

# TENTMAKERS

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## BEH ND THE JOB TRAINING

Sometime around Thanksgiving of 1982, I took in my portable videocassette recorder to be repaired by a local electronics **shop** that **specializes** in videocassettes. I had taken the recorder to that shop once before, and the repairman had solved the problem in a few moments free of charge.

As I entered, I noticed that the shop looked different. Its walls were covered with posters. They were Christian posters. One said, "Who is **Yeshua**?" In smaller print, it said that this name is the Jewish name for Jesus. There were other posters, mostly with cartoon-type drawings of wide-eyed children, and they all said "Jesus loves you," or some similar **message**.

The man **who** took my recorder told me that the store was under new management. He took my recorder, noted the problems on the repair sheet, gave me a receipt, and told me it would take a few days. Little did I know how many days "a few" were.

I never heard from the shop. A few weeks later, I came back. No, the recorder wasn't ready. In fact, it hadn't even been looked at yet. The girl told me it would take another week. So I came back a week later. No, they had been swamped; it still wasn't ready. Christmas was approaching, and I wanted the recorder to record Christmas day activities. I came back two days before Christmas. Sorry, he hadn't looked at it yet.

I confronted the man. I asked him how this recorder could sit, untouched, for a month. "Because we're real busy," he said. But why don't you warn customers about the month's delay? Just send the business away. He got angry. I reminded him that the man who owned the shop before him had always gotten the work out fast. "Well he only took in three recorders a day! He never had anything to do. We do a big business here." I responded: "No, you don't. You take in a lot of machines; you don't do much business." And I left.

Almost nine months later, I took the recorder back again to be looked at. (I have had problems with videocassette recorders over the years—all of them.) There were no "Yeshua" signs up. That was a good sign. There were no "Jesus loves you" posters. I asked the man taking in the machines about the previous delay. I told him about my previous experience. "Oh, **that** guy. He was fired last month. He never got any work done."

### Whose Name is on Your Work?

I thought about those posters. People of various religious backgrounds came into that shop over several months. Maybe they noticed the posters. Anyway, the person who put them up must have intended people to notice them. If they did, the signs testified to the fact that a Christian was in charge of that shop.

There is nothing innately wrong with testimonies. The

gospel is spread by testimonies. The problem is, the testimony is always going to be judged by the performance, appearance, and life style of the person giving the testimony. In a business, all the customer sees is appearance and performance. Because the late 1960s radically altered the whole concept of acceptable fashion, today there are all sorts of different appearances. Computer geniuses may look like wild men, while hard-core revolutionaries or cultists may look like a 1962 **Brylcreme** advertisement. So people are judged more and more by their performance on the job.

I keep thinking of those posters. I live in a town with a Dairy Queen or a Baptist church on every corner. People assume that most of the people they do business with are Christians. So when schlock Christian posters go up, it's a testimony: "I'm **really** a Christian, I'm a super Christian. I'm a Christian with posters! Not just bumper stickers, you understand. Anyone can paste on a bumper sticker. I put posters on my walls."

There's an old story about a boxing match between a Jew and a Catholic. In the audience are a Jewish rabbi and a Catholic priest, sitting side by side. The bell sounds for the first round, and the Catholic boxer makes the sign of the cross over his chest. "What exactly does that mean?" asks the rabbi of the priest. The priest replies, "If he can't fight, it doesn't mean a **thing**!"

So it is with posters. The problem is, the sign of the cross identifies the religious commitment of the boxer. If he can't fight well, it doesn't help him. It doesn't mean a thing. But what if he fights dirty? Then it means plenty. It means that his religious commitment has no real influence over his performance. It reflects badly on his church. So it is with posters.

When I went into that shop, I should have been prepared for the poor service. Schlock posters do not a calling make. A person who puts up schlock posters as his testimonial is lacking in Christian maturity. A book rack, fine. A tract rack, maybe. But not posters. And not posters, above all, in the first few weeks of new management.

What the customer wants to see is performance, not posters. When the work is done well, done on time, and done for the price agreed upon, then the customer may be interested in a slogan. He has seen that the worker has produced competent work. He may then be willing to ask himself: "Is there a relationship between how this man performs and the faith he espouses? Is the reliability of his performance a product of the reliability of his faith?"

The problem arises when the work is substandard. This is not the time to pass a tract. By your fruit they shall know you. By you, initially, they shall know your God. Produce bad work, and your testimony is compromised.

