

**Stanley J. Grenz. *A Primer to Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996.**

Reviewed by Samuel Smith, Messiah College  
*Christian Scholar's Review* 26.2 (Winter 1996): 221-23

Mark Noll opens his book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, with the remark that the scandal of the Evangelical mind is that there has been no Evangelical mind. Imagine, then, the difficult task Stanley Grenz proposes for himself: a book providing lay people in the Evangelical tradition with an understanding of postmodernism, with an emphasis on “a foundational understanding of the postmodern ethos, especially its intellectual orientation” (ix). Given the labyrinthine complexity of postmodernisms, especially their “intellectual orientation[s],” I can’t help wondering whether this book will be read much or carefully by its intended audience, particularly as an *introduction* to postmodernism. My own experience with Evangelicals suggests that *if* they do read it, it is likely to become the one book they read, which they consider sufficient for understanding—it is difficult to imagine most Evangelicals going on to read the likes of Derrida, Foucault or Nietzsche as a result of reading this book. This *anticipated* small, particular scandal, however, would not be the fault of Grenz: he offers a credible *introduction* to postmodernisms in lucid prose, presenting his “take” on postmodernism in a readable (though necessarily reductive) narrative, telling his story of the development of postmodern intellectual pathways and their various challenges to the ideals of the Enlightenment.

Grenz begins with a brief differentiation between modernism and postmodernism by comparing and contrasting the modernist original *Star Trek* series with the

postmodernist *Star Trek: The Next Generation* series—an effective strategy given the ubiquity of Star Trek in our current culture. After chapters on “the postmodern ethos” and “the postmodern world view” [with an X through the word “world”] (a Heideggerian moment for Grenz), Grenz begins his story with “the rise of the modern world,” with an emphasis on Kant and the Enlightenment. “The Prelude to Postmodernism” examines the preparatory influences of figures like Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Saussure. This is followed by the primary chapter of the text, a closer examination of three major postmodern intellectuals: Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty (“the philosophers of postmodernism”). A final chapter, “The Gospel and the Postmodern Context,” offers Grenz’s Evangelical response to postmodernism and its ramifications for living in our world.

I find Grenz’s representation of postmodernism uneven on the whole. On the one hand, there is much to like. His section on Foucault is thorough and insightful—one of the better brief introductions to Foucault’s thought I have read. He also offers superb summaries of Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and Wilhelm Dilthey’s work on hermeneutics (to be especially applauded as Dilthey is often overlooked in introductory texts on postmodernisms). One helpful strategy Grenz employs is to include, in addition to his own text, numerous textual fragments (boxed) from postmodern thinkers, about one every three pages. Some of these quotations are quite extensive (an entire page of Derrida in one instance!).

On the other hand, there is much in Grenz’s account that disappoints. For example, in addition to his own text, Grenz includes numerous textual fragments (boxed) from postmodern thinkers, about one every three pages (feeling *déjà vu* here, my

reader?). Some problems arise with this practice. On page 28, for instance, Grenz boxes this textual fragment from Derrida's essay, "The Theater of Cruelty" (Grenz is talking about postmodern theater):

The stage will no longer operate as the repetition of a *present*, will no longer *re-present* a present that would exist elsewhere and prior to it, a present whose plenitude would be older than it, absent from it, and rightfully capable of doing without it: the being-present-to-itself of the absolute Logos, the living present of God.

As this occurs early in the text, well before Grenz's section on Derrida, try to imagine Grenz's projected audience understanding this detached fragment! Decontextualized, this fragment—which is Derrida rigorously examining Artaud's theory of drama—also appears to be something it is not: a positive statement by Derrida. Despite Grenz's good intentions for this strategy (to allow postmoderns to speak for themselves in his text, which is finally antagonistic to postmoderns), this kind of difficulty haunts his pastiche of postmodern texts.

There are other problems as well. Grenz's section on the crucial figure of Nietzsche is too dependent on secondary sources, his sometimes trenchant re-presentation of Derrida is limited to Derrida's early work, and his thoughtful section on Rorty is too brief (another five pages for Rorty would not have made the 172-page text unwieldy). Grenz also ignores older traditions reflected and to some extent rehearsed in postmodern thinking: the Greek sophists and ancient Taoism (any student of the Tao can recognize the taoist tendencies of especially Heidegger and Derrida). The similarities between the Jewish interpretive tradition of midrash and postmodern hermeneutics (with Derrida's

own Jewishness and the pervasive trace of the Jewish poet Edmond Jabes' understanding of book and text in Derrida's early texts) are also neglected. Finally, the section on postmodern fiction[s] lacks any substantive examples: no mention of Milan Kundera, Umberto Eco, John Barth, Julian Barnes, Salman Rushdie or other such major writers of postmodern fictions.

Such disappointments, however, are common enough—any text attempting to represent the diversities of postmodernism will fall short of the *glory* of postmodernisms in some way. More peculiar than these common disappointments is Grenz's final chapter, "The Gospel and the Postmodern Context." There are instances of curious slippage here, instances where Grenz claims or appropriates a "postmodern" insight which he subsequently ignores when assuring his readers of their subculture's understanding of the Christian gospel. For example, Grenz writes

But in contrast to the modern ideal of the dispassionate observer, we affirm the postmodern discovery [sic] that no observer can stand outside the historical process. Nor can we gain universal, culturally neutral knowledge as unconditioned specialists. On the contrary, we are participants in our historical and cultural context, and all our intellectual endeavors are unavoidably conditioned by that participation. (166)

Nevertheless, Grenz goes on to speak as if Evangelicals had transhistorical and transcultural knowledge of God and the meaning of the gospel, rendering the above comments mere lip-service to postmodern "discoveries." He also has his positivist moments, as in statements such as "The *fact* that God *is* the social Trinity—Father, Son,

and Spirit” (168, my emphases). More appropriate: “Since we *believe* God to be a social Trinity,” etc.

Perhaps the weakest moment in Grenz’s conclusion, however (from a postmodern perspective—if this isn’t obvious), is his utter unawareness of the most significant critique postmodernists (especially Derrida) make of Evangelicalisms and their fundamentalist cousins: the nonpresence of God in textual religions. Evangelicals, who identify the Bible as the “Word of God,” encounter or “know” God/Christ/Jesus in their readings of New Testament texts. Thus they encounter an absent God/Christ/Jesus, or a trace of God/Christ/Jesus, a text and not a person, a textual presence which ironically identifies a personal absence. Or as Sting puts it in “All This Time”: “Father, if Jesus exists, then how come he never lived here?” The glorification of the New Testament, particularly the gospel accounts, to something more than testimony to encounters with God/Christ/Jesus, to something which successfully reproduces and re-enacts those encounters in a way that enables someone to say “He walks with me and He talks with me,” is clearly suspect in the eyes of a postmodernist. The particular postmodern truth that does not seem to reach Grenz: every articulation of Christian faith is an interpretation—human, all too human.

But to ask for that from this book would be to ask for the moon: Grenz’s purpose is not to allow postmodernisms to engage and interrogate Evangelical faith or understanding. And his projected audience is not looking for a book that will engage and interrogate their faith in such a way that they might not be able to recognize that faith after the encounter. To Grenz’s credit, he does identify in his conclusion certain errors Evangelicals share with modernism: an emphatic individualism, a positivistic approach to

apologetics (Evangelicals are rather modernist in their epistemology), a mistaken dualism which pervades Evangelical habits of thought, and an impotent noeticism with respect to the nature of saving faith. Grenz identifies postmodern ways of thinking that can function as correctives to these Evangelical errors, and he does this in a reasonable and evangelical way.