

## POSTMODERNISM'S ASSAULT ON THEOLOGY

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The central tenets of postmodernism need to be discussed and met on their own merits. However, it is important that we also realize how this approach affects other areas of thought. One vital area is that of systematic theology. Since postmodernists have a different idea of truth, the results of their philosophy are magnified in theology, which deals with the ultimate truths of God and our faith.

### *Two Approaches to Theology*

In past centuries Christian theologians have sought to defend their beliefs by appeal to their recognized authority. For Protestants, that authority has been the Bible. For Roman Catholics that authority has been the Bible plus the tradition of the church. In both cases it was clear to all exactly what the theologian was basing his teachings upon. It was assumed that any student or critic of that theologian could check his conclusions by following his argumentation from the authorities he used.

Charles Hodge compared the theologian to a scientist. Just as the scientist gathers data from his observations of nature and formulates his theories to account for that data and make it into a system, so the theologian gathers the facts stated in the Bible and organizes them into systematically arranged propositions.

The duty of the Christian theologian is to ascertain, collect, and combine all the facts which God has revealed concerning himself and our relation to Him. These facts are all in the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

This procedure assumes that the statements of the Bible are more or less clear to all students of the Bible, and that they have the same meaning to these students. In other words, proposition X in the Bible meant X to the author of the biblical book, meant X to a Christian preacher in Syria in the fourth century, and means X to the modern theologian in America. In fact, what the Holy Spirit intended to be revealed was X. This constitutes revelation—propositions mean the same thing to God as they do to us. This type of thinking today is called modernism. For those of us in fundamental churches, modernism has had a different meaning—the rejection of the fundamental truths of Christianity. This understanding goes back to the “fundamentalist-modernist” controversies of the early twentieth century. However, in its current usage the term now refers to those who believe that propositional statements carry truth which is valid for all cultures, that there is such a thing as permanent, objective knowledge which can be communicated in words.

The Postmodernist would disagree. He would argue that we understand propositions through a filter of our own culture, with the narratives and paradigms we receive from that

culture. Therefore, what the biblical writer wrote and understood as X may well have meant Y to the Syrian preacher of the fourth century, and to the modern American theologian could very well mean neither X nor Y, but Z. Meaning is created in the mind of the reader; it is not a static quality of the writing itself. It is similar to the theory of relativity in physics—reality is different to observers in different frames of reference. The thinking of people in different cultures cannot be objectively understood by each other. When the biblical writer thinks and writes X, the modern theologian thinks he means Z. If the modern theologian were to write down his thought as Z and then magically transport that writing back to the biblical writer, he would not necessarily understand what he wrote as X, but would misunderstand what he meant, perhaps thinking it to be M.

The modern Christian theologian must take a position regarding this understanding or insight of postmodernism. If the biblical text means different things in different cultures, how can we share the same faith? Traditional theologians reject postmodernism, and assert that the Bible does indeed mean the same thing today as it did when written. What we need to do is study the text diligently, using sound exegesis to determine the original intent of the biblical authors, which would be the same as the meaning intended by God. The meaning derived would then be the revelation of God to us. Of course, Christian theologians recognize the requirement that they be illuminated by the Holy Spirit to properly understand and accept the teachings of Scripture. But this knowledge is possible, and available by the use of means. We are able to understand meaning from the text and if we have studied it properly, that meaning will be the same meaning understood by the author, and, in fact, the same meaning known by God. Traditional Christian theologians thus assert that the Bible is the revelation given by God to us, and that we can collect and arrange its “facts” into a systematic theology, as Hodge claimed.

