


Embracing an embodied theology in the time of corona: Mimetic synchronisation with the theological rhythms and first responder stance of the apostle Paul during the time of famine

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Apart from constantly grappling with issues such as the inspiration of the Bible, theologians are also keen observers of cultural and societal changes and shifts and their impact on the interpretation of the Bible. Postmodernism serves as a briefcase in point. However, theologians do not seem to be equally responsive to natural disasters such as the present global COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst the presence of the coronavirus is reshaping the nature of our planet and threatening the well-being of all of its inhabitants, the future of formal theology is also under threat. As a matter of 'academic survival', a so-called 'ancient-future' approach is urgently called for, one that entails a mimetic rereading of the theologians of the Bible who were the first responders during the times of pandemics and other calamities. The apostle Paul served as our example in this regard. A 'preferential option for the poor', inherent in his theology, directly influenced his organisation of, and personal involvement in, two impactful collections for the poor in Judea during the extended periods of famine and poverty. Using 'mimetically synchronising' with his theological rhythms, corresponding embodied responses of theologians during the corona pandemic could become a reality. Only then will there be hope for a vibrant new post-corona theology, a lived one at that!

Contribution: The focus of this article represents an exegetical, historical and practical reflection, within a paradigm in which the intersection of religious studies and social sciences generates an interdisciplinary contested discourse. The article comprises exegesis of the Ancient Near Eastern scriptures and the Early Church, including studies in the field of early Christian literature and the New Testament.

Keywords: theology; postmodernism; coronavirus; famine; collection; responsive hermeneutics.

Wrestling with the canon

The Bible is old, but it has definitely not died of old age. Although it was composed a few thousand years ago by authors from vastly different backgrounds in equally diverse sociocultural contexts, it is still considered by millions as normative for current living.

Whilst the Bible is 'alive and well' in ecclesiological contexts; theologians continue to grapple with hermeneutical issues regarding the status and relevance of the Bible, ranging from different interpretations of its inspiration to outright rejection of any form of divine intervention. No wonder the canonicity of the Bible is still such a hotly disputed theological issue. This includes historical issues related to the delineation of the *nomina sacra*, the documents of Judaism(s) and the early church that were included in the various canons of the church, the composition of different canon lists, the impact of Church Fathers and ecumenical synods on the formation of 'Scripture' in early Christianity (cf. MacDonald 2017a, 2017b).

Simultaneously, the inspiration of the Bible, if any – as the cipher for the mysterious interaction of divine-human co-writing – remains some kind of theological battleground. Ever since Semler's ([1776] 2009) epoch-making publication in 1776, in which he distinguished between Holy Scripture and the Word of God, scholars have opted for anything from rejection of the findings of historical-critical scholarship regarding the formation of the canon, to acceptance of a so-called canon within

Note: Special Collection entitled The use of the Bible in Theology, sub-edited by Willem Oliver (UNISA).

a canon, one which is only accessible through faith. Käsemann ([1951] 1952) aptly summarised this position:

Was innerhalb des traditionellen Kanons Evangelium sei, könne nicht mehr der Historiker durch eine Feststellung beantworten, sondern nur der Glaubende, vom Geist überführte und auf die Schrift hörende entscheiden. (p. 223)

Other scholars have settled for a more nuanced canon-oriented view of inspiration:

[O]ne that is suggested and even warranted by the historical study of canon formation, retains room for the transcendent but sees the divine-human encounter as occurring over a lengthier period of time and as including more people than just the author alone. In this view inspiration would extend through the entirety of the process of the Bible's formation and focus as much on the community that transmitted the text as on the role of the text's putative author. (Chapman 2006:173)

Theologians as faithful observers of culture: Postmodernism and biblical understanding

Theologians are also keen observers of cultural and societal changes and shifts and their impact on the interpretation of the Bible. To name but one example: when the designation 'postmodernity' rose in popularity across various scientific disciplines during the second half of the previous century, many theologians followed suit. In reaction to modernism's certainties, everything now became less unified, more playful, less inclined to hold master-narratives intact and more resistant to so-called 'received views'. Postmodernism challenged the totalising discourses, transcendental forms of thinking and universalism that traditionally provided cultural, academic and religious institutions with some forms of authority and legitimation. Apart from the fact that, in postmodernist thinking, theoretical and philosophical arguments became embedded in a new type of literary rhetoric, different post-foundationalist epistemologies also took shape in scientific disciplines.

