

# From Mission to Church: The Reformed Church in America

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I have served, loved and struggled with the church for my entire life. She is near and dear to my heart. Much of my writing is for the church or about the church, and my forthcoming book [Uncomfortable](#) (Crossway, 2017) is a love letter to and for the church in all her awkward, painful, challenging glory. On Sunday I will be installed as an elder in my local church, [Southlands](#). As I've reflected on this new responsibility of guarding the flock and caring for the church of God (Acts 20:28), I've been thinking about the particular challenges facing the 21st century church. And there are many. The following 21 are in no particular order and are by no means exhaustive, and they are largely (but not exclusively) reflective of an American evangelical context. I also should note that each of them represents not only a challenge but also an opportunity. The church has historically thrived when she is tested rather than comfortable.

As I soberly take on this new role in my local church I pray that God grants me and my fellow elders the wisdom to navigate these challenges with humility, faith and fortitude.

**1) Biblical Illiteracy.** Biblical literacy is a huge problem in the American church, and it makes many of the challenges on this list all the more challenging. Quite simply, people in churches (and even moreso those not in churches) may pay lip service to the importance of the Bible, but by and large they do not read it or know it. Surveys [have found](#) that 82 percent of Americans think "God helps those who help themselves," is a Bible verse. 12 percent think Joan of Arc was Noah's wife. 50 percent of graduating high school students think Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife. It's embarrassing, and there is much work to do.

**2) Presence.** Christians ought to be people of *presence*, connected to God and to one another through the inhabiting, unifying power of the Holy Spirit. But the 21st century world busies our lives and distracts us so that every moment pulls us away from presence. The church must reprioritize its vocation as *presenters of God's presence in the world*, and to do so we must cultivate habits and liturgies that create the space and contours for that presence to be felt and known.

**3) Disembodied Tendencies.** The trajectory of technology is away from incarnational presence and toward disembodied experience. We increasingly live our lives via screens, streams, apps, phones. Our relationships are digital. This exacerbates existing Gnostic tendencies (a cerebral rather than embodied faith) and subtly deemphasizes the crucial physicality of the church, the “body of Christ” in the material and not just theoretical sense. Churches should find ways to encourage physical gatherings, the practice of the Lord's Supper, meals together in neighborhoods, bodily movement in worship, shaking hands and hugging each other, whatever it takes! Anything to re-sensitize people to the fleshly reality of the church in the world.

**4) Compartmentalization.** We live our mediated lives via windows and boxes. We chat with multiple people at a time, post one fragment of our lives here and another there, consume visual media in one window and read the Bible in another. All of this makes it easier to fracture our lived experience into disconnected compartments, a process that wreaks havoc on our spiritual formation. Integrity is wholeness (integer = whole number), all parts of our lives integrated and reflective of the Lordship of Christ. Churches today must work extra hard to cultivate this.

**5) Boredom.** We are an antsy culture. Everything is fast-paced and harried; we can hardly remember which Netflix show we loved last month or which restaurant was the rage last year. We have short attention spans and get bored easily, and this poses a huge challenge to the church. The values of routine, tradition and stability that define the church are distasteful in our fidgety age. Churches are naturally tempted to use gimmicks and trendiness to solve this problem, but this is ill- advised. The tricky task of the church in the 21st century is to lead people to awe, wonder and worship without watering things down or constantly reinventing the wheel.

**6) Temptation to Reinvent the Wheel.** The boredom challenge leads to this challenge, to “rethink” church every couple years. The problem is endemic in American evangelicalism. It is exhausting to read the scores of books that come out every year that provide a new paradigm or prescription for a revived church. One is tempted to just become Catholic so as to avoid the nauseous glut of “The church must become\_ to survive” blog posts and book rants. In this sense I think the evangelical church should become a bit more Catholic, trusting a bit more in continuity rather than seeing every cultural change as an invitation to reinvent the wheel.

