

**Postmodern Epistemology: A Critique of Stanley J. Grenz  
and John R. Franke.**

John D. Wilsey, Associate Pastor

First Baptist Church, Charlottesville, VA

In light of the negative critique of foundationalism at the end of the twentieth century, Stanley Grenz and John Franke propose an approach to theology that addresses the current postmodern context. This approach bases theology and epistemology in the life of the Christian community, a community which is, according to Grenz and Franke, called into existence by the triune God who is revealed in the Bible, church tradition, and the culture. The proposed approach entails many aspects, but this study intends to show that the inherent weakness of recognizing epistemic authority in any human community is subjectivity. To be sure, evangelicals should address the postmodern context by abandoning strong foundationalism. But instead of revising evangelicalism according to a postmodern paradigm, Christians may still embrace the objectivity, authority, and intelligibility of truth while avoiding the impossible demands of strong foundationalism. In *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, Grenz and Franke make a noteworthy and admirable plea to evangelicals to avoid irrelevance in their presentation of the truth of Christianity in the postmodern world by “set[ting] themselves to the task of grappling with the implications of our setting, lying as it does ‘after modernity.’”<sup>1</sup> However, they abandon a correspondence view of truth in favor of a constructionist view, thereby exposing the Christian message to the danger of self defeat.

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The purpose of the present study is to analyze and critique the positions outlined by Grenz and Franke in their book, *Beyond Foundationalism*. The study will be divided into three parts. First, some of the main points of the book will be presented in order to orient the reader to the nature of the positions held by the authors. The second section will be devoted to three points of critique of Grenz and Franke. These points will rally around this question: is the community of faith a sufficient standard to justify true belief? In the concluding section, a brief alternative proposal to strong foundationalism, one that is more consistent with evangelical epistemology than the one offered by Grenz and Franke, will be presented.

### **Overview of Key Points in *Beyond Foundationalism***

Stanley Grenz is the author of twenty-five books and numerous articles, many of them dealing with the transition from modernism to postmodernism and its effect on theological method. In the fall of 1993 John Franke, a professor at Biblical Theological Seminary at Hatfield, PA, read Grenz's then most recent work, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, and saw a solid agenda for theological method with room for expansion. Franke had intended to publish a more developed position of his own, but Grenz's visit to Biblical Seminary in 1996 provided the occasion for the two to discuss a joint work on the subject. *Beyond Foundationalism* is the product of their collaboration. Still, while Franke played a significant role in the writing of this book, he would readily admit that the work represents ideas Grenz has expounded in his many

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 4.

writings.<sup>2</sup> *Beyond Foundationalism* “represents the most important and comprehensive statement regarding the boundaries of evangelical theology offered by Grenz to date. . . .”<sup>3</sup>

Grenz and Franke set out to present a theological research program that is revised to address the postmodern framework. Both authors would identify themselves as theologically conservative evangelicals. Each author articulates a strong desire to prevent evangelicalism from becoming hopelessly irrelevant by advocating a shift from the modern foundationalist methodology to one that fosters “the vitality and relevance of Christian theology for the church in its various social and cultural incarnations.”<sup>4</sup> Grenz and Franke consistently and vigorously reject foundationalism, with its view of truth in terms of correspondence and universal propositions and prefer a greater accommodation to a postmodern view of truth. Thus, the methodological proposal given by Grenz and Franke is based on a constructionist view of truth dependent upon local communities, with communal experience playing a major role in the development of belief systems. When it comes to the Christian community, the product of their proposal becomes “trinitarian in content, communitarian in focus, and eschatological in orientation.”<sup>5</sup>

The book opens with a discussion on the transition from modernity to postmodernity in terms of the failure of modern theological categories to reveal universal and certain truth. The debate between theological liberals and conservatives fell apart because each claimed to be able to speak of truth in universal terms, but failed. Liberals, in the tradition of F.

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<sup>2</sup> Archie J. Spencer, “Culture, Community and Commitments: Stanley J. Grenz on Theological Method,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57, no. 3 (2004): 340.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 166.

