

BEN TRUEBLOOD & BRIAN MILLS

**A
DIFFERENT
COLLEGE
EXPERIENCE**

FOLLOWING CHRIST IN COLLEGE

The four years I spent at a small Christian university in North Carolina were some of the most formative days of my life. They shaped me and changed me, like they do for anyone who experiences college life. So many lessons learned, so many relationships formed, so many mistakes made. In my opinion, *A Different College Experience* should be required reading for every Christian who feels like college is their next step after high school. But it should be more than required reading, it should be required living. This is a Christ-centered, gospel-oriented book that digs deeper than the typical moral advice of “don’t sleep around” and “find a good Bible study group.” This book gets to the root issue of your identity, what you believe about God, and how your relationship with Him sets the course for the direction your life will go as you enter college. You don’t have to press pause on your faith during this season of your life. Instead, college is the perfect experience to ground yourself in the gospel and learn how to be on mission for the kingdom of God. It’s readable, practical, and doable. I wish this book had been written when I was a college student.

Clayton King, teaching pastor, Newspring Church,
founder and president, Crossroads Camps and Missions, and
author of *True Love Project* and *Grounded*

I have spent my entire adult life trying to prepare students to keep their faith as they journey through the “wilderness years” of university and college. One of the greatest challenges is providing outgoing seniors/incoming freshman with a real resource that can have an edifying impact on the trajectory of their journey. In *A Different College Experience* Ben Trueblood and Brian Mills have now provided all of this with that resource! I can’t wait to use this breath-of-fresh-air resource to further equip and encourage the amazing young men and women in my ministry at Student Leadership University!

Brent Crowe, vice president, Student Leadership University

Honestly, I wish this book would have been written when I was in college. This is NOT a handbook of how to get through college as a Christian, but rather a holistic discipleship worldview during one of the most crucial and formative seasons of a person's life. The emphasis is not on being good or on not being bad, but on having a right view of God, of self, and of the gospel. This book is both theological and practical, and I want to make this required reading for all of my college students.

Drew Worsham, college and young adult pastor,
Community Bible Church, San Antonio, Texas

I came to know Christ as a senior in high school and the Lord used my college years to deepen my understanding of the gospel, give me a passion for community with other believers, and ignite in me a commitment to the mission of the local church. This is not only my story but the story of many who the Lord has transformed during their college years. By helping readers become rooted in the gospel, their identity in Christ, and God's Word, *A Different College Experience* paves the way for a person's college years to be a time of great spiritual growth. This book is a needed and helpful resource for the church and families during a critical moment of life.

Eric Geiger, senior pastor,
Mariner's Church, Irvine, California

A Different College Experience is a doctrinally rich and incredibly practical book that you'll want to ensure all of your students have read before they are launched to their college and university campuses. Loaded with a passion for the kingdom of God, the local church, and the students you've been investing in, Trueblood and Mills have put together a book that serves as an echoing voice to the hopes, dreams, desires, and hours of investment you've put in to your students since they entered your ministry. It's a must-read.

Jason Gaston, family ministries pastor, The Summit Church

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Preface

I was extremely excited to go to college; however, I was also quite anxious. It was not the coming to college part I was scared of, but the leaving home part. At this time in my life, my family was in shambles. My parents were on the brink of divorce and it seemed as if every relationship in my family was full of tension. You would think I would have been excited to move out, but in reality I felt guilty for leaving and helpless knowing that I would be so far away. I was carrying a burden with me that was way too heavy for my soul to handle. A burden I was not meant to carry.

In the midst of this struggle when I thought I could not handle it anymore, God swooped in and did what only He can do. He carried my burdens and healed me of my hurts. Where I felt like there was nothing more I could do, He showed me that I did not need to do anything but depend on Him: “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isa. 41:10 *ESV*). In the midst of His presence, I found peace in my storm.

Whether you are in a situation like mine or you are battling with your own storm, know that the Lord is good and He is faithful. Through all aspects of college, the Lord will sustain you. If you know this to be truth, living out your faith in college will not be difficult at all. It will be a soul-fulfilling journey and God will use you in unbelievable ways. All you must do to live your best life in college is depend on Him. I promise that anything college has to offer you is incomparable to what God has in store.

Since leaving for school freshman year, I have seen the Lord use me in so many ways, but mainly in regard to my family. It is almost as if He pulled me out of the situation so that I could see it through His

eyes. I empathize with you who are reading this and are in a similar situation with the same emotions because I know how bad it hurts. But trust God to be God. He will take care of you and your family and bring you peace. You have the special opportunity to seek God with nothing holding you back, so do it! See how the Lord can move in you and through you in your dorm, classes, sports team, family, and anywhere else He might place you.

—Ashton Childree, Elementary Education major at the University of Arkansas

THERE IS NOTHING LIKE the college experience. It's one of those things in life that truly is what you make of it.

We wrote this book because we are passionate about high school and college students. Throughout our time in ministry, we've seen a lot of things go wrong in people's lives because of an incorrect view of the college experience. We want you to succeed in your college years and we believe that it can be the best experience of your life so far, but that will require you to make some difficult choices. You won't be able to approach your college years like most of the people around you.

