

*Working Abroad:  
Today's  
Tentmaking  
Challenge*

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London, England  
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## **PREFACE TO PRINTED EDITION**

For a number of years my wife and I have had a growing interest in world mission. The contents of this booklet were put together for our own benefit, as we considered the practicalities and implications of serving the Lord through a tentmaking lifestyle. At present, I find myself working as a statistician for a large electrical company in London, and it is in this environment that I am learning to put into practice some of the issues addressed in this booklet.

In preparing these notes for the publisher I do not claim to be a guide but rather a fellow traveler, one who has had the privilege of being in touch with many missionaries and tentmakers and to have had available some of their writings.

With gratitude I freely acknowledge my indebtedness to a number of brothers and sisters in Christ who have contributed from their experience, ideas, information and constructive criticisms. My special thanks to my grandfather Harm Wilts for his numerous suggestions, and to Maurice Muller, Douglas Hayhoe and Gordon Bennett for their substantial contributions and encouragement.

It is our prayer that, in God's hands, these thoughts may encourage a new generation of tentmakers.

Philip Nunn  
London, England  
March, 1990

## PREFACE TO E-BOOK EDITION

About two years after Overcomer Press published this booklet, I handed in my resignation letter and set out for Colombia – together with my wife, Anneke, and our two small daughters. We did not arrive as tentmakers but have been working since then as full-time Christian missionaries. Yet we have retained an interest in tentmaking. During these last 2 decades, two of my brothers (and their families) and a sister (then single), have spent a number of years serving the Lord as tentmakers: Andrew & Marianne (engineer and teacher) worked for 8 years in Colombia, John & Carolyn (Physicist and teacher) worked for 3 years in India, and Wendy (teacher) worked 4 years in the Bahamas. David (Engineer) also worked 10 years in the Bahamas before marrying Wendy. We are still very convinced that the Lord uses Christians with a tentmaking lifestyle to further His purposes on earth.

In preparing this electronic edition, the original has been updated and adapted for a wider readership. For example, I have deleted references to dear believers who are unknown to most. Thankfully the heavenly records remain unchanged! “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them” (Hebrews 6:10). In most cases I have also replaced the term “local Christian assembly” with the more widely used “congregation” or “local church” – but we mean the same thing: a local expression of EKKLESIA.

My thanks to John and family for scanning the printed edition, to Wendy & David and Ruth & Sylvain for their constructive comments and to Gordon Bennett (Overcomer Press, Owosso, Michigan, USA) for granting permission to make this material freely available.

Philip Nunn  
Armenia, Colombia  
March, 2007

## FOREWORD

Every time I read the "Acts of the Apostles" or better "The Acts of the Holy spirit", I am deeply impressed by how much variety there was in the way the Holy Spirit carried out the "Great commission." He worked through a variety of dedicated human beings totally devoted to the Lord Jesus. He used them often just where they were. He transformed their God-given "natural" abilities or capacities into useful tools to do their tasks for the Lord. They were all "different"! Some were just "simple" fishermen; there was a medical doctor, a lawyer, a number of enthusiastic young people and several highly educated men. Some were married and others were single, both men and women.

As these early Christians offered themselves to the Lord and made themselves available, He used them, wherever and whenever and in whatever capacity.

Every born-again Christian is supposed to be a "full-timer." We are useless until we have learned to surrender totally to the claims of Christ. Surrendering to Christ does not automatically mean abandoning whatever you are doing. I avoid saying "giving up your secular job", for that would contradict what I am trying to emphasise. The believer in whose affections Christ comes first has no "secular" or "sacred" departments in his life. He is never just "part-time" in what he does and how he lives for the Lord.

I am glad that Philip Nunn has written this booklet. The concept of the "tentmaker" has my full support. I have been advocating it for many years and encouraging it in my own children. I am glad that Phil does not say that "full-time" missionaries are better than "part-time" tentmakers. Each missionary and each tentmaker has realised the Lord's claims upon their lives and yielded their all. They are simply serving Him as He leads.

May many who read this booklet be challenged to "surrender" all to the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ in their lives. May they begin to live for Him daily, being available wherever He calls them.

Cor Bruins  
Ipswich, England.  
1990

Cor Bruins, his wife Audrey and 8 children served the Lord as missionaries in Egypt and Lebanon between 1955 and 1975.

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## 1. WHAT IS A TENTMAKER?

The word tentmaker is taken from the Apostle Paul's secular skill. From time to time he would make tents to give a good example and "in order not to be a burden to anyone" (1 Thessalonians 2:9). "These hands of mine" he said "have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions" (Acts 20:34). Work like this was not only a source of economic support for Paul's team - it was also a means to further their personal contact with individuals (Acts 18:1-4).

