

What Is Needed In Today's World

By James Boice

Announcer

Is coming to address us in this the first of a series of plenary sessions is, in my judgment, one of the most distinguished spokesman for the Christian faith whom God has given the Church in our generation

His academic credentials are impressive. He's a graduate of Harvard, graduate of Princeton Seminary, doctoral studies done in Switzerland at the University of Basel. He's the recipient of many honors, one of which included invitations to come and speak here at Talbot as our Bible exposition speaker in our Lyman Stuart lectures several years ago. But others of which are of a significantly different order of magnitude. Dr. Boice has for some years now edited Eternity Magazine. He's a pastor of 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, a Church which has prospered under his Ministry and which, in contrast to many ministries in the inner city in these days, has chosen to stay and to Minister and to help and to encourage those who live and to work and who in some sense suffer in the inner city environment.

He's a pastor who knows the needs of people. He's also a distinguished scholar. A list of publications which are credited to his name is very long. I've personally been helped a great deal by his studies in the Gospel of John, a series of expository studies of what I think are exceptional insight. Is very strategic investment in evangelical Christianity during the last 15 years or so, I think, has been unique. As the chairman of the International Council on Biblical and Arrange, he has helped those of us in the evangelical community define and clarify precisely what it means to say that God has spoken to us clearly and without error, and the whole foundation of everything we do here at Biola is based upon that fact, and I think we in a sense owe him a real debt of

gratitude as a major figure in the ICBI activities, refining not just what Biblical inerrancy means, but how we ought to approach the interpretation of Scripture and what a major core of implication of Scripture rightly interpreted means an application to the life of the Church today. He has been on campus before. Many of you have read his books or heard your prophets and Bible and theology talk about him. I'm delighted to introduce him to you now. Dr. James Montgomery Boice.

James Boice

Thank you very much. It's a great pleasure to be back here again. I'm already beginning to feel that Biola is my second home, or at least my adopted home on the West Coast. There's a deeper and more meaningful connection to my life than that. Everybody has a mentor, I suppose, and of all the people that have come into my life to influence me, the greatest probably is Donald Grey Barnhouse, who was also a former pastor of 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, to which he came in 1927, the year before Ruben Torrey died.

And I mentioned that because his great mentor and teacher was Ruben Torrey, so the Bible says that the faith has passed from faith to faith. I think it's the faith of one and the example of one of the faith and example of another. And if that's the case, I'm in the third generation of descendants from Torrey to Barnhouse and now to myself. So it's a privilege and a joy to be with you. And I have been looking forward to these days, as I also have looked forward to the times when I've been here before.

Now I'd like to begin each of these plenary studies that we have together four of them, this one today, two tomorrow, and the final one at the end of the week, by reading a passage of Scripture and asking God to bless it as we begin to think of it later in these addresses, I'm going to do more

strict exposition that I'm going to do today. But nevertheless, this passage is the one I want to have in our minds as we begin it's in the book of Proverbs.

It's the 9th chapter, and I begin with verse nine, but I'm reading verses nine and ten. These are verses I'm sure familiar to you, but I want to think of them. And then I want to think more fully about the kind of world into which we have to live them. Proverbs nine, nine, and ten struct a wise man, and he will be wiser still teach a righteous man, and he will add to His learning. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. Now let's pray. Our Father, we do want to understand, and we do want to be wise. And yet we read a verse like this, and we are aware as we read that that true understanding and deep wisdom is something of which we are not capable by ourselves. If we are to understand and know, we must be taught of you. And that teaching that we receive from you must be more than a mere intellectual matter. It must be a personal matter as we come to know you intimately, and it must involve our heart response and obedience.

So we pray that you would use these times we have together this week, this theme of the conference and all the sessions to lead us in that way, we pray these things in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen. Let me say just a word as I begin about the flow of these four plenary addresses that I have been asked to bring. You would not tell, I think from the subjects as you could from the elective that they all tie together. The elective is on the Book of Romans, and in the last hour I began with Romans one, and tomorrow it's Romans three, and then Romans four.

But these four subjects seem to be unrelated, and yet they're not, because what I want to do is speak about the world into which we have to live Christianity and to which we are responsible for bearing a witness. And I want to do it in four related ways. I want to talk about the nature of the world in which we live, the distinct characteristics of our culture. Now, tomorrow morning at

the early hour, I want to talk about the Scriptures, how we're to approach them and what God promises to do through them.

