ENDORSEMENTS

I really, really hope—enthusiastically hope—that youth workers all over the country will read Brock Morgan’s book *Youth Ministry in a Post-Christian World*. Please don’t get hung up over the phrase post-Christian. Whether you’re afraid of that phrase or think you are fully informed on the subject, this book is for all youth workers who want to do thoughtful, transformational and theologically sound youth ministry. I think and reflect a lot about culturally relevant, theologically robust youth ministry, but this book challenged me to examine my own youth ministry praxis and commitment. I’m rarely impressed with youth ministry books but this one is so passionately on target that I will sing it’s praises for a long time to come.

Mike King
President/CEO, Youthfront; Author of *Presence Centered Youth Ministry*

After reading the draft manuscript, I contacted the folks at The Youth Cartel and pre-ordered 25 copies! No joke. Brock’s insight into post-Christian culture and ministry to teens within such a culture are inspiring and refreshing. His optimism for the future burns brightly which makes for a helpful resource that not only deconstructs the current reality but also faithfully constructs a new way forward. This book will undoubtedly assist any youth worker in their pursuit of guiding teens into spiritual formation for the mission of God in a post-Christian culture.

Chris Folmsbee
Author of *A New Kind of Youth Ministry* and Pastor of Group Life Ministry at Church of the Resurrection, Leawood, KS

Whatever your church traditions and views of postmodern Christian relativism might be, this book is important for every youth pastor, leader, or mentor. Brock’s 20-plus years of in-the-trenches youth ministry, combined with his discerning eye towards society, culture, and faith, lead to reflections that are insightful, truthful, and challenging, and then to responses that are theologically grounded, practicably sound, and eminently hopeful.

Crystal Kirgiss
Literature Professor at Purdue University and author of many books including *More Than Skin Deep*
Youth Ministry in a Post-Christian World is, above all, a story of honesty and hope. There’s not a youth worker alive who won’t resonate with Brock Morgan’s unassuming self-portrait of a ministry (and a youth minister) coming to terms with America’s first explicitly “post-Christian” decades. I felt like I knew the youth in these pages; I groaned with recognition at Morgan’s failures and smiled at God’s grace-giving surprises. Above all, Morgan gives teenagers—and those who love them—what we are desperate for: permission to trust in a God who is far bigger than the moment before us. If you’re looking for another program manual of youth ministry how-to’s and free advice, keep looking. But if you need a friend in the trenches, whose journey will make you feel a little less alone, then this is your next read.

Kenda Creasy Dean
Professor of Youth, Church and Culture, Princeton Theological Seminary
Author of Almost Christian and Practicing Passion

What you’re going to hear in this book is the passionate heart of a thoughtful youth worker who is unwilling to let standard youth ministry operating procedure get in the way of authentic, vital ministry. You won’t have to agree with everything Brock says to recognize that he’s asking important questions. This isn’t just hand-wringing. Particularly in the last few chapters there are some helpful, practical steps for the way forward. Well-worth a read!

Dr. Duffy Robbins
Professor of Youth Ministry, Eastern University, St. Davids, PA

Brock Morgan is a real-life youth pastor who, like a fine wine, has aged well. Whether you’re a youth ministry veteran or just stepping onto the scene, this book is worth reading, simply for one reason—it’s honest. We need more thoughtful transparency in our youth ministry conversing and self-reflecting. Brock shows us a way.

Steven Argue
Life Development Director at Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan
Last year, I returned to our city’s public schools. Honestly, I’m not sure why I stopped going to them so often. It was a gradual shift and eventually the schools were off my radar completely. When I returned, I realized what I had been missing, that programs had taken precedence over people, and what I desperately needed as a human being if I was going to continue to loving and creating safe spaces for teenagers in our church to receive and experience grace. Brock, in his new book, takes us on a similar journey that shows us where we’ve been and where we could be heading if we don’t engage the heart of Christ, first in our own lives, and then in the development of our ministry plans. We need this book!

Brooklyn Lindsey
Author of *A Parent’s Guide to Understanding Teenage Girls and Confessions of a Not-So-Supermodel*, youth pastor at Highland Park Church of the Nazarene.

Brock Morgan is one of the most adaptable youth workers I know. He’s genuine in his love for God and courageous in his love for people. Brock is an innovator, but not in the popular sense, where an unstable visionary cooks up new ways of doing ministry in the name of being a catalyst or change agent. Brock innovates because he loves people, he’s observant and he’s genuinely expects that the ministry he leads will be effective. This makes for unique stories and unique youth ministry that can’t be replicated. Youth Ministry in a Post-Christian World is a glimpse into the heart of a great leader and the heart that makes Brock so good at what he does. It’s not blueprint for your youth ministry, however, the best youth pastors will read his stories and learn to be more themselves. Maybe a few will even have the courage to innovate from love, observation and hope that Brock as he leads his church to minister in a post-Christian world.

