

**An Historic Look and Brief Explanation  
Of Article X of the Formula of Concord on Adiaphora**

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## **An Historic Look and Brief Explanation Of Article X of the Formula of Concord on Adiaphora**

The assignment for this paper was to make a general examination of Article X of the Formula of Concord of Church Rites (or adiaphora) and make a presentation to the body of brothers for a review of our doctrinal heritage. Article X on Adiaphora can hardly be understood without some understanding of the imperial and papal politics that provided the background for this great confession of faith. In this paper we will review the history of events leading up to the composition of Article X, examine the article itself and make a few, quick applications to today.

### **The Augsburg Interim**

In 1531, the Lutherans and the Protestant princes organized themselves into a united resistance against Emperor Charles called the Smalcald League. This alliance was formed, not only in the interest of the evangelical confession, but also in the interest of uniting in opposition to certain imperial demands. The Emperor desperately wanted religious unity in his empire; however, he was too occupied with his empire being threatened from the east by the Turks, from the West by France, and from within by princes and electors jealous of his power. He was too preoccupied to enforce a demand for religious reform.

On February 18, 1546, Martin Luther died at Eisleben, his birthplace. Political and theological strife quickly followed the reformer's death. 25 years earlier, at the Diet of Worms in 1521, Emperor Charles had outlawed Luther and banned his movement. His government was not in a position to commit troops or enforce that edict for a quarter of a century. Now, with the aid of papal forces, the emperor was ready to try to eliminate the schism and "heresy" in his Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. On June 26, 1546, the pope and the emperor drew up a pact to combine their resources and troops in order to bring the Lutheran "faction" to their knees and back into the Roman fold. On July 4, Pope Paul III issued a papal bull which read in part:

"From the beginning of our Papacy it has always been our concern how to root out the weeds of godless doctrines which the heretics have sowed throughout Germany... Now it has come to pass that, by inspiration of the Holy Ghost, our dearest son in Christ, Charles, the Roman Emperor, had decided to employ the sword against these enemies of God. And for the protection of religion we intend to promote this pious enterprise with all our own and the Roman Church's possessions. Accordingly, we admonish all Christians to assist in this war with their prayers to God and their alms, in order that the godless heresy may be rooted out and the dissension removed... To each and all who do these things we grant the most complete indulgence and remission of all their sins."<sup>1</sup>

This papal bull was a call to holy war and was meant as a death sentence for the Lutheran Church.

The Smalcald War was over almost before it started. In the initial battle of the war on April 24, 1547, the Emperor's forces, composed largely of Spanish troops brought from Charles' Iberian domains, crushed Elector John Frederick of Saxony and Landgrave Philip of Hesse. John Frederick was taken captive and Philip surrendered and was imprisoned by the emperor's troops.

With their principal leaders gone, the rest of the Smalcald League was doomed. Before the superior power of the Imperial army and the Catholic forces, one by one the Protestant territories and cities fell. Duke Moritz of Saxony, the cousin of John Frederick, allied himself and his troops with the Catholic forces and was given the title of Elector of Saxony. Military resistance to the imperial-papal forces was futile. Fear was everywhere.

Charles left Saxony a triumphant victor. With the exception of the city of Magdeburg and a few other cities in the north, his German lands were once again under his control. At a diet that met in Augsburg in September of 1547, Charles began to impose his newfound control over these Lutheran lands and make the people subservient to Rome. Charles appointed a group of theologians to prepare a statement declaring how the Germans were to practice their religious life. This statement on religious life was to be enforced during the interim before the Council of Trent would meet and issue definitive regulations for the people to follow. Charles announced his "Declaration on Religion," popularly known as the "Augsburg Interim" on May 15, 1548.

