

May Evangelicals Dispense with Propositional Revelation?
Challenges to a Traditional Evangelical Doctrine

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Introduction

Few times in history has revealed religion been forced to contend with such serious problems of truth and word, and never in the past have the role of words and the nature of truth been as misty and undefined as now. Only if we recognize that the truth of truth—indeed, the meaning of meaning—is today in doubt, and that this uncertainty stifles the word as a carrier of God’s truth and moral judgment, do we fathom the depth of the present crisis. When truth and word remain as the accepted universe of discourse, then all aberrations can be challenged in the name of truth. Today, however, the nature of truth and even the role of words is in dispute.¹

Although those words were written more than twenty-five years ago, they are no less true today. Carl F. H. Henry, one of the founding fathers of the Evangelical Theological Society,² wrote his six-volume magnum opus, *God, Revelation and Authority*, to address crucial issues of revelation which challenge the nature of Christianity as a revealed religion. His driving concern was the refutation of philosophical proposals that reject verbal revelation (“the truth of truth—indeed, the meaning of meaning”) for various forms of non-verbal revelation, whether they be theories of “revelation in deed” (*a la* Mowinckel), or transcendent, mythological, or non-

* **Please note:** This is the complete paper, but due to its length, only selected portions were read at the ETS conference.

¹ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, TX: Word, 1976–83), 1:24. Cited as *GRA* hereafter, often parenthetically in the text. In continuous summary sections from this and other key books, the usual pattern is to give only the page number parenthetically after the first reference unless the reference is ambiguous.

² Henry was not only one of the founding fathers of ETS, but at the first annual meeting in Cincinnati (Dec. 1949), he made the motion that gave our society its name. He served on the initial editorial committee and later served as president 1969–70 (*idem.*, *Confessions of a Theologian* [Waco, TX: Word, 1986], 123).

conceptual representations (1:44ff), or personal/existential revelation. His wide-ranging discussion includes critiques of Mowinckel, Bultmann, Barth, Bornkamm, Ricoeur, etc. In the place of these “epistemic pretenses” (1:57), Henry insists on an orthodox exposition of a verbally intelligible (1:30), propositional revelation. This focus is clearly summarized in chapter one (1:18–30) and unpacked piece-by-piece throughout the entire six volumes.

Today non-orthodox positions are even more prevalent. Of greater concern, however, is the extent to which a non-propositional view of revelation has permeated evangelicalism. An increasing number of voices—some prominent ones—have rejected propositional revelation, at times explicitly challenging Henry’s defense of this doctrine. Henry sparred with a number of evangelicals on this issue twenty-five years ago,³ but current proponents have gone much further.⁴

Is propositional revelation an essential evangelical doctrine? Henry argued vigorously that it was essential: “it is nonetheless wholly necessary to insist that divine disclosure does indeed take propositional form... That divine disclosure is cognitive and intelligible...is intrinsic to Judeo-Christian revelation” (*GRA*, 3:481). Bernard Ramm, at about the same time, was de-emphasizing the importance of propositional truth: “It is not of the essence of evangelicalism to believe that revelation is solely propositional.”⁵ Although both of these statements are qualified in their contexts, it is fair to say that Henry and Ramm had opposing concerns and were attempting to

³ For example, Henry cites both Bernard Ramm and George Eldon Ladd as evangelicals whose treatment of propositional revelation pose problems (*GRA*, 1:67; 3:458).

⁴ Terminology is crucial in this discussion. It should be noted at the outset that Henry and Grenz (the two primary theologians examined in this paper) use “proposition,” “propositional,” and “propositional revelation” in different ways. The reader is advised to heed carefully these differences as they are discussed.

The term “propositional revelation” is not an ancient term, though the concept that it designates certainly is. Since this paper is not intended as an historical treatment, I have not attempted to document the specific origin of the term or developments in its definition (though that would be a useful pursuit). The term, as I understand it, originated in the early 20th century as a derogatory term used pejoratively by those who rejected the orthodox statement of biblical revelation and inspiration. As used by opponents of orthodoxy, the term was often used to portray a straw man position (that the Bible consisted only of a collection of what may technically be designated “propositions”). The term has since been accepted by evangelicals as a usable term that accurately summarizes the orthodox view, though with an appropriately revised definition and qualifications.

⁵ Bernard Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage* (Waco, TX: Word, 1973), 129.

either maintain (Henry) or extend (Ramm) the boundaries of evangelicalism. To explore this issue, this paper will first summarize Henry's understanding of propositional revelation, then that of a counter-proposal, and finally assess the discussion and propose an answer to the question, "may evangelicals dispense with propositional revelation?"

Propositional Revelation in Henry's *God, Revelation and Authority*

Definition of Propositional Revelation

The first indexed occurrence of the explicit term "propositional revelation" in *GRA* is 1:67, but it is not there defined. It is, however, used synonymously with Henry's entire discussion of *verbal* revelation which he repeatedly declares to be fully intelligible, precise, factual, conceptual, cognitive, rational, valid and literally true (e.g., 1:68–69). He also interchanges the terms "propositional revelation" and "intelligible revelation."⁶ He clarifies a reference to the propositional character of divine revelation by appending, "that is..., God's revelation is rational and objectively true" (3:455).⁷

Henry's formal definition of propositional revelation is given near the end of volume three: "We mean by propositional revelation that God supernaturally communicated his revelation to chosen spokesmen in the express form of cognitive truths, and that the inspired prophetic-apostolic proclamation reliably articulates these truths in sentences that are not internally contradictory" (3:457). He goes on to explain that "the inspired Scriptures contain a body of

⁶ See, e.g., *GRA*, 3:416, "A proposition, implicit or explicit, may communicate the same objective meaning and truth in a variable vocabulary; as long as words preserve the sense, considerable difference of expression is compatible with intelligible revelation."

⁷ The full statement is as follows: "The controversy between Protestant orthodoxy and neoorthodoxy focused with special intensity on the issue of the propositional or nonpropositional character of divine disclosure, that is, on whether God's revelation is rational and objectively true, or whether it is only noncognitively life-transforming. Neoorthodoxy emphasized that God's revelation is personal but nonpropositional. Evangelical respondents like Gordon Clark, Cornelius Van Til, Edward J. Carnell, James I. Packer, Kenneth Kantzer, Ronald Nash and Francis Schaeffer, on the other hand, insisted, as had earlier Christian theologians, that God's revelation is cognitive and propositional."

divinely given information actually expressed or capable of being expressed in propositions. In brief, the Bible is a propositional revelation of the unchanging truth of God” (ibid.).⁸

This definition may be qualified in several ways. First, Henry does not view the Bible as a digest of assorted logical syllogisms. He explicitly claims that “the truth of revelation is not a series of unrelated and disconnected propositions” (*GRA*, 1:233). It should also be noted that propositions are not the same as concepts. A concept (e.g., grace or sin) cannot be true or false. Only as one asserts a proposition regarding a concept can it be true or false.⁹ Third, propositional revelation is not invalidated by figures of speech, rhetorical questions, or imperatives. “Regardless of the parables, allegories, emotive phrases and rhetorical questions used by these writers, their literary devices have a logical point which can be propositionally formulated and is objectively true or false” (*GRA*, 3:453). Questions are not propositions in the technical sense, but rhetorical questions imply a judgment that can be stated in propositional form. Likewise imperatives, though technically not propositions by their grammatical form, do not “cancel the fact that revelation is primarily correlated with a communication of propositional truth. Imperatives are not as such true or false propositions; but they can be translated into propositions (e.g., ‘to kill is wrong’) from which cognitive inferences can be drawn” (3:417).

⁸ The term “proposition” should also be defined in this context. A fairly standard definition is that a proposition is “that which is proposed or stated; the content of a declarative sentence, capable of truth and falsity” (Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* [Oxford/New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994], 307). In a similar vein, see Gordon Clark, *Logic*, 2d ed. (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1988), 30. The meaning (and even the existence) of propositions is hotly debated in philosophical circles. For a survey of the dispute and the various positions advocated, see Richard M. Gale, “Propositions, Judgments, Sentences, and Statements,” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, 6:494–505 (New York: Macmillan, 1967). For purposes of this paper it is only necessary to know how the term is used in discussion of propositional revelation. Henry’s definition accords with the standard definition just cited: “... a proposition is a verbal statement that is either true or false; it is a rational declaration capable of being either believed, doubted or denied” (*GRA*, 3:456).

⁹ This distinction between propositions and concepts is also relevant to the doctrine of revelation, particularly in terms of method. The older “word study” approach to Scripture, although properly concerned to focus attention on the words that are verbally inspired, misplaced its emphasis with an atomistic, microscopic focus on the individual semantic elements to the detriment of a macroscopic focus on propositions and context. The words on which such study placed so much emphasis only serve to convey truth in context as components of propositions. Words alone leave us “strangely unilluminated” as to the meaning of the text (to use Brand Blanshard’s terminology as cited by Henry, *GRA*, 3:443). See also Henry’s comments on p. 453.

Henry does *not* affirm that all biblical revelation is couched in formal propositions. Such a claim would be an overstatement (3:480; see also 481).

