

AN INTRODUCTION TO POSTCONSERVATIVE EVANGELICALISM AND THE REST OF THIS BOOK

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IN THIS INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER, my aim is not only to introduce the rest of this book, but also to sketch the broad contours of postconservative evangelical theology. I will first provide an overview of postconservatism and its proponents. I will then provide an overview of and a justification for our response.

POSTCONSERVATISM

Deciding whether postconservatism is a “movement” or simply a “mood” is rather unimportant for our purposes.¹ What is important—and what is by and large no longer questioned—is that a significant shift is taking place in some segments of evangelicalism. The proponents of this perspective have assumed various labels with varying connotations—postconservatives,² reformists, the emerging church, younger evangelicals, postfundamentalists,

¹ Roger Olson referred to postconservatism in 1995 as a “small and diverse movement,” a “movement in its infancy,” and in 2002 as a “mood (not movement!).” In 2003, he clarified that it is “a movement of mood; a paradigm shift without organization” (Roger E. Olson, “Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age,” *Christian Century* 112 [May 3, 1995]: 480; idem, “Reforming Evangelical Theology,” in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000], 201; idem, “Postconservative Evangelical Theology and the Theological Pilgrimage of Clark Pinnock,” in *Semper Reformandum: Studies in Honour of Clark H. Pinnock*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross [Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 2003], 20 n. 11).

² This is the term we adopt throughout this book, though its use by some has been rather elastic. For example, Roger Olson seems to claim that even J. I. Packer’s essay in *Evangelical Futures* is “postconservative” (“Reforming Evangelical Theology,” 201-202). The editor of *Evangelical Futures*, John Stackhouse, disagrees, saying that Packer is “surely no one’s idea of a ‘postconservative’” (“Preface,” in *Evangelical Futures*, 10). And although Kevin Vanhoozer uses the term to identify his own position (“The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal About the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology,” in *Evangelical Futures*, 76-77ff.), a number of our contributors strongly advocate Vanhoozer’s methodology over and against that of someone like Stanley Grenz.

postfoundationalists, postpropositionalists, postevangelicals³—but they all bear a family resemblance and can be grouped together as having a number of common characteristics. They are self-professed evangelicals seeking to revision the theology, renew the center, and transform the worshiping community of evangelicalism, cognizant of the postmodern global context within which we live. They desire a “generous orthodoxy”⁴ that would steer a faithful course between the Scylla of conservative-traditionalism and the Charybdis of liberal-progressivism. At the risk of oversimplification and for the purposes of this introduction, I will refer to Stanley Grenz as postconservatism’s Professor, Brian McLaren its Pastor, and Roger Olson and Robert Webber its Publicists,⁵ summarizing in what follows their basic perspectives and contributions. My purpose at this point is primarily description, not analysis.

The Publicists: Olson and Webber

Postconservatism—in its broad conception—involves not only methodological proposals for the discipline of theology, but also historiographical and sociological analyses of the evangelical movement. Roger Olson and Robert Webber have been significantly involved as advocates and promoters of postconservatism. The term *postconservatism* itself is most often associated with Olson, who claims to have coined the term in a 1995 article entitled “Postconservatives Greet the Postmodern Age.”⁶ He identified two loose and often warring coalitions within North American evangelical theology: the *traditionalists* and the *reformists*. The traditionalists, he argued, have a mindset that “values traditional interpretations and formulations as binding

³ Those who use this label are quick to insist that the term does not mean non- or anti-evangelical. For example, Dallas Willard writes that “*post-evangelicalism* is by no means *ex-evangelicalism*. There are, of course *ex-evangelicals*, and even *anti-evangelicals*, but *post-evangelicals* are evangelicals, perhaps tenaciously so. However, *post-evangelicals* have also been driven to the margins by some aspects of evangelical church culture with which they cannot honestly identify” (Dallas Willard, “Smothering Jesus in a Heap of Trivialities,” foreword to Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, rev. North American ed. [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003], 11).

⁴ The phrase is used by Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000), *passim*. *A Generous Orthodoxy* is also the title of a new book by Brian McLaren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004).

⁵ Stanley Grenz is Pioneer McDonald Professor of Baptist Heritage, Theology, and Ethics at Carey Theological College (Vancouver, B.C.). Brian McLaren is the founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church (Spencerville, Maryland). Roger Olson is Professor of Theology at Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University (Waco, Texas). And Robert Webber is the William R. and Geraldyn B. Myers Professor of Ministry at Northern Seminary (Lombard, Illinois).

