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“It all starts with urgency...”. Engaging with the local *ekklesia* of Thessalonica as a window and mirror *en route* to sustained missionary impact

ABSTRACT

Acts 17:1-9 and 1 Thessalonians 1, which form part of the church’s normative library, are two underestimated windows regarding our ecclesiological identity and our missional presence in the world. Both deal with Paul’s effective church planting efforts in the city of Thessalonica. By immersing ourselves in these texts, which also serve as hermeneutical mirrors, we intend to participate in a mimetic learning process, in order to come to terms with the nature of Paul’s embodied proclamation of the Gospel and his missional urgency. This urgency, which was embedded in his own imitation of the suffering and joy of Christ, was also transplanted into the lives of the Thessalonians. In turn, their commitment to the Word, their steadfastness in suffering, and their openness to people from different social strata and cultures turned them into embodied examples of the Gospel right across the Greek world. Hence, the challenge to us as contemporary believers is to creatively, yet urgently, synchronise our own theological agendas, as well as our ecclesial practices and missional activities, with these normative textual mirrors and windows.

1. BIBLICAL TEXTS AS WINDOWS AND MIRRORS FOR CONTEMPORARY ECCLESIOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Nowadays, theological research has often become entrenched in highly sophisticated schools of academic thought. Any assumption of “direct applicability” of theological research, by means of a seamless movement from and/or an interplay between theological theory to ecclesiological practice, would be wishful thinking. At the same time, far too many church denominations and local congregations have turned into religious silos with their own peculiar discourses, rituals, and traditions. It is no wonder that stereotypical dichotomies such as “theology versus church” or “biblical scholar *versus* church practitioner” have also become commonplace at present.¹

Amid such unwarranted stereotyping, it remains the urgent responsibility and calling(!) of theologians and church leaders not only to respect, but also to interact responsibly with the message of the Bible, which serves as our ultimate source of knowledge and inspiration regarding God’s formative involvement in the world. However, this hermeneutical point of departure should not be confused with a one-sided perception of the Bible as a historical relic or an antiquarian artefact. Neither should it be confused with the misplaced idea of modern theology as a curatorial science in which the biblical text is “fetishized, its readings routinized, its readers bureaucratized” (Castelli *et al.* 1995:2). A nuanced hermeneutical understanding of the Bible is a *sine qua non* in congregational identity formation, one where we constantly consider both the “internal” and the “external” contexts of the Bible.

When an interpreter focuses on the text’s ‘internal’ context (text as mirror) he or she looks to the ‘the text itself’ – its words and sentences, its characters and settings, its plot and action, its rhetoric and imagery – for the text’s meaning and significance. When an interpreter focuses on the ‘external’ context of a text (text as window) she or he looks through the text to its situation in some larger world – whether cultural, political, religious, or literary (Struthers Malbon 2000:102).

¹ Fortunately, there are numerous exceptions to the rule, such as Kobus Schoeman. His imperturbable theological presence, combined with his unsurpassed empirical understanding of the church landscape of South Africa, has turned him into a bridge-builder of note between formal theology and local congregations. I dedicate this essay to Kobus, for his huge impact on my life as well. His emphasis on a theology that is “lived and experienced in the faith community” (Schoeman 2020:102), has had a profound influence on my thinking.

Powell (1990:8) describes this distinction as follows:

Historical criticism regards the text as a window through which the critic hopes to learn something about another time and place. The text, then, stands between the reader and the insight that is sought and may provide the means through which that insight can be obtained. Literary criticism, in contrast, regards the text as a mirror; the critic determines to look at the text, not through it, and whatever insight is obtained will be found in the encounter of the reader with the text itself.

From this hermeneutical perspective, Acts 17:1-9 and 1 Thessalonians 1 will serve as windows and mirrors when we reflect on our identity and calling as contemporary church. By immersing ourselves in these underestimated texts, which both deal with Paul's church planting efforts in the city of Thessalonica, we intend to participate in a mimetic learning process regarding the nature and impact of the local church. More to the point,

[i]t is about letting go of a critical observer posture, in order to creatively learn how theology, albeit in a different guise, that informed Paul and the first believers' self-sacrificing stance and actions ... It is about being mentored by, and ethically mimicking the theologians of the New Testament (Joubert 2020).

By being creatively "reread" and "redefined" by these formative texts, we will, it is hoped, discover some fresh answers to the challenges facing the local church in its efforts to facilitate sustained growth and missional impact.

