

POST-EVERYTHINGS

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In order to reach the current, post-everything society, Christians must humbly admit we are not doing the job while continuing to advance the answers which Reformed theology provides.

How do we do renewal and outreach in the emerging “post-everything” United States culture?

Post-everything people are those who are now in their teens and twenties, and they are our future. These persons are increasingly post-secular. They are much more open to the supernatural, to spirituality, and to religion, but not necessarily to Christianity.

They are also post-ideological. On the one hand, they are perhaps too concerned about issues of social justice to be labeled conservative. On the other hand, they are also post-liberal. The old Liberalism is not only too self-righteous for contemporary tastes, but it is also breaking up due to 9/11, the demise of socialism, and war. The emerging culture is also postmodern. Our society is increasingly opposed to purely rationalistic explanations for experience, and does not accept the hard-nosed, scientific secularism of the past.

In general, the church knows how to thrive in the shrinking enclaves of traditional people, but does not know how to thrive in this expanding post-everything culture. Michael Wolfe, in *New York Magazine*, said we are fundamentally two nations. “There’s the quicker-growing, economically vibrant, morally relativist, urban-oriented, culturally adventuresome, sexually polymorphous, and ethnically diverse nation.... And there’s the small-town, nuclear-family, religiously oriented, white-centric other America, which makes up for its diminishing cultural and economic force with its predictability and stability.”¹

The church can continue to grow among people in places dominated by this latter “nation.” However, our usual methods of ministry do not work effectively in the parts of the country and the sectors of society that have the greatest power in our culture. Our ineffectiveness in working with post-everything America comes from our tendency to limit our evangelism and discipleship efforts to people who are basically traditional in their mindset.

For instance, our typical evangelistic presentations are effective with persons who assume they should be good. The gospel-presenter tries to show them that they are not good enough, that they fall short of God’s perfect standards, and that they need Jesus to forgive sin and help them do the right thing. This presentation was quite appropriate for almost everyone in my parents’ generation. My parents, who are evangelical Christians, and my in-laws, who are not, held basically the same social and moral values. If you asked them what they thought about premarital sex, or homosexuality, or pornography, both sets of parents would have answered the same. They were part of a world in which Christianity was the folk-religion, even if it was not the heart-religion of most people. They believed that the purpose of life was to be a good person. This world no longer exists everywhere.

On the other hand, if you say to those in my kids’ generation, “You know you have to be good,” they will respond, “Who’s to say what’s good?” So what are we to do with these post-everything persons who form an increasingly dominant part of our society? The traditional gospel presentations will not make much sense to many of them.

There is great hope for us if we (a) have the humility to admit we are not doing the job, and (b) in a non-triumphalistic way, advance the answers that Reformed theology especially provides. We must first find ways to minister in three areas: universities, big cities, and ethnically diverse situations.

1. Michael Wolfe, “The Party Line,” *New York Magazine* (February 26, 2001). *Nymag.com* <http://nymag.com>. (Accessed April 14, 2009).

University towns are incubators where we can learn how to address the ideas of the rising culture. The new world usually emerges in the big cities, and if we learn to face it and engage it there, we will be able to do the same in the rest of the country. In short, we must go to the leading edges of our society and learn how to preach, model, and sing the gospel in ways that both challenge and attract people rather than merely confuse them.

People may respond, “Well, I’m not in a university town or a big city. I’m in a suburban or rural community, so such persons are not my concern.” The fact is there are already many kinds of post-everythings in your town. Because of technology, mobility, and a myriad of other influences, post-everything people are everywhere.

We may not see them in our churches because we minister in ways that exclude post-everythings—they are either offended or confused immediately after walking in the door. Further, we are not presently forced to think about the post-everythings, because our churches can still grow among the many traditional people, which makes us feel we are doing a fine job. Still, we must go to the university towns, big cities, and ethnically diverse places, because there we will learn to understand and reach America’s future.

Next, we must use Reformed resources to minister to the emerging culture in the following ways.

First, remember that post-everything people prefer narrative and story over the older kind of preaching that simply enunciated doctrinal principles. Neither are they excited about the newer, user-friendly sermons on topics such as “How to Handle Fear,” “How to Balance Your Life,” etc. So, do we throw overboard everything we have done? Absolutely not.

We turn to Geerhardus Vos, who says that every single part of the Bible is really about Jesus. If you know how to do Christ-centered preaching, then you turn every single sermon into a kind of story. The plot of the human dilemma thickens, and the hero who comes to the rescue is Jesus. Christ-centered preaching converts doctrinal lectures or little how-to talks into true sermons. Post-everythings, who are inter-

ested in narrative, are reached by such preaching that is deeply Reformed.

Second, remember that post-everythings are experientially oriented. They do not just want intellectual propositions. For them, life’s meaning is grounded in what they experience. Of course, as Christians we are very word-centered, and we know that eternal truth is not based on our subjective experience. But preachers have in Jonathan Edwards a tremendous resource for an experience-oriented generation. Edwards taught that a sermon should not only make truth clear, but should also make truth real. In Edwards we find ways to preach that are Reformed, committed to objective truth, and, at the same time, deeply experiential.

Third, remember that post-everythings are very much against moralism and self-righteousness. Preachers can turn to Martin Luther for help with this concern. Traditional gospel presentations assume that the people want to be good, but our kids’ generation wants to be “free.” Luther said, “Look, you want to be free? Good. It’s good to be free. But you’re not. You are living for something, and whatever that something is, it enslaves you.” A person who lives for reputation is a slave to what people think. A person who lives for achievement will be a workaholic.

As did Luther, we should tell such people, “You want to be free? Fine. But you’re not going to be free unless Jesus is your salvation.” When post-everythings rejected Christianity, they thought moralism and Christianity were the same thing. We can show post-everythings that the two are not the same, and that freedom really is in Jesus.

Fourth, take note of post-everythings’ concern for social justice. They innately sense that the church is not credible unless it cares for mercy and justice. We can address these concerns with the wisdom of Hermann Ridderbos and other Reformed theologians who stress the coming of and the presence of the kingdom. The Reformed understanding of salvation is not simply that God is rescuing individual souls out of the material world, but that he is also redeeming all of creation. God is going to bring complete healing and *shalom* to the material world eventually. This makes Christianity (as C.S. Lewis says) “a fighting religion”² against

2. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 37.

poverty, hunger, and illiteracy. We must deliver this kingdom message to post-everythings.

Fifth, recognize that post-everythings love art because they love the material world. Abraham Kuyper's understanding of Reformed theology enables us to say to post-everythings, "Christianity is not just a way for you as an individual to get peace, love and good karma in heaven. The Christian faith is a comprehensive worldview. You can be a Christian artist, dancer, manager, or minister—these are all ways of living out the gospel." When post-everythings hear that, they get extremely excited. They never considered that the Christian faith embraces the whole of life.

Finally, remember that post-everythings are not strongly swayed by evidences and proofs. If you start to present evidence for the deity of Christ or the proofs of God, their eyes glaze over. But the presuppositional apologetics of Cornelius Van Til can work with post-everythings.

I see people today who, in their efforts to reach the post-everythings, are trying to throw out essential elements, such as the substitutionary atonement, forensic justification, imputed righteousness, the sovereignty of God, or the inerrancy of Scripture. Many of them are probably over-adapting to the post-everything situation. What we can admire, however, is their level of engagement with the people of the emerging society.

Let us confess that we really have failed to reach the coming society, and let us resolve to use the premier resources of Reformed theology to do so. If we can make these changes, then we may begin to see real renewal and outreach, and we might actually be a resource for the broader body of Christ in this culture.

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