⁶ Olson writes, “In a *Christian Century* essay [May 3, 1995], I coined the label ‘postconservative’ to describe a new mood arising within North American evangelical theological circles” (“Reforming Evangelical Theology,” 201). It should be pointed out, however, that Clark Pinnock was using the term and making virtually all of the same sociological-theological identifications five years earlier. See his *Tracking the Maze: Finding Our Way Through Modern Theology from an Evangelical Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 63-76.

and normative and looks with suspicion upon doctrinal revisions and new proposals arising out of theological reflection.” The reformists, on the other hand, have “a mindset that values the continuing process of constructive theology seeking new light breaking forth from God’s Word.”⁷ Whereas traditionalists view the church as a bounded set, with strong boundary identification as a sign of authentic evangelical faith, reformists see the church as a centered set: the boundaries are open and undefined, so we should focus upon the center—usually identified as the oft-cited Bebbington quadrilateral: “*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and . . . *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.”⁸

Postconservatism is to conservatism what postliberalism⁹ is to liberalism: both desire to move beyond their forebears while retaining some of their positive qualities. Postconservatives and conservatives hold in common the Bebbington center, but the “old guard” of evangelical scholars is obsessed with battles over inerrancy, higher criticism, and liberal theology. In this way conservatives and liberals are unlikely bedfellows in their obsession with the modern mind. Conservatives are sliding headlong toward fundamentalism, unaware of the promises and possibilities of postmodernity’s unexplored terrain.

The postconservatives, on the other hand, have seized the opportunity to reform, reshape, and revision theology. They are eager to engage and learn from nonevangelical theologians, healing the divisions caused by modernity. They see the essence of Christianity not in doctrine but in a narrative-shaped experience. Sources for theology include not only the Bible, but also Christian tradition, culture, and the contemporary experience of God’s community. Postconservatives are open to open theism, have a hope of near-universal salvation, and place a renewed emphasis on synergy in the divine-human rela-

⁷ Roger E. Olson, “The Future of Evangelical Theology,” *Christianity Today* 42 (February 9, 1998): 41.

⁸ D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman Ltd, 1989), 3.

⁹ Postliberalism is usually associated with Yale University and theologians George Lindbeck, Hans Frei, Paul Homer, and David Kelsey. Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) seeks to move beyond the modernistic, totalizing foundations of conservatism (cognitive-propositional) and liberalism (experiential-expressionists). Over against these, Lindbeck proposes a *cultural-linguistic* turn, wherein doctrine is to theology what grammar is to language. The function of doctrine is not to correspond to objective reality or to express universal experience, but to serve as the communal rules of discourse, attitude, and action. For a symposium of postliberals and evangelicals, see Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis Okholm, eds., *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Liberals in Conversation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996). For a critique, see Michael S. Horton, “Yale Postliberalism: Back to the Bible?” in *A Confessing Theology for Postmodern Times*, ed. Michael S. Horton (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000), 183-216. And for a recent, clarifying exchange between Lindbeck and Avery Cardinal Dulles, see the October 2003 and January 2004 issues of *First Things* (57-61; 13-15). Olson has also used the analogy that postconservatism is comparable to progressive Roman Catholic theology after Vatican II (“Postconservative Evangelical Theology and the Theological Pilgrimage of Clark Pinnock,” 20).

tionship. They are willing to rethink the language and concepts of Chalcedonian Christology, viewing Jesus' divinity in relational terms. They are impatient with triumphalism, epistemological certainty, and theological systems, judging that traditional evangelicalism is "suffering from a kind of hubris with regard to truth-claims."¹⁰

In a recent article, Olson identifies the following characteristics of post-conservative evangelical theology and its theologians: they (1) are thoroughly and authentically evangelical; (2) embrace a vision of critical and generous orthodoxy; (3) believe in experience rather than doctrine as the enduring essence of evangelical Christianity; (4) express discomfort with foundationalism and embrace critical realism; (5) have a strong interest in dialogue between diverse groups of theologians; (6) have a broad and relatively inclusive vision of evangelicalism; (7) have a relational view of reality, including a relational vision of God's being; and (8) have an inclusivist attitude toward salvation. Postconservatism's one major unifying motif—its one universal interest—is a "*commitment to ongoing reform of evangelical life, worship and belief in the light of God's word.*"¹¹

This is all set over against Olson's understanding of "traditionalism" or "conservatism." He cautions that just because someone adopts a particular label does not mean that the person fits all of the characteristics he is identifying. He is "dealing with ideal types and not individual persons or institutions."¹² Nevertheless, some general characteristics can be described:

A conservative evangelical places such value on the *status quo* that he or she is closed-minded with regard to theological creativity and innovation even when they are fueled by faithful exegesis and believing reflection on God's word. . . . 'Fundamentalism' is being replaced with the label 'conservative evangelicalism' while retaining fundamentalistic habits of heart and mind. When a person proclaims himself or herself a 'conservative evangelical', more often than not it indicates commitment to strict biblical inerrancy, a fairly literalistic hermeneutic, a passionate commitment to a perceived 'golden age' of Protestant orthodoxy to be rediscovered and preserved, and a suspicion of all new proposals in theology, biblical interpretation, spirituality, mission and worship.¹³

For Olson, the differences between the two pictures he has painted are

¹⁰ Olson, "Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age," 482.

