

Lutheran Church of Australia: Commission on Worship

STATEMENT 35

SOLIDARITY IN WORSHIP: THE LUTHERAN UNDERSTANDING OF ADIAPHORA

A discussion paper

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1 The matter under discussion

The classical Lutheran teaching on adiaphora in worship, as outlined in Article X of the Formula of Concord (FC), addressed a particular problem in the early history of the Lutheran churches in Germany. The problem was whether they could, with good conscience under duress from their Catholic rulers, restore those traditional ceremonies and liturgical practices — such as extreme unction, anointing at baptism, and the feast of Corpus Christi — which had been abandoned in the aftermath of the Reformation.

In recent times the concept of adiaphora has been used to provide a warrant for liturgical innovation and minimalism in the LCA. This has raised questions such as the following.

- Is liturgy an adiaphoron?
- Should the LCA authorise common orders and promote at least a measure of liturgical uniformity?
- Should each congregation be free to devise its own way of worship as appropriate to its context?
- Are orders of worship with their propers doctrinally insignificant and so subject only to the principle of cultural relevance?
- Is it true that, apart from the preaching of the gospel in the sermon and the recitation of the words of institution, everything else in our traditional pattern of worship is an adiaphoron?

In this paper we attempt to summarise and clarify the teaching on adiaphora as found in the Lutheran Confessions in order to determine its applicability to these and similar questions. We would like to open up discussion on the teaching of adiaphora in the hope that members of the LCA may reach a measure of consensus and agree with each other in God-pleasing worship.

2 The definition of the term ‘adiaphoron’

- a. In Greek ‘adiaphoron’ means ‘something which makes no difference’. ‘Adiaphoron’ is the singular form; ‘adiaphora’ is the plural form.

- b. As a technical term it was originally used by moral philosophers for those matters which were ethically neutral, ie neither good nor bad in themselves.
 - Melanchthon used it in this ethical sense in a discussion on evangelical perfection in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (Apol) XXVII, 27.
 - The term was also used for the observance of a custom or law which was not essential or obligatory, even if it was useful and desirable.
 - The designation of an activity as an ‘adiaphoron’ did not, however, imply that it was insignificant or unimportant.
- c. In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession Melanchthon also used this term liturgically to refer to those customary rites and ceremonies which the Lutheran party was prepared to accept, provided that they were not contrary to God’s word and the gospel.¹
- d. The Formula of Concord (FC) uses the term in the same way. It defines adiaphora as those ‘ceremonies and church rites which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God’.²

3 The basic presupposition for the teaching on adiaphora

- a. The teaching on adiaphora in the Confessions presupposes that through his word the Triune God has instituted what is essential for public worship in the church. Thus, the Augsburg Confession (AC) argues that the sacrament should be administered in both kinds, since that is what Christ has commanded.³
- b. Certain rites and ceremonies have been established by God’s command for the enactment of the gospel.⁴
 - The divinely instituted rites and ceremonies are effectual and beneficial for God’s people by reason of the divine word which empowers them⁵ and through faith which relies on that word to receive what is offered by God through them.⁶
 - Since these rites and ceremonies are part of the divine service which God sanctions and approves by his word,⁷ people who participate in them can be sure that God is pleased with them.⁸
- c. The rites and ceremonies which have been devised by human beings without a divine mandate are sharply distinguished from what God has instituted for public worship in the church.⁹
 - When the Confessions speak of human rites and ceremonies they do not usually refer to the divine service (the order of the mass), but such things as fasting, festivals, vestments, pictures, pilgrimages, and processions.

