Challenges facing Christian Students at UCLA, UC Irvine and UC San Diego

Part 1 of 2: Social and Intellectual Challenges facing Christian Students at UC Irvine and UC San Diego
with Darrell Bock, Ben Shin
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Welcome to the table where we discuss issues of God and culture and today our topic is Christians on College Campuses and our focus is going to be on three campuses in California, UCLA, the most famous of the three that I’m gonna mention, UC Irvine, and UC San Diego. And one thing we know for sure, none of those campuses struggle for the environment of the weather. They’re all located in beautiful parts of the country where the weather is pretty consistent all year round.

My guest is Ben Shin. Ben teaches at Talbot Seminary and has done so now for a while and is leader of a parachurch ministry primarily to Asian students on these campuses. Ben, welcome to the table.

Hello, Darrell. Nice to see you, brother.

Yeah. Now we’re going to discuss a little bit first the nature of your ministry and what it involves and then we’ll turn to what the students who are on those campuses face. So tell us a little bit about the ministry that you’ve been involved with and how long you’ve been involved with them.

I started first as a student in 1984 at the campus of UCLA. I’m a graduate of UCLA and we started this Bible study because we wanted to reach Korean Americans specifically who spoke English. At the time, they only had Bible studies that spoke Korean language so we started an English-speaking one. And pretty soon, that caught on and more people joined us and we then branched out to Irvine as well as San Diego.

And so our ministry is called Crossroads Campus Ministries. It started out as a Korean Bible study first. It was called KACF, Korean-American Christian Fellowship, but we didn’t want the ethnic market to be a stumbling block to the gospel. As we were sharing with people on campus, they would ask us, “Do we have to be Korean to come to the Bible study?” And we said, “Certainly not ‘cause the gospel is for all people.”
So we decided to change the name to CCM, the Crossroads Campus Ministries, in 1998, and now it has become more diversified and it’s a pan-Asian ministry. It is student run but we also have staff who are seminarians primarily from Talbot School of Theology who work there to both preach and teach, to minister, counsel, and guide. And I have worked now currently as the director of this ministry and have been doing so now for almost 30 years.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Well, I was just going to say. I was doing the math. I said that’s almost 30 years on those campuses, so you’ve seen a lot in terms of the campuses. Now I take it that these are three very different campus environments. Would that be fair to say or are they fairly similar? How would you describe their relationship to each other?

Dr. Ben Shin

Yes. Well, they are similar but it is pretty true that every campus has its own unique personality to it. So for example, San Diego, the beach weather, the hang loose mentality, they like to have a lot of fun. They’re Asian surfers, if that makes sense.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Oh, wow. That’s a category I’ve never put together before. Thank you.

Dr. Ben Shin

But UCLA, they’re a little bit different. They’re a big campus, of course, and they would be in high school the more popular kids in that they run around with the jocks and the AS and so forth. There seems to be this strata within UC systems whether it’s spoken or not but the personalities certainly shows itself as being quite different.

Dr. Darrell Bock

So how does Irvine fit in that mix?

Dr. Ben Shin

They’re studious and obedient.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Okay, so three very different campus feels. Can you describe how you think those campuses have changed in the last 30 years, not necessarily in relationship to each other but as individual campuses?
Dr. Ben Shin

I think there’s been some interesting movements at all the campuses. One is that the students themselves are very different now than let’s say even 10 or 20 years ago. I think that students are actually more studious now than they were before and I think this comes with some of it is the acceptance rate and the requirements of the university as being higher and more difficult to get into. So we have students that come in that have very excellent high school careers and they score high on the SAT and they’ve done lots of activity.

So when they come into these campuses, they’re not as – I don’t know if the word is committed. They’re not spending as much time with things related to their faith as they are in the library. I guess at one level that’s good. They have their priorities straight as students but we don’t see them being involved in as many things like small groups and evangelism as in previous years.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Interesting. And so what does the ministry itself actually involve for the students on these various campuses?

Dr. Ben Shin

We focus primarily on two things. We have what’s called the general meeting that meets on either a Wednesday or a Thursday night. That’s a two-hour meeting. It resembles a service. So we’ll have worship and praise. We’ll have a speaker and we’ll typically invite a speaker form a local church, a pastor to come in that’s representative of some of the students from the ministry, and then after that, we’ll have a time of prayer and discussion and then pretty much go out and have food and fellowship.

