

Why Method Matters: Insights from the Theological Method of Stanley J. Grenz

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Abstract

The transition from modernity to postmodernity has posed many challenges for contemporary theologians, not least in the area of theological method. In particular, there has been a widespread call to shift from foundationalist to postfoundationalist approaches. This paper examines the theological method of Stanley J Grenz, a Canadian theologian who developed a model for theological construction to meet the challenges of a postmodern era. Though Grenz' specific concern was to revision evangelical theological method, the relevance of his approach, and the issues it raises, extend well beyond the boundaries of evangelicalism. Using a narrative approach to examine both the strengths and limitations of Grenz' approach, this paper seeks to highlight why method matters in theological construction.

A narrative introduction: why method is a passion

In the wing of Christianity in which I find myself, broadly dubbed evangelicalism, theological inquiry is often seen as the death of spiritual passion, and at best, a dangerous enterprise. If I were to say that my theological passion revolved around establishing the trustworthiness of scripture, or that it centred on the significance of the cross, or focused on the nature of conversion, or helped motivate the church towards greater activity in serving God, my concerns would be deemed appropriate and helpful.¹ But when I make the embarrassing confession that my theological passion focuses on the area of theological method, mild interest rapidly changes to an all too obvious attempt to change the topic. Why would anyone be passionate about theological method?

¹ David Bebbington classifies these four concerns, which he calls Biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism and activism, as a quadrilateral of priorities undergirding evangelicalism. David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 2-3. For an exploration of Bebbington's quadrilateral and its current relevance for evangelicalism, see Brian Harris, "Beyond Bebbington: The Quest for an Evangelical Identity in a Postmodern Era," *Churchman* 122, no. 3 (2008).

A reluctance to engage with questions of theological method may be more prevalent in evangelical circles than others, with Grenz and Franke maintaining that while

theologians in mainline theological circles have been in need of a reminder that theology involves more than simply reflecting on method... Evangelical theologians have... given little attention to methodological concerns.²

So why did I depart from this norm? The answer relates to circumstances in my personal history. I did not have the privilege of growing up in a committed Christian home, and most certainly not one characterised by evangelical convictions. However, the practice of my parents, in keeping with the general practice of the South Africa of the 1960s, was to send their children to the local Sunday School until such time as they were confirmed. Having been suitably Christianized we were then to be released from the burden of church attendance. But renewal came to the congregation, and I came to faith. Although converted in a Congregational church a move of home meant that I had to nurture my faith in a different church community and I became a Baptist, not from strong doctrinal convictions, but from an absence of choice.

Bulwer Rd Baptist Church epitomised both the best and worst of evangelical faith. It was a new family – more truly home than my own home and I embraced all that it stood for with fervour and zeal. The friendship, kindness and acceptance that I experienced in that congregation was so superior to anything I had previously experienced so that it is only with the deepest reluctance that I critiqued any of its practices. But some of them mystified me. There was its staunch opposition to the drinking of any alcohol. When I pointed to Jesus' miracle of turning water into wine as a counter to the churches teetotaling stance, it was explained to me that actually Jesus turned water into non-alcoholic grape juice, and that this was the reason the master of the banquet declared it superior to the wine previously supplied.³ The medicinal value of non alcoholic grape juice was seen as further proved by Paul's advice to Timothy to take a little wine for the good of his stomach – clearly something that would not be achieved if actual alcohol was consumed.⁴ I wasn't convinced, but compliance with the stance was a negligible price for the return of belonging to such a family.

More troubling was the churches stance on women in leadership. Paul's statements that women should learn in quiet and full submission and that no woman should teach a man, seemed at best unfair.⁵ I was acutely conscious of my own mother's struggle to hold our family together. Against the odds she managed to ensure that I and my two sisters received a tertiary education. I might have been male, but I knew that I had much to learn from her. Again, my growing knowledge of scripture saw me counter the

² Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 13.

³ John 2:1-11

⁴ 1Tim 5:23

⁵ 1Tim 2:11-14

argument. I tried Galatians 3:28, that in Christ there is neither male nor female, but was assured that all that meant was that both men and women could become Christians. I was unconvinced, but had no doubt that I was male, and was therefore prepared to suppress my dubiousness as none of it applied to me. It was easy to forget my concerns, as Bulwer Rd Baptist was filled with women who seemed perfectly content to follow an exclusively male leadership.

