

Confessional Unity

Presentation to East District Pastors' Conference - November 2014.

Introductory Remarks

Do you *want* to get together?

Unity may be entirely hampered by the lack of desire to work through differences and to understand the other side.

“Do two walk together, unless they have agreed to meet (Amos 3:3)?” the Lord asks through the prophet Amos concerning His wayward people Israel.

Is unity possible? desired? worth working towards?

Do you *want* to get together?

Of course, unity can never be the sole reason for us to get together: unity for its own sake. There must be a basis for our unity: and that foundational basis which unifies us is Christ our Lord! Jesus prays for our unity. Our Lord prays to the Heavenly Father for the Church to be united: “That they may be one (John 17:22).” Christ Himself is the source of our unity—one holy, Christian Church is united under Christ, the Head of the body. Every article of teaching and practice is to be informed by the life and doctrine of Christ, the Church’s Head.

True doctrine unites. That fact encourages us today. That’s our reason for looking into the Book of Concord, the documents that unite us as a synod, as we walk together. We trust in God’s rich, comforting Holy Spirit to guide us into “Concordia,” not only formal, outward, organizational unity, but an agreement in heart and mind. We ourselves cannot do this by our own wishing or work, nor by our own efforts or prayers. God Himself must bring it about.

I. Unity & Adiaphora

I have been asked to present a paper on unity especially as it relates to adiaphora as discussed in the Lutheran Confessions. Let us start by looking at the etymology of that word ἀδιάφορος. Sacred Scripture does not use this word at all. However, secular Greek does. This adjective comes from the root verb διαφέρω, “to differ, be different from.” Specifically, the verb describes a difference that works to one’s advantage, that is, to “be worth more than, be superior to (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, 189).” Scripture does use the substantive form, τὰ διαφέροντα to direct our hearts and minds to what is “excellent (Romans 2:18, Philippians 1:10)” that is, God’s gracious work of saving us in Christ. These are the things that really matter. Adiaphora is just the opposite. The alpha privative is attached to the word to refer to indifferent, unimportant things: things that don’t really matter. Although the word is not used in the Scriptures, adiaphora comes up many places in the Lutheran Confessions. The Epitome of the

Formula of Concord defines adiaphora as those practices “that are neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word (FC Ep X:1).”

What are examples of adiaphora? The Confessions provide several:

1. Clothing. In the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* discussing the Church, Melancthon notes, “For example, if the style of German clothing is not worship of God and necessary for righteousness before God, it follows that people can be righteous and God’s sons, and Christ’s Church, even though they use a costume that is not German, but French (Ap VII & VIII:34).” Later, in article fifteen of the *Apology*, he again refers to “clothing and ornaments [ornamentorum; mancherlei Kirchen-schmuck... Fahnen, Kerzen... many kinds of church decorations, banners, tapers],” which Melancthon classifies as “human traditions (Ap XV:21).”

Proper vestments, fine arts and church architecture are all useful to express our reverence for God, employing in worship the gifts we have received from His hand. We are mistaken, however, if consider these objects to belong to the essence of the Divine Service. “The true adornment of the churches is godly, useful, and clear doctrine, the devout use of the Sacraments, fervent prayer, and the like. Candles, golden vessels, and similar adornments are fitting, but they are not the specifically unique adornment belonging to the Church (Ap XXIV:51),” writes Melancthon in the *Apology*, article 24 on “The Mass.”

In this regard, Luther comments favorably on the use of the crucifix in Christian worship and piety, as he preached on May 3, 1522: “I do not entirely reject images, chiefly not the figure of the crucified Christ. We have an image of Christ in the Old Testament, the brazen serpent lifted up by Moses in the wilderness, that all who had been bitten by the fiery serpents and looked at this brazen serpent should become well. We, too, should do this. In order to become well in our souls, we should look at the crucified Christ and believe in Him. But when the Jews began to worship the serpent as God and did not consider it a sign, pious Hezekiah came and tore it down (SL 11:2241).

Simply because such adiaphora as vestments, ornaments and church art may be abused is no reason to insist that they all must be tossed out. Abolishing every visual aspect of worship is no guarantee that the heart will not turn and become attached to some other external trait of pastor, church or worship. Again, Luther preached capably against such iconoclasm in a sermon on May 12, 1522: “Now although it is true and no one can deny that images are evil because they are being abused, nevertheless we are not to condemn anything because it is being abused. In Deuteronomy 4:19 God has commanded us not to lift up our eyes unto the sun and other heavenly bodies in order to worship them, for they are created to serve all nations. But there are many people who worship the sun and the stars. Shall we, therefore, rashly attempt to pull down the sun and the stars from the heavens? No, we shall not do it. Furthermore, wine and women bring many a man to misery and make a fool of him. Shall we, therefore, kill all the women and pour out all the wine? Likewise, gold and silver cause much evil. Shall

we, therefore, condemn them? Nay, if we wanted to drive away our worst enemy, who does us the most harm, we should have to kill ourselves; for we have no more injurious enemy than our own heart (SL 20:30).”

