

Theological Notes III

by Tim Nichols

(Reflections on Real Theology, Spiritual Disciplines, and Preparation for Ministry)

Prolegomena

1. The need of the hour is philistine biblicism in the hands of a gang of fearless, steely-eyed mystics intent on anticipating heaven on earth: blessing, loving, and healing one another and a deeply undeserving world, good winners who are gracious and cheerful in anticipation of eschatological victory. How shall we develop such people?
2. We in the church have indulged in a lengthy experiment in expecting the classroom to do our hard work for us, and look where we are: many of our seminary graduates cannot pray for healing, preach a sermon, visit the sick, bless the hurting, comfort the dying, assist a failing marriage, talk with a rebellious teenager, hear from God, make a disciple. Most of the ones who can, learned those skills outside seminary. We have created a seminary-industrial complex that graduates "trained theologians" with a real command of secondary literature and footnote formatting, but they are neither the sort of people that Jesus was, nor can they do the sorts of things He did.

The Impotence of Classrooms

3. It is not the seminary's fault. The seminary is a classroom doing what classrooms do. The church has failed by expecting from a classroom what classrooms can't deliver.
4. Peter Leithart observed that practical theology departments exist to allow systematic theology departments to continue being impractical. Sadly, this testimony is true -- but it is the professors and the setting which are impractical, not the material itself.
5. The content that we find under the traditional theological -ology headings is frequently true, powerful, and very helpful, both to ministers and to Christ's flock...when those truths are implemented as practical disciplines rather than just discussed and (maybe) correctly understood. The headings themselves, however, are another matter.
6. The traditional theological headings exhibit the order of a butcher shop -- sixteen lamb shanks in nice, neat rows -- not the order of a living organism. The young theologian learns all about lamb shanks in the butcher's case, but does not necessarily learn anything whatever about the care of lambs -- which is his actual job.

7. The topics we encounter in practice are things like confession, repentance, uprooting lies, forgiveness, breaking idolatrous vows, loving difficult people, restoring relationships, navigating friendships, healing wounds, discernment, caring for a weaker brother, hearing the voice of God, pursuing a vocation, finding good trouble, suffering gracefully, and dying well. Under which heading of systematic theology does one teach such things in the classroom? One doesn't, because they're too messy, too cross-disciplinary. Too often, a seminary education barely touches these topics at all.

Theology, Systematic and Historical

8. God wrote 66 books about Himself over a span of two millennia, using over 40 human authors, including a number of trained scholars. Not one of those books is a work of systematic theology, nor does any of them present a brief for systematic theology. On the other hand, a number of biblical books document the historical development of theology and liturgy, sometimes in excruciating detail. This cannot be an accident.
9. Historical and liturgical theologies can follow the models set up in Scripture. Done well, historical theology is the story of how Our People struggled to remain faithful to God and His revelation despite the world, the flesh, and the devil whispering lies in their ears. Similarly, liturgical theology is the story of how Our People grew into maturity in faithful worship, despite the attractions of remaining children, or abandoning the faith for idols.
10. Systematic theology presents us with naked ideas, stripped of their time, place, and circumstances. At its best, it produces a student who has a working knowledge of why the bad ideas are false, and why the good ones are true.
11. Historical and liturgical theologies present us with the same ideas in their actual context. An 800-year-old bad idea may just be a bad idea now, but in its place and time it was a temptation, a lie made compelling by the prevailing sins of the surrounding culture. By understanding how the temptations of the past worked, why our people fell for them, and how they corrupted our worship, we become better equipped to address the temptations of our own time.
12. Lacking a historical and liturgical immune system, systematic theologians and their students regularly succumb to and propagate the temptations of their own time.

Theology, Real and Scholarly

13. Scholarly theology is overrated. Real theology is actual knowledge of God -- His character, words and works in the world. It is mystical and relational, or it is nothing at all. Sometimes it is also scholarly.
14. Real theology is something one attains, not something one studies. It is a personal journey of obedient life in communion with God. Books can help with your

reflection. You can hear about real theology from someone who has attained a measure of it, but you have to learn real theology by experience, walking with God. Hearing about theology from someone who has failed to grasp it for himself is pointless and fruitless -- and the seminary-industrial complex offers many such opportunities.