¹ Apol XV, 52

² FC SD X,1

³ AC XXII, 1, 2, 11, 12

⁴ AC V, 1, 2; Apol XIII, 2, 4; XXVII, 70

⁵ AC VIII, 2 in Latin; cf AC XVIII, 3; Apol XXVIII, 17–19

⁶ AC XIII; Apol XIII, 5, 19–22

⁷ AC XXVII, 36, 49

⁸ Apol XV, 13–17; XXVII, 70

⁹ AC VII, 3; XV, 3; XXVI, 1; XXVII, 36; XXVIII, 52; Apol VII, 33; XIII, 3; XV, 18

- On the one hand, any act of service which has been established by human beings for justification before God and for the reception of his grace, is false and wrong.¹⁰ Such service is opposed by God, since it contradicts the gospel.¹¹ It is spiritually unprofitable and idolatrous.¹² It confuses, burdens, and destroys sensitive consciences.¹³
 - On the other hand, bishops and pastors in the church may establish new rites and ceremonies which are consistent with God's word and so serve to promote the gospel. These in themselves, however, must not be promoted as necessary for salvation.¹⁴
 - The scriptural foundation for the distinction between divinely instituted practices and humanly devised practices is Matthew 15:9.¹⁵
- d. The confessors did not use the concept of adiaphora to reject the traditional order of the mass, but to assess their liturgical inheritance theologically.
- e. Repeatedly, the confessors maintained that they did not reject the order of the mass or the ceremonies associated with it. Rather, they claimed to observe them most diligently and devoutly, without any innovations, apart from the abolition of abuses and the introduction of hymn-singing in German.¹⁶ Nothing was changed in the customary rites unless it was contrary to the Scriptures and the gospel.

4 What is divinely instituted for public worship

- a. The Confessions do not provide us with a definitive list of what has been instituted by God for the divine service, since that was not a matter of controversy for them.
- b. The Augsburg Confession refers rather comprehensively to the divinely instituted ministry of preaching the word (gospel) and of administering the sacrament(s).¹⁷
- In the first place the term 'word and sacrament' refers to the reading and preaching of the word and the administration of the Lord's supper in the mass.
 - It also refers to the division of the service into two parts: the service of the word and the service of the sacrament.
 - The whole service is regarded as an act of proclamation or an enactment of the gospel, since in the German text of AC V the ministry of word and sacrament is called 'the preaching office'.¹⁸
- c. God not only institutes what is essential in public worship, but also commands how worship is to be conducted evangelically and eucharistically, so that the gospel and the sacrament are rightly received by the people of God.

¹⁰ AC XXVIII, 39

¹¹ AC XXVII, 35, 36

¹² AC XXVI, 21–29; Apol XV, 13–19; XXIV, 97, 98; FC SD X, 15

¹³ AC XXVI, 12–17, 39

¹⁴ AC XXVI, 40–44; XXVIII, 50–56

¹⁵ AC XXVII, 36; Apol XII, 143; XV, 5; XXVII, 23, 41, 69; SA II, II, 2; III, XV, 1; FC Ep X, 3; FC SD X, 8

¹⁶ AC XV, I; conclusion to part 1, 4, 5 (Latin); XXIV, 1,2; XXVI, 40; Apol VII, 33; XV, 38, 39, 44; XXIV, 1, 3

¹⁷ AC V, 1–2; VII

¹⁸ cf Apol IV, 210; XXIV, 35

- The divine service is to be conducted evangelically. It is meant to proclaim what God offers to his people through his Son in that service and promote the faith in Christ which receives God's offered blessings in worship.¹⁹
- At the same time, the divine service is to be conducted eucharistically.²⁰ God instituted the worship of the new covenant for his people to perform their acceptable 'sacrifices of praise'. Among these Melancthon includes the following things.
 - The proclamation of the gospel.²¹
 - Faith in God.²²
 - The confession of Christ and the gospel.²³
 - The reception of the Lord's supper.²⁴
 - The invocation of the Triune God.²⁵
 - The enactment of thanksgiving.²⁶
 - Mortification through the acceptance of affliction and suffering for the gospel.²⁷
 - The good works of the saints.²⁸
 - The ceremony of the mass.²⁹