Rather than letting clothing, art and architecture be the focus of worship, Luther sets his sights on the preaching of the Gospel as the main action of the service. As long as other liturgical adornments do not contradict the Gospel, they may be used in Christian freedom. Writing to George Buchholzer, dean of Berlin, on December 4, 1539, in reply to inquiries about which church ceremonies might be fitting to employ, Luther gave this wise counsel: “If your lord, the margrave and elector, etc., permits the gospel of Jesus Christ to be preached with purity and power and without human additions and the two sacraments of Baptism and the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ to be administered and offered according to their institution, if he is willing to abolish the invocation of the saints (as if they were mediators, intercessors, and deliverers) and if he is willing to discontinue daily Masses, vigils, and Masses for the dead and the consecration of water, salt, and herbs and allow only pure responsories and hymns, Latin and German, in procession, go along in God’s name and carry a silver or gold cross and wear a cope or alb of velvet, silk, or linen. And if one cope or alb is not enough for your lord, the elector, wear three of them, as the high priest Aaron did when he put on three vestments, one on top of the other and all of them beautiful and attractive... I am fully satisfied, for none of these things (as long as no abuse is connected with them) adds anything to the gospel or detracts from it. Only do not let such things be regarded as necessary for salvation and thus bind the consciences of men... Only what God commands is necessary; the rest is free (Luther: Letters Of Spiritual Counsel, Theodore G. Tappert, ed., 2003, pp. 306-307).”

Liturgical arts are useful for teaching the Faith to children, even witnessing our faith in Christ to unbelievers. Article 14 of the *Augsburg Confession* explains why “nearly all the usual ceremonies” included in the historic Christian worship of the Mass are preserved: “For ceremonies are needed for this reason alone, that the uneducated be taught what they need to know about Christ (AC XXIV:3).”

2. Fasting. Also within the article on “human traditions” in the *Apology*, Melancthon identifies fasting as an adiaphoron. “Human reason also thinks this about bodily exercises, such as fasts... the purpose of these bodily exercises is to hold the flesh in check (Ap XV:24).” Contemporary examples of fasting include fasting before receiving the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar, giving up a favorite food, pastime or pleasure during the season of Lent, and a generally frugal and simple life that rejects the excesses of the flesh promoted by the world. Such fasting does not in any way contribute to our salvation. However, as a component of worthy reception of the sacrament, Luther recommends this practice in the Small Catechism: “Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training... (SC VI:10).”

Melancthon expands on this as he explains the physical mortifications of the flesh that go hand-in-hand with the spiritual burden of the weight of cross shouldered by every Christian. Physical and spiritual disciplines come as a **result of** faith in Christ.

Such disciplines are not the cause of our salvation. These disciplines are as varied and unique as each individual who suffers under them. Again, Melancthon writes to commend fasting in article 15 of the *Apology*: “We teach this about the putting to death of the flesh and discipline of the body. Just as the Confession states, a true and not a false putting to death [mortification] happens through the cross and troubles, by which God exercises us. In them we must obey God’s will, as Paul says, “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1). They are the spiritual exercises of fear and faith. In addition to this putting to death, which happens through the cross, there is also a necessary, **voluntary exercise** (emphasis mine). Christ says, “But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation” (Luke 21:34). And Paul says, “I discipline my body and keep it under control” (I Corinthians 9:27), and so on. These exercises are to be accepted not because they are services to justify, but because they are assumed to control the flesh, should overindulgence overpower us, and make us secure and unconcerned. This results in people indulging and obeying the tendencies of the flesh. This effort [at mortification] should be constant because it has God’s permanent command (Ap XV:45-47).”

3. Other religious exercises. In the *Apology*, article 27, Melancthon identifies other religious disciplines similar to fasting, such as monastic vows of obedience, poverty and celibacy to be adiaphora, provided that they are used without sin and not viewed as ways to save ourselves. “... religious exercises, obedience, poverty, and celibacy—provided the latter is not impure—are adiaphora. Therefore, the saints can use them without impiety, just as Bernard, Francis, and other holy men used them. They used them to restrain the body so that they might have more freedom to teach and to perform other godly offices, not that these works are, by themselves, works that justify or merit eternal life... It is believable that in some places there are also currently good men, engaged in the ministry of the Word, who use these exercises without wicked opinions (Ap XXVII:21-22).”