Some evangelicals who espouse propositional revelation hesitate nonetheless to say that God's revelation is expressed or conveyed exclusively in a rational and objectively true form. They affirm instead that, in addition to God's frequent and possibly even normal conveyance of revelation in propositional form, God sometimes discloses himself in other than propositional modes. They emphasize that the biblical terminology of revelation sometimes suggests features not reducible to propositional statements but that are correlated rather with dreams and visions and imagery. But, it should be indicated, the extraverbal and extrarational belong only to the rim of revelation; revelation in its essential definition centers in the communication of God's Word (3:457).

The essence of revelation is personal. Although the biblical prophets did, indeed at times receive revelation in the form of dreams and visions which almost certainly did make a non-verbal impression on the prophet, yet the authoritative message for us (and for the prophet as well) was propositional in nature.¹⁰ As with history, event in the form of dream or vision must be divinely interpreted to constitute authoritative revelation.

Relationship of Propositional Revelation to Logic and Rationality

Much of Henry's defense of propositional revelation is predicated on his view of logic, rationality, and language. Although some biblical scholars (and some evangelicals) scorn the concept of propositional revelation "as an imposition of rationalistic encumbrances upon the discussion of Scripture,"¹¹ no true knowledge of God is possible apart from a rational, logical, verbal revelation. Not only is logical rationality not an encumbrance, it is essential.

Without noncontradiction and logical consistency, no knowledge whatever is possible.... The importance of intellectuality in theology, of cognitivity and concepts, of valid propositions, of logical system, therefore dare not be minimized. Some deny the rational emphasis on logic and consistency in considerations of divine revelation. God is not bound by such criteria, it is said; he is assertedly above the canons of human reasoning, so that the 'truth of revelation' confronts man in terms either of contradiction or of paradox or of mystery. But without appeal to sufficient reason, the mind of man has no basis for discriminating between mysteries, paradoxes and contradictions (*GRA*, 1:232–33).

¹⁰ "Whatever must indubitably be said for dreams, visions and other psychic phenomena, the prophets themselves, and the Apostle Paul likewise, find in the intelligibly communicated Word of God the fixed center of revelation" (*GRA*, 3:417).

¹¹ This is Henry's phraseology summarizing objections often raised (*GRA*, 3:455).

Logic did not originate with Aristotle.¹² There is but one logic in the world¹³ bestowed on humankind by the Creator as a reflection of his own nature.¹⁴ It has no independent existence apart from God himself and it is not optional, even for those who attempt to deny it.

The logical functions of the individual consciousness are everywhere the same, wherever the historically differentiated forms of human life appear; the laws of logic are integral elements of mental consciousness. The many human languages have a common basis in the fundamental logic of human language; amid their undeniable differences, all languages basically reflect the same laws of logic and modes of thought (*GRA*, 3:240).

To use logic in the interpretation of Scripture is not the intrusion of a foreign system, but the only possible way to understand any text, biblical or otherwise.¹⁵ “Evangelicals need not tremble and take to the hills whenever others charge us with rationalism, since not every meaning of that

¹² “While Aristotle systematically formulated the principles of logical thought, we should note that Parmenides and Plato and others argued logically before Aristotle formulated the rules of logic, and we must insist that syllogistic reasoning was not invented by the Greeks, that logical categories are not peculiarly Greek, and that the patterns of logic and forms of logical reasoning are human rather than provincially Greek” (*GRA*, 3:242).

¹³ “There is one logic to which all propositions are answerable” (*GRA*, 3:385).

¹⁴ “Since the eternal Logos himself structures the created universe and the conditions of communication, logical connections are eternally grounded in God’s mind and will, and are binding for man in view of the *imago Dei*” (*GRA*, 3:214; see also 1:393–94; 3:387–90).

¹⁵ “Revelation requires no dismemberment or boycotting of logic. Neither in part nor as a totality is the truth of revelation an illogical or nonlogical monstrosity” (*GRA*, 3:303). Too often the use of logic is confused with theological reasoning which extrapolates speculative theological conclusions apart from explicit biblical data. On the role of logic and rationality see the extended discussion in *GRA*, 3:234–42. Mohler has noted that “Henry is often labeled a rationalist, though this is a careless misreading of his studious attempt to forge a middle way [i.e., between the fideism of Tertullian’s elevation of revelation over reason and the rationalism of Aquinas’ reduction of revelation to reason]” (Richard Albert Mohler, Jr., “Evangelical Theology and Karl Barth: Representative Models of Response” [Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1989], 123 n. 259). In another context Mohler refers to William Abraham’s assessment of Henry’s position as “turgid scholasticism” and suggests that “this statement [by Abraham] indicates something of the great divide between those who define evangelicalism primarily as a set of theological commitments and those who point instead to an evangelical faith experience and concern for personal holiness. To be fair, Henry has evidenced a concern for both dimensions, but has given the cognitive dimension primary attention in his writings” (idem., “Carl F. H. Henry,” in *Baptist Theologians*, ed. T. George and D. Dockery, 518–38 [Nashville: Broadman, 1990], 538 n. 47). An “evangelical faith experience and concern for personal holiness” are not possible apart from propositional revelation that defines the evangel and describes God’s holy character as the standard for holiness. True, one may comprehend the doctrine without ever experiencing the evangelical faith or holiness, but the reverse is never true. Henry (and most who emphasize the necessity for propositional revelation) does not divorce the cognitive and the experiential.

term is objectionable” (3:480). Indeed, to deny the law of noncontradiction results in equating truth and error—in effect, destroying any concept of truth (1:233).

Opposing Views

Henry interacts at great length with many representatives of opposing views representing a wide variety of theological and philosophical systems. Only a summary can be presented here. His primary foil is a non-propositional view of revelation which is most frequently couched in terms of personal revelation.¹⁶ Henry contends that if revelation “is defined as an internal event rather than as a communication of objectively valid information” (as in neo-orthodoxy, etc.), then one will not be able to uphold propositional revelation (*GRA*, 3:475). Personal revelation is vaguely described as a non-cognitive, non-rational encounter with God. But “revelation which incorporates no valid knowledge can hardly be spoken of confidently as knowledge” (*GRA*, 4:436). This is Schleiermacher’s feeling of absolute dependence or Moltmann’s “promise.”¹⁷ Henry suggests that Barth has been the most influential twentieth-century theologian in disavowing propositional revelation (3:466).

As Barth puts it, “revelation ... takes place as an *event*, when and where the word of the Bible *becomes* God’s Word.... Where the Word of God is an *event*, revelation and the Bible are one in fact.” Barth later rejects a view of the Bible as propositional revelation, arguing instead that revelation is personal: “God’s Word is not a thing to be described, nor is it a concept to be defined. It is neither a content nor an idea. It is not ‘a truth,’ not even the very highest truth. It is the truth because it is God’s person speaking, *Dei loquentis persona*. It is not something objective.” The doctrine of Scripture of “later Old-Protestantism”—that the Bible is “a fixed total of revealed propositions” is “radically impossible.”¹⁸

¹⁶ “Neo-Protestant, neo-Catholic and reform Jewish theologians today all share widely in repudiating the definition of revelation as a divine communication of cognitive information” (*GRA*, 3:469).

¹⁷ See the summary in *GRA*, 2:147–49.

¹⁸ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, v. 1 pt. 1 of *Church Dogmatics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936), 127 (emphasis added), 155, 156; see also 160–61.

Or in Brunner's words, "revelation is certainly not a 'Something', a 'thing'; but it is a process, an event, and indeed an event which happens to us and in us." He goes on to explain that "the Word which has been formulated in human speech [i.e., the Bible] is now only revelation in an indirect sense; it is revelation as witness to Him." He explicitly rejects the view of "orthodoxy" that the Bible is verbally inspired—a "sterile intellectualism" with "disastrous results."¹⁹

It is true that Barth's earlier statements magnify this rejection of propositional revelation and that his later writings (beginning, perhaps, with vol. II.1 of the *Dogmatics*) modify the sharp disjunctions of his commentary on Romans and in the first volume of his *Church Dogmatics*.²⁰ This is perhaps due, at least in part, to "the counterpressure of Bultmann's view, which extended Barth's early anticonceptual notions of revelation into an erosion of all supernatural truth, and instead interpreted the content of revelation anthropologically" (*GRA*, 3:466).²¹ Despite the more orthodox statements of the later Barth, the emphasis on personal revelation remains. Henry concludes that "there is no basis in the Scriptures for Barth's theory that divine revelation is nonpropositional, personal truth" (3:468).

Evangelicals who have minimized propositional revelation in favor of an emphasis on personal revelation also receive Henry's attention. Ladd, for example, has suggested that God reveals not only propositions, but also *himself*.²² Henry then asks what is revealed in this self-

¹⁹ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics*, v. 1 (London: Lutterworth, 1949), 19, 27, 28; see also 32–34. Even more radically, Rudolph Bultmann, referring to the portrait of Jesus in John's gospel asserts that the "Revealer" imparted no information about God during his earthly ministry; "He does not *communicate anything*, but *calls men to himself*" (*Theology of the New Testament*, transl. K. Grobel, 2 vols. [London: SCM, 1952–55], 2:41).

²⁰ On this development, see *GRA*, 3:224–28.

²¹ Ramm has used these later statements in his attempt to make Barth more palatable to evangelicals. See his comments in *After Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), esp. 88–100.

