


# Missional leadership in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*

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This article examines the *Acts of Thecla* (ATH) through the lens of missional leadership, exploring its implications for early Christian identity and ecclesial formation. Utilising a literary-theological reading, this article analyses the ATH's portrayal of Thecla's journey from disciple to missionary, highlighting her self-baptism as a theological assertion of divine approval and agency, and as a disruptive leader within the broader Greco-Roman context, where asceticism and celibacy were both disruptive and subversive to Roman social structures. Thecla emerges as a compelling figure of missional leadership, challenging societal norms and embodying transformative discipleship.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** Missional leadership has become a significant theme in contemporary missiology, emphasising the role of identity, transformation and relational engagement in advancing God's mission [*missio Dei*].

**Keywords:** missional leadership; *Acts of Paul and Thecla*; disruptive leadership; celibacy, transformation.

## Introduction

Missional leadership has emerged as a prominent subject of scholarly discourse in 21st century missiology. Bosch (1991:389) highlights the pendulum shift in understanding mission as God's mission [*missio Dei*]. Mission is no longer perceived as a mere occupation of the church but comprehended as a characteristic of God (Bosch 1991:390). The nexus underscores an ontological understanding that the community of believers or church is comprised not of what they do but of who they are and who they represent in the world, that is Christ. Niemandt (2019:71), who has been seminal in furthering the conversation of missional leadership in South Africa, defines missional leadership broadly as comprising 'the idea of change, movement or transformation and the idea of change through relationships'.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this can be summed up in Hah's (2019:1) description of two indispensable features of missional leadership: baptism and discipleship. Accordingly, a core notion is understanding identity as anchored in Christ and moving from this identity in the world.

Paul fundamentally understands himself as sent. He sees himself as called and chosen by God to proclaim the good news to all people, inviting them to turn to the living God. Paul does not simply preach and depart; he is relationship oriented. His understanding of the gospel is rooted in service, as he shares his life with others (Rabens 2017:99). A narrative that embodies both profound change and transformation (*baptism*) and enacting change through relationships (*discipleship*) is found in the *Acts of Thecla* (ATH). The story centres on Thecla, a high-born woman who becomes captivated by Paul's teachings and captures the imagination of early Christians. Thecla defies societal expectations, refusing to marry and embracing an ascetic lifestyle. Initially, she is a pupil of Paul, who serves as her teacher and mentor. However, the focus shifts to Thecla, who steps into the role God has prepared for her without Paul's assistance, as she baptises herself, affirming divine approval and ultimately becoming a missionary. Upon encountering her again, Paul marvels at her and acknowledges her as an apostle, commissioning her to 'go and teach the word of God' [Ἦπαγε καὶ διδάσκει τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ] ATH 4.16).

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1. I dedicate this article to Prof. Nelus Niemandt. I had the privilege to be his student while he was a professor at University of Pretoria in Missiology; to be a fellow delegate of the Dutch Reformed Church to the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) Grand Rapids 2010 and Leipzig 2017 learning about ecumenism from him, and to be appointed in my first academic position at Huguenote Kollege by him. His theology and pioneering spirit have been influential in my formation.

**Note:** The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Festschrift Nelus Niemandt' under the expert guidance of guest editors Prof. Johannes J. Knoetze and Dr Yolande Steenkamp.

This article examines Thecla's role through the lens of missional leadership. The ATH is approached from a literary-theological reading drawing on the narrative structure, symbolic motifs and character development in subservience to theological reflection on missional leadership. Although the narrative's novelistic and hagiographic features render narrative criticism a fitting methodological approach, this article does not utilise narrative criticism in its technical application. Rather, it is informed by key narrative criticism features such as character transformation, plot development and recurring motifs to grapple with a possible understanding of the theological imagination of the early Christian community.

