

Domesticating the Gospel: A Review of Stanley J. Grenz's *Renewing the Center*¹

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Responsible theological reflection must embrace the best from the past while addressing the present. If theologians merely look to the past, then they risk becoming mere purveyors of antiquarian artifacts, however valuable those artifacts may be. But if they are concerned only with the present, then it is not long before they squander their heritage and become, as far as the gospel is concerned, largely irrelevant to the world they seek to reform because they domesticate the gospel to the contemporary worldview, thereby robbing it of its power. Stan Grenz, I fear, is drifting toward the latter error.

Content

As usual with Grenz's writings, this book is free of malice and—provided one is familiar with the jargon of postmodern discussion—reasonably lucid. Its ten chapters can be divided into two parts. Grenz begins by citing a representative sample of voices that find contemporary evangelical theology in disarray. In the first four chapters and part of the fifth, Grenz treats evangelicalism historically “as a theological phenomenon,” trying to “draw from the particularly theological character of the movement's historical trajectory” (15). Accepting William J. Abraham's analysis that the term “evangelical” embraces at least three constellations of thought, namely the magisterial Reformation, the evangelical awakenings of the eighteenth century, and modern conservative evan-

gelicalism, Grenz devotes the first two chapters to the material and formal principles of evangelical thought. With respect to the material principle, he holds that Luther's commitment to justification by faith, modified by Calvin's quest for sanctification, augmented by Puritan and Pietist concern for personal conversion, sanctified living, and assurance of one's elect status, declined into comfortable conformity to outward forms until the awakenings in Britain and the American colonies charged them with new life. The effect was a focus on “convertive piety” (*passim*) and a concern for transformed living, rather than on adherence to creeds. Evangelical theology focused on personal salvation.

He discusses the formal principle in his second chapter. Contemporary conservative views of the Bible have not been shaped exclusively by Luther or Calvin, he writes, but also by Protestant scholastics who “transformed the doctrine of Scripture from an article of faith into the foundation for systematic theology” (17). At the end of the nineteenth century the Princeton theologians turned the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture into “the primary fundamental” (17). This then was passed on to neo-evangelical theologians—those thinkers who from the middle of the twentieth century tried to lead evangelicalism out of its introspection and exclusion into engagement with the broader culture.

The next three chapters contain Grenz's

analysis of contemporary evangelicalism by studying three pairs of men. The first generation of neo-evangelical theologians can be represented by Carl F. H. Henry and Bernard Ramm. Grenz believes that Henry set a rationalistic and culturally critical cast to neo-evangelical theology and Ramm tried to lead evangelical theology out of “the self-assured rationalism he found in fundamentalism. Consequently, he became the standard-bearer for a more irenic and culturally engaging evangelicalism” (18). In the next generation, Millard Erickson and Clark Pinnock supply the contrasts, Erickson as an establishment theologian who systematized neo-evangelical theology and Pinnock as reflecting a theological odyssey that wanted to fulfill the evangelical apologetic ideal by engaging in dialogues with alternative views. Pinnock thereby carries on the irenic tradition of Ramm. The fifth chapter proposes that the third-generation polarities can be aligned with Wayne Grudem and John Sanders.

Is this polarity so great that David Wells is correct in thinking that we are on the verge of evangelicalism’s demise? Or does Dave Tomlinson’s announcement of a post-evangelical era point the way ahead? Grenz opts for neither stance. He suggests, in the second half of chapter five, that the emerging task of evangelical theology is to come to grips with postmodernity. Recognizing this term’s ambiguities, he places the heart of postmodernism in epistemology. Postmodernism adopts a chastened rationality and marks a move away from realism to the social construction of reality, from metanarrative to local stories. The rest of the book teases out this proposal.

The next three chapters constitute the book’s heart. Chapter six, “Evangelical Theological Method after the Demise of

Foundationalism,” summarizes the book Grenz jointly wrote with John R. Franke entitled *Beyond Foundationalism*.² Grenz gives us his take on “the rise and demise of foundationalism in philosophy” (185) before offering his own alternative. Here, he says, he has been influenced especially by Wolfhart Pannenberg and George Lindbeck. Pannenberg’s appeal to the eschatological nature of truth, i.e. to the eschaton as the “time” when truth is established, responds to the reality that “God remains an open question in the contemporary world, and human knowledge is never complete or absolutely certain” (197). Lindbeck’s rejection of “cognitive-propositionalist” and “experiential-expressive” approaches in favor of a “cultural-linguistic” approach supports Pannenberg’s emphasis on coherence. In Wittgenstein’s shadow, Lindbeck insists that doctrines are “the rules of discourse of the believing community. Doctrines act as norms that instruct adherents how to think about and live in the world” (198). Like grammatical rules, they exercise a certain regulative function in the believing community but they “are not intended to say anything true about a reality external to the language they regulate. Hence, each rule [or doctrine] is only ‘true’ in the context of the body of rules that govern the language to which the rules belong” (198). Lindbeck calls for an “intratextual theology” that aims at “imaginatively incorporating all being into a Christ-centered world” (199).³

Within evangelicalism, Grenz finds most hope in the work of Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, especially in their claim that Christian theology “is an activity of the community that gathers around Jesus the Christ” (201). This constitutes a “communitarian turn” in evan-

gelical theology: “we have come to see the story of God’s action in Christ as the paradigm for our stories. We share an identity-constituting narrative” (202). This is not the same as old-fashioned liberalism, Grenz asserts, because (1) liberalism was itself dependent on foundationalism, which Grenz rejects; and (2) older liberalism tended to give primacy to experience such that theological statements were mere expressions of religious experience, while in the model that Lindbeck and Grenz are propounding “experiences are always filtered by an interpretive framework that facilitates their occurrence. . . . [R]eligions produce religious experience rather than merely being the expressions of it” (202-203).

