

Missions for a New Millennium: Catching up with Paul

© Dave English

The Current Global Setting Calls for Lay Missions

The world is undergoing seismic changes-the mapping of the human genome, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the frenetic growth of human knowledge, the development of wireless and satellite communications, the explosion of the Internet. Sometimes we can almost feel it shifting under us. Some changes are frightening. but much is exciting. On one hand the door to traditional missions is closing in country after country. On the other hand, there are enormous opportunities for non-traditional mission workers if we have the eyes to see. I believe God is trying to tell us something. The world has shifted radically. So too should missions.

For the past 200 years God has enabled an unprecedented explosion of donor-supported missions. He enabled this through two unique factors-Western colonialism and industrialization. Colonialism provided three critical ingredients to this missions expansion: 1) access, 2) a medium of currency exchange, and 3) a degree of stability for proclaiming the gospel. Industrialization provided one equally vital ingredient-increased human productivity, which gave people greater discretionary funds to support missionaries if they so desired. Up to 100 years ago, it wasn't possible to fund an army of mission workers and most missionary groups worked in some manner to contribute to their own support.

Donald K. Smith of Western Seminary in the January issue of EMQ states that "historically, missions from the West began when those nation were not wealthy. The Moravians worked to support themselves wherever they went, even selling themselves into slavery to reach the slaves in the Caribbean. For years William Carey received no financial support in India but worked in various jobs to support his Bible translation efforts. His lifestyle in India was little different than it was when he was a cobbler in England. In fact, only in the last century have missionaries felt it necessary to be fully supported from the homeland." In the last 100 years, "full-time," donor-supported workers with all the attached overtones have become so much the norm that today this defines the very word "missionary."

But the world has undergone a massive shift. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the last colonial empire, the Soviet Union, collapsed. Once again, a new crop of countries sprouted on our maps. Gone forever are the colonial empires which provided missionary access.

Instead, nationalism defines this new era. Nations want self-determination and self-development. Christians of all people should understand these longings of the human soul. It is no surprising that these new nations do not want foreign culture or economics or religion imposed on them. Furthermore, they have no way to perceive Christianity except as a foreign religion which threatens their culture. Most have no concept of a personal relationship with God nor of the gospel's power to lift and ennoble culture without forcing it to Westernize. Understandably, most nations refuse to grant missionary visas. We must understand that this refusal to grant missionary visas is not primarily Satanic, but simply nationalistic, though there is Satanic influence.

Today over 80% of the world's population live in nations which restrict missionary visas so that traditional missionaries cannot reach them. But they welcome Americans with needed professional skills. Today over 4,000,000 Americans live and work overseas. Why? Because nations want help to develop. And as we know, that need is real and in many cases desperate. And what is the greatest physical need of these nations? Genuine business and economic development. No other developmental progress can be sustained without it. Without substantial economic development, these countries will never escape the cycle of dependence on other nations.

Three more traits characterize the new global situation. First, there is a growing consensus that freer economies are better than controlled economies and that representative government is better than totalitarian government. Second, these forces are combining with modern communication and transportation technologies to fuel exploding international trade of goods and jobs. And third, because of American ascendancy, English is now the world's trade language. In a word, the world is globalizing with the U.S. at the center whether we like it or not.

What does all this mean for missions? The door for missions is wider open than ever before, but it is a different door. It is a door for lay missions. The door for vocational missions is mostly shut and closing further. But nations are welcoming and sometimes begging for qualified people to help them develop. A few years ago the president of Kyrgyzstan stated that he wanted 7,000 English teachers.

Let's give them what they want and need in Christ's name! Because servanthood is central to the Christian life, our hearts should naturally be moved with compassion to bring them the skills they need as Christ's representatives. What an exciting time for missions! Imagine the possibilities if the Church caught this vision. We could deploy tens of thousands. And if we send the right kind of lay people, they can enter all sectors of society and impact whole cultures with the gospel of Christ. As professional religious workers, missionaries cannot do this. Only lay people can.

Does this mean donor-funded, vocational mission workers are no longer needed. No! Never! Would to God that more Patricks, Taylors, Amy Carmichels, Gladys Aylwards, Jim Elliots, and Don Richardsons were going. These are my heroes. We need to deploy more. But they are specialists.

The reality is that for over 100 years we have emphasized "full-time," vocational, religious workers and neglected regular, everyday Christians. I propose that we need to shift our emphasis to deploy vast numbers of effective, missions-committed lay workers. I believe God is urging us in this direction through the current world situation. Because of the unique contribution of tentmakers or lay mission workers, we would need thousands more even if there were no limits on missionary visas. Let me explain by exploring the compelling, timeless Biblical reasons for lay missions or tentmaking.

Timeless Biblical Reasons Call for Lay Missions

Missions is currently backing into tentmaking primarily to gain access to closed countries. Missionaries are using secular roles to obtain visas. The result is hybrid missionary-tentmakers with attendant ethical tensions. In many cases we could accurately describe this as "stealth missions" and missionaries' secular roles as "covers." Thankfully, the concept of "platform" is replacing "cover," though this still implies that the job is primarily a means to accomplish something else. This tension is easily resolved by genuinely going as a lay person.

This use of secular roles to obtain access is very understandable in light of history. Because of colonialism, industrialization, and specialization, vocational, donor-supported missions has become the paradigm of missions today. When countries began to close, it is no surprise that in our commitment to reach the world we simply tacked on secular roles in order to obtain visas. And it is no surprise that we've done this without thoughtful reflection on Paul's rationale for tentmaking.