D. E. Schleiermacher, spoke of truth in terms of universal experience. Conservatives, in the tradition of Charles Hodge, spoke of truth in terms of universal propositions. Grenz and Franke follow in the path of George Lindbeck, the postliberal who advocates a “[recontextualization] of the modern world using the stories, symbols, and categories of the Bible.”<sup>6</sup> They also follow Stanley Gundry and John Jefferson Davis who advocate an approach to theology “that takes seriously the role of culture in theological formulation.”<sup>7</sup>

Grenz and Franke do not view postmodernism as a threat to the Christian faith, as many evangelicals do.<sup>8</sup> In fact, they see postmodernism as a catalyst for true renewal in evangelical theology, a way to break out of the impossible demands that foundationalist methodologies placed on the attainment of knowledge. One aspect of postmodernism that has liberated theology has been a reassessment of rationality. The product of this reassessment is termed chastened rationality. Chastened rationality “is marked by the transition from a realist to a constructionist view of truth and the world.”<sup>9</sup> Rather than viewing truth as objective, chastened rationality allows the thinker to see truth as a product of the community that has shaped the world through the use of linguistics and other concepts. Chastened rationality entails the demise of the metanarrative, the narrative that defines humanity in universal terms. It is replaced by local narratives, reflecting the values, beliefs and experiences of particular peoples. “Above all,” say Grenz and Franke, “chastened rationality entails the rejection of epistemological foundationalism . . . [which is] the discovery of an approach to knowledge that will provide

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>8</sup> This study will deal with a few scholars representing such a position, such as Douglas Groothuis and D. A. Carson.

<sup>9</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 23.

rational human beings with absolute, incontestable certainty regarding the truthfulness of their beliefs.”<sup>10</sup>

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s linguistic theory made an impression on Grenz and Franke, as did George Lindbeck’s community ground rules. Wittgenstein’s thesis was that the various uses of language occur within different contexts, each with different rules governing that usage. Wittgenstein uses the metaphor of the game to illustrate his thesis. Just as groups play a game using the appropriate rules, groups use language according to the terms of the context in which they speak. Thus, as Grenz and Franke state, “[e]ach use of language . . . comprises a separate ‘language game.’”<sup>11</sup>

George Lindbeck sought a shift away from foundationalism with his introduction of community ground rules. Instead of following a cognitive-propositionalist (theologically conservative) or experiential-expressive (theologically liberal) conception of doctrine, he posited a cultural-linguistic approach. According to Lindbeck, doctrines are similar in nature to the rules of grammar. Just as the rules of grammar determine the language game of a particular group, Christian doctrines create the “ground rules for the ‘game’ of Christian thinking, living, and speaking.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, the “rules” (read “doctrines”) are true only in a particular context. Since doctrines are really only ways of speaking about God and not propositions defining God, they are not to be understood as first-order truth claims, but second-order.

So Grenz and Franke synthesize Wittgenstein’s linguistic theory with Lindbeck’s community ground rules in order to arrive at a theological method based on a constructionist

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 45.

view of truth. They assert “we do not inhabit the ‘world-in-itself’; instead, we live in a linguistic world of our own making. As Berger and Luckmann note, human reality is a ‘socially constructed reality.’”<sup>13</sup>

What exactly is this theological method proposed by Grenz and Franke? As stated previously, it is an approach to theology that is “trinitarian in content, communitarian in focus, and eschatological in orientation.” The sources for theology are found in Scripture, tradition and culture. God, through the Spirit, speaks through each of these media in order to reveal His trinitarian, relational nature in order that the Church might portray that divine nature through human relationships. Since humans do not live in a “world as it is” but a world being constructed, eschatology plays a primary role in the understanding of the will of God. Eschatology shows that the world is moving toward its *telos*, its divine purpose. It is being constructed by the Spirit through the Church as He speaks through the Bible, church tradition and the culture and will ultimately be realized in the fulfillment of its *telos* at the last day.

