



The Integration of Ministry and Secular Work: A Theological Inquiry into Paul’s Model in the Context of Bivocational Pastors in Minahasa

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		Abstract
Received:	07 July 2025	<p><i>This study investigates the integration of pastoral ministry and secular work through a theological-exegetical inquiry into the Apostle Paul’s model in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, with a particular focus on bivocational pastors in Minahasa, Indonesia. The research is motivated by growing tensions within local churches where pastors are compelled to engage in secular employment due to economic necessity, raising theological and ethical questions about the legitimacy of such practices. The aim of this study is to examine whether bivocational ministry, as practiced by many Minahasan pastors, aligns with Paul’s vision of responsible, self-sustaining spiritual leadership. Using a qualitative approach that combines exegetical analysis of key biblical texts (1 Thess. 2:9 and 2 Thess. 3:6–12) with field data collected from interviews and observations involving ten pastors across multiple denominations, the study provides a contextual reading of Paul’s ethic of labor and ministry. The findings reveal that 70% of participants engage in additional work such as farming, teaching, or trading—not as a distraction from their calling, but as an intentional way to embody their faith in daily life. Rather than compromising their pastoral identity, this practice expands their relational influence and moral credibility in the community. This research concludes that bivocational ministry, when carried out with theological awareness and pastoral integrity, is a valid and contextually faithful expression of Christian vocation. The study affirms the need for a flexible theological paradigm that acknowledges diverse models of ministry, while calling on churches to support their pastors according to their capacity and context.</i></p>
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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Indonesian ecclesial discourse—especially within the Minahasa region—a persistent and pressing theological question emerges: Should pastors engage in secular work outside their ministerial duties? This inquiry arises not merely as a matter of practicality but as a reflection of the broader tension between the ideal of full-time ministry and the socioeconomic realities faced by many churches and clergy. In rural areas in particular, where congregations often struggle to provide sufficient financial support, a growing number of pastors have adopted what is commonly referred to as a bivocational ministry model—taking on additional roles as farmers, teachers, traders, or other forms of livelihood.

While this bivocational model addresses the economic necessities of clergy, it simultaneously provokes theological unease. Some church leaders and members continue to perceive secular employment as incompatible with the sacredness of the pastoral calling. Others, however, see bivocational ministry as a faithful response to God's call—an extension of pastoral service into the everyday life of society. This dichotomy between ministerial idealism and socio-economic realism necessitates a renewed theological framework that can reconcile the tension.

The Pauline epistles to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:7–10) provide a robust theological foundation for addressing this issue. In these letters, the Apostle Paul refuses to become a financial burden on the congregation, choosing instead to “work with his own hands” while simultaneously exercising spiritual leadership. His life presents a compelling model of integrated ministry—where spiritual calling and manual labor are not oppositional, but harmonized. As Guthrie (1991) highlights, Paul's approach to work is not merely economic but is deeply rooted in a theology of vocation, where labor becomes an extension of one's faith and moral responsibility.

Griffiths (1991) echoes this sentiment, emphasizing that the Church and its leaders must adapt to the changing demands of their socio-historical context without compromising spiritual integrity. In this view, bivocational ministry is not a step backward, but rather a contextualized and incarnational model of discipleship and leadership. Especially in regions like Minahasa, where institutional and economic limitations are evident, such an integrative approach may better reflect the needs and realities of both pastors and congregations.

Nevertheless, despite its growing relevance, the practice of bivocational ministry remains underexplored in theological scholarship, particularly in Southeast Asian contexts. Previous literature—such as Gider and Weli (1974) and Noyce (1999)—discussed pastoral integrity and simplicity, yet failed to directly engage with the biblical and theological implications of bivocational realities. Moreover, recent studies in practical theology and pastoral ethics (e.g., Borrong, 2015; Gunawan, 2018) have yet to integrate exegetical reflection on Pauline texts with empirical data from local contexts. This study seeks to fill that gap.

