

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996, xii+199 pages. ISBN: 0-8028-0864-6.**

It does not take an astute observer of the times to recognize that the western world is going through some pretty vast changes. The ones that we seem most aware of at the present time are economic: downsizing and cutbacks, computerization, the laying off of middle management, in a word, the building of a leaner, meaner economy. There are other changes, however, which, though not as obvious as these, are just as significant. In this recently-published book, Stan Grenz, who teaches ethics and theology at Regent College in Vancouver, B.C., documents some of these changes, in particular, those that relate to the way we think and view the world around us.

In just under two hundred pages, he takes us on a whirlwind tour of the way that westerners have generally thought about themselves and their world during the past three centuries, and how, in the last three decades — since the 1960s, to be precise — this whole way of thinking has begun to disintegrate and be replaced by a new model of thinking about the world. The older perspective was birthed in the late 1600s, flourished in the 1700s and 1800s, and began to decline in this century. Grenz, like others who have studied this worldview, calls it “modernism.”

Modernism is a way of thinking which stresses that truth and reality are known primarily by the exercise of our reason, and that the proper use of our reason will bring genuine freedom from all external authorities. Reason alone is the authoritative voice to which women and men need to give heed. In the words of Immanuel Kant, one of the thinkers who dominated this period, “Have courage to use your own reason.”

Modernism is also convinced that the use of human reason in the realm of science can unlock all of the secrets of nature and enable men and women to build a much better world in the future. Modernism is thus characterized by a great optimism about human progress.

Well, many of the events of this century have shattered this optimistic view of the future: two horrific World Wars, the Holocaust, the Atomic Bomb and nuclear armament, the recent horrors of genocidal wars in Africa and eastern Europe. While there has been great technological progress, the human condition seems to have worsened, not advanced. And accompanying these tragedies, there has grown up a new view of the world: “postmodernism.”

This world view frankly rejects the possibility of ever finding the “truth.” Actually, postmodernism denies that there is such a thing as “truth.” There is “our truth” — what it is true for my group, my friends, and my culture —

and “their truth” — what is true for another culture or group. Moreover, postmodernism rejects the claim that reason is the supreme authority in life and that progress is inevitable. Where modernism looked on the bright side of things, postmodernism is a philosophy of pessimism: ultimate meaning in life cannot be found and all joys are fleeting. In the final chapter of the book Grenz points out the pluses and minuses of postmodernism, where it is a proper critique of modernism and where it itself needs to be corrected.

While some of Grenz’s book is tough sledding, especially when he looks at the gurus of postmodernism, the effort to finish the book is well worth it. For “ideas have legs,” and the world in which we live is not only shaped by politics and economics, but also by thinkers and philosophers. Who, for instance, a century ago, would ever have thought that the ideas of Karl Marx would have had the impact they have had in our world?

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**McGrath, Alister E. *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993, 199 pages.**

Alister McGrath investigates numerous antecedents and theological themes which Luther took up and reworked in new ways in his own unique *theologia crucis*. He observes that there were three major theological influences upon Luther, namely, humanism, nominalism, and Augustinianism. In contrast to Heiko Oberman who places the early Luther within the *schola Augustiniana moderna*, McGrath argues that the school that most influenced Luther’s early thinking was that of *via moderna*. He presents evidences that Luther commenced his study within the tradition of William Ockham and Gabriel Biel. The three Augustinian theologians — Nathin, Arnoldi and Staupitz — at Erfurt and Wittenberg who shaped the early Luther, he argues, belong to the *schola via moderna* rather the *schola Augustiniana moderna*.

Focusing on *Dictata super Psalterium* (1513-15), McGrath shows that the *via moderna’s* theology of justification was characteristic of Luther’s thinking until 1515. Central here is the understanding of *iustitia Dei*, which is in line with the Aristotelian-Ciceronian principle of “rendering to each man his due” (11.106-10). God made a covenant (*pactum*) with man in that if man would fulfill certain conditions, God by his promises would reward him with his grace. God, in his ordained power, deems the action of free will meritorious, and thereby infallibly grants grace to the one who “does his best” (*facere quod in se est*). This view of *iustitia Dei* as God’s righteous demands generates in Luther the experience of *Anfechtung*, leading him to

question the certainty of his own salvation. For Luther Christ was primarily example in this old *schema*.

