

Three Cities, Two Jobs, One Ministry: The Context and Strategies of Paul's Bivocational Labor

Troy Neujahr¹

Practical small-church guru Karl Vaters makes this bold statement: “If I could only teach one vocational principle to young pastors-to-be, it would probably be this: Learn how to pay the bills outside of your pastoral salary. You’ll probably need it.”² Vaters is one of several who predict bivocational ministry will become the standard approach to ministry in North America.³ His conclusion rests mainly on the fact that American church attendance is decreasing everywhere.⁴ Bivocational ministry presents itself as a pragmatic choice and, for observers like Vaters, the “new normal” for pastoral ministry in North America.⁵

I. The Bivocational Landscape of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Why should bivocational ministry concern The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) at this point in her history? In 2020, the Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey included for the first time a series of questions that focused upon the clergyperson who typically leads services in a given location. While the FACT survey

¹ Portions of this article have been taken and revised from the author’s dissertation, Troy Ronald Neujahr, “Paul as Paradigm: Testing His Factors in Order to Predict the Outcome of Modern Bivocational Ministry,” (PhD diss., Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, 2024). I thank John Nordling for his input on this article, as well as on that dissertation.

² Karl Vaters, “The New Normal: 9 Realities and Trends in Bivo/covocational Ministry,” *KarlVaters.com* (blog), March 4, 2025, <https://karlvaters.com/trends-in-bivo-covocational-ministry/>.

³ I define bivocational ministry as a ministry in which a credentialed minister has at least two distinct vocations that he pursues in order to provide for his financial needs. One vocation is called pastoral ministry over a specific congregation; the other vocation is secular. This definition enfolds the aspects of both the *what* of bivocational ministry (engaging in both sacred and secular vocations) as well as the *why* (from financial necessity), a paradigm that most closely resembles the record we have of the apostle Paul’s bivocational labors.

⁴ Daniel O. Aleshire, “The Future Has Arrived: Changing Theological Education in a Changed World,” *Theological Education* 46, no. 2 (2011): 69.

⁵ Vaters, “The New Normal.” “Bivocational” might be a misleading term, as some pastors engage in more than two vocations anyway. While some prefer the terms “covocational” or “multivocational” to speak of this ministry paradigm, I find “bivocational” to be widely and readily understood and also flexible enough in common usage to encompass multiple vocations.

Troy Neujahr is Pastor of St. Peter’s Lutheran Church, Shaker Heights, Ohio. He can be contacted at pastortroy@stpeterslc.org.

is not LCMS specific,⁶ the LCMS Office of Rosters, Statistics, and Research Services nevertheless had access to an oversampling of LCMS-specific respondents. Among questions regarding the pastor's habits regarding days off and sabbaticals, the FACT survey also asked whether the congregation's clergy had other paid employment besides that provided by the congregation. In those oversample responses, a full eleven percent responded "yes" (see table 1 below).

Table 1. FACT Survey LCMS Oversample

Senior/Sole Pastor	"No"	pct	"Yes"	pct
Is Bivocational	261	88.8%	33	11.2%
Full-time (<i>No=Part-time</i>)	39	13.0%	260	87.0%

Source: *Faith Communities Today (FACT) 2020 Survey: LCMS Oversample (N=327, Unweighted Results)* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2020). Data provided by Ryan Curnutt, LCMS Office of Rosters, Statistics, and Research Services. Only data relevant to bivocational ministry is shown here.

This correlates well with anecdotal observations of the growing prevalence of bivocational ministry in the LCMS. Even the LCMS' Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) program is informally acknowledged to be the route to ordination for a man who plans on being a bivocational pastor.⁷ The increasingly visible profile of bivocational ministry demonstrates an issue of rising concern.

The reason for the rise of bivocational ministry seems obvious: "Changing patterns of church attendance affect leadership needs in parishes and congregations. They contribute to the increase in bivocational and alternatively credentialed clergy as some congregations become smaller."⁸ On the other hand, a hasty adoption of the bivocational model without due investigation should be discouraged, in my opinion. Consider Johann Gerhard's section on "The Salaries of Ministers of the Church."

⁶ "The 2020 Faith Communities Today national data set is the result of a collaborative venture of 21 denominations and religious groups in this cooperative partnership." [Scott Thumma], *Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2020), 30, <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Faith-Communities-Today-2020-Summary-Report.pdf>.

⁷ Again, "informally." Even the official resolution for the SMP program references bivocational ministry only obliquely: "WHEREAS, The original and ongoing intent of DELTO was to 'provide ordained pastoral service to congregations that cannot support a full-time pastor, ordained pastoral service to contexts where English is not spoken, ordained missionary personnel where finances and/or conditions do not permit calling a full-time missionary' (BHE document, 'What Is DELTO?' Sept. 2000); and WHEREAS, The needs for providing pastoral ministry in specific and specialized situations where a traditionally prepared seminary candidate or pastor is not available continue to multiply. . . ." [The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod], *One Message—Christ! Convention Proceedings, 2007, 63rd Regular Convention* (n.p., 2007), 136.

⁸ Aleshire, "The Future Has Arrived, 72.

