

# Tentmaking unlocking closed lands

## Is tentmaking the answer?

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**Keywords:** missionaries, Paul, Corinth, Arab world, cross-culture, service, residence, salary, ministry, support, priorities, agency, training Is tentmaking the answer?

When we think of world mission we have to come to terms with two disturbing statistics. The first is that many countries are closing their borders to traditional missionaries. On average, four more nations each year are refusing to welcome missionaries and it has been estimated that by the year 2000, 83% of the world's population will live in these 'closed' countries. Is tentmaking the answer?

The second disturbing statistic is that the number of missionaries from the UK dropped considerably in the 1970s and early 1980s. Although the trend has now stopped and the numbers have levelled out and are starting to rise, the need for more workers is greater than ever before. Depending on location, it costs between ,15,000 and ,25,000 each year to support a missionary family on the field. Another 1000 missionaries from the UK would therefore cost the British church ,15B25 million each year. Tentmaking could certainly help reduce this cost.

### **Biblical background**

The term 'tentmaker' comes from the New Testament. It was the trade practised by the apostle Paul, one of the first missionaries and arguably the model for missionary service ever since. Paul did not always seek employment as a maker of tents, in preference to being supported as a missionary, but used one approach or the other depending on the circumstances.

The term 'tentmaker' comes from Acts 18:3 where Paul took up his manual skill because it was convenient and expedient during his ministry in Corinth. He also used his manual skill in Thessalonica and probably in other places too. It is interesting to clarify some of the reasons why Paul was involved in tentmaking.

Firstly, Paul did not make tents because it was his primary professional calling. He was trained and qualified as a rabbi, he had studied under Gamaliel and had been prepared for an academic life as a religious interpreter and teacher. All rabbis were expected to have a manual skill and Paul had learnt the craft of tentmaking, probably when he was quite young, but it was never intended to be his main way of life.

Indeed Paul makes it clear that those who are evangelists or preachers should receive their living from God's people: 'In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel' (1 Cor. 9:14). Secondly, Paul chose to earn some money from making tents in Corinth so that he could not later be accused of living off the believers while he was with them. He may have anticipated that the Corinthian church was going to be critical of his authority, and accuse him of commercial gain from his apostleship (2 Cor. 11:7B9).

Thirdly, Paul clearly states that the reason he made tents was to be an example to the church of the importance of hard work, of not being a burden and of helping the weak (Acts 20:34B35; 2 Thess. 3:7B9).

Fourthly, it seems that Paul chose to do some sabbatical tentmaking with Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth as a break from his normal missionary work while he was waiting for the rest of his team to arrive. While he was tentmaking he seems to have preached in the synagogue only on Sunday, whereas when Silas and Timothy came, Paul abandoned his tentmaking and 'devoted himself exclusively to preaching . . .' (Acts 18:5).

In our world travel is easy, advertizing is widespread but visa regulations are tight. Our world is altogether more complicated than in Paul's day, but some of Paul's reasons for tentmaking are still valid today. Tentmaking should not be seen as better or a substitute for the more traditional role of a missionary. Both approaches are biblical and valid, but one may be more appropriate than the other. In the Arab World where missionaries are not allowed, tentmakers are obviously needed.

### **What is a tentmaker?**

A discussion of the definition of a tentmaker often seems to be an endless circle that gets nowhere fast. Just as many discussions on the subject 'What is a missionary?' end up with someone saying that every Christian is a missionary, which is both true and unhelpful, so discussions about tentmakers are open to similar problems. A tentmaker is not any Christian who chooses to take employment overseas. Here is our working definition:

**A tentmaker is a missionary in cross-cultural ministry who has been called by God, prepared for service, and who has a secular identity in the land in which he/she serves.**

This definition gives us the characteristics of a missionary tentmaker. The tentmaker is:

### **A missionary in cross-cultural ministry**

This characteristic indicates the primary intention of the tentmaker. Why is he/she working abroad? There are many good reasons for living and working abroad: some people like the sunshine, or the high salary, or the broader experience, or the sense of adventure or a host of other good and acceptable things. But the tentmaker is just one of the many types of missionary whose major priority must be to plant, disciple and serve the church of God in a culture that is not his/her own.

