

Postmodernism & Language

Let us pray together.

Heavenly Father, we want to thank You for this day, for the glorious sunshine and for the way Your beauty and majesty are revealed in creation. Father, we pray that as we continue to reflect on the moment in which we live that You will grant us understanding, especially where we deal with difficult and challenging ideas. And help us always to think, too, about how these ideas affect us, not just the people around us who are not believers, so that we may see how our own minds and hearts need to be conformed to Your likeness and to live in Your truth. Also, Father, grant us not just understanding but compassion. We ask this for Jesus' sake. Amen.

In our last session we looked at the issue of postmodernism and style, and we came to the end of that section. We are going to move now to our second session, which is on language and literary criticism, and I want to go through this very quickly. That will be challenging for some of you for whom this issue is a new one.

Often in our universities today, English literature departments (and also French and other literature departments) are sometimes the leading edge of the most radical kind of thinking, the most extreme kind of thinking. They often lead the universities, and you will see why as we go through some of these ideas. Obviously the question about the nature of language and how we are able to read a text, a manuscript, an essay, or a book is a very important one because anything you are studying at college anywhere is going to depend on being able to read and understand texts that are before you. It is in this area of literary criticism and the nature of language that we see some of the most extreme ideas of postmodernism coming out in a very stark way.

Now, to provide a little bit of background for this, what would you say if I asked you the question, "How do you read a text or how may we read a text?" Probably all of you, except one or two who have studied literature at university, would reply in some manner like the following. You might say, "Well, it is obvious we can read a book and understand it." We have a common humanity so we can understand it even if we are reading a book from a culture on the other side of the world or from someone who wrote 2,000 or 3,000 years ago. Even though we recognize there are cultural barriers and differences in historical moments, we have to take those into account and think about the context in which something comes. Yet our common humanity transcends those barriers of cultures on the other side of the world and of cultures hundreds and thousands of years ago. So as long as we are prepared to do a little bit of work to get into the setting and the mind of the writer or the author, we will be able to understand, without too much difficulty, what somebody else was saying. Of course, every time you read the Bible you assume that it is possible for us to understand what Isaiah had in mind, what the apostle Paul had in mind, what Moses had in mind, or what Abraham had in mind 4,000 years ago. We assume that, with just a little work understanding the historical setting and trying to put ourselves into the mind of the writer or speaker, we are going to be able to understand. We might just very loosely and simply call that a traditional understanding of the commonality of human language and the possibility of being able to understand and relate to what other people think. At the deepest level, as Christians, we can say that we believe that even though there are differences of race, culture, and history that sometimes pull us apart, we see all human persons fundamentally as made in the image of God. Therefore, there really is a common humanity that unites us. What unites us is far greater than what divides us. We are all created in the image of God. We are all sinners and all in need of redemption. So, without too much difficulty, we can understand what other people think.

For the past couple of centuries, that Christian foundation of common humanity and the existence of an ultimate story, an ultimate truth that binds us all together as human beings, is everywhere in the western world. We are all really thinking the same thoughts about the most basic questions that face us, because we are living in God's world. Over the past 200 or 300 years in the western world, and we will look at this more carefully later in the course, that Christian foundation was rejected by what we might want to call secular humanism (or what is often called modernism or the enlightenment project). Instead of believing that we are created by God in His likeness, that we are sinners who have rebelled against Him, that we need God's revelation to speak to us and account for who we are and how we should live and find a way out of our problems of sin and the consequences, secular humanism insisted that if God exists, He does not really matter. Secular humanism said that He probably does not exist and that He has not spoken. But for several hundred years, the foundation that Christianity gave for our common humanity and the possibility of understanding one another was basically taken for granted. Modernism just assumed that we can understand each other—that it is possible to read books that other people wrote from other cultures and grasp them—because modernism had a tremendous confidence in human rationality. It put human reason in the place of God's revelation and said human reason is the source of all truth. That confidence was in human reason and optimism that human beings were basically good. Where the issue of language was concerned and literary criticism—reading a text—there was just the assumption that we can understand each other. We can understand each other's language because we have a common humanity, a common heritage that we are all struggling with the same questions. So there was not really a challenge to the notion that human beings can communicate with each other, but in postmodernism that has all gone. What we really have is an attempt to be more consistent to the rejection of the existence of a personal God and the rejection of the notion that God has spoken to us to tell us about our human condition.

