

With Respect for One Another, Two Presbyterian Colleagues, a Minister (Richard Mouw) and an Elder (Barbara Wheeler) Speaking to an Audience of Presbyterians

Strangers: a Dialogue about the Church

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. . . Seriously, I have wondered a lot about my apprehension over this particular assignment. I have spent a number of years now actively engaged in Jewish-Christian dialogue, and more recently in extensive exchanges with Muslim scholars, even hosting a dozen Koran experts from as many nations on our campus for a week last year. I regularly visit Utah for off-the-record discussions with LDS leaders about deep disagreements between Mormons and evangelicals. And just last week I spent several hours with government officials in China, talking about sensitive church-state matters. I go at all of these things 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 here about some important topics being debated presently in our denomination. Why the anxiety in this particular case?—this is a question I have asked myself many times over the past several weeks as I have tried to prepare for this occasion.

The basic problem, I think, is that there is so little room for genuine give-and-take in our Presbyterian discussions these days, while at the same time so much hangs on how our conversations go. It is increasingly apparent that the issues that we are discussing are not simply topics about which we happen to disagree. They are matters that are vitally connected to the question of whether we can stay together as a denomination. In that sense, our present 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 like 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.

Those are not the kinds of exchanges that I relish. More importantly, I hope with all my heart that we can avoid the divorce court. I want us to stay together. Barbara Wheeler and I have argued much about the issues that threaten to divide us. I presently do not have a clear sense of what it would take to avoid what many of our fellow Presbyterians apparently are convinced is an inevitable separation. I do sense, however,—as I know Barbara does—a strong need to keep talking. It helps much that she and I are friends, and that we know how to talk with each other. But we both know that many of her friends do not like to talk to many of my friends, and vice versa. And I am not sure how we can remedy that problem. All I can do today, then, is to talk—in the hope that some of you will also be willing to continue the conversation with people like me.

Barbara regularly makes her case by appealing to a high ecclesiology. The church, she insists, is not some mere 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 to the church, and that means that God requires that

we hang in there with each other, 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 we are expected by God to hang in there at all costs. I think that this is an important question. So in my own efforts to make the case for sticking together, I feel the need to explore additional considerations.

One such consideration, for me at least, has to do with the history of the seminary over which I preside. Let me explain that by reviewing briefly a little Fuller Seminary history with you. In the fall of 1949 Dr. Bela Vassady joined the Fuller faculty as Professor of Biblical Theology and Ecumenics. Vassady was a distinguished Hungarian Reformed theologian who had been instrumental in introducing the theology of Karl Barth to his homeland,. He had only recently completed an American lecture tour under the sponsorship of the World Council of Churches—he had been one of the founders of the WCC. Upon his arrival in Pasadena, Vassady met with a committee of the local presbytery of what was then the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in order to facilitate the process of transferring his ministerial credentials from the Hungarian Reformed Church to the Los Angeles Presbytery. Vassady assumed that the process would be virtually automatic—an assumption that had been reinforced by the encouragement of his good friend Eugene Carson Blake, the pastor of the Pasadena Presbyterian Church.

Much to Vassady's shock, his request was denied. In informal discussions with the committee that had made the decision, he was told that while the presbytery would indeed be honored to have him as a member, they did not want to establish a precedent for admitting other members of the Fuller faculty, several of whom had already expressed an interest in being admitted to the presbytery.

While the earliest generations of Fuller Presbyterians were obviously strong proponents of a conservative Calvinist theology, they had refused to identify with the separatism of J. Gresham Machen and his followers. In fact, one of them, the Old Testament professor William LaSor, had previously served in the Presbytery of West Jersey as a member of the commission of that had suspended Carl McIntyre from the denomination's ministry. He and several other early leaders at Fuller were deeply distressed by the divisive spirit of much of the evangelicalism of their day, and they placed a commitment to working within the structures of mainline denominations high among their priorities for the kind of theological education they meant to be fostering.