15. Every popular form of disobedience has its scholarly whores, bought and paid for. The medium of exchange is mammon, whether in the guise of money, influence, or respectability. The scholars are paid to produce a body of commentary and theological literature, which buys the favored form of disobedience a place at the scholarly table.
16. Once the disobedience has paid its scholarly dues, membership in the scholarly guild requires one to take the disobedient position seriously. Christlikeness requires that we never take such (literally) damned nonsense seriously. Jesus didn't write scholarly papers against pharisaical madness; He preached barn-burning sermons, told parables to make it look stupid, mocked their long faces and their prayers and their clothes. Let's be like Jesus.
17. There is a place for scholarship in theology. God-honoring scholarship is loving God and your brothers enough to seek counsel widely in space and time, get it right, and say it well.
18. The personal prerequisites to theology are to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Most scholarship -- including much biblical scholarship -- does nothing of the kind.
19. A farmer with an eighth-grade education who has walked with God these past 40 years is a better theologian than a Ph.D. seminary professor who loves the praise of men more than the praise of God. Choose your mentors accordingly.

Spiritual Disciplines: General

20. The life of spiritual discipline, lived diligently in the context of the church, is the pre-eminent preparation for (and foundation of) ministry of every kind. It is the only context in which a believer learns and attains real theology. Everything else is secondary.
21. There is a blizzard of spiritual disciplines because different people are different. Some disciplines are fundamental to the Christian life -- repentance, prayer, meditation, table fellowship, generosity, rest -- and others are peripheral, to be used by those who find them helpful.
22. Even the fundamental disciplines often have a number of possible expressions. You must meditate on the Word, but you don't have to write your meditations in a journal (although many people have found it helpful). You must pray, but you don't have to use a prayer book. Everything doesn't resonate for everyone. Live a life of

obedience, and don't worry about it if something the Bible doesn't command, doesn't help you.

23. If something the Bible does command doesn't seem to help you, keep at it. Some rewards only come from long obedience. Of course you might also seek counsel to make sure that what you think is obedience, actually is.
24. Cultivating spiritual disciplines requires us to face the subtle temptation to try to buy God's favor by doing things. It never works -- in fact, when you try, you only move further from God. The Pharisees fell for this temptation, and when God showed up, they not only couldn't recognize Him, they plotted His murder.
25. If we fall into the trap of doing our spiritual disciplines in order to be right with God, in order to be better people, in order to be more spiritual, in order to do something for God, then we are just becoming better Pharisees.
26. A spiritual discipline is a container. It opens up a space in our lives for God to fill. If He doesn't fill it, then we just have an empty space. But He delights to fill us.
27. There is no way to game the system, because there is no system to game. It's a relationship with the living God who sees the heart, and meets those who seek Him.

Spiritual Disciplines: Hearing God

28. God is a good Father, and He has given us tons of guidance. Nothing is sillier than a Christian sitting with his Bible closed and fruitlessly begging God to just speak to him. He has -- open up the book and read it!
29. The beginning of spiritual discipline is seeking God without any agenda but His. Be in His presence, and be saturated with His Word. Trust Him to take it from there.
30. God is a good Father. Like any good father, He is not satisfied to simply leave written instructions on the table before you wake up in the morning. He also wants to walk with you, to hear you, and for you to hear Him as you walk together.
31. We believe that the world, the flesh, and the devil can speak to us today, right now. Do we really believe that God will stand mute? Judging from the things we say, many of us do. But no. It is the birthright of every one of God's children to hear their Father's voice.
32. Jesus said, "My sheep hear My voice." Someone will say, "But that was when He was here -- He's gone now." Really? He also said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Jesus said the Spirit of Truth will guide us into all truth. So will He, or won't He?
33. All of us who have been Christians for more than a few weeks have had the experience of reading a passage of Scripture -- often a passage that we've read many times before -- and suddenly encountering a phrase or sentence that smacks us right between the eyes. And we recognize that this is God showing us something we need at that particular moment. So let us have no silly debates about whether God speaks to us today. We all know that He does.

