

Reflection on Stanley Grenz

Christian Blogs: Fulfilling Grenz's Communal Vision for Theology

By Ed Cyzewski

Among the many mourners of Stanley Grenz's passing was a large, faceless group who rarely, if ever appeared in the news headlines. Most did not attend the funeral, take a class with him, or even meet him. Their names, if you can find them, are not recognizable to many in the theological community and carry little authoritative weight when cited. And yet this faceless group that operates under the radar was profoundly impacted by the work of Stanley Grenz and carries on his legacy in a subtle, yet very real manner. This group is the online community of Christian bloggers.¹

A simple Google search for "Stanley Grenz blog" quickly yields a collection of eulogies and tributes to the late theology professor on a large group of blogs. In fact, one blog even bears the title, "Grenzian."² The web page of Grenz includes a list of bloggers who offer moving tributes.³ He was widely admired and respected by the Christian blogging community even though he never authored his own blog. Grenz only published a "static" web site that lacked the constant flow of content and interaction that has become the hallmark of today's blogs.

Nevertheless, Grenz's theology, both in method and in content, resonated with Christian bloggers. While working within the academic community and publishing a small army of theology books, Grenz was also passionate about encouraging the development of theology within the local church. Among the influential Christian bloggers who have cited Grenz as an influence on their thinking are Jordon Cooper,⁴

¹ A **blog** (a [portmanteau](#) made by [contracting](#) the phrase "**web log**") is a [website](#) in which items are posted on a regular basis and displayed in reverse chronological order. Like other [media](#), blogs often focus on a particular subject, such as food, politics, or local news. Some blogs function as [online diaries](#). A typical blog combines text, [images](#), and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic. "Blog." *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*. Available from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>, Accessed 13 March 2006.

² Ryerse, Robb. *The Grenzian*. Available from <http://thegrenzian.blogspot.com>. Accessed 13 March 2006.

³ Grenz, Stanley. *Stanley Grenz*. Available from <http://stanleyjgrenz.com/index2.shtml>. Accessed 13 March 2006.

⁴ Cooper, Jordon. *Jordon Cooper*. Available from <http://www.jordoncooper.com>. Accessed 13 March 2006.

Jason Clark,⁵ Alan Jamieson, Paul Fromont,⁶ and Steve Taylor.⁷ Cooper lists Grenz's *A Primer on Postmodernism* and *Theology for the Community of God* in his personal MDiv reading list,⁸ while Taylor mentions the importance of Grenz and John Franke's work, *Beyond Foundationalism*, "One of the chief urgings of much emerging thought is the priority of community as the place for theological reflection."⁹ Throughout these blogs the fingerprints of Grenz can be seen while scrolling through each post tackling the important theological issues of our time. In setting out his vision for the Christian community's role in reflecting on God in *Theology for the Community of God*, Grenz writes, "Every Christian is a theologian. Whether consciously or unconsciously, each person of faith embraces a belief system. And each believer, whether in a deliberate manner or merely implicitly, reflects on the content of these beliefs and their significance for Christian life."¹⁰ In seeing everyone as a theologian, Grenz set out to broaden the scope of the participants in theological discussion and make this practice more prominent in the local church. It is this aspect of his teaching that has been embraced and embodied by Christian bloggers.

The relational nature of the Trinity has pointed Grenz toward this communal approach to theology. In an interview that initially appeared in *Talk Magazine*, Grenz commented, "Stating the matter simply, 'community' is central to my theological thinking because I am convinced that it is both at the heart of the biblical narrative and speaks clearly to the contemporary context. More specifically, I would add that community is crucial because it arises out of the very essence of God. At the heart of Christian theology is the doctrine of the Trinity, which declares that God is not only the

⁵ Clark, Jason. *Jason Clark*. Available from http://www.jasonclark.ws/jasonclark/2005/03/stan_grenz.html. Accessed 13 March 2006.

⁶ Jamieson, Alan and Paul Fromont. *Prodigal Kiwi*. Available from http://prodigal.typepad.com/prodigal_kiwi/2005/03/stanley_grenz_g.html. Accessed 13 March 2006.

⁷ Taylor, Steve. *Emergentkiwi*. Available from <http://www.emergentkiwi.org.nz>. Accessed on 13 March 2006.

⁸ Cooper, Jordon. *Jordon Cooper*. Available from www.jordoncooper.com/2005/07/personal-mdiv_27.html. Accessed 14 March 2006.

⁹ Taylor, Steve. *Emergentkiwi*. Available from http://www.emergentkiwi.org.nz/archives/the_chasm_continues.php. Accessed March 13, 2006.