During the last couple of decades, the term "tentmaker" has been used more specifically to refer to believers who are convicted by the Lord to move abroad with the gospel to those areas of greater spiritual need while still engaging in some form of secular employment. The term includes those individuals or families who are moved abroad by their company or business yet are deeply concerned for the unsaved and the local expressions of Christ's Body worldwide. It does not include Christians who simply happen to work abroad! Tentmakers have a heart for mission. These Christians view their secular job not only as a source of income but also as a natural arena in which to meet nationals, gain their confidence and share Christ.

There is the danger of idealising life abroad as if by crossing sea, culture or language barriers one would automatically become a better and more effective servant of God. If I am not devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ, His people and His work at home nothing will change once I live abroad. A Dutch brother once put it this way: "Working abroad is never God's first call. After conversion the testimony starts at home." It is also true that, in a sense, every Christian in secular employment is a tentmaker. We all face the challenge to be a living witness for Christ at work. We all live under energy and time constraints. We all struggle to live under godly priorities, and beyond doubt we are all accountable to the Lord on how we invest our life for Him.

If you are a Christian in secular employment, it is likely that a large proportion of the ideas outlined here will be relevant to you as you seek to serve the Lord in your sphere of influence. Yet the term "tentmaker" is generally applied to those working abroad, and it is in that sense that it will be used here.

In these pages we do not aim to evaluate the relative merits of serving the Lord at home or abroad, as a full-time missionary or as a tentmaker. We shall focus on the life of a tentmaker, with its opportunities and dangers. It is worth pointing out that the tentmaker should not be seen as a replacement or a competitor of the full-time missionary. The two are distinct forms of service with their unique advantages and disadvantages, frustrations and joys.

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## 2. TENTMAKERS IN HISTORY

The idea of a tentmaking lifestyle is by no means something new. Throughout history God has sometimes called men and women out of secular employment to devote the totality of their time to the Lord's work. But this is clearly not God's way of dealing with all His people. Some were called to stay at home serving the Lord through a righteous life in their secular employment; others however, were sent abroad either by conviction or by wars, persecution, government edicts, floods, famines and trade. Many of these became tentmakers in the sense of our definition.

**2.1 In the Old Testament:** There are many examples in Scripture where God called men to serve Him abroad without a renunciation of their secular employment. Abraham, for example, was a cattle-man throughout his life. Joseph and Daniel were dedicated government administrators. Nehemiah was a governor. Queen Esther, Naaman's maid and many others were used by God abroad in the course of normal duty.

**2.2 In the New Testament:** In the early church it was the average Christian who, due to persecution, was forced abroad. "Those who had been scattered preached the Word wherever they went" (Acts 8:4). Again, Scripture furnishes us with many examples of godly men and women being used by the Lord while in secular employment. Lydia was a purple seller, Zenas a lawyer, Erastus a city treasurer, and Priscilla and Aquila were tentmakers. Luke was one of Paul's esteemed co-labourers, yet also a beloved physician.

Perhaps the greatest prototype of a self-supporting witness was the apostle Paul himself. Why did Paul spend some of his valuable time making tents when he was called by God to be an apostle to the gentiles? In 1 Corinthians 9, the apostle Paul gave an explanation of his behaviour. And in Acts 20:34-35 he states: "These hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" It is clear that Paul's primary goal was the spreading of the Gospel, and his tentmaking was part of his strategy to achieve this goal.

**2.3 During these last 2000 years:** In the history of the church a great number of self-supporting witnesses have spread across the world. The details of such are available in any good book on church history. Under the persecution of Christians by Zoroastrians in Persia between AD 339 and 448, hundreds of thousands were martyred. Many were exiled. J. C. Wilson in his book *Today's Tentmakers* writes: "Supporting themselves by the labour of their own hands or filling appointments as secretaries, physicians or stewards in the households of the nobles and princes of those lands to which they went, they were one and all missionaries of the cross." A thousand years latter, when America was discovered, many Christian families emigrated and set up Christian communities on this new continent.

Because of his evangelistic work in India, William Carey (1761-1834) is referred to by many historians as the "father of protestant missions." And yet he worked mostly as a tentmaker. This remarkable man translated the Bible into 35 of the languages spoken

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in India, and also became a leading authority on the botany of India and wrote articles on this for the Encyclopaedia Britannica. When finances were tight, he spent some time as professor of Sanskrit at Fort William College in Calcutta.

Since those early days of protestant missions, there are many examples of individuals and groups of believers who traveled abroad engaging in trade and industry, setting up schools and hospitals - and sharing the good news of Christ, discipling new converts and establishing local churches.



