
This book stands as a testament to the fact that theologians of evangelical provenance and conviction are not ignoring issues of method. In Beyond Foundationalism, John Franke and the late Stanley Grenz offer a sophisticated treatment of theological prolegomena in a distinctly postmodern context. In part 1, they begin by surveying the landscape of theological methodology as recently practiced by both mainline liberals and conservative evangelicals; here they insist that the foundationalism that is characteristic of both approaches is the culprit that cripples theology. They point out some of the problems with both approaches, and they suggest that the current postmodern context offers an opportunity to move beyond the stagnation of both camps. In place of this discredited, outmoded, and stifling foundationalism they offer a distinctly non-foundational method.

In part 2, the authors suggest that the sources of theology are Scripture (“theology’s ‘norming norm’”), tradition (“theology’s hermeneutical trajectory”), and culture (“theology’s embedding context”). Here, they reject earlier conservative, rationalist, and scholastic attempts to base theology upon an inerrant Bible as well as earlier liberal views of Scripture; instead they propose an instrumentalist account of biblical authority. They recognize that the history of exegesis is an invaluable and indispensable tool for theology, and they helpfully call for the retrieval of the broad Christian tradition as an important source for contemporary theology. Grenz and Franke also insist that theologians cannot afford to pretend that they operate in an intellectual vacuum. They argue that theologians must admit that all theologizing is done from within particular contextual settings, and they offer some reflection on what this might mean for contemporary theology.
Part 3 explores the Focal Motifs of theology. Grenz and Franke propose that all of theology should be trinitarian, communitarian, and eschatological. By this, they mean that all theological formulations, from prolegomena and theology proper to soteriology and beyond, must be guided by and consistent with a clear vision of the Triune God. Because theology should be done by a community of interpreters that bears the image of the social trinity, all theology should be communitarian rather than individualistic. Furthermore, because the community is not yet fully formed by the Triune God, all theology is to be rigorously eschatological. The end result is a vision of a nonfoundational, postrationalist, and postmodern theology that is trinitarian, communitarian, and eschatological while also being biblically normed, traditionally grounded, and culturally relevant.

All of this is quite a mouthful, and, at some points, the authors may spend too much time offering background information (overviews of the doctrine of the Trinity, summaries of the liberal-communitarian debates, and so forth) and not enough energy explaining exactly what they mean by these pronouncements. Still, there is much to appreciate in this work. The effort of Grenz and Franke to wrestle with the demise of modernity will be encouraging to many. They interact with an astounding range of theologians, philosophers, and cultural theorists. Their concern for proper and careful method in theology is most welcome, as is their straightforward recognition that theology is done in specific cultural contexts. Their appropriation of speech-act theory, while not unique, holds promise as it allows for recognition of the multiple and diverse “illocutionary” and “perlocutionary” actions (other than simply conveying information) that the Holy Spirit performs through the text. Perhaps more importantly, their insistence that prolegomena and theology proper belong together will strike many as both right and potentially fruitful. Surely this trinitarian and ecclesial approach to Christian theology that is both normed by Scripture and informed by the Christian tradition is to be heartily welcomed.

Unfortunately, however, this book raises some nagging questions and important concerns. Some are practical in nature. For instance, we are left wondering how this theology is actually to be done; we are also left with questions as to how disagreements in theology are to be adjudicated. However, I shall bypass such questions and focus on the issues that are at the heart of this project. One such area of concern has to do with the authors’ understanding of foundationalism. Their entire book comes to us as a recommendation of a postfoundationalist or nonfoundationalist approach, but it is less than obvious that they are working with the best understanding of what it is that they are rejecting. For instance, in some places, it appears that they are confusing genus (foundationalism) with species (what is commonly called classic, narrow, or strong foundationalism). At some points, they appear to recognize a distinction between soft or modest foundationalism, on one hand, and narrow or strong foundationalism, on the other hand. Often they proceed as if there is only one version of foundationalism (i.e., the strong version). Such an approach to this central topic makes it hard to escape the impression that Grenz and Franke
have either misunderstood foundationalism or overlooked the possibility that modest foundationalism is still viable and thus have dismissed it too hastily.

Furthermore, they show a tendency to confuse the foundationalist picture of epistemic justification (or warrant) with attitudes, motivations, and dispositions that have sometimes been associated with foundationalists (especially those of a narrow stripe). Grenz and Franke often characterize foundationalism as the individualistic and rationalist quest for unassailable certainty and universality, but on a moment’s reflection it should be clear that this has little or nothing to do with the basic foundationalist account of epistemic justification. Individualism, rationalism, and the desire for certainty are neither necessary nor sufficient for foundationalism—someone who is not a foundationalist could exhibit any or all of these characteristics while a foundationalist might not be guilty of any of these charges. Grenz and Franke advocate a theology that is “beyond foundationalism,” but, from what we have in this work, it is still less than obvious either that their use of the term is consistent or that their understanding of foundationalism is the best one available.

Furthermore, it is not clear just what it is that they are proposing in the place of foundationalism. At some points, it looks as though Grenz and Franke are advocating coherentism, while at others they seem to be in favor of a “wedding of communitarian and pragmatist insights” (54). It is far from clear that they wrestle adequately with the hard philosophical and theological questions that might attend such a proposal. Perhaps they should do so, for it is not enough to point out the problems with foundationalism and simply assume that some alternative is better without showing that they have taken a close look at the attendant difficulties that might come with the new proposal.

Grenz and Franke do offer a brief indication of what they might be proposing in their discussion of “eschatological ontology” and “eschatological realism.” Here, they ask if the “demise of naive realism” requires “that we give up all sense of an objective universe existing ‘out there’?” Their answer to this important question is a disappointing, “Not necessarily,” but they insist that, given their eschatology, this objectivity is never “static;” it is never about “the world as it is.” Instead it is dynamic; it has to do with the universe as God wills that it shall become. The “real universe” is not “around” us—it is “before” us, and this means that, in our theologizing, we have an important role to play in the social construction of the reality of the world to come (271-2). What this means, however, is far from pellucid, and surely this sort of profoundly important metaphysical discussion deserves more than the eight pages that it receives. Unfortunately, however, we are left waiting for a more extended treatment of the questions raised by such assertions.

In Beyond Foundationalism, Grenz and Franke offer a sophisticated proposal for postmodern Christian theological prolegomena. We can hope that they will attend to the important business that has been left unfinished; we can also hope that the weaknesses of their proposal do not cause us to lose sight of their contributions.

—Tom McCall