

The Christian Business Scholar and the Great Commission: A Proposal for Expanding the Agenda

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According to Rundle, missionary work has evolved from a donor-supported work to workplace evangelism. Rundle presents a number of implications of this change and suggests some topics for further research and discussion.

Abstract

There has been a dramatic change over the last two decades regarding how missionary work is conducted and supported.

The emphasis has shifted away from the career, donor-supported missionary toward workplace evangelism, particularly in areas of the world that are closed to traditional missionaries.

The implications of this paradigm shift and the needs and opportunities that it creates have been the topic of much discussion within mission circles. This shift is also creating significant new opportunities for the Christian business scholar. These include new areas for research, possibilities for new degree and certificate programs, and new opportunities for business-related field support. The purpose of this paper is to raise the profile of this

topic and to suggest some directions for future research and discussion.

Introduction

Often the term “tentmaker” or “kingdom professional” is used to describe the mission strategy that uses business and other professional skills as a vehicle for cross-cultural evangelism. However, precisely what it means to be a tentmaker is a subject of ongoing debate.¹ Indeed, many people believe that *all* Christian professionals are tentmakers. Within mission circles, and for this paper, the term is defined more narrowly. Following the model of the Apostle Paul, a tentmaker (1) works in a cross-cultural context, and (2) deliberately *chooses* this people group or location because it has been historically unreached

by the Gospel. Like Paul, these Christians could have worked anywhere, certainly in a friendlier and more comfortable environment. But they *choose* to go into an uncomfortable and often unfriendly environment in obedience to God’s will for their lives. It is the combination of this intentionality and the cross-cultural aspect that distinguishes a tentmaker from other Christian professionals.

Until recently, many mission agencies have treated tentmaking mainly as an “entry strategy,” that is, as a way of getting missionaries into restricted-access countries. The people they send are often ambivalent about their “secular” job and view it as a distraction from ministry. Oddly, this ambivalence is one of the main reasons many of them choose business entrepreneurship as their mode of entry. In their view, entrepreneurship is an ideal entry strategy because it gives the most freedom to choose between work and “ministry.”² Predictably, many of these businesses perform poorly, if at all.

The incentive to take their business seriously is further undermined by the fact that they are often fully supported financially by individuals and churches. According to Lai (1998,

p. 42), the benefit of such financial support is that it “reduce[s] the actual number of hours they [the tentmakers] need to work.” More defensible reasons also given for donor support is that it establishes a system of accountability and/or it protects the tentmakers and their families in the event they get expelled from their host country. Regardless of the actual motivation for donor support, the pernicious effect on the level of importance placed on the business is the same.

When this “work vs. ministry” mind-set is present, it gives rise to what Gibson (1997) calls “ministry schizophrenia,” in which the tentmakers find themselves struggling with their own identity and integrity, ultimately jeopardizing the credibility of the very Gospel they are trying to present. Ruth Siemens, founder of Global Opportunities, is even more critical, claiming that “phantom businesses sooner or later bring shame to the name of Christ” (Siemens, 1997, p. 5).

Overcoming the work vs. ministry mind-set is an area that is being addressed by many scholars and organizations.³ Yet, even those with an integrated view of work and ministry can

falter as a tentmaker. The truth is, living and working in these “emerging” economies is a difficult challenge for any entrepreneur, Christian or non-Christian. Aside from the language difficulties, the customs are strange, the bureaucracy is confusing, and the communication and transportation infrastructures are often unreliable.⁴ Peng and Heath (1996, p. 493) observe that “[d]espite the attractiveness of these newly opened markets, stories of business failures resulting from lack of understanding of local firms abound; increased interactions with indigenous firms in these countries are frequently accompanied by frustration and failures.”

Whether it is caused by ministry schizophrenia or the difficulties associated with entrepreneurship in these remote and unstable parts of the world, tentmaker attrition is a problem that is getting more attention. Although the magnitude of this problem is difficult to quantify, a recent study by the World Evangelical Fellowship (Taylor, 1997a) finds that in the case of missionary attrition overall, an astounding 47 percent leave the field during their first five years.

The overwhelming majority of these (71 percent) leave for preventable reasons.⁵ Although the study does not distinguish between tentmakers and traditional missionaries, and therefore does not inform us as to whether the problem is more or less severe for tentmakers, it nevertheless gives a first approximation of the magnitude of the problem.

In response, the mission community has been giving more attention to the need for better training. For example, at the annual meetings of Intent (May 21-23, 1999), Tentmakers International Exchange (March 21-26, 1999), and the Antioch Network (September 28-30, 1998), a significant amount of time was devoted to the topic of improving the track record of tentmaking entrepreneurs. Clearly, the Christian business scholar has an important contribution to make in this area. However, proper training is only one of three major contributions the business scholar can make toward a well-functioning mission infrastructure. The other two contributions, which are rarely discussed but may be equally as important, are business-related field support and research.

