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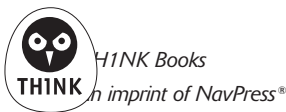
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HOW TO STAY CHRISTIAN IN COLLEGE

J. Budziszewski



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To my students

For my Lord

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I've written about some of the subjects in this book before, and I'd be a heel not to thank the journals in which these thoughts have appeared. My own story, in chapter 1, is condensed from a talk that has previously been published at greater length in *Real Issue* and *Re:Generation Quarterly* and that has also appeared in *The Revenge of Conscience* (Spence Publishing, 1999). Several paragraphs of chapter 4 have been borrowed with only slight changes from "Opening Your Neighbors' Eyes," *Citizen*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (January 1998), and "What We Can't Not Know," *Human Life Review*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Fall 1996). Chapter 7 adapts ideas that are much more fully expressed in "The Problem with Liberalism" and "The Problem with Conservatism," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, Nos. 61 and 62 (March and April 1996). Because *First Things* is online, anyone who would like to see the full text of the liberalism and conservatism articles can find them at <http://www.firstthings.com>.

My deepest debt is to my Lord Jesus Christ, who found me more than twenty years ago in the Enemy's camp and gave me a new heart and mind.

COLLEGE AS ANOTHER WORLD

WHY IS THIS BOOK NECESSARY?

One day a student approached me after class. She seemed to be close to tears. "In lecture today, you mentioned that you're a Christian," she said. "I've never heard that from any other professor, and every day I spend at this university, I feel my faith is under attack."

I knew just how she felt. Modern institutions of higher learning have changed dramatically in the last half-century, and from the moment students set foot on the contemporary campus, their Christian convictions and discipline are assaulted. "Faith is just a crutch," they hear from friends and teachers. "The Bible is just mythology." "Christianity is judgmental and intolerant." "Morality is different everywhere." "Everyone must find his own truth." "I can be good without God." "Jesus was just a man who died." No wonder so many lose their faith! Soon after my own entrance into college I lost my faith myself, and I didn't find my way back to Jesus Christ until a dozen years later. This experience, along with more than twenty years of teaching, has given me a heart for the struggles of all Christian students on the modern campus.

But here's the good news: Higher education doesn't have to be a wasteland. With a little help, Christian students can find college a means of God's blessing instead of a spiritual snare. Thousands do. In fact, during their college years, thousands of students rediscover Christ or find Him for the first time.

That's my wish for you.

MY OWN STORY

Twenty-four years ago, I stood before the government department at the University of Texas to give my “here’s-why-you-should-hire-me” lecture. Fresh out of grad school, I wanted to teach about ethics and politics, so I was showing the faculty my stuff. What did I tell them? First, that we human beings just make up our own definitions of what’s good and what’s evil; second, that we aren’t responsible for what we do anyway. For that, I was hired to teach.

I hadn’t always believed these things. At the age of ten I had committed my life to Jesus Christ and was baptized. As a teenager I had not been a mature believer, but I had certainly been an enthusiastic one. Why had I fallen away from faith? For many reasons. One was that I had been caught up in the radical politics popular among many students in the late sixties and early seventies. I had my own ideas about redeeming the world, and my politics became a kind of substitute religion. During my student years I had also committed certain sins that I didn’t want to repent. Because the presence of God made me more and more uncomfortable, I began looking for reasons to believe He didn’t exist. Then again, once I lost hold of God, things started going wrong in my life, and disbelieving in Him seemed a good way to get back at Him. Now of course if God didn’t exist, then I couldn’t get back at Him, so this may seem a strange sort of disbelief. But most disbelief is like that.

Another reason I lost my faith was that I’d heard all through school that human beings had created God in their image and that even the most basic ideas about good and evil are arbitrary. During graduate school I had fallen under the spell of the nineteenth-century German writer Friedrich Nietzsche, the originator of the slogan “God is dead.” If anything, I was more Nietzschean than Nietzsche. Whereas he thought that given the meaninglessness of things, nothing was left but

to laugh or be silent, I recognized that not even laughter or silence was left. One had no reason to do or not do anything at all. This is a terrible thing to believe, but like Nietzsche, I imagined myself one of the few who could believe such things—who could walk the rocky heights where the air is thin and cold.

All of this gives you a clue to the main reason I lost faith in God: sheer, mulish pride. I didn't want God to be God; I wanted J. Budziszewski to be God. I see that now. But I didn't see that then.

