How To Engage in a University Context: Princeton

Part 1 of 2: Preparing for Ministry to Students at Princeton
with Darrell Bock, Matt Bennett, Tim Adhikari
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Welcome to The Table where we discuss issues of God and culture, and today our subject is Christianity on the university campuses, and I have with me Matt Bennett who is the founder of Christian Union. I'll let him explain what that ministry is in a minute, and Tim Adhikari who directs the campus ministry at Princeton University, a campus that I have visited several times, actually several times for Christian Union. And our goal in these podcasts is to kind of begin to discuss what the environment is for Christians on university campuses across the country and discuss the nature of ministries on campuses there around the country as well. So Matt, thank you for joining us, and let me begin by asking you what is Christian Union, what does it seek to do, and how are you all doing?

Well thank you for asking and thanks for having me on the program. It's wonderful to see you again and to be in touch and to hear about what's going on with these podcasts. Thanks for having us, and I'm excited to share a little bit about who we are and what's going on. So yeah, Christian Union, our focus as a ministry is Christian leadership development on a number of key strategic university campuses, mostly in the northeast. Once I get talking about it I really can't stop, so I have to warn you now.

I'm a good interrupter, so you're in good shape.

Good. Well, we're a great combination. Yeah, we're really excited about what God is doing. We have such a heart to see some of the most influential and secular campuses in this nation changed, and our research has shown that about 50 percent of the most influential leaders in our country, in government, business, education, and media come from just eight schools, the Ivy League schools, and I never knew that growing up in Texas.

I grew up in Houston, Texas and Darryl and I actually went to kind of rival high schools near each other, but when I came up east for college that became more plain to me in seeing how many alumni come to these schools. I really noticed and it really impacted me at a deep level what a bad situation this was, that schools that are so influential in our culture will at the same time also be very, very secular. It seems to be more or less a train wreck that has been happening in our culture for many years, and God raised me up to help see if I could be a part of seeing that changed.
**Darrell Bock**

So Tim, to explain how this works on the Princeton campus, Christian Union is there. What kind of ministry opportunities do you create or have with those who are attending the college?

**Tim Adhikari**

Yeah. So we're as Matt said a Christian leadership development ministry, and I use that language because it is very, very much not only a niche, but I think it's a leading edge of our ministry. I mean we do many of the things that many campus ministries do as far as Biblical impartation and one-on-one discipleship, but I really do think that Christian leadership development piece, I feel like it's a technical term, that we are really wanting to connect students to a specific mindset of discipleship, a specific mindset of what it means to be developed as a pupil under Christ. We're giving them a different vision for the world.

Christian Union is very much focused on transforming culture, that is the mission of our organization to develop Christian leaders to transform culture. And so when we bring students into our ministry through Bible courses, which is the centerpiece of our ministry, real top notch Biblical impartation, exegetical book studies, some real relevant topical studies, when we're developing and mentoring students in any of those various contexts, we are doing it with an end in mind, and the end that we have in mind is to develop them in order to actually lead Princeton with cultural transformation on their mindsets.

I think of the great sort of theologian Abraham Kuyper who's credited with this quote, &quot;Every square inch there is not one square inch of existence to which Christ doesn't look at and say, 'This is mine.'" So when I think of what we're doing on campus with Bible courses, with one-on-one discipleship, and then specifically with this leadership development thrust, I think that what Christian Union is doing is we are teaching students to reclaim every square inch for Jesus Christ in the broader culture, whether it's medicine or law or politics or arts, athletics, what have you.

We are giving students a vast vision for the world and saying that by virtue of His death and resurrection, this is Christ's world. Now let's image that forth. And so we're trying to get them to embody that on campus so that they'll embody that once they leave campus and enter into these influential segments of society.
Darrell Bock

Now I'm gonna come back to that 'cause that's such an important concept, the idea of imaging and reimagining the presence of God and the reflection of God's image in any sphere and every sphere of life. I actually was gonna ask next, and maybe this is the time to do it, when you talk about transforming culture what are you aiming at? What's your target in saying that, Matt?