But the consequence is that we have forfeited the power and genius of Paul's strategy. Gaining access never motivated Paul to make tents. In fact, it never occurred to him because he could go wherever he wanted as a Roman citizen. Paul found other benefits so compelling that he chose to work for a living rather than accepting donor support.

Did Paul work for a living as a policy?

But first, did Paul really reject donor support as a policy? This is a critical question. I realize you may think, as I did, that Paul took support when he could and worked when he had to. But the New Testament record suggests otherwise. The NT specifically reports that Paul worked in Galatia, Corinth, Thessalonica, and Ephesus (1 Th. 2:9; 2 Th. 3:7-8; Acts 20:31-35; 1 Cor. 4:12; 9:6 [refers to Paul's ministry with Barnabas which took place in Galatia]).

However, the pivotal text is I Cor. 9 where Paul defends himself against the Judaizers who attacked his apostleship because he worked for a living and did not receive support like the other apostles. Paul first gives the strongest rationale for donor-support in Scripture and then proceeds to say three times that he made no use of this right and never intends to (vv. 12, 15, 18).

It is important to notice that I Cor. is written from Ephesus during Paul's third journey. This statement covers most of Paul's recorded ministry. This means that working for a living was Paul's standard operating procedure. Adding further weight is the statement that Barnabas also followed this practice. Yet Barnabas not partnered with Paul since their split after Paul's first journey. Apparently Barnabas maintained the same strategy after the split.

Paul advances this argument further when he is forced again to defend his apostleship in II Cor. He argues that far from undermining his apostleship, his working in order to make the gospel free actually authenticates his apostleship in contrast to the false apostles whose motives are polluted. The cost he paid showed the high value he placed on those he won to Christ. Because he loved them like a father, he wanted to provide for them, rather than they for him (2 Cor. 11:7-11; 12:14-16). In his final comment on this point, Paul says he is going to continue this practice (11:12).

The one problem text comes in the middle of Paul's defense in 2 Cor. He says he "robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you . . . (because his) needs were supplied by the brethren who came from Macedonia." (10:8-9) But this text does not undermine our conclusion. First, our interpretation of this text must be controlled by the larger argument of 1 Cor. 9 and 2 Cor. 11 lest we make Paul contradictory. Second, the statement is deliberate hyperbole. Paul is using exaggeration to shame the Corinthians. Third, Philippians clarifies this statement by informing us that "no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving except you only." (4:15-16) This they did once or twice while he was in Thessalonica plus maybe once while in Corinth. Thus the Philippian church is the only one which sent support, and then, only a few times. Finally, Paul would have had no need to defend his not taking support if it had not been his standard practice.

The NT adds several additional insights into Paul's practice. First, how much did he work? In 2 Th. 3:8, he says he worked "night and day." Understand that Paul knew nothing of our twentieth century American idiom. He is not telling us he was a workaholic. He is referring to the two shifts of the Mediterranean work day-"night" referring to the late afternoon-evening shift after the long, midday siesta, and "day" referring to the morning shift. Putting "night" before "day" is merely Hebrew custom as in Genesis 1. Paul is simply saying he worked full-time.

Second, this practice was so important to Paul that he made a point to pay for meals rather than accepting normal hospitality (2 Th. 3:8). Third, did others on Paul's team also work? This had to be true for Paul to argue the way he did in 1 and 2 Cor. But does the NT explicitly confirm this? Indeed it does. According to 2 Th. 3:7-9, Silvanus and Timothy also worked. Eight times Paul uses first person plural pronouns "we," "us," and "our." "You ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, we did not eat any one's bread without paying, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you. It was not because we have not that right, but to give you in our conduct an example to imitate." (2 Th. 3:7-9, 1:1; 1 Th. 2:9)

Careful reading of the NT data makes it clear that Paul made a practice of working for a living rather than accepting support. Further, his strong statements make it clear that he did this for strategic reasons.

Reason 1: To provide credibility to the gospel

The first reason Paul gives is this: "We endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ." (I Cor. 9:12) What obstacle? Mistrust of his message. If Paul had made his living by preaching, people would have doubted his message because they questioned his motives. But no one could say that Paul preached in order to make a living! No one could say, "Paul, you make converts because you get paid to" as was stated about missionaries in Taiwan. Rather he funded his own ministry. In addition he paid a great price in other ways to bring the gospel-imprisonment, beatings, stoning, shipwreck, frequent danger, toil, loss of sleep, hunger, and exposure (II Cor. 11:23-28).

No one could doubt Paul's love, or his absolute certainty of the truth of the gospel. This, I believe, is why he made such a point of boasting that he made the gospel free of charge. (1 Cor. 9:15-18)

This obstacle is still valid today, especially in unreached cultures. People know money is so powerful that they always suspect ulterior motives. They ask how missionaries make their living and wonder if they work for the CIA. Some have unfairly thought missionaries were lazy. The same doubts exist in the U.S. Godly lay people often have more impact than pastors because they are not paid to share Christ. I remember how students responded to my strong talks on quiet time and Lordship in InterVarsity. They half-humorously told me that quiet time was easy for me because I was paid to be spiritual. In other words, I didn't live in their world with their pressures and I was rewarded for cultivating spiritual disciplines. Everyday Christians have greater credibility because evangelism is not their vocation. They don't get paid to do it.