Mark Riddle
Founder/Principal of The Riddle Group
This book is really needed and worth your investment of time if you work with students, especially if you work with teens in a church setting. Here are three reasons why: First, Brock is a practitioner. He has and does live in the world of teenagers. And he does this in the context of a local church. He knows all the opportunities, challenges and realities of doing ministry in a local congregation. It is a filter that serves him well as he continually ties his concepts and insights into practical implications and direction that you will find useful. Second, Brock is a truth teller. In this book he continually tells us how things are not how we pretend they are or wish they were. “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free,”… to do real ministry in a new reality. Brock sheds light on our students, our culture, our churches and our approach to reaching this generation. And finally, Brock shares hope. This is not a dissertation of death, far from it. This book is an invitation to reaching kids and calling them into an amazing life with Jesus. Yes, Brock does all the heavy lifting and critical thinking to make sure this is a thoughtfully and theologically sound response to the world we find our ministries in. In the end you will find yourself better equipped and excited to engage with students.

Tic Long
Executive Pastor of Journey Community Church, La Mesa, CA, and former Executive Director of Youth Specialties
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I still consider myself a youthworker. (That’s right—one word, not two. Old school!) However, as God has led, it’s getting harder for me to say that in a way that people can understand. I am now not only a professor (of youth, family and culture—the academic basis for youth ministry in my world), but a seminary professor (to many, just one more step removed from the action). But even worse, I am an associate provost. (Okay, I’m an associate provost who still teaches a bunch, but it’s still a giant leap removed from professor!)

I may no longer work day to day with kids, or sit in meetings where I am ignored but still have to be there, or try to convince people who are decades older than I am that I understand their kids and am committed to them as a family. But after four decades of working in and around the youth ministry world, it’s still in my bones . . . it’s a part of my DNA. I still build these odd but solid relationships with kids, where appropriate. I still speak to and, I believe, connect with them. And I actively listen to and study teenagers and young (some would say “emerging”) adults. So, yep, I’m still in the youth ministry game.

That said, there are some good and some not-so-good aspects of being one of those “I am a youthworker, but I speak, write, and teach for a living” type of youthworkers. It’s not that I’m out of touch, because I feel like I’m as in tune with what it means to come alongside a teenager as ever. But so much
has changed since the days when I gave up Friday nights for high school football and basketball games, and when a week at camp was considered the family vacation. It’s not up for debate that so much has changed in the last 40 years. The only questions are “To what extent?” and “At what cost?” This is true for parents, for educators, and even for coaches; but it’s especially true when it comes to youth ministry.

That’s why I’m so grateful for Brock Morgan and the hundreds—if not thousands—of folks out there who have not only continued serving in youth ministry day to day, but have done it well. And I am grateful for this book.

For a brief time I was Brock’s boss at Glendale Presbyterian Church in Glendale, California. But we got to know each other pretty well during that period. He’d been around as a “professional” for quite a while even then. Brock was a committed and gifted middle school director, and his wife Kelsey was just as gifted and equally engaged in loving and nurturing sixth, seventh, and eighth graders for the kingdom. As often happens, our church paid for one and got two. And like almost every ministry I’ve seen in those cases, they took every advantage.

I’ve followed Brock and Kelsey’s ministry efforts ever since. I’ve heard him speak. I’ve read what he’s written. I’ve been around him as a family man. And I’ve spent time with him among those he is called to lead. I’m glad Brock took on this writing project. And there are five reasons why I believe he is the right guy at the right time to write *Youth Ministry in a Post-Christian World*. 
First, of all the people who started their full-time youth ministry careers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there aren’t many who’ve consistently stuck with it ever since. Brock has not only proven faithful to his calling (which is number four), but he’s lived and operated through one of the biggest, if not thee biggest, shifts affecting ministry to adolescents since we first started viewing teenagers as a defined population. Brock was trained in how to do great ’80s youth ministry, and he excelled at it during the ’90s. As the culture changed, as systems changed, and as the kids themselves changed, the church, for the most part, has not changed its approach to youth ministry. Brock was caught up in the turmoil of that transition, and he not only survived, but also thrived. It takes a special person to endure the challenges of living through one season of ministry with all of its expectations and demands, and then commit to unlearning and recalibrating everything that “worked” in the past. Brock is one of those special people.

Second, Brock has held on to what’s most important. Amidst all of the changes, two things remain constant in his approach to youth ministry: God is worthy of our praise, gratitude, and very lives; and people—children, teens, and adults—need to know they are worthy of respect and care. In the ’80s and ’90s, a good youthworker could get hundreds of enthusiasts to commit to the program. A great youthworker would know that while numbers might indicate a healthy ministry, what really mattered was the compassionate lordship of Jesus Christ and a love for people. In the 2000s and beyond, a good youthworker could keep the basic programmatic ship moving forward for at least a season, and perhaps even foster enough observable
“depth” and “growth” that he or she was able to remain employed. Today, a great youthworker realizes that while programs are sometimes helpful, they ultimately don’t matter the way they used to. People and relationships and mission are what the church is called to. In the ’90s, Brock was a great youthworker. Today, Brock is a great youthworker.

