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## **NON-PROFESSIONAL AND SHORT-TERM MISSIONARY SERVICE**

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The missionary task of the church was not entrusted solely—or even mainly—to those who were in a position to spend their whole time on it because others were supplying their temporal needs. Throughout the history of the church, men and women have witnessed to the gospel, pastored and taught other Christians, and engaged in numerous other forms of Christian service, while earning their own living. The former have come to be known as 'professional' missionaries and the latter—when they have lived in cultural environments other than that which was native to them—as 'non-professional' missionaries.

It is the purpose of this article to look at the phenomenon of the 'non-professional' missionary, and at the same time say something about the short-term missionary whose task is seen, not as a lifelong commitment but in terms of a period measured in months or years. We shall look, firstly at the rather inconsistent way in which Brethren have tended to view the non-professional missionary, secondly at the validity of the concept, thirdly at the implications of Paul's practice in the matter, and finally the way in which it has been practised throughout the history of Christian missions.

### **Brethren concepts**

The application by the Brethren of the reformation concept of the priesthood of all believers is perhaps their main ecclesiastical distinctive which marks them out most clearly from other groups of Christians. But a strange inconsistency has emerged with regard to Christian work abroad.

When a person in the homeland chooses a job or a place of residence with a view to building up a work of God in that area, he is applauded. Not so in the overseas mission field. Here the concept of a lifelong calling devoted to evangelism and church planting has been taught as being a very high calling of God and those who have given up the security of a job, home and family, earthly prospects and the comforts of the homeland have (rightly) been honoured and revered. Today, there are thousands of churches planted as a result of the faithful endurance and selfless lives of those missionaries.

However, the home church has denied a basic ecclesiastical distinctive of the Brethren by creating a distinction between clergy and laity in lands abroad. As we have noted, much has been made of the professional missionary dedicated to lifelong, full-time Christian service who has gone out in faith. But the person who has gone to a secular position with the same sense of call from God has been ignored, misunderstood and, at times, misrepresented as being merely an opportunist or, at best, second-rate compared with a 'proper' missionary. This is hardly a fair appraisal, and it is high time that the record was put straight.

Some of the early missionaries to the Godavari delta who went out in faith, trusting God to meet all their needs, would have come to grief but for the timely help of godly businessmen and government officials who were serving God in India as non-professional missionaries. They were able to provide material and financial help at critical moments, guidance in adjusting to the culture, and official sanction and backing. The same thing must have happened in other parts of the world.

Admittedly, the professional missionary has more time for evangelism, church planting, language learning, translation and literature work. Social, educational and medical work which requires full-time workers has played an immense part in gaining and upbuilding converts. But sadly all this has been taught as being the *only* scriptural way of spreading the gospel.

Behind this lies the extraordinary influence of the example of A N Groves and G Müller. Groves went abroad in the early, formative years of the Brethren movement. The tragic story of Baghdad is well known. The formulation of his policy of complete dependence upon God for the provision of material support, daily guidance and direction owed a great deal to what he saw of Müller's experiments in faith. George Müller was obviously directed by God to undertake the running of an orphanage 'by faith'. God had much to teach Christians of that era in England—and elsewhere—through his servant.

But what was right for Müller and Groves in their day cannot be claimed as the sole scriptural way of going about missionary work. Because Groves's sons made a sortie into a business venture which turned out to be a failure, it was too readily concluded that they had departed from the principles laid down in scripture. It may merely have been a matter of lack of business acumen! What we are not often told is that other missionaries' sons became wealthy, successful and *godly* businessmen who influenced the life of the church in the land of their adoption. They, it seems, had chosen the lesser path!

We must probe more deeply into the validity of the calling of a non-professional missionary.

### **The validity of the non-professional missionary as a servant of God**

Traditionally, the role of the non-professional missionary in the work of God has been seen to be valid in countries closed to the gospel. The truth of this remains as pertinent today as ever it was. Noble souls have chosen to serve in countries isolated from the rest of the world as a result of political or religious policies. Such Christians with a strong sense of the call of God have to remain incognito. Often they are deprived of fellowship to sustain or strengthen their faith. It is impossible for them to write home about any converts or advances of the gospel. Even on home leave they must be extremely cautious about whom they inform and what they say. Their need for strong prayer support is absolutely vital. Though prayer for them cannot be fully informed, they rely upon concerned, faithful intercessors who are in close touch with God, through the Holy Spirit.

