

Critical and faithful: Magnanimity rooted in the gospel

From the Editors in the [January 9, 2007](#) issue

When asked where the new members of liberal churches will come from, David Jenkins, former Anglican bishop of Durham, replied: “Where they have always come from—the evangelicals.” This is only partly true, of course. Most members of liberal churches were born or married into a mainline congregation. Yet it is true that many members of liberal, mainline churches are former conservatives. It’s a story that has been told over and over: the twin acids of modernity—science and historical criticism—erode people’s traditional views of biblical authority. People also discover that faith doesn’t deliver what is promised to them in conservative churches: folks who “get right with God” still get divorced, suffer from terminal cancer and watch their children go astray. Confronted by the hard knocks of life, they need a church that is not afraid to ask tough questions, a church where doubts can be aired.

At their best, mainline churches are that place. They exhibit a magnanimous spirit. They accept doubts and differences of opinion, engage the questions of modernity and eschew legalism and triumphalism. Grace is not only preached but embodied in hospitable relationships.

And yet, as Ian Markham suggests in *Why Liberal Churches Are Growing* (edited by Markham and Martyn Percy), mainline churches are often known more for what they don’t believe than for what they do believe. Sometimes their identity consists in not being the Bible-thumping evangelicals down the street.

The tag line on the cover of each issue of the Christian Century is “Thinking critically, living faithfully.” Embracing both those concerns is not easy. People trained to think critically about their faith sometimes find it difficult to articulate what they do believe, much less share it with others. While investigating the practice of evangelism in mainline churches, Martha Grace Reese (*Unbinding the Gospel*) asked pastors, “What difference does it make in your own life that you are a Christian?” She found that many did not know how to respond.

Holding together the poles of critical thinking and faithful living is possible; it is also necessary. Gary Dorrien, author of a three-volume history of liberal Christianity, notes that the great leaders in the liberal movement exhibited both an open, critical spirit and a passionate, evangelical commitment to the Christian gospel.

Can liberal Protestant congregations grow by means other than offering a safe haven for recovering fundamentalists? If their magnanimous spirit is rooted only in an American impulse toward live-and-let-live individualism, the answer is probably no. But the answer is yes if that magnanimity is rooted in the gospel—in the news that, as Anne Lamott has put it, God loves us exactly the way we are, and God loves us too much to let us stay like this. People who experience such a life-accepting, life-transforming gospel can't help sharing it with others in word and deed.