

IDENTIFYING GOOD AND BAD STUMBLING BLOCKS IN MINISTRY

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## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER ONE .....	3
A Word Study on “Stumbling Block” .....	3
1 Corinthians 8:9 .....	4
Romans 14:13 .....	9
1 Corinthians 1:23 .....	13
CHAPTER TWO .....	16
The History of Article X of the Formula of Concord: The Adiaphoristic Controversy.....	16
Definition of Adiaphora .....	17
The Interims and Adiaphoristic Controversy .....	18
Article X: The response to the Interims and the Adiaphoristic Controversy .....	21
Applying Article X in this Present Age.....	24
CHAPTER THREE .....	29
Case Studies on being a Good Stumbling Block and a Bad Stumbling Block. ....	29
Research Participants.....	30
Participant A: The Gospel Preached as a Stumbling Block. ....	31
Participant A: Members being a Stumbling Block to others. ....	32
Participant B: Being a Stumbling Block by your Decisions and Actions. ....	33
Participant B: The Gospel Preached as a Stumbling Block.....	34
Participant B: Members being a Stumbling Block to others. ....	35
CONCLUSION.....	42
APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS .....	43

BIBLIOGRAPHY..... 44

## ABSTRACT

What does it mean to be a stumbling block in the church? There is both a good and bad way of being a stumbling block for the church. Being a stumbling block in the good sense will help people understand the truth about the Christian church and what they teach. Being a stumbling block in the bad sense might make people question if that church is for them. This paper will help people understand what it truly means to be a stumbling block and a good one in the church. This paper reveals how “stumbling block” is used in the Bible and the historical setting behind the word. This paper also brings present-day situations on being a good stumbling block rather than a bad one.

## INTRODUCTION

I have heard the phrase, “Don’t be a stumbling block!” quite a bit in my lifetime. I have heard it used more frequently these past couple of years. Hearing the words, stumbling block, made me want to explore this phrase at a deeper level. I was curious if we were using the phrase correctly or if it was said a while ago and used in an unfitting way. As I looked deeper and talked more about being a stumbling block, I found out that there was a positive way to be a stumbling block and not just a negative way. Being a stumbling block in a positive way can help avoid the so-called “right” and “left” ditches. Strey explained these ditches as they were explained to him by a professor from the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

“Don’t drive into the left ditch to avoid the right ditch.” While students at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, my classmates and I frequently heard this advice from Professor John Schuetze, who teaches both systematic theology and pastoral theology. He repeatedly warned us about two false extremes to avoid in the ministry. The — ‘right ditch’ is legalism—insisting upon laws or customs which are not decreed in Scripture and, as a result, replacing the gospel with the law. The — ‘left ditch’ is libertinism—exerting Christian freedom to the point that it scandalizes and confuses other Christians and distorts the gospel. Both movements are alive and well in the church at large today. Both movements threaten a clear and proper understanding of the Word of God in general, and the gospel of Christ in particular.<sup>1</sup>

The negative way of being a stumbling block can be crucial to another person’s view of Christ and what he did for all people. In the positive way, Christ is the center of being the ultimate stumbling block for the pathway to heaven. This paper will define the term, stumbling block, and what that means for the Christian life. This paper will also talk about what it means to

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1. Johnold J. Strey, “Neither Papistic nor Karlstadtian: Luther’s Principles of Adiaphora Applied to the Liturgical Life of the Church.” (October 2009): 1.

be a stumbling block in the good sense and what it means to be a stumbling block in the bad sense.

This paper will begin with a word study on the term stumbling block and how the people used it during the Biblical era. Then this paper will talk about the word adiaphora and how the adiaphoristic controversy pertains to the effects of being a stumbling block towards others. This paper will then end with how being a stumbling block in the positive and negative aspects still affects churches today. These steps will hopefully help a pastor or Christian become a stumbling block, in the positive way, not the negative way, for the growth of God's kingdom.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **A Word Study on Stumbling Block.**

The word, stumbling block, is a word that appears eleven times in the NIV 2011 translation of the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Stumbling block appears in five separate Old Testament passages (Leviticus 19:14, Ezekiel 3:20, Ezekiel 14:3, Ezekiel 14:4, and Ezekiel 14:7), and appears in six different New Testament passages (Matthew 16:23, Romans 11:9, Romans 14:13, 1 Corinthians 1:23, 1 Corinthians 8:9, 2 Corinthians 6:3).

I have narrowed my focus to three of these passages representing the key issues I will discuss. I chose to focus on Romans 14:13, 1 Corinthians 1:23, and 1 Corinthians 8:9. Focusing on these passages more in-depth will help pastors and lay members understand what the word “stumbling block” truly means.

Before I get into talking about those three important passages, let me first talk about the other passages that have the word, stumbling block, in them. The passages in the Old Testament all use the same word for stumbling block in the Hebrew language. The Hebrew word that is used for stumbling block is *mik-šôl*. Each time the term *mik-šôl* is used in the five Old Testament

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2. All Bible references will be from NIV 2011 unless otherwise noted.

passages, the word talks about something that would cause a person to stumble over either literally or figuratively.

In the three New Testament passages that I am not focusing on, the Greek word is the same for two out of the three. In Matthew 16:23 and Romans 11:9, the Greek word used for stumbling block is σκάνδαλον (*skandalon*). *Skandalon* is the Greek word that is most used for stumbling block, but in 2 Corinthians 6:3, the Greek word used for stumbling block is προσκοπή (*proskope*). The definition for προσκοπή is an occasion for taking offense or for making a misstep.<sup>3</sup> A stumbling block gives people offense or causes someone to step in the wrong direction. Both of these definitions are what Paul is addressing in the passages that I have decided to focus primarily on in this paper.

#### 1 Corinthians 8:9

1 Corinthians 8:9 says, “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.” The context and background information helps us understand the verse. The story of how Paul found the Corinthian church is recorded in Acts 18:1-17. His founding of the Corinthian church was a success as “many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized.” (Acts 18:8). While Paul remained in Corinth for a year and a half, Carelton Toppe says, “he established what was perhaps the largest of his mission congregations.”<sup>4</sup>

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3. W. Arndt, F. W. Danker, W. Bauer, & F. W. Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature 3rd ed.*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 882.

4. Carleton A. Toppe, *The People's Bible: 1 Corinthians* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern, 1987), 3.



A little while after Paul had left Corinth, the Corinthian church started to have troubles. The troubles that arose in the Corinthian church needed to be fixed. The specific problems that needed to be fixed were:

(1) The congregation was in danger of splintering into factions because groups attached themselves to certain pastors and looked down upon others. There were the Paul clique, the Apollos clique, and the Peter clique. And there was also the group that had little regard for pastors and their ministry; they claimed to be following Christ alone... (2) Heathen ways began to reassert themselves. The congregation was in danger of lapsing into paganism. There were problems with Christians running to heathen judges to settle matters Christians should be able to settle themselves. The influence of pagan friends and relatives threatened to draw them back to idol sacrifices. (3) Like many Americans who make much of their 'rights,' there were Corinthian Christians who abused their Christian liberty. They advocated sexual freedom, they were ready to grant to the women in the church rights that would violate the order established by God, and they tolerated disorderly services...(4) The gift of speaking with tongues, for example, was much sought after, even though the gift of preaching the gospel was much more profitable for the congregation...(5) there were members of the congregation who questioned the bodily resurrection...(6) The congregation was overly concerned about its standing among its sophisticated pagan neighbors. Its leaders wanted to be able to boast about the 'wisdom' they had discovered in their new religion.<sup>5</sup>

Amid all of these troubles, the main problem that 1 Corinthians 8:9 addresses is the Corinthian Christians abusing their Christian liberty. The Corinthian Christians' abuse of their Christian right was causing stumbling blocks for other Christians. The way that Corinthian Christians were being stumbling blocks to other Christians is a way that needs more explanation.

This problem addressed in 1 Corinthians 8:9 was: would the Corinthian Christians be involved in the practice of idolatry if they ate meat from an animal sacrificed to an idol? This question was because the sacrificed meat was divided into several parts. Some of the meat became an idol offering on the altar, some was usually eaten at a sacrificial meal in the temple, and some was given to the priests. Also, a portion of the meat was being sold in the meat markets

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5. Toppe, *The People's Bible: 1 Corinthians*, 3-4.

of the temples or cities. This type of meat sold in the markets and available for purchase is why the Corinthian Christians were asking about idolatry. Also, Lockwood explains another dilemma that the Corinthians Christians would have faced.

