people he wanted to reach.

*Identification.* Paul not only adapted to the general culture of each host city, but specifically on the people he hoped to win—the laboring classes. In 1 Cor. 9:18 ff he says he approaches Jews as a Jew, since he is one. He approaches Greeks (educated Gentiles) as the highly educated, trilingual, tri-cultural, upper class Roman citizen that he is. He does not have much problem relating to these two groups, even in his shabby clothes. In Athens the philosophers drag him to the Areopagus to lecture; in Corinth he wins upper-class converts; and in Ephesus the Asiarchs become his friends.

But Paul had more trouble identifying with “the weak” and the poor, the slaves, the day laborers. They were his main target for several reasons. To win the empire he had to focus on them because most of its residents were at the social and economic bottom. Seventy percent of the population in the provinces were slaves, and 90% in Rome and Italy.

So Paul worked as an artisan, using his trade. Every Jewish theologian had to learn one. The making and repair of tents was still a respectable level, not quite at the bottom. With this trade Paul genuinely earned his living—he did not pretend to do so while receiving paychecks from Antioch. (We do not know what work his team members did.) Earning their living required many hours of weary manual labor. Paul wrote from Ephesus, “To this present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill-clad and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our hands.” (1 Cor. 4:11, 12)

But Paul had another reason for emphasizing the lower classes. Most were barbarians. They were not savages but foreign born slaves, and people from the tribes and villages whose first language was not Greek. These bilingual and bicultural people were Paul's channel to the hinterlands, as we will see in the next section.

*Modeling.* Paul writes, “With toil and labor (weariness), we worked night and day that we might not burden any of you, and to give you an example to follow” (1 Thess. 3:8). It is extremely important to note what Paul modeled.

1) *Christian living.* None of the pagans Paul worked with had ever seen a Christian before. It would do little good to tell them how to live a holy life. They needed a demonstration, and Paul personally gave it. Without it they would have said, “But Paul, you are demonstrating a holy life in church. But try doing it in the cesspool environment of my job!” So Paul showed them how to live a holy Christian life in a wicked, immoral, idolatrous society. It made his counseling and teaching credible. (1 Thess. 4:1ff)

2) *A biblical work ethic.* Did you ever notice how much Paul says in his short letters about work? (2 Thess. 3:6-15) Converts were to earn their living quietly. If they did not work, they should not eat. Without a strong biblical work ethic there could not be strong Christians. Paul reminds the Corinthians that a good many of them had been bums—thieves and pilferers, idlers, and worse (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Paul probably found some of them in the gutters, and maybe some had tried to rip him off. In his letters to the churches Paul tells the *Christians* to stop stealing (Eph. 4:28, 1 Tim. 5:8). Bad habits die hard. And a good job helped. If they thought they could sit around all day and get paid for a few hours of preaching (missionary work is sometimes thought to be that), many Corinthians would have sought pastorates, and sought them for the wrong reasons!

Without a strong work ethic there could not be godly families. Thieves, pilferers, idlers and drunks now had to become good providers for their families (or they were worse than infidels). And they were to be generous givers to the needy. These problems are just as true today as in Paul's day. Mr. Zai-

chenko, a top Russian economist who found Jesus Christ a few years ago says no amount of money or technical help will do much good in his country without the recovery of a strong Judeo-Christian work ethic, which was destroyed during 70 years of Communism. The lack of an adequate work ethic has kept many Two-Thirds World countries poor and has kept many mission churches dependent on foreign subsidies. We must share our material resources generously, but wisely, with younger churches in poor countries. But to support their workers has to be harmful! Paul would not have allowed it. If an Indian or African missionary in his own country can live on only \$50 a month, that means their local churches are probably able to provide it. A new kind of Western paternalism will be as damaging as the old varieties. Several missions in India refuse foreign funds.

3) *Unpaid lay evangelism.* Paul wanted to make sure all his converts would immediately become unpaid evangelists—witnesses to their families, to colleagues at work, to friends in their neighborhood. Every new convert was a new beachhead into enemy territory. He even says they should not quickly move out of their social circles, and risk short-circuiting what God was trying to do there. (1 Cor. 7:17-24). I recall a young Jewish convert in Spain, who was told to quit his sinful job and recreation (advertising and skiing), and then found he could not win his friends because he was cut off from them.

