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JURNAL ILMIAH AGAMA DAN SOSIAL BUDAYA

Reframing Tentmaking Ministry: A Theological–Ethical Critique of Contemporary Practice in South Africa

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Abstract: "Tentmaking ministry" has become a common term in contemporary church discourse to legitimise dual engagement in secular employment and pastoral service. Yet the concept often lacks precision and has generated ethical contestation, especially in church contexts marked by economic precarity and the increasing commercialisation of religion. This article offers a conceptual and theological-ethical critique of contemporary tentmaking ministry in South Africa. Rather than presenting new empirical data, it develops an analytical framework by reconstructing a Pauline normative baseline from key texts in Acts and the Pauline epistles (Acts 18:3; 1 Thess 2:9; 1 Cor 9:15; Acts 20:33–35) and placing that baseline in critical dialogue with scholarship on bi-vocational ministry and the political economy of religion. The analysis argues that when "tentmaking" functions primarily as income supplementation alongside sustained church remuneration, it increasingly resembles moonlighting rather than Pauline self-support. This shift raises concerns about ministerial accountability, the moral economy of church resources, and the long-term sustainability of congregational life. The article contributes (i) a clarified typology distinguishing Pauline tentmaking, bi-vocational ministry, moonlighting, and full-time ministry and (ii) a set of normative criteria for discerning authentic tentmaking in the twenty-first century, including motivational orientation, transparency, proportionality, time accountability, protection of the poor and mission-critical resources, contextual sensitivity, and periodic review. By reframing tentmaking as an ethically structured practice rather than a flexible label for dual employment, the study provides churches and denominational bodies with constructive guidance for evaluating economic arrangements in ministry, while safeguarding mission integrity and communal responsibility.

Keywords: Accountability; bi-vocational ministry; commercialisation of religion; moonlighting; Pauline ethics; South Africa; stewardship; tentmaking ministry

Abstrak: "Tentmaking ministry" telah menjadi istilah umum dalam diskursus gereja kontemporer untuk melegitimasi keterlibatan ganda dalam pekerjaan sekuler dan pelayanan pastoral. Namun, konsep ini seringkali kurang jelas dan telah menimbulkan perdebatan etis, terutama dalam konteks gereja yang ditandai oleh ketidakpastian ekonomi dan komersialisasi agama yang semakin meningkat. Artikel ini menawarkan kritik konseptual dan teologis-etis terhadap pelayanan tenda kontemporer di Afrika Selatan. Alih-alih menyajikan data empiris baru, artikel ini mengembangkan kerangka analitis dengan merekonstruksi dasar normatif Paulus dari teks-teks kunci dalam Kisah Para Rasul dan surat-surat Paulus (Kisah Para Rasul 18:3; 1 Tesalonika 2:9; 1 Korintus 9:15; Kisah Para Rasul 20:33–35) dan menempatkan dasar tersebut dalam dialog kritis dengan kajian tentang pelayanan bi-vokasional dan ekonomi politik agama. Analisis ini berargumen bahwa ketika "pembuatan tenda" berfungsi utama sebagai tambahan penghasilan di samping gaji gereja yang berkelanjutan, hal itu semakin mirip dengan pekerjaan sampingan daripada dukungan diri Paulus. Pergeseran ini menimbulkan kekhawatiran tentang akuntabilitas pelayanan, ekonomi moral sumber

daya gereja, dan keberlanjutan jangka panjang kehidupan jemaat. Artikel ini memberikan (i) tipologi yang jelas membedakan antara *tentmaking* Paulus, pelayanan bi-vokasional, pekerjaan sampingan, dan pelayanan penuh waktu, serta (ii) serangkaian kriteria normatif untuk mengenali *tentmaking* yang autentik di abad ke-21, termasuk orientasi motivasi, transparansi, proporsionalitas, akuntabilitas waktu, perlindungan orang miskin dan sumber daya yang kritis bagi misi, sensitivitas konteks, dan tinjauan berkala. Dengan mendefinisikan ulang pembuatan tenda sebagai praktik yang terstruktur secara etis daripada label fleksibel untuk pekerjaan ganda, studi ini memberikan panduan konstruktif bagi gereja dan badan denominasi dalam mengevaluasi pengaturan ekonomi dalam pelayanan, sambil menjaga integritas misi dan tanggung jawab komunal.

Kata kunci: Akuntabilitas; pelayanan bi-vokasional; komersialisasi agama; pekerjaan sampingan; etika Paulus; Afrika Selatan; pengelolaan sumber daya; pelayanan multi-peran

1. Introduction

In contemporary church discourse, scholars and church leaders increasingly use the term tentmaking ministry to describe various forms of dual engagement in secular employment and pastoral service. Although the concept draws on the Pauline practice of self-support as a safeguard for mission integrity, recent scholarship shows that contemporary usage has become conceptually diffuse and practically contested. Studies on bi-vocational ministry and the commercialisation of religion suggest that, in many contexts, particularly within economically constrained church contexts, tentmaking often aligns with income supplementation strategies rather than serving purely missional or church-oriented purposes (Duin, 2017; Kgatle et al., 2023; Magezi & Banda, 2017; Ndelwa, 2002). This shift raises critical questions about ministerial accountability, the financial burdens placed on congregations, and the long-term sustainability of church institutions, especially where churches do not clearly distinguish between tentmaking, bi-vocational ministry, and moonlighting.

Within the New Testament, the Pauline model of self-support serves as the primary normative reference point for tentmaking ministry. Paul's engagement in manual labour as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3) did more than secure economic self-reliance; he used it as a deliberate missional strategy to avoid financial dependence on the communities he served. He frames this practice as a way of ensuring that he would not become a burden to early Christian congregations, noting that he and his companions "worked night and day" rather than rely on their material resources (1 Thess 2:9; Acts 20:33–35). This reasoning sets out an ethical sequence: self-support protects the credibility of the gospel proclamation while also preserving congregational resources for charitable and communal purposes. In this respect, Pauline tentmaking offers a normative benchmark in which economic activity serves the integrity of ministry and the sustainability of the church community (cf. 1 Cor 9:15).

