



Association for Biblical Higher Education

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**DISMISSING GOD: WHY STUDENTS AND ALUMNI DEMIT THEIR FAITH,
AND WHAT WE MUST DO ABOUT THIS CONCERN**

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“All studies, philosophy, rhetoric are for this one object, that we may know Christ and honor him. This is the end of all learning and eloquence.”
Desiderius Erasmus, 1528

PROGRAM

- 1. Introducing DBL as Presenter**
- 2. The Formation of Enduring Faith: Not a Given Assumption**
- 3. Tell-tale Signs of Disbelief: Two American Poets**
- 4. Deterrents Facing Today’s Young Adults**
- 5. What Should Your College Be Doing That Is More Than Academic Education?**

SESSION 1:

DBL Intro: A Preacher’s Kid with a Bible College Heritage and Formation of an Enduring Faith

- **D for Donald** / name never used until college’s computerized registration / **D. Bruce** as my identity
- Parents’ conversion: Father after Salvation Army band / Mother after brother’s and a boy friend’s witness
- Father’s rejection of formal education opportunity because of Presbyterian infant baptism
- Church planters in Northern Ontario / independent Baptist pastor-evangelist-mission representative
- DBL as preacher’s kid in Ontario, Michigan, and Brooklyn, NY
- Entirely secular schooling and college education
- Devout Roman Catholic track coach: “Run the race of your life, kid, and maybe God has a surprise”
- Champion runner at **New York University** and **New York Athletic Club** / missed 1956 Olympics
- After a year of teaching/coaching at **Wheaton College**, recruited by **Frank E. Gaebelein** to teach at **The Stony Brook School** (34 years)
- Retired as **Staley Foundation Scholar-in-Residence** in 1991, after founding **PAIDEIA, Inc.** (1965)
- Consultant to 1000+ schools, 100+ colleges/universities/seminaries
- Since 2016, “Distinguished Professor of Education,” **Lancaster Bible College/Capital Seminary**
- Bible college leaders in my father’s churches: **L. E. Maxwell**, principal of **Prairie Bible College**; **Louis Talbot** at the **Bible Institute of Los Angeles**; and **James Oliver Buswell, Jr.**, **National Bible Institute**
- Uncle **John Honeyman**’s education / pastorates / academic career / inspiring example / persecution
- Uncle’s advocacy of Bible colleges in Canada / influence on **LBI/TBC/OBC/Tyndale University** / **Samuel J. Mikolaski**, first Canadian Bible college student to transfer credits to a secular university
- My own vocation: Christian schooling (K-12 through seminary) as faculty/administrator/consultant
- Author/co-author/editor of more than 40 books, including *The Way They Should Go*; *A Passion for Learning: A History of Christian Thought on Education*; *From Candy Sales to Committed Donors*; *The Liberating Word: Art and the Mystery of the Gospel*; *The Cosmic Center: The Supremacy of*

Christ in a Secular Wasteland; The Timeless Moment: Creativity and the Christian Faith; Thinking-and-Acting Like a Christian; and A Christian Paideia: The Habitual Vision of Greatness.

- For more than thirty years at The Stony Brook School, I taught the sons and daughters of families named **Boice, Bright, Graham, Hines, Howard, Koop, Lindsell, Olford, Ortlund, Perkins, Skinner, Woods, Zodhiates**, and other evangelical household names and so came to know these men and women as parents, and their sons and daughters as teenagers.
- **Why I support ABHE**
 - boyhood acquaintance with Bible college leaders
 - examples among Bible college students to be emulated during teenage years (Canada and USA)
 - curricular fidelity to biblical study while many evangelical liberal arts colleges no longer require, resulting in consequential mission drift toward secular approval and dubious attitudes toward biblical truth
 - ABHE's adaptation to 21st century biblical norms for student education and preparation for service

SESSION 2

Signs of Developing Agnosticism / Atheism, Mere Unbelief / Militant Disbelief / Mindless Contempt

- Most ABHE students/alumni remain faithful
- But other persons in my lifetime have demitted their faith and ministry:
Charles B. Templeton / Ted Turner / Peter DeVries / My own students Charlie, Tom, and Sarah Bart Ehrman / Bart Campolo
- Author of *Dismissing God: Modern Writers' Struggle against Religion* (2nd edition, 2006)
- Two dozen famous writers whose childhood rearing was in a religious if not godly home but who rejected that faith in their adult lives and art
- Front matter's three quotations:

"To deny the reality of god is to deny that there is any final sanction in moral life, a judgment which ultimately allots to each according to his or her deeds. To eliminate the awareness of such a god is to eliminate the police force from human life, the terror that each life will be called before one by whom it will be eternally assessed. . . . [Fear] lies at the origin of religious affirmation because one feels fragility before the terrors of nature or horror before death. But fear lies at the origin of religious denial; atheism is an attempt to remove the threat of eternal judgment."

Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*

"On no clear evidence theologians and philosophers declare God to be omniscient and omniscipotent. Plainly if there were such a God who really wished to reveal Himself to mankind, He would do so in such a way that left no doubt." **Robert Gorham Davis**, Letter to *The New York Times* (July 5, 1992)

Those—dying then,
Knew where they went—
They went to God's Right Hand—
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found—

The abdication of Belief
Makes the Behavior small—
Better an ignis fatuus
Than no illume at all—

Emily Dickinson, #1551, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*

- Authors cited permit Agnosticism to lead to Atheism, mere Unbelief to result in Militant Disbelief and eventual mindless and raging Contempt for any claim of religious supernaturalism, especially a holy and transcendent God to whom everyone is eventually accountable
- The Ironic Icon of Militant Disbelief: **Madalyn Murray O'Hair** and her two sons. Their stories?

SESSION 3

Telltale Signs of Doubt and Disbelief: Spiritual Ambiguity in Two Famous Poets

- **Emily Dickinson** (1830-1886) and her spiritual struggle with formal faith and worship, revealed in many of her letters and 1,775 poems; and **Stephen Crane** (1871-1900), rebellious from early youth
- Dickinson's pious home in Amherst, MA / daily Bible reading and prayers / father Edward, a respected citizen and United States Congressman / his public conversion at age 47 / his son Austin does not appear to have had a conversion experience / younger sister Lavinia converted at age 17
- Emily's mother depicts Emily at age six as *"quite inclined to question the authority of everything. The Bible, she says, does not feel as if it was true."*
- Religious revivals developed in Connecticut River Valley as early as 1827.
- In 1837, classes opened at **Mount Holyoke Female Seminary**, South Hadley, MA, founded by **Mary Lyon** (1797-1849), who wished to educate young women to serve as intellectual mates for their husbands as pastors or missionaries. She chose as her school's statement of purpose Psalm 144:12, *"That our daughters may be as cornerstones, polished after the similitude of a palace."*
- Lyon assigned her students to **three spiritual categories**: (1) those assured of salvation, (2) those in hope of such assurance, and (3) those without hope.
- By 1846, Emily had been exposed to conversions among her friends, including **Abiah Root**, to whom she wrote, *"I am not unconcerned Dear A. upon the all important subject, to which you have so frequently & so affectionately called my attention in your letters. But I feel I have not yet made my peace with God. I am still a stranger—to the delightful emotions that fill your heart. I have perfect confidence in God & his promises & yet I know not why, I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections. I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ, were I called to die. Pray for me Dear A. that I may yet enter into the kingdom, that there may be room left for me in the shining courts above."*
- Reveals a period of belief: *"I felt I had found my savior . . . I never enjoyed such perfect peace and happiness as the short time in which I felt I had found my savior."* But *"my old habits returned and I cared less for religion than ever. . . . I feel that I shall never be happy without I love Christ."*
- Regrets social and spiritual: *"I am not happy, and I regret that last term, when that golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian. It is not now too late, so my friends tell me, so my offended conscience whispers, but it is hard for me to give up the world."*
- To friend **Jane Humphrey**: *"Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am standing alone in rebellion."*
- Describes as *"perfectly hateful to me any opportunity rare for cultivating meekness—and patience—and submission—and for turning my back to this very sinful and wicked world . . . it is so much easier to do wrong than right—so much pleasanter to be evil than good. I don't wonder that good angels weep—and bad ones sing songs."*
- As her year at Mount Holyoke ended, *"I tremble when I think how soon the weeks and days of this term will have been spent, and my fate will be sealed, perhaps. I have neglected the one thing needful when all were obtaining it, and I may never, never again pass through such a season as was granted us last winter."*
- What are we to make of poem #338 that reveals her spiritual state and her desire for eternal hope?

I know that He exists.	'Tis an instant's play.	But—should the play	Would not the fun
Somewhere—in Silence—	'Tis a fond Ambush—	Prove piercing earnest—	Look too expensive!
He has hid his rare life	Just to make Bliss	Should the glee—glaze—	Would not the jest—
From our gross eyes.	Earn her own surprise!	In Death's—stiff—stare—	Have crawled too far!
- She borrows from **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's** 1858 epic, *"The Courtship of Miles Standish"* to explain how God the Father and God the Son inhabit the Trinity:

God is a distant—stately Lover—
Woos, as He states us—by His Son—
Verily, a Vicarious Courtship—
"Miles" and "Priscilla" were such an One—

But, lest the Soul—like fair “Priscilla”
 Choose the Envoy—and spurn the Groom—
 Vouches, with hyperbolic archness—
 “Miles” and “John Alden” were Synonym-- (# 357)

