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Millennials and the Reformation

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Millennials and the Reformation

Abstract

"If there is one thing that serving millennials has taught me, it's that the state of the church in its current form might be in peril. But the state of their faith might not be in jeopardy at all."

Posting about denominational identity from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/the-millennials-and-the-reformation/>

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

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

The Millennials and the Reformation

 [inallthings.org/the-millennials-and-the-reformation/](https://allthings.org/the-millennials-and-the-reformation/)

Aaron Baart

As someone who has worked in a college campus ministries setting for seven years now, church leaders and many others have often asked me questions related to my thoughts on [millennials](#) and their relationship to the church. They want to know if the statistical doomsday predictions are right. Predictions like these quotes taken directly from Sam Eaton's recent [faithit.com](#) article, founded on research by the Barna Group:

- Only 2 out of 10 Americans under 30 believe that attending church is important or worthwhile (an all-time low).
- 59% of millennials raised in the church have dropped out.
- 35% of millennials have an anti-church stance, believing the church does more harm than good.
- Millennials are the least likely age group of anyone to attend church (by far).

The huge problem with all of the scary statistics I've heard over the past number of years is two-fold:

- They are measuring values that may have mattered greatly to past generations, but those same values today simply don't captivate the millennial heart and mind—values like *institutional loyalty* and *doctrinal alignment*.
- Notice carefully the language being used. The surveys are measuring the millennial generation's commitment to the institutional *church*, not to *Christ*. Previous generations may have simply equated those two. Millennials don't.

Values like *institutional loyalty* were previously deeply-held convictions. Generations of the past century went to theological war, forging denominational lines around worship styles, women in leadership, heresies, building projects, and more. Denominational identity and belonging meant something significant about the individual believer and the congregation they called home. Whether or not you were Baptist, Methodist, or Reformed mattered. Not so for millennials. Millennials value the sincerity of their practices over how long their church has been practicing them. And denominational allegiance isn't enough to keep a millennial in the fold. They'd sooner get excited about a church merger than another split. In fact, more than anything, they are more likely to distrust institutions and denominations and wish to see them decentralized.

For generations, the American church has arranged and divided itself along doctrinal alignment. Our faith affiliations have been primarily built by agreed upon confessional statements and doctrinal ties. The closer we were in doctrinal thought with a church or a denomination, the closer our ecclesiastical ties. To this day, the denomination that I am ordained in centers its leadership qualifications (and membership identity) according to assent to the "three forms of unity"—the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort.

For the millennial, the deepest problem with this way of organizing the church (or belonging to one) is entirely predicated upon the belief that if we think the same, we'll get along. However, for a generation whose deepest held values are relevance, tolerance, justice, and service, belonging is created through *shared experiences* and *missional alignment*, not first and foremost whether or not we *think* the same.

In light of these substantial differences related to underlying values, surveys like the Barna Group one listed above reflect the lament of older generations pining for their children to come home. Of course, what's missing the most is the invitation to—and genuine allowance for—millennials to do a little renovation inside that home, thereby making it their own. If you want millennials to get excited about the church again, let them help create a church that serves our surrounding culture rather than merely criticizing it. And give them a seat at the table while they do it. After all, Jesus

gave the bumbling disciples the [Great Commission](#) amidst all of their uncertainties, doubts, and shortcomings. It went alright.

If there is one thing that serving millennials has taught me, it's that the state of the church in its current form might be in peril. But the state of their faith might not be in jeopardy at all. In fact, I would go so far as to argue that the faith they are demonstrating might, in some instances, simply be too large for our current ecclesiastical structures to house. In other words, what if they aren't the problem? What if we are?

So how does all of this relate millennials to the Reformation? Well, the Reformation was as significant and as shaping as it was for church and for history because the questions the Reformers were asking were too big for the contemporary church and its structures to handle. Could it be that today we're simply trying to answer questions that millennials aren't asking? If we listened, I mean *really* listened, to the questions that they're actually asking, we might just realize that we're ripe for being re-formed once again.