The socio-economic organisation of early Christian communities makes the plausibility of tentmaking as a normative ministerial practice even clearer. The pooling of resources described in Acts 4:34–37 primarily sustained communal life and charitable obligations, particularly towards the poor and vulnerable, and it also enabled support for those devoted to gospel ministry (Bremmer, 2023). In that setting, tentmaking reduced pressure on congregational resources rather than providing a means to augment personal income. The partnership between Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla (Acts 18) illustrates this dynamic, as their shared trade enabled continued missionary activity without eroding the economic capacity of the communities they served (Ekukndayo, 2011). Historically, therefore, tentmaking has operated within a moral economy of mutual responsibility, where economic self-sufficiency advanced communal sustainability and missional effectiveness rather than individual financial gain.

Recent theological and church scholarship indicate a significant conceptual shift in contemporary uses of tentmaking ministry. Practices associated with distinct categories, namely tentmaking, bi-vocational ministry, and moonlighting, now often appear interchangeably, with little effort to clarify

differences. Several scholars note that churches frequently invoke tentmaking to legitimise dual employment oriented towards income supplementation rather than to relieve church financial burdens (Duin, 2017; Gathogo, 2011; Ndelwa, 2002). This conflation obscures the ethical and theological distinctiveness of Pauline tentmaking, making it harder to evaluate ministerial accountability and institutional sustainability. Against this backdrop, the present article aims to analyse these practices analytically and to challenge their uncritical assimilation within contemporary church discourse.

Although scholarship on tentmaking and bi-vocational ministry is substantial, many studies address these practices descriptively or within narrowly defined denominational or missiological frameworks. As a result, researchers have given insufficient attention to rigorous conceptual boundary-making between tentmaking, bi-vocational ministry, and moonlighting, particularly where churches employ these categories interchangeably. Moreover, while scholars often acknowledge ethical concerns about clergy remuneration and dual employment, few offer a coherent, normative framework that churches can use to critically evaluate such practices. The institutional implications of this conceptual ambiguity, particularly in terms of financial burden, accountability, and congregational sustainability, also remain under-theorised, being treated as theological and ethical concerns rather than empirical descriptions alone. This article responds to that gap by offering a conceptual and theological-ethical critique that clarifies key distinctions, proposes evaluative criteria, and foregrounds institutional sustainability as a central normative issue in contemporary discussions of tentmaking ministry.

Accordingly, this article offers a conceptual and theological-ethical critique of contemporary tentmaking ministry in South Africa. It argues that when ministers practise tentmaking primarily as income supplementation while also receiving sustained church remuneration, the practice begins to resemble moonlighting rather than the Pauline model of self-support, reintroducing institutional financial burdens while weakening ministerial accountability. In response, the article presents a clarified typology that distinguishes between tentmaking, bi-vocational ministry, and moonlighting, and proposes normative criteria that churches can use to assess the authenticity and ethical coherence of tentmaking practices. The discussion proceeds by examining gospel ministry as a voluntary vocation, clarifying the distinctions between full-time and bi-vocational ministry, situating tentmaking within contemporary church contexts, and proposing a normative framework designed to protect congregational sustainability and the integrity of Christian witness.

This article adopts a conceptual and theological-ethical approach to analyse contemporary tentmaking ministry. Rather than presenting new empirical data, the study critically examines existing theological interpretations, church practices, and scholarly discourses related to the practice of tentmaking. It focuses on building an analytical and evaluative framework that can assess the conceptual coherence, ethical implications, and institutional consequences of contemporary tentmaking practices in light of the Pauline normative model. This approach is important because churches often require clear criteria to make informed decisions about remuneration, accountability, and role expectations.

The analysis proceeds through close textual and theological engagement with Pauline materials, particularly the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline epistles, to establish a normative baseline for tentmaking ministry. This biblical grounding is complemented by critical dialogue with contemporary theology and missiology on tentmaking, bi-vocational ministry, and the ethics of Christian ministry. The study also draws selectively on interdisciplinary insights from the sociology of work, especially discussions of dual employment and role conflict, as well as organisational studies on accountability, performance, and institutional burden. It further engages perspectives from the political economy of religion, including debates on the commercialisation of religion and clergy remuneration, as interpretive lenses. The analysis employs these perspectives to assess the ethical coherence and institutional implications of contemporary tentmaking practices, rather than as sources of quantitative or new empirical data.

Although the discussion focuses primarily on the South African church context, this article does not claim empirical representativeness or universal applicability. Instead, it uses South Africa as a critical site for examining broader conceptual and ethical issues surrounding contemporary

tentmaking, particularly in settings marked by economic constraints and the intensification of the commercialisation of religion. The arguments remain normative and conceptual rather than statistical or descriptive. They aim to clarify analytical distinctions and ethical criteria that can inform, rather than predetermine, later empirical research and contextual application in other church contexts.

2. Conceptual Clarification

Gospel Ministry as a Voluntary Vocation

Within the Christian tradition, people have historically treated participation in religious life, including affiliation, worship, and leadership, as fundamentally voluntary rather than coercive or contractual. Sociological scholarship consistently affirms that religious commitment remains a matter of individual choice, even where strong communal, familial, or cultural influences shape that choice (Davidson & Knudsen, 1977; Loveland et al., 2008; Yeo, 2022). Broader frameworks of religious freedom also protect this voluntariness by grounding affiliation and participation in personal conviction rather than institutional obligation (Boyle & Sheen, 2013; Murray, 1966).