### **Called by God**

Tentmaking is not something you can simply drift into, just as you cannot simply drift into missionary service. If you happen to be working abroad and you suddenly think that sharing your faith is a good idea, that doesn't make you a tentmaker. God calls people to his service in many different ways and there are no foolproof patterns, but the clear call of God gives you the confidence to go forward, the certainty that you are in the right place when things go wrong and the reassurance that God will supply all the resources you need.

The call of God is a personal and very individual thing, but must be acknowledged and confirmed by the fellowship of a local church.

### **Prepared for service**

The task of any missionary, tentmaker or not, is closely related to communication. A communicator needs to know his message, know his audience and understand the medium of communication he will use with all the implications, prejudices and cultural perspectives that are involved.

Preparation does not necessarily involve years at Bible or missionary training college, although this is probably the most thorough preparation in the UK. New opportunities for training are constantly opening up and the tentmaker needs to make every effort to get the best preparation that his/her personal circumstances permit.

### **Known to have a secular identity**

The tentmaker has a secular identity in the country where he/she serves. He/She may do the same job as a missionary teacher or missionary nurse, but the tentmaker's residence papers or visa form will not give their occupation as that of a missionary but rather of an employee of a secular organization inside the country or a secular expatriate organization abroad.

In general, the tentmaker will be allowed to stay by the government, because he/she is seen to do a job, which is beneficial to the country and one which no national could presently undertake.

### **The advantages of tentmaking**

#### **1 Residence**

The first reason for being a tentmaker and the reason why many people initially consider tentmaking is that it is the only way to achieve long-term residence in your target country. A successful job application results in the necessary papers required to get a residence permit, which is often issued on a yearly basis and can be renewed if the job continues.

#### **2 Natural contact**

Tentmaking gives you a natural contact with those you normally meet and inter-relate with through your job. You will have natural employment relationships with your colleagues. If you are a teacher you will also have a natural contact with those students you teach and they will be able to relate to you easily as they do to other colleagues. This will result in natural topics of conversation, many of which will apply to work and through these completely normal exchanges you will be able to get to know those you work with, understand how they react to things and get a feel for what really matters to them.

Through this natural working relationship you will be able to stand up for what is right and hopefully make a stand against corruption and other bad practices, as well as sharing the gospel as and when the opportunity develops.

#### **3 Financial assistance**

Very few tentmakers are completely self-supporting through the salary that they receive. Most jobs that are suitable for tentmakers just do not pay enough to cover the cost of living abroad and all the extras that are necessary for travel, pension requirements etc. However a tentmaker's salary can help very considerably in reducing support that is needed from church and friends at home.

It is never a good idea to be a tentmaker just because there is no financial support from home. If the financial support is not forthcoming, the chances are that the prayer support will not be forthcoming either, and you will need prayer support to be effective in the Lord's service whether you are a tentmaker, or following any other sort of missionary calling.

#### **4 Secular job satisfaction**

Christian ministry can be very hard-going. It is often a struggle, sometimes depressing and it is possible to go for long periods without seeing much spiritual progress. If the times of spiritual barrenness continue unabated for a very long time, then the tentmaker should probably consider whether he/she is in the right place and trying to fulfil the right ministry, but there are always periods when there seems to be no spiritual progress and on those

occasions the tentmaker can be encouraged by a job that gives satisfaction.

## **5 Perception**

Several of the advantages of tentmaking centre on the issue of how you are perceived. This is important in three areas. Firstly, how do these people of the Arab World perceive you C the Christian worker? Secondly, how do the national Christians perceive you? And lastly, how do you perceive yourself?

## **The restrictions of tentmaking**

### **1 Considerable time constraints**

Many of the restrictions of tentmaking are related to time. Time is precious and must be guarded but that is particularly difficult when trying to integrate into a culture where time has little value.

For the tentmaker there are very often restrictions on the amount of time that can be spent in preparation for service overseas. Most traditional missionaries would probably take many years to prepare in terms of theology, mission studies, Islamic studies, and language training, before coming fully into their ministry. Preparation for tentmaking is vital and important.

