

Does an Adiaphoron Ever Cease to be an Adiaphoron?

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There are certain areas of life and activity in which there is no neutral ground, no real middle between right and wrong. Can a solution to a math problem be anything but correct or incorrect? We are either dead or alive; half-dead is an approximation and not an exact expression. Where is the neutral ground between Milwaukee and Wauwatosa? Where is the fence between God's kingdom and Satan's? We are either Christians or non-Christians, God's children or not God's children. And so we could go on and on.

It is very different in the matter under discussion today. There is a definite realm of activity which is not specifically covered by either God's command or His prohibition. Every day of our life we are faced with acts and decisions for which there is no Scriptural do or don't. Such matters are left by God to our personal discretion. These matters are guided by the general guidelines and broad principles set forth in God's Word, while specifics are left to our sanctified judgement. This is the area of adiaphora.

The term adiaphoron (plural-adiaphora) is of Greek origin and signifies "indifferent." Perhaps the most descriptive and adequate terminology is: "things lying in the middle," from the familiar German term "Mitteldinge." Adiaphora are matters lying in the gray area, the middle, between the black and white commands and prohibitions of God.

It is normal to speak of adiaphora in two spheres - church and personal, or religious and secular. These terms are somewhat inadequate and the dividing line nebulous. Perhaps a better way to express it would be to speak of adiaphora in the narrow sense (church rites) and the broader or wider sense (all adiaphora). The narrow sense is spoken of in our confessions. Although numerous references are made to matters of indifference in our confessional writings, only twice do they discuss the matter specifically and at great length, in each instance relating it to "Church rites which are neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word."¹ The wider sense is spoken of by people like Koehler in his book *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*. He defines adiaphora as:

Works which God has not specifically commanded or forbidden are in themselves indifferent. (Mitteldinge. Adiaphora). But also their quality is determined by the motive that prompts them. "Whether therefore ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (I Cor. 10:31). We cannot sin to the glory of God (Romans 2:23,24; 6:1). But whatever otherwise we do in our several stations of life, if we do it from love of God and to the glory of God, is a service well-pleasing to Him. Wherever God has placed mothers, children, teachers, students, etc., we should do our duty faithfully "as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with good will doing service as to the Lord, and not to men" (Eph. 6:6,7). If done in the right spirit, the simplest duties of our daily lives become a God-pleasing service. To work merely for money, to study merely for honor and credit, is selfish, and not a good work. But to work and study because it is God's will that we do so, and to show our appreciation of what God has done for us, is well pleasing in the sight of God.²

This subject is important doctrinally. Adiaphora lie within the realm of Christian liberty. Christian liberty consists of the freedom of the believer from the curse and coercion of the law. St. Paul writes, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'" (Gal. 3:13) and again, "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14). The Formula of Concord says: "For although the Law is not made for the righteous man, as the Apostle testifies in I Timothy 1:9, but for the unrighteous, yet this is not to be understood in the bare meaning that the justified are to live without Law . . . But the meaning of St. Paul is that the Law

¹ Article X, Epitome, Formula of Concord, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 829 ff.; Article X, Thorough Declaration, Formula of Concord, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 1053 ff.

² Edward Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, p. 163

cannot burden with its curse those who have been reconciled to God through Christ; nor must it vex the regenerate with its coercion, because they have pleasure in God's Law after the inner man."³ Freed from the curse and coercion of the Law, the believer is also free from all human ordinances with regard to his religion. In God's kingdom all members are brothers, not rabbis, not fathers, not masters, but brothers (Matthew 23:8-10). In Christ's service the greatest shall be as the younger and the chief as those who serve (Luke 22:26). Even though the followers of the Lord are designated as priests and kings (Rev. 5:10; 1 Peter 2:8), we must remember that all are priests and kings of the same level and privilege, the same authority and freedom.

This liberty of the Christian is the direct result of justification. He who believes in Christ is righteous; the Law makes no further indicting demands against him, for all the indictments have been met by and in Christ. In John 8 Jesus reminds us, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (31,32). The truth is that faith in Jesus grants us freedom from sin and presents us all the wonderful liberties of the children of God. Adiaphora, then, are related intimately to the doctrine of justification.

