ABSOLUTE THEOLOGICAL TRUTH
IN POSTMODERN TIMES

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Introduction

Postmodernity brought about the greatest paradigm shift in philosophical studies since Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle defined the basic structure and destiny of Western philosophy and science. In postmodern times, knowledge and truth have become relative to the historical and cultural conditions of the cognitive subject. Postmodern "hermeneutical reason"[1] replaces the "epistemological foundationalism" of classical and modern times.[2] The epistemological shift implies that truth changes with the times. We can no longer speak of "eternal" or "absolute" truth. Truth is relative to our historically and culturally conditioned lives.[3]

How should evangelical theology relate to this epoch-making epistemological shift? Can we speak in postmodern times of an absolute unchanging theological truth?[4] Recently, Stanley Grenz has addressed this issue,[5] proposing that evangelical theology should embrace postmodern epistemology and work from within the sociohistorical limitations of the church community and the culturally conditioned language of its tradition. In short, they see theology exploring "the world-constructing, knowledge-forming 'language' of the Christian community."[6]

In this presentation, I will attempt to outline an alternate way to affirm both the paradigmatic shift of postmodern epistemology *and* the absolute truth of Christian theology. I will argue, with Grenz, that evangelical theology

[1]Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 2d ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 315-356.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1989).

[4]For an introduction to the various senses in which the word "absolute" has been used in the history of philosophy, see, e.g., José Ferrater Mora, *Diccionario de Filosophifa*, 5th ed. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1965), s.v., "absoluto." In this article, I use the word "absolute" to describe theological truth as nonrelative or not conditioned to human-historical flux.

[5]Stanley Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001). Grenz has been especially active in developing the ideas found in this book, as well as in his other prolific writings. Therefore, the emphasis will be on Grenz in this article, rather than Franke.

[6]Ibid., 53.

should abandon classical and modern foundationalisms and replace them with the postmodern understanding of hermeneutical reason.[7] However, against Grenz, I will propose that adopting postmodern hermeneutical reason does not impinge on the absoluteness of the truth of Christian theological knowledge, but enhances our capability to understand and affirm it. Instead of arguing, like Grenz, that Christian truth springs from the Spirit-led community,[8] I will suggest that it flows from God's historical revelation in the Spirit-originated Scripture.

In order to achieve this objective, I will consider, first, whether Grenz's approach to move beyond modernity makes room for absolute truth. Second, I will explore the relation between epistemology and ontology and the way they related in classical and modern foundationalism. Finally, I will review the biblical view on truth to uncover the way in which epistemology and ontology relate in biblical Christianity.

Beyond Foundationalism: Grenz's Proposal

Grenz argues that Protestant theology should accommodate to postmodern epistemology because contemporary philosophers have abandoned the foundationalist epistemology of modernism and replaced it with the hermeneutical epistemology of postmodernity. Grenz correctly describes foundationalist epistemology as the conviction "that certain beliefs anchor other beliefs, that is, certain beliefs are 'basic,' and other beliefs arise as conclusions from them."[9] He further explains that Friedrich Schleiermacher's and Charles Hodge's theological methods are expressions of foundationalist theological epistemologies.[10] For Schleiermacher, the father of liberal theology, inner religious experience is the "foundation" on which theology builds.[11] For Hodge, a conservative evangelical theologian, the deposit of timeless revelation found in Scripture "formulated as a series of statements or theological assertions, each of which is true in its own right"[12] is the "foundation" on which theology builds. According to Grenz, these theological methodological strategies came about as ways to accommodate

[7]For a scholarly introduction to the philosophical study of hermeneutics, see Josef Bleicher, ed., *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), esp. Emilio Betti, "Hermeneutics as the General Methodology of the *Geisteswissenshaften*"; Raúl Kerbs, "Sobre El Desarrollo De La Hermenéutica," *Analogia Filosófica*, no. 2 (1999), 3-33; and John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

[8]Grenz and Franke, 47-54.

[9]Ibid., 47.

[10]Ibid., 37.

[11]Ibid., 35.

