

Theological Notes II

by Tim Nichols

(Reflections on anthropology in the world and the Kingdom of God)

Prolegomena

1. The first set of notes was designed to help old friends locate me on the theological landscape. Being brief and not too snarky served that purpose well.
2. This set is more about the orthodox (albeit uncommon) understanding of the world and the Church that guides my ministry. That requires a bit more elaboration, and this time around, I put all the peppers in the salsa. If someone feels the need to return fire, I hope my position is clear enough that they'll know just where to aim.

Metaphysics: the Kingdom of God

3. There is only one world, a tangled thicket of matter and spirit spoken into existence by the triune God. There is nowhere else to live.
4. We talk of the "spirit world" and the "material world" as though they were distinguishable worlds. The language is a comforting lie that lulls us into believing we can see, hear, taste, touch and smell "our" world. But no. Our world -- the only world -- runs far deeper than we can explore with physical senses.
5. Untangling matter from spirit is impossible in the living world -- it is, in fact, the very definition of death.
6. In this tangle of matter and spirit, two kingdoms are at war. The kingdom of darkness was an early favorite to win; all the best pundits thought so. But those with eyes to see know that darkness was decisively defeated when Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God -- and His kingdom of light has been growing ever since, progressing from a garden to a garden city by means of a series of deaths, from which the kingdom is always resurrected.
7. The question we constantly face is simple: shall I live in the kingdom of God? If I live in the kingdom of God, then I live as a son of the King under an open heaven, with the unlimited resources of heaven available to me. If I live under my own rule in the kingdom of man, I live in darkness, limited to my own paltry resources.

Metaphysics: Causality, Sacraments, and Magic

8. In the kingdom of God, we learn how causality actually works: that which God decrees comes to pass. Effective action requires faith undergirded by God's decrees.
9. What we think of as physical causality -- the kind that scientists do experiments with -- is a special case of that general principle, and subject to exceptions. Pharaoh had physics on his side when he trapped Israel at the Red Sea.

10. Therefore, I believe in magic. The worlds were framed by the Word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible. Every common bush is as magical as it gets.
11. Folk magic is an attempt to hijack the spoken and sacramental nature of created reality without reference to God. In folk practice, magic operates by speaking something into being (as in a spell), or by metaphor (as in a voodoo doll). These are deep cultural memories of the structures of blessing and sacrament, respectively.
12. This world is created and upheld by the Word, and it exists by and for the Word. Of course words have power. Whether it's "Let the earth bring forth grass" or "May Yahweh bless you and keep you," there is no direct line of physical causality between the vibrations in the air and the result -- and yet speaking changes reality. Blessing manifests tangibly, but operates behind and beneath the tangible things.
13. A folk magician invests much work in getting to that literal place or metaphorical space (state of mind, situation, time) where spoken words become real. As a Christian, I approach the endeavor differently, because I know that God acts when I speak in His hearing based on His promise. God hears everywhere; I require no magic circle. I only need ears to Hear Him, and courage to speak obediently.
14. Sacrament is enacted metaphor which, by faith, accomplishes what it signifies. In baptism, we pass under the waters, die, and are raised alive again out of the depths. In the Table, we partake of Christ, becoming more like Him because we are what we eat. These are sensible signs of a reality far deeper than the physical senses discern.
15. The Church has long acknowledged a category of "sacramentals," things that do not fit into the category of sacrament proper, but nonetheless partake of the character of sacraments and work like sacraments in the lives of the faithful. This category is real, and all of reality belongs in it, if only we had eyes to see.
16. Sacramentals are often considered a sort of bridge between the sacred and profane worlds. But the category "the profane world" is a lie, since all reality is sacramental.
17. The is/is not relationship that defines metaphor is fundamental to the nature of God Himself -- the Son is not the Father, but if you have seen the Son, you have seen the Father. The creation reflects the nature of its Creator: the glory of infinite God rendered in finite matter, which is to say, metaphor come to life.
18. Folk magicians expend much energy establishing a link between the sign and the thing signified (e.g., the voodoo doll adorned with the victim's hair, saliva, etc.) The stronger the link, the more powerful the working. As a Christian, I know that reality is sacramental, and therefore I have no need to *create* a link between the sign and the thing signified; God established the links in creation. I operate based on seeing the links that God has established, and hearing what God wants to do with them. What I need is eyes to see, ears to hear, and courage to obey.
19. The thing most necessary is faith. Faith is the present, tangible reality of the thing we hope for. Faith is the evidence of what is not here yet. Faith is not an airy-fairy

