How To Engage in a University Context: Princeton

*Part 2 of 2: Religious Pluralism and the Hookup Culture at Princeton*

with Darrell Bock, Matt Bennett, Tim Adhikari

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I saw the clip that you all have posted on your website about Princeton, but most people don’t know the impact or the growing impact of the ministry that you have. Christian Union started my understanding is in 2002. I think Princeton was the first campus in which it had a local chapter, is that correct?

That’s right.

And my understanding is that you started, it was a mega church. It was three students to start off with, and then you went from there. So tell us kind of the story of the growth of the impact of the ministry on campus.

Yeah. Well, due to the long years of prayer and fasting and planning and direct ministry from Matt and many of the guys that were here on campus before me, it has grown, and it’s grown to become – you may have seen it in that video, the largest student organization here at Princeton right now. And I would say broadly it has served alongside a pretty robust Christian community that is growing in influence. One out of every I would say about eight students – one out of every – see if I’m getting that right. One out of every – yeah, one out of every eight or nine students are involved in some sort of evangelical ministry right now. I would say here at our particular ministry that we are approaching probably now in excess of 400 students as part of our ministry. So that’s students that are getting weekly biblical impartation and discipleship.

And that’s out of 5,200 undergraduates around about at Princeton, is that right?

That’s right. That’s right. So yeah, we desire to keep moving, and by God’s grace that our influence will continue to grow to where not just having students in our ministry. That’s great that we have more and more students in our ministry, but really leveraging them and establishing them to be a beachhead for further engagement on the campus.

And your hope is that by what, was it 2020 or 2025, I don’t remember, 20%. That number would double basically is what you’re hoping for.
Yeah. We think it’ll be able to happen sooner than that at Princeton. We’re hoping for the whole Ivy League to see 20% of the student body involved in Christian activity either at local churches and/or Christian ministries on campus. All this by 2020. And Princeton is ahead of the curve. We think by God’s grace we’ll see this in a couple of years. Because we started later on some of the other campuses, and at Brown we haven’t started there yet, we’ll be starting next year, then it’ll be a little bit more work to see if that can happen in that timeframe.

Yeah. Some campuses are more conducive to this than others that’s for sure. Let’s talk a little bit about some of the cooperation that you all engage in, because it’s not just Christian Union on campus. You all pair up with other organizations, some of which have been there for a while. Some of which are particular to Princeton. Is that correct?

Yeah, that’s right. That’s right. I just actually recently today, a couple of hours ago, just came back from a weekly prayer and planning meeting that I have with the directors of four other ministries here on campus. I really believe that to be a real high point of Christian Union’s emphasis is that we do co-labor alongside other brothers and sisters in a real wide tent. So yeah, there are other ministries that have been here long before us, some not as long. But yeah, we desire to partner with all of them to various degrees. We pray and fast with them throughout the semester, throughout the year at various times. Our student leaders are overlapping in an ever increasing way. So there’s a great amount of growing, I would say as well, collegiality and partnership in the gospel. Some of even our engagement has been an overlap with some of the other ministries. Even that dinner that you went to, Darrell, Dr. Bock, would have included a few different students and staff from different ministries.
That’s right. Yeah, and that’s actually one of the things that’s always made it attractive for me to come to Princeton is the recognition that these ministries are cooperating with one another, and so you don’t have the sense of competition. What you get is there really is a sense of mission that says if we’re going to accomplish what we’re seeking to do, we’ve got to work together to get there. Go ahead, Matt.

I just want to say we’ve also been blessed by having a good relationship with a lot of Catholics on campus. You know, our theology and approach is Protestant, however, we do believe in partnering with all sorts of other ministries with similar hearts and similar goals. So we’re thankful to Professor Robert George, who’s a Catholic Christian on the Princeton campus, who’s a professor who’s very outspoken on a number of important issues, and it’s great to partner with them as well.

