

A Conversation with the Unlikely Disciple

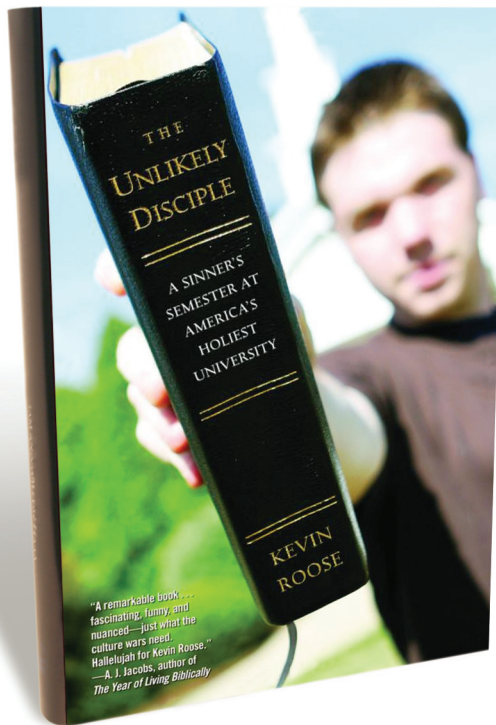
Covenant pastor **Doug Bixby** talks to **Kevin Roose**, whose new book chronicles his experience undercover at a conservative evangelical school.

Kevin Roose is the author of the widely acclaimed new book *The Unlikely Disciple: A Sinner's Semester at America's Holiest University*. Roose, a twenty-two-year-old senior at Brown University, spent a term at Liberty University, which was founded by the late Jerry Falwell. His primary motivation was a deep curiosity about evangelicals in America.

Roose grew up in the small college town of Oberlin, Ohio, which he describes as “a crunchy liberal enclave in the middle of the Lake Erie Rust Belt.” Growing up, he had only a vague sense about his parents’ religion and about religion in general. His parents belonged to a Quaker church that focused primarily on seeking peace and working for social justice. He says his family sporadically attended Quaker services, and never read the Bible or said grace over meals.

At Brown, Roose majored in English, focused on drinking fair-trade coffee, attended the occasional anti-war protest, and sang in an a cappella group. His primary impressions of Liberty University’s chancellor, he says, came from the media coverage Falwell received when he blamed the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, on feminists, homosexuals, abortionists, and the ACLU, among others.

During the second semester of his



freshman year at Brown, Roose was doing an internship with journalist A. J. Jacobs, whom he accompanied on a trip to Thomas Road Baptist Church, a twenty-thousand-member megachurch that occupies the entire north end of Liberty’s campus. While there, Roose realized that Jerry Falwell in theory and Jerry Falwell in person were two very different people. He realized that not all of Falwell’s sermons were about social and political issues. However, his curiosity was piqued when he met a few Liberty students in the church lobby and

inquired what they did for fun. One student asked him if he knew Christ. Roose paused for a moment before saying, “Please do not be offended. It’s just not my thing.” He writes, “They glanced at each other, all three a little mystified. Not my thing? How could it not be my thing? They didn’t browbeat me, but I had definitely made them uneasy. We made a little more small talk, and then since church was starting, we parted ways with nods and half waves.”

That was when Roose started thinking about going to Liberty. He wanted to know who these people really were and to get to know them on their terms and in their context. So he decided to do his “semester abroad” at Liberty, in a culture that was very different from his own. “I realized that as a non-evangelical, my chances of getting an unfiltered picture of Christian college culture weren’t great,” he writes. “So I decided to apply to Liberty as a transfer student, spend a semester living, studying, and going to church with Liberty students, and see their world from an inside perspective.” To do that, Roose went “undercover” and presented himself as a conservative Christian student.

While enrolled there, Roose adhered to the university’s forty-six-page code of conduct, which is called “The Liberty Way.” He obeyed the rules. He prayed with his hall mates, he attended worship



services on campus, he even sang in the choir at Thomas Road Baptist Church. He met with one of the campus pastors for individual discipleship sessions. He also discovered some of the benefits of dating girls without the pressure of getting intimate physically right away, and he says that he enjoyed being prayed for by others. At the end of the semester he said he was glad to leave half of what he experienced behind, but sad to leave the other half, including his friends, the sense of community he experienced, and the open discussions about God and life.