However, some possible interpretation pitfalls should be observed before we embark on this endeavour. Firstly, biblical texts should be approached cautiously, especially when a modern notion such as leadership is applied. Of course, the ATH is not a biblical text but an apocryphal one.<sup>2</sup> However, it was a prominent text widely used by the early church (Barrier 2009:25)<sup>3</sup> and offers valuable insights into the construction of early Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, and this is closely linked to the first problem, Paul does not mention anything about the organisation of leadership structures. The gleanings of ἐπισκόποις καὶ διακόνους in Philippians 1:1 and προϊσταμένους ὑμῶν ἐν κυρίῳ καὶ νοουθετοῦντας ὑμᾶς in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 are vague. It does not provide information on the duties or the duration of the offices or any indication of how these leaders were selected (Kloppenborg 2013:184). Paul is a travelling missionary and a founder of communities, which seems to be limited to household structures (Zamfir 2016:356). It seems that there was some form of resident leadership within the earliest Christian communities, but the principal authoritative leadership emanated from the travelling missionaries who journeyed between the churches (Horrell 1997:327).<sup>5</sup> In ATH, there are no ecclesial structures. Thirdly, missional leadership is intricately entwined with *missio Dei*, which refers to the mission of God resulting from the Triune God. Our conceptions of Christianity are fluid and under construction in the first few centuries, as the New Testament is a product of the 4th century.

This article will argue that ATH provides a nuanced example of missional leadership, particularly through the character of Thecla, who, despite societal limitations on women's roles, exhibits a transformative and active engagement in the mission of the church. Even though ATH derives from a 2nd century context that does not reverberate with our modern ecclesiological notions of leadership, its narrative constructs a vision for embodied transformation and Spirit-led agency.

2. To a point, the delineation of biblical and apocryphal problematic as the New Testament is a product of the 4th century. Texts circulated and were used widely within communities. Codex Claromontanus includes the ATH within its canonical list (Barrier 2009:25).

3. The only opposition to the text is found in Tertullian *De Baptismo* 17 who found problems with Thecla performing the baptism.

4. The ATH mirrors the realities of its context and offers a glimpse into the social environment of early Christians in a Roman context (Zamfir 2016:355).

5. Among others, for example, Phoebe is described as a *diakonos* of the Cenchræe church who travels to Rome (Rm 16:1–2) with messages or material support for Paul considering Philippians 2:25 and 1 Corinthians 16:17.

Construing Thecla through the lens of missional leadership engages hermeneutically with the theological vision of discipleship proffered by the text. Accordingly, ATH becomes a source of reflection on leadership that results from an identity in Christ, disrupts cultural hierarchies and a focus on relational witness.

## The plot of the *Acts of Thecla*

The story concerns the main character Thecla, a beautiful high-born woman engaged to Thamyris. The plot unfolds through mounting tribulations that transform Thecla's identity as she breaks from the social expectation of her as an engaged woman, progressively functions without Paul and upon meeting Paul again, does not meet him as a disciple, but as a fellow apostle divinely commissioned. Paul arrives in the city of Iconium with Demas and Hermogenes. He preaches to them and preaches at Onesiphorus's house. Thecla hears Paul's message of resurrection and self-control. She becomes enthralled with Paul's teaching. Theocleia, Thecla's mother, is worried that Thecla has fallen in love with Paul and will no longer want to marry Thamyris and thus sends for Thamyris to come. Thamyris finds Thecla unresponsive and only interested in Paul's teaching. He is enraged and asks Demas and Hermogenes about Paul. He offers them money to sell out Paul, and they accept his offer. Paul is arrested. Thecla bribes the prison guards to allow her to visit Paul. She kisses his bonds and only wants to learn from Paul. This leads to Theocleia calling for Thecla to be burned at the stake, and Paul is expelled from the city. A storm extinguishes the fire in a miraculous turn of events, and Thecla is saved. She goes to seek Paul, who had been praying for her with Onesiphorus's family in a cave. They travel to Antioch, where Alexander, a leading member among the Antiochenes, makes advances on Thecla. He offers Paul money for her. He refuses, but Alexander is scorned. Thecla ends up sentenced to face wild beasts, but a lioness protects her, and Thecla survives the onslaught. After these trials, she baptises herself in a pool of water filled with dangerous seals. She renounces marriage, dedicating herself to a life of preaching and asceticism.

