

THE SCRIPTURAL DOCTRINE OF ADIAPHORA AND CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

**Essay Submitted
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The year 1517, for the Lutheran Church, has always been regarded as the starting point of the work of the Reformation. For it was in this year that Dr. Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses which were written against the sale of indulgences, on the Church Door at Wittenberg, hammer blows which sounded right throughout the countries of Europe. But as soon as it was realised that this poor monk was in earnest with what he believed, and when the Pope's followers saw the effect that Luther's Scriptural teachings had, the large number who flocked after him, their thoughts quickly turned to affecting a reconciliation between Luther and the Pope's Church.

Thus in 1520, Cardinal von Miltitz persuaded Luther to write a letter to Pope Leo X. Luther also included in his communications a booklet, entitled 'The Freedom of the Christian Man'. In the first part Luther's theme was: A CHRISTIAN IS A FREE LORD OVER ALL THINGS AND SUBJECT TO NO ONE. Here he pointed out that whereas before his conversion the Christian is under the bondage and slavery of sin and Satan; since through Christ by his (the Christian's) justification the Christian has been made free from sin, he is now made free to serve his Lord willingly, out of love to the Saviour. Thus Luther showed that the Christian is not conscience-bound to be obedient to the rules and regulations of the Pope. The second part points out the principle: A CHRISTIAN IS A SERVANT IN ALL THINGS AND SUBJECT TO ALL. He explained here that the true Christian, being a servant of Christ, is required to show Christian love not only to the Lord but also to his neighbour.

Dr. Luther was here dealing with the subject of CHRISTIAN LIBERTY.

WHAT IS TRUE CHRISTIAN LIBERTY?

Many have rather strange ideas about what Christian Liberty really is.

Pastor Kleinig explains:

“Now I am free, all my sins are forgiven, now I can do as I like. That is how many church people today think. They say ‘Now we have an open cheque and can put down the figures we like’, in other words, ‘Our sins are forgiven; Christ has paid for our sin, not only for big sins, but for all sins. We are free, from the judgement, condemnation, everlasting damnation.’ Now they come to the conclusion (and the devil helps them there), ‘Since all our sins are paid for as long as we live here on earth, now we can really have a good time and do as we please’.

“Ah NO! Brethren and sisters, it is not that way.” (Comments by Pastor F.G. Kleinig on Walther's Sermon on the Fourth Sunday after Trinity - Standard Epistles, p.306).

On CHRISTIAN FREEDOM, Dr. Walther writes:

“Briefly stated, it is the teaching that a Christian has the freedom to do or not to do anything whereby he does not infringe upon love toward God and his neighbour.” (Sermon on Fourth Sunday after Trinity - Standard Epistles, Walther, p.305; underlining added).

In the first place, because of his Christian Liberty, the believer is free from the CURSE and COERCION OF THE LAW. In Gal. 3:13, we read: “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the Law, being made a curse for us.” Christ has taken upon Himself the curse or punishment for our sins through His suffering and death on the cross, making us free from having to bear it in eternity. Again Paul writes: “For sin shall not have dominion over you; for ye are not under the Law, but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). The Christian now no longer obeys God's Law through

force or coercion, but NO, he gladly, freely and willingly loves to show his obedience to His Master's commands.

In the second place, the true believer is free from all HUMAN ORDINANCES AND OPINIONS OF MEN, provided this does not infringe upon his love towards his neighbour and fellow Christian. Formerly the unbeliever was under the slavery and bondage of Satan as his master, and everything he did was in obedience to his master's will. Now however, under his freedom gained through Christ, provided he shows love towards God and his fellow man, the Christian is free in earthly matters to do as he pleases.

WHAT IS AN ADIAPHORON?

Whereas the term CHRISTIAN LIBERTY describes the Christian himself, the term ADIAPHORON describes the action, the thing that is done.

The term ADIAPHORON is not itself used in the Bible, although the truth that it describes is clearly presented in Scripture. ADIAPHORON is a word which comes from the Greek and literally means "indifferent". In other words, whether these things are observed or not observed makes no difference.

An ADIAPHORON is anything that we think, say or do which is neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word. On these matters, Scripture has not spoken, neither condemning what has been done, nor commanding what is to be done. The Christian therefore may make a choice for himself whether he desires to do or not to do such things.

Thus the Confessions of the Lutheran Church describe ADIAPHORA as "Church rites which are neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word" (Formula of Concord, Epitome X, Triglot. p. 829ff; Thorough Declaration X, Triglot p.1053ff).

Other terms used to describe this are: indifferent matters, matters of indifference, earthly matters or non-essential matters. The German language uses the word Mitteldinge, meaning "things that lie in the middle." So here we are walking on middle ground, ground where God's Word has not spoken, ground on which God's Word neither commands nor forbids.

