
LBTS Faculty Publications and Presentations

10-2011

Lessons from a Tentmaking Ascetic in the Egyptian Desert: The Case of Evagrius of Pontus

Edward L. Smither

Liberty University, elsmithere@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), [History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons](#), [History of Religions of Western Origin Commons](#), [Other Religion Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smither, Edward L., "Lessons from a Tentmaking Ascetic in the Egyptian Desert: The Case of Evagrius of Pontus" (2011). *LBTS Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 380.

https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs/380

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in LBTS Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu.

Lessons from a Tentmaking Ascetic in the Egyptian Desert: The Case of Evagrius of Pontus¹

EDWARD L. SMITHER

In this article, an invitation is given to modern practitioners and thinkers on missionary tentmaking — especially those from the majority world — to reflect on the apparent tentmaking approach of the fourth-century monk Evagrius of Pontus (c. 345–399). Though not a missionary himself, Evagrius proved to be innovative in his approach to work, which sustained his primary spiritual calling — monasticism. After exploring the necessity and context for his manual labor, his theology of work and the relationship between physical and spiritual labor will be considered. Finally, some suggestions for applying Evagrius’ tentmaking principles will be offered.

Introduction

In his recent book on missionary tentmaking, Patrick Lai asserts that “. . . churches tend to look backward instead of forward for direction. We look backward at what has already been accomplished and limit the opportunities for God to work based on what He has done in the past” (Lai 2005:371). While Lai is warning against a complacent acceptance of traditional thought and practice in mission without a fresh vision for the present or future, I suggest that a healthy interaction with mission and church history will actually humble, inspire, and even instruct modern practitioners. This conviction was evident at the 1999 Iguassu (Brazil) Dialogue — a meeting that considered global missiology for the twenty-first century — as papers devoted to Celtic, Nestorian, Moravian, Jesuit, and Coptic missions were included in the conference (Taylor 2000:489–517). Also, in a recent monograph on business as mission, a work largely dedicated to theory and practice in tentmaking, Howard Owens contributed an article on the Nestorian approach to tentmaking (2006:133–146). In light of this renewed appreciation for church history and its relationship to contemporary missiological thought and practice, my aim in this article is to consider the case of the

Edward L. Smither (Ph.D., University of Wales-Lampeter) is Associate Professor of Church History and Intercultural Studies at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary. Smither, who served in cross-cultural ministry for ten years in France and North Africa, is the author of *Augustine as Mentor: A Model for Preparing Spiritual Leaders* and translator of Francis Decret’s *Early Christianity in North Africa*. He may be contacted at elsmith@liberty.edu.

fourth-century monk Evagrius of Pontus (c. 345–399), who took an apparent tentmaking approach in his monasticism — that is, he sustained himself and his ministry through labor.

Before moving into the argument, two qualifications should be made about Evagrius' ministry as well as the subject of tentmaking. First, as he was mostly known for his implication in the Origenist controversy as well as his work as a monastic theologian, it is clear that Evagrius was not a missionary or even a missionary-monk like Augustine of Canterbury (d. 604), Columba (c. 521–597), or Columban (543–615). Rather, his spiritual vocation was pursuing an austere ascetic existence, primarily in the Egyptian desert. While his activities certainly included prayer, manual labor, fasting from food and sleep, reading and memorizing Scripture, and participating in liturgical assemblies, Evagrius also taught Scripture and spiritual disciplines, showed hospitality to visitors, and emerged as the most prolific writer among the fourth-century Egyptian monks (cf. Harmless 2004:315; Casiday 2006:7, 10–12, 36; Caner 2002:42; Brakke 2006:50).

Though Evagrius was not a missionary, there are several parallels between his experiences and those of tentmaking missionaries today. First, Evagrius exhibited a profound sense of calling to serve God. Second, he understood what it meant to forsake his homeland and live cross-culturally as he migrated from a Greek context in Asia Minor and settled in a Coptic milieu in Egypt (cf. Linge 2000:538; Driscoll 2005:5–6). Third, he had a primary focus — prayer and knowing God — that was clearly more important to him than his manual labor. Fourth, it was necessary that he work in order to sustain himself, others, and the ministry in general. Fifth, he ran the risk of being under-supported materially. Finally, he was forced to think through the relationship between spiritual and manual labor. Hence, Evagrius' approach to tentmaking, even as a monk, is worth investigating.

