

APPENDIX 1-C

LECTURE NUMBER THREE: UNDERSTANDING POSTMODERNISM AND THE POSTMODERN WORLD

Lecture Number Three Outline

- I. Notes
- II. Lecture Goal
 - A. Objective
- III. Opening Prayer
- IV. Introduction
- V. Postmodern Thought
- VI. Postmodern Art and Architecture
- VII. Postmodern Society
- VIII. Small Group Activities/Questions

I. Notes

There is an extensive “PowerPoint” presentation that accompanies this lecture that shows a number of visual examples that correspond with concepts and even specific works we cover. In most cases, when a particular work or item is mentioned, there is an accompanying photo. This lecture, especially, is very visually oriented.

II. Lecture Goal

The primary goal of the lecture is to paint, as far as it is possible, a clear picture of postmodernity. The sub goal is to help the students see both danger and opportunity for the church in the postmodern world.

II.A. Objective

Postmodernity will be painted for the students by looking at specific, sometimes even concrete, examples from the world of postmodern thought, art and architecture, and society. I believe that examples of these things will help to describe postmodernity more

effectively than words primarily because they will help the students make uniquely and individually meaningful associations.

III. Opening Prayer

“Your word, O Father, tells us that there is nothing new under the sun. How like us, though, to assume that our times are like no other and that the challenges we face are unlike any that have come before us. But nothing is new to you, O God. Nothing surprises you, and we take comfort in that truth. As we face times that are quite new to us and seem to challenge us in ways that we couldn’t have imagined only a short time ago, help us to have godly perspective. Bless us as we learn, encourage us when we worry about the future, and above all, show us how we can take advantage of the times in which we live to enhance and grow your kingdom. In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

IV. Introduction

There is monumental change occurring across our country, worship included, as we leave the modern era behind and move into a very different postmodern world. Think of it as the collision of two enormous landmasses much like we learned about in high school science class. There will be friction, there might be some earthquakes – maybe even some fire – but in the end, the steady push of the “new” will make its deep mark and change the landscape forever. The modern, with its emphasis on reason and intellect and word, is slowly but surely being overrun by the postmodern, with its emphasis on the metaphysical and spirituality and symbol.

Change in the everyday world is very difficult and we humans are loath to try anything new. Change in the church is next to impossible and we Christians are fiercely defensive of the status quo, especially when we develop ostensibly righteous reasons for defending it against the “new.”

But here’s the part that fascinates and energizes me: Much of the “new” is actually old. Doves of postmodern worshipers – especially youth – are turning for inspiration to the language and pattern of the ancient church. There they are rediscovering classic Christianity and learning to draw strength and spirituality from a deep, satisfying well of time-tested truth and tradition. The postmodern world need not frighten Christians, for many of its thirsts can be marvelously and even uniquely quenched there.

The truth is, this change has already begun (some scholars believe that the postmodern age began in the late 1970’s, with some even pointing to the late 1940’s) and the various reactions to it intrigue me. In our last session, we talked about the cases that two scholars make for the postmodern world’s beginnings.

Here’s where I’d like us to focus for a moment: Leonard Sweet characterizes what he calls five “coping mechanisms” for relating to any kind of transition or change.¹ See if you can discover yourself or perhaps your church in any of them: First, there is the “hold out” line of thought. These are the people who refuse to believe that there is any change occurring at all. They go right along with life, living it just as they always have, and give little thought to the change. Second, there is the “keep out” or “hunker in the bunker” mentality. These are the people who go inside, close and lock the doors, and limit their membership to others who think like them. They don’t deny that change is occurring,

¹ Leonard Sweet. *Postmodern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville: Broadman, 2000), XIV.

they just don't want to come into contact with it. Third comes the "move out" line of thinking. These are the people who relocate and then hide out in a kind of nostalgic yearning for the days in the not so long ago when things made more sense. Fourth is the mentality described as "close out" thinking. These are the people that simply see the vastly changing landscape before them, throw up their hands, admit defeat, and go home. Finally, there is the "reach out" line of thought that says we must understand and then engage the changing times.

