

A Trinitarian Epistemology: Stanley J. Grenz and the Trajectory of Convertive Piety

ABSTRACT

Grenz understood himself to be Baptist before he was evangelical. Thus 'convertive piety' is not only a key motif, but a critical key to Grenz's theological project. It is shown to be characteristic both of Baptist thought (specifically in the German Baptist tradition from which Grenz draws) and broader evangelicalism. His roots, in potent combination with the challenges of postmodernism and Pannenberg's theological method, critically inform Grenz's project to revision evangelical epistemology.

Stanley J. Grenz considered himself a Christian, a Baptist and an Evangelical, and definitively in that order:

As an outworking of my heritage, I cannot claim to be a 'card-carrying evangelical' in Marsden's sense. Nevertheless, I am evangelical in spirit, if the spirit of evangelicalism focuses on the vision of what it means to be Christian...For me, being evangelical can never come at the cost of being Baptist. Rather, it is as a Baptist that I sense my affinity with the evangelical movement, for my piety as a Baptist coalesces with evangelical piety as I understand it and which I see as comprising the heart of evangelicalism.¹

His mooring in the North American Baptist denominational tradition, with its focus on conversion and experiential religion, greatly influenced his theological journey.² Those who seek to understand his

¹ Stanley J. Grenz, 'Theology and Piety Among Baptists and Evangelicals' in *Southern Baptists & American Evangelicals: The Conversation Continues*. Edited by David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1993) 162. See also Stanley J. Grenz, 'Baptist and Evangelical: One Northern Baptist's Perspective' in *Southern Baptists & American Evangelicals: The Conversation Continues*. Edited by David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 53-54.

² Grenz's father, Richard Grenz, served as a pastor of North American Baptist Conference churches in Michigan, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, Colorado and Oklahoma during his son's life time. The North American Baptist Conference was originally the German Baptist Churches of North America.

thought must not overlook that important fact. Dr. John Franke, Grenz's co-author in *Beyond Foundationalism*, asserts that the concept of convertive piety 'simply informs his work at every point and enabled him to emphasize creativity and seek a unique perspective on theology that was less concerned with demonstrating its continuity with tradition than it was with addressing Christian faith to the contemporary situation.'³

This essay briefly examines Grenz's understanding of 'convertive piety' and charts the trajectory and evolution of this concept in his work. It begins by outlining a general understanding of the conversion experience from a Baptist perspective, a particularly German Baptist perspective.⁴ It continues by following Grenz's argument that convertive piety is not a concept exclusive to Baptists, but is an aspect of the evangelical trajectory in general, emerging as it did from the Puritan-Pietist trajectory in the eighteenth century. The essay turns then to examine briefly how Grenz attempts to establish convertive piety as the legitimate Evangelical epistemological source by recasting the nature of evangelical experience through the postmodern critique and the influence of Wolfhart Pannenberg's eschatological realism and Trinitarian focus.

The Baptist Conversion Experience

The first century following the posting of Martin Luther's ninety-five theses upon the Wittenberg castle church door witnessed a fragmenting of the Protestant movement into several expressions. It has become commonplace to divide these expressions into two primary camps: the Magisterial Reformation and the Radical Reformation.⁵ Of those two expressions, it is probable that the Baptist movement emerges from the

³ Email correspondence, John R. Franke to Jay Smith. December 10, 2009.

⁴ According to Southern Baptist historian Leon McBeth, German Baptist work in America originates with Conrad Fleischman, a German heavily influenced by Baptists in Bristol, England. (See H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1987), 732). According North American Baptist Conference Archives, the North American Baptist Conference was originally organized as the German Baptist Conference in 1851. (See 'Background for the North American Baptist Conference' at <http://www.nabarchives.org/NABC.html>).

⁵ See C. P. Williams delineation of the different trajectories of the Reformers in his article, 'Reformation, Radical,' in *New Dictionary of Theology*. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright and J. I. Packer, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 563-65.

latter.⁶ Although contemporary Baptists trace their roots directly to English Separatism, both continental Pietism, originating in the Magisterial Reformation, and the Anabaptist movement in the Radical Reformation, heavily influenced the Separatism from which the contemporary Baptist tradition evolves.⁷

The English Reformation, from which English Separatism springs, finds its origin in the economic and political issues of the day.⁸ Like its continental counterparts, the Anglican Church began splintering; losing adherents to the Puritan, Separatist, Quaker and Wesleyan movements. Both the Magisterial and Radical Reformation movements on the continent influenced these Anglican splinter movements. Thus drawing eclectically from the continental theologies of John Calvin, Jacobus Arminius and Menno Simons, the English Separatist and consequently, Baptist, movement finds its diverse theological moorings.

This theological diversity becomes evident in the divergence of the 'particular' from the 'general' Baptist in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.⁹ Despite this diversity, it becomes apparent quickly that the universal affirmation of 'believer's baptism' with its attendant theological commitment to 'experiential' conversion was the cornerstone belief of the earliest Baptist congregations. Baptist historian William Brackney concludes that the early English Separatist and pioneer Baptist

⁶ See Alister E. McGrath and Darren C. Marks, 'Protestantism: The Problem of Identity,' in *The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 4.

