

## Can Evangelical Theology Move Beyond Foundationalism? Some Insights from the Theological Method of Stanley J. Grenz

Brian Harris

Baptist Theological College of Western Australia

### Abstract:

*Stanley Grenz has proposed a method for theological construction that moves beyond foundationalism and which is appropriate for a postmodern context. In this article the building blocks of Grenz's method are explored before an examination of the application of his method in his text on homosexuality, Welcoming but Not Affirming, is undertaken. Though Grenz proposes that culture should serve as a source for theological construction, in this text he is only able to utilize cultural insights on a highly selective basis, which raises questions as to whether his method is genuinely postfoundational. The article argues that this highlights the difficulty evangelicals find when they attempt to embrace a postfoundational method.*

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In their 2001 publication, Stanley Grenz and John Franke proclaim their intention of devising a theological method that moves *Beyond Foundationalism*, with the hope that such a method will, as the subtitle of their text proclaims, assist in *Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*.<sup>1</sup> They are especially concerned that their method will be acceptable to the evangelical community, noting, with slight exaggeration, 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 produced numerous works concerned with the content and exposition of theology. Yet they have given little attention to methodological concerns.<sup>2</sup>

In his work on theological method Grenz has succeeded in devising a model that has occasioned much comment amongst evangelicals. There are those who see great promise in his proposals, Robert Webber suggesting that Grenz is the representative theologian of the

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Grenz and Franke, 13.

emerging church.<sup>3</sup> Pentecostal theologians have been largely approving of his work, finding that his pneumatological emphasis helps rectify some of the shortcomings they have perceived in traditional evangelical theology.<sup>4</sup> However, while many have been enthusiastic about his insights, others have been sceptical, questioning whether his proposals will lead to a theology that no longer reflects evangelical convictions.<sup>5</sup>

Given that Grenz's particular concern is to devise a theological method that moves beyond foundationalism and which is appropriate for the postmodern context, the obvious question to ask is whether evangelical theology can move beyond foundationalism, or if such a move would undermine its claim to be evangelical.

Elizabeth Barnes suggests that discussions on both postmodernism and postfoundationalism now constitute "the primary conversation in systematic theology in the academy."<sup>6</sup> For those not familiar with the discussion, a brief summary, with a focus on its relevance to the theological method of Grenz, is appropriate.

Deciding what the "post" in postmodernism refers to requires some insight into modernity. From the perspective of this article, particular aspects of significance include modernity's:

- 1) Optimistic assessment of knowledge, which it sees as certain, objective, good and accessible. Correspondence theories of truth are accepted (truth is that which corresponds to reality), as is the belief in the-world-as-it-is. Knowledge is seen to be intrinsically valuable, which is coupled with a conviction that increased knowledge will lead to a better world.
- 2) Belief that the human intellect is the arbiter of truth. Reason, not intuition, is the path to truth.<sup>7</sup>
- 3) Belief in the autonomous self, existing outside of particular traditions, or social conventions.
- 4) Belief that truth is objective rather than relational.

Key paradigm shifts embraced by postmodernism include:

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<sup>3</sup> Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 92.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Cross' tribute to Grenz in the opening footnote of his article. Terry L. Cross, "A Proposal to Break the Ice: What Can Pentecostal Theology Offer Evangelical Theology," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 10, no. 2 (2002). Offsetting Cross, see Smith's plea that Pentecostal theology distance itself from evangelical theology. However, Smith's concerns are largely addressed by Grenz's method. James K. A. Smith, "The Closing of the Book: Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and the Sacred Writings," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11 (1997).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the collection of essays in *Reclaiming the Center*, which were largely written to rebut Grenz's proposals, particularly those found in *Renewing the Center*. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds., *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004). Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Barnes, "Jesus Christ: The Church's One Foundation," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 25, no. 2 (1998): 176.

<sup>7</sup> This should be qualified by acknowledging the romantic reaction against rationalism within modernity.

