

Christianity to be shared by all as the only way to be saved. Christ is more powerful than the language we have created for speaking of him. But am I thankful for knowing Christ in the way that I do. Yes. Thankful doesn't even begin to describe it.

So whatever mishmash I have come up with here on this question, take it for what it is. I think the coffee is running low and no one seems to have a bar. There is room at this inn.

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Wally Yarbrough

First I thank Br. Craig Atwood for the invitation to respond to my brother's article. I was honored to be asked. Br. Frank Crouch has been, and is, both my teacher and my friend. He ministered to me and my wife, Linda, while we were in Pennsylvania, and continued to minister to us even after we left Pennsylvania to return home to North Carolina. I love him and have nothing but the highest respect for him, his scholarship, and his ministry to the Moravian Church and Moravian Theological Seminary. We have always discussed our differing viewpoints in a climate of mutual respect and love. I pray and believe that nothing will change that, and it is with that understanding that I offer this response.

I say these things because I must respectfully disagree with much of what my brother has written. I agree with him concerning the

profoundly disturbing context of our present exchange. Scripture has become, for some, no longer a source of the Truth, but only a part of the battlefield, or a source of ammunition. Some among us have abandoned any effort at community with one another. The Body of Christ has been wounded and real injuries (loss of income, community, status and homes) suffered by persons we know and love. The painful truth is that the North American Moravian Church is now, like most other mainline denominations, a house bitterly divided against itself.

Those who work in conflict resolution know that a principal rule for any who seek healing is to do no further harm, meaning to avoid actions or language that escalate the conflict. For that reason, given our emotionally and politically charged atmosphere, I must confess that after reading my brother's article I struggled with whether or not to be faithful to my acceptance of Br. Craig's invitation. There were two reasons. The first is that I substantially differ with Br. Frank on many things said in his article. Selfishly, I do not want this very public exchange to harm us or our relationship. But more than this, I suspect that this magazine, the public email discussion group, Unitas, and the exchanges that have occurred in the press and elsewhere have so far contributed more to driving us apart than to bringing us together.

Most of us know that as a conflict grows the debate quickly becomes personalized. The antagonists can then rarely even agree on what divides them. The defining of our issues, instead of giving clarity to our struggle, becomes part of the battleground. Issues are defined and re-defined in terms viewed more favorable to one

or the other. And here is the first place I must differ with my brother. He characterizes two of the issues (there are others) that divide us as. First is the conflict over “what place gays and lesbians are to have in the church.” He then addresses in more detail the Scriptures with regard to whether “Jesus is the only way to Salvation?”

I would not define either issue the way he does. Indeed the identity politics implicit in his definition of the first issue, and which lies at the heart of Resolution 6 from the Northern Provincial Synod, leads inexorably to the kind of conflict that now wounds us. My brother and I both grieve that for some it is no longer necessary to know more than one’s response to some “litmus test” to discern one’s “place” as a brother or a sister in the Church. However this is inevitable with the politics now widely practiced. In a politics of identity one need only know whether a person is Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, black or white, feminist or traditionalist, ad nauseum, to determine their righteousness, and what role or place they can or should have.

This inevitably leads to much mean-spirited commentary. Epithets such as “homophobe” and “antichrist” are exchanged. We accuse each other of acting out of fear, suspicion or distrust rather than from honest conviction or a concern for those without a voice. We ignore, denigrate or dismiss the pain inflicted. There was a day when our community discerned a person’s fitness for membership and ministry from its knowledge of the individual and how their lives witness to their faith. Apparently those days are now over.

I differ with my brother over his definition of the main issue as well. I confess I’m confused over an apparent change in his definition. In the

beginning he states the issue as whether Jesus is the only way, but then quickly speaks of whether Christ or Christianity is the only way. It seems again we differ on the issue. I understood his earlier statement. I’m not sure I understand what he said later. He affirms that the Scriptures teach Christ as our only source of salvation but then argues that this gives no support to the superiority of Christianity. This raises serious ecclesiological issues well beyond our present discussion. Is it possible to remove Christ from Christianity and have anything meaningful left? Can one follow Jesus and not be Christian?

My brother says seems to suggest that this is so, but I doubt this is what he intends. I believe he and I agree that it is one thing to teach and preach that the Holy Spirit is the One who enables souls to confess Jesus as Lord and Savior, leaving Him to decide of their fate; and something else entirely to teach and preach, as do some bishops in other denominations and their disciples in the Moravian Church, that Jesus is a “non-essential.” This seems where we are most deeply divided. From the beginning Moravians placed faith in Jesus Christ at the center of what it means to be Christian. Quoting Rican, “Faith in Jesus Christ was for the Brethren the heart of the Christian profession, and because of this, Christology was the center of all of theology” (emphasis supplied).¹ Sadly I question if this is any longer true.

My brother raises important issues concerning what the Scriptures say to us. I fully agree with him concerning the need to read and interpret Scripture in the light of Scripture. I also fully agree that our doctrines, dogmas, and behavior are to be tested constantly against the witness of Scripture. But we differ substantively in how we

understand the texts. He says Jesus' healing of the man born blind (John 9:1-41) "violated long-accepted practices and beliefs". He states that the text "makes clear that whenever traditional beliefs and practices are challenged, there is no way to predict which approach correctly see[s] the ways of God."

