

Thirty-Five Theological Notes

by Tim Nichols

(for old friends and new, who are trying to figure out where I'm coming from)

Prolegomena

1. I am an exegete, storyteller, and shepherd. My personal ministry focuses on helping people to pray, know God personally and directly, learn and live the biblical Story, retake lost territory the Church has ceded to the pagans, and use high-concept folk culture as a vehicle for reformation. Mostly in Englewood, Colorado.
2. I have tried to listen well to the Scriptures and be as faithful as I can be to what they say. Theologians tend to gather in herds like anybody else, and my particular set of emphases has not led me into one of the standard herds.
3. The spirit of the day being what it is -- postmodern ectoplasm that evaporates in a strong light -- I am expected to reject herding and its attendant labels, and demand recognition as an absolutely unique snowflake. But no. Gathering in community and giving apt names to things are expressions of the image of God. Hence this explanation, which I hope will help.
4. Much mischief comes of affirming something we ought to affirm, and then on that basis denying something we ought *not* to deny. We ought to have learnt this from the doctrine of the Trinity: if we believe in inerrancy, then sometimes we must submit to mystery.
5. Mood is often more important--and harder to capture--than the standard talking points. For example, I have worked productively with postmil brethren with no problem, and had trouble working with some of my fellow premil folk. The practical difference is mood: when the kings of the earth conspire against Him, Yahweh laughs at them. Do we laugh with Him, or do we think the sky is falling? The difference is easy to see in real life, but it can be quite difficult to codify meaningfully in the standard form of a doctrinal statement.

Basics

6. I believe the historic Christian faith expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, the Definition of Chalcedon, and the National Association of Evangelicals statement of faith.
7. I believe in the biblically attested miracles -- crossing the Red Sea, Joshua's long day, virgin birth, water into wine, all of it, because the Bible says so. I believe in a recent, six-literal-day creation and a worldwide flood for the same reason.
8. Since I don't approach the Scriptures with the skepticism of a 19th-century liberal, I don't approach the history of the Church that way either. Having been taught by the Scriptures to believe in such things, I believe in the miracles of the Christian Church, reported in the ministries of such notable saints as Augustine, Patrick of Ireland, George Wishart, John Knox, Charles Spurgeon, and Francis MacNutt. And I've seen some myself.
9. I have personally experienced the exegetical bankruptcy, practical impotence, and willful historical ignorance of cessationism. Never again. That said, supernatural ministry can be mightily abused, as in Corinth. 1 Corinthians prescribes a solution; cessationism ain't it.
10. Just to get it out of the way, I am not a Calvinist, and still less of an Arminian. Both Calvin and Arminius did good service to the church, but they were both Calvinists, and shared a number of assumptions which the Scriptures do not support. Talking about "the theological spectrum from Calvinism to Arminianism" is like talking about "all the colors of the rainbow, from red to pink." There were 15 glorious centuries of Christian theology before those two worthy gents came along, and a few centuries after them, too. For which all thanksgiving.
11. I am Protestant, and happy to be. I am deeply in debt to the magisterial Reformation; it remains one of the finest creations of the Roman Church.

Prayer

12. A strong view of divine sovereignty is necessary to the integrity of the Christian faith. The Scriptures require it, and there's no point in praying for things unless God is in control.
13. I believe that God's hand moves in response to prayer, and sometimes we do not have because we do not ask. This is tough to square with divine sovereignty, but if we only know enough to be obedient, then we know enough. So I pray; resolving the mysteries can wait.
14. I believe we should learn to pray by praying in the categories of the Lord's Prayer, because Matthew says so, and in the words of the Lord's Prayer, because Luke says so. Many struggle to pray effectively because we do not honor our Lord's instruction in this matter.

The Unity of Christ's Body

15. I am small-c catholic. Those who belong to Christ belong to me, and I to them.
16. I believe in the unity of the Body of Christ. Unity is a cardinal doctrine and practice, essential to maintaining justification by faith (as Paul said in Galatians), and a crucial part of our witness to the world, not to mention being Jesus' dying wish for His people. Our real convictions on unity are demonstrated in our choices of whom to eat with, pray with, worship with, and work with. If we don't do those things outside the narrow confines of our home community, we might think unity is permissible, but we don't think it's important.
17. I believe in historical unity. All Christ's people, everywhere and everywhen, are My People, more so than my family, my fellow Americans or the members of my martial arts club. In the second century, my Church was still finding her feet. In the eleventh century, my Church had suffered an unfortunate split that has yet to be healed. In the fifteenth century, my Church was hopelessly corrupt. She has always been headquartered in the New Jerusalem, no matter what some folks believed about Rome. If we celebrate Veterans Day but not Purim or the Feast of All Saints, we have an odd notion of where our primary loyalties lie.
18. Today the Church lives with denominations and highly denominated nondenominational entities by the million. These tribal loyalties are a blessing insofar as they inspire greater love for God and our neighbors, but when we cease to act as one Body with others who belong to Christ but not to our tribe, we are failing in exactly the way Peter failed at Antioch.