Tomorrow evening, in the third of these addresses, I want to talk about the doctrine of God based on Exodus three. And then finally, in the last session, I want to talk about obedience because, you see, it's not just head knowledge. It's also what we're going to do with it that counts. This last spring I gave a number of graduation addresses in different parts of the country, and I was looking for stories about graduations, and I came across one from England. There was a man who was an industrialist, quite a wealthy man.

His name was Cyril Dyson, and he was asked in England as prominent figures in the national life often were to take part in a graduation of the girls school. The pattern in England is that the visiting guest will be there on the platform when everybody receives their diploma, and then he will actually hand the diploma to the person receiving it and say a word, a personal word to each of the graduates, as he does. Well, all these coeds were coming across the platform one after the other, and he was giving out the certificates, and he couldn't think of anything more to say.

Eventually he was just running out of ideas. So as one girl came across a very beautiful girl, he finally said, the only thing he could think of. He said, what are you going to do after you leave school? And she fluttered her long false eyelids, lashes at him and smiled coily. And she said, Well, I had thought of going straight home, actually, the time is coming when you're going to leave school, but not to go home. I'm sure rather to go into the world. And it's worth asking what kind of a world it is we're going into now I want to suggest three characteristics of what we face out there to stimulate our thinking.

And the first is that ours, unlike any generation before us, is increasingly a mindless culture. I mean, mindless in the sense of unable to think. A year ago now, and a half ago, Ted Coppel,

whom you see on Nightline, was giving an address at Duke University. And in the context of it, he said something that I found very significant. Many Christians have heard about that address because in the context of it, Ted Coppel spoke about the Ten Commandments, and he was trying to point out that they're relevant for our time, speaking to a largely secular audience, and he said, They're the Ten Commandments, not Ten suggestions.

And then he talked about the tents. He said, they are not were. And a lot of preachers heard that or found a report of it. And so I've spoken about it since that was all very significant. But what impressed me most about Coppel's address was not that remark, but the point at which he began. The very first thing he said when he stood up to address these graduates is that America has been vanitized, as now nobody knew what vanitized meant, of course, any more than you do.

So he had to explain, he said, I mean vanitized, as in Vanna White. And then everybody began to get the picture. Vanna White, I know you don't watch television. Is that not Christian thing to do, not spiritual. For those of you who do not see television or watch it and who are therefore fully sanctified. Let me point out that Vanna White is the young lady on the game show Wheel of Fortune, whose job is to turn the blocks, make the letters come up after they get certain letters. And the significant things about Vanna White, these number one, she is an amazing television phenomenon. She is immensely popular. She is so popular that now books are being written about her, first of all, a biography and another one I just saw in a bookstore a week ago. And it's really an amazing phenomenon. That's the first thing. And then the second thing which Ted Coppel spoke about, and it's worth thinking about this is that although she's so popular, Vanna White on television never says a word. Now that was true a year and a half ago.

I have noticed I saw that show once some time ago, and actually, I did hear Vanna White say something. The thing was over and they were about to roll the credits and they got them together

there at the end. And she was speaking to somebody who just won some money. And she said that was very well done. So it's not entirely true that Vanna White never says a word. But at any rate, at the time, Coppel made his point. I suppose that was true.

Here's an immensely popular person who doesn't say anything as a result of which we haven't the foggiest idea what Vanna White thinks or for that matter, even if she does, what is the secret of her popularity? Well, Coppel began to analyze this, and he said, the secret of Anna White's popularity is that you can project into her anything you want. She's anything you want her to be, if you're young and feeling a bit insecure. And perhaps if you're a girl thinking you're not quite as glamorous as you'd like to be.

She's your glamorous older sister. If you're a little bit older thinking of getting married, that's the kind of girl I would like if you're a bit older and you're unhappy in your marriage. You think perhaps if you're not a Christian, that's the kind of mistress I would like. She's anything you want. Here's what Coppel said she is sister, lover, daughter friend, never cross nonthreatening, nonjudgmental to a fault. Now, the point of all that, of course, and the point of his address is that that's what television does.

