

## Preface

When Chris started playing with structuring the website, he asked me if I would write some articles. I said I was interested but had no idea what I'd write about. He suggested that I should write a series of articles about the sermon I preached on December 28, 2003 – Thirty Theses for Thinking About – and I was taken with the idea. I've procrastinated in writing for two reasons. (1) I just am hard wired to procrastinate and I use my work etc. to excuse it, and (2) I thought it would be helpful to write an introductory article about what it means to be Baptist. Or what it used to mean anyway. Someone at Wedgewood said to me in the past year that we aren't a "real" Baptist church anyway, and I think that the only reason we can be what we are is that we are "real" Baptists in a way that harkens back to the 1600s and the very origins of Baptist principles and polity. I'm still working on that article but it is taking much more time and research than I had expected so I decided to go ahead and start with my reflections on my theses to get things going. So... buckle your seatbelts – here we go....

### First Thesis

*I am convinced of God's existence. Beyond that, I am agnostic.*

I'll start out with a confessional statement. I preached this sermon because at the time we had several people in the congregation who were very conservative – at least relative to my stance on things. I had no problem sharing Wedgewood with any of them, but I felt very strongly that only one side of the spectrum was being represented and that the more liberal strands of thought among the congregants was not even recognized by the more conservative and, coincidentally, more vocal members. All I really wanted was equal time to express my views which, I knew, were quite different from theirs. And what I expected was a conversation or, at worst, a debate about our differences. I suppose I was naïve.

In any event, I introduced the sermon as being similar in intent to Martin Luther's 95 Theses he nailed to the Wittenberg church door. I have copied here my introduction to the sermon:

I have modeled this sermon on Martin Luther's "five and ninety" although any of you familiar with those theses will recognize that Luther's are written in a distinctive disputational style. Our intent is the same, however, as I am putting forth my thoughts of the moment to stimulate discussion only. I do not intend these suggestions to be normative, but only to help us engage in a conversation about these matters. I know many of you will disagree with much of what I say, but I think that disagreement might be helpful to all of us in our growth. To paraphrase the old saying: "Some of you will disagree with all of these; all of you will disagree with some; and none of you will agree with all of them." I'm going to go through these rather quickly, give some of my thoughts on them and then I want to open the floor to your comments, additions, disagreements, etc. And we can continue our discussions after church at lunch also.

In stating what I believed (at the time – my beliefs tend to change and reform over time), I truly intended to encourage thoughtful conversation about the variety of thought and theology represented at Wedgewood because, in my estimation, that variety is our spice. It's what makes Wedgewood a tasty ecclesiastical morsel worth savoring. Unfortunately, my sermon resulted in a bit of the spice being removed from the mix for which I truly grieve. To be frank, however, I suppose I actually believe that it was the inability of

some to engage in dialog that became the problem, but I expect there are others with other views and I'm willing to entertain the notion that my sermon was the Prime Mover. Of course, that attributes more power to me than I am comfortable claiming. In any event, let me move onto the first thesis.

I stated my first thesis: I am convinced of God's existence. Beyond that, I am agnostic.

I had no idea that this first thesis would be the stated center of almost all of the controversy. I say the "stated center" because I do not believe that it was the primary theological issue for most of those concerned. (For those of you who don't know, about eight persons left the congregation supposedly because of this sermon.) In such controversies, I do believe it is often the case that antagonists generally pick an easy focus for their concerns. I think it is likely that many of the theses I presented were very difficult for many to hear and that many folks disagreed (as I stated in my introduction to the sermon) but that this first thesis served well to state a generalized reason for their concern.

I think there was a general disconnect between what I meant and what many folks heard. No one seemed much concerned with my saying that I was convinced of God's existence although, to me, that seems the much greater departure from orthodoxy. Orthodoxy would assume that one cannot be convinced of God's existence – God must reveal God's existence to the true believer. Otherwise, true belief cannot exist. That's the whole concept behind "revealed truth" versus "discovered truth." I don't really know of any licit systems that suggest anyone can "discover" God's existence. And yet there I was, claiming to have been convinced of God's existence as opposed to God having knocked me from my donkey like God did Paul. But, for whatever reason, that was not the issue for anyone as far as I ever heard.

The complaint – made entirely to Chris and not to me – was that I stated that I was agnostic. Chris was apparently told that the people who left would stay but only if I never preached again. I found it unsettling, actually, that no one bothered to discuss the issue with me. Those who were concerned bypassed me altogether. No one bothered to ask me what I meant by my statement – I think they just assumed that they knew and then attempted to have me banned from the pulpit because they assumed I was "an agnostic" and further assumed that they knew what that meant. I do not think that you can take my statement about my agnosticism outside of the context of the first sentence. What I said was that aside from my conviction of God's existence, I was agnostic about the rest – or to state it more plainly (which I suppose I should have done in the sermon) – I am willing to be easy in my ignorance.

