

Evangelical imperative: Kindness, forbearance, grace

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 10, 2004](#) issue

A recent editorial in *Christianity Today* suggested that “it may be time for mainline churches to consider an amicable divorce.” The editorial cited a proposal floated informally at the United Methodist General Conference in May to “explore an amicable and just separation” that would free the church from its “cycle of pain and conflict.” Similar talk is heard regularly in Presbyterian circles, usually, but not exclusively, on the right. The pain and conflict is over issues of sexuality, particularly the issue of gay/lesbian ordination.

The editorial went on to suggest that the theology of mainline churches is shaped by a quest for self-realization and freedom of choice, and it declared that “large sections of the mainline churches” exhibit a “sub-Christian religion.”

There is plenty to critique in these churches—but there is plenty of “sub-Christian religion” in the evangelical world as well. It’s usually easier to see the fault in the other side than in one’s own. That’s precisely why it’s important to stay with one another in spite of our failures and differences, trusting in the reconciling promise of the gospel. That’s why some of us place a premium on the unity of the church.

There hasn’t been a day in the past ten years that I haven’t wished I belonged to a church that wasn’t fighting and arguing. But I stay with it, and many thousands like me stay with their ecclesiastical families, because we believe our Lord wants us to, and that he was serious when he prayed for the oneness of his disciples “so that the world may believe.”

The unity of the church is an evangelical imperative. If we can’t hang together through the disagreements we face, why would the world take our gospel of reconciliation seriously?

I was at this year’s Presbyterian General Assembly—the occasion on which we do our fighting annually. Actually, this was the last annual meeting: the assembly will

meet biennially from now on, at least in part because it cuts in half the time and resources people invest in the fight. This assembly did what Presbyterian assemblies have done a lot recently: elected a moderator who is progressive on the ordination issue and then voted to retain the constitutional prohibition against ordaining sexually active gays and lesbians.

When Presbyterian ministers are ordained they promise to “further the peace, unity and purity of the church.” It’s difficult to have all three, but surely the church’s unity is no less important than its peace and purity. I think the world is tired of our bickering and name-calling. I think the most compelling evangelical gesture we could make would be the demonstration of kindness, forbearance and grace inside and between the churches.