Field observations and informal interviews were conducted by the researcher from February to March 2025 with ten active pastors across Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Reformed denominations in the Minahasa region. Findings reveal that over 70% of respondents are engaged in secular employment alongside their ministerial duties. Far from compromising their calling, most participants view their professions as opportunities to extend their spiritual influence beyond church walls. Nonetheless, institutional ambivalence remains, as some church bodies continue to favor the traditional full-time pastoral model and resist recognizing bivocational ministry as equally valid.

The central problem of this study is thus located in the tension between ecclesial ideals of full-time ministry and the practical realities of bivocational pastors, as experienced in Minahasa. This tension invites theological re-

examination, particularly of Pauline models of ministry, and calls for a renewed understanding of how secular work can function as part of faithful Christian vocation. Therefore, the primary objective of this research is to construct a theological framework—grounded in the Pauline epistles—that legitimizes and affirms the integration of secular labor and pastoral ministry in bivocational contexts.

The novelty of this article lies in its synthesis of exegetical-theological analysis and empirical field data from a local Indonesian setting. By engaging 1 and 2 Thessalonians through both a critical hermeneutic and contextual lens, this study challenges the long-standing dichotomy between spiritual ministry and secular labor. In doing so, it offers a constructive theological vision that affirms work not as a threat to ministry, but as an extension of discipleship, responsibility, and witness in the everyday world. This approach aims to open space for ecclesial rethinking—one that embraces flexibility, contextual relevance, and faithfulness to both Scripture and lived experience.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach with a primary emphasis on theological-exegetical analysis, complemented by empirical observation. The aim is to examine Paul's integration of manual labor and ministry in 1 Thessalonians 2:9 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6–12 and assess its relevance to bivocational pastoral practice in Minahasa.

The first phase involved close textual analysis of the Pauline letters using a historical-grammatical method, focusing on ethical and vocational themes within their socio-cultural context. Key terms like *ergazomenoi* ("to labor") were explored to understand Paul's theological reasoning for working alongside preaching. This exegesis is framed by recent scholarship on Pauline theology and ethics, including the contributions of Loba-Mkole (2020) and Fee (2007), who emphasize Paul's ethic of responsibility and spiritual leadership through labor.

In the second phase, insights from contemporary theological literature were integrated to develop a contextual theological framework. Rather than relying solely on older sources, the study draws from more current discussions on ministry and work, such as Bevans' (2002) contextual theology, Borrong's (2015) ethical reflections on pastoral vocation, and Gunawan's (2018) analysis of modern ministerial challenges.

The third phase consisted of fieldwork conducted in Minahasa between February and March 2025, including semi-structured interviews with ten active pastors from various denominations and participant observation in both ecclesial and secular environments. This allowed for an in-depth understanding of how pastors navigate dual roles and perceive their work as part of their spiritual calling.

All findings were interpreted through theological triangulation, connecting biblical exegesis, theological theory, and empirical data. This method affirms that theological meaning emerges at the intersection of Scripture, context, and lived

experience (Bevans, 2002), enabling a grounded theological response to the realities of bivocational ministry.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Bivocational Reality Among Pastors in Minahasa

Field observations and interviews conducted with ten active pastors in Minahasa revealed that approximately 70% are engaged in secular work alongside their pastoral duties. These roles include farming, teaching, small business entrepreneurship, and other forms of labor. Rather than perceiving such work as diminishing their spiritual calling, many pastors—particularly one who is also a high school teacher—reported that secular employment expanded their ministry outreach, enabling them to embody Christian values beyond church walls.

As the teacher-pastor shared: *"Being a teacher doesn't reduce my ministry—it extends it. I can witness to students, model moral values, and impact lives I wouldn't otherwise reach from the pulpit alone."* This statement echoes similar reflections from five other pastors, who emphasized that their work provides not only economic stability but also missional opportunities within everyday settings.

This holistic view of ministry, wherein secular work becomes a platform for living out the gospel, was a recurring theme. Through agriculture, retail, or teaching, these pastors embodied a model of leadership that is both economically resilient and spiritually grounded, often gaining deeper respect from their communities due to their discipline, humility, and perseverance.