The first point is that in postmodernism there is nothing transcendent, neither God nor anything else or anyone else, that understands everything. There is no infinite person who created the world or who understands the world and who has revealed himself to us. Postmodernism attempts to be consistent with that position. Later in the course we will look at Nietzsche in some detail, and that is really the heart of everything that he says. What does it mean to live in a universe without God, a universe in which God is absent?

That brings us to our second point postmodernists believe. Because God does not exist, and because God has not spoken, there is no story, no account, of the human condition—no account of who we are, what our origin is, what we are here for, or where we are going. There is no story, no narrative (no “meta-narrative” is the word that postmodernists use). “Meta” means “a transcendent narrative.” That is a narrative that comes from above and explains everything for us. There is no story that makes sense of the human condition, and there is no story that gives texts or language ultimate meaning. You see, the assumption, as long as the influence of a Judeo-Christian worldview held sway, was that all of our stories, all the books we write, all the texts that are there, all the poetry, and all the drama, relates (in one way or another, either agreeing with it or rejecting it) the basic biblical account of the human condition. You might say there are three great strains in the biblical account of the human condition. One is creation, the second is the Fall, and the third is redemption. Almost all great literature across the whole face of the earth, whether it has been produced by Christians or by unbelievers, has dealt with those three great themes in one way or another, and it still does. It deals with the themes of creation, of who we are at the most fundamental level as those who have come from the hand of God. Whether people believe in God or not, they are dealing with the account of the glory of our humanity and the wonder of creation. Second, all great literature and all great human texts deal with the reality of our fall. Whether they accept Christianity or not, they deal with the problem of human shame, our brokenness, our lost-

ness, and our alienation of the reality of death and the sorrow that that brings to our lives. Also, all great literature from every culture in every age of history deals with the possibility or hope of redemption, the longing for deliverance from the condition in which we find ourselves. You can see this in endless books, drama, poetry, movies, and every other kind of human artifact, whether it is produced by Christians or not, because this is fundamental to who we are.

Once Christianity is passionately rejected and the naïve optimism of a secular humanist position gradually loses its hold, we lose the conviction that there is an ultimate story of the glory of who we are as creatures and the shame of who we are as those who are broken, fallen, and failing, and the longing for deliverance that stands behind, as I said, all great literature. Once that is completely gone in our culture, we end up with the problem that there is no story. There are no great themes of creation, the Fall, or redemption that can stand behind literature, movies, or anything else that can give us an account of who we are or that can give our language any meaning at all. So there is a complete loss of the sense that there is any story that explains our situation and to which other pieces of literature or other cultural artifacts can be related.