The Church Service

19. Every regularly held public meeting has some kind of liturgy to it; some churches are more conscious and competent at using their liturgies to achieve their goals. I prefer them.
20. I believe that worship is about what God wants to receive, not about what we happen to want to give (cf. Cain), and still less about what's fashionable this month. I believe God has told us to be a Psalm-singing people. If we sing the Psalms and follow the directions they give, we will experience richer worship than is typical in the American church.
21. Having been taught by Psalm-singing, baptism, communion, and anointing with oil, I believe in physical expressions of worship. I believe that the arts have a strong place in the church's worship. There's nothing wrong with spontaneous worship, but I believe in the value of planned prayer, painting, and dance as I believe in the value of planned music and sermons.
22. I believe in the use of the supernatural ministry gifts in the worship service, because the Bible says so. I also believe that if you're serious about that, you leave space for it. If you have a 90-minute service time, and you plan 90 minutes of content, you don't value supernatural ministry. If you schedule a move of the Spirit 27 minutes into the service, you are attempting to control something you shouldn't. He blows where he wills.
23. I believe the church service ought to end in communion, with its attendant implications of security and fellowship, rather than an invitation, with its attendant implications of insecurity and crisis. Invitations are fine for revival meetings, but have no place at family gatherings. Repeated invitations of the "Maybe you know a lot about Jesus, but have you ever really..." type have done

much mischief to impressionable children who were unfortunate enough to grow up hearing them every week.

Sacraments

24. I believe in baptizing believers immediately, like they did in Acts. Baptism is the New Covenant analog to circumcision. Of course, we circumcise the baby after he's born, but since New Covenant members are born twice, we have to ask: "Which birth are we talking about?" If baptism is the new circumcision, then what is the new birth? Well...the new birth. Paedobaptism is a throwback to the days before Christ broke the power of the clan.
25. I believe in weekly communion, but I also believe that weekly communion will be unbearable until it is celebrated as the feast of victory that it is, rather than observed as an orgy of ungodly introspection. It is vile for a shepherd in Christ's flock to turn the Corinthians' sin -- which no one is committing today -- into an excuse to torment the sheep with every imaginable doubt. Self-examination for the sins discussed in the passage is fair game.
26. I believe that the wine in the communion cup should be wine, because the Bible says so. I also believe that it is foolish and wicked to divide the Body over how we conduct the Table, so when necessary, I drink my grape juice with joy and thanksgiving.
27. It is not my Table; it is Christ's. I am nowhere commanded to fence it; how dare I? All who are His are welcome; all who desire Him are welcome. Jesus did not stint to give Himself to the children, the outcasts, and those who did not yet believe. Of course giving the body and blood of the very Son of God to such people (to any people, for that matter) is blasphemy and sacrilege. But it is Jesus' sacrilege, not ours. Who am I to argue?
28. I believe we must speak of the Table as God speaks of it, without hedging. I believe in the real presence of Christ in the elements, without feeling a need to explain the details. I follow the examples of John Knox, John Williamson Nevin, and other stalwart Protestants in refusing to let vain Romish speculation ruin this for me, as it did for poor Zwingli.

Living as a Christian

29. Eternal life is knowing God. Salvation is irreducibly relational, and individual conversion is absolutely necessary; well-remembered crisis conversion is another matter entirely. Seeing a child on the playground, I can be sure the child is alive without knowing the moment of his birth. Striking up a conversation, I might find that the child himself does not know when he was born. It does not follow that he was never born.
30. The new birth is a miraculous, gracious act of God which we receive by trusting God. Like any birth, it is the work of the parents, and not the child, that accomplishes it.
31. The body is dead because of sin, but the spirit is life because of righteousness. Continuing to grow in Christ requires an ongoing miracle, and again, we must be willing to receive that miracle. But if we are, God will do it.
32. It is the birthright of every child of God to hear and understand his Father's voice, in the Bible and in his heart.
33. Uncertainty is a poor foundation for a life of righteousness. Like any good father, God assures us that we are His own, and urges us to live on that basis. The accusations and doubts that cause us to question our place in the family come from the world, the flesh and the devil--or from our fellow believers, doing the devil's work for him.
34. Living as a Christian is a life of continual repentance. We always fall short, and God's grace is always there to transform us and move us closer to Him. We need only be willing.
35. Willingness is being open with God: openly communicating to Him what we think, believe and have done, openly hearing His approval and correction, and obeying.