- 1) A denial of objective knowledge and its replacement by interpretation. Linked to this is the move from a realist or objective view of truth to a constructionist outlook. Because all explanations of reality are seen as constructions, deconstruction is required. Deconstruction reveals the control mechanisms implicit in ideas. It identifies the stakeholders behind ideas, and thus helps to break the control that the deconstructed ideas might have over beliefs and actions.
- 2) The affirmation of local narratives rather than metanarratives. Lyotard's definition is widely quoted: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives."<sup>8</sup> Linked to this is the loss of the idea of a universe or of universals, and a respect for the local and the particular. This leads to a prizing of difference rather than of uniformity.
- 3) The conviction that truth is relational rather than objective. It can also be subjective (my truth and my objectivity).
- 4) A denial of a direct correspondence between language and the-world-as-it-is, to a belief in a symbolic, socially created world, constructed through language, with all words being used in accordance with socially constructed linguistic rules, or to use the concept developed in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, "language games."<sup>9</sup> George Lindbeck applies and extends Wittgenstein's thinking to the theological arena, developing his cultural linguistic approach which suggests that religious doctrines rather than serving as first order truth claims (propositionally asserting things to be objectively true or false) should rather be seen as the rules of grammar, having a regulative function for the believing community, shaping its thinking and experience. Doctrines are therefore not objective statements about God, but rather provide the primary rules for speaking about God.<sup>10</sup> Lindbeck's thinking has been influential in the development of Grenz's theological method.
- 5) A stress on holism and inter-connectedness. Truth, (to the extent that one can talk of truth) is contextual.

Foundationalism in theological construction is closely linked to the modern era. Working from the assumption that the demonstration of objective truth requires an undisputed foundation from which truth claims can be made, theologians attempted to define what this foundation could be. Though conservative and liberal theologians reached different conclusions as to the appropriate foundation for theology, both essentially adopted the same method for theological construction, namely that of identifying a sure and certain foundation from which all other truth claims could flow. Foundationalism assumes that a system of knowledge must include a class of beliefs that are immune from challenge (for example, the claims of scripture) and that

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<sup>8</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984), xxiv.

<sup>9</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953).

<sup>10</sup> See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

reasoning within the system proceeds only in one direction, from the foundational belief to others, but not in the reverse direction.

Nancey Murphy argues that in the modern era both liberal and conservative theologians shared foundationalism's methodological assumptions, and that the divide between them is therefore not as large as is usually assumed. The differences resulted from conservatives choosing an inerrant Bible as their undisputed foundation, while liberals assigned the foundational role to religious experience.<sup>11</sup> Methodologically, both assumed that foundationalism was the appropriate paradigm, albeit that the foundation chosen took the theology constructed in different directions.

Murphy, whom Grenz acknowledges as being influential for his thinking,<sup>12</sup> suggests that three features of postmodernism could potentially help overcome the impasses of the past.

First, in postmodernism epistemological holism replaces foundationalism by its insistence that it is not possible to distinguish between basic (foundational) beliefs and non-basic beliefs. There is a web of connectedness. Holism means that each belief is supported by its ties to its neighbouring beliefs and ultimately to the whole.

Second, in the philosophy of language the approach is also holistic, with meaning being sought in both the linguistic and non-linguistic context.

Third, postmodernism is anti-reductionist, with the recognition of the two-way influence between part and whole. The whole influences the part and the part the whole.

Murphy goes on to ask what the implications of this would be for a conservative (evangelical) theology constructed within a postmodern framework, and what would be its distinguishing features, and suggests that while reflecting the holism called for, it would also need to hold on to certain aspects considered to be an integral part of evangelical theology. She writes:

First it must maintain some special role for Scripture over against experience as authority for theology. Second, it must provide for special acts of God, and third, it must provide for the possibility of making truth claims for Christianity. This latter requirement involves both a definition of truth that is compatible with postmodern philosophy and criteria for judging the truth of a religion.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1996), Nancey Murphy, "Philosophical Resources for Postmodern Evangelical Theology," *Christian Scholars Review* 26, no. 2 (1996).

<sup>12</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, ix.

<sup>13</sup> Murphy, "Philosophical Resources for Postmodern Evangelical Theology," 194.