Interpreting Paul's Theology of Work in 1 & 2 Thessalonians

In 1 Thessalonians 2:9 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6–12, Paul's appeal to "working day and night" and the oft-cited admonition, *"If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat"* (2 Thess. 3:10), must be interpreted with care. The context does not suggest a devaluation of spiritual ministry as "non-work," but a rebuke against idle dependency and disruptive behavior within the community (Loba-Mkole, 2020). Paul's concern was with those who abandoned all responsibility under the guise of spiritual expectation, not with legitimate ministry or labor.

Importantly, Paul himself accepted material support when appropriate (cf. 2 Cor. 11:8–9; Phil. 4:15–16) and even instructed churches to provide for ministers, as reflected in 1 Corinthians 9:14: *"those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel."* In Acts and his letters, Paul encouraged offerings for the saints in Jerusalem, partly to support those in full-time service (Acts 11:29; Gal. 2:10). Thus, his working with his own hands in Thessalonica (Acts 18:3) was a contextual and voluntary choice, not a universal mandate.

This nuance is often overlooked. Within the varied denominational structures in Indonesia, some churches formally compensate pastors, while others expect them to serve voluntarily. In the fieldwork, four pastors received modest stipends, two were fully salaried, and four others received no financial support at all, relying entirely on secondary income. These differences significantly affect how pastors perceive their identity and sustainability in ministry. Therefore, Paul's example should not be rigidly absolutized, but viewed as a model of

adaptive faithfulness. His bivocational posture in Thessalonica was strategic—to avoid being a burden (1 Thess. 2:9)—yet in other settings, he did receive support, recognizing the church’s responsibility to honor and sustain its leaders.

Ethical Implications and Pastoral Witness

The Greek term *ergazomenoi* in 1 Thess. 2:9 (working) and *ēthos* (habit, character) reflects an ethic of labor that shapes moral identity and social credibility. Pastors in this study viewed their secular roles not as compromises, but as testimonies of commitment, integrity, and social engagement. Their participation in manual and professional labor enabled them to be visible moral agents, guiding communities not only through sermons but through example. Rather than weakening their authority, bivocational living—when freely chosen—can reinforce trust, relevance, and incarnational presence in the community. This aligns with Paul’s vision of ministry as more than proclamation; it is embodied service that integrates faith with the rhythms of everyday life.

The Example of Paul and Its Relevance to Contemporary Ministry

The apostle Paul, as portrayed in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, provides a powerful and formative model for pastoral ministry that remains deeply relevant to contemporary contexts. In 2 Thessalonians 3:7–9, Paul explicitly states that although he had the right to receive support from the congregation, he deliberately chose to work with his own hands. His intention was not rooted in necessity but in pedagogy—to set an example of integrity, self-discipline, and responsibility that his audience could emulate. His refusal to be a burden on the church was not a rejection of ministerial support, but an act of strategic leadership within a fragile young congregation.

This voluntary action reflects Paul’s broader theological conviction: ministry must be incarnational, responsible, and rooted in love, rather than entitlement. Paul’s ethic of self-support underscores a vision of pastoral leadership that does not shy away from labor but embraces it as an expression of faith, commitment, and spiritual witness. Such a model resonates strongly with the reality of bivocational pastors in Minahasa, who serve congregations that often lack the financial capacity to provide full-time salaries. Based on field interviews, seven out of ten pastors held jobs such as farming, teaching, and entrepreneurship. A recurring theme across interviews—expressed not only by a teacher-pastor but echoed by six others—was that secular work enhanced their ministry rather than diminished it. Their presence in classrooms, rice fields, and local markets allowed them to embody Christian values publicly and relationally.

One pastor explained, “*I meet more people at my farm than in my church. That’s where my witness begins.*” Another emphasized that earning an income outside the church allowed him to serve without placing financial strain on a small rural congregation, a sentiment mirrored by three others who receive little or no regular support.

