

Postmodernism and Style

Let us begin with prayer.

Heavenly Father, we want to thank You for this day. We praise You that You are the Lord of every day and we ask now that the words that I speak and the words, the meditations, of all of our hearts may be acceptable to You. And Lord, we ask this not because we know that anything we offer You is not acceptable in itself, but because You delight to hear us and to receive from us, because You look at us through Your Son Jesus Christ and His mercy and forgiveness. So Father, we pray that our words and our thoughts may be pleasing to You. Father, help us to think Your thoughts after You. We ask for Jesus' sake. Amen.

During this lesson we are going to start going through a section on postmodernism. Then we are going to look at some biblical material on evangelism. What I hope to do is create such a tension in you as we look at postmodernism that you will be very excited to find some answers to the problems that we are being confronted with from our culture. That is why I want to start this course this way. Rather than starting directly with the biblical material, I want us to begin by reflecting on some of the challenges we face from the culture in which we live here in North America at the present time. It is not only here, because it is a culture that is increasingly becoming a worldwide culture.

Let me begin with a little story before we get to this outline on the board. Four or five years ago a friend of mine was working for InterVarsity at Washington University here in St. Louis. He came to me in my office one day and said, "Jerram, explain something to me. I am just so bewildered by what I am facing. I was on the campus at the university down here in the city this morning, and I was talking to a group of students there." Washington University regularly comes in as one of the top 15 or so universities in the country in terms of its academic standards and excellence. So these students, having had excellent educations, were very bright, very thoughtful, and very articulate. My friend said, "This is how I would describe them to you after I had sat with them for an hour or two in the coffee shop just chatting with them." He said they were without idealism. They were reluctant to commit themselves. They were irreverent to anything sacred and disrespectful of all authority. They were apathetic, skeptical, and bored. Then he said, "After I was there I was down at the church office,"—which is in one of the poorest areas of the city—"and I was chatting with a group of young men who were outside the office and who were part of a gang there, had dropped out of school early, and were involved in taking and selling drugs and all sorts of petty crime. As I talked to them I realized that I could describe them in exactly the same way. They were lacking in idealism, reluctant to commit themselves to anything or anybody. They were irreverent about anything sacred and disrespectful of all authority. They were apathetic, skeptical, and bored." These two groups of young people were so radically different from each other on the outside and in terms of their exposure to, let us say, the philosophical life of the great university today, and yet they were exactly the same in their approach to life and their understanding of the human condition. So he said, "Help me understand this. Help me understand what is going on here. Why are young people like this?"

Of course it is not true only here in the United States. This has been true in Western Europe already for 30 or 40 years or more. This was true of my experience in high school and in college back in the 1960s. That was my experience in Western Europe then, exactly where this culture is today. I have had the privilege of going to South Korea several times over the past 15 years. Each time I go, I see that young people are more and more like this there as well—facing exactly the same kinds of challenges with the same kind of view of life. The church has been growing very rapidly in Korea for 100 years. The first

Presbyterian missionaries went to Korea in the 1890s, and for 100 years the church grew at an astonishingly rapid pace. Today the church is about a quarter, almost, of the population. Yet suddenly within the last few years, Korean churches have found that it is becoming suddenly very difficult to reach out to young people. They are not responsive because they can be described in the same way as I described those two groups of young people here in St. Louis.

