

To all who are disturbed by the statement published by Dr John Kleinig, 'Why I Changed My Mind'

In my home congregation in Washington, DC, I weekly hear the Gospel preached by Pastor Karen Brau, a third generation Lutheran pastor, with a profound understanding of grace and a passion for the spiritual growth of her parishioners. In South Africa at St Peters Lutheran Church in Pretoria, on sabbatical I again heard the Gospel preached weekly by Pastor Heike, a much-loved, hard-working shepherd of a growing English-language predominantly indigenous South African community, equally loved by the aging non-indigenous German-language congregation. According to Dr John Kleinig, had I come to faith as a result of the teaching of these pastors, Christ who does not recognise the teaching of these women, would not recognise me. Indeed, even by persisting in faithfully worshipping and being active in their congregations, I, along with their destructive 'works', am destroyed, ruined, and ultimately condemned.

Am I condemned? The answer is a resounding 'no!' As a Lutheran raised in the LCA I can state this with confidence and here is why.

Because together with the confessors at Augsburg in 1530, I and Lutherans across the world, including the LCA, confess that we "cannot be justified before God by our own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith" (AC IV) and "that we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the Gospel, that is, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake" (AC V).

It is the Holy Spirit who works faith, when and where it pleases God. It is the Holy Spirit who, through the Word and the Sacraments, works faith, not human beings. Here there is no mention of gender. Indeed when I look at these key confessions of our church, I think of the theology of divine accommodation. It is we human beings whose understanding is limited. We are incapable of completely knowing God, who is beyond gender, infinite in wisdom and mercy. He became human so that we might come to know him in Christ. In doing so, he chose a form that made sense to us as human beings who are gendered.

Dr Kleinig calls us to be afraid. To be afraid that if, in the Australian Lutheran Church, women are permitted to teach the Gospel and administer the sacraments, our faith is suspect. Christ will not recognise us. We will be condemned. But condemned by whom? God? As Lutherans we affirm that it is God who 'justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake'. Our salvation is between us and God. This is pure grace. This is why as Lutherans we can be unafraid. The Holy Spirit works faith in us when we hear the Gospel – no 'if...?', 'but...?', or other constraint. Salvation is not by pastor (whether male or female – thank, God!), but by grace. Grace is unconditional. To place constraints on it is to deny the Gospel and to confuse it with the Law.

This is why I am not condemned. This is why I know that I am saved. As a confessional Lutheran I can without fear listen to the Gospel and receive the sacraments from any person ordained to the Ministry – because I know that the Holy Spirit works through them, however gendered, however sinful, however flawed.

So, can we as a church come together to vote on this issue in confidence that the LCA will not be divided? The answer in this case is a resounding ‘yes!’ As a confessional Lutheran I can state this without hesitation and here is why.

Just as the LCA and Lutherans across the world confess that we “cannot be justified before God by our own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith” (AC IV), with the confessions at Augsburg in 1530 we accept, too, that “it is enough for the unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments” (AC VII). As confessional Lutherans we can be confident that disagreement over matters that fall outside what we hold essential for the unity of the church, no matter how distressing such disagreement might be, is not church divisive. Such disagreements are a natural consequence of our limited human understanding and part of the long history of God’s church on earth. God forgives us unconditionally, and his work in the world persists. Indeed, as confessional Lutherans we can have confidence that any attempt to divide the church because of disagreements over such matters is an unacceptable confusion of Law and Gospel, which will lead inevitably to a distortion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is something for us to take to heart – as both caution and reassurance – on both sides of the ordination of women debate.

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