

MICHAEL J. KRUGER

SURVIVING
RELIGION 101

LETTERS TO A CHRISTIAN STUDENT
ON KEEPING THE FAITH IN COLLEGE



“This is a great book! I can’t imagine a college student—skeptic, doubter, Christian, struggler—who wouldn’t benefit from it. In fact, I’m sure almost anyone would be helped by this warm and intelligent apologetic for the Christian faith. I will recommend this book often, after first giving it to my own children.”

Kevin DeYoung, Senior Pastor, Christ Covenant Church, Matthews, North Carolina; Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

“Having sent four children off to large state schools for their college years, I am thankful that Michael Kruger has written this book. With compassion and clarity, he addresses key questions that often precipitate a crisis of faith for young believers. This accessible book equips families for good conversations about challenges to our faith, helping us trade panic and doubt for blessed assurance.”

Jen Wilkin, Bible teacher; author, *Women of the Word; None Like Him;* and *In His Image*

“Every fall, untold thousands of young Christians step onto the college campus and are instantly engaged in the battle of ideas. They need help and encouragement, and Michael Kruger offers a wealth of both in this timely book. The help comes in his serious and faithful confrontation with the big questions that are unavoidable on campus. The encouragement comes from a wise author who is also a father and friend. The chapters are written as letters, and every college student you know needs every letter in this book. Where was this book when I went to college?”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President and Centennial Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“*Surviving Religion 101* is a crucial book for all Christians to read because the world that we inhabit has become the university culture of Michael Kruger’s twenties. An epistolary book composed of letters from a loving Christian father to a faithful daughter entering the university, it invites us to ask crucial questions that help us make our calling and election sure. Are we intellectually prepared to understand and respond to the non-Christian thinking that surrounds us? If we believe that personal conversion and personal piety are enough for the Christian college student to survive, we are dangerously wrong. Our lack of intellectual preparation may explain why so many faithful Christians have had their faith shipwrecked by so-called progressive Christianity, living now with cultural change and social activism as proof of holiness. And for this reason, this book is as necessary for students entering Christian colleges as it is for those entering secular ones. Thanks be to God for this book. May it be used by God to preserve the faith of our college students and bring their unbelieving professors into the kingdom of God.”

Rosaria Butterfield, Former Professor of English, Syracuse University; author, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*

“The move from home to college and those influences that grip the mind from the age of eighteen to twenty-two play an absolutely decisive role in shaping the rest of our lives. The need for us to claim the Christian faith as our own at that point—and not as something we have merely absorbed from our parents or school friends—is exhilarating; but the process of so doing is often conflicted and intellectually, morally, and socially difficult. Michael Kruger is a well-known scholar, but he is also a parent with a vested interest in this issue and someone who himself experienced the range of challenges as a young student. In this clearly written book, he draws on all this to engage with the panoply of challenges that people face at college. While he covers the ‘usual suspects’—the intellectual challenges to faith—what is so brilliant and helpful about this book is the way in which he understands and addresses the form of challenges to faith as they manifest themselves in today’s therapeutic culture. Many students struggle with the claims of their faith because the moral tastes of our modern world make it seem so implausible. Kruger understands this and has written a book that speaks precisely to the kinds of problems that afflict college culture today. Students—and their parents—will find this work most helpful and enlightening.”

Carl R. Trueman, Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies, Grove City College

“I wish I’d had a guide like Michael Kruger when I was in college. There’s no one I trust more to help students navigate the difficult challenges to our faith that arise in both the classroom and also the dorm room.”

Collin Hansen, Vice President for Content and Editor in Chief, The Gospel Coalition; Host, *Gospelbound* podcast

“Today’s Christian students in secular universities face not just intellectual challenges to their faith. Perhaps even more caustic are the social and moral pressures. Michael Kruger ably addresses the intellectual issues, and as a high-powered Bible scholar, he is especially effective in dealing with the objections to God’s word. But he also strengthens students for the more subtle spiritual trials they will encounter, addressing his readers with empathy and grace.”

Gene Edward Veith Jr., author, *Loving God with All Your Mind* and *Post-Christian*

Surviving Religion 101

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*Letters to a Christian Student on
Keeping the Faith in College*

Michael J. Kruger

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*To Emma, John, and Kate,
May this book help you keep your lights shining brightly,
not only in college but for your entire life.
“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good
works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”*

MATTHEW 5:16

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Preface

Sometimes it seems that the book you are most eager to write is the book you never seem to find time to write. For many years now, such has been the case with the present volume. It has always been there, in a sense, in the back of my mind, just waiting patiently to be written. Every so often it would whisper to me, reminding me that it was there. But other projects took precedence, and the whispers grew more and more faint as time went along. Life happened, and soon the mental version of the present book entered a state of quiet hibernation in the recesses of my mind, probably wondering if it would ever be awakened.

