

*Welcoming But Not Affirming*, by Stanley J. Grenz

reviewed by [David Matzko McCarthy](#) in the [October 13, 1999](#) issue

Stanley Grenz is responding to "welcoming and affirming churches"—churches "convinced that the Christian mandate involve[s] not only ministering to homosexual persons but also sanctioning same-sex relationships." Contrary to what the word "welcoming" in the title might lead one to expect, the book does not provide a middle ground in a divisive debate.

Grenz's "welcome" to homosexual people comes only after an extended argument against same-sex unions, and it is predicated on assisting "brothers and sisters who are seeking liberation from homosexual behavior patterns in finding places of ministry within the church." His book is not likely to sway opponents. Nevertheless, it will help partisans on both sides to clarify their arguments.

Most interesting is Grenz's discussion and defense of marriage in relation to same-sex unions. Grenz assumes that homosexuality and heterosexuality are not parallel orientations. Homosexuality is merely "the state of being erotically aroused by persons of the same sex," whereas heterosexuality "encompasses our fundamental existence in the world as embodied persons . . . our way of being in the world as male or female." Consequently, he prefers the term "sexual preference" to "orientation." Each of us, he suggests, has a natural heterosexual orientation (we are completed by the other sex), but for some this orientation is frustrated by same-sex erotic attraction.

To prepare for this argument, Grenz first considers scriptural texts such as Leviticus 18 and Romans 1, patristic and medieval repudiations of homosexuality, and hermeneutic guidelines for applying scripture to our contemporary situation. He argues that homosexuality is a dysfunction and that the notion of a stable homosexual orientation is a cultural-historical construction. Though he admits that there is no dependable evidence that people can change their sexual orientations, his work relies on the hope that gay men and lesbians might overcome their same-sex eroticism through life in communities "with strong strictures against homosexual behavior."

Grenz is concerned with the symbolic and ritual character of sexual intercourse. "Sexuality is connected to our incompleteness as embodied creatures, an incompleteness that biological sex symbolizes," he writes. Same-sex intercourse is deficient because it cannot symbolically represent the union of two-in-one through physical complementarity. Because it is a "mal-adaptation" of physical parts, it symbolizes a "pseudocomplementarity on the psychological and spiritual levels." Heterosexual intercourse is both the concrete and the symbolic linchpin of marriage and of our full humanity

By making the physical act decisive, Grenz establishes a fundamental divide between the meanings of heterosexuality and homosexuality, But in so doing he overplays his "two-in-one-flesh" trump card and skews the relationship of sex to marriage. Actually, marriage is the key to the meaning of sex, rather than sex the key to the meaning of marriage. The practical aspects of marriage shape our lives and create the setting for fulfilling sex. Biblically, marriage, not sex, is the theological metaphor. The stable joining of two lives in marriage expresses steadfast love far more completely than does the sexual act. Marriage, rather than sex, symbolizes the bond between creatures and between God and the church. This is why Christians celebrate weddings (with only an implied reference to sex) rather than gather around the nuptial bed.

Grenz mystifies and romanticizes sex and removes it from the intentions of practical life. Spouses do not say, "Honey, let's complete our bond as embodied creatures tonight." But they are likely to say, at least on their wedding day, that their marriage partner makes them complete. Looking back after years of marriage, they are likely to say (with only an indirect reference to sexual intercourse) that their marriage has shaped who they have become.

Sex can be a sign or expression of marriage; it is characterized by or characteristic of the practices of marriage and the quality of a particular relationship. But to say that sex per se is a ritual that articulates the meaning of marriage and the fullness of our relatedness to others is like saying that great sex indicates true love or that good sex can sustain bad relationships. To do so is to elevate sexual intercourse above the everyday contexts that give it meaning. Such a view of sex makes for exciting movies and daytime dramas, but it does not make for lasting marriages.

Perhaps without intending to, Grenz ends up sustaining the dominant view of sexuality in our culture.