

From big brain to big mouth: modernity and postmodernity in Christian perspective

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Preacher: Philip and Miriam Sampson

[0 : 00] I've come to the Bethinking Talks of Calvary Evangelical Church.! The church has been here since it started as a railway mission, the commercial sector, and students as well.

The reason why we do these talks, or we've been putting these talks on over recent years, is that one of the students in the church came and said they're having real problems in integrating studies with their Christian faith, and it was sort of doing a head in.

And we didn't think that we could answer all the questions ourselves, but we knew some people who could. So at that stage we started a very warm relationship with the Libri Study Centre over in Hampshire, and there they came across and gave us some lectures which were very, very helpful. Now we've sort of broadened this year and rebranded as Bethinking, and there's an excellent website called www.bethinking.org, which has got a lot of excellent material on this exact subject of integrating thought and Christian faith.

So I recommend that to you if you've never seen that website. So these talks are in that traditional, in that idea, and that's what we're aiming to do this evening.

[1 : 45] So that's us and that's the talks, and I simply remains to give a very warm welcome to Philip and Miriam Sampson, who are going to speak to us this evening, or whatever they're going to do.

And they, and those strangers to Brighton, you both studied here, didn't you? Did you see if you met here? In this? No. No.

But you came to this church, didn't you? Yes. And that was a while ago. Not with my best friend. Two years.

Yeah, two years ago. Yes. So you're currently based in Portsmouth, and I know that Phil's been working with the probationary service, you're an advisor working, and then the courts and the other people.

And at present, he's spending mostly his time writing. And that brings me to... You've got some books to sell, I've got a book.

[2 : 52] There are some copies to sell, but most of them just gives you a book out of your interest, but there are some copies to sell. So this is a specimen of what Philip has written, *Six Modern Myths Challenging Christian Faith*, which is an excellent book, and I would recommend that to you.

So, you're very welcome. Thank you ever so much for coming. I'm really pleased to see you. Let's have a prayer.

Lord God, you are the maker of everything, and we believe that you enable us to love you with our heart and soul and strength in mind.

And we pray that we may not be slack in loving you with our minds. We particularly pray for those who are involved in the world of thought in this university city, that our thinking may honour you.

And we pray that this time we spend this evening may be used in exactly that purpose, and we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So, thank you very, very much.

[4 : 00] Thank you, Phil, for that welcome.

You may think we've chosen a rather odd title tonight. Actually, the person responsible for giving us this idea is in the audience tonight, but I'm not going to embarrass her by pointing her out.

But we're going to... Sorry, excuse me. I'm just recovering from a very nasty cold, so I hope my voice will hold out. We'll be unpacking this title a bit as we go through the first part of this talk.

So, this evening we're going to be looking at post-modernity from a Christian point of view. But you may be able to guess from the term post-modernity that it's not really possible to talk about the

post-modern without also thinking about the modern, because post-modernity really defines itself by its relationship to modernity, over against modernity.

So that's why our title tonight includes the terms modernity and post-modernity. So, why should Christians be concerned about these ideas? Well, if you've encountered these terms, you may initially have come across them in academic courses or in the lecture theatre or books that you're reading to do with courses you're taking.

[5 : 33] But they're not terms that we can just forget when we close our textbooks and get on with the rest of our lives. If these terms are important at all, these ideas, they're important because we encounter the things that they describe throughout life as well as in our studies.

And this includes our lives of faith and worship, as we'll make clear as we go on. So we're going to start by surveying this wider context about modernity and post-modernity, outside of the purely academic.

Then later on in this talk, we'll focus more on the theory and the ideas. Now, the term post-modernity sounds as if we're talking about something that comes after modernity.

And in a sense, that is right. Fifty years ago, for example, no one was talking about post-modernity. Twenty years or so ago, the term was beginning to emerge, and now it's everywhere.

Now, twelve years ago, a key book about post-modernity, which we've got over there by David Lyon, defined it as follows, and I quote, post-modernity is a multi-layered concept that alerts us to a variety of major social and cultural changes taking place at the end of the 20th century within many, in quotes, advanced societies.

[6 : 56] So it's not just to do with ideas, it's about a whole range of things happening in society and the culture. Now, those changes have accelerated even further since the beginning of the 21st century.

But alongside the post-modern, many aspects of modernity still shape the world in which we live today. So we're in a kind of mixture, really. So that brings us to the other part of our title.

Why big brain and big mouth? Well, when we think about modernity and post-modernity, we often find that the things we encounter fall into opposing pairs. And we're going to spend a little bit of time exploring some of those opposing pairs now, just to clarify some of these relationships.

And then when we finish that, we'll come back to this idea of big brain and big mouth, and I think that will be clarified a bit by then. So as we've already said, modernity and post-modernity aren't just about the world of ideas.

They're about social and cultural phenomena as well. So things like work, TV programs, and even the church are affected by them. And we're going to explore some of those contrasts between modernity and post-modernity across all these areas through a short activity, which is where we come to those slips of paper that I've given you.

[8 : 14] Now, I think a couple of people came in after I'd given them out. So if some generous person sitting near them would like to share. What we want you to do is look at the words that you've got on your pieces of paper, which are in different colours.

What we've done is we're going to explore a number of topics in which you will find contrast between modernity and post-modernity. We're going to start with knowledge, and the words that are in black are to do with knowledge.

We're going to move on to social and the cultural, the media and the church. So what I'd like you to do, if you've got one of those words that are written in black, I'd like you to think about whether you think the word that you've got or the phrase that you've got is characteristic of the modern or the post-modern, and just kind of call them out.

We won't spend a lot of time on this, let's move it along quite quickly. Call them out. So say, I think this one is modern, and it's whatever it may be, and then post-modern the same. And then we're going to show on the screen in true Blue Peter fashion a list that we prepared earlier.

Okay. So it'll be interesting to see if our list agrees with yours. So anybody got anything? Well, since it's all I was talking about last week, I'd say stories are definitely post-modern. Right. Okay.

[9 : 34] What would you say? Reason. Yep. Modern. Modern. Mm-hmm. Science. Modern. Right. Intuition. Post-modern. Yeah. Deconstruction.

Hang on. Deconstruction. Post-modern. Yep. I've got a relative list which is post-modern. What's the proposition which I reckon you want? Great. Progress. Yeah.