This book will help you understand more about your faith, or perhaps begin your own faith journey, and will help you to know how to make decisions that are built on the Word of God. When you are done with the next four (or more) years of your life, you should be more equipped than ever to embrace the life God has for you. We want to challenge you to take on that life with great wisdom and discernment.

During your college years you will turn twenty-one, potentially find a spouse, be confronted with the greatest temptation you have ever faced, and will have more freedom than you've ever had. Are you ready? The freshman-year mistakes happen because most are not. Don't let the college experience get the best of you; get the best out of it. This book will help you do so.

Part 1

New Beginnings

Chapter 1

What Is the Gospel?

College is a challenging, yet rewarding season of life, filled with much change and uncertainty, but rich in new opportunities and growth. My first year of college I questioned the Lord's faithfulness in my life. Had He led me to the right university? Would I ever have Christ-centered friendships? Is it really possible to live out my faith on a campus where many of the students are unchurched and haven't even heard the name of Jesus?

I am three years into my college experience and I have seen the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord in my life particularly in those areas where doubt and uncertainty once flourished. Jesus . . . He really is good, faithful, and trustworthy in all areas of our lives. He writes a more beautiful story than anything you or I could ever write for ourselves. Amidst the Lord's faithfulness, unfortunately there is a thief who wants to steal, kill, and destroy your life and mine. The enemy knows he can use this season of opportunity and growth to steal your hope and kill your dreams.

It is crucial to surround yourself with like-minded people who are running hard after Jesus, who can help keep you accountable in your walk with Christ. Staying spiritually healthy in college is challenging; however, by immersing yourself in godly community and staying in the Word of God, you can be victorious in this season of change. Surrounding myself with Christ-centered community is the best decision I have made during my time in college. This season of life brings much change—new city, new friends, new church, new everything,

but you can hold tight to the truth that Jesus never changes, and just as He has shown Himself faithful in my life, He will show Himself faithful in yours.

—Meredith Franzke, junior, University of Arkansas studying Hospitality and Event Planning; Cross Church College small group leader; diamond doll with the University of Arkansas's baseball team

YOU ARE IN A unique moment in your life. You've heard that already. You can probably still hear the Dr. Seuss quotes and "one chapter is closing and an exciting new chapter is about to begin" echoing in your head from the graduation speech that already seems like so long ago. You are in a unique moment in your life because, for many of you, you're taking responsibility for your life for the first time. Yes, you have lived with responsibility and consequences (some more than others) before, but to some extent, there has been the covering of parents, other family members, a caring teacher, or a church leader. Now, it is up to you.

The everyday decisions about when you will wake up, what you are going to eat, when you will find time for friends, if you will study, and how often you will wash your clothes now fall to you and you alone. The transition into the college years is a unique moment in your life, not just because you are transitioning schools and perhaps moving to a different place, but you are in a sense experiencing a transfer of ownership over your very own life. It is in this "transfer of ownership" that so many college students make choices that cause them and others incredible pain and baggage.

As a student pastor for many years I have seen students take ownership of their lives and live abundantly, experiencing the college years in a God-honoring, productive, and exciting way. And I have seen the opposite take place, including the life-altering consequences of what our culture would refer to as "the

college experience.” Which will you choose? It’s a lot to take in, I know.

If there is one thing I want you to hear as you begin the journey through this book, it is this: *There is hope*. You can have an incredible college experience and close this next chapter of your life with relationships, memories, education, and a whole lot of fun, while avoiding the land mines that are in front of you. There is hope because of Jesus. There is hope because of what Jesus has done for you, what He can do in you, and what He hopes to do through you. And that is a fitting place to start our journey together here and your journey through the college years.

Dr. Jay Strack is a good friend of mine and is the president of an organization called Student Leadership University. He has spent his life pouring into teenagers and helping grow them into the leaders God has called them to be. A frequent statement I have heard him say applies directly to you at this point in your life: “In everyone’s life there is a point where the little boy or girl chooses to sit down and the man or woman chooses to stand up.” This is a statement of ownership and responsibility. We’ve mentioned a few of the everyday life kinds of things that you must now “own,” but in no way is it a complete list. Conspicuously absent from that list is the most important piece of your life to take ownership of: your spiritual life.

I know that there are people at various places in their spiritual journey who are sitting with this book right now. Some came to faith as a child, others as a teenager, some are trying to figure out what to do with Jesus, and some are still far from Him. Wherever you are in your spiritual journey, we all have the same starting point: the gospel of Jesus. Your understanding of the gospel is the single greatest influence on what your life will be like during your college years and into the future. So, in your faith, it is time for the little boy or girl to sit down and the man or woman to stand up.

Hand-Me-Down Faith

Let me shoot straight with you for a second.

If you grew up in church, in a Christian school or home, there's a good chance that you believe what you do about the gospel because it is something your parents, teachers, youth pastor, or other church leaders taught you. It was something they passed on to you, and you believed them.

It's great that these leaders in your life are Christians, but there's a danger here: if I described you just now, there's a good chance that, left on your own, you will be unable to explain why you believe what you do about the gospel. There's a good chance that you are inconsistent at best with time that you spend reading your Bible and praying. And there's a good chance that what you believe about the gospel hasn't translated into specific ways that it shapes who you are and how you live.

