

**Bamako, Mali. Friday 17<sup>th</sup> August 2007. 2.30pm**

**Subject: Models of Tentmaking; Paul's and ours**

**Speaker: Mr Roger Wells**

In his talk, Dr Dembele has shown us from the Bible how many famous people used their work to glorify God. He spoke of Paul and how his tentmaking was able to do be a means of reaching out to many others. I should like us to look in more detail as to how he was able to win people for Jesus Christ through his tentmaking, and then we shall look at the situation today.

Firstly, if you were trained as a first-Century tentmaker it was a simple trade to start up anywhere. A tentmaker's tool-bag was made up of three basic tools: a square knife, a round knife for cutting around corners, and an awl for making holes in the leather cloth. This could all be packed up in a small bag and taken from place to place. Of course there was more to this in running a tent business: you would need premises, a work bench and to obtain leather, but it was easy enough for Paul to move on to the next town as the Spirit of God directed him. He could engage labour when this were needed, and he joined forces with Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth.

It was a flexible sort of business. Sometimes he worked full time, as we read at the beginning of Acts 18, but by verse 5 of that chapter we read that Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia and joined Paul, and it seems he then devoted much more time then to preaching. He returned to his tentmaking as his circumstances changed.

In such a business Paul would have all kinds of contacts, and I am sure that for each one he had a passion to reach each one with the Gospel. Firstly, there were the *buyers* - some would have been important people purchasing very fine decorated tents, but also poorer people who would have bought the simple ones. He would have shown the same courtesy to both; would have been totally honest in his dealings; the price would have been fair. Then for the *sellers* of the skins, he would also have offered a fair price. The business community would have been pleased to do business with such a man. He may have had to take loans, bringing him in touch with *bankers*, and I am sure he would have had a good rating with them also! There may have employed craftsmen, and he would have been keen to teach them the trade and how the quality had to be the very best. He would have emphasised the very highest standards of integrity. Paul set a good model for us.

Paul's primary motive as an apostle was of course to preach the Gospel, but he seemed equally at home doing this in a synagogue, in a lecture hall, matted living room, smelly backstreet, or at his tentmaker's bench. When he was able to speak, he certainly did so. He took "every opportunity", and encourages us all to do the same. Verse 4 of Acts 18 says that "Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue trying to persuade both Jews and Greeks. So Sunday was not a day off! When the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive he didn't give up but, as is says in verse 7, left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus. Something similar happened in Ephesus in Chapter 19 and in that case he went to the Lecture Hall of Tyrannus. Paul preached and taught wherever he could. The Lecture Hall meetings seemed to have been held in working hours when Paul and his followers wore "aprons and handkerchiefs"- these would have been working clothes, the aprons as a working man's covering and the 'handkerchiefs' sweat-rags around the head. You may remember that these garments of the apostles were placed on sick folk and they became healed. Note that Paul had the clothes of an ordinary working man and he identifies with us all, whether or not we feel we are important in our working life, or whether we even have a job at the present time.

Well, what about today? It is much the same really: sometimes we work, other times we speak, answering questions. Tentmaking today is similarly a working life where we display the characteristics of Jesus. I remember when I first went to Asia in a secular working capacity I had some 72 national staff - some were Muslims, some Hindus, some Christians, some Parsees - a real mixture. As a Christian, one of the ways I felt I should witness was to treat everyone fairly and without prejudice, and I am sure that many respected me and my faith for this. As I was a young man,

I made friends with some of them, and they came to my house and we were able to talk on an informal level. Matters of faith often came up. But I want to mention one or two others who have been helped by our organisation TASK and how *they* have operated as tentmakers:

Alan. He was called to a Latin American country. As a science teacher he wanted to share the truth about Jesus Christ to children and families in that country. After a while the teaching job ceased and, being interested in computers he set up a computer consultancy so that he could help others understand how to do computer programmes. His commitment was to the country where God had called him. It was not all easy: the economy was very bad, he had great difficulty getting a job and a residency visa, and there was much violence there, but the Lord took him and his family through all this, and he was able to share Christ with many people. Teachers are important in tentmaking and many others have gone overseas as teachers of English, where there is a particular demand from all over the world. In Francophone Africa there are doubtless many openings for French teaching too.

Robert went to a Far Eastern country to teach students there about medical surgery but also about the God who could heal their souls. The students came up with so many questions about why he was different from other teachers and he was able to show that this was the difference Jesus made in our lives. I found in my own experience that it is through answering questions that we can convey many aspects of God's Truth. Working in overseas colleges and universities is another huge opportunity area.