All actions which men do throughout their lives, should be judged on the basis of God's Word. Whatever things we do which are condemned by God's Word, which some Scripture passage clearly points out are wrong, are sins. They are a breaking of God's Law (e.g. to steal, to have hatred in the heart against the neighbour). Other things God has expressly commanded us to do (e.g. to be kind to our neighbour, to maintain purity of doctrine and practice in our midst). If we fail here to perform our Christian duty, again we are sinning against God's law. But there are many things about which God's Word does not speak. God's Word does not command Christians to worship on any particular day of the week. It does not forbid him from owning a car, playing a piano or obtaining an insurance policy. Therefore to do these things or not to do them is the choice and decision of the Christian himself according to his own Christian liberty.

Since in these matters God's Word does not speak, no one has the right to compel or force through coercion others to think or act the way that he does. He has every right to make suggestions in these matters to others, but if another does not accept his suggestion, there the matter must end. For example, person A might feel within himself that it is dangerous to own a rifle or obtain an insurance policy. He has every right to act in accordance with his feelings in these matters. Person A may even bring to person B his suggestion and outline his reasons. But it is now up to person B to decide for himself whether he desires to do these things or not. If person A tries to compel person B to follow his wishes in Adiaphora, or charges him with sinning or going contrary to Scripture if he doesn't follow person A's suggestions, here he is guilty of false doctrine and practice, demanding of others things which God's Word nowhere demands.

No, since the Christian has liberty in these matters, it is his duty to give this liberty of choice also to his fellow Christian. There are numerous examples which could be mentioned in this connection. Every day of our life is filled with acts and decisions concerning which there is no specific Scriptural command.

ADIAPHORA AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament times, there were many things not contained in God's eternal Moral Law which the Lord demanded the Israelites to observe. These things were contained in the CHURCH AND STATE LAWS of the Old Testament. So many things which we are free to do or avoid were demanded of the Israelites.

Dr. Walther explains:

“In the Old Testament it was different; then a host of things, which in themselves were neither good nor evil, had been commanded or forbidden even believers; they had to do or not do merely for the sake of the Law (O.T. Church Law, GLW). For example, after the Sabbath had been instituted, no one could do the least bit of work on that day; the death penalty was even commanded. Certain foods were forbidden; he who ate them was guilty of a mortal sin. People could not even touch certain things; he who did was considered unclean according to the Law and would first have to offer certain sacrifices in order to be looked on as clean. A host of ceremonies were prescribed; unless they were strictly observed, a Christian could not have a peaceful conscience. The believers of the Old Covenant, therefore, lived as though under the toils and nets of sin, in constant and unavoidable danger of falling into sin without knowing or even wanting to do so.” (Dr. C.F.W. Walther, op. cit. p.305; emphasis added).

A short casual reading of Leviticus or Deuteronomy will recall to our minds the extent to which God's commands applied to the Old Testament Israelite people.

ADIAPHORIA AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

As the New Testament makes clear and plain, all the commands of the Church and State Laws of the Old Testament no longer apply to the New Testament Christians. St. Paul says: “Let no man therefore judge you (say you are doing wrong, GLW) in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days.” Col. 2:16. Christ therefore says: “If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.” John 8:36. Even after the disciples had studied three years with the Lord, these Old Testament regulations were so deeply ingrained in the Apostle Peter that it required a special visit of God to show him these laws were abolished. (Acts 10). Shortly afterwards, Peter appealed to the brethren at the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem, “Why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the necks of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear.” Acts 15:10. Similarly, when the Jews tried to compel Paul to have Titus circumcised, Paul under inspiration appealed to the Galatians: “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.” Gal. 5:1.

Thus Dr. Walther concludes:

“In Christ's name everything which is not sin in itself is permitted a Christian, and nothing else is necessary but faith and love.” (ibid, p.305).

THE SCRIPTURAL BASIS FOR ADIAPHORA AND THE DOCTRINE OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

The Bible amply deals with this doctrine, both in direct reference to the Christian's liberty and through numerous examples. The Apostle Paul twice tells the Corinthians: “All things are

lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient (Greek: beneficial, good to others).” (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23).

Dr. Stoeckhardt writes:

“It is self evident that by ‘all things’ (panta) the Apostle has reference to the things which God has created, the natural gifts and blessings of God. Here he comes to speak about the proper use of Adiaphora.” (Dr. G. Stoeckhardt, Exegetical Lectures on 1 Cor. p.35 - emphasis added).

The Lord here indicates that the Christian is at liberty to do as he pleases in all those matters where Scripture does not speak. But in doing so, the Lord instructs the Christian that all things (matters of adiaphora) are not expedient (helpful to others, beneficial). Thus the Christian should be willing to forego his Christian liberty when love to God and his fellow-Christian requires it of him. (This will be dealt with in a later section).

