

# Staying Christian in College

John was the leader of the Christian fellowship during my junior and senior years of high school. Our local church and high school recognized him as a model Christian student. I ran into John in the summer of my third year in college at a graduation party for a mutual friend. He coldly acknowledged my presence and then began drinking his fourth bottle of Corona beer. The girl next to him was obviously his girlfriend and I introduced myself to her. I eventually found out they were now living together and John was no longer attending a church or showing any interest in spiritual things. The high school student of great faith he once was now seemed a very distant memory. I was presently talking to a stranger I did not recognize.

A former student in my youth group named Jeffrey returned home from college and we enjoyed a nice reunion over a dinner at a sports café. He told me about his college experience and his high school friends he had kept in touch with. One in particular seemed to haunt him. While attending a Catholic High School, he and another young man, Drew were the only Christians in his class willing to stand up for their faith in Christ. Drew won several academic scholarships and attended a prestigious college on the East Coast. He majored in philosophy and eventually hoped to become a professor. Jeff met up with him a few months ago and Drew informed him that he was now an atheist. Drew felt he was brainwashed to embrace Christianity at a young age by his family and church. As a result of his college education, he was now able to recognize the foolishness of his childhood religion.

Jill was another former student in my youth group. When I first visited Jill in college, she was involved in a fine Christian fellowship group on campus and attending an evangelical church. Every so often I would get an email from her or she would stop by the church when she was in town. However, the emails eventually came to an end and so did the visits. My emails and letters were never returned and I knew what was happening. Jill was departing from her faith in Christ and embracing a new world of ideas and lifestyles. I don't know what happened to her. I hear from my former students about her now and then and what I hear is not very good. I don't know if it was the arguments against Christianity, or the attraction of the party scene, or a boyfriend with a different set of values that led her astray, probably a combination of these and others.

My stories and those of my students are common. Studies have shown that a high percentage of high school students who profess faith in Christ end up leaving the church after four years of college. The university campuses are littered with students who have departed from the body of Christ. This does not have to be the case. The majority of students I and several of my fellow youth ministry colleagues had the privilege of discipling did more than survive college with their faith intact, they excelled and their faith in Christ was strengthened. Although the university can be an antagonistic place for the Christian, there is nothing a Christian student needs to fear if they are informed and equipped to face the challenge. It is my goal to prepare students and parents sending their child to college to not only survive with their faith intact but to actually excel and strengthen their faith during their years in college. My personal experience along with the experience and wisdom of students and professors from around the country have provided me with a wealth of information to help our students engage their campus for Christ.

## The Worldview on Campus

Many will find the university atmosphere to be hostile toward Christianity. The overall attitude is that Christianity is false and dangerous. College faculty may not speak this but it is often implied in their lectures and attitudes. This does not mean anyone espousing a Christian view will be discriminated against, but one with such a view should expect to be regularly challenged on his position and beliefs. Some professors will be overtly hostile while others will be more tolerant.

Dr. Robert Koons, professor of philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin states,

“It's gotten increasingly hostile towards the Christian faith especially in the classroom. When I was a student the vast majority of teachers were not Christians but a lot of people had the attitude it is basically a good thing and we are not going to attack it or knock it. Nowadays the view among many faculty is not just that Christianity is misguided and false but actually pernicious and

evil and should be stamped out. A student arriving at almost any university or college today is going to encounter that kind attitude from the professor.”<sup>1</sup>

The reason this antagonism exists is that the overall pervading worldview on campus is naturalism, the belief that the material universe is all that there is. As summed up by Carl Sagan’s opening line in his video series *The Cosmos*, “The universe is all that ever was, all that is, and all that ever will be.” The Christian worldview and the naturalist worldview cannot be true at the same time. They present contradictory views on basic issues such as the nature of truth, the origin of and meaning of life, morality, human nature, etc...

Here are some examples. In regards to the nature of truth, the Christian worldview teaches that truth is rooted in the nature of God, embodied in His Son, and divinely revealed in the Bible. Therefore, truth is absolute, narrow, and accurately describes the world around us. Since God has established truth, man discovers truth. The naturalist has an opposite position. Since there is no divine being who created the universe, man is the measure of truth. Truth is not discovered but manufactured by the individual. It is relative to each person and continues to change. Therefore, no one can say they have the absolute truth.