Finally we need to mention the dilemma facing the Christian who was invited to a meal in the home of a non-Christian. While it appears that many meals in pagan homes were not accompanied by religious rites, it was particularly at special celebrations like feast in honor of the gods, weddings, birthdays, days of thanksgiving, funerals, and some lesser celebrations that sacrifice was likely to be offered. For the Christian to avoid all such social events, or to refuse the food offered on such occasions, could have serious consequences. It could destroy opportunities for friendship and social advancement, and mark a Christian as ‘odd and repugnant’.<sup>6</sup>

Later in chapter ten of 1 Corinthians, Paul said that the Christians were allowed to eat the meat because it did not belong to the idol but to the Lord (1 Corinthians 10:25,26). Toppe goes on to explain that Corinthian Christians should still be careful, “Yet it is understandable that some Corinthian Christians, recently rescued from idolatry and brought to faith in the true God, would feel uncomfortable about contact with any aspect or reminder of idol worship. They now feared and loathed idolatry.”<sup>7</sup> Paul mentions the newly converted Corinthian Christians as weak Christians. He calls them this not to degrade them but to help the stronger Christians, who have had the faith longer, understand the seriousness of their actions. Paul wants the strong Corinthian Christians to help their weak Corinthian Christian brothers out when confused and not understanding things. Lockwood talks about the reason for Paul’s wise counsel towards the Corinthian Christians:

The apostle’s wise counsel was needed to enable the Corinthian church to enjoy (as far as possible) normal social intercourse without compromising the faith. Paul advocates a middle course between the overly scrupulous attitudes of traditional Judaism and some Jewish Christians, and the tendency of Gentile Christians (and perhaps some

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6. Gregory J. Lockwood, *Concordia Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2000), 272-273.

7. Toppe, *The People’s Bible: 1 Corinthians*, 76.

“enlightened” Jewish Christians) not only to cause offense but also to endanger their salvation by their associations with heathen temples.<sup>8</sup>

Paul had to address this problem because the strong Corinthian Christians were endangering salvation for the weak Corinthian Christians.

This all leads to what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 8:9, “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.” Some of the strong Corinthian Christians were eating the meat, in which some were used as a sacrifice to the idols. The weak Corinthian Christians saw this happening and thought it was wrong to do this. The strong Corinthians were a stumbling block for the weak Corinthians and their faith. The Greek word used here for stumbling block is Πρόσκομμα, and Lockwood explains what Πρόσκομμα means: “BAGD, 2 a, defines a πρόσκομμα as ‘lit[erally] *obstacle, hindrance* of a rough road.’ Its figurative sense is “an occasion to take offense, ... an obstacle in the brother’s way” (BAGD, 2 b). Πρόσκομμα (Rom. 14:13, 20) and the cognate verb προσκόπτω (Rom 14:21) are synonyms of σκάνδαλον (Rom 14:13) and σκανδαλίζω (1 Cor 8:13).”<sup>9</sup> The word means an obstacle, which is what the strong Christians were to the weak Christians. They were being an obstacle on the road to salvation. Notice as well that the word is also a synonym to the word σκάνδαλον, which is the word most used in the Greek when someone refers to a stumbling block.

Some of the strong Christians of Corinth did not understand how they were being stumbling blocks to the weak Christians of Corinth. However, Paul was aware of this and knew exactly how they were stumbling blocks for others.

And Paul’s loving pastoral concern for the whole congregation has made him aware that some of the Corinthians are not yet free from the emotional pull of their former

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8. Lockwood, *Concordia Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 273.

9. Lockwood, *Concordia Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 284.

attachment to idols. As soon as they give into pressure from friends and join them for a meal in an idol's temple, the old associations begin to reassert themselves. They find they are not able to regard the meat simply as a gift from the Creator. The meat has been offered to idols. So their conscience is defiled; they eat and go home feeling guilty because they have participated, at least outwardly, in a ritual of worship of a false god (cf. Rom 14:23).<sup>10</sup>

It was a matter of the conscience in the weak Christian's heart. The weak Christian thought it was wrong to eat meat that was a part of idol worship. Some strong Corinthians of Corinth knew precisely what they were doing but did not care. Gordon Fee says, "For the Corinthians 'knowledge' (=insight) means 'rights' to act in 'freedom.' Thus for them freedom became the highest good, since it led to the exaltation of the individual. For Paul the opposite prevails: 'Love' means the 'free giving up' of one's 'rights' for the sake of others (cf. 9:19-23), and 'life together' in community is the aim of salvation."<sup>11</sup> Paul understood that Christian freedom needed to take a back seat for the faith of a weak Christian to remain. The strong-faith Christians of Corinth did not understand the significant issue at hand. Paul knew that the most outstanding problems for him in this section were the attitudinal ones; they needed careful hearing: people arguing for behavior based on knowledge and asserting their 'authority/freedom' to the detriment of others.<sup>12</sup>

Paul showed love to all Christians by letting the strong Christians of Corinth know that they were being stumbling blocks towards their weak brothers of faith. As a pastor and a lay member look at 1 Corinthians 8:9, they also should be asking the question, "How do I not become a stumbling block for other Christians?" Lockwood says, "Not only should each

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10. Lockwood, *Concordia Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 285.

11. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 385.

12. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 392.

Christian strive to live before God and his neighbor with a good conscience, but he should also try to keep others in the congregation from the burden of a stained conscience. This is part of what it means to live as sanctified people (1 Cor. 1:2).<sup>13</sup> Live as sanctified people who do things out of love for Christ Jesus who died for them. If living a sanctified life means what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8:13 “Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall,” so shall it be. Toppe also has good advice for someone tempted to think that their Christian freedom is worth more than someone else’s faith.

Every Christian who feels that he may exercise his Christian freedom when and where he pleases should read verses 9-13 slowly and thoughtfully. Burdening the conscience of a weak brother can have fearful consequences. How dare strong Christians offend their weaker brothers and endanger their souls’ salvation, when it cost the Son of God his life to redeem them and to make them his own? How can they be so indifferent to the salvation of their brothers’ souls?<sup>14</sup>

#### Romans 14:13

Romans 14:13 says, “Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.” Now, Paul’s letter to the Romans is not like his letter to the Corinthians. First of all, Paul never has been to Rome, and he did not start the church in Rome. Second, he says in Romans 1:11-12, “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong— that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.” Paul not only is eager to see the Christians in Rome, but he also hopes and prays that they can build each other up in the one true faith. Thirdly, Paul’s intent in writing the letter to the Romans does not seem to have any

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13. Lockwood, *Concordia Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 285.

14. Toppe, *The People’s Bible: 1 Corinthians*, 79.

purpose in solving any specific problems. Armin Panning explains the reason for Paul's letter to the Romans in this way:

Natural man's lack of righteousness (1:18-3:20) is offset by the righteousness that comes from God, the righteousness earned by Christ and received by the sinner through faith (3:21-5:21). Having received Christ's righteousness through faith, the justified sinner is now moved to live a life of righteousness that conforms in ever greater degree to God's will (6:1-8:39). After a three-chapter interlude in which he speaks of God's righteousness in dealing with Israel (9:1-11:36), the apostle addresses specific situations in the faith-life of the Romans. Included among these is a request for their support in sharing the good news of God's righteousness with those in the West who still need to hear that saving message.<sup>15</sup>

Romans 14:13 talks about the specific situations in the faith life of the Romans. Here again, Paul is considering the weak Christian when someone uses their freedom of Christian liberty. The Romans needed to know this if they were to anchor the new wave of gospel outreach to the West.<sup>16</sup>

How were the Romans being stumbling blocks to other Roman Christians? Is it the same reason that the Corinthian Christians were being stumbling blocks? Middendorf says,

Paul devotes a lengthy discussion in 1 Corinthians 8-10 to the eating of meat that had been sacrificed to idols, which was common practice in pagan society and most of the Corinthian Christians seem to have been Gentile converts from paganism. A number of church fathers identify the problem in Rome as such too... But this view does not take into consideration the concerns unique to Romans: different convictions in regard to holy days (Rom. 14:5-6), the description of foods as being "unclean" (κοινός, 14:14 [three times]), and Paul's conviction that all foods are "clean, pure" (καθαρός, 14:20)...the "weak" Christians in Rome felt obligated to adhere to the ceremonial stipulations of the Torah. Even if the "weak" Romans had no scruples about Gentile Christians disregarding those Mosaic stipulations, they felt that, as far as they themselves were concerned, they could not with a clear conscience give up the observance of such requirements of the law as the distinction between clean and unclean foods, the avoidance of blood, the keeping of the Sabbath and other special days.<sup>17</sup>

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15. Armin J. Panning, *The People's Bible: Romans* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern, 1999), 7-8.