The Spirit’s act of speaking through Scripture is understood as an illocutionary act, in that He intends to address the world with a particular message. The perlocutionary act of the Spirit is seen in what He accomplishes with His act of speaking. Thus, the Spirit creates world, specifically, the world of the future, the eschatological world of *telos* that is revealed in the text of Scripture. The goal of theology, then, is not to attempt to systematize the text of Scripture in propositional form, but it is to make us amenable to the voice of the Spirit in both His illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. As Grenz and Franke put it, “our goal must always be to read scripture theologically, and hence holistically, so that the world with which we are

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 53.

confronted through our reading is the eschatological world that arises from the vision of the whole of scripture.”<sup>14</sup>

Most important to note, however, is the fact that the Scripture does not have sole authority in matters of faith and theology. Church tradition is also authoritative because the Spirit speaks through it as well as Scripture. The Spirit is the One who draws the community together. The community forms under the guidance of the Spirit, thus both the Scriptures and the communal tradition are formed by the community under the leadership of the Spirit. Grenz and Franke state, “the authority of both scripture and tradition is ultimately an authority derived from the work of the Spirit. . . . even though scripture and tradition are distinguishable, they are fundamentally inseparable.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Grenz and Franke assert that while the Spirit speaks authoritatively through Scripture and tradition, “all texts of the Christian faith were formulated within the social, cultural, linguistic, and philosophical frameworks of the times in which they were produced.”<sup>16</sup> So, for Grenz and Franke, the Scriptures as well as the creeds, confessions, hymns, etc. are the constructs of the community called into being by the Spirit. The Spirit speaks through these media and in doing so, is in the process of moving the world to its eschatological *telos*.

The third source for theology is culture. Just as the Spirit speaks through the Scriptures and through the church tradition, He also speaks through the culture of the community of the Church. Cultures are to be understood not in universal terms, but in local terms. The common experience of a local community defines the culture. The Spirit can and does speak

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 84–85.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 120.

through the culture, but His voice is heard as it is consistent with the text of Scripture. Thus, since the Church is a local group with its own distinct culture, and the Church is called together by the Spirit, the Spirit's voice can be heard through this culture. According to Grenz and Franke, "[w]e listen for the voice of the Spirit who speaks the Word through the word within the particularity of the hearer's context, and who thereby can speak in all things."<sup>17</sup>

Grenz and Franke conclude the book<sup>18</sup> with discussions on the Trinity, the community, and eschatology, in terms of their importance to theology in the postmodern context. They call the Trinity "theology's structural motif" because God, as a being in an eternal and loving relationship within the Godhead, sets the standard for the Church to exist in relationship within her local community. The community is termed "theology's integrative motif," because "theological construction . . . arises out of the life of the discipleship community who are joined together by the Spirit. . . ."<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Grenz and Franke insist that the community is "the central, organizing concept of theological construction."<sup>20</sup> Finally, eschatology is termed "theology's orienting motif," because wrapped up in the notion of eschatology is the hope of the fulfillment of God's *telos* for creation. Because of the certainty of hope Christians have that God will bring creation to its *telos*, theology takes on a theocentric rather than an anthropocentric (read "foundationalist")<sup>21</sup> nature.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>18</sup> The sixth, seventh, and eighth chapters deal with the Trinity, the community, and eschatology respectively. The terms used to describe them are found in these chapter headings and throughout those chapters.

<sup>19</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 234.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Grenz and Franke broadly characterize modern foundationalist eschatology with anthropocentrism because they link it closely with classical Protestant liberalism. Adherents to this position would not argue that their eschatology was anthropocentric. However, Grenz and Franke seem to ignore the program of



The task of theology, according to Grenz and Franke, is “to draw from the unique grammar of the biblical narrative to build a linguistic world for human habitation in the present, a world whose basis lies in the new creation that God is already bringing to pass.”<sup>22</sup> So Grenz and Franke are advocating for a fundamental revision of evangelical theological method, one that is acceptable to a new paradigm, the paradigm that presents itself in the current postmodern situation.