### 3. TENTMAKING OPPORTUNITIES

Broadly speaking, one can identify two types of tentmakers: those whose primary motivation is Christian witnessing, and those who have a primary commitment to their secular job but seek to work it out as a Christian. The first type moves abroad under a conviction from God, the second type find themselves assigned abroad by their company or due to other business. Beyond doubt both types can render great service to the Lord.

When considering a tentmaking lifestyle it may be very instructive to consider our objectives and motives. What I am trying to do? Who am I trying to reach? Is tentmaking the most effective way? It is likely that when Paul was tentmaking in Corinth he felt a special need to demonstrate that the Gospel was free - even though he clearly knew that those who preach the Gospel have the right to live off the Gospel (1 Corinthians 9:14).

Working in a bilingual school in a developing country may help us reach the wealthier and more educated families who may be quite closed to the Gospel. Involvement in health, agricultural, technical or educational projects may help demonstrate the love of Christ. Perhaps our calling may be to strengthen Christian presence in a closed country or to introduce Christian witness in the marketplace.

Today, the need for professional qualifications is important to work in many countries as a tentmaker. Many different skills are looked for: Anything to do with education, computers and health care. There are opportunities for those with experience in finance, business, international trade, agriculture, technology, engineering, even social sciences and the fine arts. A popular tentmaking opportunity is teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) – this job provides flexible working hours and good contacts with locals.

Job vacancies may be looked for in different places: wealthier countries offer jobs abroad as part of their Third World aid programme, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) and voluntary social organizations such as the Peace Corps (USA), Voluntary Service Overseas VSO (U.K.) advertise job vacancies. A growing number of Christian mission agencies seek to link potential tentmakers with overseas opportunities. Many of these mission agencies may be found by searching the web using keywords "tentmaking" and "mission."

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## 4. OBJECTIONS TO TENTMAKING

God's servants have always been subject to objections and criticisms. Some criticisms may be rightly called for, others perhaps not. Serving the Lord as a tentmaker also has its critics. Here we explore some common objections.

**4.1 The category "tentmaker" is not found in the Bible.** It is true that the term "tentmaker" as currently used, is not a biblical term like "prophet", "apostle" or "elder". It should not be used as such. According to gifts and calling, Christians engage in many different services for the Lord. Each ministry has its particular challenges. Some resources are developed to encourage and help a particular subset of believers, such as "Christian mothers", or "Christian youth workers in inner cities", or "Christians engaged in trade and commerce." Another such subset is the "Active Christian expatriates" or if you prefer, the "Christian missionary with an additional set of secular work obligations." The term "tentmaker" is simply shorthand to refer to this group.

**4.2 The idea of "tentmaking" is unbalanced because it suggests that to serve the Lord abroad is somehow better than to serve the Lord at home:** Each of us must serve the Lord according to our calling, and that may be at home or abroad. One is not better than the other. Christians with a "tentmaking mindset" are used by the Lord both at home and overseas. A tentmaker who returned home a few years ago recently wrote: "I have come to the conclusion that to be a tentmaker is a matter of your attitude towards your work and use of time." Our usefulness to the Lord does not depend on geography. It depends on our obedience to our particular calling.

**4.3 Tentmaking is only an alternative for those who have been called to the mission field but lack faith in God for economic support.** If God gives a brother or sister a conviction to enter full-time service either at home or abroad it is only right for them to move in that direction. Not all, however, receive such conviction. Tentmaking is not an escape for the Christian who is weak in faith but rather a distinct way to invest one's life for the glory of God.

**4.4 Tentmaking promotes individualism and disunity in the Body of Christ since individuals and couples are able to move abroad without the blessing of their local church.** This is a real danger. For any Christian venture it is important to have the prayers and fellowship of their local Christian assembly. What we advocate here is for an increased awareness of the role of tentmakers and their great potential. It would further God's purposes if we would actively encourage and help prepare those who have the God-given desire to move abroad out of love for the Gospel. We should support them in prayer - they need not only the prayer support of individual friends and family, but that of the whole church - and also support them financially where necessary. Not all tentmaking jobs provide enough to cover all the financial needs. Interest can be shown by asking them to report back to their home church items for prayer, their needs and the struggles of their God-given ministry. This approach to tentmaking will promote unity in the Body of Christ, will help the home church to share in God's work abroad and will be of great encouragement to the

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tentmaker. After all, the responsibility to share the good news of salvation and to make disciples is not the burden of a few individuals but of all believers (Acts 8:4).