⁷ W. R. Estep examines this relationship carefully, concluding 'it seems more than mere chance that the Separatist movement in England bore such a close resemblance to sixteenth-century Anabaptism.' See Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1963), 208f. James Leo Garrett affirms an interpretive influence when he states, 'The sixteenth century Anabaptists on the continent of Europe have played a singular role in the interpretation of Baptist origins.' See Garrett, *Baptist Theology: A Four Century Study* (Macon, GA: Mercer 2009), 8f. Additionally, Bradley Holt suggests this relationship in his understanding of the formation of European Protestant spirituality in 'Protestantism and Spirituality,' *The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism*, 383-85.

⁸ For this assessment, see Gerald Bray, 'English Protestantism to the Present Day,' in *The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism*, 98-99.

⁹ See McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 67; Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1952), 62-72 and A. C. Underwood, *A History of English Baptists* (London: The Baptist Union of Great Britain & Ireland, 1947), 28-62. James M. Renihan attempts to distinguish a very specific theological trajectory for English Baptists in *Edification and Beauty: The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675-1705*, Vol. 17, *Studies in Baptist History and Thought* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008), 1-36.

John Smyth was the first to articulate this commitment when Smyth concluded that the Anglican, Puritan and Separatist traditions did not adhere to true baptism by baptising both infants and non-Christians.¹⁰ Thomas Helwys, Smyth's benefactor at Gainsborough and later Baptist pastor at Spitalfields states, 'we [sic] hold that men confessing their faith and sins are only to be baptised and that infants not capable of the word of God, nor or faith and repentance are also incapable of the baptism of repentance.'¹¹ Thus for these early Baptists, churches that admitted these two groups – infants and non-professing adults - were not 'true' churches.

The Baptist teaching on conversion thus becomes foundational for the sacrament of believer's baptism.¹² A profession of faith must precede baptism and thus admission to full church membership. As Baptist theologian Bill Leonard affirms,

[the] concern for personal conversion is consistent with that of the earliest Baptist groups that originated in Holland and England during the seventeenth century. Like the English Puritans from whence they came, these Baptists insisted that the true church was composed of believers only...All Baptists agreed that personal conversion was necessary for those who would claim Christian faith and membership in the church.¹³

For the early Baptists, believer's baptism was a crucial issue. John Bunyan, John Smyth and Thomas Helwys were harassed, exiled or imprisoned for their insistence on their Baptist beliefs. Thus the accompanying commitment to personal, experiential conversion and a life of 'convertive spirituality' are paramount to the Baptist belief grid.¹⁴

¹⁰ William H. Brackney, *The Baptists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988), 55-57.

¹¹ Thomas Helwys, 'A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland,' in *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys*, ed. Joe Early Jr. *Early English Baptist Texts* (Macon, GA: Mercer University 2009), 65.

¹² The concept of baptism as 'sacrament', rather than simply 'symbol' is gaining a devoted following among Baptists in the United Kingdom and United States. Grenz was a part of this movement. See, *Baptist Sacramentalism*, ed. Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson, vol. 5, *Studies in Baptist History and Thought* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2003).

¹³ Bill Leonard, 'Southern Baptists and Conversion: An Evangelical Sacramentalism' in *Ties that Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision*, ed. Gary A. Furr and Curtis W. Freeman (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1994), 11.

¹⁴ See James W. McClendon, Jr., 'Toward a Conversionist Spirituality' in *Ties That Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision*, ed. Gary A. Furr and Curtis W. Freeman (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1994), 23-32.

Believer's Baptism and the Import of Conversion

One over arching concern dominates the doctrinal positions of these early Baptists: In whom does the true membership of the church consist? Although the Particular Baptists and General Baptists would disagree over the nature of election, or to whom salvation was directed,¹⁵ they agreed, along with the Puritans and other Separatists, that the true Christian would be able to recount a conversion experience in order to qualify for church membership. Indeed, as Alan Kreider claims, the history of Christianity as a whole is a history of conversion.¹⁶ Yet the Baptist trajectory reclaims the conversion experience as the heart of the Biblical experience of God. John Smyth, one of the earliest Baptists, exemplifies this emphasis in his own struggle to understand conversion with his move from a strict Calvinist position on election to a more Arminian or general position.¹⁷ Baptist theologian James McClendon, Jr. posited that the Baptist understanding of this experience was best expressed as 'conversionist spirituality,' a spirituality of transformation found in tension between the individual and the community of faith.¹⁸ Contemporary English Baptist theologian Paul Fiddes affirms this position when he posits the idea that there is a 'Baptist experience' that shapes theology, being a distinctive experience of God by the individual in community as a 'response to the rule of Christ.'¹⁹ Historian Janet Lindman makes the assertion that the conversion experience was crucial to the early North American colonial Baptist experience:

Being a Baptist began with the emotional and corporeal experience of conversion. Conversion marked the Baptist body through a spiritual crisis that transfixed individuals and their bodies. After the painstaking and physically draining process of gaining salvation, Baptists preserved their faith through church ritual.²⁰

Although Baptists consistently have affirmed the Biblical and personal nature of conversion, they have not always agreed upon the process or duration of conversion. Bill Leonard elucidates six important

¹⁵ See Janet Lindman's concise appraisal in *Bodies of Belief: Baptist Community in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2008), 8.

¹⁶ Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International 1999).

¹⁷ See Jason K. Lee, 'Smyth's View of General Atonement' in *The Theology of John Smyth* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 167f.

¹⁸ James W. McClendon, Jr., 'Toward a Conversionist Spirituality,' 23-27.

¹⁹ Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, vol. 13, *Studies in Baptist History and Thought* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2003), 6-8.

