

The Continuing Relevance of the Formula of Concord:

Lutheran Worship Practices Today in the Light of Article X

By Michael Seifert

Symbolics 338—Formula of Concord
Professor A. Siggelkow
November 15, 2003

“With great power comes great responsibility.” The hearts of romantics around the world sank when Peter Parker spoke those words at the end of the latest Spiderman movie. The truth of this statement compelled him to walk away from the love of his life. To love Mary Jane was to place her in harm’s way. Spiderman’s foes would surely strike at her in order to ruin his cause. The life of a superhero is not easy—with great power comes great responsibility.

With great freedom comes great responsibility. Or, more specifically to our discussion today, with Christian freedom comes Christian responsibility. As holy saints set free from sin, death, and the devil; free from outward ceremonies of the Mosaic law; free to determine the forms and styles with which we serve our Savior and proclaim his name, we have a great Christian responsibility. It is one that must be practiced with Christian wisdom, Christian strength, and Christian love. What that responsibility entails, how it has been expounded in Article X of the Formula of Concord, and how we apply it to our worship practices today will be the subject of this paper.

Historical Context of Article X

Prior to his final trip to Eisleben in 1546, Luther summoned his closest Wittenberg colleagues to his house. There he gave them a stern warning containing a hauntingly accurate prophecy. He exhorted Melancthon, Bugenhagen, Cruciger, Eber, and Major, “Remain steadfast in the Gospel; for I see that soon after my death the most prominent brethren will fall away. I am not afraid of the Papists...but our brethren will inflict the damage on the Gospel; for ‘they went out from us, but they were not of us’; they will give the Gospel a harder blow than did the Papists.”¹

Upon the conclusion of the Smalcald War—just two years after Luther’s death—Emperor Charles V forced the Augsburg Interim upon the Lutheran church. The Leipzig Interim followed closely on its heels. Charles threatened noncompliance with punishment. As Melancthon’s pen went to work on the Leipzig Interim, Luther’s words rang true—false doctrine was attacking the church from within. Though touted as compatible with Lutheranism, the Interims were actually the reintroduction of papal practice and doctrine.

Melancthon defended his co-authorship of the Leipzig Interim and its adoption by the Lutheran churches as Christian. He and the other so-called Interimists claimed the Interim dealt only with *adiaphora*, things neither commanded nor forbidden by God. They argued that the church’s acceptance and promulgation of the Interim was thus a Christian action: it showed obedience to temporal authority, it protected the weak from persecution they were unable to bear, and it preserved Lutheran institutions such as the University of Wittenberg. According to their way of thinking, acceptance was the obvious choice. Since acceptance of the Leipzig Interim qualified as *adiaphoron*, compliance was certainly the lesser of two evils.

The Gnesio-Lutherans—under the leadership of Flacius, Wigand, and Gallus—disagreed. They viewed acceptance of the Interim as nothing short of acceptance of papal doctrines. It was one step short of the complete undoing of the Reformation. From the ensuing controversy between the Interimists and true Lutherans came Article X of the Formula of Concord. Succinctly put, the question addressed by Article X is as follows: “May Lutherans submit with a good conscience when practices of *adiaphora* consistent with practices of false teachers are

¹ Friedrich Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Lutheran Confessions*, § 120. Published in *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921).

demanded without denying truth or Christian freedom, i.e., without weakening faith of true Lutherans and without sanctioning errors of false teachers.”

Principles Drawn from Article X

This essay is not intended to be a study of Article X proper. It is assumed that this audience still has some familiarity of its structure and contents. We will therefore proceed by means of a short series of theses which the essayist has drawn from the article to serve as principles that still serve the church today.

1. In determining ecclesiastical practices, the church will reject those practices that are fundamentally opposed to God’s Word.

Article X addresses this important point with a single sentence. “We should not regard as free and indifferent, but rather as things forbidden by God that are to be avoided, the kind of things presented under the name and appearance of external, indifferent things that are nevertheless fundamentally opposed to God’s Word (even if they are painted another color).”²

Under the Leipzig Interim, the mandate that the festival of Corpus Christi be celebrated certainly qualified as a practice fundamentally opposed to God’s Word. Jesus commanded that his body and blood present in the bread and wine be eaten, not worshiped, adored, and paraded on display. The church rejects such sinful practices.

2. In determining ecclesiastical practices, the church will only consider adiaphora that give clear testimony of the church’s confession.

The statements of the confession from which this thesis is drawn deal with practices that in and of themselves are adiaphora, yet cease to be adiaphora in the context and manner in which they are employed. Adiaphora cease to qualify as adiaphora when they

- ...blur lines between opposing sides,
- ...create the illusion that they unite opposing sides,
- ...could in actuality unite opposing sides by drawing one side away from God’s truth.³

These points address the majority of the Interim’s demands. Its very intent was to blur the lines between Lutheranism and Catholicism, to create an appearance of unity where none existed, and finally to restore unity in the false teachings of Roman Catholicism. The true Lutherans recognized these pernicious goals and firmly confessed on the basis of Scripture that the Interim’s demands did not constitute adiaphora.

