

It can be shocking to discover that Jesus said little about the church during his ministry. Only two verses in all the gospels mention the word 'church': Matthew 16:18 and 18:17. Of course, Jesus loves the church. She is his bride. However, central to his ministry was the kingdom of God, mentioned in over 100 gospel verses. God's kingdom is where his will is being done. He wants his will to be done on earth, in Europe, in every life sphere.

A transformed Europe will begin with transformed disciples, a transformed body of Christ.

## 6. Look again

Short memories breed short-sightedness and rob us of vision. To have faith for God's future purposes, we need to understand how God has been active throughout history, especially working through faithful minorities.

Let us take another look at Europe—this time to see what God is doing. 'Wheat and tares' will always grow up together. We should focus on the 'wheat' and look for signs of hope, faith, and vision among the ruins:

- Recent shakings of God in the Marxist world, the Muslim world, and the world of mammon are signs of his active participation in human affairs.
- Renewed spiritual hunger; new stirrings of prayer; fresh expressions of church; migrant churches restoring faith, colour, and boldness in our cities; new ecumenism of the heart between ancient traditions; and a recovery of awareness of the gospel as trans-forming all spheres of life are signs of hope in our continent today.

## 7. Look up

Our hope is not based on circumstances or trends. It is grounded on God's person and promises. The Christian faith is all about death and resurrection. It is a story of apostasy and renewal, over and over again. As people of hope, pregnant with God's future, we look expectantly past today's crises to see how the Lord of history will fulfill his purposes for Europe and the wider world.

No, God is not finished with Europe yet!

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# EUROPE

## A most strategic mission field

JEFF FOUNTAIN



EUROPE, THE NURSERY OF WORLD CHRISTIANITY, HAS ITSELF BECOME A MOST CHALLENGING AND STRATEGIC MISSION FIELD.

Already late last century, English missiologist Lesslie Newbigin signalled this development when he compared the difference between the pre-Christian pagan and the post-Christian pagan to that between a virgin and a divorcee. What hope is there then for the continent that has been fundamentally shaped by the gospel, but paradoxically, also by its rejection?

Europe, the most Christianised of all continents, has also exported atheism, rationalism, humanism, secularism, existentialism, communism, and plain ‘unbelief’ to the far corners of the world:

- If Europeans do not return to the life source which shaped their culture and society, the Bible, they will continue to spread ‘unbelief’ in various forms globally.
- Twice as many majority world students study in Europe than in America, for example. Many return home as ‘unbelievers’ to become lecturers, politicians, business leaders, and shapers of their own society.

How then should we view Europe today? We evangelicals have often developed blind spots, distorting our vision of Europe, for various reasons. To correct these distortions we need to look in seven directions.

### 1. Look back

Christians should be aware of how the Bible and the story of Jesus have been the most influential shapers of Europe’s past:

- Arch-atheist Richard Dawkins says we cannot understand European history without the Bible and Christianity.
- However, many evangelicals seem to believe God went on vacation from the time of Paul until Luther.
- Yet in reality, many lights came on during the so-called ‘Dark Ages’ as people groups, from Armenia to Ireland, embraced the gospel.

The Bible profoundly shaped European art and music, marriage and family, language and literature, business and economics, education and scholarship, healthcare and hospitality, science and technology, law

and justice, politics and democracy, and much more.

More recently, the vision for Europe as ‘a community of peoples deeply rooted in Christian values’, shared by Robert Schuman (France), Konrad Adenauer (West Germany), and Alcide de Gaspari (Italy), midwifed the birth of what has become the European Union. Yet we evangelicals have too often watched critically from the sidelines as Catholics fought to embed biblical values, including *solidarity* and *subsidiarity*, into EU thinking against secularist influences in the European arena

### 2. Look beyond

We also need wide-angle-lens vision to view Europe beyond our nationalistic and denominationalist perspectives:

- Catholics were always conscious of being part of a pan-European communion.
- Then the Protestant Reformation produced *landeskirchen* or territorial churches, and fostered nationalistic perspectives: the Church of England, the Church of Scotland, the Dutch Reformed Church, and the Lutheran Church as state church in Germany and Scandinavia, for example.
- Later, evangelical ‘free’ churches focused even more narrowly on the local church.
- Perhaps we can say it this way: ‘Catholics see woods; Protestants see trees; Evangelicals see branches.’

Mostly we train our evangelical leadership to think local: ‘Christian leadership’ means pastoring a local church. However, where are the Christian training programmes equipping potential leaders for engagement in politics, economics, and all other spheres of life?

Or offering European studies from a Christian perspective?

Europe has hardly been on the radar for evangelicals. Instead of embracing our responsibility to help shape Europe’s future, recognising the roles Joseph, Nehemiah, Esther, and Daniel played in transforming pagan regimes, we have sometimes started with negative, disengaged attitudes influenced by popular eschatologies assuming God has planned for Europe to become increasingly apostate.

Yet surely the Lord’s Prayer teaches that it is always God’s will for his kingdom to come, his will to be done on earth, in Europe, as it is in heaven? Is it ever God’s will for his will *not* to be done in Europe?

### 3. Look forward

If the story of Jesus was the most influential shaper of Europe’s past, why should that not also be true of the future? We should ask ourselves: ‘What sort of Europe would please God?’ What vision for the future of Europe is preached in our churches, directly or indirectly? *Without a vision the people perish* (Prov 29:18). Is this why our churches in Europe seem to be perishing?

During the Second World War, Robert Schuman went underground in France after escaping from Nazi imprisonment and began praying and planning how to rebuild Europe on Christian foundations. Surely that should be our quest today:

- No one wants to turn back the clock to ‘Christendom’ when the church dominated both government and society.
- However, we can pray and work towards a Europe based on Christian values of forgiveness, reconciliation, solidarity, justice, faithful relationships, and creation stewardship.

Many questions hang over the future of the European Union. Schuman warned that the project could not remain merely economic or technocratic. It needed a soul. As the debate heats up, what vision for Europe’s future will we bring to the table?

### 4. Look around

Europe today is experiencing serious crises in economics, politics, society, religion, and the environment:

- Unemployment in Spain and Greece is as high as in America during the depression.
- Crisis has become the new norm for Europe. It will be with us for a long time.

It should reshape the missions agenda of the European churches, for these challenges also present boundless opportunities for believers to respond with care and com-passion. The soft powers of love, truth, and justice won the early church credibility and respect, and eventually conquered the Roman Empire. They could win credibility for the church again.

### 5. Look within

If we are really honest, the most challenging Europeans of all are ourselves: average Christians! Like rabbits caught in the headlamps of secularism, we often feel intimidated, immobilised, and unable to articulate our faith in the public square. Our short memories of what God has done in the past in Europe rob us of vision for the future. Our lives are often church-centred rather than kingdom-centred, as we seek the comfort zone of fellowship with like-minded believers.