Scripture places before us many examples of actions which in themselves are matters of adiaphora.

1. Eating of Meat Sacrificed to idols

In Corinth and Rome, it was the custom for the heathen, as a part of their idol worship, to bring sacrifices of meat along to be offered up to these pagan gods. Parts of these animals were used in heathen sacrifice, the greater part was sold in the markets to whoever wished to buy, the money going back into the heathen temple.

Some of the Christians freely desired to buy and eat of this meat. Others, because all their lives they had been subject to the Old Testament Church Law’s instructions concerning unclean meats felt they would rather avoid it. They felt that this meat was ‘idol’ meat and therefore unclean. Who was right?

St. Paul instructs that eating or not eating in itself was an adiaphoron. He states two reasons. Firstly, these idols in themselves do not exist, are vanity, and therefore the meat has been dedicated to nothing (1 Cor. 8:4-6). Secondly, the meat, the animal from which it came etc., was not sinful but a Creation of God (1 Cor. 10:26). Therefore he says in 1 Cor. 10:25, “Whatsoever is sold in the shambles (Greek: markets), that eat, asking no question for conscience sake.” Again in Rom. 14:3, “Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth.” See also 1 Cor. 10:27; 1 Cor. 8:8.

Put simply, to eat meat or not to eat meat which has been used in pagan sacrifices was an adiaphoron, up to the decision of the individual, and not in itself forbidden by God’s Word.

2. Worshipping on Certain Days.

In Rom. 14:5, the Apostle Paul writes, “One man esteemeth one day above another; another esteemeth every day alike.” In the early days of the New Testament, there were some Jewish Christians who still desired to worship on the Saturday as they had always done in the Old Testament. On the other hand, Gentile Christians found it more suitable to have their day of worship on some other day of the week. The Apostle Paul pointed out (c.f. Col. 2:16-17), that since the Sabbath’s Commands were now abolished, the Lord had not commanded any particular day on which to worship. The Christian Congregation of its own free will had the right to choose which day was most suitable. Whatever day they decided upon, this time was set aside for the Lord and the study of His Word (Rom. 14:6).

In itself this matter was an adiaphoron.

Other examples from the New Testament are circumcision (Gal. 2:1-5), remaining single or becoming married (1 Cor. 7). So many examples could be mentioned from every day life that I will not attempt to make a list of these.

CONSCIENCE AND THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF ADIAPHORA

Conscience, is the voice, the inner judge within a person, which tells him whether he believes what he has done is right or wrong. It bases its judgement upon the knowledge which he has within him.

Conscience can be of several types and is given the following terms.

1. GOOD CONSCIENCE. If a man does what he knows or believes to be right and good, his conscience, the judge in his heart, raises no accusations against him but announces to him that his action is approved (e.g. Acts 23:1; Heb. 13:18). He has what is termed a good conscience.

For example, if a pastor has faithfully performed his duties according to the Word of God to the best of his ability, and is accused by others of laziness or negligence, he still should have a good conscience about the matter. He has done his Scriptural duty and therefore his conscience does not accuse him of any wrong doing but pronounces him to be innocent.

Provided he does not go against his faith or Christian love, the Christian may with a good conscience do as he pleases in matters adiaphora.

2. ERRING CONSCIENCE. On occasions it happens that a man's knowledge of what is right and wrong is not in accordance with God's Word. If his conscience then tells him to act according to this false belief, he has what is termed an erring conscience.
 - (i) Sometimes a person may regard a thing which is neither right nor wrong in itself (an adiaphoron) as forbidden. There are those who regard such things as playing cards, having a glass of beer, smoking a cigarette, or eating meat on Friday, as a sin. Their knowledge of God's Word is incorrect, therefore their erring conscience tells them to avoid these things because they believe them to be wrong.
 - (ii) At times a person may regard something which is neither right nor wrong in itself (an adiaphoron) as commanded by God. The Seventh Day Adventist, for example, believes that we are obliged to keep the Sabbath. Scripture teaches that it is abolished. His erring conscience tells him that he is doing wrong if he does not do what he believes God has commanded.

The Bible also tells us that for a person to go contrary to his conscience, even though it may be erring, is a sin.

Dr. Walther explains:

"In all our actions God does not look so much at our works, which we do, as at our heart, the attitude with which we do it. If we consider something wrong and still do it, for us it is sin, even if that which we do is free and permitted by God. For example, if someone thought that it would be wrong to do the least bit of work on the Sabbath, the way this was actually forbidden to the Jews, or if he thought that it would be sin to eat certain kinds of meat the way several had been indeed forbidden to the Jews, before God he would sin against himself by doing this free and permitted thing." (ibid. p.305, emphasis added).

