

## **All Adiaphora are Not Created Equally<sup>i</sup>**

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Forty years ago, the issues that deeply troubled our synod seemed to be more explicitly doctrinal than they are today. Back then, our controversies involved questions related to the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture and the third use of the law. One of the characteristic features of our controversies and disagreements in recent years is that they often revolve around the issues related to practices whether it be worship practices (music, vestments, architecture), the practice of communion fellowship, practices related to the divine call, questions regarding participation and witness in public settings alongside leaders of other religious communities. Some will argue that these practices belong in the realm of adiaphora. Others will argue that we live in a situation that demands confession and therefore the suspension of the adiaphoristic quality of certain practices. But we should not conclude too quickly that adiaphora means anything goes as long as it does not contradict our theology. (That itself shows forth a worldview, a *Weltanschauung*, against our Lutheran understanding, for we simply ask not what is permissible, but what should we do, that is, how should we act based on who we are.) Nor should we conclude too quickly that every situation or every controversy requires that we enter into a *status confessionis*.

The Formula of Concord describes adiaphora as “church rites which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God.” We might also add that they are practices neither prescribed nor prohibited by the Lutheran Confessions. They are humanly devised practices developed and approved by the church as an empirical Christian community. As an empirical Christian community, the church seeks ways to order its life together in such a way as fully to manifest the *una sancta* within her midst. Here we are in the realm of active righteousness, or to use the language of the reformers, ceremonial righteousness. That having been said, my proposal is simple and perhaps all too self-evident. But some things are worth repeating. The proposal is this: All adiaphora are not created equal. Simply because some practices are not commanded in Scripture, simply because they are humanly devised, simply because they need not be observed for

salvation, should not suggest that the category of adiaphora means that one should do anything he wants. Some practices are better than others and some simply are more appropriate.

Here if we wish to speak not only of confessional theology, but also of confessional practice, we need to ask, “What constitutes confessional practice?” Being confessional in part has to do with reflecting on matters in a confessional manner. It is having a confessional mindset and sharing the same concerns and assumptions as the confessors themselves--understanding why they did what they did. If in the past, it has been important to identify “Principles of Lutheran Theology,” perhaps it is important today to identify “Principles of Lutheran Adiaphora.” This does not mean that the theological principles that guide us will always provide clear solutions to the questions facing the church. As principles, they will not automatically result in easy answers or single answers about how to do that. Principles give guidance, not directives. Thus absent divine mandates or directives, the church is free to draw upon reason and develop guidelines to govern its life that are mutually agreed upon by its members who are willing to submit to one another.

On what basis can some adiaphora be regarded as better than other adiaphora? While it has been common to turn to article 10 of the Formula of Concord since it carries the title “Adiaphora,” I suggest that we turn to a less considered portion of the Lutheran Confessions, namely, article 15 of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. Here Melanchthon provides some helpful guidance that can help us think through criteria for choosing and developing certain adiaphora over other adiaphora.

### **Article 15: Church Rites and Practices<sup>ii</sup>**

The rhetorical purpose (call to action) of the Apology as a whole as well as the central issue of the Apology (the basis/rationale for the call to action) shape Melanchthon’s construction of Ap 15. He opens the article *impromptu* (without an exordium) by moving immediately into the *narratio*. After summarizing the Confutation’s critique of CA XV (§1-2) he expresses astonishment at the Confutation’s line of argument. “Although we expected our opponents to defend human traditions for other reasons we never dreamed that they would actually condemn the proposition that

we do not merit the forgiveness of sins or grace by observing human traditions.”

Melanchthon apparently expected them to argue on the basis of ecclesiastical *potestas* as seen in his letter to Luther on 14 July 1530.<sup>iii</sup> But since they have chosen to argue that human traditions contribute to righteousness *coram deo*, Melanchthon declares that he now has an open and shut case. The Confutation “obscures the gospel, the benefits of Christ, and the righteousness of faith” (Ap XV, 4, 10, 15). Defending the Augustana’s *propositio* shapes his subsequent *dispositio* (arrangement of arguments).

Melanchthon opens (Ap XV, 6) his *confirmatio* by summarizing his arguments from Ap IV regarding the righteousness of faith. As he did there, he argues here from definition, which is appropriate for the legal *status*. “What is it on account of which we are pronounced righteous? Is it because of our works? Or are we received [by God] on account of another, namely, on account of Christ, by faith...” He answers. “Human beings are justified by faith when they believe that they are reconciled to God not on account of their works, but on account of Christ” (Ap XV, 6-9). Melanchthon clarifies what is included in his definition of works (namely, what kind of works are excluded as a basis for justification *coram deo*?) by anticipating two objections. First, he takes up the claim that the church does not forbid eating meat “on the same grounds that the Jews did (Ap XV, 10-11). In other words, the authors of the Confutation argued that their strictures on foods were issued for other reasons (Confutation XXVI, 133; XXVII, 137). Melanchthon replies, “there is no difference between human traditions and Mosaic Laws. Paul condemns the both alike.” Second, in response to the objection that only those who are already justified merit grace (*via antiqua*), Melanchthon replies with the words of Paul that the promise once ratified is not nullified by later laws (Gal 3). In other words, Paul does not argue only against the position that works justify apart from grace. He argues against all works. Thus human traditions are included in the definition of works and thus are excluded by Paul from the matter of justification.

