



Tentmaking and North American Church Planting
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No discussion of the role of business in mission is complete without addressing the paradigm of tentmaking. Though this apostolic model of missions has been discussed time and again over the last few decades, few of those discussions have seriously attempted to consider the application of this paradigm to North America. The purpose of this paper is to argue for the inclusion of North America within discussions concerning tentmaking, briefly examine some of the critical literature addressing tentmaking, discuss the North American need for this ministry, examine the biblical evidence supporting this missionary paradigm, and conclude with a few examples of contemporary North American tentmakers.

Tentmaking Definitions

The word “tentmaking” stirs up a variety of images within the minds of people. For some, the tentmaker is a missionary that travels land and sea to conduct mission work while supporting himself or herself by a skill or trade. Another person sees the tentmaker as a missionary doing covert activities in creative access nations, and thus compromising Christian integrity. For others, a tentmaker is someone who ventures into a distant land to minister to others but is forced to earn their living through a secular occupation

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because they could not become a “real” missionary with a mission agency. Some may even understand the tentmaker to be someone who works for The Camping Superstore!

Within this section of this paper, I wish to address the more commonly accepted definitions of “tentmaking” and conclude with my definition of tentmaking as related to North American church planting. First, leaders such as J. Christy Wilson, Jr., Don Hamilton, and Ruth E. Siemens hold well-respected definitions. For example, J. Christy Wilson, Jr., who has been hailed as the father of the contemporary tentmaking movement, noted that the best picture that portrays a tentmaker is the Apostle Paul. According to Wilson:

The apostle Paul, who thus supported himself, was the greatest missionary who ever lived. In Acts 18:1-5 we read, “Paul . . . came to Corinth and found a certain Jew named Aquila. . . lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla. . . And because he was of the same craft, he abode with them, and wrought: for by their occupation they were tentmakers. And he. . . persuaded the Jews and the Greeks. . . that Jesus was Christ.”²

In an attempt to be more specific with his definition of the term, Wilson went on to cite several writers such as Herbert Kane as defining a tentmaker as “any dedicated Christian who lives and works overseas . . . and who uses his secular calling as an opportunity to give his personal witness to Jesus Christ.’;” Andrew Dymond as writing, “the tentmaker is a missionary in terms of commitment, but is fully self-supporting.’;” Van Baak’s definition as “A Christian going overseas for any reason is potentially and ambassador for Jesus Christ.’;” and Ted Ward’s definition as one “witnessing for Christ while productively employed abroad.”³

²J. Christy Wilson, Jr., *Today’s Tentmakers: Self-support: An Alternative Model for Worldwide Witness* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1979), 16.

³Ibid., 16-17.

Don Hamilton in his work, *Tentmakers Speak: Practical Advice from Over 400 Missionary Tentmakers*, stated that “As used in this book, the term ‘tentmaker’ refers to a Christian who works in a cross-cultural situation, is recognized by members of the host culture as something other than a ‘religious professional,’ and yet, in terms of his or her commitment, calling, motivation, and training, is ‘missionary’ in every way.”⁴ Another commonly respected definition is from Ruth E. Siemens. According to Siemens:

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.⁵

At the Lausanne Congress in Manila in 1989, the Lausanne Tentmaking Task Force conducted several meetings that resulted in the development of three categories that impact our understanding of tentmaking. The “commonly agreed upon criteria for being considered a tentmaker” was 1) to live and work in a cross-cultural situation (E-2 or E-3); 2) to have a secular job or identity; and 3) to have a religious ministry. The “important but not essential criteria” included: 1) to have missiological and secular training; 2) to have defined ministry goals; 3) to be living in a closed country (i.e., restrictive-access, creative-access); 4) to reside among the people in the country where the missionary is ministering; 5) to have a legal resident visa; 6) to be sent out by a church and/or mission organization; and 7) to be accountable to experienced field

⁴Don Hamilton, *Tentmakers Speak: Practical Advice from Over 400 Missionary Tentmakers* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1987), 7.