Murphy's proposals and insights, together with those of Lindbeck, are key ingredients that help shape Grenz's methodological revisioning. Taking seriously the critique of both modernity and foundationalism, Grenz attempts to devise a theological method suitable for a postmodern era and which moves beyond foundationalism. A large part of his solution is found in suggesting a shift from a single foundation for theology (scripture) to a trio of theological sources, scripture, tradition and culture. While scripture remains the norming norm for theology, the three sources work together as conversation partners, with truth statements being tested for coherence rather than simple correspondence. Rather than truth being affirmed in propositions (as in the old evangelical paradigm), it is discerned within the narrative flow of the community of faith. The community understands its experience in the light of its grammar (doctrines), which provides the frame within which religious discourse takes place. The grammar in turn is shaped by the ongoing dialogue between the three sources for theology, scripture, tradition and culture. These sources are structured around three focal motifs, the Trinity, community and eschatology. The role of the Spirit in theological construction is affirmed, and Grenz argues that theological conclusions reached are pneumatologically mediated and that such mediation should be communally discerned.<sup>14</sup>

In devising his method, Grenz is mindful of the particular challenges posed by the postmodern context, and argues that just as theologians should not have uncritically adopted the assumptions of modernity (albeit that they sometimes did), they should not uncritically adopt postmodern assumptions. In particular, he is not willing to abandon the quest for universal truth, arguing that the Christ event stands against the postmodern loss of a centre (Christ being the world's one true centre).<sup>15</sup> Arguing against the postmodern view that the world is composed of incompatible and competing local narratives, he writes that "because of our faith in Christ, we cannot totally affirm the central tenet of postmodernism... the rejection of the metanarrative."<sup>16</sup> He is however responsive to many areas of concern raised by the postmodern critique of modernity, and is hopeful that his method will lead to the construction of a theology that is post-individualistic, post-rationalistic, post-dualistic and post-noeticentric.<sup>17</sup>

Before attempting to decide if Grenz's method genuinely moves us beyond foundationalism whilst remaining a genuinely evangelical method, let us unpack some of the basic building blocks of his method more fully.

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<sup>14</sup> For the fullest explanation of Grenz's method, see Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*. An earlier version is to be found in Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the Twenty First Century* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1993) 61-108, 37-62. Also see Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era*, 184-217.

<sup>15</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 163-64.

<sup>16</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 164.

<sup>17</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 167-74.

Grenz suggests that the three sources for theological construction are scripture, tradition and culture.<sup>18</sup>

Suggesting scripture as a source for theological construction is something of a non-negotiable for any theological method that wishes to be considered evangelical.<sup>19</sup> 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 standard conclusion. There is therefore nothing inherently novel in Grenz's suggestion that scripture serve as theology's norming norm.<sup>20</sup> Of greater interest are the shifts in emphasis proposed by Grenz.

Grenz laments that postfundamentalist evangelical theology has continued to adopt a propositionalist approach, seeking to discover and articulate the one doctrinal system embedded in the Bible.<sup>21</sup> Rather than follow a propositional program, Grenz suggests that theology should be seen as the "reflection on the faith commitment of the believing community."<sup>22</sup> 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."<sup>23</sup> He argues that such loyalty is misguided, as it is unnecessary because the Bible's status as the foundational text of the faith community guarantees its place of importance in the theological enterprise. Grenz's approach at this point 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."<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup> The constituting

<sup>18</sup> A modified version of the following synopsis of Grenz's three sources was first presented at a conference on Evangelical Identities. Brian Harris, "Stanley Grenz's Theological Method: Revisioning Evangelical Theology or Business as Usual?" (paper presented at the Evangelical Identities Conference, Auckland, 29 March 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Bebbington can be seen as representative when he suggests that biblicism is one of the defining characteristics of evangelicalism. David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 12-14.

<sup>20</sup> Together with Franke, Grenz unpacks his understanding of this in Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 57-92.

<sup>21</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 60-63. We should not accept Grenz's analysis uncritically, as he is a little one-sided in his presentation of propositionalist approaches. See, for example, Helseth's critique of Grenz's 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).

<sup>22</sup> 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.).

<sup>23</sup> Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 93.

<sup>24</sup> Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 94.

<sup>25</sup> The understanding of truth would be of truth as correspondence with objective reality.

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's stance seems a short step from relegating the Bible to a text of historical (but not authoritative) importance. 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 second aspect of Grenz's 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."<sup>26</sup> This, however, is a false dichotomy. Brand validly 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.<sup>27</sup>

Grenz then moves to an important stage in his thinking, viz. that the meaning and impact of scripture is pneumatologically mediated. He laments that the theological method of most Protestant theologians separates bibliology and pneumatology.<sup>28</sup>

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 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).

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<sup>26</sup> 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).