I now believe that without God, everything goes wrong. This is true even of the good things He's given us, such as our minds. One of the good things I've been given is a stronger than average mind. I don't make the observation to boast; human beings are given diverse gifts to serve Him in diverse ways. The problem is that a strong mind refusing the call to serve God has its own way of going wrong. When some people flee from God, they might rob and kill. When others flee from God, they may do a lot of drugs and have a lot of sex. When I fled from God I didn't do any of those things; my way of fleeing was to get stupid. Though it always comes as a surprise to intellectuals, there are some forms of stupidity that you must be highly intelligent and educated to commit. God keeps them in His arsenal to pull down mulish pride, and I discovered them all.

It was agony. You can't imagine what a person has to do to himself—well, if you're like I was, perhaps you can—to go on believing the sort of nonsense I believed to shut out belief in the gospel. Paul said that the knowledge of God's existence is plain from what He has made (see Romans 1:19-20) and that the knowledge of His laws is "written on [our] hearts, [our] consciences also bearing witness" (Romans 2:15). That means that so long as we have minds, we can't not know these things. Well, I was unusually determined not to know them; therefore

I had to destroy my mind. For example, I loved my wife and children, but I was determined to regard this love as merely a subjective preference with no real and objective value. Visualize a man opening up the access panels of his mind and pulling out all the components that have God's image stamped on them. The problem is that they all have God's image stamped on them, so the man can never stop. No matter how much he pulls out, there's still more to pull. I was that man.

How then did God bring me back? I came, over time, to feel a greater and greater horror about myself—an overpowering sense that my condition was terribly wrong. Finally it occurred to me to wonder why I should feel horror if the difference between the wonderful and the horrible was just something we humans make up. I had to admit that there was a difference between the wonderful and the horrible after all, and that meant that there had to exist a wonderful, of which the horrible was the absence. So my walls of self-deception collapsed all at once.

That was when I became aware again of the Savior I had deserted during college. Astonishingly, though I had abandoned Him, He had never abandoned me. I now believe He drew me back to Himself just in time. There is a point of no return, and I was almost there. I had been pulling out one component after another, and I had nearly gotten to the motherboard.

The next few years after my conversion were like being in a dark attic—one I had been in for a long time but in which shutter after shutter was being thrown back so that great shafts of light began to stream in and illuminate the dusty corners. I recovered whole memories, whole feelings, whole ways of understanding that I had blocked out. As I look back, I am in awe that God has permitted me to make any contribution to His kingdom at all. But He promises that if only the rebel turns to

Jesus Christ in repentant faith—giving up claims of self-ownership and allowing this Jesus, this Christ, the run of the house—He will redeem everything there is in it. And He did.

Many of my students tell me they struggle with the same dark influences that I once felt in college. I hope that by writing this book I may encourage you to seek the light—better yet, to avoid the darkness altogether.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

I've written this book for three groups of people. The first group is Christian students who plan to go to college. The second is Christian students who are there already. My goal is to prepare, equip, and encourage *you* to meet the spiritual challenges of college life. Few new college students are ready for them.

The third group is the parents of students in the other two groups. My goal is to help *them* understand what their children are going through in college so they can offer more effective spiritual support. Maybe they never went to college. Maybe they went but can't remember what it was like. Maybe they remember, but they've heard that college today is different than it was when they were there.

This chapter gives a quick overview of what to expect in college. We'll go into some of these matters more closely later on.

ALL ALONE

College means leaving many people behind and going into a world of strangers. Here's what two college students say about the experience:

When I entered college I did not know what to expect. I was alone, I discovered, more alone than I thought [I would be]. At first my roommate and I got along, but that lasted about two weeks. Then I began to get more and more frustrated. I had left a boyfriend in California, and that complicated things.

My first two years at college were probably some of the most stressful of my life, and I thought high school was stressful! But I also know that I have done the most growing emotionally, physically (dorm food = fattening), mentally, and most important spiritually, through the trials, the missing people, and the loneliness.

If you know some of the people at your college already, you might think it won't be that way. For example, maybe some of your high school friends graduated a year ahead of you and went to the same college you're planning to attend. They were glad to hang around with you when they came home for summer break, so you're thinking they'll be glad to hang around with you when you show up on campus.

Things might work out that way, but they might not. Chances are your old friends will seem different on campus than they do in your hometown. For one thing, they'll probably be busier. For another, during their year at college they will have formed new interests that you don't share and joined new social circles to which you're a stranger. They may be less interested in spending time with you than they were at home. Or they may be just as interested but act differently than they did at home. You weren't expecting their new ways because during summer break they fell back into their old ones. Changes like these may make it hard to get your old footing back with them. You know them—*sure* you know them!—but somehow they're strangers too.

