A Culture in Need
J. P. Moreland

To introduce our first speaker tonight we have Dr. Walt Russell who is the head of the New Test-
, actually the, the Dean of the Biblical Studies Department I believe or Chair of the Biblical
Studies Department for-, excuse me Dr. Dirks is our dean.

Please help me welcome up Dr. Walt Russell.

You may recall at the beginning of the public journey of Jesus the Messiah after fasting for 40
days. The devil tempted him. You may recall that the third and climactic temptation of the devil
recorded for us in Matthew chapter 4 verses 8 and 9 is what I call the malevolent short cut.
Matthew tells us, "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the
kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow
down and worship me.'"

The malevolent short cut, obviously the devil knew that Jesus as the Messiah would one day
have the kingdoms of the world as His. And so he offers him a terrifying shortcut. But Jesus and
His journey as a Messiah didn't take the shortcut did He. He took the long way home. The long
way of ministry. The long way of suffering. The long way of working through frail people like
you and like me.

As you begin this conference on your journey, may I just encourage you in light of our Savior's
example to not be tempted beyond measure by a society that perhaps is more than any society in
the history the world as a genius at shortcuts, including much of our Christian culture which offers the short way, the easy way home. And this conference of 22 different sessions offers you remarkable guidance and insights into how to take the right way, the long way home. And so may I encourage you as you begin this journey, which is about your journey with Jesus Christ, that you would take advantage of these sessions not as shortcuts, not as quick fixes, certainly not as malevolent shortcuts but as guidance as wisdom from older brothers and sisters about how to take that long way home, the way of ministry, the way of suffering, the way of working with and through others.

It's my privilege tonight to introduce my best friend, someone by the way who has taken the long way home. I've known Dr. J.P. Moreland ever since we were both the young Christians at the University of Missouri together in 1969. That seems a long time ago. He graduated from the University of Missouri with a B.S. in Chemistry. After spending five years on the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ, he then graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary with a master's in Theology. After teaching at a theological seminary in the West Coast and pastoring for many years. He continued his education at the University of California in Riverside with an M.A. in Philosophy, culminating with a PH. D. in Philosophy of the University of Southern California.

Dr. Moreland was married in 1977 soon to be 18 years to his lovely wife Hope who is here tonight. They have two delightful daughters, Ashley 15 and Allison 13. In addition to ministering to people and church planting and teaching Dr. Moreland has been a remarkably diligent scholar. He has written books in philosophy in the area of universals. He has written a bestselling book in apologetics. He has written on the philosophy of science. He has written a book in ethics, on
Moreland – A Culture in Need

aging, on immortality. He has edited a book on the creation hypothesis and co-edited books in
the areas of Christian perspectives on Being Human and most recently, Jesus under fire.

As he comes to speak to us tonight about a culture in need of spiritual transformation, I hope you
will appreciate and listen well to a brother who has avoided many many many of the malevolent
shortcuts and is in the process of taking the long way home. Listen to him. He knows that way
well. Let's welcome Dr. J. P. Moreland.

One of the great uh- Can you hear me? One of the crowning mercies in any Christian's life is the
privilege of having friends that walk with him or her. And Dr. Russell has been an intimate
friend of mine for close to a quarter of a century and next to my wife he probably knows more
about me than anybody alive. And I have had the privilege of watching him, listening to his
ideas, being nurtured by him and his family for a long time and a lot of strength in my life has
come from his friendship and his life. And it's a real joy to be able to say that in a culture where
friendship is a difficult thing to find, that I've had a friend like this for a quarter of a century. It's
hard for me to believe I'm even old enough to have had a friend for a quarter of a century but
that's not true.

I am really really delighted that you're here. And I'd like to welcome you to Biola University and
the Talbot school of theology and to this conference. I want to talk to you this evening about
what has been happening among us. As a husband and as a Christian and as a father of two
teenage daughters I am deeply distressed and concerned about an epidemic of chaos that I see in
our culture. I think about this all the time. It's with me regularly and what I have to say to you
this evening about it comes straight from the center of my heart. You might not agree with everything I'm going to say. That's fine. I don't even understand everything I say much less agree with it. But I hope that you will find some things to think about as a result of our time.