²⁰ Lindman, *Bodies of Belief*, 5.

traditions that have coloured the Baptist understanding of the conversion process in North America: Regular, Separatist, Landmark, Revivalist, Sunday School and Fundamentalist. Of these six, four have immediate bearing on our topic: the Regular, Separatist, Revivalist and Sunday School traditions. First, the adherence of the 'Regular' (Particular) Baptist tradition with a more thoroughgoing Calvinist theology, suggests an approach to conversion that highlights the process itself.²¹ The Separate (General) Baptist tradition, with their Arminian leanings suggests 'a greater emphasis on free will and human participation.'²² In the Revivalist tradition, the conversion process was not only institutionalized, but also shortened significantly.²³ William McLoughlin describes the heart of the revivalist experience in the mid-eighteenth century Great Awakening through the eyes of Isaac Backus:

IN THE BEGINNING was the experience – the explosive, power-full, transforming experience of a direct confrontation with Divine Truth. The experience came to Isaac Backus, as it did to thousands of Americans, in the 1740's. The experience not only transformed their souls – infusing them with God's grace and thereby saving them from hell – but it recast their whole outlook on life. They had lived in a dark cave and suddenly the stone in front was rolled away. The blinding light of the 'real world' shone in upon them for the first time. 'The Lord God is a Sun,' said Backus, and 'when any Soul is brought to behold his Glories, them eternal rays of Light and love Shine down particularly upon him to remove his darkness.'²⁴

For Leonard, these 'Revivals produced a powerful set of symbols that dramatized the need for and possibility of an immediate, conscious conversion event.'²⁵ Revivalism thus catapults 'conversion' to the forefront of the North American Baptist theological experience.

The 'Sunday School' is Leonard's final convertive tradition. Although the 'Sunday School' as an institution finds its genesis in nineteenth century England,²⁶ as a Baptist tradition, it has in some sense become a

²¹ Bill Leonard, 'Southern Baptists and Conversion,' 12.

²² Ibid., 14.

²³ Ibid., 16-17.

²⁴ William G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1967), 1.

²⁵ Leonard, 'Southern Baptists and Conversion,' 16.

²⁶ Henry Clay Trumbull finds the origins of the modern Sunday School in the work of Robert Raikes in the late eighteenth century in Gloucester, England.

‘catechetical preparation for conversion’ in the lives of children and a facilitator of the continuing process of conversion for spiritual maturation.²⁷ In this fashion – through theological emphases of the Regular and Separate Baptists, as well as the liturgical influence of Revivalism and the catechetical emphasis of the Sunday School – the institutionalization of the conversion process has become commonplace in the contemporary North American Baptist expression, thus grounding the concept of ‘believer’s baptism’.

The emphasis on ‘believer’s baptism’ with its grounding in personal conversion permeates the whole of Baptist life, from its beginnings in the English Separatist tradition through its contemporary expressions. To understand Grenz’s Baptist theological *ethos* this emphasis on conversion and its experiential dimension must be factored into any rendering of his theology.

German Baptists and the Predilection of Piety

Stanley Grenz was ordained, as was his father, in churches affiliated with the North American Baptist Conference (NABC). The NABC designation originally identified the group of churches called the ‘German Baptist Churches of North America’. How Grenz understood his own Baptist orientation is most thoroughly accounted for through this expression with its liturgical and theological nuances. Consequently, this expression of the Baptist family, though rooted in the German language tradition,²⁸ has an amalgam of theological expressions at its heart that differ from its sister churches in different ethnic trajectories. As Leon McBeth asserts, German Baptists represented ‘a blend of the Pietist tradition from Europe, the revivalism of early America and the Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch.’²⁹ Most important to Albert Ramaker, one of the earliest historians of the NABC, is the influence of the Continental Pietist tradition on German Baptists in America in what Ramaker labels, ‘the personal experience of religion.’ Ramaker states:

See Trumbull, *The Sunday-School: Its Origin, Mission, Methods, and Auxiliaries* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903), 109f.

²⁷ Leonard, ‘Southern Baptists and Conversion,’ 17-18.

²⁸ Dr. Jackie Howell, a personal friend of Stanley and Edna Grenz, as well as a colleague of Grenz’s at Sioux Falls Seminary (An NABC affiliated seminary), noted that the Grenz family spoke exclusively German in the home for years after returning from Germany as a means of reinforcing their German Baptist roots. Email correspondence, Jackie Howell to Jay Smith, December 19, 2009.

²⁹ McBeth, *Baptist Heritage*, 732.

It was most fortunate that the pioneers – all of them – were men of deep religious convictions, and that these centered in a personal religious experience. Themselves coming out from religious bodies where formalism and sacramentalism reigned supreme, this experience was esteemed the more highly because of the contrast...a change of life was to them the essence of New Testament Christianity. This emphasis has never become lost or displaced in our churches, and it has been a leading factor in the testimony of our people.³⁰

Cindy Wesley, Chair of Religion at Lambuth University, similarly affirms the ‘distinct pietist theological basis’ of the German Baptist trajectory in North America, with its emphasis on a personal religious experience.³¹ According to Wesley, the German Baptists, like the earlier German Pietists, understood that regeneration was just as important as justification in the conversion process.³² Finally, Grenz himself details how important the issue of conversion was to him, as he recounts giving an ‘altar call’ or an ‘invitation’ after a sermon on the topic of the character of pre-Pentecost Christians in Acts 1:

I expected that one or perhaps two of those in attendance would heed my call. When the number swelled to eighteen, I was moved nearly to tears. So overwhelmed was I by this evidence of the Spirit’s presence that I could not offer the promised dedicatory prayer, but had to call on the interim pastor to replace me on the platform to pray in my stead.

