

29

The “Tentmaker” Missionary

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The term “tentmaking” is derived from Acts 18 in which the apostle Paul carried out his missionary work in Corinth while earning his keep with Aquila and Priscilla in a tentmaking business. In his writings we discover a number of reasons why he did this, besides meeting his financial needs. He argued that it enhanced his credibility (1 Cor. 9:6-7, 12, 18). He wanted to let the Corinthians know he didn’t preach for money. He also didn’t want to be a burden to others (1 Thess. 2:9). By working with his hands for a living, he also provided an example to new believers (2 Thess. 3:7-13).

Tentmaking is widely used today as a term to designate those who serve in ministry while earning their living through “secular” jobs. In missions it can be portrayed as less than ideal since secular employment robs the missionary of “ministry time.” But it is seen as a necessary part of deploying missionaries to countries that do not issue visas to missionaries. To others, it is simply a way to be independent in ministry.



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Tentmaking, however, is not a poor second choice, a necessary inconvenience for sending missionaries into restricted access countries, or a choice for independent people. At the core, it is a mindset and a way of life that is the key to transformational mission at home and abroad. Its importance for reaching the uttermost parts of the earth with the Good News is incalculable because, in essence, it is an invitation for every genuine disciple of Christ everywhere to advance God's rule where they are currently working and to be open to using their skills and occupations wherever God may ask them to serve in the world.

While, in fact, "tentmaking" is no doubt the most widely practiced support structure for pastors and other ministers of the majority church in the Global South, for the sake of our discussion on missions, we define tentmakers as *committed disciples of Jesus who intentionally cross frontiers to be his witnesses in and through their occupations, but whose principle identity is not that of religious workers.*¹

The fact that this definition excludes the need for formal theological training, ordination as clergy, or formal service through an institutional church agency, may indicate a severe flaw for some. Although these may be legitimate concerns, if tentmaking can be understood as a way of life, it opens the door for millions of committed follower of Jesus to serve as effective witnesses wherever they live around the world. With thousands of unreached people groups and millions without a living witness for Christ, it is important to acknowledge the fact that the remaining task of reaching the vast unreached segments of the global population can't be achieved by the few thousand that comprise the less than 10% of the regular missions force dedicated to reaching the unreached. On the other hand, with an estimated 800 million faithful followers of Christ around the world, unleashing the inherent potential of the so-called laity as missionaries seems imperative to the size of the challenge, particularly as many are close neighbors of the unreached.²

Overcoming Conceptual Barriers

Tentmaking strikes at the heart of the age-old dichotomy between professional clergy and lay witness. While most of the clergy exist primarily to administer the structures and programs of the institutional church, tentmakers often see their task as ministering directly to the lost that work and live around them. When engaging people of other faiths who are not likely to even consider "conversion" to another religion, they have a distinct advantage over paid religious workers who may be perceived as primarily seeking their conversion to Christianity.

We tend to forget that for its first three centuries, the church persisted, prospered and propagated widely with a significant absence of formal churches and no greater Christian identity than that of "followers of the Way" (Acts 9:2). As a faith, it literally

conquered the Roman Empire. When the church was institutionalized by Constantine, it was somewhat successful in propagating itself by using what Ralph Winter has denominated as “sodalities” or mission-focused orders to expand Christianity largely among pagan populations in Europe. But it failed utterly to address missions to other parts of the globe. When thirteenth-century Christian explorer Marco Polo was asked by Kublai Khan to request that the Pope send 100 ordained priests to teach China to be Christian, the papacy responded seventy years later with one priest³. The Chinese had to wait till the nineteenth century to receive a significant number of missionaries, but it was after their expulsion in 1949 that the underground house church movement emerged. Led by lay (tentmaking) missionaries and ministers, it has won a reported 80 to 130 million followers to Christ in mainland China.⁴

When Islam arose in the seventh century, its primary instrument of expansion was *Jihad* (holy war). But the cornerstone of their overall success during succeeding centuries has been the concept of lay clergy. Islam expanded its teaching throughout Asia and Sub-Sahara Africa through Muslim merchants, not its armies. Its emphasis on loyalty and obedience, rather than understanding doctrine, holds entire societies captive. In fact, most Muslims believe that they are Muslim by birth and can never convert to another religion.