Second, a great deal has been written in the past 30 years on the notion of tentmaking, platforms, and more recently, kingdom business and business as mission. While the scope of this article does not allow for a complete interaction with the various definitions and perspectives on tentmaking which are being treated adequately elsewhere, a brief word will suffice (see Wilson 2002; Hamilton 1987; Lewis, 1996; Befus 2001; Yamamori and Eldred 2003; Rundle and Steffen 2003; Lai 2005; Steffen and Barnett 2006; and Pocock, Van Rheenen, and McConnell 2005:209–244).

The notion of tentmaking, of course, originates with Paul who, along with colleagues such as Priscilla and Aquila, supported himself through working with his hands — worked that also gained credibility for the gospel (cf. 2 Thess. 2:8–12). Though the circumstances of modern tentmakers vary greatly, my basic assumption is that tentmaking efforts provide material support on some level to sustain missionaries and mission work, and that this labor also provides credibility and access for the gospel. This approach has become more important in the last 50 years because many countries, after gaining their independence, have banned open Christian proclamation, and their governments have discontinued offering missionary visas. Missionaries have been forced to become more creative and to develop marketable skills in order to access such contexts. While tentmaking has facilitated access, it has also become a viable expression of holistic mission — ministering the gospel through word and deed. Finally, as missions sending has increased dramatically in the last 30 years from

the churches of the Global South — churches lacking the resources of their Northern counterparts — tentmaking has also emerged as an alternative form of generating support for missionaries and mission work.

Given these points of qualification, in this article, following a brief narrative of Evagrius' background and journey in monasticism, I will explore the context of his work, his thoughts and conviction about work, and his views on the relationship between physical and spiritual labor. My hope is that modern missionaries — especially those being sent from the more economically challenged churches of the Global South — would glean some helpful principles from Evagrius, and that the current tentmaking debate would also be enriched by a model from the early church.

Who Was Evagrius?

Evagrius was born around 345 in the city of Ibora in Pontus (Asia Minor). The son of a country bishop, he was educated in philosophy and rhetoric, which meant that he probably came from a family of some means. In the late 350s, he was ordained as a reader under Bishop Basil of Caesarea. It was probably at this time that Evagrius became a monk, following the example of Basil who had combined his clerical calling with coenobitic (communal) monasticism (cf. Harmless 2004:312; Casiday 6–7). In the late 370s, Evagrius was made a deacon by Gregory of Nazianzus in the church at Constantinople. There Evagrius served the bishop in the battle against Arianism and was involved in the council of Constantinople of 381. Following an apparent sexual affair at Constantinople, he fled to Jerusalem where he joined Rufinus, Melania the Elder, and others in a monastic circle devoted to studying Origen's writings (cf. Harmless 2004:314; Young 2001:56). After confessing his failures to Melania, Evagrius was encouraged by her to continue his ascetic journey in Egypt. In 383, he arrived in Nitria where he apprenticed under Ammonius and the Tall Brothers for two years before moving to Kellia, an environment of greater solitude, where he was mentored from a distance by Macarius the Egyptian and Macarius the Alexandrian (cf. Harmless 2004:313–315). By the time Evagrius reached Kellia in 385, where he would largely remain until his death around 399, he had gone from one end of the monastic spectrum as a city dwelling monk-cleric in the coenobitic tradition to being a more isolated, desert-dwelling anchorite (hermit). Evagrius was surely following the counsel of the abbas who “approve highly of an anachoresis that is undertaken by degrees” (Evagrius, *To Eulogios* 29.32 in Sinkewicz 2003:56).