**4.5 There is enough work at home without encouraging active believers to serve the Lord abroad.** The commands in Scripture do not restrict the Gospel to any particular social group, race or nationality. God's love and concern extends to mankind everywhere. How can we hold back those in whose heart God has placed a desire to reach those living in countries where there is less Scriptural light? I am sure there were many needs in the early church in Antioch yet God extracted two active, godly men from among them for a different ministry (Acts 13:1-3, 14:26). Feeling their loss, yet obedient to the Lord, they commended them to the grace of God and sent them on their way.

**4.6 It is not wise to encourage our youth to serve God abroad; they have enthusiasm but lack stability and experience.** No doubt there is truth in this statement. A well-traveled full-time worker commenting on the draft of this booklet wrote: "Knowledge of Scripture is necessary but not sufficient... I have known young brothers who saw the need abroad, went out, and spoiled the work of others instead of being a help and blessing. Unfortunately this has also been true of older brothers." Indeed all ages and temperaments have natural characteristics which may help or hinder the work of God. In Scripture we see God using both the young and the old; we see their strengths and weaknesses, their victories and failures. Rather than restricting service for God abroad to a particular physical age, we have Biblical precedent to recommend men and women on the basis of their verbal confession, gifts and way of life. Young and old alike have a unique contribution to make.

Though many tentmakers start relatively young, this need not always be the case. Many have mentioned the role of Christians who go overseas after they retire. Some even retire early in order to have some 10 or 15 good years on the mission field helping missionaries, supervising building projects, helping in hospitals, teaching God's Word, and much more. Brief visits by professionally active Christians to accomplish special tasks on the mission field also take place.

**4.7 Tentmakers are deceptive since they are "missionaries in disguise."** Every man or woman stands for what he or she believes, even non-Christians, and there is nothing deceptive about that. All Christians are called to live out their new life whether residing at home or abroad. We communicate our values by the way we live. Secularists are missionaries of materialism. We all represent what we believe.

**4.8 Traveling abroad to less developed countries is dangerous. Christians should not take unnecessary risks.** William Carey responded to this objection in 1792 by saying: "Is it an un-necessary risk to obey our Master?" Then he added: "It only requires that we should have as much love for the souls of our fellow-creatures and fellow-sinners, as they (commercial men) have for their profits." A missionary sister replied when questioned on the issue of safety abroad: "There is no safer place than the centre of God's will."

## 5. DISADVANTAGES TO TENTMAKING

Like every occupation, tentmaking has its advantages and disadvantages. The following are some problem areas that we should bear in mind.

**5.1 Limited religious freedoms:** The tentmaker's employer may limit his religious freedom. This problem may also exist at home. Christians need to be discreet in regard to the legitimate interests of the organisation which employs them. In areas where religious liberty is restricted the Lord's servants should be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

**5.2 Mobility restrictions:** Many companies place their foreign workers into special compounds. The contact with local Christians and nationals is thus limited. This is a disadvantage, yet by concerted effort it is possible to develop meaningful contacts with local people. Often, expatriates choose to live in the foreign community because of convenience, comfort and in some instances security, but again, this may limit their contact and ministry to nationals.

**5.3 Short term:** Secular job appointments are usually for one or two years. It may be difficult to have a lasting impact for Christ in such a short time. It takes time to develop good solid relationships with nationals. In many cases, however, working contracts may be extended. Some, after seeing the great need and the open doors, have returned later as full-time missionaries, or have just remained in the country.

**5.4 Language problems:** Tentmaking usually involves a full-time job, thus it is difficult to have enough time to master the local language. To develop real contact with nationals, the learning of their language is essential. This is best done within their culture, which takes both time and money. This, however, may not always be possible. Some form of language study before leaving is strongly recommended. Without the local language, any witness is severely limited.

**5.5 Time constraints:** The demands of the secular job limit the time and energy available to witness for Christ. This is a fact which is also true for all brothers and sisters in secular employment. A Christian, however, can usually witness by life and word and while on duty when this is done discreetly. Even full-time missionaries are not actively witnessing all the time; they may need to repair their house, their car, buy food and clothing, fill in tax forms, renew their visas, correspond with government agencies and congregations back home, fulfill family responsibilities and much more.

**5.6 Energy constraints:** There is a real danger that tentmakers can get so involved in their secular job that their witness has little effect. Watchman Nee, a well-known Chinese Christian, discovered this through personal experience. Although he was clearly gifted in preaching and teaching God's Word, he decided to take on the directorship of a pharmaceutical factory to try to be self-supporting. In time he became so ensnared by business responsibilities that for five years he had to stop preaching. Fortunately he acknowledged his error and handed the factory over to others in Shanghai. At times the tentmaker may find himself or herself trying to serve two masters. It is of interest to note that the flexibility of the apostle Paul's temporary

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secular work did not give him a second master.

