

Course Introduction

Welcome to *Access*. I am Covenant Seminary's president, Bryan Chapell. Covenant exists to train servants of the triune God to walk with God, to interpret and communicate God's Word, and to lead God's people. We praise God that you have become a part of the seminary student body, and we pray that He will use your *Access* studies to encourage, equip, and edify you. At Covenant Seminary we believe you have a call on your life. That call might be to serve as a church elder, manage a small business, lead a community Bible study, or raise a five-year-old. Whatever your calling may be, we want to help you recognize it as your God-ordained role and equip you to fulfill it. We are all part of God's plan and redemption found in Ephesians 1:10 where Paul says that it is God's intention "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." Thus, we are all called not only to share our faith but also to bring God's Word to bear on every aspect of life and every field of endeavor. As Abraham Kuyper once said, "There is no square inch of this world that Jesus Christ does not say, 'This is mine, mine.'" And as students such as you grow in grace, the light of your faith reflects in your family, community, and church. And as you serve Him, God will use you in changing your community and transforming this world. We pray that through *Access* you will gain skill not only in understanding and interpreting God's Word but also in communicating that scriptural truth to others. But above all, we consider your education to be incomplete unless it draws you closer to the heart of Jesus Christ. You have a call on your life. As you seek to fulfill God's unique purpose for you, may He bless your studies, transform your heart, and root you in grace for a lifetime of service.

I spent my first 20 years in the ministry working in L'Abri, the ministry that Francis and Edith Schaeffer founded. The context of L'Abri is that there are no questions off limits. If Christianity is indeed the truth, which of course it is, then we should happily welcome any kind of question or objection or doubt or anxiety. God never rebukes people for asking questions or for challenging Him in His word. He is much more likely to rebuke you if you have simplistic answers, like Job's comforters or the Pharisees, to the problem of evil and suffering. And it is they who insist everything works out nicely in this life who are rebuked. Job doubts that as he looks at what is happening to him. So Scripture does not rebuke us for asking questions and raising objections. The Scripture tells us that those who teach will be judged with greater strictness. I hope you have all reflected on that as you start your career at seminary. Being a teacher of God's Word is a serious business not to be undertaken lightly, because God is going to call us to account. We will be judged with greater strictness when we presume to teach God's Word because people listen to what we say and go out and live on the basis of it. So, we need to make sure that we are being faithful to God's Word. I really encourage you to ask your questions for that reason.

I also want you to be prepared to learn, whether you entirely agree with the contents of each of the books listed for the course or not. I have no doubt that you will have questions about some things. But I want you to learn to read, listen, and watch so that you are being challenged yourself. One always ought to listen that way. John Calvin was passionately committed to education. He started a school system in Geneva back in the early part of the 1500s, and he wrote the rules for the schoolteachers. One of the rules was a fascinating one that I will come back to later in the course. The teachers were to have their students read the Greek and Roman pagan writers, and Calvin put this in his directions for the teachers: "The teachers are not to criticize these writers but are rather to help their students see what they can learn from them, even though they are not believers." Calvin himself said elsewhere that it is a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to deny that pagan writers like Plato had many helpful things to say which can teach us as believers. Calvin says that so strongly because he so passionately believed in what we might call the common grace of God—that God is gracious to the whole human race, not just to

Christians, not just to believers. Just as He sends His sun to reign (to shine and to fall) on the just and the unjust, on believer and unbeliever, so also God gives His gifts to all people. It can be gifts of the seasons or of food or, as Paul says to the pagans in Acts 14, the joy they experience in their hearts every day of their lives, or even wisdom. In the book of Proverbs we are told in chapter 8 that God's wisdom speaks to the whole human race, and by this wisdom all kings reign and all nobles rule on earth and make laws that are just. That is why wherever you go on the face of this world you will find societies with just laws (not all of their laws of course, but many of them) not only where Christians have impacted the society but everywhere because of the common grace of God and His compassion and care for all that He has made. And Scripture teaches us that very strongly—that God has compassion on all He has made.

So be prepared to learn from whatever you read and whatever you watch. I want to challenge you to recognize that whenever we try to look at any aspect of human culture we need to be affirmative. We need to ask first, "Where does this reflect the image of God? Where do we see things here that teach us as believers?" We must learn to not simply have an instant, negative response to the culture in which we live. Human beings always manifest the image of God. Consequently, there will always be aspects of wisdom from which we can learn in any cultural artifact simply because it is produced by a human being who was made in the image of God and who is constantly receiving God's good gifts every day of his or her life. So, learn to read in order to find out what you can learn and where you can be challenged; do not simply critique. Of course you have to exercise discernment. That is another issue on which Scripture challenges us—to test all things and to hold fast to that which is good.

Now, if you have grown up in a Christian family and in a Christian church, some of you may have been taught that it is inappropriate for you to develop close relationships with unbelievers. I am sure there are members of this class who have been taught that. That is one of the problems we are going to look at in depth during the course of this semester because it is not biblical—let me just say that here. I will support that claim later, but I will just point out how Jesus is a friend of sinners. We are told that in the Gospels, and He is our model in everything to do with righteousness. Jesus is a friend of sinners. And we are told in the Gospels that sinners welcome Jesus gladly. They liked being with Him. We sometimes make the mistake of thinking that if a person is righteous or genuinely holy that unbelievers would never want to be around them. That is not true with Jesus. It was the holy people who criticized Jesus and did not like being around Him because He made them uncomfortable. Sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors—people in all sorts of disarrayed lifestyles and moral disobedience—were delighted to be with Jesus because of the warm, gracious, and loving way in which He related to them.