Yet Grenz wants to go a step farther, a step beyond Lindbeck: the task of theology, he argues, “is not purely *descriptive*... but *prescriptive*” (203). That is, it “ought to be the interpretive framework of the Christian community” (203). Taking a leaf out of Plantinga’s insistence that belief in God may be properly “basic,” Grenz writes, “In this sense, the specifically Christian experience-facilitating interpretative framework, arising as it does out of the biblical gospel narrative, is ‘basic’ for Christian theology” (203). This is not a return to foundationalism by another name, Grenz insists, because the “cognitive framework” that is “basic” for theology does not precede theology; it is “inseparably intertwined” with it (203-204). The appropriate test becomes coherence, not the disparate and often unintegrated data of foundationalism—as exemplified, Grenz asserts, in a Grudem.

In all of this, Grenz does not want to lose sight of the Bible, which must be the “primary voice in theological conversation” (206). But he wants to distance himself from

the modern era’s misunderstanding of Luther’s *sola scriptura*. Theologians in the modern era, Grenz says, traded the “ongoing reading of the text” for their own grasp of the doctrinal deposit that they found in its pages that was “supposedly encoded in its pages centuries ago” (206). It is far wiser to incorporate speech-act theory, and be sensitive to what the text *does*, how it *functions*, what it *performs*. “The Bible is the instrumentality of the Spirit in that the Spirit appropriates the biblical text so as to speak to us today” (207). In this light, the reading of the text is “a community event.” Grenz agrees with Walter Klaassen: “The text can be properly understood only when disciples are gathered together to discover what the Word has to say to their needs and concerns” (208).

Thus even if the Bible is the “primary voice,” that voice must never be thought of as independent of the culturally-bound situation of the community of readers.

The ultimate authority in the church is the Spirit speaking through Scripture. The Spirit’s speaking through Scripture, however, is always a contextual speaking: it always comes to its hearers within a specific historical-cultural context. This has been the case throughout church history, for the Spirit’s ongoing provision of guidance has always come, and now continues to come, to the community of Christ as a specific people in a specific setting hears the Spirit’s voice speaking in the particularity of its historical-cultural context (209).

Here tradition may play a secondary role, a kind of reference point, as the members of a community of faith recognize that they belong to a community that spans centuries.

But evangelical theologians must not look only to the voice of the Spirit through the Scripture. They must also “listen

intently for the voice of the Spirit, who is present in all life and therefore precedes us into the world, bubbling to the surface through the artifacts and symbols humans construct" (210), even though that voice "does not come as a speaking against the text" (210). In short, "We listen for the voice of the Spirit who speaks the Word through the word within the particularity of the hearer's context, and who thereby can speak in all things, albeit always according to the Word who is Christ" (211). This approach opens the way, in the wake of foundationalism's demise, "for an evangelical method that views constructive theology as an ongoing conversation involving the interplay of Scripture, tradition, and culture" (211).

Because the "one God, Christians assert, is triune" (212), communitarian focus is mandated. Following "the lead of Reformed epistemologists," then, Grenz declares that the church—the community of believers—is "basic" in theology (214). This in turn

opens the way for introducing *community* as theology's integrative motif. That is, community—or more fully stated, persons-in-relationship—is the central organizing concept of theological construction, the theme around which a systematic theology is structured. Community provides the integrative thematic perspective in light of which the various theological foci can be understood and significant theological issues explored (214-215).

Christian theology is not the theology of the individual, but of the community. "Christian theology must be communitarian, because it is linked to a particular community, namely, the community of the disciples of Jesus" (215).

This leads to chapter seven, whose title—"Theology and Science after the

Demise of Realism"—does not immediately disclose where Grenz is going. He begins with the question, "Exactly *how* are theologians scientists?" (220) and sketches "three paradigmatic Christian theological answers to the question" (220): (1) According to the modern paradigm, theology is like science, emphasizing data, controlled thought-experiments complete with hypotheses to be tested and which are themselves "members of a larger network held together by a [*sic*] overarching program that consists of certain methodological rules that guide the research process" (227). Grenz argues that this model is no longer tenable, since scientists "are no longer agreed as to what 'the scientific method' in fact entails" (228). (2) According to the medieval paradigm, theology is the queen of the sciences. Perhaps this model reached its apogee with Thomas Aquinas: theology presides over a hierarchy of *scientias speciales*. Although that model is now behind us, a form of it is being given new life today according to which "theology brings the sciences together into a unified whole" (232), a stance expounded in detail by Pannenberg. Grenz thinks that this approach correctly reflects the fact that "the scientific portrayal of the universe is also fundamentally religious in tone" (235), but it retains "a potentially problematic objectivist orientation" (235). (3) Under the postmodern paradigm, science is theology. Here Grenz sides with the postmodern writers who insist that scientific method is not as objective and neutral as it thinks it is. Kuhn has taught us to recognize shifting paradigms and a host of others have insisted on the constructionist elements of science. Science and theology alike are social constructions. So-called "critical realists" may demur and maintain that "scientific theories seek to

approximate a natural world that actually exists apart from scientific descriptions of it" (242), but Grenz insists that we do not inhabit the "world-in-itself": social construction is unavoidable. So Grenz concludes that "both theologians and scientists are involved in the process of constructing 'world'" (244).

