

*A centenary tribute to a Christian missionary,
evangelist, and visionary painter*

“Something of the Gospel” in Vincent van Gogh

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HE WAS THE FIRST son of a minister in mid-nineteenth century Holland, and his earliest serious aspirations were to follow the example set by his moderately Calvinistic father. After a brief period of work as a bookseller, an art dealer, and a teacher, the son found his primary vocation as an evangelist. Through his study of Scripture and literal application of Christ's command to seek first the kingdom of God, he gained notoriety among the practitioners of the Christianity of his day. Eventually his extreme identification with the poor led to ecclesiastical ostracism, his official status as missionary was revoked, and he was dismissed for “excessive zeal.” Thoroughly disillusioned, yet filled with spiritual vision and idealism, he then sought a new outlet for expression of his undying love for God and man.

The name Vincent van Gogh is not often associated with a man of Christian conviction—let alone one with missionary and evangelistic aspirations. In the one hundred years since the artist's death, biographers, historians, and psychologists have often preferred to focus on the sensational sides of his personality: Van Gogh the self-mutilator, Van Gogh the paint-eater and turpentine-swiller, Van Gogh the suicidal. Indeed, to mention the artist's name today is to initiate a conversation about severed ears, eccentricity, and madness. To speak of him as primarily a religious visionary is to invite incredulity.

The Letters

WHERE DOES ONE turn to gain an accurate understanding of Van Gogh's most personal thoughts on God, Christ, and the spiritual life? The primary source for all serious students of his life will always be the collection of letters he wrote to members of his family and to close friends during the latter half of his short, enigmatic life. The current English edition provides readers with nearly two thousand pages of the most intimate thoughts from one of the great creative minds of late nineteenth-century Europe.¹

First-time readers of Van Gogh's letters are often struck by the fact that their author possessed a keen spiritual sensitivity from his earliest days—indeed, that his earliest vocational inclinations were toward the life of missionary and evangelist. Painting did not become his main devotion until, at age 27, his dismissal from the missionary society, under whose auspices he had labored, compelled him to seek another means of expression for his spiritual fervor. The ten-year period which followed prior to his death at age 37 produced some of the world's most sublime masterpieces, as Van Gogh transferred his unquenchable evangelistic zeal to the canvas.

Early Days

VAN GOGH SPENT his formative years in the

southernmost Dutch province of Noord Brabant—principally around the Zundert parsonage in which he was born. After spending about five years in a boarding school in Zevenbergen, he began work at age 16 as an art dealer for Goupil and Company in The Hague. The earliest extant letters date from 1872 when the 19-year old Vincent wrote to his younger brother Theo, who was finishing school in Oisterwijk. An unusually intimate rapport was evident between the two brothers from the earliest days, and in early 1873 Theo entered the Brussels branch of the same firm for which Vincent worked. As long as the two were separated by any distance, a fruitful correspondence would ensue. The result is that the vast majority of letters from the pen of Vincent van Gogh—many of them several pages in length—reflect the blunt honesty which only the closest relationship enjoys.

Van Gogh's London Period

IN THE EARLY SUMMER of 1873, Van Gogh was transferred to the London branch of the art dealership for which he had worked the previous four years. The following two years found him enjoying a modest but comfortable living in England. When transferred to Paris in May 1875 against his wishes, Van Gogh developed conflicts with his employer and gave up the business of art sales.

Now, almost 23 years of age, and with little formal education or training for any particular field, Van Gogh was faced with the question of what to do with his life. This marked the beginning of what editors, biographers, and historians have often termed his "religious phase" or "the period of his religious mysticism."² Until this point there is virtually no mention of Van Gogh's gifts as a painter; the main feature of his letters through 1876 is a deep love for nature, art, and literature. In addition, these letters reveal a sensitivity to language on the highest level, equal to some of the world's finest literature. Van Gogh was conversant in at least four languages and, despite his lack of formal

education, he steeped himself in the great books of his day.

The period perhaps most pertinent to readers interested in the spiritual roots of Van Gogh's worldview began with his separation from the art dealership in 1876. We have little indication that there was much disappointment on his part about this move, despite the new uncertainties it engendered. Searching for direction (and a job), Van Gogh drew support from his Christian faith.

