



Please explain what Martin Luther meant when he talked about “bound conscience” and then explain what the ELCA has voted on concerning “bound conscience.”

Augsburg, Germany – 1518

Shortly after Luther had posted and defended the 95 Theses:

- Martin Luther in conversation with Cardinal Catajen (representative of Pope Leo X) used the term “bound conscience” when imploring the Pope not to put him in the position of having to choose between the teachings and practices of the Church and Holy Scripture.
- Referencing his theology of *Sola scriptura*, Luther stated to Cardinal Catajen that his conscience was, and must be, “bound to the word of God” rather than bound to human experience, understanding, and/or reasoning.
- *Sola scriptura* – (Latin "by scripture alone") is the doctrine that the Bible contains all knowledge necessary for salvation and holiness. *Sola scriptura* is not, however, a denial of other authorities governing Christian life and devotion. Rather, it simply demands that all other authorities are subordinate to, and are to be corrected by, the written Word of God. *Sola scriptura* was a foundational doctrinal principle of the Protestant Reformation and is a formal principle of Lutheranism today.

General Assembly of ELCA – 2009, a culmination of a long process:

- A contemporary understanding of the term “bound conscience” is grounded in religious pluralism, which began gaining major significance in the United States in the 1960s and early 1970's.
- Religious pluralism accepts that there are many ways or paths to God, and that there really are not fundamental differences between the world's religions.
- Out of religious pluralism comes the belief that no one belief system is superior to any other, and therefore, adherents are to respect all belief systems as equally valid.
- As the process continues, pluralism leads to relativism – a system of beliefs in which there are no absolutes. In this system, because there is no ultimate truth, each person is obliged to respect the firmly held beliefs of others as equally valid.
- Elements of this progression are alive in the ELCA today – influencing Christian education, evangelism and ecumenism, as well as the 2009 decision to ordain non-celibate gays and lesbians.

(over)

Two sides of the argument – and where the ELCA stands:

Law and Gospel, a foundational Lutheran theological principle plays an important role in the argument stated by both groups in regards to this issue. This principle states that Law and Gospel are necessarily related and, therefore, cannot be separated.

- ELCA Leadership firmly holds the position that Scripture is not clear on the subject of God's view of homosexual activity. This group believes that in the face of ambiguity, when Law and Gospel seem to be at odds, the primary focus must be on Gospel. Therefore, the church is obligated to respect the firmly held conviction of some that it is appropriate for ordained gay and lesbian clergy to engage in monogamous, long-term sexually active relationships.
- Orthodox Lutheran Leadership firmly holds the position that Scripture is clear on the subject of God's view of homosexual activity (e.g., Leviticus 18:22; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:8-11). This group believes that Law without Gospel is legalism, and that Gospel without Law is antinomianism (the belief that the law has no use). Therefore, this group supports withholding ordination of non-celibate gays and lesbians, believing that the obligation of the church is to model obedience to the Law through the love of the Gospel.
- It is within the context of this debate between ELCA Leadership and Orthodox Lutheran Leadership that the ELCA declared non-celibate gay and lesbian ordination to be a matter of "bound conscience."