I have a friend, to use another illustration, who works in Slovakia in part of what was formerly Czechoslovakia before the fall of communism around 1989 or 1990. He is an Englishman, and he has been working into central and Eastern Europe for the last 30 or 40 years, long before the fall of communism. As a consequence, he spent some time in prison during those years before the end of communism as he was taking Christian books and Bibles into central and Eastern Europe and teaching God's Word. He was constantly being searched and stopped by the police and sometimes arrested and having all sorts of difficult experiences. As soon as communism fell in Czechoslovakia, after the Velvet Revolution, he moved immediately from Vienna to Slovakia. It was the first time he had been able to live there, and he has been carrying on his ministry there ever since. He has a wonderful ministry there involved in publishing Christian books all over Central and Eastern Europe and a teaching ministry as well. He said this to me last year when he came to visit, and he has been writing some papers about this problem as well. He said, "When I first moved to Slovakia in 1990,"—he lives in Bratislava, the capital—"young people in high school were not at all, most of them, like people in Western Europe and in North America. They were not postmodern, but now they are. In less than 10 years they have changed completely as they have become exposed to the culture of Western Europe and North America. They have become completely shaped by it more and more." So he would describe young people in Slovakia and across the rest of Central and Eastern Europe in precisely the same way as my friend from here in St. Louis described them and as any pastor who works with young people in Korea would describe them in this same kind of way—lacking idealism, disrespectful of authority, irreverent to what is considered sacred, apathetic, skeptical, and bored. We could add many other words also, but you get the picture. That is the way young people are all the way across Eastern and Central Europe right now as well as everywhere in the Western world and increasingly all over the rest of the world as well, wherever our culture starts impacting the lives of people.

Western culture, in general, and the culture of the United States in particular are, among other things, the most powerful force of secularization that the world has ever seen. Our culture is an extraordinarily powerful secularizing force. One of the fascinating things about the time in which we live, and one of the particularly challenging things, is that the intellectual culture of the universities and the popular culture of music, films, and television shows are precisely the same. In fact, in many ways we are in a time where popular culture is the sort of leading edge of where our culture is going, rather than the university cultures. But basically they are in lock step, marching along side by side. You do not have to have read philosophy. You do not have to have gone to a university to be postmodern. This is the air we breathe in the culture in which we live. You cannot turn on your television, you cannot walk down the street, you cannot open a newspaper, you cannot turn on the radio, and you cannot talk to another human being, including Christians, without being affected by postmodernism.

So I want us to start looking at postmodernism. The word is used in all sorts of ways. We should notice first just the word itself—postmodernism. "Post" simply means "after"—after modernism. And I will explain a little bit more what that means a little later, but that is the basic meaning of the term. We are living in a time after the triumph of modernism. That is what the name is saying.

Now I want to look at postmodernism just briefly under three headings before I look at some of the particular challenges a postmodern setting creates for us as we seek to reach out with the Gospel. That is the purpose of this study.

If we think about postmodernism technically rather than as a sort of popular level of what a postmodern spirit is, the term “postmodern” is used to refer to three things. It is used to talk about style, it is used to talk about the nature of language and literary criticism, and it is used to talk about philosophy, especially the philosophy of knowledge, epistemology—how we know things. I will explain these as we go along.

We are going to begin by thinking about postmodernism and style. What do I mean when I talk about style? I will make several points here. First, postmodernism is completely indifferent to questions of context, consistency, or continuity. It self-consciously splices genre, attitudes, and styles. Now, before you think that I am just talking about something completely vague, which I am sure many of you do at this moment, let me explain what I mean by giving you some illustrations.

I am sure one or two of you have been to Paris. I had the privilege of being there last summer. If you have not been to Paris, some of you will have seen photographs of the buildings I am going to describe to you. While we were there, I was taking/leading this trip, the “How Should We Then Live” trip, across Europe, in Italy, Switzerland, and France, and we finished in Paris. We were staying in a hotel right near the most famous museum in France. It is called the Louvre, and it is a spectacularly beautiful building or series of buildings. It is these lovely buildings built in this beautiful, mellow, kind of light brown or yellowish stone. It is gloriously made. I mean, anybody would recognize them as a beautiful example of architecture. They are huge buildings, and it has one of the greatest collections of artifacts from around the world and throughout history that you can find anywhere in the world. You could spend days (you really need a little motorcycle going around the Louvre because it is so big) to see it. If you go to a place like that, you just have to choose to see one little part of it. Otherwise your mind starts being destroyed—you have all had this experience going to museums. If you try to see too much, you start getting weary. You start getting a terrible headache because you have become weighed down by the power of all these marvelous human artifacts. There are so many beautiful, creative things together that your mind stops being able to take it in. So you have to make some choices and say, “I am going to go look at the Etruscan room, or I am going to look at the Roman remains”—or whatever it happens to be—or “I am going to go look at Impressionist paintings.” You make your choices about what you are going to see rather than trying to see everything, otherwise you really just get destroyed mentally.

