Revisioning Evangelical Theology?:
Some Critical Reflections on the Theological Project of Stanley Grenz[1]

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Abstract

This article examines the claim that the theology of Stanley Grenz provides a paradigm for the renewal of contemporary evangelical theology. It argues that Grenz's approach to the place of 'culture' in theological reflection is inconsistent and that his concept of theology as 'conversation' fails adequately to account for the uniqueness of the role played by the voice of God speaking in Scripture. Grenz's approach to the 'construction' of theological discourse accommodates a theory of language that pays too little regard to the importance of correspondence between language and extra-linguistic reality. The motif of 'community' that lies at the heart of Grenz's project is admirable yet hardly adequate as an integrative centre since it lacks clear application to the non-human creation and elevates an important but penultimate biblical theme to a position of structural ultimacy. While recognising the value and significance of Grenz's theology this article concludes that it cannot be taken as a model for revisioning evangelical theology today.

In two recent articles published in this journal, Brian Harris has explored the question of whether the theological method of Stanley Grenz can provide a paradigm for the renewal of contemporary evangelical theology.[2] My purpose in this article is to address the same question, offering an alternative perspective to the one that Harris has argued for. In doing so, I will not set out to provide a comprehensive assessment of Grenz's theology; instead, I will focus on four issues that arise out of Grenz's theological method (culture, conversation, construction and community), each of which is associated with a strength in his theology, but each of which is also associated, I will argue, with some significant weaknesses or dangers attached.

Culture

The concept of culture and its place in the theological task is an obvious starting point for a discussion of the theology of Stanley Grenz. One of the great themes of Grenz's theological work is his

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[1] This article originated as a paper for a colloquium on the theology of Stanley Grenz, hosted by the Centre for Leadership at Morling College. I am indebted to Graham Hill for the invitation to participate in that colloquium, and to Brian Harris for the stimulating dialogue that we head in the lead-up to the colloquium and on the day itself.

[2] Brian Harris, 'Can Evangelical Theology Move Beyond Foundationalism? Some Insights from the Theological Method of Stanley J. Grenz', *Crucible* 1 (2008): 1-17, and 'Why Method Matters: Insights from the Theological Method of Stanley J. Grenz', *Crucible* 2 (2009): 1-14.

insistence that theology has a missional task and a cultural situation, and that theologians need to be 'listening to culture' if they are to do their work faithfully.[3]

This is a salutary emphasis. It serves as an important corrective against the tendency of theology to become ingrown and antiquarian, and it helps to counter the naïve assumption that theologians are capable of viewing reality without perspective or bias and speaking in language that is sterile, pure and timeless. When theology loses its missional vision, both mission and theology suffer—mission drifts to the periphery of the church's life or falls captive to an unexamined, unprincipled, un-theological pragmatism; and theology, in turn, loses touch with the missional impulse at the heart of God and drifts toward a kind of linguistic docetism; that is to say, it begins to speak in language that floats above the ground without expecting or enabling real human understanding and embodiment in the practice of communities of faith.[4]

But when Grenz chooses the concept of 'culture' as the central category around which to organise his discussion of this aspect of the theological task, and when he speaks of culture as one of the three 'sources' from which a faithful theology ought to draw,[5] inevitable questions arise.

The concept of 'culture' is a synthetic concept, and a notoriously complex one,[6] describing phenomena, systems and structures that operate at multiple, inter-connected levels. When Grenz speaks of 'culture' as a *context* into which we speak as we do theology or as a contributing source to the *language* in which we frame what we say,[7] his point is hardly a controversial one. But if 'culture', in addition to these things, also embraces the ideologies and value-systems that hold sway in a particular time and place, determining what is to be considered plausible or fashionable or acceptable discourse, then the relationship between faithful theology and culture will inevitably be one that is shot through with elements of conflict and confrontation.[8]

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[3] Cf. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994): 19-20, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (2nd ed; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 189-191.

[4] Cf. Helmut Thielicke's memorable essay (from before we learnt to say 'missional'): Helmut Thielicke, 'The Godless World and the Worldless God' in *Church, Word and Spirit: Historical and Theological Essays in Honor of Geoffrey W. Bromiley*, ed. James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 291-298.

[5] Cf. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*:, 19-20 and the discussion in Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (1st ed; Louisville: Westminster, 2001), 160-163.

[6] Cf. Grenz's own discussion of the complexities of the concept in Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 130-147.

[7] Cf. the terms in which Grenz frames the discussion in Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 19-20.