In line with a general understanding of postmodernity as incredulity towards metanarratives, many theologians started challenging the legitimising master narratives of the Church and the Bible, as well as the hermeneutical foundations of theology and the *modus operandi* of biblical scholarship (Butler 2002:13; cf. also Moore & Sherwood 2011). With finding much of its identity in what it rejects, the postmodernist era influenced biblical scholars to reread the Bible using radical reader-oriented forms of literary criticism, which shifted the hermeneutical emphasis to the implied/idealised/actual readers and their values, attitudes and responses (cf. McKnight 1988:15).

Inspired by Jacques Derrida's scepticism of truth and objectivity, deconstructive questions rose in popularity, which at times 'tend to undermine the truth claims of the biblical text' (Collins 2005:17). At the same time, ideological criticism, in the spirit of Michel Foucault, was also applied, which denied any real meaning in biblical texts, hence raising questions about

their moral status (Collins 2005:17). From these perspectives, many theologians endeavoured to 'rescue' the Bible from Western culture's efforts to turn it into an historical relic and an antiquarian artefact, as well as from '... modern biblical scholarship that, for many, has become a curatorial science in which the text is fetishized, its readings routinized, its readers bureaucratized' (eds. Castelli et al. 1995:2).

Responsive hermeneutics as the route of 'normal' theology

Theologies with a 'post' in them are now the order of the day. Apart from various postmodernist theologies, other umbrella terms such as postcolonial theology (cf. Punt 2015), post-secular theology (cf. Graham 2013), post-apartheid theology (cf. ed. Venter 2016) or post-liberal theology (cf. Michener 2013) are also frequently used. According to Rambo (2016:3), it is the responsibility of the theologian to diagnose '... the contemporary moment, interpreting the present-day world and its pressing concerns. But theology is also a meaning-making enterprise, a constructive and visionary endeavor'. However, on a high level of abstraction, post-something expressions of theology do not seem to be equally responsive, or even visionary, during natural disasters and global pandemics such as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

It would seem as if there is an apparent dichotomy between church and theology in terms of immediate responsiveness to natural disasters. Perhaps the most obvious explanation for this so-called dichotomy lies in the fact that theology has turned into a full-fledged academic enterprise, practised by highly trained scholars who operate more or less independently from the church. Particularly since the era of modernism, with its emphasis on rationality and objectivism, theology's knowing objects were distanced from its subject matter. God 'as an increasingly inaccessible Object of knowledge' (Treier 2019:28) could from then on be studied in formal theological institutions without direct intervention from the church. According to Moore and Sherwood (2011), this also gave rise to:

[T]he invention of a particular and peculiar academic entity – the professional biblical scholar ... Responding to a loss of theological authority, the Bible was rehabilitated on human and cultural grounds. The Bible was re-universalized, so to speak, and its relevance newly perpetuated in such unlikely domains as philology, ancient history, archaeology, ancient Near Eastern languages, and the quest for the ever-elusive authorial hand. (p. 1)

Theological research has also become anchored in specific schools of thought and academic guilds. Like-minded groups of theologians in different theological subdisciplines now share specific scientific paradigms. This is reflected in distinctive methodological epistemologies in terms of biblical interpretation and other theological issues. In this sense, and in line with Kuhn's (1970) well-known ideas on the formation of paradigms in scientific communities, particular theological models or paradigms serve as 'disciplinary matrices' that provide the conceptual hardware to formulate specific theories and to solve the questions and problems that theologians investigate.

'Normal' theology probably not suited for a post-corona world

Normally, any expectation of 'direct theological applicability' using a one-way movement from formal theological analysis to practice or from theory to immediate usefulness of research would be considered wishful thinking. However, suddenly, in 2020, we find ourselves in a radically different, corona-defined environment where this way of practising theology has probably reached an unplanned expiry date. This global pandemic, which has been described as World War III without the guns,¹ has irrevocably changed the shape of our planet and all of its inhabitants. Since the beginning of 2020, governments worldwide literally had to force new behaviours on all, to stem the spread of the virus. Governments had to face tough decisions such as either severely damaging people's livelihoods through extended periods of lockdown and physical distancing or sacrificing the lives of hundreds of thousands. Moral conundrums, such as who to save when hospitals run out of life-support systems and who not, have also turned into commonplace problems in various countries.