### **Three Points of Critique of Grenz’s and Franke’s Position**

Grenz and Franke have not received a lukewarm reception from their academic colleagues. There is a wide range of opinion on their positions. Some scholars embrace their position, such as Mark Medley<sup>23</sup> while others have contempt for it, such as Carl Trueman.<sup>24</sup> The aim of this study is not to survey this range of scholarly opinion but to note a recurrence of similar critiques from many evangelical scholars. This recurrence of similar critiques centers on the question of the local community’s fitness as a test for truth. Both Grenz and Franke have characterized themselves as evangelicals, and the fact that certain criticisms consistently appear from their evangelical colleagues is interesting. Indeed, there appears to be an ongoing, intra-evangelical debate between Grenz and Franke and their detractors on this question.

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modern conservatives who would no doubt have vigorously opposed the charge that their view of eschatology was anthropocentric. See the discussion on pages 260–61.

<sup>22</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 273.

<sup>23</sup> See Medley, Mark S. “An Evangelical Theology for a Postmodern Age: Stanley J. Grenz’s Current Theological Project.” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 30 (Spring 2003): 71–94.

<sup>24</sup> See Trueman, Carl R. “Responses: It Ain’t Necessarily So.” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (Fall 2003): 311–25. Trueman responds to an essay by John Franke, one which presents many of the same positions as *Beyond Foundationalism*. Trueman’s response to Franke is particularly tart.

The first and primary criticism of the position held by Grenz and Franke is that truth should not be viewed as a communal construct, but rather is best viewed as propositional and corresponding to reality. This criticism touches the very heart of Grenz's and Franke's position and so this is the most important point to discuss regarding the issue of the community as a test for truth. Recall that Grenz and Franke advocate for a new way of defining rationality—chastened rationality, which views truth as a social construct. According to them, all the texts of the Christian faith, including Scripture, are the products of the community that is the Church. Ludwig Wittgenstein's linguistic theory and George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach are important signposts for Grenz's and Franke's proposals. These and other aspects of Grenz's and Franke's position are alarming to many evangelicals because when a correspondence view of truth is abandoned, the door is left open to subjectivism.

Especially important to note is the fact that the local community should not be viewed as having no value in the search for truth. Rather than being the standard for truth, the community's role is to represent the truth of Christianity. Alister McGrath disputes the position held by Grenz and Franke, that the world in which we live is not "the world as it is," but is a social construct. As a critical realist, McGrath believes the world to be objective and intelligible. He writes, "[t]he physical, biological and social worlds are always pre-structured; the question is how that structuring is to be investigated, and subsequently how it is to be represented."<sup>25</sup> He goes on to note a postmodern epistemic fallacy, one which "rests on the false assumption that the structures of the world rest or depend upon human observation."<sup>26</sup> One is reminded of the amusing question from the school playground: "if a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to

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<sup>25</sup> Alister McGrath, *The Science of God: An Introduction to Scientific Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 144.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

hear it, does it make a sound?” If the structures of the world do, in fact, depend on human observation, the answer must be no. But since the laws of the universe are the same everywhere and are not dependent upon any creature inhabiting it, we know this question to be nothing more than an amusing one from the school playground.

Thus, since the world is pre-structured, and operates independently of human observation, the burden placed on the community for defining truth is relieved. Its true responsibility, which is to investigate and represent truth, is within reach. The reality is that every person is reared in a particular community and that persons are affected by the values, beliefs, and experiences within communities. People receive information and interpret it through the filter of their communal worldview. N. T. Wright affirms, “where I stand and the (metaphorical) lenses through which I look have a great deal to do with the communities to which I belong.”<sup>27</sup> Going a step further, Kevin Vanhoozer calls the community “a *living commentary*.”<sup>28</sup> Truth is independent of the community, but the community of the Church ought to be interpreting the truth in such a way as to embody it. Thus, acknowledging the proper role of communities in assessing truth is important because it prevents them from being ignored in the process of the acquisition of knowledge and rescues them from the hopelessness of trying to achieve an impossible goal.

