

Evangelicals on Campus

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Thirteen women—eleven evangelical Christians and two sociologists—gathered in a dorm room on a large Midwestern university to eat pizza and discuss college life one spring evening a year or so ago. Like most college dorm rooms, the room was packed with stuff—a bunked bed, TV, VCR, movie collection, refrigerator, microwave, etc. Like many of the rooms up and down the halls, it was decorated with posters of rock bands and contemporary movies. But instead of the typical display of “party pix” documenting wild nights out, this room boasted photographs from a spring break mission trip focused on literacy. Our hostess, a young Christian woman who brought together her friends to talk with us, explained that the trip was an opportunity to “have fun and do good” at the same time. We spent nearly two hours with them discussing their social lives. This dorm room conversation was one of three group interviews we conducted with 23 evangelical Christian students participating in large campus parachurch organizations. Two of the groups were single-gender (one all women, one all men), and the third included both men and women.¹

The evangelical students we spoke with have plenty of company in higher educational institutions. Evangelical Christian organizations exist on hundreds of secular campuses in the United States. Campus Crusade for Christ has full-time staff on nearly 200 campuses, and reaches thousands of additional campuses with “remote” staff and student leaders. It claims 27,000 full-time staff and 225,000 volunteers who work in 190 countries on 60 different ministries and projects.² InterVarsity Christian Fellowship claims activity on more than 560 college and university campuses nationwide. Smaller, Navigators employs 3,800 staff, and is on over 160 American campuses. These organizations are evidence of evangelical commitment to keeping young Christians within the fold. Smith (1998) explains that “evangelical parents and churches invest enormous amounts of time, energy, and money” in organizational infrastructure designed to retain young people. These efforts are effective: relative to other groups, few evangelicals defect from their religion of origin (Smith 1998: 48).

The cozy world our study participants presented to us contrasted starkly with the portrayal of the experiences of evangelicals on campus in the literature. Hammond and Hunter (1984) assert that

evangelical students on secular campuses develop a “fortress mentality.” They argue that insulated communities guard against threats to evangelical beliefs presented by both academic and social aspects of college life. The term “fortress” suggests a barren place, guarded against the outside world. We suggest, based on what we learned from the students we interviewed, that evangelical communities on campus might be better described as “havens.”

From the perspective of Christian Smith, author of *American Evangelicalism* (1998), it is not surprising that parachurch organizations provide young people with a sense of meaning and belonging. Smith argues that a religion persists when it embeds “itself in subcultures that offer satisfying morally orienting collective identities which provide adherents meaning and belonging” (p. 118). Evangelicalism is thriving, Smith concludes, because it is particularly good at this.

In this essay, we demonstrate that the young evangelicals we interviewed, like adult evangelicals, embrace a distinctive evangelical identity and worldview. We then identify the *specific* strategies that parachurch organizations employ to make participation meaningful and satisfying for young people. Our argument is consistent with Smith’s general theory, and can be seen as an example of the kind of on-the-ground analysis Smith deems necessary to explain religious strength. The success of on-campus parachurch ministries is, we argue, largely due to their capacity to address issues of meaning, belonging, and identity in ways sensitive to the concerns of young people. These resource-rich organizations have developed outreach strategies effective at addressing challenges in the lives of young people and college students. These organizations recognize that young people have a lot of leisure time, and tend to be more pre-occupied than older people with the opinions of peers, making friends, and forming romantic relationships. They also recognize a need for ongoing adult guidance and mentorship throughout the transition to adulthood. Students find participation in parachurch organizations appealing because they provide social activities, meaningful friendships, adult mentorship, guidance building romantic relationships, safe and low-stakes opportunities to meet possible romantic partners, and non-adversarial ways to relate to the opposite gender.

We concentrate on these organizations as a context for the development of romantic relationships, as one of the key tasks of youth-focused evangelical organizations is the prevention of the sexual secularization of the young. These organizations strive to keep young people on the path toward Christian marital partnerships and, thus, to create new Christian families. In this essay we focus not only on what these groups guard against, but also on the resources and supportive environment they provide for students.

Evangelical Identity and Worldview

The evangelical Christian students we interviewed set themselves apart from mainstream college culture. They define their values in opposition to typical college students. One student observed, “[We are] a group of people going away from the norm, which the norm of college would be you go, you party, you do whatever you want to do, sex, drinking, drugs, you name it. And I mean that’s your stereotypical college experience. And I would say that in high school that’s mostly what you think is gonna happen in college.” Our respondents consistently identified drinking, partying

and casual sexual relations as defining mainstream college culture. While there is, of course, variation in rates of participation in these activities on college campuses, partying, drinking, and casual sex are highly visible in many college settings. They play a central role in the student culture of this large, public, secular, residential university. To be an evangelical Christian on this campus is, for many of our respondents, to be marked as “other.”