The knock-on effects of the coronavirus in terms of global and local unemployment, corporate failures, falling asset prices, increased poverty, political uncertainties, credit defaults and market volatility are mounting by the day.² Church and theology are not exempt from this negative fallout. Permanent closures of numerous local congregations, because of lack of funds and the rediscovery of digital faith during the ensuing periods of physical distancing,³ are also on the table. A similar fate awaits theological institutions. Because of the massive global economic downturn, formal theology is under threat in ways that we have not even begun to fathom (cf. also Sweet 2019:185ff).

Will stereotypical dichotomies such as 'theology-versus-church' or 'scholar-versus-practitioner' prevail in the aftermath of this global corona pandemic? The answer depends on theology's openness to the past and adaptability in the immediate present. During the corona pandemic, it would perhaps be wise for theologians to take cognisance of some movement in the previous century that practised the so-called 'ressourcement ("return to the sources") theology' in Catholic circles (cf. eds. Flynn & Murray 2012). Scholars like Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac, Jean Danielou and others shared a common belief that the writings of the early church constituted an incomparable source for the renewal of theology and the contemporary church. According to Husbards (2008):

[F]acing a post-Christian Europe, *ressourcement* theologians turned to the works of great patristic and medieval theologians such as Origen, Ignatius of Antioch, Cyprian, Chrysostom ... In

1. <https://www.nottinghampost.com/news/nottingham-news/like-world-war-3-without-3976949>.

2. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/safeguarding-our-lives-and-our-livelihoods-the-imperative-of-our-time>.

3. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/19/coronavirus-effect-economy-life-society-analysis-covid-135579>.

so doing, they essentially rediscovered crucial sources for the revitalization of contemporary theology and pastoral life. (p. 11)

Apart from listening in on, and learning from these *doctores ecclesiae* and other influential early church leaders, it would be equally wise to take another step further to 'the first theological responders' of the Christian era. The theologians of the New Testament era (and for that matter, also the prophets of the Old Testament and other biblical figures) were highly responsive during the times of disasters. Stepping into their lifeworlds, however, is not about producing yet another wave of academic publications on their world of ideas from a post-corona or some other 'post-something' perspective, but about a new, mimetic learning process. It is about escaping from dated 'pre-coronean' theological silos as a matter of urgency and survival(!). It is about letting go of a critical observer posture to creatively learn how theology, albeit in a different guise, informed the first believers' self-sacrificing stance and actions when natural disasters loomed large on their horizons. It is about being mentored by and ethically mimicking the theologians of the New Testament (as our cases in point in this short study) on how to address natural disasters using an embodied theology and a relevant first-responder presence. Their theology was the driving force that facilitated and equipped the first believers to address the impact of calamities on their communities and environments.⁴

Forward to the first century: Theology in a unique epistemological guise

The general view of theology – one that is embedded in academic institutions and practised by formally trained scholars who operate independently from the church – is worlds apart from the New Testament era, when apostles, prophetic figures and teachers functioned as formal theological interpreters and expositors of the gospel. Theology was an inseparable part of their *kerygma*, which was also expressed in the formative rituals and practices of the early church that reflected their new identity as Jesus followers. These first theologians constructed a 'sacred canopy' (cf. Berger 1967) over newly formed faith communities to legitimise their new socio-religious reality on a cosmic scale and also to shield it against intrusion by relativising ideas and events.

Neither the secluded holy spaces of religious temples and shrines nor the detached schools of learned philosophers provided the backdrop for the apostles' conceptualisation of the *ekklesia*. Although their loci included unlikely places such as prison cells, Roman public roads and market

4. Stark (1996), in his well-known study on the growth of early Christianity, discusses the devastating impact of pandemics that swept through Roman Empire around the years 165 and ca. 251 AD. With estimated death rates from 7% to over 50%, of the entire Roman population these plagues were socially and psychically devastating. During these times, local Christian communities were strongholds of mutual assistance and caregiving, which resulted in a survival rate far greater than that of others (cf. also Everton & Schroeder 2019).

squares, local households became their teaching and preaching spaces. The daily living space of the *domus* or *oikos*, the Graeco-Roman household or family, turned into the seedbed of the *ekklesia* of the Lord. This is where the first theologians lived, worked, prayed, thought, reflected, wrote and taught. Their theology was in-house, immediate and directly applicable.

