The radicality of early Christian oikodome: A theology that edifies insiders and outsiders

In this article a study is made of the concept ‘oikodome’ and its derivatives in the New Testament and early Christianity. Hence, in this essay the focus is limited to the use of the term οἰκοδομός/οἰκοδομή(ν) in the New Testament, and briefly turns to inspiring trajectories in early Christianity. A detailed focus on the term(s) reveals the complexity of the matter in the different Biblical contexts with its multi-layered dimensions of meaning. Subsequently, attention is turned to a study of 1 Thessalonians, followed up with a discussion of the trajectories of other-regard and radical self-giving love in the early Church as witnessed by insiders and outsiders in antiquity.

Introduction

This article was written against the background of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria’s Faculty Research Theme ‘Oikodome: Life in its fullness’.

One of the challenges of a Christian faculty in the contemporary academic landscape is to what extent the research that we are doing impacts the world in which we live. In other words, is what we do relevant in any way, and could we contribute to society and academia? This essay wants to argue that the answer is yes. Christianity has something to offer, and when we turn to ancient history and wisdom, we find inspiration for the present also. This article aims to be one that could be read by theologians as well as non-theologians, and for that reason, we will attempt to limit the technical nature of the article as far as possible to make it more accessible.

During the faculty ‘table discussions’ held during the planning phase, the need was expressed for someone to conduct a thorough examination of the terms being used. Hence, in this essay the focus will be limited to the use of the term οἰκοδομός/οἰκοδομή(ν) in the New Testament, with a brief turn to inspiring trajectories in early Christianity. A detailed focus on the term(s) reveals the complexity of the matter in the different Biblical contexts with its multi-layered dimensions of meaning. The result is that, within the space of this article, one can only scratch the top layer. Naturally, this will also lead to many questions (and problems), which will not be addressed in this article.

Next the term(s) οἰκοδομέω/οἰκοδομὴ and its derivatives will be clarified and, in the subsequent section, a study of 1 Thessalonians follows, with a discussion of the trajectories of other-regard and radical self-giving love in the early Church as witnessed by Von Harnack (early Church) in dialogue with Malherbe (Thessalonians) will also be revisited.

Clarification of terms

Oikodome/Oikodome

The verb οἰκοδομέω occurs approximately 40 times in the New Testament (Figure 1). In the New Testament, the translations of the word in the different contexts, comes down to (Figure 2). The term οἰκοδομή occurs 18 times in the New Testament (NT) (Figure 3). In the NT, the word is translated as follows (Figure 4). In the Septuagint, the term and its derivatives relates to the Hebrew as follows (Figure 5).

Source: Logos/Libronix search function

The Old and New Testament background of οἰκοδομέω and its relationships

According to Louw and Nida (1996:ad loc) – who put the words οἰκοδομέω, ἐπιοικοδομέω, οἰκοδομή and οἰκοδομέω in the semantic domain 74.15 – in the NT these terms denote the following meaning: ‘to increase the potential of someone or something, with focus upon the process involved … to strengthen, to make more able, to build up’. The verbs οἰκοδομέω, οἰκοδομέων and οἰκοδομήν [noun] (1 Cor 14:12) denote the act of building or constructing or edifying, or the result thereof (a building/construction), whereas the noun οἰκοδομός refers to the ‘builder of a house’ or ‘architect’ (Ac 4:11; cf. Lk 20:17). These terms (οἰκοδομέω/οἰκοδομή[v]) are used in the New Testament in a literal (the act of building) and a figurative sense of the word (edifying or edification; cf. 1 Cor 14:12; 2 Cor 12:19; Rm 15:2; 1 Cor 14:3, 26). For the purposes of this article, we are especially interested in the figurative dimensions of the word and its use in the New Testament (Arndt, Danker & Bauer 2000).

However, let us first consider the OT and early Jewish usage of the term since the NT authors were intertextually engaged in dialogue with many of these ideas. However, this will only be dealt with in a cursory manner.

Deissmann (pp. 163ff.; quoted by Otto Michel 1964:144) and others like Elwell and Beitzel (1988) point out that ancient buildings – cities, temples, altars and the like – needed constant maintenance and restoration, and the literal meaning refers to building or restoration of the latter. Most occurrences of the term in the OT/Septuagint relates to the element of physical (up)building. In later Judaism, the life of God’s people was figuratively related to the ideas of building or constructing or breaking or tearing down.10 In the OT, God is the subject performing the action of the verb ‘to build’ – God is the One who plants, gives life and builds the house of Israel, but also the One who can (or cause to) break or tear it down (cf. Jr 1:10; 24:6; Michel 1964:137). Hence, we often see the term used as ‘a metaphor for God’s activity among his people (1 Pt 2:4–8)’ (Elwell & Beitzel 1988). Philo (cf. Leg. All., 2.6 & Leg. All., 3.228) also uses the term in the figurative sense of the word.11

In the Rabinic literature, the students of the law are described as ‘builders’ of the Torah (cf. Elisha b. Abuya: Ab. R. Nat., 24) – those who are participating in ‘building up the world by studying and expounding the Torah’ (cf. b. Ber. 64a appealing to Is 54:13; quoted by Michel 1964:137).