This lecture seeks to do just that. As Christians, there is much to be wary of in the postmodern world. There is much that will challenge and confound us. But I want to make the case for saying that we simply must reach out. We must reach out if we are to survive. More importantly, we must reach out if we are to follow our biblical mandate to be the church. The bad news is that the postmodern world is an odd, seemingly new place full of conflicting philosophies, strange sights and sounds and colors and tastes, and hundreds of incongruous images that have no discernable commonality or context. The good news is that the postmodern world isn't so new after all, and it gives us many clues as to how it can best be engaged with the gospel. I want to make the case, as Sweet puts it, for a "back-to-the-future" theology and methodology that recognizes that the postmodern world has more in common with the first century than the modern world.

Christians should not embrace a postmodern worldview; we must not adapt to postmodernity. [The church, especially the megachurch, made costly and perhaps life-threatening mistakes when it embraced many of the tenets of the modern era. We need not make the same error with the postmodern era. See Os Guinness, "Dining With the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity" Sources Consulted.] Jesus is 'the same yesterday, today, and forever' (Heb. 13:8). In other words, Jesus is the same in three time zones and two dimensions: the timely (past and present) and the timeless (forever). But we do need to incarnate the timeless in the timely. Postmoderns do need to probe the living-out of our faith in light of the classical Christian tradition.

The ancient ways are more relevant than ever. The mystery of how ancient words can have spiritual significance in this new world is evident in the cultural quest for ‘soul’ and ‘spirit.’ The very talk of soul and spirit is the talk of a very ancient language, a first-century language largely abandoned by the modern world but a language more fitting today than ever.²

Our method for looking at postmodern culture will be to take three broad categories and examine how postmodern thought runs throughout them. Our categories: postmodern thought, art, and society. Where possible, we will supplement the discussion with concrete examples from the world of art and architecture, consumer products, and entertainment.

V. Postmodern Thought

“[The word ‘Postmodernism’] has no meaning. Use it as often as you can.” Quoted in Mike Featherstone, “Consumer Culture and Postmodernism.”

“Postmodernism is a contemporary movement. It is strong and fashionable. Over and above this, it is not altogether clear what the devil it is.” –Ernst Gellner, “Postmodernism, Reason and Religion.”

Our work in the last lecture trying to define and describe modernism is useful to us for at least three reasons: 1) I hope that we can clearly see how it has shaped the way we think; 2) I hope that we can clearly see how those the lines of thought now thread their way throughout our present times; and 3) for our more immediate purposes, I hope that we can use modernism to help us define postmodernism, for if nothing else, postmodernism is a nearly complete repudiation of all that modernism represented. That last point is probably the most important one I will make (and perhaps the most clear one) in the entire lecture, because the task of defining and describing postmodernism is so

² Ibid., XVII.

immense, so complicated, that I'm not at all sure I'll be able to get much more clear and direct than that one simple statement.

Before we get into some specifics, I'd like to warn you a bit about what you are bound to discover if you do much reading at all about postmodernism. Christian thinkers are split about postmodernism and seem to struggle with one of two basic views: 1) Postmodernism is a post-Christian, uncertain, even strange, future where nothing makes sense anymore, people are mostly pagan, the prospects for the church are bleak, and we might as well let the approaching tidal wave wash over us in defeat; and 2) Postmodernism is a post-Christian, uncertain, even strange, future where nothing makes sense anymore, people are mostly pagan, the prospects for the church have never been greater, and we might as well ride the crest of the approaching tidal wave to victory.

I must joyfully confess that I land most definitely into the latter camp. And while I'm confessing, I'll have to admit that I have never been comfortable with much that is modern, especially as it relates to the way we "do" church. I'm enormously relieved that the modern era is drawing to a close and look forward to the day when most of its remaining vestiges have disappeared from the church. Having said that, quite a lot of what postmodernism gives us is antithetical to our faith. We must be so very careful. For example, the deconstructionist side of postmodernity tells us that all metanarratives are equally bad and are even dangerous. "This is a crisis," say the cynics. "The postmoderns will not give the words of the Bible the same authoritative weight as we do." On the other hand, the constructive side of postmodernism tells us that symbol and story are vital and necessary. "This is an opportunity," says the other camp. "The postmoderns will listen to the stories of the Bible and will be open to our message."

