

The next C. S. Lewis?

by [William C. Placher](#) in the [August 12, 1998](#) issue

By Stanley J. Grenz, What Christians Really Believe-and Why. (Westminster John Knox, 159 pp.)

Most of today's theologians think we understand the challenges of presenting Christian faith credibly to contemporary culture--a culture dominated by science and focused on the material, the consumable, the measurable. Rudolf Bultmann, we conclude, had it right 50 years ago: people who turn on electric lights and listen to the radio will find it hard to believe in spirits and miracles.

Stanley Grenz, however, has been attending to what's going on in popular culture, and it provides him with a very different picture. People are watching *Star Trek* and *The X Files*, reading Shirley MacLaine on her past lives and James Redfield on celestine prophecies, and buying every book they can find on angels. Fifty-five percent think that earth has been visited by extraterrestrials, and 2 percent claim to have been abducted by aliens. In many cases we Christians don't need to try to persuade people to believe in the supernatural; if anything, we need to calm their exuberant supernaturalism down a bit.

Grenz, a Baptist who teaches at Carey Theological College and Regent College in Vancouver, is one of the most prolific of the so-called "moderate" or "progressive" evangelicals. In this book he sets out to "offer a summary of the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith," organized not around traditional doctrines but around "the grave existential questions we all face. . . . Why believe at all? Who am I and why am I here? Are we alone in the universe? Which God? Who is Jesus (and what did he do)? What am I searching for and how do I find it? Where is the universe . . . where am I . . . going?"

Grenz writes with admirable clarity and vigor, and he fills every chapter with illustrations from comics, movies, TV shows and pop music. This is a book for pastors to recommend to interested laypeople, or to mine for examples from popular culture to connect with a wide range of theological issues.

People are hungry for faith, Grenz thinks, but they fear that having faith would mean committing intellectual suicide or leaping into the unknown. The very different faith he pictures involves knowledge, assent and trust, and helps us answer the questions which seem fundamental to human existence. As human beings, we are not merely biological organisms or complicated machines or disembodied souls. Rather, we are “embodied persons” whose purpose is to reflect the image of God by showing all creation the nature of God’s love. We fail to achieve that purpose and we need help, but we should turn to God, not to angels, space aliens or the spirits of the dead, to help us.

When we urge contemporary Americans to turn to “God,” however, we can’t assume that they will turn to the God of the Bible. Other world religions have become a part of our culture, and there is a pervasive “new immanentism” which sees God as exclusively in the world or in ourselves. Christians have to insist that God is both immanent *and* transcendent, not fully immersed in creation. We come to know this God through Jesus. Though Jesus was fully human, he was not just a good teacher or even the first human being to reach a new evolutionary stage. He was God’s self-revelation, whose cross “marked the entrance of the pain of our human failure into the very heart of God, so that we might share in the eternal fellowship between the Father and the Son.”

Grenz is neither a biblical literalist nor a hidebound traditionalist. He thinks the story of Adam and Eve conveys important insights about human nature, but he doesn’t insist on its historicity. He offers a feminist sort of argument for Jesus’ maleness, maintaining that Jesus was male because, in the first century, only a male could have subverted patriarchy by offering a model of mutuality and servanthood. If a woman had tried to convey these lessons, “rather than viewing her actions as in any way countercultural, they would have seen her self-sacrificial ministry as merely the living out of her socialized ideal role.” Grenz’s picture of God as suffering servant probably owes more to Barth or Moltmann than to the Westminster Confession.

But some matters are not negotiable. His eschatology is particularly unbending. “Despite its wide acceptance and its apparent affinity with the Christian faith,” he writes, “the belief that death is the doorway to eternal bliss is fraught with dangers.” Our hope lies in bodily resurrection. “God does not intend to replace the cosmos in its physicality with some purely nonmaterial, ‘heavenly’ realm. On the contrary, it is this universe that God will transform into the new creation.” Our resurrected bodies will live on a restored earth. But this transformation will not yield a happy fate for

everyone: "Throughout eternity some will suffer gnawing despair as they realize the missed purpose that characterizes their existence and yet remain set in their enmity toward God."

Christianity needs a new C. S. Lewis, a contemporary apologist for moderate evangelical faith. It is a high compliment to Grenz that he may be considered a candidate for the role. He has Lewis's gift for connecting with the reader, and Lewis's slightly bullying self-confidence. He offers a stronger social ethic than Lewis did, and his examples from popular culture will appeal to many Americans.

Lewis's pages, however, are studded with memorable, beautiful sentences; Grenz's rarely are. Lewis also made the tenets of Christian orthodoxy seem an intellectually powerful, coherent whole. In this book, they still seem more like a series of points, reviewed one by one. Moreover, no matter how persuasive Grenz's account of popular culture, something like what Lewis called "naturalism" still seems a dominant force in our society, and I wonder if we really need to spend more time refuting the UFO believers than the scientific materialists. I think Grenz's eschatology in particular needs a stronger defense, precisely in terms of how one might connect it to a scientific worldview. But coming off second best to Lewis is nothing to be ashamed of.