In our day there is a growing movement among evangelical theologians to move away from the traditional, “modernist,” philosophy. They say that postmodernism has indeed pointed out the correct state of affairs. Our knowledge is filtered by our culture, and the same text cannot convey the same meaning to different cultures. So how can we know what to believe? Postmodern evangelicals have found their answer in different categories of meaning. Instead of coming through static propositional statements, meaning in the Bible is conveyed primarily in narratives and stories. As people in the stories react to different situations, we are brought into their world and experience through them the revelation of God. The Holy Spirit thus can speak to the reader of Scripture; he uses the text of Scripture to produce the desired reaction in the mind of the reader. The Bible contains the foundation narratives of the people of God; what we need to do is align our own stories with those narratives, to radically change our paradigms of thinking, to obtain thus a new identity as the people of God today. Postmodern evangelicals are critical of the traditional approach, which, they say, “collapses the Spirit into the text.”<sup>2</sup>

### ***Theological Consequences of Postmodernism***

A prominent evangelical scholar demonstrates how postmodernism affects theology. Stanley J. Grenz is a professor of theology and ethics in two schools in Vancouver, British Columbia, Carey Theological College and Regent College. As a voluminous writer he has applied his postmodernist thinking to a wide range of topics. Most helpful for our purpose is his

*Theology for the Community of God*, a large work of nearly 900 pages, in which he sets forth his postmodern evangelical theology. Grenz has become a leading exponent of this approach, and thus can be considered as representative of postmodernism's influence on theology.

In examining this work, we must distinguish whatever differences we may find between his views and those of the Reformed faith. Grenz is a Baptist and favors congregational church government. As with all theologies written by adherents to different denominations, there will be differences due to varying interpretations of Scripture. This has always been true in traditional theology. We need to distinguish these differences from those caused by the fact that he is a postmodernist. For, whatever the denominational beliefs of a writer may be, postmodernism itself will have an important impact on his theology.

Also, Grenz in many places seems to accept many conclusions of critical Bible study. For example, he seems to accept a late date for the composition of Daniel, the non-Mosaic composition of the Pentateuch, and the form-critical approach to the gospels. While this is a vital point, it is one shared by many critical scholars who are not postmodernists. So these issues will not be discussed in this article.

Stanley Grenz classifies himself as an evangelical. Much of his theology agrees with classical theology, and clearly sets forth teachings accepted throughout church history. He also explains various heresies that have afflicted the church and exposes their false reasoning. This article will not discuss those areas in which our theologies agree.

### ***Postmodernism and the Bible***

Traditional theology begins by determining the basis of its authority. The Bible is that authority; therefore, the doctrine of the Bible is foundational to our understanding of all other doctrines. For this reason, most Christian theologies begin with a discussion of how we can know about God, the doctrine of revelation. This involves the doctrine of inspiration, and the resulting authority of the Bible. The Westminster Confession of Faith begins that way, with Chapter 1, "Of the Holy Scripture."

This approach Grenz says is wrong. "We cannot follow the lead of those theologians who set forth the inspiration of the Bible as the first thesis of the doctrine of Scripture."<sup>3</sup> In fact, he places the doctrine of Scripture very late in his theology, under the topic of the Holy Spirit. Up to that point, he says that he simply is doing theology within the community of the church, and uses the Bible as the foundation document received by tradition from the church.<sup>4</sup>

Postmodernism places much of its emphasis on the culture in which we live. Grenz does this also. When he discusses the basis of our theological investigations, he lists three sources: (1) the Bible, which is "primary," (2) church history, which is "instructive in our quest for a relevant theology," and (3) the "thought-forms of contemporary culture."<sup>5</sup> While traditional theologies have based theology on the Bible, and have considered church history, postmodernism is different in emphasizing the "contemporary culture" as the third source of theology. Grenz goes on to explain that the modern culture contributes a foundational concept—the importance of our

existence in community, and its defining our own identity and purpose.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, Grenz organizes his entire theology around the theme of community.