Reason 2: To identify and connect with the people

This leads into the second reason Paul chose to work-identification with everyday people. In 1Cor. 9, Paul says that though he is free from all people, he has made himself a slave to all in order to win the more. Paul applied this principle to every situation, contextualizing the gospel for Jews and God-fearers (Ac 13:16-41), for secular Greek thinkers on Mars Hill (Ac 16:22-34), and for political rulers (Ac 24-26)]. But in this passage where Paul states this principle, he uses it to explain why he worked for a living and gave up his right to support. He did it to "become all things to all people."

Because work is so central to human life, working for a living is one of the most profound ways of identifying with people. Paul was one of the people. He shared their joys and struggles. He genuinely depended on his earnings. He knew what it was to be tired at the end of the day, to be cheated by customers, to wrestle with ethical issues, etc. No one could say, "Paul, you don't understand what it's like to have to work."

The gospel calls for the most profound turn-around of a person's whole being and this takes time. People do not simply hear the gospel once or twice and make a decision. Regeneration is a process though we may not see the whole process. People must come to see the credibility of the gospel, the compelling Lordship of Jesus, God's rightful claim on their lives, their own culpability before God, and God's gracious offer of pardon. Finally, they must surrender to Jesus' gracious reign. Though God can greatly accelerate the process, he does not bypass it because doing so would violate our humanity.

This is why identifying with people is so important. The first task in a new people group is to authenticate the gospel. An unreached people group does not yet have a company of Christians in whom they can see the reality of the gospel in all of life. They need to see Christians who validate the gospel by their integrity, servanthood, love, joy in God's grace, and words about Christ. Only everyday Christians can show them. At work, tentmakers are constantly being observed. Working for a living allows them to incarnate and authenticate the gospel in everyday life.

Despite our fascination with mass evangelism methods, the gospel basically travels along networks of relationships through friends, co-workers, and family. Seldom does a person just come to a meeting, receive a Bible or tract, or hear the gospel once, and come to Christ. Almost everyone who comes to Christ at a crusade is brought by a Christian friend. Further, a decision at a crusade is often only a turning point which leads to real understanding and conversion later as other Christians follow-up.

Working provides natural, ongoing contact with people along which the gospel can flow. Even when tentmakers do not yet speak the local language, they share professional vocabulary and interests with their co-workers. Missionaries must create such contacts. People need both authentication of the gospel and ongoing input as they process the gospel. This is why the gospel travels relational networks. In unreached groups, the gospel can actually spread rapidly through such networks if we do the right kind of evangelism. In addition, lay people can infiltrate all sectors of society-agriculture, health care, industry, banking, services, education, government, etc. They can impact the whole culture with the gospel.

Reason 3: To set a pattern of everyday discipleship and witness

a. To model godly living in all of life

Paul's third reason for working was to set an example. By working Paul modeled discipleship for every aspect of his converts' lives. In fact he states that modeling is pivotal to his strategy. He repeatedly points to his own example and tells people to imitate him. Phil. 3:17: Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us. I Cor. 10:31-11:1: So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please all men in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

Notice the particulars Paul calls us to imitate: to live lives which promote the gospel versus being enemies of the cross (Cf. Phil. 1:27-30), to give up rights where it will help to draw people to Christ, to do everything for God's glory, to live ultimately for the hope of heaven versus earthly gratification, and to count every gain loss for the sake of knowing Christ even to the point of sharing in his sufferings and death. (3:7-10) Can you imagine the impact of Christians living this kind of life with this worldview? If even a minority lived this way, the impact would be enormous.

b. To model a godly work ethic

Paul writes to the Thessalonians that "with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you. It was not because we have not that right, but to give you in our conduct an example to imitate (2 Th. 3:8-9)." Paul set a pattern of a godly work ethic in an indolent society. The Roman empire suffered from a poor work ethic. Paul says many of his converts were idlers, thieves, drunks, adulterers, prostitutes, etc. (1 Cor. 6:9-10) So important is this issue to Paul that he mentions it seven times. (Ac. 20:53; Eph. 4:28, 6:5-9; 1 Th. 2:9-12, 4:11; 2 Th. 3:7-10; Col. 3:23; Tit. 3:1)

How does this relate to our modern situation? Earlier I stated that business and economic development are ultimately the biggest physical need around the world. What is my rationale? Simply this: the ultimate reason people do not have adequate food or health care, cannot meet natural disasters, cannot read, and cannot rise above poverty is the lack of economic development. Without adequate economic development, a nation cannot sustain any other area of development like transportation, health care, communication, etc. The only immediate hope in these situations is charity. The receiving nation is on welfare, which just underscores the problem.

I believe the major root of this problem is lack of a good work ethic. A decent work ethic has been torpedoed in the former Soviet Union. The people say, "We pretend to work; they pretend to pay us." Lack of trust is destroying productivity in many nations. In Zambia, it required over ten times the work time to sell my brother some hardware he needed. The clerk had to find the hardware because customers were not to be trusted. Then it took two clerks to check him out to prevent either one from cheating. It is impossible to build a productive economy with such work ethics.

But "working hard to get ahead" is not a good work ethic. A morally good work ethic means working hard to genuinely serve one's boss (as if one is serving Christ), one's customer, and one's fellow-workers, as well as one's family, and those in need. Thus a Biblical work ethic includes diligence, excellence, honesty, and servanthood. Such an ethic inevitably tends to create a productive and a just system.