Thankfully, through a number of circumstances, this book was awakened from its slumber. Perhaps not surprisingly, the primary reason for the reawakening was a life change relevant to its theme: my daughter Emma was accepted as a student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the very place I had begun my own undergraduate studies exactly thirty years before. As I pondered her departure and the many complex and difficult challenges that awaited her, I remembered afresh my own university experience. As I explain in the introduction below, I was decidedly unprepared for what I would experience in college. And I wanted to make sure that she (and many other Christian college students) would not enter that experience unprepared. At that point, I knew this book *had* to be written. It was time.

But there was an additional reason that this book was stirred from its hibernation. My wife, Melissa, reminded me of its importance. For years, she had been gently prompting me to write my first lay-level book, and she was convinced that this needed to be the one. Sure, academic books were critically important too. But (most) college students were unlikely to read the ones I had written. They needed to hear from a biblical scholar but in a way that was more accessible to them. Given that she is both smarter and wiser than me, her voice is one I should have listened to long before now (along with the one inside my own head). But better late than never.

Now that this volume is complete, I realize that my own tardiness is perhaps part of a larger trend—and truthfully, a larger problem—within evangelicalism. The frequency with which Christian students head off to college and return (often in a short time) with a substantially different worldview than when they left should have occasioned some serious soul-searching within the evangelical church. Indeed, more than soul-searching, it should have occasioned a substantive response to address the problem. But it seems that such a response, except in a few isolated places, is largely yet to come.

As we wait, some profoundly important questions remain on the table. Why are our Christian college students not better prepared intellectually? Is it because, perhaps, our churches in general are not intellectually engaged with their faith? And is that due (at least in part) to having ministers who are also not thinking (and teaching) deeply about the Christian faith? And can that be traced back to the state of the average American seminary? I am sure there are many answers to these questions, and there isn't space to explore them here.

But there are, no doubt, many out there who think the church might need to awaken from its own slumber of sorts. Maybe the church is not asleep in terms of well-run programs or social activity or community engagement (though I am sure all these areas could be contested). But it might just be asleep intellectually. It might be time for a new doctrinal-theological-intellectual awakening in which the church recaptures her rich heritage of the Christian mind—and then considers various ways to pass that heritage down to the next generation.

Strange as it sounds, that means that this present volume is addressing a problem—adequately preparing the next generation to think deeply about its faith—that it cannot, in and of itself, fix. No one should be under the illusion, myself included, that this book will somehow keep Christian college students from deconverting. One solitary book, especially as introductory as this one is, could never address such a complex and multidimensional issue. Nor can it address every intellectual or theological need of the modern Christian college student. But I do hope it can help, at least a little bit. A nudge in the right direction, if you will. If even a solitary college student (somewhere) is helped, then I will count the labors to have been worth it.

Of course, the labors that made this volume possible are not all my own. Thanks are in order. Let me first thank Justin Taylor and the entire team at Crossway for their keen interest in this project. This is now my fourth book with them, and they are always a joy and delight to work with. A number of colleagues and friends have taken the time to read through these chapters (or at least some of them) and offer valuable feedback. In particular, I want to thank James Anderson, Crawford Stevener, Matt Howell, Ethan Brown, Julianna Mink, and Lindsey Harding. They provided many pieces

of feedback, not all of which I accepted. So the blame for the final version lies entirely with me. The remaining shortcomings discovered by the reader (and there are many) probably just mean I should have done a better job listening to them!

Let me also acknowledge that a few small portions of the present material can be found in prior publications. Thanks go to Ligonier Ministries, the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, and the Gospel Coalition for allowing me to reuse this material. It should also be noted that a version of the section on genocide in chapter 14 was published in advance on my website, *Canon Fodder*.

I also want to thank my home church, Christ Covenant Church (PCA) in Matthews, North Carolina. It has been a joy being on staff there (part-time, of course) with my friend Kevin DeYoung. The large youth group there, along with Covenant Day School, has provided a great motivation for this book—it helps when you can actually see the faces of the people you are writing to. May they be the very ones who return home from college with their faith *stronger* than when they left.

Of course, a deep word of gratitude goes to Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS). It has been a profound joy to labor there these last twenty years. If we are to see a recapturing of the Christian mind in American evangelicalism, it surely will begin with seminaries. And on that score, I am convinced that RTS, by God's grace, is doing precisely what is needed to bring about that kind of change. May RTS continue to train men and women who have *both* a mind for truth and a heart for God.

The most profound thanks (at least on a human level) go to my family. My wife, Melissa, deserves tremendous thanks. Her wisdom, insight, and acumen—as both an editor and theologian—regularly amaze me. This book is better not only because of her input but

PREFACE

also because she's my wife. I am a better writer, a better theologian, and especially a better person, because I am married to her.

