

Miscellanea Sacra

I've benefited from listening to and thinking about presentations by evangelical theologians at their annual meetings. They discuss a number of issues that I believe are worth sharing. This may be a good place to do that. Following are highly condensed versions of just fifteen of them, not in any order. I hope you find them instructive.

1. The Prosperity Gospel. A new gospel, a *false* gospel, began in America [*where else?*] a century ago and is now spreading like a tidal wave over the whole world. This "prosperity gospel" is essentially the deification of the American dream, or the Americanization of Christianity. It asserts that everyone who names the Name of Christ should be successful, should accumulate wealth, and should have all the material blessings of God to enjoy. We can only be optimistic about the future because God is going to bless us richly. It's a religion of being healthy and comfortable [of self-indulgence actually]. "Jesus wants us to live victoriously!" is its motto. But . . . Following Christ isn't necessary. In fact the prosperity gospel message is, DO NOT follow Christ, because to follow Christ means taking up a cross, embracing weakness, accepting the shame of identifying with the despised, rejected, suffering One and self-sacrifice for the sake of others. In the Bible, we experience humiliation and maybe suffer now in order to enjoy exaltation in the future. That's the pattern for Christ and for those who follow Christ. If you are in any way into prosperity gospel beliefs or values, *flee!*

2. Søren Kierkegaard's thought. Kierkegaard is largely ignored in American evangelicalism, and that's too bad. Here's a sampling of his deep reflections on Christianity: We err today, he writes, in intellectualizing the Gospel. "Truth" is just a theological word-game unless it deeply affects us. We don't "love" the Pythagorean Theorem, yet that's the attitude too many people take to God and suppose they love Him. Even to focus on Jesus' teachings misses it, because Christianity is so radical. What God offers us in the Gospel is *Himself*. The Gospel, after all, is loving Jesus the God-man, so that the Person of Christ – *God's very life* – enters us and changes us. Our minds are enslaved to sin and dwell in darkness until the presence of God enters. His lowliness makes Him unrecognizable, but He reveals Himself to those who love Him. And so we receive Truth – and mercy. When Jesus says, "Come, follow Me," we aren't responding to a set of commands or a system of thought but into intimate fellowship with the sovereign, eternal, Creator God. To believe in Jesus is to receive Him; and faith is yearning to be like Him, even doing works of righteousness.

3. Christian Zionism. There's a grotesque movement today within Christianity that seeks to support the Nation of Israel, but it adamantly does not want for the people of Israel to believe in Christ. They even oppose Jewish Christians doing outreach to their fellow Jews. They believe we should show compassion and support to Jews – and specifically to Israel – because of the suffering they've endured in the past from "Christians," for example during pogroms. They may believe (i) Jews will be saved in the future; (ii) Jews may have their own path to salvation apart from Christ; and (iii) we must avoid offending Jews by requiring they believe the Gospel. This may be Zionism, but it's certainly NOT Christian! What is it? I suspect it's a harbinger of the Anti-Christ who, when he comes, at first offers to protect Israel but then turns on them to annihilate them. Some Christian Zionists believe that by supporting Israel, because of Genesis 12:3 God will be obliged to bless us, or bless America with peace and prosperity, but this is mistaken! The Genesis 12 blessing is Christ!

4. Worship. Universally today in American Christianity we refer to our meetings on Sundays as "worship" services. What? Do we suppose we're doing God a favor? Does God *need* our worship? At the time of Christ, pagans worshiped their deities in temples led by pagan priests, with sacrifices to their gods; but the early Christians worshiped Christ by pursuing holiness and serving Him. The early church meetings were for mutual edification and encouragement, and to help each other with their needs. But by the 3rd century of the church age, paganism had so thoroughly invaded Christianity that the Church too built structures and referred to those buildings as "temples," to its leaders as "priests," and its meetings were for "worship." And the Eucharist became a "sacrifice" offered to God. What we have today is an exceedingly deep tradition that essentially voids God's Word, something the reformers failed to deal with. It's something that's overlooked by almost everyone today. It's idolatry, but we fail to see it as idolatry because there aren't any statues. What the Reformation accomplished was to substitute preaching for the Roman Catholic mass. That was good, but inadequate. In the New Testament, Christian meetings are for *us*, to encourage each other in the faith and to teach and correct each other; meetings are not for God. There *cannot* be worship of God in the absence of obedience, self-sacrifice, mission and holiness. There cannot be worship unless there's also denying of self. We worship God by imitating God! Why is this important? If we suppose we gain merit with God by attending "worship" services, we're fools.