A different take on poverty as the 'normal reality' facing the earliest church and her theologians

One of the very first challenges the leaders/theologians of the New Testament church had to face was the alleviation of poverty in their midst. Apart from harsh economic realities, which excluded the majority of the ancient Mediterranean population from participation in the activities, customs and diets commonly approved by their societies, because of a constant lack of primary sources (cf. Cohick 2019a:23; Cohick 2019b:40-42), poverty also included relational dynamics. Hence, Green (1994:69) is of opinion that the term 'poor' has also become 'a cipher for those excluded according to normal canons of status honour in the Mediterranean world ... "Poor" is not to be narrowly understood along economic lines'. According to Van Aarde (2009):

In Mediterranean antiquity 'being poor' denoted a broad phenomenon, which transcended a state of merely lacking physical and material goods. Poverty encompassed a deprived condition, in which aspects of life that created a sense of well-being in its fullest sense, including health and wealth, as well as an individual's political belonging, which assumed socio-economic home care within a specific family, tribe and nation, were lacking.

Within peasant societies scattered right across the Mediterranean landscape, marked social inequality was at the order of the day (cf. 2016). Material poverty was widespread. Many, if not the majority of the first believers were poor.⁵ These poor included not only the economically deprived but also those who had lost their inherited social status and honour because of illness, debt, war, famine and so on. High death rates and low life expectancies were part and parcel of their daily realities. They were:

[I]l-fed, housed in slums or not at all, ravaged by sickness, precluded from all access to social prestige and power over their own destinies, and having virtually no hope of improvement in their condition. (Esler 1997:177)

For these degraded individuals, the earliest communities of Jesus followers provided a safe haven and an alternative family within the confinements of a highly stratified society dominated by a small ruling elite. Here they had a realistic chance of being cared for in terms of their material needs as well, something which was not common place in their societies.

⁵See Friesen (2008:19-20), who chastised biblical scholars for underestimating the overwhelming poverty that characterised the Roman Empire and also developed a poverty scale for describing economic resources in ancient communities.

Because altruistic motives were far removed from the typical mentality of nobles in the ancient Mediterranean world, efforts to alleviate the plight of the poor were few and far between. Most of them used their benefactions to increase their own honour and not so much to alleviate the needs of others. The general ideology that prevailed was 'civic, not humanitarian – very few euergetists would have described what they were doing as poor relief' (Garnsey & Saller 1987:101). Poverty relief was restricted mainly to temporary support for members of one's own group or association, but not on a life-sustaining or systematic level. Ehrensperger (2019:101) goes as far as to say that '[a]ny kind of organized poverty relief was actually absent'. Prell (1997) shares the same view:

Eine Armenpolitik existierte somit nicht ... Ansätze altruistischen Handelns sind bei den Römern zwar sichtbar, jedoch, erkannte erst die Spätantike die Armen als soziale Kategorie, die der Hilfe anderer bedarf. Es war die Christentum, das den Armen ihren Platz innerhalb der Gesellschaft einräumte. (p. 36)

When we turn to the early church, the general agonistic atmosphere of social exchange, based on the scheme of giving and returning the equivalence received, was mostly absent. Social cohesion was not based on the harsh reciprocity ethic that turned most of the forms of social interaction outside the family, from invitations, meals, public debates, recitals, business transactions to gift exchanges into agonistic contests for honour:

Any bestowal of a benefit signalled the start of a long-term reciprocal relationship with specific obligations, linked to the role of both benefactor and beneficiary. While the former was dependent upon the positive response of his/her beneficiary to his/her gifts, it was expected of the latter to show in turn his/her gratitude by making an adequate return. (Joubert 2000:58)

The first followers of Jesus were taught never to give to receive a return. At the same time, the recipients of their benefactions were not to be viewed as being under any obligation to respond with gifts and services of equal value. In this instance, the importance of the Hebrew Bible as a formative influence of the New Testament theologians' poverty discourse can scarcely be overestimated. They did not depart significantly from its traditions:

[I]n which an emphasis on the goodness of material creation entails the intrinsic grievousness of poverty, and in which the existence of poverty is ultimately consequent on creation's brokenness – a correlate of human transgression. Turning away from transgression entails care for the vulnerable, in hope that a decisive reversal in favour of the people of God (sometimes themselves characterized as 'the poor') will be brought about by divine initiative. (Armitage 2016:247)

The plight of the destitute such as slaves, strangers, orphans and widows was always in the focus in ancient Israel (cf. Ex 22:22-23; Lv 19:9-10; Deut 15:1-18; Am 4:1; Is 10:1-2). Simultaneously, the role of divine reward was also present, with God being viewed as the indirect object of Israelite almsgiving. In Proverbs 19:17, for instance, the wise person who helps the poor is seen as making a loan to God; he now

becomes the beneficiary who is placed in debt to this benefactor. In terms of God's personal intervention in reciprocal relations, he himself who sides with the lowly and the downcast will personally reward such benefactors (cf. Joubert 2003:376). The theologians of the New Testament also shared this view. They knew that almsgiving signalled the beginning of a reciprocal relationship with God (cf. Lk 14:14). Such 'giving' always had to be accompanied with a cheerful heart (cf. 2 Chr 24:10; Rm 12:8; 2 Cor 9:7); otherwise it means nothing in the eyes of God (cf. Mk 12:41–44). This poverty discourse of the New Testament was firmly rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the normative example of Jesus whose ministry also inaugurated the reversal of the plight of the poor. They also understood that life in the present was still:

[L]ife in the time of poverty', but signs of the coming reversal are to be expected, especially within the believing community. The anticipation of eschatological reversal provides the crucial context for sacrificial behaviour in relation to possessions in the present. (Armitage 2016:247)

In line with the formative teachings of the Messiah Jesus (cf. Lk 4:18–19; 6:20; 14:), the focus of the first believers was deliberately shifted towards the lowly and social outcasts who could not reciprocate any benefits and monetary gifts. They were taught that Christ, who was eternally rich but who became poor on behalf of all (2 Cor 8:9), distinctively favoured the marginalised and the poor. Contrary to the prevalent reciprocity ethic, where any rewarding service or gift placed the recipients thereof under obligation, Jesus taught that believers should welcome social outcasts such as the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind who could not reciprocate their benefits. In response, God would personally reward them at the resurrection of the righteous (Lk 14:12–14). From this perspective, in terms of Barclay's (2015) conceptualisation of the characteristics of Graeco-Roman gift-giving, the first believers were introduced not only to the efficacy of giving as powerful, good and rewarding in itself, accomplishing its purpose, but also to its non-circularity as being unconditional and expecting no return.

That famine ... that response!

From the very beginning, the leaders/theologians in the Jerusalem church took care of the poor using an '... "alternative subsistence strategy" because they practiced it in urban settings where a different set of economic assumptions, values and behaviors typically prevailed' (Richardson 2018:xix). The *Book of Acts* makes frequent reference to poverty-related issues amongst the first believers in Jerusalem (Ac 2:42, 45; 3:6; 4:32–37; 5:1–11; 6:1–6; 11:27–30; 24:17), thus reflecting the harsh living conditions in this pre-industrial city in roughly 33–58 CE. Initially, benefactors such as Barnabas (4:36–37) spontaneously shared their possessions with the poor. This soon gave rise to a more centralised process of poverty relief under supervision of the apostles (4:32–35). Believers who sold their properties brought the proceeds to the apostles who then distributed it amongst the needy from a common fund. Later, the apostles also arranged

for seven helpers to be appointed (6:1–7) '... to take over the responsibility of caring for the poor within the context of daily meal-fellowship' (Joubert 2003:382). But then the disaster struck, as Luke tells us in his reference to a famine during the reign of Claudius (11:27–30).