Furthermore, all of Paul's converts were to become full-time evangelists, even though they had full-time jobs. How? By integrating work and witness. That is the genius of tentmaking! It is not regular missionary work under the guise of a secular job. It is a unique approach to ministry. Paul gives them instructions on how to evangelize on the job. This point is so important

to Paul's mission strategy that I will devote the next section to it

### How did Converts Evangelize?

In Col. 4:5, 6 Paul says, "Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time (*kairos*—each opportunity). Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt (interesting, thought-provoking, thirst-inducing), so that you may know how you ought to answer every one." Their conduct and their words should get people around them to ask questions about the Lord. Then the Christians were to be ready to answer those questions.

Paul's instructions are especially for evangelizing in the workplace (or campus or neighborhood), wherever one has sustained contact with the same non-believers. Note that the Christians were not to evangelize indiscriminately. They were to patiently *fish out seekers*, and focus only on them. At work, Christians are under constant scrutiny, whether they are aware of it or not. Their attractive, non-judgmental godliness will be noted, and so will their failures, so frequent apologies are in order, which further enhance their testimony. Whenever there is a good opening they must speak for Jesus Christ, but without becoming preachy. Their conduct and speech are bait, and is usually tiny. Brief comments, not sermons, not homilies, are needed.

Four points were essential about their lifestyle. They were to concentrate on *personal integrity*—how they related to the opposite sex, their honesty, and their truthfulness, etc. Much of Paul's ethical teaching is especially for the workplace. No situation justifies lies, half truths, or evasion of the truth. Tentmakers must be transparent. They must be who they say they are. A biology professor must be exactly that, not a missionary in the guise of a biology professor. He must have nothing to hide.

Paul tells his converts to focus on

*quality work*. In Col. 3:22-24 he says they are to serve their masters (including harsh slave masters) as though they were Jesus Christ himself, and with the same honesty and enthusiasm. Eph. 6:5-9 is even stronger, and includes paid employees. Because in serving the employer they are indeed serving Jesus Christ. Imagine how a wealthy householder would respond when some of his untrustworthy, pilfering, quarreling, lazy slaves became responsible, honest and hardworking. How would he respond when he discovered the transformation was due to the power of the Gospel?

Paul is aiming at the wealthy householders through their slaves. The household was a dominant social unit in the Roman empire. The householder owned land and a villa, occupied by his nuclear family, his extended family, house servants, farm laborers, artisans and managers to run the family businesses, and maybe even a tutor, a physician and a lawyer.

The best way to convert people was to aim at the householder, because individuals often had little liberty to make their own decisions. That is why the N.T. speaks of the conversion of the Philippian jailor "and his household." Many converted householders are mentioned among Paul's converts, and usually they hosted a church. Often the converted householder was the ideal natural leader of a new house-church and he had an ample home for meetings. This is the situation in many non-Christian countries today, where we must focus on the family head if we wish to plant growing indigenous churches.

Therefore, according to Paul, if one has a contract with a human employer one has a contract with Jesus Christ. It is wrong for any tentmaker to take employment just to get an entry visa unless he intends to do quality work for his employer. Mission leaders must refrain from telling tentmakers to

spend less time on their employment "because that is not what you are here for." The job is the absolutely essential context for the evangelism.

Converts were to develop *caring relationships*. To be friendly to everyone, but to watch for people who needed help. Paul says he and his team did not only give the Gospel, but first they gave themselves in sacrificial ways. Loving people, seeking their highest good, had to be a novelty in the Roman empire.

The fourth point is *verbal witness*, because living out the Gospel cannot bring anyone to the Lord unless we speak. We must insert casual and fitting comments about God into ordinary conversations.

Paul said they should use their lifestyle and their occasional words about God as bait, to fish out the seekers, and then be ready to answer their questions (Col. 4:5, 6). This is the best way to evangelize in the workplace (or on the campus or in the neighborhood), wherever we see the same people repeatedly. It is usually not good to say so much at first that further conversation about God becomes difficult.

Peter recommends the same fishing approach because it is ideal in an environment of spiritual hostility and persecution. He says Christians should not fear the persecutors, but be aware of the presence of Jesus Christ within them, and be ready to answer the questions, making sure their conduct was without reproach (1 Pet. 3:14-17).

Can you see why this is ideal tentmaker evangelism? We miss so much by taking Paul's tentmaking concept and ignoring his instructions! Most Christians do not evangelize at all, including the majority of missionaries. (They do other church ministries.) Most people who evangelize, hunt instead of fish. The question is not whether hunters can win some converts or not, but what happens to the vast number of victims

that are turned off to the Gospel? Also, a decision is not a conversion, although sometimes the two may coincide.