2. ACTS 17:1-9: A BRIEF WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

Acts 17:1-9 provides a brief yet highly informative overview of Paul's missionary work in the city of Thessalonica. Referred to as the metropolis of Macedonia by the ancient historian Strabo (*Geographica* 7.7.21, quoted in Bock 2007:549), Thessalonica was an important commercial and administrative centre at the time. Not only did it have the largest port in the Roman province of Macedonia, but it was also close to the centre of the well-known *Via Egnatia* road which ran from east to west across the province. As was customary (17:2), Paul first went to the local synagogue to engage in discussions and debate (see also Acts 13:5; 14:1; 17:10; 18:4;

19:8). A similar reaction occurred as elsewhere – some believed (see Acts 14:1; 18:7-8; 19:9), while others strongly opposed his message (Acts 13:45; 14:2; 18:6; 19:9). This narrative highlights at least four aspects of Paul’s proclamation in Thessalonica.

2.1 The brevity of Paul’s impactful proclamation

Luke intentionally emphasises the brevity of Paul’s impactful ministry in Thessalonica, by stating that his debates in the synagogue took place on three sabbaths (Acts 17:2). This aligns with his proclivity to draw attention to the length of Paul’s ministry in various locations, particularly when it involved prolonged periods of time such as his 18-month stay in Corinth (Acts 18:11); his three months of dialogue in the synagogue of Ephesus (Acts 19:8); his two years of ministry elsewhere in Ephesus (Acts 19:10), and two years of house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:30). However, the vast majority of scholars struggle to come to grips with the idea that Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica lasted only three weeks. It would probably not allow sufficient time for him to set up shop and to attain the necessary permits to practise his trade as a leatherworker/tentmaker in the city, to which he alludes in 1 Thessalonians 2:9 and 2 Thessalonians 3:7-8. Paul also needed some time beforehand to acquaint himself with his new environment, as he did elsewhere (see Acts 17:16). During such a time of familiarisation, he would also have started to proclaim the Gospel, since his work as an artisan always served as a missional platform. At the same time, Paul’s statement in Philippians 4:15-16, namely that believers from Philippi provided financial assistance to him on more than one occasion while he worked in Thessalonica, would also point to a somewhat longer ministry. Philippi was at least a three-day trip away from Thessalonica on horseback, and even longer if people travelled on foot (Bock 2007:549). The fact that Paul simultaneously taught local church leaders in the city (see 1 Th. 5:12) might also indicate a longer stay there (see Keener 2014:539-540; Kim & Bruce 2023:59).

Still, Luke encapsulates the essence of Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica in this three-week window of dialogue and reasoning with Jews and the non-Jewish God-fearers in the synagogue. Although it would seem as if Paul spent a slightly longer period of time in the city, it was definitely not a long, drawn-out ministry. Such an assumption does not consider Paul’s own missional urgency and effectiveness. At the same time, the two visits by believers from Philippi point to their immediate concern for his daily needs after his eventful ministry in their own city (see Acts 16:14-40). Their visits as well as Paul’s preliminary work and proclamation could have fitted into a four- to six-week stay in Thessalonica. Perhaps this emphasis

on a long, drawn-out Thessalonian ministry for Paul says more about the current theological mindset, which is devoid of any missional urgency, than about Luke's deliberate emphasis on the tangible effects of Paul's work in Thessalonica in a very short period of time.

2.2 More than preaching in the traditional sense

In Acts 17:2-4, Luke emphasises Paul's strategy to communicate the good news. As the Greek verb *dialegomai* (διαλέγομαι) suggests, he did not preach in the traditional sense of the word. Rather, he engaged in dialogue and debate, with Scripture as his basis. Paul did not only appeal to his hearers' emotions, but he also "provided reasoned arguments for his claims about Christ" (Witherington 1998:505). In other words, he spoke to their hearts and minds when explaining (*dianoigō*/διανοίγω) and proving (*paratithemai*/παρατίθεμαι) that the Messiah had to suffer, die, and be raised to life. These aspects formed the Christological pillars of Paul's proclamation.² His arguments about the necessity of the death and resurrection of Christ were also explained as being planned by God and foreshadowed in the Scriptures of Israel.

The ensuing religious conversion of a large group of people in the synagogue of Thessalonica implied a deliberate, cognitive shift in their world view. In Luke's words, they were persuaded (*peithō*/πείθω – Acts 17:4), suggesting that Paul's reasoned approach, substantiated by the facts that he logically offered in his arguments, was deemed to be tenable and convincing. This underlines the point made by Witherington (1998:506, fn. 159) that Paul

assumed that the gospel should be responded to freely on the basis of the appeal to the mind in addition to the pull of the *pathos* inherent in the message. Proclaiming the gospel was not to be seen as an attempt to dupe an unsuspecting public and suck them in by mere eloquence without rational substance.