**5.7 Lack of accountability:** Many have come to grief because they have not had a group of fellow-believers to whom they were spiritually accountable. A small group of praying and knowledgeable friends is a great source of support and advice, especially in the isolation that often accompanies tentmaking. A close bond between the tentmaker and his home church is also very valuable. As someone once said, this close bond "keeps the home church on their knees and the tentmaker on his toes." Local church leaders, however, should be very cautious in expressing their expectations without first having a thorough understanding of the culture and the setting in which the tentmaker lives.

**5.8 Isolation abroad:** At times a tentmaker may find himself serving alone in an area without Christian fellowship. In this case it would be best to try to move abroad with one or two other believers as a team for mutual encouragement and help. Our Lord sent His disciples two by two, and the Holy Spirit called both Paul and Barnabas. Paul makes many references in his epistles to his fellow-workers. Loneliness is a critical factor for both singles and married couples. However, some ministries and congregations overseas would never have been started if a single couple had not been willing to go there alone, at the beginning.

**5.9 Fluctuating finances:** If a tentmaker is employed abroad by a European or North American company, their salary will usually be sufficient to cover their numerous expenses. If, however, the tentmaker is employed by a national school, university, company or government, his salary will most likely be insufficient. Unlike the national, the tentmaker's children may need to go to a special school, their standard of hygiene and shelter may be different, they will need to travel back home from time to time and so on. In these cases, it is essential for the home church to be aware of these needs and, as God directs, supplement their income in order to cover these added expenses.

Experience shows that even though a tentmaker may live in a country with a lower standard of living, where food and housing are much less expensive than in Europe, North America, Australia or New Zealand, this does not necessarily mean that their overall expenses are much less. The lower the tentmaker's income, the more time he or she must spend meeting basic survival needs and making ends meet.

**5.10 Discouragement or dryness:** Perhaps one of the greatest problems all missionaries and tentmakers face is spiritual dryness - giving, giving, giving - it is easy to feel drained. One effective source of help is to carry one's own library abroad, a selection of spiritual books such as devotionals, commentaries and biographies will prove invaluable. Christian music, audio messages and seminars on DVD can be very useful. Friends, family and the church at home can be a real source of encouragement by sending the tentmaker the occasional good book, a challenging audio message, a brief "hello" note by internet, a subscription to some encouraging and informative magazine... These expressions of love and concern remind the tentmaking family that they are not forgotten.

## 6. ADVANTAGES TO TENTMAKING

There are distinct advantages to tentmaking. Here are some of them.

**6.1 More entry visas available:** A large number of countries do not allow Christian missionaries to enter, such as Muslim, socialist or communist regimes. Many governments only provide visas to those foreigners who, in their view, have something concrete to offer them. These governments are attracted to the secular skills of the tentmakers, thus giving them access to countries which are closed to regular missionaries.

**6.2 Greater acceptance by host countries:** Tentmakers are usually well received by their host country since they desire his or her services and do not see them as religious instruments from the West. The tentmaker is free from the stigma of proselytising.

**6.3 Accelerates cultural integration:** Sometimes the job of the tentmaker may force him to adjust rapidly to the local culture. He or she could be exposed to the local management mentality, working hours, holidays, social security systems, salary levels, worker's sports clubs, etc. Missionaries, if they are not careful, can spend many years living in an artificial "western greenhouse."

**6.4 Helps build natural bridges with nationals:** Working alongside nationals and thus building working relations with them can provide a very natural setting for sharing the Gospel. Workers in the same profession have natural ties with others in the same occupation. These ties may be used to further God's interests. It provides a natural setting to befriend people outside the local church. In the course of their work tentmakers often meet types of people that missionaries may find difficult to reach, such as educated people, professional people, factory workers, university students and professors. Tentmakers, like missionaries, can also have a real impact on locals in such areas as working with underprivileged sectors of society.

**6.5 Provides a model for national believers:** Tentmakers can provide a very healthy example for Christians on the mission field. It is not surprising that national believers find it somewhat difficult at times to relate to the full-time missionary who to them has no apparent financial worries and struggles. The national brother struggles to provide food and clothing for his family and has very little time available for serious Bible study and involvement in his local church. Tentmakers also struggle trying to find the balance between their job, family life and church life. In this, they may become real life models for nationals to imitate. The value of living before nationals a healthy Christ-centered family life should not be underestimated. The way the husband and wife treat each other, the way they solve their problems and bring up their children has a more lasting effect than any amount of books, sermons or lectures. Personal attitude - the display of Christ-like humility rather than the all too common western superiority or even arrogance - will greatly enhance the tentmaker's acceptance and influence.