The purpose of the pastoral salary is to allow him to perform his duties more conveniently, care for himself and his family honorably, and—most importantly—be “free for the Word, having abandoned the serving of tables (Acts 6:3).”⁹ The duties of the pastoral ministry are of utmost importance, and without exception a secular vocation outside of the church places the pastor in danger of being made to serve two masters.

Yet there may be times when bivocational ministry may be a methodology that serves a greater missiological purpose. The question is, What legitimate strategies might turn a pragmatic matter into something that might prove beneficial to the Office of the Holy Ministry?

I have written this article as a pastor whose ministry at one time necessitated the bivocational approach, and who later went on to study the bivocational phenomenon at the PhD level.¹⁰ I know well the demands and pitfalls of bivocational ministry. Furthermore, while the Scriptures of both Old and New Testaments expect a paradigm wherein God’s servants are provided for by the gifts of God’s people, in my studied opinion they do not in any way forbid bivocational ministry. This article is not written to dissuade or disparage bivocational ministry but rather to provide a starting point for discussion regarding it.

II. How Did Paul Approach His Bivocational Ministry?

Acts and the Pauline Epistles suggest that Paul worked bivocationally in at least three different cities: Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus. The unique circumstances, and Paul’s response to them, demonstrate three distinct strategies in which Paul engaged in bivocational labor.

Paul in Thessalonica

The cultural expectations of Thessalonica formed the background to Paul’s bivocational work there and no doubt informed his bivocational strategy. It is a bit unclear how Paul came to understand that it was best for him to provide for himself bivocationally rather than accept his apostolic right of subsistence from the newly

⁹ Johann Gerhard, “The Salaries of the Ministers of the Church,” in *Theological Commonplaces*, vol. 26/2, *On the Ecclesiastical Ministry, Part Two*, trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes and Heath R. Curtis (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), §§ 324–329, pp. 181–189.

¹⁰ My initial entrance into bivocational ministry ran from 2010 to 2016, just over half of my eleven-year ministry at Our Saviour Lutheran Church of Hudson, Michigan. During that time, I was often even trivocational, working jobs outside the church, such as tech support for a regional internet service provider, a laborer at a nearby big-box home-improvement retailer, adjunct faculty for two Christian universities at four different campuses, freelance copyeditor, and freelance writer.

formed Thessalonian church.¹¹ The decision, however, was made with the twofold desire of loving the Thessalonians and giving them the gospel free of charge.¹² What did that decision mean for Paul, and what did it mean for the Thessalonians?

Ronald Hock believes Paul's primary method of evangelization was not preaching on street corners but conducted while working in a shop.¹³ A tentmaking workshop with clients and customers who may have been open to the gospel could have provided a quiet atmosphere suitable for prolonged conversation.¹⁴ Paul's use of the Thessalonian workshop, which most likely began as a financial necessity, quickly became a missionary imperative.¹⁵

The workshop where Paul labored was most likely in an *insula*, a multistory dwelling that served the laborers as storefront, warehouse, apartments, and communal kitchen.¹⁶ In 1 Thessalonians 2:9, Paul reminds the Thessalonians how "we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God" (ESV). While numerous interpreters have taken this to mean Paul divided his time between preaching and working, Wanamaker masterfully catches the contemporaneous meaning of Paul's statement *νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας ἐργαζόμενοι*: "Given the amount of working time required by a worker to be self-sufficient, we should take the wording of v. 9b seriously: 'working night and day . . . we preached the gospel of God to you.' As the present participle ('working') implies, their working night and day was done simultaneously with their preaching

¹¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 78.

¹² "Certainly no other passage [than 1 Thess 2:8] in the whole of the Pauline corpus employs such deeply affective language in describing Paul's relation with his converts," and "Paul's kindly feelings and love for the Thessalonians manifested themselves in another way: he supported himself by working with this own hands rather than burden his converts by making financial demands of them." Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 102.

¹³ Ronald F. Hock, "The Workshop as a Social Setting for Paul's Missionary Preaching," in *Tentmaking: Perspectives on Self-Supporting Ministry*, ed. Leslie J. Francis and James Francis (Leominster, UK: Gracewing, 1998), 15.

¹⁴ Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 33. Also, "we will not go far wrong in supposing that [Paul's] contact with fellow artisans and their customers often provided the first contacts in a city." Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1983), 29.

¹⁵ This was not a novel approach: the paradigm of the ideal Cynic philosopher had already set a cultural precedent for the workshop as the place for teaching and edification. Hock, "Workshop as a Social Setting," 18; Hock, *Social Context*, 31–42; Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 17–20.

¹⁶ Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 17; Schnabel draws references from similar homes discovered in Pompeii, and he prefers the term *officina* to describe the homes where industrial production took place. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 298.

of the gospel. Paul, and presumably his colleagues, had little choice but to use the workshop as a place for communicating the gospel, since so much of their time was spent there.¹⁷

Rather than moving back and forth between sacred and secular vocations, Paul's manual labor overlapped seamlessly with his proclamation of the gospel. As Paul did not have to lay down his tools to take up his pulpit, and as he did not have to set aside his pulpit to bend over the workbench, the degree of overlap served as a blessing to both Paul and the congregation. Both could enjoy the fruits of a long day spent together in camaraderie and shared labor and in lives shared together in Christ.¹⁸ In the natural overlap between secular and ministerial labors, Paul hit upon a way not only of providing his own subsistence but also of reducing his personal burden.