Christian theology builds on this voluntary foundation when it frames gospel ministry as a vocation of self-giving, rather than one driven by economic gain. The New Testament mandate to proclaim the gospel (Matt. 28:16–20) situates Christian ministry within a broader scriptural pattern of prophetic and priestly service, undertaken as participation in God's covenantal mission (Dibelius, 2022; Van Buren, 1998). Even as the early church developed more formal structures of ordained ministry in the second century, it continued to cast ministry in terms of sacrificial service rather than employment in the modern sense (Gibaut, 2024; Osborne, 2003).

Old Testament models of leadership reinforce the same moral logic by depicting covenantal responsibility as a voluntary and costly commitment, rather than an entitlement or a mean of career advancement (Cochrell, 2018; Howell, 2003; Ojewole, 2014). Leaders respond to a divine calling and communal needs, often doing so with personal risk and material cost. This tradition is significant here because it influences how churches should interpret economic arrangements related to ministry, including paid support, self-support, and mixed models.

This voluntary orientation proves crucial for understanding the theological rationale behind tentmaking ministry. As Ndelwa (2002) observes, the integration of self-support into gospel work did not aim to diminish ministry; it aimed to reinforce credibility and integrity by modelling reverence, responsibility, and freedom from financial dependency. Gospel ministry, therefore, should not collapse into a professional career defined primarily by remuneration; instead, it functions best as a vocation in which economic arrangements remain subordinate to missional purpose. This claim highlights the need for clearer conceptual distinctions, as contemporary church contexts often blur the relevant categories.

Conceptual Distinctions in Ministerial Work

Contemporary church discourse frequently uses terms such as tentmaking, bi-vocational ministry, moonlighting, and full-time ministry as though they mean the same thing. This conceptual blurring obscures important ethical and institutional differences, making a meaningful evaluation of ministerial practice difficult. To provide analytical clarity, this section distinguishes four related but conceptually distinct forms of ministerial engagement, which the later evaluative framework will build on.

Table 1 presents an analytical typology that differentiates these four forms of ministerial work by outlining defining characteristics, primary orientations, and associated ethical and institutional risks. The typology does not claim that one model fits every setting, as church contexts differ widely in terms of resources and governance. Instead, it offers a disciplined vocabulary that allows churches and researchers to evaluate practice without smuggling different motivations under the same label.

Table 1 Conceptual Distinctions in Ministerial Work

Concept	Conceptual Definition	Primary Orientation	Ethical & Institutional Risk
Tentmaking (Pauline)	Engagement in secular work as a theological and missional strategy to ensure that gospel ministry does not become a financial burden on the faith community, while simultaneously opening spaces for witness through labour	Mission integrity; church sustainability; self-giving	Low, provided there is no dual remuneration from the church
Bi-vocational Ministry	The simultaneous holding of a ministerial role and secular employment, often necessitated by structural or economic limitations within church institutions	Income security; institutional survival	Moderate; risk of role conflict if accountability is weak
Moonlighting	Additional employment undertaken outside primary working hours, primarily oriented toward income augmentation	Personal income maximisation	High; prone to role conflict, reduced accountability, and institutional strain
Full-time Ministry	Primary commitment of time, energy, and responsibility to ecclesial service and leadership	Pastoral responsibility; institutional leadership	Context-dependent; shaped by transparency and remuneration structures

Tentmaking Ministry in the Pauline Sense

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul exemplifies tentmaking ministry as a missionary practice most clearly. Paul sustained himself through manual labour as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3), and he later pointed to his own work as part of his ministerial example (Acts 20:33–35). He did not treat work as an embarrassment or distraction; he integrated it into his ethical account of gospel ministry and public credibility.

Paul's partnership with Aquila and Priscilla, who also combined skilled labour with missionary activity, illustrates tentmaking as a shared strategy of self-support rather than a private pursuit of economic advantage (Barr, 1998; Ekukndayo, 2011; Siemens, 1997). Their collaboration helped stabilise the material conditions of the mission, particularly when congregations lacked the resources to sustain itinerant workers. This communal pattern is significant because it demonstrates how tentmaking can serve as a relational practice, grounded in shared responsibility rather than individual entrepreneurship.

Paul framed tentmaking explicitly as a means to preserve the financial stability of early Christian communities. Key Pauline texts emphasise that self-support prevented the gospel worker from becoming a burden to the church (1 Thess. 2:9; Acts 20:33–35), thereby preserving communal resources for charitable and missional purposes (Bremmer, 2023). Tentmaking, in this sense, served as a strategic

expression of self-giving, oriented toward mission integrity and church sustainability, rather than as an end in itself.

Paul's refusal to insist on his right to material support (1 Cor. 9:15) further shows that economic self-restraint formed part of his account of authentic ministry. He did not deny that ministers may receive support; rather, he highlighted how restraint can serve the gospel and protect the community. This tension between legitimate support and voluntary restraint becomes a key point when contemporary church contexts describe income supplementation as "tentmaking."

Bi-vocational Ministry and Structural Necessity

Bi-vocational ministry often overlaps with tentmaking in practice, but it operates according to a different logic. In many church contexts, especially those with economically constrained settings, bi-vocational arrangements often arise from structural necessity rather than a deliberate missional strategy. In South Africa, for example, mainline denominations have historically sustained full-time clergy through centralised financial systems, whereas independent churches increasingly rely on bi-vocational ministers due to decentralisation and economic pressure (De Gruchy, 2014; Tucker, 2012).

Conceptually, bi-vocational ministry does not automatically create an ethical problem. As Bentley (2018) notes, holding dual roles can provide a pragmatic response to institutional realities, particularly where congregations cannot sustain a full-time stipend. Yet, churches still need clear expectations regarding time, responsibility, and accountability, as dual roles can blur priorities without deliberate governance.

The ethical character of bi-vocational ministry depends on whether secular employment remains subordinate to ministerial accountability and responsibility. When financial necessity becomes the dominant driver, the risk of role conflict and diminished pastoral effectiveness increases (Brushwyler & Min, 1992). This risk does not condemn bi-vocational ministry, but it does require stronger accountability practices than churches often assume.