But this book is written for my children, Emma, John, and Kate, three of the brightest lights in my life. Even if your lights flicker in college, may they never go out. And my prayer is that this book will help your light burn all the brighter, through college and for the rest of your life.

Introduction

In the fall of 1989, I began my freshman year at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill. Like many freshmen, I was excited for the next chapter in my life, eager to explore the new opportunities and experiences that college had to offer. As the oldest state university in the country, and one with a strong academic reputation, UNC was a promising place for my new adventure.

Of course, I knew there would be challenges. College life would not be easy, especially for a Christian. But I had grown up in a solid Christian home, was taught the Bible from a young age, and was a faithful member of my church youth group. And there had been no shortage of advice about my forthcoming college experience—from parents, older friends, and even my youth pastor—all keen to offer warnings about the dangers and pitfalls that awaited me. So I figured I was ready.

I wasn't.

Now, it's not as if I was entirely unprepared. When it came to moral issues (substance abuse, sex, and the party scene) and practical issues (how to get along with my roommate, manage my budget, and stay focused on my studies), I had received plenty of good input. And to be sure, these are important things for any college student to address. Many believers have shipwrecked their faith over such matters.

The problem stemmed not from what I was taught but from

what I wasn't taught. I wasn't prepared in the one area that would matter most in a university environment. I wasn't prepared *intellectually*. And I would soon learn (the hard way) that intellectual preparation was what I needed more than anything.

Of course, in retrospect, it seems a little surprising that I wasn't more intellectually prepared. After all, I was headed to a big university where foundational academic issues would surely arise. So why wasn't I ready? I am sure there were a number of reasons. Although I was a good student in high school, my free time wasn't spent studying Greco-Roman religions or biblical archaeology. Like any teenager, playing sports and hanging out with my friends occupied most of my time.

But my lack of preparation wasn't just because I was a teenager. The Christian culture in which I grew up also played a role. The most important issues in the evangelical world of my youth were *personal conversion* (was I saved?) and *personal piety* (did I live like a Christian?). To be clear, I think these two issues are very important, and I am tremendously grateful to have grown up in churches that did not ignore them (in our current day, many churches need a renewed focus on them). But generally speaking, my theological training stopped there. There was very limited instruction on the Christian worldview—what we believe and why we believe it—and virtually no instruction on how to respond to non-Christian thinking.

In short, I learned to love God with my heart but not with my mind. There was no category (or at least a very limited one) for an intellectual expression of my faith that was rigorous, deep, and well reasoned.

Needless to say, I don't believe my experience as a youth was unique—either back in my day or in the present. While evangelicalism is certainly not monolithic, most would agree that large

segments of the movement today still lack deep doctrinal reflection and intellectual engagement. That could be due to a focus on personal piety and conversion (as in my youth experience), or it could be due to evangelicalism's newer fascination with social action and cultural change. Either way, the development of the Christian mind has not been a priority. Surely, therefore, many Christian college students over the years have found themselves in a position very similar to my own—lots of zeal but little knowledge. Indeed, that reality is part of the motivation for writing this book.

My lack of preparation reached a head in the spring of my freshman year when I took a religion course titled Introduction to the New Testament. The professor was a young scholar who was bright, engaging, funny, and persuasive. It didn't take long to see that he lectured with an eye toward evangelicals, even sharing how he was once an evangelical himself not long ago. He used to believe what we believe, he told us. He used to think like we did. And then during his graduate studies, after deep engagement with the text, he realized he could no longer maintain his evangelical beliefs. The New Testament wasn't inspired after all but was full of mistakes. It wasn't reliable but was filled with made-up stories and fabrications. And its original form wasn't even accessible to us but had been badly corrupted by scribes over years of transmission.

In short, argued my professor, the historical evangelical position on the Bible is intellectually untenable. It is a book not from God but from men. You can believe it with your heart—after all, isn't that what religious people do?—but you cannot (or at least should not) believe it with your mind.

That professor's name was Bart Ehrman.

Although I could not have known it at the time, I was taking a class with a scholar who would become one of Christianity's

loudest and most prolific critics. Ehrman, now the James A. Gray Distinguished Professor at UNC, would go on to publish more than thirty books about the New Testament and early Christianity—five of which became *New York Times* best sellers. And these books, generally speaking, rehearse the same claims about the New Testament I experienced in the university classroom: it is untrustworthy, is filled with mistakes, is poorly transmitted, contains many books that are forgeries, and so on.

