

# LIFE BETWEEN MINISTRIES: A QUIET WORD ON TENT-MAKING

Ian Stackhouse

Leaving a church is a kind of bereavement; not having a church to go on to is a case of pastoral unemployment. Rather than going into the disappointingly dull details of how I arrived at this state, I prefer to reflect on the combination of gardening and preaching that I embarked upon during this time away from the pastorate and the insights it afforded me into the nature of ministry.

Now, the fact that, hitherto, I couldn't tell the difference, as my wife constantly reminded me, between a plant and a weed is beside the point. The thing that occurred to me during this time working for my friends Xavier and Paul (both of whom had recently set up their own gardening businesses) is that the apostle Paul himself, not to mention Jesus, spent large numbers of hours working with his hands, in his case sewing canvases for his tent-making business. Of course, until one is placed in that situation of having to support one's ministry (for one should never regard oneself as unemployed), the reality of Paul's tent-making business is obscured, like so many minor details in the biblical narrative, by big words like justification and redemption. Yet there it is in the text. Paul was plying his trade in Corinth like any common labourer, not just to support his ministry, nor just to prevent himself from being a burden to the churches he ministered to (with the exception of Philippi where he expected due payment). Rather because dropping down the social ladder and embarking on an artisan trade was all of a piece, as far as Paul was concerned, with the humility of the Lord himself, who did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself a servant.<sup>42</sup> Working with one's hands, sharing the toil of the common man, is commensurate with a God who laid bare his holy arm to provide salvation for us.

Some of our Latin American colleagues, as well as our African friends, have been doing this for years: supplementing their meagre church income with day-time work. To be honest, it is therapy in itself for those of us who have spent most of our time

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<sup>42</sup> See M.J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's narrative spirituality of the Cross* (Eerdmans 2001) 183-184.

dealing with the immeasurable and exhausting work of soul care. To be able to go home at the end of a tiring day's work, and know that one has actually accomplished something tangible is a rare treat for one used to dealing in spiritual imponderables. What surprised me most, during this time, however, was how many of my friends, who have known me primarily as a preacher and a pastor, were ashamed, on my behalf it seemed, of my descent to the earth. There is no doubt about it: Christians do not expect their leaders to roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty: rhetoric and rhododendrons do not mix. It is classic dualism, of the worst kind. Yet, I had become somewhat proud of the fact that after so many hours of mowing grass, digging holes, bedding plants, and chopping down old trees, my hands, after 15 years of writing sermons and listening to parishioners, finally look like they belong to a man of the soil: proper hands, of someone who, at last, has a proper job. Furthermore, my wife is a lot happier with the firmer, more muscular husband.

Apart from anything else, working alongside those people with proper jobs, as my mother caustically remarks, as a way of supporting ministry, demonstrates to the pastor that most people Monday to Saturday are not worrying about how the sermon is going to be on Sunday (which is why, as Wesley used to advise, Christian leaders ought to take time out of 'full-time' Christian ministry, if only to realise this). Nor are people thinking too much about what their minister is getting up to. No - most people are totally absorbed in how to make ends meet, in the hassles of everyday human interaction. That is not to say pastors should stop preaching, stop preparing worship, stop praying, or stop visiting people. That is, after all, their primary call.

But to share, in an immediate way, in the daily, mundane, tiring work of one of his parishioners is essential incarnational data. It is the way we get inside their skin, or step into their shoes. That which is not assumed is not healed, as Gregory of Nazianzus wisely observed.<sup>43</sup> Thus, by the time we enter the pulpit there is less chance of us standing six feet above contradiction; less chance, moreover, of the sermon, and worship itself for that matter, being an exercise in spiritual escapism, and every chance that the Word will enter into the very soil of our ever so real existence, gathering

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<sup>43</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistolae* 101.7, *Nicene & Post Nicene Fathers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, VII 440.

up the fragments of our ever so routine lives: raising children, shopping for food, commuting on the M25, going to the cinema, and lifting it all back to God, our Creator and our Redeemer.

From my new perspective, I am wondering now whether a return to the pastorate ought to incorporate some measure of trade work. Don't get me wrong. I believe in the stipend. What is more, I believe in the original intent of the stipend, which was to release those called to pastor congregations from the burden of work, and not - as is the case now - to release people into a merely spiritual version of the same frenetic busyness that we see in the corporate world (all in the name of church growth).<sup>44</sup> A stipend is a stipend, and pastors ought to respect it as such. But should not the pastor also keep his hand to the plough, in a very literal sense, and thus ensure that his sermons carry the smell of the canteen as well as the commentaries? Not wanting to sound patronising, one learns a lot standing in a queue at 8am with *Sun*-reading builders and plumbers, waiting to devour an all-day breakfast at Tesco's café. My experience of life outside the pastorate has left me more in touch with the church, not less, and more open than ever to the serendipitous nature of God's mission in the world. At the very least, the discovery that the person working in your garden is a minister, and a theologian to boot, is certainly something to tell the neighbours about.

One final thing: I was preaching in a church the other week and must have mentioned in the sermon that I was currently working as a gardener. Afterward an elderly man approached me to discuss the sermon, or so I thought. After all, this is what preachers long for: some recognition that the sermon had indeed been the word of God. Preachers are suckers for this kind of thing and are often seen hanging around church coffee hatches for just such compliments. On this occasion something else happened which I wasn't expecting. The dear man wondered if I was free that week to dig over his garden!

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<sup>44</sup> See Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1989) 24.