Matt Bennett

You know because so many of these sectors of our society, take media for instance and heads of the top media companies. Because they have such an extraordinary influence, we want the values and purposes of Jesus Christ to come through the media as well as in government and business and the other things. So there is a worldview consistent with Jesus Christ and then there are worldviews that are of course inconsistent with that. The things that are kind of the hot buttons almost immediately that come to mind for people, they think about television and the over-sexualized culture in terms of TV and a representation of all sorts of different lifestyles, which are inconsistent with what brings wholeness and life to humanity, and that's constantly being propagated through the media and look at the harm that that does in terms of people choosing to follow that lifestyle and all the hurt that comes from that.

But you think about that in every sphere. You look over in business and the importance of those in business that think about how to look out for the interests of the employees as well as the interests of those that are buying the product, and what does it mean to be a Christian in this context? How do I think about the needs of other people while keeping the profit motive but really thinking about God's purposes in addition to that in this context? It's really a broad field, all of these really are.

And so if we can focus on those who are going to be stepping into positions of great influence and give them that Biblical worldview, and we can only get them so much in four years, but at least inspire the mindset of learning and stepping into that so that as they go in they don't think about themselves only as being good church members. We want them to think about being leaders in their local churches, elders and otherwise, but then also leaders in their companies or in their families in terms of how do we see this environment more closely reflect the values of Jesus Christ in every sphere.
This is a question for Tim. How do you deal with the related challenge, which is I mean obviously we live in a very secularized culture. We also live in a very pluralistic culture. So the idea of a media leader going in and, if I can say it, and I'm gonna go ahead and use language that's a little bit inflammatory, imposing a Christian worldview on those who are listening, how do you deal with the fact that our cultures are plural in nature? Are we talking about representing Christ well through what we do in the media or are we talking about takeover? How do we not sound too triumphalistic in all of this?

Yeah, let me answer this. I wanna be careful how we answer this. What we've been trying to do is think of Christians as a people who engage by definition. In other words, engagement is not some sort of gold or platinum upgrade package to the normal Christian life. It is in many ways the normal Christian life. So we're trying to really communicate to students because that's a question that often comes up, especially because you mentioned this. This is a secularist culture, and not only that, because it's a secularist culture it's also a very privatized culture.

That's right.

So even if you have very strong committed beliefs they are your – singular pronoun – strong committed beliefs, and that's just really antithetical to the way the Scriptures speak. So what we've been trying to communicate with students is: listen, to be a Christian, to be a follower of Christ is to be someone who, and this is language we don't like, not modern sensibilities, is to be someone who manifests the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, and that is very imperialisitic to use your word, triumphalistic language in a certain sense.

Now the posture that we take and our approach, the rhetoric we use, the methods of our engagement have to be nuanced and Christ-honoring and others-centered and loving and all of that, but as far as the mode itself, the mode of engaging culture, the mode of maybe the word is "redeeming culture" is not something that it's good if you get to it. It's very much at the heart and center of the Gospel and therefore what it means to be a people of the Gospel. Mission is something that's really risen to the forefront here at Princeton this past year. If I could say this, a Biblical theological reading that just generates and catalyzes mission in our students is something that's been not only maybe new and fresh for them but something that they're desiring.
It's giving them permission to be the kinds of Christians that they're reading about in Scripture, have always been afraid to approach, but are finding that there's no real plan B to be a Christian is to be the kind of people who do engage culture. So yeah, you have to coach well into that and articulation and nuance and context and all of that matters, but I think what's at the center is the real high view of engagement that we have. It is a mind shift.

When we talk about transforming culture, I don't want us to think that transforming culture is just something out there. There's a fair amount of cultural transformation and mindset that needs to happen with Christians, which I think Matt from the very beginning of Christian Union really set out to do is to really change minds and persuade Christians in how they ought to think about God, His mission, and the world at large.

Darrell Bock: So we're talking about a form of advocacy and representation in which I like to use the picture of we're called to be ambassadors. So you're representing a nation. You're representing a people. You're representing a point of view. The ambassador doesn't just live in the embassy when he goes to the country. He's in the country. He's with the other people who are coming from a different place, and he's representing his country well in front of them.

Tim Adhikari: Yeah.