But even a reduced burden is still a burden, and there must have been a motivation for it. Paul helps us understand the motive for his manual labor among the Thessalonians with a critical point that may not be treated lightly: Paul embraced the Thessalonians with a personal love. He knew their names. He knew their stories. He knew their souls and shared his with them (1 Thess 2:8).

Paul's love for the Thessalonians left him a choice: should he have received money from them in exchange for his ministry? His new church was made up of those in the inescapable poverty of the artisan class.¹⁹ Paul's claim to apostolic support would have placed a burden upon the people that he loved. As the self-giving love of Jesus Christ had transformed Paul, Paul determined to act on behalf of the Thessalonians with the Savior's same sacrificial love (Phil 2:7a). Though it would have been proper to demand a livable wage from the Thessalonian church, Paul instead forsook his apostolic right and took that wage burden upon himself.²⁰ In love,

¹⁷ Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 104.

¹⁸ This willingness to be so fully identified with the Thessalonian congregation stands in stark contrast to the elitist spirit of the age: "For Cicero seems to have assumed—with other great ones of his age—that it was somehow his due to live off profits wrested so arduously from the land by slaves and persons of lesser status." John G. Nordling, *Philemon*, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 132.

¹⁹ Indeed, Nordling believes this working-class status is nearly universal in the apostolic age, stating, "Perhaps 'the great majority' of Christians who received some of Paul's letters were also manual laborers." Nordling, *Philemon*, 136.

²⁰ "The apostle's refusal to accept support for his daily needs was part of a deliberate missionary strategy that he followed not only in his Thessalonian ministry but elsewhere as well (see 1 Cor. 9:1–18; 2 Cor. 11:7). Although Paul vigorously defended his right as an apostle to receive financial support [1 Cor 9:14; Gal 6:6–7; 1 Tim 5:17–18; 1 Thess 5:12–13] . . . he chose not to make use of this right during his initial ministry in a particular city." Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1–2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 609–610. Weima's comments regarding Paul's initial strategy in a given city help open the door for a discussion on the widely held but erroneous assumption that bivocational ministry was Paul's consistent strategy.

Paul worked long hours and suffered deprivation rather than place a heavy burden upon the church.

Paul in Corinth

Luke's only explicit record of Paul's secular labor in the book of Acts is of that at Corinth,²¹ recording that Paul came to this work by "finding" (Greek root εὐρίσκω) the tentmakers Aquila and Priscilla²² and joined them because he and they were ὁμότεχνος ("of the same trade," Acts 18:3).

When Paul could dedicate himself completely to proclamation, he did so; when he could not, he worked.²³ But considering the relative wealth of some members of the Corinthian church, did Paul *need* to earn his own living in Corinth? And if not bearing the burden of earning his own living was a possibility, why did he adopt this approach?

Gerd Theissen—and with him Ronald Hock²⁴—is convinced that Paul knew his work as a traveling missionary would be understood through the cultural lens of the wandering philosopher, of which two kinds are important to this investigation: the Sophist and the Cynic.

Numerous negative incidents had given rise to a stereotype: the Sophist who exchanged wisdom for money was deemed incompetent, greedy, or both: "Since the time of Socrates it had been a familiar *topos* that the truly wise man takes no money for his wisdom."²⁵ The Sophist who entered the household of a patron was viewed as something akin to a slave; the necessities of life were cared for (sometimes lavishly), but it came at the cost of professional integrity and personal freedom.

The Cynic, by contrast, had the option to refuse such patronage and instead beg for his sustenance. While that preserved him from the accusation of lasciviousness, it also rather effectively preserved him from such "luxuries" as food, shelter, and dignity.

²¹ A fact that should give pause in accepting the conclusion of those commentators who insist that Paul's bivocational work was his regular missionary method, as does Bruce: "Paul as a matter of policy earned his living in this way during his missionary career." F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 346.

²² The temporal sense of the aorist active participle εὐρών suggests Paul did not seek them out specifically for work but that *after* he found them he joined them in their labor.

²³ "It needs to be recognized, however, that working as a leatherworker was not a 'method' that Paul employed in order to meet people. Rather, this was a financial necessity when his funds had run low." Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 298.

²⁴ Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, trans. John H. Schütz, Studies of the New Testament and Its World (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 39; Hock, *Social Context*, 52-59.

²⁵ Theissen, *Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, 39.

A third option—which Hock names the “Cynic ideal”²⁶—was to work to support oneself, much in the manner of Socrates’ one-time companion Simon the Shoemaker, who taught, thought, and recorded the first Socratic dialogues all from within his workshop.²⁷ The Cynic ideal kept the philosopher free from suspicion as well as entanglement and obligation. Hock concludes that Paul’s bivocational work at Corinth aligned with that cultural image.²⁸ Even here, though, the Cynic faced scorn for stooping to debasing manual labor. In both the philosophy schools and the public eye there remained disagreement over the appropriate approach.