Two nights ago one of my favorite actors Chevy Chase had a movie that was rerun on television. It was the National Lampoon's Vacation No. 1 if you'll re- , it was one of his best I think and if you'll recall that movie, Chevy and his family are trying to get to Walley world which is on the West Coast. Think it was magic mountain actually. And he's trying to get there from the East Coast. And one thing after another happens to him on the way across the country he gets ripped off, his hubcaps things are taken off his car.

Somewhere out in the West I guess Arizona or Mexico, dear Aunt Edna dies in the backseat between the two kids. Well they discover that Aunt Edna has passed away somewhere I think around Flagstaff and they don't know what to do with Aunt Edna so they pull over the car and Chevy is a little bit irritated because this is going to ruin his vacation and they have a discussion of what they're to do.

Well the wife says that we ought to stay here and make sure Aunt Edna gets a decent burial for heaven's sakes. Well Chevy is incensed by this. I mean the very idea that he wants to strap Aunt Edna to the top of the car. He says "it's not going to rain tomorrow. She'll be all right. She won't know the difference. Let's go to Wally World and worry about burying her later." Nothing was going to stop Chevy Chase in fact at one point in the debate with his family he made a statement I'll never forget. He said, "this is no longer about a vacation, this has become a quest."
What's the difference between a vacation and a quest? Is your life on vacation? Or is your life a quest? What's the difference between a vacation and a quest? I don't know if I have an answer to that question and tell you the truth. I know what the difference was to Chevy Chase and I think he was onto something. For him a vacation was something that was optional. On a vacation if the things happened to you and difficulties come, you can always pack up and go home after all you're just on vacation. But if you're on a quest. A quest is too serious to pack up and go home when hardships come. Because you take a quest much more seriously than you take a vacation.

For people of common sense, and for people who are committed to the kingdom of God, life is not a vacation, it is a quest. Plato made the statement in one of his writings The Gorgias. He said the following "There is no question which a man of any sense could take more seriously than the question that we are now discussing, namely, what kind of a life should one live?"

The New Testament and the Old Testament tell you and me that we are pilgrims in this world. We are strangers, we are told, seeking another country. We are citizens of another realm. You and I are supposed to be running in a race. And we are told in sober terms not everybody is going to win that race. You and I are a part of something that is very very serious. Now I don't know why God made you. I'm not sure entirely why He made me. But I do know that God has placed you and He has placed me to occupy a very unique place in space and time. He didn't call St. Francis Assisi to live in your home. He did not ask Thomas Aquinas to live there or Billy Graham or John Calvin or Richard Foster. He's called you to live in your unique path and space
and time. And He is asking you to live your journey in such a way that people will see it and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

You have a life to live. It has been given to you. You have a set of talents that have been distributed to you. You have a set of experiences and opportunities, a family that you were given good or bad. And you are asked to embark on a journey that you are to take very very seriously. Now I'm afraid that there are two things that may be in your mind this evening that will keep you from taking your spiritual formation seriously. And I want to get them up out front because in a little bit I want to talk about what this goal is all about. What spiritual transformation is all about as I see it, and what has gone wrong with us and why we're not experiencing it today like I think we ought to be.

But there are two things I want to nip in the bud from the very beginning that I fear might cause you not to take a conference of this sort seriously. And in fact might not take the whole idea of spiritual maturity and transformation seriously. And the first of these has to do with what I simply call low expectations, low expectations. I was converted to Jesus Christ under Professor Russell's ministry and some others at the University Missouri back in 1968. I joined the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ in-, a year and a half later, and I began to do evangelism and teach the Scriptures.

I had had no exposure at all the first three or four years of my Christian life in any significant way, certainly the first two and a half years, to any, any Bible teachers that were very good at teaching the Scriptures. The pastors in the Churches that I attended gave interesting sermons but
they didn't really teach the Bible in any depth and it certainly wasn't being taught in any depth by the Campus Crusade staff members that worked with me. Most of us had been Christians less than five years. We'd never read the Bible entirely from cover to cover anyway.

I knew very little about the Scriptures and so I didn't have any standards of what it meant to hear the word of God taught well nor did I have any clear standards about what it meant to teach the Bible well. Now if you were to ask me if I was a good Bible teacher in those days I would have said yeah I'm pretty decent.