As noted, despite his pursuit of monastic solitude, Evagrius was in regular contact with others as a teacher of Scripture, prayer, and spiritual disciplines and through offering hospitality to visitors. A recipient of a classical education that certainly emphasized reading and writing, Evagrius entered the predominantly oral environment of the Egyptian abbas — many of whom were actually illiterate — and he put this tradition to writing (cf. Harmless 2004:311; Driscoll 2005:3). His writings generally fell into three categories: ascetic treatises (such as *The Practical Treatise*, *The Gnostic*, *The Gnostic Chapters*, *On Prayer*, *Talking Back*, *On Thoughts*, *Foundations of the Monastic Life*, *On The Eight Thoughts*, *To Monks in Monasteries and Communities*, and *Exhortation to a Virgin*); biblical commentaries (such as *Job*, *Ecclesiastes*, *On the “Our Father,”* and *Luke*), and a corpus of 64 letters. Evagrius' greatest theological contribution was articulating his eight thoughts (*logismoi*) that inhibited spiritual

progress — gluttony, lust, love of money, anger, dejection, *akedia* (listlessness), vain-glory, and pride. These thoughts were introduced to the Western church by Evagrius' disciple John Cassian, and after Gregory the Great combined the ideas of vainglory and pride, they became known in the Western medieval church as the seven deadly sins (cf. Linge 554). In short, in his monastic theology, Evagrius emphasized practical spirituality (observed through spiritual disciplines) along with a pursuit of knowledge (*gnosis*) of the Holy Trinity in which a key outcome was *apatheia* — possessing a “pure heart” (cf. Casiday 7, 36; Driscoll 2005:13, 19, 63). Let us now turn our attention to two aspects of Evagrius' context — voluntary poverty and the resulting need to work — followed by five principles about work gleaned from his observed practice and his writings.

Two Aspects of Context

Voluntary Poverty

Jeremy Driscoll observes, “voluntary poverty — the renunciation of material goods — is a defining feature of monastic life” (2005:71). While this seems to be an obvious assumption when considering monasticism in general, it should be noted that many of the coenobitic monasteries, such as those led by Pachomius, Jerome, and Augustine, were often generously endowed by the gifts of benefactors, including those of wealthy ascetics like Melania who withdrew from the world and gave their estates to the monastery. Though monks and ascetics such as these certainly lived simply, they were not in danger of what Wendy Mayer calls “structural” or “economic poverty” (2008:150). For Evagrius and his anchoritic colleagues, however, it was a much different story. Brakke comments, “Unlike his coenobitic brother, who took his place in a well-structured collective, the semi-eremical monk had to manage his own financial affairs and thus monastic renunciation complicated his relationship to money and possessions rather than ending it completely.” He adds that “Evagrius' ideal monk lives simply, at the edge of poverty” (2008:77). Hence, Evagrius' entire monastic system, including his thoughts about and strategies for manual labor, was framed by a context of voluntary poverty that put the monk at significant economic risk.

Regarding such circumstances as a blessed liberation from possessions, Evagrius wrote that “charity rejoices in poverty,” arguing that this impoverished love aided the monk in his ultimate quest for knowledge (Evagrius, *To Monks in Monasteries and Communities* 16 in Sinkewicz 123; cf. Driscoll 2003:79, 81). Further, Evagrius urged the monks to be content in poverty: “Therefore, after laying aside the thoughts of anxiety, let us cast our anxiety on the Lord (cf. Ps. 54:23; 1 Pet. 5:7) and be satisfied with what we now have (cf. Heb. 13:5); and living in poverty of life and clothing” (Evagrius, *On Thoughts* 6 in Sinkewicz 157). This perspective served as a defense against three areas of temptation in particular, two of which are already categorized among Evagrius' thoughts: anger, the love of money, and worries about money.

Evagrius was aware that some monks experienced bitterness toward parents who had disinherited them. Others became angry over simply not having enough money to cover their basic needs. In *Talking Back*, Evagrius counsels the monk to put away anger by embracing his poverty and trusting God to provide for his needs (cf. Evagrius, *Talking Back* 3.2, 18; Brakke 2008:80–81).