- Eventually, Dickinson stopped attending church at all, largely because she disrespected its pastors.
 He preached upon “Breadth” till it argued him narrow—
 The Broad are too broad to define
 And of “Truth” until it proclaimed him a Liar—
 The Truth never flaunted a Sign—

Simplicity fled from his counterfeit presence
 As Gold the Pyrites would shun—
 What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus
 To meet so enabled a Man! (#1207)

- Yet she cannot abandon prayer nor ignore the invitation, *“Come unto me all ye who labor ...”*
 At least—to pray—is left—is left—
 Oh Jesus—in the Air—
 I know not which thy chamber is—
 I’m knocking—everywhere—
 Thou settest Earthquake in the South—
 And Maelstrom in the sea—
 Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth—
 Hast thou no Arm for Me? (# 502)

“Unto Me?” I do not know you—
 Where may be your House?
 “I am Jesus—Late of Judea—
 Now—of Paradise”—
 Wagons—have you—to convey me?
 It is far from Thence—
 “Arms of Mine—sufficient Phaeton—
 Trust Omnipotence”—
 I am spotted—“I am Pardon”—
 I am small—“The Least
 Is esteemed in Heaven the Chiefest—
 Occupy my House”— (# 962)

- Meanwhile, in New Jersey and upstate New York, a Methodist preacher’s son named **Stephen Crane** was developing his own animosity (later confessing hatred) toward the God of his father
- Crane’s home life marked by strict religious discipline and practice but a mentally ill mother
- One of 13 children, several of whom died at birth or soon after, Crane shocked his family when, at age 6 years, he lit and smoked a cigarette and the next day drank a glass of beer
- His father died when Crane was 8 years old and he was largely raised by an older sister
- His refusal to accept the authority of others led to incidents in New York City that made him notorious to Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt and the gangsters seeking to control the city
- Crane became a local journalist, a wartime correspondent, novelist, and poet
- Crane’s most famous writing is *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *“The Open Boat,”* and *“An Episode of War,”* all of which proclaim his fatalism and subservience to natural forces
- Themes include
 - false representation of God as a loving Father
 - if God exists at all, it is only as an aloof and impersonal being

--Nature determines our fate
--we can only struggle against inevitability

- Representative poems

A god in wrath / Was beating a man;
He cuffed him loudly / With thunderous blows
That rang and rolled over the earth.
All people came running
The man screamed and struggled,
And hit madly at the feet of the god.
The people cried / “Ah, what a wicked man!”
And “Ah, what a redoubtable god!”

A man said to the universe,
“Sir, I exist!”
“However,” replied the universe,
“The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation.”

*And the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the heads of the children,
even unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.”*

Well, then I hate thee, unrighteous picture;
Wicked image, I hate thee;
So, strike with thy vengeance
The heads of those little men
Who come blindly.
It will be a brave thing.

SESSION 4

What Are Today's Young Adults Facing as Deterrents to a Genuine Biblical Faith?

- Are we praying for a return to the “Great Awakenings” of the past?
- Thank God for signs of student revival at secular universities throughout 2024—similar to **1802 Yale Revival** that led to the Second Great Awakening—as well as those following the murder of **Charlie Kirk** in September 2025.
- What hinders such a movement throughout evangelical colleges and universities, including ABHE?
- Lack of boldness among older professing Christians in obedience to God’s Word: “**Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness**” (Acts 4:29)
- Failure to adhere to the boldness advocated by **Flannery O’Connor** (1925-1964): “**When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures**” (Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*)
- Lack of boldness advocated by **Albert Camus** to Dominican nuns: “**What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out, loud and clear, so that never a doubt—never the slightest doubt—could rise in the heart of the simplest man**” (Dominican Monastery, Latour-Maubourg, 1948)
- According to Pew research in 2025, 46% of the youngest American adults identify as Christian, compared to 80% of the oldest adults
- Yet among younger, growing numbers of “spiritual but not religious,” increasing percentage identifying as “nones”
- Many choosing not to identify with any church, preferring to avoid all such obligations
- General hostility toward biblical Christianity at most secular colleges and universities