2.3 A multicultural movement

A large group of people quickly joined this new movement, which is called the church in 1 Thessalonians 1:1. Apart from several Jews (see Acts 17:4a – "some of them"), those who were persuaded by Paul's proclamation included "a great many" (*πλήθος πολύ*) God-fearing Greeks, as well as a large group of influential women in the city. Hence, Luke emphasises not only the immediate impact of Paul's work, but also the wide appeal of the Gospel to people of different social and cultural backgrounds. Non-Jews

² See the verb *kataggellō*/καταγγέλλω – Acts 17:3.

and women, in particular, immediately became part of the new community of faith (see also Acts 1:14; 5:14; 8:3; 9:2; 16:15, 40; 17:12, 34; 18:2, 18, 26). This resonates with Paul’s programmatic statement elsewhere in Galatians 3:28 that, “in Christ”, there is no Jew and no Greek, no slave or free person, and no male and female.

2.4 A Gospel that turns the world upside down

The positive responses to Paul’s proclamation in the synagogue of Thessalonica were soon met with staunch opposition from the Jewish authorities. Luke mentions that their jealousy caused them to obtain the help of unemployed day labourers and other wicked people who quickly started a riot throughout the city (Acts 17:5). This uproar led to the capture of Jason, a new believer who provided hospitality to Paul and his helpers. He was brought before the local politarchs or magistrates of the city. The crowd’s charges against Jason, Paul, and the remainder of his movement were serious (Acts 17:6-7). They were accused of upsetting the “stasis”, the stable conditions, and the respected order in the Empire, by stirring up a rebellion. This disruptive state of events, which already took place elsewhere in the *oikoumenē* or *οἰκουμένη*,³ is now also taking place in Thessalonica. Hence, the apt translation of the first part of the troublemaker’s charge in verse 6: “οἱ τὴν οἰκουμένην ἀναστῶσαντες, in some contemporary English translations as “they have turned the world upside down”.

The second part of the charge against Paul and his new movement in verse 7 stated that they acted against the decrees of Caesar. In this regard, we know of the edicts of Augustus in AD 11 (Dio Cassius, *Historiae romanae* 56.25.5-6) and of Tiberius in AD 16 (Dio Cassius, *Historiae romanae* 57.15.8), which prohibited any predictions that forecast the death and consecutive change of a ruler (Peterson 2009:482; Kim & Bruce 2023:67). At least, this charge implied that Paul intended some form of political treason against the emperor, by proclaiming another king that could supplant him. By misrepresenting the content of Paul’s proclamation that “Jesus is king”, his opponents implied that the mantra of the Roman Empire, “the emperor is king”, was under threat (Acts 17:8-9). Hence, Paul’s proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah, the Lord, and the Son of God, as well as his criticism of the Roman idea of the *pax romana*, the so-called golden age of peace and stability brought about by the Emperor, “were heard as counter-Caesarean and as subversive to the Roman Empire” (Kim & Bruce 2023:68).

3 As a hyperbolic reference to the Roman Empire (see Lk. 2:1), or a figurative reference to the entire inhabited earth (Acts 17:31).

The Thessalonian officials were well aware of the fact that the emperor's benefactions might end abruptly if their city harboured individuals who threatened to overthrow him. As a result, and in order to show their loyalty to Caesar, they immediately took action against Paul's host Jason who was held legally liable for his good behaviour. Jason had to pay some form of bail before they let them go, forcing Paul and his co-workers to leave the city during the night (Acts 17:9-10). Sadly, this upheaval also gave rise to severe persecution of the local community of faith (1 Th. 2:14-15), which included ridicule, ostracism from family, work and the community, as well as physical afflictions (2 Th. 1:4), and possibly even some martyrdoms (1 Th. 4:13).

3. 1 THESSALONIANS 1 AND THE ESSENCE OF THE GOSPEL

While still looking through the "Thessalonian window", Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians provides more details regarding his provocative Gospel, which was embraced with great enthusiasm by the new community of faith in the city. 1 Thessalonians was written from Corinth only a few months after Paul left Thessalonica in AD 50, while Acts 17 was written at least 20 years later. However, we find numerous similarities between them such as the references to Paul's helpers (1 Th. 1:1; Acts 17:10); the staunch opposition to Paul's message; the persecution of the church in Thessalonica (1 Th. 2:1-2, 13-14; Acts 17:6-10), and Paul's proclamation of the kingdom of God (1 Th. 2:12; Acts 17:7). In this regard, 1 Thessalonians 1 serves as a *pars pro toto* for Paul's window on his Thessalonian ministry.