That brings us to our third point. The meaning of the text, or of any use of language, resides completely in the person using the language or reading the text. What the postmodernist is saying is this: it is impossible any longer to really understand somebody from another culture or from another moment of history because there is no story that unites us all. There are just fragmented individuals and groups of people. We have no possibility of genuinely understanding each other whether we are reading about Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, the apostle Paul, Julius Caesar, Hammurabi, or about people on the other side of the world today—in China, Russia, Serbia, or wherever. We are no longer able to truly communicate with each other or to understand each other. We are trapped in our individuality, in our own personal use of language and the way we individually see the world, and all of us bring our own personal meaning to any text we read. Now of course there is an element of truth in this. You bring yourself to any text you read, but this is saying something more than that. It is not just simply emphasizing what we ought to have recognized all along, that we bring ourselves to a text when we read it. That is why Jesus says, “As long as you say you see, your sin remains.” The Christian ought to acknowledge that he or she is always to read any text with a humility and an awareness of self and of the prejudices that he or she brings to reading a text. We have to do this as we read the Bible—to read with humility rather than simply imposing our personal preconceptions on the text that we read. Now, I emphasize this so you will all understand the nature of the problem here. As Christians who know we are living in a universe made by God, the God who has spoken to us, and because we recognize the problem of our sin, we are aware that reading a text is not always easy. Now, the Reformation held out the conviction of the clarity of Scripture and that it is possible for anyone (whether they are educated or not or a little child) to read God’s Word and understand the basic things that it teaches. That, of course, we must hold to. At the same time, Scripture itself teaches us that reading is not always easy because of our sin, because of our personal pride, and because of our cultural prejudices. So we must read a text with humility. The apostle Paul says, “Knowledge puffs up [...] The man who thinks that he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.” All of you must be aware as you read the Word of God that you do not yet know as you ought to know. You ought to read it because you want to sit under it and have your prejudices wiped away by it so that you are really growing and learning. If you go to God’s Word thinking you already know everything it says, you will not learn anything at all. You might just as well not bother to read it. It is the same with any other text. It is particularly true, of course, with God’s Word, but it is true with any other text. Because God’s Word challenges us in all sorts of areas of our sin, some things are very difficult for us to read. In a way, there is a key to that for the Christian and the key is this: wherever you read God’s Word and you do not like what it says or wherever you read God’s Word and you want to explain it away and make it mean something different from what it

obviously says, you need to stop and recognize that either your own personal sins or your own cultural prejudices are preventing you from reading what God has to say to you. Let me take a practical example. Look at 1 Timothy 6. This is one of the best examples one could think of because of the kind of culture in which we live. In 1 Timothy 6, starting in verse 6, Paul in the context is dealing with false teachers who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. They are teaching God's Word and getting followers for themselves because they think they can make money out of it. Well, there are lots of people in the church like that today too. Just turn on your television and you can see plenty of them. They think that godliness is a means to financial gain. In verse 6 Paul says, "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it." You cannot take your clothes, your cars, your house, your bank accounts, your pension funds, or anything else to heaven. They are not going with you. You are taking none of it with you at all. That is the reality. "But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that." Now, which of you is content with food and clothing? I cannot believe that any one of us in this room is content because we live in a culture that teaches us so strongly that we need a lot more than food and clothing to be content. Every single commercial you ever see on television, hear on the radio, or see in the newspaper or magazine, and every store you go into, is devoted to making you think you cannot possibly be satisfied with just food and a change or two of clothing. That is not what our culture thinks, not what any of us think. Then Paul goes on to say, "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction." Now that is a challenging word for us living in this moment that Paul says we should not desire to get rich. It is not an appropriate desire because we need to recognize that it creates all kinds of problems for us. "For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." Later on in the passage, in verses 17, 18, and 19, Paul goes on to say that God delights to give His children good gifts, and he charges those who are wealthy to enjoy those gifts and to be generous and not proud. The whole passage is extremely challenging to us because it says things that are exactly the opposite of what our culture teaches us: that we have the right to desire prosperity and to work for it. God's Word challenges us in this area. Jesus puts it very simply. He says, "You cannot love God and money." You cannot, but we all try to.

The example of money, which we finished that section with, points us to a challenge. The challenge is that postmodernism recognizes that we come to a text with all kinds of cultural assumptions, prejudices, and all sorts of personal convictions that we do not ever think about. They are just there as part of who we are. Christians have always recognized this. This is the problem of our sinfulness. That is why the apostle Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Then you will know what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God." You learn to challenge the assumptions of the culture in which you live and your own sinfulness and have your mind renewed by submitting yourself humbly to the Word of God. So Scripture teaches us this everywhere. Postmodernism, however, goes much further because it says that it is not just that we are prejudiced and by humility we can deal with that prejudice but that we are trapped in our individual isolation and in our cultural isolation. Some postmodern writers will emphasize the individual aspect of our being trapped in isolation more, and others will emphasize more strongly the fact that we are trapped in various little cultural groups who, as a group, have a common way of seeing the world. There are consequences to this idea that when I read a text the only meaning that is available to me is the meaning that I put into and get out of the text.

