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Adiaphora

G. W. Luetkehoelter

Introduction

To submit a paper on this subject to an Anglican-Lutheran dialogue is risky. All the precedents indicate that the result may well lead to dissension rather than consensus. It seems that one person's "adiaphoron" is another person's "esse".

A delightful musing was presented by Dr. Erwin Buck at a morning chapel in the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, in 1983. He tells of white settlers watching Indians sitting around the campfire, eating, drinking, and telling stories. The Europeans ask, "Why aren't you doing something?" Perplexed by this question the natives answer, "It isn't time to hunt buffalo." When the herd arrives, the braves mount horses, chase the animals, kill sufficient for their need, prepare the meat, and return to their village and campfire. In time, the new arrivals discover that the land and its climate demand days of sitting together interspersed with short bursts of intense activity. In spring the crop must be planted and in the fall the grain harvested. In between it is necessary to enjoy the company of others, especially during the long, cold winter.

This country, concludes Dr. Buck, makes bad theologians of us. You cannot enjoy fellowship with your neighbors if you are too different from them. To be overly Lutheran in an Anglican community can result in isolation and make the long, cold months unbearable. Doctrines that divide tend to be toned down or, more frequently, left out of the conversation. To be too Lutheran threatens life around the campfire (which becomes for the settlers the curling rink, the coffee shop, the bar, the wedding reception, the dialogue).

Anglicans and Lutherans feel the need to live together and to enjoy each other's company as they make their living in a

land of sparse population, harsh climate, and a cultural mosaic. To lift up the issue of “adiaphora” may well spoil the time together as the two churches seek ways to share, if not complete union, then at least eucharistic hospitality, and if not full intercommunion, at least an “interim sharing of the eucharist.”

In church history the notion of *adiaphora* has never been discussed until one partner wishes to tell the other that he/she has the right to be different. What one side considers settled, the other side declares to be an open question. If both agree that a matter is a true “matter of indifference” there is concord. Unfortunately, it has been most difficult for the churches to reach consensus on the definition of *adiaphora*, what such *adiaphora* might be, and if the matter should even be discussed.

Perhaps it would be well to drop the issue—but then again, the matter is on the agenda!

1. Definition

To obtain a dictionary definition of *adiaphora* is easy. An *adiaphoron* is a “matter of indifference.” H. Menge¹ translated *adiaphoros* as “gleichgültig”, “it is all the same, the same scale.” The word is not found in the New Testament and comes to us from the Stoics who use it for those things over which people have no control. To be rich or poor, healthy or sick is determined by the gods and so must be accepted. This meaning has not been taken up by the church. Rather, the definition that has prevailed is that in matters not expressly commanded nor forbidden in Scripture the Christian is free to make a choice.

But what does this mean? What matters are not “commanded or forbidden”? Edward T. Horn² lists three definitions:

1. The theory that some *actions* are indifferent, i.e. neither bad nor good, not being either commanded or forbidden by God, either directly or indirectly;
2. The theory that certain *rites or ceremonies*, not having been commanded nor forbidden by God, may be freely used or omitted without fault;
3. The theory that certain *doctrines of the Church*, though taught in the Word of God, are of such minor importance, that they may be disbelieved without injury to the foundation of faith.

None of the above is adequate since they yield no adequate criteria by which to judge which “actions, rites or ceremonies

and doctrines" are *adiaphora*. The definition used in this paper is

4. The theory that justification by grace through faith makes all human responses to the Gospel *adiaphora*, and no human actions, rites, or doctrines are unamendable. An *adiaphoron* is an undecided matter, but this does not imply that the decisions to be made and the actions growing out of them are unimportant. The response can be a joyful declaration of salvation which grace freely provides, or it can obscure this gift of God by taking itself too seriously and pretending to claim that a particular human response is also essential.³

2. New Testament

The classical case of conflict over *adiaphora* is found in Luke 7:31-35 (the term itself is never used in the New Testament).