But my problem was I didn't have high enough standards about what it meant. I had very low expectations. Now when I went to seminary and I got around people who had devoted their entire lives to studying and teaching this Book. I was introduced to a completely different realm of teaching. And I began to realize that I had set my standards far too low.

You know what I'm afraid of for you and for me and my children and family? I'm afraid that we get our standards of what it means to be a functional Christian from contemporary evangelical Christianity. And that scares me and I'll tell you why. We are living, I believe and I don't mean to browbeat anybody but we're living in a dysfunctional Church. We happen to be at a period in Church history where Christianity is dysfunctional in North America, at least in the Churches that I hang around with.

Now if your, listen carefully to me, if your understanding of what is possible for spiritual life is determined by the people around you that you look at including Christian leaders. You are liable
to think that there is really not a whole lot of progress you will ever make in your spiritual journey. And so probably you either should abandon Christianity altogether or if you continue on in Christianity you should lower your expectations about what you can practically expect in your fourscore in ten and settle for very limited goals. I fear that for you and for me.

And I want to ask you this weekend if you don't do anything else, to be willing to entertain an idea. And the idea that I would like for you to entertain is that it may be possible for you to make far more progress in spiritual formation and maturity than you ever thought possible. And just be willing to consider that idea is possible. When I was a young Christian, working at the University of Vermont among God's Frozen Chosen like I've shared with some of you got up one morning and tripped and broke my pajamas so cold.

I was a go go boy. I was an activist and I'd heard there was this dear old woman that was an 84 year old Christian that heard about the Ministry of college students and wanted to support us financially. I also heard that she was kind of a spiritual giant and I didn't know much about what that meant but I certainly wanted her support for our campus ministry. So I decided as a young Christian to go see her.

I'll never forget it. This is nineteen seventy two, seventy three. I walked in her home. I walked in a room and I could immediately sense that there was something very different about this lady. And she was so frail and old that there was not a lot of physical strength to her. But let me tell you brothers and sisters, she was one keen woman. And I came in there and she said "now dear
young man, come up here kneel in front of me." So I walked over in front of her and she put her shaking old hands on my head. And she prayed a prayer for me.

And I will tell you that the flood gates of heaven broke into that room and I never forgot it. And at that moment I realized that there was something about the spiritual life that was far more possible for ordinary human beings to attain than ninety nine and a half percent of the people I had ever met in my life. And do you know what, you and I need to remember that. We need to exposure to the great saints in the history of the Church. We need to meet people that have made significant progress in the spiritual life and would you please, would you please consider the possibility that there may be more that you can obtain and your spiritual power in life than you are seeing in your evangelical subculture. Would you be willing to entertain that this weekend?

There is a second thing though that bothers me that may hinder you getting something out of this conference like you could. And that is not just settling for low expectations. But for a lack of a different way of putting it, it is a simple confusion about what this journey is all about. It is just a simple confusion about what Christian spiritual growth and spirituality is all about.

The first of these confusions is theological. We have in the word- as Dallas Willard has put it, reduced the gospel of Jesus Christ to a gospel of forgiveness of sins. You and I think that Christianity is primarily about preaching a message of forgiveness of sins to people. And I submit to you that that is really not the full Gospel of Jesus Christ.
Would you turn, in your Bibles to Mark chapter 1. At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, He announces and declares what His message of good news is going to be in His public ministry. And in verse 14 of Mark chapter 1 we see the following, "after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of God." Now what was that gospel? It is defined for us in verse 15 and here is what the gospel was and is. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is now available or is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

Now what is the Gospel? It is not about the forgiveness of sins. The gospel is an invitation to a radically different kind of life in a very different kind of kingdom. And a major part of that is dealing with the forgiveness of sins through trusting the atoning work of Christ on the cross. You see the death of Christ on the cross as a payment for our sins is an important crucial part of the bigger Gospel. Right? You cannot enter that Kingdom unless you deal with the sin issue but I submit to you that we are not about the task of calling people simply to forgiveness of sins. What we are to be calling people to do is to enter into a completely different kind of life in a radically different kingdom that operates in a different sort of way.

