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Why the Liberal Church Needs the Evangelical Church

by [Barbara Wheeler](#) [2] | [February 2004](#) [1]

What if instead of bemoaning our estrangement, we embraced it as a gift?



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The Presbyterian Church (USA)—like many Christian denominations—has been starkly divided over the role

of gays and lesbians in the church. It feels to many, as author Richard Mouw puts it, that the church is getting ready for "divorce court." Should the church split or stay together? The authors of these two articles—both Presbyterian, one liberal and one conservative—differ on many things, but they are in accord about whether unity—or schism—is the best way forward.

All of these [Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah] died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make clear that they are seeking a homeland....they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, God has prepared a city for them.—Hebrews 11:13-16

Many contemporary Christians think the church is dispensable, that God is more easily accessed outside the limits and constraints of church structures. In my own salvation history, however, the church is central. I was introduced to Jesus Christ by the actions as well as the words of his followers. I have grown in the faith because others have taken the time to teach it to me.

Two groups have ministered to me in powerful ways in recent years. One is gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Presbyterians. The church has developed the bad habit of talking about this group as if it is a problem for the denomination. They have not been a problem for me. Quite the opposite: They have provided me with luminous examples of how to live a Christian life under very adverse conditions.

This denomination's policies toward its GLBT members are restrictive to the point of cruelty. We tell many who want to offer sacrifices for the good of the church that their life choices are so much more sinful than the rest of ours that we've had to erect special barriers to keep them from laying their gifts at the altar. Our church's teaching that all same-sex acts are wrong, no distinctions, has downright perverse effects. The more that GLBT persons conform to the practices the church blesses and honors for heterosexuals—public pledges of fidelity to another person, family commitment to the nurture of children—the less likely that they can be ordained and that they will be welcomed to work out their discipleship in most Presbyterian congregations.

Yet here they are in this denomination, or eager to be, if only we had a place for them. They keep on witnessing to the truth of Christ in their lives. They keep on offering help that the church desperately needs but is too proud and stubborn to accept. They keep on ministering, with tender compassion, to me and to many others who have the approval and privileges that have been denied to them. Their unselfishness lifts my sights.

THE OTHER GROUP that makes me feel awkward and shy is evangelical and conservative Presbyterians. I grew up in a home so liberal that when Dwight Eisenhower was elected president, I couldn't believe it: I'd never met a self-identified Republican—how could a party with no members elect a president? My liberal Catholic girlhood and liberal Protestant adult life were similarly sheltered. Fifteen years ago, I decided to do some research in an evangelical seminary. When I arrived on the campus, I knew very few evangelicals.

But I did have definite expectations, set by the liberal culture of which I had always been a part. I believed that the only reason anyone would choose to become or remain a religious conservative is lack of the psychological strength to confront the ambiguity and uncertainty of the world as it is. (I have since learned that evangelicals harbor a corresponding theory about liberals, that we are liberals because we lack the moral fortitude to confront the truth and live by it.) I also expected the evangelical conservatives to be theological dinosaurs. And I did not expect my faith to be enriched by what I saw and heard at the seminary I was studying.

But many evangelicals, in my experience, don't fit those liberal stereotypes. Evangelicals are not, as a class, fearful and unstable, at least no more than the rest of us. I have met some who are much better than I am at looking at themselves and the world with unsparing honesty. I've learned that theology in the evangelical world includes lively theological conversation that enriches all of us, including liberals. But the biggest surprise for me has been that my experience in what is still for me a very strange religious culture has not shaken my faith; it has strengthened it.

This is the doing of particular evangelical Presbyterians. Despite their best efforts, they have not changed my opinions. But early in each of the relationships that have become important to me, there was a moment—a sort of spiritual ka-ching—when we both knew, and knew that the other knew, that we were hearing the same gospel, loud and clear. The capacity to recognize each other as Christ's own despite how wrong we are, about so many things, is proof that the gospel is true—it really does cut through our wrongness and other people's. The fact that that happens strengthens faith.

Generally, the two groups I have named avoid and terrify each other. Each is deeply fearful that it and the wider church will suffer if the other gains any more power or prominence. How are we to talk about the church when we are so deeply estranged from each other?

How's this for a model of the church that we are called to become: "They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth." What if instead of denying our estrangement, or bemoaning it, we embraced it as a gift from God?

This image of the church as a band of strangers who accept our discomfort with each other as God's way of moving us forward may seem grimly Calvinistic. The image certainly flies in the face of the best marketing advice about how to grow your church or denomination: Create a warm, friendly enclave where like-minded people can find refuge from the tensions of contemporary life. Churches like that are what the proponents of a cool, clean division of the denomination claim to have in view. (Having just studied the bloody split of the Presbyterian Church in the United States in 1837, I am certain that peaceful or gracious schisms are not possible.)

I want to advocate an alternative: a tense, edgy, difficult church made up of *zenoi*, strangers, who cling to each other for dear life in the same chilly, rocky baptismal boat because we are headed to the same destination: a better country. This "church of strangers" has three practical advantages:

- 1) A church that contains members we think strange, even barbaric, is a healthier setting for us, for our formation as Christians. We like to think that a church of our kind, one that excludes those who believe incorrectly and behave badly by our lights, would be a better school for goodness than the mixed church we've got. It is not necessarily so. Familiarity and affinity breed bad habits as well as virtues.