[12]Ibid., 47.

evangelical theology to a "strong" philosophical foundationalism that gave priority to scientific natural statements over religious ones.[13]

Grenz correctly perceives that postmodernity undermined the claim of strong Enlightenment foundationalism. Additionally, he believes that evangelical theology would greatly benefit from accommodating its theological method and systematic theology to the new friendlier patterns of postmodern epistemology. Thus, according to him, evangelical method and systematic theology should adjust to the new postmodern "communitarian turn."[14] Thinking from within the modernist tradition, whose epistemology he rejects, Grenz conceives that the task of theology springs not from divine revelation, but from religious experience. However, he attempts to distance his theology from the modern model by explaining that religious experiences are not bare spiritual events, but take place within a specific "interpretive framework—a grid—that facilitates their occurrence."[15] Adopting the postmodern communitarian turn,[16] Grenz conceives that concrete religious traditions provide the interpretative frameworks from which Christian experience and theology flow.[17]

Yet, if Christian theology is bound to the changing flow of tradition's interpretive frameworks, in what sense can we say that the theological vision of various Christian communities is true?[18] Grenz's theological proposal implies theological relativism. He recognizes that although theological constructions imply the claim to "validity," we cannot confirm their truth by means of a "a universally accessible present reality."[19] To "solve" the historical relativism embedded in his theological proposal, Grenz adopts Pannenberg's well-known "eschatological" strategy. Only the eschatological advent of God will confirm the transcendent theological vision generated by religious communities. Grenz's theological proposal leaves the question of present truth dangling in the uncertainty of cultural relativism, leaving no room for the absolute truth of Christianity.

Are we rationally bound to wait in our concrete communities of faith for

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid., 47-49.

[15]Ibid., 49.

[16]On the role of tradition in postmodern thinking, see, e.g., Delwin Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations: Tradition and Theological Construction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994). Brown's analysis, 138, of "tradition" as "canon" concludes with the conviction that "Theology should be the critical analyst and creative conveyor of the vast conceptual resources, actual and potential, of religious traditions. In this critically and creatively reconstructing of the past, a theology is a tradition's caregiver. That, indeed, is the vocation of theology."

[17]Grenz and Franke, 53.

[18]Ibid., 54.

[19]Ibid.

the eschatological confirmation of the absolute truth of Christian communities? Does the acceptance of hermeneutical reason unavoidably lead to theological relativism? Can evangelical theology adopt postmodern hermeneutical reason and still affirm the absoluteness of Christian truth?

The End of Absolute Truth in Philosophy

To assess the compatibility of postmodern hermeneutical reason with the absolute truth of Christianity, we need, first, to consider the nature of truth. Contrary to general opinion, the nature of truth belongs not only to epistemology, but also to ontology. The modern turn to the subject has led us to neglect the ontological ground of truth. For more than three centuries, we have become accustomed to thinking of truth as the outcome of human reason and language. We think of truth in epistemological categories. The antimetaphysical leanings of empiricism, mediated through analytical philosophy and the philosophy of language, have led many evangelical theologians to neglect the ontological ground of reason. Modernity forgot Parmenides's groundbreaking insight: "Being and thinking belong together."[20] According to this principle, knowledge, the words we use to communicate knowledge, and the truth of our words directly relate to the way in which we understand reality. Epistemology stands on ontological grounds. If this is true, the modern turn to the subject prevented modernity from properly assessing the nature of truth and the relation of scientific knowledge to truth.

The truth of statements stands on the nature of the reality to which they refer.[21] According to classical ontology, absolute truth refers to timeless, changeless realities. According to modern empiricist antimetaphysical ontology, relative truth refers to temporal, changing realities. However, the classical conviction that reason is able to produce absolute knowledge continued during the Enlightenment because old habits of thought die hard. Kant's transcendental turn to the subject argued that the absoluteness of scientific truth stood not on ontological but epistemological grounds. In other words, the absoluteness and changelessness of scientific truth was the product of human reason.[22] In the twentieth century, scientific methodology replaced Kantian transcendentalism as the origin and foundation of absolute truth.[23]

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[20]Parmenides stated that "It is the same thing to think and to be" ("The Way to Truth," in *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Complete Translation of the Fragments in Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. Kathleen Freeman [Oxford: Blackwell, 1948], frag. 3).

[21]Martin Heidegger argues that "to say that an assertion 'is true' signifies that it uncovers the entity as it is in itself. Such an assertion asserts, points out, 'lets' the entity 'be seen' (*apoóphansis*) in its uncoveredness. The *Being-true* (*truth*) of the assertion must be understood as *Being uncovering*" (*Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson [New York: Harper and Collins, 1962], 1.6.44.a [p. 261], emphasis original).

[22]Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1990).

