The article is devoted to the study of Stanley J. Grenz’s communitarian ecclesiology. Grenz sees the postmodern situation as a helpful perspective, which challenges contractual ecclesiology that is oriented to the individual. Grenz sees community as a foundation for one’s personal identity formation. In Grenz’s mind, personal identity is never a private reality, but has a communal element, for it is shaped by the community in which the person is a participant. Community, therefore, is integral to epistemology, to our identity formation, and to the sustaining of character, virtue, and values. Community forms the content of the Kingdom of God and is the more central motif in the Bible. Grenz concludes that Kingdom is a “sphere of existence” in which humanity is called to live. The church then “is a foretaste of the eschatological reality” that God will bring to existence one day and thus is “a sign of the kingdom”. The church is the fundamental vehicle for mirroring divine image. Participation in the Christian community includes reforming one’s personal narrative in accordance with the story of Jesus as well as accepting the story of this Christian community as one’s own.

Key words: Stanley J. Grenz; communitarian ecclesiology; ecclesiological theology; community; Church.

Stanley J. Grenz (1950-2005), a Baptist scholar from Canada, was characterized as belonging to this group of theologians [Erickson, 1997: 30-31; Webber, 2002: 77-79].

Purpose of the research is investigation of Stanley J. Grenz’s communitarian ecclesiology and ecclesiological theology.

Research and results.
Communitarian Ecclesiology and Ecclesiological Theology

While keeping the valid and helpful insights of individualism Grenz wants to rediscover a communal tradition, as it has been noted above. In this case, Grenz sees the postmodern situation as a helpful perspective, which challenges contractual ecclesiology that is oriented to the individual. He acknowledges the benefits of individualism (e.g., the priesthood of all believers); nevertheless, he is right in pointing out the danger of reducing the community of Christ’s followers to little more than a group of individuals united by their shared interests in certain practices, or who believe that their participation in a certain group will benefit their personal good [Grenz, 2000: 314-15].

The Concept of Community

What does Grenz mean by the term “community”? He uses the definition offered by Derek Phillips that says: “A community is a group of people who live in a common territory, have a common history and shared values, participate together in various activities, and have a high degree of solidarity” [Grenz and Franke, 2001: 215]. He only alters the first statement and says that communities do not necessary need to be geographically concentrated. (Scientific and religious community are good examples). Hence, he believes that there are at least three characteristics that are common to any community. First, a community consists of a group of people who have a similar outlook toward life that share a similar frame of reference [Grenz and Franke, 2001: 216]. So, even though the members of the community might not be of the same mind, their common frame of reference inclines them to...
“read” and view the world through similar glasses and in a similar manner, and “to construct the symbolic world they inhabit using similar linguistic and symbolic building materials” [Grenz, 2003: 253]. Second, all communities have a group focus that facilitates a type of solidarity among the members and evokes a shared sense of group identity among them. This group identity nurtures solidarity among the members since they engage in a common task, and entails a shared interest in “an ongoing discussion as to what constitutes the identity of the group” [Grenz, 2003: 253]. The third characteristic would be a “person focus.” Thus, in accordance with contemporary sociologists the church is indeed a social group because it consists of more than two people who are related to one another, who share “unit awareness” and between whom communication of observable behavior takes place.

Community and Personal Identity

Drawing on narrative and communitarian thinkers Grenz sees community as a foundation for one’s personal identity formation. Personal identity is not created from merely the “factual data” of one’s past, but from the “plot” provided by an “interpretative scheme” through which one’s chronicle makes sense. This interpretive framework arises from one’s social context or “tradition” that is given by the community in which the person participates. Hence, it is the communal narrative that is essential for one’s personal identity formation. In Grenz’s mind, it means that “personal identity is never a private reality, but has a communal element, for it is shaped by the community in which the person is a participant” [Grenz and Olson, 1997: 282-283]. Thus, our human identities develop through the telling of a personal narrative tied with the larger group story. Furthermore, together with George Stroup, Grenz views community as a “reference group,” that is the category that shapes one’s attitudes, beliefs and values on a given subject as one, consciously or unconsciously “refers” to it. By its ability to punctuate the present with a sense of the transcendent time as a meaningful whole through the community’s common corporate memory expressed in living traditions, the church is indeed a social group because it consists of more than two people who are related to one another, who share “unit awareness” and between whom communication of observable behavior takes place.

Therefore, the common narrative of community, the common corporate memory expressed in living traditions, is the glue that holds the members of a community together and allows them to shape their identities. Community, therefore, is integral to epistemology, to our identity formation, and to the sustaining of character, virtue, and values. However, more important is the fact that community is central to the message of the Bible and to this we turn next.

