

An interview with Jonathan Morrow, Author of *Welcome to College: A Christ-Follower's Guide for the Journey*



College can be the most exciting, as well as the most frightening, time of a young person's life. On one hand are all the freedoms a recent high school graduate craves, but on the other are all the freedoms that come with responsibility. It's a challenging time, especially for Christians coming face-to-face with worldviews different from their own. In *Welcome to College: A Christ-Follower's Guide for the Journey (second edition)* (Kregel Publications), Jonathan Morrow helps students tackle this new stage of life and emerge on the other side prepared for what God has planned for them.

Q: What are possibly the most frightening questions a graduating high school senior can be asked?

What are you going to do with your life? What's your major going to be? Will you be able to get a job when you graduate?

Students feel a lot of pressure to be, well, perfect. There's a lot of anxiety to have it all together and everything figured out. Students feel pressure both from themselves and their parents (because most parents are spending a lot of money on college). They confess to feeling overwhelmed by all the choices they have to make and the weight of the choices. The simple fact of the matter is they are often insecure and afraid of failing — especially at college. Then, if they are Christians, they have the added layer of trying to figure out what God would want them to do with their lives. All of this can be scary and overwhelming.

Q: We've all heard statistics about how many students walk away from their Christian faith during their college years. Are the numbers truly as bad as we have heard?

To be clear — **any** student walking away from their faith is too much. I've seen statistics as high as 75% and as low as 40%, depending on the survey and how the question was asked. But let's split the difference and say one out of two walk away. At the outset, parents and students need to know college is not faith-friendly. Intellectual, spiritual, moral and relational challenges are coming. According to a study done by Harvard and George Mason University, one out of four college professors is a professing atheist or agnostic (a percentage much greater than the general population, which is 5-7%).

As I've worked with high school and college students throughout the years, here are the three most common responses to the challenges they face:

First, students relativize their faith. I guess this is just true for me, this is what I believe and how I was raised. Faith kind of gets quiet in their lives as they get older.

Second, they drift or pretend. On the outside everything's fine. On the inside though, it's, "I'm not sure I really believe this anymore. What do I do with that because this place isn't a safe place to ask questions or have doubts?"

Or third, they will simply walk away. "You know what? I don't believe this anymore. It's not worth it. I don't think this is really true." They are weary of pretending.

What's tragic about this is it doesn't have to be that way. God has called students to do much more than only surviving. He has called them to engage our culture with the life-changing message of Jesus. This is one of the big reasons I wrote *Welcome to College*: to help prepare students for what we know is waiting on them in the college years. I want them to own their faith so they are ready to live it out.

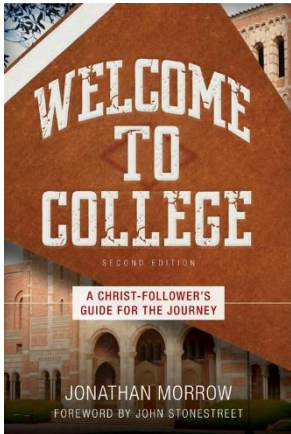
Q: How important are the high school and college years in setting the trajectory for a life of following Jesus?

It's critically important. If you get off-course in high school or college, it can have life-altering consequences.

Here are clarifying questions I like to ask students, "What story do you want to tell about the college years? Someday you will walk across the graduation stage and be filled with either satisfaction or regret. Which

one do you want? Eventually you will summarize your college years in a few sentences. Why not go ahead and shape your future now?"

This final question will give students clarity. They also need to decide if they are serious about following Jesus or if they are going to drift into "playing Christian." If they are serious about following Jesus, then they can set the destination they are pursuing early on, which will make all the difference.



Q: When should a parent or youth worker first present your book to his or her student?

I've been encouraged to hear how people are using *Welcome to College*. Some youth groups have purchased books to give away as graduation gifts. Parents have told me how they have read it along with their sons or daughters during their junior or senior year of high school. Together they have used the discussion questions in the back to start conversations.

In general, as soon as you can start the conversations, the better. Late middle school and early high school are great times to begin engaging your children on these topics.

Q: Tell us about how *Welcome to College* is set up and designed to be used. What are some of the topics you introduce and discuss?

I didn't grow up in a Christian home. I began following Jesus as a high school junior at 17, so my "life" learning curve during the college years was pretty significant. I also had just about every anti-Christian professor along the way challenge my faith. I don't know about you, but I don't want to believe in fairy tales; I began to explore if there were solid answers to the tough questions I was running into. After I graduated and got married, I told my wife that if God ever let me write a book, I wanted to write about everything I wish I would have known during the college years.