34. For some, this fact makes us so uncomfortable that we have come up with separate words -- revelation and illumination -- to describe different aspects of the experience. But this is where being an obedient practitioner allows you to cut through the theological red tape. However you hang polysyllables on the experience, it still boils down to a simple question: will you follow the direction that God just gave you, or will you disobey? So yeah -- you know you just heard God.
35. God is always speaking, always guiding us. Many times, we simply don't notice, or like young Samuel, don't realize it's Him. A large part of learning to hear God is learning to recognize His voice among many others.
36. Learn how God speaks to His people by studying the Scriptures. Learn how the world, the flesh, and the devil speak by studying the Scriptures. Apply what you've learned.
37. Revelation is received in stillness and tested in community. Grasping what God is telling us involves individual reflection, but it also usually involves discussion with others who see things we cannot.
38. Listening to God is a skill, and it is best acquired by walking with someone who has it. As Solomon said, he who walks with the skilled will be skilled.

Spiritual Disciplines: Repentance

39. Repentance is not beating yourself up for your sins. Someone was already beaten for your sins, so that you are free to simply turn from them when God tells you to turn. Repentance is turning when God says turn.
40. Combined with hearing God, repentance is the discipline that gives rise to and regulates all the others. If we can hear God telling us to turn, and respond by turning, we will make the needed course corrections along the way.
41. Developing the discipline of repentance is a foundation stone of preparation for ministry. In the end, no amount of training or skill will profit those who won't make course corrections as God leads.
42. Repentance is an individual decision, and the action must begin with the individual. No one can repent for us. But we also require support and accountability from a community that has access to our lives.
43. Like a man in a flood clinging to a fire extinguisher, we are quick to do battle with the wrong temptations. As community provides us with a check on whether we are hearing God well, it also provides us with a check on whether the repentance we have in mind actually corrects the problem at hand.

Spiritual Disciplines: Prayer

44. Jesus taught His followers to pray, both in the manner of the Lord's Prayer (Matthew) and in the words of the Lord's Prayer (Luke). Many Christians struggle to pray effectively because we do not honor His instructions.

45. If we would begin learning to pray by simply repeating after Jesus as He taught us to do, our prayer lives would be greatly enriched. The Lord's Prayer liberates us from the tyranny of a "gimme" prayer life. It broadens the scope of our prayer, and puts our requests in proper perspective.
46. Paul and James both instruct us that Christians should be a psalm-singing people. They may well have had in mind singing more than just the 150 biblical psalms, but surely they did not mean less than those.
47. The book of Psalms was the sacred songbook of ancient Israel. In these songs, God taught His people how to bring all the events of their lives and all their thoughts and feelings into His presence honestly. The Psalms are filled with things you "can't say" to God -- and He teaches us to say them.
48. The Bible also preserves for us the prayers of other saints, with the lessons those prayers teach. We would do well to emulate the prayers of Solomon, Daniel, Nehemiah, Habakkuk, Jesus, Paul, and Peter, among others.
49. In addition to the biblical examples that we are obligated to notice, there is also a grand tradition of preserving helpful prayers in the Church. Over the centuries, we have written many prayer books, and many Christians have found it productive to establish a regular prayer rule and stick to it for some time. We would do well to explore the rich heritage of the Spirit guiding the Church's prayer over the centuries.

Spiritual Disciplines: Rest

50. Many of us cheat ourselves by failing to engage in the rest God set aside for us. We were made for a rhythm of work and rest. The first and most obvious rhythm is taking our daily rest -- "for so He gives His beloved sleep." But it's not the only one.
51. When God made the world, He worked six days and rested the seventh. When He gave the Ten Commandments, He looked back on the created order and required Israel to follow His example: work six days and rest the seventh.
52. Although God presented the Sabbath law as explicitly rooted in the created order, He also presented it as a special law for Israel, intended to mark her out from the Gentile nations.
53. The Gentile nations, in turn, were intended to see Israel's practice of her special laws and recognize the great wisdom and understanding that these laws represented. Naturally, Gentiles might want to adopt some of these wise laws.
54. Since the Sabbath law (unlike, say, the prohibition against sowing a field with mixed seed) was rooted in the very order of creation, it is a prime candidate for adoption. While adopting it as a law of the land may be out of reach, adopting it as a personal practice is not.
55. The structure of working six days and resting the seventh is built into the very foundation of the world, and nothing less than a re-creation of the world could

change it. On the first day of the week, Jesus rose from the tomb and walked in the garden as the last Adam, the firstfruits of the resurrection. On that day, Jesus began the re-creation of the world, which continues in the re-creation of our inner man and will culminate in the redemption of our bodies and the resurrection of all things.

