

Beyond Individualism: Stanley Grenz's Contribution to Baptist Theology

ABSTRACT

Stanley Grenz described himself as a Baptist and an evangelical. This essay explores the first of these labels, and the extent to which Grenz's Baptist heritage impacted the way in which he understood the theological task. After briefly outlining Grenz's theological method and his interaction with both Baptist and evangelical communities, it highlights the particular issues which Grenz's theological method raises for Baptist theologians. Noting the desire expressed in documents such as the Baptist Manifesto (1997) for Baptists to transcend the individualism often associated with the movement, it explores the potential within Grenz's theological method to move Baptists towards a genuinely communal vision for their ecclesial life and practice.

James McClendon wrote, 'That there are few baptist theologians of merit will be granted by most observers.'¹ Stanley Grenz's theological contribution, made after McClendon's bleak assessment, is a pleasing exception to what otherwise might be an accurate evaluation of the state of both capital 'B' Baptist and small 'b' baptist theology.² Grenz's theological contribution was made during the transition from one century to another, a change emphasised by it also heralding the start of a new millennium.³ Theology can never be divorced from its context, and at a time of such symbolic significance it was only natural that theologians queried if existing models of theological construction were adequate for the era about to be

¹ James Wm McClendon Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 21.

² To distinguish between denominationally driven theology and theology that is baptist in broad vision and flavour. Some, including Grenz, would argue that this situation is changing. See for example, A.J. Conyers, 'The Changing Face of Baptist Theology,' *Review and Expositor* 95, no. 1 (1998).; Stanley J. Grenz, 'Conversing in Christian Style: Toward a Baptist Theological Method for the Postmodern Context,' *Baptist History and Heritage* 35, no. 1 (2000): 82.

³ Grenz's first article of note was published in 1982, with the bulk of his work published in the 1990's through until his death in 2005. Stanley J. Grenz, 'Listen America!: A Theological and Ethical Assessment,' *Foundations* 25, no. 2 (1982).

entered. Noting the active interest in theological method by those whom he termed ‘mainline theologians’ but detecting a corresponding dearth of concern amongst evangelical theologians, Grenz set about to rectify the deficit.⁴ His model for theological construction, intended particularly for a revisioned evangelical theology, is probably the most important piece of the theological legacy he has left behind.⁵

In attempting to assign Grenz to a theological category various terms can be used the most obvious being Baptist and evangelical.⁶ Certainly Grenz was happy to write ‘My entire life, then, I have seen myself as a Baptist and as an evangelical.’⁷ This essay sets out to explore the first of these labels, and the extent to which Grenz’s Baptist heritage impacted the way in which he understood the theological task. It will also attempt to highlight the particular issues which Grenz’s theological method raises for Baptist theologians, and thus some of the contribution Grenz has made to Baptist thought.

⁴ With slight exaggeration, Grenz and Franke claimed that while ‘theologians in mainline theological circles have been in need of a reminder that theology involved more than simply reflecting on method... Evangelical theologians have... given little attention to methodological concerns.’ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 13.

⁵ *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* is probably best understood as Grenz’s programmatic work, and in it he outlines an agenda for evangelical theology to ensure its ongoing relevance in a new era. In particular he makes an initial methodological proposal for theological construction which he, together with John Franke, expands upon significantly in the 2001 text, *Beyond Foundationalism*. Grenz’s later works are largely an unpacking and development of the key ideas he explores in *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*. Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the Twenty First Century* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1993); Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*.

⁶ Whether this should be capital B Baptist or small b baptist is a matter for debate, my own stance being that in Grenz’s case, both are valid. Grenz was clearly rooted in specific Baptists contexts, spent most of his teaching career at denominational colleges (even when working at Regent College, he was primarily employed by the denominational Carey Baptist College in Vancouver) and was an active participant in the work of the Baptist World Alliance. However his underlying vision is broadly baptist and cannot be contained within formal denominational structures.

⁷ Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 11.