5. Persecution of Christians in America. The Gentile peoples of the Roman Empire were pagans. Those early Christians however were totally different. They were marked for persecution ostensibly because they refused to worship the

Emperor as everyone else did (had to), but the reason was actually deeper. At that time, religion and politics were inextricably linked; the “state” was a sacred institution and a social bond united the people to the State. A politico-religious glue held everyone together. There was no such thing as “personal” or private religion. So social pressure was intense on Christians to conform, or else be shamed as anti-social. But the early Christians refused to hide their values and beliefs. They were therefore deemed subversive in a highly charged religious/political environment. It’s almost exactly like that today in the West. The “woke” are really pagans publicly worshiping the State; it’s part of their idolatrous religion. And they regard Christians as shameful if not outright subversive. To escape imminent persecution, we can hide our religion, compromise, or suffer. Those are the only options.

6. The Sin Against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:20-30). How can a sin be against the Holy Spirit but not also be against the Son and the Father? It can’t! The Godhead is a unity. So to blaspheme the Holy Spirit is also to blaspheme the Son and the Father. The Pharisees attributed the exorcism they just saw to Satan when it was really done by the power of the Holy Spirit. The sin was denying Jesus was who He really was, the Messiah sent by the Father, having come in the power of the Spirit. So the sin was also denying the saving mission of God. It means that those who commit this sin of denying God’s mission cannot be saved! Such persons have enduring hardness of heart, one that persists into eternity.

7. God’s “fairness.” We err in supposing that God’s justice is “fairness.” In modern secular thought, justice is fairness. Justice means everyone must be happy, or we all must be free to choose what we think is the good life, or it refers to who does right vs. wrong. The currently trendy concepts of discrimination and equality of outcome come from that secular notion of justice. But that secular idea of justice is not biblical. God has placed people on earth with unequal gifts and abilities, unequal opportunities, and unequal circumstances. God’s justice is never “fairness.” In Scripture, justice is righteousness. The modern Westerner supposes that God is unjust because millions of people in the world have no opportunity to hear the Gospel and be saved. That’s “unfair,” they allege. But no one ever deserves to be saved. No one deserves grace. Rather, everyone deserves only wrath. In fairness, we all really only deserve to spend eternity in hell. That God, for reasons of His own, elects and shows mercy to some is only because of Christ’s atoning, substitutionary death and resurrection. God is not unjust.

8. Our Sex-Saturated Society. To understand the sexual revolution that began in America over half a century ago and has now escalated to heights previously unimagined we need to know what “Critical Theory” is. A hundred years ago in Frankfurt, Germany, a group of Marxists tried to rescue Marxism from failure. The laboring class refused to revolt! Their contribution was to add Freudian ideas to Marxism. Happiness, they claimed, was liberation from oppressive traditions and religious teachings to erotic sexual pleasure. They had to flee the Nazis, so they came to America and established the New School, which over the decades captured the humanities departments of almost all colleges and universities. Civilization, their teaching alleges, is hostile to us and oppresses us, though we don’t realize it. Capitalism (or a free market economy) conditions us to remain oppressed. And our mass culture keeps us numb so we don’t realize what we need to become. Our only option is revolution. Then, a better future awaits, a new reality totally different from what we now know, so we can enjoy the pleasures of unrestrained sexual freedom. We’re just cogs in a world beyond our control, they say, which means that we’re really innocent beings. In their thought, church is despicable because it keeps people sexually repressed and prevents them from being emancipated and happy. We all need to “realize our true self,” and Christianity won’t allow that. Traditions won’t allow that, nor does Western civilization. So it all has to go. Liberals have been gradually instituting New School ideas. But now “woke” has not only accelerated the movement, it’s changed it into a new religion, a blatantly Satanic one. According to Romans 1, “woke” is God’s wrath. God hands people over to pursue unreality as punishment for rejection of Him. He deliberately exacerbates their idolatrous worship into lusts and a debased mind and passions. God’s wrath has already invaded our world, altho’ it isn’t yet realized in its future fullness.

9. God’s Blessings. We must be careful not to treat God with contempt by thinking or saying what we think He does or should be doing. That makes God into our image. In particular, we often err by supposing that God is blessing others with success or prosperity or something like that. In the N.T. Scriptures, blessing is to be had *in the future*. God “blesses” us by leading us to increased maturity in Christ, by perfecting our faith. God’s blessing may in fact be persecution. Think: Is God really the source of the peace, prosperity, security and comforts we experience in America? Think carefully!