To what then shall I compare the men of this generation...? They are like children sitting in the market place and calling to one another, "We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep." For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man has come eating and drinking; and you say, "Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"

It is a curious passage, and undoubtedly authentic for two reasons. In contrast to the early church's attempt to subordinate John to Jesus (Mark 1:2-3, 7-8; Matthew 3:14-15, Luke 3:18-22 [note that Luke says "When Jesus also had been baptized," passive with no agent expressed]), this passage equates the two. Also it is clear that no evangelist would fabricate an account in which Jesus is described as a glutton and drunkard.⁴

What is being said is that neither John nor Jesus conform to the traditions of the time, especially in regard to eating habits and rituals. John's extreme asceticism is an offense, and Jesus' willingness to eat and drink even with "tax collectors and sinners" is appalling to the pious Jews. This freedom to behave differently causes opposition and eventually violence (Matthew 11:12).

What is clear is that Jesus considers the religious customs of his time as *adiaphora*, and feels free to eat and drink with the Matthews of his day, no matter what the majority pipe in the market place.

Sabbath observance is another case in point. Throughout the centuries the day of rest "had, with circumcision, become

the fundamental observance of the religion of the Jews, distinguishing them from aliens".⁵ It is the only ceremonial law mentioned in the decalogue.

Yet Jesus claims freedom from the Sabbath restrictions for himself and his followers. On a day of rest he and his disciples pass through a grainfield and "harvest" a few kernels as they go, causing the Pharisees to protest, "Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" (Mark 2:24). The response is interesting. Customs are not finally binding, even that of the Sabbath. David ate the show bread because of necessity, and was not condemned—probably for two reasons: 1) the need was great; 2) David was a messianic figure. In similar vein Jesus implies that in him something greater than the law has come (Matthew 12:5f.) and so the restrictions must yield before his need and his person: "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath; so the Son of man is lord even of the sabbath" (2:27-28).

There is in Jesus an obvious freedom to treat Sabbath observance and other rites and traditions as matters of indifference. Yet it is also clear that the exercise of freedom in these matters is of great importance. "The slightest act, like the individual word, had the highest ethical significance to the extent that it was an expression of the 'abundance of the heart' (Matthew 12:25-37)."⁶

Jesus acts with great freedom so that the Pharisees "held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him" (Mark 3:6) and at the same time he exercises this freedom in matters he considers to be *adiaphora* with great care and counsels his followers to practise "righteousness which exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" (Matthew 5:20).

Paul has a similar approach to *adiaphora*. In Romans 14 he asserts that various days can be kept "in honor of the Lord" (v.6) and is persuaded that "in the Lord Jesus... nothing is unclean in itself" (v.14). There is freedom, but it is crucial that this freedom be used responsibly. "If your brother is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love" (v.15). "Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make others fall by what he eats" (v.20). Two realities stand side by side: the freedom won in Christ which fulfills the law (Galatians 5:1) and the obligation to use the liberty in such a

way that the brother or sister is served in love (I Corinthians 13) and that everything proceeds "from faith" (Romans 14:23).

In I Corinthians 6:12-20 Paul addresses two specific cases which many in Corinth consider to be matters of indifference: food and sexual intercourse. He begins his discussion by citing a current saying: "All things are lawful to me" and then goes on to explore what this means. Two conditions are immediately added: 1) "Not all things are helpful" and 2) "I will not be enslaved by anything" (I Corinthians 6:12). Even if an action is neutral in and of itself, it must be examined in the light of its effect upon the community and the individual. If the deed harms the neighbor it must not be done, or done differently. If a practice results in addiction then it destroys the personal freedom which originally permits this course of action.

Paul feels that some reader may still have missed his point. He cites another current cliché. "Food is for the belly and the belly for food—and God will destroy both one and the other" (vs.13). It seems this Corinthian saying provides license for gluttony. Paul counters this libertine argument by using the word *soma* (body) instead of *koilia* (belly). "The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body" (v.13). No one has an impersonal body, but everyone has a body with which to enter into a relationship with Christ. Therefore, what is done with the body makes the difference between morality and immorality.

The matter becomes even clearer when he discusses intercourse with a prostitute. In contrast to a prevalent view that a male and female body can experience coitus without the *pneuma* (soul) being involved, he asserts that "he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her" (v.16) "but he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit (*pneuma*) with him" (v.17).⁷ The body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit (v.19), must be used in a manner suitable to it. No one has a belly or private parts that can function in a detached manner. It is anathema to invite into the body another spirit, namely, that of a prostitute, or worse, the spirit of Aphrodite, so that the Holy Spirit and this foreign spirit cohabit the body of a Christian.