After reviewing the Lutheran understanding of justification on the basis of definition (i.e., the definition of justification and the definition of works), Melanchthon develops the remainder of his arguments for the proposition that human traditions do not justify from the dialectical topics of *causae* and *effectus*.<sup>iv</sup> He argues from either *causa efficiens* or *causa finalis* depending upon whether he is arguing about matters related to

divine righteousness or human righteousness. When answering the question, “is it necessary to observe certain human traditions for salvation (divine righteousness)?” Melancthon argues from *causa efficiens*. For in dealing with the *causa efficiens*, the main question is “by what authority do human traditions merit justification?” After all, Melancthon points out that “a law receives its authority from an efficient cause.”<sup>v</sup> When he argues from *causa efficiens*, he always includes their *effectus* (§18-19, 25-28, 31-37). But when answering whether and why we may or should observe human traditions since they lack a divine mandate, Melancthon then argues from the *causa finalis*, that is, their ends or goals. In other words, it depends upon their purpose and their usefulness.

Before answering the question regarding the purpose (*causa finalis*) for which the fathers established various ceremonies, Melancthon raises the hypothetical question, “suppose a person wants to establish a tradition for the purpose of meriting righteousness, how does he know that God will approve it” (Ap XV, 13-17)? This question can be answered only by inquiring into the *causa efficiens*. He sees this *causa* as the deciding factor in matters involving laws. By whose authority is an action required? After citing several testimonies from Scripture with which Melancthon lays down the rule that we can affirm nothing about the will of God without the Word of God. Having demonstrated that no authority exists for such claims, he moves to arguments from *effectus* and shows what happens when people establish human traditions as necessary for righteousness *coram deo* without the Word of God. In brief, they establish the kingdom of the Antichrist. On the basis of Daniel he argues that the institution of new religious rites and new kinds of worship in opposition to God is the establishment of the kingdom of the antichrist.

Having addressed the issue regarding the authority by which human traditions are established as necessary for righteousness, Melancthon returns to the question of the church fathers’ use of human traditions (§20-21). Here he shifts to the development of arguments based on the *causa finalis* namely, “what is the purpose or goal of human traditions?” This now becomes the critical question for Melancthon since human traditions lack any divine authority to propitiate God. Arguing from *causa finalis* allows Melancthon to affirm that although they lack divine authority, they may be observed in line with their original intent. In particular, Melancthon argues that the Fathers stress

three reasons for observing these practices: restraining the flesh, teaching the illiterate, and maintaining order within the church. To support his point, Melanchthon draws on corroborating witness of Epiphanius who had to deal with the Encratites, the latter of whom were like the monks of his day when it came to matters of celibacy and foods.<sup>vi</sup>

Melanchthon then proceeds to contrast the fathers' appropriate use of traditions with the unacceptable interpretation that his opponents attach to them (Ap XV, 21b-24). Unlike the fathers who use human traditions for the purpose of maintaining human righteousness within society and church, the opponents use them for the purpose of acquiring righteous *coram deo*. To explain why, he returns to his arguments from *causa efficiens*, that is to say, who or what determines that these human traditions acquire righteousness before God? He now draws on the witness of Paul in Colossians who notes that because human traditions serve good purposes,<sup>vii</sup> they have an "appearance of wisdom" "and righteousness."<sup>viii</sup> As a result, throughout most of world history, fallen human reason has concluded that human traditions are meritorious before God because reason is blind when it comes to the righteousness of faith.<sup>ix</sup> Melanchthon notes that this happened with both the Israelites and Gentiles. This *causa* (relying on the authority of fallen human reason) has two effects. First, reason tends to regard human traditions as more holy than the works of one's calling, thus prompting some to abandon their families for the monastery (Ap XV, 25-26). Second, they become an intolerable burden as they are multiplied and increased and need some kind of mitigation (Ap XV, 27-28).

The only way to counter such an interpretation arising from human reason is to fortify oneself with the Word of God (Ap XV, 29-30) (In his discussion of *causae efficiens* in the Elements of Rhetoric, Melanchthon points out that human laws give way to divine). The Word rejects such an interpretation offered by human reason, the *effectus* of which is that Christians are freed from the yoke of human traditions (Ap XV, 31-36). By condemning human traditions as necessary for salvation, the apostles thus cut the Gordian knot of looking for ways to mitigate human traditions but having no sure standard for their mitigation. (Interestingly, Melanchthon does not discuss any *causa efficiens* for establishing new traditions, such as pastor and people working cooperatively, e.g., pastor proposes, people approve or reject).

