

## Post-everythings

by Timothy Keller

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How do we, as a denomination, 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. Not only is the old Liberalism too self-righteous for contemporary tastes, it is also cracking up due to 9/11, the demise of socialism, and war. The emerging culture is also post-modern. Our society increasingly is opposed to purely rationalistic explanations for experience, and does not accept the hard-nosed, scientific secularism of the past.

In general the PCA knows how to thrive in the shrinking enclaves of traditional people, but does not know how to thrive in this increasing post-everything culture. Michael Wolfe, in *New York Magazine* said we are fundamentally two nations. “There is the quicker-growing, economically vibrant, morally relativist, urban-oriented, culturally adventurous, sexually polymorphist and ethnically diverse nation. Then there is also the smaller-town, suburban, nuclear-family, religiously oriented, traditional values, white-centric other America with its diminished political and economic force.”

America still has enough places dominated by this latter “nation” that the PCA can continue to grow among already-conservative and people. 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 as a denomination in working with post-everything America is a failure across party lines. Whether we identify ourselves as “Evangelically Reformed,” “Confessionally Reformed” or “Old-school” we face similar failures. All our parties tend to limit their evangelism and discipleship 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. Then the gospel-presenter tries to show them that they are not good enough - they fall short of God’s perfect standards - and therefore 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 at all, had basically the same social and moral values. If you asked them the questions such as, “What do you think about pre-marital 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 say, “Who’s to say what good is?” So what are we to do with these post-everything persons who are increasingly dominating our society? The traditional gospel presentations will not make much sense to many of them.

I think that a) if we have the humility to admit that we are not doing the job, but b) at the same time (in a non-triumphalistic way) advance the answers Reformed theology especially provides, then there is great hope for our church. We must first give high priority to finding ways to minister in three areas: universities, big cities and ethnically diverse situations. 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 (rather than merely confusing) people.

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 myriad 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 there are so many traditional people that our churches can still grow and, thus, we feel that we are doing a fine job. Still, we must go to the university towns, big cities, and the ethnically diverse places because there we will learn to understand and reach America's future. The next thing we must do is use the Reformed resources that God has especially granted this church to minister to the emerging culture in the following ways:

First, remember that post-everything people like narrative and story. They tend not to like the older kind of preaching that simply enunciated doctrinal principles. Neither are they excited about the newer user-friendly sermons of seeker-churches on "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 that comes to the rescue is Jesus. Christ-centered preaching converts doctrinal lectures or little how-to talks into true sermons. Post-everythings who are interested 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 Reformed Christians we are very word-centered, and we know that eternal truth is not based on our subjective experience of it. But Reformed preachers have a tremendous resource for an experience-oriented generation in Jonathan Edwards. Edwards taught that a sermon should not only make truth clear, but also should 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. But Reformed preachers have Martin Luther to 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." If a person lives for reputation, then he is a slave to what people think. If a person lives for achievement, then he 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. But 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 without care 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 rather 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" against poverty, hunger, and illiteracy. We must bring this Kingdom message of Reformed theology 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 groovy vibes in Heaven. Christianity is a comprehensive worldview. You can be a Christian artist, dancer, manager, or minister and these are all ways of living out the gospel." When post-everythings hear that, they get extremely excited. They have never considered that Christianity 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, post-everything eyes will glaze over. But the presuppositional apologetics of Cornelius Van Til can work with post-everythings. I think Reformed theology provides us with tools for our culture that Josh McDowell's kind of evidential apologetics does not.

I see people who are desperately trying to reach the post-everythings who in their desperation 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. But while they do not have our theological resources, often we do not have their level of engagement with the people of the emerging society. To correct this, let us confess that we really have failure across all our parties to reach the coming society, and let us resolve to use the premier resources of Reformed theology. If we can make these changes, then we may really start to see renewal and outreach, and we might actually be a resource for the broader body of Christ in this culture.

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