Once more, Paul does not deny the truth of "all things are lawful for me" but demonstrates that this freedom requires

wise choices and responsible living. "You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (vs.19b, 20).

In I Corinthians 10:23-33 the same phrase "all things are lawful" occurs. Again this liberty lays on the Christian the need to use freedom in a helpful manner and in a way that builds up the community. If an individual buys meat at the market place and gives no thought to the idolatry attached to Corinthian butchery then everything is in order because "the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (vs.26). If a meal is shared and no mention is made of the pagan rituals involved in the slaughter of animals then no conscience issue is involved. However, as soon as the table companion says, "This has been offered in sacrifice" (v.20) it must not be eaten for the sake of the "man who informed you" (v.28).

There is an obverse side to this situation. "Why should my liberty be determined by another man's scruples" (v.30)? Conzelmann interprets: "If I were to imagine that I must desist for the sake of my own conscience, then I have surrendered my freedom, which I do not do, even when I desist. Strictly speaking, I can eat anything that I can enjoy with thankfulness."⁸

Whether a person eats meat sacrificed to idols or not, is a matter of indifference. This does not mean, as Paul makes very clear, that the subject therefore can be dealt with recklessly. Careful attention must be paid as to what is helpful and edifying in all matters in which we have freedom of choice.

3. Patristic and Medieval Usage

The early church faced a serious problem. Pagans with abominable lifestyles are streaming into the church and threatening to dilute and obliterate Christian morality. Rather than emphasize the freedom of the believer the church feels compelled to drill the new converts in the principles of purity. A legalistic conception of Christianity begins to preponderate in the communities recently won from heathenism. As early as St. James the word of God is considered "the perfect *law* of liberty" (1:25).

This legalistic Christianity, which admits of few if any *adiaphora*, is reflected in the life of Marcion (85-160). This arch-heretic, who rejects the Old Testament and its God of wrath

and embraces the merciful God of the New Testament, makes of his Gospel a most rigorous new law. "It seems that the catechumenate in Marcion's Churches was a long one, and baptism was granted only to those who were prepared to abandon the world and its joys, including family life."⁹

Tertullian (c. 155-225) opposes Marcion but is also "attracted by the intense zeal and hard rigorism of the Montanists, finally leaving the church to identify himself with that sect."¹⁰

There is no room for "matters of indifference" in such conceptions of Christianity. It is particularly against the enthusiastic Montanists and their new prophecies, which regulate every aspect of life, that the church closes the canon and thereby denies the validity of new forms. Tertullian and his followers are declared to be in error for promulgating a Christianity without freedom. By closing the canon the early church establishes who is genuine and who is false, and on the basis of the accepted books rejects the teachings of men like Tertullian who go too far by demanding what is not commanded and forbidding what is allowed.

The only use of the term, *adiaphora*, occurs in this battle against the spiritual rigorists. To oppose movements like the Montanists the fathers point to the external nature of God's dealing with his people, the written nature of revelation, and the reality that there are religious matters not decided in Scripture.

But to whatever extent divine law is an external phenomenon, to whatever extent it is a written or customary code, it will demonstrate the notorious character of all positive law, that it does not cover all cases and works best if it does not try to; then there will be *adiaphora*. Medieval theology found the divine law externally in Scripture and the rules of the church; was suspicious of claims for unbroken inspiration; and so had use for the notion of what is neither commanded nor forbidden.¹¹

In this discussion it is evident that the term *adiaphora* has a much narrower scope than in the New Testament. The freedom practised by Christ and lifted up by Paul is not in evidence. Here the usage is not to identify virtually all human response to the Gospel, but only a limited range of activities. Church government, liturgical forms, rites and ceremonies are not in the category of *adiaphora*.¹² These matters cannot be considered open because the apostolic authority has been given to the

whole developing body of church law and custom. The early church uses the concept to say that the rigorists have gone too far: it does not say much about those rites, ceremonies, and actions which are still *adiaphora* for the orthodox.