First let me provide a brief summary of Grenz's theological method.⁸

Grenz proposes a model for evangelical theological construction that utilizes scripture, tradition and culture as the sources for theology, with the Trinity, community and eschatology as, in turn, its structuring, integrating and orienting motifs. He supplements these with the belief that the Spirit guides the church as it communally attempts to discern truth in changing contexts. Convinced that relevance in a postmodern era necessitates a method that moves beyond foundationalism, Grenz believes that his method succeeds in doing this as it appeals to a trio of interacting, conversing sources that are guided by three related motifs, rather than to a single foundational source, a role evangelicals usually reserve for scripture.

While there is nothing inherently new in Grenz's suggestion that evangelicals look to more than one source for theological construction,⁹ the implication that tradition and culture can in some sense be equal conversation partners with scripture in theological construction is novel, although Grenz does somewhat ambiguously call scripture the 'norming norm'¹⁰ for theology while at the same time insisting that the role of tradition and culture in theological construction is genuinely formative and impacts the theology constructed. If they were not, it would be difficult to argue that his model is a move *Beyond Foundationalism*, as the title of his major text on theological method proclaims.¹¹

His model is that of a conversation where each partner has the ability to inform and shape the thinking of the other by the astuteness and relevance of their argument.¹² Because theological construction is an ever unfolding conversation, new and deeper insights are always possible, with the contribution of one conversation partner often leading to another modifying or reframing its stance. Thus scripture modifies the approval or

⁸ For a fuller explanation of Grenz' method, see Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*. Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 184-217. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 61-108, 137-162.

⁹ Grenz notes that the 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral' of scripture, reason, experience and tradition is often cited by evangelicals. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 91.

¹⁰ Chapter 3 of *Beyond Foundationalism* is entitled 'Scripture: Theology's "Norming Norm".'

¹¹ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*.

¹² Grenz sometimes also describes the interplay between scripture, tradition and culture as 'this... perichoretic dance.' Grenz, 'Conversing in Christian Style', 88.

disapproval that we might give to different aspects of church tradition, and might lead us to embrace certain cultural innovations whilst shying away from others. At the same time the insights of culture could alert us that we might be interpreting certain passages of scripture in an oppressive manner, or that our lauding approval of certain periods of church history reflects a sectarian bias. The model is thus dynamic and conclusions cannot be assumed in advance of the discussion – nor indeed can they be locked away as perpetually valid, for new insights might urge us to reconsider our findings.

Important in Grenz's thinking, and of special relevance to Baptist theologians, is the conviction that when such discussion takes place within the community of faith,¹³ the conversation is pneumatologically guided, the faith community having the responsibility of discerning what the Spirit is saying to the church.¹⁴ The model thus stresses communal and corporate guidance, rather than individualism, and is also a move away from authoritarianism, potentially even from what could be perceived to be the authoritarianism of the biblical text. The church is pneumatologically guided, and while Grenz is clear that the Spirit's guidance will never be at the expense of scripture,¹⁵ he argues that it would be a mistake to view the Spirit as trapped within the pages of scripture. He argues that some evangelicals have mistakenly adopted a static view of biblical inspiration and that they have sometimes adhered to this at the expense of the equally important concept of the ongoing illumination of scripture by the Spirit. Thus Grenz complains, 'we often collapse the Spirit into the Bible. We exchange the dynamic of the ongoing movement of the Spirit speaking to the community of God's people through the pages of the Bible for the book we hold in our hands.'¹⁶ Earlier he expresses the view that 'eschatology reminds us that the Spirit is also God at work completing the divine plan' a plan with which the Spirit aligns the community as it listens to the Spirit speaking through 'the book of the community, the message of which is directed towards the 'future', toward the goal, or telos, of the divine activity in history.'¹⁷ For Grenz then the Spirit's communal illumination of the scriptures helps the community of God discern its particular path forward within the broader move of the Spirit towards the completion of God's plan in and for the world.

¹³ And in Grenz's thinking this is the appropriate location for such discussions.

¹⁴ See for example Grenz, 'Conversing in Christian Style'

¹⁵ He writes, 'whatever speaking that occurs through other media does not come as a speaking against the text.' Ibid.: 93.

¹⁶ Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 117.

¹⁷ Ibid., 115.