## Missional leadership

### Being in the Spirit

Missional leadership is primarily concerned with being in God and moving from the Spirit. Niemandt (2019) mentions that the:

[M]ain focus of leaders is to facilitate transformation, to participate in the life-giving change brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, in communities and in all of creation. (p. 74)

This is possible as the leader has transformed themselves. In ATH, Paul is not introduced as the apostle Paul.<sup>6</sup> We merely read that Paul was coming up into Iconium after the flight from Antioch [Ἀναβαίνοντος Παύλου εἰς Ἰκόνιον μετὰ τὴν φυγὴν

6. Only in the latter additions APTh 45 and APTh within 33 does the designation of ἀπόστολος appear in the Greek text (Barrier 2009:69).

τὴν ἀπὸ Ἀντιοχείας].<sup>7</sup> This leaves the original audience guessing as having to flee from Antioch also signals that Paul might be trouble. This is of course a mere passing thought as Paul's character is revealed as 'only looking to the goodness of Christ' [ὁ δὲ Παῦλος ἀποβλέπων εἰς μόνην τὴν ἀγαθοσύνην τοῦ Χριστοῦ] (Ath 3.1). However, he is accompanied by suspect fellow travellers, Demas and Hermogenes, a blacksmith. They are already within the inception of the story depicted as 'full of hypocrisy' [ὑποκρίσεως γέμοντες] (Ath 3.1).

Onesiphorus and his family were waiting for Paul in Iconium. Onesiphorus only had a description from Titus. It is one of the only instances in which we find a description of Paul's appearance. Paul is depicted as a ἄνδρα μικρὸν τῷ μεγέθει, ψιλὸν τῇ κεφαλῇ, ἀγκύλον ταῖς κνήμαις, εὐεκτικόν, σύνοφρον, μικρῶς ἐπίρρινον, χάριτος πλήρη· ποτὲ μὲν γὰρ ἐφαίνετο ὡς ἄνθρωπος, ποτὲ δὲ ἀγγέλου πρόσωπον εἶχεν [man small of stature, bald headed, a crook in the legs, healthy, a brow meeting in the middle, a small nose, a gracious presence; for some times he appeared as a man, but at other times he had the face of an angel.] (Ath 3.3. *translation* Barrier 2009:73).<sup>8</sup>

When Paul saw Onesiphorus, he smiled, instantly recognising fellow servants of God. Their countenance even reflects their beliefs. It seems that Paul even looks like an angel at times. Onesiphorus already knew Paul in the Spirit but had to meet him in the flesh, which resulted in a warm welcome.

In contrast, Demas and Hermogenes, who were travelling with Paul, are jealous of the way Paul greeted Onesiphorus, as they were not greeted in the same way. Onesiphorus replied to them: καὶ εἶπεν ὁ Ὀνησιφόρος Οὐχ ὁρῶ ἐν ὑμῖν καρπὸν δικαιοσύνης· εἰ δὲ ἔστε τινές, δεῦτε καὶ ὑμεῖς εἰς τὸν οἶκόν μου καὶ ἀναπαύσασθε [I do not see the fruit of righteousness in you, but if you are such ones, then come to my house and you will be refreshed] (Ath 3.4). Omerzu (2008:265) points out that Onesiphorus was not privy to the same information as the hearers of the text, namely that they were full of hypocrisy. Demas and Hermogenes are not in Christ. Onesiphorus already sees it, and they do not change as the narrative unfolds; they try to cause Paul harm by selling him out to Thamyris. Nonetheless, even though Onesiphorus does not recognise them as people of the way, he does not show them the door but invites them to his house.

In the case of Thecla, she hears Paul's preaching at Onesiphorus's house. The story suggests she sits for 3 days and nights only listening [ἤκουεν νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας] (Ath 3.7)

7.The Greek Text utilised in this article derives from Barrier (2009).

8.The appearance of Paul has garnered much interest. The description of Paul does not fit our modern understanding of masculinity, resulting in interpreters regarding Paul as plain, unflattering and unheroic, especially when read with 2 Corinthians 12:7–12 or Galatians 4:13–16, where it is suggested that Paul is physically weak and unattractive (Omerzu 2008:255–256). Malherbe (1986:170–175) argues that the author/authors of Ath similarly portrayed Paul as a Greek hero, modelled on Agathion-Heracles, thus being attractive according to ancient standards. In contrast, Bremmer (1996:38–39) explains that meeting eyebrows signifies a very sad human (*tristem maxime hominem sed et parum sapientem*), bow-legged people were dim-witted; small men were too fast, and baldness was perceived as unattractive. The meaning of the nose is not clear. The Ath reads like a Greek romance, accordingly Paul's negative characteristics are employed to assure the audience Thecla is not in love with Paul, but enthralled with the message.