Postmodern culture is not the first crisis culture, to be sure. Culture and crisis go together like A&W, A&P, Abercrombie and Fitch. Everyone knows what *crisis* stands for in Chinese characters: danger and opportunity. Even better is what *crisis* stands for in Hebrew: *mash-ber*, a word also used for birth stool, a seat upon which a woman in ancient times sat as she gave birth.

If ever there were a moment for birth-stool creativity, it is now. Of all the leadership arts, creativity and imagination are some of the most ‘in crisis’ in the church. Humans live in the imagination. Without imagination, all hearts are closed, all desires unknown. Like a spider spins from within the web, so we spin from our imagination the worlds we inhabit.

The history of civilizations is the history of the human imagination.

Unfortunately, the postmodern imagination is proving more creative at faking reality than at fixing reality. Our best minds today are obsessed with helping us escape more than engage our multiple ‘crises.’ Compare the state of DisneyWorld’s Main Street USA with the condition of USAmerica’s small-town main streets. Compare what you can do at cybergames *Age of Empires II* (Microsoft) and *SimCity* with what we’re doing at Harlem, Watts, and other similar cities. We consume in our real lives (even our church life), and we create in our cyber life.³

So, what about the roots of postmodern thought? The term “postmodern” did not appear as such until the late 1800’s, and it was not developed as a concept until after World War II. “The earliest use of the term to connote something of its current meaning has been attributed to the English painter John Watkins Chapman, who use the term ‘postmodern painting’ to describe a style that appeared to be moving beyond the work of the French impressionists.⁴ One of the first scholars to use the term “postmodern” was the great historian Sir Arnold Toynbee. “In the 1940’s, Toynbee engaged in a magisterial study of the rise and fall of world civilizations. [His] insights into history and the dynamics of his own time are startlingly prophetic.”⁵ (Toynbee’s 12 volume work was begun in the 30’s and completed in about 1961).

³ Leonard Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims*, XIX.

⁴ George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, editors, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996): 123.

⁵ Gene Edward Vieth, Jr., *Postmodern Times*, 44.

Let me paraphrase Toynbee's findings: Based on his study of a number of world civilizations – ranging from ancient Rome to the Aztecs – Toynbee found that societies in disintegration suffer a kind of “schism of the soul.” They are not usually overrun or defeated by an outside state, but rather commit a kind of cultural suicide. Societies in disintegration, he said, have several characteristics. They fall into a sense of *abandon* where people stop believing in morality and “yield to their impulses and the expense of their creativity.” They succumb to *truancy* or escapism where they retreat into a world of entertainment and distraction. There is a sense of *drift*, in which people yield to “meaningless determinism, as if their efforts do not matter” and they have no control over their lives. There is a sense of *guilt*, a “self-loathing that comes from moral abandon.” And finally there is a kind of prevailing *promiscuity*, which Toynbee means not so much in the sexual sense, but rather as the “indiscriminate acceptance of anything and everything, an unfocused eclecticism and uncritical tolerance.”⁶

Now here is where Toynbee is especially important to us: He predicted the coming of what he termed the “postmodern” and described what he thought it would mean. Patricia Waugh has summarized his predictions:

For Toynbee, the postmodern age would be the fourth and final phase of Western history and one dominated by anxiety, irrationalism and helplessness. In such a world, consciousness is adrift, unable to anchor itself to any universal ground of justice, truth or reason on which the ideals of modernity had been founded in the past. Consciousness itself is thus ‘decentered’: no longer agent of action in the world, but a function through which impersonal forces pass and intersect. Art becomes not so much an expression of human spirit, but another commodity. Like knowledge, therefore, it can no longer be critical but only functional. Moreover, we are in the postmodern condition and, implicated in a culture where all knowledge is produced through discourse, we can no longer seek transcendence. There is no position outside

⁶ Ibid., 45.

of culture from which to view culture... There can be only disruption from within: micropolitics, language games, parodic skirmishes, irony, fragmentation.⁷

It may sound bleak, but you can get a sense of how prophetic indeed Toynbee really was.