Dr. Walther goes on to explain that many people use as their excuse: But the majority of people are doing it; the learned and wise professors and pastors think it is right; therefore let us follow what they say.

Nevertheless, though his knowledge of God's Word may be wrong in these matters, even if he were to go against his erring conscience, he would still be sinning (Rom. 14:14). So even in matters truly adiaphora, if a person was convinced that these things were commanded or forbidden by God's Word, he would be doing wrong if he were to go contrary to his conscience.

3. DOUBTING CONSCIENCE

Often it occurs that a person is not able to decide, is unsure whether what he is about to do is right, is wrong or is an adiaphoron. Such is called a doubting conscience, for he is in doubt about the matter.

It may occur in matters truly adiaphora that the Christian is in doubt about what he should or should not do. For example, he may not be able to decide whether it is right or wrong for himself to have a glass of beer. What should he now do? Should he blindly go ahead and do this with doubt in his mind as to the correct nature of his action?

Definitely Not! Scripture itself tells us (Rom. 14:23): "And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not in faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin."

Dr. Walther therefore answers:

"You see, one sins not only in matters permitted, when one erroneously considers them sinful and still does them, but also when one does not know for sure whether it is free or not and yet permits himself these things, and if one does something, even things permitted, in doubt.

"It can be no other way: He who doubts whether something is right or wrong and still does it shows he is doing it even at the risk of sinning against God. Is that not contrary to the fear of God, which is to dwell in the heart of a Christian? Oh my dear brothers and sisters in the Lord, be admonished and warned, therefore, to be prudent in the use of your Christian freedom! Whenever you want to do something do not think: I hope that this will not be wrong, so I'll do it.... Though something may be ever so good in appearance, if we have not examined it according to God's Word and found it safe through this unerring touchstone, we cannot say with Paul in our text: I know and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that this which I want to do is free and proper. Yes, if only the least doubt exists in our heart and conscience, whether that which we want to do is right according to God's Word and though the entire world considers it all right, we should rather wish to die than do it." (ibid. pp.307-308; emphasis added).

Therefore even in matters adiaphora, if the Christian has a doubting conscience, he should avoid doing what he pleases lest he act in doubt, and sin.

PURE AND IMPURE ADIAPHORA

At this point a distinction must be made. It has been stressed beforehand that the Christian is free to use his Christian liberty in matters truly adiaphora, provided this does not conflict with the principles of Christian love. These matters are called PURE OR FREE ADIAPHORA.

But there may be certain ADIAPHORA, matters in themselves indifferent, which however, have a CONFESSION OR DENIAL OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE connected with them, or which may involve the GIVING OF OFFENCE to the weak Christian brother or sister in the faith. In such matters, because the Christian is obligated to confess that and that alone which is in accord

with true doctrine (Matt 10:32) and because he is obligated to avoid giving offense to those who are weak in the faith (1 Cor. 8:13; Matt. 18:7), he is in duty bound for these reasons to avoid that which otherwise he would be free to do. Such matters are called IMPURE ADIAPHORA.

Hence the doctrinal statement upon which Article X of the Formula of Concord was based is true:

NOTHING IS AN ADIAPHORON WHEN CONFESSION AND OFFENCE ARE INVOLVED.

Such matters in themselves are still adiaphora, but since the higher laws of love towards God, and love towards our fellow man are involved, the Christian is here in duty bound to forego his Christian liberty which otherwise he would be free to exercise.

BUT WHAT DO WE REALLY MEAN BY THESE TERMS CONFESSION AND OFFENCE?

1. CONFESSION OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

A Confession of Christian doctrine is anything which the Christian says or does, seen by others, whereby he states his belief in a doctrine of the Word of God, or his denial of a teaching contrary to God's clear Word.

The Christian is commanded to confess true doctrine in passages like Matt. 10:32, "Whosoever therefore shall confess Me before men, him will I also confess before My Father which is in heaven." If the Christian fails to confess his Lord when he has the opportunity to do so, he is guilty of denying his Saviour, as our Lord says: "Whosoever shall deny Me before men, him will I also deny before My Father which is in heaven." (Matt. 10:33).

Similarly, the Christian is obligated to speak against and deny all teachings which are contrary to God's Word in passages like 1 Cor. 1:10; Rom. 16:17; Matt. 7:15, "Beware of false prophets." If a Christian were to fail to speak up against false doctrine, he would be disobeying God's clear command and be guilty of tolerating and condoning false doctrine (1 Tim. 5:22; Ezek. 3:18-20).

Matters in themselves Adiaphora may involve confession or denial of doctrines of God's Word and therefore may cease to be Adiaphora.

Several examples will shed light on this subject.

1. CREMATION. Cremation of the bodies of dead persons is in itself neither right nor wrong, neither commanded nor forbidden. The Bible nowhere directly forbids Cremation, although the Biblical custom and practice has always been BURIAL.

