

Worship the Lord

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Confessional Perspectives on Worship

Adiaphora: They Matter to God

By Jonathan Hein

Those of us blessed to have wives know that one way we show our love is by carefully listening to what they tell us they like and acting accordingly. Your wife tells you that she'd like to paint the dining room. She wants the walls to be periwinkle with white trim. She is specific. She gives you details. Since you love her you schedule a few hours on Saturday to paint the room. When you do, because she is the apple of your eye, you do as she asked. You don't paint it indigo and say, "Eh, close enough." The woman you love told you *exactly* what she wanted. Clearly, she cares about the color if she is so specific! Therefore, because your wife was specific, in love you try to do just as she asked.

There is, however, another way to show love for your wife. It is a way that she may appreciate much more than that first way. You show great love for you wife when you put careful thought into what you do at the times when she has *not* told you what she wants.

A simple example is her birthday. Maybe you are one of those lucky fellows whose wife tells him exactly what she wants for a present. For most of us, it doesn't work that way. We actually have to think about it. *What would she like? What would make her happy?* If you buy her a new ironing board, using the excuse, "I assumed you didn't care since you didn't tell me exactly what you wanted," then you are a fool who deserves to sleep on the couch for a night. Of course she cares! Now, she probably doesn't care so much about what you give her. But she cares that you put thought into it. She cares that you wrestled with the decision. She cares about whether or not the present demonstrates that you know her. She cares not so much about the specifics of the present *but about the love that is behind it.*

This article isn't about the marriage you enjoy to your wife. It's about the marriage you enjoy with the heavenly Bridegroom. There are multiple ways to show him love too. You do it by listening to what he says he likes very carefully and then doing that precisely. His Word is full of specifics, things he tells us that delight him. "This is love for God: to keep his commands."¹ We do those *specific*

things because he has *specifically* told us they make him happy, and making him happy is our highest aspiration and joy.

However, there are many areas in our life and in our ministry where Jesus has *not* told us specifically what he wants. We call these adiaphora. The definition you often hear is this: things neither commanded nor forbidden by God.² Many have come to think this means that God doesn't care about such things.

Consider the day we worship, obviously an adiaphoron. God hasn't commanded us to worship on any specific day. Do you think this means that he doesn't care at all about which day we choose? If so, then you are making the same mistake as the man who, year after year on his wife's birthday, lazily and thoughtlessly grabs a box of mixed chocolates on his way home from work thinking, "Good enough." His wife will be saddened because her husband didn't even love her enough to think about her gift.

God cares about *everything* we do, because everything we do is an opportunity to demonstrate our love for him. Paul makes this point when he writes, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."³ *Whatever* you do. It's *all* done to God's glory.

The early Christians chose to worship on Sunday ... *for a reason.* Sunday had come to be known as "the Lord's Day"⁴, a reminder of the victory over sin and death won on that first Easter. Moving the day of worship was seen as a way of making each week a little

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Easter, a way of honoring him who is the firstfruits from the dead.⁵ The day of worship is an adiaphoron. But as Christians made their decision, they chose carefully. Their decision flowed from love for God. They knew that showing love for God always matters.

Go back to your wife's birthday. The reason you are able to make a thoughtful decision, even though she hasn't given you any specific guidance, is that you *know* her. You know, in general, what she likes and what she doesn't care for. You might spend an entire afternoon picking out the best set of golf clubs for your wife, but if she has made it clear she doesn't care for golf, your efforts are pointless.

Likewise, as we approach adiaphora, we do so mindful of God's entire revelation to us—what he likes and what he doesn't like.

God cares deeply about the Gospel.

"You also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit ..."⁶

The Gospel is the means by which God saves us ... the way the Holy Spirit creates faith, appropriating to us all the merits of Christ. Since God wants nothing more than to spend eternity with mankind, he cares about his Gospel. Since the Gospel has opened heaven to us, we consider it treasure. The Gospel consumes us, affecting not just what we do in worship, but every aspect of life. "Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."⁷

The Gospel is at the heart of the Lutheran Confessions. In *every one* of the Confessions, before adiaphora are discussed, the centrality of the Gospel in our lives and ministry is expounded. In the Augsburg Confession, Articles III, IV, V, VI, IX, X, XII, and XIII proclaim pure, unadulterated Gospel. Then comes Article XV: Church Ceremonies and Article XXVI: The Distinction of Meats, which deal with adiaphora. Why this sequence? It reflects that discussion of adiaphora must be rooted in love for an understanding of the Gospel.