Typical graduation gift books have gold edges and little quotes, but my experience is that will evaporate in three minutes when the challenges of college life come. I wanted to write a book covering everything from evidence for God and the Bible, science and evolution to what to do with doubts, how to have healthy conflict with a roommate, how to discover God's will and even how to have wise dating relationships, but in short four- or five-page chapters. A young person can read it straight through or turn to the issues he or she is struggling with. It can even be read in a small group of freshmen using the questions in the back. I heard from students at Clemson who were using it that way.

Q: How can parents better prepare their children for the college experience, especially the new freedoms and responsibilities that come from being away from home?

Start now! Let them fail around you before they have true freedom for the first time away from you. Give them a long on-ramp of freedom and responsibility. Why? Because you don't want the first time they experience freedom to be when they hit college campus and you aren't around to help them choose wisely.

Imagine your son or daughter had never seen a Krispy Kreme donut, then when they got to college there was a dozen warm, gooey donuts in front of them. What are they going to do? Go crazy and eat them all. Give them some freedom now so they can fail around you, and you can help coach them as they fix it themselves. Don't swoop in and fix it for them. Curfew is a good test case to begin exploring. Also, stay connected relationally. Don't only focus on the details, finances, schedules and logistics; focus on the heart and excitement of this life transition.

Q: What challenges do college students face today that may not have been as prevalent when you wrote the first edition of *Welcome to College* nine years ago?

The two biggest issues drastically emerging throughout the last few years are (1) the tyranny of tolerance and (2) challenges to the biblical understanding of God design for sexuality and marriage. There is growing confusion among young Christians about homosexuality and the Bible. With the success of the LGBT agenda in getting same-sex marriage legalized in 2015 by the Supreme Court, this conversation has only become more prominent. In this update, I spent time helping explore and engage these important questions.

Related is the fact people have misunderstood the meaning of tolerance to require agreement with everyone's sincerely held beliefs rather than extending to others the right to be wrong. Tolerance is not agreement. It's treating someone who believes very differently than I do with dignity and respect as one made in God's image. Today, people are afraid to disagree about spiritual and moral questions because they don't want to be viewed as a bigot or judgmental. We need courage to talk lovingly but boldly about the truth. To love someone is to seek his or her highest good — that includes having some gentle, but perhaps uncomfortable conversations about important questions.

Q: How has social media affected culture as a whole? As individuals, what should students be particularly mindful of in their online interactions?

The irony is we are a culture that longs for connection and intimacy, but we hide behind our devices because they give us the illusion of control. We are afraid of being known. The social media revolution has brought both challenges and opportunities to our culture. Three of the challenges students need to be aware of are:

1. Students now have digital footprints that will follow them all of their lives. Unwise decisions posted online could affect future jobs, relationships and families.
2. We are a distracted culture. Social media keeps us superficially engaged and overwhelmed by data, opinions and information. We have largely lost the capacity to sit still, be quiet and reflect without having to check and see what we have missed. The fear of missing out (FOMO) is real.
3. Students will have to fight hard to resist trying to find their identity from social approval in the form of follows, likes, shares and comments. This is an exhausting and dangerous way to live. Our identity is rooted in God, not social approval. When we forget that, we pursue a lot of foolish dead ends that will ultimately hurt us.

Q: What is one of the most important first things a new student can do when he or she arrives at college?

They need to find their people (Proverbs 13:20 and 2 Timothy 2:22). They need wise relationships in the form of both mentors and peers. Here is a question every student needs to answer: Who will I let influence and shape my future? Who will I let steer the direction my life? This is especially important when it comes to dating relationships. Get plugged in, especially in the first six weeks while everyone is "new."

I know the importance of this firsthand. Within a couple of weeks, my roommate, Dave, and I had met a great group of Christian friends. We all ended up walking through college together. Within another couple of weeks, I had pledged and "de-pledged" a fraternity. God had other plans in that area that would unfold in my junior year.

Q: What three pieces of wisdom do you offer students just starting out on their college experience?

1. You are not alone. Everyone has felt what you are feeling.
2. With freedom comes responsibility.
3. Don't take yourself too seriously.

Q: You write, "Most Christians have bought into the lie that religious beliefs are to be kept private and should not impact who you are — and what you say — in public. It's easy to fall into this way of thinking, but I want to help you avoid this trap because it will weaken your faith." In a time where society is increasingly hostile toward Christianity, what advice can you share for being courageous and firm in our beliefs?

