

DOMESTICATING THE GOSPEL: A REVIEW OF GRENZ'S *RENEWING THE CENTER*¹

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RESPONSIBLE THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION must simultaneously embrace the best of the heritage from the past, and address the present. If theologians restrict themselves to the former task, they may become mere purveyors of antiquarian artifacts, however valuable those artifacts may be; if they focus primarily on the latter task, 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 wittingly or unwittingly 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 in his writings, Grenz in this book is free of malice, and, provided one is familiar with the jargon of postmodern discussion, reasonably lucid. The book's ten chapters can be divided into two parts. Grenz begins by citing a representative sample of voices that find contemporary evangelical theology in disarray—though admittedly these analyses do not all agree. So in

¹ Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000). A slightly different form of this review was published in 2001 on the Internet at www.modernreformation.org. Dr. Grenz asked for space to respond, and his response was posted on the same website. About the same time, my review article was published in hardcopy in *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 82-97. For his part, Dr. Grenz published his response as an article, "Toward an Undomesticated Gospel: A Response to D. A. Carson," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 30 (2003): 455-461. In this form of my review article, I have introduced only the most minor changes in the text itself, but I have introduced footnotes in which I have briefly responded to Dr. Grenz's riposte. Because I refer to the Internet form of his response, I have not included page references, but his words are easy enough to find.

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, viz. the magisterial Reformation, the evangelical awakenings of the eighteenth century, and modern conservative evangelicalism—Grenz devotes the first two chapters, respectively, to the material principle and the formal principle of evangelical thought. In both cases he is attempting to tease out a “trajectory” of historical development. With respect to the material principle: 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, decline 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 concern for transformed living, rather than adherence to creeds. Evangelical theology focused on personal salvation.

As for the formal principle (chapter 2), contemporary conservative views of the Bible have not been shaped exclusively by Luther or Calvin, 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 was passed on to neo-evangelical theologians, the thinkers who from the middle of the twentieth century tried to lead evangelicalism out of its introspection and exclusion, and into engagement with the broader culture.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 carry on 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, the former setting a rationalistic and culturally critical cast to neo-evangelical theology, and the latter trying 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, the polarity is Millard Erickson and Clark Pinnock, the former an establishment theologian who systematized neo-evangelical theology, the latter reflecting a theological odyssey that wanted to fulfill the evangelical apologetic ideal by engaging in dialogues with alternative views. He thereby carries on the irenic tradition of Ramm. The

fifth chapter proposes that the polarities in the third generation 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? In the second half of chapter 5, Grenz opts for neither stance, but suggests that the emerging task of evangelical theology is coming to grips with postmodernity. Recognizing the ambiguities in this term, Grenz identifies the heart of postmodernism in the epistemological arena. It adopts a chastened rationality (his expression), and marks a move from realism to the social construction of reality, from meta-narrative to local stories. The rest of the book teases out Grenz's proposal.

The next three chapters constitute the heart of the book. Chapter 6, "Evangelical Theological Method After the Demise of Foundationalism," is a summary of the book Grenz jointly wrote with John R. Franke entitled *Beyond Foundationalism*.² Grenz provides 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. The former'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 the "cognitive-propositionalist" and the "experiential-expressive" approaches in favor of a "cultural-linguistic" approach supports Pannenberg's emphasis on coherence (the view that affirms that a structure of thought is believable because its components *cohere*—they hang together). In the shadow of Wittgenstein, Lindbeck in effect 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 rules of grammar, 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 [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

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

³ Quoting from George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 16. In other words, an *intratextual* theology is concerned to show that all the parts of the (biblical) text cohere to present an ordered structure—but it is not necessarily claiming that what the text ostensibly says about realities *outside* the text is necessarily true.

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 evangelical 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). Grenz wants to go a step farther, a step beyond Lindbeck: the task of theology, he argues, “is not purely *descriptive* . . . but *prescriptive*” (203, emphasis his), i.e., 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 (exemplified, Grenz asserts, in a Grudem).