I do not have to know the answers nor do I claim to know the answers about the rest. Was Mary a virgin? Don't know; didn't ask; don't care. How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? You have to be kidding? Does anyone really care? That doesn't mean that I don't have moral opinions that I consider much superior to those that differ or that I don't think I'm right about things and others are wrong. Homosexuality is morally neutral just like heterosexuality is. I'm right and anyone who believes otherwise is

wrong. I'm just saying that as to the existence of God and Jesus and Heaven and Hell and other such matters, I don't know. I'm not arrogant enough to say that I know the mind of God well enough to say things like "God doesn't like it when [fill in the blank]" like I hear so many people say. What I can say is what I think is likely and what I find compelling. A god who revels in death or compels the death of that god's own offspring is probably not a god I'd be interested in turning my back on. But can I say with any certainty that God's nature is any particular way? I just have to work out my own salvation in fear and trembling (for the Bible thumpers: Philippians 2:12).

In any event, as I said, I think that everyone *should* have been concerned about my statement that I was convinced of God's existence. Now that's true hubris and unorthodoxy if you ask me. For those who believe they have a personal relationship with God, that should have rung immediately false. It would be like me saying that after some consideration of all the evidence, I have decided that I am convinced that Chris Ayers exists. Duh! I have a relationship with Chris – of course he exists. And how dare I suggest that his existence needs my intellectual assent?!? A believer in the "personal relationship" "theology" (and I just have to put "theology" in quotes there because I'm not sure it's really a theology) should not be amenable to that type of statement. I should either know God exists or not know – but I should not be able to assent to God's existence.

As an aside, I think many if not most people do resort to assenting to God's existence for long periods of time in their lives. I use Mother Teresa as an example – God bless her for leaving those diaries. Many folks I know have what they believe to be personal experiences of God – ravishments, if you will – that bear them on through life. But those personal experiences are not constant or long-lived. After they pass, I think many people continue to assent to the existence of God based on past experience and hope for future experiences of the emotional and breath-taking nature of those past experiences. It's like lust and "true love". When people date and get engaged (or the homo equivalent) they have a great deal of emotional fervor. After a few years of marriage/union, I think that fervor goes away and must be replaced with something that is born of will and not emotion. So I think many people will themselves to continue to believe in God in anticipation of emotional highs that come on occasion but do not persist. Just a theory.

Back to me! I am not an emotional person on many levels. I'm sure I need therapy and if I were unhappy with the way I am perhaps I'd seek it. I do not recall ever having been "in love." I do love. I love many people. There are many whose absence would cause me pain. But I have not known that type of emotional high that I so often hear reported by people who say they are "in love" with someone else. When I was very young, I think I did have some of what I believed to be emotional experiences of God, but in retrospect I'm not sure they were experiences of God really. They may have been a conglomeration of many other things that were going on in my life at the time but that I focused on church and a need to belong and be loved. Even as late as college (and damn but I'm reticent to share this part) I tried fitting in with a neo-pentecostal crowd that left me feeling like a sham and a charlatan.

I finally realized (also in college) that such emotional journeys were not given to me to make and I gave up on that and focused instead on finding out more who I was than who anyone else was or trying to figure out who God was. I figured that God knew so I probably didn't have to. But in figuring out who I was, I also recognized that I needed God to exist. Again – bring in the psychologists, I'm sure they're needed. I think that the creation story (the first one when humankind was made on the sixth day, not the other one in chapter 2 where humans were created on the first day) explains this for me. And that's what myths are for – explaining to humans why we are like we are, right? For me, chaos is always just under the surface. God may have created order and imposed it over chaos, but the chaos is still there just under the surface. Maybe chaos is hell – and that's why humankind has sometimes thought of hell as being underneath? Anyway.

I think that it takes a great deal of maturity and security to peer through the order into the chaos. I think that such ability takes a great deal of time and many people don't ever care to take a look at chaos. One example of peering through order to view chaos, I think, is considering alternatives beyond our certainties. I think that's one of the appeals of fundamentalism. Fundamentalism, by its very nature, does not consider anything beyond its certainties. It may critic systems beyond its certainties, but it does not seriously consider them as alternatives. It very firmly maintains order and if anything, denies the existence of the chaos underneath the order. Fundamentalism's adherents (on the right or left, Christian, Jew or Muslim) do not have to fear the chaos – it is kept very strongly in place.

But I fear the chaos. I've seen it and I don't mind peering at it, but I fear it. I think that at least one legitimate explanation of some mental illnesses is when a person is exposed fully to the chaos – and loses that separation of imposed order. If the imposed order is removed... all that remains is the chaos. The same thing happens in events of extraordinary trauma. When a loved one dies, for instance, the bereaved experience the same ripping away of the order imposed on chaos. The task of the bereaved, then, is to rebuild order over the chaos where death has ripped a hole in the fabric of the prior order. Again, fundamentalists have solved this problem by telling the bereaved that their task is to celebrate. Ding Dong, Grandpa's dead. Asleep in the arms of Jesus. Hallelujah. They avoid holes in order by making death a goal and a matter of celebration.

All of that is to say, that I need God to exist in order to maintain my imposed order over chaos. (See why I said that they should have been concerned about that first sentence?) I'm very risk averse – but I'm not a fundamentalist. I need a strong boundary between me and chaos but I can't bring myself to swallow what I think of as mostly bovine excrement that you have to swallow to be a fundamentalist. So, I can talk about a world where God doesn't exist. I can postulate about various non-theistic grounds for morality. I can scoff at church and religiosity. But I have never found an acceptable substitute for God that maintains order in my universe. And so – I am convinced that God exists. In my understanding of the universe, God must exist (Kant forgive me). About the rest of it? I don't know. Here I stand, I can do no other.