5 What is adiaphora in public worship

- a. Even though many rites and ceremonies have not been instituted by God, they are, nevertheless, still beneficial and therefore necessary for public worship.
 - They are meant to promote good order in the church (1 Cor 14:40), ie since worship is communal, the time, place, and activity must be properly ordered, so that the whole congregation is corporately involved in the divine service.³⁰
 - They are meant to promote Christian discipline, ie the whole order of service must instruct people in God's word and teach repentance and faith in Christ.³¹
 - They are meant to promote evangelical decorum (1 Cor 14:40), ie since the Triune God admits forgiven sinners into his gracious presence through the divine service, its ritual enactment should promote an attitude of reverence and prayerfulness.³²
 - They are meant to promote the edification of the church as the temple of God (1 Cor 14:26), ie since the Triune God builds up the congregation through the service of the word and the sacrament, the ritual enactment of the service must express the common faith of the congregation, the unity of the Holy Spirit, and the subordination of its members to each other in love.³³

¹⁹ AC XXIV, 1, 7, 8 (Latin); Apol IV, 49, 60, 228, 310

²⁰ Apol XXIV, 34, 35

²¹ Apol XXIV, 25, 30, 32, 33, 34, 35

²² Apol XXIV, 25, 30, 32, 34, 35

²³ Apol XXIV, 25, 26, 30, 32

²⁴ Apol XXIV, 33

²⁵ Apol XXIV, 25, 26, 29, 30, 32

²⁶ Apol XXIV, 25, 26, 30, 32, 35

²⁷ Apol XXIV, 25, 30, 32, 34

²⁸ Apol XXIV, 25, 32

²⁹ Apol XXIV, 33, 35

³⁰ FC SD X, 7, 9; cf AC XV, 1; XXVI, 40; XXVIII, 53; Apol XV, 13, 20

³¹ FC SD X, 7, 9; cf AC XXIV, 2–4; Apol XV, 20, 40–44; XXIV, 3–5

³² FC SD X, 7, 9; cf AC conclusion to part 2, 6 (German); Apol XXIV, 3; XXVII, 55

³³ FC SD X, 9; cf AC XXVIII, 55

- They are meant to promote peace in the church (1 Cor 14:33), ie the use of common ceremonies and rites does not allow individuals and parties to disrupt the congregation by imposing their own piety and preferences on others.³⁴
- b. Human rites and ceremonies should teach faith in Christ and promote the practice of that faith in public worship.³⁵
- c. The whole service is meant to serve as the congregation's public confession of faith in the risen Lord Jesus.³⁶
 - All human rites and ceremonies are to be consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ and promote it, since the gospel gives them their significance and value.³⁷
 - In times of persecution and at times when the gospel is under threat, the observance, or non-observance, of certain rites and ceremonies which would otherwise be a matter of adiaphora, is necessary to give a clear public confession of faith.³⁸ Such an occasion is called 'a case of confession', in which 'a clear-cut confession of faith is demanded'.³⁹ The confessional context of the church therefore determines whether a human observance is mandatory at a particular time and in a particular set of circumstances.
 - Each generation needs to assess both traditional and new rites and ceremonies according to these criteria.

6 The responsibility for liturgical change

- a. In Article VII the Augsburg Confession does not turn the gospel into a theological principle or an abstract concept apart from any liturgical embodiment. Rather, it assumes that the church in its liturgy enacts and proclaims the gospel publicly. Article VII is therefore not meant to grant liturgical licence but to defend the divinely instituted shape of the church's liturgy and the evangelical content of the mass.
- b. In contrast to the Roman church, which insisted that certain humanly devised 'universal rites' were necessary for the unity of the church,⁴⁰ the Augsburg Confession maintains that the true unity of the church is established by the right preaching of the gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments.⁴¹
That is to say:
 - The unity of the church depends on the ritual enactment of what Christ has instituted.
 - The unity of the church is therefore not constituted by human rites and ceremonies.
- c. The sense of 'everywhere' (Latin: *ubique*; German: *allenthalben*) is left undefined in AC VII, 3.