All that is helpful. Tim, you going to chime in?

No. Nothing to add there. I would just second and amen that.

Yeah. Let’s shift now to some of the more intellectual challenges that students face. And with this, what I kind of want to have in the backdrop in your thinking as you answer --what advice would you give to youth leaders and that kind of thing who are preparing students to come to a university campus at the level, the intellectual challenges that they face? I don’t want to turn this into a gripe session, although could risk going there. What is it that you find the students are not prepared to face that they could be better prepared to face when they arrive on campus? And what is it that these leaders need to be aware of as they’re preparing their students for campus in the intellectual environment that many of their churchgoers are going to walk into when they come to the university?
Well you know, the first thing I would want to mention is actually a nonintellectual part of this, and I think that it’s something that everybody knows but I don’t think is talked about enough. And that is the most important thing for them to do is connect socially, relationally with other Christians when they arrive, and that being a local church and a Christian ministry. And that even means if you come a few months early, if you’re looking at the campus, connecting then with people, with students and others. Because I think we really don’t fully appreciate how much of our knowledge is so socially constructed and a purpose that really solid on a lot of good issues.

But if you walk into a context and your only friends live just a dramatically different lifestyle, it has a powerful impact negatively on your intellectual views, and your intellectual thoughts, and that’s not really understood. But if a person connects socially from the very beginning, that has a network of good Christian friends, then there’s time and context to wrestle with all the intellectual issues. Because if they don’t have that, then just forget it. So that I think Tim and I both would say absolutely is so incredibly important above all else.

But then comes the intellectual, which is important. And Tim, maybe you can comment on that.
Yeah. And Dr. Bock, really remembering the emphasis that you said is what advice we might be able to give to pastors and even parents that are preparing their students. I would say, with agreement with everything Matt said, I would say the one thing that I would love for high school pastors and families to be able to do is first of all, have a vision for their students and for their children for the next season of life, and what all will be required in order to flourish and grow in the Christian faith. And then I would say if I could, without ranting in any sense, just exhale a little bit, relax, and don’t be afraid to articulate what’s there and what’s not there. One of the things that I find when students come on campus is sometimes the ones that really get stunned by some of the opposition that might be here intellectually, it’s because they’ve never ever heard certain arguments. But here when students bring them to us, we just think oh, I mean yeah, that’s not a big deal, but students are hearing these things for the very first time and so they’re rattled. So I wish what I would want pastors to do, parents to do, is to in a sense be honest with some of the questions that are out there. Non-Christians, whether in sort of professional spheres or even at a lay level, ask some really, really, really good questions. It’s just sometimes they take the wrong track and come to wrong conclusions, but they’re really asking some good questions. So I wish that our pastors and our parents would be preparing our students better just by introducing some of these questions and creating categories that hey, you can ask these questions and not abandon or not have your faith rattled. There are good answers for them. There are good resources to arrive at those answers. And those can be found as you enter into this next level.

I’ve met with prospective students’ families here, and when I tell them about the broader sort of religious and Christian landscape here at Princeton, they’re kind of shocked because they thought it was sort of you know, the fallowed ground where no Christian can be found at any corner of the university. And surely there’s opposition here, and it’s not entirely friendly to the Christian landscape, but there is healthy sort of engagement and community as Matt was saying there, and we’re wrestling through lots of these things. And there’s no need to sort of fear monger, or cast sort of this dark blanket over this context at these strategic influential universities. I really think if parents and pastors did a good job of really being honest with the challenges that are out there, and then providing resources to respond to them, it would set up students so much better as they enter into this really, really pivotal time of life.
Now I’m going to continue on the two parts of your answer, because I think they’re both extremely important. The first is you know, getting connected very early on. I know that one thing – I saw this at Columbia. I saw the planning for this at Columbia when I was there last spring, and I know it’s done on several campuses as well. You all give a lot of energy to welcoming students when they arrive and making sure that they know that you’re there, that you’re available for them, etc. I think that’s one of the most important strategic things you all do on your campus, because it does give a place. You know, when a student is arriving, for many of them, their whole world is changing all at once.