Third, Brock is directly in touch with how the changing culture impacts relationships with and ministry to adolescents. He goes right to the heart of social media’s presence and influence, helping us see that when kids compare themselves to others, they now have measurables such as the number of “friends” and “likes,” causing a deeper sense of relational competition that constantly lurks just beneath the surface. His stories about kids and families are fresh and real.

Fourth, while Brock doesn’t pretend to have simple answers to complex and fluid questions, he at least dives in with his take on what the youthworker’s role is today. You might not agree with everything he presents (I’m not even sure I agree with everything he says!) but he does get us thinking. I especially appreciated his notion of a “Starbucks spirituality” and his story about the girl in his youth group who proudly shared that she’d become a Buddhist. Brock isn’t interested in a sanitized version of “doing” youth ministry. Instead, after all of Brock’s years of experience and training, he’s willing to sit down with the reader and ask, “Is this what you’ve seen? What about this?” I, for one, find this refreshing.

Finally, I appreciate Brock’s willingness to take us on a journey to new and, at times, uncharted territory. Kids have
changed, their developmental abilities and realities have changed, and there are many times when we find ourselves at a loss when it comes to leading and loving kids for the sake of Christ. Yet, Brock’s desire to stay in there and slug it out, to ask the hard questions—of himself and even the “sages” he praises—is what all of us need.

I heard Brené Brown speak last week, and she loves to quote Teddy Roosevelt. I thought of Brock when she shared this quote:

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena . . . ”

In summary, Brock lives what he writes, and the following passage from his book demonstrates why I am a fan of Brock Morgan:

“The essence of youth ministry is to create environments where students can experience the warmth of God. With every talk we give, every game or activity we lead, and every time we run into students at the mall, they experience God’s warmth. And that’s because our relationship with Jesus is our ministry.”

Chap Clark
Author, *Hurt 2.0*
Professor of Youth, Family and Culture
Fuller Theological Seminary
Gig Harbor, WA
I want to begin by thanking a few people who’ve helped shape me and have become, as Paul writes in Philippians 2, my “deep-spirited friends.” I owe them a very pleasant debt of gratitude.

First, I want to thank Kelsey, my amazing wife, friend, and ministry partner. I love you more than I can express, and I am so grateful for the journey we’ve been on these past 22 years. You have set the pace in so many ways. Thank you for continuing to run after kids with me, and for the detailed way you show me love every day. Thank you for reading and rereading and editing so much of this book. I LOVE you so much!

Dancin—I am so honored to be your daddy! You are spectacular, and I love everything about you. Thank you, sweetie, for how open and caring and loving you are to every person around you.

I want to thank my church, Trinity Church in Greenwich, Connecticut, for giving me the time to write this book and for the partnership we share in being salt and light in our community. This book grew out of our life together. I especially want to thank Drew Williams for his amazing leadership and wise counsel at several junctures. I love how even when you confront me, it doesn’t feel so bad because of your beautiful British accent.
Dean and Susan Allen—thank you for generously allowing me to use your homes to write. You guys are just so generous and help set the tone in our community. I’m grateful!

The youth team at Trinity—Ben, Jen, Hanna, and all of you who are in the trenches with us—thank you for your heart and vision in reaching and loving students who are growing up in this complex post-Christian world. You all just blow me away!

My parents, Paul and Carol—I couldn’t have had better parents. I love being your son!

My sisters, Sasha and Vangela—you are beauty to the core.

Dr. Bill Brown—thank you for your investment in me. Your mentorship has meant more to me than I can express.

Tim Galleher—you set me on a path and showed me how to truly bless a community.

Mark Helsel—10 years ago you began dreaming with me about what the future of youth ministry might be and how we could continue to evolve as youth workers in this ever-changing landscape of youth culture. Thank you.

Tic Long and the former and current YS teams—thank you for believing in me. I am full of gratitude for how you took a big chance on me. I still remember with such fondness how Tic asked me to come to work at Youth Specialties.

YS One Day crew—I miss those days! Chap, I appreciate your profound influence over me both up close and from a distance.
Duffy, your prayers for me were coveted, and God blessed me through you.

Marko, Adam, and The Youth Cartel family—thank you for being sounding boards, feedback givers, and, mostly, lifelong friends. I’m blown away by how generous you’ve been to me. Marko, thank you for hanging in there with me and for the favor you’ve shown me. I don’t deserve even half of what you’ve given to me. The next cigar is on me!