Moonlighting and the Risk of Conceptual Mislabeling

Moonlighting represents a distinct category that requires analytical separation from both tentmaking and bi-vocational ministry. Unlike tentmaking, which aims to reduce institutional burden, moonlighting typically centres on income augmentation and usually occurs outside normal working hours. Organisational and sociological studies consistently link moonlighting to role conflict, reduced performance, and weakened accountability (Claessens et al., 2007; Kim & Garman, 2004).

Within church contexts, the ethical concern intensifies when leaders rebrand moonlighting practices as "tentmaking" to legitimise income augmentation while they continue to receive church remuneration. Such mislabeling obscures the Pauline logic of self-giving and can quietly reintroduce the institutional burdens that tentmaking aimed to prevent (Duin, 2017; Gathogo, 2011; Ndelwa, 2002). It also makes it difficult for congregations to evaluate integrity, since the label suggests a biblical rationale that the practice may not actually embody.

The conceptual distinctions in this section establish the analytical framework for the critique developed in subsequent sections. The argument does not oppose secular employment as such, nor does it reject bi-vocational ministry where churches face structural constraints. Instead, it targets the ethical and theological consequences that follow when churches collapse distinct categories into an ambiguously deployed concept of "tentmaking." By clarifying these boundaries, the article aims to facilitate a more disciplined evaluation of contemporary ministerial practice and to restore the normative integrity of tentmaking ministry, as exemplified in the Pauline tradition.

3. Pauline Paradigm of Tentmaking

This section reconstructs a Pauline paradigm of tentmaking as a normative baseline for evaluating contemporary uses of the term. Rather than approaching Pauline texts devotionally or prescriptively, the analysis reads key passages from Acts and the Pauline epistles as sources of theological and ethical

reasoning about economic independence, communal responsibility, and mission integrity. Through close textual engagement, the discussion traces how self-support functions not merely as a personal economic practice but as an ethically charged strategy with wider institutional consequences, including the protection of church resources, the credibility of gospel witness, and the accountability of those entrusted with ministerial leadership. This approach allows the argument to move beyond slogans and toward a disciplined framework for evaluation.

Acts 18:3 provides a narrative point of departure for understanding tentmaking as a concrete and embodied practice rather than a metaphorical ideal. Luke depicts Paul as working alongside Aquila and Priscilla in their shared trade when he arrives in Corinth, and Paul integrates manual labour into the rhythm of his missionary presence. This narrative detail situates tentmaking within the everyday realities of urban life and economic exchange, suggesting that Paul viewed labour as an intentional component of his missionary strategy, rather than as a temporary response to material necessity. As several scholars observe, Paul's engagement in tentmaking enabled him to sustain a ministry within diverse social networks while maintaining economic independence from the communities he served, which in turn strengthened the credibility and integrity of his apostolic mission (Hock, 1978; Siemens, 1997; Still, 2006).

Paul also frames his manual labour explicitly as a deliberate strategy for avoiding financial burden. He recalls how he and his companions "laboured night and day" so that they would not impose upon the Thessalonian believers (1 Thess. 2:9). In 1 Corinthians 9:15, he acknowledges a legitimate right to material support yet relinquishes that right so that nothing compromises the proclamation of the gospel. Read together, these texts disclose a coherent Pauline logic in which self-support cultivates a measure of economic independence from recipient communities, strengthens the credibility of apostolic witness, and safeguards the integrity of the gospel message. In this framework, economic restraint does not function as an end in itself; rather, it serves as an ethical means directed toward maintaining mission integrity.

Acts 20:33–35 expands the ethical significance of Pauline tentmaking by placing self-support within a wider public ethic of responsibility. In his farewell address, Paul denies coveting silver or gold and reminds his listeners that his labour provided not only for his own needs but also for those of his companions. He presents his work as an example of how believers ought to "help the weak," which frames labour as service rather than private discipline. Read against the backdrop of early Christian resource sharing and charitable prioritisation (Acts 4:34–37), Paul's self-support protects communal resources and helps keep the church's financial capacity directed toward the care of the vulnerable and the advancement of the mission.

Taken together, these Pauline texts yield a coherent, though not exhaustive, paradigmatic logic of tentmaking. Self-support initiates an ethical sequence by enabling a measure of independence from the communities served, which reduces the risk of financial compulsion or obligation. That independence then strengthens the credibility of gospel witness and preserves the integrity of ministerial proclamation. Crucially, this posture also protects communal resources from being diverted toward the maintenance of the minister, allowing the church to prioritise care for the weak and the advancement of its missional commitments. While this chain of reasoning does not exhaust the diversity of Pauline practice, it provides a normative framework against which contemporary appeals to "tentmaking" warrant critical assessment.

A further nuance is relevant here, because Pauline self-sufficiency does not imply an absolute rejection of material assistance. Paul consistently refuses to become a financial burden. Yet, he also acknowledges receiving support from particular communities, most notably the Philippian church, within relationships marked by trust and shared commitment to the gospel. This pattern suggests a conditional rather than categorical stance: Paul accepts assistance when it does not compromise mission integrity, create dependency, or transform gospel ministry into a commodified exchange. Several interpreters therefore describe his practice as a discerning balance between economic independence and relational reciprocity rather than a rigid opposition to all forms of support (Hock, 1978; Siemens, 1997; Still, 2006).

A further theological-ethical tension emerges between the recognition of legitimate ministerial support and Paul's repeated acts of renunciation for the sake of the gospel. On the one hand, the broader New Testament tradition affirms that "the worker deserves his wages" (Luke 10:7), which establishes the moral legitimacy of providing material support to those engaged in gospel labour. On the other hand, Paul repeatedly narrates his willingness to relinquish such rights, working with his own hands so that he would not impose upon the communities he serves (1 Thess. 2:9; 1 Cor. 9:15). This tension suggests that the Pauline paradigm functions best as an ethic of non-exploitation and accountability rather than as a simplistic rule about remuneration. The decisive question, therefore, concerns not the mere existence of support, but whether specific economic arrangements preserve mission integrity, protect communal resources, and sustain responsible pastoral leadership.