It must be carefully noted that adiaphora are not a part of justifying faith. Unlike good works, adiaphora are not a product of saving faith. Adiaphora do not impose guilt upon anyone. They do not effect a different relationship between God and the Christian. A person is justified by grace through faith and not by the commission or omission of an adiaphoron. Above all, as our Confessions assert, adiaphora are not to be regarded as worship of God. In the Apology to the Augsburg Confession the admission is made that "obedience, poverty, and celibacy are, as exercises, adiaphora." Some may use them in a proper and God-pleasing way, "but to hold that these observances are services on account of which they are accounted just before God and through which they merit eternal life, conflicts with the Gospel concerning the righteousness of faith, which teaches that for Christ's sake righteousness and eternal life are granted us."⁴

The subject of adiaphora has tremendous practical value. This is true with regard to church rites as well as personal life. Time and time again, long and earnest, perhaps even heated and bitter, debate has centered in such topics as festival days, church music and liturgy, chanting, the use of exorcism, confirmation, the sign of the cross, a single or three-fold pouring of the baptismal water, vestments, kneeling on the part of pastor or congregation, etc. Much, if not most, of the business procedure used in the church at every level centers in an area which in itself is an adiaphoron. The external mechanics of the financial and missionary program of the Church are, per se, matters of indifference. And yet, under the blessing of God, they all may and do play a weighty matter in the extension of His kingdom. It is, therefore, important to know under what circumstances adiaphora may lose their indifferent character.

So in the realm of personal life. There are those questions which we must ask ourselves: What are acceptable Christian standards and methods of labor and leisure, manner of dress and drink, etc. When must I refrain from smoking or watching television? It is important to know the correct answers, so much so in fact that St. Paul reminds us that not only he who acts against better knowledge, but also he who acts in doubt is guilty of sin (Romans 14:23).

While it is clear that many of our daily decisions are in the domain of adiaphora, it is also clear that adiaphora (in abstracto) may cease to be adiaphora (in concreto) under certain circumstances. Martha's activity for her Savior's physical welfare was, in itself, praiseworthy, but if such interest and energy betrays a lack of interest in the one thing needful, it becomes sinful. The anointing of Jesus by Mary was, in itself, a matter of indifference, but her love for Jesus made it a compelling act of Christian devotion. The savings account or the insurance policy of the Christian is commendable foresight, but if lack of trust in God is the basic urge, they become objectionable. To smoke is, in itself, neither good nor bad, but when done to the degree that the purity of one's lungs is affected, heart impaired and health destroyed, indifference gives way. The drinking of alcoholic beverages is not a violation of God's Law, but if such drinking goes beyond moderation or promotes an ulcerous condition, it ceases to be an adiaphoron. The manner in which water is to be applied in the

³ Article VI, Thorough Declaration, Formula of Concord, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 963

⁴ Article SSVIII, Apology of the Augsburg Confession, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 427.

administration of Baptism is not designated in Holy Writ; however those who defend immersion - in itself entirely valid and permissible - as the only correct method, have removed it from the sphere of neutrality. Cremation of the body, in itself, is neither right nor wrong; but if it becomes an expression of atheistic principles, it should be studiously avoided by Christians.

Does an adiaphoron ever cease to be an indifferent thing? Yes, it certainly may. Perhaps, when it happens can best be described by three general categories. It is definitely a violation of the doctrine of Christian liberty with regard to "Mitteldinge" when an adiaphora serves "as a springboard at the pools of profligate and loose living."⁵ "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather serve one another in love" (Galatians 5:13). The Apostle had written his concern that the Galatian Christians must not be burdened by the legalistic tactics of the Judaizers. There must, however, also have been a danger of going too far the other way, hence the admonition to not permit their freedom to provide an opportunity, a base of operations, for the demands of the flesh for all kinds of excesses and indulgences.

Excesses of any kind, and in any area, which, in itself, is clearly an adiaphoron, are a violation of this doctrine of indifferent things. The glutton, the hard drinker (not drunkard alone), the chain smoker, the 6-10 cup coffee drinker, the epicurean, who argues: "If and when I die, I would rather die enjoying myself" - all such may well ask themselves if obligation to health, to family, to opportunity and duty should not prompt a re-evaluation of their concept of adiaphora. So too, the slave to fitness or some form of exercise must take an honest look at their excess. "Again, he who attends the Lord's Table only once or twice a year, who has no particular qualms about regularity at church attendance, who can somehow or other disregard appeals for foreign mission work, merely because God does not specifically demand 8,12, or 24 Communion a year, or 52, 78, or 104 church services, or on pretext that we have enough heathen in this country - such a one may well inquire if he is not feasting his Old Adam at the banquet board of Christian liberty."⁶ In short, excesses and overindulgence of almost any kind, be that in food, drink, occupation, entertainment, care of the body, study, etc., may tend toward spiritual anemia and ultimate spiritual death.

