

I began my college career at a small school affiliated with the denomination in which I grew up. Unfortunately, I knew I'd have to transfer after earning my two-year degree. The college I was attending didn't offer any majors in social sciences and I'd decided I wanted to major in psychology. I reluctantly undertook the process of finding a college with a similar environment in order to complete my Bachelor's degree.

I decided to transfer to a school that was also in my home state, was small like the college I would be transferring from and was clear about its commitment to Christian principles.

What Is a "Bible College"?

Instead of being a liberal arts college, the school I would be transferring to described itself as a "Bible college." When I applied for admission there, I didn't really understand what that meant. I knew it meant I would have to double major, since everyone had to earn a degree in Biblical Studies.

Before being accepted to study there, each student had to sign a statement saying we agreed with certain Christian beliefs and that we had made a personal commitment to Jesus as Lord and Savior. By contrast, the liberal arts college I'd been attending only required that students take two Bible classes, Old and New Testament. They also didn't make anyone sign statements saying they were Christians.

They were both small Christian schools that offered degrees in church related training, as well as other majors. Both had chapel services and Christian professors. Both were coeducational. Both had the types of rules that one would expect to find at a religious institution. I decided any differences between the two schools were either positive or too minor to matter.

Standards—Not Restrictions

I started thinking a little differently during my admissions interview. I learned that I was expected to spend thirty minutes of quiet time

with God five days a week, go to Sunday school and two church services every week and attend four chapel services each week instead of the two I was used to at the liberal arts college. I could only watch movies rated PG13 or less. Despite the substantial fees I would have to pay to live and study there, I couldn't have a TV, refrigerator or microwave in my room, and there was a strict curfew.

The Bible college's policies about dating were particularly extreme: "We treat members of the opposite gender like an actual brother or sister." I was told, "Couples aren't allowed to hold hands or kiss."

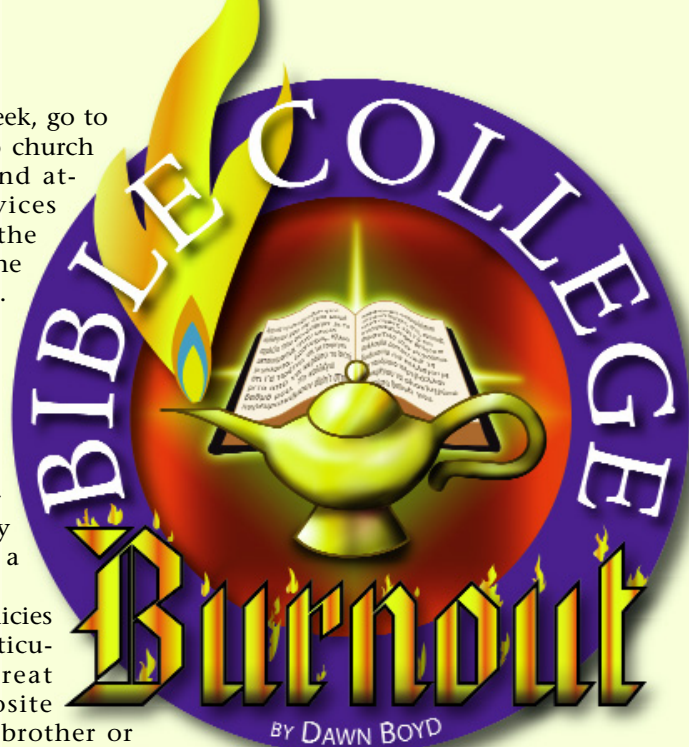
I would miss the more relaxed rules of my liberal arts college, where church was encouraged but not mandated and where I could have convenience appliances in my room. At that school, there was no curfew and, although prolonged public displays of affection were frowned upon, no one seemed to mind seeing couples holding hands or exchanging a brief hug or kiss.

I was told the restrictions were not rules; they were standards that would enable everyone to be a strong and united community. Despite my misgivings, I signed the form saying I would abide by "standards."

Overwhelmed by Rules

Things were fine at first. As I'd expected, I enjoyed getting to know a lot of new people and appreciated the diversity. I liked the small campus and some of the activities that took place were fun and unique. There was a strong sense of unity of purpose and community. I enjoyed my psychology courses and found

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some of the Bible classes extremely helpful and intellectually stimulating. My professors were both scholarly and approachable, and I was geographically closer to my family.

Cynicism and frustration began to creep up on me, though. Every time I turned around, I was signing forms and filling out log sheets. I got tired of signing forms saying I was going to follow standards at the beginning of each semester and then signing "accountability forms" in the middle of the term to say that I was following them. We all knew that, if we weren't doing something right and admitted it, we would probably be called in for a conference with the dean.