Of course, that raises the question whether Christian theology can continue to talk about an actual world at all on this side of "the postmodern condition characterized by the demise of realism and the advent of social constructionism" (244). To put it slightly differently, "can Christian theology make any claim to speak 'objective truth' in a context in which various communities offer diverse paradigms, each of which is ultimately theological? . . . Does the move to nonfoundationalism entail a final and total break with metaphysical realism?" (245). Grenz judges that the question is "both improper and ultimately unhelpful" (245). It would be better to ask, "How can a postfoundationalist theological method lead to statements about a world beyond our formulations?" (245). Christians, after all, like critical realists, do maintain "a certain undeniable givenness to the universe" (245). But this "givenness" is not the putative objectivity of what some think of as "the world as it is," but, "seen through the lenses of the gospel, the objectivity in the biblical narrative is the objectivity of the world as God wills it," which is suggested in the petition, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (246).

This universe that God wills "is primarily a future, rather than a present, reality" (246); it is the eschatological world, the ultimate new creation. It is the order that cannot be shaken (Heb 12:26-28), which is "far more real, and hence more objective, than the present world, which is even now

passing away (1 Cor. 7:31)" (246). Christians therefore adopt an "eschatological realism," which "gives shape to a social constructionist understanding of our shared human task" (246).

This divine eschatological world is the realm in which all creation finds its connectedness in Jesus Christ (Col. 1:17) who is the logos or the Word (John 1:1), that is, the ordering principle of the cosmos as God intends it to be. The centrality of Christ in the eschatological world of God's making suggests that the grammar that constructs the 'real' world focuses on the narrative of Jesus given in Scripture. . . . In short, in contrast to the driving vision of much of modern science, the Christian faith refuses to posit a universe without recourse to the biblical God who is 'the Creator of the heavens and the earth.' And the only ultimate perspective from which that universe can be viewed is the vantage point of the eschatological completion of God's creative activity (247).

Grenz then concludes that

In the task of viewing the universe from a theocentric perspective, both theology and science play important roles. Through the use of linguistic models that they devise, explore, and test, practitioners of both disciplines construct a particular world for human habitation. For its part, theology sets forth and explores the world-constructing, knowledge-producing, identity-forming "language" of the Christian community. The goal of this enterprise is to show how the Christian belief-mosaic offers a transcendent vision of the glorious eschatological community God wills for creation, and how this vision provides a coherent foundation for life-in-relationship in this penultimate age (247).

In doing this, "theology assists the community of Christ in its mission to be the sign in the present, anticipatory era of the

glorious age to come, and to anticipate that glorious future in the present" (247).

Chapter eight turns to other religions. In a postmodern world, the question of the "truth" of Christianity must be posed not only with regard to science but also in conversation with other religions. Initially, Grenz works through the traditional categories used to evaluate whether or not salvation is available in other religions, viz. the categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. He is most sympathetic to inclusivist models. He concludes that the "evangelical heart" deeply desires "to hold out hope that the eternal community will include persons who have been found by the God of the Bible even though they appeared to live beyond the reach of Christian evangelists" (268), even as "evangelical zeal" rightly maintains the urgency of evangelism. As for the place of other religions, Grenz's light survey of the biblical material leads him to conclude

that the Bible allows no ... unequivocal rejection of the possibility of either faith or true worship beyond the central salvation-historical trajectory of Israel and the church. This, in turn, leads to the suggestion that human religious traditions may indeed participate in some meaningful manner in the divine program for creation, even if only in the present penultimate age (275)

—which, I think, means that even if such religions cannot save in the ultimate sense, they may participate, at the present time, in the divine plan to build community: "the providential place of human religious traditions may lie with their role in fostering community in the present" (276).

What, then, of traditional Christian claims regarding the finality of Christ in a pluralist world? Most evangelicals want to privilege the Christian claims by insisting

that their theological vision is in fact true. But this, Grenz insists, is to retreat to a foundationalist epistemology. The way forward (with Mark Heim) is not to ask "Which religion is true?" but to ask "What end is most ultimate, even if many are real?" (280-281). Hence, Grenz argues:

The communitarian reminder that the goal of all social traditions is to construct a well-ordered society (although the various communities might well differ from each other as to what that society entails) suggests that the truth question is better formulated: Which theologizing community articulates an interpretive framework that is able to provide the transcendent vision for the construction of the kind of world that the particular community itself is in fact seeking? Hence, rather than settling for the promotion of some vague concept of community, the communitarian insight leads to the question, Which religious vision carries within itself the foundation for the community-building role of a transcendent religious vision? Which vision provides the basis for community in the truest [*sic!*] sense? (281).

As with other community-based visions, "a central goal of the Christian message of salvation is the advancement of social cohesion, which it terms 'community' or 'fellowship'" (281). The goal of life is community, i.e. fellowship with God, with others, with creation, "and in this manner with oneself" (281). All human religions do this to some extent. That, Grenz asserts, is what the Melchizedek story affirms: "wherever people are drawn to worship the Most High God, there the true God is known. And wherever God is truly known, the God who is known is none other than the one who is revealed through Jesus Christ" (281).