4. Devotion to saints. The commemorations on various dates through the church year is an adiaphoron. Rehearsing the stories of famous saints while eclipsing the public reading of Sacred Scripture and the preaching the Gospel was the particular abuse identified in the *Apology*, again on “human traditions.” “Among the adversaries, in many regions, no sermons are delivered during the entire year, except during Lent. Yet, the chief service of God is to preach the Gospel. When the adversaries do preach, they speak of human traditions, of the worship of saints and similar trifles, which the people justly hate. Therefore, they are immediately deserted in the beginning, after the reading of the Gospel text. A few better ones begin now to speak of good works; but about the righteousness of faith, faith in Christ, and the comfort of consciences, they say nothing (Ap XV:42).” Simply imitating the good deeds of another is not preaching the good news of a reconciled God through a crucified Christ. “The examples of the saints are added. When people want to imitate these, they imitate, for the most part, the outward exercises. They do not imitate their faith (Ap XV:24).” What should we take away from this? We must be cautious about employing sermon illustrations that draw

attention to ourselves or virtuous people and have the effect of hiding Christ and His saving cross. Spinning stories about modern day saints can also obscure the Gospel and draw the hearts of our hearers away from the light of Christ. Instead, Luther encourages teaching focused on the six chief parts of Christian doctrine as a defense against the assaults of the devil. Therefore, he writes this in the *Longer Preface* to the *Large Catechism*: “Besides, catechism study is a most effective help against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts. It helps to be occupied with God’s Word, to speak it, and meditate on it, just as the first Psalm declares people blessed who meditate on God’s Law day and night (Psalm 1:2). Certainly you will not release a stronger incense or other repellant against the devil than to be engaged by God’s commandments and words, and speak, sing, or think them [Colossians 3:16]. For this is indeed the true “holy water” and “holy sign” from which the devil runs and by which he may be driven away [James 4:7].

Now, for this reason alone you ought gladly to read, speak, think, and use these things, even if you had no other profit and fruit from them than driving away the devil and evil thoughts by doing so. For he cannot hear or endure God’s Word. God’s Word is not like some other silly babbling, like the story about Dietrich of Berne, for example. But, as St. Paul says in Romans 1:16, it is “the power of God.” Yes indeed, it is the power of God that gives the devil burning pain and strengthens, comforts, and helps us beyond measure (LC Longer Preface 10-11).”

True, recalling the lives of the saints does fall into the realm of adiaphora. However, there is a proper and salutary use for these observances. Examples of saints are useful to encourage us to faith in Christ and lives of good deeds. “Our churches teach that the history of the saints may be set before us so that we may follow the example of their faith and good works, according to our calling (AC XXI:1).”

5. The date of Easter and other religious festivals. The early Christian calendar was established for the good of Christians who assembled for worship, not to pin down the specific date in scientific fashion. The particular calendar date of such festivals ought not to be church-divisive. The dates are adiaphora. “The apostles observed certain days, not because this observance was necessary for justification, but in order that the people might know at what time they should gather... As is commonly the case, the apostles adapted to the history of the Gospel certain things, although somewhat changed. Among these things were the Passover and Pentecost. The apostles did this so that not only by teaching, but also through these examples, they might hand down to posterity the memory of the most important subjects... Before the synod at Nicea, some observed Easter at one time and others observed it at another time. Neither did this lack of uniformity harm faith. Afterward, the plan was adopted by which our Passover (Easter) did not fall at the same time as that of the Jewish Passover... The apostles, by this decree, did not wish to put a demand upon the churches, as the words of the decree testify. For it asks for no one to be troubled, even though his brothers and sisters, in observing Easter, do not change the time correctly. The words of the decree are found in Epiphanius: *Do not calculate, but celebrate it whenever your brethren of the circumcision do; celebrate it at the same time with them, and even though they may*

have erred, let this not be a care to you... The wise reader can easily conclude from this decree that the apostles wished to free the people from the foolish opinion of a fixed time, to help them from being troubled, if a mistake were made in setting the date... They wisely warned the reader neither to remove the freedom of the Gospel, nor to burden consciences. The apostles thought that consciences should not be troubled, even though there should be an error in setting the date (Ap VII & VIII:34).”

