

# The Tentmaker's Mandate

*It will become clear from our study of the different aspects of the tentmaker's mandate that this ministry is not an inferior alternative to traditional missionary work, but a valid and biblically authenticated form of cross-cultural outreach urgently needed in our world today. It may well be the only way to reach the "hidden" groups of unreached people. It may be the only way to penetrate the "closed countries" with the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

by David J. Price

**T**he Lord calls us to be involved in His mission to "preach the Gospel to the world." How can we reach this changing world of numerous faiths and ideologies? The tentmaking strategy gives a new force to the missionary movement and allows Christians into the cross-cultural ministry around the world. The tentmaker's mandate is rooted in Scripture, starting in Genesis and going through the New Testament, ending with Paul's own experiences.

The command of the Master continues to challenge His people, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel." But what a world we live in today! It is a world of accelerated change gripped by needs, problems and dilemmas of a magnitude never experienced before. It is a world marked by overflowing populations suffering vast inequalities; of independent nations of every shape and size jealously guarding their rights and competing savagely for survival. It is an increasingly urbanized world, a very religious world where a proliferation of faiths and ideologies, old and new, battle for people's allegiance. It is a technological world of exploding knowledge which touches every aspect of life. Into this confusing, and often frightening milieu, the Lord calls us to involvement in His mission, and challenges us, as always, to total commitment.

But how can we reach such a world? The tentmaker strategy adds a whole new force to the missionary movement and has the potential to mobilize thousands of Christians into cross-cultural ministry around the world, putting them into effective contact with many of

the unreached people of the world.

Is tentmaking a totally new concept conjured up by the mind of man to meet the current situation? Is this kind of missionary activity biblically validated? What is the tentmaker's motivation? It is the purpose of this paper to answer these questions by showing how the tentmaker's mandate is securely rooted in Scripture. It starts with the foundation and basis for all missionary endeavor, which resides in the very nature of God Himself, and ends with a specific mission calling.

## God's Nature and Kingdom

We begin with God Himself and His amazing love for His creation. He does not create and then withdraws, but reveals Himself ever reaching out to His creation. In the early chapters of Genesis we see how He related personally to the man and woman He had made. Even after the fall, He sought them out asking, "Where are you?" In spite of the grief and pain in His heart at their rebellion, He could not abandon the people He had created. He called Abraham through whom He purposed eventually to re-establish His rightful rule over all peoples. (Gen. 12:1-3) Paul sees this fulfilled in the preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles (Gal. 3:8,9). Out of Abraham came Israel, chosen from among the nations in order to be a blessing for the nations (Ex. 9:13-16, Is. 49:5, 6).

Here is the fundamental nature of God seen both in Creation and Redemption. He is a missionary God. His purpose of love is to overthrow every

destructive thing that opposes His rule as King in every area of human life.

Because we follow a missionary God, we too should be missionaries with a responsibility and privilege to be involved in His purpose. It is impossible to love Him and serve Him and not look with love at His world. Tentmakers move out into the world because they share God's priority and submit to His Kingdom rule in their own lives including their vocation. Their intention is not to seek professional advancement or status. Although their profession does open doors for their going, they serve Christ through that vocation, not apart from it. Tentmakers do go to accumulate wealth or to fulfill a desire for travel or adventure, but their primary concern is for the extension of God's Kingdom people and communities. So we see that the tap root of the tentmaker's motivation lies in the loving heart of God Himself.

## The Mandate of Human Need

A world in rebellion, cut off from the living God, doomed to destruction is lost in the most profound sense of the word. Paul spells out what this means in terms of man's real condition and need in Eph. 2:1-12

- While physically living he is spiritually dead (vs. 4, 5). His paramount need is to be made alive.

- He is part of a world manipulated by demonic forces that control cultures, and unjust structures that oppress and dehumanize people (vs. 2), so he needs freedom from the conditioning of culture and society.

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- Because he lives in a world driven and terrorized by an all-pervasive selfishness, he needs power to overcome sinful desires (vs. 3).

- As this world is already under condemnation and faces the certainty of a final reckoning, man needs deliverance from God's wrath and judgment (vs. 3b).