[23]That science produces absolute truth is a myth. Scientific methodology cannot

By the end of the twentieth century, philosophy finally came to realize the failure of Kantian transcendentalism and scientific methodology as sources of absolute truth. Moreover, in close relation to this discovery, postmodern philosophy also came to discover the failure of the timeless metaphysical ontology on which classical theology built its beliefs. In the absence of absolute reality, human reason cannot produce absolute (changeless) knowledge and truth. If reality changes so does knowledge. Consequently, postmodernity replaced absolute reason with historical hermeneutical reason in epistemology; and, timeless, changeless reality with temporal, changing reality in ontology.

Postmodernity proclaimed the end of absolute reason because it came to realize that ultimate reality is not timeless and changing as Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle believed, but rather it is temporal and changing, as, for instance, Martin Heidegger[24] and Jean-Paul Sartre[25] have argued. The epistemological postmodern shift from classical absolute reason to hermeneutical reason springs from the ontological shift from a timeless to a temporal ontology.[26] In recognizing that ultimate reality is not timeless but temporal, postmodernity reversed the macrohermeneutical principle from which Christian theologians

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produce absolute truth. For an introduction to the epistemological limitations of scientific methodology, see, e.g., Fernando Canale, "Evolution, Theology and Method, Part 1: Outline and Limits of Scientific Methodology," *AUSS* 41 (2003): 65-100; idem, "Evolution, Theology and Method, Part 2: Scientific Method and Evolution," *AUSS* 41 (2003): 165-184.

[24]This radical ontological shift at the center of postmodern thought is clearly present, e.g., in Heidegger's introduction to his *Being and Time*: "Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word 'being'? Not at all. So it is fitting that we should raise anew *the question of the meaning of Being*. But are we nowadays even perplexed at our inability to understand the expression 'Being'? Not at all. So first of all we must reawaken an understanding for the meaning of this question. Our aim in the following treatise is to work out the questions of the meaning of Being and to do so concretely. Our provisional aim is the Interpretation of time as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of Being" (foreword, 1).

[25]Jean-Paul Sartre stated: "Modern thought has realized considerable progress by reducing the existent to the series of appearances which manifest it. Its aim was to overcome a certain number of dualisms which have embarrassed philosophy and to replace them by the monism of the phenomenon (*Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes [New York: Philosophical Library, 1956], xlv).

[26]Hans-Georg Gadamer, a brilliant disciple of Heidegger, reminds us that "the brilliant scheme of *Being and Time* really meant a total transformation of the intellectual climate, a transformation that had lasting effects on almost all the sciences." Gadamer insightfully testifies that "today, with the distance of decades, the philosophical impulse that Heidegger represented no longer has the same infatuating relevance. It has penetrated everywhere and works in the depths, often unrecognized, often barely provoking resistance; but nothing today is thinkable without it" ("The Phenomenological Movement," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. David E. Linge [Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976], 138-139).

have interpreted Scripture and constructed their doctrinal systems for more than two millennia.

On this ontological basis, postmodernity has correctly recognized that the capabilities and function of human reason are relative to historical-cognitive patterns and categories. Plato and Aristotle were incorrect in their convictions that the capabilities and function of human reason stood on timeless, immutable realities. Postmodern epistemological relativism, then, flows from the conviction that reason and the reality it knows are temporal. Thus there is no ontological or epistemological ground for universal and absolute truth. When knowledge and reality are temporal, they flow and change with the times. There is no longer an absolute truth. All truth is relative to the flow of temporal subjects and objects.

Thus absolute truth stands on the belief that our knowledge springs from timeless, changeless realities. Plato devised the timeless ontology on which the absolute truth of classical and modern times was constructed.[27] Postmodernity resulted from the conviction that in nature and history there is nothing immutable or absolute on which truth could stand. Therefore, human reason cannot produce absolute truth. Reason does not work "absolutely" from timeless, ontological "foundations," as modernists believed. Instead, postmodernity argues that reason works "hermeneutically" from the interaction of temporal-cognitive subjects with temporal, changing realities.[28]

Revelation and Theological Truth

A proper response of evangelical theology to postmodernity, therefore, should include not only its obvious epistemological shift from absolute to hermeneutical reason, but also its less publicized shift from timeless to temporal ontology.

Grenz's view that theological construction revolves around the social dynamics of the private tradition-community of evangelicalism does harness the historicity of postmodern hermeneutical reason. However, his proposal falls short of the absolute theological truth Christians have always attached to their theological convictions.[29] Can we embrace the historicity of hermeneutical

[27]Plato explained that when the soul "investigates itself, it passes into *the realm of the pure and everlasting and immortal and changeless*, and being of a kindred nature. When it is once independent and free from interference, consorts with it always and strays no longer, but remains, in that *realm of the absolute, constant, and invariable*, through contact with beings of a similar nature" (*Phaedo*, 79.d, emphasis supplied).

