

Author: Paul F. Bosch [ [pbosch@golden.net](mailto:pbosch@golden.net) ]

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## ADIAPHORA

“Mere *adiaphora*”, sneered my colleague in the Church History faculty.

He had overheard me as I was suggesting to a first year Seminary student a better place — an alternative place — to position herself at the leading of the Offertory. We’re old friends, he and I, and he was tweaking my nose, metaphorically. We’d been through this exchange before. .

“Yes,” I replied. “It’s *adiaphora*. Like Church History.” Now I was tweaking his nose.

Debates over *adiaphora* are a particularly Lutheran pastime. I don’t know of another Christian church body that even uses the term. But there it is, in our Lutheran Confessions, *Formula of Concord*, Article Ten, and it refers to matters neither commanded nor prohibited in our Gospel, but simply of indifferent importance. Like questions of liturgical proprieties.

*Adiaphora* is a Greek term, and it means exactly that. The *-phor* root means “bearer” or “carrier”, while the *dia-* suggests the preposition “through” or “by means of”. Hence *diaphora* evokes carry-through, issues of signification or importance. And the *a-* prefix negates the whole thing. Hence the term *adiaphora* (plural) denotes matters of indifference — in medicine, for example, doing the patient neither good nor harm. It’s sometimes suggested among theologians that an *adiaphoron* (the singular noun) refers to matters not of importance theologically, not of significance. Of indifferent import.

I drag you through this word study so you can understand better what has become over the years a particularly Lutheran obsession. A defining Lutheran sectarianism, you might say. Lutherans are forever arguing about matters of liturgical propriety, with a significant tradition in Lutheran theology dismissing all matters of rite or ritual in the very words of my Church History colleague: “Mere *adiaphora*.” As if that is meant to end the conversation.

A footnote for my Anglican readers: Among Lutherans, matters of church order — the historic episcopacy, for example — are *adiaphora*, as well as matters relating to liturgy. Sorry about that...

Well, yes. But...

I'm Lutheran enough to agree. Questions of liturgical practice, rite and ceremony, are indeed *adiaphora*, when it comes to your eternal salvation. Whether or not you sign yourself with the cross at the name of Jesus is not an issue on which your eternal salvation depends. But I'll also protest that that's not the end of the matter

.As I have been trying to argue for more than ten years now in these Essays, questions of liturgical propriety do indeed have consequence. Ritual niceties, ceremonial punctiliousness — yes, where you position yourself at the Offering — each of these relate to the *humanum*, the universal human impulse to ritualize.

Therefore, to dismiss ritual niceties — all the non-verbal aspects of worship — as “mere *adiaphora*” is to forget the “word-character” of our actions, our postures, our gestures, our facial expressions, of what we *do* (in contrast, that is, to what we *say*). And ultimately, carelessness or contempt for such matters betray a misunderstanding of the *humanum*, and indeed of the First Article of the Creed. It is to betray an heretical docetism, a disdain for the Incarnation. It is to reveal a sectarian unitarianism of the Second Person.

As Lutheran theologian-bishop Bill Lazareth puts it, “There are practical implications in our theology, and theological force in our practice.” *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, and all that. Lutherans should know that by now.

And conversely, as I have argued before, to honour the non-verbal in worship — the *lex orandi* — is simply to respect the flesh of the Word-Made-Flesh.

Liturgical proprieties — by this I mean chiefly the role of the non-verbal, of the arts in worship, the disposition of the space, the deportment of worship leaders, the sensitivity to symbol and to visual metaphor — these arrangements and actions and gestures *speak*, as surely and as compellingly and as clearly as the words of our verbalizings. Sometimes more clearly. Sometimes more compellingly.

Woe to the pastor or worship leader, therefore, who ignores or disdains to study these with some seriousness. The study of these non-verbals, the life-long immersion into their mysteries, the unceasing investigation into what these might mean, of what these might be saying in your precise situation: that study is surely as important and as essential as the study of Church History.

If then you're a pastor or a worship leader preparing for Sunday, your work is not done when you've made certain all the words are right — the prayers, the hymns, the

scripture readings, the sermon. You've still got all those non-verbals that are going to be preaching their silent sermons, their wordless witness. Your preparations are not finished until you pay some attention to these as well.

Study liturgy? Study Church History? *Adiaphora*, both of them. But surely, if you're a worship leader, worth studying. Worth learning. Worth mastering, to the best of your ability.

A favourite parable: The story is told of a tourist in a foreign country. She didn't know the local language, but she had a guide with her who did. In a city park they came upon a sidewalk preacher, standing on a soap box, with a small crowd gathered around him. He was haranguing his listeners with harsh and abrasive shouts. He was frowning fiercely, wagging his finger in the air, shaking his fist at them, stamping his feet. Our tourist turned to her guide and asked, "What's the fellow preaching?"

Her guide said, "Love."

I rest my case.

