

Paul's Free "Tents for Humanity"

A recently discovered letter from Paul to the church in Antioch is intriguing. It was found in the recesses of my trivia-filled mind. In abbreviated form it translates something like this:

"Dear brothers and friends, Greetings. Having once been through Neapolis, I was appalled to see so many transient people with little or no shelter. Most of them earn no more than \$300 per year. The Lord has laid it on my heart to dedicate myself to making free tents for them. I am calling on you who love the Lord to help me in this. My living conditions will need to indicate that the Lord blesses those who sacrifice for him. I cannot do this on their economic level, so I will need \$12,000 per year to provide a house, some housekeeping help, help on the maintenance of the place, materials for tent-making, and a horse and cart for transportation and deliveries to their part of the city. It is hoped that many of those who receive free tents will be grateful and come to church where they can be taught the gospel. Your support in enabling me to dedicate myself to full-time work of the Lord will be appreciated very much. –Paul, a servant of the Lord."

Recently, I was thinking back through my career as a vocational, professionally supported "full-time worker for the Lord" and began to question if I was ever responsible for the conversion of even one person without help from others. I was the one doing all the baptizing. (We counted baptisms as conversions.) For most of those conversions, however, it was the parents who influenced the children, the wife who led her husband, or the friend who taught a neighbor – without pay or professionalism! I was paid by the congregation to add some public teaching and do the honorary act of baptizing. Nowadays, many baptisms are performed by others than the preacher depriving him of that role.

If any congregation increases by conversions by ten percent each year, it is far ahead of the crowd. That means that it requires a hundred disciples and a professional or two in order to convert ten people, most of whom are family members. Or, it requires four hundred disciples and as many as five professionals to convert forty people. Do you not detect some problem there? Could this be a part of the cause of declining numbers in your congregation?

You are thrilled that your insurance company remembered to send you a birthday card or Christmas greeting, aren't you? And all those things offered you free by businesses create a warm feeling for their love and generosity, don't they? I think I can answer for you. You recognize them as business manipulations and gimmicks from impersonal organizations. Nobody is "sacrificing" in your behalf. Even the bouquet the church had the florist to deliver to your sick room was void of the fragrance of personal love.

Could that be what has developed in our congregations? In the contrived letter I wrote for Paul, I pointed to current concepts. Paul was not to give his tents free; they were to be provided by the association of disciples in Antioch. Those disciples were in "full-time" work for the Lord as

much as Paul was. All of us are full-time workers if we are living sacrifices. We do not offer sacrifices; **we are sacrifices offering ourselves in all we do.**

Paul might be inconveniencing himself by moving to Neapolis. He would be putting himself in a position where he could be patronizing to those whom he was to serve. His efforts would be to use a manipulation to get the recipients to come to the less personal congregation where they could be taught in the system. However, the message is in human vessels (clay pots) rather than in golden pitchers or organized systems. Much is being written these days on how to build churches/congregations. How many of them stress private ministries with each believer using his time, money, and abilities in discipling others instead of doing it through an organized system?

Jesus fed several thousand in order to induce belief. Prospects that he would care for such physical needs led the crowd to form a parade to make him king. Not so good! Jesus never empowered or instructed his apostles to feed people as a manipulation to draw them into the kingdom.

When Paul went to Corinth, he used no apostolic miraculous power to attract or convince. He did not start a free tent for humanity program. But he did return to his professional trade of tent-making in order to support himself so he could proclaim Christ to Jew and Gentile. A chosen apostle with the rough hands of a working man. No retinue of notables and body guards accompanied him. (No pope who claims to be Christ's apostle on earth parading in his "popemobile"!) He did not reach out to those whom he could patronize due to culture or economics, but he went to the synagogues where the influential leaders would be. A tent-maker arguing with the prestigious religious leaders! A non-professional challenging the religious professionals and their organized system! The treasure was in a clay pot, so "*the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you; for I have many people in this city'*" (Acts 18).

Paul also worked with two other tentmakers, Aquila and Priscilla, who corrected the course of the eloquent and powerful preacher, Apollos. As an expression of their compassion rather than a tool of manipulation, the three might have given some free tents at their own expense.

If Paul worked with his hands to make his living, when did he have time and energy to study and create new sermons? How could he do that when in our time a man needs a college education with preferred advanced degrees and needs much time for study to prepare his sermons? Is it not almost imperative that he be a professional – a hired man so he can "serve the Lord full-time" and be schooled in the Scriptures so as to teach everyone correctly?

Are we ready to answer that candidly? Paul was a preacher, a person who proclaims the gospel. That is evangelizing. He had that simple message on his heart. It did not require a different approach each time it was presented. No new approaches, catchy illustrations, human interest stories, and jokes. He could tell the gospel story to a customer or bystander while he worked with his hands making tents. He could repeat the good news to the Jews in a synagogue confirming it by the familiar writings of their prophets. It was, and is, a simple message.

Paul was a minister of the Lord but not of any congregation. A minister is a servant, the Greek word being anglicized as “deacon.” All active disciples are servants-ministers-deacons of the Lord but none are designated in Scripture as “**the minister**” of a church. Our paid professional pulpiteer (like I was) is generally referred to as “**the minister,**” meaning the hired servant of an organized system of religion.

There is no record in Scripture of a person preaching (evangelizing) the gospel in an assembly nor any instruction for it to be done. Those who compose the assembly have already been evangelized. There is need, however, for “feeding the flock” through teaching, exhortation, warning, and rebuke. One who feeds and cares for a flock is a shepherd, a pastor, an elder. We call them elders rather than pastors. They are the teachers in general along with many others. But we have **created** one holy precinct which they do not generally occupy. It is the **pulpit**.

Because of our confusing methods of interpretation, we have complicated the message so that we feel that a special breed of **surrogate elders** is necessary to fill the pulpit once or more weekly. A new convert can be made to understand what the life in Christ is all about in a few hours of orientation but we complicate the system making it seem necessary for him to be spoon-fed constantly for the rest of his life. Surely, it is in order to continue to teach for maturity and encouragement of fidelity, but that is the work of persons in the group without having to import and pay a specialized expert who is able to deal with all the intricacies that we have developed in our **issue-oriented system**.

Most of our energy and resources are devoted to the operation of the system even as it may continue to decline. It is foolish to blame the world about us for our lack of success while we refuse to reform our traditional, failing methods. The protecting and feeding of a dying horse does not make it more productive. If a ship is off course, gaining speed is not the remedy. Blaming the customers for lack of success in your business while refusing to adjust your practices will not improve business.

Free tents from impersonal sources will not solve our problem.

I am from another age. I do not pretend to have all the answers as to how to reach our present-day society. In the next issue, if the Lord wills, I will throw out some revolutionary seed ideas. Will you consider them with me? []

(Cecil Hook; March 2007)

“I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24).