[8] Cf. the passionate, idiosyncratic argument of Robert H. Gundry, *Jesus the Word According to John the Sectarian: A Paleofundamentalist Manifesto for Contemporary Evangelicalism, Especially its Elites, in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), and the more nuanced accounts in D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 6-12, 155-164 and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster, 2005), 354-359.

Yet it is this point that is consistently understated and de-emphasized in Grenz's accounts of the relationship between theology and culture. The military metaphor implied by the quotation from 2 Corinthians 10:5 that stands at the head of the opening chapter in *Theology for the Community of God* disappears almost entirely from the discussion in the remainder of the chapter,[9] and the longer discussion in the relevant chapter of *Beyond Foundationalism* offers very little hint of this sort of confrontation, apart from a brief 'cautionary note' that qualifies the otherwise tranquil and harmonious depiction of the theologian 'hearing the Spirit's voice in culture.'[10]

In practice, Grenz's theology is not always as accommodating to the voice of culture as formulations such as these might lead his readers to expect. Brian Harris finds an inconsistency, for example, between Grenz's stated theological method and the relatively conservative conclusions that he draws in his discussion of homosexuality in *Welcoming but not Affirming*.[11] According to Harris, this inconsistency is the result of a lamentable failure on Grenz's part to 'genuinely [allow] culture to source theological conclusions' and a timid retreat to the traditional foundationalist approach in which 'an inerrant and authoritative Bible' provides 'the foundation upon which all other theological insights are built.'[12] Alternatively—I would argue—the inconsistency can be viewed as a fortuitous triumph of evangelical instincts over a poorly-formulated method. Whichever viewpoint is taken, the inconsistency remains, and we cannot assume that a new generation of theologians following in the direction Grenz's methodological proposals have pointed will be restrained by the same instinctive conservatism on this issue or others like it where the voice of 'culture' clamours to be heard over the voices of Scripture and the Christian tradition.

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[9] There is a brief reference on page 4 to the polemical dimension of the theological task. Donald Bloesch comments: 'My problem with Grenz is that he sees mainly promise in cultural achievements and not also deception and self-aggrandizement.' 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), 184-187, at page 186. See also the criticisms Grenz offers of Donald Bloesch's Barth-influenced 'theology of confrontation' in Stanley J. Grenz, '"Fideistic Revelationism": Donald Bloesch's Antirationalist Theological Method' in *Evangelical Theology in Transition: Theologians in Dialogue with Donald Bloesch*, ed. Elmer M. Colyer (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 35-60, at pages 51-57.

[10] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 162. There is also an element of critique implied earlier in the chapter in the brief discussion (pp. 159-160) of 'scrutinizing' and 'responding' as part of a theological response to culture and—in a different context—a critical comment on 'overly accommodationist approaches to the relationship between theology and culture' at p. 122 of the same book.

[11] Stanley J. Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville: Westminster, 1998). Cf. Harris, 'Beyond Foundationalism?'.

[12] Harris, 'Beyond Foundationalism?,' 11. That Grenz's failure is a lamentable one in Harris's eyes is the implication of Harris's subsequent article: 'Why Method Matters', in which (p.14) he advocates 'privileging a hermeneutic of liberation' such that…'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.' 'Perhaps then,' Harris proposes, 'with this modification, the potential inherent in Grenz' proposals can be unleashed.'

Conversation

Closely related to the question of what is meant by 'culture' in Grenz's theological method and the way in which it might operate as a source for theological construction is the metaphor of a 'conversation' that Grenz employs to describe the interaction between the three sources of Scripture, tradition and culture in the process of doing theology.

The metaphor of theology as a contribution to a conversation is a valuable one, I think. Good theology knows how to listen as well as to speak, and knows how to speak in order to win the attention of listeners and provoke their engagement. But Grenz's use of the metaphor goes further than that. According to Grenz, theology is not simply *addressed* to the culture, provoking and anticipating a response; nor is it merely a *response* to the culture, with its various questions and attacks and aspirations. For Grenz, the voice of culture is *part of the conversation* that *is* theology; the theologian is to listen for 'the Spirit's voice … resound[ing] through … the media of human culture.'[13]

Grenz is quick to offer his readers the reassurance that 'whatever speaking that occurs through other media does not come as a speaking against the text… [H]earing the Spirit in the text provides the only sure canon for hearing the Spirit in culture.'[14] But the question remains: what are we to do with those voices in the culture that *do* speak against the text (assuming, of course, that the voice of 'the Spirit speaking through the text' has not already been domesticated by a culturally accommodating hermeneutic)? Or, to push the question back a step from theological construction to hermeneutics, how are we to discern which readings of Scripture (and which voices within the culture) are to be heard as 'the voice of the Spirit'?