However, not all pastors are in the same financial position. In the research sample, two were fully salaried by their churches, raising a valid theological and practical

question: *If a pastor is adequately supported by the church, should they still engage in secular employment?*

This is where the theological nuance of Paul's model becomes crucial. While he chose to work in Thessalonica, Paul also acknowledged and affirmed the legitimacy of ministerial support in other contexts (1 Cor. 9:14; Gal. 6:6). Furthermore, in Acts and the Pauline letters, churches were encouraged to give generously, not only to the poor but also to sustain ministers in Jerusalem (Acts 11:29; Rom. 15:25–26). This suggests that Paul's bivocational example is not a normative demand for all pastors, but a context-sensitive practice rooted in pastoral wisdom.

Given this, the research offers a clear position:

Bivocational ministry should be embraced as a valid and faithful pastoral model, particularly when financial necessity or missional strategy demands it. However, in denominational contexts where pastors are sufficiently supported by the church, bivocational work should remain optional—not obligatory or idealized.

This balance respects both Pauline flexibility and ecclesial responsibility. It upholds the theological integrity of work as part of discipleship, while also affirming that the church has a biblical and ethical responsibility to support its full-time ministers when able. Moreover, the testimony of multiple pastors in Minahasa indicates that bivocational ministry, when entered willingly, can function as a powerful form of spiritual leadership. It cultivates public credibility, deepens community engagement, and offers a visible witness of faith in action. This reflects what Nurwindayani and Panuntun (2019) describe as *lifestyle-based discipleship*, where pastoral authority is not derived merely from preaching but from daily moral consistency. Thus, Paul's example should not be narrowly applied nor used to excuse institutional neglect. Instead, it should inform a contextual theology of ministry that affirms multiple vocational expressions without undermining the legitimacy of full-time pastoral support.

In a modern ecclesial landscape marked by economic disparity and shifting expectations, Paul's model provides a flexible and faithful paradigm: a ministry rooted in integrity, responsive to context, and open to multiple forms of witness—whether from behind a pulpit, in a classroom, or on a farm.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore and interpret the model of the Apostle Paul in 1 and 2 Thessalonians as a theological foundation for integrating ministry and secular work, and to evaluate its relevance for bivocational pastors in the contemporary context of Minahasa. Through a combination of biblical exegesis and empirical fieldwork, the findings reveal that bivocational ministry is not only theologically valid but also contextually necessary and spiritually meaningful.

Paul's decision to work with his own hands, as described in 1 Thessalonians 2:9 and 2 Thessalonians 3:7–10, was not born out of doctrinal prescription but from pastoral intentionality—to model an ethic of responsibility, integrity, and solidarity with the community. This Pauline example provides a

normative vision for ministry that is not detached from everyday labor but deeply intertwined with it.

The research showed that many pastors in Minahasa, regardless of denomination, engage in secular occupations such as teaching, farming, or trading—not as a retreat from spiritual vocation, but as an extension of it. Their lived experiences demonstrate that secular work can function as a space for Christian witness, deepen relational ministry, and foster ethical credibility within the broader community.

Thus, bivocational ministry should be affirmed as a legitimate and faithful expression of pastoral calling, particularly in socio-economic contexts where churches are unable to fully support their ministers. However, the study also affirms the importance of ecclesial responsibility—where resources permit, churches ought to provide adequate financial support for their full-time pastors, as reflected in Paul's own encouragement for congregational giving in other epistles (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:14; Gal. 6:6).

Ultimately, this research concludes that ministry and secular work are not mutually exclusive, but can be integratively practiced in ways that reflect the heart of the gospel. Paul's model invites the contemporary church to adopt a more flexible, context-sensitive approach to ministry—one that honors both the dignity of labor and the sacredness of the pastoral vocation.

By bridging biblical theology with lived ecclesial realities, this study contributes to a renewed paradigm of pastoral ministry that is both theologically grounded and practically responsive to the needs of the present age.

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