And the entrance requirements to that kingdom is forgiveness of sins. It is trusting the atoning work of Christ on a cross. Why is this important? If what we're up to is preaching a gospel of sin management or a forgiveness of sins then the quality of our journey doesn't make a whole lot of difference for the Gospel that we preach. It make-. We may be hypocrites in some sense but gosh we could also argue well look this proves that I need forgiveness all the more. Now I'm not saying that's good thinking but I'm saying that if the gospel we talk about all the time is believe in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross for the forgiveness of sins, and that he rose from the
dead to prove he was the son of God. If that's what we preach you'll notice conspicuous by its absence is any connection between the Gospel and spiritual transformation. There's no connection at all.

Now I am not downplaying forgiveness of sins but what I am saying is that if you and I realized one of the central part of our message is calling people to enter the Kingdom of God, and understood that what Jesus meant by that, which I'll mention in a second. But that (inaudible) basically has to do with a very different form of life than the quality of our lives is crucially put at issue when we preach our message doesn', isn't it. Because if we're inviting people into a different form of life and we are not having that different form of life then there is something fundamentally flawed about us. And we are called radically I think into question.

I fear to put it quite simply, that you will be dissuaded about this conference and its impact on you either through low expectations or, or through finding a way of forgetting that spiritual transformation is not attack on the forgiveness of sins. Spiritual transformation is the part and parcel and core of what our faith is all about. It is about transforming people from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light, into the kingdom of His dear Son.

Now what is the goal of spiritual life? What is the goal of spiritual life? I don't think any single definition will do. But I think that there are certain things that can be said about it that are useful. And here's what I take the goal of your journey and my journey to be if I can put it succinctly. It is to live with such richness and power that being like Jesus Christ is the easy thing to do. It is to live with such richness and power that being like Jesus Christ is the easy thing to do, that we are
so changed, that we experience in our own persons the fact that His burden is light, we are told, or that His commandments are not burdensome. And in my view, the whole point of spiritual transformation is to become like Jesus Christ and to serve Him in the world in a manner fitting to His kingdom.

And when I say to become like Jesus Christ, to keep that from sounding like empty words because we use that language so often it becomes dull to us. When I say to become like Jesus Christ, one of the things I mean by it is that to have so such power and facility in life that living the way He would live becomes natural and second nature to us. It is not something that we have to conjure up and try to do. But it becomes a part of our ingrained character.

Now listen to these statements and entertain the possibility that these statements are something that you and I might actually make progress in living out in our lives. Listen to some of these and don't-, I urge you not to try to write them down there are too many of them but just consider the possibility that these might-, that the people who said these statements, you'll recognize some of them, were actually meaning something by them and they're meant for you and me to internalize and to enter into. Here's one of them, "Love your enemies. Love them; And pray for people that persecute you. And I might add, Be joyful in doing that."

Russell was reminding me of just a couple of days ago. They no longer trust the institutions of the family, the church, and the government. And instead of turning to these larger holes to get meaning from, they spend all of their time trying to create meaning by promoting their own little
agendas. And he said if you are looking to your petty little life to find meaning in life, Seligman says you are looking in the wrong place.

Now think with me. What will be true of a generation of people that are primarily narcissistic, empty, alienated, infantile people. Because it goes on to describe the alienated selves as infantile. You know what infantile is? Somebody is-, that's infantile is somebody that isn't-, that hungers for immediate gratification. They want pleasure and no pain and they want to be the center of the universe.

My family went to a soccer game where my daughter played soccer last year, and there was a little 5 year old boy along the side watching the soccer game while his older sister was playing. His name was Kyle, and little Kyle sat over there and did the best he could to make sure everybody was looking at him instead of the soccer game. And if people weren't looking at him, he went over and got ice out of the ice chest and threw it on people and his basic attitude was Hey look at me, aren't I a big shot.

It was kind of cute for a 5 year old. Doesn't look too good for 35 year old. And we're finding out that people are carrying, listen, adolescent traits and attitudes into their early and mid thirties to-, in our generation. What will happen? What will happen to a group of people that bring an alienated empty self into their religious life and never question it? What will happen? Can you see that they will begin to view their religious practices as just another thing to consume? Just another tool in their tool box to make their lives successful and if God can help me a little bit I'll stick Him in there. And if the church can help me I'll stick the church in there. Here's my
therapist. Here's my favorite diet food. Here's my workout schedule. I'm Kyle. The world revolves around me. And God exists to make me happy. And He better pull this off or I'll change religions.

