

Next-Wave Interview with Stanley J. Grenz

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By Rogier Bos

Dr. Stanley Grenz is one of the premier theologians of our time. Many Christians first encountered Postmodernism in his book 'Primer on Postmodernism'. In this interview Grenz reflects on how his thinking has evolved since then, and on the nature and place of evangelicalism. Dr. Grenz teaches at Carey University and Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Next-Wave: Dr. Grenz, your book 'Primer on Postmodernism' was for many Christians the first in-depth confrontation they had with Postmodernism. How did you become aware of postmodernism, and what convinced you that postmodernism was going to be a major force in our culture?

Dr. Grenz: Perhaps the initial impetus for what developed into my interest in the postmodern situation came while I was on sabbatical leave in 1987-1988. I had returned to Munich, Germany, where I had completed doctoral work in the mid-1970s, this time, however, to write a book delineating the theology of the man who had been my doctoral supervisor, Wolfhart Pannenberg. That year marked a transformation in my own theological thinking, as I came to see the poverty of a purely rationalist approach to, as well as the crucial importance of a more communitarian understanding of, Christian life and consequently Christian theology.

Soon after my return to North America I was approached by InterVarsity Press to produce a volume on theology in the twentieth century. Working on this project, the results of which were published in 1992, led me to consider more closely the shifts in both theology and Western culture that had transpired over the last several decades. Then early in 1993, the people at the Leighton Ford Ministries asked me to participate in a "think tank" on ministry to "baby busters" (now more generally known as Generation X). My role was to interpret for the group the intellectual world of the emerging adult generation, which, I quickly learned, was dominated by postmodern sensitivities.

Finally, while all this was happening, my then teen-age son, Joel, got me watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which at that time was his favorite television program. These various strands led me to look more closely at postmodernism as the background for the ethos that seemed to be pervading contemporary Western culture, especially among teenagers—like my son—and "20-somethings." It seemed to me that what was influencing younger adults today would become increasingly important in the future. Therefore the church—and I as a theologian—needed to become aware of these intellectual trends.

POSTMODERNISM

Next-Wave If you had to give us a working definition of postmodernism, what would it be?

Dr. Grenz: "Postmodernism," like so many other contemporary terms, is notoriously nebulous. And different people today have differing understandings as to what they mean by it. In my *Primer on Postmodernism* I describe this phenomenon as the intellectual shift that is related to, even underlies the wider postmodern cultural ethos.

Actually, the term "postmodern" may have been first coined in the 1930s, although it did not gain widespread attention until the 1970s. Initially, the term denoted a new style of architecture. Then it invaded academic circles, originally as the label for theories expounded in university English departments, before invading philosophical faculties as well. Eventually it surfaced as the description for a broader cultural phenomenon.

At its heart, postmodernism is negative. That is, it is the critique of, and the quest to move beyond modernism. Specifically, it is a rejection of the modern mindset, but launched under the conditions of modernity which were first articulated in the Renaissance and developed more completely in the Enlightenment. The work of thinkers such as Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes and Isaac Newton led to the elevation of the human, thinking self to the center of reality and pictured the physical world as a machine whose laws and regularity could be discerned by the human mind. Under the banner of the "Enlightenment project," philosophers and scientists sought to unlock the secrets of the universe, in order to master nature for human benefit and create a better world. This quest led to the modern, technological society characteristic of the twentieth century with its attempt to bring rational management to life in order to improve the quality of life.

Postmodernism represents a questioning, and even rejection, of the Enlightenment project and the foundational assumptions upon which it was built, namely, that knowledge is certain, objective and inherently good. Consequently, it marks the end of a single world view. Postmodernism resists unified, all-encompassing and universally valid explanations (i.e., any all-encompassing "meta-narrative"). It replaces these with a respect for difference and a celebration of the local and particular at the expense of the universal. Postmodernism likewise entails a rejection of the emphasis on rational discovery through the scientific method which provided the intellectual foundation for the modern attempt to construct a "better" world.

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Next-Wave Would you distinguish between postmodern culture and postmodern philosophy? If so, how would you say they are different?

Dr. Grenz: Yes. As the above description indicates, postmodernism is the intellectual outlook that is connected to a broader cultural phenomenon or ethos. In fact, "postmodern" initially referred to developments in culture.

Viewed in the current context, the adjective "postmodern" describes more than an intellectual mood. The postmodern rejection of the focus on rationality characteristic of the modern era finds expression in various dimensions of contemporary society. In recent years, the postmodern ethos has been reflected in many of the traditional vehicles of cultural expression. These include architecture, art and theater. In addition, postmodernism has increasingly become embodied in the broader society. We can detect a shift away from the "modern" toward the "postmodern" in "pop" culture and even in the day-to-day aspects of contemporary life. In this broader sense, "postmodernism" refers to an intellectual mood and an array of cultural expressions which call into question the ideals, principles and values that lay at the heart of the modern mindset.

Next-Wave In recent years we have seen a steady stream of books by Christian authors on the subject of postmodernism. Yet there are still many Christians who say that 'postmodernism' is just a phase, like the hippy-movement was a phase, and that it will pass. How would you respond to that?

