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Why Paul Could Make Tents

Looking through Bible bookstore catalogs, I am always amazed at the massive amount of material written in an effort to explain the one-volume Bible. A listing that caught my eye in a catalog at hand offers “An Exposition of Ephesians” in a set of eight large volumes by the noted preacher at Westminster Chapel, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. I mention his work, not to disparage this man, but to illustrate my point.

In my copy with legible font, Ephesians takes up seven pages. Sermons on those seven pages require eight volumes! All of the writings of Paul included in the Bible require only 130 pages but who can estimate the pages written about them?. Those 130 pages have had an astounding influence on the Western world.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones would hardly have had time to make tents or support himself at any other occupation. So he was a hired professional. In our present age accustomed to organized religion, few would raise any objection to that. In fact, it is looked upon as a higher calling deserving a distinguishing title. I have had a number of men to ask my advice after stating, “I want to quit my job, raise funds, and go to a ‘school of preaching’ so I can go into full-time service of the Lord.” By that, it is implied that only professional preachers give themselves fully to serving God. It would imply that the great apostle Paul was not serving the Lord while making tents -- at least, not fully serving!

Focused on the great mission to the Gentiles which God had given Paul, how could he have time to make tents? Preparing sermons to give, perhaps even daily, surely would require much time, would it not? Oh, but the Holy Spirit always told him what to say! Right? There is little evidence for such an assumption.

Saul of Tarsus was well-schooled in the Old Testament writings. No doubt he could quote all the passages that pointed to Jesus. Did he give his converts a six-month series on Genesis followed by on Exodus and other books? I doubt it. That would have been teaching rather than preaching -- evangelizing. But he could repeat those passages that pointed to Christ over and over. He could tell the story of Jesus on a moment's notice. In order to do that, he did not need to prepare nice sermons following the technique of beginning with a new current event story, then a little self-deprecating humor, three points, and an emotional appeal in conclusion. He wasn't speaking to the same people every day.

Is the gospel story so complicated that it must be approached from some new angle each time it is delivered? Paul could tell that story to impromptu gatherings

in the market place, in the synagogue, in homes, wherever. He could tell the story to prospective customers or while he was working with his hands “manufacturing” tents. He might have resided in one of his model tents thus taking his religion into the marketplace. As an unmarried man, he might have gotten more invitations to dinner where he could also tell the story of Jesus.

Mission efforts are hindered in other lands when native preachers are paid a salary for it smacks of commercialism. Paul liked to avoid the appearance of selfish gain and commercialism on his part as the missionary. Jesus did not take up collections where he spoke. Paul invited disciples to be imitators of him even as he was an imitator of Christ. In our time, “the ministry” has come to be a well-paid profession instead of servitude as the word implies, and religion-related enterprises have become lucrative businesses. The line between servitude and professionalism has become blurred. Paul did receive some financial help for his evangelism from the church in Philippi (Phil. 4:14-19).

Not unlike churches today who want professional ministers rather than tent-making servants, the Corinthians seemed to have disdained Paul because he was not a professional. He defended himself from their slurs (1 Cor. 9:1-14) concluding with, “.. *the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.*” He was speaking of a proclaimer / evangelist of the gospel rather than a feeder of the flock. We do well to remember that many were converted in Corinth and Paul was not the “located preacher” of any one group in that great city.

The responsibility of caring for and feeding the flock (ministering, serving) was laid upon elders, not evangelists (Acts 20:28). In another setting Paul wrote, “*Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; for the scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading of the grain,’ and ‘The laborer deserves his wages’*” (1 Tim. 5:17-18). Notice that I am not the one who compared elders to oxen! :-) Elders who serve the congregation full-time deserve support, but where does the modern surrogate elder fit in this picture?

During my career serving congregations, I really preferred making my own living though I never pursued that with conviction. Congregations wanted “full-time” men. And in years past, as many of you preachers will testify, the demands of a congregation left no time for a man to make tents. For a number of years, I had from 8 to 18 sermons and lessons per week. In my “spare time” I did visitation, cleaned the church building, mowed the lawn, helped with repairs, performed weddings, and preached or led singing in area meetings. That hardly left time or energy for tent-making. A few of you may still be around who served in similar situations. Not in my contract? What’s a contract?

There is little evidence that Paul served in teaching as the “located minister” of a congregation. He did not “evangelize” the disciples repeatedly. By a letter he taught that the assembly of believers was for edification (1 Cor. 14). Elders were responsible for feeding the flock.

Just how much teaching do disciples need? No one has a definitive answer to that question. When the Ephesian disciples received Paul’s letter, do you suppose that Timothy sent word to all elders in the different congregations to come weekly for a six-month study of it with him?

Surely, a disciple would be enriched by reading an 8-volume commentary on the letter to the Ephesians but, conversely, surely a disciple can be saved without having ever read the letter to the Ephesians. Martyn Lloyd-Jones may rightly be supported to produce his lengthy work and Paul could rightly find time to make tents while proclaiming the simple gospel of salvation. My vague purpose in these lines is to point back to the beginning to detect underlying principles rather than to point to a necessary pattern of operation which must be followed dogmatically. The things discussed here are matters of expediency. The wisdom of man must decide what is the most expedient course for the local and current situation in their own time and circumstance.

The church is a living thing. Living things change. They must change and can change without losing essence of the real thing. I was fully mature at the age of 21 (I think!) and I am still the same person at age 85 after constant change. It would seem desirable to be 21 again but that is impossible. My identity is not based upon being exactly like I was then. Our salvation is based upon the gospel rather than doing things exactly like they did in Paul’s day. Our judgment is involved in determining how to best conform to the will of God in practical procedures. Your salvation in Christ’s body is not determined by whether we have song leaders, a choir, singing, elders and deacons, paid or unpaid ministers, an assembly with a pulpit speaker each Sunday, female teachers, or most of the other things we tend to make into “salvation issues.” These expedients are left to our judgment and our judgment is not law. When judgment becomes dogmatic law, then we become mired in stifling and crippling legalism. []

[For the next issue: You who were born again, were you not born of the Holy Spirit? Then why do you not call yourself a child or son of the Holy Spirit?]

(Cecil Hook: January 2004)