- 56. Between now and then, we anticipate and enact the new world by resting on the first day of the week.
- 57. In hindsight, we are not only following the example of the last Adam, but the first as well: the first Adam's first full day on earth was the seventh day, the day of rest. In Christ we achieve the reality for which we had always been built: not to rest from work, but to work from rest.
- 58. We ought to take one day in seven to rest. Liturgically, the first day of the week makes the most sense, if we can do it. Some of us -- pastors, golf pros, and so on -- simply cannot take that day off, but we have a responsibility to rest nonetheless.

Spiritual Disciplines: The Grace Given to You

- 59. God formed each person in the womb and fashioned our days, when none of them yet existed. Jesus gives gifted people to the Body, and the Spirit distributes gifts to each member of the Body as He wills. You were handcrafted by every member of the Trinity with a particular purpose in mind. It is your responsibility to learn who you were made to be, and what you were built to do.
- 60. God called Jacob "Prince of God." He called Gideon "Mighty Warrior." He called Peter "Rock." None of these people would have dared to call themselves what God called them. You would not dare to call yourself what God calls you, either -- but you should know what that is. So ask Him what He calls you, and start to live into it.
- 61. Our identity is not self-generated and it is not earned. We do not invent ourselves or work our way into being what God made us to be. We receive an identity from God and act in harmony with it, not in order to become it, but to obey what God has already declared to be true.
- 62. Paul described "the grace given to [himself]" not simply as apostleship, but as proclaiming the good news to the Gentiles -- a specific calling, not just a general spiritual gift. Paul then goes on to say "Grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift" -- which is to say, we all have such a specific calling.
- 63. God usually reveals His purposes well in advance of carrying them out. God showed Joseph and David their destinies early in life. God spoke Paul's calling over him through Ananias at his conversion. In all these cases, it took many years before God's purposes came to fruition -- and along the way, God repeated Himself. God is not silent.
- 64. Almost invariably, the initial problem -- as with Gideon, Barak, and King Saul -- is that we don't believe what God shows us. Even the Virgin Mary had her initial

misgivings, but she quickly gave herself over to God's purposes for her life. Let us follow her example.

65. Once the initial reluctance is overcome, a range of responses are possible: Gideon obeyed, Barak came most of the way, and Saul's early promise degenerated into utter failure
66. Our problem is not that God isn't guiding us; it's that we aren't listening, don't believe what we hear, or we're just getting impatient.
67. The discipline lies in hearing God well enough to identify the grace given to each of us, and then living in faith based on what God has told us.
68. Faith is the substance -- the present, right-here reality -- of things hoped for. Faith is what you do right now to posture yourself to receive what God is going to give you.
69. What faith looks like depends on your circumstances and calling. For Noah, it meant building the boat when there was not a cloud in the sky. For Abraham, faith meant packing up and moving without a destination in mind. For you? If you knew for sure that God was going to do what He has shown you about your destiny, what would you do today? That's faith. Do it.

Spiritual Disciplines: The Duty of One-Mindedness

70. Revelation is received in stillness and discerned in community. Change happens in community. We are not meant to live alone, but to live in a unified community, an image of the Trinity, which means we are called to be of one mind. The unity of Christ's body is a cardinal doctrine; practicing it is a matter of basic obedience. It is also our best witness to the world.
71. Does this mean we all see things the same way? Of course not. We have different roles and gifts; we will inevitably see the same situation from different angles.
72. One-mindedness means that we empty ourselves as Jesus did: we set aside our glory (such as it may be) in order to serve the needs of our people. If we have servants' hearts, we will be of one mind, however different we may be in gifting, role, or background.
73. Our one-mindedness will have to extend across denominational and other artificial lines. The unity of the Body is a cardinal doctrine. We cannot breach unity without failing to be straightforward about the gospel (as Peter discovered at Antioch.) We cannot be faithful to justification by faith without being unified at a very practical level (Paul's point, in describing the Antioch situation.) Jesus' dying wish for His people was that they would be one, and the unity He prayed for brings the world to Him.
74. Jesus said that the world will believe when they see our unity. How long will we waste our time, talent, and treasure on every strategy to reach our community except the one thing that Jesus told us for sure would work?

75. We often leap to worst-case scenarios or complex projects, but the beginnings can be very simple: What if we gather together to ask for God's blessing on each other and our city? Can we agree on that? Then what's stopping us from doing it?