The second aspect is there are small groups. So I would say that’s the strength of CCM is the small groups for the last 30 years. They’re very intense. They’re a high-level commitment. We have set curriculum that we go through where we teach them Bible doctrine, spiritual disciplines, hermeneutics, all of those things, and they continue on to do this for many years. I often joke that we can almost have a genealogical tree like the Mormon Church to trace back not salvation but the small group connections for the last 30 years.
Dr. Darrell Bock

No, that’s amazing. So you’ve got small group support. You’ve got this meeting that happens every week, I guess most campus ministries have the big meeting regularly and the small group structure that actually mirrors what we heard from Christian Union and Princeton, among other places, and so that kind of personal support I take it is important for students coming into college.

Dr. Ben Shin

Absolutely.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Now part of what we want to talk about is how churches prepare or don’t prepare students for what they face in college and so if you were to give advice to youth leaders who were parts of churches around the country, what advice would you give them as they’re thinking about sending their junior and seniors in high school off to college like UCLA, UC Irvine, and UC San Diego?

Dr. Ben Shin

Well, this is actually a very passionate point for me, Darrell. I have a criticism of youth groups today, especially in Southern California. I think the essence of these youth groups are pizza and guitars and those are fun at the moment but it certainly does not prepare you for the philosophies and ideologies and all the isms that one will face in the university. Go to a science class, you face evolution. You go to a philosophy class, you have atheism. You have professors who are antagonistic towards Christianity and the gospel and these kids who are well mannered and well behaved, they buckle because they don’t have a robust Christian worldview and they don’t know how to respond because they don’t even know what the questions are.

So I think what we need to help youth pastors do is to find resources that will allow the students who are in high school to think carefully and clearly about their faith and anchor them in truths, whether it be the validity of the Bible, which is always under attack, or the credibility of the resurrection or why Christianity versus other religions. I think we need to help them by giving them resources and teaching on this so they don’t get sideswiped or blindsided when they go to college. This has been a huge problem that we’ve seen.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Now I’m assuming that you have some resources to recommend or that you think to at least get the job started. Is that true? Are there some resources that you think are helpful in this regard?
**Dr. Ben Shin**

We have a number of resources. One of them that I would recommend, I think it’s called Thinking Christianly by Jonathan Morrow, who’s one of our graduates here at Talbot. He basically has a book where he has prepared people going into college I think to know what they’re up against. We also recommend Greg Koukl’s Stand to Reason. He has a lot of material that’s very adaptable to youth and he has a whole staff, Brett Kunkle and Alan Shlemon, who work with him and they train students so that by the time we get them in college, we’ll be able to at least know what direction to go with.

But once they come to college, Darrell, then we also train them through some basics on the fundamentals of the faith. We give them training on spiritual disciplines. We make sure they know the gospel and why Christianity is true. But let’s be honest. Some of these students, they’re farther along than others and some of them are barely, barely understanding that they’re even saved.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**

Wow. Well, you mentioned that Jonathan Morrow was a Talbot student. We’ll claim him at Dallas, too. I think he has switch hit in his career. Anyway, so let’s talk about each one of these campuses kind of one at a time ‘cause I think that this will help us some. Let’s start with the less well-known and work our way up to UCLA. I guess I’ll go from south to north. Let’s talk about UC San Diego.

The standard question I like to ask people who’ve been involved in ministry for some time on these campuses is can you describe what you consider to be the major challenges both social and intellectual that a student meets when they hit their particular campus? So we’re at UC San Diego and we’re asking what are the particular challenges social and intellectual that students find that your staff has to deal with on a regular basis on those campuses?

**Dr. Ben Shin**

Okay, socially there’s two things that are present. One is the distraction of the beauty of the beaches. My goodness. You can go there and not study and you would get a great tan but you would fail your class. Some of these students need a little bit more motivation to show up to class and let alone to come to our Bible studies and our faith. So I think that’s one social thing. It’s not a huge problem. I think we try to provide students with accountability so that they would be able to flourish as students as well as in their faith.
I think on a spiritual level, for a long time, Darrell, there have not been a lot of churches that these students could go to and so as a result, they were pretty dependent only on the Bible study but our ministry really wants to get students to go into the local church ‘cause we think that’s God’s long-term plan. So only recently have there been churches that we can partner with that can get these UCSD students to be a part of but I think that issue is improving.

In terms of academics, though, UCSD actually is one of the up and rising UC schools in the system and you have to study pretty hard. So I think students are getting more serious about their academics, but again, this is the problem, time management. Then how about their faith? How about their commitment to time with God and coming out to these Bible studies? So we have to try to communicate as a staff the whole concept of balance. What does balance look like?

