

Christians, Guard Your Liberty! A Sermon Study on Galatians 5:1–6

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[This is the ninth in a series of sermon studies on the 12 articles of the Formula of Concord. The Synod's Formula of Concord Anniversary Committee proposed the series to the homiletics department of the Seminary as a part of its planned observance of the anniversaries of the Formula of Concord and of the Book of Concord.]

The Historical Background and Contents of Article X

Church rites or ceremonies, the subject to which Article X of the Formula of Concord addresses itself, are a matter of continual interest in the church. The order of service, the attire of the pastor, the use of ushers or acolytes to light the candles, the practice of bringing the offerings to the altar, the use of the common cup or of individual cups in Communion, and similar matters frequently provoke a lively debate among church members. A proper, scriptural approach to such questions is therefore a fitting subject for a sermon in a series commemorating the four hundredth anniversaries of the Formula and Book of Concord.

The title of Article X refers to the fact that church rites are commonly called *adiaphora* or matters of indifference. The opening paragraph of the article explains that these are things “which are neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word.” They are matters of Christian liberty.

The controversy that prompted the formulators of the Formula of Concord to include an article on this subject arose as a direct result of the defeat of the Lutheran forces in the Smalcald War. Soon after the death of Luther on February 18, 1546, Emperor Charles V with the support of the pope attacked the Lutheran princes allied in the Smalcald League. After his victory he proclaimed the Augsburg Interim as law of the land on May 15, 1548. It was called an Interim because it was to regulate church affairs temporarily until final decisions would be made by the Council of Trent concerning the controversies that stemmed from the Reformation.

The Augsburg Interim required the immediate restoration of Catholic ceremonies and customs in Lutheran churches. It demanded recognition of the pope as supreme head of the church. It reaffirmed Catholic dogmas such as transubstantiation and the seven sacraments. In the doctrine of justification it omitted the *sola fide* and included sanctification as an element in justification. While it permitted Protestant clergymen to marry and to celebrate the Lord's Supper under both kinds, it was obvious to the Lutherans that the Interim was only the beginning of an effort to stamp out the Lutheran “heresy.”

Despite the use of brute force the emperor was stymied in his attempt to impose the Interim on Lutheran territories. Because of widespread resistance it was unenforceable. John Frederick, the Elector of Saxony, set a heroic example of courageous confession when he was removed from office, imprisoned, and shamefully humiliated.

John Frederick's ambitious, scheming nephew, Maurice, the Duke of Saxony, who succeeded him as Elector, was indebted to the emperor for his position; but he also found the Interim too radical. He did not dare to enforce it for fear of alienating his subjects. Consequently, he prevailed on the theologians of Wittenberg and Leipzig to draft a new document which he hoped would be more acceptable to his people. It was prepared chiefly by Melancthon and adopted at Leipzig on December 22, 1548. Known as the Leipzig Interim, it was a compromise that was immediately branded by many as a betrayal of true Lutheranism. Melancthon's intention was to maintain the truth while yielding in non-essential matters in order to avoid persecution.

Conceived as a compromise and born of fear, the Leipzig Interim failed to sound a clear, scriptural note. In such vital articles as justification, the church, original sin, and free will it made fatal concessions to Roman error. It recognized the supremacy of the pope and approved the reintroduction of many Catholic ceremonies, including such objectionable ones as extreme unction and the Corpus Christi festival. To many loyal Lutherans it was obvious that the Leipzig Interim was a surrender to Catholicism, but Maurice forcibly imposed it on the churches of Electoral Saxony.

The leader of the opposition to the Leipzig Interim was a Wittenberg professor by the name of Flacius. In 1549 he was forced to flee to Magdeburg, the only place in Germany that was safe for staunch confessors of the Lutheran faith. Flacius and other uncompromising Lutheran theologians who had taken refuge there waged a relentless war of the pen against the Interims. Flacius argued, “*Nihil est adiaphoron in casu confessionis et scandali* (Nothing is an adiaphoron when confession and offense are involved).” Even Calvin wrote Melancthon, “You extend the adiaphora too far.”

Stung by the charge that he was a traitor to his Lutheran heritage and realizing that the Interim could not be enforced, Maurice treacherously turned his army against the emperor, whose highhanded behavior had angered him. After his victory the Treaty of Augsburg (1555) established the principle *cuius regio, eius religio* in the empire. Princes were given the right to determine the religion of their territory. Those of their subjects who did not approve of the established church were permitted to emigrate.