People aren't used to it when you tell them, like, what I want to do is I want to be a missionary. I want to take God's and God's promise that he wants to have a relationship with every being on this planet. I want to go run off to crazy parts of the world and tell people that. And some people look at me, they're like “so why are you in college?” Because it's not, it's really not normal.

According to these students, confronting the stereotypes of peers and professors who don't understand them is part of life on a secular campus.

They rely heavily on the support and understanding of a like-minded community centered in and around evangelical organizations on campus. This separation shields them from the pressures of fitting into the mainstream. “It's a daily battle, you know, we feel pressure from all areas. We are surrounded by a lot of people in classes, who choose to go out and get drunk and sleep with whoever they please.” Their community provides an alternative to the sex and alcohol-infused party life on campus. And this alternative is a total package: different people, different social activities, different rhetoric, different relationship norms, and a different set of valued behavior.

Defining themselves as outside of and, in some cases, in opposition to mainstream collegiate culture supports an ideology of superiority. “We are called to a higher standard. We're called to be different... 'cause that's what God tells us, that we're to live in the world but we're not to be like the world.” The Christian students we interviewed believe that their lifestyle choices create deeper, more meaningful relationships and experiences than their promiscuous peers. “Our purpose, our hope, and just our hearts and who we are... is so significantly different and there is more of a light and a feeling of fulfillment that I can sense in the quality of my friendships here.” They view “being different,” not as stigma, but as an affirmation of their sense of worth. This separation strengthens their faith and highlights their common mission.

Addressing the Concerns of Youth

Social Life, Friendship, and Mentoring

Christian organizations at colleges create and maintain an active religious and social life on campus. In any given week, they offer a host of organization-sponsored activities: Campus Crusade for Christ meetings, “Nav Nights,” Bible studies, guest speakers, retreats, workshops and worship services. Students can easily attend Christian functions every day of the week. These activities structure the time of Christian students. Without heavy family or work responsibilities, many college students have considerable leisure time. Parachurch organizations make sure that there is always something faith-affirming to do. This rich array of appealing activities helps prevent young Christians from feeling the pull of secular social life.

Christian functions also provide students with opportunities to meet other Christians. Students report that they often socialize informally after meetings. Many of our respondents found most, if not all, of their close friends among other Christians.

My close friends are Christian. Just because, like, we are pursuing the same truth, we all have a personal relationship with Jesus, and that's the most important thing for us. There are a lot of people that all of their friendships at college come from Navigators. So it's also a very good support basis. When you're struggling through something in college, you'll have a group of guys and/or girls that think and believe the same things you do.

Time and time again, these students cite the importance of having the support of friends as they strive to live Christian lives. They view the creation of quality relationships as an essential component of spiritual work, of intensifying one's relationship with God.

There is a different depth that comes from having people of like mind that have the same outlook and perspective on what they believe because our dreams, although they may be different and tailored to who we are, fall under the same category of wanting to strive to be closer to God and more intimate with Him.

Many of these activities are organized by full-time adult staff. Christian student organizations, as affiliates of large, national organizations, tend to have more resources than other student organizations. They also arrange one-on-one mentoring relationships, matching students with adult ministers or peers. Some of our respondents reported having both an adult and a peer mentor.

Relationship Rules and Guidance

Parachurch organizations create evangelical enclaves on campus that structure student social lives. They surround members with like-minded Christians, provide them with a strong sense of belonging, and affirm their Christian identity and general sense of self-worth. These organizations have also devised ways to speak to age-specific concerns. For example, they provide students with tools to navigate the difficult terrain of romantic relationships. Our respondents explained that Christian relationship goals and rules are clearly defined.

There is no frivolous dating... and if at any point in the relationship you feel like you're probably not going to marry this girl or if you just don't feel like God is really calling you to grow with it anymore, then you should break up...The ultimate goal of dating and relationships and marriage is that separately you can't glorify God as much as if you are together.

The community helps students learn the rules of Christian relationships, such as the expectation that relationships not leading to marriage must end.

The students described the structure and orientation of appropriate relationships: in a Christian relationship, God comes first. As one woman noted, “It’s just loving the Lord first and then loving the other person second.” The relationship with God provides essential orientation for all other relationships. They view the right relationship as one that supports each individual in their spiritual journey, in their attempt to become better servants of God. One of the young men described the “right” relationship as a triangle.

God is on the top and each individual, there is like a man here and a girl on this side. And if they both are moving individually toward God then if they are meant to be a relationship they are actually going to become closer to each other but if both are just moving closer to each other then they are not moving closer to God...I think the number-one focus is just to grow toward God and in that you’ll grow closer to each other.