We will interact with Grenz's model as this article progresses, but this brief overview should first be supplemented with some reflections on Grenz's theological journey. In short, how did he come to articulate his model and what relevance does it have for Baptists?

In the 1980's Grenz's focus is primarily on matters related either to Baptist theology or to the prominent Baptist figure Isaac Backus or to the theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg.

The early Grenz is self consciously a Baptist in his writing and in the topics he engages with.

The first book he published, based on his doctoral thesis, is on Isaac Backus, and in the sub title of the book Grenz declares his intention to explore the thought of Backus and its 'Implications for Modern Baptist Theology.'¹⁸ The focus was thus not on Backus' relevance to the broader theological community, but on its importance for Baptist theology. To some extent this is because Backus was so clearly a Baptist figure and was instrumental in redefining the nature of the Baptist movement in eighteenth-century New England. Several of Grenz' earlier publications focus on Backus' legacy to Baptist life and thought and highlight his contribution to the struggle for the separation of church and state.¹⁹

Backus' separation of the spheres of church and state and his delineation of the roles to be reserved for the church, find echoes in Grenz' emphasis on theology being done by and for the community of faith. Neither Grenz nor Backus see this separation as being inherently escapist, but as ensuring that the church has integrity when called to exercise a prophetic role in society.²⁰ Grenz is also impressed by Backus' view that

¹⁸ Stanley J. Grenz, *Isaac Backus, Puritan and Baptist: His Place in History, His Thought and Their Implications for Modern Baptist Theology* (Atlanta: Mercer University Press, 1983).

¹⁹ Stanley J. Grenz, 'Church and State: The Legacy of Isaac Backus,' *Center Journal* 2, no. 2 (1983); Grenz, *Isaac Backus, Puritan and Baptist*; Stanley J. Grenz, 'Isaac Backus and the English Baptist Tradition,' *Baptist Quarterly* 30, no. 5 (1984); Stanley J. Grenz, 'Isaac Backus: Eighteenth Century Light on the Contemporary School Prayer Issue,' *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 13, no. 4 (1986); Stanley J. Grenz, 'Isaac Backus,' in *Baptist Theologians*, ed. Timothy George and David Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 1990).

²⁰ See e.g. Grenz' approving summary of Backus' position that 'all human laws and all political systems be continually subjected to scrutiny in the light of God's coming rule. In this task, the religious community must play a major role, becoming the prophetic reminder that political systems are not final, in view of God's final rule.' Grenz, 'Church and State: The Legacy of Isaac Backus,' 89.,

conversion involves entering into a covenant relationship with both God and the church, and sees it as a 'needed corrective for much Baptist thinking that builds largely on the individualism of the Baptist heritage while ignoring the corporate dimension...' ²¹ Grenz' own conviction on the centrality of the community finds an early expression in this passage. Although Backus does not feature prominently in Grenz' later theological construction, he serves as an inspirational figure for Grenz. Thus in the preface to *Renewing the Center* Grenz writes that, "This volume seeks to follow in the spirit of people like Backus and offer a hopeful appraisal of evangelical theology in the time of upheaval in which we are living." ²²

The second book Grenz published also has an obvious Baptist focus, being entitled simply "The Baptist Congregation." ²³ The book is a useful resource for understanding the foundations for Baptist belief and polity, but understandably has had little impact beyond the Baptist circles for which it was so clearly written.

Grenz's doctoral mentor was Wolfhart Pannenberg and it is therefore not surprising that Grenz made a careful analysis and evaluation of Pannenberg's theology. ²⁴ The choice of Pannenberg as his doctoral mentor is significant. ²⁵ A noted theologian, Pannenberg is neither a Baptist

²¹ Grenz, 'Isaac Backus,' 115-116.

²² Later Grenz writes, 'Evangelicals today can do no better than be admonished by, draw inspiration from, and follow after the examples of Edwards, Backus, and a host of other evangelical luminaries.' Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 7, 23.

²³ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishers, 1985).