To clarify the internal coherence of this Pauline paradigm, the following synthesis distils key textual observations and their ethical and institutional implications. This overview makes the logic of tentmaking visible as a structured normative framework rather than as a collection of isolated scriptural references. Table 2 summarises the Pauline paradigm by linking major texts to the ethical functions they serve and the institutional implications they generate. This synthesis supports the theological-ethical analysis developed in this article and prepares the evaluative discussion in subsequent sections.

Table 2 Pauline Paradigm of Tentmaking: Normative Logic and Ethical Implications

Key Text	Textual Observation	Ethical Function	Institutional Implication
Acts 18:3	Paul works alongside Aquila and Priscilla in manual labour in Corinth	Tentmaking as a concrete and embodied practice rather than a metaphor	Secures economic independence within the mission context and reinforces ministerial credibility
1 Thess. 2:9	Paul and his companions "laboured night and day" so as not to be a burden	Self-support as a deliberate strategy to avoid financial imposition	Reduces dependency on congregations and prevents coercive or obligatory relationships
1 Cor. 9:15	Paul relinquishes legitimate claims to material support for the sake of the gospel.	Renunciation as an ethical choice oriented toward mission integrity	Affirms accountability and resists the commodification of ministry
Acts 20:33–35	Paul covets neither silver nor gold; his labour supports himself and others and models "helping the weak."	Self-support as a public and pro-social ethic	Protects church resources for the care of the vulnerable and mission priorities
Acts 4:34–37 ***(background)***	Early Christian practices of communal resource sharing	Communal and charitable orientation	Church resources are prioritised for shared needs rather than the maintenance of leaders
Philippians (community support)	Paul receives support within a relationship of trust and partnership	Conditional acceptance of material assistance	Support is legitimate insofar as it avoids dependency or exploitation
Luke 10:7	"The worker deserves his wages."	Recognition of a normative right to material support	Rights must be weighed against mission integrity and pastoral responsibility

Readers should treat Table 2 as an analytical synthesis rather than as a presentation of empirical data. It distils the Pauline texts discussed in this section into a structured framework that makes explicit the normative connections between self-support, mission integrity, communal responsibility, and the

protection of church resources. The table does not claim exhaustiveness or statistical representation; it functions as a conceptual tool that supports the argument and provides a stable reference point for the evaluative discussion that follows.

With this normative baseline established, the following section provides a critical evaluation of contemporary appeals to "tentmaking" in light of Pauline logic, self-support, mission credibility, and the protection of communal resources. This baseline provides analytical criteria for assessing current ministerial practices, especially in church contexts where the language of tentmaking becomes conceptually blurred and increasingly conflated with bi-vocational arrangements or income-driven forms of moonlighting. It also clarifies why labels matter, since they can either illuminate accountability or obscure it.

4. Contemporary Shift in South Africa

This section situates the discussion within the South African church landscape, not to provide an empirically exhaustive account, but to utilise the context as a lens for examining broader ethical and conceptual tensions surrounding tentmaking ministry. South Africa's plural, post-apartheid setting includes significant denominational diversity, from mainline Protestant and Catholic traditions to African Initiated Churches and neo-charismatic movements. It also reflects pronounced economic inequality and institutional fragmentation, and these conditions shape the material realities through which ministers and congregations negotiate practice and meaning. For that reason, the focus on South Africa does not claim universal applicability; it provides a grounded reference point for analysing how economic precarity, institutional diversity, and theological discourse converge in contemporary debates on tentmaking ministry.

Recent scholarship on the commercialisation of religion in South Africa suggests that market-oriented logics are increasingly shaping ministerial identity and economic practice, particularly within neo-charismatic and independent church settings (Kgatle et al., 2023). In these church contexts, leaders often frame ministry through prosperity discourse and entrepreneurial models, where visibility, numerical growth, and financial viability operate as markers of success. Such dynamics do not define every denomination, and the South African landscape remains diverse. Even so, these trends suggest a broader cultural and economic environment that more closely links religious authority to economic activity than earlier church models typically assumed.

Within this environment, churches may begin to interpret the language of calling and vocation through entrepreneurial rationalities that emphasise income generation, self-branding, and organisational sustainability. As Kgatle et al. (2023) observe, these shifts can blur the boundary between spiritual leadership and economic enterprise, especially where weak or decentralised structures limit accountability. This article does not claim that such forces determine ministerial behaviour linearly. Instead, it argues that the commercialisation of religion provides a macro-context that can condition how churches reinterpret ministerial practices, including appeals to tentmaking, by embedding them in market assumptions about legitimacy, success, and survival.

Financial decentralisation within many church formations also shapes contemporary ministerial practice in South Africa. Mainline denominations have often relied on centralised systems of clergy remuneration and institutional support, but many independent, African Initiated, and neo-charismatic churches operate with limited or non-existent central financial structures (Bompani, 2008; Meyer, 2007). In these church contexts, local congregations and their leaders carry the responsibility of sustaining both ministerial livelihoods and congregational activities. This arrangement does not create a theological problem in itself, yet it intensifies institutional vulnerability and influences how churches conduct ministry in practice.

Tucker's (2012) analysis of financial resourcing in Southern African church contexts demonstrates how economic precarity and declining institutional capacity can prompt congregations to adopt adaptive strategies for survival. When congregational income remains unstable or insufficient to sustain full-time ministry, churches often adopt alternative arrangements, including bi-vocational or self-supporting models, as pragmatic responses rather than ideological commitments. This perspective

matters because it shifts the analysis away from moralising individual ministers and toward recognising structural pressures. It also clarifies why multiple income streams can emerge as a rational response to fragile institutional ecosystems marked by limited financial buffers and high socio-economic volatility.