But non-professional missionaries are also essential in countries that are open to the gospel. They can reach businessmen, government officials and those in positions of influence in industry, education etc. Because they meet such people as equals in the academic, industrial or business world, they can influence those who would never even cross the path of a professional missionary. The latter rarely enters the cultural mainstream of the country in which he serves; without the non-professional, it would remain largely untouched.

It has been said that only a full-time missionary has time to learn the language well. But the time factor is only one of several involved in language-learning. Many professional missionaries do not

possess the motivation or skills needed to attain a thorough knowledge of their local language, and remain satisfied with a low level of proficiency. Dedicated non-professionals will be motivated to adjust culturally and also to set aside sufficient time for language-learning so that they can both understand the thought processes of those among whom they live and also communicate by word, as well as by life, the truth of the gospel. Language-learning is but part of the whole process of cultural adaptation which demands commitment and a disciplined mind for the professional and non-professional missionary alike.

The professional missionary is often under much less strain than his non-professional counterpart. He is known to be a 'holy man', set aside for God's service. Therefore, crooked business deals and devious bazaar talk is kept from his 'holy' ears. Not so the non-professional. He is in the cut and thrust of the bazaar—where it all takes place. His life, and that of his family, is under greater scrutiny and therefore greater pressure. He is merely an expatriate businessman who is expected to take part in the social life of his vocation. He is not protected from the world, as the professional missionary is. He has to face pressures from demanding bosses and shady business deals, and must take a Christian stand, often without the support of Christian fellowship. No doubt the cost of all this is faced before he accepts the challenge of his service overseas, but his need for prayer support from the home church is fully as great as that of the professional missionary.

In some countries, the non-professional missionary can make big money. The Gulf countries are a well-known example. With it come the snares of social life on that level. In other countries, however, salaries may be at a sacrificial level. Home churches should be aware of this, and should be prepared to meet whatever needs may arise in a discreet and acceptable manner. Church elders should be fully cognisant of the situation into which the non-professional missionary and his family are going, and should make relevant provision, especially when on home leave.

There are still many countries where opportunities for the entrepreneur exist, though the majority of openings for expatriates are through multi-national firms or an education system requiring those with specialist skills. In these days when an increasing number of developing countries are actively opposing the presence of professional missionaries, but request the help of highly trained technologists, the scope for non-professional missionaries constitutes an opportunity not to be missed. In whatever capacity he or she goes, the person who undertakes such a task needs the

recognition and full support of his home church, and the strength which comes from the knowledge of wholehearted prayer support.

### Biblical perspectives

In his discourse to the Athenians, Paul stated: '[God] determined the times . . . and the exact places where they [the men he created] should live' (Acts 17:26). Throughout history there are records of mass movements of nations for various reasons. Then as now, political manipulation of smaller races by major powers created crises. Natural disasters, seemingly occurring with ever increasing frequency these days, are no new phenomenon. The word of God and our knowledge that 'the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes' (Daniel 4:17, 25) assures us that, whether in peace or war, plenty or famine, he is in control. Thus every age creates a situation of responsibility for the non-professional missionary.

In the Old Testament, Nehemiah is perhaps the prime example. Hearing of the endangered state of the people of God, after much prayer, he asks for and obtains leave of absence to go and survey the situation and do some immediate relief work. Later, he returns to the Medo-Persian court, obtains leave of absence from his lucrative job and exchanges the opulence of the court for a low-paid job in a far-flung corner of the empire. That job was the governorship of the insignificant, poverty-stricken, struggling group of Jewish subjects in their war-torn homeland of Judah. All this he did because of his concern to establish the people of God and his strong desire that God's name should be glorified through them.

Similarly, Ezra—also a civil servant in the pay of the Persian ruler—applied for leave and was appointed to a job which we might describe as minister of the interior. He was in charge of both civil and religious law (a kind of national administration with which we are becoming familiar in these days).

Both men used their skills and training in the service of the Lord, seeing opportunities and responsibilities before them. They became non-professional missionaries. In the case of Nehemiah it was for a period of twelve years at a stretch, with a return after a period back in the capital. As for Ezra, it seems that it was a calling for life. We may learn much from them about the frustrations, open and subtle attacks, opposition, temptations, and the cost of sacrificial, righteous living in the midst of corruption, which any non-professional missionary will have to face. We may also learn how he may overcome these problems.