²⁴ See Stanley J. Grenz, 'Pannenberg and Marxism: Insights and Generalizations,' *The Christian Century* 104, no. 27 (1987); Stanley J. Grenz, 'Reasonable Christianity: Wolfhart Pannenberg Turns Sixty,' *Christianity Today* 32, no. 12 (1988); Stanley J. Grenz, 'Wolfhart Pannenberg's Quest for Ultimate Truth,' *Christian Century* 105, no. 26 (1988); Stanley J. Grenz, 'Commitment and Dialogue: Pannenberg on Christianity and the Religions,' *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26, no. 1 (1989); Stanley J. Grenz, *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Stanley J. Grenz, 'Pannenberg and Evangelical Theology: Sympathy and Caution,' *Christian Scholar's Review* 20, no. 3 (1991); Stanley J. Grenz, 'Wolfhart Pannenberg: Reason, Hope and Transcendence,' *Asbury Theological Journal* 46, no. 2 (1991); Stanley J. Grenz, 'The Irrelevancy of Theology: Pannenberg and the Quest for Truth,' *Calvin Theological Journal* 27, no. 2 (1992).

²⁵ In turn, the compliment of being accepted as a doctoral student by Pannenberg should be noted. Grenz was only the second student from the USA to complete a doctorate under Pannenberg. Grenz, Stanley J. *Reason for Hope*, vii.

nor has he traditionally been classified as an evangelical. Grenz's willingness to step outside of both classical Baptist and evangelical theology was an early indicator of his inclusive spirit, while in turn he helped to make the thinking of Pannenberg both more accessible and acceptable to evangelical theologians.²⁶

Grenz's emphasis on eschatology, which he suggests should be theology's orienting motif, has clear links with Pannenberg's thought. This is particularly seen in his emphasis on eschatological realism.²⁷ However, there are interesting discontinuities. Grenz recognizes the value of science, but does not share Pannenberg's enthusiasm for the scientific method and is deeply conscious of its missiological limitations in trying to communicate with those shaped by a postmodern ethos. In an article that largely defends Pannenberg's theological method, he describes as 'problematic... Pannenberg's apparent thorough-going rationalism and hard-nosed rejection of any attempt to base theological conclusions on a faith decision that has not been through the fire of rational reflection and challenged by alternative viewpoints.'²⁸ Grenz however readily acknowledges that this rationalism is linked to Pannenberg's understanding of himself as a 'theologian called to serve the church in the public marketplace of ideas.'²⁹

²⁶ Specially remarkable was Pannenberg's co-operation in allowing Grenz to compile a summary of Pannenberg's *Systematische Theologie*, when the German version of the project was still underway and any hope of an English translation was years off. With only the first of the three volumes published in German, Grenz utilized material from Pannenberg's lectures in Munich to anticipate the thrust of the remaining two volumes. In the foreword to the book, Pannenberg notes that he thought the method 'touched me as a typically American desire to be always ahead of time' while he went on to confirm that 'concerning the overall synthesis of my theology, it provides a correct picture.' Grenz, *Reason for Hope*, ix.,

²⁷ While Grenz views Pannenberg's theology as consistent with several of the main trajectories of Christian theology, he maintains that Pannenberg moves beyond classical theology in his conviction that truth is not found in the unchanging essences behind the flow of time, but that truth is 'essentially historical and ultimately eschatological.' Grenz, 'Wolfhard Pannenberg: Reason, Hope and Transcendence,' 77.

²⁸ Ibid.: 86., Grenz is aware of another side to Pannenberg, and has written of his mentor's first encounter with Christ when, as a teenager walking through a wood, Pannenberg had an experience of feeling himself flooded or elevated by a sea of light. Grenz notes that 'Over the ensuing years this experience has become the basis for Pannenberg's keen sense of calling.' Grenz, 'Wolfhard Pannenberg: Reason, Hope and Transcendence,' 74.,

²⁹ Grenz, 'Wolfhard Pannenberg: Reason, Hope and Transcendence,' 86.,

By contrast, Grenz writes his theology ‘for the community of God.’³⁰ This is a significant difference from Pannenberg and in many ways reflects Grenz’s Baptist roots. Grenz notes that Pannenberg sees theology as a public discipline and that Pannenberg consciously opts for this to combat what he perceives to be the widespread privatization of religious belief.³¹ An apologetic motivation thus undergirds Pannenberg’s approach. The irony of an evangelical theologian such as Grenz opting for an in-house approach to theology while the supposedly less evangelical Pannenberg opts for a more missional stance, is apparent. It is not that Grenz does not wish to be missional, but that his strategy is different. Like Backus and Baptists generally, Grenz believes that a renewed church will impact the world.³²