Michel Foucault, described as “the architect of postmodernism,” is a name that you will come into contact with in your readings on the subject. He is not only one of the principal philosophers of postmodernism, but perhaps its most flamboyant one.⁸ One must read Foucault carefully and with an understanding that part of what motivated his writings and philosophies seems to be justification of some of his worst personal characteristics. Foucault was evidently a particularly promiscuous homosexual who denied himself virtually no pleasure or experience, no matter how deviant (he called them “limiting experiences”). Foucault also belongs to the “deconstructionist” side of postmodern thought that takes most anything and breaks it down, again and again, until there is nothing left. Some of his philosophies are harmful to the Christian metanarrative. The challenge is find the substance and benefits of his important contributions to postmodern thought.

According to Foucault, Western society had for three hundred years made several fundamental errors when scholars erroneously believed that 1) “An objective body of knowledge exists and is waiting to be discovered, 2) That they actually possess such knowledge and that it is neutral or value-free, and 3) That the pursuit of knowledge benefits all humankind rather than just a specific class.”⁹ Foucault totally rejected these

⁷ Patricia Waugh as quoted in Gene Edward Vieth, Jr., *Postmodern Times*, 45.

⁸ Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 138.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

Enlightenment (and modern) assumptions and struck at the heart of modern thinking when he rejected the self, that is the autonomous knowing subject of Descartes. He denied that we can ever stand beyond history and human society and somehow dispassionately chronicle and measure universal knowledge. Knowledge, for Foucault, was linked to power (there's Bacon again), but the kind of power that Foucault saw used as a result of knowledge was not a benevolent one. Science, then could not possibly be objective, but rather was an "ideology" for it had to "invent" truth, and thereby create reality, in order to serve its own purposes.

"Foucault's connection between knowledge and power marks the postmodern end of the road that Francis Bacon charted at the beginning of the Enlightenment. According to Foucault, human knowledge does not merely allow us to exercise power over nature as Bacon had suggested; more significantly, knowledge is violence. The act of knowing, says Foucault, is always an act of violence."¹⁰

Danger and opportunity: The danger in Foucault's theory is that there may be no objective truth to be found anywhere and that all metanarratives are oppressive; the opportunity is that science no longer writes the rules about what is and what is not truth.

VI. Postmodern Art and Architecture

Now, let's turn our attention to the world of postmodern art and architecture.

What kind of artwork do you like? Are you a "country barn and barbed wire fence" art lover? Or are you a "wild colors that look like some child splashed all over the page" person? If you asked my family what kind of art lover I am, they'd tell you something akin to the latter. In fact, that description is very close to what my parents said about

¹⁰ Ibid., 133.

some pretty expensive artwork I once bought and proudly brought home. And you should have seen my wife and me try to compromise on a china pattern before we got married. She wanted Victorian flowers and I wanted weird. At least that's what she called it.

What about architecture? Do you like "functional boxes and nice sharp, clear lines"? Or do you prefer "sweeping, organic shapes that spring up from the landscape"? When it came time for us to choose our first home, my wife and I had to really compromise on this one. We eventually bought a "functional box with nice sharp, clear lines," but then I filled it with my "wild colors that look like some child splashed paint all over the page" artwork.

The beautiful thing about art and architecture in the postmodern world is that both extremes, and everything else in between, finds a home there. The frustrating thing about art and architecture in the postmodern world is that there is little context for any of it. The snippets of this and that style blend together with such jarring force that we get no perspective. I liken it to channel surfing on the television. Try this experiment sometime: Take the remote control (we call it the "clicker" at my house) and turn on the TV. Spend no more than a few seconds on each channel, then go upward, or downward (it doesn't matter) in numerical succession and see what kind of bizarre, electronic patchwork you get. This is much like postmodern art: lots of images, many of them beautiful, thrown together with little overall meaning. I tend to think of it as terribly entertaining, but you should ask my family how they like it. They tell me that it's not too much fun when you're not the one holding the clicker.