As the greater emphasis shifts away from the text of the Bible to the understanding of the culture and community, the Bible's place as the deposit of divine and absolute truth changes. Consistently with his presuppositions, Grenz states that the Bible's inspiration is related to its theological and community purpose, and does not require that the Bible be correct by modern standards. "A person need not affirm that the Bible is without error in all areas in order to acknowledge it as authoritative."<sup>7</sup>

The Bible, according to Grenz, should not be treated like a collection of facts, but by entering into the "story," we can receive the revelation from the Holy Spirit. So the Word of God (following Barth) is primarily Christ himself, and then the response is elicited by the Holy Spirit in our heart as we read the Scripture. "New Testament authors preclude us from making a simple one-to-one correspondence between the words of Scripture and the word of God."<sup>8</sup> He says, "Revelation is God disclosing himself and not merely cognitive truths or propositional statements."<sup>9</sup> Notice the word "merely," as though cognitive truths are somehow a second-class knowledge. Actually, truth cannot be apprehended apart from cognition.

By slighting the propositional nature of the Bible, postmodernism opens the door to reject any of its statements in their plain sense, if the modern culture would not support that interpretation. The extent to which the theologian does this is limited only by his own circumstances and inclination. Grenz accepts many traditional Christian doctrines, but, as he admits, that is largely because of his own "community." In setting forth the other doctrines of theology, he does reveal areas in which he has changed traditional theology to agree with the modern culture. We can only briefly mention some of these areas.

### ***Postmodernism and God***

The doctrine of God, according to Grenz, developed in the history of Israel from that of a tribal warrior God which was stronger than other gods, to the one God, Yahweh, to the universal God of the New Testament.<sup>10</sup> The Holy Spirit led the people of God to respond to their history with this developing idea. Consequently, we know God, not through ontological propositions about him derived from the Bible, but by meeting him in encounter. Grenz acknowledges his debt to modern thinkers such as the neo-orthodox Emil Brunner and to "the new communitarians and those who are exploring the role of narrative in identity formation. . . . We know that we have encountered God in that we have been brought to share in community."<sup>11</sup>

The discussion of the Trinity also depends heavily on the idea of community. Grenz makes the foundational nature of the Trinity to be not holiness, but love, which is personified in the Holy Spirit.<sup>12</sup> By rejecting the idea of some kind of essence other than love, Grenz disputes the earlier definitions of the Trinity, which sought to define the being and attributes of God. He also rejects the impassibility of God (his unchangeableness) as an import from Greek philosophy.<sup>13</sup> With the modern philosophy of community, he insists that the unity of the godhead is simply the common bond of love, which is the Holy Spirit.

By adopting the modern idea of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, Grenz rejects the idea of God's foreordaining all events in the past and being static through time, to the God that will exist in the future. In many places in his theology, Grenz invokes this idea of "future reality" to define present reality. We and God are defined by what we shall be. Thus he can say, "The traditional discussion of God as a being is no longer helpful."<sup>14</sup> The classic attributes of God (omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent) are not present, static truths of God, but only become true at the end of time. These terms are "doxological," not "propositional truths concerning the static divine essence."<sup>15</sup> Grenz refuses to allow that the present state of affairs is according to God's plan and purpose.<sup>16</sup> Thus his postmodernism leads to a denial of several doctrines of the Reformed and biblical faith concerning God.

### ***Postmodernism and the Creation***

God's plan leads to his ultimate desire, the new heavens and new earth. Grenz sees his activities in creation and providence as seeking to bring about that plan, though somewhat thwarted and delayed by his creatures' sin. Only in the end will he be totally sovereign. "At the eschaton God's rulership, and with it his deity, will in the final and fullest sense come to be."<sup>17</sup> God desires community, with himself and with his renewed creation. That is the driving force of his actions. How does postmodernism view the sovereignty of God then? Grenz asserts the terms, but redefines them so as to make them "future-oriented," meaning that it works out in the end, but that God has not foreordained the present situation.<sup>18</sup>