So, let me just say here that if you have been taught that it is inappropriate to have friendships and close relationships with unbelievers, that was wrong. That was wrong and you need to repent of it. And you need to start praying right now that God will help you develop some close relationships. I will use an extreme example. Three or four years ago when the students in this class came to me and said, "I cannot possibly be friends with an unbeliever." I asked why. Actually I have had quite a few people say that to me. Now for many of you I am sure you already have somebody in mind as soon as I start talking about friendships with non-Christians, but for some of you this will be a big challenge especially if you have been taught to keep yourself separate from unbelievers completely. But this one person came to me and said, "I cannot possibly do this" and I said, "Well, just tell me a little bit about your life. Where did you go to college?" The person said that they had gone to a regular secular university. I said, "Well surely during four years you must have at least talked to somebody and gotten to know somebody there who was not a believer." And the person replied, "No, I was taught by my church that that was wrong, so I went to class every day and I never spoke to anyone for four years. I would just go to class and listen to the professor and then go home. And I made no relationships at all with anyone." Now that is tragic. That is tragic, and it is profoundly unbiblical. If God treated us that way there would be no Christians in

this room today at all. But He has not treated us that way. That is the very nature of the Gospel—that the Son of God became incarnate in this world because He loved us and desired to save us and serve us, even at the cost of His own life. So this is something that is at the very heart of the Gospel. It is not something on the periphery of Christianity. This is its very heart—that we are called to love and serve those who are sinners because that is the Gospel. So I want to challenge you, if you have been taught, or if it has been your practice or your conviction that you should not get to know non-Christians, I want to challenge you to start praying right now.

The most important thing in this course (and one of the things that I passionately desire to teach you) is that from now on, for the rest of your life, whatever kind of ministry God calls you to, that you will be committed to spending time with unbelievers as a regular part of your life—as a priority. When I came to teach here at Covenant 12 years ago, I had been involved all my life in a ministry that is reaching out to people who are unbelievers as well as serving Christians. One of the things I said to the Lord was, “I am not going to come to this seminary and teach apologetics and evangelism. I did not want to become buried in the context of only fellow believers, which is very easy to do working at the seminary. Of course, there is nothing wrong with being surrounded by fellow believers. It is a wonderful privilege to be in this situation. That is not a criticism of this context at all, but I am not prepared to teach apologetics and evangelism unless I am involved in close relationships with unbelievers. It would be completely lacking in integrity for me to say what I have said in the last 15 minutes and then to only have friends who are believers. I have many friends who are not Christians who I happily spend time with on a regular basis. This is something I am passionately committed to. My prayer for all of you is that if you are not comfortable with non-Christians now, that by the end of this course you will be. And that you will be committed for the rest of your life and in all of your ministry to setting an example to your fellow believers (whether you are a pastor in a church or whatever it is you are doing) of delighting to be with unbelievers and unbelievers delighting to be with you. It is very difficult to teach about evangelism if you do not like being with non-Christians. It really is my prayer at a very deep level that you will see this as a priority for your lives from this course on if it is not already something that you are going to be passionately committed to.

My prayer and longing for you (and this should be your prayer for yourselves) is that you become committed to reaching out to unbelievers because you think it is right to get to know people and to love people and to seek to understand those who are not Christians. Now this is the nature of the Gospel itself—that Christ became incarnate at a particular moment in history among a particular group of people whose ideas and customs He adopted where they were pleasing to God. And He did not do it as some kind of technique. He did it because He loved us. You cannot turn respect for unbelievers into a technique. You know, I am going to respect unbelievers so that I might win them, just like I am going to give them a bowl of soup that I might win them. You give people soup because they are hungry and because, as a Christian, you care for them and their needs, whether or not they ever become Christians or ever listen to what you say. I hope that way of thinking will stay with you for your whole life because you have become persuaded from God’s Word that God calls us to do good to all people, that He calls us to be in the world. That was Jesus’ prayer on the night before He died in John 17. He said, “Father, I pray that just as You sent Me into the world that they will be in the world.” He did not say, “of the world,” in the sense of copying its sinful patterns and false beliefs, but “in it.” That is Jesus’ prayer for all of us. He prays today for you to be in the world, and that is my prayer for you as well—that you will understand that that is really what this is about. It is a matter of deep obedience to the Gospel itself. If you feel called by God (and you are a part of this course because you feel that in some way) to the ministry of His work, then at the very heart of that must be a commitment to love the world, to love unbelievers. Now, all of you who have members of your family who you already love will have no problem at all understanding this. You long for them to become Christians. That is not inappropriate. Of

course that is right. But why do you long for them to become Christians? It is because you love them, because you care for them so deeply that the thought of them facing the judgment of God distresses you severely, and it should. That is one reason why some of us keep ourselves apart from close relationships with non-Christians. It is too painful to start caring for people so deeply and then fearing they will face the judgment of God. We prefer to keep ourselves distant so we do not have to deal with that pain. Well, get used to it. If God has called you to the ministry, He wants you to care enough for people so that you really hurt, so that you would be prepared to die for them. That is what Paul says about his fellow Jews in Romans 9. They are really wonderful words when he says, “Though I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience bears witness to this in the Holy Spirit—I care so deeply for my fellow Israelites, according to the flesh, that I could wish myself accursed for their sake.” That is what Paul says about his fellow Jews because he loves them so deeply. He longs to see them come to know Christ because he is distressed by the prospect of their judgment. So the motivation for reaching out must be one of love. Throughout seminary you are going to be taught things that are going to change your life. We are not here just to read some books and pass some academic assignments so you can go out and fill a job somewhere. You are here at seminary so that your lives can be changed—so that you can be changed—and so that you become people who long to reach out to people with the Gospel because you are being transformed by the love of Christ yourself.