Christian relationships progress slowly because it takes time to figure out if this is a person with whom one can share a lifetime of spiritual growth. Frequent co-ed, Christian events provide women and men opportunities to observe and interact with potential spouses, sometimes for years, before arranging one-on-one activities.

We learned more in the focus groups about how Christian relationships are *supposed* to proceed than about how the relationships of students *actually* developed. Some focus group members did, however, describe their own relationships. They explained that they, personally, are cautious about moving toward a special relationship, and that they prefer to start the move toward a committed relationship with what they referred to as a “friendship field trip,” which would likely involve a hike or some other platonic activity. They typically select “date” activities conducive to extended conversation because, as they see it, communication is central to building a Christian relationship.

I think talking about it with the person or [who] you are in the relationship with is really important, because that’s what I did when I first started dating was to sit down and say OK, we have to decide what to select...what’s good and what’s not right.

They view communication as necessary to assess the viability of the relationship and to negotiate boundaries.

For our respondents, one of the greatest challenges in relationships is avoiding sexual intimacy. Though they employ a number of strategies for controlling sexual activity, they emphasized the importance of setting and resetting boundaries, and acknowledged that staying within appropriate limits requires hard, ongoing work. Several respondents indicated that they interpret the experience of sexual desire as a warning sign, “I think when you get to that point where you feel like you don't want to stop, that should trigger something in your mind that OK, this is not OK for me.” For these Christian students, desire signals danger and therefore marks the limit. They view the consequences of sexual excess as severe, jeopardizing one’s relationship with God and the possibility of a fulfilling marriage in the future.

Current restraint is viewed as an investment in the development of a fulfilling, long-term

relationship. As one young woman explained, “It’s not an easy choice, but I think we all want it bad enough that we’re willing to sacrifice instant gratification for future unlimited happiness.” In another focus group, a man echoed this sentiment: “I think what we’re doing is we’re trading that hardness that challenge, we are trading it for something better in the future...a strong relationship.” One woman noted that she believes sex in a relationship impedes getting to know the person in the deeper way that is central to building a Christian marriage partnership. She explained that, “it doesn’t matter how good someone is in sex, if they are not emotionally what you need in terms of long-term. ...I think a lot of us are much more focused on the long-term and finding the right husband and not finding...Mr. Right Now.”

When surveyed, our evangelical respondents reported very low rates of sexual behavior. Only 2 out of 22 (9%) respondents reported ever engaging in vaginal intercourse (one man and one woman). About one-third reported ever engaging in oral sex. This is very low, considering that in 2002 in the U.S. 70% of teens have engaged in vaginal intercourse by age 19 (Abma et al. 2004). The chasm between the sexual behavior reported by our respondents and that reported by typical Americans suggests that participation in parachurch organizations successfully constrain sexual behavior.

Not surprisingly, our respondents were critical of the relaxed sexual norms of their peers. They viewed men and women who engaged in casual premarital sex as impatient, individualistic, pleasure-seeking and therefore narrowly self-serving.

I think it's about that you care enough that the other person that you are going to respect them and thereby and you're going to respect yourself and you're not going to go out to seek pleasure for yourself. I mean like to me, sex is very sacred and can only be shared with the one you're going to be with for the rest of your life, and then it becomes more of a giving thing...instead of that instant gratification that people that tend to have sex before marriage view it as.

In their view, all premarital sex is equally selfish. Sex becomes a sacred act of giving only when you are giving your virginity to your spouse.

Making Sense of Gender Difference

The development of romantic relationships, a primary concern of college-aged men and women, is often a complicated, ambiguous process that requires ongoing negotiation. College-based evangelical organizations provide something with considerable appeal—a clear template for relationships. This guidance includes definition of goals and boundaries (and strategies to maintain those boundaries), a map for appropriate relationship progression, and discourse that justifies a particular path and condemns alternatives. In addition, these students are surrounded by others who are purportedly invested in creating the “right” relationships. As one student said, “It is easy when you’re in an environment where, like Navigators, where no one has a belief that you should have sex before marriage.”

The structure of this like-minded, tightly-knit, clearly-bounded community facilitates a sense of

mutual responsibility. The students claim protective and proud ownership of one another (“*Our* guys are held to a higher standard”). They understand their relationship roles as distinctly gendered. This perspective translates into a gendered division of labor in the work of supporting community members’ spiritual paths.

Christian men and women both view men as naturally vulnerable to sexual desire and sexual temptation. They conceive of this as a biological weakness, and men as in need of protection from themselves. One woman explained, “There is a lot of testosterone and that's how they're built. That's how they're wired, and so they have to make the extra effort.” The women praise men who make the “extra effort” required to avoid visual sexual stimulation (examples offered by respondents included turning the television channel, ripping pages out of magazines, and reading the Bible on the way to class to avoid watching scantily clad coeds). Several of the men explained that the college environment makes avoiding sexual temptation particularly challenging. “Here, anything goes! They could have body paint and go to class. I think that, at least for me, is one of the struggles in college, there is so much access to sexual images.” The women interviewed explained to us that they see it as their responsibility to support men in their struggles with sexual temptation. To protect the men they respect, they avoid revealing clothing. It is also recognition of mutual responsibility for the sexual sins of “their” men.