Another reason you might think "aloneness" won't be an issue is that some of your friends are going to college *with* you: They've graduated from high school at the same time and chosen the same college. But you may be surprised how this works out too. High school is a smaller world than college. At college there are more people, more groups, and more activities. There are also more things to learn and more opportunities to make mistakes. Sometimes old friends grow closer at college, but sometimes they grow apart. There's no way to predict what will happen in advance.

So one way or another, to one degree or another, aloneness will be an issue for you at college. Not everyone reacts to aloneness in the same way. For example, some feel lonely, while others don't (or say they don't). Whether lonely or not, everyone is affected *somehow* by aloneness because we were designed to be with others. God said it wasn't good for Adam to be alone, and it isn't good for us either.

The important thing is to seek and build new interests and attachments in a careful, discerning way. You don't need to panic. College is full of social opportunities, and most students are more ready to form friendships than at any other time in their lives. This book devotes a whole chapter, and parts of several others, to campus social life.

SUDDENLY ADULT

If you were a typical teenager, you probably grumbled for years about the rules and limits your parents made you obey. Well, no one makes you obey them in college. Once upon a time, colleges and universities regarded themselves as standing *in loco parentis*, "in the place of the parents." Except at a few Christian colleges, that notion hasn't been taken seriously for years. Unless you cheat, commit a crime, or disrupt the campus, your school is unlikely to know—or even care—how you

live. No one will tell you not to stay up so late. No one will wake you in the morning if you oversleep. No one will tell you when to come home from a date. No one will make you go to church. No one will remind you to do your homework, wash your underwear, or stay away from sex and drugs. In these ways, you are forced to take responsibility for your own behavior.

Being thrust all at once into the responsibilities of adulthood can come as a shock. Some of my students visit me to seek advice about life after college graduation. Many have made poor grades right up until their senior year. I ask them why. "When I got to the university I went wild," says one. "For my first three years here I just partied," says another. "Do you think that will hurt my chances of getting into law school?" You can guess how I have to answer.

People invent all sorts of ways to adapt to the sudden pressure of adult responsibility. Some ways help; others don't. When I started college, one of the guys in the dorm told me that he'd found the perfect way to motivate himself to study. He kept an enormous jug of a cheap fruit-flavored wine on his desk, and for each page of homework he read, he rewarded himself with a swallow. As you might guess, he was always a little drunk. He got his reading done, but whether he remembered what he'd read was another question. I don't remember seeing him take notes either. Maybe he couldn't hold the pencil!

College sends students mixed messages. Although in some ways it treats them as grown-ups, in other ways it treats them as babies. You don't have to prepare your own meals, because you can eat in the cafeteria. You don't have to find your own doctor, because you can go to the student health clinic. You don't have to come up with your own entertainment, because music, movies, and other amusements are provided on most campuses. At some colleges, the dorms even provide

clean sheets (though you still have to put them on the bed yourself). All sorts of things are done for you at college that you're perfectly capable of doing for yourself. The arrangement has some advantages, but it hardly encourages you to remember that you're grown-up.

Of course you *really are* grown-up in one sense (you have full adult responsibilities) even though you *really aren't* grown-up in another (you haven't finished developing). What kind of person are you going to become? I'm not talking about the courses you want to take or the kind of job you want to get someday; I'm talking about the qualities you want to have. Do you desire to be wise, fair, and honest—or foolish, unfair, and crooked? Kind, loyal, and reliable—or mean, backstabbing, and unreliable? Brave, faithful, and pure—or cowardly, weak, and stained? Maybe you've thought about the kind of person you want to become but not about how to become that person. Every act, every decision, every thought will move you either a little closer to being that kind of person—or push you a little further away.

What are the small temptations in your life? To become reliable in the big things, you have to practice reliability in the small ones. To become pure in the big things, you have to practice purity in the small ones. If you haven't started practicing yet, now is the time. Pray for strength and begin.

ON ANOTHER PLANET

Going to college can be like moving to Mars. The first change you'll notice will be in your physical surroundings. If you're used to seeing cornfields stretching all the way to the horizon and your college is in the city where you can't see the horizon at all, the landscape may come as a shock. If you're used to getting everywhere by subway and bus and your college is in a spread-out place where there's no public

transportation and you have to drive, the change may be hard to get used to—especially if you don't have a car!

Compared to the cultural difference, though, the difference in your physical surroundings will seem tiny. People at college may talk differently, socialize differently, and even eat differently. One reason for cultural differences, of course, is change in region, and the farther from home you go to school, the greater such differences are likely to be. They may be hard to take. Southerners, unused to the hurry and crowding of northeastern cities, tend to consider northeasterners rude and unfriendly. Northeasterners, unused to the relaxed speech and elaborate courtesy of the South, sometimes think southerners are slow and stupid. It isn't always easy for such different groups to understand each other.