affirmation that it's all good, or "believing what you know ain't so." Faith is seeing what God wants to do that ain't so yet, and acting on it, preparing to receive God's will done on earth as it already is in heaven.

20. The old tales are true: all the really powerful magic takes blood. The essence of the gospel is that for all good ends, the necessary blood has already been shed, and by faith alone, that blood becomes effective on our behalf.

Offense or Defense?

21. Christ will build His Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. Gates are not an offensive weapon; the Church of Jesus Christ is *never* under siege. If we *think* we are under siege, we are listening to the enemy's lies, not to Christ.
22. Light doesn't get cooties from darkness. We carry the contagious holiness of the incorruptible Christ who turns darkness to light.
23. Jesus sent us to lay siege to the kingdom of darkness and *win*. If we are not coming into contact with the darkness on its home turf, then we are not living the way Jesus meant for us to live. Suppose you are looking for a site for an urban ministry, and someone offers you a storefront. Your next-door neighbors would be a marijuana shop on one side and a massage parlor on the other, and there's a liquor store across the street. Is this a good site, or a bad one? Depends -- are you establishing a beachhead, or under siege?
24. Does this mean that we will never suffer a setback? Of course not. We are as imperfect as anybody, and if we engage with the sin and the brokenness of the world, then we will sometimes fail. But God has not given us a spirit of fear. Let us risk the possible sins of action rather than commit the certain sin of burying our talent in the backyard.

Anthropology: History, Myth, and Decision-Making

25. Human history is not an undifferentiated mass of incomprehensible and chaotic events. God designed History as a single grand Story that He is telling, knowing the end from the beginning.
26. The development of the human race always boils down to change in individual humans, which sometimes leads impatient people to mistakenly try to get cultures or even the whole race to turn on a dime. People can change quickly (e.g. Saul of Tarsus), cultures more slowly, and the human race slowest of all. Unless it is a miracle, cultural revolution is a categorical error -- usually a murderous one.
27. Over time, personal revolution drives cultural reformation, leading to (slow but real) human transformation. God is building a new humanity: the resurrected Bride. Good personal decisions and transformations harmonize with that grand Story.
28. God is telling this grand Story to an audience that He built to hear it. Our psychology didn't just happen; it was designed for the Story, and it is being shaped

- by the Story as it goes. If aspects of the design are beyond us, the men of Issachar still demonstrate that we can understand the times well enough to know what to do.
29. Understanding what to do often comes of understanding the patterns of the Story. Myths are deep cultural memories of those patterns, and have much to teach. Euhemerus and Freud / Campbell were *both* right: myth arises from dimly remembered common history *and* from the deep structures common to human consciousness. God designed history and consciousness, and He is using each to shape the other toward a common end.
 30. We must distinguish myth from history, and do so like Christians. Pagan assumptions about distinguishing myth from history are bunk, because pagans do not understand history. For example, they take evidences of literary design (in, say, the Genesis creation account) as earmarks of myth, instead of an indication that God is telling the world as well as the text, and the account is capturing reality nicely.
 31. All our historians must learn that lesson. So must our pastors, spiritual directors, and life coaches, because design doesn't just happen at the macro level.