I am convinced that most Christians do not often evangelize because we do not feel comfortable invading the privacy of another person and imposing a religious conversation on someone who does not want to hear it. Are we never supposed to do that? In a hostile country it can be disastrous. It is better to fish out the seekers and answer their questions.

What are some advantages of fishing evangelism? For one thing, it is enjoyable to explain the Gospel to people who want to know God. You allow them to pace the conversations as they are ready. The Holy Spirit is patient with them and we must not run ahead of him. Their questions let you know when to speak and what to say. Their questions let you know what truths they already understand, where they are confused, as well as their hang ups and their felt needs. They show you how to pray for them. Their questions lead naturally into an evangelistic Bible study. I have seen more people find the Lord through evangelistic Bible studies than any other way. But these studies are very different from the kind most Christians do. By then you have developed a friendship with the seeker and you have more liberty to ask your own questions. I wish I had space to give you examples from my own experience. (See my papers, "Workplace Evangelism: Fishing out Seekers," 29 pp, and "Tentmaking and Investigative Bible Studies," 16 pp, both from *Global Opportunities*.) If we want the benefits of Paul's strategy, we must pay attention to its details.

### Paul's Church Planting Strategy

Paul designed a strategy intended to produce a world-wide missionary lay movement—the quickest way to win the world. Paul needed thousands of missionaries to win the Roman empire and money for their support. Instead, he

produced them as he went along, by reproducing himself in his converts. Since all must be self-supporting, he needed foreign funds.

Today, fishing conversations turn into evangelistic Bible studies, which turn into discipleship Bible studies, which turn into small house-churches. This is the basic ministry of tentmakers, and they can do it better than anyone else because of their extensive, natural contact with outsiders. But in their free time they have many other ministries. God gave me an exciting ministry in my secular school employment, and in my free time led me to begin IVCF-IFES university student movements in Peru, Brazil, Portugal and Spain. But he led linguistics professor, Dan, to do a translation of the New Testament into the language of 5 million Muslims who had never had it before, while he and his wife supported themselves. Tentmaking is ideal of church planting.

1) *Paul's churches were self-reproducing.* Everyone evangelized. Paul aimed for exponential growth. Note two clear examples. Paul may have been in Thessalonica only a few weeks or months, but in his first letter he says that the Gospel had already sounded out from them over the whole region. Maybe it spread quickly because of the persecution. Paul was in Ephesus three years. But Luke says that in the two years that Paul taught in the hall of Tyrannus "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." That area covers the Roman province of Asia (See Acts 19:10).

But the *whole* province? Even the hinterlands? I wondered if Luke was exaggerating a little, and then noticed corroborating testimony from a very unlikely source. In verses 26 and 27, Demetrius the silversmith, whose riot nearly cost Paul his life, shouts to his fellow artisans, "Men... you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but almost throughout all Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable

company of people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may count for nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship." Remember the great bonfire of magical books and fetishes in Ephesus. What success Paul had!

2) *Paul's churches were self-governing.* He brought in no foreign pastors, but appointed and coached local house church leaders, and taught them "the whole counsel of God" so they could mobilize their laity—not get them into a myriad of church committees, but to "equip" them for effective witness in their world.

3) *Paul's churches were self-supporting.* Never dependent on any foreign funds. Everyone worked during the pioneer stage, including the house church pastors. New converts learned to give—but to the poor, not to clergy.

Paul's house church leaders kept their jobs (Acts 20:33-35). By the time growing congregations required more full-time leadership, it was clear which house church leaders had the respect and confidence of the community's Christians, as well as of its non-Christians (1 Tim. 3:7). They knew who was effective at evangelism in the workplace in a hostile society. If a pastor had no personal experience in the marketplace, how could he train his church members to be effective there?

By the time full-time leadership was needed there were local funds for salaries. Paul tells his older churches to provide well for their pastors—for example in Galatia, and eventually, Ephesus (Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17, 18). The pastors were local, not foreign imports.

By then the basic pattern of unpaid evangelism was well established, so that paid ministry was viewed as an exception to the rule. But Paul did not allow his churches at any stage to become

dependent on foreign leadership or outside funds.

Paul says he did not work haphazardly, but he had planned his strategy “like a skilled master builder.” (1 Cor. 3:12ff) His foundation was theological as well as methodological. He warns all others to heed the precedents he had so carefully established. But could his plan have succeeded if he had not supported himself? Clearly, he did not think so. It would seem that Paul’s long hours in the workshop would have greatly slowed down his ministry. Instead, it was greatly speeded up.

