



Doc. bytes

The 15th Assembly decision on marriage sparked many conversations across the Uniting Church. These papers have been written as a resource to those ongoing conversations.

4 What does it mean to be apostate?

Summary Sentence:

A significant change in the church's teaching does not immediately mean that it has abandoned the faith; it means, instead, that previous understandings of the scope of God's grace must be renewed in order to allow the gospel to be confessed and lived in all its fullness.

The term 'apostate' comes from the Latin *apostata* and Ancient Greek *apostasia*, and literally means 'one who withdraws or revolts.' In matters of religion it may be used to describe someone who has formally and voluntarily renounced their faith.

A charge of apostasy within the Church is, therefore, a very serious matter. Essentially, it is an accusation that a person or a group has abandoned Christ and forfeited their salvation. The power of God's salvific grace should never be seen as somehow subservient to notions of doctrinal purity.

Ironically, the first time we read *apostasia* in the New Testament, the person being charged with it is none other than the apostle, Paul. He was charged with rejecting the teachings of Moses for welcoming Gentiles into the fledgling Christian community (Acts 21:21). Over time, the church realised that it was Paul rather than his accusers who grasped the implications of the Gospel.

A significant change in the church's teaching does not immediately mean that it has abandoned the faith. It can mean, instead, that previous understandings of the scope of God's grace must be renewed in order to allow the gospel to be confessed and lived in ways that bring out the fullness of its forgiveness, welcome and hospitality.

During the twentieth century, protestant churches began ordaining women and explicitly accepting people of diverse sexualities as full members of the church. This has involved changes to previous teaching on such matters. But it has not involved changes in the churches' confession of the centrality of Jesus' life, death and resurrection as the heart of the gospel.

The Uniting Church continues to make that confession. And in its many diverse congregations and other communities of faith, the Spirit of God continues to embolden us to faithful worship, witness and service under the Lordship of Christ, and to draw us in hope towards the coming reconciliation of all things which he will bring.

Our context is ever-changing and sometimes this may mean the teaching and practices of the church must be revisited, but the church is never apostate as long as it confesses Jesus Christ and remains faithful to his way of loving God with all of our being and our neighbour as ourselves (Matt 22: 35-40; Mark 12: 28-34).

The biblical witness

Quotable Quote

Connections

Texts: Acts 10:1-11:18

Comment: Note how in this passage the new teaching and practice to which the church is directed is warranted in part by the evidence of the same Spirit in groups previously separated on the basis of existing theological convictions.

So if we are searching for the truth of the gospel in God, then we really need to get back to the God of Jesus Christ. Jesus wasn't a dogma to be believed in. He was a life to be followed.

Teresa Okure, "What is truth?" Anglican Theological Review 93 (2011), 405-22 (421).

Reflecting on all the above material, what do you hear and see which connects with your own journey of faith and that of your particular church community?

Acknowledgement:

This document has been prepared on behalf of the Assembly Standing Committee.



Uniting Church in Australia
ASSEMBLY