In all 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*. The theologians of 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 and which 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). The reading of text, in this light, 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 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). Thus 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. Moreover, 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 is what 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, emphasis his). 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 7, whose title ("Theology and Science After the Demise of Realism") does not immediately disclose where Grenz is going. He begins by asking the question, "Exactly *how* are theologians scientists?" (220, emphasis his), 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: in this view, “theology brings the sciences together into a unified whole” (232), a stance expounded in detail by Pannenberg. Grenz thinks that although this approach correctly reflects the fact that “the scientific portrayal of the universe is also fundamentally religious in tone” (235), 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).

That raises the question, of course, whether Christian theology can continue to talk about an actual world at all, 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,” and

which is suggested in the petition, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (246). And 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 concludes:

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. In so doing, 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 8 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. Grenz is most sympathetic to inclusivist models. He concludes that the “evangelical heart” deeply desires “to hold out hope that the eternal com-

munity 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), while “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 the nature of true community life more completely 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). And 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 6–8 leads to chapter 9, “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 organizational unity. This leads Grenz to argue for 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, emphasis his). 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 framework, 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 (350).

CRITIQUE

If the success of a book is measured by the extent to which readers want to argue with it, then this reader 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 perhaps some progress will 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. One might ask if the delineation of “trajectories” is the best approach. One might appeal to other models, e.g., expanding concentric circles, or shifting centers in overlapping fields. But even if one prefers trajectories, one must ask if the trajectories that Grenz develops accurately reflect evangelicalism. Is it true, for instance, that Puritanism, which gave us the Westminster Confession, was relatively uninterested in doctrine, but was 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 labeling.

The problem is deeper. One 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.

I must mention two more examples where Grenz's historical analysis controls his discussion and yet is highly questionable. 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."⁴ A decade and a half ago, a small group of scholars, well 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 deathblow. 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. I very much doubt that this sweeping claim can 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. Beyond this, 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 in the structure of Christian theology is concerned.

More importantly for his book, Grenz sets up the polarities Henry/Ramm, Erickson/Pinnock, and Grudem/Sanders. Grenz does not ask which member of each pair represents the greater bulk of evangelical thought.

⁴This is the first place where Grenz responds. He points out, rightly, that what he actually wrote was that "the character of the Scripture focus among many evangelicals today is also the product of the approach to bibliography devised by the Protestant scholastics, which transformed the doctrine of Scripture from an article of faith into the foundation for systematic theology. The nineteenth-century Princeton theologians appropriated the scholastic program in their struggle against the emerging secular culture and a nascent theological liberalism. Drawing from this legacy, turn-of-the-twentieth-century fundamentalism elevated doctrine as the mark of authentic Christianity, transformed the Princeton doctrine of biblical inspiration into the primary fundamental, and then bequeathed the entire program to the neo-evangelical movement." He objects, fairly enough, that he actually used the expression "the primary fundamental" *not* of the Princetonians but of the fundamentalists who followed them. But my criticism is far deeper than this response recognizes. He insists that the Protestant scholastics "transformed" the doctrine of Scripture, that the Princetonians "appropriated the scholastic program," and that the fundamentalists then "transformed the Princeton doctrine . . . into the primary fundamental." That is a lot of transformation. Since in this reconstruction the Protestant scholastics had already "transformed the doctrine of Scripture from an article of faith into the foundation for systematic theology," I am not entirely clear what it means to say that the fundamentalists then turned Scripture into "the primary fundamental"—and that, plus reasons of space, is why I truncated the argument. I am entirely happy to expand it—but the thrust of my criticism remains unchanged. There is a competent and detailed literature that shows that a "high" view of Scripture is paradigm-independent, or, more accurately, that it keeps recurring in every century of the Christian church.

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. To assert that Ramm and Pinnock represent a more "irenical" tradition than Henry and Erickson is wrongheaded: their writings are not more "irenical" 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 "irenical" than theologian Y, if both engage the culture a great deal and with respect 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.⁵

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 at the heart of postmodernism lies a profound shift in epistemology. 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 (a predominantly American approach).

