

Mislabeled: The liberal impulse

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [October 7, 2008](#) issue

Reflecting on the “disestablishment” of the mainline Protestant churches, Walter Brueggemann once observed that those churches and their members are for the time being living in a kind of exile. He offered the further challenging and comforting observation that though exile entails humiliation and suffering, it is not necessarily a bad place to be. In exile, God’s people can say and do remarkable things.

One of the unhappy realities of living in exile is that one doesn’t get to define the terms of public discourse. During the Republican National Convention I was recuperating from hip surgery, and I amused myself in front of the television by calculating how long it took for whatever speaker was at the podium to start bashing “liberals.”

Labels are of limited usefulness, particularly when they are used pejoratively, but liberalism is an important thread in the fabric of our political history. The founders of the republic were Enlightenment thinkers, and in large part philosophically and theologically liberal. The liberal impulse in American politics is responsible for Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, Head Start and food stamps. Liberals, often in face of fierce conservative opposition, have been the ones to guarantee equal rights, and they have made laws that help keep our food and automobiles safe and college education affordable.

In the theological arena, *liberal* has become such a negative term that few want to use it. *Progressive* has become the preferred alternative. There too, conservatives have won the rhetorical battle.

I served briefly as an elected officer of my denomination and spent a lot of time trying to encourage dialogue between liberal and conservative factions. I observed that liberals don’t like to fight, but instead are always trying to accommodate people, to be inclusive even of those who are trying to exclude them. And I concluded that the first thing on the minds of my conservative brothers and sisters when they get out of bed in the morning is fighting liberals, whereas liberals get out of bed trying to figure out how to live with conservatives.

The emergence of Governor Sarah Palin on the national scene has been accompanied by more rhetorical claims. The media have traced Palin's personal life (with her son who has Down syndrome and her pregnant, soon-to-be-married teenage daughter) as well as her policy stances (in favor of abstinence-only sex education and opposed to reproductive rights and to teaching evolution in public schools) to her Christian faith. I don't question Palin's faith; I simply hope that we can have a broader definition of the term *Christian* and acknowledge that some devout Christians believe in reproductive choice and more comprehensive sex education—not in spite of their faith but as an expression of it.