One wonders whether we have neglected or, at least need, a renewed emphasis on the fruit of the Spirit called self-control. Such control should be encouraged both in what we avoid and in what we pursue. Prof. Theodore Graebner, in his treatise, *The Borderland of Right and Wrong*, speaks of an interesting "blind spot" (remember - a 1938 copyright was long before the surgeon general's report):

Some of our people have a blind spot when confronted with such practical questions as personal freedom in the use of gifts of nature, the satisfaction of their appetites, their indulgence in hobbies, their subserviency to acquired habits. We have stated in another section that the use of tobacco in its various forms has nothing about it that is inherently wrong. Nevertheless it would not harm our Christians to pause and ask themselves whether there are not some limitations which they should observe in the use of this "weed". It is not absurd for a pastor to ask himself whether he has a right to enter a sick-room with the smell of stale tobacco in his breath, in his clothes, and on his hands. It is not absurd for a Christian to ask himself whether he is not abusing a liberty when his tobacco habits make it necessary for people to wash their hands after having shaken hands with him. Nor is it absurd for any Christian young man to wonder whether spending dime after dime for tobacco can be done with a clear conscience; or for a theological student to consider refraining from the use of the pipe because the doctor has warned him against "Tobacco heart"; or for a Christian husband to conclude that he is practicing cruelty when he offends his wife's nerves by saturating himself with the taste and the odor of nicotine. For a person to be puffing incessantly at a pipe, cigarette, or cigar is unnatural. Some men have one or the other in their mouths nearly all the time when awake, except while eating their meals.⁷

⁵ Lorenz Wunderlich, "Adiaphora", *The Abiding Word*, vol. 2, p. 699

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 700

⁷ Theodore Graebner, *The Borderland of Right and Wrong*, p. 95

Another area of abuse of this doctrine results from any attempt to make adiaphora a matter of conscience for others. “Things indifferent in themselves lose their indifferent character and become a matter of confession when they have become characteristic of doctrinal error and are so understood by others.”⁸ Our Savior’s word applies here: “... for you have only one Master and you are all brothers” (Matthew 23:8). It is necessary that we note in this connection that this admonition came after a discussion of the abuses of the scribes and Pharisees in burdening consciences with heavy loads. Here also our Confessions clearly testify: “No one is to burden the Church with his own traditions, but here this rule is to be that nobody’s power or authority is to avail more than the Word of God.”⁹ “Matters of indifference are and remain of themselves free and accordingly can admit of no command or prohibition.”¹⁰ “We reject and condemn also as wrong when these ordinances are by coercion forced upon the congregation of God as necessary.”¹¹

With the acknowledgement that only God has the right to issue commands and prohibitions, it follows that neither pastors nor boards, neither congregations nor groups of congregations, have any such right in the field of adiaphora. None of these can transform indifferent matters into binding precepts. To be sure, church officials and boards and teachers and pastors can effect desirable changes in the field of adiaphora, but it should be done by instruction and advice rather than by order and command.

Luther gives some practical advice on how to deal with those who would make a matter of conscience out of an adiaphoron. He says, “When ever others insist that one must do such non-essential things in obedience to them as being necessary to salvation, then one should not do anything they ask, but rather the very opposite, in order to prove that all that a Christian needs is faith and love. Whether anything else is to be done or not done must be left to Christian charity, as the circumstances may demand. To do such things out of love and Christian liberty does no harm, but to do them because of necessity and obedience is damnable.”¹²

For those who are inclined to make something a conscience matter be sure to go all the way. “There are many sins against which we must warn. Let us not make more sins than there are. Above all, let us not create scruples of conscience unless it is a matter in which we are ready to excommunicate those who act according to a conviction which we possibly cannot share. Either institute proceedings of church discipline or leave the matter alone. And I would certainly not say, “Thou shalt not,” unless I can quote Scripture.”¹³

A third category of abuse of the doctrine of adiaphora involves the important question of offense and the weak brother. The New Testament holds numerous references to those who are commonly called weak brothers, and the Apostle Paul deems this such an important topic that he devotes entire chapters in his letters to the Romans (14) and Corinthians (I Cor. 8) to the discussion. Our own conference considered it important enough to prevail upon Prof. Leroy Dobberstein only one year ago to present a paper on the “Doctrine of Offense.” We will not duplicate his effort here but would encourage your personal review of his work.

Let one section of Prof. Dobberstein’s paper serve to focus our attention on adiaphora and the question of offense.

In this connection Scripture speaks of strong and weak Christians. A weak Christian is one whose conscience troubles him in a matter of adiaphora. This may be the result of an erring or doubting conscience. The erring conscience is one which is quite certain that what the strong Christian rightly recognizes as an adiaphoron ought not be considered such. A doubting conscience is one which just isn’t sure. That Christian is still weak in this matter. To act, to do some thing his conscience tells him is wrong, or he is not sure about, is a sin against his conscience. “But the man who has doubt is condemned if he eats because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.” (Romans 14:23). It is for such weak Christians in any and all matters of adiaphora that the

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 82

⁹ Article X, Thorough Declaration, Formula of Concord, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 1061