Television produces a mindless culture which does not deal with issues but merely presents images with which you can identify. If it communicates anything, it does it in an emotional way, by our identification with the images on the screen and not by stimulating, encouraging or contributing to any kind of rational process. Now, Coppel wanted the graduates to know that, but he was speaking of it also in terms of an analysis of the culture, I wonder if you thought about that thing about these presidential candidates. We see them on the television all the time.

Every news story. We see every program at night, noon time, anytime it appears local news, national news, whatever it is these days, has Michael Bush, Michael Dukakis and George Bush

on the screen or the other way around? I don't think it makes any difference. Every time you look at the news, you see these two carriages. But you ask yourself, what do they think about the issues? I mean, for that matter, what are the issues? We all know what they're talking about.

These campaigns, especially the advertisements, are the dirtiest in memory.

They're trying to exaggerate the other person's point of view, distort it. They're trying to tap on something that will evoke an emotional grassroots response on behalf of the people. But I haven't seen one really thorough examination of any significant issue, even in terms of the debate, either the first one or the vice presidential debate. I'm sure the same thing will be true of the one who comes up now. That is not accidental. That's intentional, because the people that run the campaigns are well aware of the fact that the way you win a campaign today is not by articulating the issues, but by saying nothing by presenting a nonverbal likable image and trying to keep out of trouble as long as possible.

Now, I'm willing to admit or believe that George Bush and Michael Dukakis actually do think. I assume they think I hope they think, because one of them is going to end up as the President. But my point is you would not know that from the television. You see what the television does is sell images. And so what it is producing is a culture in which people are not grappling with issues but are merely responding to stimuli. Now that is a scary thing. And yet it's something we have to cope with, because that is the way the world is operating and a lot of less significant issues than the national elections.

Now I ask the question, why has that situation come about? It's simplistic to blame. It just on television. A part of it has to do with television. If I ask why it's come about, it goes back to this kind of relativism that we have developed in our culture over the last 20-30 years or a generation

or so. I wonder if any of you have had the chance to read Alan Bloom's book that was on the top of the best seller list for so long a year or so ago.

The Closing of the American Mind, a great analysis of expose of the weaknesses of American higher education. It all has to do with relativism. And at the very beginning of that very popular book, Ellen Bloom says this. I'm quoting it exactly. There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of. Almost every student entering the University believes or says he believes that truth is relative. In other words, it's all up for grabs. There are no absolutes. Now how did a country that started out believing in absolutes ever get to that point?

We do believe in absolutes or we think we do. Our founding documents speak of their rights of life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Those are absolutes if there ever were any. And yet here is Bloom saying, Nobody really believes in them anymore, which I believe is absolutely right. Well, Francis Schaefer traces it back to Hegelian philosophy. And if you rent any Schaefer, you know the way in which that works. Hegel said that all things are relative in the historical process. And the way history moves, whether it's the movements of people or the movements of ideas is by a process which he described by the three words thesis and antithesis and synthesis. He said at any one period in history, there is always something like a thesis. And that is what people believe. If you say to somebody, is this true? And they say, yes, that's the thesis. But it isn't absolutely true. It's only true then at that moment, and it's only true for them or for that culture. And it's certainly going to change now the way it changes according to Hegel is this the time will come when people begin to get restless with that consensus. And they'll say, as we see happen all the time, I don't think that's quite right.

My experience teaches different. And then out of their experience and their thinking, they'll develop a contrary point of view, a point of view that's opposed to the thesis at certain significant

points. And Hegel said, Well, that's the antithesis. What happens in history, according to Hegel, is that those two struggle, the thesis and the antithesis struggle. And as they struggle to see which one is right or will prevail, the thesis changes a little bit. And the antithesis changes a little bit, and they tend to move together in what Hegel called a synthesis.

And so it happens at a later period in history that there is a time when people say, oh, now we know what the truth is. We used to think the truth was A other people thought the truth was B, but now we discovered that the truth is actually C. Did you see that isn't really the truth? That's only a new thesis, which in time produces a new antithesis, which in time produces a new struggle. And as a result of that, there's a new synthesis and so on.

And that's the way it goes. So it's true to say, if it's possible to say that anything is true, this is true today, but it's not true to say it will be true tomorrow and forever. And it's possible to say it is true for you, but not necessarily to say that it is true for me. Now that's the kind of culture we live in. And that is what is producing our mindlessness. Now, you know, we don't usually see it in philosophical terms in the United States because most people today aren't philosophers.