Anna. She went to Chad as a water engineer, and was able to witness to her fellow engineers and construction people on the sites, and also more widely among the citizens of Chad. She then went to Uzbekistan, and Haiti following the floods there, and other places. God had not called her to one place, but to share her love for Jesus in a number of places using her water engineering skills.

Jane. She works in the UK among immigrants from South Asia. Having lived in Bangladesh as a teacher she then returned to UK and used her acquired language skills to bring Bangladeshis to Christ in her own country. So you see tentmaking can be used in another country, but it is possible to use the tentmaking concept within the same country, and minister among people of a different culture, or perhaps a different people group.

These are all people who went from the UK to overseas countries. There may not always be a need to travel that far. Take for example the water engineer I mentioned that went to Chad. As expertise develops in so many African countries such a person could possibly have been found from another African country. There would have been huge advantages also: there would have been more understanding of African ways of doing things, the culture would have been different but much more similar. Adjustments to living conditions would have been less. Perhaps a shift needs to be made towards tentmaking within the same continent. There may still be areas of specialist expertise where one will need to look beyond Africa, but we should be looking essentially for the continent to be as self-sufficient in as many skills as possible. Praise God, this is happening more and more!

In Mali, there is already something of a model. Tentmakers are being trained to go from Bamako to the tribal areas and unreached people groups in Mali itself, taking their skills with them. This is a great model on our doorstep, and I hope we shall hear about some of their efforts for the Lord Jesus at this Conference. So tentmaking does not have to be across national borders. But there is one huge advantage of the tentmaking approach: there are many countries closed to the message that we proclaim. Think of some of the countries in this region of the world that would not allow the preaching of the Gospel! Yet there would be scope for business, for professionals working there, indeed they could be welcomed there because of what they could provide in work situations. The challenge is for all of us to consider what is God's strategy for particular countries, what is the broader strategy for Africa? And what is our part in that strategy? What is your individual part of that strategy?

So now that we have looked at Paul and some modern tentmakers, can we conclude what are the

**QUALITIES that are needed to serve in this way? Who are suitable to go? Many different people!**

The first is that we must be spiritually committed to the Lord, and the truth in His Word, and have a passion for others to know Him. We need a good and growing relationship with our Lord, and an ability to feed ourselves from the Word of God. Unless we have this, and are able to sustain it in good times and difficult times, we shall fail. Research has shown that this is the single most reason why tentmakers come home early: they have not kept up a keen spiritual life with the Lord. Sometimes the thing that keeps us going through hardship is the certainty that God has called us to that place.

Secondly, we need to have a skill, and maybe too some experience, so that we can readily offer what is required in the areas to which we are called. We need to have a job that the local community recognises as important. This could be a professional job -teachers, doctors, and the like - but carpenters, car mechanics, and similar jobs are also important. But we still need to be the very best carpenters and car mechanics. What a great privilege as a carpenter to have the trade of our Lord Jesus, and what a wonderful material with which to work and mould things of beauty as well as utility. And as for garage mechanics, people will know us by our reputation that the car will NOT need to go back to the garage.

Thirdly, we need to take the view that as far as our Christian service is concerned, there is no distinction between Sunday and Monday, spiritual or secular. We honour God in our workplace through our attitudes and behaviour, the quality of the products and services we provide, and through our integrity and morality. Tentmaking should not be a "cover" for gospel preaching. We go to do a specific job of work that the community requires and we carry this out in a relaxed way and in an exemplary manner. As we go we may earn our living, and this can prevent our being a burden on the local church or community if that exists. This is useful, but there is no theology that self-support is better than other types of Christian mission. But tentmaking is the best option for certain situations.

Fourthly, we need to be interested in people, their culture, their language, and their ways of thinking. Communication across cultures is not easy: even when something is said in a common language, others may understand something very different from your words; they may then process in their minds something totally opposed from what we think. So we need to understand how other cultures think, and their world-view as it is called. When we were in Afghanistan great efforts were being made to reach a particular people in that land. They had virtually no contact with any other groups or tribes, so how to convey the Gospel truths to them? Someone hit on an idea: The people never received strangers into their tribal group, but when they did a business deal they "adopted" that person temporarily in the group. Thus it was preached to them that God is the one who 'adopts' us, bringing us into His family. It was a concept that they very readily understood, and work was begun among them. My question to you is: are you interested in the cultures of others, and excited about seeking to communicate God's truth to them in very different ways? I hope so.

