**Formula of Concord Study, Article X Church Practices 1-25**

This is a most difficult article. What is adiaphora, middle things, things neither commanded nor forbidden by the Word of God and when/if we should pay attention to them is a constant problem. For example, are girl acolytes, women ushers, women readers, women Communion distributors middle things? Was Rev. Hale right when he said in his 2013 ACELC paper on worship that you could rap the Nicene Creed if you wanted to in the Divine Service?

The two poles to be aware of when dealing with adiaphora are these: First, are we concerned for the weak or are we concerned with being right? Second, are we so concerned with the weak we have little concern for truth or do they trump our concern for truth all together?

The following is based on Timothy J. Wengert’s *A Formula for Parish Practice*. It was published in 2006. I have cited it before in this study. I hesitate whenever I do and particularly when I use him to such an extent as I do here. He is a member of the ELCA accepts the rational and justification for killing the unborn, LGBTQ-ism and LGBTQ marriage and pastors on their website. What can he really teach us about middle things?

Here’s some things he lists as adiaphora: the age a person can receive communion; how often should the Supper be celebrated; using red or white wine; the type of robes, if any, a pastor should wear; the placement of the baptismal font; singing contemporary songs; who should vote in the congregation; who should be president: pastor or lay person; it is all right to have fund raisers. Wengert admits that some of these issues have at their heart substantive theological issues. He even says some of these touch on the article of justification. He then admits that if a substantive theological issue is at stake or if the issue touches on the article of justification, it is NOT dealt with by Article X (165).

However, and this is part of Article X, someone’s position on a middle thing can make it no longer a middle thing. The two classic examples which have all but vanished in our church are Baptism by immersion and the Fracture (the audible breaking of the bread during the Words of Institution). Historically, because some Reformed said there was no valid Baptism without the former and no valid Lord’s Supper without the latter, Lutherans made it a point not to do these things. In our day the *Lutheran Witness* can feature pictures of pastors baptizing by immersion and I hear the audible fracture when some LCMS pastors celebrate the Sacrament apparently by design.

How did the issue of adiaphora become an issue among Lutherans? Two things: First, Luther’s death in February 1546 left the Lutherans rudderless, with one authority most every Lutheran acknowledged. The second was the outbreak of full-scale war in mid-1546. It was called the Smalcald War. It was between the emperor Charles V and his allies (some were evangelical, i.e. not Catholic princes) and the Smalcald League who were all evangelical, here read Lutheran, princes. It wasn’t just over the Lutheran-Catholic issue but land and political issues, the prime one being who would be the ones to elect the next emperor when Charles V died (166).

The Lutherans lost on Easter 1547. The triumphant emperor called for an imperial diet at Augsburg 1547-1548 where the religious issue was to be settled in the interim before a general council of the church could settle things once and for all. The result was a decree nicknamed the Augsburg Interim which had the approval of the victorious imperial party. It was approved by John Agricola, a Lutheran advisor to the elector of Brandenburg. Agricola is on the wrong side of the Formula of Concord. Luther said his position on the Law was antinomian. By 1540 Luther considered him an enemy of the Gospel. After Luther’s death, he sided strongly with the Philippist (*Reader’s Edition* 700-1). The Augsburg Interim was a death sentence on the Protestant Reformation. About all it allowed was the evangelicals the right to marry and to commune in both kinds (166-167).

Duke Moritz, a Lutheran sided with Charles V so he could become one of the electors of the emperor and gain land. He thought he would have a free hand in religious matters in his territory. He didn’t. Roman bishops were going to be reinstated in his territory. Moritz sought advice from the University Wittenberg. Melanchthon was there and had written an early criticism of the Augsburg Interim in 1548. Wittenberg worked on drafts of a compromise document. The basic thrust was that in theological matters Saxony would remain clearly Lutheran. In matters of worship not directly related to the Gospel, their churches would reinstitute old practices. Other things to be granted were reciting fixed prayers and psalms during the day (the canonical hours), and the wearing of certain vestments, especially the chasuble. Because the gospel’s message neither commanded nor forbade these practices they were labeled *indifferentia* which was Latin for undifferentiated things. The Greek terms is *adiaphora*. The German term is *Mitteldings* (things in the middle) (167).

