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Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century (Book Review)

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Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century, by Stanley J. Grenz (Downers Grove: InterVarsity) 1993. 208 pages, paperback, n.p. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Associate Professor of Theology.

In response to the Liberal-Fundamentalist debates of the 1920s and 30s, many conservative American Protestants retreated into sectarian enclaves where their faith was safe from liberal Christianity and modernist culture. Seeing that this defensive strategy also left their faith intellectually stagnant and socially irrelevant, thinkers like Carl Henry called upon evangelicals to develop a renewed cultural vision and intellectual rigor so that they could again engage the academy and the larger culture. The resulting movement would forge a new evangelical consensus for the mid-century and would bring what was once seen as back-water religion into the White House in the presidency of Jimmy Carter. But something happened in the 1980s. As evangelicalism became successful and respected in American culture, it suddenly found that it had spent the theological currency and lost the culturally reformist impulse of Neo-evangelicalism.

This tale has been told many times in the last couple of years. The typical explanation is that evangelicalism expanded its influence in American culture at the sacrifice of its doctrinal depth. Where others contend that evangelicalism desperately needs to replenish its lost theological reserves, in *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, Stanley Grenz takes a radically different approach. He suggests that the problem is not one of an eroding theological foundation but rather that the theological reflection of evangelicalism failed to do justice to the historical context of modernity, and, more importantly for Grenz, it did not proceed from or serve the real center of Evangelical Protestantism, namely, pietistic spirituality.

Pietistic experience must fund theological reflection. This is the key insight of Grenz's project. Evangelicalism is not primarily constituted by a belief system but by a particular religious experience. It is not a doctrine but a "vision of the faith," a distinctive spirituality. That is why "the evangelical ethos is more readily 'sensed' than described theologically" (31). Where Carl Henry spoke of an identity crisis within the evangelicalism of the 40s and 50s due to lack of theological and confessional stores, Grenz suggests that evangelicalism's current loss of identity comes from the misappropriation of speculative theology and consequently from evangelicals coming to define themselves in primarily theological terms.

Evangelicals have always emphasized personal piety and devotional exercises. Quintessential to the

evangelical movement is the idea that every believer enjoys an immediate, personal relationship with God. Personal prayer and individual access to Scripture form the "taproot" of evangelical spirituality. Evangelical religion is religion of personal experience. As a religious experience of God's presence in the heart of the individual believer, evangelical Protestantism finds its historical headwaters in Puritan and colonial pietism (22). Grenz argues that while the Calvinist doctrine of election elevated divine sovereignty, "It offered no clear criteria whereby a believer could be assured of elect status" (39). This anxiety occasioned a fundamental shift in religious self-consciousness away from a creedal identity toward a pietistic identity consisting in an inward and personal experience of the new birth.

Pietistic spirituality is the "hallmark of evangelicalism." Such spirituality finds its locus in a personal narrative of God's presence in the believer rather than in a creedal story which integrates the believer into God's larger redemptive drama. As Grenz puts it, the evangelical finds himself and his meaning not in the drama of redemption proclaimed in the Apostles' Creed, but in being able to sing: "Oh, How I Love Jesus" (46). Thus, spirituality is generated from within the individual, for its purpose is the emotional bonding of the religious affections to God. Echoing John Wesley, Grenz writes, "As evangelicals we understand spirituality to be an inward conviction of the heart warmed by the regenerating power of the Spirit" (56).

Further, the goal of evangelical spirituality does not extend beyond its emotional purpose. Pietistic spirituality is quietistic. Its goal is to rest in the beloved, or as Grenz states it, "being" the object of divine concern rather than "doing" the faith (39). Right here we find the key to the evangelical success in the 1980s. It was not due to a levelling of its doctrinal core to complement a relativistic social and intellectual environment. Rather, evangelicalism appealed to so many in the selfist decade of the 80s because it is a selfist ethos. The pietistic spirituality of evangelicalism recognizes the inward and selfist impulse over the outward and social because "a nonnegotiable principle of evangelicalism is that religion is a matter of the heart" (45).

"The spiritual believer balances piety with activity" (44). This is just one of the many false distinctions Grenz works with in this book. He is not critical of evangelical pietism at all. In fact, he affirms it. But