The main part of the museum is set around a lovely square with these flagstones in between the buildings. It is beautifully designed. Now, what is postmodern about that? Nothing. But what is postmodern is the next thing.

A few years ago it was decided to build a new entranceway into the museum, and it is set right in the middle of this lovely square. It is completely out of place. It looks ridiculous in the context. Now that is postmodernism. What they have done is built an enormous glass and steel pyramid modeled after the great pyramid in Egypt. They built this enormous glass and steel pyramid, and they have stuck it down in the middle of these beautiful buildings in this square. It is the entryway and it just looks absurd. It is totally out of place. That is postmodern architecture—a total disregard for the original meaning of something, for the context in which it came. This burial tomb was for a Pharaoh in Egypt out in the desert. It is a total disregard for its context. It is a total disregard for the materials. The pyramids are made of stone, beautifully carved. This is made out of glass and steel. It is set in a situation where it totally does not fit, and it is also kind of ironic. When you go inside, if there is any sun at all, it is just like being in a cauldron. It is so unbelievably hot because it is glass and there are thousands of people in

there. Everybody has to go through there to get into the museum. So, as soon as you walk in, if it is sunny at all, it is absolutely stifling—a total disregard for human comfort as well. It was obviously a monument to some architect's delight in his own capabilities. It might be interesting in another context, but right there, it is totally out of place. That is postmodernism.

Let me use another example, and more of you will be familiar with this. How many of you have been to Las Vegas in the United States? A few of you will admit that you have been there, but all of you have seen many films of that city. I often go to Las Vegas, not to gamble there but because when we lived in England and now here in St. Louis, it is often the least expensive place to fly when we are going to visit my wife's parents out in California. So we often fly there and then rent a car and drive because every flight there is subsidized. We do not gratify anybody by gambling away a few days in the hotels there. We just immediately rent a car and drive off. But it is absolutely fascinating to drive through the place. Las Vegas is a kind of shrine to postmodernism. It has every possible kind of style all mixed up together and all completely out of context. Let me use another example of a pyramid there. One of the newer hotels (it has been built in the last five years or so) is an enormous black glass pyramid. It is a huge hotel and casino built to scale to the great pyramid of Cheops in Egypt again. So there is this black, shining glass object set in the desert there. It is enormous. In front of it is an enormous, black ceramic or glass (it is difficult to tell what it is actually made of) sphinx, also built as a model size. It is huge. It is the entryway into the hotel and gambling casino. Then, in front of that, there are a couple of those Cleopatra's needles except these are made of glass, stone, or ceramic as well. This is an example of postmodernism. You have taken something that had a very particular meaning in Egypt in the history of the people. You think, "That is an interesting design." So you set it in Las Vegas as a place for people to stay and as a place for people to gamble their fortunes away, with a total disregard for whatever it might have meant to anybody else, whether its original significance matters to anyone or not. You just use it in a completely different setting. That is postmodernism. And you cannot imagine anybody doing such a thing before the last 20 years or so. This is postmodernism.

Here is another example. If I were to say to you, "How many of you have seen on television or on billboards somewhere a poster advertising something using the Mona Lisa painting by Leonardo da Vinci," every single one of you in this room would say yes because there are hundreds of commercials using the Mona Lisa to sell all sorts of different things. Now just think about that. Leonardo da Vinci regarded that painting as his greatest painting. It has been considered by many people to be the finest painting ever done by any human being. It is widely considered to be that. However, you can see the Mona Lisa being used to sell deodorant, cigarettes, cars, or just anything. Her face will often be made to move. That is postmodernism. That is a total disregard for whether anyone thinks that this object is significant, or matters, or had a particular meaning to the person who painted it or to those who have admired it through the generations. I could go on giving examples like this, but I hope by now you get the point that this is not just a vague statement up here. Postmodernism is completely indifferent to questions of context, consistency, or continuity.

There is an ignoring of the historical and cultural significance of a work of art, of an architectural masterpiece, or of a wonder of the ancient world. That is the point that I am making here. Now of course there is an element of this which is just fun so I am not simply criticizing this. I am not simply criticizing this because we have all seen those commercials and been amused by them. That gets us to my next point.