From a very early stage in the Christ-following movement, the concept ‘building’ took on a Messianic (and perhaps apocalyptic) connotation in the sense that Jesus, the Messiah commissioned by God, was presented as the One who will build the future (spiritual temple) community of faith (Michel 1964:139). Here we are reminded of Mark 14:58;12

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6. This part of the article strongly depends on and builds forth on the work of the Tubingen scholar, Otto Michel (1964), in Kittle’s Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, as well as that of Arndt et al. (2000). Naturally, as all New Testament scholars are aware – especially those of the University of Pretoria where Jannie Louw (cf. Louw & Nida 1996) was a prominent scholar – the work of Kittle, Bromiley and Friedrich (eds. 1964) dates from a time before the prominence of James Barr’s (1961) approach in the Semantics of Biblical Language. For that reason, we are also critical in our use of Kittle et al. and take the development since Barr into consideration against the background of developments in linguistics. See Gibson (2001:1) for the way in which Barr’s work entailed a ‘reconstruction of descriptive Biblical linguistics’. Barr made us aware of the flaws in etymology-based word studies and also that it is not wise to simply assume word equivalents in different Semitic languages. It is also not so easy to compare Greek and Semitic thought or to simply contrast it. In Barr’s aforementioned book there is a whole chapter on Kittle and its problems. Words get their meaning in sentences and in contexts, and more than often the meaning(s) are more than the sum of the individual lexical parts. The reader of the article unfamiliar with the debate should also consult the article of Witherington (2011) in this regard and also of that other prominent New Testament and Ancient Greek scholars, like Porter (1996). See also Swanson (1997) for semantic studies.


8. According to Michel (1964:144), the concept ‘οἰκοδομέω’ has a teleological, spiritual, cultic and ethical dimension.

9. For another example of figurative ‘upbuilding’ in the OT, see Proverbs 14:1 (‘A wise woman builds her house’). See also perhaps Jeremiah 29:6; 42, 10, etc.

10. Michel (1964:139) points to: ‘1 Ch. 26:27: τοῦ μὴ καθυστερῆσαι τὴν οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ οἴκου, 1 Εστ. 2:26: έργη τοῦ οἰκοδομικοῦ τοῦ Ισραήλ; πάλιν εὗρε τοὺς μεταβάλλοντας καὶ οἰκοδομοῦντας τὸν ναὸν τοῦ θεοῦ’).

11. Jeremiah 24:6 (NIV): ‘If my eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them’.

12. Here in Legum Allegoricae (Leg. All., 3, 228), according to Michel (1964:138), Philo allegorises Numbers 21:27H, according to which Philo argues that if we trust only on our own calculations and ‘erect and build the city of the spirit which destroys truth’. In De Cherubim 101–103F we also see Philo using the metaphor of building: ‘Ronge (1995:90–91) translates Philo as follows: ‘If therefore we call the invisible soul the terrestrial habitation of the invisible God, we shall be speaking justly and according to reason; but that the house may be firm and beautiful, let a good foundation be laid as its foundations, and on these foundations let the virtues be built up in union with good actions, and let the ornaments of the front be the due comprehension of the encyclical branches of elementary instruction; (102) for from goodness of disposition arise skill, perseverance, memory, and from knowledge arise learning and attention, as the roots of a tree which is about to bring forth eatable fruit, and without which it is impossible to bring the intellect to perfection.’ (103) But by the virtues, and by actions in accordance with them, a firm and strong foundation for a lasting building is secured ...’

13. Mark 14:58 – for οἱ ἁγιότατοι κάθετος ἐξήγησαν ὡς έκ τοῦ καταλύουσαν τοῦ οἴκου τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ διὰ τῶν θεραπευτῶν ὁληχόρησαν οἰκοδομής (Translation (NIV)): ‘I will destroy this man-made temple and in three days will build another, not made by man’. 