⁵Ruth E. Siemens, “The Vital Role of Tentmaking in Paul’s Mission Strategy,” in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 14 (July-September 1997): 121.

personnel. The third category, which was labeled “divisive criteria” included the source of the person’s salary.⁶

Other writers who have offered their definitions of tentmaking include Tetsunao (Ted) Yamamori, Gary Ginter, and Patrick Lai. In the *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, Yamamori defined tentmakers as “cross-cultural workers with a secular identity called to make disciples within ‘closed’ countries.”⁷ In a detailed description, Ginter commented:

When kingdom professionals catch God’s heart for the unreached peoples, they then turn their accumulated experience, resources and intensity toward the intentionally chosen task of impacting those people for God. When they do this and successfully involve themselves with that E-2 or E-3 culture, they are tentmakers. It is effective intentionality that distinguishes tentmakers from Christian professionals living overseas [*sic*]. Of course, in real life, such distinctions are not so black and white. In reality, there is a continuum between being a Christian professional and being a tentmaker, but at some point along that progression, the difference in degree becomes so large that it is more correctly seen as a difference in kind. And it is intent that moves one along that continuum from Christian professional toward kingdom professional and perhaps to tentmakers. The latter is a strategic choice made by a kingdom professional to reach out to an unreached people group. The strategy is but the visible outworking of the heart’s intent. Tentmaking is a matter of choice, not geography. It is an issue of the will, not of one’s job description.⁸

After conducting a survey of over 400 missionaries, Patrick Lai developed a tentmaker taxonomy, in which “all tentmakers can identify themselves.”⁹ He has labeled his categories T-1, T-2, T-3, T-4, and T-5. According to Lai, the following are his definitions of each ideal type:

⁶Patrick Lai, “Tentmaking: In Search of a Workable Definition,” [article on-line]. Accessed 27, January 2005. Available from <http://www.strategicnetwork.org>; Internet.

⁷Tetsunao Yamamori, “Tent-Making Mission,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* A. Scott Moreau, ed., (United Kingdom: Paternoster Press; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 939-40.

⁸Gary Ginter, “Overcoming Resistance Through Tentmaking,” in *Reaching the Resistant: Barriers and Bridges for Mission*, J. Dudley Woodberry, ed., (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1998), 215.

⁹Lai, “Tentmaking: In Search of a Workable Definition.”

T-1: no specific ministry call; primary motivation for being overseas is employment, not witness

T-2: specific ministry call; have plan for evangelism/discipleship and possibly church planting goals; “ministry is their job and their job is their ministry”

T-3: partially or fully financially supported by a church “at home;” similar to T-2, but work part-time or operate their own business; “sees their job as a vehicle to enter the country first, a way for reaching out to people second, and a means of financial support last”

T-4: fully supported as a missionary from “back home” and raise support like regular missionaries; not recognized as “religious professionals” by the people group; examples include missionary dentist, doctor, social worker, or even a student.

T-5: regular missionary, not a tentmaker; working in areas that do not grant “missionary” visas; work for shell companies; have identity other than being a missionary; enter countries under a “cover”¹⁰

Though D. Gibson would agree with many of the aforementioned definitions of a tentmaker, Gibson takes a unique approach, that is worthy of mention here, in that he distinguished between two models of tentmaking: Pauline and Priscillan. He noted that Pauline tentmaking was a strategy used by the Apostle that provided financial support for his preaching and teaching ministry and that it was the Apostle’s way of demonstrating a practical servant life-style.¹¹ For the Apostle, “Tentmaking was only a financial means to a ministry end.”¹² Gibson implied that Priscilla and Aquila were Christian professionals who had surrendered their profession to Christ and His work, and were “therefore, better models of financial self-sufficiency in missions than Paul.”¹³ Gibson compared the two:

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹D. Gibson, *Avoiding the Tentmaker Trap* (Hamilton, Ontario: WEC International Canada, 1997), 32.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., 33.

One way of considering it is that Paul's major focus was on his calling and ministry to the Gentiles. He travelled [*sic*] extensively, and only used his tentmaking skills where they would enhance the preaching of the gospel. Priscillan tentmaking however, places greater emphasis on professional skills, and the ministry that naturally develops from using them.¹⁴

Continuing on, Gibson wrote:

What does the contrast look like in practice? Individuals and agencies whose primary goal is church planting and evangelism will favour the Pauline model of tentmaking. Whereas other organizations, placing heavier emphasis on ministries such as helps, support ministries and friendship evangelism will likely be more open to the Priscillan models.¹⁵

Though there are various nuances that separate definition from definition, the common threads that run throughout the aforementioned definitions are that the tentmaker is living and working in an overseas (Lausanne/Manila-“cross-cultural”) environment, that a skill, trade or some secular employment financially supports them, and that they are involved in religious (i.e., missionary) activity.

Despite the risk of sounding as if I do not respect decades of research and work in the tentmaking movement and that I disrespect the work of the Lausanne Tentmaking Task Force, I wish to simultaneously broaden the definition to include North America and to restrict the definition to evangelism that leads to new churches. For the present, my working definition of a tentmaker in North America is: *A missionary who is focused on evangelism that results in churches, and who is financially supported by a marketable skill, trade, and/or other non-clergy source of income.*

Why North America?