Keeping the proper role of the local community in view brings the emphasis back to the view of truth as propositional, universal, and corresponding with reality. Some evangelical scholars are quite alarmed with the direction Grenz and Franke would like to take evangelical

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<sup>27</sup> N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 36.

<sup>28</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, “Mapping Evangelical Theology in a Post-Modern World,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 22 (January 1998), 22.

Christianity in the postmodern world. Al Mohler is one of these scholars. He writes, “the abdication of the universal truth claim and the retreat into the notion of truth as communal, defined within a given cultural-linguistic system, is a massive concession fatal to any evangelical theology.”<sup>29</sup> Mohler’s assessment of Grenz’s and Franke’s position, in light of their rejection of the universality of biblical authority, is that it “is more anthropological and phenomenological than theological.”<sup>30</sup>

Douglas Groothuis is equally alarmed at Grenz’s and Franke’s concession to a constructionist view of truth. He notes the self defeat inherent in any view of truth other than a correspondence view. For example, the statement that all truth is the result of social or communal construction of language that does not point to objective reality is, by definition, a propositional truth claim, universal in scope.<sup>31</sup> Like McGrath and Wright, Groothuis acknowledges that the community should not be ignored in the process of acquiring knowledge, but makes a plea to keep the community in its proper perspective. He writes, “[t]heology should affirm that the entire content of the Bible is true” and that “[t]his revelation came through a variety of cultures . . . , but it is no less propositional for that.”<sup>32</sup> The local community simply cannot serve as a test for truth, according to Groothuis. If truth were dependent upon social construction, then the world would be closed “in impenetrable darkness, since there is nothing external to the subject . . . that can be known. This account renders knowing objective truth

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<sup>29</sup> R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “The Integrity of the Evangelical Tradition and the Challenge of the Postmodern Paradigm,” in *The Challenge of Postmodernism*, ed. David Dockery (Wheaton: BridgePoint, 1995), 81.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Douglas Groothuis, “Facing the Challenge of Postmodernism,” in *To Everyone an Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview*, eds. Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004): 246.

<sup>32</sup> Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000): 112–13.

impossible.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, it is clear that if evangelicals are to redefine the truth claims of Christianity in terms of communal construction, they may avoid some of the objections of postmodern skeptics, but will face the greater challenge of having to defend a self-defeating system of beliefs that eventually leads to skepticism.

The second recurring criticism is closely related to the first. That is, if truth is to be viewed in terms of social construction, truth becomes relative to local communities. Grenz and Franke address this objection in their proposal. To avoid the charge that truth is made relative to the local community, they assert that all Christian truth is “trinitarian in content, communitarian in focus, and eschatological in orientation.” These three motifs of Christian theology unite all local Christian communities into one. Furthermore, Grenz and Franke warn that subjectivism (the product of relativity) “arises only when we mistakenly place the individual ahead of the community.”<sup>34</sup> A fair question in response to this assertion is, what about the individual community? Is it not possible to stress the local character of the community in such a way as to adopt a form of individualism?

Many evangelical scholars think so. Millard Erickson notes the wide range of beliefs that local Christian communities often claim. He writes, “which of the countless subcommunities is the one within which our beliefs are to find their validity? Rather different doctrinal formulations are made by liberal Episcopalians and Southern Baptist fundamentalists for example.”<sup>35</sup> Amos Young, in his review of *Beyond Foundationalism*, concurs when he writes, “what gives one Christian community the right to say that its reading of the Scriptures is

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<sup>33</sup> Douglas Groothuis, “Postmodern Fallacies: A Response to Merold Westphal,” *Christian Century* 15 (July 26, 2003): 42.

<sup>34</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 68.