Objectivity. Modern. Subjectivity. Post-modern. Oh, you had the two opposing pairs. Right. Obviously, it doesn't shuffle well enough there. Any other... Anything else? I think it's post-modern. Earthy. Yes. Earthy. I think it's post-modern. And... Was there another one over here? I think it has a truth. Modern. Yeah. Father. Oh, we just have the black ones for the moment. Yep. Anything else? Anything else written in black? I think we pretty much... Sorry? And... Yeah? Great. Okay. I think let's look and see if that's pretty much exhausted our list.

[10:32] Sorry. We wanted these all to come on at once and we couldn't quite get it to happen. But anyway... If you just keep your finger on it it probably should just keep doing it. Right. Did we get all of those? I think we did.

And I think your list agreed with ours. Okay. So let's move on to the social then. Now, this is the ones that are in blue. I think our printer played up a little bit and the blue ones have got a little bit of pink on them as well.

So if you've got something that looks faintly rainbow coloured that's probably one of these. So this is the social and the economic. So what have we got? Manufacturing.

Manufacturing, yes. Modern or postmodern do you think? You think modern? Mm-hmm.

Consumption. Modern. Hmm.

Interesting one that. We'll bracket that though and then come back and see what you think. About reduction. That's what... Yeah? Sustainability.

[11:28] That's what personal. Right. Right. Job portfolio. Right. Interesting. Yes. Has anyone got anything else to do with jobs? Career.

Yes. Original. Do you? Oh, that's interesting. Right. Okay. Global. Uh-huh.

Any other blue ones? Global finish. First model. Right. Human rights. I'm saying we're more different. Okay. Okay. I think we've probably got most of them now.

Do you want to... So it'll be interesting to see. I think we have some slight... Oh, the control mastery. Sorry, I didn't get that one. And nation state. Yes. You got both of those. Oh, sorry, Tim. I should have given you more time.

Right. Okay. Okay. So we... Interestingly, these two probably should have been next to each other. We looked at the... Well, no, production and consumption. So the manufacturing processes and the production are very much associated with the modern.

[12:28] I think the consumer society, okay, it's got its roots in the modern, I give you that. But I think it's... The consumption has become much more characteristic and central in postmodernity.

And we had the career, the sort of job that you go through for your life and develop it in a systematic way as modern. And the job portfolio, the kind of, you know, moving between different things as the postmodern.

Okay. On we go. So let's look at the cultural. And this is a sort of nice shade of kind of magenta, I think. Anybody got anything on that? Right.

Okay. I think... Is that pink or is that red? Hold on to that one. We're going to come to that in a minute. Anyone got the... Images. Images. Yeah. Words as modern.

That's very close to... I think so. Sorry. It's probably with the lights and it's not so easy to see. I've got moral pluralism. Which is... Right. Mm-hmm.

[13:39] Sorry? Joey? Yeah. Got play. Is that in a theater? No. Play as in, you know. Playfulness. Playfulness. Playfulness.

Modern. Modern. Any... What do other people think about that one? I think one of the arms. Sorry? You think it's human. I think one of the arms. Play. We'll see how that one contrasts.

Has anyone got anything that would contrast with play? Need. Mm-hmm. What do you think need is? Mm-hmm.

I think that's red. I think that's red. Sorry. The pink and the red are a bit close. Okay. Let's move on then. Let's see what we've got there. So we've got purpose, need, utility, words, content, and a moral consensus under modernity.

Play, desire, choice, images, context, and moral pluralism under post-modernity. So the things in modernity are much more kind of directed.

[14:48] The things in post-modernity are much more diverse and less focused in, more focused out. Okay. Now we're going to move on to the media now.

So we've got sort of things like TV programs and stuff. I think these are a shade of green. Anyone got a green one? Broadcasting, I think, is post-modern.

Broadcasting, you think, is post-modern? That's interesting. Has anyone got anything else about something casting? Podcast. Podcasting. Now, if those are the contrasts, what do you reckon? Broadcasting, podcasting. Which is the modern and which is the post-modern?

Podcast. Podcast is the post-modern, isn't it? So broadcasting, you know, the same thing goes out to everybody. You've got your two, three, four TV channels. Podcasting, everybody's got their own little individual thing.

You can listen to it when you want and so on. So instead of one size fits all, it's lots and lots of choices. Okay. What have we got in the sort of TV programs and things?

[15:50] University Challenge. University Challenge. Which is pretty much still on. Okay. And what have you got? I've got a big program.

Free program. Definitely post-modern. And there should be one more. Okay.

Let's have a look. So two very different styles of quizzes there. One which is definitely modern, all about language.

And another one which is, well, I'm not quite sure what you'd say it's about, really. Okay. Let's move on finally. Now, this may be a little more controversial. Some thoughts here about modernity and post-modernity in the church.

And so the point we're making here, really, is that the church isn't immune from the influence of these sorts of cultural features. And so let's just have a look at how some of them may have influenced the church.

[16:52] So this is the red ones. What have we got? Right. I reckon that's modern. Okay. I've got a word. It probably depends how you think about it.

It probably depends how you think about it. Right. Okay. I don't know what you mean by it. I'm sure it does. Yes. Doctrine. Doctrine is modern. We've got a green chance.

Yes. Holy Spirit is what would be post-modernity. Uh-huh. Worship, which could be both quite easy. Okay. Demystifying. It's probably post-modernity. Well, let's have a look. We don't want to spend too long on this. Now, of course, we're not saying that these things are, for example, we're not saying that God the Father and the Holy Spirit are opposing things and that one is emphasized, that there needs to be an emphasis on one or the other.

What we're saying is we're looking at the way that things perhaps get emphasized within modernity and within post-modernity. So the emphasis on word was quite strongly in modern culture.

[17:58] The emphasis on worship has perhaps become greater in post-modernity. But we'll come back to that. Okay. So through this exercise, we've discovered that we're all very aware of this modern, post-modern context in which we live today and the mixture of things that are around us that are influenced by modernity and post-modernity, even if we're not fully aware of the ideas behind these things.

So the values of modernity we found focused on things like reason, science, objectivity, progress. Really focusing on the mind in a rather disembodied way, hence the idea of big brain.

Placing a high value on pronouncements from people that know the experts. Perhaps this could be exemplified by a radio and TV program, which really is prehistoric.