After raising similar questions, Harris proposes that a helpful resolution of these tensions can be found in Nicholas Wolterstorff's concept of 'control beliefs'; his suggestion is that the theologian can play the role of facilitator or adjudicator in the three-way conversation between Scripture, tradition and culture, making use of a well-chosen control belief to 'adjudicate between the differing sources available for theological construction'.[15]

As is the case with Grenz, Harris's metaphor requires some teasing out. If it is at the point of theological construction that the control belief operates—'adjudicating' between the voices of Scripture, tradition and culture—then it is difficult to see how the final authority of Scripture has not

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[13] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*,162.

[14] *Beyond Foundationalism*, 162.

[15] Harris, 'Why Method Matters,' 11-12. Cf. similarly the implied metaphor on p.14 of the same article of the theologian at the mixing desk, adjusting the respective 'volumes' of the three voices in the conversation.

been supplanted by the authority of the theologian.[16] If the control belief operates further back than that, adjudicating not so much between Scripture, culture and tradition as between competing interpretations of what should count as 'the voice of the Spirit speaking through Scripture,'[17] then the problem is not so much resolved as relocated—unless the control belief that governs the hermeneutical process is one that is provided by Scripture itself.

Grenz's own proposal—'participating in what frees'[18]—and Harris's paraphrase—'the gospel liberates'[19]—both seem to me to fall short of what is required, stepping back from the concrete, particular, Christocentric nature of the gospel itself into the malleable abstractions of 'freedom' and 'liberation.'[20] A better approach takes its lead from the inner-biblical hermeneutics of the New Testament writers[21] and stubbornly insists on treating as its interpretive key the irreducibly material criterion of Jesus Christ himself, interpreting and interpreted by the texts of the Old Testament Scriptures, and made known to us in turn by his apostles.[22]

Construction

A third important feature of Grenz's theological method is his emphasis on the constructive nature of the theologian's task. Grenz rightly insists that the elements of a systematic theology are not merely an encyclopaedic collection of Bible truths;[23] they connect with one another as the inter-related components of an intricate system, and the construction of a theology involves a kind of architecture that is an expression of both the artistry of the individual theologian and the conventions of the tradition within which he or she is writing. Whilst Grenz is hardly the first to make such a point, or to

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[16] A related issue is the way in which in some contemporary writers (e.g. Harris in 'Beyond Foundationalism?,' 14, and Erickson's summation of Pinnock, cited in Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 152) the doctrine of illumination (traditionally the doctrine of 'the illumination of the Spirit', as a subjective genitive, in which the object of illumination is the human mind or heart) can function hermeneutically as a doctrine of the 'illumination of Scripture' (as an objective genitive, in which the object of illumination is the Scripture itself). The change of language implies a shift in the metaphor, from one in which Scripture is imagined as a radiant text, through which the light of the Spirit shines into the dark terrain of the human heart, the Spirit in turn opening the heart's blinded eyes to receive that radiance (cf. Psalm 19:8; 119:18, 105, 130; 2 Cor 3:18–4:6, and Calvin, *Inst.* 1.9.3, 2.2.21, 3.2.35 for a classic Protestant appropriation of the Scriptural metaphor) to one in which Scripture is imagined as a dark text, waiting to be illuminated by the light of the Spirit that shines from within the hearts of the interpreting community.

[17] This distinction between hermeneutics and theological construction as separable moments in the theological task is of course a somewhat artificial one—see especially Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 3-8.

[18] Cf. Stanley J. Grenz, 'Participating in What Frees: The Concept of Truth in the Postmodern Context', *Review and Expositor* 100 (2003): 687-693.

[19] Harris, 'Why Method Matters,' 12.

[20] The rhetoric of 'freedom', 'liberty' and 'liberation' has notoriously been employed by everyone from the social libertarians of the 1960s and 1970s to the propagandists for 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' in 2003.

[21] Cf. Kevin Vanhoozer's brief but pregnant comments on 'the interpretative practices of Jesus and the apostles' as 'the cradle of Christian theology,' in Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 22.