It is during the Reformation that the scope of the concept, "all things are lawful" is expanded, and *adiaphora* refer not to what is unimportant (as in Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus¹³) but to what must be determined ever anew in response to the Gospel.

4. Luther

Luther's attitude toward *adiaphora*¹⁴ is delineated in his 1520 *A Treatise on Christian Liberty*.

A Christian man is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian man is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.¹⁵

On the one hand the "inward man", the "soul", has no need of works, and is harmed by the doing of works to achieve salvation.

Hence it is clear that as the soul needs only the Word for its life and righteousness, so it is justified by faith alone and not by any works, for if it could be justified by anything else, it would not need the Word, and therefore it would not need faith. But this faith cannot at all exist in connection with works, that is to say, if you at the same time claim to be justified by works, whatever their character, for that would be to halt between two sides, to worship Baal and to kiss the hand, which, as Job says, is a very great iniquity.¹⁶

All human activity, all externals, are of a secondary nature. They are not unimportant, but it is essential to put those things that belong to the outer man in proper perspective. It is faith that is preeminent because (1) it creates a new, spiritual, inward man;¹⁷ (2) it leads the soul to "firmly trust God's promises";¹⁸ (3) it "unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom."¹⁹

All actions, rites and ceremonies, all human works, all doctrines and dogmas of the church are reviewed and analysed in the light of the rediscovery that "the just shall live by faith" (Romans 1:16). Not only are all things once thought to be fixed and settled, open and subject to change, but there is a burning necessity to reexamine every church doctrine and practice. For Luther, salvation depends on making a proper distinction between Gospel and Law, between God's gift and humankind's

response, between faith and works. For example, he revises the relationship between the ordained and lay.

You will ask, "If all who are in the Church are priests, how do those whom we now call priests differ from laymen?" I answer: "Injustice is done those words, 'priest,' 'cleric,' 'spiritual,' 'ecclesiastic,' when they are transferred from all other Christians to those few who are now by a mischievous usage called 'ecclesiastics.' For Holy Scripture makes no distinction between them, except that it gives the name 'ministers,' 'servants,' 'stewards,' to those who are now proudly called popes, bishops, and lords and who should by the ministry of the Word serve others and teach them the faith of Christ and the liberty of believers... But that stewardship has now been developed into so great a pomp of power and so terrible a tyranny, that no heathen empire or earthly power can be compared with it, just as if laymen were not also Christians. Through this perversion the knowledge of Christian grace, faith, liberty, and of Christ Himself has altogether perished, and its place has been taken by an unbearable bondage of human words and laws..."²⁰

Luther totally reorganizes the church with his concept of the freedom of the Christian. There is no sacred institution, no venerable custom, no established doctrine, that escapes critique in the light of grace through faith.

It might be asked whether Luther considers works *adiaphora*. He never uses this term, but the implications are plain. Since God has done all that is necessary, and alone can do that which saves, works need to be given another, subservient place in the life of a Christian.

You see that the First Commandment, which says, "Thou shalt worship one God," is fulfilled by faith alone. For though you were nothing but good works from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head, yet you would not be righteous, nor worship God, nor fulfil the First Commandment, since God cannot be worshiped unless you ascribe to Him the glory of truthfulness and of all goodness, which is due Him. And this cannot be done by works, but only by the faith of the heart... The commandments must be fulfilled before any works can be done, and the works proceed from the fulfilment of the commandments....²¹

So God fulfills all commandments for us in Christ. Now that this is done the Christian can begin doing good works. But why will she/he be interested in them if they are not necessary?

Here we shall answer all those who, misled by the word "faith" and by all that has been said, now say "If faith does all things and is alone sufficient unto righteousness, why then are good works

commanded? We will take our ease and do no works, and be content with faith." I answer, Not so, ye wicked men, not so.²²

Why not? Luther answers: Firstly, the Christian must "discipline his body by fastings, watchings, labors and other reasonable discipline, and to make it subject to the spirit so that it will obey and conform to the inner man and to faith..."²³ Secondly, a person cannot be idle. "Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works"²⁴ (cf. Matthew 7:18). Thirdly,

A man does not live for himself alone in this mortal body, so as to work for it alone, but he lives also for all men on earth, nay, rather, he lives only for others and not for himself....But none of these things does a man need for his righteousness and salvation.²⁵