[28]These realities include both the cognitive subject and the cognitive objects.

[29]E.g., from the Roman Catholic perspective, John Paul II recognizes that the divine revelation in Jesus Christ is absolute truth: "The truth of Christian Revelation, found in Jesus of Nazareth, enables all men and women to embrace the 'mystery' of their own life. As absolute truth, it summons human beings to be open to the transcendent, whilst respecting both their autonomy as creatures and their freedom. At this point the relationship between freedom and truth is complete, and we understand

postmodern reason and, at the same time, safeguard the absoluteness of theological truth? We can, if we engage postmodernity not by way of tradition, but by way of consistently following the *sola Scriptura* principle.

At this point, we should take seriously Karl Barth's conviction that theology should "resign itself to stand on its own feet in relation to philosophy."[30] To do so, theology should recognize that the point of departure for its method is revelation.[31] In short, the absoluteness of theological truth does not depend on the epistemological characteristics of human reason or the changing realities of temporal beings, but on the transcendent content of divine revelation. To follow Barth's advice, we should not answer the question about absolute theological truth by adopting philosophical answers. Instead, we should answer the question from within the patterns of Christian revelation (not tradition or community) that are publicly accessible in inspired Scripture.

Absolute Truth in Scripture

If Barth is correct, we should pursue the question of whether we can affirm absolute theological truths in the context of postmodern epistemology from revelation. For evangelicals, to start from revelation means to start from biblical thinking. Scripture is the only public cognitive source of revelation available to Christian theologians. This is so because the source of Scripture is God's being. Thus, not only in philosophy, but also in theology, being and knowing belong together. Since the being and acts of God become unconcealed in the pages of

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the full meaning of the Lord's words: 'You will know the truth and the truth will make you free' (Jn 8:32)" (*Fides et Ratio: Encyclical Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Relationship between Faith and Reason* [Vatican: Holy See Web Site, 1998], 2:15). Hilary of Poitiers states: "But the voice of God, our instruction in true wisdom, speaks what is perfect, and expresses the absolute truth, when it teaches that itself is prior not merely to things of time, but even to things infinite" (*On the Trinity*, ed. Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series* 2 [Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1997], 12.39). Even the modernist approach of G. W. F. Hegel recognized that "religion has as its content absolute truth, and, therefore, also the highest kind of feeling. Religion, as intuition, feeling, or imaginative thought, the object of whose activity is God, the unlimited basis and cause of all things, advances the claim that everything should be apprehended in reference to it, and in it should receive its confirmation, justification, and certitude" (*Philosophy of Right*, trans. S. D. Dyde [Ontario: Batoche, 2001], 206-207).

[30]Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl* (New York: Harper, 1959), 191.

[31]Barth, 191, states: "This third possibility would, in a word, consist in theology resigning itself to stand on its own feet in relation to philosophy, in theology recognizing the point of departure for its method in revelation, just as decidedly as philosophy sees its point of departure in reason, and in theology conducting, therefore, a dialogue with philosophy, and not, wrapping itself up in the mantle of philosophy, a quasi-philosophical monologue. It can only be said of this third possibility, which becomes visible on the border of the Kantian philosophy of religion, that it is at all events observed by Hegel and by several of his pupils, in theology."

Scripture,[32] let us review briefly the way in which Scripture deals with truth to
see if absolute theological truth is possible in postmodern times.

The OT words for "truth" (אֱמֶת and אֱמוּנָה) emphasize the notions of
reliability, firmness, sureness, stability, and continuance, which are ontologically
grounded in the nature of God (Exod 34:6; Ps 31:5). Building on the OT, the
NT word for "truth" (ἀλήθεια) underlines the unconcealment of God's being
in the history of humanity.[33] In Scripture, then, truth stands on the ontological
basis of God's revealing his very being by presence (John 1:14; 1 John 5:6),
action (John 1:17), words (John 17:17; Ps 119:43, 151, 160; Dan 10:21), and
teachings (Ps 119:142) in the flux of human history. God's historical revelation
reached its highest manifestation in Christ, who, as God himself, is the truth
(John 14:6), and who reveals truth by his ontological and epistemological
presence and action and by epistemologically putting the truth in words and
teachings (Mark 12:1).[34]