Melanchthon then notes that while the Gospel has given Evangelical churches the freedom to omit a few traditions on the grounds that they are no longer useful, the opponents have provided an even better reason to omit them, namely, in order to reject the opinion that they somehow merit justification *coram deo*. Having said that, the freedom of the Gospel has allowed them to make use of other traditions the way that the early church fathers used them. And so, Melanchthon stresses that the Lutherans have gladly received many of ancient traditions because they serve good order and tranquility (*causa finalis*) (Ap XV, 37-48). In fact, he goes on to boast that the evangelicals observe them in a far better manner (given their purpose of teaching and order etc) than do the opponents. These traditions have now been returned to their proper place within the church. Melanchthon points to three areas: liturgy (Ap XV, 38-41), sermons (Ap XV, 42-44), and fasting (and distinction of foods) with regard to the mortification of the flesh (Ap XV, 45-48).<sup>x</sup>

Melanchthon concludes with a nicely developed *peroratio*. In an emotionally laden appeal (as is appropriate for a *peroratio*) he cautions that the question of human traditions is fraught with dangers on both sides. When they are required or made necessary, they torture consciences. Yet when they are abrogated, other evils can follow. Melanchthon had already addressed the first danger, namely, the torturing of consciences and does so here again by simply repeating his proposition that the observance of human traditions is not necessary for righteousness *coram deo*. Hence, consciences now find comfort and peace in the Lutheran teaching. Melanchthon now turns his attention to the second danger, namely what kinds of evils does the abrogation of human traditions bring?

Here Melanchthon picks up a charge that had been raised repeatedly since the peasant's revolt, namely, that Christian liberty leads to licentiousness and incites people to sedition. In the Confutation, the authors warned that disobedience to the church's ordinances would lead to rebellion within the state (Article XXVI). Melanchthon takes up charge in the final article of the Apology. "They raised an objection on the basis for the public offenses and commotions that have arisen under the pretext of our teaching" (Ap XXVIII, 23). These concerns were not without basis. Memories of Karlstadt, Müntzer, the peasants' revolt and its violent suppression remained vivid in the minds of many. The visitations, together with the changes introduced by them, brought upon the Evangelicals

charges of schisms from the Catholics.<sup>xi</sup> Tensions were further heightened in the wake of the second diet of Speyer when the princes openly opposed the diet's decision by issuing a legal *protestatio*.

Melanchthon responds to the concern of sedition in the last line of Ap XV, by declaring that the Evangelicals desire peace above all else. "We judge that the greatest possible public concord which can be maintained without offending consciences ought to be preferred to all other interests" (Ap XV, 52). This echoes a similar sentiment in the Torgau Articles, which says that peace "is to be regarded as higher and better than all the external freedoms which can be thought of."<sup>xii</sup> "One can easily see the ruinous, horrible scandal that comes from such divisions."<sup>xiii</sup> Melanchthon counters the charge of sedition in an extensively revised and much expanded section of Ap XXVIII (23-24) in the revised octavo text of the Apology (which would seem appropriate given the seriousness of the accusation). There he stresses how their teaching increases respect for rulers is very conducive to tranquility. Melanchthon reiterates, "we greatly wish for public harmony and peace" (Ap XXVIII, 24).

Toward the goal of peace, Melanchthon cites the principle that should guide the church's use of its freedom in the matter of human traditions under the Gospel, namely, love.<sup>xiv</sup> In Ap IV Melanchthon had given some examples of how such love is to be exercised when he expounded texts that his opponents had quoted in support of their position that grace assisted acts of love justify a person. From Colossians 2 (Ap IV, 231-237)<sup>xv</sup> he points out that love enables one to "overlook certain minor offenses, lest the church disintegrate into various schisms and lest enmities, factions, and heresies arise from such schisms. From 1 Peter 4 (Ap IV, 238-43) he notes that love is necessary for preserving public harmony. Melanchthon points out that if Caesar or Pompey had yielded just a little, civil war would not have broken out." In line with the responsibility of love, Melanchthon declares that the evangelicals are willing to exercise freedom in moderation by observing some of the adiaphora with their opponents even if they are "somewhat burdensome."

What precisely is Melanchthon willing to bear for the sake of love? In the opening lines of Article XV Melanchthon refers back to his discussion in AC XXVI (on Foods)

and in the final line he looks ahead to further discussion of human traditions in Apology XXVII (vows) and Apology XXVIII (ecclesiastical authority). These are also the three topics that Melanchthon addresses within the body of Ap XV (foods in §43-44; vows in §43-44, and episcopal authority in §31). Why does he mention these three and not the other four topics found in articles XXII-XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession? It would seem that articles XXII (two kinds), XXIII (marriage of priests), and XXIV (mass), XXV (confession) address divinely instituted matters that have been abused. These are not human traditions. They deal with abuses of matters that have a divine institution. In fact, the Torgau Articles indicated that compromise could not be made on the topic of two kinds and the marriage of priests (Apology XXII and XXIII) without sin. For these reasons, Melanchthon repeatedly asked that the bishops concede the issues of two kinds, marriage of priests, and the abolition of masses in his conversations with papal officials in the days before and after the presentation of the Augustana. Campeggio was willing to grant the first two (also Augsburg Interim), but not the abolition of private masses. In other words, Melanchthon refuses to observe any human tradition that impinges on justification or contradicts a divine mandate.<sup>xvi</sup>