16. Panning, *The People's Bible: Romans*, 9.

17. Michael P. Middendorf, *Concordia Commentary: Romans 9-16* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2016), 1376-1377.

The weak Roman Christians could not let go of the ceremonial law about the “clean” and “unclean” foods. The strong Roman Christians understood that the ceremonial law was not for them since Jesus died on the cross and fulfilled the ceremonial laws. Since the strong Christians in Rome understood this, they ate foods that were so-called “unclean.” The weak Christians of Rome saw this, and their consciences were bothered by this.

This all leads to what Paul said to the Romans in Romans 14:13, “Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.” In the Greek text of this passage, we have the word πρόσκομμα which was the word that was used in 1 Corinthians 8:9, and the Greek also has the word σκάνδαλον, which is the common word used for stumbling block in the Greek. Middendorf explains what both terms mean in English:

Πρόσκομμα – Previously Paul used this neuter noun in conjunction with λίθος, “rock of stumbling” (9:32,33), but here the accusative noun stands alone as “a [cause for] stumbling,” as also in 14:20...ἢ σκάνδαλον – The neuter noun σκάνδαλον, “scandal, offense,” is a synonym of the preceding noun Πρόσκομμα; the two were used together also in 9:33.<sup>18</sup>

Paul is telling the strong Christians of Rome that they are the cause of the weak Christians stumbling. Their cause for making the weak Christians stumble is an offense because they make the weak Christians stumble on something significant. Douglas Moo says, “‘Stumbling block’ translates a word that refers to that which causes a person to trip or stumble. The word took on a metaphorical sense and is always used in the NT with reference to spiritual downfall.”<sup>19</sup> Again, here in this passage, Paul is warning the strong Christians of Rome this time that they are being a

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18. Middendorf, *Concordia Commentary: Romans 9-16*, 1411.

19. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle of the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 851.

stumbling block to their fellow believers by putting up an obstacle between them and God. Paul then continues, positively urging his strong faith brothers to build up the body of Christ. Moo says, “Positively, Paul urges the ‘strong’ to recognize that their freedom on these matters (‘their good’ in v. 16) must be governed by love for their fellow believers (v. 15) and concern for the ‘building up’ of the body of Christ (v. 19).”<sup>20</sup>

Again, as pastors and lay members of the church, how can we not become a stumbling block towards others? The pastor and lay member are to not stand in judgment towards one another but to build each other up. Moo states, “Both the ‘strong’ Christian and the ‘weak’ Christian, Paul has made clear, are to stop standing in judgment over one another; for God has accepted each one, and it is to their master, the Lord who has redeemed them, and not to any fellow servant, that they are answerable.”<sup>21</sup> The Lord has redeemed every single person, so as a pastor and a lay member of a church, act like a redeemed child of God. Again, if someone thinks, in their conscience, something is wrong, correct them and show them how a Christian should act and live. Panning says it best and restates what was stated in 1 Corinthians 8:9:

The problem, however, comes when the strong Christian, by using his Christian liberty to eat anything, thereby puts pressure on the weak Christian to eat what in his heart he feels God has forbidden. “All food is clean,” the apostle says, “but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble.”<sup>22</sup>

Today, an example of this is someone who thinks that drinking beer is a sin. A pastor or a member of the Christian faith may want to reconsider drinking beer before them so that their conscience does not bother them. But then what the pastor or member of the Christian faith can

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20. Moo, *The Epistle of the Romans*, 850.

21. Moo, *The Epistle of the Romans*, 850.

22. Panning, *The People’s Bible: Romans*, 226.



instruct that person and help them understand that drinking beer is not a sin, but the sin is when you consume too much and become drunk. That is showing love to your Christian brother or sister.

### 1 Corinthians 1:23

1 Corinthians 1:23 says, “but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,” One thing to remember is that there is a good way of being a stumbling block. If there weren’t a good way of being a stumbling block, then Paul would not have written 1 Corinthians 1:23. As a pastor and as a lay member in the church, you need to know how to be a good stumbling block and not a bad one. What does Paul mean here that “Christ crucified” is a stumbling block? To understand the answer to that question, I again take you back to the context of this passage.

The Greek word that is used here again is σκάνδαλον. Lockwood gives a great definition of this word in the context that it is in. “Σκάνδαλον – Cf. BAGD, s.v. σκάνδαλον, 3: *‘That which gives offense or causes revulsion.’* The preaching of Christ crucified arouses disapproval and opposition, even violence (cf. Rom 9:33; Gal 5:11; 1 Pet 2:8).”<sup>23</sup> Again, like before, the letter to the Corinthians was a letter that Paul wrote to correct how the Corinthians were falling away from the true faith. Paul first talks about the divisions within the church to start his letter to the Corinthians, but then he moves on and talks about Christ and how he is the wisdom and power of God. Paul talks about how Christ is foolishness for some but great power for those being saved.

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23. Lockwood, *Concordia Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 63.

The unbelievers who see Christ's work as foolishness also see Christ as a stumbling block before them. One could say that the unbelievers disapprove of Christ's crucifixion.

Jews disapproved of Christ's crucifixion and its power because they could not imagine an influential person being put to death like that. Lockwood explains what some of the Jews had thought about Christ being crucified:

“To Jews” a crucified Messiah was “a stumbling block” (1 Cor 1:23), “an obstacle in coming to faith.” While there was a great diversity of messianic expectations among first-century Jews, those expectations consistently were for a *powerful* figure. Moreover, anyone who had been crucified was repugnant, having been cursed by God (Deut 21:22-23; cf. Gal 3:13). For Jews, then, the cross was the most shameful death imaginable (Heb 12:2).<sup>24</sup>

When the Jews thought of somebody being crucified, they thought that was the worst death imaginable. What kind of God would think to have his own Son die on the cross? Some Jews simply could not and would not be able to wrap their minds around an all-powerful God being crucified. Fee says, “There is simply no way that ‘Christ crucified’ could be fitted into their understanding either of God or of Scripture. Hence, ‘a stumbling block to Jews.’”<sup>25</sup> Paul goes on to say that Christ crucified is foolishness to Gentiles. Some Gentiles did not believe either because they also thought an all-powerful God would never be put to death on a cross.

To Gentiles, enmeshed in a culture enamored of power and success, it also made no sense that a crucified criminal was held up as Savior of the world (cf. 1 Cor 1:18). There is probably significance in the shift from “Greeks” (1:22) to “Gentiles” (1:23). Greeks were known for their wisdom. But not only Greeks, but especially Romans with their thirst for power would find the notion of a crucified Messiah ridiculous.<sup>26</sup>

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24. Lockwood, *Concordia Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 70.