How did he get the thousands of missionaries he needed? He multiplied himself many times over in his converts. How did he get the necessary funds for so great an undertaking? All his converts and missionaries were self supporting.

### How Effective was Paul?

In ten years (the three journeys took a decade), Paul and his friends, with no financial support, evangelized six whole provinces. Notice what Paul says after just about 20 years of ministry. He writes to the Romans “From Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum (modern Albania) I have fully preached the Gospel of Christ. I no longer have room for work in these regions!” (Rom. 15:19-24) He had evangelized the Greek-speaking half of the Mediterranean, and now turned to the Latin half of the Empire, including Spain. He proceeds with the same strategy—inviting the Roman believers to help him win their province (all Italy?), and then help him win unreached Spain. To have skipped over them and sent in new foreign workers would have been damaging to them. He will help them fulfill their responsibility before God.

Paul does not mean that everyone in the eastern Mediterranean was evangelized, but enough people had found God so that the churches could continue to evangelize the rest. The pioneering

was over. But what about the rural areas? Paul said he was debtor to the barbarians as well as to the Greeks. But we are not told that Paul traveled to the villages. Paul reached the tribes and villages by reproducing himself in many converts from rural villages and tribes. They had no anthropological nor missiological training, and many came from unsavory backgrounds, but they were effective. Michael Green in his *Evangelism and the Early Church*. describes how many did not even have Christian doctrine straight, but they had Jesus Christ inside, and they ran to their tribes and villages with the good news. They took the Gospel clothed in the language and culture of their people, not as a foreign import.

Most of the working people were from rural tribes and villages. The Roman Empire was never more than a chain of military outposts and city colonies along the Roman roads. Each had its own language and customs, its laws and deities, which were usually respected by the Roman authorities, who were concerned with federal matters and national security. Neither the Greek nor Roman emperors ever tried to integrate or educate the tribal peoples. Many languages were spoken, even in the cities. Remember what trouble the Lycaonians had caused Paul and Barnabas in Lystra? (Acts 14) But by turning his multilingual, lower class converts into unpaid evangelists, Paul guaranteed the evangelization of the hinterlands. Paul lived in the cities and let his converts evangelize the country side. It was indigenous, exponential growth. Speed matters when pioneering in antagonistic cultures. Paul’s converts took the Gospel so quickly that it was too late for the opposition to gear up to stop it. In contrast today we give non-Christian religions decades to build and reinforce their defenses.

Dr. Donald McGavran said that church growth requires a large force of unpaid evangelists, but how are they

produced if the only models we provide are generously supported leaders? If by contrast they seem wealthy, local converts with meager wages will rarely serve without remuneration. On the other hand, it is not a problem if a tentmaker earns well, since it is not pay for religious services. He gives that without pay.

### Implications for Today

We must not slavishly imitate Paul. But certainly it is folly to proceed without careful consideration of what he did and why. No tentmaker or missionary in our era has begun to reproduce what Paul did in so short a time with so limited resources. What does a study of Paul provide for us today, and how may we adapt it to the challenges of our 21st century world?

1) *Paul’s strategy gives definition.* Almost everything that is said today about tentmaking can be immediately contradicted because everyone uses a different definition—one of 20 that are floating around. If every Christian, or every working Christian, or even every Christian expatriate, is a tentmaker, then the word is as devalued as the currency in inflation-ridden countries. It is useless! Of all the Christians who have found employment overseas, probably not one percent are tentmakers. Most are expatriates who had little or no ministry at home, and crossing an ocean did not change that. But some can be mobilized and trained.

Yet almost every missionary article assumes these expatriates are tentmakers, and therefore concludes that tentmakers have little motivation, little cultural, language or ministry preparation. This is grossly unfair to all the genuine tentmakers, many of whom have better training in every way than their regular missionary counterparts. Many of our applicants have had full theological and missiological training.

I suggest that for the sake of communication, we take our definition of

tentmaking from the example and teaching of Paul.

"Tentmakers are mission-committed people who support themselves, and integrate work and witness, doing cross-cultural evangelism on the job and other ministries in their free time."

If the definition omits the financial aspect—self-support, or the on-the-job evangelism, or the cross-cultural nature of that ministry, then it is not Pauline tentmaking!

We also should use Peter for our model of regular missionaries because Jesus so clearly called him to leave his business and to trust God's people for support.