- In a hopelessly divided world, man needs the reconciliation that God offers through the Cross. He needs to know God and become part of His family (vs. 11-13).

The tentmaker is convinced of the absolute reality of the biblical assessment of the human condition. He has personally experienced deliverance, reconciliation and new life in Christ through the Cross. He believes and knows the Gospel to be the power of God to change the lives of people and nations (Rom. 1:16; 2 Cor. 5:17). In joyful response to his own needs being met, and out of a deep concern for this lost world, he is willing to change location and take risks in order that others might also encounter their Saviour and King.

### The Mandate to Unreached Peoples

The unreached peoples of our world cannot be reached without a definite missionary thrust. Paul's passion to preach the Gospel where Christ has not been named, burns on in the tentmaker's heart. (See Rom. 10:12-15 and 15:17-20.) When he sees specific groups of people who have no effective Christian witness and whole societies partly or fully closed to traditional missionary outreach, he seeks to respond creatively to the challenge.

The mandate of the tentmaker's role in the missionary thrust must be seen against the background of important realities about the unreached peoples of today.

- Their numbers are enormous—of the 5.1 billion people of the world, 26% are classified as unreached (Barrett). To reach them, cross-cultural witness is

necessary because these people do not have Christians as near neighbors nor do they have Bibles in their own language.

- Some of the unreached peoples comprise particular groups, e.g. businessmen, politicians, lawyers, educators, operating in the megalopolises of the world, not touched by usual missionary endeavour. A tentmaking approach makes it possible to reach these peoples in their own context.

- According to Dr. Yamamori, "Today, 65 % of the world's people live in countries that either partly or fully restrict traditional missionary approaches... and by the year 2000, these 74 to 84 countries are expected to contain...between 83 and 84% of all non-Christians." The tentmaker can still enter these countries, reaching these isolated "hidden" people groups incarnating and sharing the Gospel among them.

### Christ's Lordship and our Priesthood

The call to enter the Kingdom of God means that every disciple lives under the Lordship of Christ in every dimension of human experience— family, finance, vocation, leisure and worship. There is no value distinction between sacred and secular, and the message, implications and benefits of the Gospel have to be demonstrated through a whole lifestyle. In fact this constitutes the great strength of the tentmaker's approach. He witnesses through all of life's experiences, so declaring God's praises, and lives such a good life among pagans that seeing it, they come to glorify God on the day He visits us. More than this, as Peter declares, all believers, not just a select formally-ordained few, are to be priests. (1 Peter 2:9-12) Accordingly, every believer, whatever his occupation, is equipped by the Spirit for ministry. No particular calling or vocation has any special claim to be better for witness, nor any special exemption from responsibility to wit-

ness. This understanding further undergirds the tentmaker approach and gives impetus and confidence to this kind or missionary work.

### A Biblical Model

Although not invariably, Paul, the first great missionary to the Gentiles, consistently operated in the tentmaker mode throughout his missionary career (1 Cor. 4:12; 1 Thess. 2:9; Acts 20:34, 35). When seen together, the references to Paul working at his trade (which literally was making tents) point to an extensive involvement throughout his journeys, rather than to isolated incidents. For example, Luke refers to it in Corinth (Acts 18:3) and Ephesus (Acts 20:34). Paul himself speaks of it in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 2:9) and as his general practice (1 Cor. 9:15-18). His reference to Barnabas (1 Cor. 9:6) indicates tentmaking on his first missionary journey. Reference to Thessalonica (1 Thess. 2:9) and Corinth (1 Cor. 4:12) apply to his second journey and mention of Ephesus (1 Cor. 4:11) and of the future at Corinth (2 Cor. 12:14) indicate his third journey. Finally, reference to Paul's activity in Rome (Acts 28:30) may well refer to his living off his own earnings, rather than paying for his own food and lodgings.

What is the explanation for this consistent tentmaking activity? Was it merely a case of a Rabbi practicing his trade to impart his teaching without charge? F. F. Bruce says that clearly this was an important element as Paul argues in 1 Cor. 9. Even though there was a biblical basis for his right to be supported, he did not exercise this right but made the Gospel free of charge in starting a new work. In doing this he set a model for Christian outreach into a new area emphasizing the greater blessing of giving than receiving.