Evangelicals go farther. We firmly believe, Grenz says, that the Christian

vision sets forth more completely the nature of true community life than any other religious vision. "Viewed from this perspective, the Christian principle of the finality of Christ means that Jesus is the vehicle through whom we come to the fullest understanding of who God is and what God is like. Through the incarnate life of Jesus we discover the truest vision of the nature of God" (283). If this entire approach may seem to some to undercut any claim to universality, Grenz thinks he can avoid the problem by affirming "the universality of the divine intent," since "God's eschatological goal is not designed for only a select few but for all humans" (283), and God's

eschatological new creation is present in embryonic form in creation, and the seed that will blossom into the renewed inhabitant of the eternal community lies within our human nature as created by God 'in the beginning.' And this is a design or purpose that all humans share. This universal divine purpose for humankind means that insofar as it arises from an understanding of God's intent for us, the Christian vision is for all (284).

The central line of argument in chapters six to eight leads to chapter nine, "Evangelical Theology and the Ecclesiological Center." Like many others, Grenz holds that evangelicalism has lacked a strong ecclesiology. Its reliance on parachurch organizations has led to its emphasis on the invisible church, which emphasis has resulted in an impoverished understanding of the empirical church, and therefore a depreciation of true community. Moreover, pressure from ecumenists has led evangelicals to insist that biblical fellowship and biblical unity take place among individual true believers—and this sidesteps the obligation to pursue organiza-

tional unity. This leads Grenz to argue for a "a renewed missional evangelical ecumenism" (*passim*), characterized by four marks of the church: (1) the church in active mission is apostolic, i.e., it stands in continuity with the apostles' doctrine proclaimed in word and sacrament; (2) the church in mission "is truly catholic, insofar as it is a reconciling community" (320); (3) the church in mission is holy, i.e., it is set apart for God's use and attempts "to pattern life after the example of God" (321); and (4) the church in mission "is intended to exert a unifying effect" (321).

The final chapter, somewhat briefer and more diffuse than the others, calls for the church of Jesus Christ to be characterized by a "generous orthodoxy" (*passim*). Grenz wants us to abandon what he calls the two-party paradigm of people who are "in" and people who are "out": the dichotomy, he says, cannot be sustained in a postmodern age, and so is "dangerously anachronistic" (330). He quotes with approval the comment of Gerald T. Sheppard regarding the older paradigm: "A common historical, referential grammar supported their conflict on political, ethical, and doctrinal matters. One side or the other could thus be deemed right or wrong. Conflict over 'truth' made sense" (330). Grenz concludes:

The postmodern condition calls Christians to move beyond the fixation with a conflictual polarity that knows only the categories of "liberal" and "conservative," and thus pits so-called conservatives against loosely defined liberals. Instead, the situation in which the church is increasingly ministering requires a "generous orthodoxy" characteristic of a renewed "center" that lies beyond the polarizations of the past, produced as they were by modernist assumptions—a generous orthodoxy, that is, that takes seriously the postmodern problematic. Therefore, the way forward is for evangelicals

to take the lead in renewing a theological “center” that can meet the challenges of the postmodern, and in some sense post-theological, situation in which the church now finds itself (331).

This “center” to which Grenz is calling us is not the “center” of political power, of being at the heart of the nation’s life, but is “a *theological* center, and the quest to renew the center involves restoring a particular theological spirit to the center of the church” (333). Because of his emphasis on “convertive piety” as one of the core values of evangelicalism, Grenz argues that even the great turning points in evangelical history—the magisterial Reformation, Puritanism, the rise of Pietism—were not “greatly concerned about full-scale doctrinal renewal” (339-340).

These were not doctrinally oriented reform movements in the strict sense. The concern of the Reformation was to return the gospel of justification by faith alone to the church; the intent of Puritanism was to restore a duly constituted church; and the burden of the Pietists was to place regeneration or the new birth at the heart of the church. Apart from these emphases, the precursors of evangelicalism were content to accept the orthodox doctrines hammered out in earlier centuries of church history (340).

What finally “gave impetus to the introduction of a concern for doctrinal renewal into the fellowship of purveyors of convertive piety was the modernist-fundamentalist controversy” (340). The emergence of the postmodern situation calls us to rethink such priorities and return to our roots as a people of convertive piety, “calling the whole church to a generous orthodoxy that is truly orthodox” (340). “Understood as the constellation of beliefs that forms the Christian interpretive frame-

work, sound doctrine plays a crucial role in the life of faith” (344). “Doctrine, then, is the set of propositions that together comprise the Christian belief-mosaic. But the task of formulating, explicating, and understanding doctrine must always be vitally connected to the Bible, or more particularly, to the biblical narrative” (345)—but we must recognize that “every telling of the narrative always takes the form of an *interpreted* story” (345).

As for catholicity, “the language of a renewal of the center that is catholic in vision can no longer limit itself to self-consciously evangelical or even Protestant denominations” (347). The postmodern, global reality in which we live calls us to be a renewal movement that transcends such limitations (see 350).

Critique

If a book’s success is measured by the extent to which readers want to argue with it, then I at least must judge *Renewing the Center* to be a highly successful book. At the very least, Grenz has helped me to sharpen my thinking by forcing me to analyze where and why I agree or disagree with him.

To engage him fully would require a book as long as his. But some progress can be made if I focus on the following points.

