

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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More intriguing books

I keep coming across interesting books that present thought-provoking observations about today's church and world, so I'm devoting this issue of *Connections* to some more of them.



One of them surprised me, because it's by an author I was familiar with but hadn't realized was a progressive Christian activist. Rick Steves is well known for his travel guidebooks and his travel programs on PBS TV, but his latest book is far from being a typical guidebook or travelogue.

An impassioned plea to Americans



Steves is a lifelong Lutheran who is active in a congregation in the Seattle area, where he lives and has his business headquarters. His *Travel as a Political Act* (Nation Books, 2009) is essentially a spiritual autobiography as well as an inspiring, impassioned plea to Americans to open their eyes, minds, and hearts and actively promote justice.

Whether or not you expect to do any foreign travel, you're likely to enjoy and gain from reading this book. It's the only book I know that gives reliable, easy-to-read information and discussion about liberation theology, economic-justice issues, Islam, how empire shows up in today's world, and related topics, yet also has beautiful color photos on almost every page.

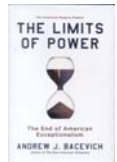


Going beyond our comfort zones

Rick Steves urges Americans to go deliberately beyond their mental, emotional, cultural, and religious comfort zones by becoming aware of the daily lives and concerns of people outside the U.S. and outside their home settings within the U.S. His book

Looking at ourselves and our nation

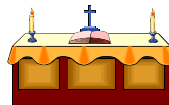
Andrew J. Bacevich, a retired U.S. Army colonel, is a professor of history and international relations at Boston University. In his challenging book *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (Henry Holt, 2008), he asks us to look more realistically at ourselves and our nation.



Bacevich sees the U.S. threatened by three interlocking crises. One is economic and cultural, one is political, and one is military. In his view, they are all of our own making and we lack the humility necessary to recognize that. "Hubris and sanctimony have become the paramount expressions of American statecraft," Bacevich believes. We see American values and beliefs as universal, and we believe that our nation serves providentially assigned purposes.

The altar at which Americans worship?

"Freedom is the altar at which Americans worship, whatever their nominal religious persuasion," Bacevich observes. Consequently, in our public discourse the very mention of freedom is enough to stifle doubt and terminate all debate.



We once saw empire as the opposite of freedom, he finds, but now it has become a requirement of freedom. Yet we can no longer generate the power necessary to establish and maintain an imperial order.

Bacevich sees our heedless worship of freedom as a mixed blessing. "In our pursuit of freedom," he writes, "we have accrued obligations and piled up debts that we are increasingly hard-pressed to meet." And the kind of freedom that we worship, in Bacevich's view, is largely self-indulgence and consumption. Our appetites and expectations have grown beyond the capacity of our economy to satisfy, yet we feel entitled to have them satisfied and we expect the world to accommodate our way of life, Bacevich observes.

Bacevich doesn't write from a religious standpoint, but he's saying things Christians need to consider. Jesus actively opposed both empire and self-indulgence. Doesn't that mean his followers also should?



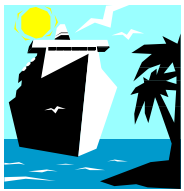
is also a plea to readers to speak boldly in their home churches and communities, about what they discover from taking broader looks at the world.

Billions of lovable children of God

Steves says his first overseas trip was when he was fourteen and went with his parents to see relatives in Norway. Seeing countless other parents and their children in Oslo's giant Frogner Park opened his eyes to much more than the park's spectacular sculptures. "Right there," he tells us, "my fourteen-year-old egocentric worldview took a huge hit. I thought, 'Wow, those parents love their kids as much as my parents love me. This place is home to billions of equally lovable children of God.' I've carried that understanding with me in my travels ever since."



As an idealistic young adult, Rick Steves struggled with what he would do with his life. He was attracted by travel, but he had misgivings about



making it his life's focus. "I wondered if it was really noble to teach wealthy Americans to travel," he explains. "As a child, my earliest image of 'travel' was of rich Americans on fancy white cruise ships in the Caribbean, throwing coins off the deck so they could photograph what they called the 'little dark kids' jumping in after them. They'd take these photos home as souvenirs of their relative affluence. This was not the kind of travel I wanted to promote."

Travel that wallops self-assuredness

"Even today," he finds, "remnants of that notion of travel persist. I believe that for many Americans, traveling still means seeing if you can eat five meals a day and still snorkel when you get into port." Steves isn't condemning cruise vacations, he says. "I'm simply saying I don't consider that activity 'travel.' It's hedonism." He finds that such trips tend to accentuate the difference between "us" and "them," and he believes travel should bring people together instead.

In Steves's view, "We travel to have enlightening experiences, to meet inspirational people, to be stimulated,



to learn, and to grow. Travel has taught me the fun in having my cultural furniture rearranged and my ethnocentric self-assuredness walloped. It has humbled me, enriched my life, and tuned me in to a rapidly changing world."

The difference between the hedonistic kind of travel Steves criticizes and the kind that rearranges our cultural furniture in helpful ways depends largely on our approach to what we see. "Watching a dervish whirl can be a cruise-ship entertainment option or a spiritual awakening," Steves finds. He tells about a whirling dervish (a follower of Rumi, an



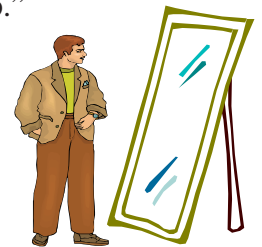
Islamic mystic poet and philosopher of divine love) who let him observe his prayer ritual on a rooftop in Turkey. "I saw a conduit of love acknowledging the greatness of God," Steves tells us. "This man was so different from me, yet actually very much the same. This chance interaction left me with a renewed appreciation of the rich diversity of humanity as well as its fundamental oneness."