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and also Matthew 16:18 where Jesus says to Peter: καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ ἐπιστέφωσα τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ ἠμαρτίας καὶ ἔφθασεν στὴν ἐκκλησίαν τῆς ἱερατικῆς (Mt 16:18). Clearly, the futurum (οἰκοδομήσω) indicates that the action will take place in the future, and that Jesus is the subject of the verb and the ἐκκλησίαν is the object of the verb. In Acts 15:16, the promise is made that 'μετὰ ταῦτα ἀναστρέψω καὶ ἀνοικοδομήσω τὴν σκηνὴν Δαυὶδ τῇ περιποιήσει καὶ τὰ κατεσκαμμένα αὐτῆς ἀνοικοδομήσω καὶ ἀνορθώσω αὐτήν' (Acts 15:16). Here in Acts, the author
use of the images of architecture (to explain the relation between σῶμα, ναός and οἰκοδομή; cf. Trossen p. 804 quoted in Michel 1964:144). The term οἰκοδομή in the New Testament can be used to refer to physical buildings, like the temple (Mk 13:1; Mt 24:1), and even figuratively to refer to man’s corporeality (cf. body as tent in 2 Cor 5:11).21 Paul also uses the term οἰκοδομή in a figurative sense to refer to the community of faith, for instance in 1 Corinthians 3:9, where he states that the believers are ‘God’s building’ – under permanent construction (θεοῦ γὰρ ἔμπροσθεν συνεργοί, θεοῦ γεώργοι, θεοῦ οἰκοδομοῦ)22 ē̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̄̀
For Paul, οἰκοδομήν is an apostolic activity and a spiritual task of the community of faith. Paul, in effect, adopts and modifies the OT concept of the idea. Paul accentuates the fact that the actions of believers should contribute to the spiritual upbuilding and edification of the community of faith (1 Cor 14:12,26 26; Rm 15:28 & Eph 4:29). In the well-known discussion of the value of the different spiritual gifts, Paul uses this term to argue that only that which builds up the community of faith has any value (1 Cor 14:3). In the same vein, Paul argues in Romans 14:19 that one should not do anything that could cause one’s brother to stumble, but rather do that which leads to mutual edification, i.e. actions that build one’s fellow believer up (Rm 14:19 – ἠμοί οὖν τὰς εἰρήνης διώκομεν καὶ τὰς οἰκοδομής τῆς εἰς ἀλλήλους cf. also 1 Th 5:11). Paul uses this term in 1 Corinthians 14:3 in relation to σωρᾶκλησιν (encouragement) and σωραμποθίαν (consolation), which deals with the upbuilding or edification of the believers, aimed at the growth and development as well as the unity of the faith community. We also find this notion in the Pauline tradition, in which the same idea is continued and slightly adapted, namely that the faith community is a body that is to be built up in love, as we see in Ephesians 4:16 (τὴν αὐξήσιν τοῦ σώματος ποιεῖται εἰς οἰκοδομὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἐν ἀγάπῃ – Michel 1964:145).

**Stewardship (οἰκονόμος) used in a metaphorical way**

Logically flowing from the above we find, especially in Paul and the later tradition, the notion of stewardship in which the term οἰκονόμος is used in a metaphorical way. In 1 Corinthians 4:1, Paul uses the word in association with servant and says that apostles are entrusted with the secrets or mysteries of God (Ὅτις ἦς λογίζοντας ἀνθρώπους ὡς ἱστρέφεις Χριστοῦ) to which they should be faithful (Michel 1964).

In the Pauline tradition, as in Titus 1:7, the author states that a bishop must both be above reproach (ἀνέγκλητον, μὴ ἀδίκημον, μὴ ἀργήλου, μὴ σφόνδυλον, μὴ σάλκτην, μὴ οἰκονομοῦσαν) and like a steward (ὁς θεοῦ οἰκονόμον) of God (Michel 1964). Similarly we see in 1 Peter 4:10–11 that believers (and especially those in church office) should serve (διοικούντας) as good stewards (ὁ καλὸν οἰκονόμον), the abundant grace of God. Michel (1964) refers to later tradition – especially Ignatius (Pol., 6, 1), who goes even further and makes this case applicable to the community as a whole: ‘Labour together, fight, run, suffer, sleep, watch with one another’ as God’s stewards, companions, and servants’ (ὡς θεοῦ οἰκονόμοι καὶ σώραμποι καὶ υπήρχοι).

**To summarise**

The term οἰκοδομή as verb denotes the act of building or edifying, and as noun (οἰκοδομή) it denotes physical buildings, like the temple, or figurative buildings, like the community of faith as God’s οἰκοδομή. In the later tradition of Paul and Peter, for instance, we see that office bearers should be like stewards serving the community and building forth on and protecting the mysteries that have been received from the apostles. In the NT, the action of ‘upbuilding’ or edification seems to be directed towards those on the inside, i.e. it seems to have a sentripetal focus towards the insiders.

However, what about the rest of the world? Do we find any evidence that this ‘upbuilding’ also has a focus towards outsiders? The answer is yes! The early Christ-followers had a radical focus towards those on the inside and also towards the upbuilding and restoration of those outside the community of faith.

Let us consider one passage in which the term οἰκοδομή occurs and in which we see the focus towards outsiders as well – starting with one of Paul’s earliest letters, if not the earliest letter, namely Thessalonians.

**Paul and the Thessalonians**

**Background of 1 Thessalonians**

During Paul’s second missionary journey, around 48–51 AD after having visited Neapolis and having planted a church in Philippi where he baptised Lydia, he visited Thessalonica (cf. Ac 17:1) where he stayed a few months. Thereafter he left for Athens and sent Timothy, who had been in Macedonia at the time, to visit the Thessalonians (Malherbe 2014:188). By early 50 AD Paul was in Corinth. Soon after, Timothy met up with him and brought him news about the Thessalonians. Subsequently, Paul wrote the letter to the Thessalonians (see Malherbe 2000:71–74).

Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians is a particularly special letter in many ways. Most scholars agree that this letter is most probably one of Paul’s earliest letters, which means that it is at present the oldest surviving document of early Christianity that we possess (Powell 2009:371). This in itself makes this letter very interesting. In this letter we see the earliest missionary content to people who have recently come to conversion. For that reason, the letter reflects characteristics of a young church – for instance, the clear intent to strengthen the faith of recent converts and an effort to provide them with moral guidance (Malherbe 2014:188).

Thessalonica was a bustling Macedonian metropolis and port city with approximately 100 000 inhabitants (Powell 2009:371). St Paul’s interest in the city of Thessalonica and its church is clear in his letter to them.
2009:373). Archaeological finds revealed that this city, as was typical of busy seaports during the time, seems to have been home to several pagan shrines and temples of which we can name a few: Isis, Osiris, Serapis, Cabirius, etc. (Powell 2009:373). Paul seems to have made a living working in Thessalonica. He was not like some pagan philosopher who sponged on the believers. He states that he worked night and day, and in the process also made use of the opportunity to proclaim the gospel to those he came in contact with (1 Th 2:9). Powell (2009:373) correctly observes that ancient Roman cities like Thessalonica had many insulae or market buildings, which contained living spaces on the top level and on the bottom floor had a shop that was visible from the street. It is possible that Paul, Timothy and Silas might have stayed in one of these insulae and that they occupied themselves with leatherwork and tentmaking (cf. Ac 18:3). This might have created the ideal opportunity for sharing the gospel and, from Paul’s perspective in the letter, seems to have been even more successful than his engagement with Jews in the synagogue. The church in Thessalonica seems to have been born out of these ‘market encounters’ with non-Jews (Powell 2009:373).

Abraham Malherbe illustrated that there is a significant parallel between Paul’s teachings and that of pagan moral philosophers, as he so elegantly illustrated in his classical commentary on Thessalonians (Malherbe 2000) and elsewhere (Malherbe 2014).

After the historical narrative section of the letter (chapters 1–3), Paul lays a philephronetic foundation in chapters 4–5 in which he gives the community of believers practical moral advice (Malherbe 2014:188). In the historical narrative section, Paul builds rapport with the readers by means of contemporary ancient conventional forms, which reminds of the epistolographic feature of ‘letters of friendship’ (Malherbe 2014:189). Paul writes about Timothy’s message that the believers ‘have a good memory of him’ (cf. 1 Th 3:6) and that they still look to him for moral guidance (Malherbe 2000:206–208, 2014:189). The image of the teacher is like a dialogical voice within the believer or the convert. This reminds us of the ‘moral hortatory tradition’, according to Malherbe (2014:189), of which we find a good example in Lucian. Here Nigrus, a recent convert, is saying (Nigr. 6–7 [LCL, transl. A.M. Harmon]; quotation from Malherbe 2014):

Then, too, I take pleasure in calling his words to mind frequently, and have already made it a regular exercise: even if nobody happens to be at hand, I repeat them to myself two or three times just the same. I am in the same case with lovers. In the absence of the objects of their fancy they think over their actions and their words, and by dallying with these beguile their lovesickness into the belief that they have their sweethearts near; in fact, sometimes they even imagine that they are chatting with them and are pleased with what they formerly heard as if they were just being said, and by applying their minds to the memory of the past give themselves no time to be annoyed by the present. So I too, in the absence of my mistress Philosophy, get no little comfort out of gathering the words that I then heard and turning them over to myself. In short, I fix my gaze on that man as if he were a lighthouse and I were adrift at sea in the dead of night, fancying him by me whenever I do anything and always hearing him repeat his former words. Sometimes, especially when I put pressure on my soul, his face appears to me and the sound of his voice abides in my ears. Truly, as the comedian says, ‘He left a sting implanted in his hearers’. (p. 189)

Not only is the image of the teacher like a dialogical voice within the believer or the convert, but the teacher becomes a model for the converts to follow (who edifies). For that reason, the believers are motivated to imitate Paul, like children would imitate their father (1 Th 1:5–7; cf. 1 Cor 4:16–17). Thus, Paul ‘remains their paradigm in his absence’ (Malherbe 2014:190).

The reality of life in its unfullness

In the opening verses of the letter it immediately becomes clear that the radical spiritual transformation that the believers experienced when they turned from the idols to serve the living and true God, was not simply a turn towards ‘life in fullness’. This have turned them into people who are loved by God and who have been called by God (ἡγαγενήθην ὑμῖν ἐν νεύματι), which becomes particularly clear (cf. ὅτι [conjunction, adverbial, causal]) in the fact that the Gospel came (ἐγενήθη) [Aor Ind Past] to them not in the form of mere human words, but with power in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance (1 Th 1:5 – ὂς ἐγενήθη εἰς ὑµῶν ἐν λόγῳ µόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν δύναµει καὶ ἐν πνευµάτωι ἀγίῳ καὶ [ἐν] πληροφορίᾳ πωληθῇ). However, it is particularly interesting that Paul mentions the fact that this spiritual transformation of the believers immediately brought them in a situation in which they had to face at least some form of opposition and distress. Next, it becomes interesting how Paul addresses this reality. Let us consider this matter in more detail by looking closely at 1 Thessalonians 1:6–10 (Table 1).