Eventually, of course, many Fuller faculty members were welcomed by local presbyteries. And as things developed, Fuller attracted many women and men who desired to study for Presbyterian ministries. Jack Rogers has taken much heat from our evangelical ranks in the past for years for the positions he has come to defend in our denominational debates—and understandably so. But I want to say here that Fuller is deeply indebted to Jack for his marvelous role for many years in serving as an important mentor to several generations of Presbyterian students at Fuller. Our strong relationship to the PCUSA would not be what it is today without his pioneering efforts. I greatly admire those earlier generations of evangelicals who worked patiently to provide an alternative to the more divisive patterns within their own ranks, and I have a strong desire to honor their labors.

But my reasons for wanting to see us all stick together in the PCUSA have to do with more than a mere streak of institutional nostalgia. I genuinely believe 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—ones that I set forth in an *Outlook* article a year or so ago.

First, the denomination from which the dissidents depart is typically left without strong voices who are defending their understanding of orthodoxy. This is what happened in the early decades of the twentieth century when J. Gresham Machen and his colleagues broke away from the Northern 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 the denomination's 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 not nearly as inclined as the Machenites to engage in sustained theological discussion. This meant that the quality of theological argumentation suffered for several decades—some would even say up to our present time—in mainline Presbyterianism.

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 increasingly became a fractured movement.

I worry much about what would happen to Presbyterian evangelicals ourselves 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 intra-evangelical 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 to deal with the tensions that often arise among ourselves when evangelicals get into the debates that seem inevitably to arise when we have established their own "pure" denominations.

I believe that it is a good thing for Presbyterians to engage in passionate theological debates about important theological topics. These are exciting times to be discussing together the relevance of the great themes of the Reformation for our present situation. Like other evangelicals, I find it discouraging when prominent folks in our denomination seem bent on denying these important teachings. But at least it is possible to have a good theological argument with people who take seriously their departures from Reformation distinctives. I worry much more about those in our denomination who don't seem to have strong views about these matters. They have not been convinced of the importance of theology as such, to say nothing of a theology grounded in Reformed orthodoxy. In their voting patterns on major issues, sometimes they lean one way and sometimes another way. I would hate to think that they would no longer have to listen to strong Reformed voices when mainline Presbyterians debate crucial topics.

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 Sunday evening in 1980, at the Mount Joy Mennonite Church in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where Myron Augsburger and I debated the issues of just war doctrine and pacifism in the presence of a large Mennonite audience. 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. He recalled how the Calvinist-versus-Anabaptist public disputations of the 16th century were typically angry exchanges in which each side spoke harshly about the other's positions. "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 here, and it occurred to me that this is the approach that Barbara Wheeler has taken on her several visits to Fuller Seminary. She has typically prefaced her explanation of any serious differences she has with evangelicals with some comments about what she has come to appreciate in our perspective. I want now to follow that pattern.

I have learned much in my life from people who my fellow evangelicals are quick to label as liberal Protestants. For example, in the environs in which I was nurtured spiritually and theologically Harry Emerson Fosdick was considered an arch-villain. As a college student I decided to form my own assessment of Fosdick's thought, and I read extensively in his writings. There was much in his theology that I found disturbing. But I also was deeply moved by many of his sermons. His articulate address 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 "social Gospel" advocates, that led me to experience considerable alienation from the evangelical community during my years of graduate study on secular campuses in the 1960s, as 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 to God for the social witness of liberal Protestantism during those days.

I take my common history and shared commitments with folks like you very seriously. And it is precisely because of this that I want so much to stay together in our denomination. A friend of mine, also a Presbyterian evangelical with a similar history to my own, put it well to me recently. "It hurts like heck to be labeled a homophobe by the folks we are presently arguing with," he said. "When it was the issues of race and militarism and gender, we were all in it together. and folks like us were out of step with much of the rest of evangelicalism. The homosexuality questions, though, are different ones for us. Here we feel we have no other choice but to draw the line and stay with what we take to be the clear teachings of the Bible. We simply have to live with the accusations of being the mean-spirited ones. I do wish, though, they would give us a little bit of credit for having some integrity on this matter! I would like to get beyond the name-calling and really wrestle together with the underlying theological issues."