Anthropology: Personal Development through Community Participation

32. The new humanity that God is growing will be a better image of the Trinity: each person will be free, but intimately connected to others.
33. This new way of being human frees each person to be what God crafted that person to be, and to do the work God set apart for that person to do.
34. At the same time, this new way of being human holds each person in deep unity with others. The power to fully act on our newfound freedom is only available in connection with community; God is not in the business of enabling monads.
35. Tribal societies are as connected as it gets. Every member knows exactly who he is, because his place is determined from birth -- no one is free. Cities disconnect people from family and land; with everything up for grabs, the city dweller is free, but totally alone. In the kingdom of man, connection and freedom are opposites, and the only way to obtain one is to sacrifice the other.
36. Only as love incarnate -- as an image of the Trinity -- can we have both freedom and connection. Trinitarian love allows us to live in community as free people.
37. The city (not the hunter-gatherer clan) is the basic unit of human community. The hunter-gatherer lifestyle has fallen to a level below that of the first generations of humans, abdicating dominion responsibility in favor of parasitism on the land. Any chimpanzee can manage that much; from the beginning, we were made for better. The garden of Eden was bounded: Adam and Eve were put out of it, and an angel guarded the entrance. The second generation of humanity (Cain) created a new bounded dwelling: the first human city, which became a place of music, technology, mayhem, and murder.

38. From that time to this, there have been cities. The city is concentrated humanness for good or evil: any given city is varying degrees of heaven or hell, bride or whore.
39. The archetypal city of man is Babel, which starts on earth and tries to build its whorish way into heaven. The *telos* of human history is the New Jerusalem, the bridal garden city that is built in heaven and comes to earth -- and that is also the Church of Jesus Christ.
40. Even darkly prefigured in the city of man, the New Jerusalem breaks the power of the clan. Baptized in crowds of strangers, separated from those who "know" who he is, his ties to blood and land cut, the city-dweller is born again. In the city of man, this bastard rebirth creates anonymity, alienation, and a criminal lifestyle unthinkable in village life. In the kingdom of God, it allows a person to pursue the calling for which God built him, unhindered by the rigidity of the clan structure. (Remember, Jesus' communally assigned identity was "construction worker!")
41. The large pool of people in the city creates the opportunity for extended families of choice, gathered around shared interests and missions. In the city, social groups can prefigure the ultimate family of choice, the New Jerusalem: "These are My mother and My brothers."

Anthropology: Finding Life in the City

42. Hobbies and fandoms are too weak to substitute for the blood tie as the cohesive force behind real community. We are still learning how to live Jesus' words: "These are My mother and My brothers." We have yet to learn that "family of choice" does not mean that *we* do the choosing. We do not understand that blood ties can only be supplanted by a superior blood tie.
43. Our (North American) society has reaped the blessings of a thousand years of Christendom, and we have been blessed with wealth and professional specialization in the process. We routinely use these blessings to create distance where we should create bonds. In the kingdom of God, we are called to live in each other's lives.
44. Trade is the beating heart of the city. In the city of man, we trade in human souls: slavery and prostitution are the starkest, but far from the only, ways we buy and sell one another. In the kingdom of God, trade is redeemed: human beings embody the image of the Trinity (via collaboration) in the common pursuit of our destiny (dominion of the earth).
45. Urban concentrations of resources fuel cultural development that would be impossible otherwise: every mud-hut village has songs, but if you want to go to the symphony, you have to go to the city. The city of man drives all but the best into the consumer role of passive spectator, but the city of God allows for a culture of fruitful and vigorous participation in folk and high art of all kinds.
46. There's nothing wrong with enjoying a performance, but there is everything wrong with spectator culture. Those who live in the kingdom of God are kings and queens;

how can we bring our glory and honor into the telic city if we only watch? The kingdom of God is a culture of makers and doers, of participants.

47. The magic ingredient for realizing the city of God on earth comes right from Jesus: tangibly love your actual neighbors. Whatever God gave you -- time, treasure, talent -- share generously. This includes *developing* the talents God put in you and others.
48. Retreat is a temporary necessity. Like many of the prophets before Him, Jesus retreated from the cities to seek solitude with His Father, and so can we. However, we who believe in the New Jerusalem and pray for God to bring it to earth can reject neither city nor empire, because the telic city is the headquarters of a worldwide empire, ruled by the King of kings. We retreat in order to return, the better to establish a beachhead of Jesus' empire wherever we live here and now.