I remember my parents enjoying this one, called the Brains Trust. Oh, somebody here remembers it. In which a group of eminent people, scientists, philosophers, other experts, as I recall, sat around a table for an erudite discussion of questions that have been sent in by listeners or viewers, which was chaired by a man soberly dressed in a suit.

Very, very static. Very much focused on the experts and their ideas. Now, in post-modernity, the emphasis has shifted to subjectivity, relativism, choice and play, where many different points of view are heard.

[19:28] Everyone can have their 15 minutes of fame, as Andy Warhol put it. So, rather than something like the Brains Trust, where viewers ask the questions and trust the experts to answer them, at the other extreme, we now have something like Big Brother's Big Mouth, where you've got a studio audience all chipping in with their views on the instant celebrities who are living in full public view in the Big Brother house, and a flamboyant young comedian is egging them on and adding his own two pennies wherever possible to stir up the mix.

A completely different cultural phenomenon. Okay, that's our introduction then, and I'm going to hand over to Phil to start looking at this from a Christian perspective.

Okay, well, we've tried to give you an overview of modernity and post-modernity, not by giving a definition, but by illustrating from a number of different areas of life. And the question that we're going to look at for the remainder of the time is how Christians have responded to this post-modern turn.

There have basically been two responses. The first is that some Christians have just rejected it. Okay, this is not something which is helpful.

It undermines Christian values. It undermines ideas of objectivity. And not something that we have got much time for.

[20 : 50] The second response has been one of accommodation. Yeah, this is new. This is something we need to get into and buy into it. So, traditionally, Christians have been more suspicious of post-modernity than modernity, or at least those who reject it have, mainly because it's perceived as undermining Christian truth and values.

This has resulted in a flight from post-modernity and taking refuge in the old modernity, the old ideas that we're familiar with and that we're comfortable with.

More recently, the second turn, the second response of accommodating to post-modernity has been associated with what's called the emerging church.

And many people active in the emerging church have welcomed post-modernity. They see in it a greater concern with issues which are of vital importance to them.

Issues like authenticity, community, spirituality, and feel much closer to the way that those things are dealt with in post-modernity than they do to the traditional evangelical emphasis upon truth, doctrine, and morals.

[22 : 14] Now, in what remains, we will be arguing that both these responses are faulty. So, you have two responses, rejection and accommodation.

The first, taking flight from post-modernity and refuge in modernity, and the second, accommodating to post-modernity. And we will be arguing that these are both faulty.

And we'll be making three main points. Firstly, we'll be arguing that modernity is not all that it claims to be. It claims to be testimony-free truth, objective truth.

And we will be arguing that it is not narrative or testimony-free truth. Okay? Science claims to provide objective truth about the world, free from subjective or superstitious bias.

In fact, we will be arguing that science, as we learn it, involves stories, and that we learn scientific truth as we trust other people.

[23 : 23] So, modernity is not all it claims to be. Secondly, post-modernity is more than it says it is, more than it claims to be. In fact, post-modernity makes claims about reality, about ethics, and about truth.

In reality, nobody lives as though all points of view are equivalent. Thirdly, we will be arguing... Do please come in. Have a seat.

Thirdly, we will be arguing that Christian truth is a richer vision of the world than either modernity or post-modernity. Or, to put it another way, both modernity and post-modernity are narrowed-down versions of this richer biblical vision.

We need not be defensive. Biblical truth is a foundation for both life and study, for living well, and for seeking truth in God's world.

So, we will be claiming that both the modern and post-modern positions have fatal flaws, and that the Christian vision is richer than either of them. Sorry about all this bobbing up and down.

[24 : 38] Before we go any further with this, we want to introduce the idea of a worldview. Because this is going to help us as we compare the perspective of modernity and post-modernity and look at them both from a Christian perspective.

So, what do we mean by a worldview? Well, there are two key ideas. The first of them is about vision, and the second is about assumptions, sometimes also called presuppositions.

So, let's think about vision first. About 20 years ago, an important book was published entitled *The Transforming Vision, Shaping a Christian Worldview*. Again, we've got a copy over there that you can have a look at.

The authors explain the importance of worldview like this, and I'm going to quote. Humans are creatures of vision. They make life choices, and they make them in terms of their way of looking at things.

Consider the biblical notion of a walk of life. The scriptures tell us to walk by the spirit and not by the flesh, in Galatians 5. Paul doesn't mean we should leave our bodies behind, attempting somehow to be bodiless spirits.

[25 : 42] No, he's saying that the orientation of our walk of life, our direction, should be one of obedience to God, not disobedience. We are to set our eyes and our vision one way and not another.

This gets to the heart of what a worldview is. A worldview is never merely a vision of life. It's always a vision for life as well. A worldview determines our values.

It helps us interpret the world around us. It sorts out what's important from what is not. What is the highest value from what is least? A worldview then provides a model of the world which guides its adherents in the world.

It stipulates how the world ought to be and it thus advises how its adherents should conduct themselves in the world. So that's the idea of a vision of life, a vision for life.

Now, although these authors were writing about a Christian worldview, their claim is that everyone has a worldview of one kind or another, a vision of what they think life is all about, even though they may not be able to articulate it and spell it out in detail.

[26 : 51] The other point about this is that a worldview isn't just an individual vision of life. It's something that's shared. Now, a worldview can be shared across a whole society if there is a common culture, or there may be various subcultures and groups within society which have differing worldviews.

And this is something we've become increasingly familiar with in today's pluralistic society, where you may have people living in one geographical area who have very different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, different religions, different ways of life.

And I'm sure that Brighton is a very pluralistic city. So in terms of worldview, the idea of vision and shared vision is important, but the other aspect is the assumptions or the presuppositions that people have, the things that they don't question, that they take for granted in their thinking about issues and about the way they live.

Now, this time, I want to quote from an American writer who isn't a Christian, but who also recognizes the influence of worldview in shaping the way we think, the choices we make, and the way we behave.

And she emphasizes the way in which we all make certain assumptions about ourselves and the world we live in, which shape the way that we think and behave. Most of the time, we just act on these assumptions without thinking about them.

[28 : 10] So how can we become aware of them? Now, this is what this writer suggests, and I quote, We must talk in order to bring to the surface underlying assumptions, to nudge ourselves and each other to reflect upon the reasons why we think and act as we do.

