

Article reprinted from *CrossWay* Issue Winter 2007 No. 103

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BEING A CHRISTIAN STUDENT TODAY

By Jessica Bowen

All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

Matthew 10:22

The Bible tells us that the gospel frees us from slavery to sin and prepares for us '*an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade*' (1 Peter 1:4). However, there is a cost to be counted. As Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 10:22, '*All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved*'. You might ask, why is it so hard for Christian students to stand firm in the gospel? After all, Christian witness is rarely easy and often brings opposition, aggression and persecution to believers at all levels of the Church and at all stages of life – why single out students? Many students who profess faith find themselves at a crossroads during their university years, where it becomes clear that they cannot live with one foot in the World and one in the Church. As Christ himself says, '*No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other*' (Matthew 6:24). This article is not intended to make excuses for those who choose the World over Christ, nor to justify any lack of activity on the part of Christian students. It is my hope that those reading will gain a better understanding of the pressures faced by Christian students in today's universities, and that this will equip them to support and pray for student ministries across the country. The contents are based on personal observations during my time as a student, and I am more than happy to concede that they may not represent every student's experience.

Not Your 'Average Student'

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Romans 12:2

Students are generally thought to be open-minded and tolerant, but university can be a hostile environment for the young Christian. For one thing, there tends to be a pre-occupation with drunkenness and sexual promiscuity, both minefields for Christians who may not yet be adept at battling temptation in these areas. Furthermore, it can just be rather embarrassing to admit to others that yes, you happen to be a Christian. No, you don't wear socks and sandals, or bash passers-by with your Bible, or have a fixation with tambourines, but there is usually an awkward silence to fill after you admit your faith to fellow students for the first time. Very few people would openly remonstrate you for your beliefs, but in an arena where popularity and public opinion is of paramount importance, and where being a Christian is about the least 'cool' thing you can do, it is perhaps not difficult to understand why some Christian freshers balk at the notion and resign themselves to undercover Christianity for at least the first few weeks of university life. This is often a perilous path however, as Christians who don't prioritise getting involved in their Christian Union (CU) or local church do very often struggle to put Christ first for the rest of their first year, or even the rest of their time as a student. Likewise, it can be easy to find reasons not to go to your Hall's small group Bible study, to CU prayer meetings, or even to church once your workload starts to pile up and friends from your course want to know why you don't want to go out drinking on a Saturday night.

Evangelism

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

Romans 1:16

Once the hurdle of actually telling people you're a Christian has been crossed, the next challenge for the Christian student can often be learning how to tell people the message of the gospel in a way that is relevant to them. This can be difficult, but is not always an uphill struggle, as many unbelieving students are surprisingly open to exploring new ideas whilst at university. For a few, this does actually include doing some research into what Christianity is all about. Some have grown up in Christian homes without having come to faith, and want some time to find out about their family's beliefs away from the eyes of parents and siblings. Others have no Christian ties and have never seriously considered the claims of the gospel, but become interested after observing the lives of Christian students. Some, however, have no belief in God and no desire to talk about spiritual matters, and will respond aggressively if any form of evangelism is attempted. One of the biggest challenges when trying to evangelise at university can be the general belief that academia, particularly philosophy or the sciences, automatically disproves God's existence. In response to this, evangelistic strategy has to involve at some level the deconstruction of certain ideas that have infiltrated society, such as the postmodern viewpoint that we can all believe different things that are equally 'true', and false teachings or misconceptions of what it means to be a Christian, for example, going to church, keeping lots of rules or being a nice (and probably slightly drippy) person. Christian Unions generally approach evangelism in a number of different ways, such as:

- Lunchbars where an outside speaker will tackle a particular apologetic issue and take questions.
- Cold Contact which involves talking to passers-by on campus and trying to start up gospel conversations.
- Christianity Explored courses where particular questions can be discussed in groups facilitated by a leader.
- Events organised in halls of residence that can be tailored to fit the specific needs of the people expected to come.

However, there is also a big emphasis on personal evangelism, which can often be more effective than inviting people to events. The benefit of personal evangelism, whilst time-consuming, confrontational and often more of a long term investment, is that it enables us to reach people who might not otherwise come into contact with Christians or a local church. Christian Unions are usually comprised of people doing a broad range of courses and extra-curricular activities, and who live in a variety of areas on and off campus, and equipping these Christians to witness to their friends, coursemates and neighbours can prove fruitful for the gospel.

Discipleship and the Church

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:25

It is easy to gain the impression that there are no mature Christians in our universities whatsoever, yet this is by no means an accurate portrayal of the situation. One thing that is hugely evident in many Christian Unions is the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those who follow Christ. One

of the greatest privileges of having fellowship with Christian students is seeing the level of spiritual growth in individuals between the first and final years of university. Some students arrive at university having never come to faith, yet are hard at work for the gospel by the time they reach graduation. And in many ways, it is not difficult to flourish spiritually as a student. Many young people's lives and hearts are changed through faithful teaching of the Word, and CU or church-run discipleship programmes such as one-to-one prayer and Bible reading with older Christians ensure that disciplines such as accountability and personal Bible study are learnt and practiced regularly. Simply being a member of the CU can be a great encouragement as there is a real focus on evangelism, and usually quite a few people to do it with.

As a result, graduates can find it a bit of a shock when they leave university and perhaps enter a job where they are the only Christian in their workplace. Many churches are actively involved in evangelism in a number of different fields, but some focus more on discipleship and Christian living compared to the CU who meet up to evangelise, pray for evangelism, discuss evangelism, or encourage evangelism. Unless graduates ensure that they involve themselves in church activities it can be easy to lose the sense of urgency you had when you were a student. While available to those who take the initiative and ask, regular and personal accountability are not centrally organised in a lot of churches, and for ex-students who have been used to meeting up with an older Christian on a weekly basis, it can be difficult to maintain spiritual growth.

Relations with the Student's Union

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. John 1:5

In general, there is very little opposition to UCCF (the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship) and Christian Unions up and down the country, in the sense that most CUs are open and honest about the fact that they exist to tell students the gospel. There have however been recent incidents where UCCF affiliated Christian Unions have lost recognition from the Students' Union. There is a general reluctance among non-Christian students to engage with or encourage evangelistic activity, in the same way that members of the public will often give Street Evangelists a wide berth and avoid eye contact where possible! However, when compared to countries across the world where even preaching the gospel is illegal and brings severe persecution to believers such as violence, imprisonment and even death, the students in this country have relatively little to fear. One of the hardest things for younger Christians can be overcoming peer pressure and being willing to stand out as being different. It is not easy to take the initial leap of faith required, but for anyone who has shunned the standards of the world in order to take up his cross with Christ, it is of immeasurable worth and eternal value. In the words of the late Jim Elliot, *'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose'*.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would encourage you to pray for Christian students as they seek to live and speak for Jesus on university campuses across the country. It has been a great encouragement to me personally to have spent time working alongside fellow Christian students, and to witness the saving and sanctifying power of God's grace at work in the lives of those around me. However, there are many pressures on young Christians to conform to the values set by the world, and they greatly need your support and encouragement as they stand firm in the faith.

Further information about how to pray for Christian students can be found on the UCCF website – www.uccf.org.uk

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