The early 1990’s saw Grenz’s focus shifting slightly, and he began writing for the larger evangelical world, as opposed to a narrower Baptist readership. During this period he wrote works on AIDS, millennialism, the role of women in the church and sexual misconduct in the pastorate.³³ Myles Werntz has noted that during this stage ‘we see that Grenz’s writing would consistently confront issues that were relevant to the audience which would be reading his books.’³⁴ Probably the most successful of these works was his *A Primer on Postmodernism*.³⁵ Intended as a ‘Primer’ on the topic, it serves its purpose well.

³⁰ Grenz sees theology as ‘a second-order discipline pursued ‘from within.’ The enterprise is a critical, reflective activity that presupposes the beliefs and practices of the Christian community.’ Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 75.,

³¹ Grenz, Stanley J. *Reason for Hope*, 8.

³² Thus e.g. Grenz, citing Edwards and Backus as ‘surely correct’ writes that they ‘perceptively saw within the momentous changes transpiring in their day the Holy Spirit at work bringing renewal to the church and the world. And they were convinced that the time had come for the church to awaken so that Christ’s followers might fulfil their mission to the world.’ Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 23.,

³³ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze: Sorting out Evangelical Options* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1992); Stanley J. Grenz and Roy D. Bell, *Betrayal of Trust: Sexual Misconduct in the Pastorate* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1995); Stanley J. Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1995); Wendell W. Hoffman and Stanley J. Grenz, *Aids: Ministry in the Midst of an Epidemic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990).

³⁴ Myles Werntz, ‘Stan Grenz among the Baptists,’ *Princeton Theological Review* 12, no. 1 (2006): 31.

³⁵ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

Grenz states that his interest in postmodernism was sparked after an invitation to participate in a think tank on ministry to 'baby busters' that took place in Charlotte, North Carolina, from 26–28 October 1993.³⁶ A paper presented to the Southeastern Regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society at the campus of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in March 1994 provides the basis for the book's first chapter.³⁷ Grenz had previously raised questions about the implications of postmodernism for the future of theology, but claims that it was after these two events that 'I proceeded to immerse myself in postmodernism.'³⁸ Grenz's conviction that an understanding of and interaction with the postmodern context is crucial for meaningful theological engagement in the Western world is consistent with his conviction that culture should serve as a source for theology and that it inevitably functions as theology's embedding context. It does however reflect an unresolved tension in his thinking. On the one hand theological reflection is for the community of God. It is an in house activity. On the other hand the community of God finds itself in a broader cultural context with which it inevitably interacts. The interaction does not leave it untouched and it is influenced by the broader changes in societal ethos and perspective. It is thus a model that is simultaneously engaged and disengaged; it listens to what society is saying, but readily travels another route if the norming norm of scripture, advised by the tradition of the church, deems this appropriate.

Because Grenz's work on postmodernism is intentionally popularist it covers well-traveled territory and it is unnecessary to detail the contents here. What is more important is to understand Grenz's motivation in writing the book and the issues Grenz signals to be of particular concern. Grenz is concerned that 'Evangelicalism shares close ties with modernity' and might therefore stake its future on a deficient and dated paradigm.³⁹ He suggests that in responding to postmodernism there will be areas where evangelicals will need to stand their ground and others where postmodern thought can be welcomed.

³⁶ Ibid., ix.,

³⁷ It was first published as Stanley J. Grenz, 'Star Trek and the Next Generation: Postmodernism and the Future of Evangelical Theology,' *Cruce* 30, no. 1 (1994). It reappeared in Stanley J. Grenz, 'Star Trek and the Next Generation: Postmodernism and the Future of Evangelical Theology,' in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. (ed.) Dockery (Wheaton: BridgePoint, 1995).

³⁸ Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, x.

³⁹ Ibid., 161.