By contrast, articles XXVI (foods), XXVII (vows), and XXVIII (the nature and extent of episcopal jurisdiction) pertain more clearly to humanly instituted activities (*ergo adiaphora*).<sup>xvii</sup> In theory, they could be purged of their abuses and rendered useful for other purposes. Although monasteries have outlived their usefulness, Melanchthon concedes that they could serve as schools of learning. When it comes to the matter of vows, Melanchthon has no quarrel with non-obligatory vows. A person may freely choose to pledge himself to a celibate life for the sake of prayer and study apart from the distractions of domestic life. What Melanchthon cannot countenance is the requirement of such vows for righteousness. On the matter of foods, it could be conceded that a prince might establish fasts for economic reasons (see the Leipzig “Resolution”). Or similarly, a person may voluntarily fast for the purpose of bodily discipline. On the matter of episcopal jurisdiction, bishops may propose orders for the church, as long as they do not impose them much less require them as necessary for eternal life. In other words, Melanchthon is willing to live under the jurisdiction of a reformed episcopacy for the

sake of tranquility (especially since they had been accused of schism for separating themselves from the bishops. cf. Ap XIV).

Melanchthon's appeal for peace along with his willingness to bear the burden of observing certain adiaphora with his opponents stands in sharp contrast with his opponents on two counts. First, in a much expanded section of Apology XXVIII, 24) he turns the table on his opponents by declaring that they are responsible whatever rebellions may arise by virtue of their response to the crisis of pastoral care. They have exercised "incredible cruelty" toward good people. Melanchthon alludes to the violence that had been threatened against the evangelical pastors (AC Concl Part I; Ap, IV, 236). These arguments parallel the ones he made against Campeggio in Ap XII. Second, his opponents are the ones who keep calling for war (Ap XXVIII, 2). They are "writing laws in blood and are asking his most merciful prince, the emperor to promulgate these laws" (Ap IV, 236). At the Diet of Speyer, Charles V insisted that princely and municipal adherents of Luther's reformation to papal obedience in compliance with the Edict of Worms. He has now issued new threats to suppress the faith with the Recess' ultimatum.

So, that brings us back to the two dangers connected with human traditions that Melanchthon listed at the outset of his *peroratio*. Melanchthon essentially argues that the teaching of the two kinds of righteousness avoids both dangers. This teaching both comforts sinners and supports societal peace and tranquility. Where Christian freedom is stressed, we exercise it in moderation for the common peace. By contrast, his opponents fail on both counts. With their teaching that human traditions are necessary for righteousness, they torture consciences. Unwilling to yield in anything (doctrine or human traditions) they only advocate the use of force and thereby incite sedition and promote war.

### **Toward the Development of Criteria for Adiaphora**

In one sense for Melanchthon, adiaphora are adiaphora. That is to say, if they lack divine authority, the church is free to use them or to disregard them. At the same time, this does not mean that the reformers thought all adiaphora were of equal value or benefit for the church. It is significant that when Melanchthon cannot argue in Ap XV from

*causa efficiens* (by what authority do we establish or follow a given practice) he then argues from *causa finalis*, that is, what is the purpose of a particular rite or tradition. In other words, he affirms that some adiaphora are more useful and beneficial for the ordering of the church's life than other adiaphora. These purposes grow out of and give expression to the reformers' theology of the church in terms of its nature, unity, and purpose.

Based on the reformers' confession of the church, we can discern several principles that guide him in the development and reception of adiaphora. Those adiaphora are to be regarded as more useful and beneficial (it is that they contribute to the building up of the church) than others are those that taken into account the following theological principles. As a modest contribution or starting-point for such a discussion, I would propose that we can identify four principles from the Melanchthon's understanding of human traditions in Apology XV: (1) Confession/Teaching of the Gospel; (2) Continuity with the catholic tradition; (3) Contextual sensitivity for Mission; (4) Corporate Collegiality/Consensus of the Church. It is not enough to privilege only one of these principles, or focus on two out of four of these principles. Instead, it is necessary to take all four into account.

### **Confession/Teaching of the Gospel**

First and foremost, good adiaphora promote the confession/teaching of the Gospel. This principle concentrates on the Gospel as the *raison d'être* of the church's existence. The church must always take care that its message is the message given by the Spirit, the message that creates and builds the church *coram deo*. Since a Christian receives divine righteousness through faith and is thereby gathered into the church (*coram deo*) only by coming into contact with the means of grace or by entering their sphere of influence, the way in which the church orders its horizontal life becomes important as it can either block or open access to the life constituting Word. The church's ordering thus flows from and centers upon the action of His Word in its midst. Through the ordering of the church's life, the Word is carried and delivered by human structures and forms. Decisions on how best to organize the church and conduct its life must be based on the sacrifice of every prejudice and value of society and individuals, whether in

themselves right, wrong, or neutral, that will in this instance not promote the practice of the Word of repentance and life in Christ. Ultimately, the church orders itself so as to best free the Gospel that gathers and sustains the church as an assembly of believers *coram deo*.