What Roose discovered is that people on the far left have more in common with people on the far right than he had ever imagined. In his acknowledgments, he thanks the people at Liberty for the lessons they taught him while he was there. He says he learned not that “they were right,” but rather that he “had been wrong” in his own prejudices and misconceptions about evangelicals.

What surprised you most about the Liberty students you met and got to know?

The first thing is that they were exceedingly normal. My only exposure to the evangelical community

prior to my experience at Liberty was through media portrayals of them. So when I went to Jerry Falwell’s school, I expected everyone to be angry zealots who spent most of their time talking about declining moral values and enacting a very intolerant worldview. But I got to Liberty and found that although the students were, by and large, very conservative and strictly adherent to the Falwell worldview, when it came to their personal lives, there was a distinct separation there. They could be very faithful evangelicals at church, but when they got back to their dorms at

night and on weekends they were just normal college kids. They gossiped about girls, worried about what they would do after graduation, and did all the things normal college students do. They broke the rules, and they doubted. They were skeptical and did a lot of critical thinking. I think that is one of the things that surprised me most. Even though Liberty does have this unambiguous political and spiritual agenda, it is not being swallowed uncritically by the students.

So you might say the students did more thinking outside of the classroom than inside the classroom.

Oh, absolutely. I think in a way Liberty invites that because it presents such a one-sided view. You are left to fill in the other side on your own time. Whereas, if they presented both sides in the classroom, some of that work of comparison and contrast would be done for you. But since faculty only give you one side, at least in the classes I took, a lot of nights were spent talking about “What if this or that tenet is wrong?” So it is a little naïve on Liberty’s part to expect that students will take these doctrines and

apply them uncritically without even so much as glancing at the other side.

Were there any other preconceived notions that you had about evangelical Christians that changed while you were there?

Sure. I thought that being an evangelical of the Liberty sort was kind of a self-flagellating thing. Like how could this ever be fun for anyone—living with a curfew, no drinking, no dancing? What could possibly be enjoyable about that? I assumed these must be kids whose parents made them come, or that they had some sort of complex that does not allow them to see what is fun and what is not fun. I thought I would go there and everyone would just be miserable.

Then I got there, and I realized that there are a few kids whose parents made them come, and a few kids who do not like the rules. But overwhelmingly, people are there because they find something positive in having a strict moral architecture on which they can hang their life. This is something that has been borne out by the studies I quote in the book about how religious college students are happier than non-religious college students. They are more diligent in their studies, they participate in extracurricular activities, and they are more involved members of their community. I think this is so because there is this sense that we are all in this together at a religious college, or that there is a mission beyond just being here to get my education and leaving in four years.

What things about Liberty students were consistent with what you expected?

It is not a stereotype to say that they are some of the most conservative students in America. This is a community in which former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee is seen as a centrist.

Doug Bixby is pastor of Evangelical Covenant Church in Attleboro, Massachusetts.

He is not even considered a conservative there. I was also surprised by the amount of time that they talk about faith and God. It almost seemed to border on obsessive. On Facebook, the number one most listed interest at Liberty was God. At Brown it was ultimate Frisbee.

Yes, but in the book, you seemed struck by how sincere people were with their faith.

Yeah, there was no beating around the bush. This was a very safe space for them to talk about their faith constantly. People were very earnest and very straightforward, and even very straightforward sometimes when they were having trouble believing or when they were doubting. So it was reassuring to see that you can doubt there, and people won't shun you.

When you left Liberty, what were the things you were most sad to leave?

The friends I made there. They were genuine friends. I liked getting to know them.

Is it true that you got to know these students on a different level than you did at Brown?

Yes and no. It was a different level in that I was not being totally honest with them. So that was hard. But yeah, when you are talking about the big questions all day, you really get a sense of who people are, and there is nothing fake about them. So I think I really got to know some of the people there, and they got to know me, despite the fact that it was only after I left that I came out to them about who I really was.

You felt more uncomfortable about the dishonesty than it seemed like they did.