In April 1876 Van Gogh returned to England. Leaving his family in Holland on Good Friday of that year, he accepted a position tutoring British boys in French, German, and arithmetic; he also led them in regular Bible study and prayer. At about the same time, his letters to Theo expressed his desire to be involved in church work—something "between clergyman and missionary among the working people in the suburbs of London."³ He adjured Theo not to speak of this to anyone, but simultaneously wrote to a pastor in London for advice and encouragement about "a situation in connection with the Church."⁴ The letter constitutes a sort of *curriculum vitae* and provides insight into how the future artist viewed himself as a young man:

Though I have not been educated for the Church, perhaps my travels, my experiences in different countries, of mixing with various people, poor and rich, religious and irreligious, of different kinds of work—manual labor and office work—perhaps also my speaking a number of languages, may partly make up for the fact that I have not studied at college. But the reason which I would rather give for introducing myself to you is my innate love for the Church and everything connected with it. . . .⁵

It is no overstatement to characterize Van Gogh's religious experience during this period as "obsessed." He attended church whenever possible (as often as three times in the same day), and he did not limit himself to any particular ecclesiastical tradition. Writing several years after his death, his sister-in-law com-

mented that "in theology he preferred to go his own way."⁶ A roommate later confirmed this, saying that Van Gogh's

... religious feelings were broad and noble, the reverse of narrow-minded; although ... he was an orthodox Protestant, he not only went to the Dutch Reformed Church, but also on the same day to the Jansenist, the Roman Catholic and the Lutheran churches. And when I once expressed my astonishment and lack of understanding, he answered with a good-natured smile, "Do you really think ... that God cannot be found in the other churches?"⁷

A related theme which emerges from the pages of Van Gogh's letters from London is a deepening identification with his father. The eldest son of pious Christian parents, Van Gogh felt a sense of filial responsibility to what he perceived were their expectations for his life. The records suggest that both his mother and his father were loving and sympathetic to their increasingly changeable son, and that they wanted to see him fulfilled in an occupation of his own choice. Van Gogh himself apparently perceived his role as similar to that of his father, and aspired to be more like him. Vincent wrote to Theo during this time: "God in Heaven can make us our father's brethren and unite us more and more strongly together."⁸ Three months later he would write to his parents:

... when I think of you ... then I feel, Hear O Lord, the prayer that my mother said for me when I left my parents' roof, "Father, I pray thee not that thou shouldst take him out of the world but that thou shouldst keep him from the evil," and "O Lord, make me my father's brother, a Christian and a Christian laborer. Finish Thy work in me that Thou hast begun and unite us, O Lord, firmly together and may the love for Thee strengthen that bond more and more."⁹

Meanwhile, we read of Van Gogh's activities at the boys' school outside London:

I read the Bible with them every day, and that is something more than a pleasure. No day passes without praying to God and with-

out speaking about God. At present my talks about Him aren't much, but with God's help and blessing they will become better.¹⁰

Aside from his official duties at the school, Van Gogh apparently felt a strong obligation to involve himself with the local church congregations. Armed with the self-confidence that usually comes with practice, he began to teach and to preach, and the letters to Theo are rife with biblical quotation and allusion. Although he later criticized the "Methodist regularity"¹¹ of a particular house's architecture, the traditional rivalry between the Reformed and other systems presented no barrier to Vincent, as we read in the following passage:

You know that I go to the Methodist Chapel ... every Monday night. Last night I spoke a few words on the subject "Nothing pleaseth me but in Jesus Christ, and in Him everything pleaseth me."¹²

A few days later, a similar letter would arrive for Theo and Vincent's mother, explaining

Last Monday I was again at Richmond, and my subject was "He has sent me to preach the Gospel to the poor," but whoever wants to preach the Gospel must carry it in his own heart first. Oh! may I find it, for it is only the word spoken in earnestness and from the fullness of the heart that can bear fruit.¹³

Other letters from the same period continue the theme:

It is a delightful thought that in the future wherever I go, I shall preach the Gospel; to do that *well*, one must have the Gospel in one's heart. May the Lord give it to me.¹⁴

How difficult life must be if not strengthened and comforted by faith.¹⁵

Theo, woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel—if I did not aim at that and possess faith and hope in Christ, it would be bad for me indeed; but now I have some courage.¹⁶

The title of a Dutch poem (transcribed in full for inclusion in a letter toward the end

of 1876) expresses the essence of Van Gogh's thinking during this period: *Zucht tot Heiliging* ("Craving for Sanctity"). It is worth noting that, at about this time, he began sketching churches and his surroundings, often as marginalia to his letters in order to give Theo and his parents a better idea of what things were like in England.