**6.6 Benefits provided by a professional framework:** Secular employment encourages discipline, efficiency and effectiveness. The Lord can use the tentmaker's professional responsibilities to mould his character. A professional framework may teach the tentmaker to work better as a team member, to manage his time, respect timetables and deadlines, to manage finances efficiently, to interact with others with respect and diplomacy, to be disciplined, to be accountable, etc.

**6.7 There is always job satisfaction:** In some fields, such as the Muslim world, the spreading of the Gospel is a very slow process. Tentmakers however have the satisfaction of their professional accomplishment which may balance, to some extent, the frustrations and discouragements which can arise in the course of Christian witness.

**6.8 Helps reintegration:** Because the tentmaker is engaged in some form of secular employment, he maintains his "secular skills" alive. When the time comes to leave, his expatriate work experience may be helpful in reintegrating into the professional job market back home.

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## 7. CONSIDERING A TENTMAKING LIFESTYLE

It should be clear by now that tentmaking is no easy option. It requires total commitment and conviction from God. Tentmakers are not Christians who happen to live abroad. Preaching the Gospel, help establish Christian congregations and building up saints in their faith is not their "sideline" - something to do if they happen to have spare time. No, tentmakers are missionary-minded and have a missionary purpose and motivation. Have you ever given serious thought to the possibility that the Lord may want you to be a tentmaker? In facing the challenge before us some important questions need to be answered.

**7.1 Do I need a call from God to be a tentmaker?** Much has been written in the New Testament about our being called. We are called to repentance, to holiness, to be saints, to be with the Lord Jesus, and so on, but nowhere do I find anyone explicitly being "called" to be a "full-time Christian worker" or a "tentmaker." The so-called "Macedonian call" was not a call to service but simply a matter of guidance to a man already active in missionary service (Acts 16:9). The nature of a "call to service", if we may so speak, is a growing inward conviction of what God desires us to do.

Many of us wait anxiously for something spectacular and subjective. The truth is that God usually moves in reasonable and unspectacular ways. Mark 16:15, Matthew 28:18-20 and other Scriptures clearly command true Christians to "go and make disciples of all nations." Perhaps we should think more about obeying a command and less about "feeling" called!

A conviction that this is what the Lord desires us to do is, however, essential. But this is nothing new or strange. Any brother or sister who wishes to please the Lord with his or her life needs a similar conviction when deciding what to study, who to work for, where to live and who to marry. A returning tentmaker remarked: "Without a sense of service, you'd go crazy in the seemingly meaninglessness and frustration of some of your tasks. If you lack a clear sense of God's calling, it is easy to doubt and to wonder why on earth you ever went." "Your ministry", the tentmaker added, "must be the result of God's directing, a response of 'woe to me if I disobey when He says go!'"

**7.2 How can I know where the Lord wants me?** This question is equivalent to how does God reveal His will to me.

1 - God works through His Word: As we regularly read, study, meditate upon and memorise Scripture, the Lord will burden our heart with the things which burden Him. Sometimes, in our reading, the Lord may speak by highlighting a promise, a command or a warning.

2 - God works through information: The well known Bible teacher H. A. Ironside once said "God favours the prepared mind." God cannot guide us if our mind is empty of the relevant facts. This is as true in our evangelism, Bible teaching, counseling and worship as it is in our contribution on the mission field.



What are the relevant facts? Try to develop an understanding of the Lord's work worldwide by attending missionary presentations, asking specific questions, reading missionary biographies, keeping up to date with missionary reports in various publications, especially from that part of the world in which you have a growing interest.

3 - God works through prayer: As we allow Scriptures to fill our mind with God's thoughts, and we gather and pray over information, the Lord will quietly burden our heart so that, over a period of time, He will grant us a strong inner conviction on what work He has prepared for us to do.

4 - God works through circumstances: From time to time opportunities arise, help is called for, needs are made known, and job vacancies are advertised. Doors open and doors close. Circumstances and personal experiences are not conclusive, yet the Lord does use them.

5 - God works through mature Christians: Wise and experienced shepherds in your local church and other experienced and Christ-like brothers and sisters may furnish you with detached, objective and Godly advice. However we must keep in mind that as stewards, we ourselves are responsible before God in how we invest our life, time, money and energy. It is you and I before the Lord who must make the final decision. We cannot shift that responsibility on to anyone else.

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## 8. THE EFFECTIVE TENTMAKER

No techniques or skills are sufficient in themselves to produce fruit pleasing to the Lord. The apostle Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 3:5-15: "So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything but only God who makes things grow... For we are God's fellow-workers... But each one should be careful how he builds... fire will test the quality of each man's work." After obtaining the advice of some retired and currently active tentmakers, here are seven important factors which contribute towards the effectiveness of a tentmaker:

**8.1 The need to know God's will and be committed to doing it:** Effective tentmakers are not only committed to spend the time necessary to prepare themselves before they go, they are also willing to work, watch, wait and pray for the development of relationships once they arrive at their destination. Some doors for Christian service only open or become visible once you are there on the spot.