25. Fee, *The first Epistle to the Corinthians*, 76.

26. Lockwood, *Concordia Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 70.

Christ crucified is also a stumbling block for people today. Some unbelievers today have the same thoughts that the Jews and Greeks had. Today, some unbelievers can't believe that an almighty God would give himself up to a cross and die, but that happened. Today, some unbelievers think that Christians who believe this are fools, but Christians are going to heaven because of what God did. Some unbelievers think that they must do something to get into heaven today, but that is not true at all. It is true that even today, "Christ crucified" is a stumbling block for some. Rejoice, knowing that the gospel message, which no one can fathom, is the greatest truth known to man. Toppe says, "The Jews saw the cross as proof of weakness, absolutely; God made that cross the world's most powerful instrument for good. The Greeks saw the gospel as proof of absurdity; God made that gospel the greatest truth the mind of man can receive."<sup>27</sup>

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27. Toppe, *The People's Bible: 1 Corinthians*, 21.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **The History of Article X of the Formula of Concord: The Adiaphoristic Controversy.**

Remember that a stumbling block is a hindrance or obstacle that causes someone to hesitate or fall. Spiritually speaking, a stumbling block can be an obstacle that causes someone to fall away from the true gospel message of Christ crucified. We also know that a stumbling block can affect someone's faith in Christ. This relates to the Adiaphoristic Controversy, which Article X in the Formula of Concord addresses. Wade Johnston says that the Adiaphoristic Controversy is,

one of the most bitter and disastrous controversies the Evangelical Lutheran Church has suffered to this day, which ultimately led to Article X of the Formula of Concord, which by God's good grace grounded the discussion in and settled the issue upon the Holy Scriptures for a majority of Lutheranism, and which, on account of Satan's wicked scheming, is in desperate need of our continuous and undistracted attention again today.<sup>28</sup>

This controversy is all about the abuse of Christian freedoms and how it can be detrimental to other people's faith. One could say that the misuse of your Christian freedom can act as a stumbling block that causes other Christians to fall away from their faith. But before we get to the heart of the Adiaphoristic Controversy. We must first define and have a better understanding of the word adiaphora.

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28. Wade R. Johnston. "Article X of the Formula of Concord and Lutheranism Today," *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (March 2010): 68.

## Definition of Adiaphora

David Scaer says:

Adiaphora is a Greek word that means “things morally indifferent” or “nonessentials in faith or conduct.” It would hardly seem that the church would need an article of doctrine on things that really do not matter. But it was a controversy over adiaphora that precipitated the first recognizable split in Lutheran ranks after Luther’s death.<sup>29</sup>

What does it mean that adiaphora is a thing that does not matter? If adiaphora did not matter, why did it cause an uprising and a split in the Lutheran ranks? Wade Johnston gives a clearer picture of what it means that adiaphora is something that does not matter:

“Ceremonies which God has neither commanded nor prohibited are adiaphora (*res mediae, Mitteldinge*) and *ceteris paribus* (other things being equal), may be observed or omitted, adopted or rejected.” I would conjecture that that phrase, “ceremonies which God has neither commanded nor prohibited,” would be close to the definition one would solicit from the average Wisconsin synod or evangelical Lutheran synod pastor in the parish, and it is a good one, for it is the same as that which our Lutheran fathers employed in the Formula.<sup>30</sup>

How does the Formula of Concord define adiaphora? Does the Formula of Concord’s definition fit with what Johnston and Scaer have said? Johnston continues his quote from before with what the Formula of Concord says about the term adiaphora. “Concerning ceremonies or church rites which are neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word but have been introduced into the church for the sake of good order and propriety, a dissension has also occurred among the theologians of the Augsburg Confession.”<sup>31</sup> The different ceremonies and church rites written in the Formula of Concord will be discussed later in the paper. The Formula’s definition for adiaphora will be our definition as well. For the sake of this paper, we will say that certain

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29. David P. Scaer *Getting into the Story of Concord: A History of the Book of Concord* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1977), 90-91.

30. Johnston, “Article X,” 70.

31. Quoted in Johnston, “Article X,” 70.

ceremonies and church rites are adiaphora and are neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word.

### The Interims and Adiaphoristic Controversy

Between the time of Luther and the time in which the Formula of Concord was written, the Lutherans had been suffering from deceitful theologians. Not only were Lutherans experiencing problems with theologians, but they also were going up against princes who used their political schemes to improve their destiny. Martin Luther died on February 18, 1546. And with the great leader for the Lutherans out of the way, the emperor, Charles V, wanted one united church with the pope as its head. Charles V was determined to achieve this goal, so he used all the military power to achieve it.

Emperor Charles had good relations with Rome, so the pope agreed to the emperor's order to have a council. Now that the emperor had his council and armies, the emperor's dream of one Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation would be fulfilled. There was just one thing that was standing in the way. The Smalcald League<sup>32</sup> had to be gone. David Scaer explains how the Smalcald League was dismembered:

The emperor offered Maurice, the head of ducal Saxony, the title of Elector of Saxony, which included the lands belonging to electoral Saxony, if he would help him suppress the Smalcald League. The temptation was too great for Maurice to resist. Another prominent Lutheran prince, Philip of Hesse, had broken imperial law by committing bigamy. The emperor promised him exemption from punishment if he deserted the Lutheran cause. Philip accepted the offer but still was imprisoned when the emperor failed to keep his promise.<sup>33</sup>

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32. The Smalcald League was started by Philip of Hesse and John Frederick, the Elector of Saxony. The League was originally a defensive religious alliance with the members pledging to defend each other if their territories were attacked by Charles V.

33. Scaer, *Getting into the Story of Concord*, 78.

After the emperor took apart the Smalcald League, he defeated the Lutherans at Muehlberg on the Elbe River on April 24, 1547. Scaer says, “These were some of the saddest and most tragic days for Lutheranism.”<sup>34</sup> During this battle at Muehlberg, the emperor defeated and imprisoned Elector John Frederick. John Frederick was one of the prominent people who had held the Lutheran cause together at Smalcald in 1537. The emperor had accomplished everything that he wanted to do.

Since the emperor had accomplished everything he needed to complete, he started to bring Roman Catholic doctrine and customs into the churches of the Reformation. The document that brought about these changes was called the Augsburg Interim. The word “Interim” was a term designated a temporary solution until the council, which the pope called, could provide a more permanent one.<sup>35</sup> Robert Kolb gives a great explanation of the details of the Augsburg Interim.

Charles promulgated his *Declaration on Religion* on May 15, 1548. Popularly known as the “Augsburg Interim,” it granted two minor concessions to Evangelicals who obtained special permission for them: communion in both kinds and the right of priests to marry. It also imposed Roman dogma, expressed in the manner of the Erasmian reform party, on Evangelical lands. The Interim linked justification to the gift of *caritas* and thus to the performance of good works. It restored the power of papal bishops and the authority of the pope. It affirmed all seven medieval sacraments and their use in the church. It defended the medieval practice of the mass and insisted that the Evangelicals use its traditional form and trappings as well as the sacramentals connected with various aspects of religious life. The Interim threatened the end of Luther’s movement and of the Evangelical churches.<sup>36</sup>

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34. Scaer, *Getting into the Story of Concord*, 78.

35. Scaer, *Getting into the Story of Concord*, 78-79.

36. Robert A. Kolb, *A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord*. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia 1978), 18.

This was just too much for Maurice, the new elector of Saxony, so he decided to issue another Interim that was not too strict.<sup>37</sup> This Interim was called the Leipzig Interim. Kolb explains the details of this Interim as well:

The basic principle of this Interim was concession on indifferent matters (adiaphora) and retention of the Evangelical understanding of justification. The document does stress divine grace and mercy as the causative factor of justification. Christ's atoning work brings forgiveness of sins, it states. But the phrase 'through faith alone' is omitted, and the role of good works in the Christian life is emphasized. Faith, hope, and love are necessary for salvation, according to the Leipzig Interim.<sup>38</sup>

The Roman Catholics were reintroducing some of their customs back into the Lutheran churches. Some examples of the Romans' customs reintroducing to the Lutherans were: certain hymns needing to be sung, chanting, readings, ministers, places, times, vestments, the ringing of bells, fasting, times for places, and times for prayer.<sup>39</sup> The Roman Catholics were also making these certain customs mandatory in the worship practices of the Lutheran church. This was an issue for the Lutherans as they looked over the Leipzig Interim. This issue caused Article X to be written and to address how the matters of adiaphora were being abused. These ceremonies could be a stumbling block for members of the Lutheran churches. The concessions made in the Interims made some people think that these ceremonies had to be in worship. This adiaphora controversy caused an argument between the Lutherans as well. The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord explains the two sides of the debate:

In the same way a dispute arose among some theologians of the Augsburg Confession over ceremonies and ecclesiastical practices that are neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word but have been introduced into the church with good intentions for the sake of good order and decorum or to maintain Christian discipline. One party held that even

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37. Scaer, "Getting into the story of Concord," 79.