Needless to say, such a religion class was a lot for a first-year student to handle. Rattled to the core, I spent that semester wondering whether my Christian beliefs had been a lie. And I was not the only one. I watched as many other Christian students struggled through that class. In an effort to protect their faith, some students just refused to engage with the material—keeping their religious beliefs cut off from their studies. Others looked for a way to mix their faith with what they were being taught, creating a “hybrid” view of sorts. Why can’t 2 Peter be a forgery and still be the word of God? And still others used the class as the opportunity to abandon their belief in Christianity entirely, pursuing new religious, intellectual, and moral pathways.

For myself, I decided to see if there were answers to Ehrman’s questions. Diving deeply into the class material and historical sources, I began to probe into the New Testament’s origins and reliability, and whether earlier Christians had ever addressed the issues Ehrman raised. Surely, these challenges were not new (though they were new to me). I quickly discovered that Christians *had* addressed these issues—even from the earliest days of the Christian movement—and had done so with depth, precision, and intellectual rigor. In short, there was a whole other side to the argument, even though that other side was never discussed or explored in class.

Simply learning that there were answers to Ehrman's claims was not the end of my intellectual journey. Sure, it was good to know that my Christian faith did not require me to stick my head in the sand every time someone asked tough historical questions. But I found myself genuinely fascinated with this new world I had discovered. I wanted to know more—more about the origins of the New Testament, more about its transmission, and more about its formation into a twenty-seven-book collection. Thus, in a rather ironic turn, my experience in this university religion class set me on a new intellectual trajectory, one that eventually led me to become a New Testament scholar myself, focused on these very same historical issues.

But for many college students, the story ends very differently. Confronted by an intellectual world for which they are not prepared, Christian college students are leaving behind their faith in worrying numbers.¹ And Christian parents feel this tension acutely. Having labored to raise their children in a Christian environment and with Christian beliefs—often with great financial cost—those same children often return, after only a single year of college, with very different beliefs from what they held when they left.

Of course, most modern universities will not see this as a problem. On the contrary, they might argue that this is exactly what the university experience is designed to do, namely, expose students to new beliefs and ideas that they have not yet considered. And if that leads to a change in their belief system, then so be it. After all, that is the price of an open intellectual environment with the free exchange of ideas. Beyond this, some in the university system would even celebrate such intellectual shifts as a form of liberation. In their minds, they are setting these students free from the unfortunate religious “indoctrination” they experienced as youths.

In short, the universities are doing these Christian students a favor.

On the surface, all that sounds eminently reasonable. Who's not for intellectual freedom? The question, however, is whether modern universities are actually exhibiting the intellectual freedom they claim to value. Are they genuinely interested in presenting both sides of the argument? As one sample area, consider the way modern universities represent political views. A recent article by Cass Sunstein, professor at Harvard Law School, highlights the fact that professors at the top major universities are overwhelmingly Democrat in terms of political affiliation, vastly outnumbering Republicans.² At some of the most liberal colleges and universities (e.g., Wellesley, Swarthmore, Williams), this ratio was a mind-blowing 120 to 1. Sunstein, a Democrat himself, laments this fact, calling it "genuinely disturbing." He states, "Students are less likely to get a good education, and faculty members are likely to learn less from one another, if there is a prevailing political orthodoxy. Students and faculty might end up in a kind of information cocoon."³

Now, this present volume is not about politics, nor am I picking sides in the Democrat versus Republican debate. I mention these statistics on political affiliation only to illustrate a simple point: university students are not, generally speaking, hearing both sides of arguments. It seems that modern universities are for every sort of diversity (gender, race, ethnicity) except diversity of ideas. And nowhere is this trend more evident than in religion classes. Sunstein points out that when it comes to individual academic departments, religion faculties have some of the most lopsided ratios of liberals to conservatives, exceeding 70 to 1.

Indeed, as noted above, my Introduction to the New Testament class was decidedly one-sided. If my own upbringing was religious

indoctrination, then one might argue that this class was just another form of religious indoctrination—only in the opposite direction. The class was not so much a rejection of absolutism as the mere exchange of one set of absolute beliefs for another.

Needless to say, it is difficult for the average nineteen-year-old freshman to recognize that this is what is happening in his or her university class. Students often see the clash before them as one between religion and science. On the one side are those dogmatic, biased religious folk, conditioned (even blinded) by their faith commitments. On the other side are neutral, unbiased, open-minded historians—trained in the finest universities in the world—who are merely giving you the “facts.” Given that framework, it is not hard to imagine why most students respond the way they do.

Unfortunately, the ideological state of the modern university is unlikely to change anytime soon. In the meantime, Christians need to think more seriously about how to prepare the next generation of believers to handle the intellectual challenges of the university environment (and beyond). We need to do more than prepare them morally and practically; we need to train their minds to engage effectively with an unbelieving world.