And some of them have never been very far away from home at any point. They may not have gone to a summer camp. This might be their first extended time away from home, so to have friends and support there for them is strategically important. And I know even when I was in college, I used to tell kids when I was engaged in ministry on campus – I used to teach a Bible study at a fraternity house at SMU – I used to say, the most important thing you can do is to make sure that you land in a ministry that’s going to be supportive of you as you go through college from the very moment you hit the campus. So I can’t agree with you more about how important that is.

And then the second half of what you’re saying that I think is important is introducing students to the issues and the questions they’re going to face and the way they’re going to face them before they get kind of “into the frying pan,” if I can say it that way, so that it doesn’t catch them by surprise. Because some students feel a sense when that happens to them of being betrayed. That what has happened, why didn’t I hear about this at my church? You know, I can see the force of that question. Why didn’t we talk about this when I was in high school? You know, that kind of thing.

And that sense of betrayal can produce an emotional reaction to the church that is the first step towards walking away.
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*Tim Adhikari*  Right.

*Matt Bennett*  And you know, what’s interesting is you have – when you have a local church context and the youth group, you have students of a wide variety and range of intellectual interest. And there are a segment of those who go to very highly academic universities where we minister. And unfortunately, a lot of times you know, very few churches are large enough to kind of provide something for each of the different students in terms of where they are and what they need. So it’s just difficult for a church to be able to provide that for the different academic interests of the different students, so this is where parents are so key. If they know their kids are very academically oriented, then it’s really incumbent upon them to provide them with the questions and the challenges in a deep way, and not being threatened by it. Because there are answers to every challenge that’s brought up, and Darrell, you know from your years of scholarship it’s just you know, the latest theory comes out, and then you address it and look at it, realize, get to the bottom of it, and then it’s onto the next thing. Because the answers are all there, but it just takes time to kind of work through them.

*Dr. Darrell Bock*  That’s right. And some of what gets hyped as new is actually quite old, and you know, it’s just been repackaged. I’m thinking about well, we’re dealing with this book that’s come out recently about Jesus called Zealot, which is really you know, gone viral in certain contexts in terms of the way it’s been responded to. And when I read that book, I look at it and I go, this is stuff that I saw in the 1990s. This is stuff that was written about in the 1960s. There isn’t really anything new here. The new twist is that now there’s someone with a Muslim background writing about it. But even that’s not surprising, because any time a book is produced by a skeptical Christian of the United States, one of the first places it lands is in the Middle East. So I think we have to realize again that getting the other half of the story out or the rest of the story out what the culture is not pumping out towards people is an important part of the equation in helping people know where those resources are.

*Matt Bennett*  Right.
Let me shift gears one more time and ask now. We’ve talked in generalities for the most part. If I were to ask you for three or four key specific intellectual challenges and/or social challenges, what would we be looking at, at Princeton?

Yeah, the key social challenge in my mind would be yeah, the social elitism, but I do think also that the thornier question of the hookup culture and the sexual licentiousness that is pervasive on campus. I think it is so destructive to students – male, female. It’s so dehumanizing that I do think that is a key social issue.

The second one is within the religion department, some of the stuff that you’ve interacted with, Dr. Bock, with our students. I think that’s another intellectual hurdle. Princeton doesn’t have a large atheist population. There’s a small crew. They’re loud, but they’re small. The issue is much more on parsing the value of Scripture and then the portion of Christ that it presents. So I would say the engagement of the sexual ethic and then the engagement of the issues of the historical Jesus, the resurrection, are very, very front and center. And therefore are front and center as far as our approach to engaging the campus this year.

Now let’s talk a little bit about something that I have spent a lot of time interacting with your campus about in detail. In fact, it’s the reason why I go up there periodically. And that is the famous what’s been nicknamed “faith buster course.”