Perhaps the most traumatic moment was when a close friend of mine, the first of my friends to have become a Christian at Bulwer Rd Baptist, announced that he was gay. I was stunned, as were all in our circle. As far as we were concerned, this was a realm that simply did not exist. We did our best, and whisked Graeme to one healing meeting after another. It was all to no avail. A few months later he announced that he was leaving the church, and would be moving in with a man from the choir – news which we found equally appalling. This was a line too far for us. We did not know what to do, but our pastor, presumably having heard some rumours, departed from his usually kindly demeanour, and launched a diatribe against homosexuals in the middle of a sermon on a completely unrelated topic. The message was clear. Those who wandered to Sodom, would have to do so alone. Our group parted company with Graeme, reassuring ourselves that he would return when he saw the folly of his ways. I never saw him again, hearing only that he had attempted to contact me shortly before his death of an AIDS related disease. I have often wondered what we would have said to each other had his efforts been successful. I continue to feel both outraged and ashamed that I was part of a system that so ruthlessly turned its back on someone at a time of such great insecurity and need. It has left me with more than a few troubling questions.

One further question unearthed during my time at Bulwer Rd was of the relevance, or otherwise, of the Christian faith to the political status quo. It was here that the church was at its most disunited. I grew up in apartheid South Africa, and the trauma of that time was the backdrop to our theological musing. The majority focused on Romans 13, and its call to obey the government. They were opposed by the Amos and Isaiah 58 faction. I had no doubt where my loyalty lay. Everything within me resonated with Isaiah's plea that we release the chains of injustice and set the oppressed free.

My convictions were rooted in my exposure to the narratives of some black South Africans. While Bulwer Rd Baptist Church, like far too many South African Baptist churches in that troubled era, was largely uncritical of the political status quo, it contained some surprising – indeed heroic – pockets of dissent. Some returned medical missionaries involved in training black medical students in the local university introduced me to some of their students. The apartheid system was designed to make such encounters near impossible, but in this instance, it failed. The friendships formed were transforming. While I had not yet been exposed to Anton Boisen's plea that theological students "learn to read human documents as

well as books," I intuitively grasped its validity.⁶ The stories of my friends were overwhelming and convicting. Never, never and never again was I able to listen to a sermon from Romans 13 that suggested that unquestioning obedience to the political status quo was required of all Christians,⁷ without a simultaneous rise in blood pressure and a sweeping sadness that the biblical text could be perverted into a text of terror.⁸

Throughout these experiences I was developing a niggling unease as to the way theological positions were being reached. Many churches in South Africa used the Bible to justify apartheid, whilst others around the world condemned apartheid as a heresy.⁹ I started to wonder if in addition to scripture there were unacknowledged factors that helped steer theological conclusions, and speculated about the role of cultural, sub-cultural and contextual drivers. It was around this time that I was exposed to what is often misleadingly referred to as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral which proposes that the four sources for theological construction are scripture, tradition, reason and experience.¹⁰ It caught my imagination, and I even went so far as to present an embarrassingly amateurish paper on the topic at a student conference.¹¹ It was thus that my theological passion, a persistent questioning of the method by which we arrive at theological conclusions, was birthed.

Discovering Grenz

In pursuing this passion I discovered the work of Stanley Grenz who has a theological method which is something a little more significant than a fresh voice or a slightly modified approach. I have concluded that, with some minor modifications, his method¹² has the potential to genuinely revision evangelical theology. In his various works is a theological method that has the potential to be faithful, hopeful and loving.¹³ I say potential, because my study of Grenz led me to the conclusion that he did not fully unpack the possibilities inherent in his method, largely because he did not critique the limitations in his approach carefully enough.

⁶ Anton T. Boisen, *The Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1936), 10.

⁷ Such sermons were common in South Africa during the Apartheid era.

⁸ I realize this gives a slightly different slant to the phrase coined by Phyllis Trible, but I think it is appropriate. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

⁹ The denunciation of apartheid as a heresy during the 1982 Ottawa meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, made a significant impact on many churches in South Africa. For a collection of articles exploring the topic see John W. de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, eds., *Apartheid Is a Heresy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

¹⁰ For an argument as to why the term is misleading see Ted A. Campbell, "The 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral': The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth," *Methodist History* 29 (1991).