There are two obvious reasons for taking this stance. By being self-supporting Paul was not a burden on the believers (although he did welcome needed support from established churches,

Phil. 4:16) and also avoided the danger of compromising the Gospel, God's free gift, by expecting financial assistance from new converts.

Some biblical scholars (e.g. Ronald Hock) would take the issue further. They see Paul's purpose in tentmaking as directly evangelistic, not simply as a necessary activity for financial support. "Workshops were conventional settings for discussion and intellectual activity which Paul deliberately utilized." In the summary of his missionary activity in Thessalonica (I Thess. 2:1-12) Paul links working and preaching together, the implication being, according to these commentators, that it was while working that he preached rather than his involvement in two separate activities.

From Paul's God-directed ministry it is clear that tentmaking is a biblical model, possibly even more "normal" than the traditional missionary model. It is seen as an important evangelistic spearhead and an effective means of reaching the unreached.

### A Biblical View of Work

Different views of work pervade the community of mankind, even within the Christian Church.

- Work is something to be avoided at all costs.
- Work is a necessary evil, the result of the fall, which must be done to earn the money to do what you really want.
- Work is something you just go on doing—like a hen laying eggs.
- Work is the means by which you finance "real" ministry.
- Work, for some Christians, is seen as a useful opportunity and sphere for Christian witness.

While it is true that believers are to live and witness for Christ in every situation, it is a mistake to regard work and the workplace as having no significance of itself. It is more than a well stocked lake in which to fish or just the means to provide for the Lord's work.

A biblical view of work and vocation goes back to creation. God is revealed as a worker who enjoyed perfect job satisfaction— "He saw that it was good" (Gen. 1). Man, made in His image, was to be a worker too Gen.(2:15), experiencing the same fulfillment and satisfaction. So work was well established before the fall, even though after the fall it had overtones of frustration, pain, boredom, and dissatisfaction when work became toil and productivity a struggle.

It is surely significant that when the Word became flesh, and Jesus Christ came proclaiming the Kingdom, he was found at a carpenter's bench. The biblical message of the Kingdom has implications for the workplace that embrace the areas of justice, loyalty, faithfulness and a commitment to the welfare of others. Paul, for example, wrote, "Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven" (Col 4:1.)

The mandate for tentmaker witness arises out of our Christian understanding of work based on a theology of creation and the Kingdom, which includes three aspects.

1) *Work is for personal fulfillment.* The potential for creative work is an essential component of our god-likeness and is not something we do to live, but what we live to do. God's intended purpose in creation was that people should find fulfillment in work (Ecc. 2:24;3:22).

2) *Work is for service to people and communities.* Adam worked the garden to feed his family. The Old Testament law emphasizes the communal aspect of work. We work, therefore, not just for ourselves but for the benefit of others, and by cooperating together in serving the needs of people, we help them realize God's purposes for them. Certainly this is more directly apparent in some kinds of work than in others. Tentmakers see their work as serving the

best interest of the national people, and of benefit to them in the overall Kingdom purposes of God, which include both the physical and spiritual dimensions of life.

Recently Chris Sugden criticized Dr. Yamamori's book *God's New Envoys* as expressing little "actual concern for national well being" or lacking any desire to become involved in the struggles of nation and community, particularly as they relate to the area of life in which the tentmaker is operating. It must be reiterated that tentmaking is not just a means of evangelism apart from any real emotional or active "oneness" with the host people that would be "interaction" rather than "involvement." This in fact would be a denial of the essential incarnation Jesus modelled for us in mission. Note what the Lord said to the exiles in Babylon: "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jer. 29:7). Here is the right perspective for the tentmaker who, in the nitty gritty of daily vocation, and in the labour of intercession, gives himself in all of life as a sacrificial offering for the welfare of a people. The Kingdom cannot be realized without the Cross—an ongoing process touching the life of the true servant of the Lord.

It is, of course, possible that some areas of work will not be suitable for tentmakers; e.g., the liquor industry, or that the policies or mode of operation of some companies might not permit the tentmaker to participate with integrity.

