



▶ INTEGRATIVE VS. CONVENTIONAL THINKING



▶ CHRISTIAN STUDENTS TODAY BY ALEX KIRK



▶ BETTER EVANGELISM THROUGH OPPOSABLE THINKING

o relentless | o relevant | o relational

Deep Roots *big reach*

Christian Students Today

An Overview of Christian Student Culture by Alex Kirk, UNC-Chapel Hill

Disclaimer, Part 1: The Ridiculous Factor:

To tackle something as ridiculous as trying to gather up all Christian students today in one fell swoop is a bit ridiculous. But I was given the task and opportunity to do so in the fall of last year. And a number of folks found it helpful, so here it is: the Sparks notes, quick overview of Christian students today!

Disclaimer, Part 2: Context Matters:

I'm going into my fourteenth year on campus staff, and all of them have been in the south/south east: Richmond, Virginia and UNC-Chapel Hill. So there are a couple of qualifiers in terms of my student population:

Major Factors:

1. **The Bible Belt Factor:** the largest number of students come from the Charlotte, NC metro area—nearly one in three. And Charlotte has the most number of churches per capita of any city in the United States.
2. **Other Campus Ministries Factor:** There are other, more evangelical-mainstream campus ministries at UNC that draw a good number of these Bible belt students to their fellowships. Ergo, InterVarsity can tend to attract a mixture of students—some are traditional “southern evangelical youth group” students, but many are reacting against Bible belt culture.
3. **Being White Factor:** My chapter is around 300 students. Probably 282 of those are white. ‘Nuff said.
4. **Unalterable Factors Affecting Students:** I think that there are two critical unalterable factors shaping students as they grow up and come to us on campus.

Observations:

1. **Post-Modernity Happens.** Here's my overly-simplified explanation of post-modernity: the over-reaction towards the emotions and the heart in response to the previous over-reaction towards the mind and reason that was modernity. This emphasis on the heart has profound impact on how Christian students process the 3 big questions that all college students

2. **Family Matters.** Messed up family situations are a huge weight on our Christian students' souls—especially Father issues. Last fall at UNC we held an evangelistic large group: “If God is Father I Don't Want Anything to do with Him!” and we had a packed house for a November 1st large group when our numbers typically tend to start dropping. What this means is that there are big holes emotionally for a generation of students who think with their hearts! Given that post-modernity has such a heavy emphasis on leading with the heart, the disintegration of the family and the resulting emotional insecurity and immaturity has huge impact on the daily lives of students.

Conditions and Conversations: Now that we've established some back-drop for our students, I want to talk about some “conditions” that our students experience growing up and on campus and the resulting “conversations” that occur as they try to live out their faith.

1. **Condition #1:** Secular pluralism. This is dogmatic assertion that all dogmatism is wrong, that everyone is free to make their own decisions as long as it does not hurt anyone else too seriously and that tolerance is the highest moral virtue.
 - **Resulting Conversation #1:** Homosexuality and other world religions. As InterVarsity staff, if we are not equipped to answer the question “what about other religions” and “why is homosexuality wrong” then we will not be able to deal with the key hot-button issues of our day. And not only must we have our theological ducks in their proverbial row, we must also remember that our students think with their hearts. It must not only be true, our apologetics must also have a pastoral element to it as well. It

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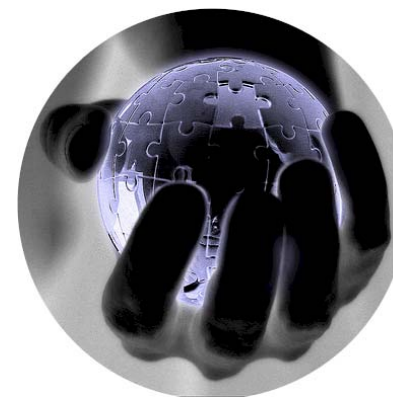
Better Evangelism Through Opposable Thinking

For many, creative thinking comes intuitively. Unique ideas seem to flow, producing winning results for their companies, churches or InterVarsity chapters. For others, however, it is often a struggle to access our creative minds. We need community to spur us on or perhaps a pressing problem that requires out of the box thinking. Regardless of whether we are creative thinkers or struggle with out of the box thinking, throughout life and ministry, we need to develop and refine the ability to think creatively and refuse to settle for “either/or” options.

We need to press toward new ways of thinking and doing. Particularly for those in ministry, we cannot afford to treat old problems with old, dead-end thinking or to resist innovation when the stakes are so high. To fail to press into durable problems or to innovate new, fresh ways of engaging culture will mean missed opportunities to reach people for Christ. As Christians, we must innovate and always resist settling for the status quo.