Yet Cremation for many years has been used by Atheists to bolster up their blasphemous denial of the Resurrection of the dead on the Last Day. Since this false doctrine is contrary to the teachings of the orthodox Lutheran Church, in order to confess the Scriptural doctrine of the Resurrection, the Lutheran Church has always buried its dead unless exceptional circumstances (e.g. contagious disease brought about by an epidemic) demand otherwise. Cremation has therefore ceased to be an adiaphoron.

2. MODE OF BAPTISM. At the beginning, Luther was more in favour of adopting immersion, as the mode of baptism in the Lutheran Church. He was quite correct because in itself the mode of baptism (as long as water is applied in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost) is an adiaphoron. He believed that immersion had a wonderful significance connected with it. However, the Anabaptists soon arose, who demand that baptism by immersion was the only valid form. In order to deny and condemn this false teaching and

confess the Scriptural doctrine that “to baptise” in the New Testament means to “apply water” Luther adopted the practice, now the custom in the Lutheran Church of baptism by wetting or sprinkling on of water.

3. ADIAPHORISTIC CONTROVERSY. This was a doctrinal matter which caused much trouble shortly after Luther’s death, from 1548 to 1555. It involved not a denial of adiaphora themselves, but the point: When do matters cease being adiaphora?

After Luther’s death, in order to try to work towards a uniting again of the Catholic and Lutheran folds, the Catholics demanded of the Lutherans the reintroduction of such abolished ceremonies as exorcism (driving out the devil), Confirmation of bishops, auricular confession, extreme unction, episcopal ordination, mass, the observance of Corpus Christi and festivals of the Virgin Mary, fastings and the abstaining from eating of meats, and others.

Pastor Bryce Winter explains:

“The question at stake was: May faithful Lutherans under the threat of persecution and violence from the Romanists, when the Romanists demanded the restitution of papal ceremonies, even if these ceremonies in themselves be neither commanded nor forbidden, may faithful Lutherans submit with a good conscience without denying God’s Word, without approving the errors of Romanism and without giving offence? The Philippists (followers of Philip Melanchthon, GLW) answered ‘Yes!’ The genuine Lutherans said ‘NO!’” (Pastor Bryce L. Winter, FOLLOWING THE FAITH OF OUR ORTHODOX LUTHERAN FATHERS, Fellowship Day, 1977. Refer to p.126 of this publication).

The Essayist then gives the correct answer:

“Even though some of these Romish ceremonies in themselves were neither commanded nor forbidden, yet false anti-Scriptural meanings were attached to them and by the adoption of them not only were clear teachings of Scripture denied, but also consciences were confused, offense was given to simple Christians and the enemies of the Truth were strengthened in their error and made bolder attacks on God’s Word.” (ibid. p.126).

Since a denial of doctrines of God’s Word was involved, and since thereby offence would have been given to those weak in the faith, the genuine Lutherans refused to give in and adopt these Catholic ceremonies and customs.

Hence we read in the Thorough Declaration of the Formula of Concord:

“When under the title and pretext of external adiaphora such things are proposed as are in principle contrary to God’s Word (although painted another colour), these are not to be regarded as adiaphora, in which one is free to act as he will, BUT MUST BE AVOIDED AS THINGS PROHIBITED BY GOD. In like manner, too, such ceremonies should not be reckoned among the genuine free adiaphora, or matters of indifference, as make a show or feign appearance, as though our religion and that of the Papists were not far apart, thus to avoid persecution, or as though the latter were not at least highly offensive to us; or when such ceremonies are designed for the purpose, and required and received in this sense, as though by and through them both contrary religions were reconciled and became one body; or when re-entering into the Papacy and a departure from the pure doctrine of the Gospel and true religion should occur or gladly flow therefrom....” (Triglotta, pp.1053-1055; emphasis added).

4. THE MATTER OF HEAD-COVERING IN PUBLIC WORSHIP (1 Cor. 11:2-16). According to Scripture, to wear or not to wear a head-covering is in itself an adiaphoron. Otherwise it

would be sinful also for males to go without a head-covering and also for women to wear the head-covering in general when she goes out in public.

However, the Bible tells us that the wearing of a head-covering by the women at a certain place (the public worship service) has a confession of Scripture doctrine connected with it. Verses 2-9 of 1 Cor. 11, outline this confession.

1. The head of the woman is the man (Sixth Commandment);
2. The glory of man is not to compete with the glory of God (First Commandment);
3. Man's authority over the woman (Order of Creation).

When the woman wears the head-covering in public worship, she confesses openly before all these doctrines of Scripture. Therefore the woman's wearing of the head-covering in public worship ceases to be an adiaphoron because this confession of Scripture doctrine is involved.