That brings us to our fourth point. Literary criticism, consequently, plunges into an abyss because meaning is lost, that is, the notion of objective meaning. Texts are completely inaccessible to us because every reading becomes a misreading. That is what the postmodern theorist says to us—that we can never know what the author originally meant. All we can know is what we read, the meaning we put into the

text. Every reading becomes a misreading. You remember I spoke last session about studying art, and at many art schools you are no longer taught to draw or paint. Well, it is the same issue. There are no objective standards. There is nothing out there that says this is quality painting and this is not. All there is is what the individual does. That is all there is. There is no accessibility. That is, you cannot go to an art museum with a contemporary art exhibit and ask, “What is it?” That is not the question you are supposed to ask because you cannot know what the artist meant. That is exactly the point. All you can do is bring your own meaning to the work of art rather than have something that is objectively there that you can look at and say, “Yes, this is what Michelangelo was trying to communicate when he did his magnificent sculpture of David.” What is being said is that that is not possible. It is only the meaning that you bring while you are looking at that statue or reading this text or anything else.

So, every reading becomes a misreading, and one of the consequences of that is our fifth point. Literature, in a postmodern context, becomes a weapon in the culture wars for various groups to reinforce their already held positions and to use against each other. Now we start attacking each other, and not just literature, but speaking as well. This is one of the problems in the time in which we live. When Christians go out on the street and wave banners and give protest speeches about various moral, social, political, economic, and cultural issues, we are perceived, in a postmodern time, as just being a little cultural group stating our thing and trying to impose it on others in a culture war. Other people do not care. They have their own agendas and think, “Who do you think you are to impose your agenda on us?” We have to be very careful how we try to communicate in the present context; otherwise we are just understood in this way. That is how most non-Christians understand us—as just a little cultural group seeking to fight in the culture war, imposing our own personal group agenda on other people. It makes it extremely challenging to deal with moral and social questions at the present time because you can be simply written off. If we speak stridently and aggressively, we are especially going to be written off. We are no different, let us say, from a radical gay-rights group that is marching down the street, waving its placards, and shouting its position. You see, that is exactly how many people regard us, as just the same. We are just another extreme group. So this makes communication very difficult because this is the context in which we find ourselves.

I have a whole series of quotations. One is from Jacques Derrida, one of the major thinkers behind postmodern ideas with regard to literary criticism and the nature of language. He says, “There is nothing outside the text.” That is, all there is is simply the text in front of my eyes. There is no meta-language, that is, no language that can enable us to stand above the text or to read it in any objective way because the writer had his personal language, and I have my personal language. There are no rules to help us understand. There is no inherent meaning to a text or even to language itself. And then there is a comment by Abrams. Like all Derrida’s key terms and statements, this has multiple significations that there is no meaning outside the text. Abrams said, “But a primary significance is that one cannot get beyond the sequence of verbal signs to anything that stands outside of and independent of the language system that constitutes a text.” For example, its reference or else the intention of its speaker or writer to express a determinate signification. Abram’s deconstruction results in the claim that the meaning of any text remains radically open to contradictory readings. You have various critics doing this with the Bible, of course. They make it mean exactly what they want to—just ignoring what it says in all sorts of areas.

Here is a quote on de-centering: “There is no center or reference point to anchor the meaning of a word—not just to a text, but of any word. Any word can mean anything you want it to mean. Free play: any term has infinite semantic range. Every word is anchored to other words. Any word can drift anywhere in the ocean of meaning.” So we cannot give a particular meaning to any word, never mind the text as a whole. Because of the criticism that his thinking is nihilistic, Derrida tries to deny this charge. But he says elsewhere that he is trying to put himself at a point “so they do not know any longer

where I am going.” That is Derrida himself. Of course the irony is that Derrida writes these textbooks that are extremely difficult to understand with all sorts of terms that he has made up himself—new words—and he expects his students and the people who buy his books to read them and understand them. There is a kind of fundamental, ironic contradiction there at the heart of everything that he is saying.