Though Scripture implicitly assumes Parmenides's maxim that "being and
knowledge belong together," it departs from the notion that reality is timeless.
Central to the notion of biblical truth is the direct revelation of God's being in
the flux of time. We should not understand God's temporal being, however, as
univocal[35] or equivocal[36] to our created time, but as analogously and infinitely

[32]This approach is actually embraced by philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, who
explains that he intends to derive his knowledge of God "from Scripture; I'll be appealing
to what we learn about God from Scripture. I make no pretense of constructing a piece of
natural theology" ("Unqualified Divine Temporality," in *God and Time: Four Views*, ed.
Gregory E. Ganssle [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001], 193). However, Wolterstorff
does not develop the ontological question of God's temporality. His view is a strong
affirmation of the biblical picture of God's acting in our time, which at face value seems to
assume the meaning of time as univocal. The notion of God's infinite, analogical,
ontological temporality, assumed in Scripture, needs to be affirmed and explained in the
limited measure allowed by our human cognitive and ontological limitations.

[33]According to the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*: "Etymologically *alētheia*
means "nonconcealment." It thus denotes what is seen, indicated, expressed, or
disclosed, i.e., a thing as it really is, not as it is concealed or falsified" (G. Kittel and
Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, abridged ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,
1995], s.v. "alētheia").

[34]A report on the various meanings of the biblical words for truth can be found in
Roger Nicole, "The Biblical Concept of Truth," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson
(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

[35]Theologians have wrestled extensively with God's relation to time. Most assume
the meaning of time univocally. That is to say, time is a characteristic of limited human
realities. In this camp, we find classical theologians, such as Augustine and Thomas
Aquinas, as well as contemporary process philosophy and the contemporary evangelical
debate generated by the Open View of God. Though Heidegger, 427, no. xiii, should
be credited for expressing with great clarity the ontological macroparadigmatic shift
from the classical-modern timeless understanding to the postmodern temporal: "If
God's eternity can be 'construed' philosophically, then it may be understood only as a

temporal.[37] The epistemological side of Christian absolute truth in words and teachings stands on and proceeds from God's reality and actions in human and cosmic history.

However, according to Scripture, the analogous, infinite temporality of God's being does not imply that he is subject to human becoming and

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more primordial temporality which is 'infinite'. Whether the way afforded by the *via negationis et eminentiae* is a possible one, remains to be seen." Though Heidegger is correct in suggesting that divine temporality is infinite, he fails to understand that God's revelation grounds an analogical view of divine time.

[36]Following a Hegelian insight, Karl Barth attempted to bring time to the very being and essence of God, but did it by dealing with the notion of time in an equivocal sense. Thus he argues: "The being is eternal in whose duration beginning, succession and end are not three but one, not separate as a first, a second and a third occasion, but one sumultaneous occasion as beginning, middle and end. Eternity is the simultaneity of beginning, middle and end, and to that extent it is pure duration. Eternity is God in the sense in which in himself and in all things God is simultaneous, i.e., beginning and middle as well as end, without separation, distance or contradiction. Eternity is not, therefore, time, although time is certainly God's creation or more correctly, a form of His creation. Time is distinguished from eternity by the fact that in it beginning, middle and end are distinct and even opposed as past, present and future" (*Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), II/I, 608. Thus, when Barth speaks of the "historicity of God" to explain his presence of the human Christ in eternity, he uses the word "time" in an equivocal sense (*Church Dogmatics*, III/I, 66). To explain the phenomenon of the revelation of the Word of God in the man Jesus of Nazareth, Barth speaks of God's own being as not timeless, but rather "historical even in its eternity." This "historicity" of God is conceived to be the very source of time (ibid., 67). This "historical eternity," however, is conceived by Barth as simultaneity, where the proper succession that belongs to the essence of time does not exist (ibid.; see the detailed discussion on God's eternity in *Church Dogmatics*, II/I, 608-677). I agree with Barth's conviction that the historical fact of God's incarnation in Christ requires the temporality and historicity of God. Yet, if we think this issue biblically, we should not conceive of God's time as equivocal or univocal to created time, but rather as analogical to it. An analogical notion of divine time means that while God experiences the future, present, and past sequence of time, he relates to it from the infiniteness of the creator and not with the limitations of the creature. Scripture gives ample evidence to support this view, which has not been, as yet, considered by Christian theologians.