¹¹ Olson, "Postconservative Evangelical Theology and the Theological Pilgrimage of Clark Pinnock," 36, emphasis his.

¹² *Ibid.*, 18.

¹³ *Ibid.*

rather stark. The postconservatives and their proposals are “liberated,” “bold,” “vibrant,” “interesting,” “new,” “relevant,” “committed,” “faithful,” “fresh,” and “fascinating.” The traditionalists are “old guard,” “obsessive,” “reactionary,” “highly rationalistic,” “rigid” “naysayers” with a “scholastic spirit” who love nothing more than “gatekeeping,” “control[ling] the switches,” and “patrol[ling] the boundaries.”¹⁴

Robert Webber joins Olson—though certainly framing his discussion in a more charitable and irenic fashion—by distinguishing between twentieth-century evangelicals and twenty-first-century evangelicals.¹⁵ However, he divides twentieth-century evangelicals into two camps: the *traditional evangelicals* (1950–1975, led by Billy Graham) and the *pragmatic evangelicals* (1975–2000, led by Bill Hybels). The emerging set of leaders is termed the *younger evangelicals* (2000 and beyond, led by Brian McLaren).

Webber works through a series of perspectives (e.g., on history and tradition, theology, apologetics, ecclesiology, etc.), and shows how the traditionalists, the pragmatists, and the younger evangelicals approach them. Traditionalist evangelicals tend to have the characteristics of rationalism, denominationalism, and separatism. They want to retain Reformation distinctives, focus on church-centered programs, and use mass evangelism and printed materials for outreach. Pragmatic evangelicals focus more on therapeutic models and success-oriented apologetics, high-energy leaders, and interdenominationalism. They are interested in the innovative, focusing on outreach programs and using seeker services and broadcast tools for outreach. The younger evangelicals, on the other hand, practice an embodied or incarnational apologetic, see the church as a community of faith, and are intentionally ecumenical. They take an “ancient-future” approach to tradition, whereby the future runs through the past. For outreach they look to “process evangelism” and interactive communication on the Internet.

“Younger” designates not only those “young in age,” but also those “young in spirit.” “The younger evangelical is anyone, older or younger, who deals thoughtfully with the shift from twentieth- to twenty-first-century culture. He or she is committed to construct a biblically rooted, historically informed, and culturally aware new evangelical witness in the twenty-first century.”¹⁶ According to Webber, the younger evangelicals value tradition

¹⁴ And this is from just one article! See Olson, “Reforming Evangelical Theology,” *passim*. For some thoughts on the phenomena of pejorative labels under the ostensible category of analysis, see Millard Erickson’s chapter at the end of this volume.

¹⁵ Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2002).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

over ahistoricism; stories over propositions; a communally embodied apologetic over rational argumentation; and the visible over the invisible church.

The Pastor: McLaren

The primary focus of our book is on the academic aspect of the postconservative movement. In this introductory chapter, however, my aim is to give a broad overview of this mood and its movement. Therefore, it is important to look at Brian McLaren, an increasingly influential pastor/writer/speaker in the Emergent Church Movement. McLaren's developing perspective is impossible to separate from his own story or narrative. "Raised among the tiny Plymouth Brethren, shaped by the Jesus Movement, trained in the secular academy, impassioned by art, music, philosophy and nature—McLaren doesn't fit neatly into any evangelical stereotype."¹⁷ After teaching English at the University of Maryland and Montgomery College, he entered pastoral ministry full-time in 1986 as the founding pastor of what would eventually become Cedar Ridge Community Church in the Washington-Baltimore area.

As McLaren interacted with unchurched postmodern seekers and studied church history, he began to reexamine not only his changeable methods but also his "so-called unchanging message." He realized that his fairly standard "method-message system" was relatively new in comparison with the varied tradition of Christendom. As he searched for an unchanging message, an irreducible doctrinal core of "mere Christianity" held in common by all Christians at all times, he began to despair at the diversity of interpretations and proposals. His doubts about both his methods and his message continued to grow.