<sup>27</sup> Chad O. Brand, "Defining Evangelicalism," in *Reclaiming the Center*, 298. Smith, in his work on 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." Smith, "The Closing of the Book: Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and the Sacred Writings," 61.

<sup>28</sup> 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. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994).

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 is aware that some evangelicals would believe that the approach has Barthian overtones where the Word of God shifts from being authoritatively inspired Word to divinely illuminated Word. In this limited sense, the Word of God becomes the Word of God in interaction with a particular person or community.<sup>29</sup>

Grenz's 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's proposal, Carson complaining, "I cannot see how Grenz's approach to Scripture can be called 'evangelical' in any useful sense."<sup>30</sup>

Grenz's 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.<sup>31</sup> 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 historically led to an impasse between opposing groups, as each tries to justify their tradition as the valid one.

Grenz's revisioned theology is intended to win over two audiences. On the one hand, it is *evangelical* theology that he revises, and he attempts 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.

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<sup>29</sup> Grenz is well aware of the reservation evangelicals have of Barth, and especially of the perception they have (arguably unjustified) of the subjectivity implicit within his approach. He writes: "Several recent theologies of Word and Spirit have come close to subjectivism. Thinkers influenced by Karl Barth and neoorthodox Word of God theologies routinely differentiate between the Bible and the transcendent Word in a manner that seems to reduce biblical authority to our subjective reception of the divine address that confronts us through the human words of the Bible." Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 67.

<sup>30</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 481.

<sup>31</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 94.

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 was a key factor in the Protestant Reformation.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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 centuries.<sup>34</sup>

While Grenz's 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 pneumatologically guided 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.

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<sup>32</sup> 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*.

<sup>33</sup> J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, "Tradition and the Task of Theology," *Theology Today* 55, no. 2 (1998): 217. While acknowledging Van Huyssteen's point, it is worth noting that many postmodern theorists would argue that as human identity is the product of culture and language, tradition is all that we have ever had.

<sup>34</sup> Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the Twenty First Century*, 95-97.

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

Grenz's third source for theology is culture. This is his most controversial selection. To Grenz's 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.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> At other times he views culture as a "resource" 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's 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."<sup>37</sup>

Grenz's 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.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> 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 Kjos 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 Kjos Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, "Culture and Spirit: The Role of Cultural Context in Theological Reflection," *Asbury Theological Journal* 55, no. 2 (2000): 40.

<sup>37</sup> 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.

<sup>38</sup> Grenz's 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): 310-11.

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.<sup>39</sup> He reasons that while 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? If conversation partners contradict each other, how are we to adjudicate between their conflicting claims? If a theological method is to move beyond foundationalism, the classic evangelical conviction that primacy must be given to the voice of scripture will no longer be indulged. Simply deferring to the voice of scripture is a return to foundationalism, with an inerrant and authoritative Bible the foundation upon which all other theological insights are built.

Grenz's own approach to this dilemma is seen in his text on homosexuality, *Welcoming but Not Affirming*.<sup>40</sup> It provides a test case of whether he has really moved beyond foundationalism, because it helps us to assess if he genuinely allows culture to source theological conclusions, largely because the major clamour for evangelicals to change their understanding of homosexuality has not primarily come from either church historians or biblical scholars, but from those who are aware of the significant shift in public attitudes to homosexuality in recent years.<sup>41</sup> What was once largely portrayed as a matter of individual personal morality is now more commonly seen as a human rights issue closely inter-woven with the question of social justice.<sup>42</sup> The context in which evangelicals are trying to

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<sup>39</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 24-25.

<sup>40</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

<sup>41</sup> This is not to suggest that there is not lively debate amongst evangelicals as to either what constitutes a valid biblical approach to homosexuality or a valid understanding of the church's tradition on the matter. It is simply to note that the more pressing questions seem to surround the role context and culture (or science and psychology) should play in arriving at an ethical response to the issue.

<sup>42</sup> So e.g. Loughlin chastises the church for inconsistency in advocating for the rights of homosexuals outside the church while denying them to homosexuals within the church. Gerard Loughlin, "Gathered at the Altar: Homosexuals and Human Rights," *Theology and Sexuality* 10, no. 2 (2004).

understand scripture and the traditional attitudes of the church to homosexuality has thus undergone considerable change. If culture is genuinely a source for theology, it would seem reasonable to expect that a changed cultural context might lead to different theological conclusions being drawn.