**8.2 The need to be spiritually qualified:** Without a good relationship with the Lord we have nothing to share. Tentmakers have stressed the need to develop a disciplined prayer life, daily personal exposure to God's Word and some practice in living God's truth before leaving home. Many have commented that there is not always enough time on the field to develop deep Scripture knowledge. One person said: "Be as prepared as you can be before you go." Another said: "The emphasis should be on spiritual truths applied to daily life and not just head knowledge." One of the most effective tools of the tentmaker is the informal home evangelistic Bible study. It is good to learn how to motivate, organise and lead evangelistic Bible studies at home before going abroad. A host of useful publications are available on this topic, providing helpful hints, study material and guidelines on how to initiate and direct healthy discussions.

**8.3 The need to network and be accountable:** We all know that discouragement is one of the most effective of Satan's tools. It is important to have the prayer support not only of close friends and family but also of the new local church (where he is working) and of the home church (where the tentmaker came from). It is healthy for him to feel accountable. It is the tentmaker's responsibility to ask for prayer support. Paul asked for prayer (Ephesians 6:19). On return, perhaps the home church or concerned friends and churches could take the initiative and ask the tentmaker for a report on his or her work.

Prior to leaving, it is very advisable to develop contact with a couple of Christians in the vicinity of where you hope to go. These may be obtained through friends, known missionaries and local church contacts. Some mission agencies may also be helpful here. If you arrive at a local Christian assembly abroad with a recognised letter of recommendation from your home congregation, describing some areas where the Lord has gifted you and used you, you will gain local confidence more rapidly. Once in place, it is important for the tentmaker to seek like-minded Christians to work with. To work as part of a team is much more effective. One tentmaker wrote: "You need spiritually close friends to help motivate, encourage and keep you accountable." Tentmakers should try to avoid working as lone-rangers but rather try to work side by

side with national Christians. Without this link it will be difficult for the tentmaker's work to continue once he leaves or returns home.

**8.4 The need for social skills:** Experience shows that the number one reason missionaries leave the field is that they cannot get along with their fellow-workers. Tentmakers face the same difficulty. If one is going to remain on the field long enough to have an impact, one needs to be able to get along with other people, both Christians and non-Christians, nationals and expatriates. Many have commented that one must go with the attitude of a learner and not one who knows it all. Studying the local language and trying to understand the new culture are ways of gaining the respect and love of the nationals.

**8.5 The need for wisdom, maturity, flexibility and patience:** Formats and customs within Christian congregations vary from country to country. This is not surprising since in many cases they represent Scriptural principles expressed in different cultures. Issues such as appropriate dress code, smoking, use of alcohol, tattoos, body piercing... and even your choice of Bible translation can greatly affect your acceptance in a given Christian community. Godly wisdom, maturity and a willingness to give up some "legitimate freedoms" are of great importance to work effectively among Christians abroad. To try to force our cultural traditions (liberal or conservative) in a foreign culture shows lack of respect, lack of spiritual insight (not being able to separate a divine principle from its cultural expression), and can cause great sorrow.

It is also true that doctrinal errors may be found in some congregations or religious traditions may have developed which obscure the beautiful simplicity of God's truth. Experience shows that many of these errors cannot be changed in a hurry without dividing the congregation, which may well be a greater error! My English grandfather used to say "You don't have enough gunpowder to fight all the battles. Choose the battles that are worth winning!" If you have growing children, you know how true this is. It also has its application in ministry. The apostle Paul was warmly flexible on many issues (Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 9:19-24), but on important basic issues he would stand very firm (Galatians 2). We all need the Lord's wisdom and grace to know for what, how and when to stand firm.

**8.6 The need for proper perspective on job and ministry:** Competence in one's field is essential to be an effective witness at work. Since a substantial amount of time is devoted to a secular job, it is important for the tentmaker to integrate his work and his ministry, to use his job as part of his witness. The tentmaker may not have enough time to organise large events like Christian camps and conferences or supervise construction projects, yet he may play a valuable role in spending quality time with individual brothers and sisters thus encouraging and training national leadership. Godly, stable, mature national leaders are in great demand in all mission fields.

The secular job, therefore, should not be seen as "a necessary evil" but as a door to opportunities. We must learn to integrate our work and ministry because that is the best way to minister. And this principle is just as applicable back home.