When it comes to the issue of the origin of life, the Christian worldview teaches that God created the universe with a purpose. The naturalist assumes the universe is an accident and that there is no ultimate purpose behind its existence. Therefore, one of the key foundation blocks is the assumption that the theory of Darwinian Evolution is true.

The majority of professors on the campus promote the naturalist position on truth and origins and the biblical position is assumed untrue and often criticized. Therefore if a Christian presents the biblical position on the nature of truth or origins he is presenting an opposing view and should expect to be challenged. Some professors may be quite hostile while others will be tolerant and gentler in their disagreement.

Not only does the student face the challenge from the professor but there is pressure from one’s fellow students to conform and accept the ideas being taught. I remember in physics class the professor was explaining that formations such as the Grand Canyon prove the story of the Genesis flood could not be true. Then he looked at the class and asked if anyone believed in the Genesis Flood account. The pressure I felt to remain silent at that moment as I gazed around the semicircular amphitheatre at the other students was immense. My hands felt like they weighed a ton as I awkwardly raised it and met the glare of the professor and the stares of the students. It was a very intimidating moment.

Four or more years of indoctrination in this often oppressive environment can erode a Christian’s beliefs if he or she is not prepared.

Not only are there opposing ideologies in the classroom, but outside the classroom, one is encouraged to not only tolerate but experiment in different beliefs and lifestyles. Since truth is relative, morality is also relative and there is the pressure to accept all lifestyles. When a Christian student voices his or her position on a particular lifestyle, they will often be condemned as intolerant or narrow-minded. Newly made friends, study partners, a professor or upper classman you admire may advocate a lifestyle contrary to what you believe.

In dealing with these pressures, the Christian begins to ask the question, “Why do I live the way I do?” “Do I really believe the Bible is God’s inspired word?” “Could the Bible be in error? After all, it was written two thousand years ago?”

These challenges are thrust on the young Christian student testing the metal of their faith. For those whose commitment to Christ is solid and their hearts and minds have been equipped, this fiery test can refine and strengthen their faith. However, for too many, they are unprepared and ill equipped. Many are engulfed in the flames or contaminated by false ideas and wander in the barren wasteland of uncertainty for a time.

The encouraging note is this. There are very few issues raised against the Christian faith that have not been answered. In fact, the Christian worldview is the only one that answers the questions of life and is the only position that can be consistently defended and lived out. All other worldviews prove to be false. The more I was challenged, the more I studied and grew in the assurance of my faith every time I found the answers. I discovered Christianity stood up well under any attack.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Koons, “A Professor’s Advice to Students,” interview by Patrick Zukeran on *Evidence and Answers* radio show August 15, 2004.

It is a shame that this is not the experience of all Christians. To help our students experience victory, we must equip them properly.

### **Christians in the College Classroom**

Since students will be challenged academically, they must be prepared to engage and interact with collegiate level issues. A survey by the Josh McDowell Ministry showed that 84% of first year Christian college students cannot intelligently defend or explain their beliefs.<sup>2</sup> In an interview I had with Dr. Robert Koons stated that the three top issues are the relativity of truth, Darwinian Evolution, and the pressure to be tolerant of all views. (Tolerant meaning all worldviews and lifestyles are considered equal and cannot be criticized or challenged). Accepting these ideas can have a corrosive effect on a Christian's faith. All Christians then must be able to answer these challenges with clear and reasonable convictions.

In order for students to gain this skill, a study in Christian apologetics is essential. 1 Peter 3:15 states, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to every man who asks you the reason for the hope you have within." All Christians, especially those on the university campus must know not only what they believe but why they believe.