In addition to the wealth of biblical quotation and metaphor included in the letters Van Gogh wrote between April and November of 1876, numerous references to such works as *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Of the Imitation of Christ* appear. Van Gogh's deep admiration for the writings of Christina Rossetti and Charles Spurgeon is also evident, and he was "sorry indeed" about having missed the hugely popular American evangelist D. L. Moody and his faithful songleader Ira Sankey during their visit to London from the States.¹⁷

Despite Van Gogh's intense spiritual activity and motivation, he was unable to obtain a church position while in England. A trip home to Holland in December 1876 persuaded him that there was no future for him in England. Through the influence of Theo, Vincent obtained a position as a bookshop clerk in Dordrecht—a position which he held from January until April of 1877. In May he moved to Amsterdam to begin studies toward a degree in theology. His zeal was now at its peak as he anticipated following even more closely the example set by his father as student and as pastor-teacher.

Amsterdam

ALTHOUGH VAN GOGH'S enthusiasm and joy during his time in England are apparent in the letters of this period, his removal to Amsterdam seemed to fulfill his deepest wish: to study theology and become a *bona fide* minister. According to the educational system of his day, however, a candidate for the university had to perform satisfactorily on a state-instituted preliminary examination. This necessitated preparatory studies of classical Greek and Latin (among other subjects)

for at least two years. If such studies were necessary for a younger person just finishing high school, they were all the more so for Van Gogh: it had been eight years since he had left the boarding school in Zevenbergen.

The entire family would assist Vincent in his new venture. Three uncles were living in Amsterdam at the time, and each played his part in facilitating the returning student's success in school. Uncle Jan was a widower whose children had all grown up and moved away, and so arrangements were made for Vincent to stay in his house. Uncle Stricker was a pastor with connections in the academic world, and he secured language lessons for Van Gogh with the noted scholar Mendes da Costa. Uncle Cor's art gallery would provide him with occasional diversion from the rigors of study.

Despite the family's wholehearted support of Vincent's decision to return to school, there is some indication that his parents were somewhat skeptical about their son's aptitude for the rigors of academic life. Time would confirm their suspicions. Vincent's strong will and seemingly limitless devotion to achieving his goal remained unflagging—for a little over a year. He craved practical Christian work above anything else, and (in spite of his fierce zeal and perseverance) conjugating Greek participles seemed strangely divorced from the biblical commands to love one's neighbor and to practice justice and mercy. Even his own study of the Bible appears to have suffered at the hands of his formal lessons:

I have begun to study the Bible already, but only at night when the day's work is done or early in the morning—after all, it is the principal thing—though my duty is to devote myself to the other study, which I do.¹⁸

Vincent was not ashamed to admit to Theo the difficulties he was encountering in his studies. Although there was concern and a sense of "duty" to complete the two-year preparation (he wrote of "the many watching me who will know where the fault is if I do not succeed"¹⁹), the adversity

of this period is evident in the following excerpts:

The work does not come to me so easily and quickly as I could wish . . . if I could, I should like to skip a few years. . . .²⁰

My head is sometimes heavy, and often it burns and my thoughts are confused—I don't see how I shall ever get that difficult and extensive study into it.²¹

Oh! boy, if I might pass that examination, what a blessing it would be!²²

And there are the everpresent words to Theo about one source of the motivation for Vincent's perseverance:

If I may become a clergyman and fill the position so that my work resembles that of our father, then I shall thank God.²³

How glorious it must be to have a life behind one like Pa's.²⁴

I do hope Father will be satisfied with what I have done.²⁵

Van Gogh continued to attend church services with the same regularity he had while in England, but there is little to suggest that he engaged in public speaking in Amsterdam as he had in London. References to the beauty of art and of nature abound in the letters written from Amsterdam as much as they had before, and occasional mention is also made of the author's own fledgling attempts at drawing. The impression one receives is that, for his own purposes at least, art would always be subservient to the larger goal of evangelism and church work.