In this text, the reality of the experience of affliction is surrounded by several theological affirmations. In the first instance, Paul affirms the truth that the believers are beloved by God (ἡγαγενήθη), and that they have been chosen (ὑμῶν ἐκλογὴν ἐπιλεξαν) by God (1 Th 1:4), as mentioned above. He also focuses their attention on the concept of imitation.32 In the process of accepting the word of God and becoming God’s beloved and elected, they were in effect sharing the suffering of their Lord and imitating him (1 Th 1:6). In Paul’s thought,

32 Green (2002:97–98) correctly opines that it was commonplace in the ancient world that the ideal student is someone who imitates his master, a model for moral instruction and education. These models ranged from parents, well-known heroes and also esteemed teachers. Green (2002:97–98) further notes: ‘Xenophon, for example, described the role of the teacher, saying, “Now the professors of other subjects try to make their pupils copy their teachers.” In Jewish literature the imitation of model lives was a commonplace in moral instruction, whether one imitated the conduct of a person (Wis. 4:2; T. Ben. 3:1; 4:1), a person’s sufferings (4 Macc. 13:9), or the character of god himself (T. Abot 4:3; Ep. Arot. 188, 210, 280–81). In the NT we find repeated exhortations to imitate the leaders of the church (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Gal. 4:12; Phil. 3:17; 4:9; 2 Thess. 3:7; 1 Tim. 4:12; Titus 2:7; 1 Pet. 5:3), other members of the community of faith (Phil. 3:17; Heb. 6:12; 13:7), and “what is good” (3 John 11), as well as God and Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:1; Col. 3:12–13). In the patristic literature, the fathers of the OT (1 Clem. 9:12, 17–18), Christian leaders (1 Clem. 19), and Christ himself (Pol. Phil. 8) are all put forward as examples to follow’.

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and in the early Christian understanding as such, this was a particularly important point. This way of thinking forms the basis of the early Christian identity and ethics since it is part of the framework in which the fundamental unity of identity and ethos comes together – that point of departure is the believer’s unity with Christ expressed in the reality of a new (transformed) being.

Schnelle (2009:320) points out that: ‘The point of departure for Paul’s understanding of ethics is the new being, since incorporation into the death and resurrection of Jesus … determines the present and the future’. Jesus becomes the Urbild [prototype] and Vorbild [model] (Schnelle 2009:321). Just as Christ served, suffered and died, so Christ-followers, who are new creations (2 Cor 5:17), should be prepared to face the same fate and participate in imitatio Christi. Christ’s actions were motivated by self-giving love (cf. 2 Cor 5:14; Rm 8:35, 37), and in the same manner, the Christ-followers are to serve in love (Gl 2:6). The life and death of Christ, and the love with which he served and died, is presented as the pattern for the believer. Schnelle (2009) correctly points out that:

What began in baptism continues in the lives of those baptized: they have been placed on the way of Jesus, they imitate Christ, so that the apostle even say: ’Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ’ (1 Cor. 11:1; cf. 1 Thess. 1:6; 1 Cor. 4:16). The Christian life is founded on Jesus’s way to the cross, which is at the same time the essential criterion of this life. The ethical properium christianum is thus Christ himself, so that for Paul, ethics means the active dimension of participation in Christ. (p. 321)

Hence, in the background of Paul’s words to the Thessalonians, we find a deep theological conviction. By the grace of God, and in the context of their affliction, they have managed to become an example to all believers in Macedonia and all over (cf. 1 Th 1:4–10). Paul wants to comfort them with the knowledge that this form of persecution that they experience, and the suffering that it entails, was analogous to the suffering the Jewish Christ-followers experienced at the hands of other Jews. In fact, in their suffering, they were participating in the suffering of Jesus. Thus, the earliest Christian document does in no way paint a picture of life in grandiose fullness or material success. Rather, from the beginning it paints the picture of the inevitable – that a life that follows Christ will have to face the reality of suffering. The fullness and the blessing, it seems ironically, is to be found in the midst of the suffering, in the spaces between the cracks and the edges of the shadows. For believers are children of light, amidst the darkness and brokenness of this world. This is where the challenge lies – to show love in a context of affliction and suffering, and in that way participate fully in their identity that follows the way of Jesus.