An even bigger reason college may seem like Mars is the culture of the campus itself. Each school tends to develop a personality of its own. Some have good personalities; others don't. The personality of the school one friend attended for his first two years was neurotically intense and competitive. He'll never forget one of the talks given during Freshman Orientation. The speaker, a dean, dwelled upon the large number of freshmen at the school who committed suicide or received psychological counseling. He wasn't warning them—he was *bragging*, because he thought suicidal tendencies were a proof of intellectual brilliance! By contrast, the college another friend attended turned out to be a "party school." In her dorm, the floors used to organize Progressive Drinking Nights. Students who participated went from room to room getting drunker and drunker. A number of women in the dorm announced that on certain evenings, they would have sex with any men who showed up at their doors. So many men showed up that they had to form lines. By the way, don't assume that your college will have a

Christian personality just because it's linked with a Christian denomination, says Christian things in its mission statement, or has the word "Christian" in its name. There's more Christianity at some nonChristian schools than at some so-called Christian schools.

A final reason for feeling that you've landed on another planet is that colleges and universities are magnets for extreme beliefs, ideologies, and cults. At one school recently, campus feminists protested sex discrimination by marching into town topless. (Take *that*, you sexists!) At another, homosexuals sponsored an outdoor gay "kiss-in" to win acceptance for their cause. I know of an art professor who lists on her résumé that she tied herself to another artist with a rope for a year. (She says they never touched.) Another professor, this one in the social sciences, offers a course every year on creating your own reality. (He says it's very practical.) I'm not making this stuff up.

The sheer weirdness of the new environment puts some students into what sociologists call "culture shock"—taking the weirdness too hard and becoming deeply homesick and depressed. At the other extreme, some students adapt by "going native"—losing their sense of who they are and plunging into the ways of the people around them.

Four simple tips will help you keep your feet on the ground:

1. **Research the school's personality ahead of time to make sure you're choosing a good one.**
2. **Remember that it's *normal* to feel somewhat odd and homesick in any new place and that such feelings normally pass.**
3. **Remember that a little worldly homesickness can be spiritually good for you. It's a reminder that Christians are *always* strangers in this world, for we are citizens of heaven.**

4. **Keep up your spiritual disciplines.** What I mean is daily prayer, frequent Bible study and worship, evangelism, service to others, and constantly reminding yourself of the presence of God. If you stay focused on Christ, He'll make even the desert bloom.

UNDER PRESSURE

Think back to the student I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter who told me that every day she spent at the university she felt that her faith was under attack.

The early Christians risked death and torture for their faith. Some were crucified, others beheaded. Still others were roasted, shot with arrows, or thrown to wild beasts. A Roman emperor, Caligula, burned them to light up his garden parties. In various countries, Christians still suffer torture for Christ. In fact, according to Richard John Neuhaus, "more Christians have been martyred in this century than in all previous centuries put together. Around the world, some 300,000 are put to death annually for their faith."¹ Thousands are also sold into slavery or sent to "reeducation" camps. Yet the cause of Christ continues to spread.

Was my student under *that* kind of attack? No. She was merely in an atmosphere that made Christian faith look ridiculous. Was that all? Yes. And is that kind of thing enough to explain why the modern university has reverted to paganism? Apparently so!

How can this be?

The answer isn't hard to understand. Violent persecution focuses the mind on the fact that the kingdom of this world is an enemy to the kingdom of God. When there hasn't been any persecution for a long time—as in our part of the world—many Christians start expecting the world

to be a friend. They slip into seeking the world's approval instead of God's. When the world *denies* its approval—when the teacher smirks or some of the other students roll their eyes—they go hollow inside.

How can you stand firm? I'm sure you aren't surprised when I tell you again to keep up the Christian disciplines. Spend time with God in prayer, study His Word, tell others about Him, and show mercy to those in need. But it's hard to do that all by yourself, isn't it? I have good news for you. God has not left you all by yourself. He provided the church. You need to seek out your partners in the faith and have frequent fellowship with them. Pray and study and show mercy, yes, but don't do it just by yourself; do it with your brothers and sisters in Christ. You see, God made us social beings; that's why we respond so readily to peer pressure. Peer pressure is good if it's the right kind of pressure from the right kind of peers. Your true peer group is the fellowship of the saints, the household of God.

This is a great secret. I don't mean that God hides it; I mean not many Christian students know it. They try to live their faith alone and find themselves losing heart. No wonder! That's not the way God planned it.