So how’s that going to happen? Ultimately, it will require a macro-shift in the broader evangelical world, moving beyond just pietism and revivalism and recapturing the deep historical and intellectual roots of the Christian faith. And then, that same evangelical world must think carefully and critically about how we pass that robust version of the faith to the next generation. Admittedly, that sounds like an overwhelming challenge. But we can take baby steps in that direction. This book is designed to be one of those baby steps.

While there are already numerous books that offer practical guidance and advice to Christian college students, very few directly

engage the intellectual minefield they face. Today's college students need more than dating advice and tips on how to make good grades. They need a framework for dealing with the flood—no, tsunami—of intellectual attacks they will receive from their professors, classmates, and campus organizations. Sure, Christians outside college face similar challenges from our culture. But the intensity and concentration of these challenges in a university environment is unmatched. And college students are dealing with these immense pressures at a relatively young age. That's why the intellectual preparation of Christian students for college must be a priority.

This present volume is designed to help in that preparation by tackling not only the key issues in biblical scholarship but also the flashpoints of our cultural conversations in a manner that is accessible to college students (and, hopefully, even seniors in high school). My desire is that *Surviving Religion 101* provides an intellectual pathway for Christian students so that they can keep their faith without sacrificing their intellectual integrity.

As indicated above, this issue is personal to me because of what I experienced as a college student. But it is also personal for another reason. In 2019, my daughter Emma left for college. And where did she go? The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. So exactly thirty years after I went to UNC, it seems things have come full circle. Who knows, maybe she'll even have Ehrman as a professor. Although she has already left for college, I have written this book for her and for my other two children, John and Kate, who will soon follow. My hope is that it helps them realize that belief in Christianity is not just intellectually defensible but also intellectually *satisfying* at the deepest of levels. Yes, we believe God with our hearts. But we can also enjoy him with our minds.

Because my daughter Emma is now in college, I have structured each chapter as a “letter” to her. And each letter will answer a question (or series of questions) that I know she will face. Such a format is designed to keep the book both personal and accessible—rather than an unceremonious dumping of facts on the unsuspecting reader, bolstered by a sea of footnotes. I am not writing for scholars, nor even for skeptics. I am writing for students.

Of course, I am not under the impression that merely reading this book will answer every possible question a college student may have. Nor do I think any single book (or even many books) could prepare students to go toe-to-toe with their college professor. No, the intent here is much more modest. Like any complex task, eventually you have to take the first step, even if it’s a little one. This volume is designed to be that first step, an initial orientation for Christian students about the challenges they face and (hopefully) a reason for them to be confident that there are answers to their questions, even if they don’t yet have them.

Or as the title suggests, this book is about *surviving*—with faith intact—one’s university experience. Now, that may seem like a strange goal, perhaps one that is far too modest. Don’t we, as Christians, want to do *more* than survive? Don’t we want to make an impact and change the world while in college? Sure, but that’s not where one starts. Instead, you start by not stopping. By not giving up. By surviving. You can’t “change the world” for Christ if you no longer believe in Christ or walk with Christ.

So let us turn now to the challenges in the “letters” that follow. My prayer is that these are an encouragement to my daughter Emma, to John and Kate, and to the many other college students who read them in the years to come.

I'm Worried about Being a Christian at a Secular University— How Will I Survive?

To say that college does something to the average student's religion is to state a truth which will be conceded by anyone who has given the matter a moment's thought.

PHILIP WENTWORTH, *THE ATLANTIC*, 1932

Dearest Emma,

Move-in day was really tough. And I don't just mean hauling all your stuff up five flights of stairs to your dorm room! It seems like only yesterday that I held you in my arms as a newborn baby and welcomed you into the world. I can still remember leaving the hospital and thinking to myself, *Do we just get to take her home? Aren't there instructions on how to do this?* And now, eighteen years later, you are all grown up and on your own. As we drove away from the campus, I thought to myself, *Do we just leave her there? Aren't there instructions on how to do this?* Mom and I shed many tears that day.

I know that move-in day was also hard for you. On the drive to Chapel Hill, I could see your anxiety growing with each passing mile. And that's understandable. Going to college is a big transition with much to worry about: making friends, fitting in, picking a major, keeping up your grades. Plus, you will be doing all this on your own—without anyone looking over your shoulder. It all seems so new and strange.

But most of all, I know that you are wondering what it will be like as a Christian at a big secular university. You are not naive about the way our modern world views your faith. And you know that what you believe will be challenged (even ridiculed) in profound ways by both professors and students. On top of this, you have already seen older Christian friends who have gone off to college and have begun to waver in what they believe. Some have even abandoned their faith entirely.

These sorts of concerns are bound to produce some angst in any first-year student. So what can you do to survive this crazy new world of college? Here are some initial thoughts for you as you begin your new life away from home.