But 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 the essential rightness of postmodernism. 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.⁶

⁵ It is true, of course, as Grenz points out, that he can later in his book use the term "irenical" of Grudem, and this sort of detail prompts him to insist that I have misunderstood or misrepresented his polarities. It seems to me this usage simply shows he can use the word in different contexts. Nevertheless, I happily encourage readers to reread chapter 3 of *Renewing the Center* to determine if my summary of the polarities that Grenz proposes is in the slightest unfair or misleading.

⁶ In his riposte, Grenz insists he nowhere vilifies modernism, but merely wants to create "an apologetic theology that brings classic orthodoxy into conversation with the contemporary situation" (to use the language that he himself cites from his book [183]). I heartily agree that that is Grenz's *motive*. But it is not his *motive* with which I disagree. I have no doubt he thinks that what he is doing is in line with what theologians have long done. My criticism is that by dismissing modernist epistemology as out-of-date and no longer tenable, and buying into postmodernism, he is in danger of repeating the errors of the modernists he criticizes—constructing a form of Christianity that is so deeply indebted to a reigning

In particular, wittingly 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 is therefore in some ways partial, non-final, conditional, 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,” asymptotic approaches to knowledge.⁷ 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/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 the insights into paradigmatic shifts with convincing qualifications?⁸ 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

epistemology that it sells something of its birthright. That is clearly what Grenz thinks has happened within modernism (hence his discussion, for instance, on how later groups of modernists “transformed” the doctrine of Scripture). That some modernist Christians *did* err in this way cannot be gainsaid; my fear is that some postmodern Christians are repeating the error within postmodernism. True, Grenz says he wants a critical appropriation of postmodernism. What is it within postmodernist epistemology, then, that he will happily criticize and reject? And does he espouse a similarly critical appropriation of modernism? I think a fair reading of him is that he constantly gives reasons why we must abandon modernism and any theology he thinks is too tightly tied to it, and constantly espouses what he judges to be the entailments of postmodern epistemology, without a whiff of rigorous critique of postmodernism itself. Why should we think that *any* epistemological “ism” this side of the new heaven and the new earth, still in a broken and noetically flawed world, should be embraced so warmly? Surely thoughtful Christians, though they may see some strengths in both modernism and postmodernism, will want to embrace neither as wholeheartedly as some earlier theologians embraced modernism and as Grenz embraces postmodernism.

⁷ For systematic treatment of these and other approaches, see my *The Gaggling of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996).

⁸ See, for instance, Gary Gutting, ed., *Paradigms and Revolutions: Applications and Appraisals of Thomas Kuhn’s Philosophy of Science* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980); Frederick Suppe, ed., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

knowledge is not the knowledge of omniscience. The fundamental data of the periodic table, for example, are beyond cavil. Even the big paradigm shifts, such as the move from Newtonian physics to relativity, do not, interestingly enough, overthrow everything in the earlier paradigm. Thus Newton's equations continue to hold good for many bodies in limiting conditions. "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. The element of truth in this postmodern assertion, of course, is that human beings are finite, and therefore their knowledge is never absolute/final/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.⁹

(3) Grenz tries to avoid the postmodern antithesis 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, and argues that this eschatological reality can ground our epistemology.

But there is a triple problem. *First*, one might reasonably ask how one *knows* that the eschatological reality will put everything to rights. One knows this 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

⁹ Although I have read his riposte several times, and the relevant parts of his book many times, there is nothing in the foregoing paragraphs I would want to change. I think that my analysis of Grenz's approach is right—and the fact remains that Grenz does *not* treat the countless texts that speak of truth (even propositional truth), of knowing true things, etc., and then integrate them into his discussion.

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?