We carry unexamined mental baggage, now centuries in the making. This metaphorical baggage, we need to put through the security check, you know, like they do at the airport, to see what's in it. We must open up this baggage, examining it in the light of its consequences for our future. Now, this process of bringing our assumptions or presuppositions to the surface is important for Christians as well.

After all, becoming a Christian is just the beginning. We've all been brought up and educated within modernity and increasingly post-modernity, and we will have taken on many assumptions and ideas from these contexts.

But if we're serious about recognising the Lordship of Christ in all the areas of our lives, then the way we think, the way we do science or create art or music, the assumptions we make about the world we live in, the way we relate to others, all of these need to be examined in the light of the Bible and its teaching.

[29 : 22] And this is how we can develop a consistent Christian worldview. Now, that would be the subject of a whole new lecture. That's not what we're here to talk about tonight. But we wanted to introduce this idea of a worldview because we're going to be looking at some key characteristics of the modern and post-modern worldviews.

So, what sort of assumptions shape a worldview and where do they come from? And how do these assumptions contribute to a vision of life and a vision for life?

Well, there are four key questions that any worldview addresses and those are going to come up on the screen. The first is the question of identity.

Who am I? And what am I, in other words, what am I here for? The second is the question of my relationship to the world. Where am I? The third is the question of good and evil.

What stands in the way of finding fulfillment? What's wrong? And the final question focuses on what could be done to put right what's wrong and find fulfillment. What's the remedy?

[30 : 24] So, as we just suggested for a Christian, the answer to these questions is going to be found in the Bible and its teaching about creation, fall and redemption. But how do the modern and post-modern worldviews respond to those questions?

You'll remember that when we listed the characteristics of modernity and post-modernity together a few minutes ago, one of the very important elements of modernity was the value placed on science. And modernity has in many ways embraced a scientific worldview. And many people have just taken this on board and never questioned it. But how do we actually learn about science?

We want to spend a few minutes looking at a scientific story that you may be familiar with. So we're going to have, we're going to watch something together and I think you're going to introduce it.

Is that right? I'll just go around and share. We're going to show you a science lesson and it's about somebody you'll all have heard of.

[31 : 24] It's called Galileo who, as you'll know, was a 17th century Italian scientist. And you'll have all heard at school or on TV or books and so on about his battle with the Inquisition.

And we're going to show you now a little presentation about that. All the statements contained in this have been drawn from books or TV programmes about Galileo mostly over the past 20 years.

Okay. Were there any surprises for you in that second version of the Galileo story? It's not one I think that we hear very often but in fact it's a good deal more accurate than the first version.

But the first version is the one that we were all brought up on. It's the one which outlines the modern opposition between science and religion.

So how does the first story that we saw the modern modernist Galileo story how does it answer our worldview questions? Who am I?

[32 : 46] What answer does it give to this? Well certainly not I am created in the image of God. The answer is I'm a resident on a minor planet. Where am I?

Well not at the centre of God's creation. I'm in an infinite universe third rock from the sun. What's wrong? Well it's certainly not that we've sinned and need forgiveness.

What's wrong is that we wrongly believe that the universe revolves around us. But the earth is not the centre and there is no God who is sovereign over all. What's the remedy?

Well it's certainly not the vision of Christian salvation. It's leaving obscurantist religion behind and following the path of science and knowledge. If our brain is big enough we can have a complete knowledge of everything a theory of everything.

We certainly don't need to worship or serve God. it's worth thinking about how we know that the earth goes around the sun.

[34 : 02] I don't know how many physicists I know there's at least one mathematician here. I don't know if there are any other physicists or mathematicians but most people I think know this not because they know the physics or the maths of it but because that's what we've been taught.

One of the things that the postmodern critique has done is to uncover the way that facts are contained in stories. We know that the earth goes around the sun not because we can do the maths but because we know the Galileo story.

We know scientific truths because somebody we trust, a science teacher or textbook has borne witness to them. This is not just blind trust because in some areas we are able to test science's claim and we have seen its fruits for example in medicine and technology.

But is this so very different from the Christian vision? The gospel is a story of God's love for the world and his intervention in history to establish his kingdom.

We know this because somebody we trust has borne witness to it. this is not just blind trust because where it's been possible we've tested its claims and we've seen its fruits for example in reforming social movements and individual lives.

[35 : 29] We can consider the historical evidence for ourselves and we can confirm that reality accords with the biblical vision. We have tasted and seen that God is good.

Now some people have used this insight that the way that we know things relies heavily on narrative and story and trust and witness.

Some people have used this insight to argue that this means that all truths are equivalent. All are just subjective stories that might be true for you but not necessarily for me.

As Leonard Cohen puts it, things are going to slide in all directions, won't be nothing you can measure anymore. When they said repent, I wonder what they meant.

The world according to this view is just story all the way down. Now this has been called the bumper sticker view of postmodernism because it greatly oversimplifies postmodern critique and what authors actually say but nevertheless it's an extremely popular perception of postmodernism.

[36 : 44] It's often described as relativism, the belief that there is no objective truth, no fixed moral anchor, only subjective accounts.

It's true if it's true for you. Well, what can we say to this? Firstly, reality resists this conclusion, conclusion, it resists this conclusion of relativism.

The relativist who insists upon the relative nature of the statement, a car is coming, so that's a statement and they say the meaning of that statement is entirely relative, but that same person will employ a different principle when he crosses the road, a principle of objective meaning.

we can rely on reality resisting error as God is faithful to the law order which he has instituted. So, reality resists the conclusion of relativism.

Secondly, the statement all is relative is an absolute truth claim. Relativism deconstructs itself. And thirdly, most relativists have, in fact, clear moral values, often admirable ones.

[38 : 07] Tolerance of others, preservation of the environment, dismay at warfare. They will be just as offended as any moral absolutist if these values are disparaged.

So, there are three reasons for being sceptical of the relativist reading interpretation of postmodernity. Firstly, reality resists that conclusion.

Secondly, there is a logical paradox involved. And thirdly, in fact, most relativists have clear moral values. Okay, well, we've covered quite a lot of ground, so let's summarise where we've got to.

Firstly, I've argued that trust and testimony are important for knowing the truth. the modernists claim that science is value-free is misleading.

Secondly, I've claimed that evidence is also important for knowing the truth. No one will put their trust in a free-floating story. This is called fiction.