3.1 A new community of faith with a unified purpose

Paul's proclamation went hand in hand with the formation of the *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία) as the official designation for the local assembly of converts in the city (1:1). The new identity of all who formed part of the church was based in their faith in God the Father and in the Lord, Jesus Christ. According to Fee (2009:68),

[b]oth the source (the work of Christ) and goal (God the Father) of their existence as God's people are expressed in this compact phrase.

The church was constituted into a new fellowship with a unity of purpose and action. This new way of life was put in place while Paul was still working among the Thessalonians (as implied by the term *μνημονεύοντες*

or remembering in 1 Th. 1:3). It was based on the triad of faith, love, and hope (1 Th. 1:3; see also Rm. 5:1-5; 1 Cor. 13:13; Gl. 5:5-6; Col. 1:4-5). Their “work of faith” entailed the practical manifestation of their new-found faith in Christ in their daily conduct. In turn, their “labour of love” reflected the dedicated, tireless nature of their self-sacrificial love and loyalty to God, fellow believers, and outsiders. Thirdly, their “steadfastness of hope” was an expression of solid confidence anchored in their expectation of Christ’s second coming. Clearly, as Richard (1995:62) states,

Paul’s choice of highlighting the combination of these three traditional virtues, as representing the essential qualities of Christian life are important in discerning his theological, Christological and ecclesiological perception of the Christian reality.

3.2 The missional ripple effect of the Gospel

The essence of Paul’s message in Thessalonica is expressed in verse 5 in one of his key terms – *euaggelion* (εὐαγγέλιον), the gospel, the good news. This *euaggelion*, which is used 60 times in his letters, came to the Thessalonians not only by means of the word, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit, and in complete certainty (see also 1 Cor. 2:4). Right from the start, the Gospel was experienced as such, as the divine message of salvation by “they themselves” (1 Th. 1:9 – the believers from Macedonia and Achaia), “you yourselves” (1 Th. 2:1 – the Thessalonians), and “we also” (1 Th. 2:13 – Paul and his helpers).

Paul’s Gospel was an embodied gospel. His own character formed part of the message he preached, as testified to by the first believers in the city. “The Thessalonians could hear the proclamation, see its power, and observe how the message was lived” (Green 2002:97). As a result, they became imitators (“mimētai”/μιμηται) of Paul and the Lord (see also 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phlp. 3:17). Verse 6 describes the nature of their imitation in terms of their receiving the word with the joy of the Holy Spirit amid much suffering. Thus, the joy as well as the suffering and sacrificial death of Christ (see, for example, 2 Cor. 5:17-21; 8:9; Phlp. 2:5-11), coupled with his apostle’s own joy and suffering, became the template for their new life as “the *ekklesia* of the Thessalonians” (1 Th. 1:1). By imitating Christ and Paul as their role models, they learned from the start of their own journey of faith how to remain joyful and steadfast in the presence of suffering. Their imitation of the Lord and his apostle was anchored in their own, unique commitment to the Word of God and their openness to the Spirit.

Paul’s presence or *eisodos* (εἰσόδος) in Thessalonica (1 Th. 1:5, 9-10; 2:1, 13; 3:6; see also Kim & Bruce 2023:77-80) had immediate, tangible ripple

effects. First, in the process of bringing God’s message of salvation to the Thessalonians, they imitated Paul’s character and obedience to the Word amid his own suffering.

Secondly, the Thessalonians instantly became an embodied example (τύπος) of the new life in Christ for all believers in the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia and everywhere else (1 Th. 1:7-8). Their faith literally “rang out loudly to all parts of Greece” (Richard 1995:71).

Thirdly, other people in Macedonia and Achaia, who heard the Gospel from the Thessalonians, reported to Paul the effective impact or welcoming (“eisodos!”) he and his helpers had in Thessalonica (1 Th. 1:8). In this way, a dynamic new movement of faith quickly took concrete shape all across the region.

3.3 An embodied confession and expression of faith

The positive response of the Thessalonians to Paul’s proclamation, expressed probably in hymnal form in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, simultaneously also formed the essence of their own confession of faith:

you turned to God from idols
to serve the living and true God
and to await his Son from heaven,
whom he raised from the dead,
Jesus who delivers us
from the coming wrath.