I am fascinated by Max Weber's conclusion that a society needs a critical mass of Bible-believing Christians to produce a successful market economy. Why? Because a market economy requires high levels of honesty, trust, and hard work. If this is so, we very much need godly, missions-committed lay people in every people group to seed that group with a godly work ethic.

c. To model lay witness and ministry

But let me narrow your attention to Paul's call to imitate and join him in advancing the gospel. This theme rides on the surface or just below through the entire book of Philippians.: I thank my God in all

my remembrance of you . . . thankful for your partnership in the gospel . . . And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more . . . so that you may . . . be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness . . . to the glory and praise of God. Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that . . . I may hear that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, etc. (including suffering). Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be . . . children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, etc. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ . . . I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature be thus minded . . . Brethren, join in imitating me . . . (1:3-11, 27-30, 2:14-16, 3:7-21) Paul consciously called his followers to imitate him in incarnating and proclaiming the gospel.

But what did they observe to imitate? Was it only his preaching to crowds or his miracles? Or did they see him witnessing in his everyday work? The answer is both. It would be impossible to imagine Paul's looking for every opportunity to share Christ and then being silent at work. Though Acts is long, Luke is very selective, reporting only the facts needed to communicate his main points. Paul's practice of work is not one of them, so his data is limited. But I believe it is clear. In Ac. 18 Paul found Aquila with his wife, Priscilla, and stayed with them because they were tentmakers like him. Luke describes Aquila as a Jew who had been expelled from Rome by Claudius, the Roman Caesar. Acts uses the term Jew to refer to non-believing Jews. Apparently Paul led them to Christ in the workshop.

Acts 19 gives us a fascinating window into Paul's activity. Luke tells us that Paul daily argued for the gospel in the hall of Tyrannus. Then he tells how people carried away Paul's "handkerchiefs" or "aprons" to heal and deliver people, the only time this practice is mentioned in Acts. But what are these "handkerchiefs" or "aprons?" A leather-worker's apron and the cloths with which he wiped his hands and mopped his brow. Apparently Paul engaged the hall of Tyrannus during the siesta break when the hall was free. He went over in his work clothes and taught, and then returned to work. Acts 20:31 takes us further. There Paul says he admonished the Ephesians night and day with tears obviously including his work time. Those he admonished cannot be limited to Christians. Undoubtedly, interested people visited Paul in his workshop in all stages of spiritual progress from seekers to leaders.

By working for a living, Paul established a pattern of lay witness and lay ministry. He could speak with authority about on-the-job evangelism because he did it. No one could say, "Paul, you don't understand the pressures, mistreatment, exhaustion, drudgery, ingratitude, and ridicule we face." Paul lived in their world. He made it normative for every Christian to evangelize and disciple.

In the early years, Paul's churches never saw a professional, donor-supported worker. They expected everyone to witness simply because they belonged to Christ. Only years later after the churches had grown, the pattern of lay ministry was established as the norm, and leaders were proven, did Paul instruct them in the pastoral letters to support leaders who labor in preaching and teaching. Paul's strategy immediately produced self-supporting, self-directing, and self-reproducing churches. This is why the gospel exploded in those early years and why Paul could say he had fully preached the gospel throughout Asia Minor and Macedonia and that there was no longer any room for work in those regions. (Rm. 15:19,23) He had planted churches which were penetrating their people groups. His task was finished.

The power of modeling

Paul's working for a living was an incarnational missions strategy! Paul modeled everyday discipleship. He showed his disciples what he told them. Instead of apologizing for modeling, Paul recognized the power of imitation and called people to imitate him.

I remember my 2-3-year-old daughter visiting me in my attic office. She saw me writing with a pen and wanted to do the same. Being a wise father I gave her a pencil instead. But would that do? No! She had to have the pen. "Monkey see; monkey do!" People learn more strongly by imitating than any other way.

So powerful is modeling that we cannot escape reproducing ourselves in others.. During a lesson on culture to a group of Christians from a South American Indian tribe, Jacob Loewen explained that people of every culture have one or several cultural universals-such as social organization, education, economic organization, religion, and material culture-at the center of their way of life. He asked the national Christians whether, after 20 years of contact with Western missionaries, they could identify the central component of the missionaries' way of life. "Money!" was the unanimous and unhesitating response. The surprised instructor asked if the missionaries really taught about money. Of course not-they speak of God and religion. But the missionaries present grew increasingly uncomfortable as the national Christians supported their conviction with numerous damning observations. With "devastating accuracy the Indian Christians one after another recounted personal experiences that showed how money was the ultimate yardstick (value) in both the material and spiritual areas of the missionaries' life and culture."

The nationals had also had a little contact with Communist propaganda, and were able to identify political structure and economics as the centers of the Communist way of life. Loewen brought the conversation closer to home, asking what had been the central feature of their grandfathers' lives. "War," was the prompt response. The first-generation Christians explained that, though their ancestors had not enjoyed killing, it was the only way to acquire spirit power. "And what if they had been Christians?"

Without as much as blinking, the teachers responded: "The Spirit of God, because he . . ." Just then an audible gasp by one of the missionaries caused the speaker to hesitate for a moment, but he continued: ". . . because the Spirit of God is the most powerful of all spirits."

"And now," [Loewen] continued, "that all of you here are Christians, is the Spirit of God the axle of your Christian way of life, too?"

"No," they responded, obviously subdued, "our axle now is . . . is money."

"How come? Are you not children of your ancestors? If the axle of their Christian life would have been the Spirit of God, why is it not yours?"

"Money is our axle now because that is what we have learned from the missionaries." (from the Introduction of Culture and Human Values by Jacob Loewen)

People inevitably tend to become like their leaders. Most do not rise above the level of their leaders.