Even though the work of professional missionaries serving through agencies has enjoyed great success during the past 200 years, it has historically met with strong resistance and poor results in countries with strong societies with integrated religious/cultural foundations. These typically denounce Christianity as a foreign religion (which of course it is) and a real threat to their cultural identity. It is reported that sixty percent of the world’s countries do not welcome Christian missionaries. Although Christians as a whole have understood that God’s kingdom is not to be achieved by military or political conquest, they have not backed off of the concept that the mission is to be achieved by “religious conquest.” We continue to emphasize conversion to our religion and have often realized too late (as in Rwanda) that we have made converts to Christianity but not disciples of Jesus.

Is it not time to move past some of the concepts that hold us back from seeing mission work that introduces a transformational paradigm to those who dwell in darkness and do so without confronting their cultural identity and heritage? To bring the transforming gospel to millions of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, we must fly under the radar of institutional religion while still advocating the lordship of Christ for all peoples. And we need to unleash hordes of disciple makers—women and men who now sit in our pews on Sunday—who are passive because they have been taught that the faith requires primarily their attendance at meetings and that success in witness is mostly about getting someone to attend church. We will never introduce

the world to the Lord and his transformational work by focusing on getting people to church. It will come as a massive outpouring of God's grace through millions of vibrant disciples scattered in their neighborhoods and workplaces around the world, operating spontaneously under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Tentmaking is the “Normal” Way to be Missional

Tentmakers are women and men who have had a fundamental, transformational shift in their loyalty from themselves, and any other primary allegiance, to the person of Christ by accepting his offer of salvation and his lordship. They pledge to keep Jesus' commandment to love God totally, and to love others as themselves. They dedicate all their occupations to him. They are willing to go to other countries or cultures and perhaps feel an authentic call to do so. They live a disciplined life in a genuinely loving and coherent manner as a spiritually alive, Spirit-filled people. They don't necessarily pursue getting people to join a church or to make converts to a new religion. But they are intensely interested in making disciples of Jesus.

According to the apostle Paul, the missionary calling is to turn people away from darkness to the light of God's loving truth in order that they may experience his forgiveness and transforming power through a relationship with Jesus (Acts 26:18). Taking this lead, tentmakers demonstrate in practical ways God's love and fulfill Christ's purposes in everyday life. They unleash his power in lives through obedience to Christ, intercession, and the Word. Since this activity is not necessarily *an overt attempt to change a person's religion*, it also flies under the radar of proselytism. This is particularly important for those whose residence status depends on signing documents asserting that they won't engage in the illegal activity of proselytism in countries where the local population, by law, cannot renounce their own religion nor change affiliation to a foreign religion.

Perhaps this is why tentmaking resonates with many. It is a way of extending witness to other parts of the world without all the baggage of religious trappings. Tentmakers can join with God to bring light into a cross-cultural context rather than focusing on expanding the institutional church or denominational structure. They are intent on influencing others towards God as a natural activity of being who they are—witnesses of Christ's love, power and lordship. That witness will bear fruit and some of the persons with whom they share their lives will no doubt become followers of Jesus, and these will no doubt want to band together for mutual support, joining existing churches or gathering informally (and perhaps in secret) in homes or “house churches.” But these initiatives, if taken, will come from those whom they've introduced to Jesus, not because a foreigner has seduced them to change their religion.

A Case Study

Jason and Christine are a young married couple who decided they wanted to serve overseas on a short-term assignment amongst a Buddhist people group. They had taken a popular missions course that motivated and challenged them to be a witness where there is little witness for Christ. Both of them were teachers and they were counseled to get certified to teach English, an occupation that could get them placed quite easily almost anywhere in the world. They found an online TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) certification course and started it while they continued working at their regular jobs and saving for going overseas. They shared their plans with the missions group from their church, which then encouraged them to work through a manual on “tentmaking.”⁵ This helped them to understand how to prepare spiritually and emotionally for their assignment and develop a lifestyle that would allow them to be effective as Christ’s witness during their time overseas.