<sup>35</sup> Millard Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 101.

inspired of the Sprit over and against that of other Christian communities with whom they disagree?”<sup>36</sup>

Carl Trueman, writing in a response to John Franke, is one of the most vehement critics of the stress on the community as the standard for truth and guarantor against subjectivity. In his critique, he posits two local Christian communities: St. James PCA Church on one side and the community of St. Attila the Hun on the other. St. James represents a local congregation reading and interpreting the Scriptures according to historic Christian orthodoxy. St. Attila the Hun represents a congregation holding to Aryan supremacy and justifying segregation and genocide. Trueman asks, “[h]ow are we to adjudicate between the two groups if both have the same canon of texts, and both consistently follow the rules of the cultural-linguistic game in their two discrete cultural settings? Can we say that the first is more acceptable than the second? If so, on what basis?”<sup>37</sup> Given the position advocated by Grenz and Franke, this is a fair question. Their attempt to avoid subjectivity by stressing the importance of the community over the individual is weak at this point and stands in need of clarification.

The issue of truth and the human capacity to know it is fundamental to the Christian faith. Making a shift in the how truth is defined is potentially disastrous to the message of the Scriptures. Given the fact that the stakes are so high, it is imperative that evangelical thinkers make conclusions about truth that are consistent with biblical teaching. The Scriptures teach that Christ is the truth (John 14:6) and that Christ is the same for all eternity (Heb 13:8). It is beyond the scope of this essay to outline a biblical definition of truth, but the fact that truth is

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<sup>36</sup> Amos Young, A Review of *Beyond Foundationalism* by Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Evangelical Review of Theology* 26 (April 2002): 183.

<sup>37</sup> Carl Trueman, “Responses: It Ain’t Necessarily So,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (Fall 2003): 318.

centered upon the changeless nature of the Second Person of the Trinity ought to point man in the right direction as he seeks to define the nature of truth. Vanhoozer asks, “[w]hy should the church bother about truth? In order to avoid living a lie.”<sup>38</sup> Later, he asks, “[w]hy bother about truth? Because idols don’t deliver: ‘O Baal, answer us! . . . but there was no response.’”<sup>39</sup> The point is that if the Church is not following the truth as it stands, then it is living a lie and worshipping an idol. Thus, when it comes to defining the nature of truth, the stakes are infinitely high. When considering a shift from defining biblical truth in propositional, universal terms to local, communal, constructionist terms in order to keep pace with the postmodern climate, deep and thoughtful pause ought to be the order of the day.

The third point of critique, also related to the community’s fitness as a standard test for truth, is the role of experience in determining truth and the extent of knowledge. Grenz and Franke have a high view of the role of experience in this regard. For them, the common experience that links all Christian communities together is the experience of conversion, or personal encounter with Christ. The Church assembles its belief system, which “comprise[s] the interpretive framework of the community that this encounter has called forth.”<sup>40</sup> Experience then, specifically the experience of conversion, is central to the Church’s formation of beliefs as well as to the mission of taking the gospel to the world. Grenz and Franke state, “what is ‘basic’ for theology is not the church itself, but the specifically Christian-experience-facilitating interpretive framework, which in turn is connected to the biblical narrative.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Vanhoozer, “Mapping Evangelical Theology,” 12.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 233.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

David Clark senses what happens to theology when experience is given this level of authority. He writes, “[t]heology is very important, in Grenz’s account, but it is secondary to experience. This makes evangelicalism most fundamentally an *experiential* [emphasis original] movement.”<sup>42</sup> Clark rightly identifies a danger here: “. . . placing experience at the center of faith opens the door to theological error.”<sup>43</sup> If avoiding theological error is viewed as important and desirable, one must consider its source. Recall that Grenz and Franke see theology as a set of second-order statements about God rather than first-order assertions. Groothuis states that “[t]heological propositions should have a first-order status in theology and all of life. Theology ought to be derived first from Scripture, not community or experience, although these will always shape our theologies in various ways.”<sup>44</sup>

Viewing truth as correspondence to reality has at least one strength that a constructionist view of truth does not have. According to a correspondence view, statements that claim to be true “are subject to various kinds of verification and falsification.”<sup>45</sup> The Christian apologetic enterprise, begun by Paul and carried out since the inception of the Church, has been successful because it has been carried out assuming the correspondence view of truth. If apologists were to make the shift to a constructionist view, as Grenz and Franke advocate, how will apologetics have success? If truth is determined by a community on the basis of communal experience, then how can the claims of Christianity be verified in any meaningful way?