This brings us to 1 Thessalonians 5:12ff., where Paul gives the believers his final exhortations and greetings. In the previous section (1 Th 4:13–18), Paul comforted the believers by reminding them of the Lord’s coming, which should provide them both with an expectation of deliverance (1 Th 1:10) and hope (see Ridderbos 1971:595, 622). This is contrasted with the false hope of peace and security (1 Th 5:2; Ridderbos 1971:545) that the Roman Empire promises. Those who put their trust in the things of this world are sons of darkness (1 Th 5:4–5). Believers are sons of light who should be sober (1 Th 5:6–8). Their destiny is not to be overcome by God’s wrath, but to be saved by God’s salvation (1 Th 5:9). Believers are to live according to their identity, that is, to live in such a manner that it could be said that whatever they do, they live and act in Christ (1 Th 5:10). Therefore (cf. Διὸ – logical inferential conjunction), or as a result thereof, the believers should encourage one another (συμαξουσία ἀλλήλους) and also build each other up (συμμορφώμεθα ἐξ ἑαυτῶν; cf. also Gl 6:1ff.).

In the final exhortation section (1 Th 5:12ff.), Paul beseeches the believers to do the following:

In this section, Paul admonishes the believers to respect those who are their leaders and to accept their critical guidance. Today, in our contemporary society, admonition and critique within the church context is an anathema, but as Green (2000:250) correctly points out, in ancient times it was commonplace for people to submit to their leaders and expect their critique as part of their own growth and upbuilding (cf. Philo, Eph. 6:4; Philo, De Specialibus Legibus 2:232; Wis. 11:10).

Ridderbos (1971:545) remarks: ’Daarom kan de komst des Heren niet alleen een motive tot heiliging, maar ook een bron en grond van troost zijn in de tegenwoordige “verdrukking”, een woord, dat ook niet slechts op incidentele tegenslag of moeite ziet, maar zeer bepaald de aan die komst van Christus voorafgaande, laatste fase van de tegenwoordige wereld karakteriseert’ [‘For that reason the coming of the Lord not only serves as a motive of holiness, but also as a source of comfort in the present “verdrukking”, a word, that does not only refer to the present adversity, but is also linked to the future coming of Christ and the time precipitating his coming, which is to be seen as characteristic of the final phase of the present world’].
35. For the parallel between Paul and the popular philosophers, see Malherbe (1989, 2000), Malherbe (2014:196) argues that the moral teaching of early Christians, and even that of Hellenistic Judaism, did not differ significantly from that of the pagan moral philosophers. Some examples are found in the early Christian writings itself: for instance, the fact that Paul’s contemporary, the Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus was well-known and respected by people like Clement of Alexandria. Another example is the respect for Seneca, as we see from Tertullian’s work. For (Hellenistic) Jewish traditions, see Thompson (2011), Niebuhr (1987:70–72, 1911) and also Ameling (2011) as referred to by Malherbe (2014).

200–201) and also with the Christian apologist, Athenagoras (Supplicatio pro Christianis, 11–12), who claimed that the Christian doctrines derive from God (cf. also Aristides, Apologia 15; Theophilus, Atol. 3.15; referred to by Malherbe 2014:198).

In the first instance, God in and through Christ is the model and deepest motivation for their identity and ethical behaviour. Early Christians like Paul believed that there was a significant difference between the motivation for action when it comes to them and other groups. To this end, Christian identity was motivated by a belief that God had created them into a new being (2 Cor 5:17 – ἐστρέψατε ἐλεημονώς ἐν Χριστῷ, καινὴ κτίσις cf. Gl 6:15). They also believed that their ethos was a result of the work of God within them. That is an important difference. Secondly, we also see that the early Christians made use of kinship language to describe the nature of their relationships – a matter that drew the attention of outsiders as well. One example could be mentioned: the pagan, Cæcilius, in his attack on the Christians, reacted to the early Christians’ kinship language and their love for one another, and perhaps also implicitly on the egalitarian structure within the Christian community(s) (Minucius Felix, Oct. 9.2 [ACW, transl. G.W. Clarke], quoted by Malherbe 2014):

They recognize each other by secret marks and signs; hardly have they met when they love each other, throughout the world uniting in the practice of a veritable religion of lusts. Indiscriminately they call each other brother and sister, thus turning even ordinary fornication into incest by the intervention of these hallowed names. Such a pride does this foolish, deranged superstition take in its wickedness. (p. 194)

The early Christian apologist, Minucius Felix, in his defence of the Christ-followers, said the following (Oct. 31.18; cf. Tertullian, Apol. 39, quoted by Malherbe 2014):

It is true that we do love one another - a fact that you deplore - since we do not know how to hate. Hence it is true that we do call one another brother - a fact which rouses your spleen - because we are men of the one and same God the Father, co-partners in faith, coheirs in hope. (p. 194)

The early Christians had a very special bond between them and used kinship language, which was noticeable by the pagans. This special understanding of their fraternal relationship to each other was rather unique in the ancient world, and for that reason also the basis of the critique against them.

