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MB521 Introduction to Theology
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Biblical, Theological... and Cultural? :
Evaluating Stanley Grenz's Integrative Motif - 'Community'

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At first glance, ‘community’, the unifying, theological motif-of-choice for Stanley Grenz, seems to kill three birds with one integrative stone; being an easily recognised theme in scripture, firmly in line with traditional theological expression, and at the same time a tantalisingly relevant theme in the consciousness of western culture. But Grenz’s suggestion has met various criticisms; most notably that of giving culture a place at the theological table. This essay will join the conversation, seeking to re-assert the biblical, theological and cultural value of Grenz’s proposal.

Grenz himself accurately defines an ‘integrative motif’ as a “systematic theology’s central organisational feature, the theme around which it is structured.”¹ Various such unifying principles or themes have been proposed at various times. In contrast to other suggestions (the Glory of God, the Salvation of God, etc.), he presents the Community of God as the truly sufficient motif. For example, he deems the ‘kingdom’ motif insufficient due to its failure to answer the question it raises regarding the nature of the coming-yet-present divine reign,² while favouring the ‘community’ motif, as it is biblically sound, responsible to theological heritage, and has the added bonus of relevance to cultural interests.³

Grenz’s application of the community motif in his systematic theology is sharp and consistent. Each theological category is aptly outlined in terms of this theme. His ‘theology proper’ (God as Trinity) describes the God “whose goal is the establishment of the eschatological community.”⁴ His anthropology avoids individualism, instead discussing “those God has designed and destined for community.”⁵ Christology then reflects on the Son sent “to initiate community between God and sinful humans.”⁶ Next, pneumatology explores the role of the Spirit who effects “salvation understood in terms of community with God and others.”⁷ And finally, the categories of ecclesiology and eschatology outline “God at work establishing community in history [ecclesiology] and ultimately in eternity [eschatology],” which (again) is Grenz’s understanding of “the divine goal for creation.”⁸

¹ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2000), 20.

² *Ibid.*, 23.

³ Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (2nd edn. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 23.

⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2000), 24.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

Not only is Grenz's communal emphasis consistent, but also thorough and detailed. In addition to the steady application of the theme to the standard theological categories, the subject index references 29 community-related subjects such as "atonement", "covenant", "election" and "new creation".⁹ For Grenz, then, the eternally existent Triune God is also the creator and sustainer of genuine human community.

But just when it was thought that a biblically coherent, theologically responsible and culturally relevant presentation of the Christian message had arrived on the scene ready to share with the world, along come the critics – among whom Bloesch, Spencer and Kurka will be mentioned here.

Bloesch is troubled by Grenz's happy acceptance of culture as a theological source, arguing that it is rather "a field for theological penetration",¹⁰ while also protesting that the basis of revelation is in the eternal revelatory "decision of God"¹¹ not in his communal nature. Spencer also is nervous about Grenz's "one-sided"¹² understanding of culture, and his assumption that the culture's understanding of 'community' is the same as the Christian understanding. Likewise, he hints that the emphasis on community risks a "loss of individual identity before God."¹³ He also wonders how much his "communal theology" is influenced by "social theories", and warns against "reducing" God in terms of "human social experience".¹⁴ Kurka disdains Grenz's "post-foundationalist" project as practically impossible and faults him for "serious deficiencies" in "biblical/historical, philosophical" and other areas.¹⁵

Strong and serious challenges indeed. But do they over-turn the validity of the community motif? The various charges laid against Grenz are too numerous and multi-layered to cover in detail here¹⁶, nonetheless, it will be demonstrated that

⁹ Ibid., 662.

¹⁰ Donald Bloesch, 'A Fellowship of Love', *Christianity Today* 39 (2): (1995), 64-66.

¹¹ Donald Bloesch, 'Donald Bloesch Responds' *Evangelical Theology in Transition: Theologians in Dialogue with Donald Bloesch*, Ed. Colyer (Elmer M. Intersarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1999), 186.

¹² Archie J. Spencer, 'Culture, Community and Commitments: Stanley J. Grenz on Theological Method', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57 (3): (2004), 338-360.