to Paul's preaching. It is unlikely that Paul preached for three days and three nights continuously, or that Thecla would sit for the duration of time. The time allocation is symbolic, immediately recalling the resurrection. Barrier (2009:90) adds that the 3 days and nights reflect the time to convert to Christ. Thecla does not see Paul. Again, the narrative emphasises that it is the spirit that prepares Thecla for receiving the gospel. She was being led on in faith with an overabundant joy [τῇ πίστει ἐπήγετο ὑπερευφραινομένη] (Ath 3.7). The verb εὐφραίνω denotes to celebrate. It spurs her on to seek God as she desires to be made worthy to stand in the presence of Paul and the word of Christ [κατὰ πρόσωπον στήναι Παύλου καὶ ἀκούειν τὸν τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον] (Ath 3.7). She finds joy in her identity in God. Part of missional leadership is to live fully and joyously, and to flourish in your ministry. This does not detract from difficulties, but when truly situated in Christ, a leader acts from an identity of being dependant on an abundant God who breathes life. Consequently, such a leader moves differently in the community.

The theme of not seeing Paul is also important, as Theoclea and Thamyris assume that Thecla is in love with Paul. The narrative resembles features of Greek romantic literature, such as Callirhoe where the pattern of star-crossed lovers, falling in love at first sight, but separated by some tragedy is seen. However, this crucial theme of seeing is absent from Ath as it displaces any notion of *eros* (Eyl 2013:4). The Ath reads like wild adventures and near-death mishaps, as seen in Greek novels, but promotes the ideology of complete sexual renunciation (Eyl 2013:15). When Thecla is condemned to the stake, she looks for Paul, but Thecla does not really see Paul, rather Christ in the shape of Paul (Ath 3.21) (Smit 2014:558). For Thecla, Paul's appearance and the Lord even become merged (Omerzu 2008:265). Thecla undergoes a transformation that is initiated by the Spirit. She breaks with the identity she started with. She does not marry and fulfil the role that is expected of her as a high-born woman in the Roman Empire. She is moulded as an apostle and ultimately also accepted as an apostle (Smit 2014:556).

## Disruptive leadership

Both Paul and Thecla are disruptive leaders in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. When Thamyris arrives with a crowd at Onesiphorus's house, wanting to take Paul to governor Catellius, the crowd refers to Paul as a magician ([τὸν μάγον], Ath 3.15). Magic is a negative word suggesting the channelling or conjuring of divine powers that was not permitted and perceived as antisocial and secretive (Eyl 2022:216).<sup>9</sup> Paul is also referred to as τὸν ξένον [stranger] (Ath 3.19). Paul is strange because he does not have a home and is seemingly a nobody within the Roman Empire. Yet, his message is untangling the social fabric of Iconium (Barrier 2009:117). Thecla herself is later labelled a stranger and perpetuates Paul's disruptive message of celibacy being necessary for the resurrection. The phenomenon of celibacy was well known in the Greco-Roman world, seen as a practice of religious expression, a perceived liberation from family

9.The positive version would be wonderworking.



obligations, and for others as a philosophical freedom (Roetzel 2022:156). However, considering the survival of the empire – as child mortality, diseases, wars and famine were constants – marriage equated to the production of children. Accordingly, marriage had nothing to do with our modern idea of love but was a family affair entwined in economic and social advantage for the households attached and pivotal for the Roman Empire (see Dixon 1992:62). In the Augustan period, laws were installed to prohibit celibacy and incentivise procreation, especially for women (Roetzel 2022:157–158). The Emperor even went as far as exploiting his position as Rome's chief priest to control and limit the practice of celibacy, claiming authority over the Vestal Virgins and with the *pontifex maximus* in 12 BCE, procreation became a civic duty and a supreme religious obligation (Roetzel 2022:158). Accordingly, even institutionalised celibacy was only tolerated when brought into line with normative social relations (Roetzel 2022:158). From a perspective of what most people living in the Roman Empire experienced, the Oxyrhynchus ostraca indicates that men and women were raised to believe the most important role in society was to marry and have children (Huebner 2019:55).