Ministry time is important too. If your regular job totally wears you out, physically and emotionally, then you are going to have very little left to give to encouraging young believers, face-to-face evangelism and dealing with all the other stresses of friendship evangelism in a hostile environment.

### **2 Priority conflicts**

Because tentmakers have to try and fit so much into a restricted time schedule, many of them tend to be activists. Activists always find it more difficult to stop and spend time waiting on the Lord, and a tentmaker who is an activist, is going to find more excuses for filling up his/her time with legitimate activities than the traditional missionary. The tentmaker has to cultivate the ability to guard those times of waiting on the Lord in order to be spiritually equipped and briefed by the Lord for ministry.

### **3 Misunderstanding by supporters**

The need for prayer backing, understanding home assignments and the financial situation are often misunderstood by Christians at home.

## **Choosing a tentmaking job**

There is no doubt that some jobs are much more suitable for the tentmaker than others. The jobs that are most unsuitable for tentmakers are those that give little opportunity for Christian ministry, and they often have the following characteristics.

- 1 A very high salary.
- 2 Long working hours.
- 3 A considerable amount of responsibility and working to deadlines.
- 4 Working with expatriates and having little contact with nationals.
- 5 Little time to improve your language
- 6 Application is made through an agency in the UK

Experience has shown that the best tentmaking jobs are very often those that you apply for through contacts on location. If a school director or a factory manager is desperate for someone to fill a particular post, possibly because he has been let down by someone not arriving from overseas, then he will be prepared to take on anybody who he thinks can

adequately do the job whatever their qualifications. The applicant concerned is then in a position to negotiate the hours of work and other conditions of service. This has proved to be particularly true where the teaching of English is concerned.

Having learnt the language it is important to trust God to make sure you are in the right place at the right time when the right job opportunities come up. Jobs that are applied for on the field very often are more suitable for tentmaking but they command local salaries rather than higher expatriate salaries.

An important question **C** independent or agency linked?

Many people with overseas experience are convinced that the advantages of being linked with a missionary society far outweigh the disadvantages and that in fact many of the independents who arrive overseas cause many problems that could otherwise be avoided. The advantages of being linked with an agency are many.

### **1 Training and preparation**

Tentmakers need just as much training and preparation as any other sort of missionary. But time is in short supply and agencies can give advice.

### **2 Orientation**

Few people understand the culture shock that faces a Westerner arriving overseas. A person or family needs to be met, helped to find housing, assisted in registering with the police and opening bank accounts, and helped with getting children into the right schools.

### **3 Support**

One agency reports that the rate of spiritual 'burnout' among independents is very high. The main reason for this seems to be the lack of effective support for those who go independently.

### **4 Special facilities**

Agencies often provide regular conferences for spiritual stimulation, practical training, and relaxing fellowship for those in tentmaking situations. These can be very valuable times, not only as a pastoral help, but also in increasing the effectiveness of those in tentmaking ministries.

Mission home offices can also provide care for the parents of missionaries or children who are being educated at home. It is difficult for a home church to care for parents and children if they are at a distance.

Mission agencies can also offer support for those returning home. Reverse culture shock is sometimes even more traumatic than the culture shock you face when you first arrive on the field.

### **5 Finding the right job**

The individuals concerned usually have to find the job themselves, but to be pointed in the right direction or introduced to the right person can be a great help.

### **6 Finances**

Most tentmakers are not totally self-supporting financially. This is particularly true for those who obtain work in the country where they serve. Although their tentmaking salary is a great help, additional money usually needs to be channelled through from churches and friends at home.

### **7 Links with home**

Educating a home church to understand what you are doing as a tentmaker, the pressures that exist, the need for security, and how the gospel can be shared in the land where you work is a major undertaking for all missionaries and particularly for tentmakers. Agencies have experienced and skilled staff, videos, slide-shows, literature and other promotional material which can help the sending church understand what the tentmaker is doing and the opposition that he/she is facing.

A much fuller and more comprehensive version of this paper, complete with appendices, is available from AWM, PO Box 51, Loughborough, Leics LE11 0ZQ. Tel: 01509 239525 Fax: 01509 264820 Email: 74754.1321@compuserve.com

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