²² Henry refers to George Eldon Ladd, "The Search for Perspective," *Interpretation* 25 (1971): 62. The quote from Ladd in its context reads as follows: "God has acted in the events of redemptive history to make himself known to men. I cannot assent to the older orthodox view, which still has its adherents, that "Revelation, in the biblical sense of the term, is the communication of information."⁸⁰ While I do not deny that revelation includes the disclosure of truth, this is too limited a definition. It is more accurate to say that "revelation moves in the dimension of personal encounter.... This is the end of all revelation, to see the face of God."⁸¹ What God reveals is not only

revelation of God that is not propositional? On what basis do we ascertain this nonrational self-revelation? “To render even the bare idea of revealed presence intelligibly defensible, one must correlate that view with a thoroughly cognitive content.” Such a proposal results, not in some form of superior, noncognitive revelation, but only in a great deal of unverifiable subjectivity. “Unless the divine ‘more’ is revelationally vouchsafed it is but sheer speculation. If it is revelationally meaningful and true, moreover, it is propositionally expressible” (*GRA*, 3:458, 459).

Henry does not reject personal revelation, but refuses to contrast it with propositional revelation. Revelation as personal (or the revelation of a personal God) does not require nor even suggest that the propositional character of the revelation be forfeited (cf. *GRA*, 3:431–32, 460). When he refers to personal revelation, he is referring to the *source* of revelation as a personal being, not to the recipient, the content, or the mode of revelation.²³ Although the subject matter given by the personal God certainly includes the nature and character of God, “legitimate emphasis on divine self-revelation cannot compensate for illegitimate debarment from revelation of its truth-content” (*GRA*, 2:166, see also 157). God is certainly more than a set of propositions—an infinite, personal God is much more—but this does not require us to distinguish divine self-revelation from propositional revelation “inasmuch as he makes himself known through rational disclosure and intelligible truths” (*GRA*, 3:461–62).

Objections to Propositional Revelation

Among five major objections to a propositional view of revelation that Henry addresses, two are of particular relevance to the discussion within evangelicalism.²⁴ Some suggest that

information about himself; he reveals *himself*.” [Notes: ⁸⁰E. J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 41. ⁸¹P. K. Jewett, “Special Revelation as Historical and Personal,” in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. C. F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 52, 56.]

²³ *GRA*, 2:151–66, where Henry works out his own view through a critique of Barth and Bultmann.

²⁴ The other three are that, 1) “God is absolute Subject, and hence it is said, cannot be an object of human knowledge”; 2) “divine revelation conveys no cognitive information” (the neoorthodox position); and 3) “since

“propositional truth depersonalizes revelation by turning it into abstract statements that dull the call for decision and obedience” (3:433). The fear of rationalism by “devotion” or pietism is an ongoing instance of misplaced anti-intellectualism. As Henry points out, if God’s commands and calls for obedience cannot be logically analyzed, “then no rational creature ought to be bound by such demands” (*ibid.*). There must be objective, cognitive content that can be understood and discussed if there is ever to be responsible obedience.

Second, “doctrinal revelation is said to erode vital personal faith in Christ by confusing personal trust with doctrinal belief” (3:436). A false antithesis between personal and propositional revelation—between faith and doctrine—is inimical to biblical Christianity. It is true that the object of our faith is Christ, not a doctrinal statement, but unless we know who Jesus Christ is, we can never place our faith in him. “To lose intelligible revelation spells inescapable loss of any supernaturally authorized doctrinal assertions concerning God” and results in “the inevitable surrender of any claim for the decisive authority of the Bible” (3:436, 437).

The verb *believe* (*pisteuō*) does in fact have doctrinal truths or propositional statements as its object; it is therefore untrue to the Gospels and Epistles to say that the object of belief is properly only a person. While the linguistic construction “believe” or “believe in” Christ, or in his name, appears as a kind of literary shorthand in which the underlying propositions are implicit rather than expressly stated, it nonetheless involves a propositional truth-claim made by Jesus directly or in his behalf. Moreover, where the doctrinal proposition or truth-claim calls for mental assent, it appears in many instances in the immediate context of statements enjoining belief in Christ (3:438).²⁵

Summary of Henry’s Views

Henry’s defense of propositional revelation is presented as a defense of “the historic Christian view...that divine revelation takes the form of propositionally given truths” (3:452). He views this as essential for truth. “Nonpropositional truth,” says Henry, is a meaningless phrase that cannot be defined or demonstrated (3:434). “Nothing can be literally true but a

propositions involve the use of language, propositional truth is of necessity culturally conditioned” (*GRA*, 3:430–38 *et passim*).

²⁵ There are many examples of the verb “believe” with specific doctrinal content as the object. As a ready example, note John 20:31, “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ.” This is a repeated Johannine theme (e.g., see John 8:24; 11:42; 14:10; 16:27, 30; 17:8; 1 John 5:1, 5), but is not unique to him (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:14).

propositional statement” (3:430). The loss or de-emphasis of this vital doctrine is destructive of Christianity as a revealed religion.²⁶ “In fleeing from propositional revelation the seriousness of truth may be trampled, and if this is the case, the concept of revelation loses all its seriousness.”²⁷

Christianity’s very claim to truth collapses unless truth can be affirmed of certain core-propositions inherent in it and integral to it. If the logical-propositional truth of the Christian revelation is ignored, and is even to be disowned, on the pretext that the efficacy of personal faith can be preserved only in this way, we shall needlessly and disastrously sacrifice what superbly distinguishes Christianity from other religions, viz., the truth of certain specific propositions that cannot be affirmed by rival faiths. . . . Faith divorced from assent to propositions may for a season be exuberantly championed as Christian faith, but sooner or later it must become apparent that such mystical exercises are neither identifiably Christian nor akin to authentic belief.

The religion of redemptive revelation, for all its emphasis on personal trust in the living God, does not expound believing *in* God in isolation from believing *about* God. And, as Donald [M]. MacKinnon writes . . . The analysis of faith “in terms of self-commitment to a person . . . leaves unanswered (or even deliberately seeks to evade) the distinction between such commitment and that involved in a *Führerprinzip*.” The demand so frequently reiterated by Kierkegaard and his dialectical and existential successors for a faith [that] leaps into the dark, and is all the more approved for its total absence of intelligibility, can hardly commend itself to rational men. Even in the case of fire, one had best be sure of the direction in which he jumps; yet the unlettered evangelist who urges his audience simply to ‘take the plunge’ has found a twentieth-century counterpart in the theologian who exhorts divinity students to polevault into paradox. The costly consequence of this theology is that it neglects the very propositions that must be true if Christianity is to be true, and if faith is to be Christian.²⁸

²⁶ *GRA*, 3:464. Henry suggests that the origin of such positions may be traced to Kant who rejected the possibility of humans having factual knowledge of supernatural reality.

²⁷ Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 154. Henry cites this statement with approval (*GRA*, 3:464).

²⁸ *GRA*, 3:486–87, citing in part Donald M. MacKinnon, “Borderlands of Theology,” in *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays*, ed. G. Roberts and D. Smucker, 41–54 (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1969), 42. *Führerprinzip* = “leader principle”; in this context it refers to a blind allegiance to a leader without rational thought. A fuller quote from MacKinnon is as follows: “No serious philosopher [of religion] can hope to dodge the questions involved in the claim of religious credenda to *truth*.”

“I shall mention only one among the various suggested contemporary devices for avoiding these questions [i.e., of truth]; the suggestion that they can be evaded by an analysis of faith in terms of self-commitment to a person leaves unanswered (or even deliberately seeks to evade) the distinction between such commitment and that involved in a *Führerprinzip*. Self-commitment is made validly to this person rather than to that because *this* person said and did certain things, thereby at once defining and authenticating, or at least effectively suggesting, certain claims.”

Evangelical Challenges of Propositional Revelation

Evangelicalism²⁹ today is undergoing something of an identity crisis. It is a very diverse movement that is not well-defined. The fact that this conference is focused on the theme, “Defining Evangelicalism’s Boundaries,” is indicative of some of the uncertainty. Professing evangelicals are riding off in all directions theologically, pursuing open theism on one hand and postmodernity on the other (to mention just two recent “attractions”). Although propositional revelation is not in the forefront of recent discussions, it is nevertheless a key issue that is being challenged, typically from a postmodern orientation. A number of evangelical scholars might be selected for comparison with Henry’s classic defense, but for purposes of this paper attention will be focused on Stanley Grenz, particularly the book in which he seeks to shape the future of evangelicalism: *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*.³⁰ Although the discussion to follow will lap

²⁹ I am using the term “evangelical” here in the broad sense of conservative Protestants who accept the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. As such those who trace their ecclesiastical heritage to the “neo-evangelical” movement are included, as are the heirs of the fundamentalist movement, and others who would claim neither of these ancestries. I am not using it in the European sense of Protestant (or Lutheran) in general or in the narrow sense of what has also been described as neo/new-evangelicalism.