This incident was a vivid reminder to me of how deeply steeped I am in the warm-hearted, relational, pietistic conception of the Christian faith that I saw in my father’s ministry and imbued in the churches he served. The concern for heartfelt piety does not only tie me to my own immediate genealogical history, however; it also links me to a long trajectory of proponents of ‘experimental’ Christianity that dates at least to the eighteenth-century Great Awakening.³³

³⁰ Albert J. Ramaker, *The German Baptists in North America: An Outline of Their History* (Cleveland, OH: German Baptist Publication Society, 1924), 44.

³¹ Cindy K. Wesley, *The Role of Pietism and Ethnicity in the Formation of the General Conference of German Baptists, 1851-1920* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008).

³² *Ibid.*, 139-143.

³³ Stanley J. Grenz, ‘Concerns of a Pietist with a PhD’ in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 37:2 (Fall 2002): 58-59.

Grenz clearly credited his denominational theological roots much more so than any other of his North American Baptist evangelical contemporaries. He wrote a multitude of articles for a variety of Baptist publications from Billy Graham's *Decision* magazine to *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, the scholarly journal of the National Association of the Baptist Professors of Religion. It is here that one begins to identify not only that Grenz identified strongly with his Baptist heritage, but also with the fact that the concept of convertive piety was seminal to his thought.³⁴ Although several of Grenz's North American theological contemporaries - Millard Erickson, D.A. Carson, Wayne Grudem and John Piper - claim a variety of Baptist affiliations,³⁵ they have clearly chosen to pitch their tents primarily as evangelicals, rather than Baptists as evidenced by their sustained engagement in that arena. For Grenz, however, claiming the evangelical rubric was secondary to that of his Baptist roots.

The Evangelical Roots of Convertive Piety

Shaped by his understanding of conversion through his Baptist identity, Grenz sought to correlate this understanding with the greater evangelical trajectory. In that his own German Baptist upbringing merged the Puritan and Pietist streams of the Reformation, Grenz sought to understand Evangelicalism as a transdenominational movement in the light of the new piety brought about through conversion.

Grenz begins his charting of the course of convertive piety by delineating its roots in the soteriological thought of the Protestant

³⁴ A short review of article titles identifies this awareness: Stanley J. Grenz, 'A Baptist Ecclesiology for the Contemporary World,' *Search* 22:4 (Summer 1993): 7-15; 'Refuge Under God's Wings,' *Decision* 34:6 (June 1993): 31-35; 'Abundant Living in a Hostile Society: A Sermon on 1 Peter 1:3-12' *The South African Journal of Theology* 13 (2004): 156-63; 'Maintaining the Balanced Life: the Baptist Vision of Spirituality,' *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 18:1 (Spring 1991): 59-68; 'Christian Spirituality and the Quest for Identity: Toward a Spiritual-Theological Understanding of Life in Christ,' *Baptist History and Heritage* 37:2 (Spring 2002): 87-105; 'Participation in What Frees: The Concept of Truth in the Postmodern Context,' *Review and Expositor* 100:4 (Fall 2003): 687-693.

³⁵ Although there are a variety of materials out on each of these scholars, none of the extent material suggests that any of them makes his Baptist sentiments as clear a priority as Grenz. For background on these scholars see Andreas J. Köstenberger, 'D. A. Carson' in *Bible Interpreters of the 20th Century*, ed. Walter Elwell & J. D. Weaver (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 423-24; *Baptist Theologians*, ed. George and Dockery; and James Leo Garrett, *Baptist Theology: A Four Century Study*.

Reformation.³⁶ He rightly asserts the formative influences of Martin Luther in Germany and John Calvin in Geneva in regards to the import of salvation. Yet Grenz also notes an important difference between Luther and Calvin in how they treated the issue of sanctification. For Luther, justification and sanctification are a unified activity within the salvation process.³⁷ Calvin, however, nuances this position in a manner that separates sanctification from justification. Whereas Luther dissolves sanctification into a constant process of justification, Calvin construes the return of sanctification, yet at the expense of separating it from justification. This distinction becomes important to Grenz's project in that he sees it colouring, and even defining the post-Reformation developments of evangelicalism and thus the essence of convertive piety.

Following his explication of the Reformation and its founders' approach to sanctification with the roles of law and grace, Grenz outlines the development of the Puritan and Pietist impulses in post-Reformation Protestantism. In general, the Puritans stood as the heirs of the Reformation in English speaking Great Britain and the Pietists stood as heirs to the Reformation in Germany. Both movements are reactionary: the Puritans sought to bring reform to the church of England in light of their Calvinist theology and the Pietists sought to recapture 'an authentic Christianity' in the wake of the scholastic Lutheranism of the day. In regards to the Puritans, Grenz charts their development in terms of ecclesiology and the reformation of the Church of England. The Puritans envisioned a 'pure' church constituted by the 'truly elect'. According to Grenz, the 'assurance of election' the Puritans sought after was ultimately found in a 'religious experience that had made them aware of their elect status.'³⁸ Nevertheless, the outworking of this belief took a different turn. In order to scrutinize 'the signs of grace' that characterize the formative religious experience, the 'Puritans came to base one's personal sense of election on the believer's own piety.'³⁹ Thus the Puritans, in their quest for 'churches of visible saints' become the Reformation's 'most powerful moulder of the *ethos* and theology of the evangelical movement.'⁴⁰

³⁶ This section is drawn from Grenz's most thorough elucidation of the genesis and trajectory of evangelicalism. See Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000).