[37]Oscar Cullmann is the one theologian that I know who has come closest to this understanding of the analogous and infinite temporality of God as the basic ontic characteristic of his being. He concludes: "Primitive Christianity knows nothing of timelessness, and that even the passage Rev. 10:6 is not to be understood in this sense. From all that has been said in the two preceding chapters it results rather that *eternity, which is possible only as an attribute of God, is time*, or, to put it better, what we call 'time' is nothing but a part, defined and delimited by God, of this same unending duration of God's time" (*Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, trans. Floyd V. Filson, 3d ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964], 62, emphasis added). For an introduction to various alternative ways to deal with God and time, see William J. Hill, *Search for the Absent God: Tradition and Modernity in Religious Understanding* (New York:Crossroad, 1992), 80-91.

limitations.[38] Because of the analogous, infinite temporality of his being, God is able to reveal his true, firm, reliable, and stable being (ontology) and wisdom (epistemology) from within the historical-temporal dynamics of human time. According to Scripture, God's being is not only analogously and infinitely temporal,[39] but also immutable and transcendent from human history and traditions. His eternity, immutability, and transcendence are not predicates of his timeless being, as classical, modern, and postmodern traditions have assumed. On the contrary, God's eternity, immutability, and transcendence are predicates of his analogously infinite temporal being.[40]

Moreover, according to Scripture, God is truth ontologically.[41] Truth is an aspect that describes the divine nature. Christ made it clear that "I am truth" (ἀλήθεια, John 14:6). Truth as ἀλήθεια names the unconcealment of God in human space and time. God has manifested himself directly in the flowing of human time, showing himself to us as he is, showing what truth is and what truth does. Because God's being, character, and purposes do not change (Mal 3:6; Heb 6:17-18; Jas 1:17), his truth is immutable (Pss 132:11; 146:6) in the flux of time (Pss 100:5; 117:2). The OT words for "truth" underline the reliability, firmness, and faithfulness of God's truth, that is, its absoluteness and universality throughout time and cultures.

Thus God's truth is absolute not because God's being is timeless and unchangeable, but because in his dynamic, temporal being he is truth. Because God's historical unconcealment through his presence, works (Ps 33:4; Dan 4:37), ways (Pss 25:10; 86:11), and words (Isa 25:1; John 17:17) cannot lie (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Tit 1:2), but rather generate truth, Scripture describes him as the "God of truth" (Deut 32:4; Ps 31:5). Thus, as the ultimate source and reference of all truth, God is not only "truth," but also "true" in all his dealing with his creatures (Jer 10:10; John 8:26; Rom 3:4). Obviously, we do not know God's truth in him, but in his revelation in Scripture.

Absolute Truth in Postmodern Evangelical Theology

Grenz's model to accommodate evangelical theology to postmodern rationality finds its inspiration and patterns in the postliberal, cultural-linguistic proposals of

[38]God's being is not in becoming.

[39]Nicholas Wolterstorff reviews the classical scriptural passages used to argue that Scripture has a timeless view of God and concludes that they "provide no such support whatsoever" ("Unqualified Divine Temporality," 190).

[40]While Wolterstorff recognizes that Scripture speaks about divine temporality, he see Scripture falling short of affirming divine immutability: "I conclude that . . . there are no passages in scripture which can be cited as supporting the doctrine [for God's timelessness]" (ibid., 193).

[41]Heidegger, 33, noted the ontological primacy of truth: "[B]ecause the λόγος is a definite mode of letting something be seen, the λόγος is just *not* the kind of thing that can be considered as the primary 'locus' of truth."

George A. Lindbeck[42] and Wolfhart Pannenberg.[43] As with his mentors, Grenz does not deal with the theological repercussions that postmodern temporal ontology bears on classical and modern constructions that persist in defining God's being as timeless. Thus, in his assessment of modern foundationalism and postmodern hermeneutical theory, Grenz fails to recognize the role of ontology in the interpretation of reason. He seems to forget that being and knowledge belong together. In turn, this failure may explain why his proposal revolves around the postmodern "communitarian turn" and neglects the ontological revelation of God in Scripture.

Because he relates only to the epistemological patterns of postmodernity, his model has no room for absolute theological truth. His model makes theological truth relative to the historical-conditions patterns operating in the community of faith at any given time in history.

Grenz's tradition-community-centered proposal is not the only way in which evangelical theologians may engage the intellectual changes brought about by postmodern thought. A better and more complete approach to the question of absolute truth calls for a rediscovering of the structural relation that exists between reason and being. This approach has the advantage of engaging reason and being in their mutual interrelatedness and thereby allowing evangelical theology to engage reason with divine revelation in Scripture.

