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TRINITY AND CHURCH: AN EXAMINATION OF THEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

JOHN D. MORRISON*

It is useful here to make a basic distinction between two types of orthodoxy *pre-* and *postmodern*. Both are schooled in the same scriptural texts. Both celebrate the same Christ. But one has journeyed through and dwelt in modernity, while the other has not. Postmodern orthodoxy is distinctive not in its essential doctrine but in its historical experience. It has been deeply impacted by modern sociology, physics, psychology, and, more so, by modern history, which premodern orthodoxy has either avoided or by historical accident never had a chance to meet. Postmodern orthodoxy by definition must have undergone a deep immersion in modernity and its varied forms of criticism (Marxian, Nietzschean, and Freudian primarily), worked for it, hoped with it, clung to it, and been thoroughly instructed by it, yet finally has turned away from it in disillusionment, only to come upon classical Christianity as surprisingly more wise, realistic, resourceful, and creative than modernity itself.¹

This statement by Thomas Oden is indicative not only of the cultural sway within which and to which the Church is to declare the gospel of Jesus Christ but also of the difficulty of the theological task to which the Church is called. Therein the doctrines of the triune God, who has redeemed and called out a people to be his own in Jesus Christ, and the Church, which is called to know and worship the triune God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit, are formatively related and mutually reflective theological issues: "You shall be my people, and I will be your God." In the study that follows I intend to critically examine primarily the theological methodology of three recent texts in evangelical theology, each of which claims the term "systematic." That methodological claim will be analyzed via the respective expressions of God's triunity and ecclesiology.

Theology for the Community of God by Stanley Grenz² may be one of the most consistently integrated works of comprehensive theological expression in recent decades. The theme of community ties the work together from first to last. For that reason the unifying motif of Grenz' theological methodology either makes or breaks him, particularly as his community theme is manifested in reflection on God's self-disclosure as Trinity and on the Church.

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¹ T C Oden, *After Modernity—What?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 60-61

² S Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994)

Numerous elements play formative roles in Grenz' theological method and its mode of expression. Claiming to be "avowedly evangelical and unabashedly Baptist," Grenz has apparently rediscovered his pietist roots while making a partial turn away from "Enlightenment-rationalist" notions of truth and toward a functional-experiential-communitarian understanding of truth. This reflects his pietist turn, but it will surely raise eyebrows among both Baptists and evangelicals generally—particularly with regard to his basis for theological expression. But our concern here is primarily methodological. Grenz gives direction to his work by something of a *Heilsgeschichte* approach as over against classical *loci* methods. Methodological emphasis is laid on relation within God and from God as he acts in history creating his people and the ultimate eschatological kingdom community. Grenz' problematic antipathy toward "theological science" and objective knowledge of God reflects long-outmoded Newtonian notions overthrown by both relativity and quantum advances (cf. T. Torrance). Both his method and content are influenced by the eschatological perspectives of J. Moltmann and especially W. Pannenberg, whereby eschatology effectively undergirds the community theme. But it is not surprising, too, that Grenz gives emphasis to Buberian-Brunnerian (even Tillichian) personalist-existentialist notions of encounter coupled with sociological conceptualizations. These elements are added to (preeminently) Scripture and tradition as normative bases of truth for the Church. In such a setting it would seem that truth can too easily become only contextual—functional as experienced within the believing community. Such a basis of theological expression would seem to inevitably incline toward an evangelical *Glaubenslehre* (Schleiermacher). Despite what appear at many points to be problematic directions in argument, Grenz' conclusions largely fall within the evangelical consensus. The text of Scripture plays more of an implicit than explicit role here. The particular, on the whole, gives way to the broad sweep of God's redemptive-kingdom movement out from himself. So by tightly and tersely weaving Scripture and tradition with modern sociological elements (and thus narrative), Grenz eventually overcomes many objections as he endeavors to follow the story of God's active purpose, as reflective of his triune image, to create the eschatological covenant community in the fullness of the kingdom (creation-redemption-kingdom).