Now and then . . . I instinctively make a little drawing. . . . This morning, for instance, Elijah in the desert, with the stormy sky, and in the foreground a few thorn bushes. It is nothing special, but I see it all so vividly before me, and I think that at such moments I should speak about it enthusiastically—may it be given me to do so later on.²⁶

In addition to the occasional sketch, Vincent also wrote Theo of his drawing maps of the biblical lands. He sent some of these

as gifts, noting that they were "made with feeling and love."²⁷ In the same letter he advised Theo to get an atlas to see maps that are "the work of *real* artists."²⁸

Other passages hint at his growing awareness of the relation between the artistic and the ministerial callings. One preacher, for example, struck Van Gogh as a sensitive man with an unusually aesthetic approach to homiletics:

I have heard the Reverend Mr. Laurillard three times; you would like him too, for it is as if he paints, and his work is at the same time high and noble art. He has the feelings of an artist in the true sense of the word. . . .²⁹

A later reference to Laurillard recalls his treatment of a sermon illustrated with an analogy from nature which caught Van Gogh's attention. The passage is significant in that it reveals an ability to synthesize theology, art, and literature:

. . . he said that one day every man shall be as a bird of passage, migrating to a warmer land. He treated this subject in the manner of Michelet or Rückert or the many . . . who have painted it, among others, Protais, "*Souvenirs de la patrie*."³⁰

Van Gogh's longing to practice his Christian faith outside the confines of an Amsterdam classroom finally led him to discontinue his formal preparation for the university. A firsthand account of his behavior in Amsterdam is provided by none other than his Greek and Latin tutor, Mendes da Costa. In his article entitled "Personal Memories of Vincent van Gogh during his Stay at Amsterdam,"³¹ we read that when it came to his perceived goals, Van Gogh failed to discern the spiritual utility of the Greek verb.

"Mendes," he would say, "do you seriously believe that such horrors are indispensable to a man who wants to do what I want to do: give peace to poor creatures and reconcile them to their existence here on earth?"³²

Da Costa also recalled Vincent's love of books:

John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is of much

more use to me, and Thomas à Kempis and a translation of the Bible; I don't want anything more.³³

Writing less than two years later, Van Gogh would characterize his time in Amsterdam as "miserable," "ridiculous," and "utterly foolish"—"the worst time I have ever lived through."³⁴

Brussels

THE TWO YEARS following Van Gogh's decision to leave Amsterdam were pivotal in terms of his spiritual experience and eventual decision to become an artist. In July 1878 he returned to the home of his parents in Etten for a month before entering "The Training School for Evangelists" in Brussels. This was a school not unlike modern-day Bible colleges, which still dot the conservative periphery of today's evangelical movement. Its academic requirements were less thorough than those of the State before one could receive a preaching position. The Training School, run by a Master Bokma, had a total enrollment of four students (including Van Gogh). Classes were conducted on the second floor of an old church.

Van Gogh was the oldest and most intellectually advanced of the students, but his three-month probationary period did not culminate in his hoped-for nomination to an evangelistic post. The reason for his failure this time was described by a classmate: "He did not know what submission was."³⁵ Once, during a Dutch grammar lesson when Master Bokma asked him, "Van Gogh, is this the nominative or dative?" he answered, "Oh, sir, I really don't care."³⁶

The most significant thing which did happen during Van Gogh's stay at the Training School for Evangelists was his learning of a location at which he felt he could be of some use: the Borinage mining district of southern Belgium. He had read of this area in a geography book and was moved by its description of the life of the typical miner:

For him daylight does not exist, and he sees

the sunshine only on Sunday. He works laboriously by the pale, dim light of a lamp, in a narrow tunnel, his body bent double, and sometimes he is obliged to crawl. . . .