The previous story is a very sobering. But the flip side of that is very positive. In my former life I served with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. I remember arriving on campus at Johns Hopkins University and finding the Christians very intimidated by the campus. Academic demands are very high and the gospel is viewed with disdain. To them two things seemed impossible 1) that they could give significant time to God's interests and still fulfill the academic demands, and 2) that the gospel could win people on that campus. I pulled 12 students together into a discipleship group and we began to study Scripture. We made a very simple agreement that we would attend all meetings and that we would seek to live out what we learned. These students began to take small steps of faith, first giving time to seeking God and serving God. They also began taking small risks in evangelism. As time passed they discovered they could be good students and set God's Kingdom first, and that God did bring students to himself. Do you know what happened to the Christians who came after them? For them it was much easier. When they arrived on campus, they saw it was possible to give real time to Christ's agenda and that they could win people to Christ! They stood on the shoulders of those who had gone before. They traded on their faith.

The implications of modeling for missions

This is why modeling is critical in missions. We need to fully enter people's world to incarnate the gospel and establish a model of everyday discipleship and witness. We need tentmakers or lay mission workers who are trailblazers in the workplace, who know how to honor Christ in their jobs and how to integrate work and witness.

We need models of the highest integrity, quality work, true servanthood towards employers, customers, and co-workers, genuine caring, compelling love among Christians, and deep joy in Christ.

Vocational missionaries cannot provide this not because they aren't Christ-like, but because they are not in the workplace. They can't speak to workplace issues, because they don't face them. The only exceptions to this are missionaries with strong previous work experience in which they integrated work and witness and lived distinctly Christ-like lives. However, even they cannot model workplace Christianity or address the unique pressures of the target culture. But effective tentmakers can. They live in the people's world.

Reason 4: To Create Rapid Church Multiplication

Paul planted churches very quickly. He often left churches after only a few months or less and then appointed leaders on the return trip. (Ac. 14:21-23). The longest he ever stayed was 2« years in Ephesus, which he used as a base for his team to strengthen the surrounding churches and to plant more. In just 10-12 years, Paul planted 10 churches that we know of. Others, like Laodicea, Colossae, and Hierapolis, were launched by members of his team or by other churches. Probably many of the churches of Revelation were started by his converts. Paul's strategy produced a blitzkrieg of rapid church multiplication. Paul expected new Christians to take responsibility immediately and for leaders to surface quickly. Acts shows that Paul never ran a local church, but rather coached them into existence.

Paul immediately indigenized the Church

Paul practiced immediate indigenization meaning he immediately gave leadership to new, local Christians. You cannot do this if you have to wait to train and fund workers. You can only do this by fully engaging lay people. Paul believed in people's potential and in the Spirit's power. He knew the Spirit transformed and energized every Christian to make disciples. So he expected them to do so, and they did! No wonder Paul's churches spread the gospel so rapidly in the first century.

Paul played a coaching-mentoring role to birth churches under local leaders. His letters show that while his authority was real, it was not absolute. Paul painfully recognized that it was entirely possible for a church to refuse his direction because they were ultimately in charge. This made their responsibility real and forced them to grow.

Paul's churches were self-governing, self-funding, largely self-feeding (digging into the Old Testament and Jesus' teaching for themselves), and self-multiplying almost from the beginning. Paul taught, but did not control. He gave minimal structure-probably only baptism, Sunday communion and teaching, and multiple elders. Other development was left to the churches. The churches never had to get rid of a foreign pattern because they never had it. The churches began indigenizing the gospel from the beginning.

Paul immediately partnered in church planting

Paul began partnering with new local Christians from the outset. The book of Acts and the greeting sections of the epistles show how attached Paul was to indigenous leaders and his genuine partnership with them. Because of the Spirit's power, he really believed in them, expected them to carry responsibility right away, and collaborated with them as peers. As evidenced by people's names and scattered statements, ethnicity seemed to make no difference to Paul. When a person came to Christ, they were part of the Family, and promising people were invited into Paul's church-planting team as co-workers.

What takes this to the next level is the size of Paul's "missionary" team. Over a period of 10-12 years Paul recruited about 24 identifiable people into his church-planting team plus others who are probably never identified in the New Testament. Paul added 2-3 people every year to his team from the local people groups. Only Silas came from Jerusalem. The rest were the "Turks," "Berbers," "Kazaks," and "Spaniards" of his day.

But how could he add people so fast? Because Paul's team followed his pattern of working for a living. Paul confirms this in II Thess. 3:7-10 by using the words "we," "us," and "our" eight times to explain that he, Silvanus, and Timothy worked in order to give the Thessalonians an example to imitate. Paul's "missionary" team was actually a tentmaker team.

A recent article on the breakthrough among the Mongolians described the genius of Ghengus Khan's army. The Mongol army was the most mobile in the world because they took their supply line with them. Family and herds traveled just behind them. This enabled them to quickly penetrate deeper and deeper into enemy territory. Paul did the same thing. By building a working lay team, he took his supply line with him.

Think of the implications: Paul led a totally mobile, self-funded mission team. They could quickly plant churches, move to new cities, and add promising people because they embraced local believers and used a lay ministry strategy. They did not have to wait for members to raise support or go to seminary. Paul provided the most effective training-apprenticeship to himself. It was Paul's lay missions strategy which generated a high momentum church planting movement and rapid expansion of the church-planting team.

Not all vocations are as portable as Paul's, but we need to think about how we might apply this insight. For one thing, it offers the solution to funding workers quickly in the Third World and to avoiding paternalism. And again, it carries with it the power of incarnated Christianity. Can you imagine the impact if we fully developed this approach to church planting.

History proves the power of lay ministry

The genius of a lay ministry strategy has been proven every time it has been tried. A most striking example is the relative growth of three U.S. denominations over 200 years.