In “The Opposable Mind: Winning Through Integrative Thinking,” Roger Martin,

Dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, gives us a set of tools and an inspiring paradigm to help us engage our creative abilities and push through to innovation. Martin argues that humans have a unique ability that can be developed and honed for creative thinking. Like the human “opposable” thumb, which gives us the unique ability to perform extremely precise motor functions, we also possess an opposable mind.



An opposable mind is one that is able to hold seemingly or truly contradictory constructs or paradigms in tension without dismissing either one long enough to think through multiple sets of options. Stated another way, we have the ability to suspend judgment in decision making, resisting the pressing need to decide

between two realities as we entertain new formulations, paradigms, sets of decisions, or routes of action. Cultivating our “opposable” mind individually and organizationally is an important part of fulfilling our personal purpose and our organizational potential.

Opposable thinking in Martin's book stands in direct opposition to non-integrative thinking which is “either/or,” “linear/sequential,” and “limited/capitulated” thinking. We can develop our opposable mind and doing so for the purpose of reaching people for Christ is an essential part of our personal discipleship and organizational responsibility to this generation.

In the creative phase of developing Proxe Stations, opposable thinking played a key role in breaking through to true innovation in postmodern evangelism. Six years ago, I sat my team of 6 young staff down and asked a simple question, “How can we reach post-moderns with the gospel through proclamation evangelism?” I had just returned from a conference where several speakers had either directly or indirectly made the statement,

“proclamation evangelism is no longer an effective way to reach post-moderns.” This was unacceptable to me as a proclamation evangelist. At that same time, my team and I were developing new tools to reach students with the gospel. In thinking about the campus, we discussed the various subcultures of the campus and the question was asked, “How can we reach those furthest from the gospel? Those who are truly resistant to evangelism—the “refusing non-customer?” We needed a face of such “non-customers” and we quickly gravitated towards those in the arts and activist community. Artists & activists often seem marginalized by the Christian culture with very few entry points. They also seem disproportionately angry with the Church and resistant to traditional evangelistic activity. Finally, they seem also to be at the cutting edge of culture change and most resistant to modernistic, dialogically driven evangelistic presentations. We had identified our “unreachable” target audience for which we needed “opposable” thinking to engage.

In thinking opposably, it is important to engage with the mess and complexity of a problem. In fact, when engaging creatively, I often try to introduce as much complexity and mess into the consideration of a problem in order to draw out potential creative options that may not be apparent when think-

Better Evangelism through Opposable Thinking (cont.)

ing sequentially. Introducing complexity to my team of young, creative staff spurred them on-it didn't discourage them but rather the challenge freed them up to begin truly thinking outside the box.

Beth Roselius and Dave Biskie, both evangelists on staff with InterVarsity in the Midwest, gravitated toward the challenge with passion and determination. "Well, if we are going to communicate to artists, we should do so through the arts," Beth said. "If we are going to reach postmoderns with the gospel, we need to do so interactively, not merely presenting concepts but inviting them into an experiential journey," Dave said. Our team began to follow the lead of our Artist Evangelist, Beth and our Evangelist Artist, Dave. It was important as we began to trouble shoot to we gave as much room as possible for the seemingly fantastical. We had no rules or boundaries- we would address those later as they became material. We were driven solely by the pursuit of the question, "How can we reach postmoderns through proclamation evangelism?" The result was the first generation Proxe Station.

Dave and Beth, with the help of our team, created an "EPIC" (Experiential, Process-oriented, Iconic/Visual, and Communal) driven art station which would later become an extremely successful, field-tested prototype Proxe Sta-

tion! We placed the Proxe Station outside the visual and performing arts building at West Virginia University to see how our "refusing non-customers" would take to the idea. As students approached the station, they were struck with stunning, professional grade visuals, a warm "guide" inviting them to go through the Proxe Station experience, relevant questions which led to a discussion of Christ, and, in its first inception, a live artist (Beth) to help with further contextualization. The first day of field testing proved so incredibly fruitful, we decided to test it further in the open market, placing it at the intersection of a busy part of campus. The results were amazing! Students literally lined up to go through the Station, others surprisingly scheduled return visits when they could go through the Station thoughtfully, and others skipped class to experience the Station!

Our "winning idea" had much broader appeal than we anticipated. Today, Proxe Stations have become a house-hold word within InterVarsity and have been used to lead hundreds of postmodern "refusing non-customers" to Christ. Proxe Stations are being used across the country outside InterVarsity by other parachurch organizations and churches and have even made their way to the shores of other countries!

Christian Students Today (cont)

needs to intuitively feel good, right, make sense or it will be rejected on no other grounds other than it doesn't sit well.

- **Resulting Conversation #2:** secular v. Biblical pluralism. There's a Biblical pluralism that paints a glorious picture of every people group coming together around Christ. But the church abdicated that work along the way and so the culture, abhorring a vacuum, has tried to fill it with secular pluralism.