The second way to express this would be to say that postmodernism is like shopping through the archives of history and through the history of different cultures. It is as if the postmodern person is a postmodern architect or maker of commercials or puzzles who is just shopping through history—

shopping through different cultures and taking things from here and there. Now we live in a postmodern culture. In a postmodern society we just collect things regardless of whether they might matter particularly to anyone or not. America, in particular, exhibits this aspect of postmodernism. This is partly, of course, because here in the United States (and this is one of the fascinating things about it) we live in a society that is so multicultural. We have people from so many different ethnic backgrounds, countries, languages, and cultures. America has been this way for a long time. When I went out to California for the first time (I came to the States in 1967 to get married because my wife is from central California), it was absolutely fascinating to me. I came from a rural part of England where everybody I knew as a child growing up in the countryside had lived there for generations. Many of the people had never been further than 30 or 40 miles away. Many of them had never even been to London, which was just 60 miles away. It was a culture that, at that time, was extraordinarily stable and settled and monocultural. When I first went out to California in 1967, it was so remarkably different because there were people from such a vast diversity of cultural backgrounds right there in the central valley. There were lots of people, of course, who were Hispanic, especially from Mexico. Part of my wife's family is of Mexican origin and had just recently immigrated to the United States. There is a large Chinese population in that area, and again part of my wife's family is Chinese. There is a huge Armenian population, a very big settlement of Armenians who came there after the genocide in Turkey in the 1920s and settled in California. And the town right next to where my parents-in-law live is a Swedish town, which was settled at the end of the 1800s, and so on and so on. One can just multiply the cultural and ethnic groups right there. Many people in her family come from a Mennonite background. They are Germans who moved to Russia to escape persecution in the 1700s and early 1800s and lived there for a couple of years, carried on speaking German, and then immigrated in mass to Colorado first and then to California around 1900. My wife grew up in a little rural town in California. This little farming community has the largest church of Mennonites in the world. America is fascinating in that way in terms of this extraordinary mixture of styles, peoples, and cultures. It has been this way for a very long time.

Alexis de Tocqueville is one of the most thoughtful commentators ever on the United States. His work on democracy in America is just being republished, I think, this month or next month in a new translation, which I commend to you very highly. He was a Frenchman who came here about 160 to 170 years ago, and he wrote about American society, political life, and culture with extraordinary perception. Much of what he said is still right, even today, so long after he wrote it. He described America's culture this way more than 150 years ago. He said, "It is a marketplace jamboree with amazing diversity striving for recognition."

Now, in a postmodern time this statement is even more so because of this issue of disregard. It is not simply this extraordinary mixture of cultures, which is, of course, a beautiful thing. It is a really wonderful thing, and it is very important that Christians recognize the beauty of multiculturalism rather than simply being negative to it. You know, I am delighted to have a multicultural family. My eldest son's wife is from the south of France and her father was from North Africa, from Algeria. He is not an Arab but an African. My middle son's wife is Philipino. Her parents moved here from the Philippines around 1970. And my youngest son's wife is English. Now I delight in that multiculturalism in our family. God delights in diversity. The book of Revelation ends with a statement that all the nations of the world and all their rulers are going to bring the glory of their cultures to Christ to honor Him. Christians should delight in that sense of appreciation for all kinds of different cultures and cultural artifacts rather than feeling threatened by it or thinking something is wrong with it or viewing it simply as a matter of political correctness. That is nonsense. Christians ought to be the first people to delight in diversity.