Even though I agree with Grenz that knowledge takes place in a historical-cognitive subject who belongs to the tradition of a historical community, the truth of our knowledge depends on the nature of the reality we know. Truth and being belong together. Unless reality reveals itself to human thought and discourse, science is not truth, but fiction. Likewise, unless divine reality reveals itself in biblical discourse, our theologizing is not truth, but myth, symbol, saga, or mere narrative.

Postmodernity has taught us the indivisible relation between being and knowing. For instance, the content of the "context-specific" categories of hermeneutical reason does not spring into consciousness by way of the feelings, creativity, words, or teachings of the communities to which we belong, but from the "things themselves"—reality unconcealing itself to reason. In other words, the notion that postmodern rationality stands on the authority of social agreements and cultural convictions misses the ontological ground of postmodern rationality. Gadamer, the great philosopher of postmodern hermeneutics, clearly explains this point: "A person who is trying to understand is exposed to distraction from fore-

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[42]Grenz and Franke, 32-41, borrow from Lindbeck freely and without serious criticism. John E. Thiel explains: "Rationality as it actually functions is context-specific. If this is so, the intelligibility of intellectual constructs—from scientific theory, to hermeneutics, to theological interpretation itself—must be measured in terms that are context-specific. From the perspective of Lindbeck's postliberalism, that context is the ecclesial culture that believes and lives by the language of God's story" (*Nonfoundationalism* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994], 62).

[43]See, e.g., Grenz and Franke, 43-45.

meanings that are not borne out by the *things themselves*. Working out our appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed 'by the *things themselves*,' is the constant task of understanding."[44] Moreover, Gadamer clearly dismisses the notion that a tradition could arbitrarily define truth, or that truth will stand on tradition rather than on the reality and nature of the *things themselves* (emphasis supplied).[45]

This may help us to understand that the newness in postmodern epistemology is not the switch from the individual rational subject to the "social subject" of community and tradition. Instead, the newness of postmodernity consists in the ontological conviction that ultimate reality, both of the knower and the known, is not timeless, but temporal. As we become familiar with the ontological ground of postmodernity, we realize that the evangelical grounding conviction that God revealed himself in Scripture is better suited to interact with postmodernity than the tradition alternative proposed by Grenz.

Evangelical theology stands on the *sola Scriptura* principle, not on tradition. Tradition is under the judgment of Scripture.[46] Tradition is the history of theological wrestling with divine revelation made public in the inspired writings of Scripture. Tradition is a secondary fallible discourse based on the primary discourse of Scripture, where the truth of God's being, actions, and words enlightens human reason within the flow and dynamics of time and space.

There is nothing in postmodern epistemology or ontology that indicates evangelical theology should retreat from using the *sola Scriptura* principle. On the contrary, postmodernity encourages us to criticize traditional teachings from an empathic listening to the "things themselves" (ontological reality).[47] In evangelical

[44]Gadamer, 267.

[45]Ibid. Gadamer further clarifies this point by explaining that "[t]he only 'objectivity' here is the confirmation of a fore-meaning in its being worked out. Indeed, what characterizes the arbitrariness of inappropriate fore-meanings if not that they come to nothing in being worked out? But understanding realizes its full potential only when the fore-meanings that it begins with are not arbitrary. Thus it is quite right for the interpreter not to approach the text directly, relying solely on the fore-meaning already available to him, but rather explicitly to examine the legitimacy—i.e., the origin and validity—of the fore-meanings dwelling with him [that is within his own history and tradition]."

[46]Alister McGrath clearly articulates the subordinated-to-Scripture and fallible role of tradition in evangelical theology. He believes that in regard to tradition, evangelicals "have felt free to appropriate the ideas that resonate with Scripture and discreetly pass over those that are obviously incorrect or shaped by outdated cultural norms. Evangelicalism is thus able to undertake a critical appropriation of its own heritage" ("Engaging the Great Tradition: Evangelical Theology and the Role of Tradition," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse Jr. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000], 150).

[47]Gadamer, 266-267, explains: "All correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought, and it must direct its gaze 'on the things themselves' (which, in the case of the literary critic, are meaningful texts, which themselves are again concerned with objects). For the

theology, the "things themselves" are those God has done, disclosed, and made public for all times and ages in the pages of Scripture. Thus, in postmodern jargon, Scripture is the discourse in which the unconcealment of God's character, wisdom, purpose, and actions has come to light in the thoughts and words of biblical writers. In Scripture, God reveals himself from within and in between the flow of human historical time as a transcendent and all-wise being whose character, plans, promises, and actions are reliable, faithful, and firm throughout history and for the unending times of future eternity.