One of the most interesting questions is what exactly attracted people to the Christian faith, if their moral advice was rather similar to that of the Umwelt? In which way was the answer offered by Christianity ‘better’ than that of the moral philosophers or the Jews? In the history of interpretation, scholars answered this question in different ways. Nock (1964:1, 67, 1933:215–216, 218, 220); see Malherbe 2014:189–199; cf. also Ameling 2011:246–248) for one, who wrote in a time in which the parallel between Christianity and pagan moral philosophy was accentuated, argued that
it was Christianity’s proximity to the latter that made it attractive and created fertile ground in the process. However, Malherbe (2014:201) accentuates that there was a major difference to be noted as well. For instance, both Paul and his contemporary Musonius Rufus (cf. Fragment 12 & 13) would argue that extra-marital sex was wrong (cf. μάθος ἐνθυμεῖ τοῦ; 1 Th 4:7). However, the basic motivation for saying this fundamentally differed from one another. The uniqueness of Paul’s message (e.g. in 1 Th 4:5, etc.) was that it had a theological basis as motivation – i.e. it relates to holiness and sanctification – whereas Musonius Rufus would argue that a person who is guilty of sexual sin acts in an irrational way. Thus, Paul has a clear theological motivation for admonishing the believers for not conducting lustful sexual behaviour. For Paul, this kind of behaviour is inconsistent with the nature of a Christian being a newly created being in Christ and who should live a life ‘worthy of the one that called them’ (Malherbe 2014:201). Clearly this is a whole other ball game.

Others, like Adolf Von Harnack (1904), take a different approach to the question on why the early Christians were so successful in attracting people to the movement. This particularly concerns us, since it deals with the radical way that Christians illustrated love towards insiders and outsiders. In the earliest Christian document we possess, we see how Paul prayed that the believers might increase in love for one another and also in love for all (1 Th 3:12; cf. Gl 6:10). This is presented as being a moral obligation to which every Christian is called. In 1 Thessalonians 4:9, Paul says that the believers were taught by God (θεοδίκειοι) how to love one another and that they should continue to do so. Malherbe (2014:203) points out that the concept φιλαδελφία was used by the pagans mostly to refer to love towards blood relatives. Paul uses it differently – he extends that to those who are part of the household of faith, that is, beyond the social boundaries of blood relations. The love for the brother that Paul is speaking about does not refer to the ‘inborn capacity’ of friendship like we have with the Stoics, nor the utilitarian motivation like with the Epicureans, but because love towards one’s brother (as general virtue in antiquity) is made into ‘a divine mandate’ or ‘religious command’ given by God (Malherbe 2014:203–204). Even more radical than this was the notion that love is, lover of the poor. Some Christians went so far as to lend

The radicality of early Christian sensitivity towards outsiders

Let us fast forward to the early Church period and turn our attention to the radicality of the way early Christians went about to show love towards each other and towards outsiders, and how they transcended social boundaries. Harnack (1904:181–249) argues that the early Christian movement’s uniqueness and radicality related to the way in which it was a movement of love and charity. Harnack (1904) refers to Tertullian (in Apolog., xxxix):

*It is our care for the helpless, our practice of loving-kindness, that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. ‘Only look’ they say, ‘look how they love one another!’ (they themselves being given to mutual hatred). ‘Look how they are prepared to die for one another!’ (they themselves being readier to kill each other).’ Thus had this saying been fulfilled: ‘Hereby shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another’. (p. 184)

For Harnack (1904:184–185) it was clear that the gospel was a ‘social message’ of ‘solidarity’ and ‘brotherliness’, which ‘raises the social connection of human beings from the sphere of convention to that of moral obligation’.

In the emerging institutional Church, for instance in Justin (Apology [c. Ixvii] and Tertullian [Apolog., xxxix]) we see that, and also how the early Christians looked after the widows and orphans, the sick and disabled, prisoners, poor people who needed a burial, and slaves. We also see how they cared for others (even outsiders) in times of great calamities, as well as how they showed hospitality to fellow brethren who were on a journey.

According to Tertullian, at least once a month, believers brought gifts (money or the like) to the church, which was then entrusted to the president who, in collaboration with the deacons who knew the context in which believers lived, distributed the gifts to the needy (Harnack 1904:13). In Eusebius’ H.E., vi, 43 we read that the Roman Church at that time supported 1500 widows and poor people (Harnack 1904:197). In the liturgy, widows and orphans occupied a special place, a tradition that we already see in the New Testament (cf. Ja 1:27; cf. also Hermas, Mand., viii. 10). Similarly, the early Church supported the sick, the disabled and the poor. Not only were they always prayed for (cf. 1 Clem fix. 4), but the Christians also visited the sick and the poor. In Tertullian (ad uxor., ii. 4) we read of the interesting scenario of a woman who was married to a pagan man, who did not particularly like the fact that his wife had to go into the streets and visit other men, especially those who were sick, and that she stayed in poor and backward areas. It was the task of the deacons (and deaconesses) to ascertain who was in distress and to make sure that those persons were not excluded from the funding that the church provided (Harnack 1904:199).

For that reason, one of the main characteristics of those in office was that they should have the trait of φιλανθρωπία, that is, lover of the poor. Some Christians went so far as to lend

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36. This is also evident in 1 Peter 1:14–16, for instance. Christians should be holy, as God is holy and for that reason there is no room for unholy sexual passions.
money from pagans in an effort to relieve the distress of the poor (Tertullian, *de idolat.,* xxiii).