At the same time, decentralisation and precarity can amplify institutional risk. When churches lack robust accountability frameworks, transparent remuneration policies, or shared financial oversight, they often struggle to keep clear boundaries between legitimate self-support, bi-vocational necessity, and income-driven supplementation (Bompani, 2008; Meyer, 2007). This ambiguity does not necessarily arise from deliberate exploitation; churches may simply lack the capacity to sustain consistent governance and ethical reflection under strain. Yet the ambiguity still carries consequences, because it can normalise practices without clarifying how they align with ministerial responsibility and congregational sustainability. For this reason, this article examines contemporary shifts in the interpretation of tentmaking ministry in response to the pressures created by decentralised finance and economic insecurity.

Against the backdrop of commercialisation, financial decentralisation, and institutional precarity, recent scholarship also points to a semantic drift in how contemporary church discourse employs the term tentmaking. Churches and scholars increasingly use concepts such as tentmaking, bi-vocational ministry, and even income supplementation or moonlighting interchangeably, often without a clear conceptual distinction (Duin, 2017; Ndelwa, 2002). This conceptual blurring risks obscuring the normative logic embedded in the Pauline paradigm, where self-support served the integrity of the mission and communal responsibility, rather than personal income augmentation. When labels lose precision, churches lose a key tool for evaluating accountability and institutional burden.

As various authors observe, contemporary appeals to tentmaking may sometimes conceal practices that fit more accurately under the categories of bi-vocational necessity or income-driven supplementation (Gathogo, 2011). Ndelwa (2002) cautioned against uncritical extensions of the tentmaking model that detach it from its original ethical rationale, while Duin (2017) highlights how economic pressure and ministerial insecurity can normalise dual-income arrangements without adequate theological reflection. In the South African context, interchangeable usage does not automatically signal intentional abuse; it can also reflect the convergence of structural vulnerability and conceptual ambiguity. Even so, this semantic drift stretches a theologically loaded concept beyond its ethical contours, and it therefore calls for careful re-engagement with the Pauline baseline articulated in the previous section.

The concern raised here does not centre on measuring pastoral behaviour empirically or producing statistical claims about ministerial practice in South Africa. Instead, it frames a normative problem: churches may legitimise contemporary economic arrangements and ministerial strategies through the language of tentmaking without sufficient conceptual clarity. By situating these developments within the South African context, the article shows how semantic drift and institutional vulnerability can reshape the moral horizons of ministry over time. The following section evaluates these shifts against the Pauline normative framework developed earlier and asks whether contemporary invocations of tentmaking still align with its foundational logic of self-support, accountability, and the protection of communal resources.

5. Theoretical Critique

Ethical lens (stewardship & accountability)

From an ethical perspective, the Christian tradition has long understood ministry as a vocation grounded in calling, entrusted responsibility, and participation in a shared moral economy rather than as conventional employment governed primarily by contractual exchange. This vocational framing does not deny the institutional reality that ministry often involves material support and remuneration. Churches have often recognised such support as morally legitimate and practically necessary for sustaining congregational life. The ethical tension emerges, however, not from remuneration as such,

but from the point at which an employment logic, centred on rights, income maximisation, and contractual entitlement, displaces the vocational logic of service, accountability, and communal trust that undergirds Christian ministry.

Within this ethical framework, church resources participate in a moral economy shaped by trust, communal obligation, and missional prioritisation. Financial contributions to the church do not function as a private income pool; they constitute entrusted communal resources oriented towards sustaining worship, pastoral care, and service to the vulnerable. Read in light of the Pauline baseline, the ethical significance of these resources lies in their capacity to protect the integrity of the gospel, prioritise care for the weak, and support the church's missional commitments. Consequently, criteria such as allocation, proportionality, and transparency become decisive for evaluating ministerial financial arrangements. These criteria do not presume misuse; they operate as markers of coherence between theological confession and institutional practice.

The ethical challenge, therefore, concerns not the mere existence of dual income but the conditions under which receiving church remuneration alongside substantial secular income remains fair and accountable. The central normative question asks when such arrangements can be justified without undermining the church's moral economy or the integrity of ministry. The answer necessarily depends on context, but it need not be arbitrary. Churches can apply threshold criteria such as transparency about income sources, proportionality in compensation, accountability to church oversight, and the absence of an avoidable burden on the community. Framed in this way, fairness does not function as a fixed rule; rather, it serves as a moral standard that enables churches to assess particular arrangements in light of their communal and missional implications.

Organisational lens (role conflict & time management)

Organisational literature on role conflict highlights ethical and functional tensions that arise when individuals must meet competing and potentially incompatible role expectations (Claessens et al., 2007). Such tensions emerge when the demands of different roles cannot be satisfied simultaneously without compromise. Applied as an analytical analogy, this framework invites careful reflection on pastoral ministry, where responsibilities extend beyond task completion to include spiritual leadership, relational presence, availability to congregants, and moral accountability. Role conflict does not automatically signal failure, nor does it inevitably characterise ministerial life. It becomes ethically significant when competing obligations encroach on the core responsibilities of pastoral care and entrusted leadership.

Studies on time management and performance also suggest that sustained time scarcity and financial pressure can undermine role effectiveness and increase reliance on delegation (Kim & Garman, 2004; Tammelin et al., 2017; Wheatley, 2012). Although this research emerges from organisational and work-family fields, an analogy to pastoral ministry raises ethical questions because ministry includes mentoring, teaching, oversight, and sustained presence during moments of crisis. Delegation in itself does not create a problem, since shared ministry and distributed leadership have long-standing theological and practical legitimacy. Ethical concern arises when ministers delegate primarily to compensate for divided time commitments, especially when such patterns weaken pastoral accountability and reduce the relational and supervisory dimensions that constitute central aspects of ministerial responsibility.