[22] Cf. Mark A. Seifrid, 'The Gospel as the Revelation of Mystery: The Witness of the Scriptures to Christ in Romans', *SBJT* 11 (2007): 92-103 and Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 58-86.

[23] Cf. Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 212-213.

put such an understanding into practice in the writing of a systematic theology, the emphasis that he gives to this aspect of the theological task is a helpful corrective to a common popular-level misconception.

There are, however, at least two important elements of Grenz's understanding of the nature of theological constructions that are problematic. The first is the extent to which he accommodates the postmodern notion of language as 'constructing' the world which a community inhabits,[24] and applies it to the language of theology.[25] What is left unclear is the extent to which, in Grenz's understanding, theological propositions make reference to an external reality beyond the linguistic-ecclesial system in which they are embedded. If the 'reality' we inhabit is one that we construct for ourselves, by means of the language-games of the communities to which we belong, is there any sense in which the statements we make can be tested for their truth-value by assessing the extent to which they correspond with the realities to which they refer?

Whilst some of Grenz's earlier writings argue in favour of retaining the older 'correspondence theory' of truth,[26] his later writings frequently seem to imply that this understanding of the relationship between language and reality is bound up so tightly with the 'foundationalism' Grenz wants to repudiate that transcending the latter [foundationalism] entails abandoning the former [the correspondence theory of truth], in favour of an epistemology that combines elements of pragmatism, coherentism and a Pannenberg-inspired 'eschatological realism.'[27]

Grenz's determination to find a method that transcends all forms of foundationalism is the second aspect of his understanding of the nature of theological construction that I find problematic. According to Grenz, the theological system should be imagined as a 'web' or a 'mosaic', rather than a building that rests on a foundation.[28] Grenz's language in reporting 'the demise of foundationalism' is

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[24] E.g. *Renewing the Center*, 178-179, 250-256, Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 22-23.

[25] Here, Grenz is particularly influenced by the postliberal theological project of George Lindbeck—e.g. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 80, 118—though it would be a mistake to read Grenz as simply adopting Lindbeck's approach *in toto*. One significant difference, for example, is Grenz's (Pannenberg-influenced) emphasis on the importance of 'external coherence' and the apologetic task of demonstrating 'the explicative power of the Christian worldview for illuminating human experience'. Cf. Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 203-205, 213.

[26] E.g. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 163, and (implicitly) Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 5-6, 10-12.

[27] E.g. Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 42-43, Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 190, cited in Millard J. Erickson, 'On Flying in Theological Fog' in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson et al. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 323-350: 329. 'Eschatological realism' is Grenz's way of describing his view that 'viewed through Christian lenses, there is indeed a real universe "out there". But this reality lies "before," rather than "beneath" or "around" us.' Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 254.

[28] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 199.

sweeping—despite the occasional nod in the direction of 'soft' or 'modest' foundationalism,[29] most of the time he writes as if the only brand of foundationalism available in stores was the hard, Cartesian foundationalism that demands perfect rational indubitability in its foundations, and as if all versions of foundationalism were equally discredited and untenable.[30]

On both fronts—the ambivalence about external reference and the correspondence theory of truth, and the crusade against 'foundationalism'—Grenz's approach seems a long way from both the rhetoric and the substance of the New Testament writers, all of whom in their various ways insist that the testimony they pass on is intended to be read and judged as making truth claims about events in the real world that are foundational for Christian believing and living. The prologue to Luke's gospel comes to mind, for example (Luke 1:1-4), along with the role played by the witnessing apostles in the book of Acts (e.g. Acts 1:8, 21-22); in the Johannine literature there are the opening verses of 1 John and the words in the fourth gospel about signs and testimony and faith (e.g. John 19:35, 20:30-31, 21:24-25); and perhaps most memorably of all, in 1 Corinthians 15, there are the opening paragraphs about the gospel traditions 'on which you have taken your stand' (NIV), complete with solemn recitation of the lists of eye-witnesses, 'most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep'.

