

more diversity we see in our world—and perhaps in our churches—the more too many people want to wall themselves up with only people who agree with them. But it's important to remember that forgiveness for a wrong done doesn't mean there is no longer any disagreement. People can disagree—even on important things—and still be in community with one another if they so choose.

Margaret goes far beyond my simplistic view of forgiveness. Theologically, my view doesn't hold up because it suggests that God, in forgiving me for some wrong I've done, is deciding not to allow me to have power over God. What conceivable power could I have had over God, whatever I might have done? Human forgiveness is between two equal human beings. God's forgiveness is in a whole other category, because for God to forgive me, there has to be grace involved. But that's what Jesus is all about. Jesus is the human/divine picture of God's grace and forgiveness.

If we Moravians are in a postmodern "Sifting Time," then in many respects we may look very different in, say, ten years. It may be that many will have left. Perhaps others will have come on board. Forgiveness and reconciliation will certainly be a part of the new order. But so will different ways of thinking about community, which will include repentance and forgiveness (in whatever order) for however our ways of thinking and living have caused division, pain and suffering. But those ways of thinking will also acknowledge that we will never all see things the same way and perhaps it's okay if

people think and live in different ways. Even Christians. Even Moravians.

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## **Bradley Jones**

"When I think about all that I have experienced in the church in the past few years, I realize that in many ways I am still recovering from all that has happened." I spoke these words to some friends of mine, the Rev. Brad Bennett and his wife, Sue, the night before Christmas Eve. I was rather surprised by this revelation, which had suddenly dawned on me during this late night discussion at a bookstore.

The words were a reflection on some tumultuous experiences I had encountered in the Moravian Church in recent years. Those years began with fighting in the Southern Province over what Jesus as the sole source of salvation means and over the issue of homosexuality. Around this time I became acquainted with the Czech Moravian Church through two mission trips; again I felt the blow of fighting in the Moravian Church, this time on another continent.

In both the Czech church and the Southern Province, I have walked with many Moravians through both the mountain peaks of personal

renewal and the valleys of estrangement from people they were once close to. I have wept with and for many Moravians over what has happened and is continuing to happen in the church. Such experiences are not uncommon in the church today; indeed, they hit closer to home than a lot of people are willing to talk about.

I confess that as I read M. Wilde's article, even her mention of some of the disagreements awakened a strong sense of both grief and anger inside me. These feelings are something that I and many others have dealt with for many years, though they tend to be lost, overlooked, or buried beneath the day-to-day activities that make up our lives.

Such emotions serve as a reminder that we live in the completed but "not yet" work of Christ, awaiting the day when all that is not of the Lord will be burnt away (see 1 Corinthians 3:10-16) and we live on the new earth in the presence of God, seeing Him in full (see 1 Corinthians 13:10-13 and Revelation 21). The pervasive reality of living in a broken world, waiting for the coming of our mustard seed kingdom (Luke 13:18-21), stretches beyond the bounds of our churches and into every aspect of human life.

The stain of sin on the world and the reminders of the life we once had before coming to the transformative life of Christ are all a part of what makes us the way we are and how we relate to the world. Although the marks of sin blind us from seeing our needs perspicuously, the redemption of Christ coming into our lives is the answer to our deepest needs as human

beings. In many places, Paul wrote that this redemption is something that has yet to be fully experienced. To the Roman Church Paul wrote about the desire for a further redemption, telling them that all of "creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth" and even God's people "groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:22-23, ESV).

Although Paul saw that the redemption of Christ was in part directed towards an eschatological reality, this same apostle also wrote that part of that redemption takes place now. Breaking many understandings of who people are, Paul wrote to the church in Galatia telling them that because of the work of Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female" and that through this work, we "are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28, ESV). While in some sense our redemption is set in the future, we are also called to invite that reality into the world that is awaiting the eschaton.

In John 17, Christ prayed that the church would have unity. Although Christians view the New Testament as the predominant declaration of God's desire for unity among His people, that desire is threaded deep into the fabric of all Scripture and into the very character of the Triune God.

In a time when the church experienced many unnecessary divisions, the Moravian Church led the way in the Spirit of Christ to show that unity is built upon the person of Christ and the experiential revelation of

Him, rather than on dogma in areas where the Scripture gives little to no explicit direction. Moravians have a rich history of reaching out in the Spirit of Christ to other churches, seeking both to learn from them and to aid them in declaring the Gospel to the world. Despite the massive difficulties that the Moravian Church has faced from within and without, unity has always been a high priority; maintaining and promoting unity is something for which the church still strives.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the church that once proved to the world that it could live in the tensions of a diverse community has, in recent times, fallen into becoming much like the rest of the church in America: Instead of remaining closely tied to what the Lord has clearly said He requires of His followers (while giving people Christian liberty in the incidental matters of doctrine), we have by and large dumbed down the message of the cross to a point where what we have to say, while not necessarily heretical, is no longer meaningful or relevant to people's lives. In an attempt to unify the church, we have neglected to hold ourselves to the objectivity of the Gospel; that is, we have begun to accept subjective experience as being of value equal to or greater than the objective work of the God-Man Jesus Christ done in real history. Holding out the word of the cross, of Christ's literal death and resurrection and of what God accomplished through it, has taken a back seat to a romanticized version of unity that did not even exist in the early church.

When the topic of unity arises among Christians, there is usually mention of Jesus' prayer that the church "may be one" (John 17:11)

as God is one, along with similar passages. The idea that God wants the church to be unified is, beyond a doubt, clearly present in the Scriptures. However, while many texts tell us that we need to be unified, few tell us how that unity will be brought about. It is one thing to say that God wants the church to be unified. It is a different matter to read into the Bible our cultural understanding of unity, an understanding that may be foreign to the text.