Fundamental, basic, and central to a confessional approach, is the confession of the Gospel. All forms and practices should support the teaching the Gospel. While we agree on this, we cannot take this for granted. A key aspects of the Gospel is the historical narrative of Christ. In particular, the Creeds center on the incarnation, death, resurrection, and exaltation of our Lord. The distinctively Lutheran documents draw out the soteriological benefits of that narrative. Those benefits are delivered at specific places and times. Lutherans participate in the sacrament as word or the word as sacrament--not by observing them--but by receiving them in faith. We are instructed in the beneficial use of the sacrament through faith. A cursory look at Apology XV brings out their concern: Children chant psalms to learn, people sing to learn or to pray, the Lord's Supper is celebrated every Lord's day, and pastors are required to instruct and examine the youth publicly.

Two examples might be enough to illustrate this concern today. First, songs/hymns need to convey the content of the Gospel, if not in every instance, at least in whole through their corporate use in a Divine Service. This assumes an approach that focuses on the historical narrative of Christ's life. There seems to be a growing recognition of this in other segments of American Christianity. In an USA Today article, a Canadian music minister, the Rev. John Platanitis of Oshawa, near Toronto, acknowledged that the short songs that work best on a screen are too often emotional "generic buddy-buddy God songs," without the theological meat found in classic hymnal choices. The author of the popular song "Open the Eyes of My Heart" (1997) acknowledges, "A steady diet of doctrinal hymns is like too much filet mignon. But living on repetitive four-line choruses is like making a meal of potato chips." Yes, we sometimes use easy-to-sing, repetitive verses to supplement out hymnody in a Divine Service, but one should never try to live only on supplements, forsaking the true food of doctrine in the process. Architecturally, or in terms of worship space and time, Word and Sacrament need prominent places. Therefore, pulpit, altar, and font provide the centers of

gravity for Lutheran space and time. Our lines of sight should be directed to them. We should not have to go looking for where the Word and Sacrament are located; our eyes should naturally be directed there.

### **Contextual Sensitivity for Mission**

As the church's life is grounded in the gospel, the church's adiaphora should take into account its evangelistic witness in such a way as to address the contextual and communications issues related to the Gospel as well as the possibilities of misinterpretation and offense that it may give in the larger civil or ecclesiastical community. It has been a hallmark of the Christian church that it has not tried to protect its message from contamination by insulating its language (*koine* Greek) into a kind of "linguistic preserve" in the way that Islam has done with the eighth century Arabic language of the Koran. Instead, "the church came to be in translation." From the beginning, the Christian church has expressed an inherent openness to other forms of cultural expression and translated its message into the "Mother tongue" of various cultures. Such openness to the culture has not been without risks. Languages embody specific cultural assumptions and thought worlds. The language learned in the home and on the street takes on its own connotations. "Recognizing these assumptions and dealing with them effectively is the task of the second level of translation." For this principle, we turn to the catechisms as a notable Lutheran example of contextualization in the sixteenth century for the sake of evangelism, re-evangelism, and mission. Luther takes catholic texts (commandments, creed, Lord's Prayer) and casts them into contextually appropriate forms. "He tunes his explanations so that they will ring true to the heart of his immediate hearers, German families carrying the tradition into their kitchens on poster boards that could be hung on the wall for use while the family is at table." He explains the catechism's texts in ways that are related to daily living. The commandments give a working analysis of how life works. He explains the catechism in immediate, down to earth ways.

In order to reach out to the non-Christian world, the church has to arrange its life so as to employ cultural forms that it finds around it and baptize them for the sake of its mission. My colleague, Paul Raabe has observed that Christianity has frequently done so,

including God's people within the Scriptures. In addition to the biblical languages, idioms, and Jesus' use of parables, he also noted that with respect to architecture, Solomon's temple resembled the style of temples in Syria as an instance in which God's people "baptized" a cultural form in communicating the faith. The polity of the church is chosen based upon what is deemed best (*bene esse*) for organizing people for the proclamation of the Gospel. The same applies to music, administration, and the development of various programs, etc. Of course, the danger always exists that as the church moves too far in the adoption of the culture that the culture will transform the message. The culture will always try to co-opt the church's message. As the early church took its message into the Hellenistic world, it found many seemingly compatible points of contact with Greek thought. Yet over time, it became evident that Platonism subtly reshaped the Christian message in a way that ultimately subverted its message of the incarnation, soteriology, and the resurrection of the dead. As the church struggles to enculturate its message within an American culture of individualism, privatism, and the therapeutic, the American culture will seek to remake the Christian message into its own image and thereby subvert the Christian message.