He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love; by faith he is caught up beyond himself into God, by love he sinks down beneath himself into his neighbor; yet he always remains in God and in His love....²⁶

Fourthly, works, laws, and ceremonies serve a useful purpose in holding wild passions in check until the person comes to faith:

... as infant boys need beyond all else to be cherished in the bosoms and by the hands of maidens to keep them from perishing. and yet when they are grown up their salvation is endangered if they associate with maidens. so the inexperienced and forward youth need to be returned and trained by the iron bars of ceremonies, lest their unchecked ardor rush headlong into vice after vice. Yet it would be death for them to be always held in bondage to ceremonies. thinking that these justify them....Hence ceremonies are to be given the same place in the life of a Christian as models and plans have among builders and artisans....When the structure is completed they are laid aside.²⁷

Nothing must be done, yet that does not mean that what is done freely, out of gratitude, and in praise of God is unimportant. The shape of the works may well be determined by tradition, but this is not a foregone conclusion. Bishops may be useful if they serve the Lord, and the Pope can be an instrument of Christ, but this depends on how adequately the Gospel is served.

Would it not be better to avoid the term, *adiaphora*, when discussing faith and works? Perhaps, because, as Gritsch and Jensen point out, this term has fostered some sloppy practices.

Liturgically, talk of "adiaphora" has continually tempted Lutherans to suppose that so long as sermons are preached, and water.

bread, and wine are regularly present with the minimum "words," it does not really matter what happens otherwise; and Lutherans have hardly ever resisted the temptation. Normally, one devotes little thought to what does not really matter.²⁸

However, as the Lutheran Church develops, conflicts arise about *adiaphora* and the content of the word is influenced by Luther's liberty of the Christian.

Carlstadt, on Christmas Day, 1521, makes a mess of the new freedom by instituting changes too quickly, and failing to comprehend Luther's care for externals. Carlstadt officiates in a plain black robe, announces from the pulpit that fasting and confession are unnecessary, abbreviates the Latin mass, distributes elements in both kinds, and for the first time announces in German, "This is the cup of my blood of the new and eternal testament, spirit and secret of faith, shed for you to the remission of sins."²⁹

Zwilling, prompted by Carlstadt, leads a riot which results in overturned altars and smashed images. Three laymen from Zwickau arrive proclaiming that the Bible is unnecessary because God speaks directly to His own, that infant baptism is wrong and the ungodly are to be slaughtered. Freedom has become license. The "nothing" which is required for salvation, has become hooting, hollering and desecration. Luther's opinion of the matter is expressed in a letter to Frederick (February 13, 1522).

We have gone too fast. The common man has been incited to frivolity, and no one has been edified. We should have consideration for the weak. Images should be left until further notice. The question of begging should be canvassed. No essential portion of the mass should be omitted. Moot points should be discussed. Carlstadt should not preach any more.³⁰

Luther opposes the radical reformers because they treat *adiaphora* as if they are opposed to the Gospel rather than being a permissible response to it. Images can provide edification if not worshipped; fasting is a good discipline if it is not made into work-righteousness. So it is also with bishops: they are useful "for the sake of love and unity, but not of necessity."³¹

5. Adiaphoristic Controversy

In the next development another issue is at stake. If Carlstadt, Zwilling, and the Zwickau prophets go too far and too fast.

what specific practices can be retained which have been used by the Roman Church? Is a practice, which has connections with a church that does not profess the *sola fide, sola gratia*, acceptable? This matter is hotly debated between Melanchthon and Flaccius from 1547 to 1555.

John Agricola, Julius von Pflug and Michael Heldin draft the Augsburg Interim which is to secure agreement on essentials and allow the government to dictate in non-essentials (*adiaphora*). This proves to be a prickly task. Lutherans are granted communion in two kinds and clerical marriage (plus the right to repossess confiscated property). In all other particulars the Roman Catholic practices are to be followed.

Lutherans of all opinions reject this Augsburg Interim and so Maurice of Saxony and Joachim of Brandenburg ask Melanchthon to revise it, reducing Lutheran doctrine to the bare essentials and conceding as much as possible to Rome. His Leipzig Interim of December 17, 1548 affirms the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, concedes the validity of seven sacraments, and decrees most ecclesiastical practices as useful *adiaphora* which can be accepted.