Fifthly, we may find ourselves in a position of discipling those who have come to faith, and here we need to have some understanding as to how to lead such people into small fellowships and into infant churches. These will need to be consistent with local cultural norms, and not modelled on what has worked elsewhere. It appears that Priscilla and Aquila, Paul's companions, were very active in developing and running these fellowships with Gentile communities.

I cannot go into all the qualities in detail, but I list a few, partly by way of reminder, from a book "The Challenge of Tentmaking". This is in French and I do suggest you read it there.

A good relationship with God and - vitally - a sustained prayer life

Good Biblical knowledge, with an ability to feed oneself

A growing ability to witness to Christ, ministry skills in evangelism, teaching, and discipleship

**A mission heart and a sense of calling**

**A marketable skill, with some experience**

**Growing self acceptance, love for others, and a servant heart**

**An excitement about other cultures, and a flexible and adaptable approach to others who are different**

**Respect for other Christians workers with different roles and perceptions of ministry**

**Good physical and psychological health**

**The ability to cope with culture stress, family stress, isolation and loneliness. We need to be prepared for whatever comes up.**

**(And although this is not possible in all circumstances) Language learning. This is hugely important if we really want to communicate effectively in local languages. Quite apart from its importance to communication, it is the most effective way of getting to bond with the local community. My language teachers in different countries often introduced me to their families, then to friends etc etc. Steinar will say more about this in the next session.**

**Well, I hope this list is not too daunting. It is not meant to be. But we do need to know what we are aiming for and that there are those willing to help us.**

**Firstly, there is the Holy Spirit. He is the one who prompts us to go, who gives us the passion, and who more than we ourselves wants to see us properly prepared. It is He who has given us the skills we possess, and He teaches us day by day.**

**Then there is our church, which should be affirming us in our desire to serve in a tentmaking capacity, and encouraging us to use our gifts, and directing us to get the right training.**

**It is in the church that we are likely to be involved in friendship evangelism; unless we have experience of this at home it is not likely that we will be effective in another culture. Is it not true that most of those who we bring to Christ have already become our friends?**

**We need also to work out to whom we are to be accountable for our tentmaker work, and the church can help with this. Above all, we need our church to pray for us regularly, and be committed to us. Most organisations insist on you forming a committed prayer group at your church before you leave your home area.**

**Then there may be Bible colleges that can help us in a whole range of studies, including deepening our faith and doctrinal understanding, and many issues relating to living in other cultures. Not everyone needs to go to Bible College. It is very good background, but those going as tentmakers, particularly those in busy careers, may not be able to spend the time to do this.**

**However, there may be other training courses that are accessible. We in TASK in the United Kingdom have been able to guide enquirers to short term courses, and advise individuals on a whole range of other matters on tentmaking service. Together today at this Conference we represent TIE, which tries to ensure that other countries too have similar organisations or contact points that can guide tentmakers on training and any other matters that concern. We all try to raise the profile of tentmaking and stand along side those whom God is calling to such service.**

**What then are the most important areas of training? We have mentioned some already, and I will highlight four:-**

**Firstly, Friendship Evangelism. To know through experience about friendship and how to introduce**

**others to their greatest friend Jesus Christ, the one that can forgive them, restores them to Himself, and give them new life.**

**Secondly, one very useful skill is how to lead an evangelistic Bible study. This is not always used but is a particularly valuable tool for sharing Christ in home situations. I have seen it wonderfully used in one Asian country where I worked, where local Christians as well as foreign expatriates were helped to Christ.**

**Thirdly, the whole area of spiritual warfare: how satan attacks the team, and the family, and how to deal with this.**

**Fourthly, the whole question of accountability. Being responsible to another Christian for the work you do. And it is right that a tentmaker sets objectives for his or her Christian work. Training will help you to ensure your objectives are realistic and measurable, so that we can see what we are achieving for the Lord.**

**Well, I spent 32 years in secular work, and it was 15 years ago that I considered the possibility of undertaking tentmaker work for God in the United Kingdom. It was a big step, and a conference was organised a conference to consider developing tentmaker work in my country. At that conference was a gentleman who many years earlier had lived in Ghana and was a pioneer in setting up the Inter Varsity Fellowship in West Africa. His name was Tony Wilmot and I always remember him saying with some passion that there was five things to remember in tentmaker service. His passion was infectious, and I pass his points on to you:**

**The Importance of the Bible**

**Love the people**

**Lean on God's Grace**

**Live the Gospel, and**

**Launch out into the Deep, to be daring for Christ.**

**Thank you**