Another dimension of care was the visitation of prisoners, where Christians not only visited but also refreshed, encouraged and edified those who were in prison (cf. already Heb 10:34). Some of the well-known examples are from Eusebius (cf. *Apost. Constit.,* v. 1) where we read of the ‘Palestinian martyrs during the Diocletian persecution’ who were encouraged and edified by other believers (Harnack 1904:203, fn. 3). According to Eusebius (in *Hist. Eccl.,* v., 8), the amount of care that Christians showed towards prisoners caused the Emperor Licinius to pass a law that demanded that ‘no one was to show kindness to sufferers in prison by supplying them with food, and that no one was to show mercy to those who were starving in prison’ (Harnack 1904:204). In fact, Licinius apparently attached a penalty to those who showed compassion, to the extent that they would also be incarcerated if they disobeyed the order. According to Eusebius, this law was directed against the Christians, for they were the ones that went the extra mile in showing compassion to those in jail.

In the ancient world it often happened that some poor people could not get a proper burial. According to Aristides (*Apol.,* xv), it so happened that whenever poor Christians died, a fellow Christian would see that such a person gets a proper burial. The believers cared for each other in rather radical ways and in the process protected the honour of fellow members, even after death (Harnack 1904:206). It even happened that some Christians not only limited their good acts to fellow believers, but extended it to outsiders. One of the most striking examples of this is found in Lactantius (*Instit.,* vi. 12) who states (quoted by Harnack 1904):

> We cannot bear ... that the image and workmanship of God should be exposed to wild beasts and birds, but we restore it to the earth from which it was taken, and do this office of relatives even to the body of a person whom we do not know, since in their room humanity must step in. (p. 206)

Last but not least, the early Christians’ care for people who got sick during times of great calamities should be pointed out. Against the background of the 2014 outbreak of the Ebola virus in West Africa, the picture of the early Christians caring for sick and infected persons illustrates the absolute radicality of early Christian sensitivity and love for others (see Harnack 1904:212–215). Harnack (1904:212–213) points to the plague that raged in Alexandria during *circa* 259 AD. During that time Dionysius (cf. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.,* vii. 22, quoted by Harnack 1904) recalls:

> The most of our brethren did not spare themselves, so great was their brotherly affection. They held fast to each other, visited the sick without fear, ministered to them assiduously, and served them for the sake of Christ. Right gladly did they perish with them... Indeed many did die, after caring for the sick and giving health to others, transplanting the death of others, as it were, into themselves. In this way the noblest of our brethren died, including some presbyters and deacons and people of the highest reputation... Quite the reverse was it with the heathen. They abandoned those who began to sicken, fled from their dearest friends, threw out the sick when half-dead into the streets, and let the dead lie unburied. (pp. 212–213)

We find very similar stories elsewhere, for instance in Cyprian (cf. *de Mortalitate*) in reference to the plague that raged in Cartage (cf. *per Pont.,* ix), which cannot be discussed in this essay due to limited space. Suffice to say, we do find in Cyprian that the early Christians not only relieved the need of insiders, but also of outsiders. Cyprian’s biographer Pontianus (cf. *Vita, ix.* 1) stated that Cyprian motivated believers to do good towards all, even towards enemies, which in fact resulted in an overflow of good works in practice (Harnack 1904:214).

One final example that could be put forward is the ‘self-denying’ and self-emptying love that believers showed, even towards outsiders, during the plague that broke out during the reign of Maximinus Daza, of which we also read in Eusebius (cf. *Hist. Eccl.,* ix. 8). Adolf Von Harnack translates this section in Eusebius as follows (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.,* ix. 8; translated by Harnack 1904):

> For the Christians were the only people who amid such terrible ills showed their fellow-feeling and humanity by their actions. Day by day some would busy themselves with attending to the dead and burying them (for there were numbers to whom no one else paid any heed); others gathered in one spot all who were afflicted by hunger throughout the whole city, and gave bread to them all. When this became known, people glorified the Christian’s God, and convinced by the very facts confessed the Christians alone were truly pious and religious. (pp. 214–215)

**Conclusion**

Against the background of what we have just seen, it is clear that the admonitions Paul gave to the Thessalonians, namely that they should grow and abound in doing good towards each other and to edify both insiders and outsiders, were not just empty words. The early Christian message was a radical one that took people on radical trajectories. In the earliest Christian letter we possess, the values of self-sacrificial love and other-regard in the context of suffering and affliction based on the example of Christ and apostles like Paul can already be seen. By the early fourth century, this obscure movement on the margins of the Roman Empire would have grown to such an extent that it would eventually become the official religion of the Roman Empire. This movement certainly impacted the world in many positive ways. Today the question facing us all is to which extent will we continue the Great Narrative of the *Missio Dei* and participate in God’s mission of restoration and reconciliation?

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