¹¹ Not too surprisingly, it remains unpublished, though one student was foolish enough to ask for a copy!

¹² As found in Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994); *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the Twenty First Century* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1993); *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*.

¹³ To utilize the categories of 1 Cor 13:13.

Grenz proposes a model for evangelical theological construction that utilizes scripture, tradition and culture as the sources for theology, and the Trinity, community and eschatology as its focal motifs. He supplements these with the belief that the Spirit guides the church as it communally attempts to discern truth in changing contexts. Grenz believes that his method moves beyond foundationalism as it appeals to a trio of interacting, conversing sources that are guided by three related motifs, rather than to the single source of scripture.

Suggesting scripture as a source for theological construction is something of a non-negotiable for any theological method that wishes to be considered evangelical.¹⁴ For evangelical method, the debate is more over seeing scripture as *a* source or *the* source for theological conclusions, with the latter serving as the default drive. There is therefore nothing inherently novel in Grenz' suggestion that scripture serve as theology's norming norm.¹⁵ Of greater interest are the shifts in emphasis proposed by Grenz.

Grenz argues that postfundamentalist evangelical theology has continued to adopt a propositionalist approach, with the theological task being conceived as the discovery and articulation of the one doctrinal system embedded in the Bible.¹⁶ We should not accept Grenz' analysis uncritically, as he is a little one-sided in his presentation of propositionalist approaches.¹⁷ Rather than follow a propositional programme, Grenz suggests that theology should be conceived as the "reflection on the faith commitment of the believing community."¹⁸ He suggests that its authority derives from it being, "... the source for the symbols, stories, teachings and doctrines that form the cognitive framework for the worldview of the believing community."¹⁹

Second, he believes that many evangelicals "...take loyalty to the Bible to heights not intended by the Reformers and not in keeping with the broader trajectory of the evangelical movement."²⁰ He argues that such loyalty is misguided and unnecessary. The Bible's status as the foundational text of the faith community guarantees its place of importance in the theological enterprise. Grenz' approach at this point

¹⁴ Bebbington can be seen as representative when he suggests that biblicism is one of the defining characteristics of evangelicalism. Bebbington, 12-14.

¹⁵ Together with Franke, Grenz unpacks his understanding of this in Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 57-92.

¹⁶ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 60-63.

¹⁷ See e.g. Helseth's critique of Grenz' historical reconstruction in Paul Kjos Helseth, "Are Postconservative Evangelicals Fundamentalists? Postconservative Evangelicalism, Old Princeton and the Rise of Neo-Fundamentalism," in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

¹⁸ Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the Twenty First Century*, 87. The adequacy of this definition must be questioned. It implies a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, role for the theologian. Perhaps a church historian might be willing to be limited to a descriptive role, but it is improbable that many systematic theologians would be willing to accept such an abbreviated description of their task. Indeed, Grenz himself does not, for in spite of this definition, he carves out a far more ambitious role in his own theological work. Perhaps it should be enlarged to be a "reflection on the *adequacy* of the faith commitment of the believing community *in the light of...*" with relevant theological criteria inserted (e.g. scripture, the tradition of the church, certain ethical criteria etc.)

¹⁹ Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the Twenty First Century*, 88.

²⁰ Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the Twenty First Century*, 93.

is essentially pragmatic and functional. If theology is the reflection on the faith commitment of the believing community, it is a reflection that cannot begin without an understanding of the “book of the community.”²¹

From a traditional evangelical perspective, this is provocative. Evangelicals assign a place of prominence to the Bible out of a conviction that its message is the truth, and its revelation the sole surety for statements made about the nature and character of God.²² The constituting role of the Bible in the life of the church is seen as of secondary importance to the claim that it is an accurate and authoritative revelation of the character, will and actions of God. Grenz’ stance seems a short step from relegating the Bible to a text of historical (but not authoritative) importance. In addition, his argument that the Bible’s role as the repository of the original kerygma of the faith community guarantees it a role of ongoing importance is not self evidently true. Belief systems can change and evolve, and most would not consider a stance definitive simply because it was the one originally adopted.