Horrible! Horrible! It was the worst thing I had ever done. It was also the worst burden on my conscience. So I expected to go down there and confess

this, and then I would be tarred and feathered and run out of town.

Why didn't that happen?

I think part of it is that people like being written about. We are all narcissists. But also forgiveness is a basic tenet of the Christian faith, and I think people forgave me.

And perhaps people at Liberty were glad you got to know them before you wrote about them.

They knew that I did not come in with an ax to grind, and it is not a book that takes cheap shots. So I think



Jerry Falwell with Kevin Roose

they were glad. The book was not entirely positive. I did not shy away from making criticisms that I thought were warranted, but they have heard a lot worse. All things considered, I think my book was pretty generous, and there is this thing about forgiveness. I asked my roommate how he could forgive me. I said, "I lied to you for a whole semester, and you lived with me every day. How can you just forgive me in just ten seconds?" He said, "Well how can I not forgive you when I have been forgiven for everything?" So he was really applying that principle of forgiveness directly, and I think that's pretty cool.

What were the things you were glad to leave when you left Liberty?

Curfew! And I am not nostalgic about

the days when I spent Friday nights at Bible study. It was not entirely a downer, but I can't say it was thrilling. I was also glad to leave the atmosphere of homophobia because, even though I am not gay, it really wore on me. This was one part of Liberty that I never came to terms with. I could not accept that as legitimate.

In what ways did your semester at Liberty change you or your life the most?

Well, I have all these Christian Facebook friends now! No, it also changed my faith. It may not have changed my faith in the way Liberty students would have liked it to, but I do consider myself to be a person who is at least interested in faith and spirituality, and I still try to pray regularly. To be honest, I pray mostly for the self-help benefits, which may be a little cheap, but I still think it is better than nothing. I do consider myself a Christian, because I grew up in the Quaker tradition. I have moments of belief and disbelief like everyone else. Right now my moments of disbelief outweigh the moments of belief, but who is to say that this will not change in the future? I am

twenty-two, and I think it would be crazy for me to say that I have everything settled right now.

When you went to Daytona Beach for spring break to do "battle-ground evangelism" with a group from Liberty, there was not much success with the approach your team took. Why do you think it was so unsuccessful?

It is hard to imagine a worse place to do evangelism than being surrounded by a bunch of drunk partiers on spring break. So I think it would be naïve to think that this is a great way to make disciples. I also think the method was horrible. It was confrontational, and it was sort of a tricky thing, where you did not want to let them know you wanted to talk about

God at first. So you sneak your way into a conversation and then drop it as a sort of an afterthought. I think it is really deceptive. And I think there have to be more effective ways to endear people to your cause than tricking them into talking about God.

Our denomination has developed a new definition for evangelism. It is anything we say or do to help someone move one step closer to Jesus. This way of doing evangelism may lead into a more subtle approach, one that allows more room for God to be a part of the process. What do you think?

I like it. I think what turns people off is any deceptiveness in evangelism. It is that you are doing something nice for someone because of an ulterior motive. This turns people off, and anything we can do to tamp that down is a good thing.

But one of the things you liked about Liberty was the ability and the freedom to talk about God and to think about faith issues.

While you are at Liberty and with Liberty students, this is totally expected.

Do you wish people could talk about these things more freely in the secular environment?

Sure!

How could that be encouraged?

Well, the reason people say “never talk about religion and politics” is because there are contentious issues. It is hard to know how to talk about them without becoming argumentative with people who disagree with you. I think you can talk about politics and religion, but you have to be aware that other people have strong feelings that may be different from yours. So you have to do it in a way that can be respectful. We need to find a common

language and a respectful way to talk about these contentious issues, without having it reduced to a shouting match.

Is there anything else you think we could do to help heal the cultural divide that exists in the United States, and that you refer to so often in your book?

I would love to start an exchange program between Brown and Liberty. I think the mere act of exposure, and spending time with people you disagree with, moderates you. Not necessarily in your political and social views, but in your attitudes toward the other. It is hard to hate someone when you are eating with them at the cafeteria. It is hard to maintain enmity over an extended period of time when you are living together in the same dorm. ■