Matt Bennett: And you know related to that I think in some ways it seems like unfortunately we only have two ways of thinking about this as Christians, either the imposition model, which I think is criticized by the media of Christians much more than it actually happens, but in some ways it can be a Christian’s mindset. It's either that or do nothing almost, and nothing is too strong perhaps, but I feel like a lot of our cultural engagement mindset is from the exilic period. We quote Jeremiah during the time of the exile and that's our means of influencing culture. And it's not really a Gospel-oriented sort of mode of influencing the culture, 'cause when you see the actions of the Apostles in the Book of Acts, it's very much more of an engaged posture than what you see during the exile.
Darrell Bock: Yeah. I think that's a helpful way to think about it. Let's talk a little bit about the pieces of the ministry there at Princeton. You've said it's a leadership development program basically that has kind of your standard Bible study time on the one hand and your one-on-one discipleship elements on the other. What are the features of what you do that operate outside of that? I'll just share. When I go up to Princeton and visit you all, of course you have the big group meeting, which is to encourage everybody. I know that's going on and that deals with different subjects at different times. What else do you do that's part of the leadership training part of this?

Tim Adhikari: Yeah. So you mentioned sort of what I think about the key impulses; let me just say first of all that I would say that the value that hangs over everything is what we call a real, real focus on seeking God. One of the things that Christian Union in my mind has really done well is to take things that appear antithetical and to hold them together. So highly intellectual engagement, high spiritual vitality, and high missional engagement, all of those three things might often emphasize different movements.

What Christian Union I believe has done a real good job of pursuing is unifying all of those and saying, no, these don't have to stand in opposition to each other. They can stand together. So for a ministry that is on the Ivy League that wants to have a certain caliber of staff to be able to meet this context, the thing that really, really hangs over the entire ministry banner on various campuses is what we call the “seeking God lifestyle,” a real strong commitment to seeking the Lord, praying and fasting that His presence and power might be what energizes our efforts. So that is very central to everything we do, and so let me now spell out some of the pieces that hang underneath that.

First as you mentioned Bible courses, and I'll just take one case study. This past fall, so I would say last fall, we went through Paul's Book of Romans at a really, really high level, deep exegetical level, not only understanding the text but interacting with different people's view of the text from sort of a classical maybe reformed position, more main evangelical, even new perspective. So really, really getting our students to think real deeply at that level of the text and interacting with it. As you mentioned just sort of classical mentoring and one-on-one where students get encouraged and discipled in a real intentional, up close and intimate way.
The third piece is that leadership development piece. This is where I believe we probably give our students the greatest sense of competitive advantage not only to their peers on campus but once they leave campus as well. Our ministry is broken out into various leadership teams that students are coached in but that students very much own. You Dr. Bock have visited us a few times on Friday nights. That team that puts together what we call our Friday night lecture series is a team of about 40 to 50 students that are led by a leadership team of four students that receive ongoing coaching from one of our staff members in how to think strategically about ministry.

Because what we don't wanna do is create sort of a sacred/secular distinction where when students enter into the real world if I can call it that, they will think strategically about the work they do. They will have certain mission and vision and values to reflect wherever they work, Madison Avenue, Main Street, Wall Street, what have you. And then we don't want them to think of ministry as this just exclusively organic side.

*Darrell Bock* Right.

*Tim Adhikari* And so the real world is organized, the ministry world is organic. We don't want them to have that kind of dichotomy, and so our leadership development emphasis, this team coaching model, is where we're getting them to think very strategically, if I might say even entrepreneurially about ministry, it develops them as leaders. We've seen students in other involvement on campus whether it's student government or on their sports team really attest to the leadership development focus and training that we give them and attest to the fact that it's given them a competitive advantage against some of their peers.
In interviews students have said that they've found that the person interviewing them has really been sort of jaw-dropping, wondering where they're getting some of this training from and where they're thinking about life and some of the things that they're working on so strategically. It's come from just the wonderful coaching that our staff gives them. So we really feel that that's where they get a level up as far as ministry. Love what our brothers and sisters are doing in partner ministries on the campus, but we really do believe that this niche is also the driving edge and competitive advantage that we give students on campus. So this leadership development team coaching is where I think Christian Union has really been able to establish its unique footprint.

Darrell Bock

And the interesting thing is the last time I was on campus I remember we scheduled a dinner with one of your graduating students, a senior who was writing a thesis and needed really some help and expertise on how to attack a thesis that was actually gonna go after a major concept of the professor in class, a pretty gutsy move in many ways, and she just needed some help to bounce off of. And your staff knew they really couldn't supply some of that advice, so they asked when I came in would I mind having dinner with this student, interacting with her and just talking about the process that she was going through, some of the arguments she was thinking about presenting, and how she should do it, and how it might work in an academic thesis environment.