38. Kolb A Contemporary look at the Formula of Concord, 21.

39. Robert Kolb, and Timothy J. Wengert. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 635.



in a time of persecution that demands confession of the faith when the enemies of the holy gospel have not come to agreement with us in public teaching it is permissible with a clear conscience, under the pressure and the demands of the opponents, to restore certain ceremonies that had earlier been abrogated (which are in and of themselves indifferent, neither commanded nor forbidden by God). They held that it is permissible to compromise with them in these adiaphora or indifferent matters. The other party argued, however, that in a time of persecution that demands confession of the faith particularly when the opponents are striving either through violence and coercion or through craft and deceit to suppress pure teaching and subtly to slip their false teaching back into our churches such things, even indifferent things, may in no way be permitted with a clear conscience and without damaging the divine truth.<sup>40</sup>

There needed to be a Lutheran response to these Interims and the controversy over adiaphora.

The Lutherans' answer was Article X in the Formula of Concord.

#### Article X: The Response to the Interims and the Adiaphoristic Controversy

According to Arand, Kolb, and Nestingen, there were three major issues that the adiaphoristic controversy raised. These issues were: “(1) the relationship between Christian freedom and ceremonies or usages in the church; (2) the nature of public confession of the truth; and (3) the relationship between the church and the society in which it lives, more specifically, the secular government of that society.”<sup>41</sup> These three significant issues caused some differences in opinions. These differences in views caused a split within the Lutheran church body. Two of the groups were led by prominent men that every Lutheran looked up to back at that time. One group was the Philippists, whom Philip Melancthon led. The other group was called the Gnesio Lutherans, led by Matthias Flacius. The third group was not led by anyone but committed to the views of Luther. Scaer explains the differences between these three groups of Lutherans:

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40. Kolb and Wengert. *The Book of Concord*, 635-636.

41. C. P. Arand, J. A. Nestingen, & R. Kolb. *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press), 183.

The restoration of political peace in the Lutheran lands was not accompanied by theological harmony and concord in the churches, however. Three different factions developed among the Lutherans. One was headed by Melanchthon, who was generally recognized as Luther's natural successor. Called Philippists, after Philip Melanchthon, this group favored some types of reconciliation with the Reformed and the Roman Catholics. They permitted the reintroduction of Roman Catholic customs into their churches without too much objection. These men were chiefly associated with the University of Wittenberg, where Luther had taught for so many years. At the opposite end of the spectrum were the so-called "Gnesio-Lutherans" ("genuine Lutherans"), led by a young theologian named Matthias Flacius. They advocated an uncompromising adherence to Luther's views and demanded exposure of Melanchthon's group as being un-Lutheran. The last group to emerge, occupying a center position, was completely committed to Luther's views but saw the restoration of harmony among the Lutherans at their first goal. From this third group emerged the Formula of Concord. It spoke directly to the problems which had caused internal strife, but it spoke in such a way that unity could be restored.<sup>42</sup>

Now, not only does the Lutheran church have a controversy that is looming over them, but they also have their leaders in a disagreement. Here is where the Formula of Concord comes into play. The Formula of Concord would restore peace and harmony among the Lutherans through a doctrinal agreement.<sup>43</sup> That doctrinal agreement would be found in Article X of the Formula of Concord.

As stated earlier, Article X of the Formula of Concord explained the issue at hand and why Article X had to be written. Article X continues by making a solid declaration or a stance on what the Lutheran church body believes teaches, and confesses. We will look at the Epitome of Article X, a summary of what the Lutherans believe, teach, and confess on the controversy of adiaphora.

1. To settle this dispute, we unanimously believe, teach, and confess that the ceremonies or ecclesiastical practices that are neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word, but have been established only for good order and decorum, are in and of themselves neither worship ordained by God nor a part of such worship. "In vain they do worship me" with human precepts (Matt. 15[:9]).

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42. Scaer, *Getting into the Story of Concord*, 79-80.

43. Scaer, *Getting into the Story of Concord*, 81.

2. We believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every place and at every time has the authority to alter such ceremonies according to its own situation, as may be most useful and edifying for the community of God.
3. Of course, all frivolity and offense must be avoided, and special consideration must be given particularly to those who are weak in faith.
4. We believe, teach, and confess that in a time of persecution, when an unequivocal confession of the faith is demanded of us, we dare not yield to the opponents in such indifferent matters. As the apostle wrote, "Stand firm in the freedom for which Christ has set us free, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" [Gal. 5:1]. And: "Do not put on the yoke of the others; what partnership is there between light and darkness?" [2 Cor. 6:14]. "So that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you, we did not submit to them even for a moment" [Gal. 2:5]. For in such a situation it is no longer indifferent matters that are at stake. The truth of the gospel and Christian freedom are at stake. The confirmation of open idolatry, as well as the protection of the weak in faith from offense, is at stake. In such matters we can make no concessions but must offer an unequivocal confession and suffer whatever God sends and permits the enemies of his Word to inflict on us.
5. We also believe, teach, and confess that no church should condemn another because the one has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other has, when otherwise there is unity with the other in teaching and all the articles of faith and in the proper use of the holy sacraments, according to the well-known saying, "*Dissonantia ieiunii no dissolvit consonantiam fidei*," "Dissimilarity in fasting is not to disrupt unity in faith."<sup>44</sup>

Notice that each point here has covered the issues that were previously stated. The main point of Article X is not to let the gospel be hindered by anything outside what God has plainly stated from the Bible. If you claim that a custom needs to be done in the church and it is not said in the Bible, you are causing an unwanted hindrance towards your brother in Christ. You are potentially being a stumbling block towards your brother. But you can use your Christian freedom in a good way by explaining to your brother why that custom is not necessary for salvation. When you do this for your brother, you are taking that unneeded and unwanted hindrance away so that your brother can live in Christian freedom and not feel hindered when

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44. Kolb, and Wengert. *The Book of Concord*, 515-516.

receiving the gospel truths. Scaer summarizes Article X's answer to the challenges and questions that were brought about at this time in history:

The answer given by Article X was the one adopted by Flacius, who refused to tolerate the reintroduction of Roman Catholic customs. Christians have freedom to practice or to avoid customs and rituals which are neither forbidden nor commanded in God's Word, but they are duty bound to resist where compliance in customs would give the impression that they were complying with false doctrine. Should a human ordinance be given the stature of a divine command or be viewed as necessary for salvation, it must be resisted.<sup>45</sup>

Flacius did not want to hinder the people's thoughts who came to worship God. Flacius did not want people to think that there was more than just one way to get into heaven. If the church members would have thought there were different that brought them into heaven, besides what Christ had done, then their faith would have been hindered. Flacius wanted to avoid the hindrance of Catholic customs that could have made people think there was more to salvation than the work of Christ. Flacius was showing love to his brothers and sisters in Christ.

#### Applying Article X in this Present Age

There will be times in the life of a Pastor or in the life of a lay member where the problem of adiaphora will be at hand. Adiaphora may not just be a conflict about ceremonies or usages in the church. Adiaphoron can also deal with disputes outside the church, conflicts that are going on in our world today. These conflicts outside the church mix in with our Christian freedom and make us think that our Christian freedom is more important than anything else. For example, in America, we have the freedom of speech and the freedom to our own opinions. Sometimes this

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45. Scaer, "Getting into the story of Concord," 91.

type of American freedom may lead someone to be a stumbling block, in the bad sense, without even realizing it.

There may be a time where one person does not think highly of the president and voices their opinion out loud at church. Someone may think that person's opinion may be the opinion of the whole church and never come back because their opinion of the president is different. As ministers and lay members of the church, we need to be careful what we say more now than ever because who knows who is listening. Jonathan Bauer says it best on how difficult this situation can be.

Ministers today experience the same difficulty as they seek the “narrow Lutheran middle road” between two false alternatives on a variety of issues. “Having one thing to say has the advantage of consistency. The more difficult position is for those who say two things, not meaning by this timid compromise, but expressing both truths loudly and energetically; that’s when you can make almost everybody angry.”<sup>46</sup>

We can learn a lot from what Bauer states. A pastor must say more than just one thing, like, “All Democrats are bad, so the president is bad.” Instead, since who to vote for is an adiaphoron, he has to say, “We respect the president, and we strongly disagree with him on some issues.” That would be saying two things, which might make both supporters and opponents of the president angry! Strey talks about who the Christian is bound to be when they use their Christian freedom:

Now when your people are confused and offended by your lack of uniform order, you cannot plead, —Externals are free. Here in my own place I am going to do as I please.¶ But you are bound to consider the effect of your attitude on others. By faith be free in your conscience toward God, but by love be bound to serve your neighbor’s edification.<sup>47</sup>

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46. Jonathan P. Bauer, “Getting All Things out of Paul’s ‘All Things’: An Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23,” (North Hollywood, CA: 20-22 October, 2009), 6.