The ATh displays a 2nd century cultural perspective, which is inconsistent with 1st century thought and expression, addressing issues relevant to diaspora-based ecclesial communities (Boughton 1991:363).<sup>10</sup> The way both Paul and Thecla are portrayed in the narrative is not by chance. The teaching of Paul, particularly emphasising his apostleship and teaching on self-control, becomes accessible to new audiences with the ATh (Smit 2014:552). Participation in the Jesus movement urged followers to abandon their families, especially abandoning marriage from the Pauline epistles onwards. However, this is not just an abandonment of family, but an abandonment of the values of the Roman Empire and joining in the family and network of Christ. The disruption promotes distinctive theological views reflecting the life of the early church concerning women's social status and why they embraced asceticism (Zamfir 2010:281). Asceticism was seen to dedicate oneself wholly to Christ.

## Baptism

From the inception of the first believing communities, baptism has been considered a symbol of participation in Christ. In the narrative, Thecla continuously wants Paul to baptise her. Paul takes a bit of a backseat in ATh. He features in the first part of the *Acts of Thecla* (ATh 3.1–3.6): he goes to pray in a cave when Thecla is being burnt at the stake and completely disappears from the story when Thecla is again in a life-threatening situation in the arena. This motif underscores God's activity and approval of Thecla. Paul is thrown out of the city, while Theocleia, Thecla's own mother, calls for Thecla to be burnt at the stake. Paul, along with Onesiphorus and his family, fasts and prays that Thecla will not be overtaken by the fire (3.23–3.24). One of Onesiphorus's children meets Thecla when she searches for Paul. He takes Thecla to Paul, and they celebrate that Thecla survived.

10. The production of literature of new literature was still in process (Smit 2014:553).

They feast with five loaves of bread, vegetables and water reminiscent of the feeding of 5000 in Matthew 14:17. During this celebration, Thecla offers to cut her hair and follow Paul anywhere that he might go. He responds that this would be shameful. She asks him to baptise her, but Paul tells her to be patient. Paul is presented as lesser than Thecla at this point, as he abandons Thecla during her trial and refuses to baptise her, denying what God aspires for her (Barrier 2009:136). The symbolic role of Thecla's tribulations in the plot emphasises God's purpose for Thecla as an apostle.

They travel to Antioch, where Alexander makes his advances. This is a pivotal moment for Thecla as she starts to claim her identity as an apostle. Alexander tries to rape her. She yells Μη βιάσῃ τὴν ξένην [do not hurt the stranger] and μὴ βιάσῃ τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δούλην [do not hurt the servant of God]. Claiming her identity as a stranger likens her to Paul, as the Iconium's referred to Paul as a stranger. Being a stranger meant not conforming to the Greco-Roman norms and ideals. Claiming herself as a servant of God also completes her conversion story and confirms her as a prophetess with apostolic authority (Barrier 2009:143). She knocks Alexander's crown from his head. The loss of the crown is a symbol of the loss of divinity, emphasising that Alexander is inferior to Christ. She mentions that she is an important woman in Iconium. This is not taken seriously, and the governor sentences her to death *ad bestias*. An honourable death would have been the option to be beheaded. Thecla is tested again, and this time in the arena with animals. A lioness protects Thecla from a lion but dies in the process, along with the other lion. Again, they sent in more animals, but Thecla saw a ditch full of water and decided to baptise herself. She already uses the formula: 'In the name of Jesus Christ, I baptise myself for the last day'.<sup>11</sup> The water was full of seals that wanted to eat her. Lightning struck, killing the seals and not harming Thecla. She was surrounded by a cloud of fire. This established her as an apostle chosen by God. None of the animals hurt her. When the governor asks Thecla how this is possible, she proclaims Ἐγὼ μὲν εἰμι θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος δούλη [I am a slave of the living God] (ATh 4.12).

After this, she keeps on looking for Paul, and with her is a crowd of people men and women who also choose to be chaste (ATh 4.15). She found Paul in Myra who was astonished to see her, and she informed him that she had been baptised by God (ATh 4.15). Paul then sends her to preach after she informs him that she will be going to Iconium.