The author then turns to the nature of Luther's evangelical breakthrough, examining the timing of it, and how he arrived at the new discovery of the "righteousness of God." He argues cogently that Luther's break with the soteriology of the *via moderna* occurred either at the end of *Dictata* or at the beginning of his lectures on Romans of 1515-16, thereby replacing the old idea of *iustitia* with the new idea of *iustitia fidei*. "*Fides Christi* is now understood as the work of God with man, and must emphatically not as a response which man is capable of making to God by means of his purely natural capacities" (p.132). McGrath observes that Luther's first formative efforts toward his *theologia crucis* can be discerned in his lectures on Romans wherein Luther's new perception concerning original sin and the development of his "holistic" anthropology are clarified. He came to realize that "flesh" and "spirit" are not to be understood as man's lower and higher faculties but are instead different aspects of the whole person. Man is *homo incurvatus in se*, and cannot be partially righteous *coram Deo*. Man is passive towards justification. Justification must be extrinsic to man, and is to be grounded in *iustitia Christi aliena*. Consequently the idea that man can do *quod in se est* is denounced as utterly "Pelagian" (p.130). For Luther Christ was primarily gift in this new *schema*.

Luther's insight into the true nature of *iustitia Dei* marked the beginning of his early theological development, which resulted in his *theologia crucis* (1514-19), this theological method that governs the whole of Luther's thinking. *CRUX sola est nostra theologia*. McGrath then proceeds in chapter five to describe the leading features of the *theologia crucis* as they are developed in Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518, and the *Operationes* of 1518-21. Since God has revealed himself, the task of the theologian is to concern himself with God as he has chosen to reveal himself. God is now for Luther hidden and yet revealed in the "humility and shame of the cross." This knowledge of God stands in total contradiction to the perception of human senses, and it is a matter of faith. Only those with the eyes of faith can see the hidden mystery of the cross. All preconceived notions of God are destroyed in light of this *theologia crucis*, which is a theology of faith, and of faith alone. Unfortunately this chapter does not contain any ideas that are not already found in Loewenich's work of an earlier period (1919).

Despite his evident familiarity with the sources and recent literature, two major significant studies on Luther's Christology — Ian Siggins, *Luther's Doctrine of Christ* and Marc Lienhard, *Luther: Witness to Christ* — are ignored by McGrath in his volume. One wonders why? McGrath is to be credited for seeing an intrinsic linkage between classical Christology and Luther's theology of justification, the former being the basis for the latter. But he does not develop this.

His strongest criticism is aimed at Luther's concept of the *Deus*

*Absconditus* in the *Servo Arbitrio* (1525), seeing it as contradicting the *Deus incarnatus*. Luther indeed admitted that there is an ineffable mystery hidden in God's being, but this in no way means that it contradicts the divine will revealed in the incarnation. What is clear in Luther is that he affirmed the identity of *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus*. McGrath should have taken into consideration Luther's lectures on Genesis 26:9 (1545) where he has God say: "From an unrevealed God I will become a revealed God. Nevertheless I will remain the same God." At crucial points, such as in the *Theses for the Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther indicated that though we are forbidden to see God's "face," we, like, Moses, are permitted to see God's "backparts," a visible piece of the divine mystery. In this way he affirmed an integral relationship between the economic hiddenness and the immanent ineffability. Concurring with much of the Lutheran tradition, McGrath sees only a contradiction in Luther because he sees Luther as only setting side by side *Deus revelatus* and *Deus absconditus*. But Luther has the former battling the latter, the former overcoming the latter, thereby making possible the certainty of faith. Faith lays hold of the *Deus revelatus* who has conquered the inscrutable and impassible God for us in concrete actuality. Unbelief, on the other hand, encounters only the absolute God before whom it faces total annihilation if it does not cleave to the crucified God (*Deus crucifixus*) of mercy. However, the question as to whether Luther always and consistently affirms their identity is a subject for another study.

Nevertheless, one must congratulate McGrath for opening up this fresh and comprehensive study of Luther's foundational theology in relation to late medieval thought.