[39 : 15] To be taken seriously, narratives have to take account of evidence. Even Dan Brown, the novelist, claims to anchor his narrative in a world of evidence, however fanciful that is.

If he didn't, no one would take it seriously as anything except fiction. And thirdly, reality resists relativism, and the assertion that all is relative is itself a truth claim.

So in this context, what does it mean to have a Christian testimony? In modernity, Christian testimony was narrowed down to personal or individual knowledge of God.

Christians, especially evangelicals since the mid-19th century, abandoned the sphere of public knowledge to the secular sciences, which were assumed to be neutral. They focused on the individual and the personal.

But times change, and this approach has left Christian testimony open to postmodern challenge. In postmodernity, everybody's got their own personal truth, their own story, their own spirituality.

[40 : 30] If we swallow the modern story, we can struggle to claim that the Christian story is unique. postmodernity is postmodernity. So in conclusion, let's draw some of these themes together.

Both modernity and postmodernity are narrowed down versions of a biblical worldview. The role of narrative in modernity is hidden but present.

Modernity involved stories, was not narrative-free truth. truth. The postmodern critique has questioned the modernist claim that scientific knowledge is neutral.

But to do so has itself relied upon rationality. The role of rationality in postmodernism is hidden but present, just as the role of narrative in modernity is hidden but present.

Secondly, the narrowed down worldviews of modernity and postmodernity make idols of an aspect of creation.

[41 : 37] Truth in modernity was narrowed to a particular kind of reason and objective fact and those aspects of the world, facts and reason, were deified and became idols.

That distorted the modernist perception of the world. In postmodernism, truth is fragmented and subjectified. Something can be true for you but not necessarily for me.

We each have our own truth. This deifies the individual subject and makes of each individual an idol and in doing so it also distorts God's world.

The Christian understanding is that truth is God's, not ours. We can have reliable knowledge of truth which goes beyond us as individuals but not exhaustive or complete knowledge as modernity claimed.

We cannot know everything but we can know in part, accurately, truthfully and trustworthily. thirdly, knowing the truth involves witness and testimony but also discrimination and testing.

[42 : 55] Christian faith is not blind faith and it's simply foolish to trust somebody known to be untrustworthy. The postmodern critique is right to emphasise the role of testimony and narrative in knowing but the Christian vision refuses to divorce this from the question of reliability and inquiry.

Think of Moses in the wilderness. You remember the story. Moses is in the wilderness and he sees a bush on fire. A strange sight. So what does he do? Does he fall down and worship this mystical phenomenon?

No. He investigates. He goes to see why the bush is not burnt. Moses went to look at the bush and then the Lord revealed himself to Moses. The Bible sees no conflict between testing and trust.

The psalmist says oh taste and see that the Lord is good. Investigate. Blessed is the man that trusts in him. Trust. At the beginning of his gospel Luke describes a complex mixture of investigation, eyewitness reports and faith.

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they are handed on to us by those who from the beginning are high witnesses and servants of the world, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, the most excellent theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

[44 : 36] Modernity, arrogantly laid claim to total truth. Postmodernity distrusts reliable truth, asking what's the agenda? Well, the Christian agenda is to be truthful, to walk humbly before the truth.

This involves the renewing of our minds as an essential part of Christian obedience. As Paul notes, do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

That's in Romans and then in Corinthians he says, we destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God and we take every thought captive to obey Christ.

Now, in this presentation we focused upon truth because truth and the foundations for truth are the subject which most commonly comes up when thinking about and talking about postmodernity and its impact on Christian faith.

But it would be really misleading to leave it there. We don't have time to extend this discussion, but I want to mention just two other themes. which are really vital in any discussion of postmodernity and Christian vision.

[46 : 04] The first is justice. In modernity, morality was a social consensus or it was based on reason. In postmodernity there is no consensus, there is no single reason, no fixed moral anchor for ethics for morality.

In such a situation, the biblical calling is to pursue justice and peace in a world devoted to violence. And that I think will become an increasingly important Christian calling. The second major theme that I want to draw your attention to as well as walking humbly before the truth and justice, the third that I want to mention is mercy.

In modernity, mercy was marginalised and one of the effects of the postmodern critique has been to draw renewed attention to the need for mercy and for forgiveness. Now this has always been a feature of Christian living, from the police court mission of the 19th century to the hospice movement of the late 20th.

I think one of the encouraging things about the contemporary church is that it contains movements such as Soul Survivor and the Message Trust, which have combined confident declaration of Christian truth with the practical pursuit of justice and mercy.

[47 : 32] In summary, we might recall Micah's summary of covenant faithfulness. He has shown you a man that is good.

What does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy and to all come be with your God? Okay, over to you.

Anybody got any questions? Or discussion? Or points arising? Maybe I'll make a point and everybody else is getting the right.

I think the issue that Christians have to face up to is actually to understand what the biblical epistemology.

As you say, we've kind of adopted the modernist one to some extent. And that's when it came apart. It's why a lot of more damage has been done to the Christian faith by the collapse of modernism than by modernism itself, I suspect.

[49 : 00] I suspect that we don't really have a coherent response. I think you're aiming for that, but we need a coherent understanding of how we do understand the scripture.

where do you think the church should be looking for that sort of, I agree, but where do you think the church should be looking for that kind of response?

Well, I think we should look at the way the Bible talks about itself. and try not, you know, one advantage of post-modernism is it's sceptical nature means that it doesn't, just tends not to just assume that the way you looked at it is the correct way.

You don't charge you not to read your presuppositions into it, which is probably a good thing. And I think maybe that's what we need to be looking at.

to, as I said last week, I think the book of Job is very important in this respect. Because that's about, that's what it's about, in a sense.

[50 : 16] It's about how do we understand the world. I'm not sure I knew all the answers, but if I did, I'd be on the BBC. Or not. Or not.

Anybody else want to take any further? Or sort of connected with that, maybe. we're conscious in biblical interpretation, the importance of understanding what the biblical text meant to the people who first received it.

So I'm just pondering when the Bible was written over that period of time, the sort of world views that people had at the time. You quote Mike out like that, and it sort of comes to light, doesn't it? it. So where did they stand on these sorts of issues? What sort of thinking did they have? There must have been a richness of understanding that they enjoyed, and yet many of those things sort of come with fresh light to us now.

there is a strong Calvinist tradition that throughout scripture you'll find a world underlying motif, if you like, of creation, form, and redemption, which is developed to a greater or lesser extent of various biblical authors, and obviously gains of richness as we go through the scripture historically.

