

# What is a Tentmaker?

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**WHAT IS A TENTMAKER?** The apostle Paul carried on his trade as a tentmaker (Acts 18.3) on some of his missionary journeys, and many people since have followed this example, taking their businesses and professions to other cultures and continents. Thus the word 'tentmaker' has passed into Christian vocabulary. A tentmaker, simply put, is a disciple of Jesus Christ who is called by God to a cross-cultural ministry using marketable skills and services. It is recognised as a valid and important aspect of world mission, and in no sense inferior to any other type of service. Not too many people are actually sewing tents together as part of mission today, (though there may be some: a number of people have set up small craft businesses). Those who go overseas are more likely to be teachers of English, administrators, businesspeople, bankers, water engineers, architects, students in overseas universities, secretaries or physiotherapists. Their jobs may be offered by companies, Governments or international aid organisations and arranged before they leave their home.

**WHY SO IMPORTANT NOW?** Before the advent of organised missionary societies about 200 years ago tentmaking was the normal pattern for overseas Christian service. Today, tentmaking has a new imperative. Many countries now restrict Christian evangelism in some way. The escalating costs of maintaining missionary families abroad has also caused many agencies to rethink the advantages of tentmaking. And even in countries that receive traditional missionaries, tentmakers meet people of different professional and social classes in a natural way. Their place alongside others at work gives them a credible identity and easy point of contact. Friendships develop which earn the tentmaker a right to be heard. All ages can be part of tentmaking, including young people, young families, and those retired or facing redundancy. Those just out of college may need to gain some years of experience before their expertise is welcomed. On the other hand those who have faced redundancy, or taken retirement but still have lots of energy, may be particularly sought, and may be fully ready to proceed abroad without much delay. Still others are already on overseas contracts but wondering what their contribution to Christian service can be.

**WORK AND WITNESS: DO THEY REALLY MIX?** Paul provides us with a good model. His primary motive as an apostle was to preach the Gospel, whether in lecture hall, matted living room or smelly backstreet. But his workbench was also a 'platform', as he was able to demonstrate his faith through hard work, integrity and business ethics. At the same time he could avoid being a financial burden on the infant churches (Acts 20.32-35; 1 Thess 2.9; 2 Thess 3 6-10). We may not share Paul's specific apostolic call, or his gifts, but God does call us whether at home or abroad to use our work to glorify Him. A calling to use our God-given skills and experience in an overseas setting is no less worthy than a call to a specific country. In practice there can be difficulties. Our companies and organisations may allow very little time to prepare adequately, learn the language and become acquainted with the culture. We may also be expected to be a part of the expatriate community to an extent that makes contact more difficult with national people. There will be pressures from our employer demanding that extra time we had reserved for our special 'Christian' work. Indeed we may find that there is very little time left for witness. In view of this, would-be tentmakers need a clear understanding of the nature of Christian witness: - Western distinctions between Sunday and Monday, spiritual and secular, are unhelpful. We should see our entire lives as ministry. We can honour God in our workplace through our behaviour and attitudes, the quality of the products or services we provide, and our integrity and morality. In some parts of the world Christian morality contrasts sharply with the behaviour of other Expatriates, and this invites questions; and- Tentmaking is not 'cover' for gospel preaching. Tentmakers obtain visas for a specific job of work, which they are required to carry out in an exemplary manner. A tentmaker should thus have no ethical dilemmas about being a first-class professional and a first-class witness for Jesus Christ, and should be happy and confident with holding and explaining that identity.

**SELF-SUPPORT IS NOT THE KEY ISSUE** Our self-support can be an advantage in that we are not paid by the church or any Christian organisation. This can give us an independent credibility to the faith we seek to share. But self-support is not essential, and those on local salaries often have to be supplemented by payments from their home churches and elsewhere. More important is that:- God has called us to use our gifts and skills in a cross-cultural situation;- We take opportunity to share the Gospel sensitively and with integrity. The work itself will be one means of testimony, and depending on the circumstances may be the only way;- We are recognised and commended by our home church and most of us link with a mission society or agency that can encourage us through the difficult times; and- Whenever possible we link with a national church in the country of service.

**WHAT QUALITIES DO WE NEED?** Many - but here are just a few: -- A marketable skill, preferably with some years' experience'- A good relationship with God and - this is vital - a sustained prayer life;- A growing ability to witness for Christ, ministry skills in evangelism, teaching, discipleship;- A mission heart and a sense of calling;- Growing self-acceptance, love for others, a servant heart;- A biblical perspective on issues relevant to work, and ethics, social matters;- An excitement about other cultures, or at least an awareness that we need to understand other cultures;- A flexible and adaptable approach to others who are different;- Respect for other Christian workers with different roles and perceptions of ministry;- An ability to set objectives realistically, while being open to God's unexpected demands and provision;- Good physical and psychological health; and- The ability to cope with culture stress, family stress, isolation and loneliness.

**CHALLENGES IN WORKING OVERSEAS** Our work is an opportunity to express of faith in Christ. Our integrity in our work, and genuine concern for our colleagues and neighbours, are outworkings of God's love, just as are feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, or healing the sick. How we live is as important as what we say. We encourage a good theological understanding of work, and recommend prospective tentmakers to take time to reflect on how this works out in their lives. Excellent materials are listed on the Resources page: Going to work with God bible-studies and Thank God it's Monday are great value for Christians in the workplace anywhere. The nature of your

overseas employment is a key consideration. Some dimensions to consider: the nature of our employer or company, its products, how it treats local employees, the time pressures it imposes on us, how it helps or allows us to relate to local culture and people. A job is not merely a platform to get into the country to evangelise. Work done is a real contribution to the host country, and will be seen in that light. "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men..." (Colossians 3:23 NIV) Tensions often arise because of the difference between the job that ideally could be done, what we would like to do and what we are able to be achieved. We will face many of the same pressures as we do in the workplace at home, with the added dimension of working cross-culturally with people who have a different world-view and in work-situations where expectations may be vastly different. Aztem's experiences can help you prepare for some of these possibilities.

**KEY QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE TENTMAKERS** A survey in the mid 1980's by Don Hamilton used the responses from 350 tentmakers to identify those who had been effective. These are their characteristics:- They have led an evangelistic Bible study before going overseas. They built personal relationships first rather than rely on impersonal means, and were able to use bible study methods in sharing the good news.- Their main reason for going was to share the gospel of Christ. The desire for travel, adventure and new experiences were inadequate in difficult and possibly hostile environments.- They believed God called them to be tentmakers. When the going got tough, the deep conviction of God's calling carried them through.- They had experience in actively sharing their faith at home. If you aren't sharing your faith at home, it's even tougher to do it 'there'. - They had strong relationships with their home church.- Their church considered their work as true outreach.- Many were commissioned by their church, were accountable and reported back to their church.- They recruited others to be tentmakers. They recognised the need for more workers in the harvest, and valued the support of others.