

“No Matter How Differently We May Value Adiaphora, the Silence of God’s Word Cannot Be Changed: A Response to Charles Arand”

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I find most of what Dr. Arand has said to be very helpful, but for some reason my mind’s eye is now focused on an elderly Albert Einstein learning to ride a bicycle with training wheels. As usual Dr. Arand’s presentation exhibits the thoroughness that has always been characteristic of his work. Dr. Arand’s method of historical contextualization is helpful to the discussion, especially in a time when proof texting only those elements of the historical record that support a particular point has almost become the norm. In this sense Dr. Arand’s presentation is refreshingly honest.

Dr. Arand began his paper by making the claim that the issues that divided us forty years ago were more clearly doctrinal, and that today they are more about practice. I agree with Dr. Arand to a point. However, the reason we cannot agree on what is wrong with certain worship practices is the very fact that we do not have agreement on our doctrine of *adiaphora*. This is both a theological and a practical problem.

I do agree with Dr. Arand that “anything goes” is not the Lutheran position on *adiaphora*. I also agree that we need to be clear about what the boundaries are. Dr. Arand is correct to point out that a misunderstanding of our theology of *adiaphora* results in two very different problems, the “anything goes” point of view, and a *status confessionis* point of view that sees heresy behind every bush. I wholeheartedly agree. On the one hand, “anything goes” is indefensible. On the other hand, it is not our Lutheran model of confession to correct an error by confessing the

error's opposite. When we do this, we only end up creating another error and we find ourselves stumbling along in the ditch on the other side. Martin Chemnitz was explicit about this not being our model of confession.

Dr. Arand defines adiaphora as “humanly devised practices developed and approved by the church as an empirical Christian community.” This is true, but it must be clear what is meant by “the church” or “an empirical Christian community” in this discussion. The church is the local congregation, or *Gemeine* according to the Lutheran Confessions (*Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration X.9), and the church is a broader fellowship of local congregations who are bound together by a common confession. This is an issue that must be included in the conversation, because there is not agreement among us on this point. While Dr. Arand asks the question, How do we decide which *adiaphora*? we must not ignore the question, Who decides?

“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*.” Does this refer to the local congregation or a larger fellowship made up of multiple local congregations, like Synod? I am assuming this statement refers to the local congregation, because the Synod is not “an assembly of believers *coram deo*.” The Synod is an association of congregations who have ordered their life together around the principle of mutual agreement *coram mundo*. Since *adiaphora* are things that are neither commanded nor forbidden by God, the church (in the broad sense) has the freedom to order its life *coram mundo*; in other words, for the sake of harmony, the church is free to order its life with rules and guidelines (Dr. Arand's words) that are “mutually agreed upon.” But since we are now operating in the realm of the principle of “mutually agreed upon,” we must not exclude

from our deliberations the issue of changing times and circumstances.¹ The issue of cultural change is an honest concern when we are talking about the use of *adiaphora* in liturgy. This is not something that should be callously dismissed in the name of the church's tradition. Neither should this concern be held to the exclusion of concerns for historic continuity. If we govern our life together on the principle of "mutual agreement" with reference to *adiaphora*, then we run the risk of dividing the body of Christ over things that are neither commanded nor forbidden by God. I do not profess to have an answer here. I am only raising this as a concern. When the Gospel and the sacraments are not at stake, and it must be honestly acknowledged that in many cases of liturgical difference they are not, then is it appropriate, is it pleasing to God, that his body be divided over things that he has neither commanded nor forbidden?

One of Dr. Arand's primary propositions is this: "All *adiaphora* are not created equal." But the Reformers and the Lutheran Confessions did not use this language. They did not make this argument. Instead, the Reformers used language that distinguished the things that are given by God (the Gospel and the sacraments) and the things that are given by the church (humanly instituted ceremonies). This distinction runs all the way through the Confessions from the *Augustana* (Article VII) to the *Formula of Concord* (Article X).

