

Flacius — About True and False Adiaphora

The term “*adiaphora*” has commonly been understood and used by Lutherans to distinguish between matters which are **neither** commanded nor forbidden by the Word of God from those which are commanded and forbidden by the Word of God. *Adiaphora* are also known as “*nonessential matters*” and, “*indifferent matters*” which we enjoy on account of our Christian freedom. The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord (Solid Declaration #26) explains,

“...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, according to the well-known axiom, ‘disagreement in fasting should not destroy agreement in faith.’”

In his book “*About True and False Adiaphora*,” Matthias Flacius (1520-1575) helped to clarify and strengthen what would become the Lutheran teaching on *adiaphora* in the Formula of Concord. In beginning, Flacius quotes from Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10 to set out, according to the Word of God, his understanding of *adiaphora*:

“What then do I say? That an idol is anything? Or that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything? No, But that the things that the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not wish you to come into communion with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of demons; you cannot eat from the table of the Lord, and from the table of demons. Or do we arouse the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He? All things are lawful to me, but not all things are profitable; all things are lawful for me, but not all things build up [edify]...”

That is, in *adiaphora* one should not consider the employment of things only according to their kind, but most of all according to their circumstances.

“When dealing with adiaphora,” therefore, *“many err by being afraid and allowing themselves to appear as if they could not see or hear for great fear ...”*

Of course, Flacius continues,

“...the most important reason why almost everyone falls into err now is the god which one calls the belly, and that life which one calls good, peaceful, and idle days. There is among them no ardent zeal for God and his truth. Instead, they see the present danger and are concerned [only] for their belly. They therefore strive with all their might to see how they might remove the scandal of the Cross. Fleshly fear drives them from love for the Word of God and makes the light of their understanding of that Word so dark that they regard the thing that they had earlier regarded as the great plank in the eye of the Anti-Christ now as if it were hardly even the most miniscule splinter.”

Following this, Flacius offers “*A General Rule Regarding Ceremonies.*”



“All ceremonies and church practices are in and of themselves as free as they will always be. However, when coercion and the false illusion that they [ceremonies and church practices] are the worship of God and must be observed, [and] renunciation of the faith, offense, or an opening for godless ways develops, and when, in whatever way it may happen, they do not build up but tear down the church of God and mock God [then] they are in this way no longer adiaphora. All these evil parts are now among the present-day adiaphora so that those particular things are not adiaphora but precisely godless.”

Flacius then asks, “*What, in the church, is adiaphora?*”

“Adiaphora in the church,” he writes,

“are not only particular practices and ceremonies, but the circumstances surrounding the Sacrament, preaching in the church and the divine service which God has neither specifically commanded or forbidden...” In these things, “*the church is free to use, without the suspicion that they are the true worship of God, and without superstition, that according to the command*

of Paul, everything proceeds in an orderly fashion and for the building up [edification] of the assembly of God. For some practices are given to the church of God, and commanded specifically - such as the preaching of the divine Word, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Absolution. Certain practices, however, together with their circumstances are not specifically commanded by God as, for example, with respect to dress and the time that the priest should normally celebrate the divine services, [and] likewise as regards what songs one should sing."

Who has the power to establish adiaphora?

"The first is the general command of God. That he wants to have everything in the church done in an orderly and proper fashion, to serve for [the] building up [edification] [of the assembly of God], because He is a God of order and not disorder.

Second, is a free Christian desire for the church! Free, in that it is entirely unforced. Christian, in that it is arranged according to the will of God, only adding to the honor of God and the building up [edification] of the God-fearing, and seeking no earthly [re:temporal] benefit through the establishing of adiaphora.

Third, are the thoughtful, god-fearing people for whom the church is inclined to establish such adiaphora.

Finally, what is the benefit and ultimate reason for adiaphora?

The end and benefit, Flacius writes, "should be what Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 14. Namely, that everything takes place in an orderly and proper fashion for the building up [edification] [of the assembly of God]. Whatever proceeds in an orderly fashion in the church serves for the building up [edification] [of the church]. Indeed, the total benefit and ultimate reason for ceremonies can be comprehended under the word building up [edification]..."