Although the Interims were dead, the controversy they had generated did not disappear. The religious indifferentism and unionistic spirit manifested by Melancthon and his adherents, who were known as Philippists, could not be ignored. Flacius, Wigand, Gallus, and other anti-adiaphorists continued to press their attack until finally Melancthon was forced to admit, “I have sinned in this matter and ask forgiveness of God.” The Formula of Concord endorsed the position taken by the anti-adiaphorists.

Article X of the Formula defines the *status controversiae* as the question “whether, in time of persecution and in case of confession, . . . some abrogated ceremonies, which in themselves are matters of indifference and are neither commanded nor forbidden by God, may nevertheless, upon the pressure and demand of the adversaries, be reestablished without violence of conscience” (FC, Epit., X, 2).

Some ceremonies which the Interims attempted to reintroduce were objectionable in themselves. The Formula clearly states that such things “as are in principle contrary to God’s Word” (FC, S.D., X,5) are not to be regarded as adiaphora. Neither should one consider as adiaphora ceremonies which might give the impression that the Lutheran and Catholic religions are not far apart, whether for the purpose of avoiding persecution or in the hope of reconciling the two religions.

True adiaphora, on the other hand, are not in themselves a worship of God and must be distinguished from it. These “the congregation of God . . . has . . . the good right, power, and authority to change . . . in an orderly and becoming way” (FC, S.D., X,9). In such adiaphora one may yield to the weak in faith as Paul teaches in Romans 14 and as he proved by his example in circumcising Timothy (Ac 16:3).

At a time, however, when the enemies of God are trying to suppress the truth, Christians are bound by God’s Word to make a clear confession not only in words, but also in deeds. In such circumstances they must not yield to the adversaries even in genuine adiaphora, nor should they permit such adiaphora to be forced on them.

The Formula elaborates on the example of circumcision. Under the Old Covenant circumcision was required, but after Christ came and fulfilled the law, it became an adiaphoron (1 Cot 7:18–19). While Paul circumcised Timothy in Christian freedom, “when the false apostles urged circumcision for establishing their false doctrine, (that the works of the Law were necessary for righteousness and salvation,) . . . Paul says that he would not yield even for an hour, in order that the truth of the Gospel might continue unimpaired” (FC, S.D., X, 12). He refused to circumcise Titus (Ga 2:3–5).

The situation was similar with respect to food and the observance of special holy seasons or days. Paul yielded to those who were weak in faith in these matters, pointing out that these were adiaphora. In Romans 14:6 he writes, “He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.” But when false teachers wished to impose laws in such things on men’s consciences, Paul resolutely refused, saying, “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day” (Col 2:16).

The Formula calls attention to the fact that when Peter and Barnabas yielded more than they should have in such a situation, Paul openly reprovved them for not walking according to the truth of the gospel (Ga 2:11 ff.). “For here it is no longer a question concerning external matters of indifference; . . . but it is a question, in the first

place, concerning the eminent article of our Christian faith, as the apostle testifies, *that the truth of the Gospel might continue*, which is obscured and perverted by such compulsion or command” (FC, S.D., X,14). To yield in such circumstances not only robs Christians of their liberty, it also confirms false teachers in their error and is an offense to the faith of true believers.

On the other hand, the Formula also rejects and condemns any and all attempts to restrict the church in its freedom to employ such adiaphora as it considers useful. It concludes with the pointed reminder, “Thus the churches will not condemn one another because of dissimilarity of ceremonies when, in Christian liberty, one has less or more of them, provided they are otherwise agreed with one another in the doctrine and all its articles, also in the right use of the holy Sacraments” (FC, S.D., X,31).

The Text, Galatians 5:1–6

If Paul’s Epistle to the Romans can be called the Charter of the Sinner’s Justification, his Epistle to the Galatians might rightly be called the Charter of Christian Liberty. The Christians in Galatia were victimized by so-called Judaizers, false teachers who insisted that faith in Christ was not enough but that Christians also had to keep the laws of Moses if they wished to be saved. The truth of the gospel that Christ has freed us from the law leads Paul to issue the ringing call, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free.”

This call is also the theme of Article X of the Formula of Concord. That explains the reason for the choice of Galatians 5:1–6 as the text for this sermon.