*Brock Morgan*
I remember the moment like it was yesterday. In fact every time I think about it, I cringe a little. At the time, I was the brand-new youth pastor at the church, and my youth group was full of doubters and skeptics. I wanted to prove them all wrong. So I worked all week on a talk that I believed would change everything. Because, you know, talks do that. But I was convinced this talk would open the students’ minds and illuminate how wrong they really were. I would show them that if they truly used their brains, they’d come to the same conclusions I had.

What’s funny is that I was so convinced that once they heard my brilliant speech, they’d all repent and come running down to the altar to receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior. What a perfect time to do communion! I thought. You can see where this is going, huh?

After I finished delivering my “brilliant” message, I explained the bread and the cup. And then I invited the students to come forward and receive communion. No one moved. Now put yourself in this scenario for a moment: You speak passionately about why faith makes sense, you explain the elements of the communion, and then you invite your students to come forward to receive it . . . and no one blinks, no one prayerfully
INTRODUCTION

considers it, no one moves. No one gets up to participate in communion. No one responds. Not one person.

Awkward!

Obviously, I needed a new strategy.

I’ve been a youth worker for over 23 years now, and most of those years have been spent in Southern California during the heyday of American youth ministry. Back then we’d build an awesome youth room and play cool Christian music videos on big screens, and tons of kids would come to youth group. We’d organize area youth rallies and see 2,000 high schoolers show up to eat free pizza and play Nintendo 64 on the big screen. I’d preach the gospel to hundreds of students on a Wednesday night, and a majority of them would invite Christ into their lives.

But as the years have gone by, I’ve noticed a few things. Kids look at me differently. Their questions have changed—they are deeper, more personal, and usually loaded. The answers I gave students 15 years ago will no longer suffice. To be honest, those answers don’t even work for me anymore.

The world is changing and it’s changing us—in some ways for the better. It requires us to reconsider the ways we think about and interact with the people around us. The good news is that thoughtful, humble, and curious Christians are making headway in today’s world. However, many of us remain stuck in the old systems and structures, using methods that were brilliantly effective at one time. But our culture has changed.
And if we’re honest, we’ll admit that the things that once worked so well are no longer cutting it with our students.

My prayer is that this book will cause youth workers to lift their heads, that it will stretch them and even shake them up a bit. But please know that I write this as a practitioner. I am not a youth ministry professor at a seminary; I’m a youth worker too. In fact, as I write this introduction, I’m also thinking about the game I’m leading tonight with our middle schoolers. It has something to do with balloons and shaving cream . . . but I digress.

What I’ve discovered over the past 10 years is that I have to let go of the junk I’ve accumulated throughout my entire life of youth ministry—the methods and the mindsets that have boxed Jesus in and kept students out. As you read this little book, I hope you’ll allow the systems and structures of your own ministry to be challenged and take an honest look at your students, the church, the world, and yourself. Hopefully we’ll emerge from this exercise better equipped to represent and extend the reign of Jesus in a world that, at best, isn’t interested.

Please note: This book contains the story of what I’ve stumbled onto in my youth ministry work. It’s the story of how an evangelical modern Christian has tried to make a difference in the lives of pluralistic, post-modern students. It’s the story about repeatedly going back to the drawing board and trying desperately to hear the cutting-edge voice of Jesus. My prayer is that you will join me on this humbling and scary, yet wonderful journey.
The first time I heard about post-Christianity was when a fellow youth worker told me something he’d overheard. He said a friend of his asked a young pregnant woman if she and her husband had thought of any names for their baby. She answered with this little bomb: “We really haven’t thought of a name yet, but one thing we do know is that it won’t be a biblical name.” This took him aback, so he asked her why. She responded matter-of-factly, “Oh, because we live in a post-Christian world.”

When I first heard this story, that term kind of troubled me. “post-Christian world” sounded apocalyptic, like something from Mel Gibson’s *Mad Max* film from 1979. Was I going to have to wear a sleeveless leather jacket and swimming goggles while driving my hopped-up VW Beetle through the desert wasteland? It sounded like the end of the world—especially the way people were talking about it. In describing the future, they said things like, “There will be no moral compass, and within 50 years the faith will be lost. The world will be like Sodom and Gomorrah.” It was quite the dramatic sentiment, and it caused youth workers and parents alike to purchase lots of books about the future doom.
As a young youth worker, I attended the National Youth Workers Convention and heard a speaker tell us to look to Europe. He said we were about 20 years behind them; so if we wanted to know where America was headed, we needed to look that way. Then the speaker described a world that a young and forward-thinking youth guy like myself couldn’t even fully grasp. It wasn’t doomsday or end-of-the-world type stuff; it was just something I couldn’t instantly apply. I was working in the trenches with American teenagers in Southern California, and they weren’t post-Christian at all. So I went back to work with my students and did the best I could.