10. Wealth. James says that the wealthy are evil. Hey, that’s us! Paul has similar words; so does Luke. Probably most of the issues in the church at Corinth were caused by the few there that were wealthy. Wealthy people expect to have privileges. Wealth creates a sense of self-sufficiency. Wealth generates a desire to indulge ourselves. It makes us want always to have a bit more, and greed is wickedness (Ephesians 5:5). We tithe to feel self-righteous while holding on to all

the rest, the 90%, to spend on ourselves as we please. What we miss is, our response to God's grace is to be generous to others in need. It's how we show God gratitude. God may give certain of us wealth purposely to share with others, and not for self-indulgence. Giving to others shows our faith to be genuine. All gift-giving is a 3-party relationship: God is always involved. There's no virtue in being poor, but being rich is dangerous. We live, unfortunately, in a culture of rights and entitlements, in a materialistic and consumerist society, rather than one of responsibilities and stewardship. So rich people simply must divest themselves of their surplus if they've been transformed by the Gospel. We give to those in need and to the work of Christ. And learn contentment.

11. Jesus' healing ministry. Why did Jesus heal people? We know that Jesus had compassion and so He healed the blind and the lame. We also know that He had to fulfill the O.T. prophecies that Messiah would do that. He also restored sight and healed the lame because the healings had spiritual significance: people were blind, for example, spiritually, but Jesus offers light (knowledge of God and His will), and the ability to walk in the ways of God. He came to bring wholeness to sick, sinful humanity and society. But there's another reason that we too easily miss: He is Creator! Jesus didn't merely restore sight to the man born blind. He completely rewired the man's eyes and brain and the connections between the two and installed in his brain image interpretation. The man lame from birth didn't just get the ability to walk and jump. Jesus had to totally rewire his brain and spinal cord and restore muscle strength and give necessary neuro-muscular coordination. Those were creative acts! A new creation is on offer with the Kingdom offer.

12. Proof of God's Existence. Philosophers insist that there are no proofs for the existence of God, nor can there be. They're either lying or self-deceived; they're expressing rebellion against God. The law of cause-and-effect absolutely demands that we understand that God exists. The Law of Causation is built into the cosmos. So what is the one really great cause that resulted in the effect of the existence of everything? "Nothing" is not an answer, but it's all that anti-theists have to offer. A transcendent, self-existent, eternal, super-intelligent and good Being is the only rational answer. God is the uncaused Cause of all that exists. Further, this Creator would surely reveal Himself to us. Otherwise, why create? Thus the Scriptures. And they are absolutely trustworthy because God cannot lie. There's no getting around this.

13. Middle Knowledge. How do we reconcile God's goodness, His demand that everyone trust Christ to be saved, and the fact that babies can die at a very young age and millions of people live in lands where there's no Gospel preaching or Bibles and so these have no possibility of being saved? Molinism. According to Molinism, God has exhaustive knowledge of all things, including (i) all possible worlds; (ii) the actual world; and (iii) a range of feasible worlds that contain truths that don't in fact actually exist. To say it differently, God knows all that *could* happen, what *will* happen, and what *would* happen if what could happen were to happen. That 3rd category is sometimes called "middle" knowledge. And what could happen – but doesn't happen – is called a counterfactual. God knows what a certain individual would have done if circumstances were different, and to God that's factual and true. So God knows that a baby who died would have received the Gospel if old enough and had heard it, so that baby is saved by the atoning work of Christ. Same with people in unreached lands. OK, there are problems with this view, but it solves more than the problems it raises.

14. The Genealogies. In the controversy between young-earth creationists and theistic evolutionists, what's missing is the significance of the chronologies in Genesis 5 and 11. Most of the debate has been on how to interpret Genesis 1, whether literally/historically, or as some other genre that allows for science to take control. But it's really the chronologies that determine the debate's outcome. Interpreters have obscured this evidence by arguing that the genealogies in Chapters 5 and 11 aren't literal, that enormous gaps are there, many missing names, so the genealogies are meaningless. Well, wrong! It's the *numbers* that establish the chronology, not the issue of whether X is a son or a grandson or whatever. It's the time that's key, not the names. (Some names could be missing, but probably not and it doesn't matter.) Indeed, there are other genealogies in Scripture with missing names – but there aren't numbers associated with them! Many evangelicals today reject those numbers because, they say, people don't live that long. [As if they were there and they know.] What that does is empty Scripture of authority; God isn't speaking, just some fallible human author! But those numbers establish earth as young; neither deep time or Darwinian evolution ever happened.

15. Hate Speech. Liberals despise the Book of Revelation because of its violence. In fact, anti-theists in America despise the entire Bible because they say it's full of "violence." It causes psychological harms. That's nonsense! Violence itself is morally neutral; it depends on its context or the purpose of it to determine its moral value. Justice demands violence! God's wrath necessarily expresses itself violently. But liberals don't want Scripture to have authority, so they invent these bogus moral issues, as if their ideology trumps God's integrity. How do they know what's moral? They don't! No one knows what's moral apart from God's revelation. In this, God's world, we either fear God or suffer violence.