To Grenz's credit, in attempting to devise an evangelical response to homosexuality he stays close to his proposed theological method. He systematically works through biblical texts and themes which deal with homosexuality, exploring alternate understandings of these texts, but concluding that they teach that all forms of genital intercourse must be between a male and a female who are married to each other. Likewise, while willing to acknowledge that some alternative readings of the church's tradition are possible, he concludes that the overwhelming weight of the church's tradition is against legitimizing homosexual relationships. Two of his three conversation partners in theological construction therefore speak with resonant voices.

For Grenz, the unacknowledged dilemma comes from his third source, culture. A significant cultural shift has taken place in both the understanding of homosexuality and in attitudes to same sex relationships. Philip Culbertson points out that

In today's counselling world, the American Psychiatric Association of Social Workers, the American Psychological Association, the National Association of Social Workers, and the National Association for Marriage and Family Therapy state that it is unethical for members to treat gayness as an emotional disorder or to discriminate in any way on the basis of sexual orientation.<sup>43</sup>

In an article in *Time* magazine in 1982, Richard Schickel argued that a more sympathetic cinematic portrayal of homosexuality was starting to emerge.<sup>44</sup> The observation has proved valid, and has escalated in recent years.<sup>45</sup> Though Grenz advocates a place for popular culture in theological construction,<sup>46</sup> he does not pay serious attention to the significance of the shift in attitudes to homosexuality, which brings into question the seriousness of his claim that culture is a source for theological construction.

In fairness to Grenz, he does endeavour to interact with contemporary culture, and from the opening chapter of the book attempts to understand, to use the title of the first chapter, "Homosexuality in Contemporary Practice." However, what is quickly apparent is the selective

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<sup>43</sup> Philip Culbertson, *Caring for God's People: Counseling and Christian Wholeness* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 191.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Schickel, "Gays to the Fore, Cautiously," *Time*, March 22 1982. Films he cites are *Victor/Victoria*, *Making Love*, and *Personal Best*.

<sup>45</sup> A good example is the 2005 movie *Brokeback Mountain*, which portrays the homosexual love relationship between two men in the American West between 1963 and 1983. It was nominated for eight Academy Awards and won three.

<sup>46</sup> See, Grenz, "What Does Hollywood Have to Do with Wheaton? The Place of (Pop) Culture in Theological Reflection."

nature of the interaction with contemporary culture. Thus, for example, Grenz quickly embarks upon the search for causes of homosexuality. The search for a cause reflects an ideological bias, as the causes examined largely presuppose some form of pathology.<sup>47</sup> A similar search for the cause or causes of heterosexuality is not undertaken. If one works from the premise that homosexuality reflects some form of shortfall, its practice is unlikely to be sanctioned. By contrast, if the premise is that homosexuality is a normal, albeit minority, preference, the ethical evaluation is likely to be different.<sup>48</sup> Even as he embarks on the search for causes of homosexuality Grenz acknowledges that, “since the mid-twentieth century the belief that homosexuality is a sexual orientation and that it may be the normal condition for some people has gained wide acceptance in professional and academic circles,” but the implications of this statement do not impact what follows.<sup>49</sup>

In describing the contemporary context, Grenz portrays two worlds. The first is the world in which most evangelicals live. It is one where homosexuality is seen as an abnormal condition whose causes must be redressed so that the homosexual orientation can be changed. Some evangelical psychologists and counsellors are cited to help support this stance.<sup>50</sup> An alternative view, which “has gained widespread acceptance in professional and academic circles,”<sup>51</sup> argues that the privileging of heterosexuality is the root cause of widespread homophobia. To counter this, the normality of homosexuality must be affirmed and celebrated. In such a world, any effort to change a person’s homosexual orientation is inappropriate.

Here we come to the heart of the quandary in Grenz’s method. When it comes to the question of homosexuality, allowing culture as a source for theology (and theological ethics) produces a majority voice that is discordant with the classic evangelical stance on homosexuality, and a much softer voice that supports the traditional stance. Which should be heeded? Consistent with Grenz’s method is his shift to the other two sources for theology, scripture and tradition. The cultural voices that are privileged will be those that cohere with the biblical message and the tradition of the church. While there is a certain “common sense” feel to this, it is not unproblematic. In an alternative scenario, would evangelicals be willing to abandon the voice of scripture if the insights of tradition and culture weighed against it? If not, does the method really move beyond foundationalism?