Spiritual Disciplines: Blessing

76. Jesus sent us out with instructions to enter unbelievers' houses and say "Peace to this house" before proceeding to preach anything. What if we actually led with peace and blessing instead of moral disapproval and condemnation?
77. James warned his readers not to let blessing and cursing proceed out of the same mouth. He is (obviously) trying to get them to stop cursing their enemies. He assumes they already say blessings -- if only he could assume the same about us!
78. James also warned against blessing someone with a physical need, but failing to actually address the need. We have the opposite problem: we meet the physical need and fail to say the blessing. Works without faith is dead, too.
79. As messed up as the scattered brethren of the early church were, they understood something we do not: the power of spoken blessing. We must adopt the spiritual discipline of blessing those around us, in words, out loud.

Spiritual Disciplines: Armor

80. People talk about "putting on the armor" like it is as simple as saying "I put on the belt of truth." But no. That sentence might be a reminder, but it's not the same thing as actually doing it.
81. "Armor of God" does not mean "armor that pertains to God" or even "armor God gives you." Paul is drawing on Isaiah 59, and it means "armor God wears." He is lending you the armor He wears into battle.
82. Girding your waist with truth means knowing and relying on the truth of God. If you don't know what He has said, then you can't put it on. If you allow yourself to be deceived or forgetful, you are failing to put it on. Putting it on is reminding yourself of what God has said.
83. Putting on the breastplate of righteousness means grasping that you are clothed with the righteousness of God Himself. There are only two kinds of accusations that will ever rise up against you, and the breastplate of God's righteousness is proof against them both. False accusations fail because they're false. True accusations fail because Jesus already died for those things, and He has clothed you with God's righteousness. So -- as Paul once asked -- who can bring a charge against God's chosen?
84. Having your feet shod with the readiness of the gospel of peace means that you are prepared to spread the peace of Jesus everywhere you step. Bear in mind Paul's earlier discussion of how Jesus brought peace in Ephesians 2. Wearing this piece of

armor means asking in every situation, "What is the good news of peace to this person, right now?"

85. Taking up the shield of faith means trusting God when it's tough. The devil will attack you with distraction upon distraction, and if you spend your time and energy battling the distractions, then the devil has succeeded in deflecting you from your purpose. Trusting God with the distractions allows you to proceed on your path undeterred.
86. There are many things to fear. The Lord delivers us out of them all. Knowing this, putting it on every day, is what it means to wear the helmet of salvation. He is our only deliverance.
87. God has given us a weapon to hack holes in the kingdom of darkness. That weapon is His Word. As we speak the true words of God into the lives of the broken, the hurting, the unbelieving, the darkness recedes and the light takes over. Taking up the sword means knowing the word and speaking it out.
88. If you have the whole Bible memorized, but you don't speak it out, you are not using your sword. If God has shown you something true, and you don't speak it out because you don't have a verse for it, you are not using your sword.
89. These things are armor -- psychic self-defense -- in a world where the enemy delights to rain flaming arrows on our heads. We are afflicted with many maladies because we do not wear our armor.

Becoming a Trouble-maker

90. Niceness is not a Christian virtue. Be gracious, be kind, be loving, be gentle, but don't ever be nice.
91. Jesus was at least as likely to cause trouble in church or at a wealthy donor's dinner party as He was on skid row. As a disciple, you must learn to hunger and thirst for righteousness. If you do, you will have Jesus' kind of trouble, no matter what branch of ministry you end up in.
92. Jesus moved through all strata of society, and He comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable everywhere He went. What He said and did was often "heavily criticized" or "poorly received." The fact that people are mad at you means nothing in itself.
93. If everyone hates you, you might just be a jerk. But "woe to you when all men think well of you" -- if that happens, you're doing it wrong for sure. Following Jesus requires that you find the trouble God wants you to be in, and get in it, right up to your eyebrows.
94. Pandering fits into any tradition. You can preach a cerebral, white-collar sermon on the Structure of Luke's Gospel or a hellfire-and-brimstone, screaming barn-burner, and each will be well received in its setting -- just don't touch the congregation's favored sins.

95. Conversely, you can be as gentle as you please, but if you call out the favored sins of the congregation, you will give offense. At such times, giving offense is the point.
96. Good preaching cuts to the heart, but the reaction is not up to the preacher: when Peter did it, revival broke out; Stephen, not so much. But then, Peter's audience was common people, and Stephen's audience was a bunch of church leaders and politicians. Might be a lesson there....