This next quotation is interesting. Jean-Francois Lyotard says, “Now that the scientific meta-narrative is broken down, all that we are left with is an infinite plurality of language games. We have moved from the muffled majesty of grand narratives for splintering autonomy of micro-narratives.” It is a beautiful statement despite the sorrow, one might say, of what he has to say. “We have moved from the muffled majesty of grand narratives...”—and he is referring to the modernist narrative, which gives a scientific explanation of the universe in which we live, the origin of the earth, who we are as human persons, our psychology, what we are here for, how we are to live, and so on. So, he is not only rejecting the Christian meta-narrative of God who has created the universe, but he is also rejecting any meta-narrative. The primary alternative to the Christian one in western culture is the scientific one. It is scientific in the sense that it is naturalistic science, which seeks to explain the universe without any reference to God. Historically, the development of science in the West is deeply tied into the period after the Reformation and a biblical worldview. The conviction is possible that God made the universe and that He made it in an orderly manner and therefore it can be studied and understood in science. But increasingly over the last couple of hundred years science has tried to set itself free from any kind of biblical moorings and insists that science is by nature naturalistic. That is, it rejects God. That is certainly not where it was historically. But Lyotard is saying the scientific account of the world is just as suspect as a biblical account. There are no meta-narratives that explain the human condition at all. It is not just that we reject that human beings are made in the image of God and have rebelled against Him and need Christ for their redemption, but we reject, too, the evolutionary account of who we are—that we are descended from apes and this is who we are. There is no meta-narrative that gives an account of our situation. The only thing we are left with, he says, is these micro-narratives, these little stories, the splintering autonomy. This autonomy is its own authority, a law unto itself. Everybody has his own account. Your next-door neighbor may be a Hindu, he may be a Mormon, he may be a Jehovah’s Witness, a Christian, a Marxist, or whatever. In our culture there are no longer any grand narratives—just the splintering autonomy of micro-narratives. And who is to say who is right? Nobody can. It is just this individual or this group with their views.

This is an enormous problem here. Theoretically, this sounds very complex and difficult, and to some it may sound bizarre. The easiest way to help you understand this is to look at examples from literature, movies, poetry, fiction, and other places, because in them you can see how this works itself out into the culture. I have given some examples. Some of you may have seen or read the play by Samuel Beckett, “Waiting for Godot.” It was written, I suppose, about 30 years ago or perhaps a little more than that. At the time he was seen as an extremist. Today it did not seem extreme at all when it was revived here in St. Louis in the past couple of years. It is about a couple of guys who do not really communicate with each other, who are waiting for Godot, but he never comes. Nothing really happens, nobody really communicates. It is a truly postmodern play. In some of Beckett’s later plays, the situations are even more extreme. One of them, “Happy Days,” has a couple who just chatter and do not communicate with each other or anybody else, and they eventually fall silent. One of the other plays is called “Breath.” In it there is no language at all, just the sound of a baby crying, the sound of a couple copulating, and the sound of somebody dying. That is the whole play. He is making the point very dramatically that there is no communication at all. There are many movies at the popular level that express the same kinds of things. Woody Allen is constantly dealing with this theme of the breakdown of communication. Other movie makers are as well. This is true in some of the popular music that some of you listen to. You

listen to the words carefully. Alternative music speaks about the breakdown of meaning, of the impossibility of communicating to one another as human persons. One of my sons introduced me to a group called “The Beautiful South.” They are a British group. One of their dominant themes of their lyrics is the breakdown of communication—that the language we use no longer really communicates to other people and that we are isolated from each other in our little alienated lives.