By this stage in his career Grenz is writing primarily for the evangelical world. While not hiding his Baptist origins, he is aware that he is painting on a wider canvas. At times he seems to acknowledge no difference in these two audiences. In *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* he dedicates the second chapter to explore the contours of a revisioned evangelical spirituality.⁴⁰ Conscious of the many loopholes in individualistically oriented definitions of spirituality, he broadens his approach and adds that evangelical spirituality involves holding in creative tension the pull between the outward and the inward and the corporate and the individual dimensions of holiness. It is interesting to compare the views Grenz is expressing about *evangelical* spirituality, to views he had earlier expressed about *Baptist* spirituality. In an article published in 1991 he suggests that the distinguishing feature of Baptist spirituality is its 'balance between the inward and the outward and between the individual and the corporate.'⁴¹ It seems fair to ask if in Grenz's mind Baptist spirituality and evangelical spirituality is essentially the same thing. If so, is he perhaps trying to revision evangelical theology in a Baptist mould?⁴² In other words, is Grenz simply writing for a wider audience, a world well beyond the walls of the Baptist denomination, but continuing to write with all the assumptions of a baptist theologian?

Grenz's journey into the world of evangelicalism was not without significant controversy. His understanding of scripture coupled with his willingness to embrace many aspects of postmodern thought was troublesome to some. His book *Renewing the Center*, published in 2000, drew a sharp response in the combative *Reclaiming the Center*, which while not purely an attack on Grenz's theology, is unlikely to have been written if Grenz's thought had not been attracting so much attention.⁴³ In it noted evangelical theologian Don Carson, whilst overstating his case, accuses Grenz of being 'utterly unable to detect any weakness in postmodern

⁴⁰ Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 37-59.

⁴¹ Stanley J. Grenz, 'Maintaining the Balanced Life: The Baptist Vision of Spirituality,' *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 18, no. 1 (1991): 68.

⁴² A general observation on Grenz is that the early Grenz is very consciously a *Baptist* evangelical theologian, in his middle stages, he is consciously an *evangelical* theologian and the later Grenz works on a yet broader canvas, and is primarily a *theologian*. While he never renounces his Baptist and evangelical roots, they feature less prominently in his later work.

⁴³ Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds., *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

epistemology,⁴⁴ and elsewhere laments 'I cannot see how Grenz's approach to Scripture can be called 'evangelical' in any useful sense.'⁴⁵

This antagonistic turn can perhaps be seen as part of the third stage in Grenz's journey. If the 1980's saw him speak to a largely Baptist audience and the 1990's to a growing evangelical audience, from the late 1990's until his death in 2005, his thoughts on a revisioned evangelical theology and on theological method saw him accused of being on the evangelical left.⁴⁶ His incomplete series, *The Matrix of Christian Theology*, speaks less of evangelical theology and appears to be a contribution to the broader theological arena. In a 2002 publication Grenz spoke of a desire that evangelicals would think of themselves as a centred rather than a bounded set.⁴⁷ His disappointment with a movement quicker to state who to exclude than to find ways to include, is apparent. In his tribute to Grenz, Roger Olson speaks of the dismay and bewilderment that Grenz felt at the strength of the opposition to his views expressed by some evangelicals,⁴⁸ and of Grenz's intention to form an alternate to the Evangelical Theological Society, an intention thwarted only by his early death.⁴⁹

There are exceptions to this loose categorization into three stages, and I will select just one to suggest that Grenz's location in a Baptist community provides a unifying link in his theological journey.

A Baptist Grenz re-emerges in a 2000 publication, 'Conversing in Christian Style: Towards a Baptist Theological Method for the Postmodern

⁴⁴ D.A. Carson, 'Domesticating the Gospel: A Review of Grenz's *Renewing the Center*,' in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 45. Carson appears not to have read the closing chapter of Grenz's *Primer on Postmodernism* where Grenz weighs up both positive and negative aspects of postmodernism. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 161-174.

⁴⁵ D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 481.

⁴⁶ For example, Grenz is one of the theologians discussed in Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

⁴⁷ Stanley J. Grenz, 'Die Begrenzte Gemeinschaft ('the Bounded People') and the Character of Evangelical Theology,' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 2 (2002).