Along these lines, Gerd Theissen developed a premise that posits that there were two types of preachers in the ancient Christian world, and like the philosophers they were distinguished by the way in which they approached the question of subsistence. This question formed the background for instruction to new preachers, dominated rules governing community relations with preachers, and at times became the central issue in quarrels among preachers and in faith communities. Theissen asserts the underlying issue determining the Corinthian conflict: “The fact is that the social legitimacy of itinerant preachers depends to a great extent on how they provide for their own subsistence.”²⁹ The itinerant preacher was the churchly parallel to the Cynic ideal, and therefore Paul’s choice of self-sufficient labor in Corinth did not come without conflict.

DeVos argues that the factions that plagued the Corinthian congregation were led by rival elites who sought to increase their community standing through a system

²⁶ Though a seemingly popular idea, we should restrain ourselves from embracing the notion of “Paul the ideal rabbi.” Hock demonstrates that the notion of a rabbi who plies a trade is a late development and thus not likely to be a concept to which Paul would appeal. Hock, *Social Context*, 22–25. See also Hock’s discussion on the unlikelihood of Paul’s labor being primarily related to his Jewish identity: Ronald F. Hock, “The Working Apostle: An Examination of Paul’s Means of Livelihood” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1974), 2–21. Hock’s conclusion, however, is somewhat tempered by Todd D. Still, who rightly supposes that “subsequent rabbinic perspectives and practices [of the second century] may well reflect earlier realities of (Pharisaic) Judaism.” Todd D. Still, “Did Paul Loathe Manual Labor? Revisiting the Work of Ronald F. Hock on the Apostle’s Tentmaking and Social Class,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125, no. 4 (2006): 791. Ultimately, though, I agree with Still that Hock has overstated his case; in cities such as Thessalonica and Corinth it would be the Cynic ideal—and not the rabbinic—that probably would be in the people’s minds.

²⁷ Hock, *Social Context*, 56.

²⁸ Terrence Paige prefers the influence of Stoicism to explain both Paul and Corinth, but even he acknowledges that Stoic features (such as self-sufficiency) were inherited from the Cynics. Ultimately, Paige hedges his bet that “part of the problem at Corinth may well have been a Stoicizing (or Cynic and Stoicizing) influence.” Terrence Paige, “Stoicism, Ἐλευθερία and Community at Corinth,” in *Christianity at Corinth: The Quest for the Pauline Church*, ed. Edward Adams and David G. Horrell (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 218.

²⁹ Theissen, *Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, 28. Though it is true that perhaps Theissen’s division between what he terms “itinerant charismatics” and “community organizers” is at times stretched, his work remains insightful and quite helpful.

of patronage.³⁰ Patronage often took on the form of civic sponsorship: a patron might donate a monument, erect a clubhouse, or commission the building of a market.³¹ These civic activities would result in increased social status and title, and thus provided a valuable and sought-for opportunity.

Yet patronage at times also took on a more private form. Within the Corinthian church, a wealthy and influential member might have determined a client carefully—in this case, an apostle—that he wished to patronize. The proper selection garnered the patron more power and influence in the church.³² The Corinthian patron no doubt possessed a certain amount of pride in his own largess, and thus the patron was not only financially invested in “his” client but emotionally invested as well.³³

Had Paul accepted the patronage of a Corinthian elite, their household would have been granted the social honor and prestige of being the benevolent patron of a popular teacher, but effectively he would have become their slave.³⁴ Rather, Paul insisted upon his own independence. He disassociated himself from the power-and-control structure of patronage, which caused him to be marked by the elite as one who spurned their generosity and stifled their efforts at social advancement. The Corinthian elite considered Paul ungrateful, uncontrollable, and useless.³⁵

This was not the only deprecation brought on by Paul’s manual labor. His labor deliberately placed him in a station in which he might identify himself with the lower

³⁰ Craig Steven DeVos, *Church and Community Conflicts: The Relationships of Thessalonian, Corinthian, and Philippian Churches with Their Wider Civic Communities*, SBL Dissertation Series 168 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1999), 221. Certainly we know from Paul’s letters that other factors were at play, such as his personal appearance and his weakness of speech (2 Cor 10:10) and the Corinthians’ schismatic preference for personalities (1 Cor 1:12). However, underlying the other issues was the social elites’ presumption that Paul had debased himself through his bivocational work.

³¹ Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 48.

³² Against this conclusion, Dungan sees poverty—and not wealth—in Corinth: “The financial capacity of the congregations at Thessalonika and Corinth was such that Paul could not feel confident in asking for financial support.” David L. Dungan, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul: The Use of the Synoptic Tradition in the Regulation of Early Church Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 31. As Dungan wrote a decade earlier than Theissen, it would be interesting to see whether he would modify this conclusion based upon newer evidence.

³³ Theissen, *Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, 54.

³⁴ Hock, *Social Context*, 55.