(1) Almost every time Grenz offers historical judgments, they are deeply tendentious, in need of serious qualification, or simply mistaken. Is the delineation of “historical trajectories” the best approach? There are other models, e.g., expanding concentric circles, or shifting centers in overlapping fields. But even if trajectories are chosen, do the trajectories that Grenz develops accurately reflect evangelicalism? For instance, is it true that Puritanism, which gave us the Westminster Confession,

was relatively uninterested in doctrine and primarily characterized by “convertive piety”? How deep are the changes from Calvin to Calvinist scholastics? The answers are disputed, of course, but in the light of serious works of scholarship that discern more continuity (e.g., Joel Beeke), we have a right to expect more than reductionistic labelling.

The problem is deeper. We must ask how “evangelical” and “evangelicalism” should be defined. Today there are several schools of thought. Without arguing the case, Grenz adopts a sociological/historical approach, following William Abraham. The result is that “evangelicalism” is a word that applies to various groups that think of themselves as evangelicals—and this means that Grenz is able to smuggle into the rubric various contemporary scholars and movements whom no evangelical thinker would have admitted as “evangelical” a mere half-century ago. I have long argued that “evangelicalism” must be defined first and foremost theologically or else it will not be long before the term will become fundamentally unusable to its core adherents.

Here are two more examples where Grenz’s highly questionable historical analysis controls his discussion. First, Grenz argues that in the nineteenth century the Princetonians transformed the doctrine of Scripture from an article of faith into the foundation for the faith, into the “primary fundamental.” A decade and a half ago, a small group of scholars, exemplified by Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, tried to convince the world that the Princetonians had transformed the historic doctrine of Scripture into an indefensible precisionism, an indefensible inerrancy. Their own historical errors were nicely put to rest by John Woodbridge and others,

whose close knowledge of the primary sources dealt this revisionist historiography a death blow. The result is that no one of stature makes the same mistake today. But now Grenz is attempting his own wrinkle: the Princetonians may not have *changed* the doctrine but they *elevated* it from one article of faith to the foundation for faith. This sweeping claim probably cannot be sustained. The Princetonians had more to say about Scripture than some of their forebears, precisely because that was one of the most common points of attack from the rising liberalism of the (especially European) university world. But I suspect that even-handed reading of the evidence would not find Hodge or Warfield adopting a stance on Scripture greatly different from that of Augustine or Calvin, so far as its role is concerned in the structure of Christian theology.

Secondly, and more crucially for his book, Grenz sets up these polarities: Henry/Ramm, Erickson/Pinnock, and Grudem/Sanders. He does not ask which member of each pair represents the greater bulk of evangelical thought. In the last case (Grudem/Sanders), I’m not sure that either is highly representative and, in historical terms, I’m not even sure that Sanders should be called “evangelical” at all. Moreover, to assert that Ramm and Pinnock represent a more “irenic” tradition than Henry and Erickson is wrong-headed: their writings are not more “irenic” than those of their respective opposites but are open to more stances not historically central—or in some cases even admissible—to traditional evangelicalism. It is tendentious to say that theologian X is more “culturally engaging” and “irenic” than theologian Y, if both engage the culture often and respectfully, but X absorbs more of it into his or her system than Y. That may simply

prove that X is more compromised than Y—but in any case, the point must be evaluated and argued, not simply blessed with positive adjectives or cursed with negative ones.

These and other historical misjudgments would be merely irritating if they were not being used to determine the direction of Grenz's argument.

(2) Grenz is right to see that a profound epistemological shift lies at the heart of postmodernism. But postmodern epistemology has been shaped by several streams, including the hermeneutical analysis of the Germans and the linguistic/deconstruction priorities of the French. Interestingly enough, these trends are now being trimmed in their own countries. Grenz focuses almost exclusively on analyses of postmodern epistemology that think of all "knowledge" in terms of social construction, which is a predominantly American approach.

There is a more fundamental flaw in Grenz's approach to postmodernism. He is utterly unable to detect any weakness in postmodern epistemology and therefore all of his prescriptions for the future assume that postmodernism is essentially correct. Postmodernism has displaced modernism: the latter was so wrong Grenz can say almost nothing good about it and the former is so right Grenz can say almost nothing bad about it. The approach is like a 1950s western: there are light hats and dark hats—and everywhere the reader knows in advance which side is going to win.

In particular, intentionally or otherwise, Grenz has bought into one of the fundamental antitheses embraced by postmodernism: either we can know something absolutely and omnisciently or our "knowledge" of that thing is nothing more

than a social construction that has the most doubtful connection with reality, i.e., with the thing-in-itself. If you think that this antithesis is a convincing analysis of the alternatives, then you will be driven to a pretty radical postmodernism, because one can always show that human beings know nothing omnisciently—so if the antithesis is reasonable, there is only one alternative left. Postmodernism is entirely right to remind us that all human knowing is necessarily the knowledge of finite beings, and therefore in some ways partial, non-final, conditional, and dependent on a specific culture—after all, language itself is a cultural artifact. But nuanced alternatives abound to the absolute antithesis so beloved of postmoderns and everywhere assumed by Grenz. Various scholars have developed the hermeneutical spiral, the pairing of "distanciation" and "fusing of horizons," and asymptotic approaches to knowledge. All of these have argued, convincingly and in detail, that notwithstanding the genuine gains in humility brought about by postmodernism, finite human beings may be said to know some things truly even if nothing absolutely and omnisciently. Quite frankly, it is shocking that Grenz does not engage this very substantial literature. He has bought into a simplistic antithesis and he never questions it. This leads him to a merely faddish treatment of science. For instance, why does he not engage with Kuhn's critics, who appreciate his contribution but carefully surround his insights into paradigm shifts with convincing qualifications? To cite Polkinghorne to the effect that scientific method cannot be reduced to some mere formulation is not the same as saying that no knowledge of the objective world has been gained, even if that knowledge is not the knowledge of omniscience. The funda-