They don't even read philosophy. They can't even spell it. But nevertheless, that is the way we operate and where we see it often as Christians is what we try to give a Christian witness. If we speak about the claims of Christ, it used to be that a generation ago you'd get an argument that people didn't believe what you were saying. They would disagree with you and they tell you why they disagreed. But that doesn't happen today. For the most part, sometimes you run into people that are just argumentative.

But generally, today, isn't it true if you speak to somebody about the gospel and you give your own testimony that instead of arguing with you, they'll say something like this. They'll say, I am glad that you found something that is meaningful for you. If that makes you happy, that makes

me happy, I'm happy for you. But that just isn't my thing. I'm into the New Age movement or crystals or some other thing. And next week I might be into something else, depending what happens. You see that's your truth.

But it's not my truth. It's truth for you today. But I'm sure as you go on to mature, it's not even going to be true for you tomorrow. Now, that presents great problems for Christians trying to witness to that kind of a culture because we do believe in truth. We believe that the Bible is true. We believe that God is a God of truth. The Holy Spirit is described as the Spirit of truth, and the Lord Jesus Christ said, I am the way the truth and the life.

How do you speak the truth to a culture that, properly speaking, doesn't even believe in truth.

That's a problem, you see. But what it has produced, the point I'm making is the kind of mindlessness that Ted Copper was speaking about in his address at Duke University. There's a third thing I want to mention. I want to mention it briefly because we don't have a lot of time.

And that is together the two produce culture, which is afraid to make commitment. It used to be that commitment was very highly valued.

You couldn't accomplish anything without commitment. If you wanted to produce change, you had to be committed to the possibility of the revolution. If you want to work for the good of humanity, you had to be committed to some kind of an organization that was trying to do that. If you spoke about Christianity, commitment was involved in the very nature of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. But today we have a culture that no longer really believes in commitment. It will make a halfhearted allegiance with something for a short period of time for the benefit that the individual can get out of it.

But without any idea that that is going to last a lifetime. The most obvious place we see that is in marriage. People marry, but certainly not with any idea, staying together forever. And we see it

in all sorts of other ways as well. Now, the point I'm making is that all of this is linked together because you see if there are no absolutes, well, obviously, you can't think clearly about absolutes because the absolutes don't exist. But even if somewhere out in the blue, there were absolutes of truth, you couldn't even reason about them.

But because in order to reason, you have to have absolutes, very laws of logic or absolutes law of non contradiction and so forth. It's something that always holds true. But if there are no absolutes where you can't use the laws of logic, if you can't use the laws of logic, you can't even think so. I think the only thing that's left is to respond to stimuli. But because the stimuli vary all the time, certainly you can't make commitments because nothing is ever going to last long enough to merit that kind of a lifelong commitment.

On one's part, what's going to happen to a culture like that? I tremble for a culture like that, a culture that can't analyze things filled with people who can't think why in a culture like that, a demagogue comes along and sweeps the culture away. That's what they did in Germany back in World War II. They followed Hitler mindlessly, and I should say and less mindlessly than we are inclined to think today. I fear for that. Now, out of that, I asked the question which is the subject of our time together today, what is needed in today's world, what is needed in today's world?

Obviously, what's needed is a generation of people who know the absolute. And what does that mean? It means God, a generation of people who know God, because if you're talking about absolutes, it's proper to talk about absolutes like the laws of nature, the laws of logic. All those things are absolutes, but they are only absolutes because they are the product or the creation of the God, who alone is the absolute or to do with Francis Schaeffer, he is the absolute absolute. He's the only real absolute there is.

So what we need is a generation of people who know God. Isn't that what our text is all about? Our text is about wisdom. It's speaking about the folly of the world, which is always linked with a moral folly. People who behave badly as well as think inaccurately. And it says to those who would live in such a world and bear a witness, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. That's what I want to challenge you to do, to make it a serious point in your life.

Really, to know God. I don't mean just to know about Him. You can go to a seminary and you can learn a lot of theology and you can stand up and give a lecture in theology and sound very wise and erudite. But that's not what I mean. I mean, really to know God to know Him personally in a way that changes your life and is always involved with your obedience. If you haven't read it, a good book to read is Ji Packer's book *Knowing God*. The very first chapter talks about knowing God and what we mean by that theologically Packer talks about four different kinds of knowing.

