

Teachings from the Confessions

A Bible Study on Adiaphora based on the Formula of Concord

Introduction: *How would you react to the following situations?*

- 1. Pastor preaches his sermon in shorts and a T-shirt*
- 2. Our Lutheran Elementary School hosts a Valentine's Day dance*
- 3. Church council holds meeting at the local tavern*

Would you support any of these things? Would you discourage any of them? Why do you react the way you do? Can you show a Bible passage which supports your answer?

You've just run headfirst into the issue of adiaphora. Adiaphora are those things which God neither forbids or commands in his Word. How do you figure out who's "right"? For some help with this, we're going to turn to Article X of the Formula of Concord.

I. Historical background

Trouble caused by adiaphora is not a new phenomenon in the church. The apostle Paul dealt with it on several occasions, as we will see a little later. At the time of the Reformation, the issue was potentially explosive. After Luther's death in 1546, the Roman Catholic emperor Charles V made some political moves against the Lutherans. In 1547, the Lutheran alliance known as the Smalcald League was defeated in battle by the emperor's forces. As usually happens, the terms of peace were not particularly favorable to the losers.

To compound the problem, the man whom most thought would be Luther's successor, Philip Melancthon, was too willing to compromise Lutheran principles. His motives are difficult to sort out completely. On the one hand, he was attempting to preserve the university at Wittenberg, the stronghold of the Reformation. On the other hand, he didn't seem to be able to stand up for the truth of the gospel when the chips were down. He considered his concessions to be minor, not realizing that he was actually compromising the integrity of the gospel itself.

What exactly did Melancthon concede? Part of the terms of peace included a reinstatement of all Roman Catholic church ceremonies. Luther had spent considerable time "cleaning up" the Roman Catholic worship services, removing such heresies as the worship of the saints, the re-sacrifice of Christ's body in communion, and the adoration of relics. While Luther retained much of the basic Roman Catholic liturgy, he did so because of its historical value and for the sake of the people who were long accustomed to it. Luther adamantly refused to retain any Roman Catholic worship element which disagreed with Scripture.

Melancthon, however, as he helped draft the terms of peace, was willing to allow Roman Catholic worship practices to return. This sparked a debate among the Lutherans about whether any Christian could cooperate with this decision in good conscience. Melancthon argued that all worship forms are human inventions and fall into the realm of adiaphora. His opponents replied that sometimes even adiaphora become a matter of confession if they compromise the gospel.

Did Melancthon have a point? Did his opponents have a point? If both possessed a measure of truth, how can you categorically declare one right or wrong? Let's take a look at some portions of this Article.

II. Adiaphora are...

A. (Working Definition)

We turn to the beginning sentence of this article for our working definition of adiaphora. Adiaphora are “neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word, but are introduced into the Church with a good intention, for the sake of good order and propriety, or otherwise to maintain Christian discipline”. The word adiaphora does not itself occur in Scripture. In Romans 14:1, Paul uses the term “disputable matters.”

What are some other examples (or areas) of adiaphora that you can think of?

B. ...up to the individual congregation/church

Because these matters are “disputable”, adiaphora are simply something that the church will have to wrestle with. Everyone is not necessarily going to agree. More than that, people are going to be adamantly convinced of their own position (cf. Romans 14:5, “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind”). How will a congregation develop unity of practice in keeping with good order?

The Formula puts it this way: “The congregation of God in every place has, according to its circumstances, the good right, power and authority to change, to diminish, and to increase them, without thoughtlessness and offense, in an orderly and becoming way, as at any time it may be regarded most profitable, most beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline and the edification of the Church.”

What two things does the Formula warn about when changing an adiaphoristic practice? What types of reasons should we have for creating or modifying a church practice?

C. ...potentially dangerous

As you might guess, there will sometimes be strong feelings in these areas. For instance, think back to the transition from *The Lutheran Hymnal* to *Christian Worship*. Was it a rough transition for this congregation? I can tell you that I know of congregations which still have not been able completely to resolve the emotional issues involved in switching lifelong patterns of worship. Another example might be the combination of synodical college and preparatory schools, a decision which directly affected me as a student moving from Northwestern College to Martin Luther College. Any time tradition and emotion are combined, it won’t take many sparks to light the fire.

There is another danger here as well. Sometimes we argue for our opinion so much that we give the impression that any other view is wrong (and even sinful). Here the Formula also speaks: “For as soon as the ordinances of men are forced upon the Church with coercion, as though it were wrong and a sin to omit them, the way is already prepared for idolatry, and by this means ordinances of men are afterwards multiplied and regarded as divine worship, not only equal to the ordinances of God, but are even placed above them.” Christian brothers and sisters, acting in love, must never give the impression that these matters are on the same level as Scripture or part of salvation.

What did the Formula writers mean by “the way is already prepared for idolatry?”

The congregation narrowly approves the opening of a new school, 52% to 48%. Does this article have anything to say about how to proceed?

D. ...sometimes a matter of confession

There are times when adiaphora are not optional (or allowable). That's an important principle, which we will let Article X establish for us. "...by such yielding and conformity in external things, where there previously has not been Christian union in doctrine, idolaters are confirmed in their idolatry; on the other hand, the true believers are grieved, offended, and weakened in their faith."

There are really two sides to this coin. First of all, if a less-than-Scriptural church body sees us adopt a practice which is uniquely identified with them, they will likely take our actions as approval of their false teaching. For instance, many Baptist congregations demand that the only valid method for Baptism is immersion. While Scripture neither forbids nor commands immersion, they have taken an adiaphoron and elevated it above Scripture, fitting the description of "idolatry" given in the previous point. For us to baptize solely by immersion would then give the impression that their teaching is correct. Obviously, we can go too far in the other direction (immersion is wrong). It is a narrow road to walk.

