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Ugly Churches

By Wesley Trobaugh



Is it a gym? Is it a hangar? No! It's superchurch!

Most denominations of Christianity are experiencing a rapid decrease in members or at least in people willing to attend church services on a regular basis. The most important problem posed by this lack of attendance is a near-empty offering basket¹.

Priests, bishops, deacons and parsons, ministers, pastors, presbyters and Popes are all trying to figure out why people don't believe or even if they do believe, why they don't participate in the institution we know as Church. Some say it's because of social issues, some say it's because of humanism. Obviously, this must be true. However, I think there is also another very simple, very important reason: ugly churches.

Look at the temples of yesteryear². Even in the early 20th century architects and builders seemed capable of making buildings that at least appeared to glorify God. That idea went to hell in a handbasket³ in the 1950's and 60's when

suddenly function came before form. Major Protestant denominations were especially good at this. Get them in and out in about an hour's time. A church needed to serve a purpose: to fit a bunch⁴ of people in a big room and pray. The result of this was churches that, pews⁵ removed, could serve as a basketball court. I have been in churches that were one cement block short of being a warehouse⁶.

Go into the cathedral of Seville, Burgos, León or Barcelona. Or try "Los Jerónimos" in Madrid. Tell me what you feel. Then go into, say, "La Parroquia Espiritu Santo de Ibaeta" in San Sebastián. It is right near our office. I went to a funeral there once and wondered if under the floor there might be a swimming pool. This church is a big box which is completely uninspiring. The walls are painted white and the columns and structure are painted fireman red.

Fireman red does not inspire a belief in God or anything for that matter. Gyms don't create in us a sense of awe⁷ and spirituality. Shopping centres don't enlighten our souls. Even the most agnostic of us all are struck by a sensation of peace and wonder when we see what humans were capable of creating, inspired by their Maker. But when God's house becomes a mere functionality, it is no longer interesting. If God created The Grand Canyon, Mount Everest and Victoria Falls, why would he want to have an earthly chalet that looks like a bunker? Imagine a Vatican City that is nothing more than an industrial park. Imagine a Notre Dame de Paris in the style of a Corte Inglés. It just doesn't work.

Maybe before they build more ugly churches, the religions of the world should put some thought into it and give us a reason to be inspired. After all, Christianity wasn't built in a day but it could crumble⁸ away in a second.

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¹ Offering basket: ofrenda, colecta

² yesteryear: antaño

³ go to hell in a handbasket: disappear (in a bad way)

⁴ a bunch: a lot

⁵ pews: bancos (de una iglesia)

⁶ warehouse: almacén

⁷ awe: impresión

⁸ crumble: fall apart (deshacerse)