As well as that sort of delight in diversity, in postmodernism we also see the recovery of historical figures and cultural artifacts that were ignored because they were not part of the dominant culture. Now that is another positive aspect of postmodernism. And again, Christians should not be threatened by that. For example, you know it is only very recently that America in general has begun to acknowledge that there were many African American soldiers who fought in the Civil War. One of my favorite movies is “Glory.” I thought it was a wonderful movie. That is one of the reasons why it is wonderful, because it is recovering a neglected part of history, completely neglected by the dominant culture for a long time, as if it had never taken place. The movie shows marvelous acts of heroism and self-sacrifice that came from that black regiment in the Civil War. Now again, Christians must not resist this. It is true. It is true that the dominant culture, the white, male-dominated culture, has ignored the contributions of other ethnic and cultural groups. That is a reality. Christians ought to be the first to recognize that. As well as delighting in diversity, we ought to delight in recognizing things that should be honored wherever they come from rather than feeling that they are a threat in any kind of way. Now again, it is simply a matter of being humble and faithful to what God’s Word has to say, to give honor wherever honor is due rather than try to suppress the history of what others have done.

So that is the second element of postmodernism. This is quite a good one in all sorts of ways—a delight in different cultures and a readiness to look more carefully at history, to see not only what the dominant culture produced but also what others produced. That brings us to my third point.

In postmodernism, of course, there is more than this. There is not simply a delight in other cultures and in ignored people and cultural artifacts of history, and there is not simply a playful use or misuse of the historical significance of a cultural artifact. Rather, at the heart of postmodernism, there is a denial of any standards by which cultural artifacts may be judged. There are no standards—there is no canon, that is, no rule, no measure. There is no canon which will tell us what a great work of art is, what a beautiful cultural artifact is, or what a wonderful piece of music is. That is at the heart of postmodernism as well. So there is this positive element of a delight in diversity and a recognition of things ignored, and that is good. The Christian should say amen. We should have said it first. We should have said it first because God requires His people to stand up for those who are ignored and oppressed. That is God’s own character, and it ought to be ours as well.

There is not simply that, but there is more than that. There is the denial of standards. So in postmodernism, no style, no subject, is superior to any other style. Let me give some examples. I use the example of Marcel Duchan. He was a Frenchman who did painting and sculpture going back to the first part of the 20th century. He was producing works of art, if we want to use that term, back from shortly after 1910. Some of them were very famous, and you will see a couple of them over and over again reproduced in books on the history of art. I am going to give you some examples of his work.

One of his works was a bicycle wheel. Marcel Duchan called these his “ready-mades.” He took a wheel off of a bicycle, put it on a stand, and exhibited it as a work of art in a gallery. He had not made it himself, of course. He just cut it off a bicycle, but he insisted that it was just as much a work of art as anything else. An even more famous example is he took a men’s urinal and exhibited it in a museum as a work of art. He demanded that it be taken seriously, and people took it seriously. I dare say somebody paid an enormous amount of money for it and has it in his or her home today, proudly on display, not for use, of course, but to be admired as a work of art. Now, that is postmodernism. It is a very serious statement. It is not just saying, “Let us recover the glory of other cultures that have been ignored in their contribution.” It is saying, “There are no standards by which I can tell what art is.” I remember going to an exhibition in London at the Haywood Gallery of Contemporary Sculpture. I wandered around observing some quite lovely and beautifully made contemporary pieces of sculpture and some that I

would not use those words to describe. The one that struck me more than anything else and that I remember to this day was this little block of wood with a glass case over it and inside was a piece labeled “The Artist’s Breath.” It was a collapsed balloon. That is what it was. There it was, on display, and again I dare say somebody paid a great deal of money for it. So, there are no standards by which we can judge what is great, beautiful, or artistic. Anything is art.

Recently I was in Kansas City lecturing and preaching. A friend there invited me to speak at the Culture House. They have just started this new ministry in the city reaching out to people down there, and they wanted me to speak at the first kick-off evening. They were driving me around downtown Kansas City, and it is very beautiful. It is “the city of fountains.” It is just lovely. We drove past the art college, and my friends who run a ballet company there and also a rock group (an interesting mixture of things that they do) were saying that that particular art school no longer teaches its students how to paint or how to sculpt. There are no standards by which you can learn. You do not learn techniques of drawing, painting, or sculpting. You just do your thing, whatever it is, without any training. You will find this in many art schools. Thankfully, you will not find them all around the country. But there are many out there that do not teach anybody anything because the professors really believe there are no standards.

