

“They brought to the Pharisees...”

Naming sexism as sexism is not a failure to engage diverse views.

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“They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind.” John 9:13

“But what if we are vernacular? What happens when we discover the possibilities of what our bodies mean—when we discover a community of people who interpret our bodies in new ways, who see the image of God in new ways?” [Brian Bantum](#)

The election of Donald Trump was a nasty, shocking surprise for me in one particular way—I realized that sexism was a negotiable value in American culture. We were, as Americans, on the fence about the equality of women, and if other interests trumped this value, then so be it.

The election also prompted self-reflection. As a white female, I’ve gotten by within the system of white patriarchy. When the values of our country happened to align with feminism and my flourishing, as they have for most of my young adulthood and early career, I’ve been content to let certain things slide.

So it’s important to say something about this.

This has been a hard two weeks. Even after my alma mater, Princeton Theological Seminary, rescinded the Kuyper Prize awarded to Tim Keller while retaining the invitation to lecture, I was rattled that a PCUSA seminary with a core institutional commitment to educating women and LGBTQ persons for ordained ministry in the church would want to award Keller with \$10,000.

But I’ve been further rattled by the suggestion, made almost entirely by white men whose lives and careers have never been the subject of dissection by people in power, that somehow women are out of line for suggesting that it is institutionally

out of line and personally hurtful for Keller, who relegates women to second class citizenship in marriage and ministry, to be awarded for his theology.

Like many women, LGBTQ people, and concerned allies, I wrote a letter to PTS president Craig Barnes expressing my sadness and confusion about this decision. I told him about my experience as one of three female lead Mennonite pastors in my conference of roughly 70 churches. I told him about the times when I've been asked who is home with my children, when I've been looked at with suspicion when the answer to "may I speak to the pastor" is "I'm the pastor." I shared my sorrow that it took hundreds of years, until 2001, for my conference to ordain women for ministry.

Let me be clear: there is no negotiation about diversity of views when you are not allowed to sit at the table where those views are being negotiated. It is wrong to suggest that naming sexism as sexism is a failure to engage diverse views. It is wrong to claim that the bodies and lives of those who have been historically marginalized by the church are "secondary theological issues," that we can all pat each other on the back about our tolerance when the people being asked to tolerate are those who have had the rules set for them.

I'm equally concerned at the suggestion that Keller's sexism is something we can bracket out of his good work. This idea that "but he's such a good man" has been horrifically destructive for the church, particularly for vulnerable people. You cannot bracket out a theological underpinning that suggests some have access to ministry while others do not.

Every institution makes a decision about what they want to award, the ideas in which they will engage, and those that fall outside the institution's identity and purpose. Creationism, literal readings of the Bible, the Shroud of Turin, differing positions on the end times—these are not conversations entertained at Princeton Seminary. These are conversations that we do not engage even though they are very much in the purview of conservative Christianity. They are not within the scope of ideas for the institution.

Decisions are always made about the marketplace of ideas, limits are placed. The question is, who decides? What makes it to "the table" and what does not? A limit Princeton Seminary and the Kuyper Center have set (and should have had the good sense to set long before this debacle) is that sexism will not be awarded with a \$10,000 prize.

If you are having a hard time with this discussion, if you are enraged about Keller's exclusion, I suggest you have a conversation with someone who has actually been excluded from ministry in the church. Ask what it is like to have your gifts and calling challenged, to have your body be a topic of conversation by the powerful, to be a subject of scrutiny. Read John 9, the Gospel reading in the lectionary this week, with new eyes. Talk to someone about her experience of being a female or LGBTQ pastor, of being brought before the Pharisees, generation after generation to be told what their body is for.

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