In his plenary presentation at the 2003 Theological Symposium, Dr. Glenn Nielsen highlighted several features of our present context including the observation that Americans are increasingly visual learners: Hence the appeal of and increasing use of screens within sanctuaries. And yet he cautioned that such things have to be used discriminatingly, for the medium can shape the message in a negative way. Even strong proponents of screens have observed that they are better suited for short songs of an emotional variety than six-stanza hymns with theological meat. And so we mustn't let the medium drive the message, or as some say, let the tail wag the dog.

### **Connectedness to the Larger Church**

As the church is united in the Gospel *coram deo*, the church needs to take into account its ecumenical witness within the world by expressing its continuity with the larger church in time and space. It needs to be concerned about the threat of schism as an obstacle to the church's unity and mission. This concern stands front and center in the Augustana and Apology where the confessors are seeking to demonstrate that they are

not schismatics or sectarians (unlike the Anabaptists). The Augsburg Confession's theme can be stated simply: "Our teaching is catholic and orthodox, we've brought some practices into line with that teaching." Responding to charges of schism the reformers stressed that the *una sancta* existed among them. They are church. In addition to demonstrating that their teaching is catholic on the basis of the scriptures and the collaborative witness of the creeds and church fathers, they also demonstrate that their practices are catholic. In doing so, they raised questions about the practices of their opponents as being un-catholic. Melancthon charged that his opponents were guilty of introducing innovations into the church over the past several hundred that are detrimental to the church (AC 22-28). These practices did not represent the settled practice of the ancient church. On this basis they argue both for the continuity of their practices with the church as well as the diversity of practices from their opponents (different days for Easter).

Congregations in the twenty-first find themselves in the midst of countless denominations, para-church organizations, and trans-denominational movements (ACE, Pro Ecclesia). And yet no Christian or congregation stands as an island. We are not a collection of individuals or congregations. We belong to the *una sancta* and to the stream of the empirical Christian church in the West. In this context it becomes important to express our connection with that wider tradition. Here we can take an example like the wearing of vestments. There is a long history within the Christian church of pastors wearing some kind of vestment/uniform that identifies them as men called and ordained to proclaim the word. To be sure, styles have changed. But in our context we might ask why use doctoral gowns with three chevrons instead of albs or cassocks and surplices? It is not particularly contextual-except for Presbyterians and seems to highlight something different such as the man's expertise. At least we might avoid practices that are un-catholic (not to mention non-contextual). If the church moves too far in its quest for continuity with the past, it may absolutize foreign cultural forms and create unnecessary obstacles to the hearing of the Gospel.

Today, we live in the midst of countless denominations, para-church organizations, and trans-denominational movements. The Missouri Synod finds itself increasingly alone as a Lutheran confessional voice in the United States. We are not in

official church fellowship with any church body in the continental United States. Nor are we involved in any sustained official church-to-church dialogue. Yet the Missouri Synod is not an island. Nor is it a collection of individuals Christians. As members of the Missouri Synod we are part of something larger than ourselves. We belong to the *una Sancta* and are an integral part of Christian church's story in the West. In our post-modern American context, it is important for us to express our connectedness to and identification with the church of all places and all times (*ubi et semper*).

### **Collegiality and Walking Together**

Even as the theological principles above guide the development of the church's horizontal life, there exists a great deal of freedom in how best to order that life. Indeed, there may be a variety of ways for expressing each principle in and of itself. In any case, all three principles should be taken into account when considering how the church can best order its life within the world. We do harm to the doctrine of the church if we select a single principle to the exclusion of the other three. Ideally, we must seek to balance all three principles within the overall "big picture" of the church's life. But keeping them in balance is not a matter of straddling the fulcrum of a teeter tot with one's weight equally distributed on each foot. Instead, it is more a case where we are constantly shifting our weight however slightly, from one foot to the other foot in order to maintain the balance. If we shift too much in one direction or the other, then we fall off. The same applies to these principles. If heresy can be defined as one doctrine emphasized at the expense of other doctrines, we can say the same about ecclesiastical practices. We go awry by emphasizing one or other principles at the expense of the other principle. At that moment we lose our balance and our way falling off either with culture transforming the message or in attempt to preserve the past becoming irrelevant. If the church has failed to find contemporary expressions for the Gospel in favor of that favorite of Lutheran principles, *wir bleiben beim alten* (loose translation: "we've never done it that way before"), a little extra weight might need to be given to the contextual principle. But we can't go too far lest we lose the catholic principle and become either indistinguishable from American culture. When we start leaning in that direction, we need to place a little extra weight on the catholic principle, but not so much that we become another sectarian body and erect insurmountable barriers between ourselves and those whom we seek to reach. Striking a

balance between them is the tricky part.