(c) *Work for the worship and glory of God.* Above and beyond personal fulfillment and service to others, our work is for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). Through our work we participate in the purposes of God for humanity and we see past the immediate to the ultimate goal. "Whatever you do," wrote Paul, "work at it with all your heart, as working

for the Lord, not for men. since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Jesus Christ you are serving" (Col. 3:23, 24). It is not without significance that these words are addressed to slaves!

The tentmaker deliberately engages in a work context because he views his work as an expenditure of energy (manual, mental or both) which is personally fulfilling, benefits the community, and honours God. The out-working of this biblical understanding of work is a vital aspect of the tentmaker's witness and discipling.

### A Clear Call from God

Most of what we have considered applies generally to Christian disciples, all of whom are expected to witness in daily life and work and to be involved in God's mission to the nations of the world. But at this point, the tentmaker's mandate narrows down to the clear and specific call of God to the individual. The divine call is as crucial to the tentmaking ministry as to any other. While it is personal, it is not just individual, and has to be discerned and worked through within the fellowship and encouragement of the Body of Christ. This call will focus as three dimensions come together and are recognized and affirmed by the Body.

#### 1) *The Tentmaker's Gift-Mix*

"They saw that I had been given the task of preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles....For God was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles." (Gal. 2:7-9) The tentmaker will have been equipped by the Holy Spirit with the mix of gifts necessary to live and work in a cross-cultural context. All disciples are called to serve Christ in their own culture, but not all are fitted to serve cross-culturally.

#### 2) *The Tentmaker's Goal*

Paul's ambition was to share the Gospel with unreached peoples and to strengthen young churches. This is

the particular goal of the modern tentmaker also, and it is no peripheral goal, but central to his vocational faithfulness. He not only witnesses to the Kingdom through his values and attitudes displayed at work and the love demonstrated through his service and relationships, but he is concerned to verbalize the good news in terms that are meaningful to the receptors. Like his biblical predecessor Paul (Rom. 15:17-20), the tentmaker is constantly looking for opportunities for spoken witness at every level of his involvement with another people. His purpose in living amongst them is to proclaim and persuade so that they might be brought into relationship with Jesus Christ as His disciples. Neither is this any shallow engagement. Like the Master, the tentmaker is concerned to make disciples by fellowship through initial contacts and investing quality time with individual people.

#### 3) *The Tentmaker's Call*

As Paul and Barnabas were directed by the Holy Spirit to leave Antioch to go to the Gentiles, so every tentmaker is specifically called and directed. (Acts 13:1-4). The call comes personally but is also recognized by the congregation. Tentmaking is a Spirit-empowered vocation.

### Conclusion

Down through the centuries God has been calling His servants out to do the unnatural thing: to leave country, culture, people and family in order to fulfill His saving purpose among the nations. The tentmaker is a missionary in terms of his calling and commitment. He is sent by the Lord at a specific time, to a specific place to bear witness to His Name, there to be a stranger and a pilgrim, closely following the Master who denied Himself, humbled Himself, and walked daily the way of the Cross. Through that obedience, the tentmaker earns the right to be there, the right to be heard, and the right to be invited back.

It is clear from our study of the different aspects of the Tentmaker's Mandate that this ministry is not an inferior alternative to traditional missionary work, but a valid and biblically authenticated form of cross-cultural outreach urgently needed in our world today. It may well be the only way to reach certain isolated groups of unreached people, and the only way to penetrate so called "closed countries" with the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[Editor's note: This article is taken from Dr. Price's book *Twentieth Century Tentmakers: Mission Mandate and Motivations*. Bible College of Victoria Centre for World Mission, Commodore Press Pty, 58 John St., Lilydale, Victoria 3140, Australia.]

*Dr. David J. Price is the Principal of the Bible College of Victoria, Australia. Following a short pastoral ministry, he and his wife served for 16 years in Papua New Guinea at the Christian Leaders Training College. He returned from there to the Bible College of Victoria in 1984, and teaches in the area of Missiology, Theology and Discipleship.*

Photo here  
of  
Dr. David Price