

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

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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

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

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).

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.”² 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).³

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 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.*).⁴

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

* This is the small section of the paper that was presented at the 53d Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Colorado Springs, CO, November 14, 2001. It has been highly abridged for purposes of the ETS presentation. As a result, some footnotes may give incomplete bibliographical information and some other “discontinuities” may be evident. A copy of the complete, 38-page paper is available online at <http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/ets_sbl.htm>. You will find a download link there to a .pdf version of the paper (note: Acrobat v. 5).

¹ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, TX: Word, 1976–83), 1:24. (Hereafter cited as *GRA*.)

² 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.”

³ 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.”

⁴ 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).

upon the discussion of Scripture,”⁵ 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 cognitivism 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).

Logic did not originate with Aristotle.⁶ There is but one logic in the world⁷ bestowed on humankind by the Creator as a reflection of his own nature.⁸ 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.⁹ “Evangelicals need not tremble and take to the hills whenever others charge us with rationalism, since not every meaning of that 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).

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-

⁵ This is Henry’s phraseology summarizing objections often raised (*GRA*, 3:455).

⁶ “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).

⁷ “There is one logic to which all propositions are answerable” (*GRA*, 3:385).

⁸ “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).

⁹ “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.

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.¹⁰

Evangelical Challenges of Propositional Revelation

Evangelicalism today is undergoing something of an identity crisis. It is a very diverse movement that is not well-defined. The fact that the ETS 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*.¹¹ Although the discussion to follow will lap into some related areas, this is not a critique of the entire book or of Grenz’s theological position in general.¹² This summary focuses primarily on Grenz’s view of revelation, roughly in the order of his discussion in the book.

Grenz proposes that the heart of modernity has been the authority of reason.¹³ 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 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).¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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

¹⁰ *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.

¹¹ Subtitled: *A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993). Hereafter cited as *RET*.

¹² 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 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.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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!

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 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.’¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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,¹⁸ “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-cultural context forms the final source for theology.¹⁹ The goal is to “diligently draw these three sources into a creative, practical systematic theology” (100).²⁰

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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).

¹⁹ 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.

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).

Evaluation

A number of things may be said about the revised 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.²¹

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).²²

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, 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.²³ If the point is simply that much of human action is not logical, is that particularly profound? A postmodern outlook was

²⁰ 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).

²¹ Tom Nettles, “Review of *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* by Stanley Grenz,” *Trinity Journal* 15 ns 1 (Spring 1994): 126.

²² Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 120.

²³ “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

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.”²⁴

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 reflection of God’s nature and relevant to all aspects of truth.²⁵ Apart from the laws of logic, Grenz could not even raise his objection since apart from the law of noncontradiction language conveys no meaning.²⁶

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.”²⁷ 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.”²⁸

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:

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.²⁹

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

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).

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ 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).

²⁶ 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).

²⁷ VVA, 86.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

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."³⁰

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 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.³¹

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,³² viewing revelation rather as an event, the response to which by the believing community is preserved in the Bible, certainly has Barthian echoes.³³ 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.³⁴ 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.

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.³⁵

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.³⁶ The assumption (sometimes stated explicitly, sometimes only implied) is that

³⁰ Mohler, "Integrity of the Evangelical Tradition," 81.

³¹ 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.

³² 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*.)

³³ 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).

³⁴ This is not to suggest, as Grenz does, a neo-orthodox-type distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* (ibid., 394).

³⁵ 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."

³⁶ Olson is one of the most blatant in this regard ("Whales and Elephants," 170–76).

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."³⁷ 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 evangelicals and there is no need to accept the postconservative, postmodernist conclusion that there are no universals—that all "truth" is community relative.³⁸

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 also³⁹). 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.⁴⁰ 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 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,⁴¹ 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."⁴² 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."⁴³

³⁷ Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 60.

³⁸ Two of the better discussions of these issues are D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, and Groothuis, *Truth Decay*.

³⁹ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 379–404.

⁴⁰ 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).

⁴¹ 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.

⁴² Carson, *Gagging of God*, 481.

⁴³ Tom Nettles, "Review," *Trinity Journal* 15 ns 1 (1994): 130.