Art has always been the means by which abstract ideas are brought down to earth. Artists express ideas and beliefs in concrete ways. When you stop to think about it, art, like no other expression, is the main means by which culture and worldview are expressed. “This is especially true of postmodern art, which seeks to break out of the ‘high culture’ of the art world into the ‘popular culture’ of the mass mind.”¹¹ Not many people would read Toynbee or Foucault, but most everyone channel surfs on the TV or goes to movies or listens to “Top 40.” Postmodern art, above all, is an art for popular culture. Let’s remember that, like postmodern thought, postmodern art is by and large a reaction against the modern.

One of the things postmodern art does is toy with convention. Postmodern art does not take itself too seriously. Modernity put the arts above the reach of ordinary people; postmodern art has reacted against that idea. Modernity assumed that the artist’s self was paramount; postmodern art assumes that self-identity is an illusion. Modernity had the artist work for an individual style; postmodern artists use common, even recycled, materials and mass-produced styles (a wonderful example is Andy Warhol’s self-described “Factory,” where hired workers churned out hundreds of prints of pop icons like Marilyn Monroe). Modern artists were “deep,” concerned with inner realities and complex truths; postmodern artists are “flat,” obsessed with surfaces and superficial appearances. Modernity idealized the individual artist laboring to create unique works of art. Their values, as Steven Conner says, were “uniqueness, permanence, and

¹¹ Gene Edward Vieth, *Postmodern Times*, 93.

transcendence.” Postmodernists, by contrast, dismiss the uniqueness of the artist and the high view of art. Their values are “multiplicity, transience, and anonymity.”¹²

Let’s talk about some specific ways that postmodern artists go about accomplishing these things:

Some artists relate their art to the outside world by making the work’s surroundings part of its meaning. In this way, they manage to remove the art from the museum (what could be more modern than a museum?) and take it outside into the streets or the natural environment. “Thus, we have artists who devise King Kong balloons and install them on the Empire State Building, artists like Christo who wraps civic landmarks [or even small islands] in cloth, earth artists who pile up dirt in a desert with a bulldozer, and artists who stage elaborate ‘happenings’ [like the bizarre “Burning Man” event in Arizona].”¹³

Another way artists of postmodernity reject the modern notion of art having a privileged status is to blur the lines between what is and what is not art. “Ordinary objects – such as Coke bottles, sleds, or toilets – are displayed as...art. Conversely, artists might make meticulous realistic paintings of a Coke bottle, a sled, or a toilet.”¹⁴ Have you heard of art in the last few years that involves human excrement or urine? Instead of trying to make art that would be considered universally beautiful or pleasing, postmodern artists are purposely trying to make art that is disgusting and irksome.

I mentioned a moment ago how postmodern art is much like channel surfing on the TV. Television presents not only a broad collection of images, but also a broad collection of styles and ideas, “with nostalgic ‘Leave it to Beaver’ reruns juxtaposed with

¹² Ibid., 95.

¹³ Ibid., 96.

‘Star Trek’ futurism, images of warm family values interspersed with images of salacious sex and horrific violence. By the same token, a postmodern painting might be a pastiche of the Mona Lisa (in the Renaissance style), a Greek god (the classical style), and Donald Duck (pop art) all cavorting in a super-realistic landscape.”¹⁵

The modern era dismissed the past as irrelevant, but postmodern artists embrace the past and freely draw from it. A new office building with seemingly anachronistic decorative features powerfully brings back the past. A perfect example is architect Philip Johnson’s “AT&T” headquarters. This odd combination of old and new is a very common theme in postmodern design, but another thing that the Johnson building does is to confuse purpose. The Chippendale pediment on top of the building brings to mind a classical design theme, but it also makes the building look like a grandfather clock or perhaps a chair. So, is the building art, or is it functional, or is it a giant clock or a chair?

This confusion of styles and of purpose may be seen repeatedly in postmodern architecture. In the medieval era, churches were functional, but they were also built to convey transcendence and purpose: the cross shape of the gothic church was meant to be transforming, as well as symbolic. In the modern world, churches were built for function, for the notion that “form follows function” is a decidedly modern one. Think about the way the church went about doing Sunday School in the 40’s and 50’s: departments were arranged by age or grade, they met in a large assembly room for a short time, but then retreated to adjacent small rooms for a school-like study of the Bible. This is precisely the way the education building of my present church was designed. Modern churches

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 98.

tended to be drab and almost entirely function-oriented with little or no thought to aesthetic beauty.