But the Belgian miner has a happy disposition . . . and when he goes down into the shaft . . . he entrusts himself to God, Who sees his labor and protects him, his wife and his children.³⁷

Vincent wrote to Theo of his desire to minister to the Borinage miners in a letter dated November 15, 1878:

You know how one of the roots or foundations, not only of the Gospel, but of the whole Bible is "Light that rises in the darkness," *from darkness to light*. Well, who needs this most, who will be most receptive to it? Experience has shown that the people who walk in the darkness, in the center of the earth, like the miners in the black coal mines, for instance, are very much impressed by the words of the Gospel, and believe them, too.

Following the Training School's rejection in December, Van Gogh decided to enter the Borinage at his own expense, as a sort of self-supporting missionary.³⁸ During this period, he initially lived in Pâturages near Mons with a Mr. Van der Haegen, whose children he taught in exchange for his room. In the evenings he held Bible classes and visited the poor. His free time was spent drawing large maps of Palestine, which he sold to members of his father's congregation in Etten, for ten francs apiece.

In the Borinage

THE FIRST LETTER to Theo from the Borinage is typical Van Gogh. Writing to his brother, still an art dealer with Goupil's, Vincent related that "in the Borinage there are no pictures . . . [the miners] do not even know what a picture is."³⁹ The letter continues to register Van Gogh's new surroundings:

At every moment I am reminded here of the work of Thijs Maris or of Albrecht Dürer. There are sunken roads, overgrown with

thornbushes, and old, gnarled trees with their fantastic roots, which perfectly resemble that road on the etching by Dürer, "Death and the Knight."

It was an interesting sight to see the miners going home in the white snow in the evening at twilight. Those people are quite black. When they come out of the dark mines into the daylight, they look exactly like chimney sweeps.

Here blackthorn hedges surround the gardens, fields and meadows. Now, with the snow, the effect is like black characters on white paper—the pages of the Gospel.⁴⁰

Writing a few months later, Van Gogh demonstrated his ability to find beauty even in the seeming ugliness of the miners' poverty:

Around the mine are the poor miners' huts, a few dead trees black from smoke, thorn hedges, dunghills, ash dumps, heaps of useless coal, etc. Maris could make a wonderful picture of it.⁴¹

When the evangelization committee met in January 1879, a temporary nomination was granted Van Gogh to work in the Borinage village of Wasmes. He was to receive 50 francs per month in exchange for comforting the sick and giving Bible classes. All seemed well, as if an answer to his prayers. He set to work immediately with characteristic enthusiasm, and became increasingly drawn to the daily needs of the miners.

In Wasmes, Van Gogh lodged with a Mr. and Mrs. Denis, and the records indicate that the arrangement was a stressful one—particularly for Esther Denis. In his zeal to comfort the miners, Van Gogh often went to unusual lengths, at times confusing and irritating others. Once, after an explosion in one of the mines, Van Gogh proceeded to prepare bandages for the wounded made from bedsheets at the Denis household. In response to Mrs. Denis's protests, he replied, "Oh, Esther, the good Samaritan did more than that! Why not apply in life what one admires in the pages of the Bible?"⁴² On one occasion she ex-

horted Van Gogh to take a bath and to lace his shoes, to which he replied, "Don't worry about such details, there is nothing for heaven in them."⁴³

Moved with compassion at the miserable conditions most of the miners and their families were forced to endure, Van Gogh gave away his earnings and possessions—including his own clothes and bed. When relationships with the Denis family became counterproductive to the larger task of ministering in the mines, he elected to move out in favor of a pile of straw in the corner of a room in a destitute miner's shack. A perplexed (and no doubt humbled) Mrs. Denis questioned him about his decision, but Van Gogh is said to have responded, "Esther, one should do like the good God; from time to time one should go and live among His own."⁴⁴

Mr. Denis seems also to have been not a little perturbed by Van Gogh's behavior. A memoir published thirty-five years after Van Gogh's death tells of an encounter between the two men.⁴⁵ Once, as they were walking together, Denis was about to crush a caterpillar underfoot. Van Gogh is reported to have stopped him, exclaiming, "Why would you want to kill that little animal? God created it. . . ."