That is my wish also. I believe the real issues have to do with the great themes of the Reformation. Indeed, these are the themes that I kept returning to in the earlier debates, within evangelicalism, on matters of justice and peace. I first got an inkling about the connection between historic Calvinism and social justice issues when in 1962, as a student at Western Seminary in Holland, Michigan, I was sent on a weekend preaching assignment to a congregation in a Dutch-American community in a neighboring state. I arrived on Saturday, and was an overnight guest in the home of a church elder and his wife. At the dinner table after the evening meal, the husband read a chapter from the Scriptures—as was the custom in that subculture. I don't remember the passage, but I do know that when he finished reading he told me that the verses reminded him of Heidelberg One, adding that it is wonderful for a person to be able to say, "My only comfort in life and in death is that I am not my own."

We soon left the table and sat in the living room, where he turned on the evening news. The main news story that day was about Martin Luther King leading a march against housing discrimination. My host grew agitated and he walked over to turn off the TV set, telling me that he could not stand to hear "all of this stuff about the colored people and their complaints." I immediately let him know that my sympathies were with Dr. King, and we soon were engaged in a heated argument. At one point he pounded his fist on the coffee table and shouted: "I don't want those people moving into my neighborhood! What I have I got on my own, and no one is going to take it away from me!"

I realized that it was pointless to keep the argument going, and things soon calmed down. Later, when I lay in bed, the irony hit me: the person who had shouted that what he possessed he had gotten on his own and no one could take it away from him had only minutes before told me that his only comfort in life and in death was that he was not his own, but that he belonged to a faithful Savior. That lesson stayed with me. The more I thought about this, the more I came to realize that the concluding words of the answer to Question One contains all the basics necessary for a Calvinist activism: God's Spirit "makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth to live unto him." As sinners who cannot save ourselves from our depraved condition, our only hope is the sovereign grace made available to us by the sacrificial death of the heaven-sent Savior. To know the wonders of those saving mercies is to be called to participate in the life of a covenant community whose mission it is to demonstrate to the larger world what it means to glorify God and to enjoy God forever—calling others to join us in doing the will of the Savior who is also a Lord who alone is worthy of our full obedience.

I have spoken often to evangelical audiences about sexuality issues. And I have always made it very clear to them—and I must to you today—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 have often told the story of hearing 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 get up and 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 truth of the matter is that 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. We evangelicals have nothing to brag about in this area. It is not enough for us to tell those of you with whom we disagree strongly about sexual orientation questions 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 myself. But I will never forget how she concluded her talk. This is how I remember her words: “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.

Lloyd Ogilvie told me a month ago about a recent visit he paid, while in Scotland, to his theological mentor, Thomas Torrance. Lloyd went to the theologian’s bedside, knowing that Torrance does not have long to live. Just before they bade each other farewell, Professor Torrance gave him a parting word of advice: “Lloyd,” he said, “never tiptoe around Golgotha.”

I am convinced that that is a good word from the Lord for us Presbyterians today. It has never been more important for us not to tiptoe around Golgotha. Indeed, 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’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” at Calvary. 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 long strangers to each other—who are eager to talk to each other, and even to argue passionately

with each other about crucial issues of Christology, atonement and discipleship, as servants who are “wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.”

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 did happen, I would be surprised. But then, the God whom we worship and serve is nothing if not a God of surprises.

Strangers: a Dialogue about the Church

Barbara G. Wheeler

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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 are speak in this way make clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, 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

I am acutely uncomfortable—standing here, giving this talk. Partly, it’s the assignment, to speak about the church as it ought to be. The church is the theological topic about which I care most. I know that it is way down the list of what Calvin liked to call the heads of Reformed doctrine. He got to it in the fourth of four books of the Institutes, and it hasn't advanced much in most people's theological systems since. Indeed, 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. My conversion experience occurred, not incidentally, in a church building. (Happily, I'm a liberal Presbyterian, so I don't need to tell you anything more about that.) 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. Tom Torrance says that there isn't any other way: in a tradition in which "the Truth is an historical person..., it must be communicated by other persons, in time. It is not something we can tell to ourselves."(1) And when my faith has flagged, as it does all the time, I depend on others—including some in this sanctuary and on this platform—to keep it for me. Perhaps God arranges exclusive assignments with some people, but not with me. In my case, it's always been a group date. Given what I owe the church—in it and through it my life was saved—it seems cheeky of me to tell it what it should be like. It might be more fitting for the church to set the standard for me.