With Asian students, too, Darrell, there’s another self-imposed pressure as well as parental pressure. In sociology, we’re called the model minority, which means that we’re well behaved and we follow pretty obediently and we’re supposed to be good in math and sciences. That’s the stereotype. Whether that’s true or not, that was not true for me. I’m horrible at math and sciences. I was an English major in college so I break that stereotype right off the bat.

But I think that those challenges are things that we face as challenges. They’re not struggles but things that we have to pay attention to and work hard at so we develop holistic followers of Christ, not just theological eggheads or just academic hermits or social butterflies. So we have to try and be mindful how do we develop the person holistically.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Now are there any particular intellectual challenges at UCSD in terms of the way Christianity is handled on the campus in classes? Is there anything specific in that regard?

Dr. Ben Shin

In the Philosophy Department and in their Western Civ classes, there have been strong opponents to Christianity.
Dr. Darrell Bock: So if someone hits the campus, I take it they take the Western Civ class pretty early on if they’re in the humanities. It’s the way most campuses work. And they might opt into philosophy or not. I don’t know if they require a philosophy class. Anyway, so what does that look like? What’s the nature of the challenge? Do you know specifically the kinds of things that are being taught?

Dr. Ben Shin: Yeah. It’s basically atheism and saying that Christianity is not true. In Western Civ, they would like to pose other religions as more credible or came before Christianity. They would show the different references of the Genesis accounts and say that the Bible copied the other words that were predated and all of this. So when we come down, we have to do a lot of apologetics and we have to show them that there is good, rational material that responds to some of these challenges that atheists and others would like to pose at us.

Dr. Darrell Bock: That’s interesting because we’ve just done on our podcasts on the non-college side a full presentation of Genesis in the context of the ancient Near East, which I know is a big discussion generally in Old Testament studies. But to think about that being a part of the college campuses and it’s significant and I’m actually aware of those issues being introduced in public schools as early as junior high. So that’s not an unusual kind of issue to face.

Okay, well, that’s UCSD. Let’s switch to UC Irvine. You say it has a slightly different flavor as a campus. It seems to be from what I can tell less laid back, more intense, and a little more serious kind of student. So again, the question is what are the social challenges particular to that campus and what are the intellectual challenges?

Dr. Ben Shin: UC Irvine, when I first started working there in 1990, it seemed like a clean and plastic environment. There wasn’t much to do if you were a college student and unlike most college towns, everything closed at 9:00. There was only one Denny’s that opened and it had terrible service and no one wanted to go there and that eventually closed down as well.

Dr. Darrell Bock: That would drive you to the beaches.
Dr. Ben Shin

Absolutely. And so that’s why, unlike the other two campuses, UC Irvine students would typically graduate in four years because they were studying all the time. I think people were pretty moderate and mild heeled in personality there at UCI, but I know one of the challenges that they faced is they would have Bible as Literature classes and they would introduce things like JADP theory and they would come up to me and say, “Pastor, do you think Moses really wrote some of these books in the Old Testament?” And I would say, “Certainly. Why do you think not?” And they would come up with these things that they would learn in their classes.

And so unlike San Diego, however, Irvine had a plethora of churches where people could easily go to on weekends and Friday nights, which was another gathering for the church groups, so there were a lot of pastors that they could ask and be able to find some responses to some of these other questions. So I don’t think UC Irvine students struggled as much as San Diego students with some of these issues.

Dr. Darrell Bock

And this was because of the church support that you’re talking about. That’s interesting. Now I’m debating whether to ask this question but I’m going to go ahead and ask it and that is you said that students are hunting for churches at these two campuses. I know a little bit about the Irvine area because when I’m out there, sometimes I go to Mariners, which is certainly in the area. Can you name some of the churches that have helped you in the ministries? Let’s be campus specific. So UCSD first and then UC Irvine.

Dr. Ben Shin

At UCSD, we have really depended on Emmanuel Faith Church where old Doc Strauss used to be and that’s been a real helpful church for us. The Lighthouse Bible Church down in San Diego has been huge for us. The church called – now it’s called Redeemer Church. It previously had a different name, I’m blanking on the name of it. But these are churches that we have worked with together.