¹⁰ Grenz, Stanley, *Theology for the Community of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI : William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 1.

one who enters into relationship with creation, and hence relates to us in time. Rather, God is internally relational within the Godhead, and hence eternally relational.”¹¹

Such a Trinitarian, and thereby communal, approach to theology was especially key to Grenz in his approach to theological reflection in the postmodern context. In his widely acclaimed work, *Renewing the Center*, he stated, “I noted above that a theology that seeks to be responsive to, and to take seriously, postmodern sensitivities after the demise of foundationalism views itself as a conversation. More specifically, theological construction--the attempt to delineate what ought to be the belief-mosaic of the Christian church--may be characterized as an ongoing conversation that the participants in the faith community share as to the meaning of the cultural symbols through which Christians express their understanding of the world they inhabit. These symbols include sacred texts, language, rituals, and practices. This constructive theological conversation requires the interplay, or perichoretic dance, of three sources of insight.”¹² Therefore, in a postmodern context that values a variety of perspectives, inclusion of the other, and conclusions open to revision, Grenz found that a communitarian approach to theology was not only appropriate for the times, it was also most faithful to the character of God. The merging of theology with blogs was a natural evolution in the postmodern environment that Grenz explored and described so well.

Though blogs can be impersonal in some respects,¹³ many Christians have locked on to the blog format of posting, commenting, and replying to these comments as a primary medium for theological conversation. Christian communities will often take their discussions online to their personal blogs, follow up in person, and then continue to share ideas throughout the week on the internet. There is no shortage of online theologians. Well-known and respected blogger, Andrew Jones, even has his own list of 40 so-called

¹¹ Grenz, Stanley. *Stanley Grenz*. Available from http://stanleyjgrenz.com/articles/talk_mag.html. Accessed 13 March 2006.

¹² Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 4.

¹³ Though most discussions on blogs are cordial and beneficial, there are bloggers who post angry rants, anonymous browsers who leave tasteless comments, and spammers who fill up comment space with ads. Without seeing or knowing the owner of a blog, it is tempting for some to leave disparaging remarks.

“Theoblogians” on his site: www.tallskinnykiwi.com, while Emergent¹⁴ director Tony Jones posts regularly on his blog with the title “Theoblogy.”¹⁵ Even pastors such as Mark D. Roberts,¹⁶ Todd Hiestand,¹⁷ and JR Briggs¹⁸ go online and post thoughts concerning their recent sermons or discuss current church issues. Online directories such as <http://www.blogs4god.com> reveal a large number of Christian bloggers who, if not influenced directly by Grenz’s work, practice what Grenz preached.

Blogs may not be the exact format that Grenz had in mind for the rise of theological reflection among lay people in the church, but it is clear that Christian bloggers are living out his vision of reflecting on God in a communal format that encourages participation and is constantly in process. Christian blogs are one of the most important mediums for the ongoing construction and revision of theology in the local church. Blogs enable students of scripture to link up with a vast online network, thereby bringing the balancing influence of community that Grenz advocated. He commented, “The Bible-centered dimension of the gospel-focused church ought not to be interpreted in an individualistic manner, however. Rather, even though Christians possess the great privilege of reading the Bible privately, discerning the Gospel message is not merely a private, but also a community process.”¹⁹

If the medium is indeed the message,²⁰ then interactive blogs are a powerful tool in developing Christian communities who faithfully work together to know God and grow in fellowship with one another. Ideas, theories, and articles are shared free of charge, while ongoing discussion is welcomed. The best way to promote the writings of others that are worthy of further consideration can be easily shown with a simple link on

¹⁴ *Emergent Village*. Available from <http://www.emergentvillage.com/>. Accessed 13 March 2006.

¹⁵ Jones, Tony. *Theoblogy*. Available from <http://theoblogy.blogspot.com/>. Accessed 13 March 2006.

¹⁶ Roberts, Mark D. *Mark D. Roberts*. Available from <http://www.markdroberts.com/>. Accessed 13 March 2006.

¹⁷ Hiestand, Todd. *Todd Hiestand*. Available from <http://www.toddhiestand.com/>. Accessed 13 March 2006.

¹⁸ Briggs, J. R. *Brokenstainedglass*. Available from <http://brokenstainedglass.typepad.com/>. Accessed 13 March 2006.

¹⁹ Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 339.

²⁰ McLuhan, Marshall and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: Language Arts & Disciplines*, (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 5.

a blog page. Those who are particularly regular in posting excellent content can be added to a “blogroll” that is typically listed down the side of a site.²¹ While printed books have their essential place in the church as material that has been critically evaluated and held to a high standard, blogs have created a way for anyone with basic internet and word processing skills to actively engage in a burgeoning conversation of theological reflection.

No one could ever claim that Stanley Grenz is responsible for the rise in “theoblogians” or even that he is the “patron saint of bloggers.” Nevertheless, the writings of Grenz, particularly *Renewing the Center* and *Beyond Foundationalism*, have provided a tremendous amount of insight and direction for Christian bloggers. Grenz’s focus on theology that is communal and located in the church has been fulfilled in part by those *in* the church who take their discussions *out* of the church building and onto the internet. With the rise of collaborative online tools such as blogs emerging in our postmodern culture, Stanley Grenz gave the church the philosophical and theological categories to boldly combine blogging software with theological reflection. Lay theologians who wish to participate in forming theology need only log on to join in the discussion.

²¹ One of my personal favorites is <http://www.jesuscreed.org/> by Scot McKnight.