

The Work of Tent Making and Christian Calling

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Acts

Paul's identity fundamentally changes when he encounters the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. When he meets Jesus, Paul's world is turned upside down. Using the language of the accounting ledger in his later letter to the Philippians, Paul writes that what he had previously regarded as "gains" he came to view as "loss."

One thing stayed the same about Paul's work, however. The passage most often connected to work in the book of Acts is Paul's tent making in Acts 18:1-4. Although this passage is familiar, it is often understood too narrowly. In the familiar reading, Paul earns money by making tents, in order to support himself in his real ministry of witnessing to Christ. This view is too narrow, because it doesn't see that the tent making itself is a real ministry of witnessing to Christ. Paul is a witness when he preaches and when he makes tents and uses his earnings to benefit the broader community.

This fits directly into Luke's view that the Spirit empowers Christians to use their resources for the sake of the whole community, which in turn becomes witness to the gospel. Remember that Luke's orienting idea for

Christian life is that of witness, and the entirety of one's life has the potential to bear witness. It is striking, then, that Paul is an exemplar of this Spirit-formed practice.

It is certainly true that Paul wants to support himself. Yet his impulse was not only to support himself in his preaching ministry, but also to provide financial support to the entire community. When Paul describes his economic impact among the Ephesians, he says:

“I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities, and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by so toiling one must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” (Acts 20:33-35)

Paul's money-earning work was an effort to build up the community economically. Paul employs his skills and possessions for the sake of the community, and he explicitly says that this is an example others should follow. He does not say that everyone should follow his example of preaching. But he does say everyone should follow his example of toiling to help the weak and being generous in giving, as Jesus himself taught.

In other words, it is not the case that Paul engages in tent making as a necessity so that he can do his “real job” of preaching. Instead, Paul’s varieties of work in the sewing shop, marketplace, synagogue, lecture hall, and prison are all forms of witness. In any of these contexts, Paul participates in God’s restorative project. In any of these contexts, Paul lives out his new identity in Christ for the sake of God’s glory and out of love for his neighbors. If he had not had the gift of being a preacher and apostle, he would still have been a witness to Christ simply by the way he engaged in making tents, toiling for the sake of the community, and working for the good of others in all situations.

Tent making has become a common metaphor for Christians who engage in a money-earning profession as a means to support what is often called “professional ministry.” The term “bi-vocational” is often used to indicate that two separate professions are involved, the money-earning one and the ministry one. But Paul’s example shows that all aspects of human life should be a seamless witness. There is little room to draw distinctions between “professional ministry” and other forms of witness. According to Acts, Christians actually have only one vocation—witnessing to the gospel. We have many forms of service, including preaching and pastoral care, making tents, building furniture, giving money and caring for the weak. A Christian who engages in a money-earning profession such as making tents,

in order to support a non-money-earning profession such as teaching about Jesus, would be more accurately described as “dual service” rather than “bi-vocational.” Uniting many different forms of service is one shared calling: the calling to witness to Christ.