mental data of the periodic table, for example, are beyond cavil. Even the big paradigm shifts (e.g., from Newtonian physics to relativity) do not, interestingly enough, overthrow Newton's equations for many bodies in limiting conditions. In Grenz's text "critical realism" receives short shrift; the nature of empirical testing of hypotheses is not adequately explored; the differences between a "hard" science and historical disciplines are not probed. The different branches of knowledge are merely social constructions—and that is all there is to it.

Of course, the element of truth in this postmodern assertion is that human beings are finite and therefore their knowledge is never absolute or final or omniscient. Moreover, all human articulation is necessarily within the bounds of some culture or other and can thus truly be said to be a social construct. But to run from this fair observation to the insistence that it is improper to talk about objective truth, or about human knowledge of truth, is merely a reflection of being hoodwinked by that one untenable antithesis. We may not know truth with the knowledge of omniscience and, insofar as postmodernism has reminded us of this, it has debunked some of the idolatry of modernism. But that is not the same thing as saying that we can know some things truly, even if nothing omnisciently. We can know that the water molecule is made up of two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen, that Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead, that God is love, and countless more things. We cannot know any of them omnisciently but we can know them truly. Think of the many things the Bible says that believers do know, know to be the truth, and are obligated to pass on to others *as the truth*. Grenz does not discuss such texts

or use them to temper the postmodern antithesis that has snookered him.

(3) Grenz tries to avoid this trap by having recourse to Pannenberg. "In this world human knowledge is never complete or absolutely certain," he writes, and opts for the certainty of the eschatological world, the ultimate world, the world that is not passing away. He argues that this eschatological reality can ground our epistemology.

But there is a triple problem. First, we might reasonably ask how someone knows that the eschatological reality will put everything to rights. This is known only because of the specific revelation that has been given us in Scripture. But the same Scripture gives us revelation about the past and present, too, and about atemporal truths. If we can know enough about the future through Scripture to let its promise ground our epistemology (even though our knowledge of that future is not omniscient), why not say something similar about other things that are revealed in Scripture?

Secondly, Grenz introduces a category mistake. The mere fact that this world is passing away and the eschatological world is final and eternal does not mean that the latter is more "real" than the former and therefore better known. That is to confuse the category of eternity with the category of reality. Something that is temporary, while it (temporarily) exists, is just as "real" as something that is eternal.

Thirdly and most importantly, even when we arrive in the eschaton, we will never be more than finite beings. Omniscience is an incommunicable attribute of God. True, we will no longer be blinded by sin, and we will be living in a transformed order of perfection. But we will never enjoy absolute and omniscient

knowledge. (Incidentally, the closing verses of 1 Corinthians 13 do not challenge this point. Paul insists that the eschaton brings unmediated knowledge, not omniscient knowledge.) If finiteness is the grounding for the epistemological limitations so beloved by postmodernists, the new heaven and the new earth will not enable us to escape them. So why does Grenz think they will?

(4) Grenz's reliance on Lindbeck is even more troubling. Doctrines are rules of discourse "not intended to say anything true." They are the rules of discourse that constitute the "belief mosaic" of the believing community. But this is a mistake of the first order. The Bible does not encourage us to think that we are saved by ideas that have no extra-textual referentiality, i.e., that do not refer to realities beyond the text. We are not saved by ideas (that is, doctrines) that are merely the discourse rules of a believing community. We are saved by the realities to which those ideas refer. Anything else is a merely intellectualist game, but it is not the gospel.

For some time I have been wondering if I should write an essay with the title, "The Bibliolatry of George Lindbeck." The point is that even the most right-wing fundamentalist thinks that the Bible refers to realities beyond the ideas that are found on the Bible's pages. In that sense, no fundamentalist can rightly be charged with bibliolatry, since the Bible is not the ultimate object of veneration, but rather the realities to which the Bible refers (God, Christ, Jesus' death and resurrection, etc.). But if Lindbeck denies that biblical extra-textual referentiality is crucial and utterly essential to faithful Christian existence, then he uses the Bible as no fundamentalist ever does: he goes back to the Bible and then stops. That is bibliolatry. (It may be

that in some of his very recent essays, Lindbeck is beginning to change his mind; I'm not sure. But this is irrelevant in a review of Grenz, since Grenz does not attempt to trace the development of Lindbeck's thought.)