It's not only the topic that daunts me this morning; it's also the audience. Present in this room are two groups that 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. Let me address you directly. You have not been a problem for me. Quite the opposite: you have provided me with luminous examples of how to live a Christian life under adverse conditions—very adverse conditions. This denomination's policies toward its GLBT members are restrictive to the point of cruelty. We tell many of you who want to offer sacrifices for the good of the church—countless hours of volunteer service as elders and deacons or a lifetime in demanding and low paid pastoral ministries—that your life choices are so much more sinful than the rest of ours that we've had to erect special barriers to keep you from laying your gifts at the altar. Our church's teaching that all same-sex acts are wrong, no distinctions, has downright perverse effects. The more you 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 you can be ordained and that you will be welcomed to work out your discipleship in most Presbyterian congregations.

Yet here you are, in this room, in this denomination, or eager to be, if only we had a place for you. You keep on witnessing to the truth of Christ in your lives. You keep on offering help that the church desperately needs but is too proud and stubborn to accept. You show us your anger—I take that as a compliment, a sign of trust. You keep on ministering, with tender compassion, to me and to many, many others who have the approval and privileges that have been denied to you. Your unselfishness lifts my sights. It makes it difficult, however, for me to lecture you about the future, because many of you live your lives better in the present, under far more difficult conditions, than I do.

The other group that makes me feel awkward and shy this morning is evangelical and conservative Presbyterians. Richard Mouw is here as their chief proxy, but others are present as well. I stumbled into the evangelical world by a kind of academic accident. Fifteen years ago, I decided to do some research in an evangelical seminary, not because I had any interest in conservative Christianity, but because some colleagues and I wanted to understand how the culture of a seminary shapes the ministers who are formed there, and culture is best studied from the outside. I could not have been more of an outsider if I had gone to do my research in Bali. I grew up in a home so liberal that when Dwight Eisenhower was elected president, I couldn't believe it. In all my eight years, 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. When I arrived on the campus of that seminary fifteen years ago, I knew very few evangelicals.

But I did have definite expectations for what I would find. They had been set by the liberal culture of which I had always been a part. I believed—I think this is standard on our side of the aisle—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 with whom I would be more or less living for the next three years to be theological dinosaurs, mired in pre-critical questions long ago settled and forgotten by the rest of us. I had expectations, too, of what I would not find. I did not think that evangelicals would be either funny or fun. More seriously, I did not expect my faith to be enriched by what I saw and heard at the seminary I was studying. Indeed, I thought it would be severely tested by the things that were said and done there in the name of Christian faith.(2)

Now it's true, Richard, that you, the one evangelical I knew fairly well when I started my project, didn't fit this description. A guy who can drive a Dodge Dart without damage to his self-esteem has a lot of psychological strength. You know hundreds of funny stories, and you've got a searching, well-furnished mind. I assumed that you were the exception. I found out that you are not. Exceptional, yes: your intelligence, integrity and depth would be in any religious culture. But many evangelicals, in my experience, don't fit those liberal stereotypes. In other settings, I have talked at length about what I have learned about evangelicals. I don't have time to do that today, so let me summarize my findings in a few sentences.

I have discovered that you evangelicals (I'll talk to you directly, too) are not, as a class, fearful and unstable, at least, no more than the rest of us. You do have some rather ruthless colleagues, and I confess I still find myself wondering what happened to them early on to make them that way. But I have met some of you who are much better than I am at looking at yourselves and the world with unsparing honesty and at changing your minds and behavior when that is warranted. Thanks to you, I've had to begin work on an alternate theory of why people become religious conservatives and stay that way. I've also learned that theology in your world is a mixed bag. The range is vast. Some of it is, indeed, fossilized debates that most Christians, even many evangelicals, don't care about any more. But there is also lively theological conversation in the evangelical world that has reminded me how much gold there is in classic Christian tradition and how it still enriches all of us, including liberals. I have to admit, too, that I've had a good time, Richard, with you and your ilk. Among other things, I've learned a slew of good jokes about evangelicals.