This (hymnal) narration of the faith of the Thessalonians encapsulates the past, present, and future effects of their conversion. Paul deliberately emphasises the nature of their conversion, which entailed turning away from previous idols in the past to serving the living and true God of Israel here and now. At the same time, four aspects highlight the central position and role of “the Son”. First, the Son will come back from heaven in the future, an occurrence referred to elsewhere in this letter as his royal coming or *parousia* (see 1 Th. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15).

Secondly, and in line with the core of the apostolic proclamation (Acts 3:7; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30), the Son is the one whom God raised from the dead.

Thirdly, the name of the Son is Jesus. According to Green (2002:109),

[t]he historic person, Jesus of Nazareth, is the same one who died, was raised, and will come from the heavens (see Acts 1:11). Over and again in this letter Jesus is the one who is said to have died (1 Th. 2:15; 4:14; 5:9-1) and who will come again (1 Th. 1:3; 2:19; 3:13; 4:14; 5:9, 23).

Fourthly, Jesus is the one who rescues believers from the coming wrath. This eschatological event, directed to those who do not obey God (2 Th. 1:6-10), is no longer a threat to believers. Their present sufferings should, therefore, not be confused with divine punishment. God himself will reverse their fortunes. Their final liberation is certain through Jesus as their eschatological deliverer (1 Th. 5:9).

4. A SENSE OF URGENCY IS URGENTLY(!) CALLED FOR

When mirroring ourselves in Acts 17 and 1 Thessalonians 1, we are confronted with our own missional effectiveness and urgency, or rather, the apparent lack thereof. Urgency is one of the forgotten, but essential drivers of change in any system or organisation. As one of the leading modern voices on the study of leadership, change, and the importance of urgency, Kotter (2008:Kindle edition) found in his research that, in approximately 70 per cent of the organisations where people endeavoured to facilitate change, they were either not fully launched, or the change efforts failed, or they were eventually achieved, but then late and with great frustration. Only in 10 per cent of cases did people achieve more than would have been thought possible by creating a sufficiently high sense of urgency.

According to Kotter (2008:Kindle edition), “[i]t all starts with urgency ... complacency is much more common than we think and very often invisible to the people involved”. He also warns against a false or misguided sense of urgency (hurriedness!), one “where action is driven by anxiety, anger and frustration or an unhealthy determination to win as soon as is reasonably possible”. True urgency, which is central to and highly important for any organisation, group, or movement’s survival, success, and flourishing, facilitates continuous change and growth in healthy ways.

Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica was infused with a constant sense of urgency. Instead of focusing on the problems he encountered within this new missional environment, he saw it as a space filled with endless opportunities. Amid the ever-present hazards of persecution and misunderstanding of his message, Paul’s powerful desire to act and to move in the here and now was fuelled by, and revolved around the clear, relentless, yet relevant proclamation of Christ, as well as the formation of a vibrant community of faith. Paul’s efficiency was the result of constant urgent action, the type that Kotter (2008: Kindle edition) would describe as

alert, fast moving, focused externally on the important issues, relentless and continuously purging irrelevant activities to provide time for the important and to prevent burnout.

Paul created a culture of sustained urgency by proclaiming the formative narrative of the cross clearly, consistently, and passionately. By also addressing the issue of suffering and resistance to the Gospel right from the start (by linking it to the atoning death of Christ and to his own apostolic mission), Paul effectively targeted people's hearts "where fear and anger can kill hope and stop the growth of a true sense of urgency" (Kotter 2008:Kindle edition). He did not merely dump a bunch of religious facts on people. Neither did he simply address their basic emotional needs; he actually provided them with a divinely inspired Gospel that existentially changed their own identity and purpose in life. As a result, it aroused the necessary determination and urgency in his hearers to embody this good news themselves.

By instilling his own sense of urgency to share the good news in as many others as possible, Paul formed a sustained, passionate movement of Christ followers with a new metanarrative and new organic gathering spaces ("the church"). The *ekklēsia*, as the new family of God, was open and accessible to people from all social strata of society, as well as to individuals from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds. The church was magnetically countercultural when compared to the predictability (and numbness!) of surrounding cults and institutions. No wonder Paul's opponents angrily complained, in Acts 17, that his Gospel turned their world upside down.