³⁷ Ibid., 30.

³⁸ Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 39.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 40.

Following on the heels of the Puritan movement in England was the rise of the Pietist movement on German soil.⁴¹ Mark Noll notes that ‘Continental pietist movements played a significant role in the beginning of evangelical movements in Britain, and the main themes of pietism anticipated the main themes of evangelicalism.’⁴² Like the Puritans, the Pietists envisaged their work as a reform of the church; yet ‘their intent was to reform the church from within, rather than through separation.’⁴³ In contrast to the dry Lutheran scholasticism that dominated the German church at that time, the Pietists, led by Spener, sought to bring a depth to the church that was unreachable through doctrine alone.⁴⁴ This leads Grenz to conclude, ‘The focus on the objectivity of justification that had consumed Luther and to a lesser extent Calvin was replaced by a concern for the work of regeneration, understood as the transformation of the heart, as the wellspring of a transformed life.’⁴⁵ Consequently, it is at the intersection of Puritanism and ‘Reformed Pietism’⁴⁶ that Grenz finds the birth of contemporary evangelicalism as a hybrid movement in the eighteenth century.⁴⁷

Convertive Piety as Evangelical Experience

From this starting point, Grenz delineates what he believed were evangelicalism’s two central concerns: ‘convertive piety’ and ‘experimental piety’. Convertive piety, derived from both Puritanism and Pietism, is the

⁴¹ The Puritan movement would seem to predate the Pietist movement by about 50 years. See Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 53-65.

⁴² Ibid., 18.

⁴³ Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 40. For a similar understanding of these groups see, James Stein’s article on Phillipp Jakob Spener as well as Carter Lindberg’s glossary entry under ‘*Collegium pietatis*’ in *The Pietist Theologians*, ed. Carter Lindberg (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 84 and 274-75.

⁴⁴ Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 41-42.

⁴⁵ Ibid. For an elaboration on this assertion, see a similar assessment by Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2007), 24-27.

⁴⁶ Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 44. Also see Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 26, for this understanding of the mix of Puritanism, Pietism and Presbyterianism that stands as the fount of evangelicalism.

⁴⁷ Historical theologian and self-professing ‘Postconservative’ evangelical argues persuasively for Grenz’s position. See Roger E. Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 61-63.

‘vision of faith that focuses on personal regeneration...as the key to a changed life.’⁴⁸ Grenz finds that this focus on convertive piety is most keenly felt in the Methodist movement of John Wesley, which Grenz, characterizes as ‘epitomizing the point where Puritanism and Pietism met.’⁴⁹ This leads Grenz to the following conclusion:

Convertive piety as the central hallmark of evangelicalism has, in turn, given shape to evangelical theology. The theological task as understood by generation of evangelical theologians since the early eighteenth century has focused not only on holding for the heritage of Reformation doctrine, as was the case in Protestant scholasticism, but more importantly on reflecting on and delineating the nature of the conversion experience, which all evangelicals share.⁵⁰

Experimental piety, the second concern of Grenz’s understanding of the advent of evangelicalism, marks a new emphasis in salvation upon the concept of assurance. This understanding of assurance as the focus of ‘experimental’ piety, Grenz concludes, is a concept developed in the methodological quests of early modernity and the consequent elevation of the empiricist, inductive, scientific method in theological circles.⁵¹ He posits that this acceptance of scientific method is evident in the works of Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley in the early origins of evangelicalism⁵² and reaches a peak in the middle of the nineteenth century. This introduction of Enlightenment scientific method into evangelical theology is of critical import to Grenz’s understanding of the contemporary shape of evangelicalism and its current bifurcated trajectory.⁵³

⁴⁸ Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 44.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 50. In regards to Edwards’ empirical theological method, Bruce Kulnick states: ‘To the extent that empiricism was a distinct position in the middle of the eighteenth century, Edwards was an empiricist. But he also believed that the supernatural was conveyed in experience; he was an experimental Calvinist.’ See Bruce Kulnick, *A History of Philosophy in America: 1720-2000* (New York: Oxford, 2001), 18.

⁵³ Both Roger Olson and Rob Warner see this bifurcation as well, though Warner delineates it as ‘Conservatives’ and ‘Entrepreneurs’ and Olson as ‘Conservatives’ and Postconservatives.’ See Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming*, 57-59; and Rob Warner, *Reinventing English Evangelicalism 1966-2001: A Theological and Sociological Study*, Studies in Evangelical History & Thought (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008), 15-16.

Evangelicalism thus posited as a ‘religion of the changed heart’ resulted in a transformed life and was a shared characteristic the earliest evangelicals issuing from Reformed tradition. English literature of the nineteenth century is replete with the influence of early English evangelicalism. Indeed, literary scholar Elisabeth Jay argues that it is the ‘practical piety’ that marked the ‘religion of the heart’ of the earliest English evangelicals and thus shaped much early Victorian literature.⁵⁴ Jonathan Edwards commented on this phenomenon of the transformed heart and renewed mind as well in his observations of the Great Awakenings in North America.⁵⁵ In the twentieth century, English historian W. R. Ward posits the genesis of Evangelicalism with the Pietist movement as a reaction to the ‘confessionalisation’ and Aristotelianism of the Lutheran Orthodoxy and their preoccupation with ‘theological system-making.’⁵⁶ For Ward, the experiential focus of the early Pietists is exemplified in Philipp Jakob Spener, who sought to unite justification by faith with an active Christian life. In regards to Spener’s attempt, Ward tellingly states, ‘The living faith needed for this purpose was not the dead consent to theological propositions, it was the personal trust which lead indeed to knowledge of divine illumination.’⁵⁷ In reference to Pietism’s influence on evangelicalism in North America, historian Thomas Kidd states, ‘The Pietist ‘religion of the heart’ and New England’s developing expectation of revival became two to three most important influences on early Evangelicalism.’⁵⁸ Further, English theologian Alister McGrath affirms the contribution of Continental Pietism’s influence on the contemporary evangelical trajectory and notes how it illustrates the ‘positive place of experience in the Christian life.’⁵⁹ Indeed, McGrath expands on this understanding when he posits, ‘evangelicalism is as much a devotional ethos as it is a theological system’ and as such, is ‘strongly experiential and personal, capable of transforming both the heart and the mind.’⁶⁰ Ultimately for Grenz, both convertive and

