

Paul's Secret - A First-Century Strategy for a 21st Century World

Article published in World Christian Magazine - September 2001

By Dave English

The missions community is backing into tentmaking. Some missionaries now use secular roles as covers to obtain visas - a kind of "stealth missions" to gain access to closed countries. The result is hybrid missionary-tentmakers with attendant ethical tensions.

This use of secular roles to obtain access is entirely understandable in light of history.

For most people missions means donor-supported, vocational missionaries. However, more than 80 percent of the world's population lives in nations which exclude or restrict missionaries. I praise God for the determination and courage of missionaries to find another way into closed countries.

When countries began eliminating missionary visas, it is no surprise that we simply tacked on secular roles to obtain visas. This was called "tentmaking" after the trade Paul used to fund his mission. Interestingly, we have not investigated why Paul did it. Consequently, we have forfeited the power and genius of Paul's strategy.

So why did Paul work for a living? Certainly not for access.

As a Roman citizen he could move freely throughout the empire. This means Paul found reasons so compelling that he voluntarily chose to work for a living rather than accept donor support.

Really a tentmaker?

I used to think Paul took support when he could and worked when he had to, but the New Testament refutes this. It specifically reports that Paul worked in Galatia, Corinth, Thessa-lonica and Ephesus (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-8; Acts 20:31-35; 1 Corinthian. 4:12; 9:6.)

The pivotal text is 1 Corinthians 9 because Paul wrote it near the end of his recorded ministry and explains his ministry-long policy. After making the strongest argument for donor-support and for his right to it, Paul says three times that he made no use of this right and never intends to do so in the future (vv. 12, 15, 18).

Working for a living was Paul's standard practice. Why? Because tentmaking was a complete strategy for maximum evangelistic impact and church multiplication. The intensity of Paul's statements shows he had compelling purposes.

Credibility

Rather than seeing work as an obstacle to missions, Paul saw donor-support as an obstacle to credibility. No one could say that Paul preached to make a living. By supporting himself Paul demonstrated how much he loved his hearers and his absolute certainty of the gospel's truth.

This obstacle is especially valid among unreached peoples. People know money is so powerful that they suspect ulterior motives. Today, nationals still make statements like, "They get paid to make converts," about local missionaries. They ask how missionaries make their living and wonder if they work for the C.I.A.

Some unfairly perceive missionaries as lazy. Similar judgments also arise in the U.S. Unpaid witnesses carry greater credibility because they do not get paid to evangelize.

Identification

In 1 Corinthians 9:22, Paul writes the most-quoted missions text about identification, "I have become all things to all men, so that by all possible means I might save some." Paul applied this in every situation. However, in context, this is

Paul's final and climactic reason for working rather than taking support. He worked in order "to become all things to all people."

Work is central to human life. Working is one of the most profound ways of identifying with 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 and to evangelize appropriately.

The gospel calls for the most profound reversal of a person's whole being. An unreached people group has no company of Christians in whom to observe the reality of the gospel. They need to see Christians validate the gospel by their integrity, servanthood, love, joy in God, patience under suffering and words about Christ. And that gospel has to work in everyday life. Only everyday Christians can demonstrate this. Effective tentmakers incarnate the gospel in everyday life.

Further, the gospel travels through networks of relationships - family, friends and co-workers. Secular work provides natural connections for the gospel to travel, connections missionaries must create. The gospel can spread rapidly through these networks if we do "network" evangelism. In addition, tentmakers can infiltrate all segments of society and impact the whole culture.

Discipleship and Witness

Paul knew that people instinctively imitate others, and he deliberately modeled godliness and called people to imitate him. "Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you." (Philippians 3:17) By working, Paul modeled discipleship for every aspect of his converts' lives. Two patterns are of special importance:

a. Godly work ethic

Paul writes, "On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow." (2 Thessalonians 3:8-9) The Roman Empire suffered from a poor work ethic. Many converts were idlers, thieves, drunks, adulterers and prostitutes. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11) Paul consciously modeled godly work - quality, integrity, hard work, servanthood and concern for others.