³⁰ Subtitled: *A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993). Hereafter cited as *RET*. This programmatic work has been reiterated and/or developed in Grenz’s more recent works, including, e.g., *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), but the substance of his approach has not changed. I had originally intended to interact with several writers, but the space required to do so in an adequate manner has prevented me from doing this. A brief sample of where other considerations might be directed includes the following. Although more cautious in some areas than Grenz, Alister McGrath also singles out Carl Henry as an illustration of what is wrong with traditional evangelicalism. His major criticism is that Henry affirms his belief that divine revelation is logically consistent, even claiming that “without noncontradiction and logical consistency, no knowledge whatever is possible” (McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* [Downers Grove: IVP, 1996], 170, citing *GRA* 1:232). McGrath’s objection (“What logic is to be allowed this central role? Whose rationality provides the basis of scriptural authority?” [McGrath, *Passion for Truth*, 170]) seems to imply that there is more than one logic available in this world—an assertion that would warm the heart of any postmodernist. The result of following Henry on this point, says McGrath, is that we would inevitably allow “fallen human reason to judge God’s revelation” (*ibid.*, 170; see similar statements in his “Evangelical Theological Method: The State of the Art,” in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. J. G. Stackhouse, Jr., 15–37 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000], 32–34). The statements by Henry which McGrath quotes are not passing statements, but are part of an extended discussion of the necessity of logical consistency as a test for truth in which Henry interacts with the many proposals for establishing truth that had been proposed at the time he wrote. Yet McGrath does not respond to any of these arguments. He simply says that “evangelicalism is free to avoid the false lure of foundationalism, and to maintain the integrity of divine revelation on its own terms and in its own categories” (*Passion for Truth*, 172). This is a dismissal by assertion, not logical argument (but perhaps that expects too much from someone who does not consider Christianity to be logically consistent). Henry would reply that without assuming logical consistency it is impossible even to challenge the

into some related areas, this is not a critique of the entire book or of Grenz's theological position in general.³¹ This summary focuses primarily on Grenz's view of revelation, summarized roughly in the order of his discussion in the book.

claims of logic. Indeed, he says, renouncing "the importance of noncontradiction and logical consistency sponsors ... the suicide of theology" (*GRA*, 1:233).

Clark Pinnock's *Tracking the Maze: Finding Our Way Through Modern Theology from an Evangelical Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) evidences emphases similar to Grenz: "Christian theology, then, should not be primarily rational-propositional in form, even though it usually is, especially among evangelicals. Its primary task ought to be to explore and proclaim the Christian story, which is what gives meaning to doctrines in the first place. The job of theology is to expound the story and tell us what the meanings are. Doctrines that help us understand the story better are good and true; doctrines that ruin and distort the story are false and harmful.... We should redefine heresy as something that ruins the story and orthodoxy as theology that keeps the story alive and devises new ways to tell it. Within this kind of theology, there will be room for liberal Christians to relate contemporary stories and for conservative Christians to rehearse the mighty acts of God. Both will be telling stories, rather than arguing about abstractions" (183). But how do we know what it is that "ruins" the story? What is the objective means of evaluating this? Or is this just a subjective reaction that differs from hearer to hearer? Apart from propositional truth, there is no standard for evaluation. Are the deity of Jesus Christ and the trinity just "stories," or do they express propositional truth about ontological reality? If they are only stories, then the liberal can tell a story regarding Jesus' "deity" that merely serves to express the view of a great man, even though he believes that the ontological reality is that Jesus is only human. Another major problem with this is that to oppose story and theology is a false dichotomy. A story with no specific meaning is worthless. Can we tell the story of Jesus' death which provides forgiveness of sin without clarifying who Jesus is, the purpose of his death, the nature of forgiveness, and the meaning and penalty of sin? All of these parts of the story must have content else we are left with a fairy tale. A similar tack is taken by Roger Olson who, along with Pinnock, raises the flag for narrative theology in which "truth-as-story," with the "real world" being "created by the story," produces "realistic history" (often "historylike but not likely to be historical" in Pinnock's words—the fall is an example) replaces propositional revelation ("Whales and Elephants Both God's Creatures But Can They Meet? Evangelicals and Liberals in Dialogue," *Pro Ecclesia* 4.2 (1995): 165–89 (see esp. on narrative theology, 181–89). Olson desires to escape from "the poison of fundamentalism and ... epistemological propositionalism" (176).

Likewise Bernard Ramm's later work (his earlier work, *Special Revelation and the Word of God*, contains some excellent sections) also moves sharply away from propositional revelation to a view of Scripture heavily influenced by Barth (e.g., see his *After Fundamentalism*). Had I discovered it in time, I might have chosen to interact primarily with Kevin Vanhoozer's article, "The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. J. G. Stackhouse, Jr., 61–106 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) [hereafter cited as VVA], but I did not get to that volume early enough in this project. Vanhoozer's approach is quite different from that of Grenz, primarily in that he has not (if I read him correctly) adopted a thorough-going postmodern framework as has Grenz, but raises some substantive issues related to propositional revelation, some of which I have noted in this paper. His work deserves significant interaction despite the obtuse writing style, overly-technical jargon, neologisms, and heavy dependence on analogy which makes the argument more opaque than necessary (and which also at times drives the argument rather than illustrates it).

Also note the recent dissertation by Glenn Galloway which argues that encounter with God is primary, theological propositions are not foundational, the cognitive holds no special place, and theological statements are second order, non-regulative affirmations ("The Efficacy of Propositionalism: The Challenge of Philosophical Linguistics and Literary Theory to Evangelical Theology," Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Seminary, 1996), 253 (concluding summary).

³¹ A complete evaluation of Grenz's system would certainly be helpful. At the least his systematic theology, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), ought to be incorporated, as well as his *Renewing the Center* (Grand Rapids; Baker, 2000) and *Created for*

Grenz proposes that the heart of modernity has been the authority of reason.³² We are now transitioning into postmodernity where this authority is now being challenged (*RET*, 15). Grenz blames evangelicalism's preoccupation with propositional truth on their acceptance of the fundamentals that arose out of "the more intellectually oriented discussion" over liberalism's antisupernatural approach—and this in contrast with the more personal orientation of earlier Protestant thought. A focus on "a person's relationship with God" is said to be characteristic of 19th century theology in contrast to the propositional focus of fundamentalism and evangelicalism (26).

He is very much opposed to defining evangelicalism on the basis of doctrine. His proposal for revisioning evangelical theology involves moving beyond the "fixation with theology" (30). Instead the primary focus should be on experience, not on doctrinal formulations. Historically (and despite his previous assessment that evangelicals have been preoccupied with doctrine!) he argues that "because evangelicalism is not primarily constituted by a body of beliefs, the evangelical ethos is more readily 'sensed' than described theologically" (31).

Evangelical theology, according to Grenz, has been based on the conviction that the Bible is a deposit of cognitive revelation. Our duty is to learn that truth and be totally loyal to it. "As a result, many evangelicals view the task of theology primarily as systematizing and articulating the body of doctrine they assume to preexist implicitly or explicitly in Scripture" (62). But Grenz concludes that such an approach cannot serve to "revision" evangelical theology.

His specific discussion of propositional revelation begins with a four-page summary tracing the prominence of this doctrine from the 17th century Reformed scholasticism (his term) of Francis Turretin, through the 19th century work of the Princeton theologians, to the modern

Community (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1996). This paper, however, is deliberately limited in scope due to the time constraints of the ETS conference schedule. Only a few notes from the other volumes have been included. I have read from them, but have not been able to interact with them in detail.

³² I do not think that this is the right way to express this. It is not the authority of reason which lies at the heart of modernity, but the *autonomy* of unaided human reason exercised independently from and in defiance against God.

defense of it in Carl F. H. Henry's *God, Revelation and Authority* (*RET*, 66–69). The summary, though brief and quite selective, is fairly accurate of the issues included.

Grenz does acknowledge that a propositional view of revelation is correct in so far as “our faith is tied to the truth content of a divine revelation that has been objectively disclosed. God has communicated truth—himself—to us” (72).³³ Grenz says that he does not object to a cognitive element in revelation. Rather, the deficiency of the traditional evangelical view of propositional revelation “is its often under-developed understanding of how the cognitive dimension functions within the larger whole of revelation” (73). This, of course, implies that there is a larger category of revelation that is not cognitive.³⁴ His concern seems to be that benighted evangelicals have not adequately accounted for the social aspects of theological discourses. We have been captive to modernity in its focus on individualistic objective knowledge. In its place we must adopt a “profound community outlook” by recognizing the role of the community of faith in the theological task.

This community-based approach recognizes that “personal identity is formed within social structures” (73). Thus we can only understand and experience the world through a socially-mediated grid. Likewise our encounter with the divine is mediated through the conceptual framework of the religious community of which we are a part—and this corporate experience has priority over our individual encounter with divine reality (74).

How does this approach to theology work itself out? Grenz explains that the community recounts the biblical narrative of God's work in our world to its members, thus creating the conceptual framework in which the community members view both themselves and their experience in the world. In turn, theology is the community's reflection on this conceptual

³³ This is not an adequate or an accurate statement of propositional revelation as it has traditionally been defined for it does not indicate that this objective truth content has been inscripturated in the Bible. It leaves open (and seems to imply) a personal view of revelation should someone claim that such is, indeed, objective. This may be merely a sloppy definition, or it could be a deliberate ambiguity.

³⁴ Since cognition relates to the process of knowing or perceiving, how Grenz is aware of a noncognitive revelation or noncognitive aspects of revelation is unclear!

framework and on their beliefs. As a result, theology has a very different function in Grenz's system. It is no longer a study of the biblical revelation which instructs the community as to what they should believe (on the basis of propositional revelation), it is rather a "second-order" study of what they *do* believe—hopefully as a result of this vague recitation of the biblical narrative (which is propositional only in limited ways) (74–75).