⁴⁸ He writes 'Stan was absolutely bewildered by some of the reactions to his *Revisioning* proposal...' Roger E. Olson, 'Stanley J. Grenz's Contribution to Evangelical Theology,' *Princeton Theological Review* 12, no. 1 (2006): 28.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*: 27.

Context.⁵⁰ It is significant that this article is little more than a helpful summary of the theological method he develops in detail in *Beyond Foundationalism*, and other than for Grenz's acknowledgment of the work of some Baptist theologians at the start of the article, it is difficult to know why he inserted the term Baptist into the title, unless it was to ensure its publication in the denominational Baptist History and Heritage journal. However this assessment is in all probability too hasty. The overlap between Grenz's theological method articulated in a text intended for a broad readership with an article intended for a denominational readership more likely indicates that Grenz viewed his method as flowing from his Baptist heritage and being relevant to the wider theological arena.

If this is indeed the case, we are now in a position to ask what contribution Grenz has made to Baptist theology. Clearly Grenz's work cannot be considered a contribution to Baptist thought if it is completely discontinuous with it, so it is in the realm of overlap with minor extensions or subtly new emphases that we should look.

In his 1991 article, 'Maintaining the Balanced Life: The Baptist Vision of Spirituality', Grenz suggests that 'the genius of the Baptist vision of spirituality lies in the attempt – sometimes successful, sometimes thwarted – to maintain a delicate balance between, or to hold in creative tension, two sets of seemingly opposite principles: the inward versus the outward and the individual versus the corporate.'⁵¹

For Grenz, warm hearted personal faith is a given of Baptist thought, and lies behind the Baptist distinctive of a regenerate church membership. Grenz goes so far as to write 'Without a doubt, Baptists understand the Christian life as an individual matter. Both conversion and subsequent growth in faith are first and foremost the task of the individual.'⁵² Noting that the fine balance of Baptist spirituality has often been lost, he laments that 'At times our sense of the individual had led to a schismatic individualism.'⁵³ Grenz's emphasis on community as the integrating motif for theological construction and his vision of the Spirit illuminated scriptures being interpreted and embraced by contextually embedded communities of faith goes a long way to move beyond such individualism.

Amongst Baptists, Grenz has not been alone in this plea. The influential 'Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America', to which

⁵⁰ Grenz, 'Conversing in Christian Style.'

⁵¹ Grenz, 'Maintaining the Balanced Life: The Baptist Vision of Spirituality,' 61.

⁵² Ibid. 64.

⁵³ Ibid. 68.

Grenz was a signatory, has as its first affirmation, 'We affirm Bible Study in reading communities rather than relying on private interpretations or supposed 'scientific' objectivity.'⁵⁴ In expanding on this article the Manifesto sounds remarkably like Grenz when it speaks of 'an open and orderly process whereby faithful communities deliberate together over the Scriptures' claiming that 'when no one is silenced or privileged, the Spirit leads communities to read wisely and to practice faithfully the direction of the gospel...' A little further it more provocatively states, 'We therefore cannot commend Bible study that is insulated from the community of believers or that guarantees individual readers an unchecked privilege of interpretation.'

Some of the reactions to the Manifesto reflect the responses of Baptists to Grenz's proposals on the communal reading and discernment of scripture, Shurden being representative when he writes 'The right and responsibility of private interpretation of Scripture is most certainly part of the 'politics' of Baptist church polity. One may argue that Baptists, along with many other Protestants, are theologically wrong in calling for the personal interpretation of Scripture, but one cannot argue historically that Baptists have not embraced the idea.' A little further he continues, 'I am not sure that I have ever seen a statement on the Baptist identity proposing a denial of the private interpretation of Scripture prior to the *Manifesto*.'⁵⁵

Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of the *Manifesto*, when Grenz calls for the communal reading of scripture he has several concerns in mind, all of which help to rectify a Baptist impulse towards individualism. He clarifies the process in *Beyond Foundationalism* when he writes, 'Reading within community occurs as we approach the text conscious that we are participants in the one faith community that spans the ages.' Implicitly then, reading scripture within community involves a hearing informed by tradition. A little later he adds, 'Reading within community occurs as well as we approach the text conscious that we are participants in the contemporary church... We do well also to consider what the Spirit is saying to us as a global community regarding what it means to be the one church in the world today.' The need to listen to the voice of the Spirit via scriptures interaction with culture is implicit in this concern. In the next paragraph he adds, 'Being conscious that we are participants in the church today means above all, however, reading the text within the local congregational setting. We come to scripture aware that we are participants

⁵⁴ 'Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America,' *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24, no. 3 (1997).