The other side of the coin is that by accommodating ourselves to their false teaching, we would damage the members of our own congregation. We would give the impression that God's Word does not matter, and that our own rules are more important than God's law and gospel. In matters which have become a point of confession, adiaphora cease being adiaphora, and our confession must be made clearly.

Apply this principle to the situation with Melancthon after the defeat of the Smalcald League. Who was right, and why?

III. Adiaphora are not...

A. ...equal to the teachings of Scripture

We've touched on this concept already, but it bears repeating. The Formula puts this in a way which strikes us as strange at first. "But as regards genuine adiaphora, or matters of indifference, we believe, teach, and confess that such ceremonies, in and of themselves, are no worship of God..." Here the writers are simply making a distinction between the commands of God and the commands of men, as is shown by the passage they quote in support: "They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men" (Matthew 15:9).

The hymnal we use was written by men. Does this quote say that it is not valuable for worship? Why or why not?

B. ...an appropriate term for frivolous matters

Some matters do not have enough substance or weight to them to rise to the level of adiaphora. Also included in this group are things which have no good purpose for building up the church. Here's how the Formula puts it: "When there are useless, foolish displays, that are profitable neither for good order nor Christian discipline, nor evangelical propriety in the Church, these also are not genuine adiaphora."

For this reason, the motives and rationale behind church forms become very important. Some things may be borderline adiaphora at best: for example, putting a vending machine in the church lobby. I suppose I could envision situations where there may be some spiritual benefit for such a practice, although I do have to use my imagination to do so.

Evaluate these as “genuine” adiaphora: Consuming alcohol, using tobacco products, theatrical worship, sports program at a Lutheran Elementary School (This is a trick question—all of these, in and of themselves, have to be considered adiaphora).

C. ...a cover-up for sinful activity

We must also beware of using the name adiaphora as an excuse to allow sin into our lives. Generally speaking, God has clearly labeled sin through his commandments. Although adiaphora are subject to the sound judgment of each individual Christian, we dare not let something forbidden attempt to camouflage itself there. As you might have guessed, the formulators anticipated this as well: “When under the title and pretext of external adiaphora such things are proposed as are in principle contrary to God’s Word, these are not to be regarded as adiaphora, in which one is free to act as he will, but must be avoided as things prohibited by God.”

No doubt the formulators had in mind some of the idolatrous worship practices of the Roman Catholic church. The worship of the bread used for communion, the worship of the saints, the worship of relics, even though they fall into the category of worship are not permitted by God’s 1st commandment. Our sinful nature is always looking for loopholes; it is clear from this quote that there are no loopholes to be found in adiaphora.

Why do you think that this is such a common sin to fall into?

D. ...something we can allow to be forced upon us

This really was the heart of the matter for the theologians after Luther’s death. We’ve covered most of the aspects of this principle already, and so this serves as a good summary. “At the time of confession... the entire congregation of God, yea, every Christian...are bound by God’s Word to confess freely and openly the doctrine, and what belongs to the whole of religion, not only in words, but also in works and with deeds;...in this case, even in such adiaphora, they must not yield to the adversaries, or permit these to be forced upon them by their enemies, whether by violence or cunning, to the detriment of the true worship of God and the introduction and sanction of idolatry.”

At the heart of the matter of adiaphora lies our Christian freedom. Because we have been redeemed through the precious blood of Christ our Savior, our guilt has been removed forever, and we are no longer under the curse of following the law to obtain salvation. Instead of treating us as children, God treats us as adults capable of making spiritually mature decisions. In matters of adiaphora, sanctified Christian judgment must be exercised. To allow adiaphora to become the same as a kind of New Testament law completely destroys the gift that Christ won for us. As Paul say, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

Agree or disagree: It is a gross overstatement to say that a small compromise in practice can destroy the powerful gospel of Christ.

IV. For Further Application

A. The example of Paul

Paul had to deal with this issue a fair amount in his ministry. For him, the specifics often had to do with whether Jewish Christians should still follow the ceremonial law. The issue of circumcision was always a big deal. Compare these two passages: “Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts” (1 Corinthians 7:19-20). “Paul wanted to take [Timothy] along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews living in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek” (Acts 16:3).

Was Paul contradicting himself here? Why or why not? What was Paul’s primary concern when writing to the Corinthians? What was his primary concern with Timothy’s situation?

B. Concern for the weak brother

Paul was concerned for the weakness of faith that some tender Jewish-Christian consciences felt about the ancient customs of their people. He makes application of this for us in other places as well. Compare these two passages: “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration, or a Sabbath day. These were a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ” (Colossians 2:16-17). “Accept him whose faith is weak without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand...Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way. As one in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died...Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Romans 14:1-4, 13-15, 19).

Does Paul at any point in either of these passages deny the fact of Christian freedom? What warning does Paul give about passing judgment in matters of adiaphora? Who does the weak Christian put first? Who does the mature Christian put first? What is our primary goal in all matters of church, adiaphora and otherwise?

Conclusion: There are two primary goals in matters of adiaphora. One is to give a clear confession of Christian freedom through the gospel. Thus adiaphora sometimes become a matter of confession when dealing with those outside of our fellowship. Inside our fellowship (unless a fellow believer errs), adiaphora is an opportunity for mutual edification and must be treated with

a spirit of Christian love. It is the love for our Savior that makes both of these things possible: Love to confess him boldly, and love to maintain peace and unity within the church.