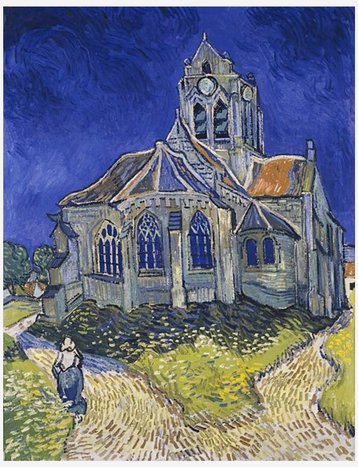
ART TO HELP YOU REFLECT: THE CHURCH AT AUVERS



By Paul Miles

Above is *The Church at Auvers*. It was painted by Vincent van Gogh about a month before he committed suicide in 1890. The church is illuminated by light from the front, but emits no light of its own. In fact, it casts a shadow into the light from where it sits. Through the windows, we see that the church is as dark inside as the night sky behind it. The roof is deformed, giving the church an unstable feel to it. This really isn't the kind of building that I would like to step into. But, churches are more than just buildings, aren't they? Really, it's rather silly to call a building "a church," isn't it? The Bible never mentions a "church building." In fact, there weren't any buildings built intentionally for Christian assembly and worship prior to Constantine's issuance of the Edict of Milan in February 313 A.D. When I see *The Church at Auvers*, I think of churches that are unstable, not because the building itself is wobbly, but because we, the Christians who make up the local church, are flawed.

There's an interesting detail about the design of Solomon's Temple that is quite different from Van Gogh's depiction of the Church at Auvers. In the Geneva Translation of 1 Kings 6:4, we read:

> **And in the house he made windows, broad *without*, and narrow *within*.**[1]

Flashlights usually have parabolic mirrors around the bulb to intensify the beam of light as it comes out. If an architect intends to bring more light into a room, he can broaden the inside of a window like a flashlight and it will make the room brighter for the people inside as seen in Fig 1. The temple's windows were the opposite, though. They were broad on the outside and narrow on the inside as seen in Fig. 2.

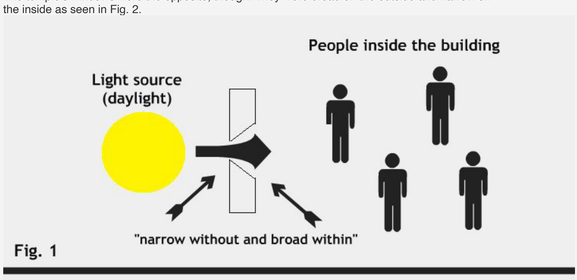


Fig. 1

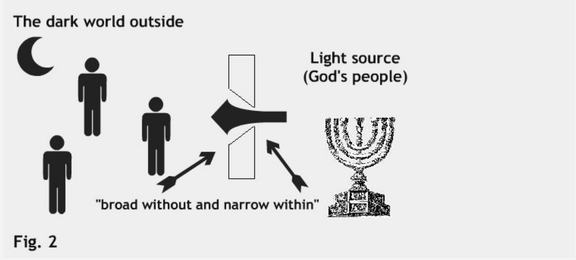


Fig. 2

It is said that when God designed the temple, He intended for the windows to be a decorative reminder that His people are not to be illuminated by the world, but that the world is to be illuminated by His people. As Jesus said in the sermon on the mount, "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden" (Matt. 5:14). The Church at Auvers sits on a hill in plain view, but it certainly is not providing light to the world.

When we see *The Church at Auvers*, not only are the windows dark as the night sky behind them, but the building is actually casting a shadow into the light. There's a cute little cliché that pastors tend to use. They say something to the effect of, "Light eliminates darkness! Darkness is the absence of light. Have you ever heard of a flashdark? Of course not! You can't shine darkness, because darkness doesn't even exist." Well, it seems that the Church at Auvers missed out on that sermon, because it has become a flashdark. And they aren't alone. Brennan Mannings words are tragically true:

> **The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians: who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.**

This is not the message that we should be carrying to the world. We should rather follow Paul's instructions from Philippians 2:14-16:

> **Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.**

Or as Paul further writes in Romans 12:9-13:

> **Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.**

And so, my challenge to you today, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is to reflect upon the role that you are playing in the Church. Are you a light shining in the darkness? Have you become a "flashdark?" What is it that you could be doing better?

1 Translators differ on the translation of this passage. A more literal and awkward rendering of the Hebrew could be "He made for the house the windows of openings that were narrowed." It's a tough verse to translate, but in my opinion the Geneva translation does best. It's certainly not a major Bible doctrine and Geneva and I could be wrong on this one.

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