Grenz' community theme and narrative communitarian method are centrally and methodologically presented in his doctrine of God, particularly God's triunity. The living God is the God known truly only as triune, the "social" Trinity, the "relational God." Contra Schleiermacher, Grenz is firm that the "truth of God" is not merely community-commitment related but also relational, Scriptural, historical, and grounded in God's self-disclosure as Trinity. The Trinity is true *theologia* and the conceptual-relational-methodological heart of all that Grenz says theologically. Thankfully beyond current processive modalisms (e.g. Moltmann, Peters), Grenz concludes that all that can be said of God and of God's creative-redemptive relation to and for the world arises in, from and toward the eternal triunity of God. Herein Pannenberg, and also recent sociological emphases on community, become methodologically, hermeneutically and contentfully critical for Grenz. In any

case his point is that the internally and externally relational (i.e. triune) God, as historically and preeminently disclosed in Jesus of Nazareth, is thus working from his own relational nature to and for all of history toward the final revelation of the glory of God in the *eschaton*. So, with Pannenberg, Grenz says that in the ultimate sense there is but "one historical self-revelation of God which stands at the end of the historical process, not at the beginning." The self-revelation of the triune God has been and is present but is finally the glorious reality of the eschatological kingdom, the *telos* of God-redeemed, God-created community in Christ by the Holy Spirit in the new creation.

Of note regarding Grenz' doctrine of the Trinity is his surprising agreement with the western (Augustinian) understanding when initially the eastern view would seem more useful for his own methodological and systematic emphases on relation and community. Yet he does make use of insights from both the eastern and western doctrines of the Trinity while also partaking of Barthian (there is no God but the self-revealing Trinity) and Rahnerian (immanent Trinity and economic Trinity are one) emphases. Yet he falls into Augustinian pneumatological subordinationism when the work of his own mentor Pannenberg ("concretized Spirit") would make his theological expression of a truly intratrinitarian community complete.

Grenz' consistent use of community has created a unitary, and so truly systematic, context for theological expression of relation in God, from God and toward the God in whose futurity as centered in Christ we can now participate together. Therefore his ecclesiology stands methodologically within and from the being and action of the triune God, the divine community. The Church, as the present focus of God's redemptive-historical intention to fashion his people (community) throughout time, is said to be (1) a people standing in covenant who are (2) a sign of the divine reign and who constitute (3) the eschatological community. In this way Grenz consistently approaches the doctrine of the Church in consciously relational (versus merely functional or static ontological) terms. Definitionally the Church is "a special people who see themselves as standing in relationship to God who saves them and to each other as those who share in his salvation." The Church is grounded in the "social (relational) Trinity" and thus in God's own reconciling kingdom purpose. Thus the Church is found to be manifest in multidimensional relationships that form the covenant community, body of Christ, nation of God in and toward eschatological fullness by the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit. Herein Grenz' community theme has allowed him to balance the individual and corporate dimensions. Baptist/free-church purposes are also well served by it. Most of Grenz' ecclesiological conclusions are not revolutionary. But again his unitary methodology in and from God's triunity effectively sets these elements systematically within his larger salvation-historical-kingdom purpose (God's reign). Thereby Grenz is able to transcend the static categories that have often inhabited theological expression while affirming the Church's Biblical-historical-traditional nature as mystical, universal and local. By its vertical and horizontal relations in the power of the Spirit of Christ the Church is said to be the image (reflection) of the triune God. In the futurity of the triune God (kingdom), this will ultimately be brought to fullness when

the divine reign becomes historical actuality in the new heavens and new earth through Jesus Christ our Lord

Despite a fair number of concerns over theological particulars and inclusions, I agree that most of Grenz' overall conclusions fall within the broad evangelical mainstream. But given our concern here for method, his discriminating and incorporational use of Scripture, tradition and modern modes of conceptualization, as set within his consistently unitary theological expression of God and the Church and arising from his desire to follow/think after (*Nachdenken*) the way God has, is and will take in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit, makes this work a model of systematic theological methodology.

Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Bible Doctrine*³ is aptly titled. Methodologically speaking, the colon is a sign of equation. Grudem has written a modern Reformed, scholastic and free-church reformulation of the classical *loci* method in theology. In fact he states that one can begin at any chapter and grasp it without having engaged prior material. Theology is said to arise directly from Scripture passages in a way akin to Newton's description of scientific methodology. Therefore doing theology (issue of methodology) is said to require several steps that, if followed, will tell us what the Bible teaches us today. The steps are (1) collecting the relevant Scripture passages, (2) understanding the verses, and (3) summarizing the teachings of these texts to see what Scripture says on each topic (*locus*). Hence the texts are "translated into concepts and applied in contemporary terms."

But in what sense is this "systematic" theology? Where does conceptual unitariness lie within an admittedly topical, piecemeal approach? For Grudem systematic theology is internally consistent theology whereby all that Scripture says on various topics fits together like (as Grudem illustrates) the parts of a jigsaw puzzle, particularly the "border and some of the major items pictured." Major and minor doctrines are distinguished by "influence" on other doctrines. Yet Trinity, Christ, and salvation, while having more cause-effect impact on other pieces, are regarded as but pieces of the whole. Again Newton's mechanistic physics may prove to be an even more helpful illustration. Newton's mechanistic scientific method gave to the cosmos a cogs-and-gears, tongue-and-groove appearance that belied the dynamism of its objective intelligibility. So too here (*mutatis mutandis*). Relations between doctrines tend to be understood as mechanical and quantitative, so to speak. So, for Grudem, Trinity and ecclesiology are finally distinct doctrines within the larger systematic fit. As a result, issues that bear directly on Grudem's theological method are of significance. What are Grudem's (implicit) hermeneutical assumptions? Can theological concepts and ideas be read directly off the surface of Scripture? Do his scholastic presuppositions and distinctions prohibit real theological reflection on the dynamic movement of God, his transcendent-immanent, creative-redemptive, interactive relatedness to, in and for the world? Is Grudem clear about the real historicity of the ongoing theological task? Is it really doubtful that the theological "liberal" (i.e. one who "denies the absolute truthfulness of Scripture")

³ W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Bible Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

has given us any theological insights? How does the language of Scripture relate to its proper object, and how is this set within the hermeneutical circle? Finally, is Grudem consistent in the use of his own stated three-step theological method in relation to the doctrines of God's triunity and the Church?

Throughout Grudem's doctrine of God, and particularly in his formulations on the Trinity, he regularly begins with a summary statement or definition of an aspect of the doctrine. This is followed by a series of Scripture texts with statements of what is thus implied. This is accompanied by further texts, or a series of texts with brief statements of additional implications. Grudem repeatedly speaks of everything in Scripture as "proving" this or that about God's triunity. Thus Scriptural recitation, usually without context or interrelatedness to the redemptive-historical action of God for us, is held to be sufficient to establish the doctrine. This is certainly to be distinguished from the method of, for example, the Nicene fathers.

But throughout his discussion Grudem's doctrine of the Trinity is actually formed methodologically by that unstated but clearly scholastic, *a priori* approach that belies the claim to be simply uncovering what Scripture teaches. Contrary to early-Church and most recent trinitarian discussions, "Jesus is Lord" and "God is love" play little or no part in Grudem's trinitarian formulation. God's love is related more to God's aseity than to the Trinity. Yet by his scholastic-ontological distinctions Grudem wants to strike a proper balance between God's infinite difference and Scripture's other clear references to God's historical activity and relatedness to the world. But despite assertion he creates an unresolved tension, an "in himself" and "for us" tension, that could be greatly eased if Trinity had been made methodologically central to all of his theologizing. Overzealous distinctions, rather than unitary, theological thinking in terms of field relations, have resulted in a static view of the triune God and of the God-world-human, God-human-world interrelatedness arising from God's grace in creation-incarnation/redemption. Grudem has a tendency to disjoin God's own being from real historicity in and from the incarnation (revelation), and immanent Trinity from economic Trinity.