The ultimate souvenir

"Experiences like this one can be any trip's most treasured souvenir," Rick Steves finds. He finds, in fact, that a broader outlook is the ultimate souvenir. With it, "when we return home, we can put what we've learned—our newly acquired broader perspective—to work as citizens of a great nation confronted with unprecedented challenges."

"I enjoy learning about my society by observing other societies and challenging myself (and my neighbors) to be broad-minded when it comes to international issues," Steves writes. "Holding our country to a high standard and searching for ways to better live up to its lofty ideals is not 'America-bashing.' It's good citizenship."

He finds that travel helps him come home and look more honestly into the mirror and become involved in helping our society confront its challenges more wisely.



People see different truths as self-evident

"Travel," Rick Steves points out, "challenges truths that we were raised thinking were self-evident

and God-given. Leaving home, we learn other people find different truths to be self-evident.” When he travels, Steves often sees such differences, especially in religious beliefs and practices. “The U.S. may be a Christian nation, but we’re certainly not *the* Christian nation. As a Lutheran, I was surprised to learn that there are more Lutherans in Namibia than in the U.S. Even though they wouldn’t know what to do with the standard American ‘green hymnal’ and don’t bring Jell-O molds to their church picnics, they’re as Lutheran as I am. They practice the same faith through a different cultural lens.”



Hometown blinders get wedged open

Travel beyond the Christian world, Steves finds, “offers us invaluable opportunities to be exposed to other, sometimes uncomfortable perspectives.” About his stay in Iran to make a PBS documentary film, he says, “I come away from experiences like this not suddenly convinced of an opposing viewpoint but with a creeping discomfort about my confidence in the way I’ve always viewed the world. Whether reading the Bible through the eyes of Christians from other cultures, or having your hometown blinders wedged open by looking at another religion in a new way, travel can be a powerfully spiritual experience.”



A trip that lit a fire

Even exploring a continent with a level of affluence similar to ours can be helpful, if we go with our eyes and minds open. It gives us a chance to see firsthand the result of allocating resources with priorities different from ours. However, Rick Steves has found that his main life-changing trips have been to countries that don’t have affluence like ours.

“Back before my first trip to Central America in 1988,” he writes, “I specifically forbade my heart to get caught up in economic justice issues south of our border. There was just too much pulling at me. ... I just didn’t have the energy to sort it out, and I didn’t need it in my life.” But then, he tells us, “that first trip lit a fire in me.”



He realized that he had the right, if not the responsibility, to form his opinions based on his own observations, even it went against the mainstream at home. He came home, published his trip journal, and hand-delivered copies to the office of each member of Congress. “Deep down,” he says, “I knew that my efforts would likely end up in congressional recycling bins, but I needed to do it. And doing it felt good. That little mission marked the start of the time when my travels became more than just recreation.”

We can travel mentally

Steves reminds us that even if we don’t physically travel outside our own country, mentally going outside of it by getting news from elsewhere and considering views different from our own is essential. “Seek out balanced journalism,” he urges. “Assume commercial news is entertainment. ... Read a progressive alternative source. ... Find ways to translate your new global passions to local needs. ... Put your money where your ideals are.”

Steves urges us especially to speak up and to stand in solidarity with courageous leaders when we get home from our travels or get new insight in other ways. “Having traveled in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” he reports, “where religion and government are thor-

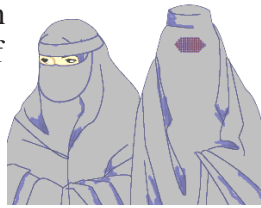


This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I’ve written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 16 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

oughly interwoven, I've seen the troubling consequences of mixing mosque or church and state. In my church, some want the American flag right up there in front, while others in my community would like to hang the Ten Commandments in our city hall. Because I care for both my church and my state, I work to keep my church free of flags and my city hall free of religious commandments. ... Travel becomes a political act only if you actually do something with your broadened perspective once you return home."



Share, expect more, don't hold back

"Share lessons, expect more from your friends, and don't be afraid to ruin dinners by bringing up uncomfortable realities," Rick Steves advises us. "Get involved. ... Reach and preach beyond the choir. Don't hold back in places where progressive thinking may seem unwelcome."

That's good advice for all of us, not only with regard to travel but also with regard to seeking and acting on new insights from other sources. New insight is available even at home, and making use of it there is especially important.

Barbara

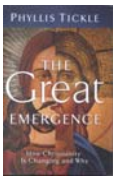


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More intriguing books

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In her book *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (BakerBooks, 2008), Phyllis Tickle points out that "holy rummage sales" have happened about every five hundred years throughout Christian history. Tickle, a lay minister in the Episcopal Church and the founding editor of the Religion Department of *Publishers Weekly*, believes we're in one of those times now. However, she doesn't see such disruptive times as necessarily bad. "No standing form of organized Christian faith has ever been destroyed by one of our semi-millennial eruptions," Tickle observes. In fact, "when an overly institutionalized form of Christianity is, or ever has been, battered into pieces and opened to the air of the world around it, that faith-form has both itself spread and also enabled the spread of the young upstart that afflicted it."

Phyllis Tickle reminds us that "in each of our five-hundred-year hinge times more than religion has been in turmoil," and there's a good reason for this. "Religion is a social construct as well as an individual or private way of being and understanding. In its public or corporate role, any established or organized religion is the soul of the culture or society that, in turn, is the body in which and through which religion acts." Tickle looks at the non-personal aspects of religion as a kind of cable of meaning that keeps the human social unit connected to some purpose and/or power greater than itself. Spirituality, corporeality, and morality are strands of this cable. Her fascinating book describes how these strands have appeared and changed during Christian history, and what their current forms may mean for us. I believe every Christian could grow personally and also help our world by considering Tickle's descriptions and conclusions.