³⁵ Dahl lists what would have been several of the Corinthians’ objections to Paul’s ministry, the most notable of which was Paul’s “lack of stability” and his resorting to manual labor. Dahl concludes that all of the Corinthian problems were ultimately centered upon the parties’ acceptance or rejection of Paul. Nils A. Dahl, “Paul and the Church at Corinth According to I Corinthians 1–4,” in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, ed. W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule, and R. R. Niebuhr (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1967), 321.

strata of society.³⁶ “Since such laborers were deemed to be ‘low-lives’ by the culturally elite, Paul’s practice of self-support by that means had already raised the issue of the propriety of his lifestyle.”³⁷ The Corinthian elite thus also determined the apostle Paul—and his teaching—to be unbecoming and unattractive.³⁸

Paul’s bivocational strategy in Corinth was, like his strategy in Thessalonica, humble (again, see Phil 2:7a). But whereas in Thessalonica that humility served as a warm reminder of his love for the Thessalonians, in Corinth his humility demanded that he endure the scornful wonder of people who could not and would not grant such a lowly figure the honor his apostolic position deserved. Paul’s actions, however, also carried a sharp rebuke to the Corinthian detractors: Paul’s great boast was the paradox of Christ’s power being magnified in Paul’s weakness, a determination and attitude far removed from the Corinthian elites’ attraction to worldly prestige and preoccupation with their own power.³⁹

Paul in Ephesus

Paul testified that he had earned his own living in Ephesus, reminding the Ephesian elders, “[Y]ou yourselves know that these hands [αἱ χεῖρες αὐτῶν] ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me” (Acts 20:34 ESV). Luke also indirectly confirms the same in Acts 19:11–12, referencing Paul’s σουδάρια (“handkerchiefs”) and σιμικίνθια (“aprons”) being used as thaumaturgical means to cure the sick. An investigation of these terms determines that they are the sweat-cloth and apron of the leatherworking artisan,⁴⁰ thus confirming that Paul resumed his tent-making. In Ephesus, Paul’s bivocational work provided for his personal sustenance even as it had in Corinth and Thessalonica.

³⁶ Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 209. See too Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 697.

³⁷ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 422.

³⁸ Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 211. See also Hock, *Social Context*, 60: “In the social world of a city like Corinth, Paul would have been a weak figure, without power, prestige, and privilege.”

³⁹ Robert Scott Nash, *1 Corinthians*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2009), 265. See also Fee: “When Paul uses [the word boasting] positively, his ‘boast’ (or ‘glory’) is ordinarily in things that stand in contradiction to human ‘boasting/glorifying’ Thus his preaching the gospel without pay is both a calculated decision so as not to hinder the gospel and an expression of his form of apostolic ‘weakness.’” Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 461.

⁴⁰ Thus, “face-cloth for wiping perspiration, corresp[onding] somewhat to our ‘handkerchief.’” Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. σουδάριον. Also, “apron, such as is worn by workers w[ith] σουδάριον Ac[ts] 19:12” (s.v. σιμικίνθιον).

An inquiry into Paul's bivocational strategy at Ephesus requires that we focus not so much upon the apostle's income there but upon what would have been his expenditures. With regard to the Ephesian ministry, Acts reports that Paul "entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:8–10 ESV).

Our investigation begins in the hall of Tyrannus. Depending on arrangements for use of the hall, Paul may have incurred significant expenditures well beyond the means of a common tentmaker. Keener's analysis of the passage leads him to propose four options for how the costs of the lecture hall may have been covered. These options have some overlap and are presented in order of increasing likelihood:⁴¹

1. Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla supported Paul's teaching in the hall by their own earnings or perhaps by a growing business under their leadership (cf. Acts 20:34);
2. Tyrannus or the hall's owner (if not Tyrannus) was a convert or sympathizer to Paul's ministry;
3. Paul paid lower rates by using the hall during its "off-hours" as reported in the Western text (D),⁴² where it is reported Paul taught "from the fifth hour until the tenth [ἀπὸ ὥρας πέμπτης ἕως δεκάτης]";⁴³
4. Wealthy benefactors supported what they viewed as a popular, growing movement.

This list is not without difficulty. A tentmaker's income was often insufficient to provide for one's necessities, let alone a hall rental. There is no evidence to suggest that Tyrannus was a convert, and in fact his name might have been only a moniker describing the man's unpleasant demeanor, marking him as one unlikely to give out discounts.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 3, 15:1–23:35 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 2834. Keener notes that he has adapted his list from Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 575.

⁴² A possibility that Nordling mentions. Nordling, *Philemon*, 22.

⁴³ As supported by uncial manuscript D, a few minuscules, and some ancient translations. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed. (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), 379.

⁴⁴ The word *τύραννος* (which was Tyrannus' name) means literally "autocratic ruler, despot, tyrant." Danker and Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. *τύραννος*. Hence, "Tyrannus" could have been a nickname given by students to a demanding teacher. Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 575.