Yeah.

Some people have no idea what that is, so let’s start there. What does it mean to walk into a “faith buster course” and what are we talking about?

This course at Princeton has a long history, and even before the current professor, the previous professor who taught it was known for teaching a course on New Testament origins, but at least in my view instead of presenting a balanced view of the scholarship on the issue, would present one side. Would never deceive or would never lie outright, but by the way it was presented it would leave the students in my view intentionally with a very wrong perception of scholarship on the subject. Which is really disappointing and really less than what Princeton should be, and is in most other areas.
But in the last few years, as you know, it’s been taken over by another professor, and there are similar problems. And Tim, you can address…

Tim Adhikari: Yeah, so the “faith busters” class is actually going to be sort of the locus of one aspect of our engagement this year. It’s actually a perfect case study when I talked before about there’s a need here to be honest about certain things related to scriptures and just sort of early interpretations of who Jesus was, and that there was some variegation about it, and yet the conclusions that are arrived at in this “faith busters” course need not be logical outcomes. There’s a lot of non sequitur there. So it’s oftentimes the disagreements that we find between biblical scholars and systematic theologians is the kind of challenges that you’re fighting in this “faith busters” course.

The problem is students heading into this course have never heard any of these sort of nuances to Canon, or discussions of the Gnostic gospels. The Gnostic representation of Jesus versus the synoptics. The synoptic problem. What is a synoptic problem? Any of these things. These are all raised as it were for the first time for many students, not necessarily for our faculty at all, but for the students their first time hearing about --there’s a problem in the synoptic gospels? They’re giving a different representation of Jesus than John would? John was influenced by the Gnostics in the Gospel of Thomas? The dating? All of these sorts of things. This is exactly the kind of thing I’m talking about where students hear this for the first time. They’re intimidated because they hear it from a top-notch distinguished scholar who has received this honorary degree, that honorary degree. So they’re very intimidated. They almost don’t stand a chance.
So “faith busters” is a course that we’re very much engaging, and I’m happy to report that our initial levels of engagement last year, which I really believe are just preliminary efforts, just really fact-finding, just gathering something at a grassroots level that we’re giving more energy and resourcing to this year. But even last year’s efforts resulted in I think significant changes and modifications where that course, that “faith busters” course, is now seeing some changes in its curriculum. Where before I would say like Matt was attesting to, that the curriculum, the reading, the bibliography was very, very I would say skewed and asymmetrical, it’s actually finding much more balance where right now you’re starting to find resources like C.E. Hill. You’re starting to find resources like N.T. Wright’s engagement with John Dominic Crossan. Things that you wouldn’t have found five, three, two, even a year ago are now starting to enter into that course syllabi for many of these students.

So we’re engaging in ongoing conversations with that professor, engaging in this particular area so that now what we’re actually hearing is some of the other campus ministers who used to tell their students do not take that class, do whatever you can to avoid it, are actually now telling their students go take that class because you’re going to be trained and equipped and resourced to be able to engage and interact with that professor at a level that’s going to actually build your faith, not break it.

Dr. Darrell Bock

That’s interesting to hear, and that is an interesting development. You know, as surprising as that sounds, it really is nothing but a mirror what goes on culturally. If you look at what goes on television that talks about Christianity or whatever, you see the exact same things. Like that’s where it’s coming from. So it isn’t like this material is inaccessible. It isn’t like you have to go to universities to find out what these arguments are. They’re actually on your television. They’re on the History Channel, or they’re a CNN special or whatever. When they dive into these areas at Christmas and Easter on a regular basis.
The Table Podcast  How To Engage in a University Context: Princeton

You’re getting the presentation of this stuff, and what you’re getting in the public square oftentimes is very much a reflection of kind of where the “faith busters” course started, which is you’re getting one side of the argument presented in a very organized, crisp, aesthetically pleasing and attractive way that then says – and uses the quote more often than not, many scholars argue or most scholars argue, so who’s going to argue with the scholarship on this? That kind of thing. And you’re off and running. And again, the secret is that people don’t know there’s a whole other half of this debate that they’re not even being exposed to.

