

Pulpit and Paycheck: The Upside of Bi-Vocational Ministry



by Steve Eichelberg

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The five-year old church was small and struggling financially. The founding pastor diligently worked a secular job in addition to his pastoral duties. The church had grown in those first five years but then the economy took a down turn. Several key families within the church were severely impacted and consequently the church finances were limited as well. The pastor who had begun the church had moved on due to family difficulties, and the new pastors, an enthusiastic young couple with the ink not yet dry on their Bible College degrees, were welcomed by the congregation. The transition was received with great anticipation that God was beginning a new work in the church that would finally impact the surrounding community in the manner they had hoped for ever since the church had been planted. They had a nice building and a devoted fellowship of parishioners, but very limited finances, especially after the economic slump.

They limped along financially for just over a year after the arrival of the new pastor and his wife, but then, after much discussion and exploring of options, the elders hesitantly approached the pastor and told him the church simply could not afford to continue to pay his full salary and could he find a part-time job until the church was in a better position or the economy improved. The young pastor, in disgust, replied, "God did not call me to work." Shortly thereafter he resigned from the church and moved on to greener pastures. In the words of poet Robert Frost, "The world is full of willing people; some willing to work, the rest willing to let them."

In much of Christendom today, there is a sharp divide between the pulpit and the pew that stems, in part, from a misconception of the nature of work and a misperception of what comprises spiritual work. There is a belief among clergy and parishioners alike that "spiritual work" is superior to common labor of even the highest order. This seldom spoken but widely held belief has further advanced the idea among parishioners that full-time vocational pastors do not understand the real working world --- and a feeling among clergy of being underappreciated by a bourgeois church community.

This essay is about the "un-holy" labor of so many pastors who work bi-vocationally to enable their "holy" calling. My hope in writing this paper is to illuminate the vocational divide that segregates the pulpit and

the pew, and then debunk the notion of holy and un-holy work. Career ministers and lay persons alike should have a greater appreciation for all types of labor and laborers, employed however God may call them.

The Theology of Work

In 1974, Studs Terkel, in his landmark book *Working*, wrote that “Work, by its very nature, [is] about violence – to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fist-fights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us.”

While this is not what God intended, for many it is a fitting description of the daily grind. One can hardly imagine the paradigm Terkel describes as that of Adam and Eve before the fall as they cared for the sanctuary in which God had placed them. Yet the gift of work became as fallen as human nature itself. “Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:17-19)

The introduction of sin into the world wreaked havoc on many of God’s gifts to mankind, including work --- but it is still a gift, given for the benefit of mankind. The bi-vocational working pastor understands this and his ministry is enriched by that understanding. Contemporary authors such as Bill Heatley (*The Gift of Work*), and Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan (*Church on Sunday, Work on Monday*) extol the virtues of so-called secular labor, for saint and sinner alike. Their insights however, are often juxtaposed with the prevailing sentiment. Contrast the words of famed atheist Bertrand Russell, “One of the symptoms of an approaching nervous breakdown is the belief that one’s work is terribly important” --- with those of St. Augustine: ““Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you.”” Indeed, the apostle Paul writes to the church at Colossae, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.” Whether in the church, or the marketplace, work is ordained for man and blessed by God, and some take the idea seriously.

Marketplace Ministry

It is simple logic and requires no leap of understanding to perceive that most of those who need to hear the message of the gospel are not sitting in church pews on Sunday. Many of them, for one reason or another, would never set foot in a church for any event other than a funeral or a wedding, but they go to work day in and day out, or they enter the marketplace to attend to their affairs. They work or shop at the grocery store, or the fast food joint, or the small business, or any of a countless variety of other enterprises in the world’s marketplace. And that is where we believers interact with them, often with religious regularity: the clerk at the quicky-mart, the manager at the burger place, the guy or gal at the coffee shop, and for those in bi-vocational ministry, the co-workers with whom they share eight to ten hours each day in an office, factory, or other work environment.