But as the years went on, from time to time I’d notice things. Like how the Christian faith wasn’t having as much of an impact on students’ thinking. The biblical stories were either lost on them or, more importantly, just didn’t matter to this new generation. And so as any thoughtful youth worker would do, I started researching how I might stay effective in my ministry to students. You see, when what you’ve always done has worked just fine, why should you change anything?

However, if you happen to notice that what you’ve always done is no longer sticking or completely resonating with your students, then this realization should cause you to go back to the drawing board. And it will keep you humble. I felt like I was living on a different planet than my kids. I was standing in the old modern world, and my kids were living in a world where the Christian story no longer mattered. Oh sure, I had a cool goatee and dressed like a member of Pearl Jam, but I was no longer traveling the same road as my students.
It wasn’t that I suddenly noticed these teenagers were horny or they wanted to party and get drunk. Students have always wanted to do those things (I still do.) But their mentality was changing. We youth leaders weren’t as effective, the gospel wasn’t making as much sense to them, and culturally the faith was no longer having an impact in centering our community. Before I knew it, I was working with post-Christian students.

Stuart Murray defines post-Christianity (or “post-Chr
tendom”) as “The culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence.”¹

The Christian faith losing coherence? Check.

Christian institutions declining in influence? Check.

It’s a difficult shift to perceive when all the people you hang out with think just like you do. But if you get outside the bubble and really listen, you’ll discover that things really have changed in the world, and they continue to change. You see, a post-Christian world is one in which Christianity is no longer the dominant religion or even the dominant mindset. An evolution has occurred over the past 50-plus years. Slowly and gradually over time, our society has begun to assume values, cultures, and worldviews that aren’t Judeo-Christian. At that youth workers’ conference 20 years ago, I was told this was going to happen. But I didn’t listen. And now that time is upon us.
America is in the midst of this transition from a Judeo-Christian value system into a post-Christian mindset. Oh, you can bet the church is doing a lot of kicking and screaming right now. That’s what happens when the top dog is no longer the top dog. It’s called a power struggle. And when something that’s been dominant within a culture starts to lose its voice, power, and influence . . . well, it can get pretty ugly. Watch the news and you’ll see that it’s not just ugly; it’s downright toxic.

Some of you might be thinking, No way, Brock! You’re wrong. I’ve read the stats and I’ve seen the research. The majority of people in America and around the world are Christians.

To that I say, “Really? That’s what you think?”

Most youth workers are very familiar with the work of Christian Smith. He’s done the most extensive research on teenage spirituality in America called The National Study of Youth and Religion. What he and his colleagues found was that the most pervasive religious beliefs of teenagers is not Christianity, but what he calls Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD):¹

- **Moralism** = Be good.
- **Therapeutic** = Feel good.
- **Deism** = God is just in the background.

It’s fairly obvious that the dangerous, radical, die to self, pick up your cross and follow Jesus kind of faith has lost steam in our culture. Our students aren’t growing up in that world.
In the summer of 2010, I took a new job at Trinity Church in Greenwich, Connecticut, just north of New York City. People tend to move to Greenwich once they’ve “made it” in The Big Apple. It’s a small city full of successful artists, actors, musicians, and Wall Street money people; it’s also a melting pot of cultures, ideas, and worldviews. For the better part of the previous 23 years, I’d worked with students on the West Coast. So going to New England was a huge move for my family. And while post-Christianity is alive and well on the West Coast—especially in the Northwest—moving to Greenwich provided me with some visible evidence of what’s happening in youth culture today.

When I arrived in this new town, word had already gotten out amongst the students in our church that I was really into Jesus. Initially, I took that as a compliment. But I soon realized, um, not so much . . . . See, the church had recently hired a lead pastor from England who was very “Jesus-y.” And now the church had hired me, another “Jesus-y” bloke except worse—I was from California, and I have a couple tattoos.

Granted, the students’ rebellion toward me was partly because of the transition. They of course loved their previous youth pastor, and I represented change, which teenagers don’t like. But I also represented conservative Christianity, which is very offensive to them.

If you want to see post-Christianity in full swing in America, just look to New England where the church is either dying or dead. Beautiful old buildings stand empty in the center of towns. It reminds me of the old children’s poem that says,
“Here is the church, and here is the steeple, open the doors, and where are all the people?” Well, the people are long gone. They left many years ago.

To keep their churches “alive,” pastors and congregational leaders have become property managers, turning their buildings into rental facilities where music lessons, choirs, AA meetings, acting troops, and exercise classes can rent out space. But there is barely any Christian community life happening inside of those four walls. The post-Christian world is now in full force, and the church is not even a blip on the screen.

While I was speaking at an amazing youth camp in Michigan, I met the worship band that had been brought in for the weekend. When they learned that I’m a youth pastor in New England, they were amazed. They’re from Canada, and they tour all over the United States. But they said when they get to New England, they just drive on home because there are no gigs in sight.