[51 : 40] but the underlying from the first book to the last is this vision of God's creation, of the fall into sin, and of God's plan, redemptive plan, of the restoration of his creation.

And that that as framework underpins, underlines, our reading of scripture. And I don't know what to think about that. What you just said about creation, fall, and redemption, that's, they're what most people, myself included, think of as religious truths that have got not anything to do with science, though, as a thing.

Okay. Do you think that's a valid comment? In what way are they not to do with science? What is it about which makes them not to do with science? Well, if you're a scientist, it really has no, it really has no, it really impact.

You know, it's a bit of what you're doing. It's like, like I said earlier, it's like, it's like if you're doing concrete, it makes no difference for anything in a Christian or not, it's still concrete. And it's the same for science as I understand it.

That's certainly what we've all been brought up to believe, isn't it? That science is value free, that it's subjective knowledge that doesn't depend on... If that's not the case, how does what you've just said about Gershon for...

[53 : 06] Which I think, I mean, what relevance does it have to science? Well, I think that the strength of the postmodern critique is that it's questioned that view of science.

It's suggested that the way that we all learn science, the way that we know that the earth goes round with the sun, for example, is not because we can do the maths. It's because we listen to a story, a story presented to us, which is itself part of a bigger story.

It's part of a so-called enlightenment story that science broke free of religion, exactly as you say, and presents us with objective truth, which isn't religious.

But postmodernity has questioned that story and has drawn attention to the way that science has embedded in stories, in narratives, in accounts of things, which we believe because we trust the person that's telling us, and we trust the book that's telling us.

Is that quite... What you just said about Gary Lyle, that... I wasn't wholly familiar with what you showed, but I didn't know there was something of that. But that's very difficult.

[54 : 11] That is what you might say, despite the story that won't go further, that's the view. It's like any news story. It depends how it's told. But then that's a different order to Newton's laws, for example, which, although they've been superseded by Einstein, still apply to all intents and purposes and are narrative free as far as I can see.

Well, Newton's laws are a very interesting example because a number of authors have argued that the reason that for the growth, the background, the tremendous growth in the natural sciences of the 17th century was precisely the Protestant view that God had created the world and subjected it to law, to law forms, to which he was faithful, but by which he was not bound.

So, as one author puts it, natural scientists in the 17th century started looking for laws laws, because they believed in an orderly lawmaker.

So, Newton's laws historically are rooted in a changed belief about the nature of the world arising from the Protestant Reformation. law enforcement.

I understand what you're saying, but that's the philosophical underpinions. But the law itself is very free. It just is checkable.

[55 : 42] Anyone can check it. How? Well, actually, now I can't immediately think what the law and the Needs laws and motion are, but they are probably simple to do measurements for, I believe, aren't they?

Well, the difficulty is they're full of assumptions, you see, that there are different ways of construing the experiments used to test them.

And the ways of construing those experiments depend on a lot of assumptions about what's going on so that the experiment itself even is embedded in narrative.

But I think that there is, you do raise a really important point because as you begin to narrow down the narratives and make, take smaller and smaller pictures of things, as it were, exclude the historic and all the rest of it and just focus on, in the case of physics, on what's going on, you become, you know, knowledge becomes increasingly technical.

And there is a Christian understanding of this which would reject the post-modern critique that all knowledge is rooted in narrative and would argue that there are specific sorts of very technical knowledge which are free of narrative.

[57 : 01] But that becomes a very technical debate. But that's a specifically Christian response to your question. what I mean is, if you use science to build rockets and rocket flies, then you can more or less say that that's science is narrative free.

It may very well have come out of the Christian world view, just as it may have come out of Newton's head and parents and history. But the actual laws are true.

What you can say is that in a particular area there's evidence there which would support a scientific story of what's going on, just as one could say that in other areas there's evidence that would support a religious story of what's going on.

If somebody were to draw attention to it, for example, to change lives or to social movements inspired by a Christian faith or to the historic authenticity of biblical accounts, there's evidence there which supports a religious narrative, just as your rocket taking off is evidence which supports a scientific narrative.

But both of them are still embedded in narrative. Now, the postmodern critique of modernity would stop there, but I think there is a Christian understanding of this, specifically associated with Calvinism, which would want to argue that there are actually very technical spheres of knowledge which are not embedded in narrative.

[58 : 46] Thank you. I don't think anybody else was joining there. The narrative, even in science, the narrative is never totally reliable.

I've read an essay recently claiming that most of the results published in sports science are actually wrong because they've made statistical mistakes and so and this is never shuttles don't always fly. They sometimes become damn inclined. Yes, but that's an accident. Not that the laws have changed their mind. No. No, and to that extent there is a great definition of the laws that, I mean

that's what the Bible says, that the rain falls on the just and the unjust.

There is a coherence in the universe but that is part of the Calvinism, the Calvinism position is part of creation. It's made that way.

Yes, a postmodern narrative critique of the shuttle of discussion would suggest that choosing the shuttles that fly to illustrate the success of science is a bit picky and that you excluded the ones that don't die and something went wrong with those ones.

[60 : 15] It's that the best evidence is always invading in a narrative and a story of some kind unless you focus down in the way that I was suggesting.

In those cases some Calvinist philosophers would argue that there is narrative free science but that's a specifically Christian point of view.

I think it's a big postmodern most personalising critics will accept. I'll ask a question about changing the subject now. Sorry.

We were talking about histology which has to do with the theory of knowing things. Knowing a person seems to me to be a different sort of knowing.

You haven't mentioned that either in personal or normal terms. In the Bible there's a lot about this is eternal life to know you be one true God and knowing God is linked with truth.

[61 : 18] For example in the middle of one John we're going to look at tomorrow it says it talks about no lies from the truth and that there's such a thing as false prophets and the spirit of Antichrist which tells novels.

So that seems to tie truth and knowledge to knowing a person. would you like to comment on it?

Well I think that the scripture doesn't see a conflict between knowing the character of God and knowing God's faithfulness in his works in creation.

So that knowing God in a personal sense is entirely compatible with knowing God as the creator of the world and subjected his creation to certain laws to which he's faithful and by which he's not bound.