Think about the ways these concepts are changing. Today, churches can resemble shopping malls, with their large, open concourses and common spaces; and shopping malls can resemble churches (at least the more medieval concept), with their soaring spaces and emphasis on sight, sound, and symbol. Postmodern architecture is meant to turn convention on its head. Outside spaces are brought inside (atriums and planters and large glass windows and walls), and inside spaces are brought outside (where air ducts and support beams are exposed). Perhaps the best example of the former is the “ultimate postmodernist structure,” Minnesota’s “Mall of America,” a huge mall and theme park rolled into one. A great example of the latter is the famous Pompidou Center in Paris.

The mixture of styles and of times may be seen in the design of our vehicles. Consider two cars popular with consumers right now: the new “VW Beetle” and the “Chrysler PT Cruiser.” Both are a mix of contemporary, in the true sense of the word, and old, with a design harkening back to each car’s “classic” era. The overall effect is jarring, but not altogether unpleasant. The PT Cruiser almost has a cartoon-like feel to it, which is very postmodern in and of itself. Is the car a vehicle, or an experience? Is it a car, or a picture or cartoon of a car that you can drive?

Speaking of cartoons, TV networks have preserved television history and you can see this old-new dynamic clearly at work on the airwaves. Cable TV especially depends upon reruns to make up the bulk of their programming. When you pick up the clicker these days you can watch silent movies from the 20’s, “The Wizard of Oz” from the 30’s, newsreels from the 40’s, Jackie Gleason from the 50’s, “Star Trek” from the 60’s, Bob

Newhart from the 70's, "Hill Street Blues" from the 80's, and "Seinfeld" from the 90's – all on the same evening, perhaps even in the same sitting.

The world of fashion does the same kind of thing. Do you remember when we had rules about what we could wear and when we could wear it? Now days, there are no rules and fashion blends together nostalgic trends and styles from clothing design of all periods. I recently found a photo of me from the late 1970's. Thanks be to God, I got rid of that horrible leisure suit a long time ago; the problem now is that it would probably fetch a pretty good price in one of the many "retro" clothing stores we have in my hometown.

A word about performance art: "The unifying mode of the postmodern," says Michel Benamon, "is performance."¹⁶

Whereas the modernists saw the work of art as transcending time, postmodernists see the work of art as existing only in time. The modernists, as well as the traditionalists, valued permanence. Postmodernists value transience. Thus, postmodern art is unabashedly fashion-conscious, fully aware that nothing in art (or anything else) is permanent.

Instead of trying to create timeless artifacts, postmodernists create ephemeral art, existing only in the moment. Some artists construct an object only to dismantle it, leaving behind historical documentation to show that it once existed. Other contemporary artists eliminate the object of art altogether and simply perform what they consider to be some imaginative art.¹⁷

In New York City, an artist produced a work of art that built, then destroyed, itself. We've already mentioned the artist Christo, whose works of art, say "Running Fence" for example, only exists for a short time and are then removed.

These days a visitor to a museum or art gallery does not see paintings on the walls, but typed pages and Polaroid photographs. These are examples of "conceptual art." The

¹⁶ Ibid., 100.

¹⁷ Ibid., 101.

artist displays the ‘documentation,’ the written description of his idea and possibly photographs of his artistic event. “Sometimes the work of art no longer exists. One artist spelled out the word ‘SEA’ in pebbles along the shore. He took a series of photographs as the waves washed the pebbles away, destroying his work of art.”¹⁸

“Performance Art” is a strong theme in postmodern art, the pioneer of which is the German artist Joseph Beuys. Listen to an art critic’s description of one of Beuy’s works: “In one of Beuy’s rituals [notice the sacred overtone], known as *Fat Corner*, a lump of fat, usually margarine, is packed in the shape of an inverted cone in a corner. The ritual involves simply leaving the fat to spread and stink over the course of days. The piece consists of the fat, its slow spreading, and the viewer’s response.”¹⁹ Notice that part of the work is how the viewer reacts, another very postmodern idea.