The electors of Brandenburg and Saxony tentatively agreed to it. Agricola said it was in line with the Augsburg Interim. The princes of Saxony, although their Duke approved it, they didn’t. The opponents labeled it the Leipzig Interim. Evangelical pastors who were struggling against the Lutheran Agricola and the Augsburg Interim felt betrayed. The Gnesio-Lutherans felt attacked by the Wittenberg faculty now under control of their political enemy the Duke of Saxony. The serious theological question was: is there a point when a neutral matter, a middle matter, an adiaphoron matter of liturgy and/or organization are no longer middle things, adiaphora (167)?

By 1555 the Peace of Augsburg was signed bringing peace to central Europe until 1618. Lutherans who held to the Augsburg Confession were given legal, but second-class status in the empire. The Augsburg Interim was officially overturned. But the theological debate over middle things wasn’t. Other issues between the Philippist and Gnesio Lutherans took center stage as we see from the Formula of Concord: original sin, free will, justification, good works, and the relationship between Law and Gospel. Still the question of neutral matters had to be answered. The Concordists managed to express some of the chief concerns of the Gnesio Lutherans while not limiting Christian freedom in middle things (168).

We see their solution in how Luther, long before in 1522, handled the middle things in Wittenberg. While Luther was absent, for his own safety, at Wartburg, Karlstadt led the charge to bring the liturgy in line with Lutheran theology: Communion would be in both kinds; no vestments for clergy; the elements taken in the hand not placed in the mouth; worship in German not Latin. The city was in chaos. Luther returned and preached against the changes for 8 days straight. His message was: this may sound like good theology but it is terrible pastoral care and therefore must be bad theology really. We don’t have to change things so quickly that we hurt the weak (169).

Twenty-six years later came the struggle over the Augsburg Interim and *adiaphora*. The Lutheran question was how to we best avoid hurting the weak? Melanchthon seeing how Lutheran churches were being devastated by Spanish soldiers, looked for a way to protect the vulnerable pastors of Saxony by reaching a compromise on middle thing with the Catholic opponents. While the Gnesio-Lutherans, looking to protect the weak who would see Catholic liturgical practices restored and think they aren’t saved by grace but by following certain rites didn’t want to compromise (169).

The Concordists, the authors of the Formula of Concord, allowed churches to adopt practices that fit their situation but not in such a way to affect the weak. However, if it was a time of true oppression, “when the enemy’s troops are at the door,” then changes in practice can’t be tolerated. When you’re under the threat of force from a true enemy of the Gospel nothing is a matter of indifference (170).

What is involved in this debate is 1) “ceremonies and church practices.” They are important because they are public and you can tell a lot about a congregation by watching how it conducts itself in worship. 2) Other practices that are different from the Lord’s Supper, Baptism, preaching, or praying. About these other practices we have no direct Word from God to tell us whether or not to do a particular thing. 3) What are involved, although referred to as middle things, are not indifferent but undifferentiated things. They are not, thereby, frivolous things. They are introduced into the church for the sake of “good order and decorum.” “One sometimes gets the impression from slipshod liturgical practices that it is not God and God’s promises that are at the center of the congregation’s life, but the congregation, its pastor, and their good feelings” (172).

We must be clear the circumstances this article addresses: It is one of persecution in which confession is necessary and it involves enemies of the Gospel who refuse to come to terms with us. It is not about honorable disagreements among Christians. For example, there was a controversy in Eisleben over what to do with leftover Communion wine. Luther rebuked a pastor who rebuked another pastor as a papist, as if the pastor opposed the very Gospel itself for wanting special treatment for leftover wine (173). The rebuked pastor was advocating what Confessional Lutherans do. Either keeping them separate or consuming them. These have been accepted practices by the Church for centuries.