Second, Grenz introduces a category mistake. The fact that this world is passing away while the eschatological world is final and eternal does not mean that the latter is more “real” than the former, and is therefore something better known. That is to confuse the category of temporality with the category of reality. Something that is temporary, while it (temporarily) exists, is just as “real” as something that is eternal.¹⁰

Third and most important, 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/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?¹¹

(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 water. The Bible does not encourage us to think

¹⁰ “Despite this objection,” responds Grenz, “I stand by the perspective set forth in *Renewing the Center*, for I believe that it reflects the outlook of Scripture. Moreover, giving priority to the eternal, understood in the sense of what will abide forever, places me squarely within a long tradition of Christian thought from Augustine to C. S. Lewis.” It certainly does, and I stand within that tradition as well, emphatically so. But “giving priority” to the eternal does not make it better known. This is merely to confuse priority with epistemology.

¹¹ Grenz’s response to me on these matters is especially thin, I fear: “This leads to what may in fact be the fundamental point at which Carson and I disagree. Much of what I write in *Renewing the Center* is driven by the desire to call us to elevate God’s eternal purposes, God’s *telos* for creation, as the ultimate perspective from which the world ought to be viewed. As a consequence, I want to deny any final autonomy to the human knowing project outside of Christ. Carson’s review suggests to me that in the end he is critical of my stance regarding what is ‘real’ not so much because he thinks that it is unbiblical, but because he does not share my perspective regarding the centrality of theology and he is not sympathetic to my rejection of the autonomy of the human sciences. It [*sic*] can only surmise that at least here he retains many of the epistemological and ontological assumptions of modernity, despite the disclaimer that comes near the end of his review.” For the life of me I cannot fathom how anything I have said suggests I am not committed to “the centrality of theology” or that I myself uphold “the autonomy of human sciences.” Meanwhile, Grenz has not responded to the central points. To say that God’s eternal purposes constitute the ultimate perspective from which everything must be viewed is true, indeed for the Christian a truism. But how do we know what those purposes are? Indeed, how do we know that we *ought* to view things from that perspective? Christians appeal to what God has revealed about such matters in Scripture—the same Scripture that also tells us true things, *from God’s perspective*, of our past, our present, of facts in history (like the death and resurrection of Jesus). Grenz weaves together his response as if, because I have disagreed with him, it can only mean that I want to affirm the “final autonomy to the human knowing project outside of Christ.” Astonishing. Meanwhile, the points I have raised remain entirely unanswered.

that we are saved by ideas that have no extratextual referentiality, i.e., that do not refer to realities beyond the text. We are not saved by ideas (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, and 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 themselves 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, Christ's death and resurrection, etc.). But if Lindbeck denies that biblical extratextual referentiality is crucial and utterly essential to faithful Christian existence, he uses the Bible as no fundamentalist ever does: he goes back to the Bible, and 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, 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 antecedent 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 tell us true things. Nor does it help to tell us that the ultimate authority is the Spirit speaking through Scripture—at least not 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.¹² In one sense,

¹² It is precisely the context of such discussions that is troubling because it is so vague. In his rebuttal, Grenz says that by linking Word and Spirit he is doing no more than what the Westminster Divines do. "My proposal, therefore, is an attempt to return to the Reformation, with its close linking of Word and Spirit." Just about everyone "links" Word and Spirit; the burning question is the nature of the link. Reread from the Westminster Confession of Faith chapter 1, "Of the Holy Scripture," with its final reference to "the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture," and ask whether or not the link that the Westminster Divines were trying to forge is the same link that Grenz says he is trying to forge.

for instance, 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).¹³

By chapters 9 and 10, Grenz eventually recalls enough of his evangelical roots that he says 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 giveth, the left hand taketh away. For instance, the reference to "sound doctrine" is lodged in a crucial sentence:

¹³ Grenz responds to these criticisms by saying that my engagement with his book is marred by a misunderstanding of the *reason* (emphasis his) why he introduced Lindbeck and Pannenberg into the discussion. He charges me with thinking that he has bought into Lindbeck uncritically. "By assuming that I must be saying what Lindbeck is saying," Grenz writes, "Carson fails to see that one key purpose of my book is to move beyond, or to correct, Lindbeck by offering a proposal for understanding the extra-linguistic referential character of Christian doctrine." Dr. Grenz, please show me where, in your book, you correct Lindbeck by offering a proposal for understanding "the extra-linguistic referential character of Christian doctrine." That is *exactly* what I have said is needed, and *exactly* what you did not propose. When you go "beyond" Lindbeck, it is never to insist on the extratextual referentiality of Scripture, but to insist on the prescriptive nature of the Christian tradition for Christians. In other words, those who live within this tradition must abide by it; there is an implicit "ought" to living within this tradition. But Scripture keeps saying that we "ought" to believe certain things, and act on them, because they are *true*. When it comes to the resurrection of Jesus, for instance, Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 does not encourage us simply to live within the tradition of the resurrection, but to recognize that the resurrection of Jesus objectively *happened*—so much so that if we could imagine that it didn't happen, we would have to conclude (a) the apostles are liars, talking about something as if it were true when it isn't; (b) we are still in our trespasses and sins; (c) our faith is vain (no matter how intense or public a tradition it is!); and (d) we are of all people most to be pitied, because we are believing something that isn't *true*. In other words, Paul does not simply say that we must live within the "tradition" (i.e., what has been handed down)—though he can say that—but insists that our faith is properly grounded only if its object is *true*. Now if either Lindbeck or Grenz had asserted that sort of thing, I would feel much happier. But the only way in which Grenz has gone "beyond" Lindbeck, as far as I can see, is by insisting, "There is no generic religious experience, only experiences endemic to specific religious traditions, i.e., experiences that are facilitated by an interpretive framework that is specific to that religious tradition" (203). Within that tradition, "The task of theology is not purely *descriptive* . . . but *prescriptive*" (203). He adds, "The theologian seeks to articulate what *ought* to be the interpretive framework of the *Christian community* [emphasis added]. In this sense, the specifically Christian experience-facilitating interpretive framework, arising as it does out of the biblical gospel narrative, is 'basic' for Christian theology" (203). And still not a word about extratextual referentiality.

“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 interpretive 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 those doctrines 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-representation 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 the postmodern claim on this point is correct, then Carl Henry was engaged in the social construction of reality every bit as much as Stanley Grenz is.

Second (although this point is minor), 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: “*my* proposal,” for instance, is one of his favorite phrases. So I confess I am not certain what he means, in concrete terms, by his advocacy of theology as a communitarian activity.

Third, 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. Why should it not be, say, God, or Christology, or the cross?

Fourth, it is difficult 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. Can we maintain agreement on what the solution is, for instance, if we cannot agree as to what the problem is? So 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.

Fifth, although he says some useful things about the influence of parachurch movements (which many are saying these days), the chapter on ecclesiology is a disappointment. It is not that evangelicals have no ecclesiology, but that we have several of them, to some extent mutually contradictory. And one of the reasons for this state of affairs is that one of the characteristics of evangelicalism is that soteriology is elevated 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 the danger.

Sixth, 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 misunder-

standing 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 nonfoundationalist's foundationalism. Plantinga happily talks of this God in extratextual terms: what he means by "basic" is more than what Grenz means. I suspect this matter needs more thought and care.

(6) I shall end with three irritants, with an ascending order of seriousness.

First, here and there 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).

Second, although I agree that coherence is one of the important elements of any responsible epistemology, for the life of me I cannot see 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, and 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 shortsighted. 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. Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings* is certainly not claiming extratextual referentiality!

Third, Grenz has raised the fine art of sidestepping crucial questions to an annoying level. Recall that Grenz 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). That is precisely what must be asked: Can we talk about objective reality, objective truth? But

instead of answering the question, he judges that it 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). 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, 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). Hence Grenz argues (as we have seen):

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 postmodernism. 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 rethink several matters of fundamental importance before he goes any farther down this trail.