I read theses on the other end. And we had a wonderful dinner discussion that was really in two parts. One was "Here's the content that you're dealing with", which would be the normal part of any kind of conversation, but the second part of it was "Here's the strategy. Here's the way to approach handling that material hopefully in a way that will produce a helpful result and on the other end produce a work that people can go and refer to in a way that will be persuasive." And that's very much what I'm hearing is that there's that kind of two-pronged approach of helping people on the substance side but also on the whole – packaging is a bad word, but it's the word that's in my head – packaging way in terms of how to present it in a way that will be effective.
Matt Bennett

Yeah, and as we think about on the campus too in terms of impacting the larger community, it is in the area of probably academics and in the social culture, which we think about it the most. If we feel like we can't help and coach the students to succeed in this area now, how will they succeed when they graduate, when life gets a lot more complex? So being able to provide the content and the approach in their academic classes and then also on the social scene on campus where the hookup culture and binge drinking is such a problem. There are two main ways that we are helping them to be lights now and hopefully when they graduate.

Darrell Bock

Okay, well you've made a great transition 'cause that is actually where I was going next, and that is what are the issues and the challenges that the students who are a part of your ministry that you're ministering to that you feel like they face? Let's divide them up so that we can kind of discuss them in sequence. Let's talk first about the social pressures and things in social life, which is one thing, and then come over and talk about the intellectual challenges that come from saying I'm a Christian on an Ivy League campus. So let's talk first about the social pressures. Tim, what generally do students face, and how do you help them to face those challenges?

Tim Adhikari

Yeah. I would argue that the social pressure at Princeton anyway is – it may be the most formidable challenge that we have in the sense that yeah, there's intense academic and intellectual pressure, but the social pressure both as far as elitism and then as far as immorality, those two are huge. There's sort of- if I can land it in actually the time and space of Princeton, there's this street Prospect Street where nearly all of Princeton social life is located. And I'd say that what's on that street is a set of what's known as the “eating clubs,” which are part – if I can think of it this way, they're part dining hall, part fraternities and sororities, and part country club. So think about all of those and mash 'em together and you have “eating club.”
There is everything you would expect on sort of the biggest – when you look at a national list of biggest party schools, a lot of the stuff that happens in those schools are happening at these eating clubs, particularly the hookup culture and sort of just the licentious view of relationships and sexuality. That is very, very much alive and well at Princeton, and I think if not kept in check, it would rise to new levels. One of the sort of data points that I use for that is last year at Princeton there was a student group on campus that was looking to bring in an initiative, which has found its way on many other campuses across the country. It's known as sex week, and it's usually pitched as education, conversation, but really what it winds up being is advocacy in the worst sense of the word.

Not only is it something that's unbecoming of the Princetonian context but obviously of the Gospel context. We're talking about a student group bringing in porn stars, and if I just mention some of the titles of the talks that they were conceiving you'd be horrified by it. So that is something that I really think would've gained steam here at Princeton if not for the engagement, the direct engagement from some of the ministry staff and students here on campus where we gathered together to mobilize first in prayer and fasting, really advocated with all the different ministries, and then even went outside of just the Christian circles here to other circles of student life and student groups that would be sympathetic to the cause.

By God's grace near the end there was no sex week to speak of. It stopped. It didn't land on campus, but it would have, and not only would it have landed here this year, but if you know anything about Princeton it lands on a calendar this year and it's been institutionalized for many years to come. So that just gives you a window into how live the social pressure not just to party, not just to climb the ranks of some social hierarchy but to actually get really licentious how real and powerful it actually is here on campus.

You know I hear the eating clubs, the New Testament person in me comes out and I think about the Greek symposia that used to happen in the first century and some of the elements of mystery religion that feed into fraternities and sororities and that kind of thing. People aren't aware of how deep some of the roots are for some of the cultural features that we do see on a university campus and how long they've been around culturally in one form or another.
Tim Adhikari

Right, and in order to penetrate any sense, because truth be told we have never shied away from having our students be a part of the social scene for the redemption of the social scene, but it requires a lot of nuance, a lot of care, thoughtfulness, teaching and coaching in order to be a part of it and to seek its redemption while not practicing in the very things that we're looking to engage and oppose.