One of the major arguments for the validity of tentmaking is that of the “creative access nation.” Since traditional missionary approaches are prohibited in certain

¹⁴Ibid., 35.

¹⁵Ibid.

countries, therefore, the Church needs a “platform” in which to minister within these nations. A portion of the rationale for tentmaking understands the paradigm as a means of gaining entrée. Since traditional missionary approaches in North America have not been prohibited, rarely is tentmaking on anyone’s mind unless there is a financial crisis facing a denomination or mission agency.

There are several reasons why tentmaking should be emphasized in a Western context. Interestingly, much of the apologetic for tentmaking in a creative-access nation is applicable to non-restrictive Western societies. Both J. Christy Wilson Jr., and Jim Reapsome have commented on the various strengths of the tentmaking paradigm.¹⁶ Their writings have influenced my thinking in addressing North America. There are at least eight particular reasons for an increased use of this paradigm as applied to North American church planting.

First, there is biblical support for this model of mission work. Specifically, the evidence points to the fact that the tentmaker is one who is involved in planting churches. The passage whereby the concept is clearly portrayed is from Acts 18:1-4.¹⁷ It is here that the Apostle Paul arrived in Corinth from Athens, was awaiting the arrival of Silas and Timothy, but was also involved in his missionary labors. He started working with a Jewish man named Aquilla and his wife, Priscilla. Paul had two things in common with them. First, he just arrived in the city, just as they had recently arrived from Italy. Second, he was of the same trade, a tentmaker. Paul stayed with them and worked

¹⁶See Wilson, 70-71 and Jim Reapsome, ed., “Tentmakers,” in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 32 (October 1996): 420.

¹⁷There are several other passages that reveal that Paul was involved in a “non-clergy type” of business at times throughout his mission work (e.g., Acts 19:11-12; 20:34; 1 Cor 4:12; 1 Cor 9:6; 2 Cor 11:27; 12:14; 1 Thes 2:9).

alongside of them. Despite the fact that Paul was using his trade, he was also preaching the gospel. He remained in Corinth for eighteen months and witnessed the planting of the Corinthian church. Rare is the missiologist or New Testament scholar who would argue that Paul was not both a tentmaker as well as a church planter. If the concept of tentmaker is going to be supported by biblical evidence, then textual application requires the tentmaker also to be involved in church planting.

Second, North America has been experiencing many radical cultural shifts, especially since the 1960s. Globalization, urbanization, post-industrialization, immigration, post-modernism, pluralism, and economic swings have created within our information society a stewpot of worldviews. Gone are the days when we could assume the same cultural perspectives as our neighbors across the street. Even more astounding is the fact, that gone are the days when we could assume the same culture as our neighbors who were of the same ethnicity, spoke the same language, and were of the same socio-economic and educational level as ourselves.

Much evangelism and church planting in North America is cross-cultural to some degree. Evangelism at least involves a clash of world-views. What historically would have been considered E-1 evangelism is now E-2 and in some cases E-3 evangelism. Though some are quick to omit North American church planters from the concept of tentmaking by pointing to the lack of cross-cultural dynamics involved in their work, it must be understood that mission in North America today involves many of these dynamics.¹⁸

¹⁸I do not make light of the fact that for most first generation North Americans missionary work outside of the continent is much more cross-cultural than missionary work done here. The point that I desire to make is that cross-cultural mission work does not only happen “there” (i.e., overseas) and not “here” (i.e., at home).

Third, the potential for the missionary to develop credibility and to open a multitude of doors to preach the gospel increases whenever he or she enters into the world of the marketplace. Listen to the words of Steve Sjogren and Rob Lewin:

You desperately need to get into the community. You need to work no matter what your financial backing looks like. We encourage you to work outside the church until your plant reaches 200 in weekend attendance.¹⁹

Many North Americans have negative thoughts regarding the Church and money. In fact, one of the commonly heard excuses for why people are not interested in the Church is because of their perception that “the Church is only interested in my money.” Tentmakers are able to gain some credibility in the eyes of those who labor alongside of them and have “real jobs.” The personal perspective of Jack Strong illustrates the point. Strong, who undertook a mining job while serving as a vicar within the same parish, noted “after priest and parishioners have scrubbed each others’ backs a few times in the communal pithead bath-house, things could never be quite the same again.”²⁰

Along with new credibility in the eyes of unbelievers come opportunities to share the gospel that would not be available if one was outside of the marketplace. Postmodern cultural shifts have created a desire for authenticity and legitimacy in many areas of North American life. People are tired of being told empty promises by advertisers, educators, politicians, and religious leaders. There is a hunger for reality and genuineness. Gone are the days where the clergyman was well respected and honored as an outstanding citizen with a calling that surpasses any secular form of employment.