When my youngest son was a student at Washington University here in St. Louis doing art history, he worked part time for the art history library and helped take care of the slides. One of his jobs was to help visiting lecturers, who came on Wednesday evenings, set up their slide shows as they were giving their lectures. Most of the time that was fun and he enjoyed it, but one evening the woman who came to give her lecture just showed a series of extremely pornographic slides and simply presented them as art. That was her lecture. That is what it was about. She just delighted in shocking people by her art. This is a problem that does not exist only at universities; it exists in the whole culture.

Let me use a couple of illustrations, and most of you will probably remember this. Several years back, about three or four years back now, there was a trial of the group “2 Live Crew” over some of their song lyrics. The trial was about whether their lyrics were obscene. Now, if you had any standard whatsoever by which to judge those lyrics you would say, “These are obscene,” because in the most graphic language possible the lyrics in question were encouraging men to sexually, brutally assault women. The lyrics were in the most explicit terms possible. I would not ever repeat to anybody what they said. It would not be appropriate. It is horrific. Now, at the trial, the charges of obscenity were thrown out—that was not what was interesting. That should not surprise anybody who understands anything about our culture. What was interesting, however, were the comments of all the jurors afterward. When they were interviewed they said something like this: “I personally thought those lyrics were obscene. I thought they were horribly obscene. I never want to listen to that music. I do not want my children listening to that music, but who am I to say that anybody else should think they are obscene?” Now that is a loss of standards. You can say, “Personally I think,” but can you say, “This is obscene by some objective standard which should be applied to other people and not just to myself”?

Another example of precisely the same thing happened a couple of years later. There was a trial in Cincinnati of an exhibition of photographs by the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. Again, it was a question of obscenity, and again I will not describe what some of the pictures were. Many of his photographs are certainly beautiful. He is a very fine photographer. However, there is no doubt that some of them are also exceedingly obscene and pornographic, and purposefully so. Now again, exactly the same thing happened. The charges were thrown out and he was acquitted, but the jurors said exactly the same things: “I have no doubt that those pictures were obscene. I do not want to see them. I certainly will not allow my children to see them, but who am I to say that other people should not see them or that anybody else should think they are obscene.” That is exactly the same thing. See, this is a very deep

problem in our culture. It is not just a few people at a university saying there are no standards by which to judge a great work of art. So we can have a men's urinal or Michelangelo's statue of David side by side and you take your pick. This is where our culture is as a whole. We have no standards by which we can judge whether something is right, worthwhile, beautiful, good, or true.

So, the negative side of postmodernism is a denial of standards. Some of you may very well have studied English literature at the university. However, in probably more than half of the universities in this country today, if you study English literature you will never read a play by Shakespeare. Now, if you have any standards at all, there is no question that Shakespeare is the greatest dramatist who has ever written in any language. You do not have to be an Englishman to say that. His works have been translated into languages all over this world and are constantly performed everywhere. There is not a day that passes that there are not many productions of Shakespeare's plays all over. Why? It is because people love them because he was a great dramatist. There is no question about it. You can go to a university and study literature or drama, but you may not study Shakespeare at all. Why? It is because he is just considered a dead white European male, so why bother to read him? That is not just saying, "Well, we delight in multiculturalism." That is saying something quite different. It is saying that there are no standards at all by which we can say Shakespeare was a great dramatist. So we will not bother to read his plays or watch them.

Thankfully, at this point, popular culture is a little more sensible. That is why there have been so many films of Shakespeare's plays made over the last 10 years. Some of them are just wonderful and have received all sorts of awards and lots of popular acclaim. People recognize them as great drama because they touch something so very deeply in the human heart. Postmodernism denies that reality. It denies it altogether.