Van Gogh abased himself in his new surroundings, practicing self-mortification to the extent that he often went on his rounds wearing neither shirt nor socks—for he had given his own away. For others, so poor that they lacked clothing, Van Gogh made shirts out of old sackcloth. At times the more extreme forms of self-abnegation were a source of confusion to his new housemates. Since Van Gogh was descended from a family that the miners considered wealthy and noble, he was sometimes asked why he had come to live among those who had nothing. His typical response was simply, "I am a friend of the poor, like Jesus."⁴⁶

A passage in a letter provides a clue to understanding Van Gogh's rationale for leaving the exalted status of perceived nobility to minister to the miners on their own level. Describing the miners, he wrote to Theo:

... they have a nervous temperament—I do not mean weak, but very sensitive. They have an innate, deep-rooted hatred and a strong mistrust of anyone who is domineering. With miners one must have a miner's character and temperament, and no pretentious pride or mastery, or one will never get along with them or gain their confidence.⁴⁷

This principle of missionary methodology—contextualizing the Gospel in terms understood by its potential receptors—is elaborated upon in another letter to Theo. Van Gogh had preached a sermon to the miners based on Acts 16:9, “the Macedonian vision.” Concerning the man from Macedonia, Van Gogh told the miners that

... we must think of him as a laborer with lines of sorrow and suffering and fatigue in his face—without splendor or glamour, but with an immortal soul—who needed the food that does not perish, God's word. How Jesus Christ is the Master who can comfort and strengthen a man like the Macedonian—a laborer and working man whose life is hard—because He is the Great Man of Sorrows Who knows our ills, Who was called a carpenter's son though He was the Son of God Who worked for thirty years in a humble carpenter's shop to fulfill God's will. And God wills that in imitation of Christ man should live humbly and go through life not reaching for the sky, but adapting himself to the earth below, learning from the Gospel to be meek and simple of heart.⁴⁸

Toward the end of his second month of the six-month commission in the Borinage, word of Van Gogh's strict approach to Scripture reached the evangelization committee, as well as his parents. A Reverend Mr. Rochelieu paid a visit to the dilapidated little hut which had become the evangelist's home, and he was shocked at what he found. As Van Gogh's sister-in-law later expressed it, “So much zeal was too much for the Committee, and a person who neglected himself could not be an example to others.”⁴⁹ After an *ad hoc* church council meeting was convened in Wasmes, it was agreed that Van Gogh should lose his position if such eccentricities continued.

Shortly after the committee's reprimand, a severe explosion occurred in the mine. Estimates placed the toll of victims in the hundreds. Van Gogh's devotion to the injured and their families increased, to the extent that he tore up his own clothing and linen, soaking the rags in wax and olive oil for use as bandages. The miners now began to refer to him as “*l'pasteur Vincent*.”⁵⁰

Van Gogh gained a reputation among the miners for selflessly sharing their hardships and for his love of the unlovable. Anecdotes from this period illustrate the length to which he would go to practice the love of Christ and to fulfill his evangelistic calling. One story tells of an alcoholic, blaspheming miner who was badly injured as a result of an explosion. When Van Gogh entered the shack to comfort the victim, he was derided as a *mâcheux d'capelets* (literally, a “rosary chewer”), as if he were a Catholic priest. But in the end even this man was converted by Van Gogh's tenderness and love.⁵¹

The mining explosion was just one of many which finally culminated in strikes, many of them violent, for better working conditions. There is a suggestion that Van Gogh served as a peacemaker between the striking miners and the army, which had been called out to assist the local gendarmes in enforcing order. His moral influence with the men was such that this is not at all unlikely, although the image of Van Gogh as a strike organizer and union leader hinted at by some writers is doubtful.⁵²

In July 1879 the news came that the evangelization committee would not renew Van Gogh's appointment to work in the Borinage. He was considered unfit to convey the image of “churchman” to the miners and was dismissed for “*excès de zèle*.” In the meantime, typhoid fever had broken out among the miners and Van Gogh continued to busy himself among the sick and the dying. But without even the meager support provided by the committee, he had no other choice but to devise yet another plan to facilitate ex-

pression of his Christian burden.