Organisational theories, therefore, function here as analytical analogies rather than as empirical descriptions of pastoral behaviour. Their value lies in identifying structural risks associated with role overload, divided attention, and time scarcity without assuming that these risks always materialise in the same way. From an ethical standpoint, the central issue concerns not the mere existence of multiple occupational roles, but whether particular church arrangements enable ministers to sustain pastoral accountability, relational presence, and responsible oversight. This organisational lens, therefore, prepares the ground for conceptual propositions through which the article can evaluate contemporary ministerial practice normatively.

Political economy of religion/commercialisation

The political economy of religion draws attention to the ways religious practice and ministerial identity develop within broader economic and institutional forces. Rather than framing commercialisation as a matter of individual moral failure, this perspective treats it as a structural process through which religious organisations increasingly operate within, and respond to, market-oriented conditions. In such environments, economic sustainability, organisational growth, and public visibility can shape how churches practise and justify ministry. These pressures do not disappear when churches speak the language of vocation; they often work through institutional expectations and the metrics leaders use to define success.

Recent scholarship on the commercialisation of religion in Africa, particularly within the South African context, suggests that ministerial practice is increasingly negotiated within conditions of economic precarity and institutional competition (Kgatle et al., 2023; Magezi & Banda, 2017). It does not reduce churches to commercial enterprises. It does, however, indicate that market logics, such as revenue generation, audience expansion, and organisational survival, can exert formative influence on ministerial identity and economic practice. Within these conditions, churches may struggle to maintain clear boundaries between vocation, institutional sustainability, and entrepreneurial models of ministry, which raises normative questions about the ethical orientation of contemporary ministerial arrangements.

Within this framework, the ministry can undergo commodification, where churches begin to evaluate spiritual authority, pastoral care, and ministerial labour through measurable outputs such as attendance growth, financial inflows, media visibility, and organisational expansion. In such settings, ministers can become service providers by default, while congregants can take on the role of consumers whose participation is mediated through expectations of value, performance, and return. This shift does not always appear through explicit doctrinal statements. It often emerges through everyday institutional practices and evaluative metrics that align ministry with market rationalities.

Scholarship on prosperity discourse helps clarify how churches can normalise these dynamics through theological narratives that emphasise blessing, success, and divine favour (Bowler, 2013; Cornelio & Medina, 2020). Prosperity-oriented approaches remain diverse, so analysis should not treat them as a monolithic entity. Yet in some church contexts, they can reinforce the monetisation of charisma, the branding of ministerial identity, and the evaluation of pastoral effectiveness through performative indicators. From a normative perspective, these tendencies raise a central ethical question: does ministerial practice remain oriented towards vocation and communal responsibility, or does it become shaped by commodified expectations of productivity and reward?

When churches operate within increasingly commercialised religious economies, appeals to tentmaking risk reinterpretation through entrepreneurial rationalities that prioritise income diversification and financial optimisation. Under such conditions, the boundaries between tentmaking, bi-vocational ministry, and entrepreneurial activity can become even more blurred, reinforcing the semantic drift identified earlier. The language of tentmaking can then shift from signifying economic restraint for the sake of mission integrity to functioning as a legitimising discourse for particular income-generating arrangements within ministry. This shift does not necessarily imply intentional exploitation or personal moral failure; it highlights how structural pressures can shape the moral framework through which churches interpret economic practices and justify ministerial identity.

From a theological and ethical perspective, market logics encounter clear normative limits when churches apply them to their ministry. Economic considerations and organisational sustainability cannot function as value-free tools in church life. The Pauline paradigm reconstructed earlier foregrounds non-exploitation, economic restraint, and the protection of communal resources, especially for the sake of the weak and the integrity of mission, as decisive ethical priorities. When churches absorb appeals to tentmaking into market rationalities without these constraints, they face an ethically significant risk: they may legitimise income-driven practices through theological language. This risk calls for careful evaluative judgement and sets up the conceptual propositions and guiding principles developed in the following section.

6. Normative Framework

Having reconstructed the Pauline normative baseline and examined the ethical, organisational, and political-economic dynamics that shape contemporary ministry, this section moves from critique to constructive guidance. Conceptual analysis, if it is to serve church life, should not only identify ethical tensions but also offer principled orientations for discernment and practice. The principles proposed here do not function as legalistic rules or universally binding regulations. Instead, they operate as ethical criteria through which churches, governing bodies, and ministers can evaluate whether tentmaking arrangements cohere with vocation, accountability, and communal responsibility across diverse church contexts.

The guiding principles that follow translate the preceding conceptual and ethical analysis into a coherent normative framework for evaluating contemporary tentmaking practices. These principles do not stand as isolated recommendations. They interlock and should be read together as a set of ethical lenses for assessing ministerial arrangements. Each principle articulates a theological-ethical rationale grounded in the Pauline paradigm and clarifies practical implications for institutional decision-making, pastoral accountability, and stewardship of communal resources.

Principle 1 — Motivational Orientation (Motivational Test)

Authentic tentmaking should aim primarily to reduce financial burden on the church and to advance the integrity of the gospel's mission rather than to increase personal income. Within the Pauline paradigm, self-support functions as an ethically motivated practice that preserves communal resources and reinforces ministerial credibility, rather than as a strategy for financial optimisation. In practical terms, this principle invites churches and ministers to examine the dominant motivations that drive a particular arrangement and to test whether economic activity remains ordered to missional ends rather than quietly redefining ministry as a vehicle for supplementary income.

Principle 2 — Transparency and Disclosure

Transparency and disclosure are essential for establishing openness as a foundational requirement for trust and accountable governance. Ministers and churches should regard transparency about income sources and employment status as an ethical duty, rather than an optional disclosure. Openness enables informed communal discernment, reduces moral hazard, and protects the relationships of trust that should characterise ministerial oversight. In practice, this principle requires clear disclosure structures through which church boards and relevant governing bodies can evaluate financial arrangements in light of institutional responsibility and mission integrity, rather than leaving them to private negotiation, informal assumption, or unspoken entitlement.