Now, another illustration of this problem is what we might call the loss of heroism in our culture. You may not have noticed this but we are living in a society where there really are not any heroes in the traditional sense of the word. That is, a hero was somebody who you held out to admire and to emulate. Your hero is a wonderful example of a human being who has done something well, who has done some great accomplishment in a way that I would love to copy myself and have my children copy. That is what a hero is. Of course, as a Christian we would say Jesus Christ is the great hero. He is the true hero who has done the most wonderful things and who deserves to be imitated. But our culture has lost heroes. Instead, it has celebrities. You think about that, the cult of celebrity in our society. It is really a new phenomenon—the loss of heroes and the cult of celebrity—and that is postmodernism for you. It is a loss of standards, whether it is in the arts or whether it is with regard to human accomplishment. What matters is not that one does something wonderful but that one is famous. Why do you think all these people try to get on television shows to have their five minutes of fame even if it means telling the most appalling things about what they have done (what one might call moral freak-shows)? People want their few seconds of fame to be watched in order to become an instant celebrity. People become celebrities for being witnesses at trials of famous people. It is ridiculous. What have these people accomplished that is worth anything, that is worth you being interested in them, that is worth endless books being written about them, or that is worth having their own television shows? This kind of thing is happening all the time. If you are interested in pursuing this particular question, there is a wonderful video series produced by British television called "Fame," which is narrated by an Australian named Clive James. It is extremely funny, but it is also a very acute account of this loss of heroism and its replacement with the cult of celebrity in our culture.

Something of the same is happening in American television shows like "Survivor" and all the other things that they are spawning in which we become interested in things that really deserve no interest at

all. In fact, they are going to become worse and worse all the time. One of the present shows, as you know, is setting people up to basically commit adultery. That is exactly what it is trying to do. They will be famous for sinning, we might say. That is what its purpose is.

What date would I put on the beginning of postmodernism? Well, if you read books you will see all sorts of different dates assigned to it. One of the most common actually refers to an event here in St. Louis—the destruction of one of the housing complexes that was built down in the city, Pruitt-Igo. You will see this referred to as the beginning of postmodernism. Many books try to set out the history of this. When I was a student here in the late 1960s, Pruitt-Igo was a housing complex which was right down in the city that had been built by a modernist architect with a complete disregard for the life of the people who were going to live in it. They demolished rows of houses, of poor housing in the city, and they put up these horrible, ugly towers where it was almost impossible to have any kind of human community. Children had no access to the outside, and crime just flourished. It really was simply a monument to the architect who had done it. He was completely disregarded. It was a triumph of rationalism in one sense. It was just a block, a mathematical block. That was the sort of extreme end of modernism where everything becomes reduced to squares and blocks and without any real regard for anything human at all. Of course Pruitt-Igo was an absolute disaster for the people who lived in it. It was eventually blown up in the 1970s while it was still a fairly young building. I do not remember the exact date, but you will see it in lots of textbooks. It was just the recognition that this purely rational approach, this kind of mathematical approach to architecture, was just ridiculous. So the blowing up of that tower—of that tower block—is seen by many people as the beginning of postmodernism. Now you will find other dates. One date is the day of the exhibition in New York where Marcel Duchan exhibited his bicycle wheel and men's urinal. That was somewhere around 1913 or 1914. I do not remember the date exactly. You will find it again in textbooks. It is called the Armory Show. That is sometimes thought of as the beginning of postmodernism. So you will get all sorts of different dates given to you. I do not think that it is possible to assign a particular date because actually, modernism is still with us. Modernism simply means two things, and we will talk about this in the next lesson. When we use the term “modernism,” the meaning in this context is “a supreme confidence in human reason and all its products, especially the products of science and technology.” So, modernism here is an equivalent, really, to humanism, to secular humanism. Modernism says that I have complete confidence in human reason. We do not need any words from God, from anybody outside. It is just simply the human mind looking at the human condition, understanding our lives and finding resolutions to our problems through science and through, particularly, technology. The second aspect of modernism is an optimism about the human condition—a feeling that people are basically good and that we can make a better society. Now, those are the two fundamental aspects of modernism, and I will talk more about them next time. Postmodernism is a reaction to that. It is a rejection of that confidence and rationality and that optimism about the human person and human society.