Even though he had soundly defeated the Lutheran territories, Charles knew better than to try to force too much too soon on the Lutherans. He knew he could have a major uprising on his hands. He had his theologians prepare another statement on religious life that would seem to be a compromise between the Lutherans and the Catholics. The Augsburg Interim was an attempt to leave the chief Lutheran articles of the Reformation intact while demanding the Lutherans comply with papal rule, recognition of the hierarchy of the bishops, as well as the reintroduction of Romish rites and sacraments. In order to help appease the Lutherans, this interim granted two minor concessions to the Lutherans: communion in both kinds and priests could still marry. The Interim further demanded the immediate reintroduction of certain Catholic ceremonies: such as exorcism, the restoration of the seven sacraments, the adoration of the saints, penance, extreme unction, the mass, the vigils and holidays, processions and fasts. All doctrines were to be understood in the Romanist sense. The Reformation's chief article on justification by faith alone was virtually cancelled out by the Interim. Only two years after Luther's death, the teachings he had won from God's Word were to be silenced by military and political might.

There was strong and immediate opposition to the Augsburg Interim from all of the Lutheran territories. There was also very strong and immediate retaliation by the emperor. Charles V used his Spanish troops to enforce the Interim. Most of the Protestant princes in Germany accepted these terms in order to avoid further difficulties with the emperor. They gave in rather than pay the price of a lengthy stay in prison. Lutheran pastors did not generally submit, but measures were taken by the emperor and the pope to ensure that they did. Hundreds of pastors who did not submit to these terms were banished or thrown out of the church. Many were imprisoned and some were killed.

Melancthon, the man who was at that time considered to be Luther's theological heir, became the voice for the Lutherans. He spoke out against the Augsburg Interim. However, he had never been very strong under pressure. He had always needed Luther to lean on and keep him stabilized in his doctrine. Melancthon now feared for his life because he had spoken out against the Augsburg Interim and he also feared for the future of the Lutheran Church. Because of his fears and his compromising nature, he allowed Elector Moritz of Saxony to pressure him into composing a substitute document for the Augsburg Interim, "something less distasteful to

the Lutheran party.” The result was the Leipzig Interim, so named for the city in which it was adopted.

### The Leipzig Interim

On December 22, 1548, Melancthon became involved in the compromise for which he would be criticized for the rest of his life. His compromise also became the root of many bitter controversies among the Lutherans. Elector Moritz felt pressure from his estates and subjects who were uncompromisingly Lutheran in spirit and doctrine. Moritz also felt pressure from Emperor Charles who was very determined to have religious peace in his country and threatened to remove the electorate from Moritz if his lands did not comply. Moritz applied pressure on Melancthon and his colleagues to forge a compromise plan for Saxon religious life. Melancthon looked at the persecution of Protestants in certain parts of South Germany and he saw this as a sign that the Emperor would not be satisfied unless the Protestants complied with his religious regulations. The persecutions surely were being used by the emperor and the pope to intimidate Melancthon and his companions so they would make a number of concessions. By the end of 1548, Melancthon helped author a compromise document called “The Leipzig Interim.”

The Leipzig Interim was not drastically different from the Augsburg Interim. It also included the recognition of papal authority and the restoration of Romish ceremonies. Melancthon and his followers declared these Catholic practices as adiaphora (indifferent things, neither good nor bad) and therefore permissible provided that the proper doctrines were maintained and everything was explained properly to the lay people. Of course, Rome did not regard them as such. Rome regarded these ceremonies as a very shrewd way of reintroducing Catholic doctrine in Lutheran churches. Confessional Lutherans like Flacius, Bucer, Brenz, and Chemnitz recognized these concessions as an eventual return to the papacy. They rebuked Melancthon and the Interimists (those Protestants who agreed with Melancthon on the terms of the Leipzig Interim).

Melancthon’s willingness to make concessions to the Romanists caused much controversy and nearly destroyed Lutheranism in the land of Luther. As we look back and consider the events that led up to the writing of Article X of the Formula of Concord, we can easily see that Melancthon was not the best leader for the Lutherans on this doctrine. Melancthon was just not capable to lead amid the turmoil of this troublesome period. He was more of a scholar than a leader. Melancthon was certainly a Christian man with a deep religious training and understanding, but he also had a timid, wavering, peace-loving disposition. He seemed to never truly lose his affection for the Catholic Church and her many ceremonies.