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 Presbyterians, first you, Richard, then others. Despite your best efforts, you 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. I am not proud of the fact that, in every case, my evangelical friends spoke first, affirming my faith before I affirmed theirs. I'm not proud that I failed to take the initiative, but I'm grateful that they did.

I'm grateful, too, that a number of you have publicly affirmed the faith and sincerity of the liberals you know and respect, a risky act in your party, where some leaders like to stir up the troops by claiming that our party practices a different religion. One such public affirmative statement that I

treasure personally is a nominating speech by Price Gwynn, a card-carrying conservative. He wrote it on my behalf when I faced conservative opposition in an election for a slot on a General Assembly committee. "Barbara Wheeler is a faithful follower of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," Price said. "That doesn't keep her from being wrong most of the time." Just the point: 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. Because some of you evangelicals recognized me as a Christian first, however, or first had the courage to say so, I am reluctant to instruct you about how to be the church. You know how. You've shown me.

There is one more item in the catalog of factors that complicate any attempt to think together here about the church. Not to put too fine a point on it: the two groups I have named that have been the church so powerfully to me in recent years can't stand each other. Of course there are exceptions. I am far from the only Presbyterian who has found faith and friendship in unexpected places. Generally, though, these two groups 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 than it has already. What can I possibly say about the church in the presence of groups—many groups, for the alienation I have named is by no means the only one dividing this denomination—how to talk about the church when we are so deeply estranged from each other?

How about this? They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth. What if we not only acknowledge the fact that we are strangers to others in our own denomination (according to my Greek lexicon that is the first sense of "confess" here, "admit"); but also affirm it—the second sense, declare it; and even praise the fact, give thanks for it—the third connotation of confess (Let us praise God..., confess God's name [Heb 13:15])? Instead of denying our estrangement, or bemoaning it, or whining in good 21st-century fashion that it makes us tired, why not embrace it as a gift from God? How's this for a model of the church that we are called to become: A company of strangers, who like Abraham and Sarah set out for a new place, because from a distance all of us, in our own weird ways, [have glimpsed the promises of God] and greeted them?

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 sort of thing that Garrison Keillor had in mind when he said that Presbyterians are those folks who think that having a good time with nice people in a pleasant place makes you stupid. 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. A church something like that—or churches—is what the proponents of a cool, clean division of the denomination claim to have in view. (They are dreaming. Having just studied the bloody split of the Presbyterian Church in the USA in 1837 under circumstances not all that different from our own, I am certain that peaceful or gracious schisms are not possible.) But I suspect that even those of us who hate the idea of an outright split have a secret hankering for a church in which they, or at least the most irritating of them, won't be around to make our lives miserable. If we hammer each other

long enough with whatever weapon our side has at its disposal at the moment, maybe the other side will eventually be cowed into silence, give up or go away, and we will have an improved if not completely purified church that is much more fun to be part of.

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. If I had time, I think that I could make the full-blown ecclesiological case for a church of strangers; but for this conversation I'll stay with three practical advantages: strangeness is better for us, better for the church, and better for the world than the warmer and cuddlier options. I will try quickly to convince you that these claims are true.

Claim one: A church that contains members who 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 has already confessed an unhealthy family pattern of conservatives: contentiousness. I have seen it with my own eyes. When I arrived on the campus of that evangelical seminary I studied, I had steeled myself for a lot of liberal-bashing that I would not be able to counter because ethnographic researchers are supposed to keep their personal views to themselves. I was surprised, and I have to say a little hurt, that the faculty and students in that school rarely mentioned liberals. There was a good deal of hostile theological rhetoric, but almost all of it was directed at other evangelicals. As Richard has written in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, if this denomination split, within minutes the new conservative church would be organized into warring factions. Aggressiveness is part of conservative religious culture; it's both the secret of its effectiveness and its downfall. When other targets are not available, evangelicals tend to turn their aggressiveness on themselves with special vehemence. In one of our exchanges at Fuller, Richard pointed this out and told the audience that he hoped the church wouldn't divide, because far more good could be done by him contending with people like me than by him beating up on them.