Southern Baptists built the most lay- oriented movement; Congregationalists, the least. Congregationalists required Bible college or seminary plus apprenticeship under a senior pastor before preaching. Methodists allowed greater lay initiative. But Southern Baptists encouraged the greatest lay involvement. They required the least formal training and used bi-vocational and lay pastors to pioneer new churches.

The less the requirement for formal training and the greater the involvement of lay people, the greater the growth, the faster the mobilization, and broader the impact. This is essentially what we have witnessed with the growth of house churches in China, with the growth of small-group driven churches in Korea, Colombia, the U.S., and other countries, and with the huge impact of the relatively small Moravian movement, etc.

To effectively deploy lay people you have to mentor them, model for them, support them, and give them responsibility-ownership. You don't have to give them money or status. In fact, that will generally torpedo their spiritual lives. This is why Paul tells us never to appoint novices to ecclesial position. Giving people genuine responsibility and ownership and expecting them to deliver are the secrets. Paul immediately expected new believers to produce. In fact, he never pastored any of his churches, but quickly appointed local leaders.

The impact of over-using vocational missionaries

Because modeling is so powerful, our pattern of sending "full-time," vocational religious workers is replicating itself all over the world. As a consequence we have marginalized the primary workforce of regular, everyday Christians. We've developed a whole theology around this approach. Because vocational religious workers are "full-time" and have received a "special call," they are the really important players. Since regular Christians have not received this call and are only "part-time," we cannot expect that much from them. Instead they are relegated to second string status where many simply cheer and warm the bench. By implication, lay people don't have the same God-given potential nor the same empowering by the Spirit. Can you imagine suggesting this to Paul?

Our dependence on vocational religious workers creates a second problem-over dependence on money. Since we need "full-time" workers, we must find money before we start any ministry. This tends to kill church growth momentum. In addition, it makes Western paternalism almost inevitable because of our relative wealth. We can send financial peanuts overseas and have it balloon into a large sum which can fund whole divisions of Third World workers. Relatively small sacrifice gives us enormous power. But even with the best of intentions, the elephant eventually squashes the mouse with which it dances.

A lay ministry strategy is the solution to both these problems-the marginalizing of the major workforce of everyday Christians and the problem of paternalism and dependence.

Tentmakers are effective today.

Let's forever drop the objection that lay people cannot be effective and even plant churches. Paul and his team did it, powerfully. And tentmakers are doing it today.

Ken Crowell went to Israel and started a company with the conscious purpose of planting a church. Ken gained high credibility in Israel because of his genuine servant heart and his quiet, open witness to Christ. Even before he returned to Israel to start his company, he was frequently introduced in Israel as a "Christian engineer." Ken started his company in Tiberius because there had been no significant church there for hundreds of years and because there was a tremendous need for industry. So he started essentially the first industry in the city.

He deliberately hired Jews, Arabs and Christians in order to provide a setting in which witness could take place. Ken struggled against great odds in the beginning. Before he left for Israel, his partner absconded with the manufacturing equipment he had bought and set up for test production. As a result, he had to use his wife's oven to bake the pvc onto his antennas. Ken's company supplies most of the antennas for Motorola cell phones. Orthodox Jewish extremists attacked him repeatedly. At one point they threw stones into his home, one of which struck his wife. Another time they sought to incite a riot with his workers, but instead of abandoning him, they defended him. The little hotel the Christians rented for the fellowship was burned to the ground. Several times the rabbis slandered him and launched criminal investigations against him. They even accused him of kidnapping Israeli children and selling them to N. Africa. But God blessed and the church grew in sync with his company-when there were 30 in the company, there were 30 in the church and when there were 300, there were 300 in the church, of course not all the same people.

Ken repeatedly asked government leaders how he could help them and did so. He was awarded the Decade Award for the best firm of the decade and the Kaplan Prize, the highest award for industry. These were presented by the Prime Minister in the hall of the Knesset before Israeli dignitaries.

Ruth Siemens ended up teaching fifth grade at a secular international school in Lima, Peru. At this time, almost fifty years ago, Peru was largely unevangelized. But Ruth managed to find a small, evangelical church nearby where she offered to teach a Sunday School class to which she could invite her students. Though she had perfect freedom to preach the gospel in class, she did not do so because it would have violated her educational task. Instead, she freely shared her life in Christ, and invited her students to her Sunday School class. Most of them came and most became believers. So respected was Ruth in her work, that she revised the curriculum for the whole school during her second year.

Ruth also reached out to colleagues through friendship and evangelistic Bible studies. A number of colleagues found Christ as well as a number of staff. Then in her "free" time Ruth went to the university in Lima repeated the same process and started the Peruvian "InterVarsity" movement. Some of these have become national and international leaders. Soon the Peruvian movement was going strong and had helped start the Ecuadorian movement and Ruth felt she could move on. So she sent her résumé, throughout Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America, but to her surprise, no offer came. So she finally accepted an unsolicited offer from an international school in Brazil to serve as principal.

Once again she repeated the same process, winning students, faculty, and staff to Christ and starting the Brazilian "IV" movement. In the middle of her work in Brazil, the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students asked Ruth to leave her job, go on support, and give full-time to the student work. So after turning down an offer to double her already good salary, Ruth transitioned from tentmaking to donor-supported ministry. By the time she left Brazil there were student fellowships on 30 college campuses. At the invitation of IFES, Ruth then moved to Spain where she pioneered the Spanish and Portuguese university student movements. Let me just observe, that if Ruth had started such Christian fellowships in the larger ethnic communities, they would have been churches.