Melancthon’s fear of chaos and disorder led him to make concessions to the Catholics during the conferences and debates of the Leipzig Interim that would possibly reunite the Catholics and Lutherans. It appears he was lured by some dream of a Lutheran-Catholic Church. He thought it would be possible to remain within the Catholic Church, even with the new Lutheran theology.

Melancthon still believed in and hoped for reconciliation with the Romanists. He hoped his concessions would appease everybody – the Lutherans and the pope and the emperor. He did succeed in appeasing the enemies, but he also made many new ones among his Lutheran

associates. Flacius saw through the schemes of the emperor and the pope and fully realized the danger of Melancthon's concessions. The Lutherans feared that these concessions to the Romanists would eventually lead to the complete undoing of the Reformation and all God had enabled them to do. If the Romish ceremonies were reintroduced into the Church, the Lutherans maintained, "this would be followed by the entire ugly mass of Romish errors and abuses – a complete dominance of the Lutheran Church by the pope." If the Leipzig Interim were followed Flacius declared that it would "restore the Antichrist to the temple from which he has been expelled by the Finger of God." Thus, Flacius charged Melancthon with a lack of faith in God and committing treason against the truth of God's Word. He characterized the Leipzig Interim as "an unholy union of Christ and Belial, of light and darkness, of Christ and Antichrist." "Even John Calvin censured [Melancthon] with biting pen, exclaiming that a leader who flinches in battle is many times more reprehensible than a whole troop of soldiers who flee the field." <sup>ii</sup>

The Leipzig Interim was a disaster. Melancthon's concessions closely paralleled those made in the Augsburg Interim. The only real difference was that now Melancthon, the once right-hand man of Luther, was the author of this comprising, unionistic document. "The man who had once written the formidable treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope (appendix to the Smalcald Articles of Luther, 1537) now reneged meekly on the question of the papacy as the Antichrist. It was a black hour for Lutheran theology and undoubtedly the blunder of Melancthon's life." <sup>iii</sup>

All the articles of the Leipzig Interim were presented in a very Catholic sense. The basic principle of the Interim was to concede on indifferent matters (adiaphora), but retain the Lutheran understanding of justification. This document of compromise did stress divine grace and Christ's atoning work that brings forgiveness of sins, but it also omitted the Lutheran phrase "sola fide." There were definite problems in the Leipzig Interim on the doctrines of justification and conversion: "The merciful God does not work with man as with a block but draws him, so that his will cooperates if he be of understanding years." <sup>iv</sup>

The Interim once again forced the Protestants to believe in work righteousness. In the article on good works the Interim stated that good works were necessary for salvation: "It is certainly true that these virtues, faith, love, hope, and others, must be in us and are necessary to salvation... And since the virtues and good works, as has been said, please God, they merit also a reward in this life, both spiritual and temporal, according to God's counsel, and still more reward in the eternal life, because of the divine promise." <sup>v</sup> Faith, hope, and love were necessary for salvation, according to the Leipzig Interim.

The Protestants were again to believe in the sole power and right of the church in interpreting the Scriptures. In the article on ecclesiastical power the Interim placed the traditions of the church and the power of the papacy over Scripture: "What the true Christian Church, gathered in the Holy Ghost, acknowledges, determines, and teaches in regard to matters of faith is to be taught and preached, since it neither should nor can determine anything contrary to the Holy Scriptures." <sup>vi</sup>

The concessions made by Melancthon and his colleagues allowed for the submission of the Protestants once again to the authority of the bishops and the pope. In the article on

ecclesiastical ministers the Interim placed all ministers, Protestant and Catholic, under the direction of the pope: "And that all other ministers should be subject and obedient to the chief bishop [the Pope] and to other bishops..."<sup>vii</sup>