It is in the work-a-day world that we interface most often with those who need to hear the gospel. It is sitting in the office cubicle or stocking shelves or working the fryolator that we encounter those who are searching, in the words of Studs Terkel, “for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying. Perhaps immortality, too, is part of the quest.” And so it is there that we can best

serve the Master by introducing those who are hungry and dying to the one who “give[s] us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11) and who “came that they might have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

Tent-making Ministry

If work of all types should be understood as a gift from God, it would seem that God’s word would express his guidance on the interplay of ministry and the marketplace. The Old Testament and New Testament alike provide clear counsel that, for those who minister the word of God, their ministry should also be the provenance of their wage. Under the old covenant of the Mosaic Law, the tithe was intended for the upkeep of the temple and the sustenance of those who ministered in the temple. (Numbers 18:21-24; 2 Chronicles 31:4-6; Malachi 3:10a). In the New Testament, Jesus, in the pattern of many of the rabbis of the day, received his support from those to whom he ministered. For example, Luke 8:1-3 records the names of several of the women who helped to provide for Jesus’ ministry.

The right of those who minister for God to receive payment from and for their ministry is, therefore, clearly established. However, this essay, in chasing away the vagabond notion of holy and unholy labor, is more concerned with examining the motivations of some, like the Apostle Paul, for often choosing not to receive an income from the churches to which they minister. The Apostle Paul was, in every sense of the word, a bi-vocational minister. In fact, bi-vocational ministers are often referred to as “tent-making” pastors and this term is taken from the example of Paul’s ministry. Luke records in Acts 18:1-4, “After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade.”

Paul’s example has led to bi-vocational ministry often termed as tent-making ministry. A tent-making pastor then, is one who derives the greater part of his income not from church ministry but from a “secular” job, as Paul did while ministering in Corinth. In his letters to the churches and his protégés, Timothy and Titus, Paul provides at least three reasons why he often chose to work at his craft rather than accept support from those to whom he ministered; an unwillingness to burden them, an unwillingness to be obliged to them, and a desire to be blessed of God.

First, an “unburdensome ministry”: in I Thessalonians 2:1-10, Paul explicitly states that he did not want to hinder the ministry of the gospel by being a burden to the people of Thessalonica. Paul’s desire was for their well-being, not his own, and his unselfish giving of himself to them kept the message of the gospel from being perceived as just another financial burden in a taxing world.

Second, an “irreproachable ministry”: to his protégés Titus and Timothy, Paul adamantly asserts the need for God’s steward to be above reproach (Titus 1:7-8, I Timothy 6:6-10). Paul’s exhortations to his spiritual pupils show Paul’s own heart regarding the ministry; that it must never be approached as a means for worldly prosperity. While this attitude flies in the face of many televangelists and prosperity ministries in Western Christendom, Paul’s doctrine is well grounded in Old Testament teaching. Israel’s history provided several examples of men who sought only to prosper from the ministry. Men such as Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of the priest and national judge Eli, are described in First Samuel, chapter 2, as men whom God declares have blasphemed his name and will receive his judgment. Paul, as a student of the scriptures, purposed not to fall under the same judgment that had befallen those who had perverted their ministry with untoward profit. In the same manner he exhorted Timothy and Titus to follow his model of ministry.

Third and finally, a “blessed ministry”: just as Paul had respect for the judgment of God with regard to profiteering in ministry, he also respected the blessing of God on those labored for and ministered the word of God. He followed not just the example of Samuel and other godly old covenant figures, but also the example of Christ, the forbearer of the new covenant of grace and peace with God. Luke records Paul’s words to the elders of the church at Ephesus in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 20, verses 33-35. Here Paul reiterates to them that the goal of ministry is to meet the needs of those to whom one ministers, not to profit from their distress.

At Thessalonica, in Corinth, and at Ephesus, Paul’s philosophy of ministry was constant. He supplied his own needs, and those of his companions, by laboring at his trade, while ministering the gospel whenever and wherever he could. Through his tent-making ministry Paul sought to spread the gospel in a way that would bring no reproach or indictment either on himself or the message of the cross. Though he acknowledged his right to receive support from the gospel, Paul saw advantages for the church and himself in working bi-vocationally. The Apostle who said “to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due” (Romans 4:4), chose not to profit temporally from the ministry so that his ministry might profit eternally.