Richard Mouw has acknowledged that when conservatives stay in their own enclaves, they direct their natural combativeness at each other. When we so-called liberals hang out together, without those "other" Presbyterians, we can be—in fact often are—smug. We are pretty sure that we are advanced and others outmoded. When everyone else grows up, we believe, they will look and think like us. In my experience, we are less likely to slide over into snobbishness when "they"—those we have defined as inferior—are in the room, some of them thinking as clearly and acting as maturely as some of us. So if one reason for joining a church is to get help for living more faithfully, the strange members are important. They make us self-conscious, and perhaps more aware that if we want more righteousness for the church, we may have to fix ourselves as well as those others.

2) The Presbyterian Church will be better off—more productive and more faithful—if we strangers in it hold on to each other. There are several important projects that estranged groups in the church could profitably work on together. One is Christology. None of us is able yet to say clearly or powerfully enough who Jesus Christ is in this world. The debate often takes place at the level of bumper stickers: "Jesus the Only Sole Singular Way" on their vehicles; "Many, Many Paths to God" on ours. We can do better than that. Our various parties have different kinds of specialized knowledge: Liberals are practiced in learning as Christians from other faith traditions; evangelicals have expertise in nurturing and sustaining intense personal relationships with Jesus Christ. Instead of battering each other with our different perspectives on Jesus Christ, we might listen for what complements and corrects our own view in what others have to say. Perhaps, if we did that, we could represent him more fully and accurately to a world that doesn't know him very well.

And what about the issue of gays and lesbians and the church? Richard Mouw and I agree about two matters. First, the question of homosexuality is important. The church cannot avoid it. But second, important as the issue is, it is not a faith-breaker. Each of us thinks that the other, seriously mistaken as the other is, is a Christian, and a Reformed one at that.

Beyond that, however, we do not agree even about how to define the challenge God has placed before the church. Many conservatives think that God wants us to hold the line, to keep traditional (they would say biblical) rules of sexual conduct firmly in place. I think that God is doing something different: expanding the church's understanding, not of sex in the first instance, but of a deep and pervasive biblical theme, *hesed*, loyal love. I think that God is teaching this church, chiefly through the impressive testimony of GLBT Presbyterians, that to love another person with one's whole being and to pledge one's life for that person's welfare is not a sin. Far from it: Such acts of self-giving love are channels through which grace can and regularly does flow—in no way they should disqualify people for church leadership. On this issue, we really are strangers, far apart and mystified about each other's outlook and convictions.

Our side doesn't have to agree with conservatives about what God is seeking to change or redirect or squelch—namely, all same-sex impulses—or about who is first in line for change. (I suspect that God's priority is the privileged and powerful.) But we can stand our ground on these points and still let the evangelicals help us balance our word to the church: inclusion and acceptance, but also *metanoia* and new life. Who knows? If evangelicals listen intently to the testimony of faithful GLBT persons, and if our side accepts evangelicals' prompting to admit our need and desire to be renewed, maybe we can strive together for a church as just and generous—and holy—as God's grace.

3) The last and most critical reason for all of us Presbyterian strangers to struggle through our disagreements is to show the world that there are alternatives to killing each other over differences. As long as we continue to club the other Presbyterians into submission with constitutional amendments, judicial cases, and economic boycotts, we have no word for a world full of murderous divisions, most of them cloaked in religion.

In 1869, the two Presbyterian denominations formed in the bitter split 40 years before came back together. Seeking, said their reunion plan, to create a church marked by "diversity and harmony, liberty and love," both assemblies met in Pittsburgh, in separate halls from which their members marched to opposite sides of a broad avenue. Their moderators and clerks then stepped into the street and met in the middle. They "clasped hands," according to a contemporary account, "and amidst welcomes, thanksgivings, and tears, they locked arms and stood together in their reformed relations."

It was a powerful moment, but I can imagine a more powerful witness. We could skip the split. We Presbyterians, who share so much—a confession of faith, a rich theological heritage, the advantages and the

burdens of wealth and social power—could covenant to stay together in our reformed relations, to labor with each other, in love, for justice and truth. It would be very arduous and painful, much more so than splitting or drifting apart. It would be worth it. The world would take note of what the gospel makes possible for those who confess their dis-ease with each other and their displacement by each other but still keep on going, strangers locked in covenant, toward the better country of diversity and harmony, liberty and love.

It is, of course, a long trip. We have only glimpsed what that better country might be like. But God, it says in Hebrews, was not ashamed to be called the God of those who stepped out in faith. Indeed, God has prepared a city for them. God has prepared a city for us strange Presbyterians and for all the other foreigners God loves. I pray that with God's help, we will get there together.

Barbara G. Wheeler was president of Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City when this article appeared. It is adapted from a presentation at the Covenant Network of Presbyterians national conference held in November in Washington, D.C.

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