In 1994, at the age of 38, he faced a crisis of faith and a seemingly insurmountable dilemma: (1) continue practicing and promoting a version of Christianity that he had deepening reservations about, or (2) leave Christian ministry, and perhaps the Christian path, altogether.¹⁸ A process of wrestling and rethinking led to an alternative between hypocrisy and apostasy: learn to be a Christian in a new way.¹⁹ In the mouth of one of his fictional characters, McLaren summarizes his discovery:

¹⁷ Greg Warner, "Brian McLaren Unlikely Leader of 'Emerging Church' Movement," *Associated Baptist Press* (May 13, 2003). See <http://www.abpnews.com/abpnews/story.cfm?newsId=3587>.

¹⁸ The story is recounted in Brian L. McLaren, "The True Story Behind This Story," in *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), ix-xviii.

¹⁹ To facilitate this end, he also helped to found Emergent (www.emergentvillage.com)—a "growing generative friendship among missional Christian leaders." McLaren is a senior fellow of this international theological network.

What a relief to have a third alternative—to read the Bible as a pre-modern text, emerging from a people who believed that truth is best embodied in story and art and human flesh, rather than abstraction or outline or moralism. . . . According to the Bible, humans shall not live by systems and abstractions and principles alone, but also by stories and poetry and proverbs of mystery.²⁰

McLaren's *A New Kind of Christian*, the first installment of his theological trilogy, was published in 2001. It is written in a narrative format as a philosophical dialogue between two fictional characters: Dan, a frustrated evangelical pastor, and Neo, a pastor-turned-high school teacher, who serves as McLaren's prototype for this new kind of Christian. The sequel, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, was released in 2003, and another volume is forthcoming (at the time of this writing). *A New Kind of Christian* proved both popular and controversial.²¹ At the crux of his proposal is a call for us to break free from the bondage of modern categories. As an "emergent post-modernist," he advocates dialogue over debate, community over individualism, experience over proof. McLaren argues that evangelicals tend to think that the gospel is about how individual souls get into heaven when they die; emergent postmoderns point instead to Jesus' message about the kingdom of God, which concerns *the here-and-now*, not just heaven; *community*, not just individuality; *all of creation*, not just the individual soul.

Through McLaren's struggle over his dissatisfaction with the old kind of Christianity came four seminal ideas about the gospel across time and cultures that led him to believe that "our message (like our methods) must change from time to time and place to place in order to remain truly the gospel of Jesus and the gospel about Jesus."²² (1) *The gospel is story*. We need to be "depropositionalized" and realize that the gospel is narrative and story, not propositions, mechanisms, abstractions, or universal concepts. (2) *The gospel is many-versioned, many-faceted, many-layered, and Christ-centered*. The story of the gospel lies embedded beneath multiple stories, versions,

²⁰ McLaren, *New Kind of Christian*, 159

²¹ *Christianity Today* granted the book an "Award of Merit" in their best books edition of 2002. And *Books and Culture* commissioned three essays on the book, along with a response by McLaren. See Andy Crouch, "Let's Get Personal," *Books and Culture* 8 (January/February 2002): 12; Mark Dever, "Reformed or Deformed?" *Books and Culture* 8 (March/April 2002): 26; Tony Jones, "Post-Evangelicalism," *Books and Culture* 8 (May/June 2002): 32; Brian D. McLaren, "Faithfully Dangerous," *Books and Culture* 8 (May/June 2002): 33.

²² The following summary is drawn from Brian D. McLaren, "The Method, the Message, and the Ongoing Story," in *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, ed. Leonard Sweet (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 191-230. This book has an intriguing format whereby the other contributors' comments—both critiques and agreements—are embedded within the individual essays, not unlike an extended email exchange. Michael Horton's critique of McLaren is, in my opinion, extremely insightful. Horton thinks that much of popular postmodernism is in fact "most-modern."

facets, and layers—all of which center not in a theory about Christ or an idea of Christ, but in Christ himself. (3) *The gospel is cumulative*. It did not arrive in a vacuum. It includes and continues the Jewish prequel, as well as the continued acts of Jesus by the Spirit throughout history. Jesus continues to work, the story continues to unfold, and the unchanging story continues to change and grow richer and deeper. (4) *The gospel is performative and catalytic*. The gospel is not just told, heard, and affirmed; it performs, catalyzes, and saves. The gospel, empowered by God's Spirit, brings about transformation among the community of faith in order that God's will might be done on earth, inaugurating the kingdom of God.