Josephus (*Antiquitates* 20:51–53) mentions this famine in Judea during the procuratorships of Cuspius Fadius (44–46) and Tiberius Alexander (46–48). He refers to queen Helena of Adiabene who sent large quantities of figs from Cyprus and grain from Egypt to the people of Judea (cf. also Gregson 2017:94ff). Later, when learning of this famine, her son Izates also sent a great sum of money to Jerusalem. This famine, which could be dated somewhere between 44 and 48 CE, was followed a little while later by yet another famine in Judea (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 3:320).⁶ Thus, during the years 44–49, the people of Jerusalem were hard hit by two very severe food shortages. The effects were disastrous. Josephus (*Ant.* 3:320) tells us that the price of grain at this time was 13 times higher than normal. Starvation and death were also the fate of large numbers of people (cf. *Ant.* 20:51). We know from other ancient sources that, during such times, people consumed anything from twigs, bulbs, cooked fresh grass, to roots of indigestible plants that caused tumours, fevers, dysentery and skin diseases (Cohick 2019a:19).

Acts 11:27–30 tells us that believers in the city of Antioch heard of this approaching famine through a charismatic prophet Agabus. They responded by sending relief aid (or a *diakonia*, as Luke calls it) to the believers in Jerusalem. This fast-growing community of Jesus followers in Antioch, under the leadership of Barnabas and the theological ministry of Paul (cf. 11:19–26), understood that their unity in faith with Jerusalem entailed an immediate response to alleviate the plight of their fellow brothers and sisters. Because Luke suggests that this was a worldwide famine (although we have no historical proof that the entire *imperium Romanum* was affected), Antioch was per implication also affected. Still, amidst their own presumed suffering, the local believers promptly held a collection for Jerusalem, in which 'each of them' voluntarily participated according to their means. This unanimity of communal spirit was no abstract theological sentiment, but a concrete, self-sacrificial *diakonia*. Their understanding of their new identity as members of the *familia Dei* also entailed the self-sacrificial care for others in need. It was the basic motivation for their proactive, timely response by means of the collection, which was conceptualised, organised and steered by Paul and his colleague Barnabas.

Paul's collection for Jerusalem

At the meeting with the elders of the Jerusalem church during the delivery of the collection, Paul's interaction with James Peter and John as the 'pillars' of the Jerusalem church, to which he refers in Galatians 2:1–10, probably also took place.

⁶We know from the information in the Tebtunis papyri that Egypt experienced very high grain prices because of crop failures in the spring of 45 CE. This would imply that there would only have been excess grain in Egypt at the earliest during the spring of 46.

In this instance, Peter posed the request to Paul not to forget the poor amongst the saints (verse 10; cf. also Joubert 2000:72–115). In response, Paul launched an imaginative collection for the church in Jerusalem as part of his missionary programme. He undertook this project between the years 49 and 57 in the Roman provinces of Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia (cf. 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8–9; Rm 15:25–27) and eventually delivered it to Jerusalem (Ac 24:17).

The theological purpose of the collection remains a topic of debate amongst scholars (such as Paul) seeking to ‘...ameliorate tensions between his Greek-speaking and primarily non-Judean assemblies and the Judean leadership of the Jesus movement in the homeland’ (Kloppenborg 2017; Last & Harland 2020:3; cf. also Ogereau 2012). However, Paul’s collection is also a poverty relief project on an unprecedented scale in early Christianity, one fraught with endless logistical and personal challenges from beginning to end. The mere idea of convincing communities of believers thousands of kilometres away in very different sociocultural contexts to donate a significant sum of money to Jewish people who were viewed as a suspected minority in the Roman Empire was daunting, to say the least. Bestowing benefactions on them was not a natural choice for people elsewhere.

Amidst Paul’s strenuous work of planting communities of Jesus followers in various Roman provinces, which had him covering thousands of kilometres on foot, working as a manual labourer to provide for his daily bread and suffering constant rejection and persecution (cf. 1 Cor 4:8–13; 2 Cor 11:23–27), he never let go of his commitment to carry through the collection. The collection was no secondary add-on, or some nice-to-have project separate from his basic *kerygma*. Right from the start it formed part and parcel of his preaching and teaching. New communities of faith were immediately involved in the collection for Jerusalem, as observed in his theological conceptualisations and defences of this project throughout his letters. He knew it was a necessary expression of the new believers’ faith in Christ and of their unity with believers in Jerusalem where the gospel originated.