These difficulties notwithstanding, we have evidence to lean into the fourth suggestion, that wealthy benefactors supported Paul's work in Ephesus. When Luke described the riot caused by the Ephesian silversmiths, he mentioned that certain Asiarchs urged Paul not to enter the fray (Acts 19:31). While the precise nature of the title Asiarch is debated, it is generally agreed that this is the title designated for a recognized civic leader.⁴⁵ Additionally, Keener notes that Asiarchs were "among [the] patrons of public education in Ephesus."⁴⁶ What is pertinent to the situation is that the Asiarchs, wealthy and influential patrons of public education in Ephesus, were "friends" (φίλοι) to Paul (Acts 19:31), and so quite possibly they were well-disposed to Paul's teaching in Tyrannus' lecture hall, even if they were not Christians themselves. Indeed, it seems possible that these Asiarchs supported Paul's work materially and that it was they in particular who could have funded the apostle's use of the lecture hall at least in part.

Further, the small number of Paul's coworkers in Ephesus renders it unlikely that Paul's labors alone supported the needs of a mission and missionary capable of reaching "all the residents of Asia" (Acts 19:10). Schnabel observes that during Paul's time in Ephesus, he was assisted by Epaphras (Col 1:3–8, 4:13), Philemon (Phlm 1–2), Aristarchus from Macedonia (Acts 19:20, 20:4, 27:2; Phlm 23), Gaius from Corinth (Acts 19:29; 1 Cor 1:14), and Tychicus and Trophimus (Acts 20:4; Col 4:7). Aquila and Priscilla were with Paul in Ephesus from the beginning, as was Timothy (1 Cor 16:10). Later Stephanas, Fortunatus and Archaicus visited Paul in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:17).⁴⁷

We know for certain only of the trade of Aquila and Priscilla, but we are not left without hints regarding the financial situation or social status of the others. Epaphras was a Gentile convert used by Paul to bring the gospel to Colossae,⁴⁸ whose "much hard labor" (Col 4:13) is described in ministerial—not manual—terms.⁴⁹ Wealthy Philemon owned at least one slave (Onesimus) and hosted the church in Colossae, though his role likely was not that of active preaching but of providing

⁴⁵ R. A. Kearsley, "Asiarchs," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al., vol. 1, A–C (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 495–497. Only at times did this title overlap with specific governing offices.

⁴⁶ Keener, *Acts*, 3:2835.

⁴⁷ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 2, *Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 1220.

⁴⁸ Nordling, *Philemon*, 333.

⁴⁹ Paul E. Deterding, *Colossians*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 187. Deterding suggests that Epaphras "also served to supervise those *who were working full time* in Laodicea and Hierapolis" (emphasis added).

material support.⁵⁰ Aristarchus is surrounded by “an aura of mystery,”⁵¹ and we can infer almost nothing of a trade or social status. Gaius was of sufficient wealth that he could host the whole Corinthian church (Rom 16:23), thus marking him as more likely an elite than a laborer—but this is only if the Gaius involved in the Ephesian riot (Acts 19:29) is the Gaius of Corinth, a matter far from certain.⁵² According to Stegemann’s prosopographical assessment, Tychicus was a slave.⁵³ Of Trophimus we can go no further than suggest he was a convert from paganism.⁵⁴ Finally, Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus were sent to Paul in Ephesus as official delegates of the Corinthian congregation, and thus their travel expenses were likely paid by that church.⁵⁵

With regard to finances, none of this suggests that these helpers—not even Tychicus the slave—were the destitute poor described as *πτωχοί*, and only very few (if any) can be qualified as the elite. Probably, then, most of the individuals listed were among the working poor (*οἱ πενέσται*).⁵⁶ Further, given the transitory nature of Paul’s Ephesian helpers, even those who had trades were likely unable to practice them consistently and therefore were unlikely to have earned their own living. The missionary enterprise would have required benefactors.

Drawing all things together, we may comfortably assume that Paul preached and catechized in the lecture hall of Tyrannus at Ephesus and that he earned his own

⁵⁰ Nordling declares Philemon’s status as “fellow worker” with Paul as commending Philemon’s benevolence in hosting the Colossian congregation but denies that he was a pastor or preacher. Nordling, *Philemon*, 24–25. Probably Philemon was converted through Paul’s lectures.

⁵¹ Nordling, *Philemon*, 337.

⁵² The matter is not easily decided, because Gaius was an incredibly common name. Keener, *Acts*, 3:2906. Witherington, equally hesitant, nevertheless deems it plausible. Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 594.

⁵³ Ekkehard Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 303. The authors are careful to declare that this does not have to mean Tychicus lived below subsistence level. Meeks’ assessment is that we have “no clear indicator” of Tychicus’ social standing. Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 56. In contrast, Gill believes that the ability to travel with Paul marks Tychicus (and others) as members of the social elite. David W. J. Gill, “Acts and the Urban Elites,” in *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, vol. 2, *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting*, ed. David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 110.

⁵⁴ Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, The Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 829.

⁵⁵ Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 58. In contrast, while not saying so explicitly, Lockwood implies that Stephanas was not only the source of travel financing but of a monetary gift to Paul as well. Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 625.

⁵⁶ For this distinction, see Lothar Coenen, “Poor: *πένης*,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, vol. 2, *G-Pre* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 820–821.

living through his manual labor. Simultaneously, he established a network of missionaries, which he sent forth to proclaim the gospel throughout Asia.⁵⁷ As just examined, the financial requirements of this enterprise suggest that the Asiarchs were likely a source of funding not only for renting the lecture hall but also for the travel and expenditures of the Pauline helpers. Paul's tentmaking paid for his own needs, which freed the financial resources given by Paul's benefactors to provide for the needs of the ministry.