There is a warning here for us. Before we imagine some middle matter suddenly matters we must look at the situation carefully. Are we dealing with enemies of the Gospel? Are they using real not imagined force? If the answer to these questions is ‘yes,’ than this Article X would say we must not give in. If the answer is ‘no’, then even if we don’t like a particular practice this article would encourage us to reach concord (173).

Wengert derives 5 rules. These come from the Epitome of this article but you should be able to see them in the Solid Declaration too  
 Rule 1 - Adiaphora Exist. Not everything described in the Bible is commanded, and not everything omitted is forbidden. We do some things in the church not because they are commanded by God but for the sake of good order. We dare not confuse ‘good order’ with direct service and worship of God (174).

Rule 2 – Times, People, and Places Change. There are only three reasons, according to Article X, that things are to change: These are indicated by three quotes from Article X and cited below.

First, is the change “’According to its own situation’”? In Luther’s day, there were early services for household servants, later afternoon services for children and others to learn the basics of the faith; a main service of the Lord’s Supper in German for the general population, and a Latin service for foreigners and the university.

Second, the measuring stick for change is usefulness and edification: “’as may be most useful and edifying.’” What works and what builds up is how Wengert puts it. It’s never change for changes sake, or change because people need to be shaken up.” It must be useful, that is serve the Gospel, and must be edify that is help the people.

Third, is the change “’for the community of good’”? Not for the pastor’s sake, the leader’s sake, or the squeaky wheel’s sake (174-5).

Rule 3 – Watch the Weak. Our society loves change, and thinks the only truth is that everything changes. We don’t want to mirror our culture and so give the impression that the Gospel, the truth, changes. Wengert posits that one of the reasons the church has lost her children is that when the prodigals do finally return they find the waiting father has sold the house and moved away. “We must be concerned for those who, if we changed something, will lose faith because they are too weak in faith to separate the certain things of faith from the freedom we have in practice.” In any dispute about change it is crucial to identify who the weak person is. The goal can’t be “how do we win them to our side,” but “how do we strengthen the weak in the faith? How do we unite around the Gospel? How do we distinguish between weakness and stubbornness (175-6)?

Rule 4 – What to do When Hell Breaks Loose. This article doesn’t deal with a matter of church politics but where “’unequivocal confession of the faith is demanded of us.” That’s when “all hell breaks loose.” For example, around the time of the Formula of Concord a pastor used regular, not unleavened bread and broke it while reciting the Words of Institution. In those days that meant without a doubt that the pastor rejected the real presence (176-7). I am increasingly believing open Communion, praying with pagans, and ordination of women without a doubt are ‘all hell breaking loose’. I don’t see girl acolytes, ushers, and voters as that but these will eventually lead to the last

Rule 5 – How NOT to Judge Others. In the 16th century worship was varied from congregation to congregation. In one place, it was very plain and had little ceremony. In another, they still used exorcisms in Baptism, used the Latin in worship, had elaborate processionals, rang the bells at the consecration, elevated the Body of Christ during the Sanctus. The Concordists came from three different areas of Germany each having their own practices. Our unity doesn’t consist in the way we worship but in our message proclaimed from our pulpits and celebrated in sacraments (177). However, if the way we worship contradicts what we believe, teach, and confess or compromises that, it can’t be right. Disunity in adiaphora doesn’t disrupt unity in faith. But unity of faith doesn’t automatically exist where there is unity in adiaphora or even worship.

Wengert summarizes the negative theses with two short sentences. One, don’t confuse your way of doing things with worship commanded by God. Two, when someone uses coercion, this destroys Christian freedom (178). They are giving you no freedom *not* to go along, but you are, nevertheless free to go along as long as it doesn’t involve a denying of the Gospel.

Wengert suggests just as Texas has “Remember the Alamo” and the U.S. has “Remember the Maine,” we should have such slogans (I’m modifying his but referring to the same events). Remember Luther’s return from the Wartburg! Remember the Compromising Interim! Remember the Weak when you’re confident you’re the Strong.

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