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Getting It Wrong

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Getting It Wrong

Abstract

"We need to remember our sinfulness so we don't get too proud of our own accomplishments or too sure of our ability to save ourselves."

Posting about differing perceptions of history from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/getting-it-wrong/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Getting it Wrong

▫ inallthings.org/getting-it-wrong/

Neal DeRoo

Thanksgiving is a strange time of year. It's a time for remembering alongside an almost willful forgetting or ignoring. We remember all the gifts we've been given by God — and then [forget them the next day](#) when we rush out to buy all the stuff we really want to replace the stuff we already have. We remember our history and the pilgrims — and then try to forget (or gloss over) the fact that pilgrim-Native American relations were never that great, that [we don't really know what happened on the first Thanksgiving](#) but we sure know what happened after that, and it isn't pretty.

This strange space between remembering and willfully forgetting, this balancing act of being sure to think about certain things, but *only* certain things and *not* other things very closely related to those certain things, is something that all of us are familiar with, even if we might not realize it. It is a space that we find ourselves in every time we have to acknowledge that we are wrong.

The thing about being wrong is that, for most of us, we never are. Of course, all of us would admit that it is at least possible that we might be wrong about something in the future. Some of us would even admit that we have been wrong about something in the past. But few (if any of us) think we are wrong about anything right now. We are never [wrong in the present tense](#).

And this puts us in a precarious position. For while we might remember some times that we were wrong, we try hard not to think about that when we are passionately claiming the truth of whatever we think right now. We know, in the abstract, that we might be wrong — we just never think we're wrong in the here and now.

This comes up often when Christians disagree with each other about some moral or social issue, and someone says: "Well, that's what Christians said about slavery,¹ too — and look where that got us. Let's not repeat that same mistake again." This line of argumentation is asking us to remember a time when we got something wrong, and bring that memory to bear on how we feel about something right now.

On its surface, this is a great thing to remember. We have been wrong before and will be wrong again, which means, at least sometimes, that we are wrong right now, even though we think we aren't.

But this line of reasoning often tries to do more than just remind us to be humble. It often elicits one of two equally unhelpful responses. The first is to equate the fact that I have been wrong previously with the fact that I must be wrong now: we were wrong then, so we must be wrong now. Here, we let the past over-determine our feelings about the present. We hold too strongly to our fallibility.

The other also unhelpful response is to refuse to let my thoughts in the present be impacted at all by the fact that I was wrong in the past. "Sure, we were wrong then, but that has nothing to do with what's going on now. I *know* that I am right this time!" Here, we don't let the past determine our feelings in the present enough — we hold too strongly to our certainty and neglect the truth of our fallibility.

In both cases, we fail to adequately own up to our faults and failures. In the first case, we let our fear of being wrong again (and possibly hurting people by doing so) totally overwhelm the need for accurate discernment of the relevant details in this particular situation. We get so worried about being wrong (again) that we refuse to countenance the fact that we might be right.

In the second case, we let our certainty and conviction in our claims blind us to the fact that we do get things wrong, even things we feel certain and convicted about — and that people (including ourselves) sometimes get hurt in that process. We are so convinced that we are right that we refuse to countenance the fact that we might be wrong.

So how do we walk this line between appreciating that we are wrong (even sometimes in the present tense), while acknowledging that we are also sometimes right? Logically, I could try to make a case for the need to determine which facts are the ‘relevant’ facts from the previous situation (in which I was wrong) that pertain also to the current situation (in which I’m pretty sure I’m right), and so try to ascertain the extent to which I need to let my previous being-wrong affect my current feeling-that-I’m-right. While this may make logical sense, the difficulty is that our history suggests that it can be nearly impossible in the present to know which are the ‘relevant’ facts. If our history of being-wrong shows us anything, it should be that we are really bad at figuring out what would prove us wrong as long as we think we’re right.

Instead, I want to encourage us, as Christians, to learn to live in the tension. In some sense, I think the space of being-wrong is precisely the space of human living: as image-bearers of God, we live always in the tension between the sinfulness (the ultimate “wrong-maker”) that infects all of creation, and the grace (both creational and redemptive) that means things are never all the way bad. We need to remember our sinfulness so we don’t get too proud of our own accomplishments or too sure of our ability to save ourselves. But we need also to remember to forget our sinfulness sometimes, lest the ubiquity of sin cause us to deny the goodness of God’s creation and the power of God’s redemption and sanctification.

So we live in this weird space of remembering and forgetting, of recalling and ignoring. We need to remember that we are sinful and broken, but also sometimes ignore that sinfulness to embrace the grace of redemption. We need to remember the promise of sanctification and redemption, but also sometimes ignore that sanctification, lest we start to think that being God’s chosen people makes us somehow better than the rest of God’s creation.

The key, perhaps, is to remember that we are precisely redeemed sinners, people who have received a promise of transformation through the work of the Holy Spirit — we will be made new. As such, we need to own our mistakes — but also the things that, by the grace of God, we’ve done and continue to do right.

Let’s not be too quick to make ourselves better than we are — but also not too quick to make ourselves worse than we are. Instead, let us live in the tension of remembering and forgetting, of giving thanks and needing restitution.

Footnotes

1. Or the Crusades, or apartheid, or Inquisitions, or inter-racial marriage, or... ↩