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1057

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1061

¹² Wunderlich, *op. cit.*, p. 702

¹³ Graebner, *op. cit.*, p. 99

apostle expresses great concern and pleads with strong Christians to be considerate of them. In Romans 15:1-3 Paul writes: “We who are strong ought to bear with the failing of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please Himself, but as it is written: ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on Me.’” In the opening verse of the previous chapter Paul had said, “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgement on disputable matters. One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.” (Romans 14:1-2) The Corinthian congregation also had a mix of weak and strong Christians. As we already noted Paul expressed a special concern for the weak: “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.” (I Cor. 8:9) The same concern for the weak can be found in Paul’s writing to the Christians at Thessalonica. “And we urge you brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.” (I Thess. 5:14) A strong Christian in the exercise of his Christian liberty in any given matter might cause a weak Christian to follow his example, and thereby act against his conscience.

The Christian will forego his own liberty in a matter for the sake of another, a weak Christian. “To the weak, I become weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do this for the sake of the gospel, that I might share in its blessing.” (I Cor. 9:22-23).

Our discussion of causing offense in matters of adiaphora is not complete unless we hasten to add that a Christian will forego his Christian liberty only as long as the truth of the Gospel is not at stake.¹⁴

So what should we do with the weak? Let them remain weak in their faith and by it paralyze the church? Should every adiaphoron that may cause offense cause us to stop its use? No. We must first of all remember that the weak brother is just that, a brother in the faith! The strong is not to despise the weak or cause him to stumble, but bear with his weakness while trying to instruct him and to strengthen him.

Scripture is clear in what must be done. Leaders are to educate and instruct in the matter of Christian freedom. We must never assume that people know all they are to know, or will retain the clarity of any teaching indefinitely. We must constantly be using the Scripture for the purpose God breathed it, “for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (II Tim. 3:16). Are we, perhaps, failing to properly instruct the weak in the matter of adiaphora?

The charitable application of the doctrine of adiaphora, especially in this sphere of offense, is particularly difficult. In the first place, it is not a simple matter to decide what actually constitutes offense in all instances. It is also, by no means, easy to bring the necessary personal sacrifice which the required forbearance demands. Then, too, in our day and age, we are quite likely to err in the direction of liberalism rather than in the direction of pietism.

It is obviously impossible for us to catalog every kind of adiaphoron and then to declare, for every conceivable application, when it ceases to be an adiaphoron. Such a list would be bounded only by the observation, the experience, and the imagination of the individual Christian. The whole field of casuistry is not only filled with adiaphora but is largely composed of them.

Perhaps, in summary, a few general principles are desirable:

Human ordinances are necessary for the welfare of the Church, both locally, nationally, and internationally. “But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way,” St. Paul reminds us (I Cor. 14:40). While this is true in all matters of life, it is especially applicable to matters pertaining to church life. Often through fitting and orderly procedures there is an opportunity for growth in knowledge and appreciation. Such ordinances are properly in the realm of the Christian congregation and, as such, are subject to change. Such change should be made carefully and for a good reason. It is necessary that proper teaching be given and

¹⁴ Leroy A. Dobberstein, “Doctrine of Offense”, p. 6,

desirable that as many members of the congregation as possible participate in any discussion and decision relating to them. Then peace and order will be promoted. Finally, if an adiaphoron assumes a confessional character, it ceases to be an adiaphoron.

With regard to the personal life of the individual Christian the questions to be answered are: Does God command it? Does He forbid it? Is there any statement in God's Word which applies to it? If so, it is simply not an adiaphoron. Furthermore, does the law of love or the conscience of a brother make valid demands? If so, we voluntarily forego our freedom as long as no violation of the truth or selfish hypocrisy are involved. Evaluations by God's law and by love are needed!

In any discussion of this field we do well to remember Francis Pieper's practical advice in his *Christian Dogmatics*: "A discussion that in an adiaphorous matter becomes vehement and acrimonious indicates that the temper of the meeting is sinking below the Christian level. The discussion of the adiaphoron should then be interrupted and the Christian spirit and frame of mind be restored by instruction and admonition, e.g., on the basis of I Peter 5:5. (All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. ")."¹⁵

The discussion of adiaphora rightly belongs to the doctrine of Christian liberty. This is a glorious and comforting doctrine. As Christians we grow not by command and prohibition only or chiefly. The Christian lives, grows, and thrives by divine grace and love. Imagine! "Within the framework of His divine revelation, God's grace permits you and me, sinners though we be, to devise and use new and unprescribed ways and means of applying our Christianity, limited in number and variety only by a divinely enlightened understanding of His Word and a divinely inspired love toward our neighbor. This is grace, pure grace, exalted grace, divine grace."¹⁶

¹⁵ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, p. 430

¹⁶ Wunderlich, *op. cit.*, p. 708

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