Now if that's going on in a culture, there's not gonna be a whole lot of spiritual transformation. I hope I'm not sounding harsh, I don't mean to be harsh about this. I'm just trying to be candid. A topic that I was assigned to was "why there is not more spiritual transformation?" And I believe that we're living in an epidemic of infantile behavior in our culture. And I think that people like you and me have trouble. We all have trouble distancing ourselves from that culture and practicing authentic Christianity.

Now why do we now live if you believe that I've established my point? Why is it that we now live in a generation of people that are largely narcissistic empty alienated selves that have infantile passive behaviors toward life? If that's true why is that? May I suggest to you there are five factors that have contributed to this. I'll say them as quickly as I can but I want you to get them because I think they're important.

Why do we now find ourselves spiritually and emotionally bankrupt? What's contributing to this? I think there are five, at least five factors that have created this cultural climate in which you and I are expected to make our sojourn. And here's the first one. We no longer believe the unseen world is real. We no longer believe the unseen world is real. Pitirim Sorokin, who was a sociologist at Harvard, said, that we have shifted from an ideational to a sensate culture. And so that won't sound academic and highfalutin, let me tell you what he meant by it.
According to Sorokin, an ideational culture is a culture that believes that the visible physical universe is not all there is. That in addition to the visible physical universe there is an unseen world where God and spirits and values and abstract objects and things like that dwell. Now according to Sorokin, cultures that are ideational, that believe that there is a larger world than the physical world we see, also believe that it is that other world that gives this world its point and significance and meaning, and ideational cultures hold out the hope that people can become transformed for some bigger purpose for which they were put here.

Sensate cultures no longer take the spiritual life seriously because they don't believe in an unseen world. The idea that spirituality is something that we ought to take seriously is not countenanced by most people today.

Everything's relative in spirituality isn't it. Somebody said it this way, in politics the makeup man has become more important than the speechwriter. And in religion, feeling good about it is more important than really understanding what true spirituality is all about. And I fear that for many people today there is no reason to talk about a serious journey because there is nothing to journey toward. And even if you still believe in God in this culture, spirituality is the sort of thing that you can make up the rules as you go along, right? Whatever you believe is fine for you in spirituality. There is no point in trying to learn from the great masters of the past. They were old, they were-, they're not moderns anyway. They probably don't know anything and we make up the spiritual life as we go don't we? That's the first problem.
The first problem is frankly a lack of conviction that there's an unseen world. And if that's your-, if, if you're here this evening and you are struggling with whether or not there is an unseen world may I suggest that you find answers to your questions in that regard. Don't be embarrassed that you have questions. Do the best you can to try to find answers to them because you have, you have a need to be-, to rest secure in the existence of the unseen world.

Here's a second reason. There has been a shift in our understanding of what the good life is. We hold these truths to be self-evident. All men are endowed by their Creator. With what? Life, Liberty and the pursuit of what? Eudaimonia. Happiness, the good life. What did they mean by the good life? What was the good life? You know the good life, you want to know your test for what the good life is? Your view of the good life is what you fantasize about and what you play act that you'd really like to be doing and becoming when you have time to fantasize about the things that you really value and nobody knows about it. That is your view of the good life.

And for the ancients, for Aristotle and Plato and for the biblical writers and medieval culture, and up until the people who were writing as recently as one hundred and fifty years ago, the good life, the life to fantasize about, the happy life, the person that was well off, was the person who had intellectual and moral character and wisdom and virtue. The person to daydream about, the good life, was the person who had character and courage and kindness and depth and virtue, that was the good life.
Today, I can't tell you why because of time. But there is a very interesting reason, today the good life has come to be defined as possessing two things: one pleasurable mental states, and two the means to consume goods. The good life today is about having pleasure and no pain and about obtaining consumer goods.