Community and the Biblical Narrative: Church and the Kingdom

While Grenz finds sociological insights helpful in devising Christian theology he is very careful in presenting his methodology so as not to treat “sociology as an objective science that sets both the agenda and the methodological direction for reflection and construction.” According to Grenz, theology and not sociology as a discipline should emerge as the ultimate basis for our reflection on the nature of the church. The church, then, is a community “not so much because it reflects certain traits set forth by sociology, but because it has a special role in the divine program, at the heart of which, according to the Bible, is the establishment of community” [Grenz, 2003: 258]. Grenz acknowledges that biblical authors didn’t think about the church in categories of community only. But this observation does not dismiss the fact that the sociological term “community” offers a conceptual tool able to describe the essential nature of the church. While community-focused ecclesiology remains faithful to the evangelical commitment of the convetive piety, it broadens the ecclesiological scope to the extent that the local community gathered around the Word and sacrament as Reformers proclaimed [Grenz, 2000: 314].

Grenz believes that the term Kingdom is seemingly contentless when taken on its own and Kingdom theology can easily degenerate into an individualist theology. Community, on the other hand, forms the content of the Kingdom of God and is the more central motif in the Bible. Also fulfilling God’s will, which is the prerequisite for the Kingdom, leads to the community [Grenz and Franke, 2001: 235]. By connecting the concept of the community of God with God’s Kingdom we have a very dynamic view of ecclesiology. Putting a distinction between God’s kingship by right (de jure) and in fact (de facto), Grenz concludes that Kingdom is a “sphere of existence” in which humanity is called to live. (Humans ought to recognize that God is king de jure, and choose his kingship by the exercise of their free will and in this manner proclaim his rule de facto). God’s community is called to be incorporated into God’s powerful invasion of the world which remains an eschatological event. This eschatological reality determines the church’s identity and constitutes its corporate life. In contrast to all platonist conceptions which draw their existence from some eternal past, the church lies in the eschatological will of God, in what God wants the church to be. The church then “is a foretaste of the eschatological reality” that God will bring to existence one day and thus is “a sign of the kingdom” [Grenz, 1994: 623-624].

The Doctrine of God and Identity of the Church

For Grenz, ecclesiology lies at the heart of the theological enterprise because only the ecclesiological perspective can present our theology as a unifying whole. Neither soteriology nor theology proper can serve on its own without the concept of community. “[T]he creedal marks must be predicated first in the triune God active in and through the church, and then, by extension, in the church as the people through whom God works” [Grenz, 2003: 266]. In other words the church as a missional community is the church that finds its qualities in the mission of the triune God, which is directed toward all of creation. “The church’s identity as a community must emerge out of the identity of the God it serves and in whom its life is hidden...” [Grenz, 2003: 267]. God is not a “cosmic egoist” that demands from his creatures what he is really not. On contrast, he is the triune God that abides in the love relationships from eternity past, and thus desires that humans “mirror his own holy character, which is love” [Grenz, 1994: 623-624].
The church, therefore, is the fundamental vehicle for mirroring divine image.

Drawing from the writings of the early church fathers, Grenz argues that the church is a "community of communities" and contemporary sociologists (especially Backlund) emphasize the "interconnection of all local congregations." This communal ontology is what leads Grenz to term the identity as "ecclesial self." Therefore, since God is three persons in relationship, "the imago dei must in some sense entail humans-in-relationship as well, i.e., humans who through their relationships reflect the divine love (1 John 4:7-8)"

The church's catholicity then is revealed in its service as reconciling community, so that the church acts as "an agent for the fostering of wholesome relationships among humans in every dimension of life and existence." The sanctifying mission of the church is a twofold one, namely, external and internal. By being the ecclesia simper reformanda the faith community continually renews its own pattern of life and, at the same time, seeks to be a people who live according to God's example in order for His name to be "hallowed" in this world (Ex 28:41; Mt 5:43-48; 1 Pet 1:15-16). By gathering around the Word and sacrament the local community exerts a unifying effect on its members who celebrate a new humanity in Christ. Moreover, the unifying mission goes beyond the local church for it testifies about the eschatological purpose of God who will dwell with his people in the renewed creation. Grenz tries to convince his audience that a shift to a postfoundationalist epistemology and its implications for theology is a justified one. For this purpose he examines the postmodern philosophical climate and the evangelical reaction to it. Presenting the goal, or the contours of the postmodern gospel, Grenz delivers his way of reaching it, which is his conception of postmodern theology. Defining postmodern theology as "a conversation involving the perichoretic dance of Scripture, tradition, and culture," Grenz does not limit his method by a study of doctrines, but draws actively on cultural and philosophical artifacts of postmodernity. As a result he goes beyond classical foundationalism in his epistemology and presents community as an epistemological foundation. Utilizing pragmatist and coherentist epistemologies along side communitarian concepts together with eschatological realism, Grenz defines the task and orientation of theology. He argues that genuine evangelical theology should be communitarian because it is, first of all, linked with a particular community (which is foundational for Christian epistemology), and because community is the explication of the Christian conception of God and this is the divine purpose as revealed in the Bible.