The fiction of James Joyce is another example. His works, “Ulysses” and “Finnegan’s Wake,” are examples of language breaking down. And you remember I used the example of John Cage taking the text of one of Joyce’s books and just taking the eighth word of the middle line in every page and stringing it together. He was just saying, “Language is meaningless so I will have a text in my opera where the words have no relationship to each other whatsoever except that they will happen to come from the same book. They will be just strung together regardless of whether they are verbs, nouns, adjectives, subjects, objects, or whatever. They will be strung together in any order, without any meaning at all.” He is simply making the statement that communication is impossible—that we cannot communicate with one another.

Another example is T. S. Eliot. He is a very interesting example because he wrote “The Hollow Men” in the 1920s, dealing with this problem way back then, almost 80 years ago. This poem talked about the way we do not communicate with each other. T. S. Eliot wrote about the wasteland of western culture in the 1920s, where communication between people is breaking down because there is an ultimate loss of meaning. Now, Eliot eventually became a Christian, but it is a problem that he addresses very carefully in much of his poetry. A few lines from his “Four Quartets” were actually written after his conversion, but he was still addressing the problem. He wrote, “. . . Words strain, crack / and sometimes break, under the burden, / under the tension, slip, slide, perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, / Will not stay still. Shrieking voices / Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering, / Always assail them. . .” Now that is really what the postmodernist was saying. Eliot was a prophet. Postmodernism, and people like Derrida, did not come along until the 1960s and 1970s in terms of writing what they did about language and the decay of meaning in text. Eliot was already recognizing the problem in the 1920s. In his case, the recognition of the problem of the breakdown of communication is one of the things that God used to draw him to Himself. Interestingly, the primary factor in Eliot’s conversion to Christianity seems to have been literature by great Christian writers—John Donne and George Herbert and, in particular, the Italian writer Dante. Eliot was basically converted through the language of Christians who communicated really well because this problem of the lack of meaning—the lack of communication—and the lack of being able to understand, created such a tension in him. We need to understand that this is an appalling tension. Again, if you look at movies by somebody like Woody Allen, this is one of the fundamental issues that he deals with—the breakdown of communication—that we cannot understand each other, and our lives have lost their meaning. It is true in lots and lots of contemporary music that kids are listening to all the time.

Obviously this has enormous consequences for theology. I will refer to a writer named Frances Young. Frances Young is an English theologian who is still teaching theology, I think, at the University of Nottingham. Frances Young applies what postmodernism is saying to our reading of the Scripture. She uses the idea of Arthur Kessler who divided life into the trivial and the tragic. What Kessler meant by that was that the only things we can really know at all are what he called trivial things such as what I ate for breakfast today, how to drive here to work, the fact that the sun is shining outside, etc.. These are just the little things of everyday life that we can have some knowledge about. But when it comes to anything of significance for our lives, we can have no access to meaning or understanding at all. Things beyond that trivial level are completely beyond us, and that is why he uses the term “tragic” to express this. Frances Young says, “In the realm of the tragic”—“that is the level of meaning, the meaning of our

