

ADIAPHORA,
THE ARTICLE BY WHICH
THE CHURCH STANDS OR FALLS, AND
THE BLESSING OF SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

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This essay was composed at the request of the National Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada to assist the church in considering the matter of the blessing of same-sex relationships.

What are “adiaphora” and “the article by which the church stands or falls,” and what do they have to do with the blessing of same-sex relationships?

1. Adiaphora

Adiaphora are treated in the *Formula of Concord*,¹ which defines the term as concerning ceremonies and church rites “which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God.”²

At the time of the writing of the Confessions, the main debates dealt with ceremonies and rites that had been practised in the pre-Reformation Church. However, the Confessions do make clear that the church “at every time has the right, authority, and power to change, to reduce, or to increase the ceremonies according to the circumstances, as long as it does so without frivolity and offense, but in an orderly and appropriate way, as at any time may seem to be most profitable, beneficial, and salutary for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the edification of the church.”³

¹ In *The Book of Concord*, trans, and ed. by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), pp. 492-494, 610-616.

² Ibid, 610.

³ Ibid, 612.

It is clear that the Confessions' discussion of adiaphora is relevant to the contemporary debate about the blessing of same-sex relations. Such blessings are not mentioned in the Word of God, and thus are neither commanded nor forbidden.

The blessing of same-sex relations is a highly controversial topic in our church today.⁴ On the one hand are those who view all homosexual relations as sinful. Those holding this position believe that to bless same-sex relations is to give sanctity to a ceremony that appears to sanction acts that are contrary to the Word of God. On the other hand, there are those who deny that is it sinful when a same-sex couple commit themselves to a life of love together, in which case a blessing of their relationship is truly both a matter of adiaphora and, at this time, desirable.

When the church is divided in this way about adiaphora, the Confessions have two recommendations. Both are based on Christian freedom.

First, the Confessions condemn any attempt to impose by force a matter of adiaphora upon the community of God as necessary.⁵ That is, no congregation which believes that all homosexual relations are sinful should be forced to bless same-sex unions.

Secondly, the Confessions condemn a "procedure whereby matters of indifference are abolished in such a way as to give the impression that the community of God does not have the liberty to use one or more ceremonies at any time or place, according to its circumstances, as may in Christian liberty be beneficial to the church."⁶

In addition, the Confessions offer a final, defining word on the subject. Churches "will not condemn each other because of a difference in ceremonies, when in Christian liberty one uses fewer or more of them, as long as they are otherwise agreed in doctrine and in all its articles and are also agreed concerning the right use of the holy sacraments"⁷ – a position based upon the *Augsburg Confession*, Article VII (The Church): "it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian Church that ceremonies, instituted by men [sic], should be observed uniformly in all places."⁸

⁴ For an excellent discussion of differing views on homosexuality see Erwin Buck's *Studies on Homosexuality and the Church* (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, 2001), a document produced in response to a need expressed at the ELCIC Convention in Regina 1999 and recommended to congregations for study.

⁵ Tappert, 615, no. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 615-616.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 616.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

When Article VII of the *Augsburg Confession* says that “it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word,” it is referring to Article IV (Justification), the article by which the church stands or falls, that is, the regulating principle in theology against which everything else must be measured.

So, the Confessions appear to sanction a situation in which some congregations may adopt same-sex blessings and others may not. Our church has gone through a similar situation with the question of communing of children before the age of confirmation. It will likely encounter other such situations in the future. An understanding of adiaphora is thus crucial to such situations as is the issue treated in the next section.