Knowing the gospel means knowing the times. We live in a postmodern era—but what does that mean? McLaren distinguishes and defines three forms of postmodernism: (1) *absurd postmodernism*—which denies truth, reality, and morality—is virtually nonexistent and is used by modernists to scare people; (2) *adolescent postmodernism*—associated with relativist pluralism, consumerism, alienated European intellectuals, and political correctness—is dying; and (3) *emerging postmodernism*—the approach advocated by McLaren—is an attempt to move beyond both the reductionistic rationalism of modernism and the relativist pluralism of adolescent postmodernism. It is not fully definable, and may still be decades away from mature definition. McLaren argues that the people of faith will not only be instrumental in defining the term, but in shaping the era. This postmodern transition will likely be a 75-year or 100-year process.

McLaren certainly doesn't claim to have all the answers for how best to define, or how best to live, in this transitional age. He has emerged, however, as an influential voice among younger evangelicals.

The Professor: Grenz

Stanley Grenz has been at the forefront of scholarly work from a post-conservative perspective. His theoretical commitments and theological methodology are dealt with in some detail in the pages that follow, so I will provide here a broad overview by focusing on his *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (1983), an early programmatic work on evangelical method. Nearly a decade later he collaborated with John Franke to produce *Beyond Foundationalism*,²³ a full-scale work on theological method in the post-modern context that seeks to flesh out what was sketched and suggested in

²³ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

Revisioning. His recent appraisal of evangelicalism, *Renewing the Center*, is summarized in some detail in chapter 2 of our book.

Grenz's proposal involves revisioning evangelical identity and spirituality, and revisioning the task of and sources for theology, biblical authority, theology's integrative motif, and the church. He argues that our transitional age, with the death of modernism and the advent of postmodernity, "demands nothing less than a rebirth of theological reflection among evangelicals. . . ." ²⁴ In Grenz's view, "to be 'evangelical' means to participate in a community characterized by a shared narrative concerning a personal encounter with God told in terms of shared theological categories derived from the Bible" (chapter 1). ²⁵ This means that evangelicals have now shifted from a creed-based to a spirituality-based identity. Spiritually rooted theology is the essence and ethos of the evangelical movement (chapter 2). What is the foundation for this new theological vision? Traditional evangelical theologians have seen propositional revelation as foundational material for the theological enterprise. But Grenz rejects this as the product of an outdated modernist mindset that ignores the social nature of theological discourse. Building upon but going beyond Lindbeck, Grenz argues that "theology systematizes, explores and orders the community symbols and concepts into a unified whole—that is, into a systematic conceptual framework." ²⁶ In other words, theology is the intellectual reflection on faith we share as the believing community in a particular context (chapter 3). Whereas traditional evangelicals tend to see Scripture as the only source of theology, Grenz argues that we must also draw upon the theological heritage of the church and the thought-forms and issues of our historical-cultural context (chapter 4). All evangelicals acknowledge the authority of the Bible, but they differ on *why* it is authoritative. Traditional evangelicals have stressed the divine to the neglect of the human side of the Bible, and Grenz argues that therefore the Spirit-Scripture link must be revisioned. The Bible is the product of and the vehicle for the working of the Holy Spirit. In other words, its authority lies not in the text itself, but rather in the Spirit speaking through the Scriptures (chapter 5). Grenz next turns to the issue of theology's integrative motif. The kingdom of God is an appropriate but insufficient candidate, for the *content* of the kingdom is left undefined. Its proper content, Grenz argues, is the community of God. With a view toward the already and not yet, the kingdom of

²⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the Twenty-first Century* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

God and the community of God function together as the proper integrating concept for theology (chapter 6). Finally, since the church is the proper context for theology, Grenz applies his conclusions on theological methodology to the doctrine of the church. He advocates an eschatological-process model of ecclesiology: the church is the eschatological community of love constituted by its destiny as the company of the kingdom that reflects its King.

The response in academia to Grenz's work has been varied. All recognize its ambition and creativity. Some have judged it remarkable and revolutionary as a methodology that takes seriously the postmodern situation; others have seen it as a dangerous and damaging accommodation to the spirit of this age. Due to the serious, extensive literature Grenz has produced in this area, we believe his work merits our sustained engagement.

OUR RESPONSE

This book is an interdisciplinary work that critically engages this proposal for evangelical methodology and identity. Our desire is not merely to debate, but to enter into dialogue; not only to denounce, but to accurately and charitably describe; not only to critique, but to learn. No doubt we have not done so perfectly, but that is the spirit in which these chapters are presented.