A third aspect of Grenz’ proposal on scripture, and one which reflects something of the heartbeat of his concern, is expressed in his approving discussion of the Pietists. He notes, “For the Pietists, talk about the truth claims of the Bible was less important than the fact that ‘truth claims’ – that the Scriptures lay hold of the life of the reader and call that life into divine service.”²³ While probably a false dichotomy it leads to the next stage of Grenz’ thinking about scripture.²⁴ Grenz stresses that the meaning and impact of scripture is pneumatologically mediated. He laments that the theological method of most Protestant theologians separates bibliology and pneumatology.²⁵

In practical terms, Grenz calls evangelicals to pay as much attention to the doctrine of illumination as they do to inspiration. By placing the emphasis on the inspiration of scripture, a static view of scripture can

²¹ Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the Twenty First Century*, 94.

²² The understanding of truth would be of truth as correspondence with objective reality.

²³ Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the Twenty First Century*, 112. While hard to dispute, this does seem to beg the question. Is it not the task of the theologian to articulate why this happens and how to evaluate the validity of such an “encounter”? In addition, this presentation of the Pietists is one sided according to Travis. See William G. Travis, “Pietism and the History of American Evangelicalism,” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

²⁴ Brand accuses Grenz of driving an artificial wedge between those who focus on the Bible as a source of correct doctrine and those whose focus is on the Bible as a source of spiritual sustenance. Dismissing this typology as overly simplistic, Brand argues that balance between the two has usually characterized evangelicalism. Chad O. Brand, “Defining Evangelicalism,” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelicalism Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 298. Smith, in his work of the relationship between Pentecostalism and evangelicalism, is more nuanced when he distinguishes between evangelical theology and grass-roots evangelical experience. He writes: “This issue (the relationship between Pentecostalism and evangelicalism) situates us in the midst of an ongoing historiographic debate between Donald Dayton and George Marsden... Dayton has been insisting on a ‘pentecostal paradigm’ for understanding evangelicalism over against what he calls Marsden’s ‘presbyterian paradigm.’ I think both of them are right, but on different levels. I think Marsden is correct in asserting the dominant influence of the Princeton tradition on mainstream evangelical *theology*; but in agreement with Dayton, I think evangelicalism at a grass-roots level has been significantly influenced by a more Wesleyan-holiness piety as found, for instance, in Finney.” James K.A. Smith, “The Closing of the Book: Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and the Sacred Writings,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11 (1997): 61.

²⁵ Grenz follows up on his own suggestion in *Theology for the Community of God* and his discussion of scripture in the middle of the book within the section on the work of the Spirit, makes for a refreshing point of difference.

dominate. Arguments revolve around the once for all divinely given message of scripture, rather than around the need to listen to the ongoing voice of the Spirit speaking through scripture (illumination).

This focus on illumination shifts the subject-object locus. So long as we have an inspired text to study, the theologian can approach scripture as an objective text whose message can be interpreted and explained. If, however, the focus shifts to scripture as a Spirit illuminated text dynamically interacting with the life of the community, the static 'given' of the text is replaced by uncertainty, ambiguity and the subjectivity of a required response.

Grenz' pneumatologically mediated approach to scripture has led to concerns being expressed. A major refrain is that the approach is subjective and undermines the concept of the authority of scripture by taking the locus of authority from the text and placing it within the contextualized, Spirit guided, community of faith. Consequently some evangelicals have been dismissive of Grenz' proposal, Carson complaining, "I cannot see how Grenz's approach to Scripture can be called 'evangelical' in any useful sense."²⁶

Grenz' second source for theology is tradition. In exploring tradition as a theological source which serves as theology's hermeneutical trajectory, Grenz attempts to answer the question of how the insights gained from the Spirit's guidance and leading of the church over the last two thousand years can be utilized in the process of theological reflection.²⁷ In suggesting that tradition serves as a hermeneutical trajectory, pointing toward the eschatological future of the church on the basis of insights from the past, and in turn being critiqued on the basis of the eschatological vision, he hopes to overcome static views of tradition that have led to an impasse between opposing groups, as each try to justify their tradition as the valid one.

Appropriating Grenz

Grenz' revisioned theology is intended to win over two audiences. On the one hand, it is *evangelical* theology that he revisions, and his hope is to draw traditional evangelicals to a broader vision of the movement. On the other hand he writes for the *postmodern* context, and seeks to develop a theology that is true to its evangelical roots, but which is a respected player in the postmodern arena. For neither of these audiences is tradition an obvious choice as a source for theology.