**8.7 The need for professional qualifications:** Most countries are protective of their own labour force. If nationals can do the job, they do not welcome foreigners. Most countries require a university degree or something equivalent, and preferably several years of practical experience. It is recommended that one works at home long enough to adjust to working life. The demands of a professional environment are very good to discipline and mature any believer who desires to serve the Lord.

## 9. WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE?

It is clear that every Christian is called to be an active witness for Jesus Christ. It is also clear that not every Christian is called to work abroad. A tentmaking lifestyle is not an option for every Christian. If you are called to stay at home, perhaps you have gained some ideas in these pages to put into practice locally. However, if you sense the Lord may be calling you to be a tentmaker, the following suggestions may be of some help.

**9.1 PRAY – Seek the Lord's mind on the matter.** Make it a priority to know His will above all else. Make it clear to the Lord that you set no conditions to following His leading. This is important because “unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain” (Psalm 127:1). The Lord has promised to guide the humble, yet He has also made it clear that He will not force us along “like the horse or the mule which have no understanding but must be controlled by a bit and bridle” (Psalm 25:9-10, 32:8-9). Unlike the horse and mule, our Lord has given us the faculty of understanding and He expects us to make good use of our renewed mind.

**9.2 RESEARCH – Try to keep informed on what the Lord is doing in that part of the world.** As we have mentioned earlier, the Lord uses information. Good stable decisions require a wide selection of relevant information. Regularly read missionary letters and mission reports. Try to find out how Christians are progressing in the country you are interested in. What are the perceived needs in that area? Where could you contribute something? What is happening economically and politically? Seek some contact with missionaries and tentmakers with experience in your area of interest. If possible, arrange a 10 day exploratory visit. Can you start a language course? Can you read up about local customs and religion? For today's potential missionaries and tentmakers, the web is a very useful source of up-to-date information. Use it!

**9.3 SERVE LOCALLY – Be active in your local Christian assembly.** The skills used by effective tentmakers are the same skills needed to serve the Lord at home. So, while you wait for that opening, serve the Lord with passion at home. A brother recently wrote: “Superficial people might think that only the last 40 years of Moses' life were useful, and that the periods in Egypt and Midian were just lost years. They are greatly mistaken. The first 80 years were necessary for his education for the task the Lord had in store for him.” None of us has so much time of course, but the principle remains.

**9.4 LOOK FOR THE OPEN DOORS - Make contact with like-minded active Christians and look for tentmaking opportunities.** “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17). Many brothers and sisters with missionary or tentmaking experience will be very happy to help you. Try to develop personal contacts with some of them. Those on the field may be in a position to find some local vacancies. Regularly look for normal employment opportunities, register with some mission agencies. The Lord is the one who opens the doors. But we must look for them, see them, and go through them. “See, I have placed before you an open door that no-one can shut” (Revelation 3:8). And, as the apostle Paul knew well,

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going through an open door is not always an easy process: "A great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me" (1 Corinthians 16:9).

**9.5 BE PATIENT AND DO NOT WORRY – If you are living in communion with the Lord, if you are serving Him happily locally and if you are sincerely seeking His guidance for your future, He will not let you "miss the boat".** Somehow the Lord will make His will known to you. He loves you deeply and wants to guide you. And even when by our stubbornness we sometimes miss opportunities, the Lord in His grace continues to love us and still desires to guide. The Lord does not love us because of what we can do for Him. He has simply chosen to love us despite our failings. Trust in Him and enjoy the process!

"Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others,  
faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms."

**1 Peter 4:10.**

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## FURTHER RESEARCH

Over the last 20 years, there has been an impressive growth in the amount of information about tentmaking, both opportunities and resources. There are books, videos, courses, directories, websites... To enrich your knowledge of the "tentmaking world", here are some possible starting points:

- **Global Opportunities**

[www.globalopps.org](http://www.globalopps.org)

A very informative site designed to encourage and help tentmakers. It is USA based. You will find up-to-date information on events, courses and seminars about tentmaking. It offers a free periodical, articles, books, materials, etc.

- **Missionary Training**

[www.missionarytraining.com](http://www.missionarytraining.com)

This site offers a distance learning course titled "Working your Way to the Nations." It can be downloaded from:

[www.missionarytraining.com/workingcourse.htm](http://www.missionarytraining.com/workingcourse.htm)

- **Intent - Networking Professionals for Gospel Impact**

[www.intent.org](http://www.intent.org)

This site is a USA based membership organization. It provides an interesting set of Links.

- **TASK**

[www.taskgb.co.uk](http://www.taskgb.co.uk)

TASK is a UK based site formed to help Christians with advice and training before taking up professional and business appointments abroad.