⁵⁴ See Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth Century Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁵⁵ See Jonathan Edwards, ‘The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God,’ in *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. G. Goen, vol. 4, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 226-88.

⁵⁶ W. R. Ward, *Early Evangelicalism: A Global Intellectual History 1670-1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1-5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁸ Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 24.

⁵⁹ Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism & the Future of Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 25.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

experimental piety, understood together, become the cornerstone of the shared evangelical experience of the Triune God.

**From Shared Experience to Evangelical Epistemology:
Postmodernity, Pannenberg and Trinitarian Participation**

Grenz's personal and communal affirmation of convertive piety as the essence of evangelical experience is refined further by his understanding of postmodernism as critique and opportunity; and, Wolfhart Pannenberg's influence in the areas of eschatology and Trinity. Although these elements would seem to be incongruent, it is precisely through these theological stimuli that Grenz's understanding of convertive piety ultimately coalesces into a uniquely evangelical epistemology.

The Postmodern Shibboleth

Grenz's concern over the theological centrality of convertive piety for evangelicalism runs into a roadblock with the incursion of Enlightenment rationalism and its offspring, modern foundationalism and the new scientific method. As Grenz maintained in his delineation of experimental piety,⁶¹ the nature of evangelical experience shifted from the shared experience of convertive piety to a foundational emphasis on the nature of scripture. This shift was due at least in part to the inroads that both modern philosophical foundationalism and scientific method had made upon evangelical theology.⁶² Over the next two centuries, roughly 1760-1980, Grenz posits that both evangelical theology and mainline Protestant theology, either intentionally or naively, allowed philosophical foundationalism and scientific method to colour or even distort the earlier evangelical theological centre. Grenz would not cry foul at such a trajectory were it not for the advent of the 'postmodern turn'. For Grenz, theology is a context-driven enterprise. As long as the modern cultural *ethos* reigned, then theology spoke to it via those epistemological presuppositions and methods. Nevertheless, with the 'postmodern turn' Grenz saw not only a problematic shift of emphases, but also a means by which evangelical theology could recover its former theological commitment to convertive

⁶¹ See Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 69-80.

⁶² This shift is complicated and hotly contested. Those evangelicals from a confessional or stringently Reformed background tend to contest Grenz's understanding of convertive piety, whereas those from an Anabaptist or Wesleyan background tend to affirm Grenz's understanding.

piety and thus reach a generation of people who had become disillusioned with the Modern world.

Grenz's project of critique, recovery and construction is, of course, not without its critics. D. A. Carson, Millard Erickson and the contributors to *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*⁶³ have vigorously assailed Grenz's position. These criticisms have varied levels of merit, but often consist of apologetic rhetoric designed to defend the individual critic's own indebtedness to a particular confessional stance or their own modern philosophical presuppositions.⁶⁴ By far the largest ground for critique of Grenz's proposal is on the meaning of the term 'postmodern'.⁶⁵ Even Grenz's critics are undecided as to the nature and import of the postmodern. Is the 'postmodern' the next philosophical era after the modern and that which precedes the post-postmodern?⁶⁶ Is the 'postmodern' actually the modern's own self-criticism?⁶⁷ Is the 'postmodern' antithetical to modern evangelical sensitivities and thus a threat to destroy theology as we understand it?⁶⁸ Grenz's approach to the postmodern cannot be neatly summarised by these questions nor can he be neatly labelled a 'postmodernist' as his critics are prone to do. Nevertheless, in light of Grenz's emphasis on convertive piety, it becomes clearer that Grenz views the postmodern turn neither as a friend to be embraced nor as a foe to be rejected, but rather as both a critique and an opportunity.

⁶³ *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoos Helseth and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004).

⁶⁴ English sociologist Rob Warner has made a telling study of this type of criticism in *Reinventing English Evangelicalism*. Particularly trenchant is his analysis of Carson's critique of Grenz, p. 6-8.

⁶⁵ Because whatever 'postmodern' means is so highly contested, I will use the general rubric of 'postmodern', rather than move between the nomenclature of postmodern, postmodernism and postmodernity.

⁶⁶ This is the question Millard Erickson poses in *Truth or Consequence: The Promise & Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 306f.

⁶⁷ This is the question and position of Thomas Oden in *After Modernity...What?: Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990).

⁶⁸ This is the general position and question posed by several authors. See D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996); R. Scott Smith, *Truth & the New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effects of Postmodernism in the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005); Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press 2000) and the contributors-in-general to *Reforming or Conforming?: Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church*, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson & Reginald N. Gleason (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008).