In the New Testament, Paul is the greatest example. Indeed, the term ‘tentmaker’, which is so often used for the non-professional missionary, comes from his ‘secular’ occupation. Ironically, his missionary work has been used as a basis for the (so-called) scriptural pattern for missionary work today among the Brethren. While I, as an *Echoes* missionary, have followed this course for thirty-five years, and continue to do so, proving that God is faithful and that he does provide, and knowing that this has been his way for *me*, yet I still feel that we need to look at scripture afresh without the Brethren-tinted spectacles to which we have grown accustomed. Increasingly I realize that in every age Christians have a responsibility to read the living word of God looking for what God has to say to them in their day. Unfortunately, we have tended to take only one aspect of Paul’s missionary work and have made that normative for *all* missionary work. As a result, we have done less than justice to those of our brothers and sisters in Christ who have taken up vocations abroad with a sense of God’s calling equal to that of the traditional missionary.

### **Lessons to learn from Paul’s missionary methods**

(a) Paul took up secular employment not merely as an emergency means of support when funds from the home church or elsewhere dried up, but as a method of reaching people right where they were. He was acting not from expediency but from policy. He deliberately used his secular skills for the furtherance of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:12; 2 Thessalonians 3:8). For example, while in Corinth, he approached Aquila and Priscilla, fugitive Jews from Rome as a result of the policy of Claudius Caesar, and, as another fugitive Jew, on the run from Berea, he identified with them, obtained work with them and witnessed to them (Acts 18:1-3). The result was two converted Jews who gave a lifetime of friendship and support to Paul and service to the Lord (Acts 18:18-26; Romans 16:3-5).

(b) Paul was determined to remove any impression that he was using his missionary activities as a means of making easy money. He worked, day and night, at his trade as well as in the gospel, in order to support himself and his team. In this way he proved the validity of his gospel and also provided an example to new converts (1 Corinthians 9:1-18; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-9). Paul wanted to prove that the Christian life was capable of taking the tensions and entanglements of the day-to-day life of the commercial world and that he was not giving his teaching from a position of advantage

without such stresses. He was anxious to show that business was a legitimate sphere of activity for a Christian and, conducted rightly, (difficult though that has always been) was in itself a testimony to the power of the gospel. It meant a life of discipline and holiness, always with one objective—that of proclaiming Christ in the situation. The believer's priorities had to be in direct opposition to those of the world. They were not money-making, or progress in the business or social world. These must remain secondary and subject to the prime objective of making Christ known in the world. Paul was saddened when Demas got his priorities wrong (2 Timothy 4:10).

(c) Paul would admit of no dichotomy between secular and spiritual aspects of life. He had no time for any distinction between 'clergy' and 'laity'. He was trained in both secular and spiritual skills and was therefore able to demonstrate the power of the gospel both through work in the bazaar and through preaching in the synagogue (Acts 13:14-48; 14:1-7; 17:1-15, 17; 18:4; 19:8) and the debating chamber (Acts 17:22-23; 19:9-10). All opportunities were divinely appointed for him, from gossiping the gospel to individuals in a job situation to debating with pagan academic philosophers, from preaching to Jews at their sabbath gatherings to exhorting new believers at their church meetings. To him there was only one priority—to 'live' Christ (Philippians 1:21)—and that included all situations, from workshop to prison.

(d) Surprisingly, Paul's was not a lifelong calling, but a series of short-term commitments with constant reviewing and reporting back to the home church. This created and sustained not only a strong sense of fellowship with the sending church, but also a constant readiness for redirection.

(e) Surprisingly, also, there was no financial commitment by the sending church. They saw no problem in the apostle being free to use his secular skills in the progress of the gospel. Paul did declare unequivocally that he had a right to live by the gospel, as did the other apostles. But he deliberately chose to do otherwise so that he could 'win the more for Christ', and, as a result, was accused of not being a *bona fide* apostle. He had been released from his church duties to go where and to act how he felt the Spirit was leading him, with the full backing and total confidence of his home church (Acts 13:1-3).

(f) Surprisingly, again, he did not learn a local language. He chose strategic centres in which he stayed for varying lengths of time—the longest being three years at Ephesus. The language he used was Greek, the *lingua franca* of the Roman empire, the language of

commerce, culture and education. It was a language which the Jews of the dispersion used, even in their synagogues. Paul left the planting of churches speaking the vernacular to the converts reached at the strategic centres (eg Epaphras, Colossians 1:7). He commended the Thessalonian believers for the way in which news of their faith had spread throughout the region (1 Thessalonians 1:8). All that he achieved was done with minimal financial support—and that mostly from churches he had been instrumental in establishing (Philippians 4:18). Whenever possible he worked at his trade *for the sake of the gospel*.