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<sup>42</sup> John S. Feinberg, ed., *Foundations of Evangelical Theology: Method for Theology, To Know and Love God*, by David K. Clark (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), xxviii.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 119.

<sup>45</sup> Douglas Groothuis, “What is Truth?,” *Doug Groothuis.com: Apologetics. Philosophy. Ethics. Culture*, June 20, 2002, <<http://www.gospelcom.net/ivpress/groothuis/doug/archives/000108.php>> (March 13, 2005).



Experiences of conversion are important, and theology affirms these experiences. But apart from theology as a set of first-order propositional truth claims, experiences of conversion cannot be differentiated from any other experience popularly viewed as “life-changing.”

The role of community in assessing truth, as shown above, is to represent and investigate it, even to act as a “living commentary” on it, as Vanhoozer says. What is the role of experience in the assessment of truth and the acquisition of knowledge? McGrath states that, “[e]xperience is seen as something which is to be interpreted, rather than something which is itself capable of interpreting.”<sup>46</sup> In addition to the danger of opening the door to theological error, McGrath points to another pitfall of relying too heavily upon experience. Experiences, unlike theological propositions, are outside scrutiny. But if anything needs to be scrutinized, it is experience. The experience of the people on Good Friday as they witnessed the death of Christ affirmed the absence of God even though many expected Him to vindicate His Son. To them at that time, God had abandoned Jesus. McGrath points out that the resurrection showed that this conclusion was false. “He was not *perceived* to be present—but present he really was. What experience interpreted as the *absence* of God, the resurrection showed up as the *hidden presence* [emphases original] of God.”<sup>47</sup> He goes on to state, “[i]nstead of relying upon the misleading impressions of human experience, we should trust in God’s promises.”<sup>48</sup>

It is fair to ask at this point, to what extent can one characterize Grenz’s and Franke’s position advocated in *Beyond Foundationalism* and many other writings? Although Grenz calls himself an “evangelical theologian” and seeks to position himself “in keeping with

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<sup>46</sup> Alister McGrath, “Theology and Experience: Reflections on Cognitive and Experiential Approaches to Theology,” *European Journal of Theology* 2, no. 1 (1993): 67.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

the evangelical heritage,”<sup>49</sup> some would go so far as to place both Grenz and Franke outside the evangelical camp. Erickson identifies Grenz and Franke as postliberals in the tradition of George Lindbeck because of their “emphases on [local] narrative and the community.”<sup>50</sup> Al Mohler is a bit more forceful. He writes, “[t]he issue for evangelicalism is whether his proposal will produce a genuinely evangelical theology. Given its concessions to postmodernity’s skepticism and localizing tendencies, in the end it cannot result in a genuinely evangelical system.”<sup>51</sup> D. A. Carson delivers the *coup de grâce* to the claim that Grenz’s and Franke’s proposals as evangelical: “I cannot see how Grenz’s approach to Scripture can be called ‘evangelical’ in any useful sense.”<sup>52</sup> Given that the basis for Grenz’s and Franke’s proposal is a faulty view of truth that fails as an adequate test for knowledge because of its inevitable surrender to subjectivity, the conclusion that Carson, Mohler and Erickson have drawn should be affirmed.

### **Conclusion: Assessment of Critiques**

A careful reading of Grenz and Franke will lead the reader to the conclusion that the authors would like to retain elements of both postmodernism and evangelicalism. They seem to embrace the postmodern concern for the locality of community and narrative and the rejection of universal truth claims. At the same time, they will declare that the Church is unified, calling it “trinitarian in content, communitarian in focus, and eschatological in orientation,” obviously a universal claim that is reminiscent of foundationalism. They will hold to the primacy of Scripture

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<sup>49</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, “The Virtue of Ambiguity: A Response to Archie Spencer,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57, no. 3 (2004): 364.

<sup>50</sup> Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith*, 101.

<sup>51</sup> Mohler, “The Integrity of the Evangelical Tradition,” 81.