### The Younger Worker

No one ever sits down and explains this principle to younger workers. A century ago, young men were more often trained as apprentices. The master was not going to risk his reputation as a result of poor performance on the apprentice's part. His reputation was a capital asset. So the apprentice was assigned boring, simple tasks initially. The master would see how he performed in small tasks before he was assigned to more important tasks. This is a fundamental biblical principle: service in menial tasks before service in ruling tasks. This is why men who want to become elders in a church are supposed to serve as deacons first.

Today, we substitute performance of menial intellectual tasks—the taking of written examinations—for service to men “on the job.” This is why 25-year-old, unmarried, inexperienced young men can become ordained ministers, meaning **superelders**. The devastated congregations in their wake are predictable. It takes two or three ruined congregations to complete the apprenticeship training of a contemporary superelder.

White collar workers are recruited from the same stratum of society as superelders: on campuses. Pass a mid-term exam and a final exam per course, ten courses per year, for four years, and you're a potential white collar professional. Their training is impersonal. No one need ever speak a word directly to them in four years. Pass the exams, and you are given the certificate. No one gives you “on the job training.”

I remember Duncan Smith. Duncan was about a B-average student, but he had a knack for taking computerized national examinations. He could score in the 99th percentile every time. He was about to graduate and was looking for a job. I asked him what he was looking for. “To get someone to pay me to take computerized exams for the rest of my life,” he said.

In Japan, a college graduate enters a firm at age 21 and retires from that same firm at age 55 (unless he is part of the highest levels of management, in which case they keep him on indefinitely). In some firms, he is taken under the wing of a 40 to 50 year-old man, who “shows him the ropes” for up to a decade. Until a man has spent 15 years within the firm, and has been transferred many times to understand the whole system, he is not eligible for a senior-level management position. In effect, he gets his apprenticeship training on the job. But because he is a college graduate, he is not paid menial wages. Because he is expected to stay with the firm throughout his career, the firm can invest the time and training in his apprenticeship.

The American system is much different. The young man is seldom instructed personally by a superior. The young man, if he is a “hot shot,” is a threat to the older man's position. The kid can leapfrog over older men. Furthermore, he will probably leave the company if the firm doesn't allow him to leapfrog over older, mature, but less aggressive employees. So firms have had a tendency to let these men “seek their

level of incompetence” rapidly. But pride goeth before the fall, and when they fall, they take whole corporate divisions with them.

### The Church's Role

Older men do feel threatened by these younger men. The American corporate system offers older men little security. In recessions, middle-level managers with 20 years on the job are sacrificed without a second thought, to be replaced by energetic, hungry younger men who perhaps can “turn the company around.” So these men have little incentive to help younger men.

Who can do it? The church is one of the few institutions which can counsel younger men about the realities of honest work, a willingness to dedicate themselves to a life of profitable service, and the proper ways of advancing one's career. Of course, younger men may leave the congregation. They may resent the interference from church officers. But then their testimony will be for some other congregation. Let the other congregation suffer the consequences.

The problem is, so few church elders today see any responsibility for creating training classes for younger workers —“behind the job training.” They may even feel overwhelmed by the energy and drive of these younger men. While these men may not replace them on the job, perhaps they will replace them as elders. Because age is not respected, and brightness is, younger men are deprived of the counsel that in other centuries they might have received. The young worker is as deprived of counsel as the young pastor is, and the “hotter” the hot shot is, the less counsel anyone is likely to give him. Besides, since the system immediately rewards his particular talents —so long as he doesn't stumble — he may not feel that he needs counsel.

No one told that repairman not to put up his schlock posters until after he had demonstrated his skills to his customers. No one tells young single pastors that they had better leave their present church when they get married (for they have necessarily rejected many daughters of many families in that church). No one tells younger men how to deal with older, experienced men, whose aid in navigating the corporate maze can salvage a threatened career. No one tells young self-employed men the realities of hard work, estimating (and sticking to) time schedules and budgets, and “going the extra mile” for customers. And because no one tells them, society gets stuck with a wall full of framed bachelor's degrees and schlock posters.

But older men must understand in advance: younger men can be far brighter than they are, and not very patient with the plodder's skills. They need time to learn the ropes. Older men had better learn how to channel the talents of the younger ones, instead of marking off 90% of the turf and assuming that it belongs to age. This isn't Japan, after all. There must be give and take, with mutual respect, and mutual deference to demonstrated skills. This is what the division of labor is all about (1 Cor. 12).