Matt Bennett  Like you mentioned you know, a lot of these arguments are the same ones that were around decades ago, but most people don’t know it. Some of these arguments haven’t even been refuted and most scholars won’t even look at this anymore, even though there might have arose some new sort of arguments against the scriptures. But they don’t know. They’re not exposed to it, and if it weren’t for Tim and his team there to show them the other side and have you come up and speak on it and show them the resources, they wouldn’t have much of a chance.

Dr. Darrell Bock  Yeah. Well, it’s an extremely important conversation and it’s an important element to the equation. We’ve talked about sexuality. We’ve talked about specific biblical issues. Let me bring up a couple of others that I know hit our campus, although it sounds like one of them is not that big on Princeton’s campus, but it might be big in other spots on other key campuses. The whole new atheism emphasis and thrust. That’s not so much a battle over the nature of the Bible, although sometimes it goes there. It’s a more philosophical and worldview battle it seems to me. Is that big on campus, Tim?

Tim Adhikari  As I’ve said before, it’s a small – probably loud crew, but a small crew. The reason why it’s not probably as big is because pluralism is so big at Princeton, and a hard atheism seems just as unwelcomed as a hard exclusivity of Christ view. So you often don’t find the Richard Dawkins, or the Sam Harris, or the Daniel Dennett kind of books circulating. That’s almost as extreme as really a high orthodox view of Christianity would be.
What I would say is, however, this is one of those cases where being real honest with questions would be very, very helpful, and has been very, very helpful with students. I would say that if there is an atheist population on campus it probably resides – this may not be surprising at all – resides within the science department, particularly the physics department. And if they do ever have a biblical attack, it’s generally been located with Genesis 1 and like issues.

So what we’ve found is just again, there’s questions about Genesis 1. There’s also different readings of Genesis 1 that they’ve never heard.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**

That’s right.

**Tim Adhikari**

What is a framework view? So when they encounter things like that, they’re realizing that my goodness, what the biblical author is talking about there is perhaps very far from our 20th and 21st Century kind of debates that we’re having, and it really just defuses and defangs their opposition. So last year even having some of these just across-the-table conversations on things like Genesis 1, we’ve found those who have been in sort of these atheist or even hard agnostic sort of camps have really softened, and some have even come to faith.

One of the things I was going to say before is out of the number of students we have in our ministry approaching 400 right now, 1/6th of the students in our ministries right now came to Princeton as a non-Christian. So if you think about it, by God’s grace that’s quite a manifestation of just how even minds are being changed from those who are – whether they were apathetic or antagonistic, many of whom were antagonistic – are now just finding that Christian belief isn’t as high a jump as they originally thought it was going to be because we’re engaging some of these what they thought were going to be just nonnegotiables. They were never going to be able to breach this. They’re never going to be able to breach Genesis 1 versus modern science. Different readings and different handling of those questions are actually proving the opposite to be true.
**Dr. Darrell Bock**

That’s interesting. You know, one of the things that I find interesting about pluralism when it exists is that one of the more difficult things about it is, is that it kind of becomes a “Well, you believe that and if it works for you, that’s great, but I believe something else.” And it almost produces a kind of subtle withdrawal from engagement if you’re not careful. So being able to engage that mindset that says everyone has a right to be at the table for the conversation, but then knowing how to do your advocacy once you get to the table, that’s an interesting combination of skills to teach somebody. And I take it that’s part of what you’re after in your leadership development part of what you do.