Verse 1: “*For freedom Christ has freed us; stand firm therefore, and do not let yourselves be burdened again with a yoke of slavery.*”

This verse is transitional. It sums up what has preceded and introduces what follows. It harks back to chapter four with its comparisons, first of all between slaves and sons, and then between Hagar and Sarah, Ishmael and Isaac, the covenant of the law and the covenant of the gospel. Τῇ ἐλευθερίᾳ is a dative of purpose. Some call it a dative of interest or advantage (“with a view to, in the interest of freedom”). It stands in an emphatic position at the beginning of the sentence. All of Christ’s redemptive work, His active as well as His passive obedience, His holy life as well as His vicarious suffering and death, is embraced in the term ἠλευθέρωσεν. This verb reminds us that we were formerly slaves. But Christ is our great Emancipator. No slave who has tasted the heady wine of liberty would without a struggle submit once again to the cruel shackles of involuntary servitude. But this is just the danger that threatens us! If we are not to be reenslaved, we must stand firm. We must be on our guard. We must recognize and resist the ever-present threat to our liberty.

“A yoke of slavery” is an allusion to the Sinaitic covenant. It made impossible demands on the people of Israel. It was, in the words of Peter, “a yoke...which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear” (Ac 15:10). But that was its very purpose. It was to drive Israel to despair so that it would see its need for the Savior and the salvation promised in the Abrahamic covenant given 430 years earlier (Ga 3:17).

The law did not set aside the gospel. “It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come” (Ga 3:19, NIV). In addition, it served as a παιδαγωγὸς εἰς Χριστόν, a custodian or guardian until Christ came (Ga 3:24). It served to hedge and hem Israel in, isolating and insulating God’s chosen people from their heathen neighbors that the promise given to Israel might be protected and preserved until it was fulfilled. At the same time many provisions of the law such as the Passover and the scapegoat, to name but two, were types and shadows of the coming Christ and His wondrous salvation.

At His coming Christ, the Giver of the law, fully met all of its demands. He is therefore “the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth” (Ro 10:4). Hence Paul warns, “Do not let yourselves be burdened again with the obsolete, abrogated Sinaitic covenant” (cf. Col 2:16–17).

Verse 2: “*Note well! I, Paul, say to you that if you submit to circumcision, Christ will not benefit you at all.*”

The gospel frees, the law enslaves. Reminding the Galatians of his apostolic authority (cf. Ga 1:1), Paul points out that to put oneself under the law again is to lose Christ. Περιτέμνησθε is the causative or permissive

passive: “if you let yourselves be circumcised,” that is, in response to the demands of the Judaizers. Circumcision for non-religious reasons is, of course, not under consideration.

Verse 3: *“And I testify again to every man who has submitted to circumcision that he is under obligation to obey the whole law.”*

From Galatians 4:10 it is apparent that the Galatians had begun to observe various holy days, seasons, and years prescribed in the Mosaic law. Circumcision was a key provision of the law. Submit to that, Paul says, and you must go all the way. Then you must also obey the laws concerning food, the Sabbath, sacrifices and worship, purification, redeeming of the firstborn, levirate marriage—the whole bit. Consistency demands this. If salvation is to be gained by obeying the law, selective obedience will not do. Nothing less than perfect obedience to all of the law’s requirements will be necessary.

Verse 4: *“You who are trying to be justified by the law have been cut off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”*

All those Galatians who were trying to achieve justification by obeying the law had in reality renounced Christ. Δικαιοῦσθε is conative. Justification by works is an unattainable goal. Κατηργήθητε means “you have been estranged, alienated, separated.” The precious fellowship they once enjoyed with Christ was disrupted and severed by their attempt to become justified by their own efforts. By despising God’s grace they forfeited it.

Verse 5: *“For through the Spirit we by faith are eagerly awaiting the hope of righteousness.”*

In contrast to those trying to become righteous in God’s sight through their own efforts, believers enjoy God’s gift of righteousness by faith. Their faith is a work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3). By raising Jesus from the dead God declared the whole world righteous for His sake (Ro 4:25). He demonstrated that He was satisfied with the atonement Christ had made. When the Holy Spirit through the gospel creates faith in the sinner’s heart, he has the personal assurance that God considers and declares him just and righteous.

Paul does not deny this when he speaks of believers as waiting for the hope of righteousness. But eternal salvation is still for us a matter of faith. As long as we live in this world, “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7). We are still waiting to receive the inheritance reserved in heaven for us (1 Pe 1:4). “The hope of righteousness” means “the righteousness for which we hope” (NIV). Ἀπεχδεχόμεθα indicates the eagerness with which we look forward to receiving the goal of our faith, the salvation of our souls (1 Pe 1:9). The Christian lives in hope, in an assured, unailing hope.