47. Strey, “Neither Papistic nor Karlstadtian,” 9.

A Christian is bound to all people because people see a Christian as an example of how the Lord wants people to act on this earth. When a Christian is a good example instead of a bad one, they are leading people towards the truth of God and his Word and how he wants all to act.

What needs to happen to avoid preventing someone from hearing the gospel, is not to abuse that Christian freedom that Christians have through the work of Christ Jesus. Like when someone hears a Christian speaking their opinion and thinks that is what the church thinks as well. Bauer states, “Inside the free man is a heart that beats in rhythm with God’s. Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, and lovely to God is the same to the man set free. The content of God’s holy and immutable will does not change for the free man. But it is no longer law.”<sup>48</sup> Christian freedom does not mean that a person can say and do whatever they please to say and do. Strey says, “There are very many who, when they hear of this freedom of faith, immediately turn it into an occasion for the flesh and think that now all things are allowed.”<sup>49</sup> Christian freedom means that a person can live free from the burden of the law because of what Christ has done for that person. Christian freedom means that what God wills still needs to be the primary focus of Christian life.

Now, what do adiaphora have to do with Christian freedom and God’s will being the focus of a Christian’s life? The answer to that question is that they have everything to do with God’s will and Christian freedom. Let’s go back to the example about the person who doesn’t like the president and the person who does like the president. Now, nowhere in the Bible does it say that a child of God MUST be a Republican, and nowhere in the Bible does it say that a child of God MUST be a Democrat. This is an adiaphoron in the sense that God does not say anything

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48. Bauer, “All Things,” 8.

49. Strey, “Neither Papistic nor Karlstadtian,” 6.

distinct about this topic. One thing that God does say about the government is, “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.” (Rom. 13:1). For a Christian to say that a child of God must be a Democrat or a Republican would be exercising their Christian freedom in the wrong way. For a Christian to state what side they agree with and understand that is merely their opinion, and not what a Christian should be, is using their Christian freedom in a good way.

The difference between the Christian using their Christian freedom the right way and using their Christian freedom the wrong way is based on their love for Christ and their love for others. Bauer says,

Just because a man is free does not mean he lives for himself. In fact, that thought does not cross his mind. He finds as much joy in putting the interests of others ahead of his own as Christ did. He loves as Christ loved. He walks in step with the Spirit. And all of this naturally, willingly, and gladly. All of this in spite of the fact that none of it is necessary.<sup>50</sup>

A Christian realizes that he has freedom through Christ and what he did. What the Christian wants to do with that freedom is not abuse it but use it as Christ did. That means that maybe the Christian wants to use their Christian freedom at some points but understands that there is a new guest at their church. The Christian may decide that they may choose not to put their opinion out there instead of airing their grief with the president. Instead, the Christian may use their freedom through Christ to welcome the member to the church and air their grievance about the president at a different time.

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50. Bauer “All Things,” 8.

Showing love towards all people and not abusing Christian freedom plays a massive role in wanting guests to be a part of something special, indicating that love may wish the guest to become a member and, more importantly, become a child of God. Showing love towards others prevents the Christian from being a stumbling block in the bad sense and learning how to live for God the best way they can. The next part of the paper will talk more about real-life examples of how to be a good stumbling block for Christ and a bad stumbling block that gets in the way of Christ.



## CHAPTER THREE

### **Case Studies on Being a Good Stumbling Block and a Bad Stumbling Block.**

This paper will present two case studies based on two interviews. These interviews helped with the research process so that the readers and researcher could better grasp instances where pastors were stumbling blocks and how they handled those instances. These two case studies will shed light on real-life examples of being a stumbling block and how some may occur. The case studies will also, God-willing, help other pastors and possibly lay members understand the differences between a necessary stumbling block and a harmful stumbling block.

The two interviews that were conducted followed a list of questions prepared in advance.<sup>51</sup> These questions helped by giving the research real-life experiences of stumbling block moments in the interviewed participants' churches. The interviewed people were asked for consent to audio and video record the interview and were assured that they would remain anonymous. All the interviews lasted between 35-40 min, which gave the two participants more than enough time to answer the questions.

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51. The interview questions are printed in the appendix.

The two participants in this research are pastors in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. These pastors, like all pastors, have had their ups and downs in ministry and were willing to share some of them for this paper. The questions, which may have been broad, helped to demonstrate real-life stumbling block situations that may occur in the pastor's ministry. The questions also may help the average lay member understand the real-life problems of being a stumbling block in which they can see how to be a good stumbling block. The questions were also intended to bring pastoral support to those pastors who may be struggling in their ministry with stumbling blocks. They may also help a pastor interested in how to be a good stumbling block when these types of situations occur in their ministries.

#### Research Participants

Participant A: Being a Stumbling Block by your Decisions and Actions.

Again, both participants are pastors who are serving in two different locations. Now, when Participant A was asked, "Has there been a time your actions or decisions were a stumbling block, and you wish they hadn't been?" Participant A said, "A decision I wish I would not have made was choosing someone to be on the church council." This specific decision that Participant A had made ended up being a stumbling block situation. In the words of Participant A, this person, who was on the church council at the time, "had opinions and an attitude that caused a lot of friction on the church council." Participant A continued by saying, "this person accused people of loving money more than they loved God, and this man was a spiritual man but had no people skills." At the end of all this, Participant A had asked the individual to step down from the church council because of everything that transpired. Participant A also advised about whom to

choose when you are selecting people for church council, “Just because a spiritual man is in your church does not always mean that they are good for the church council.”

Participant A asked the man who was causing unnecessary friction not to be on church council anymore. But Participant A did not let his communication with this man stop. After all, this man is still a beloved child of God. Participant A continued to take the time to talk to the man as much as possible so that this awkward situation could become water under the bridge. Participant A, by doing this, showed God’s great love towards this man so that he would know he still is a forgiven beloved child of God. Now, Participant A says, “the relationship between him and the man that was on church council is better than ever!”

#### Participant A: The Gospel Preached as a Stumbling Block.

When the question was asked, “Has there been a time when the gospel you preached was a stumbling block to someone?” Participant A talked about how he encountered a Pakistani Muslim woman. Participant A said,

I talked with a young woman, a Pakistani Muslim, and we talked about how to get to heaven. I asked her if she knew she was going to go to heaven? Or why would Allah let her into heaven? She said, “I do not presume to know what Allah will do.” Then she asked me about my faith, and I said that through grace, Jesus offers us full and free forgiveness. She said, “The thing that Muslims think when they hear Christians talk about grace is that you’re not really serious with your faith. You can just do whatever you want to. You can live however you want to, and everything is going to be washed away.”

Participant A talked about the follow-up to this conversation with this Pakistani Muslim woman. Participant A said, “We continued talking, and then about two years after that, she was baptized. I did her marriage, but I was there at her baptism. I baptized her son later.” The Gospel that was preached to this woman acted as a stumbling block. This Pakistani Woman claimed that Christians were not serious enough about their faith. And then, later on, she was a baptized child

of God, and then farther down the road in her life, she had her son become a baptized child of God as well.

Then Participant A had advice on what to do in these types of situations. Participant A said,

Do not take offense when somebody says something like the Pakistani woman said to me. Let people say what they really believe because if you start judging them and telling them, they're just all wrong. Most times on evangelism calls, when something like that comes up, I just say, "Oh, that's very interesting. I hadn't thought about it that way," because then you're giving the impression that, "I am listening to what you have to say." I am not just waiting for you to be done so that I can start talking.

Participant A's advice is suitable for all people. Why would we take offense at someone when it is not us that they are being offended by but instead truly being offended by God and his Word?

Participant A: Members being a Stumbling Block to others.

When Participant A was asked, "How have you seen members become a stumbling block to others?" He talked about a member who posted things on Facebook, and the things that were posted on Facebook were not very God-pleasing:

Yes, somebody in a position of, I wouldn't say church leadership but well known because of his role in the public eye. His thing was posting all kinds of just inflammatory stuff on Facebook. I mean, first of all, racist stuff, and then on top of it, just really a crude language. Then right after that, posting a sermon from [Participant A].