**Tim Adhikari**

Absolutely. Absolutely.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**

I’m sitting here going our hour is just about up, and I’m sitting here going it’s amazing. There are a whole series of things that I’d love to come back and talk with you about, and I suspect I may impose upon you all again sometime in the future to talk with us about some stuff in more detail. Let me ask you one final question, because I’m coming back to the sexual environment and the social pressures. One of the things that I’m hearing that’s interesting to hear from you is that if I ask that question on a lot of campuses, what I often get in terms of a response of social pressure and sexuality is the whole, if I can say it, debate over same-sex marriage and those kinds of issues. But what I’m hearing from you, at least what I think I’m hearing from you, is that the level of personal ethics with regard to sexuality is almost overwhelming that particular discussion, which can be more of a political debate or a social debate as opposed to personalized. I mean, it can sometimes move into that. But am I hearing that right? That the personal challenge of your overall approach to sexuality is in some ways a more profound issue on the campus for students?

**Matt Bennett**

Yeah, it really is. You know, the same-sex attraction issue, of course, affects a lot of students, but it’s minor compared to heterosexual attraction and all the sexual practices that happen on campus, you know, premarital sex. So far more of our students deal with that. So the whole hookup culture as they call it, which is a culture pretty much people sleeping with everybody all the time, just overwhelms that. So we definitely have to deal with the homosexual issue, but it’s just not nearly as big as the hookup culture.
**Tim Adhikari**  
Yeah. Underneath it, Dr. Bock, I think you nailed it, is I think the real challenge is just autonomy. It’s the right to just say I can live with whoever I want, however I want, however often I want, and that’s the real challenge. It’s not necessarily this manifestation of it, that manifestation. The root problem is autonomy. And I’ll just end with this.

The language that arose last year as we were going through a study called sex and spirituality, what we started to ask Princeton students were, particularly those that are in engineering and some of quantitative mindset, we said hey, there is, would you agree, a certain logic and law to the universe as it relates to engineering? You would never think of just originating your own laws of engineering. What you’re trying to do is observe, interpret, and then apply the laws that are in place in order to be fruitful at your studies here and then in life in the future.

Well, similarly there is a sort of relational physics, and we ought to observe what’s there, interpret it, and see if we can understand, apply it, and embrace that. But for some reason there is a disconnect that happens there where students will say “Yes, there is something that we must answer to in the former in order to do engineering or economics, or physics well. But as it relates to relational engineering, or relational physics, or relational economics, we somehow have the right to develop our own universal laws.” And they’re realizing that disconnect, and some actually just caved under the pressure of that and actually became Christians through that course last year. So that is something that we hope to be able to continue and expand upon. Is just examining that disconnect. It feels arbitrary, and I think students are becoming increasingly aware of it.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  
I think that’s a great articulation of a principle that I like to talk about, and that is that sometimes the church thinks that because it’s in the Bible, it’s true. But maybe because it’s true, it’s in the Bible. And those are not the same thing. So when you work on explaining why it’s true, which is why it’s landed in the Bible, rather than saying it’s in the Bible and therefore it’s true, you actually give depth to what’s going on. And in and out of that depth there becomes a kind of reflective process and thinking that goes on that a person who isn’t connected to any loyalty to the Bible can still wrestle with and hopefully appreciate.

**Tim Adhikari**  
Right.
Dr. Darrell Bock

Listen, again, thank you all for taking the time to meet with us. I’m sure this is the first of several that we’ll be doing with campuses in the Ivy League, and Tim, I really do thank you for taking the time to introduce Princeton to us. Matt, Christian Union. It’s a great ministry. We continue to pray for what you all do up there, and our hope is that by giving some to time to talk about some of these issues, we’ve helped some people in the church or parents think through where their kids are, particularly their teenage kids who are thinking about heading to universities. So thank y’all very much.

Tim Adhikari

Thank you.

Matt Bennett

Thank you very much. Blessings to you.

Dr. Darrell Bock

And we appreciate you joining us on The Table where we discuss issues of God and culture.