It is very obvious as we think about that definition that modernism is still with us. It is still everywhere around us. We still live in a very rationalistic society. We live in a society that is absolutely dependent upon science and technology and a rational approach to the universe. Just think of computers. There is nothing more rational than a computer, emailing, and websites. This is the triumph of rationalism. It is a product of modernism, we might say. It is clearly very much with us still. Some people would say there is no postmodernism, that we are still living in a modernist setting. Let us think about that and take an example here. Think of the Heavens Gate cult. They are an example of postmodernism. The Heavens Gate cult made their money by working on computers, by being computer programmers. That is thoroughly modernist. Nothing could be more rational, but their religion was totally irrational. Their leader taught them that there was a big spaceship up in the sky and when they took drugs and killed themselves they would be transported up to join it. It was completely irrational. It had no foundation or

reason at all. That is the challenge of the time in which we live. People at one level are extraordinarily modernist in the sense that they are rational about things. At the same time, they may be completely irrational in things that are enormously important to their lives. So modernism is still with us, though we are certainly living in a postmodern time.

In terms of where it began, if you read postmodern writers themselves, many of them look back to Nietzsche as the father of postmodernism. Nietzsche died in the 1880s—somewhere around the latter part of the 19th century. I do not know the exact date of his death, but his writings were from the 1870s and 1880s. You will constantly find Nietzsche's name coming up when people talk about postmodernism because Nietzsche attacked the rationalism and optimism of secular humanism. Many people would see him as the beginning of postmodernism. Looking at it from the point of view of the history of the arts, you are already finding what is postmodernism today by 1905, 1910, or 1915. People like Picasso, for example, were involved in all sorts of postmodern activities, happenings, and plays where bizarre things took place and where the audience was offended completely by what was happening and threw rotten fruit at them. They were way ahead of their time. It would be like seeing something that you could see today. So, I do not think it is appropriate to say that postmodernism starts in the 1970s with the fall of Pruitt-Igo, although I understand why that is used as a symbol, especially where architecture is concerned. Nor did it start with a particular art show, like the Armory show in Marcel Duchan's pictures. I think it was already happening before the end of the 1800s as people realized the folly of the secular humanist perspective about confidence in rationality and in the human person. You begin to get an element of Nihilism, and that, of course, goes back to Nietzsche. But there are others as well. You find this in other writers and artists of the period who are already beginning to express some of these things.

Let us look at an example of music, of the American jazz musician, Coltrane. I think that you can look at a musician like him or you can look at some contemporary jazz or contemporary classical music or at various kinds of extreme rock and alternative music and you can say these have postmodern elements in them. But you rarely find somebody who is totally postmodern when it comes to music because people just stop listening to it. So as long as there is harmony still and not just total dissonance, as long as there is rationality (that is, there is some order to the music), the music is going to be interesting and people are going to delight in it. If it becomes totally atonal, without harmony, and dissonant and if there is no melody of any kind and no pattern or structure there, then it is completely postmodern. There are a few examples of this. The one I would use is John Cage. He died a couple of years ago in his 1980s. I had the privilege, if I can call it that, of going to a concert of his when I was a student here in 1969 or 1970. He came to Washington University and put on a concert. John Cage's music is completely chance music. If any of you have seen Schaeffer's film, "How Should We Then Live," John Cage appears in that and he has a piece for piano that lasts for two minutes, but it is a piece for closed piano. Cage comes in, actually he does not come in but he goes out because it is outdoors in the open. It is not in a concert hall. I mean the setting is chosen carefully as well. He comes out and he sits down at the piano and he sets his alarm clock to two minutes. He closes the piano and sits there for two minutes and then the alarm goes off, and he gets up, everybody applauds, and he goes off. Well, there is no music at all. That is John Cage. Another example of his work is an opera he wrote to James Joyce's book, *Ulysses*. The text of his opera is something like the eighth word of the middle line of every page from the book stuck together. It is nonsense. It is intended to be. It is completely irrational. It does not communicate anything. It is not supposed to, but that is exactly Cage's point. There is nothing to be communicated so my opera will not communicate anything. Now that is radically postmodern music. People will not listen to music like that unless it is a kind of freak show. I mean, it is not something you could enjoy. It is not something you want to listen to again and again. You might go once to hear what it is like, but the music of Coltrane is not like that though there are elements there. What you see in a lot of contemporary

music, both classical and jazz and in various forms of rock music and punk, is a mixture of things that are harmonic and dissonant. So you get both things there side by side.