<sup>52</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 481.

over construction, while affirming that the nature of all texts of the Christian faith are products of the frameworks of their times. Because of these and other like statements, Grenz and Franke have been charged with ambiguity in their understanding of postmodernism, evangelicalism and in their own proposals. Grenz defends himself by saying, “I am still attempting to gain further insight on a variety of theological issues that retain a degree of provisionality (or call it ‘ambiguity’ if you will) in my writings to date.”<sup>53</sup> Of course there will be a degree of tentativeness when approaching something so serious as the nature of truth, the mysteries of God and the clear communication of the gospel to the world. But Grenz and Franke make strong assertions in their writings, and given the seriousness of their topic, it is appropriate to recognize that ambiguity may not be a virtue but a stumbling block.

Postmodernism is a way of viewing the world that is contrary to the Christian worldview. While Grenz and Franke would agree with Merold Westphal who claims that Christians can find wisdom in postmodern thinking,<sup>54</sup> Groothuis says, “I argue that the errors of postmodernism outweigh whatever wisdom it possesses.”<sup>55</sup> Postmodernism and biblical Christianity are at odds with one another because one rejects a propositional, universal view of truth as correspondence with reality, while the other affirms it. All through the history of the Church, no Christian thinker has ever affirmed any view of truth that would negate the law of non-contradiction. The Bible presents truth in terms of propositions, as well as in terms of a Person, One who does not change with the times and moods of men. Any proposal that concedes

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<sup>53</sup> Grenz, “The Virtue of Ambiguity,” 364.

<sup>54</sup> See Westphal, Merold. “Blind Spots: Christianity and Postmodern Philosophy.” *Christian Century* 12 (June 14, 2003): 32–35.

<sup>55</sup> Groothuis, “Postmodern Fallacies,” 41.

ground to the postmodernist worldview in regards to the nature of truth cannot be called evangelical.

This does not mean that evangelicals should resort to strong foundationalism. If Grenz and Franke are right about one thing, it is that strong foundationalism has proved a failure. Absolute certainty for many truth statements is not possible, including the statement, “God exists.” This is not to say that God does not exist, or that faith in God is unreasonable. It is simply to say that such a statement should be investigated, tested and shown to be justified through rational analysis.

The critical realism espoused by Alister McGrath, N. T. Wright, Arthur Peacocke, and others has a great deal to offer to evangelicals. Grenz and Franke seek to propose a theological method that recognizes the role of local communities in the acquisition of knowledge in order to show Christianity relevant in a postmodern world. This ambition is noteworthy and should be modeled in evangelical scholarship. Christians have a mandate to address the world in the appropriate context with the gospel. It is not necessary, however, to adopt the methods of postmodernism while addressing it with truth. Critical realism offers a way to address the postmodern situation while also challenging it.

McGrath writes, “[a]gainst postmodernism, critical realism affirms that there is a reality, which may be known, and which we are under a moral and intellectual obligation to investigate and represent as best we can.”<sup>56</sup> He quotes John Polkinghorne in showing that the goal of critical realism is not to attain absolute certainty of this reality, as Cartesian foundationalism would affirm, but “verisimilitude.”<sup>57</sup> N. T. Wright says, “our assertions about

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<sup>56</sup> McGrath, *The Science of God*, 142.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

‘reality’ acknowledge their own provisionality.<sup>58</sup> Finally, Groothuis asserts, “[c]ritical realists, like myself, do not claim that they can achieve a perfect or exhaustive system of truth. However, the perfect system does exist in the mind of God . . .” and “*some* truths . . . can be known even by erring mortals.”<sup>59</sup>

Given the high stakes of living, thinking, and presenting the truth claims of Christ to a lost world, it is clear that Grenz and Franke’s proposal must be rejected. But the spirit in which they offer their proposal should be affirmed. In addressing a culture that is steeped in subjectivity and relativism, the solution is not found in offering it more of the same. Rather, it is found in offering a solution that affirms that the truth is real, it can be known, and is found in what God has revealed to the world through Scripture in the person of His Son.

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<sup>58</sup> Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 35.

<sup>59</sup> Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 132.

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