What Church practices may be considered as adiaphora, but actually are not? Again, the *Confessions* identify some examples:

1. Withholding the chalice in the distribution of the sacrament. We are not free to change Christ’s institution of His Holy Supper. The Church has suffered from those who do not give both parts of the Lord’s Supper. Not excused are those who ban, excommunicate and persecute those who give the entire Sacrament. How can human decisions override God’s own institution? asks Melancthon in article 22 of the *Apology*: “They also bring up the danger of spilling (the wine) and certain similar things. These are not serious enough to change Christ’s ordinance. Certainly, if we assume that we are free to use either one part of the Sacrament or both, how can prohibiting <the use of both kinds> be defended? The Church does not allow itself to change Christ’s ordinances into unimportant matters. We certainly excuse the Church that has suffered since it could not receive both parts. But we do not excuse the writers who maintain that using the entire Sacrament is justly banned and who now not only ban, but even excommunicate and violently persecute, those using the entire Sacrament. Let them figure out how they will answer to God for their decisions (Ap XXII:14-16).”

2. Marriage. Insistence on the celibate life, elevating virginity over marriage and ascribing perfection to those who choose this state is not simply a matter for Christian freedom. Such teaching is forbidden by God and His Word. In article 27 of the *Apology*, Melancthon rightly asserts, “Virginity is recommended, but to those who have the gift, as has been said before. However, it is a most deadly error to hold that evangelical perfection lies in human traditions. In this way, even the monks of the Muslims could brag that they have evangelical perfection. Neither is virginity part of the things called adiaphora. Because God’s kingdom is *righteousness and life in hearts* (Romans 14:17), perfection is growth in the fear of God, growth in confidence in the mercy promised in Christ, and growth in devotion to one’s calling (Ap. XXVII:27).”

Since approving of married clergy appeared to be an innovation, departing from the practice of celibate priests, Lutherans appeared to be bringing in a new practice which divided the Church. Melancthon notes in the *Apology*, article 23, that remaining faithful to God’s Word is not schismatic, but rather gives a clear conscience: “We seem to have separated from those who are considered regular bishops. But our consciences are very secure. We know that, though we earnestly desire to establish harmony, we cannot please the adversaries unless we cast away clear truth and then willingly agree with these very men to defend this unjust law, to dissolve marriages that have been contracted, to put priests to death if they do not obey, and to drive poor women and

fatherless children into exile. But since these conditions clearly displease God, we cannot feel sorry that we have not allied with the multitude of murderers among the adversaries (Ap XXIII:59).” Melancthon ends this article pointing to Scripture as the source of God-pleasing unity in both Church and government: “Neither novelty nor dissent delights our princes. Especially in an undoubted matter more regard had to be paid to God’s Word than anything else (Ap XXIII:71).”

3. Idolatry. Article 10 of the *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord* cites the example of circumcision in the first century Church. Although circumcision was an adiaphoron at the time, it quickly became much more. When forced on the New Testament Church as a necessary requirement, such coercion made circumcision the focus for false worship: idolatry. “The case is no longer a question about outward matters of indifference, which in their nature and essence are free. They cannot produce a single command or prohibition that they must or must not be used. The case presented by Paul is a question, in the first place, about the outstanding article of our Christian faith. For the apostle testifies, “so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you” [Galatians 2:5]. The Gospel is obscured and perverted by such compulsion or command, because such adiaphora are publically required for the approval of false doctrine, superstition, and idolatry, and for the suppression of pure doctrine and Christian liberty, or at least are abused for this purpose by the adversaries and are viewed this way.

The article about Christian freedom is at stake here. The Holy Spirit, through the holy apostle’s mouth, sincerely told His Church to preserve this article, as we have just heard. As soon as Christian freedom is weakened and human traditions are forced on the Church with coercion, as though it were wrong and a sin to omit them, the way is already prepared for idolatry. In this way, human traditions are multiplied and regarded as divine worship, not only equal to God’s ordinances, but even placed above them.

Furthermore, idolaters are confirmed in their idolatry by such yielding and conforming in outward things, where there has not previously been unity in doctrine. On the other hand, true believers are grieved, offended, and weakened in their faith. Every Christian, for the sake of his soul’s welfare and salvation is bound to avoid both of these (FC SD X:14-16).”