Such a confession of true doctrine and denial of false teaching, flows from and is based upon the Love towards God which is required of Christians in the First Commandment. Love towards God shows itself in implicit and loyal obedience to His Word.

In order to show that a Confession or denial of Christian Doctrine is connected with a matter in itself an adiaphoron, clear evidence and proof must be brought that this is so. This evidence must not only show that this false meaning was connected with the thing in the past, but also at the present time.

For example, in the past some Lutherans took exception to card playing. This was at the time in which it was in the main connected with gambling or social groups that indulged in other sinful activities.

Here an evil confession may have been made and offense given to the weak in faith, namely the false claim that gambling was acceptable and permitted by the Word of God.

However, no longer is this so. At the present time there are many card games that have nothing to do with gambling, and which can be played without coming into contact with sinful activities. Therefore no longer can card playing be rightfully objected to, as long as other principles of the Word of God are obeyed.

Not only are we, however, to show love toward God in the confessing of pure doctrine, but also love toward our fellowmen in avoiding all offense to them.

2. OFFENSE TO THOSE WEAK IN THE FAITH

The word OFFENCE means, "to cast a stumbling block in the way of another, to cause another to stumble or fall."

To give OFFENCE, is to do or say anything whereby we cause another, one who is weak in the faith or weak in Christian knowledge, in weakness or ignorance to sin, to endanger his soul's salvation or even to cause him to fall from the faith.

Offence is given in the first place when one commits a sin, something which is wrong in itself. For example, the drunkard gives offense to the world, as well as to his own church members.

Offence also may be given in matters of adiaphora, where we cause through our actions our weak brother or sister in the faith to sin or fall from the faith. Here the Confessional Principle also applies: NOTHING IS AN ADIAPHORON WHERE CONFESSION AND OFFENCE ARE INVOLVED.

Such a matter may be in itself neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word, but comes under the title of an IMPURE ADIAPHORON since it involves offence to those who are weak in the faith. Therefore because of the love one is to show to fellow Christians, (Rom. 14:15; 1 Cor. 13:4-7), especially those who are weak in faith and Christian knowledge, as long as the Word of God is not attacked, one should be willing to forego his Christian liberty in order to avoid offending the weak.

Scripture abounds with examples where Christians are urged to forego their Christian liberty for the sake of the weak in faith. The Apostle Paul urged the Corinthians: "But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to them that are weak.... and through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?" (1 Cor. 8:8, 11). Again: "We, then, that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak and not to please ourselves" (Rom. 15:1). Finally, "Him that is weak in the faith, receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things, another, who is weak, eateth herbs" (Rom. 14:1-2).

Thus Dr. Walther points out:

"There are, my friends, many, when they know that a thing is a free matter and not sin in itself, who think that they can without further thought do it under all circumstances. If one admonishes them not to do it, they say: Do you mean to claim that it is a sin?.... If one must admit that it is not sin in itself, then they think that they have won and say to the one admonishing them: What? are you going to make a sin out of something that is not sin in itself?

"Yet how greatly they err! They do not recall what great difference there is between whether a thing is free in itself, and whether one dare in freedom use it under certain circumstances....

"So you see, my friends, when a Christian wants to do something it is by no means enough to know that in itself it is not a sin; a Christian must always ask: But do not others; do not weak Christians, consider it sin? If I were to do this, would they not be offended?" (Standard Epistles, Dr. C.F.W. Walther, p.309; emphasis added).

Who are such weak in faith? The weak in the faith are those fellow brothers in the faith (Rom. 14:15; Rom. 14:6) who, because of insufficient knowledge, or because of lack of understanding in the matter, regard something adiaphora as forbidden or commanded, or who are in doubt concerning it. Thus the Apostle Paul, in dealing with those who are weak in the faith, explains: "there is not in every man that knowledge" (1 Cor. 8:7). Such are "weak in faith" (Rom. 14:1). Some of these weak Christians in the early New Testament refrained from the eating of meats sacrificed to idols and desired to worship on the Sabbath because they felt it was still commanded by the Lord (Rom. 14:2, 5). Such a weak Christian shows that he is not as yet stubborn in his false belief by his desire to be instructed and willingness to learn, a humble Christian attitude of loyalty to and implicit obedience to God's Word, a genuine desire for more time in order to make up his mind and learn more. Where however, one has clearly made up his mind in the matter, "I am right and refuse to budge on the matter", where he refuses to be instructed and no longer desires to learn, when he even tries to spread his error and make public propaganda for it with others, there he no longer is to be regarded as one who is weak in knowledge but as one who is firmly fixed in his error. (This will be dealt with shortly).