¹⁹Steve Sjogren and Rob Lewin, *Community of Kindness: A Refreshing New Approach to Planting and Growing a Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2003), 172-73.

²⁰Jack Strong, “Into a Thick Wood,” in *Tentmaking: Perspectives on Self-supporting Ministry*, eds., James M. M. Francis and Leslie J. Francis (United Kingdom: Gracewing Fowler Wright Books, 1997), 303.

When I was serving as an Associate Pastor with a church in Indiana, I recall a counseling session in which I was ministering to a teenage girl and her mother. It was getting late in the evening and the mother felt that they were intruding upon my time. I quickly informed them that I was here for them and that I did not mind staying as long as they needed. To this, the girl responded in semi-jest, “Yes, you are getting paid to be here.”

Fourth, though the North American Church is the wealthiest Church in the world, little financial resources are available to support full-time church planters long-term. Tentmakers are able to avoid this dependency on a mission agency or a church, thereby freeing up funds to be used in other areas of missions.

Fifth, in a recent study that I conducted of 190 North American church planters and church planting leaders, the most common critical issue they faced was that of finances. Many church planters found themselves receiving very little financial support to serve as a church planter. Some felt called to a particular area, but were unable to live among the people due to the cost of living and their small mission agency subsidy.

Once I was working with a church planter who had a core group of about thirty individuals, but the group was unable to support him with a full-time salary. His response to me was that if God wanted him in this ministry, then He would provide, and that provision would be a full-time salary. The notion of tentmaking was far from both his heart and mind. Tentmaking allows for a source of income that could easily keep the

church planter out of poverty and able to relate socio-economically to his or her people group.²¹

Sixth, the tentmaker is able to avoid the temptation of developing evangelism strategies that are subtly motivated by financial gain. During one conversation with a church planting-pastor from the Midwest, I was told that he was approaching the date in which his personal funding would begin to decrease according to his denomination's policy. Though this individual's primary reason for being involved in church planting was to glorify God through making disciples, he did inform me that in the back of his mind was the prosaic reality that if his strategy did not entail reaching others quickly who would start giving tithes and offerings, soon he would be out of money for his family.

Seventh, tentmakers are not restricted by bureaucratic policies and red tape that many times accompanies the reception of subsidy. There is much freedom found in the ministry of the tentmaker, freedoms that other church planters sacrifice when they serve with parachurch organizations. Tentmakers are not restricted by guidelines developed by policy-makers who are miles away from the field and unfamiliar with the church planting context.

Eighth, Wilson noted that tentmakers, "have satisfactions of their own professional accomplishment which may balance the frustrations and discouragements which may arise in the course of Christian witness in different areas."²² Many times in North America, church planting is a slow process and certain personalities (including the personalities of those who fund church planters) have a difficult time when the work

²¹Of course, for some the call to follow Christ is a call to poverty. But this calling is not the same for all. One only needs to look to the New Testament to find both the poor and wealthy in the same congregation (e.g., Philemon and Onesimus, book of James).

²²Wilson, 70-71.

appears to be moving slowly. God has created within people a desire to take satisfaction in their accomplishments. Tentmakers are able to experience this satisfaction in knowing that they have put in both a day's work and ministry. Tentmakers can avoid the pressure and the desire to measure their "success" in terms of an economic model of production. It is a problem when the Church takes the Protestant work ethic out of the American workforce and makes investments and production the standard by which we measure Kingdom work (e.g., church planting); we should not measure spiritual results solely by a materialistic yardstick. The tentmaker is able to have the channel of applying the Protestant ethic to his or her trade and measuring Kingdom work by Kingdom measures of success.

Important Tentmaking Literature

Contemporary literature relating tentmaking to global missions is very limited, and literature specifically addressing tentmaking and North American church planting is for the most part non-existent. This field of missions is in extreme need for future research and publications. Of course, there is a large body of literature related to the close cousins of the tentmaking movement, the marketplace Christian movement and the quickly emerging for-profit entrepreneurial strategies paradigm being advocated primarily by Tetsunao (Ted) Yamamori, Kenneth A. Eldred, Steve Rundle and Tom Steffen.²³ Due to the specific focus of this paper, this section will provide a brief review of some of the few, yet important resources related specifically to tentmaking.

