

Hanging in there: Why conservatives need liberals

by [Richard J. Mouw](#) in the [January 13, 2004](#) issue

I have spent a number of years engaged in Jewish-Christian dialogue. More recently, I have been involved in extensive exchanges with Muslim scholars. I regularly visit Utah for off-the-record discussions with Mormon leaders about deep disagreements between Mormons and evangelicals. I approach all these conversations with great enthusiasm. And yet I have found myself regularly breaking into a cold sweat at the thought of engaging in dialogue with fellow Presbyterians about homosexuality. Why the anxiety in this case?

It's because there is so little room for genuine give-and-take in our Presbyterian discussions and at the same time so much hanging on them. The issue is vitally connected to the question of whether we can stay together as a denomination. In that sense, the Presbyterian debates do not feel like friendly arguments over the breakfast table, or even the more heated kinds of exchanges that might take place in the presence of a marriage counselor. Rather, it often feels as if we are already getting ready for the divorce court, under pressure to measure every word that we say with an eye toward the briefs that our lawyers will be presenting as we move toward a final settlement.

Barbara Wheeler and I have argued much about the issues that threaten to divide us, but we share a strong commitment to continuing the conversation. She regularly makes her case for staying together by appealing to a high ecclesiology. The church, she insists, is not a voluntary arrangement that we can abandon just because we do not happen to like some of the other people in the group. God calls us into the church, and that means that God requires that we hang in there with one another even if that goes against our natural inclinations.

I agree with that formulation. And I sense that many of my fellow evangelicals in the PCUSA would also endorse it. The question that many evangelicals are asking these days, though, is whether God expects us to hang in there at all costs.

One of my reasons for wanting to see us stick together is that a Presbyterian split would be a serious setback for the cause that I care deeply about, namely, the cause

of Reformed orthodoxy. I spend a lot of time thinking about how people with my kind of theology have acted in the past, and I am convinced that splits inevitably diminish the influence of the kind of orthodoxy that I cherish—for at least two reasons.

First, the denomination from which the dissidents depart is typically left without strong voices to defend orthodoxy. This is what happened in the early decades of the 20th century when J. Gresham Machen and his colleagues broke away from the northern Presbyterian church.

I know that this is not a very popular thing to say in this setting, but I happen to be a strong admirer of Machen. I think that he pretty much had things right on questions of biblical authority, the nature of Christ's atoning work, and other key items on the theological agenda. But I have strong reservations about his ecclesiology, and I regret that his views about the unity of the church led him to abandon mainline Presbyterianism. As long as he remained within the northern church, he had a forum for demonstrating to liberals that Calvinist orthodoxy could be articulated with intellectual rigor. When he and his friends departed, this kind of witness departed with them.

The evangelicals who stayed on in the northern church generally did so because they were not as polemical as the Machen group; they were also not nearly as inclined as the Machenites to engage in sustained theological discussion. This meant that the quality of theological argumentation in mainline Presbyterianism suffered for several decades—some would even say up to our present time.

The second way in which the cause of Reformed orthodoxy was diminished has to do with what happened to the conservatives themselves after they left the mainline denomination. They quickly began to argue among themselves, and it was not long before new splits occurred in their ranks. The result was that conservative Calvinism itself became a fractured movement.

I worry much about what would happen to Presbyterian evangelicals if we were to leave the PCUSA. When we evangelical types don't have more liberal people to argue with, we tend to start arguing with each other. And I can testify to the fact that intraevangelical theological arguments are not always pleasant affairs. I would much rather see us continue to focus on the major issues of Reformed thought in an admittedly pluralistic denomination than get into the debates that seem inevitably to arise when evangelicals have established their own "pure" denominations.

In the 1970s and 1980s I spent considerable time in dialogue with Mennonite scholars about the differences between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions on political and ethical questions. One of the most interesting encounters of this sort happened one evening at a Mennonite church in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where Myron Augsburger and I debated the issues of just war doctrine and pacifism. I had come prepared to launch immediately into a critic of pacifism from my Calvinist perspective. But when Augsburger and I met in the afternoon to talk over the format for the evening, he proposed a somewhat different approach. "Let's do it differently tonight," he urged. "Let's each of us begin by talking in very personal terms about the things we respect in the other person's position."

That is what we did, and it was a profoundly moving experience for me—setting a very different tone for the airing of our disagreements than I had experienced in previous dialogues. I thought about that encounter as I was preparing for this discussion, and it occurred to me that this is the approach that Barbara Wheeler has taken on her several visits to Fuller Seminary.