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<sup>47</sup> Grenz is fully aware that he lays himself open to this charge: “I embark on this task conscious, however, that a number of writers look askance at the research into the ‘causes’ of homosexuality. They worry that these endeavours are intrinsically hostile to homosexual persons...” Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality*, 14.

<sup>48</sup> The tendency to confuse a “minority preference” with an “abnormal preference” is one that must be avoided. Indeed, if homosexual people are a minority group, it could be argued that the ethical focus should shift to the safeguarding that the Bible encourages for vulnerable groups. The issue is then not one of preventing certain perverse behaviours, but of protecting a susceptible group as a matter of social justice.

<sup>49</sup> Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality*, 14.

<sup>50</sup> Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming*, 25-30.

<sup>51</sup> Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming*, 14.

A further problem in Grenz's attempt to move beyond foundationalism is also apparent. At the heart of Grenz's postfoundational revisioning of the role of scripture in sourcing theological insights is the need to reclaim not only the doctrine of the inspiration of scripture, but its illumination by the Spirit. Grenz's proposal is that this illumination comes to the faithful community of God in their historic and geographic locatedness and that it is pneumatologically mediated and communally received. Such an approach leads to a greater tentativeness in reaching theological conclusions, and potentially allows a changed context to lead to new conclusions. The more provisional and open contours of this stance help to justify the claim that this is a move to a postfoundational approach to scripture.

The test comes in whether Grenz is prepared to accept the outcomes of such an approach. In what seems a fairly close adherence to Grenz' proposals, Glennon outlines how two Baptist congregations came to the conclusion that they should adopt an approach to homosexuality that is both welcoming and affirming.<sup>52</sup> The conclusions reached by these two congregations are very different to those reached by Grenz in *Welcoming but Not Affirming*, where, rather than this revisioned understanding of biblical illumination being implemented when the biblical text is approached, a standard evangelical exegesis of the text is undertaken. The text is assumed to be inspired and therefore able to be propositionally analysed to yield timeless truths and propositions. In doing this, Grenz adopts a method that is in no way remarkable for evangelical ethics, but which clearly falls short of the revisioned postfoundational evangelical method that he proposes.<sup>53</sup>

Having three sources for theology compounds the hermeneutical dilemma – which understanding of scripture, which tradition and which view of culture? The model adopted by Grenz in *Welcoming but Not Affirming* suggests that it is via classical biblical exegesis, a mainstream understanding of tradition and the selective use of culture, where only evidence that supports the insights from the first two sources is allowed.<sup>54</sup> Not too surprisingly, as in this instance, this leads to conclusions that are perfectly consistent with the Evangelical tradition, but it is unconvincing to claim that the method used to source these conclusions

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<sup>52</sup> Glennon's thought-provoking study outlines the process of discernment which led to two Baptist congregations adopting both a welcoming and affirming stance on homosexuality, and which led to their subsequent disaffiliation from their denomination. Fred Glennon, "Must a Covenantal Sexual Ethic Be Heterocentric? Insights from Congregations," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 28, no. 3 (2001).

<sup>53</sup> Grenz also fails to grapple with the emergence of "Queer hermeneutics" which sometimes adopts a method not dissimilar to the one Grenz proposes. So, for example, Gray Temple, using the grid of scripture, tradition and reason (what he calls "the three-stranded chord of Anglican authority"), arrives at very different conclusions to Grenz, and in a quest for "the grace of relational stability" argues for "same-sex unions as a sacramental option." Gray Temple, *Gay Unions: In the Light of Scripture, Tradition and Reason* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004), 21, 129.

<sup>54</sup> This is a strong accusation, but is seen in Grenz's insistence, for example, that scientific research has not established that homosexual attraction "is either innate or an ineradicable trait that for this reason can be said to be normal for some persons." Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality*, 32. We earlier noted Culbertson's statement that such a position flies in the face of the findings of, amongst others, the American Psychiatric Association of Social Workers, the American Psychological Association, the National Association of Social Workers, and the National Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. If the views of mainstream representative bodies from the social sciences are disallowed, one is led to the conclusion that the insights of the social sciences are being used selectively. Culbertson, *Caring for God's People: Counseling and Christian Wholeness*, 191.

moves “beyond foundationalism.” At best, Grenz’s application of his model represents a chastened foundationalism. In other words, Grenz is willing to embrace a foundationalism which allows sources other than scripture to be engaged with during theological construction, but which ensures that scripture’s inspired (but not illuminated) voice can override any dissenting voices. If this is a move beyond foundationalism, the distance covered is extremely modest.