And what about us so-called liberals? What are our bad family habits? It's not easy to generalize about "us." The very fact that there is no one name we all want to be called on the non-conservative side of the church signals that we are a loose association more than a party with a platform or community with a culture. But we do hang out together, without those Other Presbyterians, and when we do we can be, in fact often are, smug. We tend to look down on our opponents. 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. You could say that our progressive openness to the world, which is where this sense of being ahead of the curve comes from, is the secret of our effectiveness and also our downfall. 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, maybe less likely to display some of the

uglier traits of our sub-group and perhaps more aware that if we want more righteousness for the church and all of us in it, we may have to fix ourselves as well as those others

Claim two: the Presbyterian Church will be better off—more productive and more faithful—if we strangers in it hold on to each other. This denomination has a lot of important work to do; and though we would like to see all of it accomplished our way, the fact is that none of the factions, including our own, has the capacity or the skills to do it all alone. Richard has named two of the projects that estranged groups in the church could profitably work on together. One is Christology, which is high on the agenda not, I think, because we Covenant Network types have stepped over an orthodoxy line that is clear and easy to draw, but because none of us is able yet to say clearly or powerfully enough who Jesus Christ is in this religious situation and this world. The version of the Christological debate that is most audible inside the church and beyond 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 and caucuses 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. There are some in the church—women, gays and lesbians, racial and ethnic minorities—who have experienced what it is like to suffer at the hands of the civic and religious establishment. That is valuable insight into what it means to be the body of Christ, who had similar experiences. 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 about their knowledge and love of him. Perhaps, if we did that, we could represent him more fully and accurately to a world that doesn't know him very well. I think that he would be honored if we pooled our efforts in his behalf

And what about the issue that brings us to a Covenant Network conference? Is there anything to be gained by working together to resolve it? Richard and I know from experience how difficult this is. We do agree about two preliminary but critical matters: we agree that the question of homosexuality is important—the church has to face it. We also agree that important as it is, it is not a faith-breaker. Each of us—correct me if I'm wrong, Richard—thinks that the other, seriously mistaken as the other is, is a Christian, and a Reformed one at that. But beyond that, we do not agree even about how to define the challenge God has placed before the church. You, Richard, think that God wants us to hold the line, to keep traditional—you 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—no way they should disqualify people for church leadership. Over the last two decades, many Presbyterians, most of them theologically and temperamentally moderate and some of them conservative, have come to recognize that God's blessing is available to all who commit themselves to love God more fully by loving another person truly. Richard, this is not capitulation to a libertine

culture. This expanding understanding makes the church and us in it more, not less holy. This is, I am deeply convinced, the work of the Holy Spirit.

On this issue, Richard, we really are strangers, far apart and mystified about each other's outlook and convictions. Shall we stick with each other as we, and the whole church, continue to struggle about these things? You have implied that we should. You've candidly admitted that conservatives often don't speak fairly or respectfully of homosexuals, especially when they are not around. From that I conclude that you think you can make a more faithful case if you are engaged with them and their allies.

I think the reciprocal is true for us. We make a strong case: God invites GLBT persons into full membership, committed partnerships and church leadership on the same basis as everyone else. But we tend to leave it at that, to give the impression that inclusion is the end of the story. Of course it is not. God incorporates us into Christ's body for a reason: transformation. Evangelical theology and culture place heavy emphasis on that next step. 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—about who is first in line for change. (I suspect that God's priority is the privileged and powerful, including in the present instance we self-indulgent heterosexuals who have full church and society support for the promises we make, yet still don't keep very well.) 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.

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 forty 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.⁽³⁾ 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." ⁽⁴⁾

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.

(1) Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), xxxiii.

(2) The results of this study are reported in Jackson Carroll, Barbara G. Wheeler, Daniel O. Aleshire, Penny Long Marler, *Being There: Culture and Formation in Two Theological Schools* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

(3) *Minutes of the General Assembly, N.S. 1868*, 508.

(4) *Presbyterian Reunion: A Memorial Volume, 1837-1871* (New York, 1870), 275, 380; cited in Maurice W. Armstrong, Lefferts A. Loetscher, Charles A. Anderson, *The Presbyterian Enterprise: Sources of American Presbyterian History* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 221.