Our perspective as business scholars is particularly valuable because the problems being encountered by tentmaking entrepreneurs are strikingly similar to those being identified in the International Business (IB) literature. Lessons learned in the mission field may be worth sharing with an IB audience, and lessons learned in IB may be useful to the mission community. Thus we have an even greater opportunity to participate in the Great Commission and to engage in cross-disciplinary scholarship.

Following a brief description of the origins of the modern tentmaker movement, this paper will elaborate on the additional contributions that can be made in the areas of training, field support, and research. The examples used throughout the paper are based on my own firsthand information which was gathered either from personal visits of tentmakers in the field or by corresponding with them by e-mail. For the sake of their own privacy and safety, the names and details are altered.

The Origins of the Modern Tentmaking Movement

Prior to the Industrial Revolution and the Colonial Period, the Gospel was spread

primarily by “ordinary” Christians, often as an unintended consequence of military overthrow (Winter, 1999) or through friendships developed between merchants, soldiers, or refugees (Cox, 1997). However, the dramatic increase in wealth and income that resulted from industrialization made it possible (and even efficient) to create a professional class of missionary that was supported financially by the donations of these same “ordinary” Christians. This model of a donor-supported, professional missionary has since become entrenched in the mind-set of the evangelical church.

The rejection of capitalism that followed the Colonial Period also led to the banishment of the donor-supported missionary in many countries. Switching to a strategy based on workplace evangelism was scarcely an option because most of these countries severely restricted foreign residency, travel, and ownership of capital. These countries essentially became closed to the Gospel, which set the stage for strategies based on Bible smuggling and other almost James Bond-like activities.

The subsequent fall of the Iron Curtain has dramatically changed the mission landscape

once again. These countries are now experimenting with their own forms of capitalism and are trying to attract the very entrepreneurship and capital that they repudiated in the past. However, they remain suspicious of the West and, in particular, of its religion.⁶ Many of these countries profess to tolerate other religions, but what this usually means is that it is lawful to *be* a Christian, but not to try to convert others or to say anything negative about the country's dominant religion. This obviously rules out the professional missionary, but leaves open many opportunities for tentmaking.⁷

Thus, it is now easier than ever before to get tentmakers into these so-called restricted access countries. Helping them *stay* long enough to become effective, however, has proven to be far more difficult. Statements regarding the troublesome problem of tentmaker ineffectiveness and attrition can be found in many places, such as Gibson (1997), Hamilton (1987), and Christensen (1997). However, a comprehensive empirical study of the problem would be difficult

to carry out because of the difficulty of identifying and locating tentmakers who are not affiliated with any agency.⁸

The best empirical information available regarding tentmaker effectiveness and attrition can be found in Hamilton (1987) and Taylor (1997b), respectively. In his classic study of tentmaker effectiveness,

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Hamilton (1987) finds that effectiveness depends on (1) prior experience in leading small group Bible studies, (2) an ability to cross cultural boundaries and to share one's faith in a culturally relevant way, and (3) a strong relationship with one's home church. Similarly, within a broader study of overall missionary attrition, Taylor (1997b) briefly comments specifically about tentmaker attrition, identifying (1) unrealistic expectations, (2) cultural adjustment problems, and (3) lack of accountability as important factors in tentmaker attrition.

Regarding the missionary force as a whole, Brierley (1997) found that American missionaries have a greater propensity to leave

for "preventable" reasons than do missionaries from other countries. From most to least important, these reasons include

- (1) problems with peers,
- (2) marriage and family conflicts,
- (3) poor cultural adaptation,
- (4) inadequate supervision,
- (5) inappropriate training, and
- (6) language problems.

By comparison, missionary attrition from other countries is more likely due to unpreventable reasons, such as (1) political crisis, (2) marriage to someone outside the agency, (3) care for elderly parents, (4) health problems, (5) children issues, and (6) death.

The mission community has placed most of the blame on inadequate training in Bible, theology, and cross-cultural evangelism. However, succeeding in these foreign markets is a difficult challenge even for non-Christians. Perhaps equally as important is the need for a more coordinated support system for tentmaking entrepreneurs while they are in the field. When a business struggles, the family and the ministry itself will often struggle as well. Therefore it is not enough to simply focus on cross-cultural ministry skills. Nor will new training programs address these problems entirely.

Long-term success in these markets will also require new directions in our research and new types of field support projects for our business faculty and students.