(g) Lastly, it must be carefully noted that Paul did not set out on this kind of life without first undertaking a lengthy period of spiritual preparation. This included private study of the scriptures (for him the Old Testament) during which time God revealed to him the special truths he was to make known during his lifetime of service (Galatians 1:15-17). Then he worked within the church, gaining the acknowledgement and approval of apostles, elders and church members alike over a lengthy period of time (Galatians 1:18-24; Acts 11:25-26).

From all this it may be seen that Paul served as a non-professional missionary in the course of his service for the Lord. It was a legitimate part of his ministry. While some are and will still be called to the more traditional forms of full-time service as professional missionaries, and indeed are still needed as such in some areas of the world, there is a *very great* need for many to consider deeply and investigate thoroughly the possibility of becoming non-professional missionaries in both closed lands and others which provide openings in secular work. Opportunities are not lacking, but there must be a sure conviction regarding the call and as full a preparation as possible. Non-professional missionaries need as much and even more intercessory prayer from the home church and should be sent with their blessing and affirmation of their call, just as traditional missionaries.

### **Important postscript**

There is plenty of evidence to show that the non-professional method of missionary work has been used extensively in the history of Christian missions. In New Testament times it was used so extensively that Michael Green, who has written profoundly on the subject, is of the opinion that it played a larger part in the expansion of Christianity than full-time missionary work.

In the sixth and subsequent centuries Nestorian Christians

migrated eastwards as a result of persecution, carrying the gospel with them along the trade routes of central and eastern Asia. K S Latourette, the historian of Christian missions, draws attention to the influence of Christian merchants from Armenia who evangelized as they travelled the trade routes of the Middle East, and hazards the guess that Christian merchants from Mesopotamia and Syria may have taken the gospel to China.

The Middle Ages saw an enormous amount of missionary work undertaken by monks and friars, many of whom were, in effect, non-professionals, paying their way by the labour of their hands as well as relying on charity. Christian merchants like Marco Polo played their part in making openings for Christian missionaries.

The modern Protestant missionary movement abounds in instances of the non-professional missionary. The great pioneer, William Carey, made self-support one of his foundation principles. He paid his way by running an indigo plantation and, later, by teaching languages at Fort William College to the employees of the East India Company. At a time when professional missionaries were not allowed to enter British India, Christian witness was provided by a succession of godly men—the most notable being Henry Martyn—who took employment as chaplains with the East India Company.

As far as Brethren missionary activity is concerned, non-professionals have played a significant role, particularly in India, Africa and Argentina. In India, army officers, judges and officials of the Indian Civil Service, as well as businessmen and educationalists, played a notable part. Among the most celebrated were Sir Arthur Cotton and Major-General Felix Thackeray Haig. Cotton—who advised Groves to transfer his operation from Baghdad to India—was in charge of extensive irrigation schemes in the Godaveri delta and was later appointed chief engineer in Madras. He not only made it possible for the irrigation work force to be evangelized by Bowden, a professional missionary, but often conducted services himself. Haig, who was converted in India, was appointed to Cotton's staff. When he moved on from the Godaveri he gave his residence as a mission station, and in 1881, soon after his retirement, he and his wife took charge of the station for eighteen months during the furlough of the missionaries. He established Christian work at Mokpal, and translated Luke and 1 John into the Koi language. It was his ardent plea for the spiritual needs of Aden that resulted in the remarkable missionary service of the Hon Ion Keith-Falconer. Soon after, he himself spent two years in arduous travel in the Near East. He has been described as the originator of nearly every modern effort to evangelize Arabia.

In Africa there were many who went out as farmers or businessmen, settling near the 'Beloved Strip' across central Africa, and in other places. Their witness in the growing cities and elsewhere resulted in churches being planted, while their help given to the missionaries in more remote places was a great source of encouragement. Indeed, some used their farms as a direct means of missionary involvement.

As for Argentina, it would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of the part played by expatriates who went out to work for railway companies, port authorities, banks and various commercial undertakings. Among them were Charles Torre who was a railway official, Gilbert Lear, a bank manager and Sam Williams, an accountant. In his book, *Dawn over Latin America*, (p44) Dr F A Tatford comments:

As the railways extended more and more through the country, so many of the brethren were able, in the course of their employment, to travel to new towns which were springing up and which subsequently became centres of large populations, and to preach the gospel in them. Many assemblies were founded as a result of these activities. Business men were thus able, not only to supplement the work of full-time missionaries, but also to undertake, in some instances, work which could not otherwise have been done.

In words which may fittingly conclude this article, he declared:

Both full-time missionaries and businessmen were needed and they complemented one another. Moreover, in assembly matters, the business or professional man could often make a contribution from his experience, which the full-time worker could not supply.