Joe L went with 5 others to China on an exchange program. He taught English and studied Mandarin. Within a short time the other 5 had either left or been expelled because of discontent, immorality, or unruly behavior. As a result, three Chinese students asked Joe, "Why aren't you like the others'?" So Joe invited them to visit and he would tell them.

That evening they appeared bringing several others. Over the next few weeks Joe led three to faith and began discipling them. When his contract expired at the end of the year, he returned to the US, very concerned for these new believers. But almost as soon as he arrived home, he received a letter asking him to return, because of his integrity and excellence.

That fall when he stepped off the plane, one of the three he had discipled met him with a big grin and introduced a friend whom he had led to Christ. He asked, "Do you have any materials? I want to teach Deng." During his second year, officials asked Joe to teach a course on American holidays to 60 exchange students going to America. Joe responded, "But I can't talk about American holidays without talking about Christianity." "That's okay," they answered. Later authorities asked him to help them set up a program to recruit more English teachers for China- "people just like you" they said. Joe continues to work in China today.

"John and Beth" have been tentmakers in Japan for about 15 years. Jim works as an engineer for a corporation under contract to the Air Force. This could easily insulate them from the Japanese people, but they have deliberately centered their lives around reaching the Japanese. Their home is a constant parade of Japanese friends coming and going seven days a week. Both they and their children have opened their hearts and their home to the Japanese. They teach conversational English and Bible several times a week. Barbie teaches patchwork quilting and a women's Bible study. At various times, they hold a weekend camp for Japanese young people. And hospitality is a constant. "John and Beth" have befriended and witnessed to many Japanese. Over these years, more than 80 have trusted Christ and joined Japanese churches! Jim's job requires him to travel to the Middle East to service high tech avionics equipment. Jim has repeatedly seized these opportunities to do ministry as well.

Paul's Invasionary Strategy of Evangelistic Expansion

Luke does not organize Acts around Paul's three missionary journeys. That is a foreign construct imposed on the book from our missions viewpoint of home churches and the field. Luke doesn't view it that way. Why do I think this? Because Luke clearly indicates the close of each section of Acts with a refrain-some kind of summary statement like And the word of God increased: and the number of disciples multiplied greatly . . . (Ac. 6:7) Sometimes it says "the church grew and was multiplied," other times, "the word grew and multiplied." The summaries are Acts 6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, and 19:20. By the way, these summaries fit perfectly the three stages described in Luke's introduction: "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (1:8).

What is remarkable is where the last three summaries come. They do not come where we would expect, and understanding why they come where they do leads to startling insights. Luke does not divide Paul's mission into 3 journeys, but into three advances. The first summary comes after Paul has returned from his first journey, decided the Judaizer issue with the Jerusalem council, carried that decision to Antioch and the churches of Syria and Cilicia, and revisited all the churches he had planted in Phrygia and Galatia. Then comes the summary.

At this point, he is at the front of the gospel's advance. This front then becomes the new staging area for the next thrust into Macedonia and Asia.

The next summary comes after Paul has started churches throughout Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia, returned to Antioch, Syria, revisited the churches of Phrygia and Galatia, and returned to Ephesus. Once again the new front of the gospel becomes the new staging area for the next advance into Rome and Italy.

What Luke is describing is a virtual military strategy in which the gospel advances to new fronts and these then become the staging points for each succeeding advance. He does not seem to see the "home church-mission field" concept. Nor does he see the "sending church" as we do. I do not believe Antioch ever sent Paul and Barnabas in the sense we think of it, nor that Paul reported back to Jerusalem and Antioch because they were sending churches.

What does Luke see? He sees the whole world full of peoples as both "mission field" and "staging area" as the gospel advances. He seems totally blind to ethnocentricity. To him the whole world is the mission field initially. The gospel naturally advances with power into new territory. The new territory then becomes the new front and new staging area for the next advance. This process is repeated over and over and provides an ever enlarging team for further advance into the world. And where did Luke learn this? >From Paul.

Finally Acts ends with a wonderful, non-concluding summary comment that the gospel is going forward unhindered. What Luke is saying is, "Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera." The story of Acts is continuing in like manner to the end of history which means that Acts is normative for missions till Christ returns.

So let us return the entire Great Commission to the laity. Let us send them to unreached peoples as full partners to vocational mission workers. In fact, why don't we give the job back to all Christians and become the equippers who empower them for ministry? Is that not what we were meant to be? Why not make lay missions central to missions today!

The world is crying out for the deployment of effective, missions-committed lay people who can help them in all areas, demonstrate the power of the gospel, and reconcile them to the King of kings and Savior of the world. Let us mobilize the tens of thousands of committed Christian professionals they need.

(c) Dave English

Addendum: What Do We Need?

But what will it take to produce effective lay mission workers? As you have been reflecting on the missiology I've presented, you realize that we have a serious challenge. Since modeling is the single most powerful teaching method and inescapably produces disciples of like kind, then exporting effective tentmakers is no walk in the park. How many American Christians have worked out and lived a genuine Christian theology of work? How many practice servanthood toward employer, client, and co-worker as central to how they work? How many even practice true Christian ethics at work? How many genuinely care for the needs of those around them? How many show that their joy in God supercedes all other sources of fulfillment and thus rises above all other goals? How many have integrated work and witness so that they do appropriate, effective evangelism at work? How many are impacting the ideology and practice of their professions?

We need to recover a Biblical approach to work

If we are honest, Christians have largely been neutralized in the workplace. They have been silenced by the pressures of tolerance and pluralism. Too many of us are seduced by the values of self-fulfillment, materialism recreation, and comfort. The joy of knowing God is not greater than the pursuit of other gratifications.