Verse 6: *“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value, but faith which expresses itself through love.”*

Being united with Christ Jesus is all-important. Whether one is circumcised or not makes no difference (cf. Ga 6:15; 1 Cor 7:19). Circumcision was a sign and seal of the Old Covenant. Originally given to Abraham as the seal of God’s gospel covenant with him (Gn 17:7–14; Ac 7:8; Ro 4:11), it was later incorporated by God into the Sinaitic covenant of the law (Lv 12:3; Jn 7:22–23). Now that Christ has come, it has lost its meaning and value. The circumcised Jew has no advantage over the uncircumcised Gentile, nor does the Gentile have an advantage over the Jew. The only thing that counts is faith in Christ Jesus. Faith is the ὄργανον ληπτικόν by which the sinner appropriates Christ’s righteousness. Such faith inevitably and invariably expresses itself in love. A life of love is a natural fruit of faith. A living faith manifests itself in sanctified, Christian living. Such a life is a “new creation” (Ga 6:15). It consists in “the keeping of the commandments of God” (1 Cor 7:19).

Ἐνεργουμένη is a middle participle, not a passive as Rome has claimed, although even the Vulgate translated it *“fides quae per caritatem operatur”* (“faith which works through love”—*operatur* is a deponent verb). Through the years Rome has cited this passage as support for its doctrine of *fides caritate formata* (faith which is perfected by love). This doctrine makes salvation dependent ultimately on love or works rather than on faith. Faith alone, according to Rome, is insufficient. It must be supplemented by works. Works are said to be meritorious, and they are the critical factor in justification.

It is significant that, following the lead of the Vulgate, *The New American Bible*, the 1968 Catholic translation, renders this phrase “faith, which expresses itself through love.” It would be a mistake, of course, to conclude that since Rome admits the correctness of this translation, it also concedes the correctness of Lutheran theology. On the basis of this text, which is in perfect agreement with the rest of Scripture, the Lutheran Church continues to teach that justification is *sola gratia et sola fide*.

Homiletical Hints

The keynote of the text, like that of Article X of the Formula of Concord, is liberty. As Paul warned the Galatian Christians not to let themselves become enslaved again to the law, so Article X warns us against giving up the freedom we enjoy in adiaphora.

The word “adiaphora” will be almost indispensable in a sermon on this subject. It should be or become a part of every Christian’s vocabulary. The preacher will have to make certain that he defines it clearly and that he from time to time reinforces his explanation by using appositional phrases such as “things God has neither commanded nor forbidden,” “indifferent matters,” and “things in which we enjoy Christian liberty.”

It will be helpful to the preacher in his preparation for this sermon to read or reread Luther’s treatise “How Christians Should Regard Moses,” *Luther’s Works*, Volume 35, pp 155–174 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960).

Every preacher will have his own approach in constructing a sermon outline utilizing the text to illuminate Article X, but the following suggestion illustrates one way of doing this.

The Outline

Introduction: We cherish our political liberty. It is a precious heritage. We must guard it continually if we are to preserve it.

Even more precious is the heritage of spiritual liberty we Christians have. This, too, is a blessing we can lose if we do not guard it. The Lutheran Church was in danger of losing it soon after Luther’s death. The Galatian Christians were also in danger of losing it in Paul’s day. Hence at all times the admonition needs to be heard and heeded:

Christians, Guard Your Liberty!

Remembering

- I. How dearly Christ bought it for you (vv. 1, 5, 6).
 - A. The Old Covenant given to Israel by God through Moses on Mt. Sinai was a yoke of bondage (v. 1).
 1. Its nature
 - a) God repeated the moral law which He had inscribed on man’s heart but which had become blurred through sin.
 - b) God gave numerous laws regulating Israel’s personal, religious, social, and political life. Give an example or two.
 - c) Circumcision, the seal of God’s gospel covenant with Abraham, was incorporated into the law of Moses.
 - d) The Mosaic law was a temporary covenant (2 Cor 3:7–11).
 2. Its wholesome purpose
 - a) To show Israel that salvation by works is impossible;
 - b) To isolate and insulate Israel for the preservation of the gospel promise;
 - c) To foreshadow the coming Savior and the promised salvation through the God-ordained types in many of its provisions. Give an example or two.
 3. Its consequences

