

Adiaphora: Why We Should Not Be Indifferent to “Indifferent Things”

THE SCRIPTURES AND THE CONFESSIONS:

Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:31-32, New King James Version)

...God’s Word is the treasure that makes everything holy. ...the power and force of this [third] commandment consists not in the resting but in the hallowing, so that this day may have its special holy function. ... Places, times, persons, and the entire outward order of worship have therefore been instituted and appointed in order that God’s Word may exert its power publicly. (Large Catechism I:91, 94, *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000], p. 399)

But all things should be done decently and in order. Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you – unless you believed in vain. (1 Corinthians 14:40–15:2, English Standard Version)

...the apostles...observed certain days...in order that the people might know at what time they should assemble. Whenever they assembled, they also observed some other rites and a sequence of lessons. Frequently, the people continued to observe certain Old Testament customs, which the apostles adapted in modified form to the gospel history, like Easter and Pentecost [cf. Acts 18:21; 20:16], so that by these examples as well as by instruction they might transmit to posterity the memory of those important events. (Apology VII/VIII:40, Kolb/Wengert p. 181)

(In Acts 18:21, Paul “took leave of them, saying, ‘I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem; but I will return again to you, God willing’” [NKJV]. In Acts 20:16, Paul “was hurrying to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the Day of Pentecost” [NKJV].)

Now they who received his word were baptized, and ... they continued steadfastly in the teaching of the apostles and in the communion of the breaking of the bread and in the prayers. (Acts 2:41-42, Confraternity)

...the term “liturgy”...does not properly mean a sacrifice but rather public service. Thus, it agrees quite well with our position, namely, that the one minister who consecrates gives the body and blood of the Lord to the rest of the people, just as a minister who preaches sets forth the gospel to the people, as Paul says [1 Cor. 4:1], “Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries,” that is, of the gospel and the sacraments. And 2 Corinthians 5:20, “So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ...” Thus the term “liturgy” fits well with the ministry. (Apology XXIV:80-81, Kolb/Wengert p. 272)

Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings... (Hebrews 13:7-9, New American Standard Bible)

...different rites instituted by human beings do not undermine the true unity of the church, although it pleases us when universal rites are kept for the sake of tranquillity. Thus, in our churches we willingly observe the order of the Mass, the Lord’s day, and other more important festival days. With a very grateful spirit we cherish the useful and ancient ordinances, especially when they contain a discipline by which it is profitable to educate and teach [the] common folk and [the] ignorant. (Apology VII/VIII:33, Kolb/Wengert p. 180)

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe... (Hebrews 12:28, New International Version)

...the churches among us do not dissent from the catholic church in any article of faith but only set aside a few abuses that are new and were accepted because of corruption... ...it can easily be judged that nothing contributes more to preserving the dignity of ceremonies and to cultivating reverence and piety among the people than conducting ceremonies properly in the churches. (Augsburg Confession [Latin], Introduction of Part Two: 1, 6, Kolb/Wengert p. 61)

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. (Colossians 3:16, NIV)

...we do not abolish the Mass but religiously retain and defend it. Among us the Mass is celebrated every Lord's day and on other festivals, when the sacrament is made available to those who wish to partake of it, after they have been examined and absolved. We also keep traditional liturgical forms, such as the order of readings, prayers, vestments, and other similar things. ... Ceremonies should be observed both so that people may learn the Scriptures and so that, admonished by the Word, they might experience faith and fear and finally even pray. For these are the purposes of the ceremonies. We keep the Latin for the sake of those who learn and understand it. We also use German hymns in order that the [common] people might have something to learn, something that will arouse their faith and fear. (Apology XXIV:1, 3, Kolb/Wengert p. 258)

Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength! Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts! Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth! (Psalm 96:6-9, ESV)

The true adornment of the churches is godly, useful, and clear doctrine, the devout use of the sacraments, ardent prayer, and the like. Candles, golden vessels, and similar adornments are appropriate, but they are not the distinctive adornment of the church. (Apology XXIV:51, Kolb/Wengert p. 267)

“Everything is permissible” – but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible” – but not everything is constructive. (1 Corinthians 10:23, NIV)

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... Moreover, we must not include among the truly free *adiaphora* or indifferent matters ceremonies that give the appearance or (in order to avoid persecution) are designed to give the impression that our religion does not differ greatly from the papist religion or that their religion were not completely contrary to ours.

...useless, foolish spectacles, which are not beneficial for good order, Christian discipline, or evangelical decorum in the church, are not true *adiaphora* or indifferent things. ...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.