Research shows that there is little difference between Christians' and non-Christians' practice of ethics at work. Protecting personal rights is far more common than servanthood toward others. And giving time and effort to meet the needs of so many needy people around us loses out to more important things.

We need to get fresh, clear grip on reality. Work is central to human life. And it should! God is the Great Worker-the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the universe! And He is still working. We are made in his image and working is central to being like him. Furthermore, God gave us the task of managing and developing the earth to His glory. This is called the creation mandate and has never been revoked. All legitimate work is part of this mission. What redemption does is to restore our capacity to fulfill this mission. It restores our motives, understanding, and actions so that our work once again advances God's purposes as vice-regents under him. And when we get to the new heavens and new earth, I believe we will finally work with complete God-centeredness and complete joy. We will no longer have to fight evil and call rebels to God's grace.

Since work is always central to human life, the gospel must make it in the arena of work. If it cannot redeem work and, by implication, all our everyday relationships, it is worthless. We must re-sanctify work and learn to live "full-time" for Christ in all of life. And we must learn to represent Christ effectively. Let us champion those who make breakthroughs in the workplace and begin to master the elements of glorifying Christ there, like integrity, excellence, servanthood, love, and joy in God. Let's cheer on those who become effective in integrating work and witness. (By the way, I realize many of us can't imagine this happening because we don't have a model for effective witness in today's relativistic, pluralistic workplace.

Let me just point you to Ruth Siemen's paper, "Workplace Evangelism: How to Fish out Seekers" on our website, <www.globalopps.org>. She has some answers.)

The need to recover discipleship in other areas

And what about family life? Christian divorce rate essentially matches non-Christian divorce rate. Apparently we do not know how to build and maintain lasting, committed marriages. Since there are so many repeat divorces after teaching and counseling by pastors, obviously we do not know the critical components of Biblical loving which produce lasting marriages. Instead we have imbibed many of the culture's distortions of love. In light of premarital sex rates among Christians, similar things can be said about our understanding and practice of Biblical sexuality. And how well are we doing at raising kingdom-committed children? To what degree have we been sucked into the child-rearing mentality and practices of our culture?

We should also raise the question of how much we are impacting our overall society and culture with a Christian worldview and Christian values. All of us lament the moral decline of our culture, but much of the fault lies at our feet. The words of John Stott have haunted me for years on this issue. Commenting on Jesus' call to be salt in the world, he said that it is the nature of meat to go bad. When it goes bad we do not blame the meat. We blame the salt. So if our culture goes bad, it is no surprise. It is the nature of human society to degenerate. It is the church which serves as the conscience of society and which preserves and protects society from degeneration. So when a Christian society declines morally it shows that the Church has declined and lost impact in society.

By the way, I believe that following Christ in these areas is far more important to the gospel's credibility than the issue of the excluded middle and the lack of miracles. Often, Christians long for these as shortcuts. But the supernatural transformation of character is much more demanding of and demonstrative of faith and ongoing power. This includes our joy in God even in the middle of suffering. Supernaturally transformed lives also provide the proper context for the witness of miracles and the kind of faith which such lives demand and produce readily allow for performing miracles as God leads. I believe it is because transformed lives are so crucial to the gospel's credibility that Paul spends so much of his teaching on issues of Christ-likeness and everyday faith even in the middle of real pain.

I should go just a little bit further and mention the challenge of impacting the overall worldview of our culture.

I would submit that along with everything else we are exporting, the biggest thing we export is Western ideology and worldview. Everywhere I went in Africa, I found that Africans ultimately knew there was a Supreme Being, though he may have removed himself from them. But after they went to university, many were no longer sure. They began to doubt. The same observation extends to other aspects of Western "enlightenment." Probably the biggest market for Americans overseas is as teachers at all levels.

Are we Christians able to effectively engage Western thinking and replace it with a Biblical worldview? Or are we simply exporting Western worldview and ideology even with our Christian teachers?

None of these deficiencies means we should lose heart. The One in us is still greater than the one who is in the world and the gates of hell cannot stop the advance of the Church. Also, God is the God of new beginnings who is always ready to remake us when we are ready for a fresh start. I believe that we will make great progress if we will commit ourselves to working on these areas personally, in the church, and in our missions agencies.

This discussion does provide us a clearer picture of what we need in effective lay missions workers and how to equip them. Essentially we need to recruit and equip lay Christians with effective spiritual disciplines, Christian theology and practice in the workplace (excellence, integrity, servanthood, care for others), integrated workplace witness, effective engagement with Western worldview, risk-taking faith, greater joy in Christ than in other pursuits, and effective discipling and church planting.

If our goal is the planting of self-sustaining, self-directing, self-multiplying churches capable of penetrating their people groups with the gospel, then I submit that we must produce witnessing churches and salting churches capable of impacting their culture with the gospel. Without this the church may grow for a while, but eventually it will become an island of irrelevance and stop growing. The key is for the church to live out a Christian worldview with thoroughgoing transformed values combined with a thoroughgoing new view of the world and of life.

And we cannot do this without mobilizing the laity, without returning the great commission to them. Only they can engage the culture and workplace because only they are there. Only they can work out and model workplace discipleship where people spend most of their time. Only they can set a pattern of lay witness and ministry. And only when they are fully mobilized do we have the full force of workers deployed in the task. As long as we keep missions as the domain of specially called, full-time workers, we kill rapid church multiplication, as well as the full health and independence of daughter churches.

© Dave English