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Or consider the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord. When Lutherans discuss adiaphora, Article X of the Solid Declaration, titled "Church Practices," is probably what they quote most. But it is preceded by Article III: The Righteousness of Faith before God and Article V: The Law and Gospel and Article VII: The Holy Supper. Why? Article X discusses adiaphora in terms of how they relate to the Gospel. For example:

- It teaches that worship practices cease to be "genuine free adiaphora" when they are done to avoid persecution by false teachers who subvert the Gospel.
- It teaches that worship practices cease to be adiaphora when the goal is to make it seem that "our religion and [another false

teaching religion] are not far apart" for the sake of establishing a false unity.⁸

- It teaches that when a worship activity is "not profitable for ... evangelical practice" (i.e. promoting the Gospel), then it is "useless" and "foolish" even though God hasn't explicitly forbidden that practice,
- It teaches that when worship practices are forced upon Christians, "whether by violence or by cunning," then Christians cannot yield even though those practices are adiaphora. To do so would be to compromise the freedom Christ has given to us in the Gospel.
- Article X points us to Galatians 5:1. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not be subject again to a yolk of slavery."

It *all* comes back to what serves the Gospel. And so, as we look consider how we worship, while so much falls in the realm of adiaphora, Christians *never* say, "It doesn't matter what we do." It *does* matter! We structure our worship to serve the Gospel. We do this because we know that God cares deeply about the Gospel.

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God cares deeply about love.

"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."⁹

God has shown us that love—true love—is not mere sentiment, i.e. that you care deeply for someone. Someone says, "Of course not! Love must also be shown by action." But even that doesn't give us a true definition. I can do nice things for people with the hope that they return the favor. That is not really love, but self-interest. Love, Scripture says, is shown by a specific type of action—*sacrifice*. To show love to us, God *sacrificed*. The Father let his wrath and his justice fall upon the Son, not upon us. The Son placed his happiness into our happiness, put our interests before his own. That is sacrifice. Sacrifice shows love.

In appreciation for the loving sacrifice God made in our service, we make sacrifices in service of others. The Confessions cite Paul's approach to adiaphora: "Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible."¹⁰ Adiaphora provide a wonderful opportunity to show love. If you sacrifice your own interests in a matter where God has not spoken, what else could be compelling you *except* love!

Both Scripture and the Confessions talk about ways we might do this.

- We show love for our fellow Christians when we *don't* do something we have the freedom to do because we are afraid of leading them into sin against their conscience. We sacrifice

our freedom for the sake of their spiritual welfare. "We can yield and give in with a good conscience to the weak in faith in such outward adiaphora."¹¹

- We show love for our fellow Christians when we keep certain traditions simply to demonstrate our unity with them, even if those traditions aren't my preference "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."¹²

We keep certain traditions simply to demonstrate our unity ... even if those traditions aren't my preference.

- We show love for our fellow Christians when we *don't* get upset if, after careful thought, they change a worship practice because they think doing so will better serve the Gospel. "We believe, teach, and confess 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 all in the right use of the holy Sacraments."¹³

We need to ask the right questions.

I have a clear notion of what *I want* to take place in worship. That notion comes from so much more than Scripture. It also comes from my experiences in worship as a child, ones I recall with fond memories. It comes from personal preferences about music and other forms of art. It comes from my experiences in ministry.

Allow me to confess to you, my brothers, a sin I have already confessed to my God. At times, when making decisions about worship in areas of genuine adiaphora, those things—fond memories, personal preferences, etc.—have greatly influenced my decisions. And I have justified my decision by saying, "*It doesn't matter!*" Nonsense! It *does* matter to God. And so when approaching adiaphora, the question is not "Am I free to do this?" Of course you are, in the case of genuine adiaphora. And certainly the question is not, "Do I want to do this?" Such self-centeredness is unworthy of the Gospel.

What are the right questions? I humbly suggest the following questions might be beneficial for you and your worship committee to wrestle with as you prayerfully consider matters of adiaphora.

- If you are going to change something in your worship, is the change going to enhance or clarify our proclamation of the Gospel? How so?
- If you are *not* making any changes to what you do, is *that* getting in the way of the proclamation of the Gospel? (Consider what it would have meant if we had not changed from German to English services.)