Gnesio-Lutherans under Flaccius reject Melanchthon's Interim stating that "as long as imperial edicts compel Lutherans to restore medieval ceremonies and rites, their rejection is mandated by the gospel."³²

Flaccius' view finds its way into the *Formula of Concord*, Article X.³³

This article drives home both the reality of freedom and the opinion that *adiaphora* are matters which cannot be treated lightly. It is possible to change ceremonies, but these amendable parts of the Christian experience serve to edify the congregation, and so must be handled with care. When it comes to the point where the practice of one church is forced on another, then nothing is an *adiaphoron*. "For in such a case it is no longer a question concerning *adiaphora*, but concerning the truth of the Gospel, concerning Christian liberty...." *Adiaphora* move from being optional to being unacceptable when they are no longer allowed to be option, for then something is being said about grace: It is no longer freely given, but given under a condition. The Reformers are determined that nothing ever again make salvation contingent upon anything but the grace of Christ.

6. Pietism

In the second adiaphoristic conflict, Lutheranism and Calvinism clash. Luther maintains that a Christian has freedom to enjoy a glass of beer and to participate in secular amusements. Calvin stands for a fundamentally different principle. At Geneva (1541) life is strictly regulated under a civic administration and the consistory, with the civil councils, subordinate to the ecclesiastical. All signs of idolatry, such as crucifixes, stained-glass windows, candles and flowers, are removed from churches. Adultery, blasphemy, and witchcraft are treated as major crimes, punishable by death.

In the quest to counteract a secularized Christianity, pietists seek to regulate life in order to create a new person, a new congregation, and a new world. A pessimism about the ability of grace to make all things new is apparent. There is a growing conviction that the only effective method to revive the church is through the law.

Joachim Lange believes that in the light of revealed law there is no indifferent act. Actions under the influence of the Holy Spirit alone are right. Therefore, those actions that are not required by God are unprofitable and also wrong. Lange lists nineteen reasons why Christians should not attend secular amusements (like the opera) and if they do they are to be excommunicated. He considers all those who defend *adiaphora* as heretics who have abandoned all evangelical doctrine.³⁴

Philipp Spener (1635-1705), the father of pietism, has essentially the same opinion but is more moderate in practice. He counsels those who take part in secular amusements to desist by indirect exhortations to follow Christ, rather than excommunicate them. Nevertheless, it is clear that *adiaphora* have little room in his thought.

Martin Schmidt summarizes his teachings as follows: (1) Salvation occurs through God's activity, with the person being a passive recipient. (2) People are lost and dead in sin prior to regeneration. (3) New birth results in a radical change of lifestyle. Conversion is a one-time act consisting of God's offer of grace and the person's decision to accept it. (4) Converted persons have an immediate awareness of being God's children.³⁵

The spotlight has shifted from the incarnate Christ to the indwelling Christ. Congregations are no longer the assembly

of those *called* together by the Word and Sacraments, but the gathering of the reborn. The true church consists of small "conventicles" where the regenerated can exchange Christian experiences. Formal worship services, the Sacraments, confession and absolution, and the observance of festivals are crutches that the thoroughly regenerated person finds unnecessary.

This movement makes many positive contributions to the Christian church, but its stress on Christian practice and regulation of life is in danger of denying the objective atonement.³⁶ The joy of Luther's discovery that the Christian is saved by grace, and therefore, nothing more needs to be done, is lost. Faith as a gift becomes faith as a question: "Do I really have it?" The theory of *adiaphora*, rejected by the pietists, preserves the realization that all human responses are approximate and should not be allowed to compete with the salvation granted by God in Christ through grace.

The pietists do underscore the importance of an appropriate response, but by moving the Christian lifestyle from the sphere of *adiaphora* to the realm of the essential, they make what is an important human answer to God's grace a heavy duty rather than a lighthearted response shaped by the question, "Now that I don't have to do anything, what shall I do?"³⁷

7. Status Confessionis

Adiaphora are in the news today. In 1977 the Lutheran World Federation, meeting at Dar es Salaam, attempts to respond to the 1975 Swakopmund Appeal which asks for an end to separate white and black Lutheran churches in South Africa, and an end to the banning of blacks from the communion tables of white churches. In response the Federation passes the following resolution:

The Lutheran churches are confessional churches. Their unity and mutual recognition are based upon the acknowledgement of the word of God and therefore of the fundamental Lutheran confessional writings, particularly the Augsburg Confession, as normative.