Everyone has had conversations he wishes he could have over again. I now realize that the student who spoke to me about being under attack hadn't yet discovered the secret I've just told you. I wish I could speak with her again so I could tell her about it. There's no such thing as a solitary Christian. If you go into the world alone, you'll be swallowed.

HOW THIS BOOK CAN HELP

You can use this book in three ways. First, you can read it straight through. If you haven't reached college yet, don't worry if not everything

you read “clicks” right away, because some parts will make better sense after you get to college and see for yourself what I’m talking about.

Second, you can take this book along to college and use it as a handbook. As you run into the kinds of problems and situations I write about, you can turn to the chapters that cover them.

Third, you can share the book with friends. Didn’t I just say that there’s no such thing as a solitary Christian? You need them, but they need you too.

God urges us in Scripture to renew our minds, to see all things as He sees them, which means to see them truly (see Romans 12:2). To help you to see them truly, the next three chapters are about competing “world views.”

Chapter 2 is “What God Thinks of the World.” The understanding of Jesus you gained as a child is precious to God, but it may not be enough to help you survive the challenges of college; as a young adult, you need meat as well as milk. This chapter is a more mature presentation of what the good news is all about—man’s sin and God’s response.

Chapter 3 is “What the World Thinks of Itself.” The modern university is profoundly alienated from God and hostile to Christian faith, so in order to stay centered on the gospel you need to learn about the nonChristian worldviews commonly met on campus. That’s what this chapter is for.

Chapter 4 is “Talking with NonChristian Friends.” NonChristians and wavering Christians offer numerous objections to the

Christian life and worldview. This chapter explains how to talk to both groups—and what to say once you've started.

The apostle Paul says, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?" (2 Corinthians 13:5). To help you test yourself and keep free from delusions, the second part of the book is about "Campus Myths."

Chapter 5 is "Myths About the Search for Knowledge." False ideas about the relationship between faith and reason undermine the confidence of many college Christians and encourage other students to be hostile to Christianity. This chapter sets the record straight by explaining how faith and reason are really related.

Chapter 6 is "Myths About Love and Sex." False ideas about love and sex make some college Christians wonder whether sexual purity is worth the trouble. It is, and in this chapter you learn what sexual purity is all about.

Chapter 7 is "Myths About Politics." Passionate secular political ideologies yank some college Christians away from their identity in Christ. This chapter is where you find out where nonChristian elements are hidden in the thinking of both Left and Right political ideologies.

To flourish as a Christian you need to know how to put all these things into practice, so the last major part of the book is about "How to Cope."

Chapter 8 is "Coping in Campus Social Life." Campus social life will pose special challenges for you because it doesn't conform to a Christian pattern. In this chapter, we talk about how to be faithful in friendship, fun, and dating.

Chapter 9 is "Coping in Campus Religious Life." As I explained earlier, living the faith requires mutual support among believers; the problem is that not every campus "Christian" group lives up to its name. This chapter explains how to find a healthy and faithful Christian fellowship.

Chapter 10 is "Coping in the Classroom." Although Christians have plenty to learn in college, the classroom can sometimes be intimidating. The goal of this chapter is to show you how to practice intellectual discernment, how to hold your own in a discussion, and how to deal with classmates and professors who think Christians must be stupid.

In the conclusion of the book, chapter 11, we'll talk about "The Meaning of Your Life." God aims at more than making you live forever; His goal is to make each Christian a mirror of His joy and glory. Nothing happens by chance, and if He has put you in college, He has a reason for your being there. The more fully you understand this reason, the more perfectly you can serve and enjoy Him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. Budziszewski (Boojee-shefski) is a former atheist, former political radical, former shipyard welder, and former lots of other things, including former young and former thin. He earned his Ph.D. at Yale, and since 1981 he's been at the University of Texas in Austin, where he teaches in the Departments of Government and Philosophy. He writes about natural law, and if you ask him what that is, he'll say it's *What We Can't Not Know* about right and wrong (which happens to be the title of another of his books). He's been married for more than thirty years to his high school sweetheart, Sandra, and has two daughters. People think they must be related to the Romanov dynasty because their names are Alexandra and Anastasia. What else? He loves teaching. He hates paperwork. He loves writing. He hates pens and pencils. He says he loves contemporary music, but it turns out that he means "the contemporaries of Johann Sebastian Bach." He deserted his faith during college but returned to Christ a dozen years later. If you'd like to find out about his journey, you can read about it at <http://www.leaderu.com/real/ri9801/budziszewski.html>. And if you like what you read in this book, you can also read his monthly column at <http://www.boundless.org>, a cool webzine for college students.