Now stop and think about that. Stop and think about the difference in the good life. There was an article written by a person named Roy Bergmeister, who did a study of the concept of success in American history. He studied the idea of success. And he argued that the successful person used to be the person who was able to live a virtuous life even if everybody else was living a debauched life. That was the successful person to most people.

Today the successful person is the individual that can project an image to other people and who has enough money to consume consumer goods. Now what's that going to do to the spiritual life? What's that, what's that shift in the good life going to do to the spiritual life? Do you realize the spiritual life involves some pain and struggle and hard work, delayed gratification, you know that, you have to delay gratification. If the good life is about pleasure and about consuming consumer goods, what what sense does it make to say I'm going to discipline myself. I'm going to deny myself. I'm going to learn and train myself to go without things. What sense does that make if the purpose of life is to consume in the first place?

I have a-, one of my best friends just found out this week that his wife may very well be dying of cancer and may have less than a year to live. One of my dearest friends; this man and his wife still have journeying to do. But if the good life is about pleasure and no pain I'd say their journey
is already over with wouldn't you? But if the journey is about living your life well. Hmmn? It sounds to me like they've still got some journeying to do. Wouldn't you agree with that?

Third, there is no emphasis on the interior life today. There is no emphasis on the interior life. One person put it this way about the empty self. Listen to this. This is unbelievable. The empty self, he said, is filled with consumer goods, calories, experiences, politicians, romantic partners, and empathetic therapists. You know what-, you know what's common to every single one of those? The self in every case is defined by something external to the self that the self can consume. And the emphasis that's placed on life is achieving and getting and getting.

Now in that context, the art of learning how to be alone and to be quiet and learning to cultivate my interior life is going to be a lost art. One of the results of this has been loneliness. Henri Nouwen makes the point that people today are experiencing a chronic loneliness because they've never learned how to be by themselves and feel the presence of God in that moment of aloneness. It's been a loss of emphasis on the inside interior life that I think has created an awful lot of the loneliness in our culture.

Fourth. I don't mean to sound mean spirited on this. This is just a fact. Local church ministry simply cannot be counted on to produce radical disciples. It is not so much that the local church isn't-, the things that the local church is doing are wrong. It is quite simply that the ministries that take place in the local church are not intense enough. They do not provide the opportunity for intense enough focus on the spiritual life.
And you and I know in our hearts don't we, that the week in week out activities of a local church standard ministry typically cannot be counted on to produce people that lived the way I described earlier in this talk. That means that you and I need to rethink don't we? We need to rethink what a local church is and what it is to be about.

Finally, I think that our culture is in desperate need of spiritual transformation because Christians have confused works with effort. Christians have confused works with effort. We evangelicals are rightly against works. Works are not a means of obtaining justification or favor with God. That's what the Reformation was all about and rightly we are against the idea that works are means of obtaining grace with God.

But from the fact that we set works aside, it does not follow that we set effort aside. And I will tell you that spiritual growth is something that requires all the effort you can bring to it. Spiritual maturity does not happen by osmosis. I wish it did. I think. Well I guess I probably don't. But part of me does. But nothing in this life that's worth anything can be obtained without effort. And spiritual progress requires effort.

Well let me summarize my sharing with you, finally, what I've been trying to get at. You're here to learn something about your life. I want to suggest to you that there is a possibility, on the authority of Jesus' words and His friend's words and on the authority of the experience of people in the history of Christianity, it is possible to make more progress in the spiritual life than we are currently considering possible if we look to the evangelical community typically and only.
I suggest to you that this is a generation that you and I now live in, that we're called to occupy our places in space and time for the Kingdom's sake, that we are living in a culture that is experiencing an epidemic crisis, ladies and gentlemen, that has not been seen to my knowledge in American history before this, of alienated childish narcissistic empty people. And that you and I have got to understand the factors that have contributed to that culture, distance ourselves from it, and find ways to hook ourselves into the Kingdom of God so that our lives can be so different than the people around us. That when we invite them to enter a Kingdom that offers them a different form of life, our invitation will be augmented by the lives of those who extend it.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, it is a privilege for me, not only to be here but to know the students and friends who have labored to set this conference up. And Lord I happen to know their faith and their hearts. And it's my prayer this evening that You would honor their faith and hearts and do a work in all of us not only for our sakes but for theirs, in Jesus' name, Amen.