Though Evagrius did not see money as inherently evil, warnings against the love of money (*philargyria*) appear throughout his writings (cf. Evagrius, *On the Eight Thoughts* 3.1–14; Brakke 2008:77). For instance, in *To Monks* he warns his readers, “If you desire riches you will have many worries” (Evagrius, *To Monks* 57 in Sinkewicz 126). Thus, again, embracing voluntary poverty freed the monks from the powerful hold of having and desiring possessions.

Finally, Evagrius acknowledged that many monks were worried about their financial security. Concerns of growing old or potentially falling ill — circumstances that would hamper the monks' ability to work and provide for their needs — were the source of various temptations for Evagrius' colleagues. As a result, some were driven to over work in order to store up provisions for the future, while others were tempted to withhold charity or hospitality (cf. Evagrius, *The Practical Treatise* 9, 18; *On the Eight Thoughts* 3.3–5, 7; *Talking Back* 3.4–10, 28, 30, 37–38, 40, 44, 49, 52, 55; Sinkewicz xxvi–xxvii; Brakke 2008:83). In the face of these real concerns, Evagrius again encouraged the monks to trust God for their needs:

Having therefore what you need for the present time, do not worry about the future, whether that be a day, a week, or some months. When tomorrow has arrived, that time will provide what is needed, as long as you are seeking above all for the kingdom of God and his righteousness. (Evagrius, *Foundation* 4 in Sinkewicz 6; cf. Evagrius, *Talking Back* 3.23, 29; and Brakke 2008:84)

The Need to Work

For Evagrius the context of voluntary poverty — what Brakke noted as creating economic “complications” — made it necessary for the monks to support themselves through manual labor. A fairly well established practice in the Egyptian desert, especially for monks who were tempted to wander and beg, Evagrius instructed his colleagues: “Give thought to working with your hands, if possible both day and night” (Evagrius, *Foundations of the Monastic Life* 8 in Sinkewicz 9; cf. Brakke 2008:82; Caner 24). In his exhortation to virgins, he encouraged them to spend the first hour of the day reading Scripture, and then the second in manual labor (Evagrius, *Exhortation to a Virgin* 4). Though this counsel to begin work early may have been given to avoid the heat of the day, it also shows that manual labor was an important and integral part of the ascetic's day.

Assuming that work was the basis for the monk's livelihood, Evagrius also proved to be innovative in his choice of monastic labor as he took up calligraphy. Though Abba Isaiah deemed calligraphy as an inferior trade compared to weaving rope — the most common form of manual labor among Egyptian monks — it seems that Evagrius chose a job that put to use his unique skills as a literate and formally educated monk (cf. Caner 46; Harmless 2004:315; Brakke 2008:83). Indeed, books were less common and less valued in the largely oral context of fourth-century Egypt; however, Evagrius does seem to break new ground in a field that would be dominated by monks in the medieval period. Ironically, Evagrius' own writings survived through the work of copyists — including translations into Syriac and Armenian that were not discovered until the twentieth century (cf. Harmless 2007:140–141). Hence, his monastic theology was preserved through his monastic labor.

Five Principles on Work

In light of Evagrius' monastic journey and his context of voluntary poverty, let us now consider Evagrius' convictions about work and how manual labor related to spiritual labor. From a survey of Evagrius' writings, primarily his ascetic treatises, five predominant themes emerge: (1) work was to be done with excellence; (2) work should be done with integrity; (3) work should render the monk self-sufficient; (4) work was for the sake of providing for others; and (5) work ultimately aided monastic progress.