The Bible is not equated with revelation, for revelation does not consist of propositional truth—it is rather "an *event* that has occurred in the community within which the believing individual stands" (76, emphasis added). The early church preserved the memory of the Christ event "together with the earliest responses to the revelation of God in Christ." Later generations are then able to interact with this record of earlier responses to God's revelation in such a way that they "become a continual source of revelation for the ongoing life of the community" (77).

The "truth" that we discover does not correspond directly with reality, but is a community-shaped understanding of it: "The ontological claims implicit in theological assertions arise as an outworking of the intent of the theologian to provide a model of reality, rather than to describe reality directly." Or again, "By its very nature, the conceptual framework of a faith community claims to represent in some form the truth about the world and the divine reality its members have come to know and experience" (78–79). Truth is a social construct and what one community has come to "know and experience" may differ from the knowledge and experience of another community. Nor is this proposal subject to evaluation by rational, logical thought.

Grenz argues elsewhere that,

The rational, scientific method is not the sole measure of truth, for aspects of truth lie beyond reason and cannot be fathomed by reason. As the old pietists declared, 'the heart has reasons which the head cannot understand.' ... Our theology must give place to the concept of 'mystery'—not as an irrational aspect alongside the rational, but as a reminder of the fundamentally nonrational or suprarational reality of God.... In the postmodern world we must reappropriate the older pietist discovery that a 'right heart' takes primacy over a 'right head.'³⁵

³⁵ Stanley Grenz, "Star Trek and the Next Generation," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism*, ed. David Dockery, 89–103 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1995), 97, 99, 101.

Grenz's discussion of the sources of theology also reflects his challenge of propositional revelation. Although "twentieth-century postfundamentalist evangelical theology has tended to take a propositional approach..., the revisioned evangelical theology advocated in these chapters conceives theology as reflection on the faith commitment of the believing community" (*RET*, 87). Theology must therefore move beyond a "solely propositionalist paradigm" since its task is not "merely to discover divinely disclosed truth ... lodged within the pages of the Bible." This move requires "a revisioned understanding of the *nature* of the Bible's authority [in which it functions] as the source for the symbols, stories, teachings and doctrines that form the cognitive framework for the worldview of the believing community" (88).

Three pillars are proposed as a tripartite source for theology: Scripture, tradition, and culture. The Bible (accepted fideistically: "we may simply assume the authority of the Bible"), is the primary norm.³⁶ Based on this norm, a traditional body of teaching developed in the early church. This has been transmitted to subsequent generations and is now accepted by contemporary believing communities. Since theology is regarded as second-order discourse,³⁷ "this body of beliefs likewise belongs to the faith of the church on which theology reflects" (95). Although creeds and confessions are "not binding in and of themselves," they are still considered to be a source for theology (97). A holistic, inclusive analysis of the church's social-historical-

³⁶ Elsewhere Grenz says that inspired Scripture cannot be used as a premise for biblical authority, but instead the religious community senses this authority as a result of the Spirit's illumination. The Bible is therefore viewed as authoritative and inspired "because believers in every age hear in them the voice of the Spirit as they seek to struggle with the issues they face in their unique and ever-changing context" (*RET*, 120). Bibliology is thus founded on a fideistic, existential base.

³⁷ See the discussion of Lindbeck's theological method later in the paper; Grenz explicitly bases his view of doctrine on Lindbeck's model (e.g., *RET*, 77-78).

cultural context forms the final source for theology.³⁸ The goal is to “diligently draw these three sources into a creative, practical systematic theology” (100).³⁹

Illumination becomes the umbrella term governing bibliology, including within it both inscripturation, inspiration, and canonization—as well as the *community* work in the “Scripture-forming process ... as these people participated in the process of bringing Scripture into being” (122). Although this illumination of the Spirit is the same now as in the past, formative stage of Scripture, Grenz insists that the canon is complete. He also argues that we must move beyond “a one-to-one correspondence between the words of the Bible and the very Word of God” (130). That is, the “word of God” is not to be equated with Scripture, but is rather “the Holy Spirit announcing the good news about Jesus, which word the church speaks to us in the Spirit’s power and by the Spirit’s authority” (131).

In what appears to be a deliberate postmodern approach shunning “propositionalism,” Grenz never speaks in terms of biblical doctrine. He constantly refers to narrative illustrating or modeling or shaping appropriate action and appropriate responses by the faith community (e.g., 126–28). Rarely (ever?) does Grenz tell us that “the Bible teaches that....”

His focus on personal revelation (though that term is seldom used) and his resistance to propositional revelation can be seen in statements such as, “‘the revelation of God’ is the divine act of self-disclosure, which reveals nothing less than the essence of God, the ultimate truth which is God” (129).

³⁸ The role of culture as a source for theology can be seen in Grenz’s discussion of church as community in which he argues on a philosophical (e.g., Charles Peirce and Josiah Royce) and (especially) on a sociological basis, appealing to the work of social scientists such as Emil Durkheim and George Herbert Mead (150–55). There is appeal to Scripture, but in the force of his discussion, cultural arguments carry (at least) equal weight.

³⁹ One result of elevating these three to the level of sources is an insistence that all traditions within Christendom be counted as equal partners—including Roman Catholicism. This is said to be of value due to the broader perspective thus achieved while each maintains fidelity to their own confessional heritage and retains mutual respect of other groups (105–06).

Excursus: Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine

Since a major component of Grenz's view of revelation is explicitly based on Lindbeck's *Nature of Doctrine*,⁴⁰ it will be helpful to summarize the relevant portions of that proposal. Lindbeck, along with Hans Frei, David Kelsey, and Brevard Childs, represents the "New Yale School"—the "most influential postmodern experiment" in American biblical studies.⁴¹ Lindbeck argues that there is no basis upon which to establish truth in religion (11). His own approach is presented in contrast to both traditional propositional orthodoxy with its goal of objective truth and an accurate description of ontological reality, and to the symbolic, existential expressions of liberalism (16).

The older cognitive-propositional view was destroyed by Kant who demolished its epistemological foundations. Subsequent to Kant "most educated people" abandoned "literalistic propositional interpretations" of such things as creation on the basis of scientific developments. Instead, all doctrines came to be understood to be relative—conditioned by the historical context in which they emerge. In the place of this traditional cognitive view, Schleiermacher and his followers have proposed various theories of religion which "all locate ultimately significant contact with whatever is finally important to religion in the prereflective experiential depths of the self and regard the public or outer features of religion as expressive and evocative objectifications (i.e., nondiscursive symbols) of internal experience" (21).

⁴⁰ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984).

⁴¹ Richard A. Mohler, "The Integrity of the Evangelical Tradition and the Challenge of the Postmodern Paradigm," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery, 67–88 (Wheaton: Victor, 1995), 76. Mohler summarizes the New Yale School's approach as follows: "Foundational to this school is the claim that a new epistemological situation represents a new post-Enlightenment challenge to the Christian truth claim and to our understanding of Scripture and doctrine.... The main thrust of this movement is to shift the basis of Christian theology away from a propositional claim based upon an objective and universal revelation, to a self-consciously local and particular narrative claim rooted in a specific cultural-linguistic system. Thus, the universal truth claim of Christianity is reduced to a culture-specific system of shared meaning" (77). For a critique of issues related to historicity in relation to narrative theology, see my article "Realistic or Historical Narrative?" *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 4.1 (Spring 2000): 52–81.

In place of these two approaches, Lindbeck proposes a regulative theory in which doctrines do not state propositional truths or serve as existential symbols, but rather function as communally authoritative rules which specify when, where, and how specific items apply. Thus both transubstantiation and those doctrines which would appear to contradict it may both be “true” because the doctrine only serves to specify rules of sacramental thought and practice that apply in specified historical and ecclesiastical contexts.

In contrast to a traditional, orthodox view of religion in which truth is determined by the correspondence of objective propositions to ontological reality, Lindbeck’s (admittedly novel) version of a cultural-linguistic view of religion defines truth in terms of categorical adequacy: i.e., does a religion have adequate categories “which can be made to apply to what is taken to be real” (48)—to make meaningful statements. As a result different religions may have “incommensurable notions of truth.” This is not a problem to Lindbeck, however, since these statements simply have different functions.

Lindbeck also defines the ontological truth of religious statements on a different basis than non religious ones. Here he insists that a propositional statement cannot be true—cannot correspond with reality—in and of itself. It can only be such when it is viewed as a *function* of constituting or regulating a particular way of life “which itself corresponds to the Most Important, the Ultimately Real.” He uses Austin’s terminology⁴² at this point to explain that a statement can only be elevated to propositional status by becoming a performative act (i.e., a deed that “helps create that correspondence,” 65). For example, the only way in which the statement “Jesus is Lord” can be viewed as propositionally true is for the speaker to commit himself to a way of life that reflects such a relationship (66). This declaration “becomes a first-order proposition capable ... of making ontological truth claims only as it is used in the activities

⁴² J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (The William James Lectures, Harvard Univ., 1955), ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2d ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975).

of adoration, proclamation, obedience, promise-hearing, and promise-keeping which shape individuals and communities into conformity to the mind of Christ” (68).