However the roots of evangelicalism are traced, it is never less than a movement supportive of the Reformers' cry of *sola scriptura*. Indeed, the perceived use of tradition at the expense of the scriptures

²⁶ D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 481.

²⁷ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 94.

was a key factor in the Protestant Reformation.²⁸ In suggesting tradition as a source for theology Grenz therefore has to indicate how to move beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion from which evangelicals usually operate when appeals to tradition are made in theological construction.

Neither is the choice of tradition for a postmodern audience a self evident one. Wentzel Van Huyssteen accurately summarizes a key postmodern concern about the use of tradition when he writes,

By seeking to disturb any easy relationship with our past by arguing that our assertion of continuity is itself an invention of our need to control the destiny of our culture and society, a sceptical form of the postmodern critique of continuity thus calls into question the very possibility of tradition.²⁹

While aware of these reservations, Grenz provides four persuasive reasons for using tradition as a theological source:

- 1) Past doctrinal statements and theological models are instructive for the present theological quest and help to avoid the pitfalls from the past
- 2) Traditions serve as a reference point
- 3) Some doctrinal formulations have withstood the test of time
- 4) As a second order task, theology is undertaken by theologians who are themselves members of a faith community which spans the centuries³⁰

While Grenz' case for appropriating tradition as a conversation partner with scripture and culture is sensible, he glosses over the problems inherent in the approach. His claim that the believing community will be guided by the Spirit to discern which aspects of tradition to embrace flies in the face of the very history of the church that Grenz wishes to uphold. Even a cursory glance through church history establishes the wide range of conflicting answers that have been adopted by different segments of the faith community. Grenz is silent on how this impasse is to be overcome, other than to note the helpfulness of having the interacting voices of scripture, tradition and culture rather than a monologue by scripture alone.

A key issue Grenz leaves unresolved is therefore what criteria can be seen as valid in testing the authoritative status of any particular theological tradition. At the very least, tradition needs to be an interactive player subject to other criteria. Acknowledging the input of both scripture and culture in reaching a decision is useful, but still leaves wide and vague parameters. Openness to pneumatological

²⁸ Which is not to suggest that the reformers made no use of tradition. Attempts to literally apply *sola scriptura* are, inevitably, naïve. While the reformers held a theoretical commitment to *sola scriptura*, their hermeneutical practice is better described as *suprema scriptura*.

²⁹ J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, "Tradition and the Task of Theology," *Theology Today* 55, no. 2 (1998): 217.

³⁰ Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the Twenty First Century*, 95-97.

mediation may reflect a pious and reverent approach to theology, but its hazy boundaries make it hard to either affirm or refute.

Grenz' third source for theology is culture. This is his most controversial selection. To Grenz' suggestion that culture is a source for theology, evangelicals are likely to respond that while culture provides the location within which a particular theological system is developed, to suggest that culture is a *source* for theology goes beyond the mandate of evangelical theology.

Because Grenz writes in a nuanced way, it is dangerous to assume that one can respond to his broad categories without carefully examining the meaning he attaches to them.³¹ When he suggests culture as a source for theology, at times he seems simply to be calling for a "culture-sensitive theology," a plea that is neither original nor divisive.³² At other times he views culture as a "re-source" for theology, another essentially uncontested insight. More often, however, the suggestion is that culture is one of three conversation partners sourcing theology. This latter stance has been the cause of debate amongst those who have responded to Grenz' work. Bloesch is representative when he writes, "My problem with Grenz is that he sees mainly promise in cultural achievements and not also deception and self-aggrandizement... In a viable biblical, evangelical theology culture is neither deified nor demonized but relativized."³³

Grenz' argument is that the Spirit and community mediated interaction between culture and scripture enriches the understanding of scripture and unearths aspects of biblical truth that would otherwise be overlooked. It also allows the theologian to speak to areas not directly addressed in scripture. The whole is therefore greater as a result of the interaction, and culture has thus genuinely sourced theological conclusions.³⁴

In addition to utilizing scripture, tradition and culture as sources for theology, Grenz argues that a theology suited to the postmodern situation will utilize three focal motifs, namely the Trinity as a structural motif, community as an integrative motif and eschatology as an orienting motif.³⁵ He reasons that while

³¹ Both Carson and Erickson can be accused of responding superficially. 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), Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), Millard J. Erickson, "On Flying in Theological Fog," in *Reclaiming the Center*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

³² Stanley J. Grenz, "Culture and Spirit: The Role of Cultural Context in Theological Reflection," *Asbury Theological Journal* 55, no. 2 (2000): 40.