So the two kinds of knowledge I think are very closely integrated with the scripture. Yeah I think that's true.

I mean again I think if you look at the book of Job that's the point isn't it? That Job's comforters are trying to abstract something of principle of knowledge that you know that if you do things wrong that must mean you know that there's somewhere the view that something nasty happens because you've done something wrong and Job says no what happens in the world is because of God's covenant and God's wisdom.

[62 : 55] And then he talks about the end he talks a lot about creation and saying that you know there are lots of things that the world was created by wisdom which surely is a claim that it makes sense it's just that it's not always obvious that it makes sense.

So I think any Christian epistemology must be based on the nature of the personality of God and the personhood of God and particularly the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

But it doesn't mean to say to some extent it can't be abstract. It probably can but... That was what I was trying to tease out a bit that in terms of a worldview if we end up with a worldview that is impersonal whichever way we can it should be reduced it because the truth behind the universe is a person.

So that ought to figure in our understanding. Well I think that the Christian, the Calvinist expression of the Christian world of creation, form and redemption is intentionally personal.

God created the world that he didn't just abandon it and wind it up like a clock and need to get on with things. But he's constantly sustaining and upholding the world without his word of power nothing, things would cease to exist.

[64 : 30] that when the world fell into sin he didn't then abandon it but covenanted with the Father covenanted with the Son and the Holy Spirit to redeem the world to lead the industry to do so.

The Calvinistic expression of the Bible I think is intensely personal. I think Paul was the first to talk about the two books, the book of scripture and the book of nature as being mutually complementary.

As Paul tells us in Romans what can be known about God is clear in the scripture though we distort it in an unrecognisable way but the Holy Spirit so we use our minds to be able to see the revelation of God in the world which is entirely compatible with the revelation of God in his word.

Some Calvinistic philosophers argue that the modern world you distort that into on the one hand personalism and on the other hand mechanism and that a modern world is perpetually oscillating between the whole of personality and the whole of the mechanism so you can see for example in science the focus on objectivity and the impulse and in humanistic drive to freedom and focus on the person and the subject and there is a constant oscillation between the two which are regarded as being intention but I think that's not true in a biblical one of the view which doesn't have that kind of opposition about it.

So, what do you say? I appreciate very much your pointing at the great tension between post-modernity and modernity in terms of narrative versus reason and how Christianity needs to sort of not withdraw from both but rather needs to partake of both or fulfill both because both are only part of the reality.

[66 : 59] I think that's tremendous. how does that alter or affect the way that we read and understand scripture? Well, it would be interesting to know here whether people feel closer to a kind of the traditional focus of evangelical religion which has been on doctrine and on truth.

Sorry, let me just stand. Please stand up. Sorry. Whether people feel closer to the modernist understanding which has been focused on among evangelicals of truth and doctrine or whether these sorts of post-modern themes of authenticity have more resonance for you.

Does anybody have a view about that? Whether you feel closer to the one or the other. Just one observation and that is that in the church I think there's been a bit of a shift away from systematic theology and towards the biblical theology and I wonder if that's maybe linked with these things.

Okay. I think in the evangelical church at large there's been a shift away from all theology. And if you give from my knowledge of the general scene in writing I think if you've got the ministers together and asked them to discuss theologically they wouldn't know what you're talking about most of them to be honest.

Whereas if you ask them to talk about authentic spirituality or something there might be more Yeah. Does anybody else feel that you're around? Probably a bit hard.

[68 : 53] There's dumb truth in that I think yes. I mean I've been emailing with Marcus Hammersett who wrote the Meldown book. I do feel that is true in Brighton.

There is a lot of postmodern thinking within the church. I mean to answer your question my view is my background is very much in very much in the modernist approach but I think I've come to see that there are limitations of that.

It isn't as you say that neither is really an adequate understanding of the scripture. But I think what worries me is the abandonment of the idea of knowledge, the idea of almost the possibility of theology which is really as I say seems to me to be an abandonment of epistemology, an abandonment of the actual possibility of knowing.

Which is one of the things Marcus Hammersett says in his book of course that postmodernism is no longer interested in epistemology because it thinks there's no such thing. So coming back to your question, I think how we read the scripture, that within an evangelical world deeply influenced by modernity, scripture has tended to be read in a very uptrial kind of way.

That would be, I guess, sure, up to about 30 or 40 years ago. But increasingly scripture is read in precisely in a non-theological way, in a way of taking individual texts for their spiritual value or in isolation.

[70 : 43] And that neither of these, I think, would be an authentic reading of the scripture. What's the best way? That's my question. How can we pull all this together and have a better reading than either of those?

Well, I think that by having regard to the context of the scripture and the context in which we live our lives and drawing on both those things so that we're coming to the scripture from the point of view of the world that we're living in with questions and issues that we're facing and we're seeking wisdom from the scripture.

but we're also sensitive to the setting in which the scripture itself is written and the context in which it's written. But that we seek scriptural truth in all of our lives rather than just in very narrow spiritual parts of our lives or for its subject for its doctrine and content.

Not that doctrine and content is unimportant. Quite the contrary. I think the other thing that's important is not just to see each section of the scriptures as separate and self contained but to look at the whole sweep of the scripture and as we want to map the creation for redemption this whole drama really which the scriptures unfold for us so that when we're reading the New Testament

we're reading so in the light of the Old Testament and so on.

So we're getting an integrated picture of the whole of the view of the world creation that the scriptures give. Perhaps an illustration, a practical illustration, I was recently doing some work on the connection between food policy and global warming and the way that the kind of food that we eat affects this very topical area of global warming and the threat to the lives and livelihood of a very large number of mainly poor people.

[72 : 57] Rich people like us will be able to build walls as the poor people will suffer. And one way of approaching that which I find helpful in this and other context is simply to have that question in mind and read the Bible from beginning to the end.

So what does scripture say about these issues? And it's just astonishing how much scripture has to say about food. It's from beginning to end and we neglect all this and it's to our detriment if we don't. And we do the same with other issues, social justice, social justice, social justice, whatever it is that you're facing, absolutely. Sit down, spend a few hours, and with that particular question in mind and read through.

I'll just come back to the point that Philip was reading a bit earlier about the whole area of relationship. Because I've kind of gone through a bit of a change of mind as I thought about this whole issue.