Tensegrity Ecclesiology: The Nature of the Church

49. The Church is the pre-eminent place where God builds the new humanity. The Church as it is present here and now is a beachhead for the Jerusalem from above, which is free, and she is the mother of us all. The gospel offers every person a place of unparalleled freedom and genuine connection in the new bridal city.
50. The biceps pull one way; the triceps pull the opposite way. Both pull their insertion points on the forearm toward the shoulder, and on that point of agreement they are opposed by the humerus, which pushes outward against them both. All bodily health and movement require that every part does its share in tension with all the others. Unnecessary tension causes ill health and makes movement harder, but a healthy body is a sea of necessary tension -- and the Church is a Body.
51. Our sovereign Lord made us with different histories and cultures, different sexes and gifts, and unique individuals to boot. If we are to be free, then we must function in tension; conflict and confrontation appear where free people live together.
52. Apostles pull outward toward the new, and evangelists toward the lost; shepherds pull inward toward the flock. Prophets reach upward to mystical reality; teachers ground us in the text. Apostles and prophets seek to bring about heavenly realities that don't yet exist on earth; evangelists, shepherds and teachers work hard to address what's already here. The resulting conflicts are the normal and healthy corollaries of setting people free to embrace their unique giftings and destinies.
53. Churches that do not have these conflicts are enslaving people to some myopic distortion of the kingdom of God -- usually the senior pastor's. This is the spiritual equivalent of communism, as over against the glorious and creative disarray of a market economy. The slavery will be called "order," but it will be the order of a well-run cemetery, not of a well-run nursery -- and just as life-giving.
54. While we're on the subject, there is no such biblical position as "senior pastor" for a reason. And some of the best people who hold that title are not, in fact, pastors at all.

Tensegrity Ecclesiology: Thriving in Conflict

55. Facing conflict, we have to ask the same question as always: will we live in the kingdom of God, or in the kingdom of man?
56. Facing conflict like royal children of God means we tell each other the truth about what we feel and think, and that we stay at the table to hear others' responses. There are no parting shots in the house of God, because we have to keep coming back in peace to the same Table. We honor one another unconditionally, giving preference to one another in love. This is how free people get along and remain free.
57. If we allow ourselves to behave like beggars fighting over scraps, then our sinful desires will overwhelm us. We will either abandon the community, run roughshod over others, or strive to become people-pleasers without actually knowing what people want, because we are afraid to have the conversation where we find out.
58. In the end, communities of beggars simply fly apart unless well-meaning leaders multiply restrictions and policies in order to hold them together. These restrictions have an appearance of wisdom through self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of how God made the Body, but they are of no value in our battle against sin.
59. When all the gifts are allowed to function, and we let all our people press into their unique destinies *without losing connection to the Body*, then we all stretch, and God enlarges our territory. When we are engaged in prophetic ministry, the prophets lead and everyone else supports them; when we are engaged in teaching ministry, the teachers lead and everyone else supports them, and so on.
60. Different church communities likewise function in tension with one another. Christ has not forsaken any of the scattered strands of His Church; He providentially enables them all to continue because they all preserve valuable emphases. They all have weaknesses and errors -- just like individual members of the Body. As with individuals, so with communities in the Body: we can cover each other's weaknesses and profit from each other's strengths if we can rise to the challenge of interacting as free people, as children of one King and heirs of one kingdom.
61. Surrounded by the attacks of the enemy and the animosity God-hating pagans, two people or churches in living relationship with the risen Christ find community together, as outposts of the New Jerusalem should. They come from different clans, but the new city breaks the power of the clan and unites them in the family of Jesus. Any time Jesus is not enough to unite us, we have lost our way. True ecumenicity was born in the hatred of sinners against Jesus at the cross, and as a practical matter, it often takes the hatred of sinners to restore it.
62. To our shame, conservatives have allowed "ecumenical" to become a swear word. Ecumenicity is the most potent weapon we have. Scripture says it is Jesus' final prayer for us, a necessary result of being straightforward about the gospel, and our best evangelistic tool. True ecumenicity gave us full Gentile participation in the church, the Nicene creed, and Chalcedonian christology. If only we had more of it!