³³ Donald G. Bloesch, "Donald Bloesch Responds: On Grenz," in *Evangelical Theology in Transition: Theologians in Dialogue with Donald Bloesch*, ed. Elmer M. Colyer (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 186.

³⁴ Grenz' comment that "our theological reflection can draw from the so-called 'secular' sciences, because ultimately no truth is in fact secular" and later that "theology seeks to show how the postulate of God illumines all human knowledge," is important. Instead of the common evangelical reactionary default drive to that which is new in society, this approach allows the embracing of that which is not directly addressed in scripture on the basis of the insights which arise from the interaction. Stanley J. Grenz, "What Does Hollywood Have to Do with Wheaton? The Place of (Pop) Culture in Theological Reflection," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43, no. 2 (2000): 310-311.

³⁵ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 24-25.

the use of scripture, tradition and culture provide a rounded trio of conversation partners, these should be supplemented by the focal motifs of Trinity, community and eschatology. Placing contemporary theological construction in eschatological perspective, and in this way working backwards from the ultimate *telos* of human existence, helps to address the concerns of the present without being held hostage to them. It ensures that theology retains a prophetically anticipatory character. If the eschaton will see the creation of a community that reflects and interacts with the communion experienced by the triune God, focusing theological construction around Trinity, community and eschatology provides a seamless trio of motifs.

In moving from a single source for theological construction to a trio of sources filtered through three focal motifs, a fundamental methodological problem appears. Grenz uses the image of the three sources acting as conversation partners, but how does one decide if a conversation partner is speaking too loudly? Put differently, if we, for example, say tradition is a source for theological construction, we must ask "which tradition?" Some theologians have been willing to make their commitments in this regard clear. Thomas Oden, for example, has proposed that theology draw from a pyramid of sources, with scripture occupying the wide base of the pyramid, and modern theologians the narrow apex.³⁶ After scripture come the patristic interpreters of scripture. Modern sources are given less prominence because, as recent participants in the historical conversation, they have had little time to influence the overall consensus. To the question, "which tradition should have the dominant voice?" Oden answers that the ancient sources should be given greater weight than recent ones.

While Oden's model does not need to be embraced,³⁷ he has alerted us to the need for criteria to discern the appropriate "volume" of each conversation partner. Grenz has made no commitments in this regard, but seems to believe that the natural back and forth of the conversation will help set an appropriate volume for each source. By insisting that scripture remains the norming norm, the implication is that scripture has sufficient prominence to mute other sources if they are moving in a direction contrary to scripture. If this is the case, then Grenz is not methodologically transparent in his proposal that there are three conversation partners. A more nuanced approach would acknowledge that while three sources are conversing, they have significantly different amounts of influence.

Revisioning Grenz

It is Grenz' use of the term "source" that is problematic. Claiming that theological construction flows from three sources implies that any of the sources can add to or direct the path taken by the theology

³⁶ Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1992), xv-xx.

³⁷ While accepting the usefulness of seeking areas of consensus in the churches tradition, Harmon points out how fruitful times of dissent have been. Steven R. Harmon, "The Authority of the Community (of All the Saints): Toward a Postmodern Baptist Hermeneutic of Tradition," *Review and Expositor* 100 (2003): 611-612.

constructed. However a careful reading of Grenz reveals that while he treats scripture as a genuine source for theology, both tradition and culture serve more as what Maquarrie describes as “formative factors.”³⁸ By opting to use the term “source” Grenz has claimed more for tradition and culture than he is willing to give.³⁹ Those who have reacted against Grenz have usually accepted Grenz’ use of the term “source” at face value, without observing the significant limitations he places upon both tradition and culture in theological construction. The criticism is therefore often unfounded, but flows from Grenz’ misleading terminology.

If it is valid to assert that in Grenz’ method scripture serves as the source for theology and tradition and culture as formative factors, the question arises as to if Grenz’ method represents a genuinely postfoundationalist contribution to theological construction, or if it is better described as a model utilizing a “chastened” foundationalism in which other voices are encouraged to participate, so long as they essentially harmonize with the lead singer, scripture.