After persuading believers in local communities of faith throughout the Roman Empire to contribute to the collection, and after initial resistance (such as from the Corinthians – cf. Stenschke 2015) to this programme, Paul and his helpers also had to deal with the logistical challenges of gathering the funds from the various churches and then safely transport it to Jerusalem on perilous journeys. Finally, he had to overcome the possible opposition to the collection from the Jewish Christian recipients at a time of increasing zealotism and anti-Roman and Gentile sentiment in Jerusalem (cf. Stenschke 2017). Eventually, in the presence of a sizeable number of representatives from the churches under his supervision (Ac 20:4), Paul undertook the long journey to Jerusalem, which suggests that he succeeded in raising a substantial amount of

money. A cryptic remark in Paul’s speech before the Roman governor Felix in Acts 24:17 that he came to Jerusalem to bring alms to his people also hints at the successful delivery thereof. This project, which served as a concrete expression of *koinonia* and *diakonia* and which involved Christians from diverse cultural, social and geographical contexts, took Paul close to 10 years to complete. Whilst alleviating the plight of the poor, it visibly expressed the very nature of the theology he practised and preached.

Fin

In a time ravished by famine and poverty, Paul’s theology entailed more than theoretical conceptualisations of a new symbolic universe, or rational defences thereof against conflicting ideologies. He was no systematic theologian or social analyst. It would actually be anachronistic to think of him in this way. However, his theology was indeed a two-world practice. It was deeply engrained in his servant-like ‘followership’ of Christ, his decisive leadership and his personal involvement in two collections for the impoverished in Judea and their capital city, Jerusalem. Clearly, a ‘... “preferential option for the poor” as an authentic expression of Israel’s faith and consequently, the gospel of Jesus Christ of which he had been made a minister’ (Elliott 2006:87) informed Paul’s theology. Right from the start he considered the links between his theology and praxis in terms of his material commitment to the poor. According to Longenecker (2019):

In his best theological moments, Paul imagined the body of Christ to be the of the abundant community, whose resources were supplied by an abundant Spirit, where all members had important contributions to make, regardless of their prosopographic profile, and where each incarnation of the body built its identity and mission around the indigenous resources brought to it by its mutually gifted members. In this way, Paul’s vision has some overlap with what some today are calling ABCD – asset-based community development. But for Paul, these were not simply community-resourced assets. They were theological capital, precisely because they were resourced by the Spirit of the self-giving Son of God. They spoke of the presence of God within the relatively unimpressive communities of Jesus-followers. (p. 51)

Contemporary theologians should, as a matter of urgency, ‘synchronise’ with Paul and the other theologians of the Bible whose embodied theologies directly influenced and shaped believers’ involvement with and care for the impoverished during famines and other pandemics. A redefined ‘ancient-future’ theology is called for, a theology that reflects a similar responsiveness is imperative in this age of corona:

Time and again we have to inquire of the Word and of the first believers with regards to our roots, our path, our oxygen, our food and our direction. We have to capture the rhythm of biblical folk by reversing to advance. With all that knowledge, narratives, lessons, norms and experiences, we have to live backwards and forwards simultaneously. To master this rhythmic motion of advancing and reversing, it is necessary to know how our ancestors in biblical times expressed their own

crossroad experiences with Jesus. The life rhythms flowing from this offer precious lessons to contemporary spirituality. (Joubert 2009:37)

The 'how and what' of such mimetic responses, in terms of the nature and content thereof, is up to individual theologians, but the necessity thereof in terms of a relevant personal involvement in a time of corona is non-negotiable. It is now about shifting from that deeply ingrained critical observer mode to an embodied responsiveness. Rambo's (2016:3) understanding of theology as a two-world practice, as the work of '... transfiguring the world and working between the *as is* and the *otherwise*', should be put into practice here and now. Theology can no longer be about subjecting the Bible to yet another wave of rational scrutinisations, but vice versa. It is hoped that by being creatively 'reread and redefined' by the Bible, contemporary theologians will turn into first responders yet again to effectively address the needs, suffering and well-being of people during this time of corona. Only then will there be hope for a vibrant new post-corona theology, a lived one at that! Today the words of Vos (2001) are more valid than ever:

There is a place for the poor in God's household, where their identity changes from that of a non-people son to that of a child of God. In the Father's household people live not only on grace, but also on bread. We obtain grace from the Father as a gift. We owe one another daily bread. (p. 66)

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