Grudem's expressed method is, again, to go directly to relevant texts and to then summarize "the clear biblical teaching on the Trinity." But does Scripture make direct statements concerning the Trinity as classically formulated? Scripture is explicitly handled as though a trinitarian doctrinal summary comes immediately off the surface of Scripture and not also through the soteriological-hermeneutical conceptualization as created (properly, I believe) by the history of interpretation. But implicitly Grudem assumes Nicea in all Scriptural summaries and only then alludes to theological controversies in order to show what to avoid. Thus he separates Scripture from the contextual dynamism of the Church's actual historical faith formation and from the dynamic interrelatedness within God and from God in and to the divinely established history of creation-redemption-kingdom out of a center in Jesus Christ.

Grudem's understanding of the Church is strongly redemptocentric—that is, "the community of all true believers for all time." As with his theological method with regard to the Trinity, Grudem's ecclesiological definitions are presented at the beginning of each portion. Argumentation then works

full circle by reference to numerous texts found to corroborate the initial definition. Like his expression of the Trinity, Grudem's ecclesiology gives little attention to historico-theological developments, and when it does they have no real connection to his overt theologizing and are rendered in cut and dried, right and wrong ways. Grudem clearly intends to lay his emphasis upon the redemptive whole, but his method of mere Scripture recitation-summarization as coupled with his disjunctive *loci* method of presentation as here applied to the Church separates the critical aspects of the doctrine from the wholeness of the purpose, movement and historical acts of God in all history to create and redeem a people for himself in Christ.

Far more than in his discussion of the Trinity, Grudem's formulation of the Church is (understandably) parochial, ad hoc and very anecdotal. There is a strong anti-Roman Catholic undercurrent. But of more formative significance for Grudem's ecclesiology are two themes that, while central, create further tension for his discussion: Church purity and Church unity. Purity has clear precedence and is applied to morality, local churches, denominations, and even to eras of the history of the Church. But this very concern, as herein formed, gets in Grudem's way. He has difficulty juxtaposing, balancing and integrating purity and unity, and his attempts to do so are quite strained. It leads finally to a remarkable "apologetic" for denominational and other divisions in the Church of Jesus Christ.

Throughout our analysis the focus has been Grudem's explicit and implicit theological method as related to Trinity and Church at two levels. He is clearly scholastic in his actual perception of theological methodology (and thus theology's task). But as noted earlier Grudem's explicit microcosmic method of apparently taking doctrine directly off the surface of lists of Scripture texts is actually controlled by an implicit hermeneutic whereby texts are interpreted through the creeds. This is fine and commendable, but it is not his stated methodological claim. His macrocosmic concern is to usefully set forth each doctrine on its own in piecemeal form with but peripheral relation to other doctrines rather than by an approach that follows the unitary redemptive-historical movement or action that God has taken from within the divine trinity to and for the world. The result is an updated Charles Hodge or, in the extreme, R. A. Torrey's recitational method. It was Hodge (clearly admitted by Grudem) who described theology as purposing "to systematize the facts of the Bible and to ascertain the principles or general truths which those facts involve." It is Grudem more than Hodge who, as an early modern theologian, has fulfilled his methodological role in his doctrines of the Trinity and the Church.

Like both Grenz and Grudem, James Leo Garrett's *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*⁴ is fairly titled from his content and theological method. Grenz' trinitarian-community-kingdom theme creates his method, while Garrett's subtitle encapsulates the distinct elements of his method and the boundaries of his doctrinal development. Thus for Garrett systematic theology arises from "fruitage" of Biblical theology and the history

⁴ J. L. Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990-95).

of doctrine. This is good, but clear questions ensue. Do the elements truly correlate methodologically? How is each element authoritative, thus lending authoritative content to Garrett's systematic theological conclusions? Are these elements integrated, developed and used in ways that are truly systematic and evangelical—particularly as applied to the Trinity and the Church?

Garrett follows W. T. Connor in understanding systematic theology as the presentation of the several doctrines of Christianity in their particular significance and in their relations to one another. Somewhat like Grudem, then, the term "systematic" is reckoned in terms of parts properly brought together to form a coherent whole.