My conviction is that Grenz has not given sufficient attention to the manner in which the conversation between scripture, tradition and culture should be undertaken. A more nuanced approach would provide guidelines on the appropriate “volume” for each conversation partner. Volume might well be related to the topic under investigation.

If Grenz’ method is to move beyond the soft (or chastened) foundationalism he embraces, clarification of the rules for the conversation between the sources of theology is needed.

Nicholas Wolterstorff’s concept of “control beliefs” is useful at this point.⁴⁰ Wolterstorff notes that certain beliefs, be they religious, philosophical, biblical or other, exercise “control” over what can and will be believed. He writes, “Everyone who weighs a theory has certain beliefs as to what constitutes an acceptable *sort* of theory on the matter under consideration. We all have these *control* beliefs.”⁴¹ Control beliefs lead us to reject certain sorts of theories, while they are also instrumental in the theories we devise. He notes, “We want theories that are consistent with our control beliefs.”⁴² Rather than attempt to

³⁸ Macquarrie prefers to speak of formative factors as this clarifies that each factor is not on the same level or of the same importance. While acknowledging many formative factors, he discusses six, experience, revelation, scripture, tradition, culture and reason. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, Revised ed. (London: SCM, 1977), 4-18.

³⁹ For example, Grenz very modestly suggests that “the tradition of the Christian church serves as a source or a resource for theology, not as a final arbiter of theological issues or concerns but a hermeneutical context or trajectory for the Christian theological enterprise.” Even when speaking of the ecumenical consensus represented by statements such as the Apostles and Nicene Creeds Grenz cautions, “Despite their great stature, such resources do not take the place of canonical scripture as the community’s constitutive authority. Moreover, they must always and continually be tested by the norm of canonical scripture.” Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 120 & 124.

⁴⁰ See, Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976). The title of Wolterstorff’s work is intentionally contra Kant. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960).

⁴¹ Wolterstorff, 63.

⁴² Wolterstorff, 64.

eliminate control beliefs, Wolterstorff argues that they should be acknowledged and embraced. Thus he suggests that in theology “the belief-content of the theologian’s authentic commitment ought all the while to be functioning also as control over his theory-devising and theory-weighting.”⁴³

Using Wolterstorff, we can ask what control belief should be adopted to help adjudicate between the differing sources available for theological construction. Examination of Grenz reveals that his control belief is that all theories need to be evaluated in the light of scripture. To move this beyond foundationalism, he suggests that it is scripture in interactive conversation with tradition and culture, but this soon leads to a circular argument.⁴⁴

More helpful would be the adoption of a control belief that is allowed to act as a lens through which the contribution of all sources of theological construction is filtered. Attempting to adopt scripture as both a control belief and a source does not work, as a control belief cannot operate on the same level as a source unless only a single source is allowed. Grenz’ attempt to adopt scripture as one of three sources while at the same time assigning it the role of the control belief,⁴⁵ is consequently flawed.

The logical question therefore becomes, “Is there a control belief that can be adopted that is consistent with evangelicalism, which can effectively adjudicate between the differing sources for theological construction?” My proposal is that evangelicalism taps into that which it believes most deeply, namely that the gospel, the *evangel*, is, as the word literally means, good news. This can be expressed in different ways. Some slogans come to mind: “It isn’t the gospel if it isn’t good news.” Or Grenz’ own contribution “participating in what frees.”⁴⁶ A suitable synthesis is *the gospel liberates*.

An objection needs to be considered at this point. Is the adoption of a control belief another name for foundationalism? While the question cannot be lightly dismissed, in this instance, it is not. A highly specific and restrictive control belief could be seen as an alternate name for an indisputable foundation, but the control belief adopted is that *the gospel liberates*. While this could be interpreted as a propositional statement, (the truth of which needs to be defended), it is better to view it as a statement encapsulating an ethos and projecting a vision. The filtering is on the basis of this expansive ideal. Its edges are soft, and allow for the incorporation of new insights. Rather than a foundation from which all

⁴³ Wolterstorff, 82.

⁴⁴ For example: Which reading of scripture? That which is appropriate for the embedded cultural context. But which cultural context? That which is consistent with scripture...