The apex of God's creation is the human race. Again Grenz turns to modern thought to form his doctrine. He uses the modern concept of anthropologists that humans are unique because of their "openness to the world." This concept provides the framework for the contemporary understanding of humanity.<sup>19</sup> When Grenz discusses the creation of the first humans, he leaves open the possibilities that God created them directly or that he used biological evolution; he says that our faith is not affected by that debate.<sup>20</sup> Man, he says, was created free, not subject to Calvinistic determinism, or to determinism determined by his essence as human. We are "autonomous or self-determining."<sup>21</sup> In an even more controversial conclusion, Grenz follows recent research and thinking to say that humans do not possess an immortal soul as a substance that exists after death. Rather, at death, they cease to exist, as God withdraws the "life principle"; they will be restored at the resurrection. The classic teaching of the soul is, he says, the result of "Greek" thinking from Plato and others, and is contrary to the Bible and to modern understanding.<sup>22</sup> Humans' being in the image of God, then, is not a statement about our make-up, but rather refers to our being God's representatives on the earth, taking care of God's creation in his place.<sup>23</sup>

In his discussion of angels, the postmodern approach again is seen. While not denying the existence of angelic beings, Grenz spends much more time describing what he calls "structures of human existence." These are personalized and provide a link between the biblical idea of angels and the modern idea of social structures.<sup>24</sup> In this regard, his theology resembles that of Walter Rauschenbusch and the social gospel.

## **Postmodernism, Sin, and Salvation**

Since the most important factor in God's plan is community, sin is viewed, not as breaking God's law (a term nearly absent in this theology, and used with a very limited meaning), but in terms of failure to sustain community. We do not need to accept Adam's sin as a literal fact; it could be symbolic of early humans becoming alienated from God, each other, and the natural environment. We are trapped in this sin, not because our immortal soul is polluted (we have no such soul), but because we receive from our culture this alienation, which affects all parts of us.<sup>25</sup> God considers us guilty only after we consciously sin; he considers us innocent until the age of accountability.<sup>26</sup>

When he discusses the person and work of Christ, Grenz leaves behind the traditional "Christology from above" and prefers the more recent "Christology from below." That means that what we know of Christ is to be derived from our experience of him in history and in our lives, not from deduction from biblical theological statements. Jesus himself did not claim to be the Messiah, but became recognized as such after his resurrection.<sup>27</sup> Our faith is based not on the assumption that the Bible is true, but on the historically verifiable facts of Jesus' remarkable claims to be unique and his resurrection. Thus these facts, obtained through empirical study, lead us to put faith in Jesus, and thereby to accept the Bible as the book of his people. Grenz either denies or redefines many of the traditional theological terms describing the person of Jesus. For example, he does not believe Jesus preexisted in the classical sense; he denies any Christophanies in the Old Testament; he redefines preexistence to agree with his views.<sup>28</sup>

The atonement is viewed as the "covering" of all the sins of the world, so that God can forgive anyone who comes to him—an Arminian understanding of the universal atonement. Grenz considers the classic definitions of the atonement (ransom, satisfaction, penalty) as metaphors taken from the cultures of the times in which they were formulated.<sup>29</sup>

The Holy Spirit enables us to believe (Grenz at times seems to have a more Calvinistic approach to effectual calling, with regeneration producing repentance and faith<sup>30</sup>; but he never discusses unconditional election; so we wonder how the Spirit selects those in whom to work). But the abiding ministry of the Holy Spirit started at Pentecost, with the beginning of the church. There is a noticeable lack of discussion of the Reformed view that the church is under the Abrahamic covenant.

Grenz spends a great deal of space showing how contemporary thinkers have contributed to the correct understanding of conversion; the community of believers, in the same way as shown by contemporary studies in sociology, provides the convert with a new identity and value system. Our stories and narratives unite, after an initial "dialectic of disorientation and reorientation," producing this new paradigm for the convert.<sup>31</sup> The place of divine election and ordering of salvation is understood, not from a decree before the world was created, but as a goal that will become real in the last day; thus Grenz's reliance on contemporary cultural thought produces a reversal in order of salvation.<sup>32</sup>

Following his Baptist position on the church, that the local church is central, with

members being those who enter into a covenant with God and each other, Grenz applies his ideas to the church, declaring that it is not based on a past election, but on a future destiny (how one cannot fail to follow from the other is not suggested).<sup>33</sup> Rather than building on the Reformed covenant of grace, or even the biblical Abrahamic and new covenants, Grenz finds the central constitution of the church a covenant arising from the people. This more man-centered (he would say “human-centered”) approach is in keeping with the postmodern emphasis on man in his culture as autonomous from other cultures.