²³Two recent works on the role of business in missions are Tetsunao Yamamori and Kenneth A. Eldred, eds., *On Kingdom Business: Transforming Missions Through Entrepreneurial Strategies* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003) and Steve Rundle and Tom Steffen, *Great Commission Companies: The Emerging Role of Business in Missions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

In 1930, Roland Allen published his controversial work, *The Case for Voluntary Clergy*.²⁴ Despite the conflict that emerged from Allen's work, his thoughts have influenced contemporary tentmakers. Within this work, he addressed issues such as the biblical passages related to missionaries, the economic benefit of voluntary clergy to the Church at home and abroad, and the danger of the use of subsidy in mission work.

James L. Lowery, Jr. edited and published *Case Histories of Tentmakers* with Morehouse-Barlow Co., Inc. in 1976.²⁵ This work consisted of fifteen "full-sized" case histories and nine "mini-histories," primarily reflecting the work of the Episcopalian Church. The ideal for this text came out of an annual meeting of the National Association for the Self-Supporting Active Ministry. Numerous authors shared their tentmaking stories in this work.

J. Christy Wilson, Jr.'s work *Today's Tentmakers: Self-support: An Alternative Model for Worldwide Witness* was the seminal work that launched the contemporary tentmaking movement. Published in 1979 by Tyndale House, the work drew from Wilson's experiences while serving for twenty-two years as a tentmaker in Afghanistan. The purpose of the work was to "inspire, inform, encourage, and challenge those whom God is calling to serve as his tentmakers" and "to make all Christians aware of their responsibility to pray for, assist, and encourage self-supporting witnesses along with regular missionaries."²⁶ Wilson examined the biblical evidence for tentmaking and traced examples of tentmaking throughout Church history. He also addressed various

²⁴Roland Allen, *The Case for Voluntary Clergy* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1930). This work contains Allen's 1923 publication *Voluntary Clergy*.

²⁵James Lowery, Jr., ed., *Case Histories of Tentmakers*. Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow Co., Inc., 1976.

²⁶Wilson, 10.

issues facing contemporary tentmakers and the relationship between tentmakers and mission agencies. In addition, he included a bibliography containing resources mainly addressing lay ministries, self-supporting missionaries, non-professional missionaries, and general works on missions.

By 1980, Fortress Press published Ronald F. Hock's work, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship*.²⁷ Though this work was only 112 pages in length, it was a first of its kind. Hock, a New Testament scholar, argued that tentmaking was actually at the center of the Apostle's life and ministry. Hock not only examined the biblical evidence and writings by other New Testament scholars, but also drew heavily from socio-historical studies.

Don Hamilton published the widely-popular study of "practical advice from over 400 missionary tentmakers" in 1987 with Regal books, under the title *Tentmakers Speak*.²⁸ According to Hamilton's work tentmakers need: 1) to know God's will and be committed to doing it; 2) to be spiritually qualified; 3) a team approach; 4) appropriate social skills for the context; and 5) the professional qualifications.²⁹

William Carey Library published Jonathan Lewis' popular work, later published by InterVarsity Press (1997) and now available on-line, entitled, *Working Your Way to the Nations: A Guide to Effective Tentmaking*.³⁰ This work grew out of a dearth of practical material available for training tentmakers. This twelve-chapter text, written by

²⁷Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

²⁸Don Hamilton, *Tentmakers Speak: Practical Advice from Over 400 Missionary Tentmakers* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1987).

²⁹*Ibid.*, v.

³⁰Jonathan Lewis, ed. *Working Your Way to the Nations: A Guide to Effective Tentmaking* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1993). Available on-line at <http://www.tentmakernet.com/canada/book.htm>.

twelve experienced tentmakers from ten nations, was designed so it could be incorporated into a twelve week traditional Sunday School “quarter.” Its contents addressed interpersonal issues, necessary skills, biblical and doctrinal foundations, and cross-cultural matters as related to tentmaking.

Though not a book, Ruth E. Siemens’ provocative article published in the *International Journal of Frontier Missions* (1997) has been a significant work influencing the world of tentmaking.³¹ Siemens argued that tentmaking was a vital and strategic component to the Apostle’s ministry, and that it has great potential for frontier mission work today. Though she did not discard the traditional fully supported missionary, Siemens made a biblical apology for tentmaking as a regular and intentional Pauline paradigm for missions.

James M. M. Francis and Leslie J. Francis edited a lengthy work entitled *Tentmaking: Perspectives on Self-supporting Ministry* (1997).³² This work contained numerous chapters related to “non-stipendiary ministry” and was divided into several sections addressing tentmaking from biblical, historical, denominational, social, theological, personal, and local perspectives. The chapters were well documented and the book contained a very extensive bibliography.

