

Preface:

Stanley Grenz and Baptist Theology

Stanley Grenz (1950-2005) was without question one of the key participants in the theological conversations of the last 25 years. His works appear on college course bibliographies the world over. Students and theological colleagues from many traditions owe him much and mourn his untimely removal from the field.¹ His prolific output generated contributions to theological method, ethics, historical theology and debates on the nature and impact of postmodernism. He was an incisive interpreter of theologians as diverse as Isaac Backus and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Responses ranging from profound admiration to dismissive criticism demonstrate his importance as a lively protagonist in the contested ground of the nature and future of evangelicalism.

Much has already been written (and will continue to be so) on these and other aspects of Grenz's wider significance. Many are acknowledged and outlined in the essays which constitute this issue of *The Pacific Journal of Baptist Research*. The theme of the issue, however, calls for a particular focus. Grenz was a lifelong Baptist, asserting indeed that this identification was fundamental to his theological project. Much of his career was spent in Baptist or Baptist-related institutions. The essays which follow take this connection seriously, addressing Grenz's theological contributions through the lens of his Baptist roots.

Brian Harris, considers the wide range of contributions Grenz made to issues of theological method. He identifies Grenz's recovery of 'community as the integrating motif for theological construction' and his call for 'a communal reading of scripture' as both intuitively rooted in but also critical of Baptist spirituality.

Grenz's attention to ecclesiology was incomplete at his untimely death. Jason Sexton examines what can be known of the trajectory of Grenz's thought in this area. Ecclesiology has been central to Baptist polemics. As Sexton shows, classic Baptist themes such as covenant and believers' baptism were important to Grenz but they were recast in his theological enterprise. Here the influence of Pannenberg is crucial, with a baptist (small b) and increasingly ecumenical focus emerging from an essentially 'telic and trinitarian' vision.

¹ The diverse tributes linked to the website at stanleyigrenz.com are testimony to the affection and admiration Grenz generated.

Jay Smith addresses the Trinitarian vision further. Key to understanding Grenz's methodological and epistemological proposals, Smith suggests, is a commitment to 'convertive piety'. This emphasis on personal conversion or heartfelt piety is characteristic of the Baptist traditions which Grenz imbibed. It also, moreover, connects naturally to wider evangelicalism, explaining Grenz's project to revision evangelical theology, in particular its epistemology in a postmodern context.

Jonathan Wilson also notes the pietist instincts of Grenz's thought. Rather than exploring what this emphasis directly generates, Wilson identifies what it tends to relegate – namely, attention to the doctrines of creation. Grenz the Baptist, who stands in the pietist way and indeed promotes its virtues, was also deeply influenced by the decidedly non-pietist Pannenberg, engendering both 'creative tension and incompleteness'. The tension was evident and unresolved in Grenz's theology of creation.

Together these essays make an important contribution to our understanding of Stanley Grenz's theology. Here was a Baptist who, to a degree matched by few others, entered creatively the wider debates of the theological world. The influence of Pannenberg comes through consistently, as does the sense that Grenz's Baptist identity was more a subtle presence than a driving motif. Might we surmise, then, that Grenz might only formally be viewed as a Baptist theologian? Perhaps. But maybe that is to ask the wrong question.

These studies of undoubtedly one of the finest theologians that Baptists have produced may reveal as much about the nature of Baptist thought as they suggest about Grenz himself. In recent studies Tom Nettles calls for a more confessionally defined Baptist vision.² Whilst Nettles' argument suits his polemical context it fits less well with the realities of the many Baptist stories. Rather than defining Baptist thought by confessions and defended doctrines we may better see it too, like the church itself, as telic, moving forward, changing and morphing as contexts and demands alter and shift. Rather than driven, by logic or even text, Baptist theology may most authentically be understood to be drawn forward, infinitely responsive to the rich magnificence of the Kingdom. Of this vision of theology Stanley Grenz was a prime exemplar.

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² Tom Nettles *The Baptists: Key People in Forming a Baptist Identity* (Fearn, Rossshire: Mentor, 3 vols. 2005-2007).