Confessional Lutherans strenuously objected to these concessions and compromises because they went against Scripture. Flacius and the Lutherans rightly contended that under certain times and circumstances, some ceremonies might be considered true adiaphora. However, they ceased being adiaphora when enemies of the Gospel forced them upon Christians against their conscience. The Interimists claimed they could introduce these ceremonies and make the people understand them correctly. Flacius and the Lutherans again rightly contended that any reintroduction of Romish ceremonies would be regarded by the lay people as an admission by the Lutherans that they had been wrong and the Romanists had been right. Flacius wrote: "The common people, especially the Romanists, always impressed by ceremonies much more than by the doctrines, will infer that those teachers who reintroduce the ceremonies approve of the Papacy in every respect and reject the Evangelical doctrine."<sup>viii</sup>

The Lutherans were concerned about the effect any concessions to Rome in the Leipzig Interim might have on the average parishioner. Trained theologians like Melancthon or Flacius might be able to guard themselves from the dangers of the reintroduction of old superstitions and Catholic ceremonies. They could look upon the adiaphora as external and indifferent forms. The simple layperson could not always make this distinction. "To them the essence often disappeared under the forms."<sup>ix</sup> Those who were against the Leipzig Interim were aware of the consequences of conceding anything to the Romanists. The Lutherans believed that if they gave in to the ceremonies and practice of the Romanists: consciences would be confused, simple Christians would be offended, and the enemies would be strengthened in their errors and emboldened in their attacks and in their further demands upon the Lutherans. "[The Lutherans] replied to the electoral Saxon theologians that the average parishioner saw as much as he heard in worship. If he saw the surplice and the candle, he would believe that the Wittenbergers who had reintroduced these medieval practices had returned to the message of the old days as well. He would not hear the gospel because the reminders of Rome seemed to indicate that Luther's successors had forgotten it."<sup>x</sup> Melancthon and his colleagues in their positions as university professors had a disadvantage when it came to understanding the every-day thinking of the common parishioner. Flacius and many of the other confessional Lutherans; however, had lived their ministries among people for whom "words were less important than symbols."

Flacius contended that under the circumstances of that time, any concession to the Romanists, even in ceremonies and festivals that were harmless in and of themselves, was equivalent to a denial of Lutheranism. Flacius reduced the entire argument against conceding to the Romanists in these areas of adiaphoron to the following principle: "*Nihil est adiaphoron in casu confessionis et scandali*. Nothing is an adiaphoron when confession and offense are involved."<sup>xi</sup>

The Interimists (those who agreed with Melancthon on adopting the Leipzig Interim) pleaded that these concessions were on adiaphora and therefore harmless.

“They maintained that they had yielded merely in minor matters and ceremonies, which were neither commanded nor prohibited by the Word of God; that this was done in order to preserve intact the central Christian truth of justification; to preserve political peace and to save the Church from ruin; to protect the weak, whose shoulders were not strong enough to suffer persecution; that in their concessions they had been guided by the dictates of true wisdom, which always chooses the lesser of two evils; and that in all this they had merely followed the example set by Luther himself. They minimized the entire affair, and endeavored to explain away the seriousness of the situation. In particular they ridiculed Flacius for shouting and sounding the fire-alarm when in reality, they said, he had discovered nothing but a little smoke coming from a Wittenberg chimney.”<sup>xii</sup>

The Interimists were declaring that it was better to compromise appearances than to have Spanish troops and papal priests marching into Saxony.