First and foremost, do you know **why** you believe **what** you believe? Do you own your faith? Is Christianity really true? Not were you raised in a Christian home, or what do your mom or dad believe, but what do you believe? Remember, just because you believe something doesn't make it true. Sincerity is not enough. If Christianity is true, then it is true for all of life. Following Jesus is a way of life not just a Sunday-morning activity.

Young Christians are growing up in culture that is deeply confused about what is right and what is true. It's hard for them to break free from the riptide of relativism, but if you lose truth, then you lose Christianity. Period. Students need to know how to understand, explain and defend objective truth. Without training, they will simply fall into the default settings of those around them. When the pressure is turned up and the tyranny of tolerance presses in, Christians tend to wilt if they do not have the confidence that only comes from knowing why they believe what they believe.

Essential areas they need to be ready to engage in: How do I know God really exists? Is truth relative? Who was Jesus, and did He rise from the dead? Can you trust the Bible in the 21st century? How do I have helpful spiritual conversations? How can Jesus be the only way to God? If God is good, then why is there so much evil?

Q: One of the chapters is on tolerance. Is OK to have friends who believe differently than we do?

We live in a challenging culture when it comes to truth, but this also gives us exciting opportunities to live out the Gospel in front of people. The fact is we need to embody the truth and speak the truth. Loving people well can't be separated from truth because reality is involved. With that said, we need to push back against the tyranny of tolerance in our classrooms, workplaces and culture. How do we do this? Without getting defensive, we need to reframe the conversation. Tolerance used to mean giving other people the right to be wrong and disagreeing with them. Now tolerance has come to mean I must accept what everyone around me does, says or thinks. But that's false and, quite frankly, unlivable. Someone's views will always get imposed upon.

Moreover, Jesus was loving and tolerant but did not compromise on truth. Sometimes he simply asked a question, and sometimes he pushed back hard against hypocrisy. We need wisdom and discernment on how to do this well given the situations we find ourselves in, and He's our example. We all need to be courageous and ready to stand for truth as thoughtfully and graciously as we can when (not if) those times come.

Q: What is one of the most important lessons you learned during your time in college? What's something you wished you had done differently?

It's easy to lose your way or accommodate whatever everyone else is doing. Living for Jesus will take courage. You must overcome the temptation to please or be accepted by everyone all the time. Do you know who you are? Are you secure in your identity? Do you know what you believe and why? During college I was in a fraternity and saw many other guys who grew up in Christian homes check out from their faith or reject it completely. They were simply not ready for the challenges to accommodate their faith. There were many nights at my fraternity house when they were so drunk they would come up to me and apologetically say, "This isn't me. I'm not normally like this." There may be no more important decision during the college years than who you choose to surround yourself with. I have seen so many students go down paths they never intended to because they surrounded themselves with friends who were not committed to following Jesus. Be intentional with your time — your college years will go quick. Don't waste the opportunity for influence God has given you!

By God's grace (and some really great friends), I emerged on the other side of college without any major regrets. But one of the things I wished I had done differently is handled my finances more responsibly by sticking to a budget and not getting in as much debt. Unfortunately, I fell into some bad spending habits during the college years it took a while to recover from.

Q: What advice do you have for parents who have teenagers on how to talk to them about the importance of truth and resist moral relativism?

First thing I would do is gently share that just because your son or daughter goes to church or a Christian school doesn't mean he or she is not a closet relativist. He or she could be hearing great lessons and sermons each week, but if he or she has not been taught what truth is and the difference between objective and subjective truth, then he or she is more often than not simply and sub-consciously putting all that teaching into the "true for me" box in his or her worldview. Next, we need to give students space for questions and doubts. They need to wrestle with things to own it. We don't just want them to give us the right answers, so press in to why. Lastly, love them unconditionally and be relationally present and engaged. That is the foundation for good conversations. Your faith shapes their faith.

Q: Where can students go for more resources on building a Christian worldview and not only surviving but thriving during the college experience?

As they read *Welcome to College*, they can visit me online at JonathanMorrow.org and WelcometoCollege.tv for more resources, podcasts and videos to help them along the way.

Learn more about *Welcome to College* at www.jonathanmorrow.org. Jonathan Morrow is also on [Facebook](#) ([ThinkChristianlyOrg](#)) and [Twitter](#) ([@JonathanMorrow](#)).