The question is not, some *adiaphora* are better at being *adiaphora* than others. The question as it is framed in the Lutheran Confessions is whether something even is an *adiaphoron*. If it is an *adiaphoron*, then the silence of God's Word cannot be changed. The issue then

¹The phrase the *Formula of Concord X* uses to refer to the circumstances of the local congregation is *nach derselben Gelegenheit*, "according to its own circumstances." In other words, the local congregation has the confessional authority and freedom (not crass autonomy) to order its own humanly instituted rites and ceremonies in liturgy "according to its own circumstances." Cf. FC SD X.9; Ap VII & VIII.32; AC XXVIII.67-68; Ap XXVIII.15-18; FC Ep X.4, 12; FC SD X.9, 30; Melancthon's *Loci Communes* 232; Chemnitz's *Examination of the Council of Trent* II.110, 115. The reference to "specific times and places" also highlights the confessional understanding that the formulators were applying this doctrine of *adiaphora* to the local congregation.

becomes the use or the non-use of the thing.

Dr. Arand's proposition that "All adiaphora are not created equal" actually does help us to focus on one of the primary issues: Who has the confessional authority to make this determination? And here Dr. Arand has attempted to address this problem by pointing out that the Lutheran Confessions occasionally appeal to tertiary authorities, like certain church fathers.

As attractive as Dr. Arand's appeal to tertiary authorities is to me, the difficulty lies in the simple fact that tertiary authorities are not a part of our formal principle for defining our theology of *adiaphora*. Tertiary authorities can help us better understand the context, and we need to use tertiary authorities to clarify intent and meaning. But tertiary authorities also express the personal opinions of individuals that were not included in the Book of Concord, and they were not considered binding in a normative catholic sense (*Formula of Concord*, Rule and Norm). For example, the point of view held by Matthias Flacius, that an *adiaphoron* ceases to be an *adiaphoron* in a case of confession, was not included in the *Formula of Concord*. In fact, the *Formula* states in plain language that *adiaphora* "in their nature and essence are and remain in and of themselves free" (FC SD X.14).

Of course our predecessors used tertiary authorities like their favorite church fathers to illustrate that they were not creating a new church. But they never cited these sources as authoritative for defining our theology or prescribing specific practices. The Rule and Norm of the *Formula of Concord* makes this absolutely clear. There is only one formal principle for Lutheranism, and that is the inspired, sacred text of holy Scripture.

In his discussion of *Apology XV*, Dr. Arand describes Melanchthon's rhetorical use of *causa efficiens* and *causa finalis* in order to distinguish between the use of human traditions for righteousness before God (incorrect use) and the use of human traditions for other purposes

(correct use), and framing this with Luther's concept of the two kinds of righteousness. I find this part of the discussion to be helpful, because it keeps us from straying beyond the truth of the Gospel in our worship practices. One point of clarification, however. Dr. Arand mentions that Melancthon never discusses "any causa efficiens for establishing new traditions, such as pastors and people working cooperatively." In Article XXIII of the *Augsburg Confession*, Melancthon did state that bishops or pastors have the authority to make regulations for the sake of good order, and that those regulations include "Sunday and other church ordinances and ceremonies."

In the second half of his paper Dr. Arand outlined a theology of *adiaphora* based on four confessional points. The first is confession/teaching of the Gospel. Dr. Arand rightly puts this at the top. This is a real issue, especially since there are Lutheran congregations who make uncritical use of contemporary worship forms that do not clearly confess the Gospel, or do not confess the Gospel at all. We need to be clear about what the Gospel is. Dr. Arand has simply and directly stated the Gospel for us; it is the life, death, and resurrection of Christ for us, for the forgiveness of our sins, for our salvation. We can never lose sight of this. We cannot state it often enough to each other, especially at a conference like this. The Gospel is what binds us together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Second. Contextual sensitivity for mission. The examples Dr. Arand presented serve the purpose well enough, Luther's catechism and the use of big-screens in church; but let me share another example that I think has a more direct application. The fifth-century church historians Salminius Hermias Sozomen of Gaza and Theodoret who was also a Byzantine Syrian bishop, both describe how in the third century large numbers of orthodox Christians from Syria were leaving the orthodox church. Why were they leaving orthodoxy? They were enticed away from orthodoxy because of hymns composed by Bardesanes and his son Harmonius. Bardesanes and

