
The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei

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Expectations for religious leaders are changing rapidly in this dynamic, chaotic and postmodern world. In the midst of the chaos, humans are adrift in their search for a sense of self and purpose. How should Christian leaders seek to address this situation? Unfortunately, much of the current literature focuses on specific activities which religious leaders can *do*, such as creating vision and mission statements, planning strategically, forming small groups, and managing conflict. But today's challenges are more systemic in nature and require that more attention be focused on helping postmodern persons find meaning and identity. To do this, Christian leaders need a biblical and theological foundation to inform their efforts.

Stanley Grenz has recognized this need. In response, he has embarked on an ambitious journey to create a six volume series that engages in theological construction called the Matrix of Christian Theology. Though his intent is not to create a theological summa, ultimately the series will explore the central topics that comprise the work of systematic theology: theology, anthropology, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. This series is unique in that Grenz plans to approach each topic through a postmodern lens. Though Grenz is well known for his expertise on postmodernism, an additional and notable influence on this series is the rediscovery of the doctrine of the Trinity in the 20th century. Grenz's intent is for each volume to be grounded in the conviction that God is Triune.

Grenz begins the series by focusing on anthropology, not theology. It is the social and relational nature of the Triune God, in particular, that influences the first volume of the series *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei*. It is through the concept of the *imago dei* – humans created in the image of God – which Grenz hopes to develop a *theological anthropology*. While he admits that

this may not be entirely possible, Grenz intends to at least present a theological response to "the most pressing issue of anthropology, the constitution of the self, or as stated in Christian anthropological terms, the character of the *imago dei*" (20).

The fundamental argument in *The Social God and the Relational Self* is that "the image of God is ultimately an eschatological concept – it is our divinely given destiny - and as such it has critical implications for our understanding of the nature and role of the church" (xi). Grenz's goal is to reconceptualize the *imago dei* as a social reality in a postmodern context where the notion of self has been lost (15). He intends "to foster a renewal of the Christian communally constituted soul out of the ashes of the demise of the centered self" (3).

The core of the book is divided into three major sections – Context, Texts, and Application. Grenz's methodology is evident in each section. He engages in a critical and constructive conversation that is influenced by biblical, theological and cultural perspectives on theological anthropology.

In part one, Grenz develops the theological and anthropological context for his argument by first providing a fascinating historical retrospective of both theology and anthropology. He begins with the roots of trinitarian theology, wisely focusing on the importance of Barth, Rahner, and Moltmann. He then shifts the focus to anthropology, and goes back to Augustine who is credited with defining the modern concept of self, individuality, and personal identity.

Grenz adeptly guides the reader through the numerous transitions of the notion of self until the late nineteenth century notion of the autonomous self collapsed and its demise was embraced. In the postmodern world, personal identity has become indistinguishable from social identity. Self is determined by context and relationships, and is defined by external, rather than internal influences. The sense of loss and confusion is palpable. Grenz anticipates the postmodern human's need to find meaning and identity by turning to theological resources. These are explored in the second section of the book.

In part two, Grenz develops the scriptural foundation for the *imago dei* within a trinitarian perspective. He identifies

and analyzes three historical interpretations of the *imago dei* structural, relational and eschatological. It is the eschatological perspective that clearly sparks Grenz's imagination, which leads to his detailed exegetical analysis in subsequent chapters. Grenz's exegesis includes detailed use of both Hebrew and Greek, and his careful work in chapters five through seven inspires focused attention to the biblical texts. The reader is advised to keep a Bible nearby.

Grenz approaches the texts by starting with Genesis and proceeding through Revelation. Thus, he moves from a creation-centric *imago dei* to a Christo-centric *imago dei*. Through Christ, a new humanity emerges. Through the power of the Holy Spirit persons are transformed, and are called to live as bearers of the *imago dei* in the present, while also pointing to the eschatological future.

Grenz's historical and scriptural analysis leads to the inevitable question of application. He addresses this question in part three where he reverses the direction of his approach by beginning with Revelation and continuing back through Genesis. Grenz makes the case for the *imago dei* as a social reality, but in an unexpected way. Through a fascinating biblical and theological discussion of human sexuality, he makes the claim that the *imago dei* is relational and communal. Ultimately, the *imago dei* is revealed in the relationality of those who are gathered in community – the ecclesia. Thus, the postmodern *self* can find identity among those who are in Christ and thereby participate in the fulfillment of God's plan for all of humanity.

Grenz has written a thought provoking book that is well worth reading more than once. It contains excellent exegesis that will be appreciated by those familiar with the biblical languages. His research also provides interesting and helpful historical perspective on complicated issues.

This book is a welcome addition to the ever expanding discussion of trinitarian theology. More importantly, the focus on the postmodern loss of *self* should not be overlooked. Grenz has carved out new space by bringing postmodern anthropology and trinitarian theology together in conversation. He carefully manages the potentially volatile combination on the printed page, but I anticipate that this book will inspire vigorous responses from various readers. In the end,

I believe that Grenz does achieve his goal of constructing a theological anthropology of the self in the postmodern world. Fortunately, we know what he plans to do for an encore. We can anticipate that the conversation begun in this volume will continue as he moves on to theology and pneumatology. Grenz should be applauded for embarking on an extremely ambitious journey to create this six volume series. Though his declared intent is not to create a theological summa, ultimately this series will become one. Start your collection now.

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