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I love Paul's down-to-earth approach to life and ministry. After being shipwrecked, he could have easily said "I told you so," or have assumed a role of leadership in organizing the castaways. Luke tells us that he simply began gathering sticks to lay on the fire. There is something about this that gives a glimpse into Paul's practical perspective to tentmaking.

When we consider the question, "Was Paul a Tentmaker?" the answer is perhaps not as simple as we first thought. Luke mentions Paul's trade in Acts 18. We find him arriving in Corinth and making tents alongside Aquila and Priscilla. However, in the same passage, we are told that "when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself fully to the word."

It is clear that Paul's tentmaking held a secondary role in his life and ministry. Ministry was always Paul's main focus. He describes himself most often as a slave to God and an apostle, one sent out to do the work of the gospel. This was Paul's primary occupation.

Why Tentmaking?

The answer to whether Paul was a Tentmaker is yes... and no. Throughout his ministry Paul sometimes engaged in tentmaking, sometimes not, but always for the purpose of ministry. As we read the Book of Acts and the Pauline epistles, we begin to build a picture of how tentmaking contributed to the support, strategy and success of his ministry.

Tentmaking contributed to the support of the ministry

Financial support is perhaps the most obvious reason for tentmaking. Paul was able to survive in Corinth with the money he earned making tents. In a similar way, tentmaking allows missionaries today to get to the field quickly without needing to raise as much financial support beforehand. On the field it can give a dependable stream of income that ensures the continuation of the missionary.

In contemporary missions, it seems that missionaries are finding it more difficult to raise support from an ever-smaller group of potential financial supporters. Tentmaking, or even a season of tentmaking, should be considered as an option for today's missionaries in certain mission fields.

Tentmaking contributed to the strategy of the ministry

It is interesting to note that, while Paul certainly differentiated between mission work and tentmaking work, he did not see them as at odds with each other. When he speaks of the work he did to support himself, he speaks of it as a chance to teach biblical principles, or to remove an obstacle to the gospel. Tentmaking then, was a strategic part of his ministry and opened doors for the work of the gospel. It provided opportunities for the ministry to grow and develop.

Today tentmaking is used to provide access to difficult places. Most countries around the world will not openly welcome missionaries. On a local community level, tentmaking removes some of the suspicion and apprehensions people have toward the missionary. In some mission fields, tentmaking may be the only way to effectively reach people with the gospel.

Tentmaking contributed to the success of the ministry

One of the most significant outcomes of Paul's tentmaking is his lifelong connection with Aquila and Priscilla. They had become close enough that, when Paul left for Ephesus, they both accompanied him. And although they remained there when he left, we see them instructing Apollos in the gospel. Throughout his ministry, they were close partners with Paul, advancing the mission when with him and when apart. They held church meetings in their home and Paul sent greetings to them often and counted them among his "fellow workers."

Ministry is about people. Paul used tentmaking to minister to people, ultimately supporting his efforts to establish churches and disciple leaders.

We find ourselves in a unique era of modern missions. Never in history have there been so many opportunities to do tentmaking work on the mission field. We need to think beyond our traditional models of missions and recognize the potential of tentmaking without losing the central emphasis of fulfilling the ministry. Tentmaking should never become a distraction or take precedence over the work to which God has called, but it can be one of the ways God enables a missionary to support their ministry, develop creative strategies and ultimately find success on the mission field.



What Can Tentmaking Look Like?

One of the characteristics of God is that He is omniscient. That means that He is infinitely creative. Variety has no limits with Him. So, in the context of tentmaking, TBM has seen quite a diversity of work which a missionary might do to help him get on the field to do the ministry of church planting .

The pictures on this page are a sample of jobs a missionary might get into for tentmaking : quilting, photography, construction, mechanics, lamp making, water ministries, hospitality and woodworking.

Some of the tentmaking jobs which TBM missionaries had, or still have are: truck driver, cabinet maker, start an export business in a foreign country, banking, food service, basketball coach, university professor, nurse/ medical, hairdresser, retail warehouse, salesman for solar panels, school teacher. The sky is the limit in God's economy!

Not only does tentmaking provide income, but it also connects the missionary with the community. He is able to "rub shoulders" with his co-workers. This may lead to having meals together, starting a Bible study, giving the Gospel, counseling, and much more. The end result, ideally, is for a church to begin to be planted so that many generations can hear the Gospel clearly, and that they might be disciplined to carry on the work.