2. The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls

The *Augsburg Confession* (the Augustana) – irenic in tone, clear and concise in style – is a cogent and compelling summary of Lutheran teachings. It begins by affirming adherence to the tradition of the historical church (Articles I-III) before focussing on its chief concern: the way of salvation, Article IV (Justification), the core or heart of its position. Placed where it is, this Article is related organically to the foregoing doctrines and becomes strategic to the understanding of all that follows. In his *Smalcald Articles* (Part II, Article I), Luther, after summarizing justification by grace through faith for Christ’s sake, declared that “Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised.”⁹ By the time of the nineteenth century, this article was described in Lutheran tradition as the “article by which the church stands or falls,” that is, as the regulatory principle in theology against which everything else must be measured. The article reads as follows:

Article IV (Justification)

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.¹⁰

The simplicity of this doctrine is stark. Individuals are made acceptable to God, that is, just (righteous) before God, without making any contribution themselves, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that God does accept them and that their sins are actually forgiven for the sake of Christ, who made it possible through his death.

⁹ Ibid, 292.

¹⁰ Ibid, 30.

The church is not discussed until Articles VII and VIII after statements on the Ministry in Article V and on The New Obedience in Article VI. The articles on the church, together with their subjects, read as follows:

Article VII (The Church)

It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel. For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in according with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men should be observed uniformly in all places. It is as Paul says in Ephesians 4:4-5, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”¹¹

Article VIII (What the Church Is)

Again, although the Christian Church, properly speaking, is nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints, yet because in this life many false Christians, hypocrites, and even open sinners remain among the godly, the sacraments are efficacious even if the priests who administer them are wicked men, for as Christ himself indicated, “The Pharisees sit on Moses' seat” (Matt. 23:2).

Accordingly, the Donatists, and all others who hold contrary views are condemned.¹²

Although both articles deal with the nature of the church, they are more concerned with “where” the church is than with “what” it is. The problem faced by Lutherans at that time was not one of a definition or doctrine of the church. Rather, they had to demonstrate that the true church did indeed exist among them and that this church was the church of the ages, the one which had previously existed and which would continue to exist. So, in effect, their formulation was a hand extended to Rome, affirming that the church is not the claim of any person, organization, or institution, but that the church exists as event “where” the gospel is rightly proclaimed and the sacraments are rightly administered, regardless of the type or the form of the external life. The church is “where” there are true believers. The church is “there” in spite of hypocrites and evil persons. So the principle of inclusion rather than exclusion, the very principle which makes the Augustana so open and potentially unifying, by focusing on the “where” of the church provides

¹¹ Ibid, 32.

¹² Ibid., 33

God's pilgrim people the freedom to move through history without the restrictions of organizational or ceremonial uniformity.

According to Augustana, the presence of the church is integrally related to Christology and the relationship of individuals in its community to the saving work of Christ stated in Article IV (Justification). When Article VII (The Church) says that "it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in according with the divine Word," it is referring to Article IV (Justification). The gospel and the sacraments cannot simply be present "somehow." A mutually recognized and acknowledged consensus of what the gospel is, is necessary, and that broad consensus concerning the heart of the gospel is clearly but simply stated in Article IV.

The theological methodology is simple. Christ, mediated through proclaimed word and sacrament in the community of faith, is the central theme and controlling principle. All other themes relate directly to this. As rays going out from a central sun, all other ideas find their focus and importance there. This means that no complete system of theology is contemplated and that there are greater and lesser doctrines depending upon their relationship to Christ and Christ's work of salvation. Since the gospel is a message and the sacraments are actions that call for response, what happens when the gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments administered is more important than agreement on matters of adiaphora.

Though the Augustana does not use the term "adiaphora," Article IV (The Church) does declare that "It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men [sic], should be observed uniformly in all places," and Article XV (Church Usages) acknowledges the use of rites established by humans, but notes that such observances are accompanied by instruction "so that consciences may not be burdened by the notion that such things are necessary for salvation."

The strongest confessional testimony to this freedom in churchly action is found in the *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration*, Article X. Church Usages: The Ecclesiastical Rites That Are Called Adiaphora Or Things Indifferent – "rites which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God but which have been introduced into the church with good intentions for the sake of good order and decorum or else to preserve Christian discipline" (*S.D.* X, 1).¹³

¹³ Ibid., 610.