In another work, entitled “I Love America, and America Loves Me,” Beuys had himself wrapped in felt and put onto an airplane. Upon arriving in New York, he was picked up at the airport, still wrapped in felt, and taken directly to the museum. He was put into a room with a live coyote, said to represent Native Americans and other “victims of American oppression.” The artist, shrouded in felt, would bow to the coyote. Periodically, he would pace around the animal and touch it with a stick, and then lie down in a bed of straw. The coyote would look puzzled.²⁰

Danger and opportunity: The danger in postmodern art is that depth and substance are not necessarily paramount and context may be sacrificed; the opportunity is that more people are more open and exposed to art. Another opportunity: an openness to borrowing from the past.

VII. Postmodern Society

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 102.

²⁰ Ibid.

Now, let's turn our attention to postmodern society.

There are at least two themes I want us to trace in this part of the lecture that, I think, will help us to paint a picture of postmodern society. The challenge in examining postmodern society is getting far enough removed from it so that we can see it clearly with some context and perspective. We live so "close," as it were to the culture that we might not see the forest for the trees.

The first theme is relativism, and closely tied to it is the theme of multiculturalism.

Have you ever been to Disney's "E.P.C.O.T. Center" in Orlando, Florida? You may recall that there is a "World Showcase" beautifully arranged on the banks of a huge lagoon. "Countries" are situated one next to the other and simply by walking around the lagoon, park visitors can visit several foreign lands and sample foreign foods and entertainment, all in a clean, safe, family-friendly environment. Once, with a special traveling musical group, I had the opportunity to see behind the scenes at the World Showcase. Did you know that there aren't real countries at the World Showcase? The real France and the real Eiffel Tower are on the European continent far away from sunny Florida. I simply had no idea. The shops and attractions and restaurants are designed to look like the architecture of the host country, or more accurately, our perception of what we think the architecture of the host country should look like. The façades are as fake and plastic, literally, as a movie set. Behind the scenes, nondescript metal warehouses are the norm with large loading docks ready to handle all the incoming trucks filled with souvenirs for guests to buy. Out front, a family may walk from "Mexico" to "China" in about 15 minutes, eat at "Germany," stroll through "Japan" and finish up in "England" in

half a day. By the way, the food in “England” is much better than the food in England; believe me, I lived in the real country for a year.

Now, if all that sounds a bit surreal, we need to remember that families do the same kind of thing most every day in their own hometowns. As Gene Edward Vieth puts it, “In a typical evening, an American family might drive their Japanese car to a Mexican restaurant, return to their Tudor home to watch a western on TV and listen to some reggae music. Contemporary culture, like postmodern art, is definitely eclectic. Surrounded by diverse styles and cultures, we pick and choose from a global smorgasbord.”²¹

One effect that multiculturalism has had on our society is more and more relativism. The idea is that since different people come from different cultures, and each has something positive to share, then surely one can’t be better than another one. Much of this thinking, as you already know, has found its home on college campuses where to suggest that Western culture is in any way superior to any other is perhaps the most dangerous, even evil, thing you can say. “America is great because America is diverse” is a prevalent theme among the staunch multiculturalists – a long way from de Toqueville’s famous pronouncement that “America is great because America is good.” America is not, nor ever will it be, great because it is diverse. America is great because of the values it was founded upon and those held by its people. Diversity does not necessarily equate with morality or, say, excellence.

Think back to our discussion about postmodern art, especially to the idea that it tends to concentrate on the superficial. This relativism, in some ways especially as it applies to

²¹ Ibid., 143.

the multicultural issue, acts in much the same way. While postmodernism celebrates diversity in terms of style, it also reduces style to surfaces. Like the elaborate but plastic facades of the World Showcase, our daily encounters with other cultures are largely superficial. Again, Gene Edward Vieth:

Is eating a burrito at Taco Bell really equivalent to entering into the experience, history, and values of the Mexican people? Is listening to reggae music on a Japanese CD player really a multicultural encounter with the West Indies and Japan? Contemporary westerner's understanding of other cultures often only skims the surface, like tourists sampling cultural stereotypes instead of genuinely engaging another civilization. If all cultural values are relative, then none need to be taken seriously. Postmodern multiculturalism might affirm all cultures, but in doing so it may destroy them all.