Training

One of the pitfalls of earning a business degree from a Western university or college is that the education received is based almost exclusively on our own Western experience and orientation. Although this may be appropriate for the average student who plans to follow a "traditional" career path in a Western, capitalist economy, it is inadequate for the student who desires to work in a non-Western context. Western-style business practices do not transfer well into these emerging market economies. These countries are immensely different institutionally and until recently have been hostile to the idea of profits and free-market economics.⁹ The tentmaker must therefore be able to manage and motivate people who have different attitudes about work, relationships, self-initiative, and customer service.

One response has been to create training programs which address the need for more

practical training in cross-cultural ministry. An example of this type of program is the innovative two-month cultural immersion program of the Los Angeles Missionary Internship (626-797-7903).

What the studies by Hamilton and Taylor do not reveal, however, is the relationship between a tentmaker's effectiveness or attrition and the type of business-related problems being encountered. Many problems may have relationship symptoms, but have causes that are more closely related to a struggling business or a successful but over-extended entrepreneur. The fact that even non-Christian entrepreneurs are struggling and failing in these remote and unstable regions suggests that a solution will require more than cultural and Bible training alone.

Some business-related training programs are beginning to emerge. For example, the business and ministry seminars offered through Marketplace Ministries (www.scruples.org) promise to provide students with the tools for business and mission, all within the context of an integrated view of work and ministry, and all in a few short days! While short-term training

programs such as these may be necessary for those who are preparing to leave in the near future, it can hardly be viewed as adequate training for the long haul. According to Christensen (1997, p. 134) "too often ... we throw in a couple weekend courses, pack a correspondence course in their bag, and wave their plane good-bye." Instead, the mission community needs to recognize that tentmakers "need training that is just as well-planned, just as balanced, and in many cases, *just as extensive*" as that expected of those preparing for a more traditional career in missions (Ibid, emphasis added).

For Christians interested in relief and development, several well-respected programs are available. For example, Wheaton's HNGR program (Human Needs and Global Resources) and the economic development programs at Eastern College nicely combine culture- and business-related courses. However, relief work limits the location choices and usually requires specific training in agriculture, medicine, or education. Entrepreneurship opens up many more opportunities for tentmaking. When done well, a business can give Christians access to people

who are often unreachable by other mission platforms.

Even if we disregard tentmaking, there are at least two reasons why the timing is right for more training in cross-cultural entrepreneurship. First, many of these markets are poised for economic growth in the near or medium term and are attractive investment opportunities in their own right. Second, the production process is becoming increasingly global and "disintegrated." More than ever before, the stages of production are being carried out in multiple countries, and much of it is being done by firms that are only loosely affiliated with the U.S. parent. Our current supply of corporate managers has little training or experience with doing business in these markets. Therefore, even on the basis of keeping up with the needs being created by globalization, a cross-cultural entrepreneurship program makes sense.

What would such training look like? The answer obviously depends on whether it is a graduate, undergraduate, or certificate program. Nevertheless, some basic cultural and business courses should be the foundation of any curriculum. Many of these courses are already offered on the Christian campus and need only

to be packaged in a way that is attractive to the tentmaking entrepreneur.

Based on the findings of Hamilton (1987) and Taylor (1997b), as well as the studies by Drogendijk (1998) and Suutari and Riusala (1998), we know that there should be significant coursework in cross-cultural ministry. For example, courses such as evangelism and discipleship, world religions, cross-cultural ministry, cross-cultural communication, and church planting models and strategies would be good candidates. Likewise, business training for the tentmaking entrepreneur would have a distinctly Third World or global orientation. Such a curriculum should include courses such as global entrepreneurship, global marketing, and courses covering the economic, political, and legal environment of the Third World, as well as some of its history. In addition, a course in organizational and/or personnel psychology should be included to expose the student to problems related to group dynamics, human resource management, and so on.

Field Support

Clearly many problems encountered by tentmakers can be

blamed on inadequate training. However, poor planning or inadequate training is not the entire source of the problem. Indeed, mission agencies deserve much credit for their ability to evaluate tentmaker candidates and ensure that they have the appropriate experience and training. Nevertheless, circumstances almost certainly will change once the tentmaker is in the field, and when this occurs, particularly when it involves an unexpected business-related problem, the agencies are poorly equipped to respond.

Tentmakers need the same sort of counsel and resources that any business owner requires, but they live in parts of the world where these resources are particularly scarce. Sometimes the assistance required is as basic as answering a question about how to use a spreadsheet program or how to determine the value of a business and buy out a partner. It is often possible to find this kind of assistance locally, but because of the sensitive nature of their residence in the country, they often prefer, and sometimes require, the advice of a mission-minded Christian.