**7) Complexity.** Related to our temptation to reinvent the wheel is the temptation to complicate Christianity and church life. We see this in the 345 definitive “definitions” of the gospel that various authors and theologians set forth every year. We see it in the enormous staffs and array of programs that turn churches into bureaucratically complex corporations. Complexity is cumbersome. It impairs mission. Especially at a time when faithful churches will be increasingly exiled from mainstream culture, we need to become leaner and more nimble. We need to rediscover the beauty of simplicity, focusing on the core practices and historic sacraments of the church. The more complicated we make the church, the less countercultural she is.

**8) Consumer Christians.** The ubiquity of consumerism in late capitalism has fully infiltrated the church, to the extent that “church shopping” and “what I got from the sermon” are things we say without thinking anything of it. People go to Sunday services to “get something.” They choose churches that “fit them” and match their checklist of preferences, just as one would choose a car or a new pair of jeans. But churches must challenge rather than cater to this mentality. Church is a place where members of a body come together for purposes beyond themselves. It’s an invitation to join Christ in what he is already doing in the world, not an invitation for Christ to affirm our self-actualization.

**9) The Temptation to Homogeneity.** The consumerism of contemporary Christianity has unsurprisingly led to churches that are more homogeneous than ever. When we go to churches that fit us (how we look, talk and worship) we will naturally be surrounded by people who look, talk and worship just like us. But homogeneity is not the biblical ideal. The power of the gospel is that of unifying diverse groups of people, breaking down the walls of hostility that naturally divide us (race, class, culture, gender, music preference, whatever). At a time when social media allows us to curate feeds and surround ourselves with people who agree with us and confirm our biases, this work becomes even more difficult.

**10) The “Authenticity = Brokenness” Fallacy.** I wrote about this [a few years ago](#) and still believe it’s one of the biggest challenges currently facing the church. At the heart of it is an unbelief in change and a weak theology of sanctification, a problem that leads to claims of “this is just who I am” essentialism and immutability. Aren’t we a people of resurrection and hope? Isn’t the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead within us now? Our anemic belief in change is coupled with a fetishizing of brokenness, and it’s a toxic combination. Many Christians today are quite simply more compelled by sin (though we call it “brokenness”) than we are with holiness, and that is a significant problem the church must address.

**11) The Idol of Autonomy.** Little poses a bigger threat to the church in 21st century western culture than the pervasive mindset that individual people are the sole arbiters of their identity, morality and destiny. The “be and do whatever feels right to you” philosophy of expressive individualism is fundamentally at odds with Christianity, which calls us to bow to the lordship of Christ. Churches must counter this and disciple people to submit their convictions about themselves, however sincere and authentic they may be, to the authority of Jesus Christ as revealed to us in Scripture.

**12) Aversion to Commitment.** We live in a culture that is commitment averse. Millennials are the FOMO (“fear of missing out”) generation, preferring to keep options open rather than committing to something or someone and foreclosing other possibilities. We are the generation that has rendered RSVP-based party planning a futile endeavor. We are the generation that is opting to own homes at a far lower rate than previous generations did. 91% of us expect to stay in a job less than 3 years. We are far less likely to be affiliated with a religion or a political party than previous generations were, and we get married at lower rates and later in life than our parents and grandparents did. Naturally, this leads to weak (if any) commitment to the local church, which makes discipleship and true “long obedience” formation difficult. Against this backdrop, churches can be relevant not by reinforcing unencumbered individualism but by challenging people to connect and commit to the body of Christ.

**13) The Struggle for Balance in an Immoderate Age.** As the world becomes more and more polarized and less and less capable of nuance and complexity (favoring simple, soundbite answers and tweetable convictions), the church will increasingly struggle to resist oversimplifying or too neatly resolving important tensions and complex paradoxes (which often leads to heresy). Truth and love. Word and Spirit. Justification and sanctification. General and special revelation. Gathering and scattering for mission. Now and not yet. Churches must lean into the complexities and paradoxes of these

things and try to seek healthy balance, tempting as it will be to claim “radical” and “extreme” positions so as to appeal to Generation Antsy.