D. Gibson also published a work in 1997. *Avoiding the Tentmaker Trap* offered within 155 pages excellent practical insights into this ministry. Drawing from real-life examples, Gibson was not hesitant in sharing the challenges facing contemporary tentmakers. He wrote several chapters including biblical and theological support,

³¹Ruth E. Siemens, “The Vital Role of Tentmaking in Paul’s Mission Strategy,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 14 (July-Sept 1997): 121-29.

³²James M. M. Francis and Leslie J. Francis, *Tentmaking: Perspectives on Self-supporting Ministry* (United Kingdom: Gracewing, Fowler Wright Books, 1997).

historical examples, finding a job, identifying and overcoming the traps, and several contemporary examples. There were also sixteen appendices which contained subject matter such as suggested readings, films and videos, internet sources, conferences, Lausanne statements, helpful organizations, and a tentmaker personal assessment.

Biblical Support for Tentmaking

It is clear from the Scriptures that the Apostle received financial support from at least three sources: other churches (2 Cor 11:9; Phil 4:15-20), from individuals (Acts 16:15), and from his own labor (Acts 20:33-35).³³ F. F. Bruce commented on the Apostle's tentmaking paradigm:

[H]e supported himself, and his companions where necessary, by his "tent-making". Many rabbis practiced a trade so as to be able to impart their teaching without charge. Paul scrupulously maintained this tradition as a Christian preacher, partly as a matter of principle, partly by way of example to his converts, and partly to avoid giving his critics any opportunity to say that his motives were mercenary. When, however, hospitality was spontaneously offered [e.g., Lydia] . . . he gladly accepted it: it would have been ungracious to refuse.³⁴

I would add a fourth reason that the Apostle chose to abstain from regularly receiving financial support: partly as a way to become all things to all people so he could win some. I do not agree with those who have advocated that tentmaking should only be the option "in the absence of another means of full support" and that "self-support is legitimate as a *temporary* option."³⁵

³³Dick Scoggins, *Building Effective Church Planting Teams* (Middletown, RI: Fellowship of Church Planters, n.d.), 37-38.

³⁴F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 220.

³⁵David L. Washburn, "Tentmaking: Is It Really a Biblical Means of Missionary Support?" *Evangelical Theological Society Papers*. Portland OR: Theological Research Exchange Network, 1987. Text-fiche, 3.

Lukan Narratives

Two passages in the book of Acts that offer substantial evidence for the Apostle's tentmaking paradigm include 18:1-4 and 20:32-35. Since I have already addressed the former tentmaking passage in an earlier section, I will refrain from redundancy and briefly examine the latter passage.

The setting was in Miletus; the audience was the elders of the Ephesian Church. Since Paul was in a hurry to arrive in Jerusalem before Pentecost, he sailed past Ephesus and called for the elders to meet him. In this farewell address, Paul's last words to the church leaders included his usual admonition to imitate his lifestyle.

And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my *own* needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."³⁶

By manifesting a healthy work ethic, Paul was able to avoid the accusation of avarice, and truly show forth the example of a servant leader, as one who gives rather than takes.

Corinthian Correspondence

There are several Corinthian passages that offer evidence for and explanation of Paul's tentmaking practice. In 1 Corinthians 4:12, Paul made the passing statement that he was one who worked with his own hands.³⁷ In chapter nine, the Apostle made a very

³⁶Acts 20:32-35 (NASB).

³⁷"We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, *even* until now (1 Cor 4:10-13 (NASB)).

clear declaration regarding the fact that he indeed had the right to provender and drink from the Corinthians (1 Cor 9:4), but abdicated this right so as to not hinder the spread of the gospel (1 Cor 9:12) and considered it a reward to preach the gospel without charge (1 Cor 9:18). He made himself a slave to all so that he “might win the more” (1 Cor 9:19) and show his desire to “become all things to all men that I may by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22).

Thessalonian Correspondence

Paul maintained his tentmaking practice while in Thessalonica. In 1 Thess 2:9, Paul reminded the Church that he and this team labored “night and day” so as not to burden them. Later, in his second letter to the Church, he repeated this fact and echoed his Corinthian abdication, in conjunction with the problem that the Thessalonian Church had with members who were unwilling to work. He wrote:

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we *kept* working night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right *to this*, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, that you might follow our example. For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone will not work, neither let him eat. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.³⁸

Contemporary Examples of North American Tentmakers

Out of curiosity, I recently conducted an informal survey of North American church planters who have served or are serving as tentmakers. This section includes five brief examples of men scattered across the continent. In hearing of both the blessings and

³⁸2 Thess 3:6-12 (NASB).

challenges of contemporary North American tentmaking, there is also a cry for more such tentmakers. I will conclude this section with some summarizing thoughts.