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**G. R. D. McLean, selected, *Praying with the Celts* (1988 ed.; repr. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1996), viii+126 pages. ISBN: 0-8028-4264-X.**

In the literary world there is currently great interest in books dealing with things Celtic. Some of them are clearly bogus, cashing in on a trend, and owing more to New Age sensibilities than to the ancient Celtic peoples. Others, though, do give the modern reader genuine insights into the worldview of this important European culture. Among the latter should be numbered this collection of roughly a hundred Scottish Gaelic prayers, praises and blessings. Selected from the translations of G. R. D. McLean in his *Poems of the Western Highlanders* (1961), they were originally from the monumental *Carmina Gadelica*.

They display a piety that is at once simple and profound. Simple, for they are concerned with perennial human concerns: the need for security and meaning, fear of the unknown, safety in travelling. The profundity, on the other hand, is well seen in the trinitarianism of many of these spiritual texts. Consider this prayer before sleep (p.99):

Thou Father, righteous and kind one who art,  
Thou Son, who o'er sin didst play victor's part  
Thou Holy Spirit of the mighty arm,  
Give keeping to me this night from all harm. . .

Or this one, to be uttered before prayer itself (p.54):

The Father who created me  
With eye benign beholdeth me;  
The Son who dearly purchased me  
With eye divine enfoldeth me;  
The Spirit who so altered me  
With eye refining me holdeth me;  
In friendliness and love the Three  
Behold me when I bend the knee.

This trinitarianism, so characteristic of Celtic Christianity and yet oddly absent from many sectors of contemporary evangelical piety, makes this a marvellous resource for private prayer.

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**John Owen, *Sin and Temptation: The Challenge of Personal Godliness*, ed. Jame M. Houston. 1983 ed.; repr. Paris, Ontario: Bethany House Publishers, 1996, 210 pages. ISBN: 1-55661-830-1**

The last few decades have witnessed a massive resurgence of interest in the Puritans, and central to this resurgence have been the works of John Owen (1616-1683), who, in his own lifetime, was dubbed the "Calvin of England." Indeed, as J. I. Packer writes in the introduction to this modernized version of three of Owen's most penetrating treatises, "Owen is to be bracketed with such [theological giants] as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, Spurgeon, and Lloyd-Jones" (p.xxiv).

James Houston, who has modernized and abridged the works in this

book, has done an excellent job of enabling the Puritan theologian to speak to the late twentieth century. Though our technological and historical circumstances are very different from those of Puritan era, the hearts of men and women have not changed. Indwelling sin, now as then, is an ever-present reality, as Owen details in *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Remainders of Indwelling Sin in Believers* (1667), the first of the three treatises. Basing his discussion on Romans 7:21, Owen shows how sin lies at the heart of even believers' lives, and, if not resisted by prayer and meditation, will slowly but surely eat away zeal for and delight in the things of God.

The second work, *Of Temptation*, was first published in 1658 and consists of sermon material preached during the 1650s. Essentially an exposition of Matthew 26:41, it further analyzes the way in which believers fall into sin. Owen enumerates four seasons in which believers must exercise special care that temptation not lead them away into sin: times of outward prosperity, times of spiritual coldness and formality, times when one has enjoyed rich fellowship with God, and times of self-confidence, as in Peter's affirmation to Christ, "I will not deny thee." The remedy that Owen emphasizes is prayer. Typical of Puritan pithiness is his remark in this regard: "If we do not abide in prayer, we will abide in temptation."

The final work, *The Mortification of Sin in Believers* (1656), is in some ways the richest of the three. Originally sermons that Owen preached in the University of Oxford during the mid-1650s, it is based on Romans 8:13 and lays out a strategy for fighting indwelling sin and warding off temptation. Owen emphasizes that in the fight against sin the Holy Spirit employs all of our human powers. In sanctifying us, Owen insists, the Spirit works "in us and with us — not against us, nor in spite of us, nor without us" (p.162-163). Yet, Owen is very much aware that sanctification is also a gift. Owen would rightly regard those today who talk about "letting go and letting God" take care of the believer's sins as unbiblical. Yet, he is very much aware that sanctification is also a gift. This duty, he rightly emphasizes, is only accomplished through the Holy Spirit. Not without reason does Owen lovingly describe the Spirit as "the great beautifier of souls."

In a day when significant sectors of evangelicalism are characterized by spiritual superficiality and shallowness, and holiness is rarely a major topic of interest or discussion, these books are like a draught of water in a dry and thirsty land. They remind us of the great spiritual heritage that we possess as evangelicals. Even more significantly, they challenge us to recover the biblical priority of holiness.

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