human condition—“we can assign no literal or factual meaning to the language we use about God.” She is saying that when we theologize, when we speak about or write about God, when we worship Him, when we sing hymns or pray, or when we preach sermons, it has no literal meaning at all—that all the language that Christians use about God or to God has no literal meaning to it. We can never know whether there is anything there about which we are speaking. She also says, “As Christian believers we work one with the scientific model, which finds explanations of phenomenon, behavior, and events in terms of natural causes and to what we can only describe as mythological, symbolic models—models which however inadequately represent the religious and spiritual dimension of our experience. To call them mythological is not to denigrate their status but to indicate that they refer to realities which are not only inaccessible to the normal methods of scientific investigation, but are also indefinable in terms of human language, and in their totality, inconceivable within the limited powers and experience of the finite human mind.” For her, the problem is that we are finite. If we are little, if we are finite (and this is the problem for the whole of postmodernism), it is obvious to us that we do not understand the whole universe. What we know is very small. Now, if you believe in God, in the biblical God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that is no problem at all. Newton, one of the greatest scientists ever, spoke about this issue. He is the one who studied the nature of the planets and how they have different orbits around the sun, and he was a committed Christian believer. He understood this very well even though he was discovering all these marvelous things about the universe. He is really at the foundation of modern physics and astronomy as we know them and he was a deeply committed Christian. He said, “At the end of my life, after all that I have discovered and understood, I recognize that I am like a child playing on a seashore who has picked up one pebble that I thought was a little prettier than others and spent my life delighting in it, while all around me stretched this vast shore of knowledge which I have not begun to touch or understand.” That is a wonderful statement of humility by a Christian who recognizes his finiteness. For the Christian, it is no problem because we know that there is a God who exists, who understands everything, and who has communicated to us the things that are most important so that my finiteness is not a problem. For the unbeliever, for the postmodern person, finiteness is an enormous problem because I can never know, as Frances Young says, whether the words that I use have any relationship whatsoever to the ultimate nature of reality. I cannot know because I am alone here in this universe by my little self or with my little group of people. So access to any objective meaning of words beyond myself is truly impossible. She uses the image of music. She says that “religious language works exactly like music.” She uses the example of “Mass for the Dead,” and she says, “This has the power to convict me and terrify me.” If you listen to Brahms’s “Requiem,” for example, it is like that. Some of the music is terrifying. It is very powerful. She is saying that our Christian language is just like music. It is just something that moves us. We can have no notion as to whether it actually relates to anything true at all. We need to be moved and so we go to church, just like we like to listen to musical concerts because the music moves us. But that is all that is happening. Our religious language is no different from music.

There clearly is, as I said with regard to Derrida, a contradiction at the heart of everything that they are saying. They are saying that language has no objective meaning and yet they constantly try to communicate to one another, to their students, and to their readers. I am sure if they are professors they assign exams on the basis of whether students have understood their books, and the most appropriate response, if you were a student, would be to write something totally unrelated to the book. I do not know how they would respond to it, if you were to do that. People are not usually that consistent. But, it is not enough for us simply to make that response, I would say. If you look at popular culture you see how this expresses itself in a way that completely undermines a sense of meaning for ordinary people, and that is the real issue. Of course they are not going to be consistent. You can take somebody like John Cage who believes that everything is chance, and so his music is chance music. I heard him do a concert here in St. Louis in 1968 or 1969 when I was at seminary. He had a huge computer on the stage (at that point

computers were enormous) connected to a piano, and rather than having a person play the piano, he had a machine play the piano. He had programmed the computer so that all the notes that came out of the piano bore no harmonic relationship to each other whatsoever. Again, there is a contradiction at the heart of it. In order to get a piece of music in which there is no relationship whatsoever between the notes—no pattern, no harmony, no form—he had to use a computer that was extraordinarily carefully structured and patterned. There is a tension at the very heart of what he was doing, and that is always going to be present. You will find very few cultural artifacts that are absolutely consistent. What about certain forms of jazz? What you will find is a mixture of dissonance and harmony because people are not consistent. I have used an example, which I did not read, of the poetry of Ted Hughes. Ted Hughes died last year. He is one of my favorite poets, an Englishman. He was not a believer. He was the poet laureate in England for many, many years. He was constantly writing about the loss of meaning, the decay of language, the alienation of persons, the breakdown of relationships, and the emptiness of the human condition. But he writes in the most exquisitely beautiful language with marvelous images. There is this tension that he is quite aware of at the very heart of it. For him, the issue is that this loss of meaning, whether it is words or meaning for the human condition, is a tragedy. The tragedy (and I think somebody like Derrida would say this as well) is that personally we have this longing for meaning. We love to communicate with each other. We delight in all sorts of things about life and human relationships and everything else, but these are really only tricks. What is important is not just that we point to the sort of contradiction at the heart of this but to have some compassion for the tragedy because to many of these people this is not a game that they are playing. I am sure for some of them it is, and only God can judge the heart. But there are many people who are so deeply touched by this that it destroys their life as human persons. They have a longing for communication and for meaning, and yet they have this deep sense that ultimately nothing means anything at all. You hear that in a lot of the music. There is a terrible note of sadness in it. You see it in the movies of somebody like Woody Allen. They are really sad even while he is mocking himself for the questions he is asking and for the ultimate lack of meaning and lack of communication. We need to recognize the sadness that is there. There is a contradiction there. If you held this view consistently, you could not use words at all. That is why you have plays like Beckett's where there are no words.