Now back to my initial arrival in Greenwich. Picture my wife and me sitting in a living room with about 20 students. I asked them, “So tell me, what do you guys love about the youth group?”

Here’s where they drew the line in the sand for this “Jesus-y” youth worker. One student stood and spoke for the rest of them, saying, “What we love about our youth group is that no one preaches Jesus here, and we can believe whatever we want to believe.”
Huh. Okay. After that, my wife and I got in our car and drove back to California, never to return. No, not really. We got in the car and sat quietly for a moment. Then I blurted out, “What in the hell have we gotten ourselves into?!”

In Greenwich, every public school student takes a class called “The Myth of Creation.” It’s not a science class about evolution; it’s a class that basically breeds agnostic thinking. Our students have grown up surrounded by liberal reductionism, and the church has no voice in the community mindset. The biblical narrative no longer has any coherence, and its influence left the building not long after Elvis did.

I know this may not sound anything like youth ministry in Atlanta or other parts of the nation. But the world is flat, which means my students and your students are not so far apart. If you aren’t seeing the post-Christian culture’s impact upon your students yet, then it’s just around the corner. I speak at youth camps all across the country, and I’m always blown away by how the kids ask the same types of questions and with that same look in their eyes. No matter where they’re from, students are having the same kinds of thoughts. They all listen to the same music, watch the same movies, and are growing up in a world whose main religion is Moralistic Therapeutic Deism at best.

I took a World Religions class in high school. We learned about Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, the folk religions, Judaism, as well as many others. Back then, the students in my class were either Christians or nothing at all. In fact, except one of my friend’s parents who were nominal Buddhists, I didn’t
know anyone who believed differently than my family or I did. Today, this is not the case. Students are growing up with different worldviews and different religions all around them. As a kid it was easy for me to dismiss a religion, a philosophy, or even a perspective when I didn’t know anyone who held those beliefs. But when the Buddhist is your best friend, when the liberal is your cousin, when the Muslim is on your basketball team, when the agnostic is your neighbor . . . well then, that changes everything.

Our students are growing up in a pluralistic society that’s much different than the world in which you and I grew up. And if you’re smack-dab in the midst of adolescence and your top goals are to fit in and not stand out, to be different by being just like everyone else, then the acceptance of all things is an important value to have. This is the world we’re living in, and it’s the collision of all things.

Al Mohler, president of Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, wrote:

*In candor, we must admit that the Church has been displaced. Once an authoritative voice in the culture, the Church is often dismissed, and even more often ignored. At one time, the influence of the Church was sufficient to restrain cultural rebellion against God’s moral commandments, but no longer. The dynamic of the culture-shift marches onward. . . . The worldview of most Americans is now thoroughly secularized, revolving around the self and its concerns, and based on relativism as an axiom. We Americans have become our own best friend, our own*
The Barna Group recently conducted research on religion in America, and they specifically looked deeper into this post-Christian trend. Based on a random survey of 42,855 people, they found that 37 percent of Americans are post-Christian and that percentage is climbing. In addition, this 37 percent labeled themselves as either atheistic or agnostic, in disagreement with the Bible, not committed to Jesus, and not participating in a church.

Even more interesting were the differences they discovered between generations:

The differences by generation are striking, and they suggest a less “Christianized” nation in the decades to come. The younger the generation, the increasingly post-Christian it is compared with its predecessors. Nearly half of Mosaics (48%) qualify as post-Christian compared with two-fifths of Busters (40%). One-third of Boomers (35%) and one-quarter of Seniors (28%) are post-Christian. These patterns are consistent with other studies that show the increasing percentage of “Nones” [i.e., adults who claim no religious affiliation] among younger generations.

What this data tells us is that post-Christianity is a booming trend.

After I’d been at Trinity Church for a few months, the time finally came to take the youth group on a weekend retreat. Up
until then, we’d seen very little openness to the gospel, but we just kept loving students, listening to them, and praying for a breakthrough. On Saturday night, the unimaginable happened. After I finished speaking, everyone worshipped—let me say that again, everyone worshipped—and God moved in an amazing way. Students all over that room were repenting of their rebellion, giving their lives to Jesus, and praying for each other. It was one of those nights that keeps you in youth ministry and makes you believe your investment is finally paying off.

Afterward I was sitting with a group of tenth grade guys, and they were all sharing what Jesus had done in their hearts. Honestly, I was floating on air. I couldn’t believe what God was doing and what they were sharing. Yep, I was floating! But then a kid named John spoke up, and I came crashing back to earth.

He said, “Tonight, God told me that reincarnation is true.” I looked at him and wondered if he was joking around, but I soon realized he was serious.

Thank goodness his buddy cut through the awkward silence and said, “Dude, wrong religion.”