The fact is, real cultures promote strict ethical guidelines. From Mexico to Africa, family ties are strong and sexual promiscuity is strictly forbidden. No culture (other than our own) would teach that there are no absolutes. Contemporary Western culture with its pornography, consumerism, and all-encompassing skepticism toward authority and moral traditions is ravaging traditional cultures.²²

Of course, not all of Western culture is bad. This, by the way, is another common theme you will encounter when you read on this subject: quite a number of writers have very little good to say about Western culture. Just recently I had the pleasure of hearing one of my favorite authors and thinkers on worship at a conference. The question came up about patriotism and worship and the obvious problems that combining the two can present. But part of her response took me by surprise: She acknowledged that the terrorism inflicted on the United States on September 11 was horrific, but equated it with the "terrorism" our nation inflicts on other countries with our TV shows and other cultural exports. For me, this is a perfect example of a typical postmodern failing: the inability or unwillingness to make difficult distinctions, and the ability or willingness to end up on the side of easy superficial pronouncements. Is the junk we export harmful to

²² Ibid., 144.

other countries? In my opinion, yes. But can you equate a Chinese kid buying blue jeans, or the BBC buying reruns of “The Dukes of Hazard,” with a person hijacking a plane and flying it into the side of a building? I think not.

Another dominant theme in our look at postmodern society is that of segmentation, which naturally follows from the previous one. Parts of our society are splitting into many diverse subgroups, each with its own set of social rules and lifestyles. The idea of community, another very important theme in postmodernism, has radically changed just in the last few years. Many forces in our country once seemed to work against the idea of community in terms of uniqueness, and work toward a kind of homogenized, pasteurized sameness. We are a widely traveled people who take advantage of superior interstates and discount airfares. When we arrive at our destination, there will be a familiar hotel, a Wal-Mart, a McDonald’s, and the same cable channels on the TV that we watch at home. These were all modern notions and inventions, but the postmodern result of them has been segmentation. Ironically, the more we travel and the more we see the same things and hear the same voices, the more we want to make the place we live in unique, or at the very least, do what we must to shut out the world. Modernity promised that we would have better technological communication, but it failed to see how the technology would also separate us. Now we are seeing the value of community and are working against segmentation.

Danger and opportunity: The danger of postmodern thinking about diversity and multiculturalism is that all cultures and worldviews will be seen as equal; the opportunity is that people will be open to new experiences and new voices. The church can be strengthened if we pay attention to how brothers and sisters in Christ from other parts of

the world worship. The danger of postmodern thinking about segmentation is that people will “cocoon” in their homes in a kind of overwhelmed sensory overload; the opportunity, however, is that people are hungry for community. The church has unique community to offer.

VIII. Small Group Activities/Questions

Group 1: Examine and prepare to share with the class your reflections on this topic: The world is definitely changing around us. Do you see any of Sweet’s coping mechanisms in yourself? In your church? The world is changing, for sure. Want to go back to the modern world?

Group 2: How much of Toynbee’s description of postmodernism rings true with you? Foucault was reacting strongly against the Enlightenment and modernism. What do you think about his idea that “the act of knowing is always an act of violence”?

Group 3: Talk about the problems with postmodern art and architecture. Where is the danger? The opportunity? Churches can resemble malls or even theme parks. Robert Schuller’s “Crystal Cathedral” is something like a religious theme park, featuring “babbling brooks and luxuriant plant life and multimedia sensory overload.”

Group 4: Postmodern thought has some ramifications for politics. What are some examples? (Reality is socially constructed. The minimalization of the individual. No one worldview is better than another).

Group 5: What are some of the ways postmodernism affects everyday life? For example, does postmodernism make it possible to hold mutually contradictory ideas? How has the postmodern mindset changed business in America? Education? Is the “Oprah Winfrey Show” postmodern. How so? For me, the toppling of science by

postmodernity is almost entirely a good thing. Am I wrong? What are some negative ramifications for this?