It's a Dangerous Business

As you think about the challenges of college life, you may begin to wonder whether this whole issue is a bit overblown. Aren't we being a little alarmist when we paint college as this "dangerous" place for Christians? Aren't we just scaring parents with exaggerated stories about how big, evil universities will devour their children? Don't many Christians have a wonderful college experience and leave with their faith fully intact? And aren't some faculty members themselves committed Christians?

Absolutely! There's a sense in which the answer to all these

questions is yes. I don't want you to enter college with an overly pessimistic view of your situation, convinced that everyone is out to get you and paralyzed by a martyr complex. Like the group of kids in the movie *The Sandlot* (which you loved as a child), sometimes we can create monsters that aren't really there. In their minds, behind their baseball field, the junkyard dog—which they called “The Beast”—was six feet tall, roared like a lion, and shook the ground when he walked. It's only at the end of the film, when they meet him face-to-face, that they realize they've had overactive imaginations. He's just an ordinary dog after all.

So we need to be careful not to see monsters around every corner. Please know that your non-Christian professors are not Darth Vader, and your fellow students are not part of the Inquisition looking for evangelical Protestants to string up.

At the same time, we must also guard against the opposite mistake. If unbridled suspicion is a problem on the one side, then a naive overconfidence may be a problem on the other. Some young Christians enter college absolutely convinced that nothing can shake their faith—they are mature enough, wise enough, and theologically astute enough to handle whatever comes their way (so they think). There's nothing to worry about, they tell themselves. Falling away is always something that happens to *other* people.

But this is precisely the kind of thinking you need to avoid, Emma. It both underestimates the real pitfalls of the university environment and overestimates your own strength and ability. As for the pitfalls, don't minimize them. Serious intellectual challenges are coming your way—arguments you've never heard, facts you didn't know, issues you've never considered. Beyond this, such challenges are being delivered by professors who are bright, persuasive, compelling, and eminently likable. Even more, you will hear

these challenges repeated over and over (sometimes to the point of exhaustion) by your fellow students. And if you don't change your views, you might be regarded as narrow minded, intolerant, arrogant, and even hateful.

So are you ready for that? I suppose most eighteen-year-olds are not. And as mature as you are, Emma, you, too, need to recognize your own weaknesses and vulnerabilities. In principle, *all of us* are susceptible to falling away. That's why the Bible repeatedly warns us that we must persevere to the end. We must keep running the race and not give up.

When you were much younger, I used to read *The Lord of the Rings* aloud to you and John and Kate. The three of you sat together, listening to every word. You might remember that in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo was a young hobbit always eager to go on adventures with his uncle Bilbo. But Frodo recalls Bilbo's wise advice to him about such adventures. Yes, there are beautiful mountains and wonderful treasures. But there are also real dangers and frightening enemies: "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. . . . You step into the Road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to."¹

So what does all this mean? It means that as you head off to college as a believer, you need to realize that it can be "a dangerous business." Don't take your spiritual health lightly while you're there. You need to be serious about the potential challenges you will face, while at the same time not living in fear and worry. Simply put, "Be on your guard" (1 Cor. 16:13 NIV).

Of Course You Don't Have All the Answers!

As you jump into the intellectual fray at UNC, it will quickly become clear that there are many questions you don't know how

to answer. Maybe it will be questions about God (If God is good, then why is there so much evil in the world?) or questions about the Bible (How can you believe in inspiration if there are contradictions in the Gospel accounts?) or even questions about science (Hasn't genetics proved that the human race did not originate with just two people?).

Whatever the question might be, it can be very uncomfortable not having an answer. The intellectual give-and-take of a big university environment can be intimidating. If you get caught on the losing end of an exchange with your professor or classmates (whatever that may mean), you might feel silly or embarrassed. It might make you withdraw from future conversations or even lead you to doubt what you believe.

But should your lack of answers lead to this sort of reaction? Not at all. First, you need to give yourself a break. Most eighteen-year-old Christians are not fully equipped to answer the barrage of complex (and aggressive) questions coming their way, nor is it reasonable to expect them to be. What first-year student is able to go toe-to-toe with a professor? Of course you won't have answers to every question! Why would you ever think you should or could? Don't hold yourself to an unrealistic standard.

Second, not having an answer does not affect the truth of what you believe. Your beliefs can be absolutely correct, even if you cannot explain or defend them. Consider other beliefs you might hold. If asked whether you believe humans landed on the moon in 1969, I imagine you would say you do. But if you happened to strike up a conversation with a moon-landing denier (these folks are more common than you think) who shared all his well-crafted objections and pressed you to defend your beliefs, you would probably have very few answers. But surely you wouldn't

abandon that belief just because you were stumped. Your belief would still be correct.

