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STANLEY J. GRENZ'S COMMUNITARIAN ECCLESIOLOGY

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.*

Problem statement. The last decades of the twentieth century in evangelicalism have been characterized by a strong emphasis on theological method and not as much on the content of theology (though, certainly, the latter will influence the former). An evangelicalism only recently came out from underground, the question of the theological method is extremely important for me and the church in my context (due to the fact that such concepts as "theology" and, not the least, "theological method" were foreign to the state of affairs of evangelicals during the days of persecution). As I first became acquainted with Grenz's works, I was attracted by his sincerity and openness to dialogue with others. Also, taking into account some peculiarities of Eastern European culture (such as the dominance of Eastern Orthodoxy or the very communal culture, for example) Grenz's overall emphasis on the community as the locus of the theological method sounded very promising to me. I studied Grenz in the context of our native, mostly Orthodox, theologians, as well as other leading evangelical scholars, mostly Western.

Analisys of research and publications. A "hardening of traditional categories," "accommodations to modern culture" or emphasis on "the center" of theology, evangelicals were struggling with its method [*Olson, 1999: 538, 554, 590*]. This happened due to the cultural and intellectual shifts often associated with the phenomenon called postmodernity. While the word "diversity" or even "a symphony orchestra" [*Olson, 1999: 591*]. Describes evangelical states of affairs in the twentieth century, one particular group of theologians became apparent. This group of "postconservative theologians" was characterized by an openness to contemporary cultural insights and to dialogue with other Christian denominations, in contrast to "conservative" theologians. Often called somewhat negatively as "Evangelical Left" [*Erickson, 1997*] or, from another perspective, more positively as "Younger Evangelicals" [*Webber, 2002*] this group challenged the traditional understanding of the theological method and came up with new proposals.

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[1]. 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 the communal "constitutive narrative" forges a link to the past and the future and thereby this community becomes a "community of memory" and a "community of hope." The communal history extends into the future and turns the focus of the community members toward the future when its goals and ideals will be fully realized. Hence, the community's constructive narrative "bestows a qualitative meaning upon time and space," and provides "the overarching theme through which community members can view their lives and the present moment in history as a part of stream of time that transcends every particular 'now'" [*Grenz, 2003: 255*]. There fore, 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.

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[1] Narrative for Grenz is not merely an explanatory device but a constitutive of the way human beings experience their world and themselves. Since human beings are "story tellers" their identity emerges as they tell a personal narrative, in accordance with which one's life "make sense." Following narrative thinkers Grenz points out that "any identity-forming story of a person's life is always embedded in the story of the communities in which the person participates. - Grenz actually views self as narrative, a self formed by narrative [*Grenz, 2001: 325, 330*].

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 convertive 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 platonic 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:*

636-637]. The church, therefore, is the fundamental vehicle for mirroring divine image.

Drawing from Cappadocian Fathers, the concept of "communal ontology" and contemporary sociological thinkers, Grenz argues that the three members of the Trinity are actually "persons" because they are "persons-in-relationship" so that their personal identities also emerge out of their reciprocal relations. Therefore, to represent the divine reality, which is our vocation, means to be "persons-in-relation after the pattern of the perichoretic divine life disclosed in Jesus Christ" [*Grenz, 2001: 332*]. 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 (1John 4:7-8)" [*Grenz, 2001: 267*]. The church, then, is called to be a community that reflects the character of the Creator in the relationships of its members and to all creation, which is the foretaste of the imago dei. The church serves as a community of salvation in that the Holy Spirit brings this ecclesial community to fulfill the divinely given imperative to be the "the prolepsis of the new humanity as the *imago dei*." The church therefore is primarily a fellowship of people whose relationships are being transformed by the indwelling Holy Spirit, who "seeks to transform the community after the pattern of the perichoretic life of the triune God" [*Grenz, 2001: 335*].

By reciting the constituting biblical narrative the faith community mediates to its members the narrative plot and hence serves as a community of reference. By participating in this constitutive narrative believers not only find meaning in their personal stories but also link their stories with the work of the biblical God in history. This constitutive narrative is being communicated by means of the Word of God because "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, to allude to Luther's description of the invisible church" [*Grenz, 2000: 322*].

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. The Christian identity, then, is a shared identity and bound up with the purpose to be the *imago dei*, to reflect and exemplify the pattern of life, which characterizes the triune God [*Grenz and Franke, 2001: 215*]. Because Christ is the true image of God believers can participate in the life of the triune God by being "in Christ," namely through their union with him. The Holy Spirit is the one who facilitates this participation for He is the agent of new birth and sustainer of the new life in believers. This participation in the fountainhead of the life of the triune God brings the communal fellowship of Christians into a new ontological and existential level [*Grenz, 2003: 268*]. It marks the true church and actually constitutes the faith community in the highest sense. Therefore, we might conclude that Grenz strongly believes that the overarching focus of the biblical narrative is the person-in relationship and this, according to him, corresponds to the modern communitarian thought and suggests that the concept of community should be the integrative motif in theology [*Grenz and Franke, 2001: 215*].

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 diversity 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 reforms 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; 1Pet 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, орієнтованій на особистість. Він визнає переваги індивідуалізму (наприклад, священство всіх віруючих); проте справедливо вказує на небезпеку зменшення спільнотності послідовників Христа у порівнянні з індивідуальними групами людей, об'єднаних спільними інтересами щодо певних практик або тих, які вважають, що їхня участь у тій чи іншій групі принесе користь їхньому особистому добру. Ґренц бачить спільноту як основу формування особистої ідентичності, він не має на увазі якийсь географічний чинник їхньої характеристики. На думку Ґренца, індивідуальна ідентичність ніколи не є приватною реальністю, оскільки наділена елементом спільноти, в якій 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 відзначаються т. зв. "груповим фокусом", що визначає загальну солідарність між християнами-учасниками спільноти та характеризується загальним відчуттям групової ідентичності, що сприяє солідарності; по-третє, т. зв. "індивідуальний фокус", що підтверджує сучасні соціологічні дослідження, які на основі спостережуваних поведінкових даних визначають церкву як соціальну групу пов'язаних між собою двох і більше осіб, що поділяють визначену "спільну свідомість". Тому спільнота є невід'ємною частиною епістемології, формування нашої особистості, а також становлення характеру, чеснот та цінностей. Спільнота формує зміст Царства Божого і є одним із центральних мотивів Біблії. Ґренц робить висновок, що Царство є "сферою існування", в якій людство покликане жити. Відповідно, Церква "є ключовою частиною есхатологічної реальності", яку Бог об'явить певного дня і, таким чином, є "знаком Царства". Церква є фундаментальним засобом відображення божественного образу. Участь у християнській спільноті містить трансформацію особистого наративу відповідно до історії Ісуса, а також прийняття історії цієї християнської спільноти як власної.

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

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