

Paul: The Nonprofessional Missionary

by Jim Reapsome, Editor Evangelical Missions Quarterly (Winter, 1997)

"Tentmaker" scares more than a few professional missionaries. When they hear powerful appeals for students, teachers, engineers, and doctors to consider working in business, education, government, and industry overseas--while being a "missionary" on the side--they throw up the yellow caution flag.

Of course, their yellow flags are fully warranted. Professional missionaries with considerable overseas experience need to dispel some of the romantic notions often attached to being a tentmaker. No one should apply for a secular position overseas without first talking to some missionaries who have been there.

For example, would-be tentmakers need to know that Americans generally are suspect. They ought to know that the demands of their jobs will come first and that there will be little time left over to do "missionary work." They ought to know that social, cultural, and language barriers are steep hurdles to overcome. They certainly ought to believe that unless God has given them a fruitful "missionary" ministry while working in the U.S., the chances are quite slim that they will blossom overnight into something different in Saudi Arabia while working for an oil company.

Of course, these realities need not deter people from facing them and overcoming them in the power of the Holy Spirit. In fact, it would not hurt if some professional missionaries took a turn at being bivocational and did some secular work. In terms of sound missiology, such a strategy is both biblical and practical.

We are astounded that in some ten or eleven years the apostle Paul established churches in four provinces of the Roman Empire: Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia. We picture him traveling ceaselessly, preaching the gospel everywhere. Certainly, if anyone was ever a full-time professional missionary, it was the apostle Paul.

Wrong, because about half the time he worked at a secular job making tents. According to our definition, he was a part-time professional missionary. He not only worked for extended periods at Corinth and Ephesus, he also worked during shorter visits, such as the one to Thessalonica.

This side of Paul's missionary methods has been overlooked. Even Roland Allen failed to comment on it in his discussion of the missionary's finances. But the evidence for the practical value of the missionary's doing secular work stands out in Acts and in Paul's letters (see Acts 18:3; 20:34, 35; 1 Cor 4:24; 9:6, 12, 15, 18, 19; 2 Cor 11:7; 12:14; 16:1; 1 Thes.2:9; 4:11; 5:14; 2 Thes. 3:7-13).

Paul worked for a number of reasons, the most obvious of which was to pay for what he called "my necessities," that is, his room and board. He also worked to help pay for the needs of his fellow team members. He worked to give an example to his converts, so they might overcome laziness and work hard.

Paul worked full-time while preaching and teaching so that he might not be a financial burden on others. He worked so that he might "make the gospel free of charge." He deliberately refused his right not to work, so that no one would suspect he was preaching for money.

Overworked missionaries find it hard to accept that Paul accomplished so much in church planting while holding down a job, but he did. All of Paul's reasons for doing so should spur some fresh study and creative applications.

For example, in many countries people think missionaries are paid with foreign money to preach. Working would overcome that suspicion. In some cultures laziness is endemic. Hard-working missionaries can set the standard for their converts by farming, fixing cars, repairing computers, or whatever, full-time.

Of course, in some circumstances foreigners can gain entry only if they have certain job and professional skills. That's an important strategic clue that has spawned much of the current interest in "tentmaking." That's why mission agencies have prepared lists of strategic openings for the most highly qualified people they can find.

But if we follow Paul's example, we can see that he did not adopt this strategy because he was working in what we call "restricted access" nations. He did it for the reasons noted above. Apparently there was some connection between his carefully planned strategy of working and his establishment of new churches. This is what I would like to see more missionaries do. Who knows what would happen if skeptical unbelievers saw a missionary get out of bed and go to work in the morning? Paul, the nonprofessional missionary, was that kind of person.