This principle stresses our accountability and responsibility to one another as brothers within the pastoral office. Put another way, we do things together. The *Satis est* of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession does not give license “to do whatever you want.” Instead, the confessions are often a witness to strong desire and effort on the part of sixteenth century Lutherans to do things together. The very production and presentation of the Augustana stands as an important example of how Lutherans sought to do things together, in this case, confess the faith together. Nine years earlier at the Diet of Worms Luther stood and declared, “Here I stand.” Now at the Diet of Augsburg some of the most important powerful princes of the empire stood together and declared, “Here we stand!” The desire to do things together is perhaps best exhibited by the Formula of Concord. The history of preparation of the Formula of Concord is a story of collaboration, conversation, and accountability as it undergoes draft after draft. Three proposals for unity, the Maulbronn Formula, the Swabian Concord, and the Swabian-Saxon Concord were authored by three different groups of theologians. Jacob Andrea had to swallow his pride, and keep his ego in check when Martin Chemnitz and David Chytraeus totally reworked his Swabian Concord into the Swabian-Saxon Concord to the point that he could barely recognize it as his own work. They all came together and hammered out the Torgau Book. They sent it out for feedback and comments. The Lutheran leaders took the many memoranda they received into account and published the Bergen Book—what we know as the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord.

How might such collegiality look like when addressing matters involving practice? Suppose a congregation wants to adopt the practice of giving communion to fifth graders prior to their confirmation in eighth grade? Are the pastor and congregation free to do so? Yes--but should they? It would be most appropriate for the pastor to collaborate with the brothers in his circuit about how this change in practice will affect them. It may be that they ask for a study of the matter. They may ask the pastor to delay the implementation of the change in practice in order that they may have time to educate their congregations about the whys and wherefores of the differing practices. The pastor who desires to adopt the practice of early communion may, and perhaps even should, delay its implementation for a few months for the sake of his fellow congregations and

pastors. This would be entirely in the spirit of Apology XV. “We have sufficiently shown that, for the sake of love, we will willingly observe adiaphora with others, even if such things may prove to be somewhat burdensome. We judge that the greatest possible concord which can be maintained without offending consciences ought to be preferred to all other interests” (Ap XV, 52). Lutherans had been charged with introducing innovations into churches because of the visitations of parishes in the late 1520s. They were called to Augsburg to explain themselves and give an account. In a sense, the burden of proof was on them. They expressed a strong desire to work with their opponents on matters of adiaphora where it did not involve a compromise of the Gospel.

### **Managing the Tensions and Balancing the Principles**

In the end, a certain amount of uniformity and diversity in practices will characterize the church’s life. Following these principles does not mean that the church’s orders and forms in various times and places will look uniformly alike. The church may find a variety of ways for ordering its life in order to meet the particular needs of its time and place. It always has. The church has usually employed the experiences of the society in which it is called to confess the Word as it structures its public life and organization. Consider the various ways in which the church has organized itself. “For instance, the ancient Roman Empire provided the church with an episcopal form of church government that not only reflected societal theories of organization but also fit into the missionary situation of the church, where pastors or bishops were gathering and raising “children” in the faith in their congregations. Geneva’s aristocratic social structure provided a presbyterian model that had the potential of putting the abilities of the rising middle class at the disposition of the Gospel. Lutheran consistorial government reflected the early modern reliance of German and Scandinavian rulers upon the new bourgeois bureaucratic form of secular government” (Kolb). None of these forms of church government is in and of itself inimical to the confession of the Gospel; none can guarantee the preservation of the Gospel. Only the Gospel and its faithful proclamation can guarantee the preservation of the Gospel. But they can hinder or promote the faithful proclamation of the Gospel.

An attentive reading of the Confessions with a view to their historical situation will quickly reveal that each of the documents in the Book of Concord expresses a

distinctive concern. The Augsburg Confession and its Apology dealt with Rome and contended for their catholic and creedal identity (thereby meeting the standards of citizenship within the empire as laid down by emperor Theodosius in A.D. 379 even while calling Rome's into doubt. The Catechisms are prime examples of Lutheran pastoral care and attentiveness to the cultural context of the people in the pew. The Formula of Concord addressed intra-Lutheran theological divisions over and against the inroads made by Calvinism. In our American context, we are dealing with all of contexts at any given time. We live in a world of 20,000 Christian denominations. Do we really need 20,001 denominations? In such a world, it is important to stress our connection with the larger church. At same time, our context continually and rapidly changes. Ours is American. How do we do "church" in this context? Walther had to figure it out in the nineteenth century. We need to do the same in the twenty-first century.

So, how do we bring all four of these principles regarding adiaphora to bear on particular practices? We might illustrate the respective roles or places of these four principles by using the example of a bicycle with training wheels. The Gospel would be analogous to the front wheel that steers the bicycle and thus leads it in the direction that it should go. So the Gospel provides the focus for adiaphora and sets the direction in which adiaphora should go. The principle of collegiality might be compared with the rear wheel in that what binds us together is a common confession of the Gospel and we seek to do things together for the Gospel. Meanwhile, the principles of connectedness to the Great Tradition and sensitivity to contextual issues for mission provide the training wheels, one on either side of the bicycle. There exists between them a certain tension between continuity with the past and creative adjustments to future contexts and settings. Generally, when one rides such a bicycle, the rider will lean first to the left and then to the right in trying to maintain his or her balance. That is to say, at one time the wheel of catholicity is touching the pavement as the bicycle moves forward and at other times the wheel of contextuality touches the pavement. The bicycle constantly leans from one side to the other and back again.