⁴⁵ Grenz’ expression is “the norming norm.” Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 57-92.

⁴⁶ He uses the expression in an article with the same title and which suggests that the truth of the gospel is ultimately that which frees and liberates. Stanley J. Grenz, “Participating in What Frees: The Concept of Truth in the Postmodern Context,” *Review and Expositor* 100, no. Fall (2003).

other insights flow, the control belief *the gospel liberates* is enriched by its interaction with sources for theological construction such as scripture, tradition and culture.

The adoption of *the gospel liberates* as the control belief needs further explanation. At the finest moments in their history, evangelicals have been at the forefront of meaningful social change. Evangelicals attribute the abolition of slavery to the evangelical convictions of William Wilberforce and the evangelical Clapham sect. Likewise they attribute measures to protect children, the promotion of religious liberty, and the establishment of multiple humanitarian and educational programmes to those who were motivated by a vision of Christian faith forged within the evangelical camp.⁴⁷ An undergirding belief was that *the gospel liberates* those who respond to it, and that this liberation finds expression both in the present moment and throughout eternity.

There is also a shadow side. Sectors of evangelicalism have been supportive of a right wing agenda, which on occasion has revealed itself in racism, sexism, homophobia, militarism, ecological and economic exploitation, cultural insensitivity and more beside.⁴⁸

Evangelicalism's inconsistent track record in the social arena is reflective of an under developed theological method. Whilst evangelicals usually cite biblical references to justify doctrinal and ethical stances, the lens that drives the selection of the supporting biblical material is rarely acknowledged or examined. Acknowledging and privileging the control belief "*the gospel liberates*" as the lens through which all assertions are filtered would result in a transparent and consistent method. A critiquing lens calls for accountability for the morality that inevitably flows from all theological construction. While the control belief ultimately critiques what is proposed, the lens adopted shapes construction at all stages.

How would adopting the control belief *the gospel liberates* work in practice?

Each of Grenz' sources for theology is susceptible to the "which" question. Which reading of scripture will be privileged? Which tradition will be heeded? Which cultural voices will be heard? Acknowledging a bias⁴⁹ towards liberation helps answer these valid questions, and allows for a methodological transparency that is otherwise missing.

⁴⁷ For a partisan account not limited to the role played by evangelicals, but providing a useful overview of the way evangelicals understand their own contribution, see Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

⁴⁸ Jim Wallis laments, "Evangelicals in this century have a history of going along with the culture on the big issues and taking their stand on the smaller issues. That has been one of the serious problems of evangelical religion. Today, many evangelicals no longer just acquiesce to the culture on the larger economic and political issues, but actively promote the culture's worst values on these matters." Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion* (Herts: Lion, 1981), 25.

⁴⁹ I am using "bias" to help provide a range of descriptors. However, as bias has a pejorative tone, my inclination is to opt for the more positive "privileging" or the more neutral, "preference." However described, the goal is to attain methodological transparency.

It also helps to answer the question of the “volume” of each conversation partner. Privileging a hermeneutic of liberation allows shifting volumes for each conversation partner, depending on the issue at stake. We are quick to respond (not uncritically) to those voices that point in a liberating direction. Thus for example, in ethical reflection on homosexuality, the voice of culture, and especially those cultural voices that are seriously engaged in helping to understand sexual identity, should be allowed a strident voice. This is not to attempt to mute the voice of scripture, but it is to be ready to acknowledge that this is an ethical issue scripture deals with obliquely and fleetingly. On this issue, the cultural voice alerts us to the subtlety of the debate in a way that scripture does not. Alerted to the subtle innuendoes unpacked by culture, the conversation is able to deepen as broader biblical themes interact with the insights of the social sciences. The conclusions should not be anticipated in advance, nor should they be fossilised. New insights might lead to the conversation reaching a yet deeper level. Authentic conversation thus takes place within a framework that is genuinely postfoundationalist.

Perhaps then, with this modification, the potential inherent in Grenz’ proposals can be unleashed. Adopting the control belief that *the Gospel liberates* could see evangelical theology enter an era of renewal and relevance... And it would certainly stop the silliness of my Bulwer Rd days, where wine making miracles were morphed into cosy tea parties, and Romans 13 buttressed the status quo, while Amos and the quest for justice was forgotten.

Indeed, method matters – and that is my passion!