I have learned much from people whom my fellow evangelicals are quick to label as liberal Protestants. In the environs in which I was nurtured, Harry Emerson Fosdick was considered an arch-villain. As a college student I decided to form my own assessment of Fosdick's thought, and though I found much in his theology disturbing, I was deeply moved by many of his sermons. His articulate approach to issues of war and peace, and his profound commitment to the betterment of the human condition, left a strong impression on me.

Indeed, it was Fosdick's influence, along with that of Walter Rauschenbusch and other advocates of the social gospel, that led me to experience considerable alienation from the evangelical community during my years of graduate study on secular campuses in the 1960s, when I joined protests against racial injustice and marched against the Vietnam war. And even though I continued to search for a more traditionally orthodox basis for my political commitments, I drew much inspiration and solace from the witness of Christian people of more liberal theological convictions who modeled for me a courageous commitment to the biblical vision of justice and peace. I was—and I continue to be—ashamed of the failure of evangelicals to take up these causes in the 1960s. And I was—and I continue to be—deeply grateful for the social witness of liberal Protestantism during those days.

I have spoken often to evangelical audiences about sexuality issues. And I have always made it very clear to them—as I must to you—that my views on same-sex relations are very traditional. I am convinced that genital intimacy between persons of the same gender is not compatible with God’s creating or redeeming purposes. But that kind of clarification of my understanding of biblical teaching for evangelical groups has usually been a preface to a plea for sexual humility.

I often tell of listening to a conservative spokesman express his views in this way: “We normal people should tell these homosexuals that what they are doing is simply an abomination in the eyes of God.” When I heard that, I tell my audiences, I wanted to cry out, “Normal? You are normal? Let’s all applaud for the one sexually normal person in the room!”

The fact is that none of us—or at least very few of us—can honestly claim to be normal sexual beings in the eyes of God. The labels we typically use in describing sexual orientation are blatant examples of false advertising. My homosexual friends are not very “gay.” They have experienced much pain and loss in their lives. And the rest of us are not very “straight.” We are crooked people, often bruised and confused in our sexuality.

None of this should be shocking to Calvinists. We are living in the time of our abnormality. We are all sinners who have been deeply wounded by the stain of our depravity, and we are nowhere more vulnerable and given to temptation than in the sexual dimensions of our being. In our sexual lives, as in all other areas, we know that while we may be on a journey toward wholeness, we are a long way from our destination. We are already the redeemed sons and daughters of God, but “it doth not yet appear what we shall be.” So in our brokenness we journey on, knowing that “when he shall appear”—and only then—“we will be like him, and we will see him as he is” (1 John 3: 2).

This is an important time for each of us to be honest about our sexual condition. Evangelicals have nothing to brag about in this area. It is not enough for us to tell those of you with whom we disagree how wrong we think you are. Nor is it very helpful for you folks to keep insisting that we can solve most of our theological problems in this area by focusing on a Jesus who cares deeply about a generic, unnuanced “inclusivity.” If that is all we have to say to each other, there is no hope for the continuing unity of our denomination.

When I was on the faculty of Calvin College, I helped to arrange a special evening lecture on campus by my friend Virginia Mollenkott, who had recently come out publicly about her lesbian orientation. Many of the things she said to a packed auditorium that evening were off the theological charts for most of us, including me. But I will never forget how she concluded her talk by saying something like this: “You may disagree with everything I have said thus far, but I hope we can at least agree on this,” she said. “Whatever your sexual orientation, there is nothing—absolutely nothing—that you have to do or agree to before coming to the foot of the cross of Jesus. The only thing any of us has to say as we come to Calvary is this: ‘Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, / and that thou bidst me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come.’”

I believe that in that plea she was expressing good Reformed doctrine. We do not have to have either our theology or our ethics well worked out before we can come together to Calvary. All we need to know is that we are lost apart from the sovereign grace that was made available to us through the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

Our only hope for moving on together as partners in the cause of the gospel is to bow together at the cross of Calvary, acknowledging to each other and to our Lord that we all need to plead for mercy to the One who is, in the Heidelberg Confession’s wonderful words, our “only comfort in life and in death,” and who “at the cost of his own blood . . . fully paid for all [our] sins.” And then, having experienced together the healing mercy that comes from the one who alone is mighty to save, we can journey on as friends—no longer strangers to each other—who are eager to talk to each other, and even to argue passionately with each other about crucial issues.

I want with all my heart for this to happen to us in the Presbyterian Church—that we take up our arguments about the issues that divide only after we have knelt and laid our individual and collective burdens of sin at the foot of the cross. Needless to say, if it does happen, I would be surprised. But then the God whom we worship and serve is nothing if not a God of surprises.

*This article is adapted from Richard J. Mouw's address in November 2003 to the Covenant Network of Presbyterians.*