This domesticates propositional truth to the point where one cannot make any objectively true statement about religious matters other than those which seem to enable a direct expression in conduct. By this standard the statement, “the personal, triune God of the Bible exists” would be false if stated by a non-believer—or if it appeared in print. At this level we are dealing with some form of existential truth (Lindbeck denies that this is so, but his disclaimer is not convincing) and we have dichotomized/bifurcated our world into two compartments—the physical (in which objective reality does exist apart from any personal act in relation to it) and the religious (in which there is only existential “reality”). Lindbeck explicitly acknowledges that we do not define truth or reality in the manner described above in relation to non-religious statements (65–66).

Propositional truth and falsity characterize ordinary religious language when it is used to mold lives through prayer, praise, preaching, and exhortation. It is only on this level that human beings linguistically exhibit their truth or falsity, their correspondence or lack of correspondence to the Ultimate Mystery. Technical theology and official doctrine, in contrast, are second-order discourse about the first-intentional uses of religious language. Here, in contrast to the common supposition, one rarely, if ever, succeeds in making affirmations with ontological import, but rather engages in explaining, defending, analyzing, and regulating the liturgical, kerygmatic, and ethical modes of speech and action within which such affirmations from time to time occur...theology and doctrine, to the extent that they are second-order activities, assert nothing either true or false about God and his relation to creatures, but only speak about such assertions” (69).

This second-order discourse thus consists of rules which regulate and illustrate correct usage: “exemplary instantiations of paradigms” (81). New rules may be formulated, but there are no higher order directives which govern this process. The result is pluralistic diversity with no objective standards to govern communal life—even though “some crucial usages are beautifully

right and others dangerously wrong. The experts must on occasion bow to the superior wisdom of the competent speaker who simply knows that such and such is right or wrong even though it violates the rules they have formulated” (82). Anything which might be stated in propositional form about God or the world is variable. The only continuity/unity in the diverse expressions of Christianity is that they are all molded by the biblical stories—doctrine and experience “may be fantastically different” (83–84).

How much of Lindbeck’s total system Grenz is willing to acknowledge is unclear. He does explicitly appeal to Lindbeck to justify his classification of doctrine as regulative, second-order discourse in a culturally-conditioned community setting (*RET*, 77–78). This appears to be the heart of both approaches. Grenz *does* disavow Lindbeck’s discounting of the “ontological intent of theological descriptions” (*RET*, 85), but theological declarations are still said not to describe reality directly; they are only a model of reality (*RET*, 78).

Evaluation

What are we to make of these proposals? Is Henry’s traditional, orthodox position still viable? Or is the radical new system proposed by Grenz to be adopted as a new and improved evangelical product?

Grenz

A number of things may be said about the revisioned evangelicalism that Grenz proposes. I would suggest that there are nine major problematic issues arising from Grenz’s material considered in this paper. First, Grenz rummages across the full range of Christendom and cites writers from a vast array of perspectives in support of his “revisionings.” This accords with his claim of tradition as a *source* for theology, but he makes no allowance for the radically different presuppositions of these writers. Wide reading and interaction is certainly legitimate in scholarly pursuits, but this reading must reflect a critical appropriation which is very much on the thin side in Grenz’s work. It seems that a wide convergence of non-evangelical scholars carries more

weight than the ongoing consistency within the evangelical mainstream. Liberal critiques of conservative, evangelical positions are more persuasive to Grenz than capable, conservative discussions of orthodox doctrine. And throughout all of this there is, as Tom Nettles has pointed out,

precious little biblical exposition in his proposal.... He hardly even touches the surface of the biblical teaching concerning the relationship between revelation and inscripturation. It would seem, even casually, that a theological method which assigned Scripture a role different from that which it claims for itself cannot be a helpful model.... Without this kind of strong reasoning from Scripture, Grenz's presentation remains theologically flaccid.⁴³

Second, is it fair to suggest, as Grenz does, that evangelical theology has been based on the conviction that the Bible is a deposit of cognitive revelation to which we must be totally loyal? Certainly no evangelical will suggest that we should be disloyal, but Grenz's argument implies that this is as far as evangelicalism often goes. Though some may be content at this point, that is not a fair representation of the heart of evangelicalism which has placed a great deal of emphasis on our *duty* to obey as well as to know. It is partly by such a caricature that Grenz sets the stage for rejecting or denigrating the importance of propositional revelation. As Groothuis affirms,

The purpose of divine revelation is not merely the enunciation of a set of true propositions. Nevertheless, without these true propositions, revelation vanishes as a conceptual category, for there remains no cognitive content to be revealed. Revelation is God's effort to make himself known in ways that bear on every dimension of the human being—the mind, the emotions, the imagination and the will. The entire person must bow before the Creator and Redeemer in submission to the Holy Spirit. We are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength as our first priority; within that first-order theological affirmation, we then love our neighbor as ourselves (see Mt 22:37–39).⁴⁴

Third, throughout his discussion Grenz reflects considerable misconception regarding cognition, logic, reason, rationality, etc. His thrust seems to be an attempt to do theology apart from such categories. Revelation includes cognitive elements and propositions, but this is only part of the picture according to Grenz. But what is cognition? If cognition, as the dictionary says,

⁴³ Tom Nettles, "Review of *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* by Stanley Grenz," *Trinity Journal* 15 ns 1 (Spring 1994): 126.

⁴⁴ Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 120.

is the process of knowing or perceiving, how can there be revelation or theology on any basis other than the cognitive? If one cannot know or perceive something, it is not particularly suitable as a basis for theology and certainly cannot count as revelation in any meaningful sense of that term.⁴⁵ If the point is simply that much of human action is not logical, is that particularly profound? A postmodern outlook was not needed to discover this. Many motivations are volitional, emotional, etc., rather than strictly logical. But as Henry points out, this “deflective role of dubious presuppositions and of aberrant desire in human decision are important emphases in Christian theology. But not for a moment do they obscure the important role of appropriate evidence and of logical consistency.”⁴⁶

Likewise Grenz’s classification of truth as being in part “beyond reason” and the reality of God as “fundamentally nonrational or suprarational” are impossible constructs. Although he denies that this means that truth or God are “illogical,” what can nonrational mean? Is it legitimate to exclude considerations of rationality from any discussions of truth or of God? This attempt seems to view logic and rationality as somehow distinct from God and reality—a category that is sometimes relevant and sometimes not, as for example, electronics. This is a legitimate category of reality, but it is not always relevant. Some things are non-electronic. A carrot is non-electronic. That does not mean that carrots contradict electronics, only that the category of electronics is not relevant to a discussion of carrots. Grenz appears to suggest that this is the case with some aspects of truth and of God—logic and rationality are not always relevant categories. (I say, “appears to suggest,” since, if Grenz is correct, this logical conclusion may be irrelevant!) This “electronic carrots fallacy” casts serious doubts on the coherence of Grenz’s theological method and his view of biblical revelation. Rationality must be viewed as a

⁴⁵ “If divine revelation is truly revelation it must reach the human race in a substantial form. It must come as speech or language and bearing a rich conceptual booty with it.” And again, “without conceptual elements ‘pure encounter’ becomes meaningless encounter. And with conceptual elements one must admit that revelation is not only encounter but also conceptual, i.e., it contains ‘truths’” (Ramm, *Special Revelation*, 151, 153 n. 20).

⁴⁶ Carl F. H. Henry, “Postmodernism: The New Spectre?” in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery, 34–52 (Wheaton: BridgePoint/Victor Books, 1995), 50. It is possible that “deflective” is a typo for “defective,” but either reading communicates essentially the same point.

reflection of God's nature and relevant to all aspects of truth.⁴⁷ Apart from the laws of logic, Grenz could not even raise his objection since apart from the law of noncontradiction language conveys no meaning.⁴⁸

Fourth, equally objectionable is the role which Grenz assigns to the community. In his approach, corporate expression of the divine has priority over individual encounter with divine reality. This is also reflected in the weight that Grenz places on tradition as a *source* for theology. This denies *sola Scriptura* (that Scripture, not community, is the final authority for faith and life) and the priesthood of all believers. "Schleiermacher was right at least in this—the believer is not first related to the church which in turn relates her to Christ, but is instead first related to Christ who in turn relates her to the church."⁴⁹ Vanhoozer also points out that "we should resist locating interpretative authority in community consensus, for even believing communities, as we know from the Old Testament narratives, often get it badly wrong, and to locate authority in the community itself is to forgo the possibility of prophetic critique."⁵⁰

Fifth, this community focus leads to Grenz's insistence, following Lindbeck, that doctrines are second-order beliefs, not first-order propositions. By making doctrine a second-order enterprise, Grenz has destroyed any possibility of objective truth in theology since that discipline is now excluded from attempting to discern the ontological nature of reality and has become a descriptive, sociological serf to what the community believes. Although referring to Lindbeck's position, Vanhoozer's evaluation is also true of Grenz:

⁴⁷ See Henry's rigorous discussion of this issue as summarized in the first part of this paper and Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 175–79. McGrath's statement implying multiple logics (see n. 28) encounters similar problems and reflects a confusion between logic and rationality on one hand and philosophical systems or world views on the other—i.e., how logic is *used*. Groothuis critiques McGrath at this point (*ibid.*, 120–27).