The committee's rejection left Van Gogh in somewhat of a daze, as his disjointed correspondence from that period suggests. It is difficult to escape the impression that he had made every effort to follow the simple teachings of Jesus to the letter. Although the Reverend Van Gogh was by no means party to the committee's decision, there is some indication that his son began to be distrustful of religious authority in general—including that of his father—following the rejection. The ostracism Van Gogh received from men whom he had formerly trusted and respected was just one of many burdens he had to bear in the long process of finding his true vocation. He now faced the confusing question of what to do next. If he could not remain in the Borinage, then where would he go? And if he should not be an evangelist, then what would he do?

The days and months following the committee's rejection were the most bitter in Van Gogh's life. Disillusioned with the church of his day, yet struggling to keep some semblance of his own spiritual life intact, he drifted about in Belgium without work, without friends, without prospects—the casualty of a system preoccupied with form rather than substance, with impersonal tradition rather than human feelings. References to God, Christ, and the Bible all but disappeared from his letters, and were gradually replaced with stinging criticisms of institutional hypocrisy. In fact, the letters themselves came less and less frequently, even to "Dear Theo," whom Vincent temporarily shunned. As a result of this gap in the two brothers' correspondence, relatively little is known about this period of Van Gogh's life.

Nearly a year passed before his silence was broken with a letter to Theo containing the first definite intimations that Vincent would seriously devote himself to art. In this letter, dated July 1880, and written from the Borinage, Van Gogh wrote of problems between himself and other family members—particularly his father—but he also expressed a desire to see an "*entente cordiale*" re-established between

them. He also wrote of authors whose works had touched him deeply, most notably Dickens, Shakespeare, Victor Hugo, and Harriet Beecher Stowe.⁵³ There are also some references to the Bible and to Van Gogh's lingering faith in God. But the most revealing passage of this letter is one in which Van Gogh addressed the question of what he now planned to do with his life:

But you will ask, "What is your definite aim?" That aim becomes more definite, as the rough draft becomes a sketch, and the sketch becomes a picture—little by little, by working seriously on it, by pondering over the idea at first, over the thought that was fleeting and passing, till it gets fixed.⁵⁴

Toward the end of September 1880 Vincent, still in the environs of the Borinage, wrote to Theo again of his desire to become an artist. This time he was even more direct. After having wandered about in Belgium in a dubious psychological condition, Van Gogh had reached an impasse in his thoughts that also proved to be climactic in his development. One can sense his excitement and joy as he told his brother about what amounted to a kind of "second conversion":

In that deep misery I felt my energy revive, and I said to myself, In spite of everything I shall rise again: I will take up my pencil, which I have forsaken in my great discouragement, and I will go on with my drawing. From that moment everything has seemed transformed for me.⁵⁵

In the same letter he was to reveal that he had not totally forsaken his commitment to evangelism; it had only taken on a new medium for him, for he saw in art something capable of expressing the same sublime mystery as that of the Gospel:

In Millet, in Jules Breton, in Josef Israëls too, this precious pearl, the human soul, is even more in evidence—expressed in a nobler, worthier tone, more evangelically, if I can say it that way.⁵⁶

There is something of Rembrandt in the Gospel, or something of the Gospel in Rem-

brandt—whichever, it comes to the same.

...⁵⁷

The remaining ten years of Van Gogh's life were devoted to drawing and painting with the same intensity he had shown as a young church worker in England, which had carried him through his studies in Amsterdam and Brussels, and which had nourished him as he ministered to the outcasts in the darkest Borinage mine. The "excessive zeal" which caused him to lose his place in the ecclesiastical system that prevailed in Holland never disappeared—it was merely redirected from the theology classroom, the church pulpit, and the miners' makeshift hospital, to the drawing board, the easel, and the canvas.

Van Gogh was indeed a zealot, and perhaps more of a Christian than popular mythology has made him out to be. Did he really "fail as an evangelist," as one recent film boldly declares?⁵⁸ Or did he merely find a more appropriate context in which to express his love for the Creator? Given the enduring spiritual legacy of the artist, clearly there remains "something of the Gospel" in Vincent van Gogh to this day, inextricably bound together with the mystery of the man's genius. It is a testimony to the ferocity of Vincent van Gogh's religious zeal that, once a "direct path" to union with God was denied to him by the church of his day, he devoted himself to achieving that same union at all costs—including that of his own life.

