

THE
(NOT-SO-SECRET)
SECRET TO

REACHING THE NEXT GENERATION



KEVIN DEYOUNG

*The (Not-So-Secret) Secret to
Reaching the Next Generation*

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The (Not-So-Secret)
Secret to Reaching the
Next Generation

Kevin DeYoung

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The (Not-So-Secret) Secret to Reaching the Next Generation

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GETTING A BOOK PUBLISHED is a funny thing. People you've never met suddenly think you're amazing. Other people you've never met (who may leave a review on Amazon) think you're the scum of the earth (and not the good Pauline kind). And lots of people expect you to be an expert in things you don't know much about.

After my first book came out, *Why We're Not Emergent*, pastors and other Christians started asking me how my church reached out to young people. "We don't want to go emergent," the questioner would explain. "We need sound doctrine. We need good preaching. But what do you do in your church to reach the next generation?" My usual response was, "Nothing." I wanted people to

understand that there's nothing fancy or brilliant about our church strategy. We are just trying to be faithful.

But after a while I began to sense that “nothing” was not a terribly helpful answer. So I talked about our campus ministry, and staff structure, and small groups—all of which matter. Yet this answer seemed like more of the same. “If you want to reach young people, you have to have this program or capture this feel or go for this look.” Don't get me wrong; thinking about strategy, structure, and feel is not sinful. I'm thankful for all the people in our church who work hard in these areas. I try to be wise in these areas. But this is not the secret to reaching the next generation.

There have been times when, as a pastor, I've been discouraged by the slowness of numerical growth in my congregation. I've thought: “Why is that church over there so successful? Why did they go from 150 to 1500 in three years?” I've

even been borderline snippy at times: “Lord, if I get to heaven and find out there was some secret musical style or movie clip or new program I was supposed to use in order to be successful, I’m going to feel pretty bummed.” But in my saner moments I’ve come to see two things: (1) It’s more my sinful flesh than my sanctified spirit that wants success. And (2) the secret is that there is no secret.

Reaching the next generation—whether they are outside the church or sitting there bored in your church—is easier and harder than you think. It’s easier because you don’t have to get a degree in postmodern literary theory or go to a bunch of stupid movies. You don’t have to say “sweet” or “bling” or know what LOL or IMHO means. You don’t have to listen to . . . well, whatever people listen to these days. You don’t have to be an influencer on social media, watch whatever HBO show everyone is talking about, or imbibe fancy coffees. You just have to be like Jesus. That’s

it. So the easy part is you don't have to be with it. The hard part is you have to be with *him*. If you walk with God and walk with people, you'll reach the next generation.

Let me unpack that a bit. After thinking through the question for over a year, I've come up with five suggestions for pastors, youth workers, campus staff, and anyone else who wants to pass the faith on to the next generation: Grab them with passion. Win them with love. Hold them with holiness. Challenge them with truth. Amaze them with God.

Grab Them with Passion

Increasingly, people do not go to church out of a sense of cultural obligation. This is true especially among the young. Newer generations will not give Christianity a second thought if it seems lifeless, rote, and uninspiring. They will only get serious about the Christian faith if it seems like

something seriously worth their time. You can have formal services, so long as you do not have formalism. You can have casual services, so long as you do not approach your faith casually. Your services can have a lot of different looks, but young people want to see passion. They want to see us do church and follow Christ like we mean it.

We would do well to pay attention to Romans 12:

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. (vv. 9–11)

We'll be far less likely to lose our young people and far more likely to win some others if the spiritual temperature of our churches is something other than lukewarm. People need to see that God is the all-consuming reality in our lives.

Our sincerity and earnestness in worship matter ten times more than the style we use to display our sincerity and earnestness.

I'm tired of talking about authenticity, as if prattling on about how messed up you are or blogging about your goldfish is a sign of spiritual maturity. We need passion, a zeal fueled by knowledge (Rom. 10:2). Young people want to see that our faith actually matters to us. They are like Ben Franklin when asked why he was going to hear George Whitefield preach. "You don't even believe what he says," people told Franklin. To which he replied, "I know. But he does." If our evangelical faith is boring to us, it will be boring to others. If the gospel is old news to you, it will be dull news to everyone else.

We cannot pass on what we do not feel. Whitefield blasted the church in his day because "the generality of preachers [in New England] talk of an unknown and unfelt Christ. The reason why

congregations have been so dead is because they have had dead men to preach to them.”¹ The next generation—every generation, really—needs to hear the gospel with personal, passionate pleading. There is a time for dialogue, but there is also a time for declaration. People don’t need a lecture or an oration or a discussion from the pulpit on Sunday morning. They need to hear of the mighty deeds of God. And they need to hear the message from someone who not only understands it but has been captured by it.

If we are to grab the next generation with the gospel, we must grab them with passion. And to grab them with passion, we must be gripped with it ourselves. The world needs to see Christians burning, not with self-righteous fury at the sliding morals in our country but with passion for God. As W. E. Sangster put it, “I’m not interested to know if you could set the Thames on fire. What I want to know is this: if I picked you up by the

scruff of your neck and dropped you into the Thames, would it sizzle?”²

Win Them with Love

The evangelical church has spent far too much time trying to figure out cultural engagement and far too little time just trying to love. If we listen to people patiently and give them the gift of our curiosity, we will be plenty engaged. I'm not arguing for purposeful obscurantism. What I'm arguing for is getting people's attention with a force more powerful than the right lingo and the right movie clips.

We spend all this time trying to imitate Gen-Z culture, and to what end? For starters, there is no universal youth culture. Young people do not all think alike, dress alike, or feel comfortable in the same environments. Moreover, even if we could figure out “what the next generation likes,” by the time we figured it out, they probably wouldn't

like it anymore. I'm now old enough to remember when Gen X was the thing, and then targeting Millennials was the holy grail of ministry. Count on it: when the church discovers cool, it won't be cool anymore. I've seen well-meaning Christians try to introduce new music into the church in an effort to reach the young people, only to find out that the "new" music included "Shine, Jesus, Shine" and "Shout to the Lord." Few things are worse than a church trying too hard to be fresh and turning out to be cringeworthy and dated. Better to stick with the hymns and the organ than do "new" music that hasn't aged terribly well or do the new music in an embarrassing way. Singing good new songs well is one thing. But if they're bad or can't be done well, don't force it.

The evangelical church needs to stop preaching the false gospel of cultural identification. Don't spend all your time trying to figure out how to