¹³ Ibid., 348.

¹⁴ Ibid., 348-9.

¹⁵ R. C. Kurka, 'Before "Foundationalism": A More Biblical Alternative to the Grenz/Franke Proposal for Doing Theology', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50 (1): (2007), 145-165.

¹⁶ We certainly haven't the time to meaningfully interact with the intricate and carefully nuanced views from various philosophical standpoints such as foundationalism and its various conversation partners (i.e. 'post'-foundationalism). For the immediately relevant opposing views, see Grenz, Stanley J., 'Beyond Foundationalism: Is a Nonfoundationalist Evangelical Theology Possible?', Carey/Regent College and Northern Seminary (1998), located online at

Grenz's community motif project retains immense worth, for it remains biblically coherent, theologically responsible and culturally relevant; and all these at the same time.

First, the charge against Grenz in the biblical area (via Kurka) has to do with his careful statements related to biblical inerrancy, which seek to avoid 'modernist' or 'foundationalist' terms and ideas.¹⁷ The question Kurka raises is not how Grenz *uses* the Bible as a theological source for the community motif, but how he *understands the nature* of this source. Quite apart from this detailed (and important) philosophical point of tension regarding how to understand 'inerrancy', it remains that the motif of 'community' is a thoroughly biblical one. It is hard to imagine a passage where the presence of community is not vital or assumed (or its absence not problematic).

Next, the theological charge against Grenz (via Spencer) warns against remaking God in the image of current socio-cultural interests. One can appreciate Spencer's concern regarding the doctrine of God, but Grenz's 'communal theology' is hardly revisionist, and is both reflected in and stands firmly on Trinitarian doctrinal heritage regarding the "very essence of God".¹⁸

Finally, the most significant charge against Grenz (via Bloesch) is the way he relates to culture. Bloesch seems to view cultural understanding as merely necessary in terms of relating the Christian message to culture.¹⁹ If by 'culture', Bloesch means the values and priorities of a human civilization, then Grenz's inclusion is indeed worrying. However, this narrow understanding of 'culture' fails to recognize that *all* human thinking and acting is a cultural phenomenon, *including the theological thinking and acting* of the believing community. Grenz's notion of a 'dialogue' between "the biblical message, the theological heritage and the contemporary culture"²⁰ is therefore to be seen not as a handing over of the theological reins, but

http://www.luthersem.edu/crtf/Papers/1998_grenz.pdf, and the response: R. C. Kurka, 'Before "Foundationalism": A More Biblical Alternative to the Grenz/Franke Proposal for Doing Theology', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50 (1): (2007), 145-165.

¹⁷ Stanley J. Grenz, 'Beyond Foundationalism: Is a Nonfoundationalist Evangelical Theology Possible?' (Carey/Regent College and Northern Seminary, 1998), 10-11.

¹⁸ Stanley J. Grenz, 'Community & Relationships: A Theological Take, An Interview.' *Talk: The Mainstream Magazine*.

¹⁹ Donald Bloesch, 'A Fellowship of Love', *Christianity Today* 39 (2): (1995), 64-66.

²⁰ Stanley J. Grenz, ' "Fideistic Revelationism": Donald Bloesch's Antirationalist Theological Method', *Evangelical Theology in Transition: Theologians in Dialogue with Donald Bloesch*. (ed. Elmer M. Colyer. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 60.

rather a recognition that theology not only takes place within a culture itself,²¹ but needs to appreciate, understand (and even *benefit from*) the culture it wishes to speak to.

In conclusion, while differing philosophical and socio-cultural views most certainly are important and affect the thought and action of the believing community, we have seen that the biblical, theological and cultural significance of Grenz's 'community' theme remains intact, in spite of some sincere concerns. Significantly, the categories of theology, anthropology, christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology and eschatology remain wonderfully integrated by the motif of community in a way that is both systematic and beautiful.

²¹ Stanley J. Grenz, 'Conversing in Christian Style: Toward a Baptist Theological method for the postmodern context', *Baptist History and Heritage* (Winter 2000).

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