Flacius and those who agreed with him thoroughly and completely refuted these weak arguments of the Interimists. The confessional Lutherans reminded everyone that when dealing with even the seemingly most insignificant adiaphora one must not overlook what is attached to it. “We do not believe,” they said, “that the robber will let the traveler keep his money, although first he only asks for his coat or similar things, at the same time, however, not obscurely hinting that, after having taken these, he will also demand the rest. We certainly do not doubt that you yourselves, as well as all men endowed with a sound mind, believe that, since the beginning is always hardest, these small beginnings of changes are at present demanded only that a door may be opened for all the other impieties that are to follow.”<sup>xiii</sup> The reintroduction of these ceremonies would be the beginning of the general restoration of the papacy. That is exactly what the confessional Lutherans believed would happen as a result of the Interimist concessions and that is exactly what Emperor Charles and the pope hoped to accomplish with these concessions.

The Interimists pretended that they had consented to the Leipzig Interim out of consideration for the weak who were unable to bear the persecutions of Charles V and the pope. The Lutherans answered that weak Christians “could not be strengthened in their faith by teaching and persuading them to deny their faith.” The Lutherans also added that the enemies and the persecutors of the Gospel could certainly not be considered weak in faith.

“Even though the intention of those who receive and use the adiaphora be not an evil one, the question is,” said Martin Chemnitz, “whether the opinion of the one who commands, imposes, and demands the adiaphora is impious or wicked, whether such reception and observation is interpreted and understood as a turning away from the confession of the true doctrine, and whether the weak are offended and grow faith thereby.”<sup>xiv</sup> Brenz declared: “Adiaphora must be judged from their conditions. For if the condition is good, the adiaphoron, too, is good, and its observance is commanded. If, however, the condition is evil, the adiaphoron, too, is evil, and the observance of it is prohibited.”<sup>xv</sup>

The Interimists, in arguing for their support of the Leipzig Interim, went so far as to claim they were following the example of Luther, who for the sake of the weak, had tolerated certain “Romish ceremonies.” The Lutherans replied, “Distinguish times and conditions!” Luther

was dealing with people who were truly weak in the faith. The Interimists were dealing with people whose “weakness” was not an erring conscience, but a fear of persecution. Also, Luther tolerated Romish ceremonies as long as there was the hope of arriving at an agreement with Romanists in doctrine. Luther’s attitude in dealing with matters of adiaphora with the weak-in-faith flowed out of a compassion for the weak and a pure love for the truth of God’s Word. The Interimists reinstated ceremonies that had been abolished in the churches in an attempt to reconcile with the Romanists when no reconciliation could be made on the basis of Scripture. The Interimists’ position was nothing short of an unchristian denial of true compassion for the weak, a lack love for the truth of God’s Word, and a lack of trust in God’s sustaining power over evil.

The Interimists maintained that they were doing the right things – they were accepting the lesser evil (Romish ceremonies) rather than the greater evil (persecution). The Lutherans replied that one should not be guilty of sinning simply to avoid suffering and persecution. Westphal declared, “It is wicked to avert dangers by sins, nor are they removed or diminished in this way, but rather superinduced and increased.” He also said, “It is better to take upon himself punishments and great dangers than to offend God and to provoke his wrath by such offense.” And, “It is better and easier to bear many evils and to undergo many dangers than to be unfaithful in the least commandment of God, and burden oneself with the guilt of even a single sin.”<sup>xvi</sup>

The Interimists were afraid that their Wittenberg University would be closed, their churches would be deserted and their preachers would be banished. Flacius and the loyal Lutherans stated again and again that it is not the duty of a Christian to escape persecution, but to hold on to the truth. The Lutherans answered: “It is our duty to confess the truth regardless of consequences and, at the same time, to look to God for the protection of His Church.” “Obey the Lord and await His help!” was their counsel to the weak and persecuted.