About a year after initiating the process, they were ready when an opportunity presented itself that “felt right” to them and their support group. They accepted a two-year contract teaching English in a private high school in an Asian country. They arrived and settled into a routine. They soon made friends with their students and invited them into their home. In this context, they were able to share their lives and witness in a natural and conversational way. They gained the trust of the students and were able to pray for their needs. God responded and after a few months, some of the students made a commitment to follow Christ. The group grew as these invited their friends to join them. Aware of the fact that their contract would soon come to an end, Jason and Christine encouraged leadership as it emerged from within the student group. They focused on simple meetings around the Word, open discussion, mutual accountability and prayer. They used Scripture to seed the thought that they should form other small bands of believers around God’s Word and taught on how that could be done. At the end of their contract, the couple did go back to their home in Canada and were greatly encouraged when they heard that the group they left behind had expanded into seven house gatherings, largely among students and their families.

Why Tentmaking Works

The above is derived from a true story, and similar stories are continually unfolding around the world. Although it is not a “classic” missionary approach and might even be criticized by some from a missiological perspective as “short term” or because English was used as the medium of communication, it was nevertheless effective in discipleship terms for a number of reasons.

First, Jason and Christine were intentional in their mission and went prepared. There are tens of thousands of Christians that go overseas for work reasons, but they are not effective witnesses for Christ. Their primary interest is the work or the overseas experience, not the witness. They may not feel they are qualified to be missionaries so the thought never enters their minds. They may not even be intentional in their own discipleship. Even though some others may believe they are missionaries, they are often unprepared, going without thinking through issues that keep Christians from being effective witnesses in overseas contexts. They may be genuine in their faith but haven't developed the lifestyle essential to being and making disciples.

A few years ago, this author went to the Philippines to help the national missions movement with a particular opportunity. The Philippines "exports" eight million Filipino contract laborers overseas each year. With an estimated 6% of the nation claiming to be evangelicals, there were potentially 480,000 Filipino evangelicals working in the Persian Gulf nations and around the world. Leadership was asking itself how to mobilize this enormous potential missionary task force. As a result of this work a manual was published to help give orientation and training to churches and individuals called *Worker to Witness*⁶. Laudable as this effort may have been, the larger question is: why was this special effort at training these workers necessary? Why aren't we as a global church equipping *every member* of our congregation to minister confidently as able, spiritually ordained people in their communities and the workplace?

Jason and Christine went prepared. Through their tentmaking course, they had become aware of the spiritual and emotional challenges of working in an overseas context. They dealt with personal issues and took on disciplines that produced growth in their lives. They knew the difference between being a witness (living naturally as committed followers of Christ) and proselytism (attempting to convert someone to their religion) and that gave them great freedom. They knew discipleship was the key to leaving any permanent fruit and understood the importance of small groups to achieving this. They understood themselves as spiritual people and their priestly role. They focused principally on blessing their students and this opened the door to direct spiritual ministry by interceding for their needs before they had even proclaimed the gospel to them. They focused discipleship on loyalty to Jesus and obedience to his teachings (not just doctrinal assent). They helped new believers grow by addressing their questions and issues through open discussion, studying the Word to find answers, praying together spontaneously, and mutual accountability. They also knew that long-term success in helping the church develop depended on modeling a simple, reproducible encounter led by the new believers.

Their work was their ministry, not simply a way to be in the country to do ministry. They were good at what they did and were a blessing in and through their work. This was the venue where they were developed relationships naturally. They practiced their priestly role. Their students were their “parish.” They prayed *for* them and, when opportunity permitted, prayed *with* them. They were seen as spiritual guides without the trappings of religiosity. That broke down many barriers that regular missionaries in the same region had faced as religious workers who were perceived as propagating a foreign religion that threatened their social traditions and stability.

The Heart of Tentmaking

The heart of tentmaking lies in its doctrinal emphasis on relationships, the disciple’s spiritual identity, total loyalty to Christ, recognition of integral vocation and gifting, and the sacredness of work.