With the advent of the postmodern, Grenz identified a 'Luther-like Babylonian Captivity' of evangelicalism by Enlightenment foundationalism. If indeed convertive piety was at the centre of what it meant to be a 'classical' evangelical, then contemporary evangelical theology could not be grounded in an epistemology that was unbiblical and unspiritual. Thus Grenz saw the advent of the postmodern not as the latest system of thought to be embraced nor simply as a replacement for a dead or dying Modernity. Rather, he viewed it as an opportunity to rethink his own inherited evangelical theological paradigm in order to expound the gospel for a new, post-modern, post-foundational era.⁶⁹ With the postmodern criticism of classical foundationalism, both modern theology's reliance upon Schleiermacher's individualistic *'gefühl'*⁷⁰ and evangelicalism's reliance upon 'inerrancy'⁷¹ are brought into question as epistemological foundations for the theological endeavour. Thus the postmodern critique allows Grenz to posit the shared experience of convertive piety as the defining evangelical experience and constructively engage other epistemological alternatives to explain the Christian understanding of reality.

Pannenberg, Eschatology and Trinitarian Participation

Although deeply rooted in the theological ground of his German Baptist heritage and augmented by a conservative evangelical seminary education, it was Wolfhart Pannenberg who made the greatest impact on Grenz's theological trajectory. Grenz was profoundly shaped by his *Doktorvater*. Pannenberg's theological fingerprints are evident throughout Grenz's project: from the Trinitarian structure to its relational anthropology. Yet nowhere is this impact more apparent than in Grenz's appropriation of Pannenberg's eschatological thought.

⁶⁹ See Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), xi.

⁷⁰ Several contemporary scholars are revisiting and attempting to renovate Schleiermacher's understanding of *gefühl* or 'feeling', though evangelical's still tend to reject his contribution. For example, see Clinton Curle, 'The Schleiermacher Redemption: Subjective Experience as a Starting Point for Evangelical Theology,' *Didaskalia* 9:2 (Spring 1998): 17-36.

⁷¹ The debate over inerrancy, or better, the nature of theological authority rages on in North America. In recent years this debate has taken on the added weight of hermeneutics, but for the outsider looking in, the debate has become 'shallow' and 'trivializing.' (See N.T. Wright's assessment in *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a new Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005), 21f.)

In his book-length treatment of Pannenberg's work, Grenz describes the heart of Pannenberg's understanding of truth:

Although agreeing that truth is objective, he declares that complete coherence, which alone is the full measure of truth, is an eschatological expectation, incapable of being realized in any present moment...According to Pannenberg, truth lies ever before the pilgrim enroute to the eschatological celestial city. This leads him to call into question any claim to the possession of full truth in the present, a stance that harmonizes well with the modern conception of truth. Yet he has not budged from the concept of truth as an objective reality. In his thinking an objective standard remains against which all truth claims are to be measured, and this standard is the most significant imaginable, the eschatological revelation of the glory of God.⁷²

This understanding of the eschatological nature of truth permeates every aspect of Pannenberg's thought, from his doctrine of revelation,⁷³ theology proper,⁷⁴ cosmology,⁷⁵ theological anthropology⁷⁶ and Christology.⁷⁷ Consequently, Pannenberg's eschatological emphasis gives further theological shape to Grenz's understanding of the trajectory of convertive piety. For Grenz, convertive piety – the conscious experience of the grace of God in conversion,⁷⁸ a communally shaped and thus shared experience – is at the heart of what it means to be an evangelical Christian.

⁷² Stanley J. Grenz, *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 38-39.

⁷³ See Pannenberg, 'Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation' in *Revelation as History* ed. Wolfhart Pannenberg, trans. David Granskou (New York: MacMillan, 1968), 123-58.

⁷⁴ See Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 5§ 'The Trinitarian God', vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 259-336. For an illuminating commentary on Pannenberg's trinitarianism, see Iain Taylor, *Pannenberg on the Triune God* (New York: T & T Clark/Continuum, 2007).

⁷⁵ See Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 7.III 'Creation and Eschatology', vol. 2, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 136-146.

⁷⁶ See Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 522-32.

⁷⁷ See Pannenberg, *Jesus-God and Man*, 2nd ed., trans. Lewis Wilkins and Duane Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968/1977), 53f.

⁷⁸ Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 23.

Combined with Pannenberg's eschatological understanding of reality, convertive piety becomes for Grenz the proleptic experience of the Triune God, realized fully only in the eschaton. Indeed, as Iain Taylor has noted, this proleptic experience of God is nothing less than participation in the divine Triune life.⁷⁹ As Grenz states in *The Social God and the Relational self*, 'Although participation in the divine life – and hence the advent of the ecclesial self in its fullness – is ultimately eschatological, the deification that constitutes the self-in-community is proleptically present in the here and now.'⁸⁰

From Pannenberg, Grenz not only adopts an understanding of reality as eschatologically framed, but also develops his basic Trinitarian ontology and structural form for theology. Indeed, Grenz's systematic theology, *Theology for the Community of God*, could be considered an attempt to 'evangelicalize' Pannenberg's project with his own distinctive evangelical nuances.⁸¹ This trinitarian approach to the Doctrine of God opened Grenz up to the possibilities of a fruitful, new approach to the evangelical theological endeavour. Through his affirmation of Pannenberg's eschatological realism as the Christian reality, Grenz came to question the sufficiency of the 'Kingdom of God' motif as a unifying centre for the theological enterprise.⁸² Grenz asks the question, 'What is the kingdom of God that is coming but is already present among us?'⁸³ His answer is the 'community' of God. Inspired by the seminal work on community by sociologist Robert Bellah in *Habits of the Heart*,⁸⁴ Grenz recasts his integrative motif as 'community'. For Grenz, this does not displace the 'kingdom of God' motif, necessarily, but grounds it in a more basic idea: 'Taken as a whole, the Bible asserts that God's program is directed to bringing about community in the highest sense of the word – a redeemed people, living within a redeemed creation and enjoying the presence of their Redeemer God.'⁸⁵ Furthermore, Grenz locates this assertion even more fundamentally in the ontology of the Trinity. If God's program is to bring about a fundamental community of the redeemed, God does so out of the

⁷⁹ Taylor, *Pannenberg on the Triune God*, 165-67.