Whether we look at pop culture or anywhere else, we see lots of understanding as well as this emphasis on the breakdown of understanding. However, human beings are made in the image of God. That is the reality whether they acknowledge it or not, whether they worship God or not, whether they bow before Him, or whether they refuse to have Him in their knowledge, as Paul says in Romans 1. And because they are made in the image of God, they are going to continue to communicate because fundamental to what it means to be in the image of God is that we are created as communicators. This is why Schaeffer entitles one of his books, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. The ultimate issue is this: are we living in a universe that is silent or one in which words ultimately have meaning? The Christian answer to this is, "Yes, God has existed eternally in the three persons of the Trinity who have communicated with each other through all eternity." This is fundamental to the very nature of God Himself—that He delights in communication. The Father speaks to the Son and the Son to the Father and to the Spirit and they have been speaking to each other in language for all eternity. The ability to use language to communicate with each other is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. So we know that this universe is not ultimately silent. It is a universe that is filled with sound, language, and communication, and words have an ultimate referent. They ultimately find their reference in God Himself. The words "holy," "love," and "justice" find their meaning in the character of God Himself, not in some arbitrary definition that we give to them. But if you have rejected the knowledge of God, then the universe is ultimately silent. It is ultimately silent and there can be no final meaning to words. I am trapped in my individuality. How can I ever know whether what I am saying is the truth about things out there? That is the dilemma that postmodernism is struggling with. Every postmodern writer, thinker, or pop musician may not have

reflected on these issues. At the same time, we all have this longing for communication and we use words. The practical reality is we are living in a culture where human relationships are breaking down. The most common problem for Americans today is personal loneliness. People do not know how to make relationships at the most basic level. Many people's closest relationships are ones on e-mail and Internet chat rooms where they never meet somebody face to face. There is an extraordinary proliferation of dating services because people do not even know how to meet or get to know each other. So they have to pay somebody else to do it for them. It still does not help, and most of the relationships break down after a while because people do not communicate. People are losing the ability to communicate with each other well. That is one of the things that is actually happening in the culture in which we live. Communication really is breaking down. There is always going to be this dual reality, this sense of alienation and loss of communication and meaning and at the same time the longing to communicate, because that is how God has made us. That is the fundamental reason why you have both realities.

Postmodernism denies everything that you regard precious as a human person. It is not just language and meaning, but it is the possibility of love, the possibility of moral order—that there is a difference between good and evil. It is the reality of the significance of my choices, the possibility of beauty—that there really is objective beauty out there—it is everything that is actually precious to us as human beings and that makes our lives worthwhile. There is no longer any foundation for it, but everybody longs for those things and so they will continue to reach for them even though they have said there is no foundation for them. That is the tragedy of the moment in which we live. People are searching for things for which they have no answers. You should be thankful they are still searching rather than simply attacking them as Christians and saying, "Look how contradictory they are," even though they are. The fact that they are still searching, still using language, still longing for relationships, and still longing for meaning and beauty means we have the possibility of communication. Otherwise they would be in hell already. Hell is the complete loss of communication, the end of meaning—total and final alienation. But thank God people are not there yet. So our response should be to look at people and see that they are helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. That is a wonderful description of a postmodern culture. People are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, so we should have compassion on them.