III. Analysis

While neither the apostle Paul's writings nor Luke's record in Acts indicates that they should be taken as templates for bivocational ministry, nevertheless we would do well to examine how each of Paul's three bivocational situations illuminate a modern bivocational context. In this, however, the reader is given a caveat. The factors that determined Paul's success—or failure—in implementing bivocational ministry simply cannot be brought wholesale from an Ancient Near East culture to our modern Western setting. What determined Paul's success cannot be relied upon to determine our own. The analysis below is given to stimulate thought and conversation around the bivocational issue, not for uncritical imitation.

In our conversation prompted by Paul's bivocational experiences, three items present themselves for consideration: strategy, sustainability, and spiritual outcome.

Thessalonica

Strategy: Paul's humble strategy in Thessalonica was straightforward. The fledgling Thessalonian congregation, made up of a small artisan community, simply could not sustain a minister of the gospel financially. Whereas normally we would expect that the minister provide the word and the congregation provide his sustenance, in this case Paul did both, and did so for the benefit of all involved.

Sustainability: We do not know for certain whether Paul would have maintained bivocational labor in Thessalonica long-term. From his Epistles to them, we know that he upheld his manual labor among them as worthy of diligent emulation in their labors (1 Thess 4:11; 2 Thess 3:7–9).⁵⁸ This might suggest an ongoing combination of work and ministry.

However, only the initial state of the congregation demanded that Paul earn his own living. Their later gift to Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5; 1 Thess 3:6–7; 2 Cor 11:9)

⁵⁷ This echoes Nordling's conclusion that Epaphras was Paul's emissary, sent to Colossae from Ephesus, and that Philemon's reception of and support for Epaphras' work actually made the congregation in Philemon's household a reality. Nordling, *Philemon*, 22–25.

⁵⁸ Hock, *Social Context*, 48.

suggests that while the socially homogenous infant congregation was initially unable to support a minister of the gospel, as the congregation grew over time it gained access to more financial resources. The ability to give gifts of support to Paul might indicate their increased ability to support a minister. Furthermore, while Paul's comparative exhortation that the Corinthians give to the Jerusalem aid effort highlighted the extreme poverty of the Thessalonians, it conversely confirmed their extreme generosity (2 Cor 8:1–5). Given their combined poverty and generosity, an ongoing bivocational ministry in Thessalonica, while perhaps not being completely necessary, would nevertheless have been a financial buttress for the church.

Spiritual outcome: Paul's personal burden was considerably eased by the seamless overlap between workbench and pulpit. That, combined with the communal nature of the fledgling congregation's shared living quarters, workdays, and meals, provided Paul an unparalleled level of access to their lives. Every moment of the day was fit for pastoral care and conversations, and the result was an indelible bond between minister and congregation. Their gratefulness for the gospel and for Paul's ministry among them, as evidenced by their later gifts, sustained Paul's spirits. His labor among them was no bitterly resented hardship but one that Paul considered to be rich and rewarding.

Corinth

Strategy: Paul's bivocational strategy at Corinth was to affirm pastoral authority and maintain pastoral autonomy free from patrons' restrictions. Furthermore, his self-sufficiency identified him with the lower classes, affirming that the riches of the gospel were freely available to all and were not tightly controlled by a privileged few.

Sustainability: Hypothetically, given the apparent presence of societal elites from her earliest days, the Corinthian congregation *could have* provided for Paul indefinitely. Paul's financial choice to refuse their patronage, however, shifts the question to actual sustainability. In that, the apparent stability of Aquila and Priscilla's workshop provided a steady—if not lavish—income (Acts 18:1–4). Combining that with Paul's lengthy stay in Corinth, we conclude that he could have financially sustained his bivocational ministry there indefinitely.

Spiritual outcome: The Corinthian ministry was financially sustainable, but the congregation's relationship to Paul was emotionally taxing. The view—held by some at Corinth—that his manual labors were inherently demeaning disheartened Paul, and he had to contend for the respect rightfully due his office. Of Paul's three bivocational strategies, Corinth produced the greatest level of difficulty, demanding not only tiring physical labor but also exhausting emotional costs.

Furthermore, bivocational ministry in Corinth did very little to resolve congregational conflict. If anything, the apologia in his Corinthian letters shows that it

heightened and furthered that conflict (e.g., 1 Cor 9:3–6, 9:12b–14, 9:18; 2 Cor 6:3, 11:7–9). Yet for Paul to relinquish ministerial autonomy to an elite patron was unthinkable. We consider the bivocational situation in Corinth to be an extreme case that demanded an equal response but which came at great cost for the apostle.

Ephesus

The particular circumstances of Paul's bivocational ministry and strategy in Ephesus are by far the least certain of our three examples, and therefore analysis is the most speculative.

Strategy: If our analysis is correct, Paul in Ephesus provided for his own needs so that other monies could be used toward mission expansion.