Confessional subscription is more than a formal acknowledgment of doctrine. Churches which have signed the confessions of the church thereby commit themselves to show through their daily witness and service that the gospel has empowered them to live as the people of God. They also commit themselves to accept in their worship

and at the table of the Lord the brothers and sisters who belong to other churches that accept the same confessions. Confessional subscription should lead to concrete manifestations in unity in worship and in working together at the common tasks of the church.

Under normal circumstances Christians may have different opinion in political questions. However, political and social systems may become so perverted and oppressive that it is consistent with the Confession to reject them and to work for changes. We especially appeal to our white member churches in Southern Africa to recognize that the situation in Southern Africa constitutes a status confessionis. This means that, on the basis of faith and in order to manifest the unity of the church, churches would publicly and unequivocally reject the existing apartheid system.³⁸

The reaction is curious. There is unanimity that apartheid is an abomination, but a debate now arises as to when a situation is actually an emergency, when nothing is any longer an *adiaphoron* (*in statu confessionis*). An exhaustive and exhausting study is made of the history of the term, its application, and its efficacy.³⁹ Eventually the Lutheran World Federation determines that a special case of confessing has arisen when the following conditions exist:

1. When the gospel is no longer considered the sole necessity for salvation;
2. When the life-giving Good News is perverted into demand that kills;
3. When the truth of the gospel is no longer expressed in its wholeness;
4. When a church by its conduct or by its concessions to alien norms, especially out of defence to the "weak" (Romans 14; Corinthians 8), so loses its credibility that it contradicts the gospel;
5. When it is no longer possible for the gospel to be proclaimed.

All of this can be summed up briefly: Apartheid has dared to occupy the position of an essential matter which only the Gospel can be permitted to hold. Whenever anything foreign tries to enter the "esse" area, the church must sneeze, and expell the offensive intruder.⁴¹

On August 1. the Lutheran World Federation suspends the 6,000 member Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa (Cape Church) and the 15,000 member German Evangelical Lutheran Church in South-West Africa (Namibia). The Assembly declares that "opposition to South Africa's racial policies is a matter of faith."⁴²

Conclusion

Recognizing what legitimately belongs in the essential area is never easy, but clues as to whether it is of the Gospel or not is most easily determined in answer to the question: "Are you amendable?" The Gospel must never be. What God has done for our salvation is a gift that must not be added to, nor is it permissible to attach conditions to grace. All other things are *adiaphora*, and so must confess: "I can be changed." This does not make *adiaphora* unimportant: rather it gives them their rightful place.

Notes

- ¹ Hermann Menge, *Griechisch—Deutsches Schulwörterbuch*, (Berlin: Langenscheidt, 1903), 9.
- ² Edward T. Horn, "Adiaphorism". *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1908), 91.
- ³ Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 201f. take issue with this definition. "Luther and Melancthon used 'adiaphora' as a label for what is 'not necessary' to be done. 'Not necessary' for what? Already there is a difficulty. 'Not necessary for the doer's salvation' cannot be the sense, even though it often seems to be. Nothing is necessary by us for salvation, so that if this were the sense, all our acts would be *adiaphora* and the concept would be emptied. We must not, therefore, take the *adiaphora* concept as a comprehensive expression of the Reformation's concern for Christian liberty. When such an interpretation has been made, the resulting message is: 'Only believe, and for the rest it does not matter what you do.' To the considerable damage of the Lutheran movement, many of its opponents (including the Council of Trent, Canon 19) have misunderstood the matter in this way." The definition used here, however, attempts to steer clear of this danger by asserting that *adiaphora* are anything but unimportant. Only believe, and for the rest you have freedom to decide, but the decisions are crucial. The *adiaphoristic* matters can reflect a faithful response to the Gospel, or can negate the freedom won in Christ.
- ⁴ James Breech, *The Silence of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 22ff. makes a thorough study of this passage.
- ⁵ C.F. Evans, "Sabbath", *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson (New York: MacMillan, 1951), 205.
- ⁶ C.A. Beckwith, "Adiaphora", *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, Third Edition, ed. Albert Hauck (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1908), 41.
- ⁷ C.T. Craigh. *The Interpreter's Bible*. Vol. 10 (New York: Abingdon, 1953), 74 expresses surprise that *pneuma* rather than *soma* is used in

this verse. Paul's argument, however, is that the spirit is involved in our relationship with the Lord *and* the prostitute, and therefore such sexual activity is unthinkable.