- If you are considering doing away with a “customary rite,” do you have a “reasonable cause” for that decision? If you are replacing a “customary rite” with something else, is it because what you are replacing it with proclaims the Gospel better?
- Have you carefully explained any potential changes in worship practice to members to make sure you don’t harm weak consciences?

Have you discussed any potential changes in worship practice with brothers in the ministry?

- Have you discussed any potential changes in worship practice with brothers in the ministry, so that they might understand your Gospel-motivated rationale? Share with them that you are still *completely* united with them in doctrine, and that the only reason you are considering a change is that there is a “reasonable cause,” i.e. a compelling reason.
- If your worship practice is similar to that of a false teaching church, how will you make a clear confession that you preach a different Gospel than they do?¹⁴

My guess is that the sin I confessed above is not unique to me, that others have failed to ask questions such as these when approaching matters of adiaphora in worship. Let none of us take comfort in the fact that our sin is common. Let all of us find comfort and pardon in the uncommon love of Christ, demonstrated to us through great sacrifice.

Different conclusions, different practices, equally pleasing.

I began by talking about your wife’s birthday. Let’s move to Father’s Day. That happy day rolls around, and your three children all bring you gifts. One brings a drawing she made. Another brings a treat he purchased at the grocery store with his own money. The third plays a song on the piano she learned just for that day.

Now, you hadn’t given the children any instructions: “This is how you shall show your love for me on Father’s Day.” Does that mean you didn’t care? Of course you cared! We fathers delight when our children show their love for us. And so your heart will swell at each of those gifts, because you know that your child put much thought into how to honor you.

Now, imagine they start to quarrel over whose gift was best. The son picks on his younger sister, because he thinks *his* gift was the right way to honor Dad. What would you say to your son? Obviously, you would help him to understand that you appreciate all the gifts equally, because they all flowed from love and careful thought.

Likewise, Christians are going to come to different conclusions about the areas of worship that are adiaphora. Your practice may differ

from mine. But if we have both honestly wrestled with the questions above, seeking to serve the Gospel and our fellow man, what does it matter if our practices differ? They are equally pleasing to God, not because he doesn’t care, but because in matters of adiaphora, God is looking for love and thoughtfulness, not a specific course of action.

May God place his wisdom deep within our hearts.



¹ John 5:3
² Literally, adiaphora means “indifferent things.” It seems the word originated among the Stoic philosophers of the 4th century. Perhaps the German term better captures the biblical sense: *Mitteldinge*, “middle things.” It’s not that God is indifferent or that he doesn’t care. Things which God has commanded are good, simply because God has commanded them. Things which God has forbidden are bad, simply because God has forbidden them. And in the middle are things that God cares about, which can be either good or bad, depending on one’s motivation.
³ 1 Corinthians 10:31
⁴ Revelation 1:10
⁵ See *Gathered Guests* (CPH 2003) by Timothy Maschke, page 52.
⁶ Ephesians 1:13
⁷ Philippians 1:27
⁸ I think this teaching of Article X has been abused at times. Let’s say a WELS pastor decides not to wear robes and use a band to lead worship instead of an organ. A charge is levied: that church’s worship practice is aping the Evangelicals, in violation of Article X. And maybe some aspects of that church’s worship do indeed look like what you might see in an Evangelical church. Still, that church has not violated Article X unless their goal in losing the robes and using the band was the same as Melancthon’s unionistic compromises in the Leipzig Interim. Does anyone think that the pastor actually wants to join in union with the Evangelical churches? Or consider my church with over 80 ex-Catholics. They will remark how similar our worship is to what they grew up with. What of it? My goal in using the Imposition of Ashes is not to look Catholic. It’s certainly not to trick Catholics into feeling at home. (If one truly believes Catholic doctrine, they will *not* feel at home in my church!) However, I feel that the Imposition of Ashes, after careful explanation, serves the Gospel very well on that day. One doesn’t violate Article X by having rites similar to a false teaching church. One violates Article X when the goal of those practices is to avoid persecution or to promote a false unity.
⁹ 1 John 4:10
¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 9:19, cited in FC SD X:9
¹¹ FC SD X:9
¹² Apology XV:51,52
¹³ FC SD X:31
¹⁴ This responsibility falls upon everyone—those whose worship is more formal (and thus look like Roman Catholic or Anglican worship) and those whose worship is more informal (and thus look like the Evangelicals).