In particular Garrett approaches the doctrines of the Trinity and the Church by combining (especially) Biblical and historical theology. So the outcomes are reached via the "location, interpretation and correlation of pertinent OT and NT texts" and the "more significant statements from the patristic period to the modern age." But here Garrett is not clear how his own selective use of the history of doctrine is authoritative. For a free-church theologian this can hardly be axiomatic. Why Scripture has authority is made fairly clear. The authority of historical theological development is not. It seems that, theoretically, the multiplication of Scripture texts provides the theological basis and content, while historico-theological conclusions are meant to give authoritative form and expression to the many texts. In actual fact the demarcation is thin and fairly porous. But probably the biggest difficulty Garrett has methodologically in making a truly systematic presentation of God's triunity and the Church is his inability to bring the many parts into interactive or interrelated wholes. The many elements tend to sit side by side like lumps and thus often read like lists of statements, beliefs and positions without any clear welding element giving that needed wholeness and directional, interpretive unity—even within the respective doctrines.

Garrett is particularly concerned with the concept of God—that is, who is the God revealed in nature, conscience and, more, in the old covenant and in Jesus Christ? But our question of theological methodology leads one to Garrett's means of approach in relation to the various elements of his larger doctrine of God as it is directly related to his expression of the Trinity. We can also inquire about whether God's triunity plays any methodologically formative role in his larger system. Throughout his doctrine of God (Trinity) and Church, Garrett is consistent in his desire for a truly Biblical, historical and evangelical theology. For each element of his doctrine of God, Garrett begins by expressing questions or issues central to that immediate, particular element. This sets the theological stage and gives direction to discussion. An overview of Biblical materials follows wherein Garrett accumulates a developmental list of pertinent OT and NT verses in order to give a fair taste of that Biblical-theological concept. This step points ahead toward a brief, selective and (again) developmental overview of contributions to the doctrine of God's being and triunity for patristic, medieval, Reformation and especially modern theology. Selections are sometimes surprising, even puzzling. But they are connected to the intended systematic theological conclusion toward which Garrett is driving. To close each subsection Garrett gives extremely brief theological conclusions or definitions "for the contemporary

Church." There are usually brief restatements of several modern theological viewpoints (often Brunner and Barth) that Garrett prefers to synthesize (rather than asserting anything distinctive of his own). These systematic elements within each subsection read like isolated parts rather than as aspects of an integrated, systematic whole. Thus Garrett too approaches and formulates God's triunity by means of a rather piecemeal, mechanical and thus modern (Newtonian) methodology.

Certain issues are of special note here with regard to Garrett's doctrine of God's triunity: God as personal and the three persons of the Godhead, God's fatherhood, and God as love. We will mention two. Due to proper concern about modern, Enlightenment notions of person in static, isolationist terms, Garrett repeatedly hedges, capitulates and then rehedges on the question of the three "persons" of the Trinity (preferring differentiation in terms closer to Barth's "modes"). He has not observed that there is a proper sense of "person" in terms of constituting relations. Also, "God is love" has ever been (especially in modern theology) a statement and model significant to trinitarian formulation. Garrett first makes "God as love" (with "God as holy") one of the two centers around which he clusters God's attributes. In relation to God's triunity Garrett maintains that the divine *agapē* is basic to the immanent trinitarian relations, but (as for Grenz) the Holy Spirit is relegated to the Father-Son love relation (implicit subordinationism). And, like that of Grudem, Garrett's theological method has relegated the divine Trinity to merely one of the doctrinal *loci*. The Trinity is not *theologia* par excellence for Garrett and so not formative of all doctrines, particularly here in relation to the Church. He rather takes a *via media* between Schleiermacher's Trinity as theological appendix and Barth's Trinity as priority, as central and formative of all theology. But what can this mean in the end but a static conventionality and an inability to follow after the redemptive-historical movement of God? This then is indicative of Garrett's theological method: orderly, mechanical relations within and between the elements of diverse *loci* whereby God's triunity is but one of the many (contra Garrett's statement that the Trinity is "the one, all-comprehensive, single grand generalization," a statement not fulfilled in Garrett's method and expression). Still, with the Nicene-Constantinopolitan fathers he does view God's (personal/modal?) "differentiated" oneness to be one of perichoretic mutuality. But he speaks of it as a oneness more "organic" than "arithmetic," a oneness reflecting the "circulatory character of divine life." This closing point seems to be directly reflective of Hegel and Tillich.

