

Reflections of an American Tourist

by Joel McClure

I was about halfway down the main aisle in St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City when I was struck by the realization. This magnificent structure appeared to me more museum than church. I looked around and saw the crowds of people, some pilgrims, some tourists. I saw the flashes of cameras. I saw the tour guides explaining that so and so spent 12 years carving such and such. And suddenly a terrifying thought crossed my mind: will our American churches become museums like this one? Places to be admired for their historical value or for their ability to stir up feelings of nostalgia within us?

Maybe it was just that I was a tourist myself, but it seemed that many of the great churches I saw were drawing people in to see the great works of art they housed rather than to hear the great message of hope in Jesus Christ.

And I wondered, "Will that happen to our churches? Is it already happening?"

I would like to share three reflections on the future of the church in a post-conservative, post-liberal, Post-Toasties™, postmodern America. They are reflections based on my brief travels in three European countries.

Reflection #1: Masterpieces crafted for the glory of God can themselves become idols.

There it stood, the towering altar that commanded the attention of the crowd of tourists who wandered through the sanctuary of St. Peter's Basilica. Three stories high, this fantastic altar of pure bronze was where the Popes have presided over the mass since the middle ages. Like many, if not all, of the masterpieces within this breath-taking building, this imposing altar was created to give people a sense of the glory and majesty of God.

The irony is now its stands as a monument to outstanding craftsmanship. People are rarely now drawn to contemplate the glory of God, but rather they think, "Man, I wonder how long it took them to make that?" or "Wow, I wonder how much that thing weighs?" or "Isn't that a magnificent example of baroque sculpture?"

As I later stared at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, I found myself not in awe of the God who is depicted in the paintings, but in awe of the skill of Michelangelo. The colors, the form, the sheer mass of the paintings—amazing!

And all along the winding corridors of the Vatican museum you can buy books that describe just how amazing his paintings are. But not once did I ever recall hearing anyone speak about the amazing story of creation and redemption that Michelangelo depicted across the ceiling and down the walls.

So I wonder, *could it happen here? Has it happened here?* In one respect it cannot happen here because most of our churches lack the artistic genius found in those ancient basilicas and chapels. We lack the masterpieces that could be worshipped as priceless works of art. But we have made things objects of worship.

In our churches, we have worshipped particular translations of the Bible. We have worshipped certain hymns, or even the hymnals themselves. We have worshipped styles of worship. We have worshipped styles of clothing. We have worshipped all kinds of things that are more about aesthetics than they are about God.

No, we do not have white-marble statues of Peter carrying his cross, but we do have our King James Versions, our New International Versions (but not the scandalous TNIV!). We don't have Michelangelo's painting of Creation, but we do have suits and ties and Sunday dresses.

I don't want you to think that I am suggesting these things are outdated and should be thrown out. I am not saying that they are bad. Some churches are throwing out their organs because they think they are outdated. I like the organ, to tell you the truth. I appreciate the skill and artistry of master organists. But I don't worship the organ. Nor do I worship the piano or the keyboard. I don't worship the guitar or drums, or even the saxophone (although the Church could use a little Coltrane!). I worship God, and all these things may serve to *help* me do that.

I like hymns, at least the good ones. I like the new hymns and choruses, but I don't worship them. I worship God. I like theater seats. I like comfortable pews. I like comfortable folding chairs. But I don't worship any one of them. I worship God.

I like old church buildings. I like stained-glass windows. I like brand new church buildings. I like huge auditoriums where crowds of us can get together and worship. I like little chapels where you can know everyone by name. But I don't worship church buildings—new or old. I worship God.

It is important that we remember that we must worship God, not the things that are supposed to direct us to Him. What does that mean? That means we must hold onto God, not hymns, not guitars, not buildings...not liturgies, not spontaneity, not boomer, not buster, not netgen, not any-gen.

We must be flexible. When we keep in mind that it is God that we worship, our focus changes from what we are comfortable with to what is effective in helping others encounter God. Our mission is not a mission to our ancestors...it is a mission to this generation and the ones to follow. Our mission field is not in the cemeteries, but in our homes, schools, jobs, and the places we meet people who live in the world today.

Reflection #2: Jesus did not tell his disciples he would make them architects of buildings, but fishers of men.

The church buildings I saw in Europe were magnificent. I saw a lot of beautiful cathedrals and basilicas. What I did not see were a lot of disciples. I did not see a culture that had been marked by the presence of the Holy Spirit. I did not see a culture that was being shaped by the followers of Jesus (might I add that my European friends would be justified in saying the same of America—except the bit about church buildings).