⁴⁸ Ramm once wrote that "it is not unusual to find the law of contradiction derided as if it prompted an arid intellectualism or revived the wooden methods of the scholastics. Theologians and religious writers who take such a cavalier attitude towards the law of contradiction had best check with logic. MacIntyre calls our attention to the fact in logic that if a contradiction is allowed in our system *any proposition may follow*" (Ramm, *Special Revelation*, 143 n. 6).

⁴⁹ VVA, 86.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model, by seeing theology's task as describing the grammar of the community's culture and language, ultimately runs the risk of reducing theology to cultural anthropology, in which talk about God *just is* talk about the community. Such a reduction amounts to a failure to speak of God..., and hence to a failure to preserve the reality of God, together with his divine initiatives. Failure to refer to the divine initiatives results, in turn, in the loss of the central point of the good news, which is to say, in the loss of the gospel itself.⁵¹

Turning doctrines into rules (as Lindbeck does) enables a pluralist to hold that mutually contradictory beliefs (e.g., transubstantiation and, say, a memorial view of the Lord's Table) are equally true. This is possible since doctrine is now only a rule which prescribes how one is to conduct oneself in a particular religious community. It is not a first-order statement, an absolute statement of ontological reality. It is difficult to see how Grenz can escape a similar debacle. If doctrines are only second-order descriptions of community belief, what precludes different communities from validly professing contradictory beliefs? On what basis is one community's belief to be preferred to another's? Or are we now to become genuine pluralists and accept such contradictions? This is "a massive concession fatal to any evangelical theology."⁵²

Sixth, to elevate tradition and culture to the level of sources for theology, in the same category as Scripture (as Grenz does), is a startling move in terms of theological method. That Grenz specifies Scripture as the most important of these sources is not particularly reassuring. The fact that they are categorical equals lowers Scripture from its proper *sola Scriptura* pedestal. Roman Catholicism has, of course, elevated tradition as a legitimate source for centuries, but only the more radical liberal scholars have ever dared accord culture such a place. Carson's reaction to these moves is appropriate:

Grenz rejects the "propositionalism" in "modern evangelicalism's" approach to Scripture. He does not fairly assess how affirmation of the Bible's truthfulness has been characteristic of believers throughout church history until the modern and postmodern periods, or evaluate how numbers of contemporary evangelical scholars want to uphold the propositional truthfulness of Scripture where propositions are offered to us, while still recognizing other dimensions of truth.... He prefers the direction illumined by Schleiermacher, arguing that the three sources or norms for theology are Scripture, tradition, and culture. This is, to say the least, decidedly unhelpful. Quite apart from the

⁵¹ Ibid., 100.

⁵² Mohler, "Integrity of the Evangelical Tradition," 81.

extraordinary complexities of linking Scripture and tradition in this way, the addition of culture is astonishing. One might hazard a guess that Grenz has read enough to recognize that the interpreter cannot escape his or her own culture, and therefore has put down culture as a norm or source of theology, without recognizing the minefield he has created for himself. . . . With the best will in the world, I cannot see how Grenz's approach to Scripture can be called "evangelical" in any useful sense.⁵³

Seventh, there are disconcerting parallels in Grenz's view of revelation with neo-orthodoxy. Although it is not precisely the same, his reticence to directly identify the Bible with revelation,⁵⁴ viewing revelation rather as an event, the response to which by the believing community is preserved in the Bible, certainly has Barthian echoes.⁵⁵ The Bible as the community's "continual source of revelation" as each generation interacts with and confronts the record of these events in the biblical documents sounds very much like the existential, "break through" encounter with the divine—only now it is a community confrontation rather than an individual crisis.

In regards to Grenz's claim that revelation is God's "act of self-disclosure, which reveals nothing less than the essence of God" (129), defining "revelation" as an act is not the issue. It is the suggestion that this act reveals God's essence. Although Moses, for example, may have seen God's glory (certainly not his essence), he also heard God's voice which interpreted the significance of that revelation in cognitive terms.⁵⁶ In any case, the believer today has no direct access or recourse to this act of revelation, having only the inscripturated text of the biblical record which records in propositional form the knowledge of that event which we need.

⁵³ D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 481. Lest anyone conclude that Carson dismisses Grenz's thesis by assertion, note that Carson references the entire first two parts of his book (over 350 pages) as his critique of such a move.

⁵⁴ In his systematic theology, *Theology for the Community of God*, Grenz *does* say that "the Bible is God's Word to us" (396) but this is only "on the basis of this understanding of revelation" that he has earlier summarized, including his statement that we are precluded "from making a simple one-to-one correspondence between the words of Scripture and the word of God" (395). (This section largely reproduces material from *RET*.)

⁵⁵ Elsewhere he does suggest that we should resist Barth's "inordinate emphasis on the event character of revelation" (*Theology for the Community of God*, 392).

⁵⁶ This is not to suggest, as Grenz does, a neo-orthodox-type distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* (*ibid.*, 394).

Nor is the recognition of personal aspects of revelation in any way contrary to propositional revelation. One of the best explanations of the relationship between these two aspects of revelation is the clear statement of the earlier Ramm.

What does it mean to disclose a Person? ... Real encounter in life between persons is *always within the context of mutual knowledge*. This *mutual knowledge* is not opposed to the encounter, *but it is its indispensable instrument*.... Therefore to speak of revelation of a Person and not of truths is to speak ... nonsense. God is given in revelation as a Person, *but along with truths of God*. Encounter with God is meaningful because it is not ineffable; *by virtue of the conceptual element of special revelation* it is also a knowledge of God. Revelation is event *and* interpretation, encounter *and* truth, a Person *and* knowledge.⁵⁷

Eighth, one of the most crucial faults in Grenz's approach is the denial of any form of foundationalism and a denial of the correspondence view of truth—the loss of an overarching metanarrative that possesses universal validity. This is at the heart of postmodernity and is flaunted by the postconservatives as an assured conclusion. It is seldom argued. Modernity is dead, therefore foundationalism (in any form) is also passé.⁵⁸ The assumption (sometimes stated explicitly, sometimes only implied) is that evangelicalism has been modern in its epistemology and since postmodernity has now dethroned modernity, the epistemology of evangelicalism must be jettisoned in favor of the new monarch. But is this premise accurate? Does evangelicalism wear modernity's epistemological clothes? Or is there a biblical worldview and implicit epistemology that long predates the Enlightenment? Groothuis argues that “although the Bible does not present a carefully nuanced philosophical discussion of the nature of truth, it does offer a unified perspective on the matter of truth and falsity that flatly opposes the postmodernist orientation.”⁵⁹ It is certainly not possible here to enter the complex discussions of truth and epistemology. Suffice it to say that these issues have been thoroughly explored by capable

⁵⁷ Ramm, *Special Revelation*, 159–60. In a footnote to this statement, Ramm references Ronald Hepburn (*Christianity and Paradox* [London: Watts, 1958], 33ff) to the effect that “the concept of ‘pure encounter’ is simply a nest of logical problems and no way out can be found until *knowledge about* is admitted. As soon as we recognize this our thesis that revelation is meeting a Person, not assent to truths, crumbles.”

⁵⁸ Olson is one of the most blatant in this regard (“Whales and Elephants,” 170–76).

⁵⁹ Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 60.

evangelicals and there is no need to accept the postconservative, postmodernist conclusion that there are no universals—that all “truth” is community relative.⁶⁰

The ninth and final area of Grenz’s system that deserves attention (at least in this paper!) is the structure of his theology. Although the specific categories and structure of systematic theology are not inspired and sacrosanct, nevertheless the way in which a theologian chooses to organize his system is often indicative of his views of the source, nature, and role of theology. Grenz’s system is novel in this regard. As was pointed out above, bibliology (including the issues of revelation and epistemology) is not the starting point for Grenz’s theology. These topics are instead included under *pneumatology*, specifically in terms of illumination (his systematic theology is structured this way also⁶¹). By the structure in and of itself, Grenz is teaching that our knowledge of God does not start in the objective realm of Scripture, but in the subjective realm of our apprehension of the Spirit. But how does one know that there *is* a Holy Spirit apart from Scripture? How does one determine that what he “senses” is from the *Holy* Spirit rather than from his own imagination or even from some other spirit? In light of the biblical warnings regarding the deceitfulness of the human heart and of the adversary (e.g., Jer. 17:9; 2 Cor. 11:3–5, 13–15), this opens the door to both mysticism and to other potentially nefarious influences.⁶² Grenz’s response to this objection is an appeal to the community versus the individual. But this is no great security given the community record of apostasy and false teaching in both testaments as well as throughout church history. Apart from an objective record there is no basis to confront a wayward individual or community. Yes, either may also misread

⁶⁰ Two of the better discussions of these issues are D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, and Groothuis, *Truth Decay*.

⁶¹ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 379–404.

⁶² Although addressed to the neo-orthodox, the warning by Reymond is relevant here—if from a slightly different perspective: “The human religious existent who would espouse the epistemological views of neoorthodoxy can never be sure that the nonverbal subjective religious encounter concerning which he boasts was with God and not with his own subjective consciousness, if not with Satan himself. How does he know it is a true and not a false religious experience? What reason can he offer to justify his *verbal* explication of his nonverbal religious experience? And why should anyone believe him?” (Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* [Nashville: Nelson, 1998], 16).

Scripture, but in that case there remains an objective text to confront and correct the errant reader/s. When the appeal is first and primarily to illumination, there is no recourse, especially given Grenz's view of doctrine as only descriptive of community belief.