Conclusion

The Reformed principle leads us to elevate the local nature of the church from which the universal church emerges as the "interconnection of all local congregations." The view of the church as the "community of communities," according to Grenz, does not require uniformity in all aspects of church life in order for the one church in the world to be in unity. On the contrary, the church is encouraged. In this way notae ecclesiae no longer exclusively belong to any particular institution but rather encapsulate a task for every local Christian community. In this way Grenz refuses to stress a platonic-type of universal church, which, as a form, should be realized in the local congregation. The universal church is a collection of all communities and therefore the creedal marks are shared by every Christian church. Together with Reformers Grenz sees four creedal traits of the church more as eschatological goals than as mere attributes of the visible church. However, these marks should be sought by a local community in order for them to be realized even in the visible church. Hence, "the marks are better read as adverbs than adjectives, so as thereby to capture the dynamic character of the church's faithfulness to her mission," so that the church might be called "proclaiming, reconciling, sanctifying and unifying." These marks then describe the church actively involved in missions. The church "apostolicity" is not only in her standing in continuity with apostolic doctrine, but in her proclaiming the Gospel in the world (from apostellw meaning "send out"). The church's catholicity then is revealed in its service as reconciling community, so that the church acts as "an agent for the fostering of wholesome relationships among humans in every dimension of life and existence." The sanctifying mission of the church is a twofold one, namely, external and internal. By being the ecclesia simper reformanda the faith community continually renews its own pattern of life and, at the same time, seeks to be a people who live according to God's example in order for His name to be "hallowed" in this world (Ex 28:41; Mt 5:43-48; 1 Pet 1:15-16). By gathering around the Word and sacrament the local community exerts a unifying effect on its members who celebrate a new humanity in Christ. Moreover, the unifying mission goes beyond the local church for it testifies about the eschatological purpose of God who will dwell with his people in the renewed creation. Grenz tries to convince his audience that a shift to a postfoundationalist epistemology and its implications for theology is a justified one. For this purpose he examines the postmodern philosophical climate and the evangelical reaction to it. Presenting the goal, or the contours of the postmodern gospel, Grenz delivers his way of reaching it, which is his conception of postmodern theology. Defining postmodern theology as "a conversation involving the perichoretic dance of Scripture, tradition, and culture," Grenz does not limit his method by a study of doctrines, but draws actively on cultural and philosophical artifacts of postmodernity. As a result he goes beyond classical foundationalism in his epistemology and presents community as an epistemological foundation. Utilizing pragmatist and coherentist epistemologies along side communitarian concepts together with eschatological realism, Grenz defines the task and orientation of theology. He argues that genuine evangelical theology should be communitarian because it is, first of all, linked with a particular community (which is foundational for Christian epistemology), and because community is the explication of the Christian conception of God and this is the divine purpose as revealed in the Bible.

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ЕКЛЕЗІОЛОГІЯ СПІЛЬНОТИ СТЕНЛІ ДЖ. ҐРЕНЦА

Стаття присвячена дослідженню еклезіології спільноти канадським богословом Стенлі Дж. Ґренцем. Ґренц розглядає постмодерністську ситуацію як корисну перспективу, яка суперечить договірній еклезіології, орієнтований на особистість. Він визиває перевагу індивідуалізму (наприклад, священство всіх віруючих); проте справедливо вказує на небезпеку зменшення спільнотності послідовників Христа у порівнянні з індивідуальними групами людей, об'єднаними спільними інтересами щодо певних практик або ті, які вважають, що їхня участь у тій чи іншій групі принесе користь їхньому особистому добру. Ґренц бачить спільноту як основу формування особистої ідентичності, в який бере участь та формується. Він вважає, що є щонайменше три характеристики, спільні для будь-якої церковної спільноти, а саме: по-перше, спільнота сформована з групи людей, які мають схожі погляди на життя та поділяють однакову аксіологічну систему; по-друге, всі спільноти відзначають т. н. "груповий фокус", що визнає загальну соціальну солідарність між християнами-учасниками спільноти та характеризується загальним відчуттям групової ідентичності, що сприяє соціальністі; по-третє, т. зв. "індивідуальний фокус", що підтверджує сучасні соціологічні дослідження, які на основі спостережень поведінкових даних визначають церкву як соціальну групу, пов'язану між собою двома і більше осіб, що поділяють визначену "спільну свідомість". Тому спільнота є нерозривною частиною епістемології, формування нашої особистості, а також становлення характеру, чесності та цінностей. Спільнота формує зміст Царства Божого і є одним із центральних мотивів Біблії. Ґренц робить висновок, що Царство є "сферою існування", в які й участь у тій чи іншій групі принесе користь їхньому особистому добру.

Ключові слова: Стенлі Д. Ґренц; еклезіологія спільноти; еклезіологія; спільнота; Церква.

ЛІТЕРАТУРА