Of course, the foundations which the apostles offer for Christian faith and life are not the sort of indubitable deductions from the necessary truths of universal reason demanded by Enlightenment rationalists. Nor are the gospel traditions to which they bear witness simply put forward as brute, uninterpreted facts—if that were possible. The Christ to whose death Paul testifies is a Christ who died 'for our sins, according to the Scriptures'; even in the very act of calling him 'Christ', Paul is evoking the whole grand narrative of Scripture and its messianic eschatology.[31] The pegs of eye-witness testimony that the apostles hammer into the ground are already attached to the guy-ropes of a big, complex interpretive framework. But they are still hammered into the ground, and the sides of the tent are not left flapping in the breeze.[32]

This matters, not only when it comes to the apologetic task of offering reasons for faith to the sceptical outsider; it is also crucial for the formative function of doctrine in shaping the life of the church. If believers in Corinth are not reminded of the non-negotiable anchor-points of the gospel they have

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[29] E.g. *Renewing the Center,* 196 (with reference to the nineteenth century common-sense epistemology of Thomas Reid); see also the brief discussion on pp.208-209 of the same work of the way in which Reformed Epistemologists such as Plantinga and Wolterstorff 'question strong foundationalism while not rejecting the basic foundationalist insight.'

[30] Cf. the critique of Grenz's position in J.P. Moreland and Garrett DeWeese, 'The Premature Report of Foundationalism's Demise' in *Reclaiming the Centre: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson et al. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 81-108, and the sharply critical comments in Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, 128-131.

[31] See especially Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 16-17. 'Scripture is not a secondary confirmation of a Christ-event entire and complete in itself; for scripture is not external to the Christ-event but is constitutive of it, the matrix within which it takes shape and comes to be what it is.'

[32] See especially Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 286-306.

come to believe, their faith is at risk of mutating into an empty, culturally accommodated vanity, and their lifestyle of drifting into something indistinguishable from the meaningless consumption of those who have no hope.

The situation in which we find ourselves presents similar challenges and dangers. If First Corinthians is any guide, the great epistemological requirement for faithful mission in times such as our own is not a finessing of the connections between theological language and real-world events; it is a willingness to hold together the propositional and the personal, a preparedness to build on the foundation of the apostolic testimony not just valid arguments but also a consistent, compelling lifestyle that bears witness to the truth, and is prepared to joyfully serve and suffer and sacrifice for it.[33]

Community

The fourth element of Grenz's project on which I would like to comment is his choice of 'community' as the integrative motif around which his theology revolves. Here, perhaps, we are closest to the heart of Grenz's theology, and it is here that I feel most sharply torn between appreciation and critique.

There is much to appreciate in the prominence that Grenz gives to the community of God both as the locus within which theology is to be done and as a theme concerning which theology ought to speak. In emphasising the importance of the community of God's people as theology's primary *context*, Grenz offers a helpful corrective against both the self-promoting individualism of the theologian-as-guru and the tendency of some modernist theologies to chase after the respect of the secular academy. And the prominence Grenz gives to the theme of the community within the *content* of his theology finds some obvious Biblical support in the salvation-historical narrative of a saving, gathering God, who assembles a people to be his own, and in the eternal relations of mutual love between the Father, the Son and the Spirit, within the Godhead. Grenz's particular version of social trinitarianism contains some beautifully articulated insights into the way in which the intra-Trinitarian distinctions within the economy of salvation flow out of the eternal being of God,[34] and the implications of this vision of who God is for our understanding of the shape of Christian experience[35] and of the creation in which we live.[36]

But for all the strengths—and they are very significant ones—that come with giving a greater degree of prominence to the community of God's people as a theme within the theological system, there are still

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[33] See especially Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'The Trials of Truth: Mission, Martyrdom and the Epistemology of the Cross,' in *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge*, ed. J. Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 120-156, and Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine,* 426-440.

[34] E.g. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 66-71.

[35] E.g. *Theology for the Community of God*, 74-76.

[36] E.g. *Theology for the Community of God*, 101-106.

some serious inadequacies in the concept of community if it is to serve as the integrative motif for the whole project.   One obvious limitation in the value of community as an integrative motif is its inadequacy as a foundation for an ecological theology;[37] the only significance that it implies for the non-human creation (either the present world or the new heavens and new earth to come) is as a stage on which the ecclesiocentric drama of human salvation is played out.[38]   The idea that the distant stars and the creatures of the deepest oceans might give glory to God quite apart from any interaction that we humans have with them is hard to fit into a theology that revolves around the theme of community.

Related to this concern—and perhaps larger than it—is the way in which the choice of community as integrative motif elevates a penultimate theme into the position of structural ultimacy.   Even if the concept of 'community' is read broadly enough to include not only human community but also the eternal divine community of persons within the Trinity,[39] the fact remains that has been given central place in the schema is not the unique, particular glory of the God who exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit but the generic, abstract concept of community in which we too participate by a kind of *analogia relationis*.