Relationships: God exists in relationship as modeled by the Trinity. Because we are designed in God’s image, humans also exist in relationship and seek fulfillment through these. But sin has broken our relationship with God and marred our human relationships. Ultimately, human fulfillment only comes by breaking the sin barrier and entering into relationship to God through Christ (who breaks the barrier for us). Restoring our relationship to God enables us to live in grace-filled relationship with others.

Only through this spiritual relationship with the Father can women and men be empowered to experience the fullness of life (John 10:10). This is essentially the Good News that tentmakers share with the world. And the primary way they communicate it is by living a life that expresses this truth by blessing those around them in word and deed. Knowing someone with a loving, godly lifestyle is the most compelling reason for anyone to desire to know God.

Spiritual Identity: Because of their sinful self-centeredness, men and women are spiritually dead (Rom. 3:23). The good news is that if they repent of their sins and change their attitude (conversion), they can receive Christ’s gift of salvation and be made spiritually alive through the agency of God’s Spirit (Col. 2:13; John 6:63). This requires a fundamental, transformational shift in loyalty from one’s self or any other primary allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord. From that point onward, the believer’s primary identity is as a son of God (John 1:12; Rom. 8:14), follower of Jesus, and citizen of the Kingdom. Only through this process will a person’s worldview be changed and all other loyalties come into alignment.

Vocation: Humans are created in God’s image and are designed to express his glory (2 Cor. 3:18). Our vocation is intimately related to whom he designed us to become (Ps. 139:13-15) and reaches its maximum human fulfillment when his design

is allowed to develop fully. As humans follow this internal design and develop their interests, gifts, and talents into abilities and skills in service to others, they fulfill their human vocation. This pleases and glorifies God who created humans to be able to serve each other and to excel in what they do. As Eric Liddell, champion runner and 1924 Scottish Olympian is widely quoted as saying, “God made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure.” Liddell went on to become a missionary in China and there made the ultimate sacrifice for Jesus.

Spiritual Gift and Role: Knowing God is essential to discovering who we were meant to be spiritually. New believers are given a spiritual gift that motivates them to service as part of Christ’s body (Eph. 4:7-8). When they develop this gifting into wholehearted service for God, this is true worship (Rom. 12:1-2). In the exercise of their service, they also become a part of God’s royal priesthood (2 Pet. 1:9). The priesthood has a mediating role between men and God—interceding for the needs of others and explaining the ways of God to them. This universal priesthood of the believer is a role vested by God, not by human agency, and should be exercised by all believers (not just by trained clergy). This is the doctrinal cornerstone of tentmaking.

Workplace: Work is not a curse. God blessed Adam with meaningful work by appointing him steward of the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:19-20). Sin and the systems of this world have corrupted creation and distorted this role (Eph. 6:2; Rom. 8:19). Work can be hard and not always humanly satisfying or rewarding. Nevertheless, our work is sanctified (or not) by our attitude (Col. 3:17-18) and we have the opportunity to be agents of transformation in the workplace. When with God’s help we do the best we can in God’s way as an expression of our love for him, God’s will is done and his Kingdom does come to the workplace. When we follow God’s design for us and do it unto him, it results in personal fulfillment. This in itself is “witness” and brings glory to God.

Obedience

For tentmakers, it boils down to disciplined obedience that is manifest through a lifestyle that pursues God’s agenda with excellence, whatever we do, wherever we are. No matter whom we are or what we do, if this lifestyle is adopted, God will use us in his “kingdom come” agenda and perhaps to the “ends of the earth.”

A friend who works placing tentmakers claims that if you are good at whatever you do, he can definitely place you. He cites the example of a young man fresh out of high school who was passionate about goats. He loved goats, raised them, and knew all about them. But he felt he wasn’t really qualified to be a missionary, supposing he needed formal theological training or perhaps a university degree which he wasn’t able

to pursue. Nevertheless, he felt prompted to make himself available as a tentmaker and was eventually placed in the most inaccessible country to foreigners in the world! There he helped start a center dedicated to goat-herding. He ran a breeding program and was successful in increasing the productivity of local stock. His work was greatly appreciated. He lived a simple lifestyle that demonstrated his commitment to love God and to love those around him. He also erected a prayer tower where he went each morning to intercede for his people and where eventually, he was joined by some of his co-workers who had experienced God’s love and grace through his life. Through his simple obedience and good work, he brought light to a very dark place.