While adiaphora are those things neither commanded nor forbidden by God, in a time of persecution, when such adiaphora are said to be required as necessary for salvation, they cease to be adiaphora. When the Church’s freedom is bound by new laws that contradict the Gospel of salvation in Christ, such adiaphora become the ways to confess true faith in Christ. Reacting to pressure from adversaries to compromise church ceremonies for the sake of peace and unity, article 10 of the *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord* identifies such practices as the very ways for the Church faithfully to confess the Gospel of salvation in Christ. During persecution, the Church uses adiaphora as tools to confess Christ *in status confessionis*. “We also believe, teach and confess that at a time of confession, when the enemies of God’s Word want to suppress the pure doctrine of the Holy Gospel, God’s entire church, indeed, every

single Christian, but especially the ministers of the Word, as the directors of the community of God <God's church>, is bound by God's Word to confess the doctrine freely and openly. They are bound to confess every aspect of pure religion, not only in words, but also in works and actions. In this case, even in adiaphora, they must not yield to the adversaries or permit these adiaphora to be forced on them by their enemies, whether by violence or cunning, to the detriment of the true worship of God and the introduction and sanction of idolatry (FC SD X:10)." The summary statement at the end of article 10 is quite clear: "We likewise regard it as sin that deserves to be rebuked when during persecution anything is done that is contrary to the Christian confession. This includes indifferent matters or doctrine and what otherwise applies to religion, for the sake of the enemies of the Gospel, in word and act (FC SD X:29)."

The *Apology* distinguishes between the central teaching of the forgiveness of sins graciously given through faith in Christ and the freedom in matters of adiaphora that Christ purchased for His dear Christians. The Gospel is of paramount importance; traditions are not: "We must keep in the Church the doctrine that we receive the forgiveness of sins freely for Christ's sake, through faith. We must also keep the doctrine that human traditions are useless services and, therefore, neither sin nor righteousness should be placed in meat, drink, clothing, and like things. Christ wished the use of such things to be left free, since He says, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person" (Matthew 15:11); and Paul says, "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking" (Romans 14:17). (Ap. XXVIII:7)."

The Church needs to distinguish between "unnecessary and useless wrangling... since it destroys more than it builds up..." and "articles of faith or the chief points of Christian doctrine (FC SD Comprehensive Summary, Foundation, Rule, and Norm 15)."

"We believe, teach and confess also that no church should condemn another because one has less or more outward ceremonies than the other, for those are not commanded by God. This is true as long as they have unity with one another in the doctrine and all its articles and in the right use of the holy Sacraments (FC Ep X:7)." The Church's Christian freedom is specifically defended also in the *Epitome*, article 10: "We reject and condemn as wrong... when these outward ceremonies and adiaphora are abolished as though the community of God <the churches of God> were not free to use one or more ceremonies in Christian freedom, according to its circumstances, as may be most useful at any time for the Church <for edification> (FC Ep X:12)."

The repeated concern in the Lutheran Confessions is not useless wrangling to micro-manage the quirks and bad habits of brother Pastors. Unity does not focus on the peripherals, on adiaphora. The truth of the Gospel was their sole concern and ours. Christian freedom allows much latitude. But not if the central article is threatened by the exercise of freedom, which is truly abuse of freedom. Article 7 of the *Augsburg Confession* simply states, "For the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree about the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. It is not necessary

that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies instituted by men, should be the same everywhere (AC VII:2-3).” The *Apology* elaborates, “We are speaking of true, spiritual unity. Without faith in the heart, or righteousness of the heart before God, such unity cannot exist. Similarity of human ceremonies, whether universal or particular, is not necessary. The righteousness of faith is not a righteousness bound to certain traditions... (Ap VII & VIII:31).”

Useful to our discussion at this point is a comment by Martin Chemnitz in his *Enchiridion*, as he addresses the distinction between that which God has commanded and adiaphora, or things indifferent. While describing “The divine law in general,” Chemnitz answers this question:

“Ought there then be no ceremonies whatever in the church of the New Testament?”

“The chief true rites of the apostolic church are these: Baptism, Mt 28:19; Lord’s Supper, I Co 11:23; holy assemblies to hear the Word of God, for common prayers, and collection of alms, Acts 2:42, 46; and the use of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, I Co 5:3 ff.; 2 Co 2:6 ff. But besides those rites the church has appointed and ordained also some other ceremonies in adiaphora, or things indifferent, namely things in harmony with the Word of God and useful to the church for this, that in the proclamation of the divine Word, in the administration of the Sacraments, in saying prayers, in gathering alms, and in the use of the keys all things be done in order, decently, and for the upbuilding of the church. And since Paul allows the churches this liberty (I Co 14:26, 40), it will therefore be permissible to use this kind of ceremonies unto edification for that purpose without loss of Christian liberty (Ministry, Word, and Sacraments - An Enchiridion Martin Chemnitz, 1593, 1603, tr. Luther Poellot, Concordia Publishing House, 1981, p. 51).