This individual was being a stumbling block towards the church by acting in a way that a child of God should not be acting. Then, on top of that, he gave an unwanted image to the church he attended.

Participant A responded to this situation by going to the source of the problem and talking to him.

I had to talk with him again, and then I had to speak with him again and then, he's suitable for a while, and then I had to speak with him again. I think he just forgets. He

just publishes stuff that's just factually not true. I remember something came up not too long ago when the United States pulled out the troops from Afghanistan; he said this thing to everybody, including me, that 800 and something Christian missionaries were going to be beheaded in Afghanistan if you didn't do something next week. So, I checked this out and told the man that this was not happening; it was fake news.

When there is a member like this in a congregation, sometimes it is beneficial to repeatedly talk to them, reminding them that their image is under Christ, reflecting Christ when they post on social media. Doing this goes a long way in preventing someone from being a stumbling block to the church and, more importantly, being a stumbling block that works against God and his Word.

#### Participant B: Being a Stumbling Block by your Decisions and Actions.

Participant B, when asked, "Has there been a time your actions or decisions were a stumbling block, and you wish they hadn't been?" Participant B said,

I guess the one example that I can think of is a time when a young boy was killed in a car accident. And they were members of our church in kind of a loose way. I would consider them to be under our care. They came regularly, and the children came to Sunday school, but they hadn't gone through instruction class. The issue was that this child had not yet been completely led away from the Mormon influence at the funeral. The Mormons had the power of the Boy Scouts; they pretty much ran that organization, and this kid was a Boy Scout. What had happened was his scout leader wanted to say something after the funeral had been wrapped up. The scout leader started praying a Mormon prayer.

Now, Participant B had no clue that the scout leader would say a Mormon prayer. But the matter at hand is that the scout did say a Mormon prayer. The Mormon prayer and not being 100% sure of what was going to happen was the cause of the stumbling block in the wrong way. But,

Participant B responded to his mistake in a good way. Participant B continued by talking about what happened after this funeral:

I thought, well, that wasn't great, and I didn't like it, but what was I going to do about it? The decision was made. But I had an elder who came to me a couple of days later who said that wasn't right, and you have to make it right. At first, I tried to defend myself, but the more I thought about it, the more I felt that what the elder was saying was true. It was

a public thing and certainly a public offense for our congregation. So, I had to make it right, and I did. I made a public apology to the elders.

Participant B knew that what happened was wrong, and he had to make it right. So, Participant B made it right by apologizing for what had happened. Sometimes a pastor needs to take the blame for what happens in the church. But a pastor also needs to remember to apologize and understand that his sins are forgiven because all are sinners. This can be hard for a pastor, and Participant B handled it the right way. The advice that Participant B gave is, “Be very careful during services, whether a funeral or any other special service that you know what is going to happen the whole time.” This is true but especially in situations like funerals involving those who are not officially church members a can’t predict what will happen. Nevertheless when a pastor is careful in their work, that will help them avoid being a stumbling block in their decisions and actions.

#### Participant B: The Gospel Preached as a Stumbling Block.

When Participant B was asked, “Has there been a time when the gospel you preached was a stumbling block to someone?” He said, “When people understand the radical law and the radical gospel, it is a stumbling block for them.” Then he continued with an example from his ministry:

There was one occasion when I was going through Bible information class with an ELCA Lutheran guy before he came to my church. We went to the part of original sin, and it just happened at this time that there was a guy in the Utah state prison who insisted that he wanted to be executed. He wanted to be executed by a firing squad because a murderer, according to Mormon theology, must be atoned for by a blood atonement. If you kill somebody, the only way of getting into good places is through blood atonement. So, he wanted to be killed by a firing squad, and so it was a notorious case everybody was talking about it. Now the guy, who was taking my Bible information class, finally got what I was saying about radical gospel meets radical law that Jesus didn’t die for the pretty good but that he died for those who are lost and condemned. There is no sinner that’s better than any other. You could tell that it finally struck home. The guy said, “so you are saying that I am not better than that guy who got shot on the mountain top?”

Participant B helped the person who took his Bible information class understand what it means to be a true sinner. All people are truly sinful human beings, and there is nothing good in them or that they do according to sinful nature. The moment though the sinner realizes that there is nothing they can do and that it is entirely up to Jesus and what he did for the sinners, then the stumbling block of the gospel at that point worked. What the average man thinks is foolishness to believe has given us the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in heaven. Participant B said, “the theology of the cross was probably something that started to strike home in my thinking when in Salt Lake City, you had Mormons who were embarrassed about the cross.”

Participant B: Members being a Stumbling Block to others.

When Participant B was asked, “How have you seen members become a stumbling block to others?” He talked about the Women’s guild and an argument about the right way to do something. He said,

In the women’s Guild for a while, there was a certain right way of doing things. I think it had been sort of impressed in them even from some of the previous tasks that they may have had. It was Easter Sunday, and we wanted to have a gathering where we invite the rest of the community for Easter. Sort of like a goal or strategy where you have people invited to come to our Easter breakfast and Easter church. I became aware of some raised voices in the narthex that were pretty loud and that you could hear throughout the church. Two women were arguing about the use of the plates. Someone had bought china-like plates, but they were supposedly glorified paper plates. The other had brought a special kind of china. They were arguing about what they would put in front of the guests that came. If they had talked it out, they would have been fine, but they argued loud enough so that guests may have thought there were factions in the church. So I took them aside and said, “this is not how we should act on Easter Sunday, especially with guests coming in.”

Participant B heard women arguing with each other and knew he had to act quickly to get them to stop. He did an excellent job of getting it handled quickly. The stumbling block here was that the ladies were causing a scene by the entranceway, and it may have caused some people to think

that this church has a lot of tension in it. This tension might cause some people not to come back because they do not want a church with a lot of drama. The advice that Participant B gives about this stumbling block situation is, “Get to know your congregation on a personal level as soon as possible so that when something like this comes up, you can act on it and not offend the people in the congregation.” When a pastor gets to know his congregation better and leads them towards God and His Word, the problems become more manageable. If a pastor does not know their congregation well, the problems may increase, and they become harder to handle.

#### How to be a Stumbling Block in the Good Sense rather than the Bad Sense.

The main question about the word stumbling block is this: when is it good to be a stumbling block, and when is it wrong to be a stumbling block for God and his Church? The participants would agree that the best time to be a stumbling block is when a person must faithfully say what God and his Word say. The wrong time to be a stumbling block would be when God’s Word doesn’t have anything to say about a specific topic, but someone is convinced that it does and argues that God’s Word says this. When someone is confident that the Bible either does say something about the subject or they think the Bible agrees with their opinions, they think that if they are correct, the views or feelings of others do not matter.

These thoughts and opinions that have nothing to do with God and His Word can significantly impact how people perceive the congregation of the church and God. Both participants in my case studies dealt with members who were being stumbling blocks to other people in a bad sense. Some church members mentioned in my case studies, though not necessarily all of them, may believe that since there is Christian freedom, they can do whatever



they want. Some pastors may also think along these lines in using their Christian liberties.

Becker talks about Christian liberty in this way and says the guide in these cases is sinful reason.

Yet Christian liberty is not license. When we describe Christian liberty or salvation by grace alone in such terms as these, those whose only guide is sinful reason will invariably object and say that such doctrines will lead men to believe that they can do anything they please and live according to their heart's desire. And their words are far closer to the truth than either they or we sometimes imagine. The Christian, insofar as he is truly Christian, is free indeed to do what he pleases.<sup>52</sup>

When the only guide is sinful reason, people will think that they are free to do whatever they want. They will not care about others' opinions, and since they do not care about others' views, they will do whatever their heart wants them to do. Sometimes their heart has the wrong mindset, and their actions then paint an alarming picture of God and the congregation.

Another way to being a stumbling block in the bad sense was mentioned earlier with the Apostle Paul's situation. The newer Christians had a troubled conscience when seeing other Christians eating meat sacrificed to idols. Today, there are times when we can trouble the consciences of weaker Christians as well. Becker talks about some examples of how we can bother the consciences of the more fragile Christian.