I encounter too many Christians who say, "I just believe in Jesus." In other words, I believe because I grew up in a Christian home and this is what I was taught and I refuse to consider any arguments that may challenge my beliefs. Unfortunately, this is a misunderstanding of faith and prevents one from being an effective witness on campus. There are solid reasons and compelling evidence for Christianity. The defense of Christianity using well reasoned arguments and compelling evidence was the example of the Apostles and the Christian student is commanded to follow in their steps. The good news is that there are answers to the questions Christians will face. Christians do not need to be afraid to engage in discussions that may pose a challenge to their beliefs. There are numerous good web sites and books on apologetics. My articles are available at [www.evidenceandanswers.com](http://www.evidenceandanswers.com) and my book *Unless I See...* (available at [www.evidenceandanswers.com](http://www.evidenceandanswers.com)) are great places to start.

There are also many good ministries that prepare students for the college campus. An example is the Probe Ministries' *Mind Games* conferences, which are designed for this very purpose. Youth pastors and parents should strongly encourage their students to attend conferences like these.

Then there will be times when a Christian faces questions for which he or she does not have an answer. Fortunately, there are numerous resources they can turn to for help. The Internet is a great asset. Some excellent Christian sites include, [evidenceandanswers.com](http://evidenceandanswers.com), [probe.org](http://probe.org), [carm.org](http://carm.org), [leadershipuniversity.org](http://leadershipuniversity.org), and [boundless.org](http://boundless.org).

Christians must also find other Christian students in their area of study with whom they can discuss and study issues with. Many upper classmen or graduate students can provide useful advice and insight since they probably struggled with the same questions you are encountering. Take time to find who the Christian faculty are. If there is one in your field of study, they can often become an academic and spiritual mentor for you.

When a Christian is mentally prepared, he or she will actually grow stronger in their conviction and actually learn more in the process. Here is an example. I know several Christian students who know and understand Darwin's Theory of Evolution very well, some even better than the naturalist themselves. Why is this the case? Many in learning how to answer the arguments of the Darwinists, were forced to study Darwin's theory in order to provide a rebuttal to the theory. As a result their faith was strengthened for in the process they discovered the weaknesses of the naturalist's arguments and the strength of the Christian position. This would not have happened if their faith had not been challenged.

When the Christian student is prepared, they will not only learn their material but find new insights and build a stronger foundation on which to rest their Christian faith.

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<sup>2</sup> McDowell, Josh, *The New Tolerance* (Wheaton, IL.: Tyndale House Publishing 1998), p. 174.

## **When My Professor Challenges My Faith**

There will be times when Christian students find themselves in the class of a professor who is openly hostile to Christianity. Here is some practical advice for dealing in such situations. First, there is nothing a Christian needs to fear from a professor's arguments against the Bible or the Christian worldview. Christian scholars have answered most objections and their work can be obtained.

In my early years, I felt I needed to answer every objection raised by the professor. Although I felt I was being a courageous witness for Christ, I was actually upsetting the professor and irritating the students in my class. In the end, I was not winning people to Christ but actually pushing people away. A Christian needs to remember the words of 1 Peter 3:15, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..." When we present our case we must do it with a spirit of kindness and respect for the teacher. Being argumentative and disruptive will only anger the professor. However, all teachers enjoy a student who asks questions or shares a different position respectfully and gently. So always be gentle and respectful to your professors and you will gain their appreciation.

Third, a Christian should be a good student even if he disagrees with the position of the professor. There is nothing wrong with learning the arguments of those who disagree. We can learn the material but that does not mean we will embrace the conclusions as true. Mastering the material provides us a stronger platform to speak from when the appropriate time arises to present our case.

Fourth, learn to ask good questions. When done in a respectful way, it shows that we are paying attention and interested in the topic. Teachers appreciate interested students. Asking good questions can even cause a professor to reevaluate his or her position in a non-threatening way and consider another alternative view.

Finally, if you are challenged in front of the class, don't feel as if you have to answer every question that is raised. I often felt that if I did not give a good answer to every question I was asked, I had somehow failed. That is not true. We are all in a learning process and we will never have all the answers to all the questions that are raised. There is nothing wrong with saying, "I don't have a good answer to that but I will do some research on it."

Each class, each professor, and each situation is unique. Therefore Christian students must be in prayer and apply the wisdom taught in the Bible for each situation. Our desire is not to always be right or expose the foolishness of the opposing views. Our goal is to win people to Christ through our humble attitude, our respectful conduct, and reasonable arguments.