Not only do we face these dangers, but if the Spirit's work of illumination today is essentially the same as in the formative stages of Scripture,⁶³ why stop with a completed canon in the first century? There is no reason not to see an on-going revelatory work of the Spirit extending the canon indefinitely. Grenz explicitly rejects this conclusion (*RET*, 132), but only by assertion; no logical grounds for such a conclusion are given—a glaring weakness in light of his previous arguments.

My conclusion regarding Grenz's view of propositional revelation and his theological method is that, despite some interesting and even helpful discussions at times, I must join the ranks of those who conclude that this is not a legitimate form of evangelical theology. In the words of D. A. Carson, "With the best will in the world, I cannot see how Grenz's approach to Scripture can be called "evangelical" in any useful sense."⁶⁴ Or, as Tom Nettles concludes his review, "following [Grenz's] suggestions ... would be devastating to evangelical Christianity and set it on a course of theological confusion.... His neutrality, if not negativism, toward propositional revelation, bibliological apologetics, and explicit commitment to inerrancy is both unnecessary and hurtful."⁶⁵

Henry

Does Henry fare any better? My conclusion is that, yes, this is the path that we must follow in terms of a biblical doctrine of revelation. It is not necessary to repeat the summary of Henry's proposals at this point. There are some possible refinements and clarifications that could be

⁶³ A related problem that I have not addressed is the role that Grenz assigns to the *community* in the formation of Scripture (not canonization, but inscripturation). This has been critiqued by Tom Nettles in his review of Grenz's book: *Trinity Journal* 15 ns 1 (1994): 126–27.

⁶⁴ Carson, *Gagging of God*, 481.

⁶⁵ Tom Nettles, "Review," *Trinity Journal* 15 ns 1 (1994): 130.

helpful, but the essential position that Henry has delineated is clear and accurate. The following concluding remarks draw on the discussions of Ramm and Vanhoozer to suggest several complementary aspects of the discussion.

Grenz and others reject propositionalism because they insist that revelation is not just a collection of propositions (e.g., *RET*, 69–71). Others suggest that “what is of value in Scripture are the statements or truth conveyed by its language” (*VVA*, 75). But Henry would agree with both of these statements. Propositional revelation does not refer to a view which asserts that the Bible consists of a string of technical propositional statements. The terminology may not be ideal since, as Ramm points out, it prejudices the issue at the outset by picturing revelation as “God dictating Euclidean theological statements.”⁶⁶ The term is used in evangelical theology in a more general sense as a verbal statement conveying meaning. As Ramm goes on to explain,

the phrase intends that there is a valid conceptual side to revelation. The phrase intends that there is a knowledge of God in revelation. The phrase signifies that the writing of theology is not a futile task because God may be studied in his revelation. The expression means to say that when God comes to us he comes to us in truth. *And whoever writes a theology at all admits the intention of the phrase, “propositional revelation.”* For it is only under the intentions of this phrase that theology is possible at all. Deny the intentions of this phrase and theology could never be written.⁶⁷

Nor does Henry disagree that what is of value is the truth conveyed. Propositional revelation is that view which argues that the Scriptures constitute an objective, rational, effable, verbal deposit of a wide range of information, couched in a wide range of literary forms that serve a variety of functions. Often the same literary form/verbal statement can function in multiple ways depending on how the author employs it in any given context.

Just because many portions of Scripture are couched in poem, parable, narrative, etc. does not in the least contradict the description of revelation as propositional, for that term does not require every part of the text to be in the form of a technical Euclidean proposition. Yet every part of Scripture conveys specific, conceptual content irrespective of genre. As Ramm puts it,

⁶⁶ Ramm, *Special Revelation*, 154.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 154–55.

this content “does not reside in Scripture exclusively in terms of ‘propositions’ but lies buried there in literary, historical, and poetic forms; nevertheless, out of the process of mining and smelting the knowledge of God may be cast in a discursive form.”⁶⁸

Vanhoozer’s discussion of theological method proposes that the “covenantal canon” must be understood as communicative action and thus “any and all attempts to reduce theology (and revelation) to something exclusively ‘propositional’ or exclusively ‘personal’” are to be resisted.⁶⁹ He argues for a “phronetic,” canonical-linguistic theological method that is consciously postfoundationalist, postpropositionalist, and postconservative.⁷⁰

Although they address the same issues of theological method and biblical authority, and both use Henry as their verbal sparring partner in regard to the nature of revelation, Grenz and Vanhoozer come to opposing conclusions. Grenz spars with Henry because they have very different views of revelation and biblical authority. Vanhoozer, on the other hand, challenges Henry due to a difference in emphasis. Despite Vanhoozer’s claim to be a postpropositionalist, I am not convinced that he really understands Henry. Perhaps my understanding of Vanhoozer is skewed, but despite the rhetoric and the terminological differences (caused mostly by Vanhoozer’s analogical neologisms), I think that Vanhoozer is much closer to Henry than he realizes. Henry focuses his attention on the nature of biblical revelation; his discussion of personal elements of revelation (both the personal Revealer and the appropriate personal response of the recipient/s) are not central. Vanhoozer, by contrast, focuses (at least in this article) primarily on the personal, relational aspects of revelation, almost exclusively on the Christian’s proper *response* to God’s revelation. Henry’s topic is revelation, Vanhoozer’s is

⁶⁸ Ibid., 156.

⁶⁹ VVA, 64 n. 8.

⁷⁰ Ibid. These are his own terms, perhaps encouraged by the postconservative context in which he delivered the original paper? Vanhoozer has mined speech-act theory (Austin and Searle) for its contribution to the discussion, something that he has done more extensively in his *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998)—a book that I must confess to have not yet finished as of this writing. I have found the first half of the book very helpful.

theology. As a result, a number of Vanhoozer’s proposals can be used to supplement Henry’s discussion.

Vanhoozer suggests that “God reveals himself by what he does” (VVA, 72), and Henry would surely agree (*GRA*, 2:151ff, 247ff). But can we accurately understand what it is that God does—what it is that God reveals/communicates apart from some verbal, cognitive content? Henry would say, no.⁷¹ One might observe, say, the exodus or the cross, but apart from a verbal interpretation of the event, might interpret it in many different ways. The event of the cross could be viewed as a failure, a hoax, a heroic martyrdom, or God’s provision of a sin-bearer. But in any event we must remember that “the most common of all the acts of God in history is the use of quotation marks”⁷²—in other words, God has spoken. Frequently.

“Revelation” may refer to either God’s action or to the account of that action (either a verbal account by a prophet or an apostle, or the written account—the Bible). The word is used both ways in Scripture.⁷³ Once written, “the Bible—the Word of God—is ... an instrument of divine action” (VVA, 71). This is what Vanhoozer refers to in terms of communicative action—“God’s word does things” (72). In more traditional theological terms, this is the animation of the Word (Heb. 4:12). Revelation is not an ongoing act in this instance, but as people read and understand this verbal revelation it serves to instruct them—to challenge, rebuke, encourage, etc. The

⁷¹ Reymond would agree with Henry (*New Systematic Theology*, 5).

⁷² Nigel M. DE S. Cameron, “Revelation, Idea of,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. W. Elwell, 679–82 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 679.

⁷³ The primary vocabulary in both the OT and NT (הִלְבִּיחַ and ἀποκαλύπτω/ἀποκάλυψις) are used most frequently of the act involved in God’s disclosure, but reference to the written record as revelation is not unknown. The OT does not express the concept of a written revelation by a noun form of הִלְבִּיחַ (to reveal; there is no nominal form of this root that designates the content of the revelation), although the articular participle clearly has this meaning in Deut. 29:28 : הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת : הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת (the things revealed belong to us and our children forever, in order that we may follow/obey all the words of the law [Eng. v. 29]). The preceding context refers not only to the בְּרִית (covenant, v. 24 [25]), but also to the סֵפֶר (book, v. 26 [27]) in which the covenant was written. Also the purpose clause at the end of v. 28 [29] (לְ) with the infinitive construct) makes it clear that the things revealed are כָּל-דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת (all the words of this law). More often the OT refers to the written revelation as the word of the Lord (דְּבַר יְהוָה) or as Torah (תּוֹרָה). In the NT, ἀποκάλυψις refers to the text of Scripture in Rom. 16:25–26 (ἀποκάλυψιν μυστηρίου ... φανερωθέντος δὲ νῦν διὰ τε γραφῶν προφητικῶν); note the parallel between the two phrases. Likewise in Rev. 1:1, ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is parallel with τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας.

common statement (or its many variations), “God’s Word speaks to me...” does not (or should not be taken to!) imply a new act of revelation, but refers to the *effect* of the written Scriptures on the lives of the reader.

Authority in theology is based on the self-revelation of God through the Scriptures, which are the result of a human/divine concursus. Theology must respond appropriately to God’s self-revelation.⁷⁴

“Theology is possible only as a word comes to us from beyond ourselves. There must be an *effable ... and transcendent ...* word if theology is to be truly the knowledge of God. There can be *logia* only as revelation is effable, and it can only be *tou theou ...* only as it truly comes from God.”⁷⁵

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⁷⁴ VVA, 74. The above is my summary of Vanhoozer’s thesis, stripped of its jargon.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

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