This should have warned Grenz that there is something wrong with postmodernism or at least that form of postmodernism that buys into the crucial antithesis I have already discussed. But it doesn't. So eager is Grenz to avoid saying that what the Bible says at any point is *true* or *authoritative* or *binding* that the most he can affirm is that the Bible is our "primary communication partner." Contrast the ways in which, say, Jesus and Paul can speak of the truth and the binding authority of Scripture. Appeal to speech-act theory will not free Grenz from the dilemma. For speech-act theory, however useful it is at helping us to understand the diverse ways in which language actually functions, certainly does not deny that one of the things that language does is to tell us true things. Nor does it help to tell us that the ultimate authority is the Spirit speaking through Scripture—not least when we are promptly told, first, that the Spirit speaks through everything in the creation and, second, that all of the Spirit's speaking is a contextual speaking. There are vague senses, of course, in which these claims are correct, but they actually misdirect the argument and hide the fundamental issues. For instance, in one sense it would be entirely correct to say that God himself holds the ultimate authority. But that does not sort out for us what role Scripture must play in our knowledge-formation. It is correct to say that all interpretations of Scripture are shaped by the context of the interpreter: postmodernism is right to remind us of our finitude, our

dependence on specific languages, and so forth. But unless one buys into that one unconscionable antithesis which I have already dismissed, it does not follow that we cannot know some true things from Scripture or that we cannot be shaped by it both in our beliefs and in our conduct or that Scripture itself—precisely because there is an omniscient Mind behind it—cannot be objectively authoritative. Certainly that is the way Scripture views Scripture. Grenz's reformulation of the doctrine of Scripture is so domesticated by postmodern relativism that it stands well and truly outside the evangelical camp (whether "evangelical" is here understood theologically or socially/historically).

By chapters nine and ten, Grenz eventually recalls enough of his evangelical roots to say encouraging things about the incarnate Jesus being the truest vision of God, and the new creation being embryonic in the old creation, and the importance of adhering to the apostles' doctrine, and even the importance of holding to "sound doctrine." Still, it is difficult to avoid the impression that what the right hand gives, the left hand takes away. For instance, the reference to "sound doctrine" is lodged in a crucial sentence: "Understood as the constellation of beliefs that forms the Christian interpretive framework, sound doctrine plays a crucial role in the life of faith." But does "sound" mean "true"? What makes the doctrine "sound"? Is it simply the fact that it is part of the belief-mosaic of a peculiar Christian community? *Any* doctrine held by finite human beings is necessarily "interpreted" doctrine, but (apart from that nasty antithesis again) it does not follow that it is unintelligible to assert that the interpretation is true.

Moreover, in the light of his earlier reliance on Lindbeck, I wonder how Grenz

reaches the conclusion that the incarnate Jesus is the truest vision of God. And precisely *why* should we hold (with both Lindbeck and Grenz) that the Christian interpretative framework is not merely descriptive but prescriptive? Do we hold that simply because we belong to a Christian community where the doctrines in question are part of the essential "grammar" of discourse? Or do we hold them because they are true, or at very least we claim that they are true? How do we know that the one God is triune? On what basis do we assert it? Merely because the "belief mosaic" of one community asserts it? In that case, the lessons that Grenz draws about the importance of being-in-relation-ship is grounded not on God as he is, but on the grammar of discourse of the community. How can the grammar of discourse of the community properly ground the grammar of discourse of the community?

(5) Grenz places enormous emphasis on the Christian community. In part, this is tied to his view that all human "knowledge" is a *social* construct rather than a reflection of reality. But I fear that every major turning point in his argument is weak. Apart from that wretched antithesis, which rises again here (i.e. because human "knowledge" is a social construct, it cannot be claimed to be true), the crucial weaknesses are as follows:

First, Grenz makes a fascinating jump from "is" to "ought." Because postmodernism has taught us that all human knowledge *is* a social construct, therefore in this postmodern age we *ought* to emphasize the community. But that misunderstands postmodernism's point. If all human knowledge is a social construct, then the ostensible knowledge gathered by modernism was also a social construct. Postmodernism is arguing that the social

construct model is inevitable, not that we should opt for it. If postmodernism is right on this point, then, despite what it might have thought it was doing, modernism was as socially constructed as postmodernism. No “ought” is required; the “is” is all-devouring. To put it concretely, if postmodernism is correct on this point, then Carl Henry was engaged in the social construction of reality every bit as much as Stanley Grenz is.

Secondly (although this a minor point), for a writer who says a great deal about the importance of doing theology in community, Grenz has given us a book with a very high proportion of *individual* self-references: for instance, “my proposal” is one of his favorite phrases. So I am not certain what his advocacy of theology as a communitarian activity means, concretely.

Thirdly, it is extraordinarily difficult to see on what ground Grenz moves from the church as the *locus* of theological reflection to the church as the *object* of theological reflection. To put the matter slightly differently, even if we agree that theology is properly a communitarian activity, it does not follow that the organizing doctrine of the resulting activity ought to be the community. That is an enormous leap—and logically and methodologically unjustified.

Fourthly, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this emphasis on the church has blinded Grenz to what the gospel itself is about. Paul does not resolve in Corinth to preach nothing but the church, but nothing but Christ crucified. Tied to this astonishing silence in a book that purports to tell us how to renew the *evangelical* center is a failure to think through and articulate a host of related matters. For instance, can we maintain agreement on what the solution is if we cannot agree as to what the problem is? Can we come to agreement

about the atonement (Rom 3:21-26) if we cannot agree on the wrath of God and human guilt (Rom 1:18-3:20)? At what point do biblically faithful Christians *confront* and *contradict* the world in its current opinions, instead of reshaping the “gospel” so as to parrot the world’s agenda? There is very little hint of the perennial urgency of this task in Grenz’s volume.

Fifthly, although he says (with many others) some useful things about the influence of parachurch movements, the chapter on ecclesiology disappoints. It is not that evangelicals have no ecclesiology but that we have several that are, to some extent, mutually-contradictory. One of the reasons for this state of affairs is that one characteristic of evangelicalism is that it elevates soteriology above ecclesiology—or, to put the matter differently, soteriology is more determinative of the shape of ecclesiology than the reverse. Traditionally, it is Roman Catholicism that elevates ecclesiology above soteriology. I cannot detect that Grenz is even aware of this danger.