If heresy can be defined as one doctrine emphasized at the expense of other doctrines, we can say the same about ecclesiastical practices. We go awry by emphasizing one or other these four principles at the expense of the others, and then we

lose our balance and our way. If the church has failed to find contemporary expressions for the Gospel because of that favorite of Lutheran principles, *wir bleiben beim alten* (loose translation—we've never done it that way before), a little extra weight might need to be given to the contextual principle. But we can't go too far lest we lose the catholic principle and become either indistinguishable from the American culture or become sectarian. When we start leaning in that direction, we need to place a little extra weight on the connectedness principle so that we do not become cut ourselves off from the larger church. But again, we go so far that we become irrelevant by erecting insurmountable barriers between ourselves and those we seek to reach.

### **Conclusion**

The modest proposal offered here certainly does not claim to provide a magical wand that when waved will resolve all of our differences when it comes to the matter of practices involving adiaphora. It does contend, however, that the solution is neither to claim that if something is an adiaphoron we may do whatever we want as long as it does not involve false doctrine nor to turn every debated practice into a matter of confession (*in casu confessionis*). In order to allow us to move forward together, it seeks to identify some of the principles that guided our Lutheran confessors and forbearers that allowed them to recognize each other as Lutheran in practices as well as in theology. In this way we may continue to stand on their shoulders as we confess the faith, in word and practice, before the world in our day.

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<sup>i</sup> The following is a revision and expansion of an article that I first published in the *Concordia Journal*, entitled “Not All Adiaphora are Created Equal,” *Concordia Journal*, 30(July, 2004): 156-64. It has been augmented with material from a paper that provided a rhetorical reading of Apology XV. See next footnote.

<sup>ii</sup> This section is taken in part from a paper delivered at a conference in Wittenberg, Germany. The full text of the article is found in "The Apology as a Backdrop for the Interim of 1548" appears on pages 211-227 of *Politik und Bekenntnis. Die Reaktionen auf das Interim von 1548*, edited by Irene Dingel and Günther Wartenberg (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006). For a more thorough treatment of Melanchthon's rhetoric in the Apology, see Arand "Melanchthon's Rhetorical Argument for Sola Fide in the Apology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 3(Autumn 2000): 281-308. Also see, Arand, "Melanchthon's Rhetorical Composition of the Apology" in a forthcoming festschrift for Bengt Haaglund.

<sup>iii</sup> See Maurer, *Historical Commentary*, pp 223-225 for a discussion of the correspondence between Melanchthon and Luther on the subject of orders during this period. See also article 26 of the Confutation in *Sources and Contexts*, p. 132.

<sup>iv</sup> This is discussed in Maurer, *Historical Commentary*, pp. 75ff. and then picked back up on pp. 224-228. It is an extended discussion of the question of the causes and the difference between Melanchthon and Luther.

<sup>v</sup> La Fontaine, *Rhetoric*, 156, CR, 441.

<sup>vi</sup> Although originally cited in Ap XXIII of the quarto edition, Melanchthon moves it to Ap XV and expands his citation considerably. See Christian Peter's work for an account of the various drafts of the Apology. *Apologia Confessionis Augustanae: Untersuchungen zur Textgeschichte einer lutherischen Bekenntnisschrift (1530-1584)* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1997).

<sup>vii</sup> See Timothy Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melanchthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over Poenitentia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) for an account of Melanchthon's lectures on Colossians from 1527.

<sup>viii</sup> Melanchthon glosses the word "righteousness."

<sup>ix</sup> People usually thrive on these external rules, and out of an inborn blindness make great holiness and merit of them. In this error, men everywhere throughout the history of the world have fabricated and accumulated ceremonies. *Melanchthon on Christian Doctrine: Loci Communes, 1555*, tr. Clyde L. Manschreck (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 306.

<sup>x</sup> See the Confutation's critique of AC XXVI as a possible reason why Melanchthon does not have an article XXVI in the Apology corresponding to the AC

<sup>xi</sup> "Torgau Articles" translated by William R. Russell in *Sources and Contexts of The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb, James A. Nestingen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 95ff.

<sup>xii</sup> "Torgau Articles," 102

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xiv</sup> Cf. Maurer on Luther in *Historical Commentary*, 216-219.

<sup>xv</sup> See Timothy J. Wengert, *Human Freedom, Christian Righteousness: Philip Melanchthon's Exegetical Dispute with Erasmus of Rotterdam*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) for an account of Melanchthon's treatment of Colossians.

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<sup>xvi</sup> Again, he echoes the Torgau Articles: “We should at the least give up everything that we can yield with a good conscience,” *Sources and Contexts*, 102.

<sup>xvii</sup> In the Apology he does not even have an article on confession (covered thoroughly in Apology XI & XII) or Foods (covered in XV and hence reference back to AC XXVI).