...in a time when confession is necessary, as when the enemies of God's Word want to suppress the pure teaching of the holy gospel, the entire community of God, indeed, every Christian, especially servants of the Word as the leaders of the community of God, are obligated according to God's Word to confess true teaching and everything that pertains to the whole of religion freely and publicly. They are to do so not only with words but also in actions and deeds. In such a time they shall not yield to the opponents even in indifferent matters... (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration X:5,7,9-10, Kolb/Wengert pp. 636-37)

Live with all humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in the one hope of your calling. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in us all. (Ephesians 4:2-5, Evangelical Heritage Version)

We... reject and condemn it when such indifferent things are abolished in such a way as if the community of God did not have the liberty to use, in a manner appropriate for specific times and places, one or more such things in Christian freedom as best serves the churches. 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. (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration X:30-31, Kolb/Wengert p. 640)

ADDITIONAL TEXTS

At the seventh hour we returned to the city church [in Wittenberg] and observed by which rite they celebrated the Liturgy; namely thus: First, the Introit was played on the organ, accompanied by the choir in Latin, as in the mass offering. Indeed, the minister meanwhile proceeded from the sacristy dressed sacrificially [in traditional mass vestments] and, kneeling before the altar, made his confession together with the assisting sacristan. After the confession he ascended to the altar to the book that was located on the right side, according to papist custom.

After the Introit the organ was played and the *Kyrie eleison* sung in alternation by the boys. When it was done the minister sang *Gloria in excelsis*, which song was completed in alternation by the organ and choir. Thereafter the minister at the altar sang “Dominus vobiscum,” the choir responding “Et cum spiritu tuo.” The Collect for that day followed in Latin, then he sang the Epistle in Latin, after which the organ was played, the choir following with *Herr Gott Vater, wohn uns bei*. When it was done the Gospel for that Sunday was sung by the minister in Latin on the left side of the altar, as is the custom of the adherents of the pope. After this the organ played, and the choir followed with *Wir glauben all an einen Gott*. After this song came the sermon... After the sermon the choir sang *Da pacem domine*, followed by the prayer for peace by the minister at the altar, this in Latin as well. ...

The communion followed, which the minister began with the Lord’s Prayer sung in German. Then he sang the words of the Supper, and these in German with his back turned toward the people, first those of the bread, which, when the words had been offered, he then elevated to the sounding of bells; likewise with the chalice, which he also elevated to the sounding of bells. Immediately communion was held. ... During the communion the *Agnus Dei* was sung in Latin. The minister served the bread in common dress but [the minister who served] the chalice dressed sacrificially [i.e. in mass vestments]. They followed the singing of the *Agnus Dei* with a German song: *Jesus Christus [unser Heiland]* and *Gott sei gelobet*. After the sermon the majority of the people departed... The minister ended the communion with a certain thanksgiving sung in German. He followed this, facing the people, with the Benediction, singing “The Lord make his face to shine on you, etc.” And thus was the mass ended. (Wolfgang Musculus, travel diary [1536]; quoted in Joseph Herl, *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2004], pp. 195-96)

The All-Holy Communion is celebrated among us today [in Württemberg] with a minimum of ceremonial. The church assembles at an appointed time. Hymns are sung. Sermons are preached concerning the benefits of Christ for mankind. Again, hymns are sung. An awesome exhortation is read, which in part explains the words of institution of the Most-Holy Supper, and in part demands that each person should prepare for a worthy communion. A general but sincere confession of sins is made. Forgiveness is publicly pronounced. With devout prayers we ask the Lord to make us partakers of the heavenly gifts and benefits. The Words of Institution of the sacrament are read, after which the congregation approaches with reverence and receives (offered by the holy minister) the body and the blood of Christ. Again we give thanks to God in prescribed words for the heavenly gifts. Finally, the holy minister of God says the blessing over the assembled congregation, and all are dismissed to go to their homes.

We think that these rites are sufficient, because a multitude of distracting customs, beyond those which are necessary, prevent the people from properly paying attention to the important and necessary ones. Certainly, we do not contend with anyone about customs so long as they do not include anything which contradicts the Word of God, or (contrary to Christian freedom) is insisted upon as necessary for salvation. (Lucas Osiander, Jacob Andreae, and Martin Crucius, letter to Jeremiah, Patriarch of Constantinople [1577]; in George Mastrantonis, *Augsburg and Constantinople* [Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1982], p. 144)

The ceremonies of the Mass are not all of one kind. For some have a divine command and examples of Scripture that they should be done at the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, being as it were essential, e.g., to take bread and the cup in the public assembly, to bless, distribute, eat, drink, proclaim the death of the Lord. Some indeed do not have an express command of God, that they must of necessity be done thus in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, nevertheless they are in their nature good and godly if they are used rightly for edification, such as psalms, readings from Scripture, godly prayers and giving of thanks, confession of the Creed, etc. Some are *per se* superstitious and ungodly, for instance the sacrifice of the Mass for the living and the dead, invocation of the saints, satisfaction for the souls in purgatory, the private Mass, consecration of salt, blessing of water, etc. Some ceremonies indeed are *adiaphora*, such as vestments, vessels, ornaments, words, rites, and things which are not against the Word of God.