Joe Ciresi--Avon, Ohio

Thirty-nine year old Joe Ciresi lives in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio with his wife and three children. He graduated in 1994 from Trinity Divinity School and returned to Ohio where he planted Northpointe Community Church one and a half years ago (His third church plant.). During my interview with Joe, he was quick to comment that he was “an entrepreneurial type guy” with a desire to “start things.”

Joe works full time for a company with Stanley Tools and Doors, and has been a tentmaker for one and a half years. Though Northpointe is currently nondenominational they will soon affiliate with a denomination and Joe will begin to receive some financial support from that denomination. During our discussion regarding his employment, he noted, “I always viewed my secular work as temporary.” Though he believes that he is where God wants him to be, and that he would “do it all over again” if necessary, Joe does believe that God is leading him out of secular employment.

Joe’s journey into the tentmaking ministry began out of financial need. He stated that though he had sent out many resumes, “God had not opened any doors for anything,” so he looked for secular employment. Beginning with his conversion at sixteen years of age, Joe believed that God called him into full-time ministry, but that he needed to go through a time of preparation first. According to Joe, God’s calling on his life for full-time ministry is still present, “It has just taken 20 years” for it to start to become a reality.

Jim Frago--Bonne Terre, MO

Jim Frago, 38, and married with three children, works full time as a loan officer. He has served as a tentmaker for almost three years, and is involved in his second church plant. Jim offered a brief history of his employment record and transition into tentmaking:

For fourteen years I was a full time police officer and a bivocational pastor. I then went full time pastoring for three years and finished my master's degree in church planting through Liberty University. After this I went back to bivocational as my family started the new church plant. I was a full time hospice chaplain for two years and recently was laid off and went to work for a mortgage company. . . as a loan officer.

Upon further inquiry into Jim's journey into serving as a tentmaker he stated:

For about ten years I pastored existing churches and began to feel frustrated with churches that were stuck in not wanting to change to reach people for Christ. I went full time as a pastor and it was during that time that the Lord lead me to finish my degree and equipped me, and my family, to begin starting a church that had a heart of starting new churches and doing what it takes to see people come to know Christ as their Lord and Savior. I gave up my job, not knowing how we would survive on just my wife' income, and God provided as doors were opened . . . in starting a new church.

Jim's pastoral heart is filled with love for the church. He was quick to comment, "I take whatever job I find to keep my focus on my flock."

I asked Jim why he chose to serve as a tentmaker. His response revealed his passion for evangelism noting, "Because of more opportunities to be able to share Christ." Jim, like some of the others whom I surveyed, commented that one of the blessings of serving as a tentmaker is that the tentmaker is in the real world. According to Jim, "It keeps you in touch with reality of what life is like outside of a world surrounded by primarily just Christian people. When you are full time, you tend to get a tainted picture of what peoples' real struggles are."

Mike Buffi--Smithfield, RI

In New England, forty-seven year old Mike Buffi is married with two girls, and receives his full salary working with the Fellowship of Church Planters. His work in church planting, however, has not always been this way. For twenty-one years, until October 2004, Mike worked full-time with MetLife in both a management and administrative role. In fact, Mike shared with me that he served as a tentmaker from 1987-2004.

I was most amazed and impressed with Mike when I asked him how many churches he had started during his tentmaking work. After a somewhat lengthy time of silence and counting aloud, he hesitantly stated “ten churches.” I got the impression that Mike genuinely was not concerned so much with numbers, but mostly with the work of the ministry.

When I asked Mike why he chose to serve as a tentmaker, he quickly noted three reasons. First, he wanted all of his “service to God to be out of a free-will offering, not out of compulsion because I was being paid.” Second, he desired that his lifestyle be a “model” before others. He wanted to show believers that it was possible to have a job, a family, and a significant role in the life of the church. Finally, he desired “to be light in the community.” Mike, as with most of the others in my study, commented that he had been significantly involved in personal evangelism and leading evangelistic Bible studies long before he started serving as a tentmaker.

Though Mike has had a very fruitful tentmaking ministry by human standards, he was quick to note the challenges and overall difficulty of tentmaking. “It is tough.

Really, really though,” he stated. It is “Just a constant challenge,” to balance all of life’s responsibilities as a husband, father, businessman, and church leader.