In our time, too, we sometimes speak of Christian liberty as consisting of the use or non-use of things or the observance or non-observance of certain practices. We leave the impression at times that Christian liberty is the freedom to drink a glass of beer or to smoke a cigarette whenever we want to and that anyone who suggests that it might be wise and proper at times to dispense with beer and tobacco is seeking to destroy our Christian liberty. In certain circumstances the drinking of a glass of beer may well be an exercise of Christian liberty and in other circumstances not drinking a glass of beer may be just as much an exercise of that same freedom.<sup>53</sup>

Drinking alcohol is not a sin, but when you consume too much alcohol to the point of drunkenness, that is a sin. Some people out there think drinking alcohol is a sin and maybe get

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52. Siegbert W. Becker, "Christian Liberty" (August 1983): 10

53. Becker, "Christian Liberty", 17.

offended when they see someone of the faith drink. A person who knows that it is acceptable to drink alcohol may not think about the other person's conscience. The person who is okay with drinking alcohol is a stumbling block in a bad sense because they do not care for the other Christian and their thoughts. Not only is the person who is okay with drinking alcohol being a stumbling block in the bad sense, but that person may lead the other Christian to sin within their conscience. Becker talks about the sin against the conscience and how Christians can help one another stay away from that sin.

To offend someone, in scriptural terms, means to do something that leads him into sin. God's Word makes it very clear that a man sins not only when he violates a direct command of God but also if he sins against the convictions of his own heart and the warnings of his conscience. Paul teaches that when he says that "if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean" (Ro 14:14). If our example prompts him to do what his conscience warns him against doing we will by our action lead him to endanger his own souls' salvation. In such circumstances we will gladly give up the use of our freedom.<sup>54</sup>

We do not want to endanger anyone's soul or their eternal salvation. We are threatening their salvation by abusing our Christian freedom in bothering someone's conscience and not caring about others. When we endanger other Christian's salvation, we are being a stumbling block in the worst possible way.

But as pastors and, most notably, as children of God, we will want to care for all people. We want to watch for all people because the Bible says, "[God] wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). As a pastor and as a lay member, the best possible way to care for all people is by being a stumbling block in the good sense. Being a stumbling block in the good sense means boldly preaching the gospel, which means that "the goal...is to remove the stumbling blocks that stand in the way of the Stumbling Block."<sup>55</sup> Jesus

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54. Becker "Christian Liberty", 18.

55. Bauer, "All Things," 16.

himself is the Stumbling Block being referred to here, and when the stumbling blocks are removed, the more direct the path is towards Jesus. The perception of the gospel will be a better perception by people who don't know much about God and his Word. When the perception of God and his Word are correct and precise, the more likely the people will learn the truth about Jesus Christ, the Savior of all.

For the pastor to remove stumbling blocks for the sake of Jesus, the Stumbling Block, he must show his care for his guests and members, just as how the participants in the case study showed their love for their members. Bauer says, "A pastor will use all of the gifts that God has given him to remove stumbling blocks. Love for others moves him to be a faithful steward of the gifts God has given him whether he is preaching, teaching, training, visiting, counseling, or planning."<sup>56</sup> The great love that a pastor shows towards his congregation is reflected by how the members act in response to that love. A pastor also needs to remember that his work is not to create faith in guests and strengthen that faith. A pastor's work is to preach the gospel and let the Holy Spirit do the rest of the work. Bauer continues by saying, "A pastor wants to remove every stumbling block. But he must be very careful not to remove the Stumbling Block. The goal is not to make the gospel more appealing or believable. The goal is simply to win a hearing for the gospel so that the Holy Spirit can do his work."<sup>57</sup> When all stumbling blocks are cleared away, the path is open for the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of guests.

A helpful way for a pastor to have great care for his members is to see them as not just numbers that come to your church but souls who are part of the kingdom of God. That is what

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56. Bauer, "All Things," 15.

57. Bauer, "All Things," 16.

either gaining a new member or keeping a member is all about so that they can be part of the kingdom of God. Bauer says,

Whether we are talking about gaining the lost or keeping the found, the gain is for the Kingdom of God. A gain for a church (whether it be a congregation, school, or synod) is a gain only in so far as it is also a gain for the Holy Christian Church. Paul was not concerned about how many were on the books in Corinth as opposed to Rome as opposed to Philippi. Nor was he concerned with how many he had gained personally. The heart of the free man beats in rhythm with the heart of God, who is concerned with just one Church.<sup>58</sup>

A pastor concerned with one Church helps them become a stumbling block only in the good sense by preaching the gospel of Jesus without compromise. The pastor realizes that the one true main goal is to have eternal life with him one day.

Another way for the pastor to avoid being a stumbling block, in the bad sense, is by taking the narrow Lutheran middle road. Deutschlander describes this road as, “The middle road to which Jesus points us in his Word is one that leads us to a God-pleasing life here and to heaven hereafter.”<sup>59</sup> The way people walk the middle road is by not going to the extremes in one direction or the other. People will be led down the middle road when God and his Word are the priority of their lives. This is where Christians should want to be. Bauer explains that there is a contrast between one’s sinful nature and the nature of being a free Christian.

In so far as the Christian is free, “it is his one occupation to serve God joyfully and without thought of gain, in love that is not constrained.” However, “While he is doing this, behold, he meets a contrary will in his own flesh which strives to serve the world and seeks its own advantage. This the spirit of faith cannot tolerate, but with joyful zeal it attempts to put the body under control and hold it in check.”<sup>60</sup>

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58. Bauer, “All Things,” 10-11.

59. Daniel M. Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle: Following the Scriptural Road* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House), 128.

60. Bauer, “All Things,” 8.

God's Word is the very thing that does not lead a Christian to go way to the right with their opinion or way to the left. God's Word keeps a Christian from caring about this world and what this world has to say. God's Word helps the Christian care about the person and allows the Christian to go down the loving path.

The narrow Lutheran middle road helps the pastor realize that avoiding being a stumbling block will help lead souls to faith in Christ Jesus. The way to lead souls to faith is by serving others. Pastors and other Christians want it to be a priority to serve others because it is a great joy to do so. Deutschlander explains the type of joy a pastor or Christian has in serving others.

We live to serve. And there is no greater joy than such service. In the needs of those around us, whether dear friends and family or even enemies, we see the lowliness of Christ. We see the opportunity to give him a cup of water, to offer a piece of bread to the Man of sorrows on the way to the cross, a cloak or a blanket against the cold to the Child in the manger. We see the opportunity to share the Bread of Life in the message of the gospel that saves for time and for eternity. It is all so worthwhile. It is all so blessed. It is all made holy and an eternal fruit of the passion of the Savior.<sup>61</sup>

Where we serve others for Christ, then that is where a pastor or Christian becomes like Paul. We will want to be someone who wants to serve others so that they may receive the faith in Christ Jesus free from any stumbling block and ultimately free from the depths of hell and Satan's grasp.

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61. Deutschlander, "The Narrow Lutheran Middle," 223.

## CONCLUSION

Although there are many times where the term stumbling block is used negatively, we can see that through Christ, a stumbling block can be a good thing as well. A pastor and a Christian want to be that stumbling block only in the good sense—by preaching the gospel of Jesus without compromise. When a pastor and a Christian are being a stumbling block in the good sense, they will, in love, strive to be all things to all people. As Paul states in 1 Corinthians 1:23, “I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.” One of the many blessings that Paul is talking about here is the blessing of people sharing in the faith in Christ Jesus. Where the gospel is shared without any hindrance, someone is a stumbling block only in the good sense.

A pastor and a Christian are being a stumbling block in the good sense when they present the gospel of Jesus without letting anything get in the way. They are not making up their own rules and are not saying something about which the Bible is not clear. A pastor and a Christian are a stumbling block in the good sense when they understand that Christ died for all and cares for all. When someone truly understands that Christ died for all and cares for all, then they will want all to hear God’s Word in all its purity and truth—without anything getting in the way.

## APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Has there been a time your actions or decisions were a stumbling block, and you wish they hadn't been?
2. If so, how did you follow up with the people involved?
3. What did you learn from the experience?
4. Has there been a time when the gospel you preached was a stumbling block to someone?
5. If so, what was the result of the situation?
6. How did you react and follow up with those involved?
7. What did you learn from the experience?
8. How have you seen members become a stumbling block to others?
9. How did you approach those who were offending others?
10. What was the resolution to the situation?

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