As alluded to above, the next chapter in this book is a review by *D. A. Carson* of *Renewing the Center*, summarizing and critiquing the broad outlines of Grenz's vision for evangelicalism. Carson argues that Grenz's historical conclusions are either tendentious or highly questionable and that his theoretical commitments are in danger of domesticating the gospel to postmodernism, with the result that his program could be largely irrelevant to the world and devoid of power. Grenz warns against evangelical accommodation to modernism, but Carson fears that it is Grenz who is in danger of being held captive to an unbiblical, postmodern epistemology.

In the opening chapter of the section on philosophy, *Doug Groothuis* observes that something philosophically significant is afoot among purported evangelicals, for the received concept of truth is being jettisoned in favor of postmodern models. He examines the coherence, pragmatic, and postmodern theories of truth against the standard of the correspondence theory of truth, showing that only the latter is sufficient and acceptable for evangelicals.

Whereas postconservatives routinely celebrate the "demise of foundationalism," epistemologists *J. P. Moreland* and *Garry DeWeese* suggest that the obituary has been written prematurely. While denunciations and assertions regarding foundationalism are rampant, specific arguments have been rather rare. Moreland and DeWeese, however, identify three theoretical com-

mitments that are key to the postconservative package: (1) the rejection of the correspondence theory of truth in favor of an epistemic or deflationary theory of truth; (2) a rejection of metaphysical realism in favor of a theory of socially or linguistically constructed reality; and (3) a rejection of the referential theory of language in favor of a semiotic theory. Moreland and DeWeese provide rebuttals and offer a positive case for modest foundationalism as the correct general epistemological theory of justification, and modal reliabilism about evidence as the best form of modest foundationalism. They then proceed to show that modal reliabilism about evidence comports with biblical inerrancy.

Scott Smith, who has written extensively on the language-world relationship, argues that the core of the postconservative view is that we are inside language and have no epistemic access to the world as it is in itself. In other words, they believe that we live in a linguistic world of our own making. Our discourse is simply an expression of the way in which our localized communities talk. But which community? And if their claims are nothing more than this, then who cares? The way in which postconservatives actually argue their case demonstrates that they are inconsistently presupposing what they purport to deny, namely, epistemic access to the real world. Smith goes on to apply this linguistic constructionism to some central doctrines of the Christian faith.

The next section turns to theological method. *Ardel Caneday* shows that Grenz and Franke view Scripture as functional over against propositional. In so doing, the postconservatives have bought into a false disjunction. The locus of God's revelation and authority is not to be found in the text of Scripture, they argue, but rather in the Spirit's appropriation of Scripture for the contemporary community of believers. Over against Grenz and Franke's adaptation of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic method of theology, Caneday proposes that we look instead to Kevin Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic approach,²⁷ with its recovery of a robust biblical theology that draws upon the categories and structure of Scripture.

Steve Wellum continues this examination of the Grenz-Franke model, explaining how they understand postmodernism and its importance for doing theology, what their alternative proposal is, and the role that Scripture plays within it. After delineating some of its positive features, Wellum offers a number of criticisms. Their interpretation of postmodernism is overly optimistic, and their linking of Scripture as an inerrant foundation with Enlightenment foundationalism is grossly unfair. Employing coherentism, pragmatism, and epistemological and metaphysical nonrealism as resources

²⁷ See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, forthcoming).

for their theological method, they have obvious difficulties stating and defending the truth question. Finally, their doctrine of Scripture is incompatible with the Bible's own claims for itself and weakens the possibility of doing theology in a normative fashion. It is this surrender of biblical authority that Wellum ultimately finds most disconcerting. He closes by offering summary reflections on what is necessary for the doing of theology that honors Scripture as fully authoritative, seeks to be faithfully biblical, and is applicatory for all of life.

In the final chapter of this section, African theologian *Kwabena Donkor* describes and evaluates postconservative methodology by focusing mainly upon Grenz's proposal. An attractive feature of postconservative theology is that it welcomes the perspective of the Third World and seeks to make sense of our global context. But Donkor sees a dilemma between the necessity of missiology and a consistent postmodern methodology. In his view, the postconservative incredulity to metanarratives undermines the very legitimacy of apologetics and evangelism. With respect to the question of how we can maintain the finality of the Christian vision when all religions claim to foster community, Donkor detects conceptual difficulties at every turn. He then applies this to the African context in particular, arguing that the proper way forward runs contrary to the postconservative ethos and is inconsistent with postconservative principles.