Sixthly, Grenz does not give us a rationale for jumping from Plantinga’s argument that belief in God is properly “basic” to the conclusion that the community is properly “basic” or that the “specifically Christian experience-facilitating interpretive framework” is properly basic. Unless I am misunderstanding him, Grenz is using “basic” in a manner rather different from Plantinga’s usage. In any case, appeal to Plantinga makes a thoughtful reader long for reflection on a related matter. While Plantinga (rightly) rejects foundationalism, his appeal to God as properly “basic” introduces a kind of “soft” foundationalism, a warranted belief for the Christian community, a kind of non-foundationalist’s foundationalism. Plantinga happily talks of this God in extra-textual terms: what he

means by “basic” is more than what Grenz means. I suspect this matter needs more thought and care.

(6) I close with three irritants in an ascending order of seriousness.

First, sometimes the jargon is so thick and fuzzy that I am uncertain if anything substantial or precise is being said. “We listen for the voice of the Spirit who speaks the Word through the word within the particularity of the hearer’s context, and who thereby can speak in all things, albeit always according to the Word who is Christ” (211). “This divine eschatological world is the realm in which all creation finds its connectedness in Jesus Christ (Col. 1:17) who is the *logos* or the Word (John 1:1), that is, the ordering principle of the cosmos as God intends it to be” (247).

Secondly, although I agree that coherence is one important element of any responsible epistemology, I cannot see for the life of me that coherence is less important in modernist epistemology than in postmodern epistemology. To level the charge against Grudem is particularly misjudged. The reason why Grudem thinks it is possible to organize a systematic theology from almost any point is precisely because in his view the truth behind theology—which theology is meant to discover and expound—is so superbly coherent that the internal ties will eventually take you to the whole anyway. Whether or not this is the best way of thinking about these things is not the point. The point is that coherence is far from being the peculiar preserve of postmodern epistemology. Moreover, to make coherence the ultimate test of a system is short-sighted. Tolkien gives us a very coherent world but it is not a world so objectively true that it may usefully serve as the proper object of faith.

Thirdly, Grenz has raised the fine art of

sidestepping crucial questions to an annoying level. I have noted that he asks the obvious questions, “[C]an Christian theology make any claim to speak ‘objective truth’ in a context in which various communities offer diverse paradigms, each of which is ultimately theological? . . . Does the move to nonfoundationalism entail a final and total break with metaphysical realism?” (245). This is precisely what must be asked: Can we talk about objective reality, objective truth? But rather than answer these questions, Grenz judges that they are “both improper and ultimately unhelpful” (245). It is better to ask, “How can a postfoundationalist theological method lead to statements about a world beyond our formulations?” (245). And that leads him to his Pannenberg-inspired references to the eschatological world, leaving unanswered the question about whether we can say anything objective about this world. In any case, what precisely is the relationship between our “statements” and this “world beyond our formulations”? If the expression “world beyond our formulations” is taken in an absolute sense, we cannot say anything about it and so we may as well stop trying. But if the expression imposes some important limitations that are not absolute, then we are obligated to tease out, as best we can, the relationships between that world and our statements of it. But that brings us back to truth claims—and so Grenz punts again. He tells us we must not ask, “Which religion is true?,” but “What end is most ultimate, even if many are real?” (280-281). As we have seen, here Grenz argues:

The communitarian reminder that the goal of all social traditions is to construct a well-ordered society (although the various communities might well differ from each other as to what that society entails) suggests

that the truth question is better formulated: Which theologizing community articulates an interpretive framework that is able to provide the transcendent vision for the construction of the kind of world that the particular community itself is in fact seeking? Hence, rather than settling for the promotion of some vague concept of community, the communitarian insight leads to the question, Which religious vision carries within itself the foundation for the community-building role of a transcendent religious vision? Which vision provides the basis for community in the truest [*sic!*] sense? (281).

But on what ground do Christians claim that their vision for community-building is best? Isn't that a merely communitarian conclusion? Would, say, a Muslim community concur? What is the next move? Do we establish merely sociological criteria to measure our respective communities? But aren't those sociological criteria merely social constructs? Grenz is trying to have his cake and eat it. He cannot have it both ways.

Renewing the Center is a bit of a disappointment. Quite apart from its stance, with which, transparently, I have sometimes disagreed, it has the flavor of the amateurish about it. Nevertheless the questions Dr. Grenz is asking are important. No one reading this review article has the right to hunker down in traditional modernist epistemology and feel justified in mere cultural conservatism. To the extent that he has exposed the folly of that route in several of his books, Dr. Grenz has done all of us a considerable service. But it does not seem to have struck him that, just as thoughtful Christians should not permit their epistemology to be held hostage by modernism, so they should not permit their epistemology to be held hostage by post-modernism. There are alternatives, deeply

Christian alternatives. Dr. Grenz could serve all of us well with his fluent pen. But he needs to take stock and re-think several matters of fundamental importance before he goes any farther down this trail.

ENDNOTES

¹*Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era*. By Stanley J. Grenz. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000, 366 pages, \$23.99 paper. This review first appeared on the website of Modern Reformation.org at <http://www.modernreformation.org/monthly/grenzreview.html>.

²Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000).

³Quoting from George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 16.