There's knowing by awareness. If you're aware that there's a God, that's the kind of knowing that Paul is writing about in Romans One, the whole world is aware that there's a God, even if they deny it. There's a knowledge which is a knowledge involving information. That's the kind of knowledge you get in a seminary where you go and study these things, you read the books and you analyze what the theologians philosophers have to say that's better. It's more complete. The third kind of knowing is knowing by experience.

You stand out in the field under the sky and a starlit night, and you say, I sense the presence of God. That's a valid kind of knowledge. But it's not what we mean when we're talking about knowledge in the Biblical sense, the real knowledge is the knowledge of a person in which information is shared and a personal response is called out. That's why Jesus could say in John

17, when he's praying to the Father, this is eternal life, that they might know Thee. The only true God in Jesus Christ, whom now has sent that's not mere awareness of it is not knowledge of it is not even experience of that is transforming knowledge on the personal level.

So to know Him and to know God is, as he said, life eternal. Now, the point I want to make is that it's only people who know God in that sense that are going to change the world. I think Ted Coppel was far closer to the truth in his graduation address for that very reason than Alan Bloom. Alan Bloom has analyzed the problem very well. But unfortunately, when you get to the end of the book, the only solution Bloom has is to get back to classical learning.

Platonism. I'd rather have classical learning than much of what passes for instruction today. But that's no solution. Coppel's address was very short compared Bloom's Area Night exposition. But at the end, Chapel wanted to get back to the Bible. And Coppel said something like this. He said, The Commandments of God require that we believe in the existence of a single Supreme God, that we prohibit the worship of any other God, that we forbid that his name be taken in vain and require that one day in seven be set aside to rest and worship him.

He warns us to shun today's false gods which are magnified by the flickering light of television.

And he calls on America to set its sights on that which is eternal. A great story in the Old Testament about that of some men who did it comes from the book of Daniel. I think Daniel is a very relevant book today because it's exactly what you and I face. You see a few godly men taken from their homeland and placed in the middle of a secular culture, maybe a lot of believers in America today.

But we're a minority in a secular culture. And what happened, of course, that these men did very well. They knew how to think. They were hardworking. They were men of integrity. They rose to positions of real power in the Babylonian Empire. But as is always the case with believers in

God in a secular culture, the time came when their convictions ran up against the demands of the secular culture they served. And in the case of Daniel's three friends, it was this great statue.

There's a golden statue that was set up by Nebuchadnezzar and Nebuchadnezzar had demanded that everybody in the Empire bowed down and worship it.

And they wouldn't do it. Now. Why not? When we read their response, we find out the reason they wouldn't do it is that they knew God, not just about him. They didn't just say, oh, we know what they used to teach back in Jerusalem, these men lived in the shadow of the Almighty. They knew who he was. They trusted him because they knew him on that level. And because of that, and only because of that, because of that great absolute they were able to stand. And what they said when they came before the King was this.

Oh, Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. In this matter, we are thrown into the blazing furnace. The God we serve is able to save us from it. You see, they were talking about his sovereignty and his power, and he will rescue us from your hand, O King. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O King, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold that you have set up. Television is a place where the images of gold are being set up.

That's where we are being lured to the world's culture, and the culture is demanding.

Increasingly, Christians bow down and worship that gold statue. Where are we going to get a generation of men and women that refuse to bow down? The only people that won't bow down are those who know their God and who, because they know their God, are willing to pay the price. Many will pay the price, pay a high price. But it's only people like that that will change anything. Doesn't it bother you that we have so many alleged Christians in this country of ours?

And yet we are being such failures at changing it in any significant way. Our culture, the United States of America, is rushing along in a Godless direction so fast you can hardly track its decline. What's wrong? What's wrong is that we don't know our God, and we need to. Let us pray. Our Father, we pray that you would use this time that we have in these sessions as well as these years of study for those who are here Biola, to instruct us as to what you really are and to change us by a personal encounter with yourself.

We would pray that for some, these days might be life transforming ones. And the hours of these meetings might be times which they will never forget, and that you will do things here in the lives of many that will produce a difference for generations in many, many lives to come. We pray that in anticipation of what you'll do in the name of Christ, our Lord, Amen.