In the case of a genuine weak Christian, while he is in doubt or errs concerning the matter, if he were to follow the example of the strong brother (who exercises his Christian liberty), he would be going contrary to his own conscience, thus sinning against his own erring or doubting conscience and risking eternal damnation. For a Christian, weak in knowledge, to go contrary to his erring or doubting conscience, is sin.

WHAT NOW IS TO BE THE ATTITUDE OF THE STRONG TOWARD THE WEAK BROTHER?

Should he say: "Since this matter is free, I'm going to do as I please. I couldn't be bothered about how it affects my fellow Christians. Whether other people who think it is wrong see me or not, does not concern me. I'll still do it"?

DEFINITELY NOT!

He must remember that the weak brother is a BROTHER IN THE FAITH (Rom. 14:6); that his weakness results from his lack of knowledge or understanding (1 Cor. 8:7); that the free exercise of his Christian liberty may not only become a stumbling block for the weak (1 Cor. 8:9), but also cause him to perish (1 Cor. 8:11). Thus the strong may be responsible for the damning of that blood-bought soul (Rom. 14:20), thereby definitely sinning against God (1 Cor. 8:12). Therefore it is the duty of the strong not to despise the weak or cause him to stumble (Rom. 14:13, 15), but rather to bear with his weakness (Rom. 15:1).

During this time the weak are to be INSTRUCTED AND STRENGTHENED in the clear Word of God.

Thus Pastor Kleinig, commenting on Dr. Walther's Sermon (previously referred to) says:

"If there are people who believe a thing is really wrong or sinful, but of itself it is not a sin, they must be instructed and patiently shown from the Word of God that Scriptural principles are not involved in these matters and that the thing is free. It can be done if somebody wishes to do it and he can leave it undone too. He is not doing wrong either way." (Comments by Pastor F.G. Kleinig on Sermon by Dr. C.F.W. Walther, Standard Epistles, p.309).

Dr. Pieper also speaks of the instruction of the weak:

"Hence we deal with weakness in doctrine and confusion in a proper, God-pleasing way if we seek to remove the weakness through patient instruction in the unabridged plumb-line of the Word of God. We must demonstrate great patience in this genuinely Christian activity. Instruction should not be abruptly broken off if success does not appear as rapidly as we had anticipated. Instead the instruction should be continued with great patience as long as Christian judgement would still indicate that there is still hope for the removal of the error." (Dr. Pieper, Theses on Unionism, p.31; emphasis added).

HOW LONG ARE WE TO BEAR WITH THE WEAK?

Scripture clearly indicates that there is a time when such instruction must come to an end. This time comes when such a person no longer is to be borne with because he no longer is weak in knowledge and understanding but has become, despite all instruction, stubbornly set in his false teaching. Such shows his attitude by his claims, "I am right and I refuse any longer to be instructed in the matter", "I no longer desire to discuss the matter with you and despite what you say I am not changing my position." Such a one may even begin to try to spread his false teachings to others, thus causing much harm and damage to souls.

What is to happen then? Are we still to bear with such stubborn errorists?

SCRIPTURE CLEARLY INDICATES OTHERWISE

Dr. Beck translates Titus 3:10-11: "A man who chooses to be different in his teaching warn once and a second time, and then don't have anything more to do with him because you know such a man is set in his wrong way and is a sinner who condemns himself."

In Titus 1:9-10, we read: “Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and convince the gainsayers (those who oppose, GLW). For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, especially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not.”

Dr. Pieper thus says:

“It must also be noted that when weakness ceases to be weakness and becomes false doctrine, it is to be dealt with accordingly. This becomes the case when those who are in error demand authorisation for their error within the church, seek to make propaganda for their error, to label divine truth as error, and call true teachers false teachers....”

“If the foolish talkers and deceivers prey upon the weak in the Congregation, then the clear and evident exposure and refutation of the errors of these deceivers is the only way in which the weak can be rescued from their captivity to stubborn false teachers.” (ibid. pp.31-32).

In short, if such ones set in their ways were not dealt with, the congregation would be guilty of disobeying the Lord (Titus 3:10-11; Amos 3:3), tolerating and condoning false doctrine and helping its spread, jeopardising the salvation of the souls in its midst and confirming and encouraging the errorist in his false teaching.

Clearly, when one makes the demand, “I am a weak Christian; therefore you should give in to me out of love”, such a one is demanding toleration of his error. He is using this as an excuse for his error, clearly indicating that he is becoming set in his false position. Despite his claim of being a weak Christian, he rather is to be regarded as coming into the group of those who, despite instruction, refuse to be admonished.

