

## **Book Review**

*What Christians Really Believe and Why*

**Stanley J. Grenz**

Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998. 159 pages.

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The Christian church owes a debt of gratitude to Stanley J. Grenz for giving an up-to-date doctrinal primer on the Christian faith.<sup>1</sup> Despite the provocative title that might suggest novelty, there is little new in this book in terms of the classic doctrines of Christianity. Grenz, in fact, affirms the major tenets of the historic Christian faith. His noteworthy contribution stems from the manner in which he articulates them. He relates Christian dogma to the contemporary scene in a fresh, innovative and illuminating way. Christian truth is presented by framing the discussion against the backdrop of questions posed by the variegated streams of modern religious experience. This approach has the strategic advantage of doing theology in dialogue with the world around us, which insures its relevance. Moreover, it avoids answering theological questions that no one is asking and encourages the church to expound its faith in light of the existential questions asked by all people. In addressing those questions, special attention and sensitivity is given those steeped in Postmodern spirituality where authentic religious experience trumps doctrinal orthodoxy. Grenz has tackled the formidable task of arguing for doctrine that is foundational to and inseparable from authentic religious experience, an experience with the one true, triune God who has uniquely

revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ.

The book is organized around seven perennial questions Grenz believes are universal: (1) Why believe? (an exploration into the multi-dimensional nature of biblical faith); (2) Who am I and Why am I here? (a discussion of the nature of humanity as created by God and for God); (3) Are we alone in the universe? (an inquiry into and analysis of the modern fascination with angels and various expressions of New Age spiritism); (4) Which God? (a comparative survey between the God of the Bible and the modern pantheon of deities that compete for the instinctual worship of humanity and allegedly hold the key to unlock the mysteries of the universe); (5) Who is Jesus and what did he do? (a clear presentation of Jesus as the unique God-man and Redeemer over against Modernity's attempt to cast Jesus in the role of *merely* human and Postmodernity's portrayal of Jesus as *extraordinary* human, but "human" nonetheless); (6) What am I searching for and how do I find it? (a penetrating probe into the human quest for meaning and purpose in life and how the true identity of Jesus Christ provides a definitive and satisfying answer); and (7) Is the world—am I—going anywhere? (a biblical explanation of the Christian's eschatological hope that reveals

meaningful continuity between this life and life after death).

The strengths of this short but poignant work are numerous, but chief among them is its relevance. Not only is the author a theologian versed in classical Christian orthodoxy, he is a scholar who has studied the *Zeitgeist* of this world and American religious, social and political culture in particular. He can draw his illustrations from pop culture, citing Charlie Brown and Doonesbury, and then sample the profundity of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kierkegaard and Kant. He is also conversant with a broad range of theological opinion. From classic social liberalism (Harry Emerson Fosdick), the radical skepticism of the Jesus Seminar (Robert Funk), and the popular revisionist portrayals of Jesus by Christopher Hills and Norman Mailer, Grenz has sought to engage their views and expose the ideological springs from which flow different answers to his seven chosen questions. He is, of course, well read in his own Evangelical tradition, from the classic orthodoxy of C. K. Chesterton to the writings of Bernard Ramm, George Eldon Ladd and J. R. W. Stott. But Grenz is also aware of what could be labeled “cultic Christianity” that challenges the borders of Christian orthodoxy (for example, his references to Agnes Sanford). However, most will marvel at how widely read Grenz is outside his theological discipline. He cites material from major newspapers from Canada and across the

United States, the latest religious polling data, scientific journals and monographs devoted to a wide range of subjects. One cannot help but conclude that the author’s broad sampling of diverse literature has uniquely qualified him to detect a widespread search for answers to the questions he poses.

While one could cite any number of notable examples of how Grenz applies Christian theology to the contemporary scene with its seemingly limitless religious pluralism, nowhere is Grenz more illuminating than in chapter four where he discusses New Age “Immanentalism.” Sampling an array of popular writers and religionists, he demonstrates that the Eden’s quest for divine equality is far from passé. In fact, he holds up a mirror before contemporary society to show that this illusory dream of godhood is still among us, albeit in numerous and diverse forms, all pursued at the cost of denying the transcendent and immanent God revealed in Scripture.

The pastor and layman who wish to stay abreast of the contemporary religious scene, primarily in the western hemisphere, will find *What Christians Really Believe and Why* an illuminating and informative work. Moreover, it will strengthen your faith by clarifying essential Christian doctrine amidst the modern religious climate that surrounds the church.

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<sup>i</sup> Stan Grenz died on January 18-20, 2005. Because, as Chapter 7 reveals, Dr. Grenz believes death does not spell the end of personal existence only the end of earthly service to our Lord, I have chosen to use the present tense to describe the thoughts and views of the author who, while gone from us, nevertheless lives on in the presence of his Lord.