⁵⁵ Walter B. Shurden, 'The Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto,' *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 25, no. 4 (1998): 325.

in a concrete, visible fellowship of disciples in covenant with one another.⁵⁶ Here the voice of Grenz as Baptist speaks loudly. As with Baptists through the ages, Grenz affirms the importance of the local church discerning the voice of the Spirit speaking in its particular context.

Rather than representing a weak view of scripture that might somehow undermine a classic Baptist commitment to the authority of scripture, Grenz is at pains to demonstrate what a clear commitment to scripture might mean for Baptist communities. In Grenz's thought this commitment is never less than a communal commitment to hear what the Spirit has said to the church through the scriptures in the past, what the Spirit is currently saying to the church globally through the scriptures, and the particular voice of the Spirit speaking to the local congregation as it corporately listens to the Spirit speaking through the scriptures in its own local context. Conversing with tradition and the global cultural context has as a key goal the discernment of the voice of the Spirit to the church in a specific local setting.

This stress on the importance of the local church is one which resonates with Baptists, Martin Sutherland arguing that a key text, possibly even the key text for Baptist ecclesiology, is Matthew 18:20 with its affirmation that the risen Christ is present when even two or three are gathered in his name.⁵⁷ As it is in the gathering that Christ is encountered, Sutherland believes that one can speak of the sacramentality of the gathered community. While this possibly goes a little further than Grenz, it again reflects a desire within Baptist circles to move beyond the individualism with which Baptists are often associated.

So important is the idea of the local church in Baptist ecclesiology that Baptists affirm the autonomy of the local church, thereby indicating a belief that the local church under the lordship of Christ is equipped to serve as a church, without the need to rely on external church bodies for approval or validation. While intended to free the local church to confidently engage in ministry in its own setting,⁵⁸ it has often led to an unhealthy 'individualism' of the local church, with a corresponding disrespect for tradition and the broader concerns of the church in the world. In Baptist circles the local and provincial all too often become the major driver for the church. Grenz's model goes a long way to combat such

⁵⁶ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 91-92.

⁵⁷ Martin Sutherland, 'Gathering, Sacrament and Baptist Theological Method,' *Pacific Journal of Baptist Research* 3, no. 2 (2007): 56.

⁵⁸ In many instances this was also to distinguish the church from the State church.

insular thinking. As local communities of faith gather to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the church through the scriptures, and as that conversation is enriched by the voice of tradition and the Spirit speaking through culture,⁵⁹ the impulse towards parochialism is overcome. If this is strengthened by Grenz's conviction that the eschatological vision of the redeemed community is the orienting motif for theology, the impetus away from individualism gains momentum. This is again reinforced by Grenz's assertion that the structuring motif for theological construction should be the Trinity, with community serving as the integrating motif. Rather than autonomous local churches acting independently of one another, these images capture a hopeful interdependence as churches journey together towards a compelling portrait of the future – a future where they belong together, and which they should therefore seek to actualise in the present.

Should they embrace such a vision, Baptist churches will be well positioned to move beyond individualism. If this is part of Grenz's contribution to Baptist theology, he has indeed been able to construct *Theology for the Community of God*.

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⁵⁹ Grenz is clear that it is not culture but the Spirit speaking through culture that is the source for theological construction. He acknowledges that both the voice of the Spirit and the voice of the demonic can be discerned in cultural trends. The community of faith, in conversation with tradition and scripture, needs to distinguish between them. See Stanley J. Grenz, 'Culture and Spirit: The Role of Cultural Context in Theological Reflection,' *Asbury Theological Journal* 55, no. 2 (2000).