Flacius rightly declared: “Confess the truth and suffer the consequences! A Christian cannot obtain peace by offending God and serving and satisfying tyrants. Rather be drowned by the Spaniards in the Elbe with a millstone about one’s neck than offend a Christian, deny the truth and surrender the Church to Satan.”<sup>xvii</sup>

### **The Truce of Passau & The Religious Peace of Augsburg**

The concessions made in the Interims were soon voided by the Religious Peace of Augsburg of 1555. Duke Moritz had secretly formed an alliance with most of the Protestant princes and with King Henry II of France to attack the emperor. The duke struck suddenly while Emperor Charles was sick with the gout. Charles escaped with his life, but he was taken by surprise and clearly admitted that he was beaten. He then empowered his brother, Ferdinand, to negotiate a truce of temporary peace with the victors. The result of these negotiations was the preliminary Peace of Passau of 1552. After some lengthy discussions and debates at a diet in Augsburg, a more permanent peace was adopted in 1555, called the Peace of Augsburg.

These documents established the right of the prince to determine which faith, that of Rome or of Wittenberg, would be the faith preached in his lands. While these documents did not give complete religious freedom to the Protestants, it did guarantee their continued existence.



“This Peace Treaty of Augsburg was in spite of its limitations the greatest triumph of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. The Protestants were not completely freed from the preposterous demand of the Emperor that they submit to the church council; and their complete emancipation from the dominating authority and power of the Pope was thereby recognized and guaranteed. Protestantism, could, indeed, now grow and expand and mature in peace. But unfortunately the ripening of the fruits of the Reformation which could now be expected was seriously interfered with, hindered, and retarded by numerous fights and strifes that broke out in the ranks of the Protestants.”<sup>xviii</sup>

With these documents the Interims were dead. However, the controversy had burned too hot for too long for everything to die out so quickly. The Interims had raised too many issues that needed to be discussed and debated by the Lutherans.

With the Peace of Augsburg the Lutherans had for the first time gained the right to exist and practice their faith freely. By this time the “victory” was bittersweet, for within the Lutheran church itself there was chaos. “Dissension and disunity reigned as a result of the struggle between conservative and moderate factions, between those concerned to keep Lutheran teaching pure and those somewhat indifferent to doctrinal purity and open to compromise. Polarization of theological positions around leaders like Melancthon and Flacius became intense. Under these extremely charged positions sharp words and actions drove an ever deeper wedge between the sides and sundered every vestige of Lutheran solidarity.”<sup>xix</sup> Theologians who were once loyal to the cause of the Reformation were now split into opposing parties. On the one side were the “Philippists” (followers of Philip Melancthon): Bugenhagen, Major, and Pfeffinger and on the other side were the Gnesio-Lutherans (“genuine” Lutherans): Flacius, Amsdorf, Wigand, Gallus, Westphal, and Aquila. Each side had their own sympathizers. Lutheranism was distinctly split.

“Controversies erupted on multiple questions which were not settled until another group of concerned theological leaders and Lutheran laymen came to the fore, chiefly in the mid-1560’s and early 1570’s. Chemnitz, Andrae, Brenz, Chytraeus, Koerner, Moerlin, and Selnecker, with a host of loyal laymen, now appeared as a third group, totally loyal to the position of Luther and of the Lutheran Confessions but also able to pour oil on the troubled waters and resolve the sharp doctrinal differences.”<sup>xx</sup> The Formula of Concord was their instrument of peace and unity for Lutheran theology. In this confession of faith there was no compromise, no surrender of the faith, no lack of trust in God, no fear of persecution. There was only a clear and strong declaration of their faith based solely on the truth of the Holy Scriptures.

#### **Article X of the Formula of Concord**

The Formula of Concord was designed to bring reconciliation and peace to the Lutheran churches and to solve the questions that were being debated. The Formula of Concord is a positive statement of what the church of God believes according to Scripture. The Formula is written in such a way that: there is a rejection of those teachings that do not agree with Scripture; there is an accurate and simple confession of the truth of God’s Word that we are to believe and teach; there is a brief statement written to avoid further schisms and compromises. Article X and

all of the articles in the Formula of Concord are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as their cornerstone.