My response, briefly stated, is that the Gospels do not suggest His actions transgressed any widely accepted Sabbath tradition. His disciples and followers, though questioning other acts, never questioned His Sabbath healings. The crowds never responded negatively, as they did in other situations (Luke 4:28-30, John 6:60-66), rather much the opposite (John 7:31-32; Luke 13:17). Indeed in one case (Luke 13:14), the Synagogue ruler had to admonish people against coming to the Synagogue on the Sabbath for the purpose of healing. The Gospels uniformly attest that this was an issue only for some of the Pharisees who made it an issue to find a way to accuse Jesus (e.g. Matthew 12:10, Mark 3:2, Luke 6:7, Luke 11:54, John 8:6). They very likely disagreed even among themselves as to what was lawful on the Sabbath.²

A second substantive disagreement between us arises with Brother Frank's exegesis of Peter's proclamation (Acts 4:8-12) of grace through faith in Jesus. He argues this is ambiguous because the Greek word used can be translated either as "healed" or "saved". He also says that Peter and John were tried for a healing, not for proclaiming salvation through Jesus. However this is not what the text says. Peter and John were arrested on a complaint of the Sadducees, not for healing, but for preaching the Resurrection (Acts 4:1-3). Further, any ambiguity between "saving" and

"healing" lies with Enlightenment rationalism. Our post-Enlightenment minds habitually divorce the spiritual from the physical, if we admit of the spiritual at all. In the ancient Hebrew mind physical healing was only by the grace of God. Peter's healing of the paralytic would have been seen as an irrefutable sign of God's grace. This was the reason for the consternation of the Sanhedrin at the man's presence (vss. 14-16). They could not denounce Peter and have him stoned, as they afterward did with Stephen, because the man's healing couldn't be denied. The earlier text cited by my brother (John 9:1-41) even begins with the disciples' question, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (NIV) Sin was assumed to be the cause of his blindness. Their only question was whose sin was it.

Finally, I argue that my brother is mistaken in the way he links our struggle over the ordination of women with our present issues. He seems to see this as a new thing that came from recombining texts to create a new narrative, or by seeing some texts more relevant than others. In contrast, many of us saw the decision to remove gender as a bar to ordination as a correction of the errors of the synods of 1764, 1775 and later that restricted our sisters' roles. He agrees that the early Church gave some who were women a prominent place in its ministry.

I argue that our return to ordaining sisters in the Church was based not on a denial of the relevance of Scripture, as others have done with respect to the issues that divide us now, but rather an affirmation of its witness. According to Scripture the first person ordained (i.e., set apart) to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus and His Resurrection was Mary Magdalene. And this was

not because of any change in cultural politics. The Synods that restricted the roles and activities of our sisters did so to accommodate Moravian practice to the politics and cultural norms of their day. This is precisely what many of us see happening in the Church today.

While much is left to be said, it seems we have already reached an impasse. It appears my brother and I cannot even agree on what divides us, let alone on how to understand the relevant texts. So where do we go from here? Is the love I have for him, and that he has shown to me, enough? Is the life and the love that Jesus Christ gives us both sufficient? Or must we part company, each of us seeking politically and culturally more compatible communions?

I pray this is not so. I don't believe it needs to be. However there are two things I believe must happen and happen very soon. The first is we must agree to cease doing things that offend and wound one another. The victory we are given in Christ is not a victory of one of us over the other. The second is that we must recognize that unity is possible only in our Chief Elder. With apologies to Peter, there is no other name given us by which we can be healed/saved, save the Name of Jesus. May Christ and Him crucified remain our confession of faith.

(Footnotes)

¹ Rudolf Rican, *The History of the Unity of the Brethren*, trans. C. Daniel Crews, (Bethlehem: The Moravian Church in America, 1992), p. 364.

² A discussion of the Pharisees and their attempts to enforce "traditions" concerning the Law can be found in E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York, Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 44-46. Sanders also argues on p. 215 that it is improbable

that anyone would have considered Jesus' healing, at least in the case of the man with the withered hand, Mark 3:1-6, a violation of the Sabbath law.

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Hartmut Beck

With appreciation I do comply with the editor's invitation to respond with about 1000 words to Dr. Crouch's initial article of 6500 words on a subject for which one would like to write a book. The issue is important and controversial, not only within the Moravian Church. The German Protestant Churches (EKD – Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland) have recently issued a paper (*Denkschrift*) with the title "Christian Faith and other Religions."¹ These are no longer only in the "regions beyond" but right in our midst. We must reconsider our relationship to them.

For the Old Testament Israel is the "chosen people" (Isaiah 43:20,21, *passim*) amongst all peoples (Hebrew: the *goyim*)—not because of its own merits but for love's sake by the Grace of God (Deuteronomy 7:6-8). In the New Testament the followers of Christ (*ecclesia* — those who are called) are the chosen priestly people of God (1 Peter 2:9, 2 Peter 1:10, *passim*). The biblical texts reflect this self-understanding. After Christianity had become official religion in the Roman Empire people of other forms of religion were considered as "pagani" (uneducated rural people) or in English "pagans". The Enlightenment, Romanticism and Secularisation changed this perspective. In the 18th Century when Moravian missions got on their way, there was a growing appreciation (by Jean Jacque Rousseau and others) for the so-called "primitive"