Excellence

Palladius reports that Evagrius did remarkable work as a calligrapher — that his penmanship was excellent and that he had mastered a certain style (Oxyrhynchus) of calligraphy (cf. Palladius, *Lausaic History* 38; Harmless 2007:139). In a teaching on prayer, Evagrius' analogy to labor also seems to reveal a conviction about working with excellence. He writes, "Just as it is impossible to learn a skill without having persistently devoted one's time to it, so it is impossible to acquire prayer without having devoted oneself to God with an upright heart" (Evagrius, *Exhortations* 2.19 in Sinkewicz 221). Evagrius' commitment to excellent work was also reinforced by the fact that he apparently enjoyed calligraphy. While many of the Egyptian anchorites viewed manual labor as a negative consequence of the fall of man, Evagrius spoke of God's goodness in creation by making an analogy to his trade:

But God, out of his love, has provided creation as a mediator: it is like letters. Just as someone who reads letters, by their beauty senses the power and ability of the hand and the finger which wrote them together with the intention of the writer, thus he looks upon creation with understanding, perceives the hand [= the Son] and the finger [= the Holy Spirit] of its Creator as well as his intention, that is, his love. (Evagrius, *Letter to Melania* 2:35–48 in Harmless 2004:331; cf. Evagrius, *Gnostic Chapters* 3.57; Harmless 2007:154)

In Evagrius' case, his manual labor as a calligrapher reflected the glory of God, and thus it was an enjoyable and worthwhile enterprise.

Integrity

In addition to working with excellence, Evagrius commanded his readers to work hard, to be good stewards, and to go about their work and business with integrity. As noted, Evagrius discouraged monks from wandering, and he also condemned laziness. He writes to the virgins, "She who diligently attends to the work enjoined upon her will find a great reward; but she who neglects it will be neglected" (Evagrius, *Virgin* 20a in Sinkewicz 133). Appealing to the monks to be good stewards, he warns, "One who squanders the goods of the monastery offends God; one who is negligent with them will not go unpunished" (Evagrius, *To Monks* 75 in Sinkewicz 127; cf. *To Monks* 73–74, 76, 86, 93). For Evagrius, this stewardship also extended to taking care of work tools. He adds, "The foolish monk neglects the tools of his art; the prudent one takes care of them" (Evagrius, *To Monks* 79 in Sinkewicz 127).

Evagrius also advocated honesty when it came time for the monks to sell their goods at the market. In fact, in order to keep from succumbing to a love of money, he suggested the following radical measures:

In the giving and receiving of payment you cannot avoid sin. So, whether you are selling or buying, take a small loss on the just price, lest you get caught up by the meticulousness in the ways of greed regarding the price and fall into dealings that cause harm to the soul, such as disputes, oaths, and perjuries, and in such things you cast dishonor on our honorable purpose and you shame its dignity. (Evagrius, *Foundations* 8 in Sinkewicz 9)

In the same teaching, Evagrius advised that it might be better for the monks to employ a trusted middle man to do their market business for them:

Bearing this in mind, guard yourself from buying and selling. If you choose the better option and this possibility is available to you, cast this concern of yours onto some other trustworthy person, so that with an even temperament you can possess good and joyous hopes. (Evagrius, *Foundations* 8 in Sinkewicz 9)

Finally, Evagrius urged the monks to avoid the company of individuals who were excessively materialistic to avoid being tempted by greed (cf. Evagrius, *Foundations* 5). In summary, as Evagrius' monk embraced voluntary poverty and was forced to work — sometimes in collective enterprises with other monks — these circumstances posed temptations which could not be addressed passively (cf. Evagrius, *Talking Back* 3.15; 7.10; 56; Brakke 2008:82).

Self-Sufficiency

One of Evagrius' key values for monastic labor was that the monks should be self-sufficient, and not be a burden to others as the wandering, begging monks tended to be. While he was not opposed to a monk receiving some initial help at the outset of his ministry, he urged his colleagues to pursue financial independence and trust God for their survival (cf. Evagrius, *Foundations* 4; *Talking Back* 3.1–2, 17). Brakke argues that this practice was modeled by Antony who accepted food from others at the beginning of his anachoresis, but then later planted a garden in order to sustain himself and offer hospitality to others (cf. Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 50.4–6; Brakke 2008:82).