A common reaction, also among us, is to regard adiaphora entirely as matters of personal freedom. If God’s Word has not clearly spoken on these matters, then we conclude we are free to do what we like. Such matters are viewed as licence to do whatever we want, claiming after all, “It’s just adiaphora.” That was the state of affairs at the end of the book of Judges: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25).” The fact that matters of adiaphora were treated repeatedly in the Lutheran Confessions as potential threats to the unity of the Church indicates that such practices are more than simply expressions of personal freedom. The fact that we are considering this today shows how our practice in matters of adiaphora affect the unity of the whole Church.

The Reformers in the Lutheran Confessions did not simply consider adiaphora to be a blank slate for each to express his personal preference. They viewed matters of adiaphora not as free and open, but **confessional** matters. In cases of adiaphora, the Church must not simply splinter off in every direction so that everyone can do his own thing. Adiaphora provide the Church with the opportunity to stand together and to

confess the unity of the Christian faith with a common practice.

In Walther's *Pastorale*, Dr. Walther also tackles the question of adiaphora in the frontier Lutheran churches in America. He does not counsel that all churchly customs simply be tossed out. Church life in the new world does not simply begin with a blank slate to be filling according to personal preferences. Rather, Walther encourages retaining these usages as a matter of Christian freedom, and as ways to confess the Gospel. "The customs added by the ecclesiastical men are adiaphora. So they are not to be absolutely rejected, but they are also not necessary to the same degree as the usages commanded by God. In those customs which God has neither commanded nor forbade (*in ritus adiaphoris*), the freedom which Christ dearly purchased and gave to His Church is to be firmly held. So they may be observed in freedom, without being considered necessary. But they may be removed and changed in an orderly way, with the agreement of the church, especially if they cease to be useful, do not attain their beneficial purpose, or degenerate into misuse and superstition. But in removing them, offense is to be avoided, and so changing these customs is not to be permitted to the frivolous arbitrariness of every private person, but it should be left up to the public opinion of the church (American Lutheran Pastoral Theology CFW Walther 1906, tr. John M. Drickamer 1995, p. 101)."

Historically, such "public opinion of the church" was not the choice of individual congregations. Common practice in matters of adiaphora was administered by the consistory. Within a German territory, lay and clerical members formed a commission to regulate ecclesiastical affairs (The Church of the Lutheran Reformation Conrad Bergendorf, Concordia Publishing House 1967, p. 138, 297-298). Martin Chemnitz and the authors of the *Formula of Concord* understood that matters of adiaphora would be regulated by the decisions of the consistory. In Christian freedom, Lutheran congregations would adopt common orders for worship, rites and other ceremonies. Through these means, they would also confess their unity.

Yet, such a consistory composed of laymen and clergymen should never impose unbending regulations in such a tyrannical fashion that Christian freedom is undone. In article 28 of the *Apology*, Melancthon circumscribes such power: "The Gospel clearly testifies that traditions should not be imposed upon the Church to merit the forgiveness of sins, to be services that God approves as righteous, to burden consciences, so that leaving them out is regarded as sin... In the Confession we also have discussed to what extent they may legitimately enact traditions, not as necessary services, but only for the sake of order in the Church and for peace. These traditions should not entrap consciences, as though to require necessary services. Paul teaches this when he says, "Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1). The use of such ordinances should be left free, so long as offenses are avoided and they are not determined to be necessary services. In the same way the apostles themselves ordained many things that have been changed with time. Neither did they hand them down in such a way that they never could be changed. They did not depart

from their own writings, in which they greatly labored should the Church be burdened with the opinion that human rites are necessary services...This is the simple way of interpreting traditions: they are services that are not necessary. Yet, for the sake of avoiding offense, we should observe them in the proper place (Ap. XXVIII:11, 15-17)."