It’s interesting to look back and see how our country got to where we are today. America began as the brave new world that welcomed all. Posted symbolically on the Statue of Liberty are the words “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free . . . ” So every tribe and tongue has been coming to America ever since. They
accepted our invite. But what if those masses of people arrive with different religions and worldviews? And what if they bring their own cultures and start influencing American culture? What if they don’t look like us? What if they don’t think or act like us? What if white Christian America is no longer the majority? What if this so-called “Christian nation” eventually dies out and a new post-Christian world emerges? Well, people will start freakin’ out. Those who were once in the majority begin using words like “us” and “them,” and then the culture wars begin.

This is what’s happening in our nation right now, currently, at this very minute—whether or not you admit it or see it. Post-Christianity is in full swing, and it’s growing. Christendom is now dead, and we need to get over it. The bigger problem is the fact that the church saw this coming for a long time, but it didn’t respond well. It all started happening during the nineteenth century when liberalism began its rise and Darwinism was gaining steam. Because of the church’s poor response to Darwin’s theories about evolution, science was now on the offense, and Christianity was left to play defense. Instead of embracing science, we defended our position and insulated ourselves against the world. We appeared angry, unintelligent, and backward to those on the outside. Instead of joining the conversation, we started preaching to the choir, turned inward, and lost our voice in the world. And now the church can’t get over it.

At one time Christianity was known for its leaders in thinking, bringing justice to the world, and creatively engaging the culture around them. We started schools such as Princeton and
organizations like the Red Cross, but then we replaced those things with the Christian Right. We turned against culture and taught our children how to defend their faith. Christians used to play offense, but then we became defensive specialists. And this change in our position created the “us versus them” construct. I don’t blame Christians for responding the way they did. It was a scary time. I get it. But how we respond now is just as vital. We must take lessons from that time period and apply what we learn to how we respond today.

Last night I was talking on the phone with the father of one of the students in our ministry. He was brought up Catholic but rejected the faith when he was in high school. He is the typical post-Christian adult living in New England, but recently he came to faith and started attending our church. During our phone conversation, he told me he was very concerned that his son’s grandparents were having a bad influence on him. Naturally I thought he was talking about his own parents who are agnostic.

I said, “Oh, don’t worry. They won’t turn your son into an agnostic; he has a very strong faith.”

The father said, “I’m not talking about my parents. I’m talking about my wife’s parents—they’re evangelical Christians. I’m afraid they’ll turn him into one of those!”

I laughed and said, “So you don’t mind if he becomes agnostic; you just don’t want him to become an evangelical?”

“Exactly!” he said.
CHAPTER ONE

What he sees as “evangelical Christianity” in America turns him off. Christians appear closed-minded and judgmental, and he doesn’t want his son to become like that.

POST-CHRISTIANITY IS NOT GLOBAL

This post-Christian world isn’t a world at all. If you look at global Christianity, you’ll notice a few things. First, the church isn’t dying; it’s actually growing. Timothy C. Tennent’s brilliant book *Invitation to World Missions* gives us an amazing perspective and insights into what’s happening globally. Yes, Europe is in full swing within the post-Christian era, and America is just now entering into it. But there is a new face to global Christianity, and it’s no longer Caucasian. It’s Korean, African, Chinese, and Indian.

The church is booming in those locations because Christians have learned to live and minister in a culture that hasn’t been sympathetic to their faith. They don’t have a political machine talking for them; rather, Christians are creatively and humbly bringing the gospel and extending the beautiful reign of Jesus to those around them. Great writers and theologians are now coming out of these countries. And amazingly, they see America as a huge mission field, so they’re sending missionaries to us. We’ve become the region that must be reached.

Tennent writes:

*Today there are over 367 million Christians in Africa, comprising one-fifth of the entire Christian church. Throughout the twentieth century a net average gain of 16,500 people were coming to Christ every day in Africa.*
From 1970 to 1985, for example, the church in Africa grew by over six million people. During that same time... 4,300 people per day were leaving the church in Europe and North America.  

There is amazing growth happening in South Korea as well, with over 20 million Christians living there. This number is pretty significant considering there are only 49 million people in the entire country. In America that percentage (41%) may not seem so massive when you consider our nation’s history with a large majority of Americans claiming to be Christian. Just remember that these countries are and have been pre-Christian for thousands of years.

A church in America is considered to be a megachurch if at least 2,000 people attend its services. And some of America’s largest churches have as many as 30,000 members. By contrast, Tennent writes that “South Korea is widely regarded as the home of the modern church growth movement, which is exemplified by... the Yoido Full Gospel Church.” It’s the largest church in South Korea and has over 700,000 members. And he has this to say about India:

*India has been called the cradle of the world’s religions, having given birth to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Yet today this land of exotic Eastern religions is also the home of over 60 million Christians. ... many missiologists predict that by the year 2050 India will have over 100 million Christians.*
Today there are over 420,000 missionaries working around the world, but only 12 to 15 percent of them are from the West. All of these statistics are good news because they prove that the church isn’t dying after all. It’s just no longer composed of only white Westerners.