In my senior year of college, I had a physics professor who constantly pointed out the flaws of the creationist perspective. After four years of hard lessons in previous classes, I had learned how to apply 1 Peter 3:15 to the situation. In class I respectfully asked questions and wanted to know his view on certain Darwinian theories that were undergoing changes. Although he knew I was a Christian and we disagreed on these issues, I actually became one of his favorite students. He would often call on me in class and give me an opportunity to present the creationist perspective. He would often joke about some of my points but although we disagreed we developed a healthy respect. In fact on several exams, he put my name down alongside other great physicists as a multiple-choice option. After the final exam, we shook hands and he asked me to keep in touch. I realized that an attitude of humility and gentleness with reasoned answers proved to be a stronger witness than a combative spirit.

## **Christians and Campus Life**

During our college experience, we will learn just as much outside the classroom as we will in the classroom. As mentioned earlier, a Christian is often pressured to accept the ideas presented by the naturalist worldview and accept different lifestyles. For this reason a Christian must be prepared for not only what goes on in the classroom but in the arenas outside the classroom as well.

Dr. Jay Budziszewski, professor of political science at the University of Texas at Austin states,

"The university is a total immersion environment of indoctrination. It goes on in student health services, in the dormitory, campus social life, the classroom, in advising, etc... This is the

dominant tendency so you have to have your wits about you at all times, you have to be on the alert at all times.”<sup>3</sup>

College is a time when young people are vulnerable and open to the influence of the culture around them. Usually the student is away from home and alone, isolated from the support structure they had in high school. For this reason, a Christian must find social and spiritual support with an on campus Christian group. Ecclesiastes 4:12 states, “A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.” There is strength in numbers and campus fellowships play a key role in encouraging a Christian student. Christian groups provide accountability, encouragement, prayer support, mentoring relationships, and they are a whole lot of fun.

God designed us to be social creatures. Therefore, we are vulnerable to peer pressure. However, not all peer pressure is negative, it can be used in a positive way as well. We must choose to surround ourselves with friends who will provide a positive influence. It would be wise for students to research their college and find out what Christian groups are on campus and contact them before they arrive. Once you arrive plug in immediately. The longer you procrastinate, the harder it is to plug in to a group as the semester goes on.

If in your research, you discover there is no ministry on campus, it may be wise to consider another school. I have seen too many students select a school that had no strong Christian group on campus. Many felt they would get involved in a church nearby. However, the task of finding a ride to a church every Sunday proved draining. Along with this came the demanding schedule of school, work, and the pressure to conform slowly suffocated the spiritual life of the Christian student. Jesus asked the question in Matthew 16:26, “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” On a similar line I ask, what does it profit anyone to go to a prestigious college and shipwreck your spiritual life?

In my college experience, the Christian fellowship was usually a breath of fresh air. After a week of spiritual and mental skirmishes in the classroom, locker room, and dorms, it was as refreshing as a summer rain to be in the company of men and women who loved God. We could worship, share our week’s events, pray and encourage one another. The friendships I formed in those years remain till this day.

Not only must one have fellowship on campus but one must be plugged into a local church as well. We need to worship with the entire body of Christ. Fellowship with our peer group is great but we need the fellowship with older men, women, and children as well. I am grateful for the mentoring I received from older the men and women in my church. Many significant decisions in my life were made after long talks over dinner with older and wiser adults. These wise men and women steered me in the right direction and kept me from making some costly mistakes.

I hope that you have found this article helpful as you prepare for another year of college. I would encourage you to obtain my CD series, “Staying Christian in College,” in which I interview professors and college students. I also encourage you to purchase the books on the recommendation list below to further prepare yourself for your years in college. College should be a great experience that we all look back on and cherish because we grew in mentally, socially, emotionally and spiritually. It can be all that, if we are prepared for the challenge.

### **Recommended Reading (Put the amazon.com links on these)**

Jay Budziszewski. *How To Stay Christian in College*. Colorado Springs, CO.: NavPress, 1999.

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James Sire. *Chris Chrisman Goes College*. Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

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<sup>3</sup> Jay Budziszewski , “The Christian and Campus Life,” interview by Patrick Zukeran on *Evidence and Answers* radio show August 8, 2004.