⁸⁰ Grenz, *The Social God*, 334.

⁸¹ Note Grenz's methodological prolegomenon in *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman, 1994 / Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans 2000), 1-25 and its similarity to Pannenberg's own systematic project as outlined by Grenz in *Reason for Hope*, 11-55.

⁸² Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 147-48.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁸⁴ Robert N. Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

⁸⁵ Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 156.

communion that is the Trinity. Nowhere is this more clearly stated than in *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (2001), where Grenz, building on the social Trinitarian work of Pannenberg, Colin Gunton, John Zizioulas and Catherine LaCugna, connects the perichoretic being of God with the proleptic nature of the redeemed community.⁸⁶

It is only a short intellectual distance from the Trinity and community formation to the Trinity and conversion. For Grenz, just as for Pannenberg,⁸⁷ Jesus comes ‘as the exemplary human being, the revelation of who we are to be’ in order that he might take the ‘sins of all upon himself in his death’ and thus ‘mediate to eternal life through our union with him.’⁸⁸ Consequently, the Holy Spirit is responsible for the establishment of community by witnessing to the truth of Christ and gathering together the people who believe into a singular body, transcending every human division.⁸⁹ Thus the relationship forged in Christ through the Holy Spirit in the initial activity of conversion, becomes participation in the very being of the Triune God in convertive piety.

From Piety to Participation: Grounds for a Trinitarian Epistemology

Grenz does not stop with conversion as a change in attitude displayed by belief in the Triune God; nor does he simply view it as salvation from sin. Rather, Grenz affirms that ‘through conversion, the Holy Spirit causes us to be children of God’⁹⁰ and consequently, through the gateway of conversion we become participants in the divine life. Grenz, after observing the apostle Paul’s understanding of the role of the Spirit in believers’ lives, describes this participation:

by incorporating the new humanity into Christ, the Spirit gathers them into the dynamic of the divine life. Yet the Spirit does so in a particular manner – namely, specifically and solely ‘in the Son.’ Through the Spirit, those who are ‘in Christ’ come to share the eternal relationship that the Son enjoys with the Father. Because participants in this new community are by the Spirit’s work co-heirs with Christ, the Father bestows on them

⁸⁶ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

⁸⁷ See Taylor, *Pannenberg on the Triune God*, 125-30.

⁸⁸ Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 158-59.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 187.

by virtue of their being 'in Christ' what he eternally lavishes on the Son.⁹¹

In that the inner dynamic of the Trinity is marked by a reciprocal glorification of the Father and the Son through the Spirit, the new humanity, thus drawn into the inner life of God participates in this glorification as well.⁹² Grenz has thus reconfigured conversion from the simple 'act of turning from one's sin in repentance and turning to Christ in faith,'⁹³ to 'convertive piety' - a continual, active participation in the divine life. In the postmodern context, this encounter with Father and Son through the Spirit becomes the cornerstone of Christian experience and thus an evangelical 'epistemic norm'.

Grenz's evolving understanding of 'convertive piety' is an interesting study in cultural engagement embedded in, and coloured by, evangelical commitments. The depth of his commitment to these tenets and his theological interpretation of these commitments are vigorously and even rightly challenged by his evangelical peers. The density of his thought, the evolution of his theological position regarding the postmodern critique and his commitment to convertive piety are areas that demand sustained attention from the critic. Nevertheless, his theological project is too important simply to be dismissed, as some scholars are predisposed to do.

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Criticism aside, Grenz has done evangelicalism a service by positing a contemporary theological understanding of 'experience'. In his quest to better understand the concept of conversion, Grenz spent much of his academic career attempting to explicate this understanding of the shared, evangelical experience in scholarly terms while simultaneously attempting to contextualise this thought for a postmodern world. Although other theologians have touched on the concept of the Christian life as participation in the Trinity, none have so thoroughly engaged the issue as Grenz.⁹⁵ In his final work, *The Named God and the Question of Being* (2005),

⁹¹ Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 326.

⁹² Ibid., 327.

⁹³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 946.

⁹⁴ Warner, *Reinventing English Evangelicalism*, 4-15.

⁹⁵ For example, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004); Catherine M. LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1985). Interestingly, Paul Fiddes, an English Baptist, shares this affinity with Grenz and details a similar trajectory in Paul S.

Grenz completes his thought in this area by asserting that it is through the inclusion of our name into the story of the self-naming God (the divine Trinity) that we are given the 'gift of being' and fulfill our human *telos*.⁹⁶ Thus what begins with the conversion experience becomes the orientation and attitude of the evangelical life in convertive piety and through Grenz, finally finds its completion in the concept of Trinitarian participation and the legitimization of a Trinitarian epistemology.

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Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

⁹⁶ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Named God and the Question of Being: A Theo-Ontology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 342f.