**14) Social Media.** There are some positive things social media offers, but there are many things about it that pose challenges to the contemporary church. Chief among them is the challenge of *posturing*, a performative obsession that feeds pride and hypocrisy. But social media (and texting too!) also can complicate pastoral situations and make existing problems worse. Closely associated with social media, the allure of celebrity and “platform” has become pervasive in the 21st century and can destroy a church, particularly when pastors and leaders become more interested in impressing their “audience” than tending to the flock of God.

**15) The Need for Racial Reconciliation.** The church should be no haven for racism, and yet too often the church has let racial wounds fester and prejudice (whether explicit or implicit) go unaddressed. The 21st church must not be on the sidelines in the work of justice, healing and reconciliation; she must actually *lead* these efforts. The most vibrant centers of global Christianity are not in western countries these days, and the face of western Christianity is becoming much more diverse. Churches that celebrate, embrace and embody this reality in their communities will thrive, while those that resist diversity and cling to their ethnocentric privilege will falter.

**16) Gender and Sexuality.** This is a vast area that encompasses a wide range of things (homosexuality, gender identity, marriage, divorce, egalitarian vs. complementarian gender roles, pornography, etc.), each of which could be its own category on this list. We are already seeing how this issue creates fragmentation within churches, denominations and [parachurch organizations](#), and this will only continue. It will also be the primary issue that drives the cultural alienation of the church in the 21st century. The challenges are aplenty here, with major theological and pastoral implications. One of the biggest challenges for theologically conservative churches will be to maintain a *consistent*

biblical ethic on these matters, speaking in truth and love about (for example) the witness of Scripture on divorce as much as the witness of Scripture on homosexuality.

**17) Religious Freedom.** The days are numbered for churches to freely conduct their affairs according to traditional beliefs and practices on issues of sexuality and gender, without government interference. The [recent Massachusetts state law](#), which forces churches to allow transgender people to use church bathrooms and shower facilities of their choice, is just the tip of the iceberg. Churches will need to disentangle from the government to the extent that they can (return to house- churches?), or else figure out how to deal with inevitable legal/legislative challenges.

**18) Anti-Intellectualism.** It has been 21 years since Mark Noll's discouraging assessment in *The Scandal of the Evangelical*

*Mind* (that "there is not much of an evangelical mind"), and while progress has been made there is still a lot of work to do in combating anti-intellectualism in the church. Too many churches do not encourage intellectual curiosity, vibrant debate and healthy questioning. They offer simplistic and unsatisfying answers to huge questions and in so doing they foreclose a whole arena (the life of the mind) wherein God can be worshipped and holy wonder cultivated.

**19) Hyper-Intellectualism.** The other end of the spectrum is a challenge as well. As important as apologetics, theological training and rigorous rational defenses are for the faith, if our presentation of Christianity is entirely cerebral it is missing something. The church in the 21st century must embrace the *mystery* and *embodied* elements of Christianity, the experience of God rather than just the conception of Him. This means worship and church life will be messier, more emotional and more unpredictable than the rationalists would prefer, but it will be more powerful and I daresay more transformative.

**20) Distrust of Authority.** For many (very valid) reasons, younger generations today have a real distrust of authority. This makes church inherently challenging for them, not only because they have a hard time trusting leaders but (more importantly) they struggle with submitting fully to the authority of Christ and the authority of Scripture. Yet churches must lean into the “transcendent authority” of Christ, countercultural as that may be. As Russell Moore recently observed, “In an age suspicious of all authority outside the self, the appeal to a word that carries transcendent authority can be just distinctive enough to be heard, even when not immediately embraced.”

**21) Entanglements of Allegiances.** This has been a struggle for the church since her earliest days. In what sense does a person’s allegiance to empire or nation or some other secular community interact with their allegiance to Christ and his church? Today we’re seeing this play out in the messy entanglements of Christians in politics, to the point that we have to say out loud that trickle-down economics and the right to bear arms are political, not biblical values. Today’s focus on identity politics makes this even more challenging, as any given member of a church may see their Christian identity as secondary to some other identity (gender, race, political affiliation, nationality, etc.). Churches will have the messy task of acknowledging and respecting multifarious identities while also challenging people to prioritize them in the right way.