Harmonius were Gnostics. According to Sozomen and Theodoret, the people were attracted to the melody and the meter of the Gnostic hymns. In order to stem the tide of this defection as it continued into the fourth century, the orthodox deacon, Ephrem of Syria composed hymns with the orthodox Christology of Nicaea set to the Gnostic hymn forms of Bardesanes and Harmonius. Historically, contextualization is not only a postmodern issue for the church. The practical application to today and to Dr. Arand's contextual principle seems relatively obvious. One point that Dr. Arand's paper did not address and I wish he had, in connection with the contextual principle, is what the Lutheran Confessions say about the freedom the church has to change *adiaphora* in order to address changing times and circumstances. Luther, Melancthon, Chemnitz, and the Lutheran Confessions all refer to this freedom "as the respective place, time, and persons may require it." What does this mean?

Third. Connectedness to the larger church. Dr. Arand describes the concern of the Reformers not to be schismatic or sectarian, but that both their teaching and their practice was in continuity with historic and creedal orthodoxy. The question this raises for us is: What will our concern for the catholic principle look like in practice in our own time? In the Missouri Synod the diversity of those who define catholicity runs the gamut. There are those who run with a page 5 and 15 definition, and there are those who define catholicity on the basis of the purity of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. What will the catholic principle look like in practice? While it is true that our predecessors sought catholic continuity in both theology and practice, it is also true that they exercised the principle of love that allows for diversity of practice. So we must also embrace the statements in the Confessions that say things like, "it is not a sin to violate" the traditions of the church. Why did they say this? Why did they allow for this kind of diversity in practice?

Fourth. Collegiality and walking together. The example of introducing the novel practice of early communion that Dr. Arand uses seems relatively innocuous in view of the different worship practices already taking place in Lutheran congregations. I agree with Dr. Arand in principle that ecclesiastical collegiality is part of the ethos of confessional Lutheranism, and mutual accountability is in fact a corollary of catholicity. I also agree with Dr. Arand that we must be able to identify the *status controversiae*, and that we must fairly and accurately state both sides of the issue. This is a matter of both intellectual and theological honesty. But the question the collegiality principle raises for me is this, What kind of a road are we paving? Is this a street that will be controlled by a few who will demand the movement of some in one direction to meet their liturgical requirements? Or is it a two-way street, where we will meet together somewhere in the middle. Luther took the middle course on the issue of worship, neither requiring nor forbidding as his 1525 “Against the Heavenly Prophets” demonstrates. What does Dr. Arand’s collegiality principle look like in practice?

In my opinion Dr. Arand has opened a way for furthering the conversation on the following points:

1. What is our model of confession? Do we correct an error by confessing the error’s opposite, or do we confess straight ahead the truth and the freedom of the Gospel as this is modeled in the *Formula of Concord*?
2. Who ultimately has the confessional authority to order humanly instituted rites and ceremonies, *adiaphora*? I have argued that according to the plain language of *Formula of Concord X* it is the local congregation. Since we agree that “anything goes” is not who

we are, what are the boundaries for defining how the local congregation orders its own humanly instituted rites and ceremonies in liturgy, especially when the local congregation is viewed in the broader context of a fellowship of churches in confessional agreement and practical harmony?

3. What are our formal and material principles for defining these boundaries? This is a methodological question and Dr. Arand has demonstrated that he is bound by Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions as our only formal principle for defining our theology of *adiaphora*. His contextual exegesis of the Apology is impressive, but it is more than impressive, it is helpful for clarifying what our predecessors meant when they wrote about *adiaphora*. When we look outside the Confessions to define our doctrine of *adiaphora*, detaching ourselves from the only formal principle we know as Lutherans, Sacred Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, we find ourselves operating in the realm of human opinion rather than what is given.

4. One point that Dr. Arand's paper did not address and I wish he had, was what the Lutheran Confessions say about the freedom the church has to change *adiaphora* to address changing times and circumstances.

In the end I find Dr. Arand's paper to be very helpful, because it moves the conversation in the right direction, the direction of harmony for Christ's church.