Yuri Onuffer--Thorton, CO

In a suburb of Denver, Yuri Onuffer lives with his wife and three children. Though he has served as a tentmaker since 1999, he has been involved in church planting since 2004 and planted two Russian-speaking churches in Aurora and Littleton. At the time of my interview a third group was soon to transition from a women’s fellowship to a church. Yuri’s vision is to be involved in planting 100 Russian-speaking churches among the 10,000 Russian-speakers of the Denver area.

Yuri supports himself and his family by owning and operating a small flooring business. He has a history of entrepreneurial skills. While living in Russia, at the age of twenty-one, Yuri started a lumber business. He commented that it was after he arrived in the United States that he came to faith in Christ. The Lord took him out of owning and operating his own business for five years and then allowed him to start his flooring company.

Though he readily acknowledged that his profession allows for much time flexibility and financial freedom, he quickly confessed that these two blessings are also two of his greatest struggles. “Business is really exhausting,” commenting on his desire to be able to channel the time and energy involved in running the business into the “ministry.” Yuri also confessed that he dreamt of the day when he could “retire and dedicate everything [time?] to the Lord.” Regarding finances, he noted that owning and operating a company is risky. Over the years, both he and his family have suffered financially and emotionally because of the volatile construction market.

Larry Dorothy--Eatonville, WA

In the Northwest corner of the continental United States, Larry Dorothy, 47, lives with his wife. He has served as a tentmaker for twenty years, earning his income as a self-employed specialty contractor in construction and rain gutter systems. Over the years Larry has participated in planting The Christian Biker Tabernacle, Calvary Baptist Church of Eatonville, and Home Spun Ministries. In 1989, Larry built his house and his shop on the same property, and in 2001 built a chapel on his property where the church meets.

Larry explained to me that his journey into church planting began with his conversion. "We, my wife and I, have always felt drawn toward ministry from the time we came to the Lord. We started each work as outreach Bible Studies and they grew from there." When asked specifically about the reason to serve as a tentmaker, Larry, commented that, "I don't exactly know that we chose to do it this way. It is just the way it happened."

Reflections

A comparison of these different tentmakers reveals some findings worth addressing. Since these tentmakers were not selected by a highly scientific sampling procedure, I cannot claim with any degree of certainty that these tentmakers are representative of all North American tentmakers. Despite this shortcoming, some things

are worth noting and may nevertheless be issues that are found in the larger North American tentmaker population.

First, it was not uncommon that these tentmakers had been involved in planting other churches. Most of these men had a history of other churches they had started. This reality was also true of the Apostle Paul's life. His missionary journeys reveal that he was always involved in planting churches. Though he remained for differing periods of time with the new churches, he continued on to plant others.

Second, one of the repeated challenges that I heard was the challenge of time. When I asked one of the tentmakers what were his three greatest challenges, he wrote, “#1 is time for more ministry. #2 time. #3 time!!.” These men were quick to note the balancing act they faced between family, church planting, and occupation. For them, this was a continuous challenge.

Third, I heard from some of these men of their desire to be full-time in the “ministry.” Some mentioned this desire in passing, saw their tentmaking ministry quickly ending, or had already transitioned out of tentmaking and were receiving a full-time salary for ministry.

Fourth, the only other published study concerning tentmakers that I could locate was Don Hamilton's *Tentmakers Speak: Practical Advice from Over 400 Missionary Tentmakers*. Hamilton discovered that tentmakers working outside of North America tended to have led an evangelistic Bible study before serving as a tentmaker, were actively involved in personal evangelism before serving as a tentmaker, and had a strong relationship with their home church. Some of my findings mirrored those of Hamilton.

When asked, “Did you ever lead an evangelistic Bible study before serving as a tentmaker?” I received responses such as, “Often! (Is there any other kind?),” “Yes. Absolutely,” and “Yeah, a lot of them.” One tentmaker commented that he started to lead evangelistic Bible studies soon after his conversion. All of the tentmakers had been significantly involved in personal evangelism. Unlike Hamilton’s study, however, most did not have a close connection with their home churches. I did hear on different occasions that many of these men desired to have that strong relationship.

Conclusion

The North American Church needs to consider the significance of the tentmaker and missions not only throughout the world, but also on Her continent. Aside from the biblical model, there are numerous advantages to tentmaking in post-Christendom, Western civilization. Despite the need for more and well equipped tentmakers, there are numerous challenges facing those who tread this ministerial path. Limitations of time, struggle for balance, and lack of recognition by established church leaders will all affect the North American tentmaker. Despite these limitations, many tentmakers see extreme Kingdom value in their ministries, even if for them tentmaking is only for a season.

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