Should we choose to use resources (books, studies, programs) produced by other denominations? The answer to this question often impacts our doctrine and practice. Attempting to "Lutheranize" resources written by non-Lutherans does not contribute to unity among us as confessional Lutherans, that is, as those who subscribe to the doctrine and practice of the *Lutheran Confessions* as normative. Borrowing from others was anticipated already in 1577 as the *Formula of Concord* offers this condition:

"Other good, useful, pure books, expositions of the Holy Scriptures, refutations of errors, and explanations of doctrinal articles are not rejected at this point. As long as they are consistent with the above-mentioned type of doctrine, these works are considered useful expositions and explanations. They can be helpful. What has been said so far about the summary of our doctrine is only intended to mean this: we should have a unanimously accepted, definite, common form of doctrine. All our evangelical churches should confess it together and in common. Because this Confession has been derived from God's Word, ***all other writings should be judged and adjusted to it to determine the extent to which they are approved and accepted*** (emphasis mine) (FC SD Comprehensive Summary, Foundation, Rule, and Norm, 10)."

Such a trumpet call was sounded in warning against the use of heterodox writings because the Church needed to hear it just one generation after Luther. Have things improved in our day? Is our theology and practice any closer now to other Lutherans and to the non-Lutheran church bodies surrounding us? Truly, the denominational landscape around us has only grown more varied and splintered. Resources from other churches are often hard to adapt to our uses in a salutary way. The pattern of false doctrine frequently leaves its stamp on what we may try to adapt for our use. For the sake of unity among us, such heterodox writings may not always be "approved and accepted."

Clearly, unity is not forced by requiring everyone, everywhere to worship in the same way. For example, true, confessional Lutherans are not only those who use page five and fifteen of The Lutheran Hymnal. The particular order of service is not the source of our salvation; Christ is. "The apostles did not want us to believe that we are justified through such ceremonies, or that such ceremonies are necessary for righteousness before God (Ap VII & VIII: 39)." However, it would be wrong to say that the form of our worship ceremonies doesn't matter. Just the opposite. Common worship forms are a great blessing to the Pastor using them and to the people under his care. Using the same order of service expresses the fellowship of teaching and practice that we hold in common. Worship expresses unity.

Article 24 of the *Augustana* starts with this point: "Our churches are falsely

accused of abolishing the Mass. The Mass is held among us and celebrated with the highest reverence. Nearly all the usual ceremonies are also preserved, except that the parts sung in Latin are interspersed here and there with German hymns. These have been added to teach the people. For ceremonies are needed for this reason alone, that the uneducated be taught what they need to know about Christ (AC XXIV:1-3)."

In the *Apology* regarding "Human traditions," Philip Melanchthon argues against forsaking the "customary rites" in the name of freedom. Such innovation in worship would pose a threat to the unity of the church: "Still, we teach that freedom should be so controlled that the inexperienced may not be offended and, because of freedom's abuse may not become more opposed to the true doctrine of the Gospel. Nothing in customary rites should be changed without a reasonable cause. So to nurture unity, old customs that can be kept without sin or great inconvenience should be kept. In this very assembly we have shown well enough that for love's sake we do not refuse to keep adiaphora with others, even though they may be burdensome. We have judged that such public unity, which could indeed be produced without offending consciences should be preferred (Ap XV:51-52)."

While acknowledging the freedom of churches to adopt "dissimilar ceremonies" according to local custom, Melanchthon extols worship which draws on the historic practices of the church through the ages, promoting peace through "universal ceremonies:" "We believe that the true unity of the Church is not injured by dissimilar ceremonies instituted by humans, just as the dissimilar length of day and night does not injure the unity of the Church. However, it is pleasing to us that, for the sake of peace, universal ceremonies are kept. We also willingly keep the order of the Mass in the churches, the Lord's day, and other more famous festival days. With a very grateful mind, we include the beneficial and ancient ordinances... (Ap VII & VIII:33)." The generous gift of *Lutheran Service Book* from the East District to its congregations has encouraged peace and unity among us. We have the means to worship according to "universal ceremonies."

Summary Thoughts:

- ❖ Adiaphora refer to practices neither commanded nor forbidden by God in His Word.
- ❖ No adiaphora can be used as a means of grace to justify or save.
- ❖ Jesus Christ purchased our freedom to use or not to use these practices at the infinitely precious cost of His holy precious blood and innocent suffering and death.
- ❖ Matters of adiaphora are free to those purchased by the blood of Christ and no rule should be made requiring us to follow these practices.
- ❖ However, uniformity of practice also with respect to adiaphora can be a great blessing to the Church that is in fellowship through a common subscription to Sacred Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions

II. Ways To Address Issues Of Disunity

A. Ignore it. Refuse to deal with disunity. Associate only with those who share your opinion. Avoid those you know to be different. Stay away from a presentation like this. How's that working for us? It's not.

B. Study—wrestle through the issues raised in the realm of adiaphora, looking to Christ in His Holy Word. Essentially, that is what we are doing this morning: returning to the common doctrine that we have subscribed to individually, and as a church body in the confessional writings.