Before you angrily close the book, hold on one more second and hear me out. I know there's a good chance for these things to be true because I've seen thousands of students fit this description throughout my time in student ministry. And I've also fit this description myself.

As a high school student in a Christian home, involved in a great church, and at a Christian school, I had a hand-me-down faith. I believed it because other people whom I loved believed. Truth be told, I struggled in my faith, at times doubting my belief, and at other times being sure of it. Once the doubting of faith was settled, my struggle moved on to wondering if I was a good enough Christian, if I was strong enough in my faith. I was a leader in the youth ministry and was at that time the only one of three children "walking with Jesus" in the eyes of my parents. The expectations I felt were like a mountain of burden that lasted through my college years and beyond as I struggled to know if my faith was strong enough, if I was "good enough."

Because of this I often found myself simply trying harder or giving more effort to living a “good Christian life,” but at the same time, I found myself on the losing side of my personal battles with sin and temptation. It was like I was constantly running but never going anywhere. This kind of life is painful and exhausting, and is the furthest thing from the abundant life that Jesus said is available to us (John 10:10).

The “good enough” struggle is a real one that plagues many, and it begins in the minds of believers who have not yet taken the step to truly own their faith. They’re still living in a hand-me-down Christianity. I was meant for so much more than life on a spiritual treadmill, constantly running and going nowhere. You are too. It’s time for you to jump off of the treadmill and take ownership of your faith, which begins with an understanding of the gospel.

The Gospel

What comes to your mind when you hear the word *gospel*? Literally, it means “good news.” So, the gospel of Jesus is literally the good news of Jesus.

J. D. Greear, in his book *Gospel*, defines it this way: “The gospel is the announcement that God has reconciled us to Himself by sending His Son Jesus to die as a substitute for our sins, and that all who repent and believe have eternal life in Him.”¹ It may be the case that you’ve heard something like this before. If so, don’t move on from here thinking there isn’t anything more to learn. You were never meant to move on from the gospel to something else. Yes, it is where your life as a Christian begins; but it’s also where you are meant to stay as a person who follows Jesus. Martin Luther, a German theologian in the 1500s and a key

¹J. D. Greear, *Gospel* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2011), 5.

influencer in the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, said about this, “to progress is always to begin again.” His point is that for a Christian to continue progressing, or growing, in his or her life with Jesus, he or she must return to the beginning where it all started: the gospel.

So, let’s take a few moments to begin again.

You are an image bearer of God. It is important that you remember this truth throughout this book and, more important, throughout your life. You bear God’s image. You are valuable and treasured.

In Genesis 1:27 we see that God created people in perfection and in His image. Then, in Genesis 3 we see the first sinful act of humanity. That sinful act had immediate consequences for Adam and Eve, and it has lasting consequences for us today. From that moment forward, all those born of a man and woman inherit a sinful nature. This sinful nature brings with it some of the same consequences that Adam and Eve experienced: death and separation from God. We don’t enter life in a neutral place before God; there’s no such thing. A person is either in relationship with God or separated from Him. Contrary to popular belief, there’s no middle ground.

Romans 3:23 says, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Every person enters this life separated from God because of sin. The Bible explains that we are helpless (Rom. 5:6), enemies of God (Rom. 5:10), that we are alienated from Him (Col. 1:21), and deserving of His wrath because of our sin (Eph. 2:3). The post-Genesis 3 picture is pretty bleak.

Since that first act of rebellion against God, sin has brought devastation to people’s lives. It has brought devastation to my own life through the separation that exists with God upon entering this world, and it has brought devastation through my own choices to sin. Sin only brings devastation, and its offspring is more sin and more devastation.

At this moment in your life, you are about to be exposed to more opportunity to sin and more kinds of sin than at any point in your life previously. The college campus can be rampant with drunkenness, drugs, and sexual sin, and your choices in these years—whether to participate or to abstain—will have long-lasting consequences for you. You need to understand that what happens in college does not stay in college.

At this point it would be easy to wallow in our sinful state and go on and on about how sinful we are, and some people do. This would be a mistake. It is necessary for us to realize our sin because we can never understand the depth of our salvation until we understand the depth of our sin, but sin isn't the main character of the story. Yes, sin has tainted the good picture that we saw at creation, but God is working to restore His image fully in us. He loves us so much that He provided a way for us to be with Him again rather than leave us in an alienated state before Him. He would rather have us as His children than His enemies.

We are more sinful than we will ever know, but at the same time, we are more loved than we could ever imagine.

He loves us so much, in fact, that He made a way for us to be back in a right relationship with Him. Romans 6:23 sums up this idea perfectly: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Sin brings death; Jesus brings life. Sin has taken us far away from God; Jesus has made it possible for us to be brought near to Him and into His family.

John 3:16 says it this way: "For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." You've probably heard that passage a million times before, and because of that, you may have read through it quickly when you recognized it. Take a moment and look at this verse one more time. Slow down and read every word, absorbing its depth and meaning. Remember, "to progress is always to begin again."