Then we need to recognize that any combination of these two quite different approaches to cross-cultural ministry is valid, as long as it is honest. In these hybrid options we must be sure there is no pretense before outsiders, Christians of the host country, nor donors in the home country. Where there is pretense, there is usually a clandestine mentality that leads to suspicious actions and loss of credibility.

2) *Paul's example gives a biblical basis.* This is desperately needed! The mission community is not even sure whether to accept tentmakers as valid workers. Almost all the magazine articles and book chapters on tentmaking in my considerable collection have one common characteristic. They give a few advantages of tentmaking and end up with a long list of disadvantages. Always the same ones, most of which are not defects of lay ministry, but are based on an inadequate definition, and the restrictions of a hostile society. Regular missionaries cannot do a better job in those countries since they cannot enter at all.

A whole book has been written about tentmaking with the bottom line that the ones with evangelism and Bible study skills did better than the rest. In my opinion, any person who does not have evangelism and Bible study skills is

not a tentmaker. The book is not really about tentmakers, but about Christian expatriates in general.

Even though most true tentmakers serve in risky and hostile countries, they are constantly lumped together with uncommitted expatriates, and disparaged along with them. Our definition will help us to distinguish clearly between the two groups.

Tentmakers are often made out to be second class. They receive little help or encouragement from their churches or the mission community because these do not understand the tentmaker approach to which the tentmakers are called by the Lord.

No wonder so relatively few young people are going as tentmakers and many of those overseas do not renew their contracts. I believe the whole church needs the biblical basis which Paul gives us, and tentmakers need to keep it before them as an encouragement. Roland Allen said that if we are convinced that tentmaking is biblical, we will not find fault with it, but will seek ways to make it more effective.

3) *Paul gives a description and model of this unique ministry approach.* Tentmaking is not supposed to be regular missionary work under the guise of a job. Paul goes into detail on the Christian's conduct and speech on the job, and how to do selective evangelism, fishing out the seekers and conversing with them where adversaries cannot dissuade them or harm the tentmakers. We refer many tentmakers to mission agencies, but I always find it discouraging that in no time at all the tentmaker has been pressed into the mold of a regular missionary and most of the benefits of tentmaking are lost.

Paul also says much about tentmaker ethics. His instructions can protect us from serious derailments, like the current attempt of some leaders to decide when it is permissible to lie in tight situations. Never! There is no loophole in Scripture. No one can ever arrest you

unless God permits it, and if he does, then do not short-circuit His plans. If the early Christians had lied when Saul of Tarsus arrested them, then "the chief persecutor of the church" might never have become "our beloved brother Paul." We must heed Paul (and Jesus) on this question.

4) *Paul shows us what should be included in tentmaker training.* There is a good deal of overlap with what every Christian and every missionary should learn. But most of the training should be based on the unique character of tentmaking. In a war, not all the foot soldiers need officer training. But in the Lord's army all of us had better know how to do spiritual warfare, how to wield the sword of the Spirit in good evangelism and Bible study. It is shameful how poor most Christians are at these basic skills, even after years in Sunday school and church. Preparing young people for future ministry should provide strong motivation for Sunday school teachers and youth workers.

But the tentmaker in today's world also needs good academic preparation and experience witnessing in the workplace. If Paul came to China today, he probably would go as a university professor, since most people in China are interested in education. He might go to India as a businessman.

The person who goes to a Christian high school, a Christian college and then seminary is poorly prepared for tentmaking. Probably, the best training place is in a Christian fellowship on a secular university campus. A university is a microcosm of a multicultural, spiritually hostile world. It is a mission field ideal for in-service training for more distant hostile countries. Ideally, the candidate should gain the benefits of both secular and Christian institutions. The tentmaker will make language and cultural preparation. (See GO Paper, "The Tentmaker's Academic, Cultural and Spiritual Preparation," 20 pp.)

5) *Paul gives us a complete pioneering strategy for hostile environments.*

How his strategy should be implemented in varied modern contexts needs careful study. But surely it is folly to ignore what he said and did since no one has yet equaled his achievement, to evangelize such a large region, so thoroughly and quickly, with such a small team and virtually no money.

Tentmaking in itself cannot assure the success of missionary efforts. That would be asking more than it can provide. Many other factors contributed to Paul's success, like his holy life, thorough teaching, Holy Spirit's power, willingness to suffer risk, his prayer life, etc. But clearly, Paul's manual labor as a tentmaker made a great contribution to his overall strategy. He would not have dedicated the better part of many days making tents had it not been a vital part of his mission strategy.

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