³⁴ AC XV, 1; XXVIII, 55; Apol XV, 1, 13, 38

³⁵ AC XXIV, 2–4; Apol XV, 20; XXIV, 3–5; XXVII, 55

³⁶ Apol IV, 210; cf XXIV, 35

³⁷ AC XV

³⁸ FC, X

³⁹ FC Ep X, 6

⁴⁰ Apol VII and VIII, 30; XV, 50

⁴¹ AC VII, 2–3

- The discussion shows that it does not refer to each local congregation but to the evangelical churches in contrast to the Roman church.
 - In AC XXVI, 42–45, mention is made of the lack of ritual uniformity between the eastern church and the western church.
- d. The Formula of Concord permits some degree of liturgical diversity in public worship.⁴²
- At different times the church may change those rites and ceremonies which have not been instituted by God.
 - The ‘church in every place’ (German: *die Gemeinde Gottes j(e)des Orts*; Latin: *ecclesia Dei ubivis terrarum*) has the right to do so in its particular location.⁴³
 - Does this refer to each local congregation, as the translation of church as ‘community’ and the incorrect translation of the Latin dative singular as ‘churches’ in the footnote to FC Ep X, 4 by Tappert seems to imply, or does it refer to each regional church?
 - The Latin translation of *Gemeine* as ‘church’ (*ecclesia*) and of ‘every place’ (*jedes Orts*) as ‘in all lands’ (*ubivis terrarum*) shows that the authors were thinking of territorial churches. Historically speaking, that is how this formulation was understood and applied in the Lutheran church until modern times.
- e. Article VII of the Augsburg Confession has been used by some people to promote liturgical licence rather than liturgical diversity. They maintain that, since the ordered liturgy is equated with the rites and ceremonies which have been instituted by human beings, the whole order of service with communion is regarded as an adiaphoron. However, Article VII does not deal directly with the worship of the church, but with the place of the gospel in the church. It maintains that the divinely instituted gospel of Christ, enacted in the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments, constitutes the church and establishes its unity.
- f. The teaching on adiaphora in worship does not give pastors or congregations licence to conduct public worship as they please. Rather it protects the scripturally and confessionally informed conscience from oppression by human traditions⁴⁴ and gives assurance to the conscience that the worship offered is pleasing to God.⁴⁵
- g. The responsibility for the arrangement of public worship is given to the ordained ministry as part of the public exercise of the keys in the church.
- Bishops and pastors should regulate the order and content of worship, so that everything is done in good order, in love, and in peace.⁴⁶
 - They must ensure that the divine service, with all its rites and ceremonies, is performed in accordance with God’s word and the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁴⁷
- h. The Formula of Concord acknowledges that the church has the right and power to ‘change, reduce, or increase ceremonies’.⁴⁸

⁴² FC Ep X, 4; FC SD X, 9

⁴³ FC Ep X, 4

⁴⁴ AC XXVIII, 50–60; Apol XV, 51–52; FC SD X 14–15

⁴⁵ Apol XV, 14, 17

⁴⁶ AC XXVIII, 53, 55; Apol XXVIII, 15–16

⁴⁷ AC XXVIII, 5, 21–28; Apol XXVIII, 12–19

⁴⁸ FC SD X, 9

- i. The right of the church to change old ceremonies or to introduce new ceremonies is limited by two important pastoral considerations.
 - Changes must not be frivolous, but must be introduced for some good reason.⁴⁹
 - Offence must not be given to people whose faith and piety is sustained by familiar, traditional forms.⁵⁰

7 Conclusion

- a. It is best that major liturgical changes to the communion service are introduced corporately by general agreement and consensus within the LCA.
- b. General pastors conferences and conventions could serve the LCA well by determining the extent of liturgical uniformity and diversity among its congregations.
- c. The presidents of the LCA, working together with the pastors, have the responsibility for good liturgical order and practice in the LCA.
- d. The principle of adiaphora is not meant to justify either liturgical rigidity or liturgical licence, but to promote the enactment of the gospel in public worship.

⁴⁹ Apol XV, 51; FC SD X, 9

⁵⁰ AC XXVIII, 55; FC SD X, 9