Things which are of the first kind must of necessity be observed, for they belong to the substance of the Lord's Supper. Of the things that belong to the second and fourth kind, many which make for the edification of people are observed in our churches without infringing on Christian liberty. The third kind, however, being superstitious and godless, has deservedly, rightly, and of necessity been abrogated and done away with. (Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part II [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978], pp. 524-25)

The royal house of Brandenburg, Prussia, was Reformed, while the population was largely Lutheran. ... The war against the Communion vestments was declared by the peculiar soldier-king, Frederick William I, who ruled in a very autocratic fashion. Through a Decision of 1733 he "prohibited the remnants of Popery in the Lutheran Church: copes, Communion vestments, candles, Latin song, chants, and the sign of the cross." ... Many complained and counted the whole event a "betrayal of genuine and pure Lutheranism." ... In a supplement [to V. E. Löscher's *Unschuldige Nachrichten*] of 1737, ...we find the following: ... These things are admittedly not of any inner necessity, but they have become no insignificant mark of our church, and must therefore be safeguarded under these circumstances. The king gives to the Papists and the Jews full liberty in matters of worship. Should then the Evangelical Lutheran Christians not be able to obtain the same protection and liberty from their *Landesvater* – their king? ...

One might think that the Pietists, with their dread of externalism, would wholeheartedly support the royal command. This is, however, not the case, for their chief city, Halle, was among those who protested against the royal dictatorship. The Danish Hallensian, Enevold Ewald, shows no sympathy in his account of the event. He says: "Some obeyed the royal decision, but a number of places protested, for instance, Königsberg, Pomerania, Magdeburg, Halle, etc. This led to a repetition and strengthening of the royal command in 1737. A number of priests chose to be dismissed from their office rather than make submission." ...

Frederick [William] I was succeeded in 1740 by his son Frederick II. Immediately on ascending the throne, he issued a cabinet order allowing the churches and their priests full liberty in the matter of religious services. A number made use of the liberty granted. The Communion vestments were restored in Berlin and other places. ... Some years of prohibition put the vestments out of use in many places, and the time of Frederick II ...was not a time for pious sentiment. Rationalism flourished, and it had an infinite dread of all that was "mystic" or that was handed down from the "Middle Ages." The use of the Communion vestments was decidedly "catholic" to the mind of Rationalism. Rationalism completed what the Reformed king of Prussia had begun. (J. Madsen, *The Proper Communion Vestments* [n.d.]; an English abridgement of P. Severinsen, *De rette Messesklæder* [1924])

...it appears to be our duty to aid in spreading a knowledge of the rich treasures of our Lutheran church... A good liturgy, the beautiful Lutheran service form part of those treasures. Church usages, except in the case when the confession of a divine truth is required, are indeed *adiaphora*. But they are nevertheless not without an importance of their own. Congregations that adopt the church usages of the sects that surround them, will be apt to conform to their doctrines also, more easily and quickly than those that retain their Lutheran ceremonies. We should in Lutheran services...as much as possible use the old Lutheran forms, though they be said to be antiquated and not suiting this country.

We will mention here the words of a pious Lutheran duchess, Elisabeth Magdalena of Brunswick-Luneburg. Her court-chaplain [Hieronymus] Prunner relates as follows: "Although her ladyship well knew that the ceremonies and purposes of this chapter (at which Prunner officiated) must have the appearance and repute of popery with some people, she still remembered the instructions which that dear and venerable man, Luther, had once given to her father [Joachim II, Elector of Brandenburg] concerning such ceremonies. I remember in particular that her ladyship several times told me that she did not desire at these present times to begin discontinuing any of those church usages, since she hoped that so long as such ceremonies continued, *Calvinistic temerity would be held back from the public office of the church.*" (August L. Graebner, book review of *Church Liturgy for Evangelical Lutheran Congregations of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession*, *The St. Louis Theological Monthly*, Vol. 1, No. 4 [August 1881], pp. 77-78. Emphasis in original.)

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"Don't ever take a fence down until you
know the reason why it was put up."
– John F. Kennedy
(paraphrasing G. K. Chesterton)