When applied to the Church of Jesus Christ, Garrett's Biblical, historico-theological method remains essentially the same. But he is here faced with a significant methodological problem. While Trinity is transdenominational, ecclesiologies are diverse. In all matters ecclesiological Garrett is clearly anti-ecclesiastical in the sense reflected in the ecclesiology of Trent. Here then the question of method becomes acute for Garrett: How can his use of the history of doctrine, which is largely that of developing and assumed ecclesiasticism, be squared with his ardent free-church, anabaptistic beliefs about the nature of the Church? Can Garrett operate one way in relation to the

Trinity and another toward the Church? A significant historico-theological shift in hermeneutics does take place.

Prominent within Garrett's "Biblical Materials" sections under ecclesiology is his clear intention to accumulate all the pertinent Biblical data that point to and emphasize the local church (as prominent among other uses). This lengthy listing of Biblical texts related to *ekklēsia* is meant to demonstrate that the primary Scriptural emphasis is on diverse local-church forms as well as believer's church and believer's baptism. From this basis Garrett finds the door open for his own formative free-church and inconsistent theological use of historical ecclesiological developments.

From the fathers to the present, Garrett approaches ecclesiology with a high level of selectivity not found in his approach to the doctrine of the Trinity. This shift is necessary for Garrett's conclusions if his larger theological method is to make constructive use of Biblical and historical theological elements. He must also show a false shift or deviation in the Church's view of its own nature, ministries and mission that the doctrine of the Trinity did not require. Garrett's handling of such developments regarding the Church then forms a clear historical apologetic against most sacramental, episcopal, ecclesiastical outcomes, and for diverse, free-church forms as are indeed reflected in the NT and in several later medieval and post-Reformation (pietist) movements.

To summarize, I would assert that Garrett's initial sense of the proper elements of a systematic theology is correct. Christian interpretation of Scripture cannot occur without reckoning with the theological developments in the history of the Church. Yet his Biblical, historical and therefore systematic elements lack true systematic integration and wholeness. The apparent need to include most viewpoints has again led to extreme brevity and a mechanical choppiness that occasionally borders on the bibliographic. As a result Garrett's own position is often unclear or seemingly relativistic (could this be a tentativeness that is an ill effect of our pluralistic culture?). His theological method negates the possibility of transcending the *loci* approach to theology that could have been obtained by following God's redemptive-historical movement in and to the world as centered in Christ. An implicit Kantianism also takes its toll at critical points in Garrett's doctrine of the Trinity (cf. his notion of "projection"). And Garrett has not made clear why conclusions from the history of doctrine have the authoritative role he gives to them, and if they have such authority, why he must shift his use of the history of doctrine (affirmation to negation) when moving his discussion from Trinity to ecclesiology.

CONCLUSION

My own theological convictions or conclusions would set most closely with what Grudem says. But the question here has been primarily one of theological methodology and not conclusions. At one level, what we have found here are somewhat postmodern, early-modern and late-modern evangelical approaches to God's triunity and the Church. But beyond that issue it would

appear that theological unitariness, synthesis, relatedness, and the faithful following of the way God has and will take in creation and redemption—characteristics that ought to be manifest at some level in a truly systematic theology—favor something akin to the kinetic focus on God's redemptive-kingdom movement from within God, in Jesus Christ and by the Spirit as reflected in Grenz' terse work. One may not agree with all aspects of what Grenz includes and concludes theologically, but his methodology makes his work the one truly systematic evangelical theology available today. By way of a closing note, on the whole it is still difficult to surpass the *Christian Theology* of Millard Erickson⁵ for both effective theological method and content.

⁵ M. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983–85)