## Discipleship

Paul was not a solo traveller. His work was embedded in a wide-ranging cooperation with various co-workers (Rabens 2017:103). From the onset of the narrative, we see Paul is introduced as evangelising to Demas and Hermogenes. In an interesting twist, the text mentions that Paul does not do anything bad to them [οὐδὲν φαῦλον ἐποίει αὐτοῖς], but Paul loves them exceedingly [ἀλλ' ἔστεργεν αὐτοὺς σφόδρα] (ATh 3.1). A theory is posited that Hermogenes might be

11. Tertia also baptises herself in the Acts of Thomas. The practice of continence does not seem to be dependent upon formal ritual induction (Kraemer 1980:300).

the Hermogenes mentioned in 1 Timothy 1:15 who turned away from Paul and that he is the coppersmith mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:14 who caused harm to Paul. There are no grounds to see this as conclusive. Ironically, it is Demas and Hermogenes who will cause Paul harm as it unfolds in the plotline with Thamyris. Paul is known to invite others on his travels to participate in the love and life of God (Rabens 2017:99).<sup>12</sup> He is on his way to Onesiphorus, who is also part of his network.<sup>13</sup> It becomes clear that at Onesiphorus's house, they pray together (κλίσας γονάτων [bending of the knees] ATh 3.5), enjoy the agape meal (καὶ κλάσις ἄρτου, ATh 3.5) and preach on self-control (περὶ ἐγκρατείας, ATh 3.5) and the resurrection (ἀναστάσεως, ATh 3.5). It is with this gathering at Onesiphorus's house that Thecla becomes a disciple.<sup>14</sup>

We read how her first house mourns her becoming a follower of Christ. Thamyris mourns the loss of a wife, Theocleia the loss of a child, and the rest of the household the loss of a mistress (Ath 3.10). However, Christ becomes her husband, and she shares the gospel with Tryphaena, who becomes a new mother figure for Thecla and witnesses to Tryphaena's household, who convert. Tryphaena is a cousin of the Caesar and plays a pivotal role in Thecla's survival of the trial. After surviving her trial in the theatre and speaking to Paul again, Thecla decides to go to preach in Iconium. The narrative ends with Thecla approaching Theocleia again (Ath 4.18). The last line read that Thecla ended up in Seleucia, having brought many to the word of God (Ath 4.18).

## Why looking at Thecla as a missional leader matters

Niemandt (2019:141) emphasises the importance of stories as fundamental in humans' understanding of themselves and life. The story of ATh captured the imagination of early believers. It's a story that draws on well-known tropes, particularly resembling Greek romance literature. The trope of a highborn woman who courageously defies the social order is a common motif in the Apocryphal Acts of the second and third centuries CE (Matthews 2001:39). These narratives were typically interwoven into the elite Greco-Roman framework of societal ideals, reinforcing and promoting the Roman Empire's conception of virtue and ethics. However, ATh seems to be a typical narrative, but the narrative disrupts the assumed social standards of its day. It challenges gender norms, authority, and interpretations of Pauline literature. Thecla

12. It is a misnomer to concede that Paul 'converts' people. Paul invites people to a lifestyle change.

13. Barrier (2009:72) argues that Onesiphorus is not from Iconium, but a travelling co-worker who was expecting Paul to begin his work with him. He is mentioned as a coworker in 2 Timothy 1:16 who refreshed Paul in various cities, as seen in 2 Timothy 1:16 and 2 Timothy 4:19. Accordingly, Onesiphorus was tasked to plant a church in Iconium. However, Zamfir (2016:356) cogently argues against this position. The ATh is a fictitious narrative, implying that Onesiphorus does not necessarily refer to the Onesiphorus from 2 Timothy 1:16 and 2 Timothy 4:19. She attests that Onesiphorus visiting Paul in Rome does not convincingly prove that he was an itinerant co-worker (Zamfir 2016:356).