Augustine comments poignantly in his *Confessions* on the danger that goes with treating a penultimate good as if it were ultimate:

> The friendships of men also are endeared by a sweet bond, in the oneness of many souls. On account of all these, and such as these, is sin committed; while through an inordinate preference for these goods of a lower kind, the better and higher are neglected,—even Thou, our Lord God, Thy truth, and Thy law. For these meaner things have their delights, but not like unto my God, who hath created all things; for in Him doth the righteous delight, and He is the sweetness of the upright in heart (Ps 64:10).[40]

In his own eschatology—which, like Grenz's, is unmistakeably and gloriously social and ecclesial[41]— Augustine emphatically anchors the penultimate sweetness of human community in the larger, deeper reality of the glory of God:

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[37] Cf. John Jefferson Davis, 'Ecological "Blind Spots" in The Structure and Content of Recent Evangelical Systematic Theologies', *JETS* 43 (2000), 273-286 and Brian Harris, 'Straddling the Tasman: The Relevance of Grenz's Revisioned Evangelical Theology in the Australasian Context', *Princeton Theological Review* 12 (2006), 5-10.

[38] E.g. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 112-115.

[39] As Grenz hints in *Renewing the Center*, 223-224.

[40] *Confessions* 2.5.10 (ET in *NPNF* 1:57).

[41] Cf. the discussion in Brian Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), 146-148.

> Who would not long for that City whence no friend goeth out, whither no enemy entereth, where is no tempter, no seditious person, no one dividing God's people, no one wearying the Church in the service of the devil… There shall be peace made pure in the sons of God, all loving one another, seeing one another full of God, since God shall be all in all. We shall have God as our common object of vision, God as our common possession, God as our common peace.[42]

At his best, Grenz is capable of echoing this theocentric, Augustinian note.[43] At his worst,[44] he can write as if community itself, as a generic phenomenon, was the heart of the Christian gospel, and as if the greatest blessing that the church held out to the world in mission was simply a better and brighter version of that universal experience and aspiration.[45]

Conclusions

What conclusions should we draw about the usefulness of Grenz's theological project for the 'revisioning' of biblical community? Personally, I find much to be thankful for in Grenz's theology—in his determination to write a theology that acknowledges the uniqueness of the culture in which we live and the missional vocation of the church within that culture; in the reminder that he offers of the importance of listening to the culture of today and the tradition of the church as part of the theologian's task; in the attention that he pays to the constructive nature of the theological project and the ordered, inter-related architecture of a theological system; and in the account that he gives of the intra-Trinitarian relations and the centrality of the church of Jesus Christ within the saving purposes of God. But these very strengths—at least according to my reading of Grenz—come with significant weaknesses in the way in which he articulates them, and pose significant dangers for God's people if Grenz's vision is adopted in its totality as the new vision for evangelical theology. His missional openness to culture is articulated in categories that can have the effect of weakening theology's defences against the threat of cultural accommodation. The way in which he deploys the conversation metaphor as a model for theological hermeneutics runs the risk of elevating the authority of the

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[42] *On the Psalms* 85.7, ET in *NPNF* 8:407. Cf. *The City of God* 19.13.17.

[43] E.g. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 486-488.

[44] For example, when he attempts to reformulate the truth question in 'communitarian terms' as, 'Which theologizing community articulates an interpretive framework that is able to provide the transcendent vision for the construction of the kind of world that the particular community is itself seeking?' (*Renewing the Center,* 289)—a reformulation that not only borders on incomprehensibility, but also runs the risk of recasting theological reflection into an exercise in collective aspirational story-telling, in which statements such as 'God exists in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, equal in substance and united in love' are to be interpreted and evaluated as meaning nothing more than 'We are the kind of community that treasures and longs for relationships of perichoretic mutual love.'

[45] The fine-print of Grenz's proposal acknowledges that the various religious communities of the world 'espouse differing visions and embody differing understandings of what actually constitutes true community' (*Renewing the Center*, 288), but the way in which he has organised his whole system around the concept of community still implies an understanding in which this differentiation between species is subordinated to the elevation of the common genus to which they belong.

listening community over the functional authority of God speaking in Scripture. The model that he offers for how theological constructions relate to reality loosens the connections between theology and the realities that it purports to be describing and weakens the foundations of Christian life and witness. And his reorientation of the theological system around the concept of community effectively treats something good but penultimate as if it were ultimate. There is much that we can learn, and keep learning, from the theology of Stanley Grenz. But I do not think that his theology is the formula for revisioning evangelical theology in our time.