An example of a one-time project that would accommodate both faculty and students is a

tentmaker couple I recently met whom I will call Priscilla and Aquila. This energetic and college-educated couple is planning to open a small-scale eating establishment in the Middle East. They know that if the business locates in the tourist district, it stands a good chance of becoming profitable. But they feel called to live and work among a people group that lives off the beaten path. If they locate in this alternative location, it is almost guaranteed that the business will never become profitable. Helping them solve or mitigate this problem would be a fascinating project for both faculty and students.

Other problems require longer-term relationships between faculty, students, and tentmakers. For example, Simon owns and operates a small export company in Asia. In order to maintain legal status in the country, he must meet minimum revenue and profit targets. Achieving these targets would not be particularly difficult, were it not for the fact that he is a music teacher by trade and has no business background. He was evaluated by his sending agency and granted a visa by the country based on his credentials as a music teacher. But to remain in the country, it eventually

became necessary to obtain a business visa. Simon has been struggling ever since, both on the professional and personal levels. Recently his visa status was rescued with the help of concerned friends and prayer partners from his home church, as well as a significant investment by a mission-minded angel investor. This investor is

quite concerned, however, about the viability of the current business plan, and exploratory steps are now being taken about a possible collaboration with the business faculty and students of Biola University to develop and implement a new business plan.

Similarly, Matthew went to great lengths to prepare himself for a career as a tentmaker. In addition to Bible training and experience with cross-cultural evangelism and discipleship, he earned a master's degree in an up-and-coming technical area that many developing countries are demanding. To his great disappointment, however, he has not been able to gain employment in this field and has instead obtained permission to stay as an

entrepreneur. He is beginning to have an impact for Christ among his neighbors, but his business has yet to record a single transaction, leaving the duration of his ministry in question.

As the examples of Simon and Matthew show, despite the best planning, circumstances can,

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agencies excel in evaluating their candidates' spiritual qualifications and progress, they fall short when it comes to providing even basic evaluation or advice in the area of professional qualifications, business strategies, and economics. To supplement this weakness, they rely on a network of mission-minded business professionals who are willing to serve as advisors and investors.

Oddly, the full range of resources available at Christian colleges and universities often goes untapped. We have allowed our role to be narrowly defined as one in which we simply provide the initial training, whereupon churches and agencies take over and provide the accountability structure and resources necessary

to support the tentmaker while in the field. While there is some truth to this, the difficulties being encountered in the field are an indication that something is wrong with that approach. The error is that our roles as consultant and scholar are often overlooked.

Great Commission-Driven Research

Perhaps the most unique, and therefore valuable, contribution the Christian business scholar can make is in the area of research. The kingdom orientation of tentmaking businesses creates some unique and interesting problems that are not addressed in the business or mission literatures. Although there are practitioners such as the Business Professionals Network (www.bpn.org) who can, and do, fill the gap in the areas of training and field support, practitioners are much less likely than we are to assimilate or produce research regarding how firms and employees behave in these countries and how the tentmaker can simultaneously increase their effectiveness as an evangelist and as a business professional.

Specifically, what are the financial and management issues that arise when profit is

dismissed as a secondary issue? For example, in the above mentioned case of Priscilla and Aquila, I first met them while they were in the process of trying to raise start-up capital. In a case like this, when they are almost assured to lose money, what can be done to ameliorate the obvious concerns investors will have?

Or consider the following hypothetical problem. Suppose a tentmaking entrepreneur starts a business within an unreached people group and begins to see meaningful relationships established because of the business. As expected with any start-up, it may take several years before the business becomes profitable. But suppose this period of time continues longer than expected? Hypothetically, suppose after ten years the business continues to require a cash infusion of \$50,000 per year, but over this period five Muslims have made commitments for Christ? How should the investors, contributors, or church respond? Should the tentmaker/manager be replaced? Does it reflect a flawed business plan? Or should the church simply sit tight and rejoice that the cost per soul is averaging a mere \$100,000?

Some of the people I pose this question to are offended that I

would even think about world evangelism in these terms. Yet, one of the commonly-touted advantages of tentmaking is that it is a cheaper means of world evangelism because it is at least partly self-supporting. Yet, if a significant number of these businesses are money-losers, and we must therefore support a family *and* a business, this claim is unsupported by the facts.

And why should profits be dismissed as secondary? What if we were to make it possible, even desirable, for the best and brightest Christian entrepreneurs to become successful tentmakers? One of the most interesting questions I ever ask tentmakers has to do with their views on the subject of profits. Many seem embarrassed or even ashamed to admit that they have ever thought about it. The subject is often switched to "What would I do with profits?" I have learned from this experience that microenterprise development is apparently one of the few respectable uses of profits, should someone ever be so blessed. One tentmaker admitted that if he ever started to earn profit, he would never volunteer that information to his home church for fear that his financial support would drop!