It is this kind of simple obedience that will bring the light to the peoples of the world who still live in darkness. It will happen as the result of millions of candles burning rather than isolated bonfires or occasional fireworks displays. And it starts right here at home with family, schoolmates, work companions, and neighbors. We are spiritual people who love God and love others as best we can. We begin bearing fruit and God equips us with greater insight and opportunity. We consistently intercede with and for others, making it as natural as breathing. We are genuine and consistent in our walk and talk. We speak the truth in love as the Spirit moves us. We do so without judgmental attitudes since that is the Holy Spirit’s work. Our work is to look for opportunities to join God in what he wants to do and work with him by blessing others, interceding with them and speaking God’s Word into lives when invited to do so. Fruit follows.

Conclusion

Beyond a second-rate way to get to the mission field, or a strategy to get our regular missionaries into countries who don’t want them, tentmaking is a mindset—a way of life. It calls for genuine disciples—those who have fully acknowledged the lordship of Christ in their lives—to work with God in being good news to those around them. They develop this lifestyle at home and are open to God’s leading for service in a cross-cultural context. They are effective in leading others to Christ and forming small groups of believers who start other groups.⁷

Although many Christians work and live overseas, many have never awakened to the opportunity they have to be on mission for God. Why? What needs to happen in our churches to promote a revolutionary lay movement to the ends of the earth? May God grant us the insight and vision to see a vast number of “laymen” sent forth who are selected for their intentional tentmaker lifestyle and go equipped to be effective in a cross-cultural context! They are already out there sitting in our pews. Are we up to the challenge?

Notes

- ¹ Much discussion has revolved around whether or not all of a tentmaker's support is derived from their secular occupation but in this author's opinion, this is a secondary matter. For most tentmakers, God's provision for their livelihood and ministry will come in a variety of ways.
- ² Much of the support for these assertions can be found summarized with references accessed July 31, 2014 at <http://www.aboutmissions.org/statistics.html>
- ³ Accessed July 31, 2014. <http://www.livescience.com/27513-marco-polo.html>
- ⁴ Accessed July 31, 2014. <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2011/01/20/christianity-china/>
- ⁵ The WEA Missions Commission developed a manual for tentmakers available as a free download from www.globalopps.org/downloads/working.pdf
- ⁶ Jojo Manzano and John C. Solina, *Worker to Witness Church Strengthening Ministry* (Makati City, Philippines, 2007).
- ⁷ The importance of "small" vs. "large" groups to generate movements to Christ among the unreached has been well documented by David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Monument: WIGTake Resources, 2004).

Recommended Reading

- Canadian Tentmaker Network. <http://www.tentmaking.org/>
- Church Planting Movements. <http://www.churchplantingmovements.com/>
- Global Connections. <http://www.globalconnections.co.uk/>
- Global Opportunities. <http://www.globalopps.org/>
- Intent eMagazine Quarterly. <http://www.intent.com/>
- Missionary Training Service. <http://missionarytraining.org/>
- TENT. <http://www.tent.no/>
- Tentmakers International. <http://www.tentmakersinternational.info/>

Study Questions

1. The author states "Tentmakers can join with God to bring light into a cross-cultural context rather than focusing on expanding the institutional church or denominational structure." If you represent a denomination, what do you think of this? Is he saying that you shouldn't start churches linked formally to your denomination?

2. Can you think of people around you who are good at what they do and also like to share their faith and enjoy being around different people? Could they be tentmakers? Are you one of those?
3. Would the leadership of your church circles affirm a “tentmaking” missionary going out from the church? Would they allow that person to baptize and serve Communion to new believers?
4. How many of the missionaries you know are tentmakers? Reflect on the differences between their qualifications and those of “formal” missionaries.