Students don’t come home every weekend so we say, “Just go to these churches,” and that would be really helpful in the San Diego area. The Fields Church is another one in San Diego that’s been really helpful for us. We’ve sent people to The Rock. I think that’s Miles McPherson. So all these have been really helpful churches in San Diego.
In Irvine, we’ve partnered with a number of churches. Berean Community Church is an excellent church that we’ve recommended. Cross Life Church is a wonderful church, Bethel Korean Church. We’ve done Rock Harbor, of course. All of these have been really helpful churches. And what we’ve done, Darrell, is we’ve had a lot of the pastors from these churches come to our Bible study and speak, so when students see these pastors they go, “Wow, I really like this teaching,” and they’re more apt to go there on Sundays.

And the support that you’re looking for that you’re hoping the churches would give are obviously a place to worship on Sunday but obviously a place that also has some element of healthy Christian social life. Would that be fair?

Yes, absolutely. We understand our role as a parachurch, too, Darrell. We understand that we are not a substitute to the local church because our tenure is only four or five years with these college students. So during the time that they are in our campus ministry, we’ll really emphasize the local church. And so in our announcements, we say, “Our ministry, CCM, is not a local church and if you have questions or would like to go to one,” we have a list ready in which we submit it to the students and we recommend them to go to these churches because I think it was Howard Hendricks that said, “A ministry of churches from the womb to the tomb.” And we need to honor that. That is God’s chosen institution. We’re just there as tutors to help students along so that they would make the transition long term.

Now some churches find it a little bit hard to engage in campus ministry and I think to some degree, some of them have said, “Well, there are these parachurch organizations that are there working with the students and they’re able to give more time and energy to it.” So what advice would you give to churches that say, “We really shouldn’t neglect the campus that’s down the road from us or the junior college that’s down the road from us.” Do you have any advice for how they can be effective in engaging on their campus?
Dr. Ben Shin: Yes. I think the key word is partnership. There are a lot of things that both the parachurch and the local church can offer that are different from one another. For example, the parachurch, we can have staff there that churches cannot necessarily spare to be on the campuses all the time, whereas the local church has facilities that we can’t necessarily get a room on campus at times and that’s becoming increasingly difficult because of the different even religious challenges where administrations are not recognizing some groups.

So I think partnership is key but we have to get over a sense of territorialism, which I think is a huge stumbling block. We have to realize we’re on the same side. We have to realize we need solidarity. We’re working towards the same goals and in many cases, they are with the same students. And so we say, okay, we take care of them Monday through Thursday. You take care of them Friday through Sunday. And if we can strike up a good partnership, it works extremely well and both benefit as a result.

Dr. Darrell Bock: That is a terrific suggestion. Okay, let’s shift gears now. We’ll probably spend a little more time with this campus. It’s a little more well-known, has a little more of a national reputation, UCLA. I mean you can’t say UCLA without thinking basketball and sports and Westwood –

Dr. Ben Shin: It’s football this year.

Dr. Darrell Bock: – and Wooden. Yeah, you’re off and running in football this year and USC’s got their problems. Anyway, so let’s talk about UCLA. First, the climate on campus. What’s the climate on the campus there and then we’ll come to the specific issues?

Dr. Ben Shin: Well, I’m gonna be biased ‘cause I’m a UCLA grad myself, but in all honesty, I will say there are probably the most distractions at UCLA because there are so many things that you could do. There’s a huge social scene. There’s a large fraternity and sorority system. Of course, sports is huge with all the different activities. And within striking radius, there are a lot of negative distractions of clubs and places that they could go to and do inappropriate things that would be not consistent with their Christian testimony.
So these are real struggles that the students have and when they’re young and out of the guidance and tutelage of mom and dad, they feel free to do whatever they want.

Dr. Darrell Bock

And they’re encouraged to do that in many ways.

Dr. Ben Shin

Correct and they do. So we find ourselves often taking the lifesaving posture where we throw out the lifesaver and we have to reel them back. But I’ll tell you one thing that’s really positive about this is we have a lot of kids who have grown up in a local church and the dynamic that we find is in their first year of college, they have a prodigal son or daughter period. They walk away from the faith. They’re tired of the institutionalized church and they do anything and everything that they please. But then they end up, because of friends in the dorms or classmates they meet in class, they end up coming into these Bible studies that don’t look like or feel like church and they end up staying and they actually end up committing themselves.

So going back to an earlier question, we talked about partnership. This is where I’ve seen the parachurch function in helping students who’ve gone away from the church eventually go back to the church through the means of the parachurch. And we have seen this, again, for 30-plus years. It has been a joy and surprisingly, many of these students who were pretty pagan in their first year in college, a number of them are pastors now and we praise the Lord for that.