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## The Church's Response to Changing Culture: A Review of "Future Faith"

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## The Church's Response to Changing Culture: A Review of "Future Faith"

### Abstract

"Congregations may die, and denominations may wither; but the Church of Jesus Christ will stand strong."

Posting about the book *Future Faith: Ten Challenges Reshaping Christianity in the 21st Century* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-churchs-response-to-changing-culture-a-review-of-future-faith/>

### Keywords

In All Things, book review, Future Faith, challenges, Christianity, twenty-first century, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson

### Disciplines

Christianity

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

## The Church's Response to Changing Culture: A Review of "Future Faith"

Robert Lancaster

**Title:** *Future Faith: Ten Challenges Reshaping Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Word & World)*

**Author:** Wesley Granberg-Michaelson

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Every so often, a new book comes along that considers how the church must change, or reshape itself, for the current historical moment. So, it should come as no surprise that another book would come at this particular time. Much in our world is changing, and the church must pay attention; for example, changes right now include: the rise of the "nones," the rapidly changing demographics in the United States, the continued growth of the church in the Global South, the election of Donald Trump, and the continuation of the culture wars. While the particulars are new, many of "trends" are the same as those of the early church: the rise of paganism, the changing demographics, the rise of a new ruler, the growth of the church in various areas, the culture wars and changing social norms, and the like. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson seeks to do pay attention to these changes around the world in Future Faith.

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson has held a number of important roles in various church and parachurch organizations. Most notable, he has served a general secretary of the Reformed Church in America, director of Church and Society for the World Council of Churches, and he is the associate editor of Sojourners magazine. Due to his background, one would expect that he is well-traveled and well-versed in all the ways the world is changing, major trends in the church, and what he believes churches must do if they do not want to die.

Granberg-Michaelson identifies ten challenges for the church:

1. Revitalizing Western Congregations
2. Embracing the Color of the Future
3. Seeing through Non-Western Eyes
4. Perceiving the World as Sacred
5. Affirming Spirit-Filled Communities
6. Rejecting the Heresy of Individualism
7. De-Americanizing the Gospel
8. Defeating Divisive Culture Wars
9. Belonging before Believing
10. Saving This World

At first glance, many of these challenges will be evident to those of us who have spent time in a church in twenty-first century America. Indeed, few (if any) of these challenges would be terribly controversial in the way they are worded. Where this book challenges our comfortability and assumptions in some sections (and I would add that it also challenges Scripture in others) is in the fleshing out of the challenges and in Granberg-Michaelson's prescription for the church in modern America.

I will note from the outset that a recurring theme (and one that I believe is an important trend) for the American church is to pay attention to the voice of the churches in the Global South. Like all churches, churches in the Global South are not perfect, but they do have good words to say to us. I have learned much from the global voices of Anglicans in Africa over more than the past decade—as I have not only listened to their experiences but also submitted myself to their authority in what is now the Anglican Church in America.

There is no doubt that the church in the United States is shrinking, and those who identify as “nones” are increasing. However, there seems to still be debate if the “nones” were once Christians, or simply churchgoers who decided to stop attending church. In my experience, it is much more the latter than the former. Having lived in both the South and the Pacific Northwest, the decline is noticeable. However, interestingly, the “nones” in the Northwest are much more open to conversations about religious and spiritual matters than the “nones” in the South. This trend may not be as evident here in Northwest Iowa as it is in other parts of the country.

There is also little doubt that it is important for the church to welcome and embrace people of all ethnicities and nationalities. It is important that we welcome our brothers and sisters of color into our denominations—not as token people of color, but as members and leaders whose voices we learn from and take seriously. They are people who can speak of past and current experiences that we may not be able to identify with, and their experience we may well need to apologize for. Those challenges, along with seeing through non-western eyes, are two important ways that Granberg-Michaelson identifies as future church trends. Some of the non-western perspectives that find their way into the remainder of the book are community over individual<sup>1</sup>, sacred over secular, and spiritual over material. While some Christians may disagree with the importance that Granberg-Michaelson gives the Pentecostal tradition, it is not an issue over which to break Biblical fellowship; and all of us, even those who identify as cessationists, would do well to be reminded of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church and the world.

Of all the chapters in the book, the two that may prove to be the most controversial are “De-Americanizing the Gospel” and “Defeating Divisive Culture Wars.” One's opinion on these two chapters will likely determine whether he or she enjoys this book or not. His chapter on “De-Americanizing the Gospel” focuses largely on the election of Donald Trump, and the evangelical support he had and continues to have. He is careful to call Christians to a different kind of loyalty and away from the view that America is God's chosen nation. All Christians in the United States should keep the three strategies that he notes in our minds as we seek to serve God faithfully: listen to non-American voices, deepening faith formation, and solidarity instead of

withdrawal. The third being his response to the Rod Dreher's book *The Benedict Option*. It seems the primary focus of this chapter is on politically conservative evangelicals, but we would be remiss if we did not notice times that politically progressive Christians can also draw too tight a relationship between their faith and political power. However, that is not as obvious in our current culture moment.

The most controversial chapter in this book is "Defeating Culture Wars." Honestly, this chapter almost ruined the book for me, and figuring out how to write about it has delayed this review numerous times. I mostly want to note that this chapter is problematic when read in light of Scripture and church teaching. In this chapter, he offers arguments in favor of same sex marriage and the full affirmation of LGBTQ people in church membership. One of the primary issues of this chapter is that while in every other chapter, he argues for the importance of listening to the voices of the Global South. However, in this chapter, he wants to ignore those voices because he does not agree with what they are saying. He writes that when the Global South see empty churches in the West, it is a "result of having betrayed Christian orthodoxy" (173). In fact, this is absolutely true. They do! I have heard Anglican bishops from the churches in the Global South say as much. This heterodoxy is one of the reasons Christians in the Global South continue to send missionaries to the West. Can Christians speak faithfully from Scripture, show Christian love to those who identify as having same-sex attraction, proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins, while not fighting the "culture wars" in the ways they have been fought in the past? I believe we can. While many will disagree with this chapter, and while it does color how I read the rest of the book, it is here. Readers may disagree with the conclusions of this chapter, but it is definitely one of the top ten trends in the modern church. So, we must pay attention to it, even if we respond differently than Granberg-Michaelson recommends.

There is no doubt that things are changing fast around the church, and in certain times, the church must respond. I would question whether the survival of the church is dependent upon changing according to every wind of culture. Jesus says that the church will never die. Congregations may die, and denominations may wither; but the Church of Jesus Christ will stand strong. May we be faithful as we serve and attend whatever local manifestation of the body of Christ into which God has placed us. Our ancient faith, present faith, or future faith is a faith that is not grounded in the kingdom of this world, but one that looks forward to the kingdom that has come, is, and is to come—the Kingdom of God.