- Many of their own Christian liberal arts colleges have abandoned daily chapel/worship and rely instead on voluntary prayer/Bible study groups (teams, residence halls, department majors, et al.)
- Many Christian colleges no longer require/expect Sunday worship (**“Bedside Baptist/Mattress Methodist/Pillow Presbyterian”**)
- Growing disregard for the authority of Scripture as the Word of God demanding full obedience
- **“Evangelical”** has become a negative identity among some former evangelicals
- General behavioral decline in societal standards of what constitutes morality and ethics
- Personal behavioral decline among once-revered and respected leaders (politicians, teachers, pastors)
- Personal behavioral decline among family and friends / intense disillusion after divorce by parents
- Allure and seeming social necessity to conform to lower standards of morality and ethics
- Heterosexual morality no different from unbelievers (living together without benefit of marriage)
- Fear of disdain and even contempt from friends and acquaintances for upholding outdated standards
- Legally protected public protests against common moral and ethical standards
- Alleged conspiracies against free expression of counter-biblical arguments
- Violent threats and acts by opponents of common moral and ethical standards
- Public support of those who have committed violence including murder: Luigi Mangione and Tyler Robinson
- **But the major point of controversy among youth is homosexual preference and behavior**
- As of December 2025, Pew research shows that advocacy of LGBTQ+ morality and lifestyle has increased among so-called evangelicals, with more than a third of evangelical Protestants now believing that homosexuality should be accepted by American society, up 10 points from 2007.
- Perhaps the most powerful deterrent by social pressure and the most frequent complaint is, **“How can you be so mean to my friends?”**
- For most young adults today, what matters is based on personality, loyalty, and a deepening friendship with LGBTQ persons / overrides religious stricture and invalidates biblical teaching
- Since United States Supreme Court has ruled (***Obergefell v. Hodges***, 2015), barring prejudice against “gay people,” you should too!
- Often the argument is based on an opinion that God made someone “that way.” Counter-argument: **Suppose I confess that I am characterized by a moral and mental condition called “kleptomania”?** Does it justify uncontrollable desire for your Rolex or a museum's Renoir or a rich man's Rolls Royce?
- A wave more surprising and shocking than any other social convulsion makes homosexual relations—long hidden and once punishable—now lawful and acceptable even by professing biblical believers.
- Yet we have no alternative but to **“stand firm in the truth that sets us free”** (Galatians 5:1)

SESSION 5

What Should Your College Be Doing to Help Students and Graduates Retain Their Faith?

OUR FIRST AND MOST IMPORTANT TASK IS FERVENT AND UNCEASING PRAYER FOR

- one's own relationship with God
- our family and all depending on us
- our calling to Christian education
- meeting the challenge of Proverbs 22:6, *“Train up ... and when he is old[er] ...”*
- our ABHE institution's leadership, current colleagues and students, and supporters
- God's blessing upon specific decisions and duties (wisdom/knowledge/understanding)
- individual students and alumni in our special care

THEREAFTER, WE MUST FULFILL OUR VOCATION WITH INTEGRITY AND IMAGINATION BY PUTTING OUR PRAYER PETITIONS INTO ACTION!

1. Affirm and apply personally your institutional **Mission: daily academic purpose (professional)** and **Vision: eternal spiritual purpose (prayerfully hopeful and aspirational)**

2. Retain historic commitment to biblical authority but alter the method by which Scripture is taught and its worldview recognized to *inductive study* rather than *denominational prescriptions and proscriptions*
3. Heed T. S. Eliot's 1939 treatise, *The Idea of a Christian Society* and his stated purpose for a deliberate Christian education: "*not . . . merely to make men and women pious Christians. . . . A Christian education would primarily train people to be able to think in Christian categories.*"
4. Proclaim and promote the biblical model of a God-honoring family by strong examples among adults
5. Avoid attempting to offer "*a safe education*"
6. Take on the tough issues and face them honestly
7. Reject the primary quest for "*academic respectability,*" as if biblical studies were an inferior academic pursuit
8. Don't compromise regarding either *personnel* or *curriculum*
9. Be or become the best Bible college in ABHE, teaching your specialized curriculum with its unique emphasis, but not neglecting to teach and demonstrate how the rest of God's wisdom, knowledge, and understanding pertains to what can be known through the lens of a *biblical worldview*
10. Just as the child Jesus matured in *wisdom/stature/favor with God and man*, so we must enable our students to grow *intellectually/physically/spiritually/socially and emotionally*
11. Obey the instructional standard of Scripture itself (*memorize memorize memorize*) and don't be deterred by student protests.
12. Examine/adjust/change your attitude toward a residential institution for young adults away from home.
 - welcome to your home / remember what compelled the Prodigal Son to return home
 - meet them in lounges, sports events, dining hall
 - open your office door for informal meetings / less time in formal "office hours," unless needed
 - don't hesitate to confess your own doubts and how they opened your mind to God's truth
13. Follow up with your alumni, especially those who have given signs of doubt, even unbelief
14. Be daring in your counsel, noting St. Paul's recommendation to be ambidextrous, even left-handed (*"We wield the weapons of righteousness in right-hand and left"* 2 Corinthians 6:7)
15. My experience with a college president and his "troublemaker" student body president

NEVER GIVE UP ON YOUR CALLING!