Dr. Grenz: It may indeed be the case that certain *expressions* of the postmodern ethos will fade. However, I would venture to say that there is no going back from many of the intellectual sensitivities that characterize the postmodern ethos. These include such hallmarks as the dethroning of reason in favor of a more holistic understanding of the human person, the rejection of radical individualism in favor of a more communitarian understanding of existence, and the rejection of uniformity in favor of the celebration of difference.

Next-Wave: If you had to categorize different Christian responses to postmodernism, what categories would you use, how would you describe them, and where would you place yourself?

Dr. Grenz: Christians tend to fall into two opposite and equally unhelpful responses to cultural expressions such as postmodernism. Some simply "baptize" every new development. They jump on the latest bandwagon thinking that this is the way to stay relevant. Others "demonize" what they see happening around them. In their estimation, the "new" is always dangerous or evil, whereas the "old" is safe and good.

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I seek to promote a third response, critical engagement with culture. I believe that like the modernism that emerged from the Enlightenment the postmodern ethos is a mixed bag, containing much useful material, but also harboring certain potential pitfalls. Our task as Christians, therefore, is neither to hail the arrival of postmodernism as the savior of humankind nor to fight against it in the name of a return to modernism. Rather, our goal ought to be to understand how we can bring the gospel to postmodern people in ways that communicate meaningfully to them.

Next-Wave: Please help us understand the relationship between evangelicalism and postmodern thinking. Many evangelicals seem to have a hard time understanding postmodern thinking and culture. They seem to intuitively reject it. Why is that?

Dr. Grenz: Despite their critique of modernism, evangelicals seem to have grown quite comfortable in the modern world. Several factors have contributed to this. For example, many historians of evangelicalism point out that although its roots lie in the Reformation, the evangelical movement as we know it today was born in the early modern period and hence the evangelical vision of the faith developed in conversation with the Enlightenment milieu. Perhaps equally important is the fact that evangelical apologists and theologians have been active in recent years carving out a place for Christianity in the modern world by showing that a person does not need to commit "intellectual suicide" (when judged against modern scientific categories) to be an evangelical Christian. In this process, many evangelicals committed themselves to a modernist notion of truth, namely, that truth is the correspondence of our assertions with reality "as it really is."

Postmodernism, of course, calls this concept of truth into question. Evangelicals who have pinned their faith to the modernist understanding, that is, who view the faith as bolstered by or constructed on a rationalist apologetic, find this intellectual shift threatening. Unfortunately, they often caricature postmodernism in the process, such as by claiming that postmodernism entails the denial of truth. One debilitating problem with this approach is that it leads evangelicals to assume that they must convert postmoderns to modernism before they can bring them to Christ. This battle, I might suggest, was decided at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.

Next-Wave: D.A. Carson questions whether your approach to scripture can be called evangelical. Would you consider yourself an evangelical? Does it concern you whether others see you as evangelical? Why/why not?

Dr. Grenz: I must admit I found Don's comment disconcerting when it was first brought to my attention, in that in his book it seems to come almost out of nowhere. Rather than being the conclusion drawn from a scholarly interaction with my position as espoused in my writings, it appears tacked on to a very short mentioning of me and my work in postmodernism.

I have always seen myself as an evangelical. Indeed, I was raised in the so-called "evangelical subculture." And I am a contributing member of the Evangelical Theological Society, as well as a consulting editor of *Christianity Today*.

I have described in print what I see as the heart of the evangelical ethos, namely, a spirituality or understanding of what it means to be Christian that focuses on understanding oneself and telling one's story in accordance with the biblical categories of "having once been lost" but "now being found." This glorious transformation occurs through an encounter with God in Jesus Christ.

I realize that others may have slightly different understandings of what "evangelical" means and that they might be disposed to make judgments about others based on their own descriptions. I am naturally saddened when people make quick and unsubstantiated judgments about others, especially when such judgments could potentially predispose others to dismiss without warrant another Christian or another's work.

Next-Wave: Evangelicals have long contended over how we viewed the scriptures. 'Infallibility' and 'Inerrancy' have been crucial issues to

them. How would you explain your view of the scriptures, and how is it different from a standard evangelical view?

Dr. Grenz: In my one volume systematic theology, *Theology for the Community of God*, I use both "infallibility" and "inerrancy" to speak about biblical authority. These terms are words that evangelicals (and others) have employed to affirm the trustworthiness of Scripture. Unfortunately, many evangelicals understand "inerrancy" in a manner that is more reflective of modern ways of thinking than of biblical understandings. Some see the Bible as a storehouse of facts understood as propositions that are accurate assertions about reality. The task of the biblical exegete, in turn, becomes that of determining what these facts are. The Bible is then said to be inerrant in that all the facts that it presents are accurate.