- a) Many felt it as an impossible burden (Ac 15:10).
 - b) Condemned by the law, they saw their need for a Savior and in joyful faith awaited the fulfillment of God's promise.
 - c) Many others abused it and tried to gain salvation by the works of the law (Pharisees, Judaizers).
- B. Christ has set us free from the law (v. 1).
- 1. He obeyed it perfectly in our stead.
 - 2. He atoned for our disobedience by His innocent sufferings and death.
 - 3. His resurrection testifies that God has declared the world just for His sake (Ro 4:25).
 - 4. The Old Covenant has now been abrogated.
 - a) Circumcision is now meaningless (v. 6).
 - b) The law of Moses has nothing more to say to us.
 - c) The things commanded in the ceremonial law are now adiaphora, that is, things neither commanded nor forbidden by God (Col 2:16–17).
- C. This freedom becomes ours through faith (vv. 5–6).
- 1. Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit.
 - 2. He awakens faith through the means of grace, the gospel in the Word and in the Sacraments.
 - 3. Through faith we now have hope.
 - a) We personally enjoy the assurance that all our sins are forgiven and that we are clothed in the robe of Christ's righteousness.
 - b) We need not fear death or the judgment.
 - c) We eagerly look forward to receiving the inheritance awaiting us in heaven.
 - 4. This faith expresses itself in a sanctified Christian life.
 - a) The moral law as it is repeated in the New Testament serves us as a guide in recognizing the holy, immutable will of God.
 - b) Its essence is love.
 - c) With thankful hearts we try to please Him who first loved us.
 - 5. We now enjoy true freedom (Jn 8:31–32), freedom from sin, death, and the power of the devil, as well as freedom from the law.

Transition: This liberty is a priceless treasure. Consider the price Christ paid to buy it for us! Earthly treasures are in constant danger of being stolen from those who possess them. These spiritual, heavenly treasures are likewise apt to be stolen from us. Therefore, Christians, guard your liberty, remembering

- II. How easily Satan steals it from you (vv. 1, 2, 3, 4).
- A. The threat in Paul's day.
- 1. The Judaizers claimed that circumcision was necessary for salvation.
 - 2. It was required under the Old Covenant of the law, but under the New Covenant of the gospel it is an adiaphoron.
 - 3. When it is required for salvation, one must refuse the demand, as Paul refused to circumcise Titus though he had circumcised Timothy under other circumstances (Ac 16:3; Ga 2:3–5).
 - 4. All who submit to circumcision are under obligation to keep the whole law of Moses (v. 3).
 - 5. Those who try to gain salvation by works despise God's grace and set aside Christ's work (vv. 2, 4).
 - 6. Satan was attempting to rob the Galatian Christians of their liberty and thus of their salvation.
 - 7. Paul admonished them: Stand firm! Guard your liberty!

- B. The threat in the days following Luther's death.
1. Emperor Charles V defeated the Lutheran princes and demanded that they reinstitute many Catholic ceremonies and practices (The Augsburg Interim).
 2. Many, like Elector John Frederick, boldly refused and even suffered persecution.
 3. Satan influenced some, like Melanchthon, to compromise the truth of the gospel (The Leipzig Interim).
 - a) Their aim was to maintain the truth while making concessions in non-essential matters (adiaphora) in order to avoid persecution.
 - b) Some concessions went beyond adiaphora.
 4. Many loyal Lutherans recognized that it was wrong under these circumstances to make concessions even in true adiaphora.
 - a) A forthright confession was called for even if this resulted in persecution.
 - b) Compromise and concession could have caused offense.
 - aa) Some might have done things which were adiaphora with a bad conscience.
 - bb) Others might not have done them but might have had a bad conscience because they thought they really were necessary for salvation.
 5. Article X of the Formula of Concord speaks clearly (Epit., X,6).
 6. Our Lutheran forefathers guarded their liberty when Satan tried to steal it from them.
- C. The threat in our day.
1. By God's grace we are not at present threatened with overt persecution, but many subtle pressures are exerted.
 2. Our Old Adam continually suggests that we try to gain salvation by our own efforts.
 3. Many who claim to be Christians fail to recognize that the law of Moses has been set aside (e.g., confused Christians who quote indiscriminately from it as if it were God's will for man today; Seventh Day Adventists).
 4. We meet many adiaphora in our Christian life and worship (e.g., in food, drink, liturgical practices, etc.).
 5. But we need to remember that "nothing is an adiaphoron when confession and offense are involved." Give an example or two, such as: You *must* kneel facing the altar during the confession before Communion. You *must* use offering envelopes.
 6. Our salvation is at stake in maintaining our Christian liberty (v. 4).
 7. Remember the example of Paul and our Lutheran forefathers! Christians, guard your liberty!