Darrell Bock

Okay, now the social part of this is something that I think is part of the life of most campuses around the country in one way or another, but there's a particular problem that I think populates your Ivy League schools and some of your top schools around the country, not just Ivy League, and that's the elitism that you mentioned. That manifests itself in some ways in a more subtle way. The social pressures are kind of frontal. They're in your face. You're not gonna miss them, but the elitism can be a kind of more subtle kind of pressure. Talk about that a little bit and how that shows itself and what kinds of pressures are we talking about for students?

Tim Adhikari

Yeah, and Matt can certainly add to this having been here for so long, but the social pressure is overwhelming. We've seen students go into depression because they didn't get into the particular eating club that they wanted to. Eating clubs makes it sound like we're flattening all of them. There is a hierarchy amongst even those eating clubs. There is an elite among the elite, and we've seen students go into severe depressions. It's really affected their walk with the Lord. It's affected their academic studies. It really spills over into all aspects of life, because it's not just where they fit into Princeton, but think of life after Princeton when they're at a reunion years from now or whether they're meeting sort of alumni on the job.

They not only say "Oh, I was at Princeton", but then the next part of the conversation is "Hey, which club were you in?" And based upon the answer you give, you get stuck into one sort of category or another. And so all of that students really inaugurate when it's time to bicker. That's the process. Think about it as pledging or rushing. When it's time for the bicker process, you really see an intensity amongst the students, an extreme panic the night before when they're waiting to hear the decisions of whether or not they got in. I mean, students are in a frenzy like as if they're waiting for their MCAT score or to find out if they got into the med school that they wanted to.
So it is in every sense an idol that must be challenged, and we do that the way we do in every form of idolatry. We hold every thought captive. We teach the Scriptures. We teach the very character and nature of Christ. God chose the foolish to confound the wise, all of these things. It requires every bit of all of our ministry, discipleship, leadership development, energy and efforts to combat that as it would to combat immorality or some of the other more obvious forms of sin and idolatry in our culture, but the social pressure here is so, so significant.

**Darrell Bock**

And you're already in an environment, which you're dealing with highly competitive and very competent people, so that there's an edge to all this. I know that on many campuses, particularly the ones that are known to have a reputation for being top flight schools not only are talking about depression, but oftentimes you're talking about suicides as a result of some of this. So it can be absolutely devastating. Matt, what would you add to this discussion on elitism? I know it is a very, very big concern in Ivy League context.

**Matt Bennett**

Yeah, you know I think Tim said it well. It's such a concern, and it's navigating the importance and the encouragement for Christians to be in all circles of society including influential ones. Because what you have is as someone becomes aware of elitism, their knee-jerk response is "I'll just pull back and not be engaged in these positions." And that's not a great answer either or response, because then you have people purely with a secularist mindset in the most influential positions.

So then you have the other side where you go after these things, and they become more important to you than the Lord, and they are idols. So helping coach people through that is very difficult when there's such a pressure around them to idolize this at all costs. It's either “all-in” in the bad sense, idolatry, or “just reject it all,” which is kind of a fundamentalism response, which is something that we don't believe in.

**Darrell Bock**

Yeah, and I think it's really, really important to step back and even see this in a cultural context in our own society. I often am engaged in conversations with people about where evangelicalism is, and I say when we went through the fundamentalist/modernist controversy of what is now over a century ago, and in effect evangelical Bible believing Christians had to rebuild their social structure. They were out of the universities. They were out of the major role in the denominations.
They really had to rebuild from scratch, and what they did is they created their own subculture, their own schools, their own universities, etc. And for many people that's great, but what happened also is it created a vacuum in all the universities that we're funneling into the core parts of our culture. In that vacuum basically what you got was an acceleration of a secular presence with no counter voice present, and what you all are doing it seems to me is trying to help people be that wise counter voice as a part of that engagement in the very circles that do feed into the main pipelines of our culture.

*Tim Adhikari*  
Yeah.

*Matt Bennett*  
That's right on, you know. These schools became very secular because in many ways the Christians left, and it wasn’t so much of a secularist takeover as an abandonment by the Christians. So we have kind of no one to blame but ourselves because of that, and so we need to rethink that, understand the theology and have one of staying engaged while not giving into the idols but not just simply leaving and abandoning. When you were speaking it made me think of the introduction that Christian Smith, sociologist at Notre Dame has, to a book called The Secular Revolution, which is – the 90-page introduction is amazing. He just catalogues this process of the secularization of the academy, again attributing it mostly to the abandonment by Christians.