While not doubting the integrity of Grenz’s effort to devise a method that moves beyond foundationalism, Grenz’s failure to capitalize on the potential inherent within his method raises the question of whether evangelical theology can renounce foundationalism and remain evangelical theology. Is it necessary for scripture to remain as the undisputed foundation for all theological conclusions that wear the label of evangelical theology?

In Grenz’s own work there are times where he seems to move beyond foundationalism. The opening volume of his incomplete<sup>55</sup> series *The Matrix of Christian Theology*,<sup>56</sup> develops a theological anthropology that engages the concerns of a postmodern culture in a genuinely postfoundational manner. The difference between *The Social God and the Relational Self* and *Welcoming but Not Affirming* lies in Grenz’s ability to effectively appropriate the insights of the social sciences in *The Social God*, whereas he feels compelled to renounce them in *Welcoming but Not Affirming*. Though the majority of evangelicals may feel comfortable with Grenz’s selective use of the social sciences (or culture), from a methodological perspective it reflects that Grenz is only willing to move beyond foundationalism when he is confident that the extra biblical voices will help confirm the voice of scripture. When this is not the case, he lapses back to foundationalism. In doing so he signals that any attempt by evangelicals to move beyond foundationalism will, at best, be inconsistent.

Grenz’s inability to move beyond a chastened foundationalism in *Welcoming but Not Affirming* should alert us to the potential pitfalls in embracing a genuinely postfoundational method. If a hallmark of evangelicalism is to continue to be its insistence that scripture serves as the norming norm in theological construction, the effort to construct an evangelical theological method that embraces postfoundationalism might prove more difficult than initially imagined.

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<sup>55</sup> Grenz died suddenly in 2005 at the age of 55. Only two of the proposed six volumes of *The Matrix of Christian Theology* were completed.

<sup>56</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei, The Matrix of Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

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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's 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. 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.<sup>23</sup> Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the Twenty First Century*, 112. *Domesticating the Gospel: A Review of Stanley J. Grenz's* *Renewing the Center*. D. A. Carson. Chapter six, "Evangelical Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism," summarizes the book Grenz jointly wrote with John R. Franke entitled *Beyond Foundationalism*.<sup>2</sup> Grenz gives us his take on "the rise and demise of foundationalism in philosophy" (185) before offering his own alternative. Here, he says, he has been influenced especially by Wolfhart Pannenberg and George Lindbeck. Grenz Stanley J. and John R. Franke. *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*. -Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. Jan 1984. Lindbeck George. While philosophical non-foundationalism has been appropriated by theologians like Stanley Grenz and Nancey Murphy as a way to ensure theological justification and autonomy, the anti-realist non-foundationalist themes are deeply problematic and impact adversely on Grenz's and Murphy's proposals. Bruce Marshall offers another way to appropriate non-foundationalism that avoids anti-realism while explaining justification and truth within a Trinitarian framework. In *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, Grenz and Franke make a noteworthy and admirable plea to evangelicals to avoid irrelevance in their presentation of the truth of Christianity in the postmodern world by set[ting] themselves to the task of grappling with the implications of our setting, lying as it does after modernity. <sup>1</sup> However, they abandon a correspondence view of truth in favor of a constructionist view, thereby exposing the Christian message to the danger of self defeat. <sup>2</sup> Archie J. Spencer, *Culture, Community and Commitments: Stanley J. Grenz on Theological Method*, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57, no. 3 (2004): 340. <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>4</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 15. Evangelical theology is "still in the trajectory" set by *Revisioning*, Franke said. Grenz's ambitious decade-long undertaking rightly earned him the distinction of evangelicalism's leading theologian, but Franke, associate professor of theology at Biblical Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, added: "I can understand other folks, more conservative, not feeling that way. But even where people don't agree with him, he is raising questions that even conservative theologians need to be raising. Even for folks who really can't agree with him, they are still benefiting from the way he was raising the issues." Some conservatives now want even to deny Grenz the "evangelical" label.