In the next section we turn to the historiographical discipline. One of our concerns about postconservative epistemology has been well-expressed by Richard Mouw:

I worry . . . about an iconoclastic spirit that often manifests itself in evangelical calls for new constructive theological initiatives. If we cannot be fair to our past in spelling out our heritage, I am not confident that we will accomplish much that is good in our efforts to clear the way for new theological paths.²⁸

Historiography of evangelicalism is essential to the postconservative program. "If they can convince enough people that evangelicalism has *always* been primarily a movement defined not by beliefs and doctrines, but by other concerns, then it becomes easier to stretch the label 'evangelical' to include more and more people today who ignore these doctrinal distinctions."²⁹

²⁸ Richard J. Mouw, "Comments on Grenz Paper and 'The Word Made Fresh,'" unpublished paper read at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Toronto, November 2002.

²⁹ D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996), 458.

Paul Helseth begins this section by explaining that the postconservatives see Old Princeton's theology of Scripture as owing more to Scottish Common Sense Realism and Enlightenment-foundationalist rationalism than it does to the Word of God. While this historiography certainly fits into the postconservative perspective, Helseth argues that recent scholarship suggests this is a superficial, caricatured reading. The Princetonians viewed reason in a moral, not merely rational, fashion—advocating what Warfield termed “right reason.” Helseth then turns the tables on the postconservatives, arguing that since they can offer no justifiable reason for validating Christianity's truth-claims, it is the *postconservatives* who are therefore necessarily imperialistic, triumphalistic, and elitist. In other words, the postconservatives have become a new incarnation of the fundamentalism they so despise.

Postconservatives pan the Princetonians, but they praise the Pietists. According to Grenz's historiography, the material principle or essence of evangelicalism is “convertive piety”—a personal experience of God through new birth coupled with a transformed life. In the mid-twentieth century, however, the neo-evangelicals added a formal principle of “correct doctrine,” with the result that the formal has now subsumed the material. Postconservatives, by championing convertive piety, are calling evangelicalism to return to its roots. Historian *Bill Travis* examines this revisionist historiography through a detailed analysis of Pietism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, along with studies of Methodists, Lutherans, and others in the United States. Travis shows that Philipp Jakob Spener, August Hermann Francke, and those influenced by them were very much concerned with orthodox doctrine, seeing the relationship between doctrine and experience as one of both/and, not either/or.

Despite an array of theological and sociological perspectives on the state of contemporary evangelicalism, many seem to agree on one thing: evangelicalism has become an “essentially disputed concept”³⁰ trapped in a “definitional quandary”³¹ and “descriptively anemic.”³² Whereas Helseth and Travis examined specialized aspects within the story of evangelicalism (the Princetonians and the Pietists, respectively), *Chad Brand* steps back to examine the nature of evangelicalism in general. He is convinced that despite the difficulties of definition, it is still possible to use the term “evangelical” in a meaningful sense to describe the broad coalition of conservative Christians

³⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Foreword,” in Bernard L. Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage: A Study in Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000), xiii.

³¹ Jon R. Stone, *On the Boundaries of American Evangelicalism: The Postwar Evangelical Coalition* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), 7.

³² David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 134.

today. Early on in his essay he offers a minimalist working definition: “a movement within generally North American and British circles that emphasizes the classic Protestant doctrines of the authority and reliability of Scripture (especially over against a rising liberal reconstruction of the doctrine of Scripture), the triune God, and the historical second coming of Christ, and which promotes the need for fervent evangelism, a conversion experience, and a life of discipleship before God.” Before refining and expanding upon this, he first explores the roots of evangelicalism by providing a look at three major periods: the eighteenth-century Awakenings, the conservative response to liberalism, and the transition from fundamentalism to evangelicalism. Evangelicalism is certainly a variegated movement, and yet the “evangelicals” were united around certain core beliefs until the mid-twentieth century. These commitments included the sole sufficiency of Scripture as the source of our theological knowledge, the complete and utter reliability of God’s Word, and the nature of theology as a study of what God has said to us. In the next major section Brand asks whether the postconservatives have been faithful to this tradition. His conclusion is that the postconservatives are mobilizing against these core beliefs in the interest of defending relational theology, defeating foundationalism, contextualizing Scripture, and emphasizing tradition.

In the final section, we explore postmodernism’s future. *Jim Parker* suggests that postmodernism’s demise is now all but certain, and asks, “Whither shall we go?” Following Paul Vitz, he argues that a significant cultural shift is on the horizon: a coming *transmodern* period is emerging that avoids the extremes of both modernism and postmodernism, while drawing upon the strengths of each. This transmodern vision is elucidated through a brief examination of new trends within the diverse disciplines of music, the visual arts, architecture, poetry, cinema, ethics, and social-political philosophy.