And, you know, looking at the Bible and our belief and trying to present it in perhaps a more modernist way by say doing what Ford had said. He went to the synagogue and he reasoned, he persuaded.

[74 : 14] So there's a certain approach that he took, and it appeared to have worked. But the thing is that I find that nowadays, as the days that we live in, it's not so easy to do that, because, you know, when you take a scientific angle, there are some assumptions one makes in any scientific environment.

And, you know, we talk about the area of evangelizing. You know, what's, you go out with some kind of assumptions to give people. And I, you know, I was looking at a particular evangelistic approach that we were using in America.

and it was a great approach, but there were assumptions made that people they went up to talk to knew what the Ten Commandments were and had a respect for them.

But, you know, we know that wouldn't translate to somewhere like Bryson, who, I would say, certainly the younger generation wouldn't have a clue about the Ten Commandments, and nor would they have a respect for whether they broke them or not.

So, there are assumptions that already we can never use in this situation. However, what I have found when I speak, I've spoken to those who don't have a faith or the Christian faith, when I speak about it from a personal or relationship point of view that I have with God, I find that you get more attention from that because it's people don't want to dispute something that you claim is personal to you, and they're much more open.

[75 : 55] to hear about that kind of thing. And so, for instance, what comes to mind is something like Proverbs where it says, you know, the fear of the Lord, the fear of what is the beginning of wisdom.

Or if we say that wisdom may be a similar word to knowledge, we're saying actually something about our relationship with God is the beginning part of understanding and knowledge of everything.

So, you know, I've kind of shifted my understanding of how easy the difficulty is to cross to people as far as explaining my faith is concerned.

Yeah, I think that what you've identified is a good way into discussion in a postmodern context. The difficulty is that you come to the point where, well, that's fine for you, that's what helps you to personal fulfilment.

But as for myself, you know, I like the I Ching or Buddha or the Yin and Yang or something or another. The weakness of it is that we have, that it can become a pick and mix spirituality.

[77 : 08] So at some point there has to be a meeting with what the real world is like. whilst people might not know or care much about the majority of the taken on, so there'd be a few that might be sensitive to it.

Everybody has a moral position, I think, an ethical position, because that's the way we're made. By talking to people, you can make contact with them what that is and then begin to explore that with

them.

but that's still in the talking with people. In the end, you know, you can give your personal experience or something, but if you continue in relationship with that person, you know, our faith says that there has to be an evidence of it as well.

It's not just we are giving a testimony of something that happened to you in the past. There is an actual outworking of it and it's in evidence in your character, the way you're meant to someone or to a point one hopes where they begin to think actually there's something real about it.

It's not just something for you. I can see it actually affects me. So it's very much down to, I think, long term relationship with people, perhaps in a time now where relationships chop and change as quickly as jobs chop and change.

[78 : 24] Yeah, that's also, I agree, is vitally important. I think that there's a range of different things. We shouldn't just focus on one thing, but there are a range of different approaches that might be helpful with different people.

Sorry, what was all you was going to say? That's what we ended up by saying. It's not just relationships with individuals, it's also with the society in which we live.

And I think it's becoming increasingly important that churches and Christian organisations are seen to be actually helping people in some of the most defiant parts of our country and working with disadvantaged groups and so on.

That's a very important part of Christian witness in today's world. one thing that's positive about postmodernism is that if you say this is by a personal experience, it does show considerably more respect for people's personal experience.

Under modernism, if you sort of said something about the personal experience, the answer you get, well, nevertheless, science says this can't happen. That would be the sort of response you might very well get.

[79 : 42] Yeah, that's right. And the weakness that goes along with it is that then the response is, well, that's just your personal experience, mine is different. So there has to be a link with the real world as well.

But yeah, it does open up possibilities. And the perhaps more traditional approach among evangelicals to reject postmodern critique outright is to disadvantage ourselves for precisely the reason that you and our sister here have given.

I could ask a really controversial question. On our basis of faith, we talk about the scripture being inerrant and infallible.

Are those modernist words? Well, a lot of people would argue that they were. That formulation certainly came within a modernist context.

But it's referring to a truth which predates modernism, going at least back to the early modern period with the magisterial reformers.

[80 : 53] So I think what they're getting at is not limited by modernism, but perhaps the formulation in the 19th century under the influence of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers was probably modernist.

Yeah. They're all right, as you say, as long as you take them in the context that they were meant.

But there is a danger of treating the scripture as as if it's axiomatic.

If it's a series of propositions that you can construct logical conclusions from, there is a danger in that language, actually.

And to read some authors that they perhaps err rather in that direction, which is why Phil's point about the personality. Yes, that the scripture doesn't have this conflict which we have in modernism between necessary truth and personal truth.

I wonder if those terms are actually pre-modern rather than modern, because modernism tries to discover truth by human efforts and experimentation, as opposed to receiving truth by revelation and authority.

[82 : 18] Well, perhaps they're anti-modernist rather than modernist, but I mean, they are words that make sense in a modernist context, I think. They probably don't make so much sense in a post-modern context.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Time's getting on and thank you so much for stimulating our thinking and enlightening us and we're very, very grateful to you.

Can we just express our thanks a lot of in just a moment.

I'll just try and dig myself out of a slight hole and say I've got lots of good friends in the city who are ministers who have very good theological conversations. I've just got a bit of myself out of that one. Chris, would you just pray for us, please? We do thank you, our Father, that you are a God who has revealed yourself in many, many ways.

[83 : 34] We thank you, most especially who have revealed yourself in the Word of God. And we do pray, Father, that you would grant us such help by your Spirit that we may think and act rightly and wisely and properly in the world that you've set us in today.

We pray, Father, for all the illumination that we need. We just feel so feeble and weak and needy. We thank you that you are a God who comes near to us and shows us what we need to know to please speak to us, each one, and take the things that we've heard tonight and make them rich and lively in our hearts and minds.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. We did mention books over there. We've also brought a sort of jargon-busting sheet with some explanations of some terms that we often come across in post-modernity and a reading list which might be of help.

So they're over there. And Phil, you did actually put the mathematics up here, didn't you? Oh, yeah. I don't know. I don't know. So if anyone wants to know about mathematics, it shows the X-Y.

The other goes around the sun. That's it. Just in case anybody thinks that I'm down on the point. It's just a derivation, Steve, of the notation of it.

[85 : 00] The river is late.