The fact is that most things we believe are like this. We haven't had time to *personally investigate* each and every belief we hold—instead, we rely on other authorities. A person might believe that $E=mc^2$, that Constantine won the Battle of Milvian Bridge, and that her grandfather was born in George, Iowa. But few could defend these beliefs on the spot if pressed by a determined critic who was eager to question everything.

Third, don't confuse not having an answer with there not being an answer. The two are not the same. Even if *you* don't have answers to difficult questions, that does not mean there are none. Indeed, you should know that most of the objections you will hear are old news (even though they are often presented as if no one had ever thought of them before). A little research will show that Christians have been wrestling with these issues—and offering coherent answers to these issues—for generations. In fact, some of these objections were answered in the first few centuries of the early Christian movement. Moreover, there are many Christian scholars out there who have provided comprehensive answers to these questions (though secular professors often refuse to discuss those arguments).

Here's the big point: you're not going to be able to answer every objection to Christianity that you hear. And that's okay. You just need to be ready for that. It's not a reason to doubt your faith.

What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger

As hard as it is to endure severe opposition to what you believe, there is an upside. To quote Kelly Clarkson, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger" (though, as a side note, this was originally said

by Friedrich Nietzsche). What does this mean? It means opposition can actually be a blessing. As with a weight lifter or professional athlete, the pain of resistance can actually create more strength and endurance.

Think back for a moment to your soccer-playing days. It was the end of practice that was always the most miserable because your coach would make you run “suicides”—a near-endless amount of sprinting back and forth across the field until your lungs were on fire and you felt like throwing up. At first glance, the whole scene seems sadistic. It might look as if your coach were out to destroy you. After all, he was inflicting severe pain on you! But as a player, you knew better. You knew your coach was just preparing you for the state tournament at the end of the season, when every last drop of endurance would be needed.

In a similar way, the opposition you endure at UNC can, as strange as it sounds, be a tremendous benefit. It can shape you into a better, fitter believer who can serve God in unique and exceptional ways—ways that would be impossible in an opposition-free life.

For one, opposition will force you to sharpen your thinking. It will force you to find the answers to the tough questions. It will push you to be a better theologian. Truth be told, most Christians are never really required to do this. We live most of our lives in a Christian bubble, surrounded by Christian friends in our Christian subculture. It’s very peaceful and comfortable. But comfort never produces good soldiers. And that’s what we are called to be. Paul said, “Share in suffering as a good *soldier* of Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:3).

I found this to be true in my own experience at UNC. As I’ve told you before, I had Bart Ehrman as a professor when I was a

freshman. I didn't know it at the time, but I was taking a New Testament class with a professor who would become one of the leading, and most vocal, critics of Christianity, authoring over thirty books. It was a painful experience for me as I heard attack after attack on what I believed.

But God used it to strengthen me. The opposition didn't make me quit (by God's grace) but instead made me pursue my faith with more vigor. I sought out the answers to my questions. I chased down the resources that could help me respond to Ehrman's claims. I read everything I could get my hands on about the origins of the New Testament. In many ways, it was a means of survival. I didn't want to end up like so many others who abandoned their faith.

Let this be true of you, Emma. Let all these questions drive you to pursue the answers. Be a reader. Be a studier. Be someone who dives into the deep issues of your faith. And here's the payoff: not only will that bless your own soul, but it will bless many, many other people as you help them work through challenging intellectual issues. You can become a resource for others.

The Christians in the earliest generations of the church also learned this lesson. In the second century in particular, Christians faced an unprecedented barrage of attacks. Some of those attacks came from the intellectual elites of the Greco-Roman world, heaping scorn and ridicule on the burgeoning Christian movement. In their eyes, Christianity was intellectually lacking and philosophically deficient, attracting only the uneducated and gullible (especially, they argued, women and children).

But attacks also came from within. Numerous heretical groups arose, questioning foundational doctrines of Christianity and amassing an impressive number of followers. In particular, Gnosticism was a serious threat. The Gnostics argued that the physical

world was the creation of a false god and that Jesus, therefore, could not have really come in the flesh. Moreover, they argued that “salvation” came not through the work of Christ on the cross but through a special knowledge given to only certain enlightened ones.

Such challenges—from both inside and outside—created a bit of a crisis in the early Christian movement. How would they respond? Would the infant church even survive? And here we see again that God uses challenges and opposition for good ends. Not only did the early church survive, it thrived. How? It dug deep and pursued these tough theological and intellectual questions. The earliest Christian leaders learned how to express their faith in better ways, clearer ways—ways that would distinguish it from (and would refute) the various heretical groups around them.

In short, opposition made early Christians better theologians, better defenders of the faith, and better evangelists. Such theological reflection and nuance culminated in the beautiful and unmatched Nicene Creed of AD 325, where the church expressed its commitment to Christ as both God and man united in one person, over against opposing views.