Pastor Kleinig finally comments:

“However this instruction, of course, finally comes to an end. You cannot instruct a person forever and ever, and that person keeps on saying, ‘No, I won’t accept that’.... If after continued instruction people still will not accept it, then also we have got to take that stand: “We are not going to do it’ or ‘We are going to do it’. We will not budge. If they say, ‘Well, we won’t budge either,’ then we are confronted.... with a very serious question - the question which was already raised by the prophet Amos: ‘Can two walk together except they be agreed’? We are all required by Scripture, at least eventually, to speak the same thing and have no divisions among us, and to be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgement.” (ibid.).

Two clear Scriptural examples where the Apostle Paul bore with Christians weak in knowledge and instruction are Acts 16:1-3 where he requested Timothy to be circumcised in order not to offend the Jewish Christians amongst whom his student was to work, and Rom. 14:1; 1 Cor. 8:10, where Paul urged the Christians at Corinth and Rome on certain occasions to avoid the eating of meat in order not to offend those who were weak and confused about the matter.

On the other hand, when the Jews stubbornly insisted that they were right and refused any longer to be instructed (Gal. 2:1-5), Paul refused to give in to their demands that Titus his second student be circumcised.

Similarly, Scripture indicates that for the woman not to wear the head-covering in the public worship service, offence would be given to the holy angels (1 Cor. 11:10). Therefore the command is given: “For this cause ought (Greek: a moral obligation) the woman to have power on her head.” (1 Cor. 11:10).

Let us all therefore, out of love to our fellow Christians, be glad and willing to forego our Christian liberty when offence to the weak is involved.

ADIAPHORA AND THE CHRISTIAN CONGREGATION

Much could be said about the important part this doctrine plays in the life of a congregation. Time does not permit. The following distinction is to be observed.

1. In matters which are NOT ADIAPHORA, that is, where God's Word has clearly spoken, there the congregation must be unanimous in its acceptance of true doctrine and rejection of false doctrine. The congregation votes, not to decide what is right and what is wrong. The Word of God has already done that. The vote simply indicates who accepts God's Word and who rejects it.

Where unanimity on matters of doctrine does not exist, it must be obtained through the proper steps of Doctrinal Discipline towards those who err.

2. In matters of Adiaphora, where God's Word does not speak, unanimity in the decision though to be desired, is not absolutely required. In such matters (e.g. What time service is to be held, what colour carpet the church is to have, etc.), the congregation may decide by majority vote. The majority should remember that they should consider the needs and opinions of the minority on the matter. Christian love may occasionally require that the majority in love be prepared to give way to the minority. But when the congregation makes a decision in earthly matters by majority vote, the minority should be willing in a loving Christian spirit to accept and abide by the will and decision of the majority. If the minority take the attitude: "My opinion was not accepted, and therefore I refuse to work together with the congregation; I refuse to go along with what they have decided", one must wonder whether their desire as a Christian to work together in peace and harmony with their fellow Christians (Rom. 12:18) is actually true. Often their stubborn pride is hurt because their opinion was not accepted.

CONCLUSION

We conclude with some fine words recorded by Dr. F. Pieper on the general theme The Evangelical Lutheran Church the True Visible Church of God on Earth.

Thesis 18, Subdivision D reads:

"The Evangelical Lutheran Church makes a strict distinction between those things which God has commanded in His Word and those things which are free (adiaphora: the organisation of the Church)."

Under this heading he writes:

"An orthodox church body must hold fast to the entire Word of God and to all the teachings revealed in it. To dispense from the acceptance of this or that Scriptural doctrine is an offense against the majesty of God. But the converse is also true. In order to claim the orthodox name, a church body must permit all these things to be free which are not commanded by God's Word. It must not prescribe to any of its members to believe or to do aught that God has not in His word prescribed to men. When a religious body does not strictly draw the line of things commanded and things left to our freedom, that church body likewise sins against the majesty of God by placing itself in the stead of God. God has reserved to Himself the right to command to Christians anything that is to be binding on conscience. 'One is your Master, Christ'. A Church body which restricts evangelical liberty by laws of its own misleads its people into

idolatry; for inasmuch as a Christian in ecclesiastical, spiritual matters accepts any command from men, he apostatises from God. Such a Church commits grand larceny on her members, who have all received Christian liberty from their Lord, freedom from human commandments. Indeed, a church body of that kind would subvert the entire order which was to be the characteristic of the Church, by making a kingdom of this world out of the Christian Church. The kingdoms of this world have the right to issue laws which transcend God's Word (if not in contradiction to it). But the Church has no such right, has no power to legislate beyond the Word of God. It can command only where God has commanded in His Word.

"You intend to become Evangelical Lutheran preachers. I charge you therefore to adhere to the principles of our dear Church also in this matter - Under no conditions to allow liberty where Scripture commands and, on the other hand, never to command anything where Scripture is silent. Only so you will become faithful servants of God and of the Lutheran Church" (Quoted in the Borderland of Right and Wrong, Dr. T. Graebner, pp.34-36; emphasis added).

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