In the final chapter of this book, *Millard Erickson* attempts to clear away some of the fog by drawing together the insights of the previous chapters and sketching the contours of the type of theology we need in order to navigate our way into the post-postmodern period. The future evangelical theology will be *global*, broadening itself to include the voices of Third World and female theologians. It will seek to be *objective*—not in the naïve modernist sense, but as a careful return to the correspondence theory of truth and metaphysical realism presupposed by Scripture, an adoption of neo-foundationalism, and a rejection of the new historicism. This new conservative theology will be *practical and accessible*, with contributions by and application toward those in practical areas of ministry, not just the small and isolated ivory tower. It will be *postcommunal*, recognizing not just the value of community but also the

liabilities therein, including the tendency of groups to gravitate toward that which is new and creative. Instead, it will bring critical thinking and healthy skepticism to bear, asking of every new proposal, “Yes, but is it true?” This new theology will be *metanarrative*, insisting that the exclusivity and universality of the biblical message not merely be dogmatically asserted, but be substantiated with support. It will be *dialogical*, not in the sense of being improperly polemical, but in interacting with differing claims, considering those claims, and advancing cogent argumentation. Finally, this new evangelical theology will be *futuristic*, anticipating and preparing for the future and the forthcoming need to contextualize our message.

DEBATE, THE ACADEMY, AND THE CHURCH

If good theology, faithful philosophy, and accurate historiography didn’t matter—or if we all agreed—books like this wouldn’t need to be written and debates wouldn’t need to be undertaken. But it does matter, and we don’t all agree. Although the notion that “bounding lines must exist”³³ is inherently offensive to some and elicits caricatures and pejorative labeling, we feel obligated nonetheless to engage our friends across the aisle.

Nothing could be clearer from the New Testament, it seems to me, than the idea that God has given us universally true doctrinal revelation that can be understood, shared, defended, and contextualized. “The faith” has been once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). We are to guard “the good deposit” entrusted to us (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14), instructing in “sound doctrine” and rebuking contrary doctrine (Titus 1:9; 2:1). False doctrine is associated with conceit and ignorance (1 Tim. 6:3-4), and we are commanded not to be tossed to and fro by its winds (Eph. 4:14).

These commands and warnings are set forth in the context of purifying and protecting the *church*. Why, then, have we labored to assemble a largely *academic* tome? The reason is that as goes the academy, so goes the church. Sociologist James Davison Hunter, writing at the height of the culture wars in the 1980s, observes:

The struggle over the ivory tower is significant for the contemporary culture war for the simple reason that its outcome will ultimately shape the ideals and values as well as the categories of analysis and understanding that will guide the next generation of American leaders.³⁴

³³ The expression is from C. S. Lewis, “Christian Apologetics,” in *Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 147-148. The entire essay is worth a careful read.

³⁴ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 211.

If this is true of the culture wars, how much more so is it true within the church? For good or ill, the postconservative project is already influencing the church. Postconservatives have raised extensive questions regarding the nature of theology and the nature of evangelicalism itself. And we judge it a worthwhile investment—ultimately for the health of the church—to engage the postconservative proposal with seriousness and candor.

AVOIDING TWO ERRORS AND RECLAIMING THE CENTER

It is possible to turn both the past and the present into idols and objects of functional worship. Some confess with their lips that the church is *semper reformanda*, but their hearts are far from it. Others tend to operate on the notion that “the newer is the truer, only what is recent is decent, every shift of ground is a step forward, and every latest word must be hailed as the last word on its subject.”³⁵ Needless to say, both attitudes must be avoided.

Postconservatives complain of a “conflictual polarity” between the categories of liberalism and conservatism.³⁶ But one of the arguments throughout this book is that the postconservatives have set forth their own set of debilitating dichotomies: focus on the center versus preoccupation with boundaries; convertive piety versus correct doctrine; appropriation of postmodernism versus stagnant traditionalism. In this book, we want to argue that these polarities are misguided. The path forward is to reclaim the historic center of evangelical theology, which is centered on the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ—both in its doctrinal assertions of objective and accessible truth and its experiential effects of transforming our lives.

Al Mohler has expressed our conviction well, and with this I conclude our introduction:

A word that can mean anything means nothing. If “evangelical identity” means drawing no boundaries, then we really have no center, no matter what we may claim. The fundamental issue is truth, and though the modernist may call us wrong and the postmodernist may call us naive, there is nowhere else for us to stand. . . .³⁷

Soli Deo gloria.

³⁵ J. I. Packer, “Is Systematic Theology a Mirage? An Introductory Discussion,” in *Doing Theology in Today’s World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), 21.

³⁶ Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 331.

³⁷ R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “Reformist Evangelicalism: A Center Without a Circumference,” in *A Confessing Theology for Postmodern Times*, 146.