The Jesus who prays for unity in John 17:11 is also the Jesus who told us that He did not come to bring peace on the earth, but division and a sword; that our enemies may indeed be those closest to us (Luke 12, Matthew 10). John writes in his epistles that not all who claimed to be the people of God had a true understanding of who God was (1 John 1:19; 3:1,8). Paul tells the church in Corinth, a church known for divisions, that some division is necessary and even beneficial (1 Corinthians 11:18-19).

Ultimately, there will be no true reconciliation in the Moravian Church until there is agreement on the nature of the Bible and the meaning of biblical authority. Those who see reason and culture as illuminating Scripture and those who see Scripture as the means of illuminating our ability to reason and our view of culture will be at odds indefinitely, as even the meaning of forgiveness and how that forgiveness is lived out are tied up in how we view Scripture and its role in guiding us.

We may agree that forgiveness and reconciliation begin when people free themselves from their imagined role of judge and lord over

those with whom they differ; but how we view the next step depends upon our view of Scripture. Some may seek to maintain differences in close proximity to one another. Others, in the face of a disagreement they see as irreconcilable, may divide in order to promote what they see as true unity, a fellowship based on understandings that they consider orthodox. Those in the second group view themselves as able to live peacefully with differences, sharing life in many capacities, provided they are not under the spiritual direction of those with whom they disagree.

Unfortunately, people all too often cannot live in the midst of this tension without disparaging those with whom they differ. But however badly we may miss the mark, living peaceably in this tension is what I know Scripture to teach and is what the Moravian communities did when their settlements had to interact with the world that existed outside of their community. Christ can empower us to live in the midst of this tension, as He empowered the saints who came before us, and to trust and obey Him in this matter is to trust that God will give to us what He commands for us to do.

Wilde's article contains some invaluable insights regarding the need to equip people with practical and effective methods for bringing about forgiveness. Speaking directly with the person with whom we have a disagreement, following other biblical guidelines for dealing with conflict—these are much-needed practices for the people of God in dealing with conflict both inside and outside of the church. Wilde's realistic suggestions give hope that the church can, in fact, learn how to deal more effectively with conflict.

Although these methods do provide a framework from which the church can work, having a new framework does not automatically mean that reconciliation will occur:

We are responsible to pursue reconciliation, but live with the pain if it does not succeed. In other words, we are not responsible to make reconciliation happen. Paul says in Romans 12:18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." So far as it depends on you. Jesus took every step required of a human being to make matters right with his enemies (He never sinned), and still they had things against Him and were not reconciled to Him.<sup>2</sup>

As Christians living before the eschaton, we cannot expect that all people will respond to the message of Christ in a positive manner. Believing as we do that there exists an absolute truth, we must accept that not every different understanding of God can be a right understanding. There will always be people who call on God, believe in God, but do not have a right understanding of who God is. That is not to say that our interpretation is the truth, but it does mean that even though people may have some knowledge of God, not all are correct in their understanding. Therefore, when conflict arises, we should be listening to what the other person is saying, examining it to see if it is in line with Scripture, and having open discussion to lead the other person to see our perspective. Ultimately we must be obedient to Scripture and not forfeit what God has revealed to us simply to appease others.

Lest we deceive ourselves, as professing Christians we should ask whether we are actually willing to forgive others. “An unwillingness to forgive clearly has no place in the kingdom, and may in fact signal that such a one has not experienced the initial forgiveness of God in his or her life.”<sup>3</sup> Saving faith in Christ is not just the belief that Christ has forgiven us:

Saving faith means tasting this forgiveness as part of the way God is and experiencing it (and him!) as precious and magnificent. Saving faith looks at the horror of sin, and then looks at the holiness of God, and apprehends spiritually that God’s forgiveness is unspeakably glorious.... It means savoring the truth that a forgiving God is the most precious reality in the universe.<sup>4</sup>

When God gives us the eyes to see the reality of His forgiveness, we cannot help being humble and forgiving people. Although people who profess faith in Christ may not have a true knowledge of Him, there is no reason to conclude that they cannot come to a true knowledge of Him. In fact, God may desire that they will come to know Him through people with whom they are in conflict. God will oppose us if we are proud with one another, but will give us grace if we are humble (James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5). When we are able to see that Christ has paid for all of the sins of His children and that He is sovereign over all things, we can claim the promise “that all things work together for good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28) in spite of what may appear to be happening around us.

Perhaps it is time that our efforts to maintain unity be refocused onto the only

one who can truly unify us. Maybe if we are broken enough, humble enough, we can shed our veneers of self-righteousness and self-sufficiency and receive the kingdom like a little child. Then maybe, just maybe, we can see restoration begin to take place.

*Father, this is me calling, a broken child in a broken world...*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> From some of the reading I have done about Zinzendorf and the Moravians on his estate, as well as the Moravians in Bethlehem, I cannot help wondering if the problems in the Moravian Church today are, in part, a sociological outworking of the process of adapting from an earlier model, in which the church was the center of community that defined its members’ lives, to a new model for “doing church” in an individualistic, decentralized and pluralistic society. This explanation does, in many ways, seem appropriate to what has been occurring in the Moravian Church in particular, as well as in the church in America as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> John Piper, “Getting Right with God and Each Other (Matthew 5:21–26),” [www.DesiringGod.org](http://www.DesiringGod.org), March 10, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> R. C. Sproul, *The Purpose of God: An Exposition of Ephesians* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1994), 120.

<sup>4</sup> John Piper, *Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1995), 269–270.

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