From the Biblical Era to Our Own

But are the considerations of the Apostle Paul still viable for today’s pastors? Modernity, with all its conveniences and efficiencies has brought many additional ministerial concerns to the task. Issues such as healthcare and housing are more significant considerations in our day, and walking is generally not an adequate means of transportation any longer. In addition, while the Apostle Paul, as an unmarried man, was certainly less restricted in his ability to support himself in his ministry, the spiritual gift of being single is not given to every pastor. With the blessing of family also comes the responsibility of family. The message of the gospel has not changed but perhaps the method has evolved to match society’s evolution.

However, in reviewing the verbal effusions of several modern authors who have written on the topic of bi-vocational pastoring, such as Brandon J. O’Brien (*The Strategically Small Church*), Dennis W. Bickers (*The Tentmaking Pastor*), and Steve R. Bierly (*How to Thrive as a Small Church Pastor*), I must conclude that not only do the Apostle Paul’s methods and motivations hold true for the present day, but in fact several additional advantages of a bi-vocational pastorate could and should be considered as well.

Furthermore, since no one knows the battle as well as those who serve on the front lines, it seemed prudent to elicit the perspectives of some ministers working either as bi-vocational pastors or as fully funded pastors. To that end I also interviewed ten pastors to see if their insights accorded well with the several authors I surveyed. The further advantages of bi-vocational ministry, compiled from both authors and pastors, are described as follows:

1. A Relevant Ministry
2. A Shared Ministry
3. A Personal Ministry
4. An Authentic Ministry
5. A Faith-Centered Ministry
6. A Responsive Ministry
7. A Socially Significant Ministry

The ability to relate to those who spend Monday through Friday, or Saturday, in the marketplace is a considerable advantage of the tent-making pastor. The pastor's facility in communicating the whole message of life in Christ to his congregants is markedly enhanced because he too interacts on a daily basis with those who sneer and scoff at Christianity; who carelessly toss around the name of our Savior with the most vile language and an implicit challenge to make something of it. As he gets his feet dirty walking in the world the bi-vocational minister develops a far better understanding of and empathy with those who struggle to remain holy in an unholy environment. God's final answer to the problem of sin was not to change the world from without, but from within. In the god-man Christ Jesus, God entered into his own creation to effect the change he sought. The goal of ministry of course, is to keep as many people as possible out of the smoking section for eternity. But that may require the minister to get a few burns on his fingers and a little smoke in his eyes as he attempts to rescue those who live in the fires of hell their lives have become. Not many of those folks are sitting in the church pews on Sunday morning.

One Clear Drawback

While I believe that there are many advantages to bi-vocational ministry, at least one significant disadvantage must also be noted: the intensified struggle with time. Unless a minister has the anointing of Joshua, or perhaps Hezekiah, each of us has only 24 hours in a day. I remember well the words of Dr. Haddon Robinson in his final exhortation to the seminary cohort of which I was a part. Despite his many significant achievements, Dr. Robinson was speaking of some of the things he would have liked to accomplish in ministry. He sharply cautioned us, "Time is not your friend!" This is, of course, a significant concern for those in bi-vocational ministry.

Conclusion

Many pastors, though certainly not all, leave the hallowed confines of seminary and enter directly into the rarified air of pastoral ministry; separated and segregated from the marketplace, and find they cannot communicate effectively with any but the most churchified of their parishioners. They sometimes feel that the congregation appreciates neither them nor their advanced degree in theology. Parishioners, likewise, fail to connect with the pastor because they suppose he does not understand them and their struggles. He speaks church-ese fluently but their language is far more earthy, even occasionally peppered with cuss-words that make the pastor blink and gulp when he hears them. The pastor who spends all his time leading/pastoring can even lose perspective and become un-teachable. But the bi-vocational pastor, who is far less insulated, may well appreciate and handle carefully the influence that has been given to him in the church body he pastors.

The witness of authors who have experienced or researched the bi-vocational calling, and the testimony of pastors who are engaged daily in the rigors of church and secular employ, speak with one voice to the advantages of tent-making ministry. The release of finances for other ministry areas, the wealth of shared responsibility, the blessings of God poured out on the one who seeks to bless rather than be blessed; these are a few of the several benefits of tent-making ministry. The writings of Paul and, I believe, the applause of heaven, should encourage and strengthen the bi-vocational minister for the tasks that lie ahead for each of us.