- 8 Hans Conzelmann, *I Corinthians*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 178.
- 9 W.A.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 216.
- 10 J.C. Wand, *A History of the Early Church to A.D. 500* (London: Methuen, 1937), 79.
- 11 Gritsch and Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 200.
- 12 Cp. *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, 92.
- 13 *New Schaff-Herzog*, 42.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Works of Martin Luther*, Philadelphia Edition II (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1943), 312.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 315.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 313.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 319.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 320.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 325-6.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 322-3.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 328.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 328.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 331.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 335.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 342-3.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 347.
- 28 Gritsch and Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 203.
- 29 Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950), 207.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 210.
- 31 M. Luther, "Smalcald Articles," Part III, Article X. *The Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 314.
- 32 Gritsch and Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 196.
- 33 Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article X. Church Usages, Called Adiaphora or Indifferent Things:

The Correct, True Doctrine and Confession about this Article

1. To settle this controversy we believe, teach, and confess unan-
imously that the ceremonies or church usages which are neither com-
manded nor forbidden in the Word of God, but which have been
introduced solely for the sake of good order and the general welfare,
are in and for themselves no divine worship or even a part of it. "In
vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men"
(Matt. 15:9).

2. We believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every locality and every age has authority to change such ceremonies according to circumstances, as it may be most profitable and edifying to the community of God.

3. But in this matter all frivolity and offenses are to be avoided, and particularly the weak in faith are to be spared (1 Cor. 8:9-13; Rom. 14:13ff.).

4. We believe, teach, and confess that in times of persecution, when a clear-cut confession of faith is demanded of us, we dare not yield to the enemies in such indifferent things, as the apostle Paul writes, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:11). "Do not be mismatched with unbelievers, for what fellowship has light with darkness?" (II Cor. 6:14). "To them we did not yield submission even for a moment, that the truth of the Gospel might be preserved for you" (Gal. 2:5). In such a case it is no longer a question of indifferent things, but a matter which has to do with the truth of the Gospel, Christian liberty, and the sanctioning of public idolatry, as well as preventing offense to the weak in faith. In all these things we have no concessions to make, but we should witness an unequivocal confession and suffer in consequence what God sends us and what he lets the enemies inflict on us.

5. We believe, teach, and confess that no church should condemn another because it has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God, as long as there is mutual agreement in doctrine and in all articles as well as in the right use of the holy sacraments, according to the familiar axiom, "Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in faith."

(*The Book of Concord*, ed. Tappert, 493f.)

³⁴ *Religious Encyclopedia*, I, 43.

³⁵ "Pietism." *Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, ed. Julius Bodensieck (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965), 1899.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1900. Positive contributions of pietism are many. Martin Schmidt mentions seven.

1. It neutralized the rise of a sectarian Christianity within the institutional church.
2. It changed spiritualistic mysticism into ethical concepts.
3. It preserved the freedom of individual decision in matters of faith (one of Luther's chief emphases!) over against every kind of external authority.
4. It attempted to "change the world by changing man!"
5. It restored serious Bible study by the determination to bring present-day Christianity into line with the New Testament.
6. It favoured increased lay activity.

7. It changed the image of the pastor from being a learned preacher to being a personally accountable representative, an example of godliness.

37 Gerhard O. Forde, *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 39f.

38 *In Christ—A New Community*. The Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of the LWF, Dar es Salaam, 1977, 179/180.

39 See *The Debate on Status Confessionis: Studies in Christian Political Theology* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1983).

40 *Ibid.*, 127.

41 Cp. Robert W. Bertram, "Confessing the Faith of the Church", *The New Church Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983, 123.

42 *Lutheran World Information*, 32/84, 2.