The *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord* begins with this exhortation: “For thorough, permanent unity in the church, it is necessary, above all things, that we have a comprehensive, unanimously approved summary and form of teaching. The common doctrine must be brought together from God’s Word and reduced to a small circle of teaching, which the churches that are of the true Christian religion must confess. They must do this just as the Ancient Church always had its fixed symbols for this use. Furthermore, this should not be based on private writings, but on the kind of books that have been composed, approved, and received in the name of the churches that pledge themselves to one doctrine and religion. Therefore, we have declared to one another with heart and mouth that we will not make or receive a separate or new confession of our faith. Instead, we will confess the public common writings, which always and everywhere were held and used as such symbols or common confessions in all the churches of the Augsburg Confession before the disagreements arose among those who accept the Augsburg Confession. We will confess them as long as there are on all sides, in all articles, a unanimous adherence to and maintenance and use of the pure doctrine of the divine Word, as sainted Dr. Luther explained it (FC SD Comprehensive Summary, Foundation, Rule, and Norm, 1-2).”

The Summary goes on to identify those unifying writings as these:

1. The prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments
2. The three ecumenical creeds
3. The unaltered Augsburg Confession
4. The Apology
5. The Smalcald Articles
6. Luther’s Small and Large Catechisms
7. The doctrinal and polemical writings of Luther

The *Epitome of the Formula of Concord*, article 11, expresses the purpose and goal of such study: unity in the Church. “Every Christian can recognize, according to the direction of God’s Word and the simple catechism, what is correct and incorrect. For here we have set forth not only the pure teaching but have also exposed and

rejected contrary, erroneous teaching. In this way the offensive divisions that had arisen are completely resolved. May the almighty God and Father of our Lord Jesus grant the grace of his Holy Spirit, that we may be all one in Him [John 17:20-21] and steadfastly remain in this Christian and God-pleasing unity (FC Ep XI:22 KOLB-WENGERT).” Our encouragement as we go about the hard work of scriptural and confessional study is this: true doctrine unites.

C. Pray—pray for unity among us. Ask God for a resolution of the matters that are set at odds by sin. Pray for those who oppose you, for those who have a different practice from you, for those who even act with hostility towards you instead of love. Especially do we need to intercede before the gracious throne of Almighty God for our brothers in the Office of the Holy Ministry rostered in LCC. Remember, as you pray, that despite our differences, we are on the same side.

D. Forgive—be reconciled to those brothers and sisters in Christ who are at odds with you. “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there at the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift (Matthew 5:23-24).” Unity is not automatic. Unity is not in our nature as sinners. God forges the bonds of unity between forgiven sinners. “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26).” Unity in the Church is not produced by our efforts: not by our earnest study, not by our fervent prayers, nor good intentions. God must do this. God Himself answers our continual prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” God works unity between us through His Holy Spirit. He leads us to repent of our sins: to repent of our anger, frustration and back-biting. To repent of the ways we have deliberately worked to isolate and cut ourselves off from those in fellowship with us. He forgives, cleanses and restores us to Himself, and to each other, effecting true reconciliation. God must do this. God’s own body and blood are the price to unite us as one body in Christ crucified and raised for us. Out of love for us, Jesus offered Himself on the cross, into death, to the depths of hell and back again to answer His own dominical and fervent prayer: “That they may be one (John 17:22).”

May God in His grace grant this gift to us!

E. Thank God—for the ways He **has united** us as a confessional Christian church body. The fact that we are taking pains to examine our differences shows the treasure of that Spirit-worked unity that **does** in fact exist among us. We are here because we want to build bridges to see that unity increase, grow and flourish. The sad fact is that this side of eternity, sin will always drive wedges between us: fractures we feel keenly within the fellowship of the Christian church. But, as members of Lutheran Church-Canada, particularly within the East District, we **do** enjoy a closeness of doctrine and practice not seen in other church bodies. This is not an occasion for self-congratulatory back-slapping. Where there is unity, we have not done this. Where we experience unity of doctrine and practice among us, it is the gracious gift of God in

spite of us. As we pray, study, repent, forgive, and seek reconciliation with our dear brothers, we are also moved to doxology: thanks be to God!

And He [Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the Head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! (Psalm 133:1)

Almighty and ever-living God, You fulfilled Your promise by sending the gift of the Holy Spirit to unite disciples of all nations in the cross and resurrection of Your Son, Jesus Christ. By the preaching of the Gospel spread this gift to the ends of the earth; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.