¹*The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh* (Boston, 1958). ²For example, *inter alios*, Mark Roskill in his edition of *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh* (New York, 1963). ³Letter dated June 17, 1876. ⁴From an undated letter, a copy of which was enclosed with van Gogh's June 17, 1876 letter to Theo. ⁵*Ibid.* ⁶Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, "Memoir of Vincent van Gogh by His Sister-In-Law" (December 1913). ⁷P. C. Gorlitz, quoted in the column *Onder de mensen* ("Among People") by M. J. Brussee in a well-known Rotterdam newspaper *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, May 26 and June 2, 1914. ⁸Letter dated August 7,

1876. ⁹Letter dated November 17, 1876. ¹⁰Letter dated August 26, 1876. ¹¹The reference was to Jules Breton's studio in Courrières, in a letter dated September 24, 1880. ¹²October 3, 1876. ¹³Letter dated October 13, 1876. ¹⁴From an undated letter (#79 in *The Complete Letters*, emphasis in the original). ¹⁵Letter dated November 10, 1876. ¹⁶*Ibid.* ¹⁷Letter dated May 12, 1876. ¹⁸Letter dated May 22, 1877. ¹⁹Letter dated May 30, 1877. ²⁰Letter dated May 28, 1877. ²¹Letter dated May 30, 1877. ²²Letter dated November 25, 1877. ²³Letter dated May 31, 1877. ²⁴Letter dated September 18, 1877. ²⁵Letter dated December 9, 1877. ²⁶Letter dated June 12, 1877. ²⁷Letter dated November 19, 1877. ²⁸Emphasis in the original. ²⁹Letter dated July 9, 1877. ³⁰Letter dated September 18, 1877. ³¹Published in the leading newspaper of that city, *Het Algemeen Handelsblad* on December 2, 1910. ³²*Ibid.* ³³*Ibid.* ³⁴Letter dated August 5, 1879. It also bears mention that despite the frustration and antagonism suggested by these remarks, Da Costa and Van Gogh maintained a warm respect throughout their time together. When the time came for the two men to part, Van Gogh made a present of *De Imitatione Christi* for his teacher without any attempt to convert him from his Jewish faith. ³⁵From *Ons Tijdschrift* (*Our Magazine*), quoted in an article in an unnamed newspaper dated April 12, 1912. ³⁶From the Amsterdam newspaper *De Telegraaf*, November 24, 1927. ³⁷These passages were apparently quoted directly from the geography book by Van Gogh, in a letter to his brother dated November 15, 1878, written from Laeken, a suburb of Brussels. ³⁸The method was thoroughly biblical, after the pattern set by Saint Paul in Corinthians: See *The Acts of the Apostles* xviii. 3; cf. xx. 34-35; *The First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* iv. 12; ix. 6, 18. ³⁹Letter dated December 26, 1878. ⁴⁰*Ibid.* ⁴¹Letter dated April 1879. ⁴²From a personal correspondence, dated c. January 1947, between the nephew of Vincent van Gogh and a P. Driutte (an apparent descendant of a friend of the Denises). ⁴³*Ibid.* ⁴⁴*Ibid.* ⁴⁵From the popular weekly *Groene Amsterdammer*, September 19, 1925. ⁴⁶Louis Piérard, *La vie tragique de Vincent van Gogh* (Paris, 1939). ⁴⁷Letter dated April 1879. ⁴⁸Letter dated December 26, 1878. ⁴⁹Van Gogh-Bonger, *op. cit.* ⁵⁰According to the twenty-third report of the Synodal Board of Evangelization, 1879-80 (under the chapter "Wasmes," the area of Belgium in which Van Gogh had lived). ⁵¹Piérard, *op. cit.* ⁵²Louis Piérard implies as much in a letter to Van Gogh's nephew dated October 8, 1951. ⁵³Van Gogh was particularly moved by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). ⁵⁴Letter dated July 1880. ⁵⁵Letter dated September 24, 1880. ⁵⁶*Ibid.* ⁵⁷Letter dated July 1880 (*op. cit.*). ⁵⁸Paul Cox's *Vincent* (Australia/Holland, 1987).