So in my context, my culturally, politically, and theologically conservative (white) students have no framework for understanding multi-ethnicity apart from a seeming politically liberal attack on white people.

Or, they fall off the other side of the horse and buy into secular pluralism and end up rejecting most of the biblical world view, which of course means...

- **Resulting Conversation #3:** ambivalence towards evangelism and missions. Twelve years ago when we studied Jonah at chapter camp, the message was "GO!" Our students were stuck in a bubble. Today, they're not in the bubble, they've "gone," but now they need to be challenged: "GO with a MES-SAGE!"

Most of our Christian students today are what sociologist Christian Smith calls "Moralistic, Therapeutic Deists." Here are the tenets of moralistic, therapeutic deism from his book on the religious beliefs of teens entitled "Soul Searching:"

1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

That's the dominant religion of our culture and the dominant religious view of most of our Christian students today, even if they'd call themselves Christian.

2. **Condition #2:** Pragmatic Idealism: if they've been taught to "think globally, act locally" then there's a tremendous amount of desire in students to make a difference and give back in our culture.

- **Resulting Conversation #1:** Post-college plans. Few of my students have any idea what they're doing after school, but many of them want to give back and make a difference in the world after four years of what many of them feel to be self-absorption in college. Perhaps here is an opportunity for us to cast vision for InterVarsity staff?

- **Resulting Conversation #2:** Shifted Theological Discourse. None of my students care much about predestination v. free-will any more. They want more practical answers to questions about suffering and pain, other religions, sexuality, women, etc.

While there's definitely some loss here, there's a great deal of value: our students questions and their non-Christian friends questions are much more aligned than they were in previous generations.

3. **Condition #3:** The Technological Society: Technology has had profound influence on how people relate, even just in the past six years or so with the explosion of social networking. This has profound impact on how our students relate to the world and to faith.
 - **Conversation #1:** Continuous Partial Attention. This is a phrase borrowed from Thomas Friedman in his book "Longitudes and Attitudes." My students will be sitting in class with laptop open, ostensibly taking notes but also checking sports scores, playing online poker, and chatting with the friend sitting next to them or in another class.

There is a demand in the technological society for multitasking. This becomes an ingrained habitual way to relate to the world. And it makes spiritual disciplines agonizingly difficult for many of our students.

- **Conversation #3:** Continuous Partial Relationships. Technology has not only conditioned students attention span for tasks, it has also had profound impact on how they relate to one another. My students average between 200 and 500 friends on Facebook. Many of my students have 1,000 Facebook friends or more.

But when we sit down at chapter retreat and do men's and

women's prayer time, the 2 things that come up most often are family brokenness and deep loneliness.

My students have continuous partial relationships. They are "connected" to hundreds of people all the time, but they know and are known by no one. They have no real friends. They have only hundreds of acquaintances.

Facebook encourages them to create an identity rather than to live into their new names given to them by Christ. They are electronically connected to a network of hundreds of people but they have almost zero real community.

Most of my students spend at least an hour on Facebook a day. Many of them 2-3 hours. And it leaves them with few real friendships, only continuous, partial relationships.

- **Conversation #3:** Sources and Authority. The Greek staff was working with student leaders who confronted her and told her that they didn't believe in hell any more. She wanted to work with them, so they agreed to do some research and come back the next week to discuss it.

The staff put together some Scriptures. The students Googled "heaven and hell." They didn't go to Scripture, didn't pull out an IVP book. They Googled it.

- **Conversation #4:** Consumerism. It would take an extraordinary 17/18-year-old student who has been marketed to their whole

lives to come to college and not be a consumer.

I refer to the first six weeks at UNC as "Christian Rush"—we have literally 500-750 students who are rushing the various Christian organizations. And they break them down and critique them just like they would a restaurant or a class or anything else.

And then when the community life gets tough, like it does in any community, they have no category for sticking with it. Consumers don't think much about sticking with something that doesn't feel good all the time. This is a serious issue that we have in terms of upper-classmen retention

What do they do when the freshmen buzz has worn off?

Summing it All Up

Christian students are just as complicated and impossible to "narrow down" as any other group. But these are some broad-stroked attempts at nailing down some of the challenges and opportunities that I see as I work with my students and attempt to encourage them in their discipleship.

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SMARTER OUTREACH: The Opposable



In Roger Martin's "The Opposable Mind," he outlines the process of integrative vs. conventional thinkers. Using this process for thinking through how to reach people for Christ is the key to "winning through integrative thinking!"

Conventional Thinking		Integrative Thinking
Limited consideration of features	Salience	Consider all salient features- no exclusion
Simplified consideration of causes	Causality	Multidirectional causality considered
Pieces considered sequentially	Architecture	Whole visualized while working on parts
Ready acceptance of unattractive trade offs	Resolution	Search for creative resolution of tensions



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