Perhaps you remember the Latin adage conceived during the Adiaphoristic debate: *Nihil est adiaphoron in casu confessionis et scandali*. Nothing is adiaphora in matters of confession and offense. Thesis 2 deals with adiaphora and matters of confession. Our church practices must clearly confess the scriptural teachings of our church. The following thesis deals with adiaphora

² Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article X:5, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, translated by Charles Arand, et al. p. 636.

³ Ibid.

and matters of offense, that is, how adiaphoristical practices affect the hearts and faiths of those who come into contact with them.

3. In determining ecclesiastical practices, the church will consider the times and circumstances in which the group of believers finds itself. Christian love for people and for the gospel will dominate.

Dealing with the application of adiaphora, Paul says in Romans 14:19, “Let us make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” This passage is the litmus test of adiaphora. It is the famous Latin adage of the Lutheran confessors stated positively. It is a scriptural exhortation that takes true Christian wisdom, strength, and love to apply. While it will never be perfectly applied in this sinful world, this passage and the thesis that flows from it are fundamentally important to the decisions we make in our Christian freedom. May everything be done for the good of the church, for the good of believers.

The confessors’ conviction that God has given Christian freedom not for the indulgence of the sinful nature, but for the spread of the gospel, shines forth from these words:

Therefore, we believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every time and place has the right, power, and authority to change, reduce, or expand such practices *according to circumstances* in an orderly and appropriate manner, without frivolity or offense, *as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church.*⁴

In the Old Testament era, God prescribed certain external modes of worship. In the New Testament era, God gives the church freedom to change its modes in order to best serve the spread of the gospel and the edification of the church.

A significant phrase in the above citation is “according to circumstances.” Although the faith of the Holy Christian church of every time and place is founded on the same unchanging Word of God, the environment in which the church finds itself has varied widely from century to century and from place to place. The Christian church of 16th century Germany was not identical to the Christian church of 16th century Switzerland just as the Christian church of 16th century Germany was not identical to the Christian church of 1st century Palestine—even though they are all the same church. Groups of believers in different times and places belong to particular cultures, with particular worldviews and particular weaknesses. God has blessed his church with freedom to change its external modes to best minister to and build up Christians according to their environment. Keeping this purpose of Christian freedom in mind, the church will consider the times and circumstances in which the group of believers finds itself. Christian love for people and for the gospel will dominate.

To demonstrate Christian freedom in loving action, the confession points to the apostle Paul’s dealing with the matter of circumcision. In the New Testament church, circumcision is neither commanded nor forbidden by God. It is a free matter. However, Paul did not always treat circumcision as such.

At times Paul spoke vehemently against circumcision: “Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law” (Ga 5:3). “As for those

⁴ FC SD X:9, Kolb, 637. Emphasis M. Seifert.

agitators [who demand circumcision], I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves” (Ga 5:12). It was on account of the circumstances that Paul took such a strong stance against circumcision in Galatians. Because circumcision was demanded by the Judaizers, it was no longer a matter of freedom; it was a matter of confession. To give in to the Judaizers would be to blur the line between truth and error. It would harden false teachers and weaken those who confessed the truth. Circumcision was to be rejected in this situation for the sake of the gospel.

Paul acted differently on his second missionary journey: “Paul wanted to take [Timothy] along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area” (Ac 16:3). At first glance it might appear that Paul was not a man of principle. He didn’t seem to practice in his work what he preached to the Galatians. Yet Paul was a man of principle. His divine principle was this: Everything I do in my Christian freedom I do for the preservation and the spread of the gospel. At times that will mean a certain course of action (using freedom for the sake of the gospel); at times that will mean a different course of action (using freedom for the sake of the gospel). While Paul condemned circumcision among the Galatians because it was a stumbling block between them and Christ, he circumcised Timothy lest his uncircumcision become a stumbling block between the Jews and Christ. Time and circumstance will determine what will be done out of love for God’s Word and his church.

The Application of Article X’s Scriptural Principles Today

As we turn our attention to application, we keep in mind that to legislate specific applications in the realm of Christian freedom is to take Christian freedom away. While we might find application to be easier under a code of canon law, that is not the way Christ made his church to be. God has commissioned his church to make disciples of all nations through the administration of the means of grace, and has also has given his church the responsibility of determining itself the forms it uses in that administration. What a blessing it is that he gives us the strength and wisdom to carry this out through that same Word and Sacrament that we administer! Let us therefore always run back to the means of grace in personal devotion and study—not only for our own spiritual benefit, but also for the spiritual benefit of the flock entrusted to us! The more we grow in faith and knowledge, the less likely we will be to become legalists in matters of adiaphora.

Thus we turn to Article X not to find canon law as the Roman Catholics do with papal bulls and encyclicals, but to identify scriptural principles that hold true at all times and in all places. While the context in which the article was written differs greatly from the context in which we find ourselves today, the scriptural principles remain the same. In order to illustrate how these principles might be applied in the church today, we will discuss one possible application in the area of worship.