Principle 3 — Proportionality and the "No Double-Dipping" Concern

Proportionality and the "no double-dipping" concern address fairness in the distribution of entrusted resources. Where ministers receive substantial and stable secular income, continued church remuneration raises a legitimate ethical question that requires careful justification. Such arrangements may remain permissible, but churches should assess them against standards of proportionality, communal fairness, and the moral economy of church resources. In practical terms, this principle encourages churches to calibrate compensation according to the contextual need, scope of responsibility, and institutional capacity, so that support responds to missional priorities rather than operating as an automatic or duplicative entitlement.

Principle 4 — Time Accountability and Pastoral Responsibility

Time accountability and pastoral responsibility frame availability and oversight as integral to ministerial integrity. Authentic tentmaking requires clear standards for time accountability and pastoral responsibility. Dual employment may be structurally necessary in some settings, but it should

still preserve adequate availability for pastoral care, teaching, leadership oversight, and relational presence. Delegation can support ministry, and churches have long practised shared leadership; however, this principle insists that delegation should strengthen rather than substitute for pastoral accountability. The ethical question concerns whether the arrangement protects core ministerial obligations from dilution or displacement, especially in moments of congregational need.

Principle 5 — Protection of the Poor and Mission-Critical Resources

It links economic arrangements to the church's preferential obligations. In continuity with early Christian practice, the church carries a primary obligation towards caring for the poor and vulnerable, as well as advancing its mission. The Pauline ethic of self-support reinforces the duty to protect communal resources, allowing the church to direct them towards these priorities rather than absorbing them into ministerial maintenance. Tentmaking, therefore, remains ethically coherent when it strengthens, rather than competes with or diminishes, the church's capacity to meet charitable responsibilities and pursue missional commitments.

Principle 6 — Contextual Sensitivity and Institutional Diversity

It guards the framework against both relativism and rigid standardisation. Normative evaluation of tentmaking must remain attentive to the diversity of contemporary church contexts. Denominational structures, levels of economic inequality, historical formation, and organisational capacity shape the feasibility and ethical contours of ministerial arrangements. For that reason, these principles should remain adaptable rather than uniform. They offer shared ethical criteria that churches can apply with discipline while still responding to local realities, and they allow for contextual judgment without collapsing into the claim that "anything goes."

Principle 7 — Periodic Review and Discernment

It treats tentmaking as a provisional arrangement that requires ongoing accountability. Churches should not treat tentmaking as a permanent or self-justifying status. Instead, they should subject it to regular communal discernment through financial, pastoral, and missional review. Such a review allows the church to assess whether an arrangement still serves its ethical purpose, including accountability, mission integrity, and responsible stewardship, and it enables adjustments when conditions change. In practical terms, this principle calls churches to establish periodic evaluation processes through which they can affirm, revise, or restructure tentmaking practices in response to evolving institutional and pastoral realities.

These principles provide a normative framework for discerning authentic tentmaking within contemporary church contexts. They aim to preserve the ethical logic of the Pauline paradigm, marked by accountability, restraint, and communal responsibility, while remaining attentive to institutional diversity and structural constraints. Rather than issuing definitive judgements or universal prescriptions, the framework offers churches and governing bodies reflective criteria for evaluating decisions about ministry and economic life with integrity, prudence, and missional clarity, and it prepares the ground for the concluding synthesis that follows.

7. Conclusions

This article has argued that contemporary invocations of tentmaking ministry, particularly within South African church contexts, reflect a significant conceptual and ethical shift from the Pauline paradigm. In the Pauline tradition, tentmaking served as a means of self-support, safeguarding mission integrity, protecting communal resources, and avoiding a financial burden on the communities served. Contemporary usage, however, increasingly risks conflation with bi-vocational necessity or income-driven moonlighting. This semantic drift does not amount to a merely terminological concern. It carries substantive ethical implications for ministerial accountability, institutional sustainability, and the credibility of gospel witness.

The primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in its reconstruction of a Pauline normative baseline and its integration with ethical, organisational, and political-economic lenses for evaluating contemporary ministerial practice. By distinguishing analytically between tentmaking, bi-vocational ministry, and moonlighting, the article introduces conceptual precision in a field where authors and practitioners often use these terms interchangeably. It also frames tentmaking not as an isolated technique but as an ethically charged configuration shaped by motivation, accountability, institutional context, and economic structures. In doing so, the article advances theological ethics and missiology by moving beyond descriptive accounts and towards normative boundary-making that churches can apply in governance and discernment.

Beyond its conceptual contributions, the article offers practical value through its articulation of guiding principles for authentic tentmaking in the twenty-first century. These principles provide churches and denominational bodies with criteria for ethical discernment on ministerial remuneration, transparency, time accountability, and prioritisation of communal resources. Rather than prescribing uniform solutions, the framework supports context-sensitive evaluation that acknowledges economic realities while still holding vocational integrity as a non-negotiable concern. In this way, it equips church institutions to engage tentmaking arrangements critically, preserve trust, protect mission-critical and vulnerable priorities, and sustain responsible pastoral leadership.

Although this study adopts a deliberately conceptual and normative approach, it points to several avenues for future empirical research. Researchers could pursue qualitative case studies of denominational approaches to tentmaking and bi-vocational ministry, comparative analyses of remuneration policies across church traditions, and surveys examining perceptions of fairness, accountability, and pastoral availability within congregations. Policy-oriented audits of church governance and financial structures could also clarify how churches implement normative principles in practice. Such empirical work would not replace the ethical framework developed here; it could refine it, test its limits, and clarify its applicability across diverse church contexts.

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