The Westminster Confession of Faith declares that the final authority in the church is the Holy Spirit speaking through the Scriptures. This suggests to me that the most profound truth about the Bible is that it is the Spirit's instrument—the Spirit speaks to us through these documents. This suggests that we should speak first and foremost about the authority, and hence the infallibility and inerrancy, of the Spirit and the Spirit's speaking through the text. Biblical authority, in turn, finds its basis in the Spirit who is the ultimate voice that we hear in the text. When fleshed out (which is part of my current writing project) this yields an understanding that is fully evangelical (especially in the Reformation sense of this term) and offers, I believe, a more helpful point of contact with postmoderns than the view held by some evangelicals, which was born in an era when evangelicals sought to understand biblical authority in a manner that could engage with the modern mindset.

Next-Wave: I know that one can be very elaborate when it comes to describing one's theology. But if you had to be brief, which doctrines do you think will be most affected by the postmodern world, and how?

Dr. Grenz: You are right in suggesting that being brief here is difficult. Let me suggest in reply two broad aspects. First, sensitivity to the postmodern world profoundly affects the way we view theology itself. Rather than yielding a collection of isolated facts designed to enhance our knowledge, theology becomes the delineation of a "mosaic" of interrelated beliefs, the goal of which is wisdom for living as Christians. And second, the postmodern ethos leads us, I think, to see the communitarian dimension that lies at the heart of biblical faith. This communitarian understanding begins with a renewal of the focus on God as triune and concludes with a realization that God's program leads to the establishment of the new creation.

Next-Wave: How has your thinking on Postmodernism evolved since you wrote 'Primer on Postmodernism'?

Dr. Grenz: I would have to say that the main points of my outlook have remained the same. In my work of a theologian, however, since writing the book I have seen more clearly that the postmodern context provides the occasion for theology—and with it apologetics—to move to what several people call a "non-foundationalist" approach. More importantly for the readers of *Next-Wave*, I am increasingly convinced of the importance of the ministry of Christian communities (i.e., the church) in reaching postmoderns and therefore of the need for the church to take seriously the postmodern context in which God has called us to live and minister.

Next-Wave: Since you wrote the Primer more and more people have started talking about Postmodernism. What developments are you really happy with?

Dr. Grenz: When I first started thinking and speaking about this topic I found parachurch groups keenly interested in the cultural shifts occurring on university campuses and among teens. This, of course, was to be expected. And I was pleased to be invited to work with such groups. Although I continue to enjoy these opportunities, now I am increasingly receiving calls from church leaders wanting to talk about what the church can do to reach postmoderns for Christ. I find this development especially gratifying, for it means that the church as a whole is beginning to enter into the discussion.

I am also very gratified that many people are now engaging Christianly with pop culture, for in many respects the entertainment industry has become the vehicle through which postmoderns express their spiritual quest. I see this enterprise, as well as a return of evangelical Christians into the realm of pop culture, as standing on the cutting edge in the immediate future.

Next-Wave: You are involved in a wide variety of networks, and a sought-after expert on Postmodern thinking and culture. As you travel around, and see people and ministries attempt to interact with Postmodernism, what concerns do you have?

Dr. Grenz: As I suggested earlier, I am concerned that some evangelicals so readily become judgmental of those who sense that God is calling them to take seriously the postmodern culture. The labeling and name-calling that often emerges does not serve to advance the gospel. At the same time, I am saddened whenever I see postmodern evangelicals denigrating Christians who continue to express their faith in more traditional manners. Related to this is the intolerance and lack of understanding that is so often demonstrated by the various combatants in the "worship wars." I happen to appreciate both contemporary and classical music styles. But I find it ironic how postmodern Christians can quickly adopt a modernist mindset, which emerges whenever they erroneously assume that their preferred, particular music is the only way to have a truly effective ministry in the postmodern context.

Next-Wave: What, in your eyes, are key-essentials for churches that desire to reach postmodern people?

Dr. Grenz: The ultimate key is "community." The best apologetic we have in the postmodern context is the vibrant, local community of disciples who are loyal to Christ, that is, a community in which the power of the Spirit is transforming relationships. As many of my friends in IVCF tell me, postmodern persons are converted to the community before they are converted to Christ.

In addition, I think the church today needs to recapture a profound confidence in the power of the Spirit who remains active in the world today and is active in ways that we might not immediately recognize. Many Christians are tempted to become cynical and despairing along with people around them. In this way the downside of the postmodern ethos invades the church. In a context in which people no longer find a humanly-based reason for hope, we have good news to share, namely, the gospel

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about the God who does what is humanly impossible—the God who brings life from the dead.

Next-Wave: As you look at the future, what do you think is likely to happen in the next 25 years in terms of what we have been discussing here?

Dr. Grenz: Rather than stating what I *think* will happen (which in the end might be quite irrelevant), let me say that as I look to the future I am profoundly hopeful—not because of what I believe we will accomplish, but because of the God in whom I believe. Although the problems we face are enormous, we stand under the mandate of Jesus Christ who is the Lord of Creation, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and we are children of the Creator of the universe. For this reason, I am convinced that just as the gospel has gone forth with power in every era and to every generation, so also believe the gospel will sound forth in the postmodern context in which we live. And the God who promises to bring creation to its divinely intended goal invites us to participate in the divine program. May we, therefore, empowered by the Spirit, be faithful to mandate Christ has entrusted to us, to the glory of God!