“CHRISTIAN” IS A CURSE WORD

In the Middle East, Christian missionaries are creatively and humbly working in a region that truly is anti-Christian. In an article titled “Unlocking Islam: What a Kuwaiti Muslim ‘Knows’ about ‘Christianity,’” Robby Butler tells of a Kuwaiti Muslim who learned as a young teen “that Christianity promoted immorality, pornography and television programs like Dallas.” Butler goes on to write, “For a Muslim to say he has become a ‘Christian’ is to communicate that he has launched into a secret life of immorality.”

In Kuwait becoming a Christian is seen as entering into a prayer-less, apostate community. What they have done, like so many of us, is linked Christianity and America. From their perspective, America is a Christian nation and also the number one contributor to the pornography industry. Therefore, they attribute the downfall of global morality to this so-called “Christian America.” Why would they want to become Christians?

What’s interesting is they hold a very positive view of Jesus Christ. And these perceptions have caused some followers of Jesus in the Muslim community to remain in the mosque rather than unite with the Christian church. So how does a missionary living and ministering in a foreign land go about
discipling a Muslim Christian? Well, you do it humbly, respectfully, and with much grace. You contextualize the environment and live with the awareness that the culture in which you are working and ministering in is not open to your faith. As youth workers, we must do the same thing.

Recently I was hanging out in a coffee shop with a group of adults who aren’t from my church but who are becoming my friends. I say “becoming” because when they heard I was a pastor, huge walls went up. It wasn’t like, “Oh, let’s watch what we say in front of the pastor.” It was much more antagonistic than that. For two years they’ve tried to get me mad, angry, or defensive. And I’ve tried to navigate and pursue a relationship with a group of people who deem me as being ignorant, bigoted, and backward just because I call myself a Christian. They aren’t benevolent or kindhearted about my faith. So while it hasn’t been easy for me, it’s been good practice. Instead of trying to get them to sympathize with my faith, I suppose I’ve tried to sympathize with theirs.

Students don’t want to be called Christians because of the baggage that comes with the title. They’ll say things like, “Brock, if I become a Christian, then doesn’t that mean I’ll have to be pro-gun, anti-gay, and a Republican?” To this new post-Christian world, the word Christian is truly a curse word. And to many, it’s almost synonymous with Nazi. How can this be? How do you lead students to a faith when it has a reputation like that? This, my friends, is a difficult world to minister in and navigate. But we’ve been called and selected and chosen for such a time as this.
Now for sure this characterization of Christians isn’t completely fair. One time I was talking with a girl in my youth group who told me she hated Christians. She said they were bigots and ignorant and full of hate. Honestly, I was offended by her words. I mean, a Christian woman in our church was mentoring this girl; a Christian family had intervened on her behalf and rescued her from a terribly dysfunctional situation; our church had rallied around her as many people in the congregation took her shopping for new clothes and paid for her to go to camp, on our mission trip, and on many retreats. One family even bought her a new bicycle. Every Christian she knew had loved her and treated her with thoughtful care and kindness. Had she forgotten? Well, the answer is yes and no. She hadn’t forgotten the love and sacrifices of those around her, but she is living in a culture that sees Christianity as a terribly ugly thing. To many people, this is the Christian’s identity, and identity trumps everything. Even a new bicycle.

We need to maintain an awareness that we live in a post-Christian culture. When the captives from the nation of Judah entered Babylon, what they found was a city filled with exiles from other nations. It was a city where many gods were worshipped and where different codes of ethics were followed. So think about this for a minute: What perspective, view, and posture did the Israelites have while living in this foreign land and pagan culture? Think of Daniel and his quiet, humble, wise strength. What we see transpiring here in Babylon is not altogether different from the ever-changing cultural landscape in which we live today. Think of the different cultures represented right here in our communities, along with the various religious traditions that accompany
them. We must be thoughtful. We must be prayerful. The trouble is that many churches, and many individual Christians, still believe that the prominent mindset in our culture is Christian.

Again, Christendom is over. So as followers of Jesus, we need to learn what it means to live as exiles in a culture that is not sympathetic to our faith. Being exiles is dangerous, and it needs prayerful and thoughtful responses. James understood this when he wrote, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (James 1:19, NIV).

In America, we’re starting to see that the majority of people who are sitting at the table do not agree with us. But instead of listening and being humble, we’ve just gotten louder. (Don’t you hate it when people do that?) This response has created a negative reaction within our culture; and honestly, it hasn’t kept this post-Christian world from emerging.

So what do we do? How will a post-Christian world impact our students? And what’s the way forward?