The mission community, which obviously has not been involved in the debate about the compatibility of Christianity and capitalism, needs to be taught a biblical view of business, profit, and wealth.¹⁰ Assuming that this may take some time to accomplish, we need to also be available to counsel them about the management and financial issues raised when profits are viewed as unimportant. A theory of tentmaking entrepreneurship would resemble in many ways the theory of nonprofit corporations, but since the tentmaker is presumably also trying to make a profit, a new twist is added to the problem that has not been carefully explored.

Lastly, one important element for good scholarship is a venue for discussing it. Many of these topics would be well beyond the scope of most mission journals, although the *Evangelical Mission Quarterly* could accommodate some of it. Nor will the topics always be appropriate for secular journals which focus on emerging market economies. For a truly integrative and multidisciplinary discussion about the economic, social, and political problems unique to world evangelism, it might be worth creating a multidisciplinary association of

Christian scholars and even a multidisciplinary journal dedicated to this purpose.¹¹

Conclusion

The end of Colonialism, combined with the recent collapse of the Soviet empire and remarkable advances in technology, have dramatically transformed the global economic landscape. More than ever before, firms are interacting with people from other parts of the world, people who often have enormously different attitudes about work, the value of time, and the importance of customer service. These differences are creating significant challenges for business programs across the country regarding how to prepare the next generation of business professionals.

For similar reasons the mission paradigm has also been changing dramatically, and Christians are using the new openness as a vehicle for evangelism. Perhaps more than any other tentmaking strategy, a for-profit business provides the most flexibility in terms of location, hiring, and time allocation decisions.

The disadvantage, however, is that their success in ministry is critically dependent on their

ability to develop a successful, or at least viable, business. Even those with business degrees can struggle because Western-style business practices do not transfer easily to these emerging markets.

I believe these problems are creating an opportunity for the Christian business scholar to play an even more vital role in the Great Commission. Moreover, this can be achieved by becoming even more deliberate about preparing students for success in an increasingly globalized and cross-cultural economic environment. The resources necessary to address both sets of concerns are located in one place—on the campuses of our Christian colleges and universities. By drawing from the disciplines that make the Christian university unique—theology and Bible training, cross-cultural communication, anthropology, missiology, and *business*—our graduates will not only be among the most well-rounded and effective professionals, but they will be at the forefront of the modern mission movement.

ENDNOTES

¹See, for example, Clarke (1997), Gibson (1997), Price (1997), Siemens (1997), Taylor (1998), Wilson (1979), and Yamamori (1987, 1993).

²See Lai (1998), for example.

³See, for example, Chewning, Eby, and Roels (1990), Hamilton (1987), Novak (1996), Sherman and Hendricks (1987), and Volf (1991), as well as *The Life@Work Journal* (www.lifeatwork.com) and the Global Opportunities and Scruples Web sites (www.globalopps.org and www.scruples.org, respectively).

⁴A common complaint I heard from tentmakers during a recent trip to the Middle East was how long it takes to do even simple tasks, like buying a piece of office furniture or paying the monthly garbage tax.

⁵Preventable attrition is defined as that which “could have been avoided by better initial screening or selection in the first place, or by more appropriate equipping or training, or by more effective shepherding during missionary service” (p. xvii).

⁶Their image of Christianity is based largely on what they see in American-made movies and other forms of media. Their impression is that this is how all Christians behave. It is hardly surprising that they want no part of it. Hence the need for “ordinary” Christians to live and work among them.

⁷See Yamamori (1987) for a ranking of each country’s restrictiveness with respect toward overtly evangelical activities.

⁸According to Hamilton (1987), this could be 70 percent or more of all tentmakers. I suspect that the percentage of agency-affiliated tentmakers has increased since then, but confirming this would nonetheless be difficult or impossible to do.

⁹In a pair of studies of the problems being encountered by expatriate corporate managers in Central and Eastern Europe, Drogendijk (1998) and Suutari and Riusala (1998) find that expatriate managers tend to be over-optimistic, impatient, and have insufficient training in the areas of language, culture, and in the challenges associated with working in these countries. These are strikingly similar to the problems identified by Taylor (1997b) regarding tentmaker weaknesses.

¹⁰See Rundle (1999) and Swarr (1999) for two initial steps in this direction.

¹¹According to my interpretation of the statement of purpose, the *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business* would not be able to accommodate much of this research.

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