Sustainability: Given that Ephesus was the longest of Paul's ministries (Acts 19:8–10), the sustainability of this model was quite high. But we also note that this sustainability probably was made possible by generous benefactors richly supporting Paul's missionary efforts with no apparent expectations for control over him.

Added duties also accompany this model: Paul labored over his workbench, shepherded the young congregation, and taught regularly at the lecture hall. Unlike in Thessalonica, these vocations did not overlap temporally, thus increasing the burdens placed upon Paul. Additionally, the expanding missionary enterprise would have necessitated Paul act as an administrator: interacting with benefactors, guiding and directing missionary labors, and overseeing both work and funds. The skills, duties, and unmarried status required to sustain this ministry are highly unique to Paul's particular personality, experiences, and circumstances.

Spiritual outcome: Regarding the Ephesian congregation itself, Paul's comments to the Ephesian elders on Miletus (Acts 20:18–35) and his Epistle written to them while in prison indicate a fruitful, respectful, and beneficial relationship between the congregation and the apostles.

The model of bivocational ministry in Ephesus also allowed for word and sacrament ministry to be widely disseminated. Ministry efforts—and their results—were multiplied all over Asia and even ultimately yielded for the church catholic no fewer than six canonical Epistles written by Paul to churches, ministers, or residents of Asia Minor.⁵⁹

IV. Conclusions

It is the desire of every faithful missiologist to give shape to, biblical foundations for, and encouragement in mission. In that spirit, then, I would like to speak

⁵⁹ Gal, Eph, Col, 1 and 2 Tim, and Phlm.

to church leaders and frontline pastors alike as I offer conclusions for bivocational ministry based on this study.

Each bivocational ministry is an entirely unique phenomenon and cannot be replicated or repeated. The three contexts wherein Paul labored bivocationally gave rise to three different strategies, each of which arose organically from factors that included cultural settings, societal expectations, congregational needs and particularities, and the minister's vocational and avocational skillset. For this reason, I doubt that Paul's tactics in one city could have been replicated in another location.

This might teach us that very few secular vocations and even fewer ministers could universally thrive in every bivocational setting. In interviews with bivocational pastors for my dissertation research, I repeatedly observed indications that, much as had happened in Paul's missionary experiences, our Lord had carefully arranged circumstances unique to each emerging ministry, matching skills to man and circumstances to congregation and congregation to pastor with such singular deftness as to articulate clearly that he remains the gracious and all-knowing Lord of his church. Pastors considering bivocational ministry would be wise to consider their ministry context and all potential vocational skills and to seek the markers of a divinely opened door for secular labor that is fitting and unique to their setting. Church leaders would be wise to trust deeply in the Lord's hidden guiding of the divine call, fully expecting him to craft a pastor/church bivocational match that none could have predicted.

In my opinion, bivocational ministry as an initial strategy is to be considered suspect. Paul's example demonstrates that a strategy was developed only after bivocational ministry was presented as a pragmatic solution. Upon finding themselves in a situation necessitating bivocational ministry, pastor and congregation would be wise to investigate and implement strategies to lessen burdens and improve effectiveness. Apart from a well-defined necessity, however, they would do well to consider what benefits they hope to glean that outweigh the benefits of a dedicated full-time minister.

For Paul, bivocational ministry in Ephesus was fruitful, in Thessalonica rich and rewarding, but in Corinth it was a cure so costly that it made the disease almost seem preferable. Financial factors must not be the only consideration for long-term sustainability of a bivocational ministry. We must consider a matrix made up of spiritual, cultural, historical, physical, emotional, financial, and even familial concerns. Furthermore, as these factors are inevitably in flux, a ministry and minister that seek

bivocational ministry as a means of sustainability is a ministry that must regularly reevaluate a bivocational approach's continued applicability.⁶⁰

The examples of Paul's three bivocational contexts contribute much to the emerging conversation. Through them one becomes aware of the myriad possibilities that exist for bivocational ministry, and hopefully one's eyes can be opened to the possibilities that exist in one's own contexts. But we must close with a reminder that is the one constant in each of Paul's bivocational ministries, and so true for us today: *Christ is yet preached*.

Regardless of hardships and burdens, regardless of specific strategies required by particular places, the universal truth of the gospel continues to ring forth from pulpit and altar. Bivocational ministry might not look like the ministry paradigm to which we have become accustomed, but in no way does that lessen what God accomplishes through it. He continues to confirm his promise that his church shall remain, that he shall be in the midst of the saints when they gather. He ensures that the saving gospel of Jesus Christ and him crucified is the firm foundation upon which his church stands, and that through it the church derives her life. And thus we know that, as long as it means Christ is yet preached, bivocational ministry can occupy an important place in the church's missional life together.

⁶⁰ Regarding Paul's example, let us consider, first, that none of us are the apostle Paul, and none of us possess his extraordinary skill, endurance, and perseverance. And therefore, we should approach bivocational ministry as a long-term strategy and solution very carefully. Second, even the apostle Paul's longest time of ministry in a single city was shorter than the typical duration of one of our calls to the pastoral ministry.