The “adiaphoristic controversy” which Article X addresses, arose directly out of the concessions made in the Augsburg and Leipzig Interims. Although the Religious Peace of Augsburg caused these Interims to no longer be binding on the Lutherans, the issues these Interims raised remained the subject of furious debate among the deeply divided Lutherans. The precise point at issue is defined in the Solid Declaration X 1-3: “In matters neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word, may one at the demand of the enemies of the Gospel yield to a forced restoration of ceremonies that have fallen into disuse?”<sup>xxi</sup> Melancthon and the Philippists said yes, since the points at issue were only adiaphora. Flacius and the Gnesio-Lutherans said no, since the points at issue were being forced on them by persecution. They correctly felt that these compromises on ceremonies and the like were suppressing the pure doctrine and were gradually introducing false doctrine into their churches, so they could not yield, even in such externals. The Formula’s decision naturally was in favor of the latter view. The Formula agreed with Flacius’ principle on adiaphora that nothing is adiaphoron when confession and offense are involved.

Before turning to the question of real adiaphora, Article X settles troubled consciences about things had been falsely labeled as adiaphora. The Leipzig Interim had tried sanctioning matters of adiaphora which were really not adiaphora at all (i.e. “extreme unction, the reintroduction of the Corpus Christi celebration, and the restoration of the seven sacraments). Article X refers to these matters as “under the title and pretext of external adiaphora” because they are “in principle contrary to God’s Word and are not to be regarded as adiaphora.” (SD X 5) The Formula states that these types of ceremonies should be avoided because they give the appearance that 1) there is no difference between the Lutherans and the unorthodox; 2) they are trying to reconcile contrary religions; 3) and lest the Lutherans appear to have reentered the Papacy and were departing from the pure doctrine of the Gospel. (SD X5) All this is forbidden in 2 Corinthians 6:14, 17: *Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? “Therefore come out from them and be separate,” says the Lord.*

One final class of ceremonies that are not genuine adiaphora and should be avoided are described as being “useless, foolish displays, that are profitable neither for good order nor Christian discipline, nor evangelical propriety in the Church.” (SD X 7) “Since no examples are given in the Formula itself, judgments will presumably differ, according to times and circumstances, as to what constitutes ‘useless, foolish spectacles.’”<sup>xxii</sup>

After the Solid Declaration states what does not constitute adiaphora, it then describes in three basic points what really is genuine adiaphora. Each of these points is introduced with the phrase “we believe, teach, and confess.” The first major point defines the principle that ceremonies “are no worship of God.” (SD X 8) The proof text is Matthew 15:9: *“They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.”* The point of course is that adiaphora are not “in and of themselves” worship. In other words, the ceremonies used in worship are true adiaphora, they are indifferent things. The Roman Catholics were declaring that their ceremonies, like the mass and their religious holidays, were actually worship and a service to God. Article X disputes that thinking. Religious ceremonies, like the Lutheran liturgy, may help

to maintain dignity and cultivate reverence and devotion in public worship, but they are not “in and of themselves” worship. These ceremonies are adiaphora.

The second major point about genuine adiaphora is that “the congregation of God” has the authority, in matters that are truly adiaphora, to alter them “for the benefit of Christians, for preservation of good order, and the edification of the Church.” (SD X 9) A Christian church may change in matters of adiaphora at any time as long as it is not done out of thoughtlessness or if it does not cause offense. The Solid Declaration also declares that Christians may “yield and give way with a good conscience to the weak in faith in such external matters.” (SD X 9) A weak Christian is somebody who is yet unable to grasp and understand the full range of his freedom in matters of adiaphora and who may be in danger of stumbling in his faith upon seeing others using their Christian freedom to the fullest extent. In the proof passages, Paul teaches in Romans 14 and proves it by his example in Acts 16:3, Acts 21:26, and 1 Corinthians 9:19 how a stronger Christian will interact with a weaker Christian. The stronger Christian (one who fully understands all the freedom God has intended for him) out of a deep and selfless love will, in matters of adiaphora, restrain from making full use of his Christian freedom so as not to offend or endanger the faith of the weaker brother.