We have noted that Evagrius instructs the monks in his *Foundations* to "Give thought to working with your hands, if possible both day and night," to which he adds purposefully, "So that you will not be a burden to anyone" (Evagrius, *Foundations* 8). This argument for self-sufficiency is taken from Paul's letters to the Thessalonians: "For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: 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" (1 Thess. 2:9 ESV; see also 2 Thess. 3:8). Though Evagrius' ministry was an ascetic calling, it is interesting to note (especially in light of this article's goals) that he appropriates verses from Paul, who is speaking about his work as a tentmaker in the context of an evangelistic and church planting ministry.

Caring for Others

A fourth aspect of Evagrius' theology of monastic labor was that work existed to benefit others. As Evagrius' ministry included showing hospitality to visitors, it was incumbent upon the monks to work to make sure that they could provide a basic level of hospitality. Warning once more against the love of money, Evagrius reminded his

colleagues, “Do the work of manual tasks for the love of humanity . . . in order that on the one hand there may be hospitality for guests” (Evagrius, *To Eulogios* 10 in Sinkewicz 37; cf. Caner 42–43).

Though it was assumed in Evagrius’ context of voluntary poverty that any surplus should be donated to the poor, monastic labor was also a means of generating aid for the poor. This allowed the monks to practice the virtue of almsgiving, a practice highly praised by Evagrius. He writes, “The one who consoles the poor is manly in pious acts” (Evagrius, *Scholia on Proverbs* 342 in Brakke 2008:84).

While encouraging such work that leads to charity, Evagrius warned the monks against becoming proud in their abilities to provide for the poor. Their primary calling was not philanthropy, and working excessively to meet the needs of the poor would certainly steal away from the overall ascetic focus. Also, for more sincere monks who were simply overwhelmed by the needs of the poor, Evagrius reminded them that it was not necessary to place themselves in financial jeopardy in order to please God. Rather, monks should be aware of their own limitations and realize that there are other people and resources that God may use to care for the poor (cf. Evagrius, *Talking Back* 1.28, 49; 3.28, 57; 5.28; and Brakke 2008:85–86).

Monastic Progress

For Evagrius, the various disciplines of the ascetic life were necessarily integrated. This value is perhaps best captured in his famous statement on prayer and theology: “If you are a theologian, you will pray truly; and if you pray truly, you will be a theologian” (Evagrius, *On Prayer* in Sinkewicz 199; cf. Casiday 5). It seems that manual labor was also a vital and integrated part of the monastic pursuit — not merely what the monks were forced to do to survive.

Evagrius saw knowledge (*gnosis*) of the Trinity, which resulted in a pure heart (*apatheia*) and spiritual perfection, as the most important goal of the ascetic life, and prayer seems to have been his most cherished spiritual discipline. Given that, other practical disciplines — including manual labor — helped the monks to pray and achieve spiritual perfection. Driscoll notes that Evagrius likens the relationship of work and prayer to that of Leah and Rachel in the Scriptures; that is, the habit and steadiness of daily work helps the monks to develop discipline in order to pray without ceasing and without distraction (cf. Driscoll 2005:13, 19, 63; also Linge 557).

While Evagrius noted that manual labor helped the monks to fight against gluttony and other attacks from the devil, their work was especially useful in battling the thought or demon of *akedia* (cf. Evagrius, *Eulogios* 10; Brakke 2006:58; Sinkewicz xxxi). Translated by some as “listlessness” or an “unnatural slackness of the soul,” Evagrius describes it as “The noonday demon . . . he attacks the monk from the fourth hour [viz. 10 a.m.] and besieges his soul until the tenth hour [2 p.m.]” (Evagrius, *The Practical Treatise* 12 in Sinkewicz 99; cf. Brakke 2006:65; Harmless 2007:143–145). A hindrance to the monks’ ability to focus, this demon posed a particular challenge to prayer, Scripture reading, and manual labor. Though *akedia* greatly stifled the monks’ desire to work, Evagrius actually urged his colleagues to combat this tendency in part by persevering in work. He writes: “In this way you can also overcome the demon of *akedia* and eliminate all of the desires inspired by the enemy. The demon of *akedia* lies

in wait for laziness and ‘is full of desires,’ as Scripture says (Prov. 13:4)” (Evagrius, *Foundations* 8 in Sinkewicz 9). Elsewhere, he continues:

Perseverance is the cure for *akedia*, along with the execution of all tasks with great attention [and the fear of God]. Set a measure for yourself in every work and do not let up until you have completed it. Pray with understanding and intensity, and the spirit of *akedia* will flee from you. (Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts* 6.17–18 in Sinkewicz 85)

Evagrius’ strategy was probably influenced by Antony who had also struggled with *akedia* and also proposed manual labor as an antidote (cf. Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 1; cf. Caner 40). Later, Cassian would advocate similar measures in his *Institutes* (cf. Cassian, *Institutes* 10.14).

In summarizing Evagrius’ thoughts on work, it seems clear that manual labor was an integral spiritual element in Evagrius’ ascetic theology. He was a monk who practiced prayer, meditated on theology, and traced beautiful letters. His work, performed with excellence and integrity, allowed him to be self-sufficient and able to care for visitors and the poor alike. Ultimately, his monastic labor helped him along the way of spiritual progress.

Conclusions

In this article, five major principles have been proposed as key components of Evagrius’ theology of work. His case has been read and considered in light of his fourth-century monastic context in which voluntary poverty was embraced and manual labor was necessary. Given that, what lessons can modern tentmakers, particularly those from the majority world, learn from Evagrius?

First, today’s tentmakers can learn from Evagrius’ general regard for possessions. Though they may not embrace the level of poverty that Evagrius suggested, they can reflect upon the meaning of simplicity and humility as it relates to worldly goods. Certainly, Evagrius’ warnings about the love of money transcend time, culture, and various economies, and missionaries are not exempt from being tempted by material things. While possessions can cause problems in the missionary’s own spiritual life, they can also place barriers between the transcultural worker and those in the host culture that the missionary desires to reach for Christ. In short, does what we drive, where we live, or what we own create unnecessary obstacles to sharing the gospel with others?

Second, for tentmakers from modest economic backgrounds or for those who are struggling financially, Evagrius’ perspective on poverty seems quite helpful. Feelings of anger, bitterness, and worry over finances can beset people today just as much as they did in the fourth century. Lai asserts, “Money hinders missions by distracting us from evangelism, and keeping us from relying on Jesus to meet our needs” (Lai 376). Will today’s tentmakers trust God for daily bread as Evagrius and his colleagues did?

Third, much can be gleaned from Evagrius’ theology of work. It was an integral part of his monastic theology and practice, aiding him in spiritual growth. He enjoyed his work, carried it out with excellence and integrity, and set a standard for monks after him with his innovative monastic labor. Evagrius did not see work as an annoying task that he had to do so he could remain a monk. Rather, he seemed to identify more with Adam in his pre-Fall garden labor (Gen. 2:15) than in the cursed toil Adam

experienced after leaving Eden (Gen. 3:17–19; cf. Evagrius, *On Prayer* 48). Given Evagrius' position, how do modern tentmakers view their labor? Is tentmaking work integrally related to other ministries? Is it a means of honoring and worshipping God? Can work be enjoyable for the tentmaker?

Fourth, and very much related to the last point, Evagrius asserted that an important reason for work was caring for others — in his case, the poor and visitors. While work is a form of worship, it is also a means of blessing others. This value has certainly been affirmed by modern proponents of holistic mission — those who proclaim the gospel verbally and also care for human needs. The increasing emphasis on business as mission is a healthy trend and a winsome model for the global church as it ponders mission.

Finally, Evagrius' ideas on self-sufficiency, which were taken directly from Paul in his tentmaking, church planting context, serve as an important model for majority world missionaries today. While transcultural workers from the non-Western world now outnumber those being sent from North America and Europe, over 80 percent of the Christian resources remains in the Global North (cf. Laing 2006:165–177; Johnson 2007). As today's missionaries are getting poorer and the Western "professional ministry model" is being abandoned by non-Western mission leaders, Evagrius' model should become increasingly relevant (cf. Mordomo 2006:224–225).