How important is this for missions today?

Immensely. The world's biggest development need is business and economic development. Without it, other development cannot be sustained - not transportation, health care, communications, agriculture, anything. But Western technology alone cannot solve this problem. Corruption and lack of integrity destroys productivity in many nations. In the former Soviet Union, people say, "We pretend to work; they pretend to pay us." Humorous, but deadly to the economy. Infiltrating society with a moral work ethic is vital for development and creates a more productive, just system.

b. Every Christian a witness/minister

By working for a living, Paul set a pattern of witness and ministry by regular, working Christians, not just "full-time" Christian workers. He could speak with authority about on-the-job evangelism because he did it. Paul made it normative for every Christian to make disciples. In the beginning, Paul's churches never saw a professional, donor-supported worker. They thought everyone should witness simply because they belonged to the family of Christ. This is why the gospel exploded and Paul said he had fully evangelized Asia Minor and Macedonia (Romans 15:19, 23). He had spawned a rapid church-planting movement, which was penetrating surrounding people groups. His task was finished.

History proves the power of mobilizing lay people every time it is tried. We see this in the growth of house churches in China, in the growth of small-group driven churches in Korea, Colombia and the U.S. The less the requirement for formal training and salary and the greater the involvement of lay people, the faster the growth and the greater the impact.

Over-using career missionaries is enfeebling the Church. We are replicating a career-missions model all over the world. Consequently, we have marginalized the primary workforce of everyday Christians.

We have evolved a theology that reinforces this approach. Because vocational religious workers are "full-time" and have received a "special call," they are naturally more committed and productive. By implication, lay people do not have the same potential nor the same empowering by the Spirit. They are relegated to second-string status where many simply cheer and warm the bench.

This creates a second woe - over-dependence on money. Since we need "full-time" workers, we must find money before starting any ministry. This undermines church multiplication and momentum.

In addition, it makes Western paternalism almost inevitable because of our relative wealth. We can send financial peanuts overseas where they swell into huge sums, funding whole divisions of workers. 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 solves both these woes.

Multiplication

Paul indigenized immediately. From the outset, he shared leadership with new, local believers. He believed in people's potential and in the Spirit's power to transform and energize for making disciples. He expected new Christians to do so and for leaders to surface quickly.

He never pastored local churches, but rather coached them into existence. You cannot do this if you have to wait for formal training and donor funding. You can only do this by fully engaging everyday Christians.

Paul's was a warp-speed strategy for church multiplication. It immediately produced self-governing, self-funding, self-feeding (studying the Old Testament and Jesus' teaching for themselves) and self-reproducing churches.

Paul partnered immediately with new believers. Acts and the epistles show Paul's deep attachment to local leaders and his partnership with them. They collaborated as peers. Ethnicity made no difference. When a person came to Christ, they became family.

Paul invited promising local believers into his church-planting team as co-workers - at least 24 during 10-12 years of ministry. These came from local people groups. They were Turks, Berbers, Kenyans and Czechs of his day. But how could he add people so fast? Because they were all self-supporting. Paul's team was actually a tentmaker team.

Paul developed a totally mobile, self-funded missions group. They could quickly plant churches, move to new cities and add promising people to their team. They did not have to wait for members to raise support or attend seminary.

Incarnational Missions

By working for a living Paul entered people's world and demonstrated the gospel's power in all of life. He simultaneously modeled everyday discipleship for new believers. By funding his own ministry, he intensified the gospel's credibility and impact and set a pattern of every-Christian-a-witness which produced an army of unpaid, lay witnesses.

Tentmaking is vital for 21st-century missions. We need to deploy a large number of effective tentmakers alongside career missionaries to reverse the deadening professionalization of missions. Only by fully re-engaging everyday Christians in God's purposes, can we unleash the vitality and power found in the book of Acts.

- Dave English is executive director of Global Opportunities.