It's our responsibility as Christian women to dress conservatively, because if a guy sins because of what we're wearing it really comes back and falls upon us. So it is our responsibility to make sure we don't lead them down the wrong path and that we are consciously making a decision to help guide them in the right direction. Yes it's their fault if they sin, but it's our fault if we cause them to.

For the students we interviewed, the counterpart to men’s weakness (sex and desire) is women’s vulnerability to excessive emotional attachment. One respondent explained that,

I think that girls are more easily sucked into the emotions—as far as the future possibilities. Guys are just more into the moment and the physical and attraction and that kind of thing.

Getting swept up in romantic emotions may distract from the most important relationship, one’s relationship with God. The male respondents reported that it is their responsibility to help women avoid too early, too intense emotional attachment. They referred to this as “guarding a girl’s heart.”

From what I understand from different relationship conferences we’ve had...and other sex talks I’ve had—for women it is really easy get lost in this thought process thinking about marriage and thinking about kids and thinking about a husband. Girls really worry about that, all the time. They talk about how much they need a man, want a man or whatever, and it’s not good to talk about those things because if you are not guarding her heart then she’s not putting all of her focus on to the Lord, then she’s not going to be what she needs to be for God.

The women in our focus groups acknowledged their appreciation for their male friends' spiritual assistance and indicated that they find this kind of support exceptional. They make a clear distinction between college men in general (selfish, lustful, out of control with desire, disrespectful) and Christian men.

It's so genuine that they [Christian men in their friendship circle] hold us up and spur us on in our relationship with the Lord and in our relationships with each other. They just honor us so much. I think the guys are really Christian in their treatment of women. [They] are very respectful and don't ever want to push you too far and make you uncomfortable, and they have this kind of cautious, kind of a "can I hug you, is that okay"...Outside of that the majority of them are like "let's go get trashed and then I'll let you do stuff to me."

Relationships with Christians are easier to navigate than those with outsiders because there are clear rules that are seen as providing legitimate guidance. Our respondents described an underlying contract—women don't tempt the men and men don't pressure the women or fuel their romantic fantasies. These students described a sexual and relational world in which men and women are viewed as fundamentally different, but are expected to be empathetic and supportive of each other.

Conclusion

This essay suggests that evangelicalism thrives on college campuses not only because it provides a distinctive identity and worldview, but also because parachurch organizations have figured out how to make evangelism meaningful to young people. To prevent young evangelicals from getting pulled into a worldly, secular peer culture, evangelicals have devoted considerable resources to building parachurch organizations that provide appealing and comprehensive social worlds for young people.

Parachurch organizations segregate evangelical students from the mainstream of university life and thus could be described as "fortresses." This metaphor, however, focuses on the boundary between those inside and outside, and does not do justice to the richness of the social worlds offered by campus Christian organizations. The students we interviewed would balk at this description of their social worlds. They could have related easily, however, to a description of their groups as "havens" from the pressures of a secular campus. They experienced their social worlds as warm and supportive, and as more inward than outward looking. They participated because the groups provided them with deep connections, relevant guidance, and meaningful experiences. Evangelical communities on campus may defend against the incursions of secular ideas and practices, but their primary defense is the vitality of the social and relational life they provide.

The model developed by parachurch organizations could be employed by other groups seeking to provide a meaningful, alternative social world for their members (e.g. other religious groups, racial/ethnic minority groups, feminists, or organizations for gay youth). Building the infrastructure necessary to do so, however, requires high and unceasing commitment of organizational resources. Not all groups interested in sheltering young people from mainstream

college culture have the resources to do so, or prioritize it as highly as do evangelicals. For some groups, the potential costs of creating such havens (e.g. limited engagement with different perspectives) may outweigh the benefits.

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Endnotes

¹ The data that we discuss were collected in the context of a larger project, directed by Armstrong, on the social and sexual lives of undergraduates at a large Midwestern university. Focus groups were conducted in the spring of 2004 by teams of two researchers: one facilitated and the other took field notes. Students were questioned about the role of religion and religious groups in their lives, social life on campus, and attitudes about partying, premarital sexuality, romantic relationships, and homosexuality. The research team also conducted 13 other focus groups involving 66 other students, nine months of ethnographic observation of a women's floor in a residence hall, and in-depth interviews with 42 of the floor residents.

² See <http://www.intervarsity.org/>, <http://www.ccci.org/>, and <http://www.navigators.org/us/>.

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