4.1 An embodied urgency

A sense of true, countercultural urgency should be continuously instilled in believers. It formed an integral part of the DNA of the first Jesus followers, and it should also form an integral part of ours. Urgency starts when we set aside our love affairs with cluttered calendars, boring church meetings, predictable planning sessions, uninspiring reports, and lifeless religious discussions merely for the sake thereof. We should be confronted with our own spiritual numbness, our predictable expressions of faith in shrinking Sunday services, as well as our dated approaches to ministry.

A false sense of urgency, which is prevalent in many local churches nowadays, one which is driven by fear and anxiety about declining congregations and a lack of resources and funds, should be countered by vigorous leaders, infused by the joy of the Spirit, who continuously choose to imitate Christ and Paul in their personal commitment to the Word amid

numerous challenges and setbacks. However, the sad reality of our day is that, instead of turning their local congregations upside down with the provocative Gospel of Christ in fresh new ways, many ministers have turned into glorified public relations officers who are officially responsible for the maintenance of the local religious *status quo*. They have to maintain shrinking congregations by means of predictable ministries that include endless house calls, fundraising events, and pragmatic efforts to attract young and old to dated church activities.

4.2 Replacing stagnant “churchdom” with healthy urgency

A vibrant alternative to “stagnant churchdom” is offered right here in the Thessalonian window/mirror. In both Acts 17 and 1 Thessalonians 1, we encounter enthusiastic, highly focused Jesus followers who were unified in their love for the Lord, as well as in their openness to people from all social classes and cultures. We see how they became an instant example throughout the Greek world, by setting a magnetic standard worthy of being imitated by others. At the same time, when we mirror ourselves in their timeless ecclesiological example, we as contemporary Jesus followers are challenged to rekindle the fire in ourselves and others for the Gospel. We need to empower as many people as possible to embody the normative narrative of Christ.

Much more is needed nowadays than merely another church synod, or yet another bunch of religious meetings to debate the problems of the church and the correct religious dogmas for the umpteenth time. Much more is needed than new religious structures or more funds. We need to embody, live, share, and urgently build the truth of Christ into the lives of others.

Action is the test. Never forget, furious activity and running and meeting and slick presentation are not a sign of true urgency. Alertness, movement and leadership, now – and from many people, not a few – are the signs of true urgency (Kotter 2008:Kindle edition).

5. FIN: CATCH ON FIRE, AND THEY WILL DRIVE FOR KILOMETRES TO WATCH YOU BURN

“Catch on fire with enthusiasm and people will come for miles to watch you burn.” This quote, mistakenly linked to John Wesley, is still profoundly true, especially if we amend it to “catch fire with enthusiasm and urgency

for Christ, and people will join from all over to follow your example". Such an embodied faith would be the correct ecclesiological response to the poignant question posed by the well-known Dutch artist, Vincent van Gogh, in a letter to his brother Theo. This letter was written on 24 June 1880 (Van Gogh 2014:Kindle edition):

Does what goes on inside show on the outside? Someone has a great fire in his soul and nobody ever comes to warm themselves at it, and passers-by see nothing but a little smoke at the top of the chimney and then go on their way. So now what are we to do, keep this fire alive inside, have salt in ourselves, wait patiently, but with how much impatience, await the hour, I say, when whoever wants to, will come and sit down there, will stay there, for all I know?

Van Gogh's answer to his own question was embedded in his conviction that love is the only conduit towards connecting with one's purpose in life, and with the divine:

I'm always inclined to believe that the best way of knowing [the divine] is to love a great deal ... But you must love with a high, serious intimate sympathy, with a will, with intelligence, and you must always seek to know more thoroughly, better, and more. You know, what makes the prison disappear is very deep, serious attachment. To be friends, to be brothers, to love; that opens the prison through sovereign power, through a most powerful spell. But he who doesn't have that remains in death. But where sympathy springs up again, life springs up again.

Van Gogh's urgent question is still relevant at present. How can passers-by experience more than simply a little smoke at the top of our own chimneys, and then, instead of going their way, be warmed by the great fire in our own soul? Well, this will happen when we embody our faith in Christ in magnetic ways. This will happen when we become urgent in our love for the fallen, the downtrodden, the outcast, and the lonely. This will happen when we begin to synchronise our own theological mission and agendas creatively and urgently, as well as our contemporary church practices and activities, with the normative texts of the church. God's involvement in the world, as recorded in the Bible, must inform and fuel our own coordinates in terms of theological and ecclesial reflection, as well as the formation of mission and practices. The Word must become our windows and mirrors in our search for a new sense of urgency.

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