Theological truth, then, is absolute in postmodern times because it is simultaneously temporal and transcendent. This is possible because in his transcendent being God is analogously and infinitely temporal and, therefore, able to disclose absolute unchanging truth within the changing dynamics of time. The understanding of God's absolute truth does not depend on human reason or the community of faith. On the contrary, human reason and the community of faith depend on the absolute truth that God is, and that he has historically revealed in Scripture.

Conclusion

Neither the postmodern interpretation of human knowledge, nor the social dynamics of the community of faith can support the claim of absolute theological truth. Yet divine revelation in Scripture is still able to support absolute theological truth even within the new epistemological and ontological parameters produced by postmodern philosophy. The absoluteness of Christian theological truth springs not from the supposedly universal parameters of human reason, but from the unchanging divine being whose ontic revelation in the flux of created time is testified and interpreted in the inspired record of Scripture. More precisely, the absoluteness of truth springs from the analogical, infinite, temporal transcendence and immutability of God's being, actions, words, and teachings preserved in Scripture. Because God's being and historical purposes are immutable and transcendent to our limited and sinful histories, his truth is also immutable and transcendent.

Secular-minded individuals do not recognize the reality of divine revelation because it contradicts the rational patterns of postmodern hermeneutical reason or ontology. Yet, postmodern philosophers, such as Heidegger and Derrida, considered that God's revelation in future history is possible.[48] However, most

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interpreter to let himself be guided by the things themselves is obviously not a matter of a single, 'conscientious' decision, but is 'the first, last and constant task.' For it is necessary to keep one's gaze fixed on the thing throughout all the constant distractions that originate in the interpreter himself."

[48]Heidegger not only places the question of God within the flow of temporal Being, but he leaves the possibility of a future God open. See, e.g., George Kovacs, *The Question of God in Heidegger's Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 114, 78-79, 83. See also Karin de Boer, *Thinking in the Light of Time: Heidegger's Encounter with Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 162-163. Even Jacques Derrida kept the

postmodern thinkers do not recognize God's past revelation in biblical history most probably because they identify it with the onto-theo-logical construction[49] of the "great tradition" of church teachings.[50] Thus evangelical theology needs to go back to its essential conviction about divine revelation in Scripture and to think about theological truth not from within the dictates of the great tradition, but from within the light of the history of God's bottomless eternal past to the unending future of eternity.

This task, however, may require the critical deconstruction of many cherished doctrines that are rooted in tradition rather than in Scripture, such as the related doctrines of divine being and divine revelation.[51] Deconstruction of the history of theological interpretation is necessary to help us understand the absolute truth of Christianity that takes place within the general dynamics and truth of God's history.[52]

Individual or social human histories do not produce absolute truth, but a collage of conflicting and contradicting truths. Although in his transcendence, God's history and truth are independent of our personal and social-historical projects, he invites all humanity to center their personal historical projects within the general patterns and dynamics of his own eternal history. Only in this way can our personal histories share in the absolute truth that God is and shares.

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notion of God and a future messianic event open as compatible with his critical and postmodern approach to tradition. See, e.g., John D. Caputo, ed. *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 20-25.

[49]"Onto-theo-logy" is a way in which Heidegger refers to the metaphysical ground on which Christian theology, classical, evangelical and modern stand ("The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics, in *Identity and Difference*, ed. Joan Sambaugh [New York: Harper and Row, 1969]).

[50]For the positive role of classical Christian tradition in evangelical theology, see, e.g., McGrath.

[51]In a recent study on justification, Bruce McCormack ties current problems in the Protestant understanding of justification to the neglect of ontological issues: "The problem with refusing to engage ontological questions as an essential part of the dogmatic task is that we all too easily make ourselves the unwitting servants of the ontology that is embedded in the older theological rhetoric that we borrow—and so it was with Calvin" ("What's at Stake in Current Debates over Justification? The Crisis of Protestantism in the West," in *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates*, ed. Mark Husbands [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004], 105). The same takes place when ontological issues are not clearly considered in the question of truth.

[52]On theological deconstruction, see, e.g., Fernando Canale, "Deconstrucción Y Teologia; Una Propuesta Metodológia," *Davar Logos* 1 (2002): 3-26.