What I did see were church buildings that spoke of the greatness of its architects and artisans. But as I said earlier, they are more museums than luminous communities of children of Light.

This statement gets at the heart of what we are about as a church. What did Jesus set out as our purpose? Did Jesus say, "Therefore, go and make great buildings and wear nice clothes on Sunday and compose great hymns, singing them in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"? No! Our mission is to make disciples. It is to share the good news of Jesus about the present and impending availability of the kingdom of God.

What we do and how we do it is not about making *me* comfortable. It is about delivering the message of the gospel to people in a way they can understand it (which makes me wonder if we even understand it).

We must renew our sense of mission as the community of people who follow Jesus. Our mission is to tell people about the availability of God's kingdom and make the kingdom of God a reality in

our lives and in the lives of this generation and the next. Jesus did not call us to be his disciples so that we could “play church” once a week or even twice a week. He did not call us to “follow” him so we could carve our names on brass memorials and build monuments to each other. He called us to a changed life—a kingdom life—and he called us to bring others into that kingdom life too. He called us to a changed world.

So often we invest all our time in temporary things. They may be great, like the paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, but they are temporary. How much time have we wasted on temporary things when we could have been investing in people’s lives?

Man, that is a question that haunts me quite often. I look at my life and ask, “How did I invest my life today in things that are going to make a difference in someone’s life? Did I waste my time on selfish, temporary things? Did I choose to invest my time building sandcastles instead of building spiritual friendships with people?”

We have to ask that same question. How much of what we do is fulfilling our primary calling? Do we do this program or that event just because we always have, or because it is in some way helping to bring people into the kingdom and the kingdom into people?

It takes a courageous church and courageous Christians to ask those questions. Because the answers might mean that some remodeling must be done so that we can be more faithful to our calling. We may need to change our vocabulary so the world can hear and understand our unchanging message of God’s grace through Jesus.

Reflection #3: Latin may be a beautiful language, but it is also a dead one.

For the church to have an impact on our culture, we must be able to speak to our culture. We must become missionaries in our own neighborhoods.

We live in a culture that speaks a different language than us. Their values are different; their perception of reality is different. So we must begin to see ourselves as missionaries to our own neighbors. We must translate the gospel in ways that make sense to the people we work with, the people we meet at the laundromat, and at the grocery store. We have to be able to tell the gospel story in ways that make sense. That means that we must understand it enough to be able to translate it into the language we use outside the sanctuary. We then have to speak about the *significance* of that story in our lives.

The gospel story does not answer every little question about life. What it does is it tells us about God and His relationship with the world that He has made, and with human beings in particular. We must tell this story in language that draws people to God and enable them to relate to Him as their Creator and Redeemer. We must make the distinction between the never-changing message and the ever-changing methods of delivery.

We cannot speak to a 21st century culture in language from the 17th century, or the 18th or 19th or even language from a large part of the 20th century!

I would like to finish this by quoting a paragraph from Trevor Hart’s book, “Faith Thinking”. He writes:

“So the church must meet the challenge of an ever-changing present by responding with new ways of expressing its message to the constantly revised account of the world offered by the contemporary worldview, by answering today’s questions and concerns, rather than resting content with the answers which it gave to yesterday’s. Unless Christians face this challenge squarely, they fail in the missionary task just as surely as if,

traveling in some far-off land, they had not bothered to learn to speak the language or to understand the ways of its inhabitants. The result will be the isolation of a self-imposed irrelevance. If, rather than facing up to the task of extending God's story into the present, we seek constantly to dwell in some previous chapter of it, we should not be surprised when we are either ignored or not taken seriously by those who find our approach quaintly anachronistic. If we persist in such nostalgic inertia, we shall rapidly become a mere tourist attraction, a side stall in the fragmented freak show of contemporary pluralism, more pathetic than prophetic in the face of the needs and worries of our fellow human travelers through time."¹

Will your First Christian Church or your Second Lutheran Church or your Third Assembly of God be like the museum-cathedrals of Europe in 10, 20, 50 years? It is a very real possibility. It is up to us to stand up, wide-eyed (and wild-eyed?), and reach out in fresh ways and words to share the story of Jesus to the world around us.

Jesus spoke, through the pen of John, to the church in Sardis these words of warning: "...I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you" (Rev 3:1-3, NIV).

May the Spirit of Jesus guide us and bring fresh fire into the churches on both sides of the Atlantic.

¹ Hart, Trevor, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology*, (InterVarsity Press: 1995), p. 188.

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