But opposition to your faith will change you in another way. In addition to sharpening your mind, it will also hone your character. It will force you to trust the Lord in new and even radical ways—to lean on him and not your own understanding. It will give you a patient spirit and calmness under pressure. And most of all, it ought to give you love, compassion, and sympathy for those who don't know Christ.

Here's the big point: don't view opposition only in negative terms; view it as an *opportunity* to grow as a Christian, so that you might be better equipped to build up your fellow believers and reach non-Christians more effectively.

Band of Brothers (or Sisters!)

I can still remember the first time I saw the World War II film *Saving Private Ryan*. The opening scene of the D-Day invasion was so profoundly gut-wrenching, I almost had to leave the theater. It's the first time I think I ever really got a taste (just a taste, mind you) of the horrors of war. I could barely watch as those brave US soldiers stormed the beaches of Normandy, knowing it was almost certain they would die. And at Omaha Beach, most of them did. The Nazis were dug in at elevated positions, forcing the Americans to charge forward, unprotected on the open beach, into a barrage of bullets and explosions.

When faced with such incredible heroism, an obvious question comes up. What enabled these soldiers to be so brave? What could explain a person's willingness to give his life so courageously?

I suppose there are many answers to those questions. But as the movie wore on, one answer became quite clear. After the Normandy invasion, the movie tracks a small band of soldiers who take a harrowing journey through war-torn France to find a solitary soldier, Private Ryan, and bring him home. Ryan had lost his three brothers, and the State Department didn't want his mother to lose her fourth, and last, son.

After Private Ryan is finally found, it turns out he doesn't want to leave. He wants to stay and fight. And here's why: "You can tell [my mother] that when you found me, I was with the only brothers I had left. And that there was no way I was deserting them. I think she'd understand that."

Here's the answer (or at least one of the answers) for how soldiers could exhibit such unimaginable bravery: *they didn't do it alone*. For Private Ryan, it was the camaraderie, the brotherhood, the friendship—centered on a common goal—that made him so willing to

give his life. And the same could be said of the countless soldiers who died on Omaha Beach. They could do things together that they could never (and would never) do apart. They were a band of brothers.

The same is true of the Christian life, Emma. You are not headed to the beaches of Normandy, of course. But the Christian life is a battle, and you are one of its soldiers. And the university environment can be a hot war zone with lots of enemy fire. So how do you survive it? Don't go it alone. You've got to find a band of brothers and sisters to walk together with you.

First and foremost, that involves finding a good local church. You need a church home where you can be a member, get involved, and sit under the preaching and teaching of the word of God. There are lots of church options, but make sure to find one that believes in the gospel message—we are saved by grace alone through faith in Christ alone—and that affirms the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

Similarly, you need to find a good campus ministry to plug into. This won't replace the local church, but it will be a vital part of your on-campus life and fellowship. Here's where you can meet fellow believers who can walk with you through the ups and downs of college life. Their encouragement can keep you going, especially when things are difficult. As the book of Hebrews says,

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, *not neglecting to meet together*, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Heb. 10:24–25)

And here's what you have to look forward to. Many of those friends—your band of brothers and sisters in college—will be dear

friends for the rest of your life. Some of the strongest bonds are formed in the field of battle. They are a blessing not just for four years but maybe for forty years!



Emma, we are so excited to see you head off to college. I know it's a time of great anticipation and fear mixed together. But I know you are ready. You are on your guard because you know, as Bilbo said, that the college adventure can be "a dangerous business." Don't panic when you don't have the answers—they're out there even if you don't yet have them. And most of all, stick with your band of friends who can spur you on to love and good deeds.

Our prayer is for you to stay faithful not only in college but throughout your whole life, so that you can say with Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7).

Love,

Dad

“I can’t imagine a college student—skeptical, doubter, Christian, struggler—who wouldn’t benefit from this book.”

KEVIN DEYOUNG



For many young adults, the college years are an exciting period of self-discovery full of new relationships, new independence, and new experiences. Yet college can also be a time of personal testing and intense questioning—especially for Christian students confronted with various challenges to Christianity and the Bible for the first time.

Drawing on years of experience as a biblical scholar, Michael Kruger addresses common objections to the Christian faith—the exclusivity of Christianity, Christian intolerance, homosexuality, hell, the problem of evil, science, miracles, and the reliability of the Bible.

If you’re a student dealing with doubt or wrestling with objections to Christianity from fellow students and professors alike, this book will equip you to engage secular challenges with intellectual honesty, compassion, and confidence—and ultimately graduate college with your faith intact.

“I wish I’d had a guide like Michael Kruger when I was in college.”

Collin Hansen

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“A crucial book for all Christians to read.”

Rosaria Butterfield

Former Professor of English, Syracuse University; author, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*

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