I also signed prayer logs stating how often and how much I'd prayed for missionaries (for Intro to Missions class) or unsaved friends or relatives (for evangelism class). Though I checked boxes to the contrary, there were times when I didn't complete assigned readings, attend church, eat my vegetables, get eight hours of sleep a night or spend the required amount of quiet time with God.

The Bible college was extremely serious about church attendance, too. On Sunday mornings, the Resident Assistant on duty would check each dorm room. If a student was

in bed, it was assumed that the student was ill. This student was then told to stay in their room all day and rest. A list of students who did not attend church was turned over to Student Affairs deans, so that they could keep track of those who might be making this a habit.

Too Many “Standards” Hurt My Relationship With God

I felt stifled in this environment. I began to feel that I was “under law rather than under grace.” I wasn’t good enough or holy enough. Maybe I really was lacking integrity. Maybe my relationship with God wasn’t as solid as I thought. I certainly wasn’t growing spiritually. I was floundering in this cloistered bubble where I ate, slept and breathed organized religion and pious people. Religion was in my face every second, being thrust at me from external sources. It seemed that, every time I turned around, I was hearing Christian jargon and buzz words. I was so busy learning, being graded on and talking about God and the Bible that I couldn’t find my true internal connection with the Lord.

I prayed for God’s help and strength, which is what we’d been told to do if we found standards burdensome, but it didn’t seem to help. I knew that the Bible said to submit to authority, but I was having a very hard time doing that. I was even becoming resentful about it. We were told during certain chapel services that, if we couldn’t accept and live by standards, maybe we weren’t supposed to be attending this particular school.

I’d once considered myself a Christian with strong values, but

the students I came in contact with made me feel like the most liberal, unspiritual Christian in the world. So many seemed to be thriving under standards. They believed these guidelines helped them to live holy lives, focus on God and grow spiritually. They felt blessed to attend a college that provided a strong moral compass for their lives.

A Burned-Out Cynic

By the time I graduated, I was more than ready to leave. I was accepted into graduate school at a state university and never even thought about applying to a seminary or religious university. I stopped going to church and no longer listened to Christian music or read Christian books, including the Bible. I rarely prayed. My belief in God and in the basics of the Christian faith hadn’t changed. I simply had no interest in organized religion or daily spiritual practices. I felt spiritually burned out, cynical and bitter.

About a year after I’d begun graduate school, I discovered that I could receive daily Bible readings via email—available in contemporary translations. They simply showed up in my inbox, which made the effort on my part minimal. Eventually, I also subscribed to a daily email that provided information about various mission efforts throughout the world. I still didn’t feel that I was supposed to be a missionary, but I did want to stay informed and pray for those who were serving in this way.

My prayer life slowly became stronger, too. I didn’t use lists or block off a specific time each day to pray. I simply talked to God when I

felt a need or wish to do so. I also began to pray when I went for walks, as being outdoors has always made me feel close to God.

About two years after graduating from Bible college, I began attending church again. My roommate (also a Christian) started attending a small Methodist church a few blocks away from where we lived. I often felt guilty for not going, but still wasn’t sure I was ready to step back into an overtly religious environment, even for one hour a week. My roommate invited me from time to time. She didn’t nag or pressure, but she let me know everyone was friendly and that the atmosphere was comfortable. I dragged my feet at first but eventually decided to go. I’ve been attending that church regularly ever since. I’m not there “every time the doors are open,” but I am glad to be involved with a church family again.

I’ll probably always struggle with anything that seems too religious and may avoid certain environments and people for that reason. I think I will continue to experience cynicism with anything that comes across to me as Christian cliché. It feels good to be reading the Bible and praying again, though.

I feel spiritually nourished by the hymns, readings and sermons at my church. I am enjoying a close relationship with God again, too. I am different in many ways because of my Bible college experience, but different can be good. □

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College Choices for Christians

You might be thinking about attending a Christian college to study for the ministry, or because you want to pursue higher education in a Christian environment, as I did.

Maybe you have a child who will soon be making decisions about where to attend college. You may think a conservative Christian school would be the best place for your child. As a parent, you may worry about what your teen might be exposed to at universities that don’t have a religious affiliation.

There are many things to consider when making a decision about college. I can say from experience that:

- It is important to know what you really want and why.
- It is crucial to know what a particular school is *really* like. Know what the rules and expectations are, and be sure that’s what you want.

- If your teenager doesn’t want to go into ministry or study at a school comprised exclusively of Christian peers, consider a liberal arts college associated with a denomination you agree with.
- If a college sets more rules for your soon-to-be adult child than you do, you may want to look elsewhere.
- Just as having too many rules at home will make a resistant teen rebel, having too many rules at college can lead to the same result.
- Finally, don’t rule out state colleges as a possibility. Most have a variety of student organizations that can help Christians find a group of like-minded peers and grow in their faith.
- If you, or your child, does attend a Bible college or other very conservative school, pay attention to feelings of cynicism, frustration and burn out.