14. Onesiphorus seems to play a supporting role. Although he invites Hermas Dermogenes to his house, he does not seem to be doing the evangelising. In ATh 3.23 when he has taken his wife Lectra and children Simmeas and Zeno to fast and pray with Paul in an open tomb on the road from Iconium leading to Daphne, the children become hungry after spending a few days there. It is Paul who instructs the one child to go buy bread and bring it back to them. Onesiphorus is seemingly not concerned about his hungry children and lets Paul take the lead.

even baptises herself. The missional church has in view that instead of bringing people to the church, people of God should live their faith in their everyday life. Thecla even baptises herself in her unabashed obedience to God's call on her life. This serves as a reminder for modern believers to be obedient to God even if this seems peculiar to others. The important link for missional leadership is seen in Thecla's action as she puts God's will first. The result of Thecla's Christ-centredness is a witnessing movement in Iconium and Seleucia Cilicia.

The ATh stands out from other 2nd century writings such as the Pastorals and the Didache, and the Ignatian epistles that suggest a more structured institutionalised church with teaching and leadership pertaining to officials (Zamfir 2016:357). This could be indicative that the church did not develop linearly, but that some communities were still unstructured. For the ATh, the focus is on the οἶκος [household]. The relationships matter. Authority is charismatic and bound to ascetic itinerant preacher rather than resident officials (Zamfir 2016:357). People resonate with the person as both Thecla and Paul mirror Christ. The focus is on the message and not on positions and titles. This ties in with our understanding of the missional church, that it is not a location, but people being busy where God is busy. Missional leadership is not concerned with titles and hierarchies. It rather empowers believers to truly embody their faith in all facets of their lives. Thecla exemplifies our understanding of missional leadership as even in the face of many life-threatening circumstances, this does not dampen her zeal for Christ and her genuine and authentic style speaks to her earnest belief in Christ. Thecla exemplifies that a different life with meaning is possible. For our modern understanding, her example inspires that being in Christ fosters narratives of meaning and purpose.

Thecla goes back to try and tell her mother of Christ, even after she wanted her own daughter to be burned at the stake. Thamyris has passed when she returns. We do not know if she managed to change her mother, but Thecla brings transformation, and her popularity attests that she resonated with early believers. The primary focus of the tale is not merely the liberation of women but rather to draw the reader into Christ's family, a community defined by distinct values.

The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* advocate for the sole authentic form of Christianity as one that demands complete sexual abstinence, even within marriage, while rejecting both the family unit and the traditional household structure (Martin 2012:294). Thecla responds to her calling. She goes through immense trials, but staying true to her calling protects her and affirms her ministry.

## Conclusion

The ATh proffers a captivating narrative that summarises the essence of missional leadership. This is seen particularly in the transformation of Thecla. Paul plays a lesser role in the narrative. This is also part of the strategy of the story as Thecla is highlighted as changing from a mere listener of Paul to a pupil of Paul and, eventually, an apostle in her own right. She surpasses Paul in the narrative, garnering

her disciples and thriving in ministry. It is an undeterred fervour to follow God that shapes her ministry. The key components of missional leadership are reflected in her behaviour and actions. This is prevalent in the manner the Spirit leads her, the disruption of existing social norms, the pivotal moment of her baptism, affirming her identity in Christ and God's working through her and her discipleship.

Both Paul and Thecla's role in ATh highlights travelling missionaries that focused on relationships. The success of the relationships is not measured by how many people convert. We never hear, for example, whether Theocleia converts nor does it seem that Demas and Hermogenes transform. This is not the focus of the narrative. The narrative rather indicates the transformative role the narrative of the gospel plays in a person's life. This is reminiscent of the basic principles of missionary leadership. The story of Christ transforms and should stay the focus as exemplified by Thecla.

Missional leadership is not without obstacles and difficulties. Both Paul and Thecla challenge the societal norms of the Roman Empire. Thecla, in particular, is faced with two near-death experiences. These are shameful experiences. Yet, she embodies missional leadership through her unswerving commitment to asceticism and evangelism. The narrative emphasises her total participation in God's mission.

The ATh offers a valuable insight into early Christian communities' imagination as the message of Paul is reinterpreted to be contextual in a 2nd century context. The narrative inspires us to reconsider the way the gospel is retold in our modern context. Missional leadership is pertinent in the story to overcome societal boundaries and embodying the *missio Dei*. Accordingly, Thecla's narrative not only enriches our understanding of early Christian leadership but also serves as an insight into how missional leadership may arise in unexpected and disruptive ways that challenge normative roles and expectations.

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## Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. The article does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder or agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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