The doctrine of postmodernism sees the church as “a community of memory and hope.” which “fosters identity formation within believers.”<sup>34</sup> Speaking to modern concerns (especially in left-wing academia), Grenz spends much time discussing how the church must be involved in social outreach, not as a means of preaching the gospel, but as an end in itself, showing God’s image.<sup>35</sup> This teaching agrees with the social gospel emphasis of the early twentieth century. Rather than accepting Paul’s definition of the gospel (1 Cor. 15), Grenz, says, “The gospel is the announcement of the presence of God’s reign which establishes community. The community God is creating is a reconciled people who are concerned about compassion, justice, righteousness, and, above all, love.” Therefore we are to “become advocates of the wounded by attempting to foster structural changes in society.”<sup>36</sup> This postmodern conclusion fits in well with the various “theologies” being promoted by liberal groups today.

Grenz finds in postmodernism a method of fostering ecumenism. Regarding the presence of the Lord in the Lord’s Supper, he seeks to find a solution to the age-old division among Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Zwinglians. This solution is found, he says, in recognizing the future orientation of the community. Jesus is present in the “perspective of the eschatological community.”<sup>37</sup> This expedient appears to be inadequate, however, as it does not answer the points of controversy. Of course, postmodernists can cut themselves free when desired from the conclusions of other cultures!

### ***The Assault on Theology***

Postmodernism offers a flexible gospel. The theologian can cast biblical teaching in a way that agrees with the prevailing sentiments of the culture. With the culture being as hostile as it is to the traditional interpretations of the Bible, it is no wonder that some theologians are tempted to adjust those hard teachings. Thus theology itself is under assault, from those who sincerely claim loyalty to the Bible.

Our view of the Bible must be different. God is true and his word is true. The Bible is the word of God, not just its reflection or people’s reaction to it. Truth is propositional, and does not change with changing cultures. God determines truth, and he has revealed it to us. The Bible is the revelation we have, and must be the sole source of our theology.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1871-72; reprinted London: James Clarke & Co., 1960), 1/11.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), pp. 6-8. This quotation is a statement Stanley Grenz made during a presentation at the Northwest regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Feb. 28, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Grenz, *Theology*, p. 506.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-26.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26, 29-30.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 523.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 514.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 512.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 38-40.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91, and throughout the work; e.g., pp. 486-488.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105; see also p. 117, "Attributive assertions do not impart knowledge of God's essence as a static reality or in isolation from the world."

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118-121.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143; cf. the entire chapter.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 156-161. See the results of this approach in the identity of the elect, pp. 623-624. For a discussion of this future orientation, cf. pp. 848-859.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 169-187.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., see *ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 198-201.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 205-213, 402, 716-764; e.g., "There is no part of the human person which is intrinsically immortal," p. 211; see his explanation which seeks to maintain continuity between earthly and resurrection life, pp. 759-778.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 296-305.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 255-275.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 270-271.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 324-341.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 405-409.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 443-456.

<sup>30</sup> However, in a later list regeneration follows faith, p. 565. In an abbreviated discussion, Grenz compares Calvinism with Arminianism on the five points, pp. 584-590. His conclusion is that a third way is needed—the future orientation of the faith community—thus sidestepping the impasse, pp. 590-594.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 553-557.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 598-599.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 623-624.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 649; see the strong postmodern slant in this section: pp. 649-653.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 653-663.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 661.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 700.