A popular source of church music in many WELS congregations (not to mention Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary) is GIA Publications, Inc. While this company produces much scripturally sound, wonderful-sounding worship material, it has strong ties to the Roman Catholic Church. Should a WELS congregation consider buying and using materials from such a company?

We consider this under the first thesis: Is such a use fundamentally opposed to God’s Word? As long as the material is true to Scripture and does not easily lead to misinterpretation, then it is not fundamentally opposed. We will not delve into the issue some might raise, that purchasing

music from a company is an act of fellowship where there ought to be none. The essayist views the purchase as an action of a Christian who is in the world but not of the world.

We consider this under the second thesis: Can the Lutheran church use GIA materials while still giving clear testimony of its confession? Does its use blur the line between Roman Catholicism and true Lutheranism? Does it give the impression that there is unity between the two churches?

Here the worship planner needs to proceed with circumspection. He needs to carefully examine the material he considers, not only for false doctrine, but also for ambiguities and confusing words. Perhaps the pastor might be able to correctly understand a statement that tends toward Catholicism, but perhaps the less mature in his flock might not. If the shepherd of the flock senses anything that might confound any of his sheep—even if it can be understood correctly—he will be sure to avoid it for the sake of the gospel.

As the pastor wrestles with this, the times and circumstances in which he and his flock are placed will play a definite role in his decision-making. With that in mind we consider the use of GIA material under the third thesis.

We assume that those planning the worship of a congregation have found worship material from GIA that is scripturally sound and clear. Although it may have been written by a Roman Catholic, the lyrics are in and of themselves distinctively scriptural—even Lutheran! Do the worship planners go ahead with it without further ado? Not before they consider the people among whom the material will be used. If this adiaphoron does not serve to edify them, if it does not serve the building up of the church, then it is to be avoided.

Might the use of such material be a stumbling block to the weak? That is surely a possibility. Perhaps the congregation is filled with Lutherans newly converted from Roman Catholicism. Using material affiliated with their former church—which opposes justification—may at worst seem hideously hypocritical to them and at best confusing.

Worship planners also need to keep in mind that the weak are not only to be found among the members of the congregation, but also among the visitors. Could the use of GIA music make visitors stumble? Consider the ELCA member who is upset at the indifference toward doctrine and the desire for ecumenism at the expense of the truth in his church. Could he possibly interpret our use of GIA music as a step toward unity with Rome—a step in the same direction that his church is walking? Might this hinder him from hearing the pure gospel that is proclaimed through that music and through the rest of the service as well?

These examples may come across as extreme. However, considering the consequences that our use of adiaphora will have on the church is vitally important. Our mission is to preach Christ—our crucified, risen, and reigning Savior. May everything that we do both in the formal worship of our church and the informal worship of our lives serve that proclamation and nothing else.

One more important point merits our consideration in this discussion. The Lutheran confessions mention it at the conclusion of Article X:

For this reason the churches are not to condemn one another because of differences in ceremonies when in Christian freedom one has fewer or more than the other, as long as these churches are otherwise united in teaching and in all the articles of the faith as well as in the proper use of the holy sacraments. As it is

said, “*Dissonantia ieiunii non dissolvit consonantiam fidei*” (dissimilarity in fasting shall not destroy the unity of the faith).⁵

So should WELS congregations use material from GIA Publications, Inc.? That depends. This answer is not the result of wishy-washy doctrine or an advocating of subjectivism. It is the recognition of the freedom Christ has earned and given to his church. That freedom gives the church the right to make wise decisions in matters of adiaphora in order to best preach the gospel and confess the truth. Because times and circumstances vary, so will the wise decisions of the church in its various settings. Consider the variety of worship practices within the fellowship of the CELC: A member of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of Germany might be surprised to see individual cups at communion in the WELS. A WELS member might be aghast as preaching and singing styles in sister congregations in the African bush. Ought the WELS member condemn the Africans for their practices? No. Ought the WELS pastor introduce African practices in his rural Wisconsin congregation? One might question the wisdom of that.

With great freedom comes great responsibility. With Christian freedom comes Christian responsibility. As members of the church militant carrying out Christ’s Great Commission, let us cherish that freedom, using it proudly and wisely. In all that we do, may the gospel dominate; may it shine forth from all practices as a brilliant light; may all of our practices be to the end that Christ is proclaimed and the truth of the gospel remains with us.

⁵ FC SD X:31, Kolb 640.

Bibliography

Bente, Friedrich. *Historical Introductions to the Lutheran Confessions*. Published in *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921.

The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert. Translated by Charles Arand et al. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

Jahn, Curtis. "Christian Freedom: Lessons from the History of the Church." Unpublished essay, 2001. Available online at www.wls.wels.net/library.

Schultz, Michael. "The Scriptural Foundation for our Christian Freedom." Unpublished essay, 2001. Available online at www.wls.wels.net/library.

Koehler, J.P. "Legalism Among Us." In *The Wauwatosa Theology*, vol. II, 229-282. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997.