As the majority world churches are taking the lead in global missions sending, the church in North America and Europe has much to learn from these courageous mission movements. However, it is the position of this article that the current global church also has some lessons to learn from the historic church, and that the model of Evagrius of Pontus should be considered in the ongoing discussion about tentmaking.

Note

1. This article was originally given as a paper to the Patristics and Medieval study group of the Evangelical Theological Society on November 18, 2009 in New Orleans. I would like to thank my colleagues in that group, especially Rex Butler who wrote the formal response, for their feedback. I am also indebted to Mike Barnett and John Morrison who provided further feedback, and to Emily Heady at the Liberty University Graduate Writing Center for helping a theologian to become a better writer.

References Cited

- Befus, David R.
2001 *Kingdom Business: The Ministry of Promoting Economic Activity*. Miami: Latin American Mission.
- Brakke, David
2008 "Care for the Poor, Fear of Poverty, and Love of Money: Evagrius Ponticus on the Monk's Economic Vulnerability," in Susan R. Holman, ed., *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 76–87.
- Brakke, David
2006 *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Caner, Daniel
2002 *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Casiday, Augustine C.
2006 *Evagrius Ponticus*. London: Routledge.
- Driscoll, Jeremy
2005 *Steps to Spiritual Perfection: Studies in Spiritual Progress in Evagrius Ponticus* (Ancient Christian Writers 59). Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press.
- Driscoll, Jeremy
2003 *Evagrius of Ponticus: Ad Monachos*. Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press.
- Hamilton, Don
1987 *Tentmakers Speak Out: Practical Advice from Over Four Hundred Tentmakers*. Duarte, CA: TMQ Research.
- Harmless, William
2004 *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harmless, William
2007 *Mystics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, Todd
2007 "World Christian Trends," *Lausanne World Pulse*, <http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/766/08-2007?pg=all>.
- Lai, Patrick
2005 *Tentmaking: The Life and Work of Business as Missions*. Colorado Springs: Authentic.
- Laing, Mark
2006 "The Changing Face of Mission: Implications for the Southern Shift in Christianity," *Missiology: An International Review* 34(2): 165–177.
- Lewis, Jonathan
1996 *Working Your Way to the Nations: A Guide to Effective Tentmaking*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.
- Linge, David E.
2000 "Leading the Life of Angels: Ascetic Practice and Reflection in the Writings of Evagrius of Pontus," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68(3): 537–568.
- Mayer, Wendy
2008 "Poverty and Generosity Toward the Poor in the Time of John Chrysostom," in Susan R. Holman, ed., *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 140–158.
- Mordomo, João
2006 "Unleashing the Brazilian Evangelical Mission Force," in Tom Steffen and Mike Barnett, eds., *Business as Mission: From Impoverished to Empowered* (Evangelical Missiological Society 14). Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 219–239.
- Owens, Howard
2006 "Nestorian Merchant Missionaries and Today's Unreached People Groups," in Tom Steffen and Mike Barnett, eds., *Business as Mission: From Impoverished to Empowered* (Evangelical Missiological Society 14). Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 133–146.
- Palladius
1965 *The Lausiac History* (Ancient Christian Writers 34), trans. R.T. Meyer. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Pocock, Michael, Gailyn Van Rheenen, and Douglas McConnell
2005 *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Sinkewicz, Robert E.
2003 *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Steffen, Tom, and Mike Barnett, eds.

2006 *Business as Mission: From Impoverished to Empowered* (Evangelical Missiological Society 14). Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.

Taylor, William D., ed.

2000 *Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Wilson, J. Christy

2002 *Today's Tentmakers: Self-Support: An Alternative Model for Worldwide Witness*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock.

Yamamori, Tetsunao, and Kenneth A. Eldred, eds.

2003 *On Kingdom Business: Transforming Missions through Entrepreneurial Strategies*. Wheaton: Crossway.

Young, Robin Darling

2001 "Evagrius the Iconographer: Monastic Pedagogy in the *Gnosticos*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9(1): 53–71.