The third “we believe, teach, and confess” (SD X 10-17) gets to the heart of the whole matter that was raised by the Augsburg and Leipzig Interims – congregations, Christians and ministers must not permit adiaphora to be forced upon them. Here it is no longer a question of being gracious to the weak. Now it becomes a question of is it a detriment to the true worship of God. Is it introducing idolatry, is it suppressing pure doctrine or Christian liberty or is it allowing spiritual tyranny to reign. The proof texts cited are Galatians 2 and 5 where Paul points out that circumcision is an adiaphoron unless this adiaphoron was forced upon anyone, then Paul says “that he would not yield even for an hour, in order that the truth of the Gospel might continue unimpaired.” (SD X 12)

“Likewise, the article concerning Christian liberty also is here at stake”... for as soon as “the ordinances of men and human traditions are forced upon the Church with coercion, as though it were wrong and a sin to omit them, the way is already prepared for idolatry.” (SD X 15) The apostle Paul showed to others how he had been given Christian liberties by God and he used his Christian freedom to win more people to Christ. *To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. (1 Corinthians 9:22)* Paul used his ability to deal with the weak on their own level to try to win them. However, Paul was also very strong in resisting any compulsion to give up his freedoms. One example of this concerned the adiaphoron of circumcision (Acts 16:3 and 1 Corinthians 7:18f). In order to avoid unnecessary conflict with the Jews, Paul had Timothy circumcised. Paul was free to choose circumcision and he did so out of concern for the salvation of his fellowmen and out of interests for the work of the Lord. But when false teachers were demanding Paul circumcise Titus because it was necessary for salvation, Paul refused. The matter had ceased to be an adiaphoron. To give in to the demands of the false teachers would have been in effect a denial of the truth, a yielding to error, a failure to make a clear confession of doctrine. It would also have been an offense to the weak in faith and confirmed the false teachers in their error. Paul stood firm in his teachings: *We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you. (Galatians 2:5)* At stake here was not minor point that could be

conceded, as the Philippists believed, but “it is a question concerning the eminent article of our Christian faith.” (SD X 14)

The holy writer Paul and the authors of the Formula of Concord both believed that “becoming all things to all does not mean taking liberties with the word of God, adapting it to what men may be willing and ready to hear, taking off some of the sharp edges of the law, making the gospel less of an offense to them, or in general making some compromises and concessions on individual points of God’s message.”<sup>xxiii</sup> No one has the right to “streamline God’s Word” to attract more people.

The Formula then adds quotations from the Smalcald Articles, from the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, and references to Luther’s writings to show that all this “has always and everywhere been the faith and confession, concerning such indifferent matters.” (SD X 18) The quotations are followed by five brief rejections of errors concerning adiaphora.

Article X concludes with the important pronouncement not to condemn Christian congregations regarding ceremonies when there is agreement in doctrine. “According to this doctrine the churches will not condemn one another because of dissimilarity of ceremonies when, in Christian liberty, one has less or more of them, provided they are otherwise agreed with one another in the doctrine and all its articles, also in the right use of the Holy Sacraments according to the well known saying: ‘Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in the faith.’” (SD X 31) The “pure marks” of the Christian Church are the pure Gospel and the sacraments of Christ. They alone are the sole determinants of extending or terminating fellowship. Agreement or disagreement in matters of “indifferent things” or adiaphora should not influence Christian fellowship at all.

#### **Brief Application of Article X of The Formula of Concord for Today**

As we discuss Article X of the Formula of Concord we would have to agree that we could find many instances where this doctrine is important and must be applied in our lives. In previous ages this discussion of adiaphora might center on the exchange of wedding rings (which was hotly contested by the Puritans in the seventeenth century); the use of cosmetics and jewelry or the length of hair. Some churches have made matters of adiaphora into church laws such as not eating pork, not playing cards, dancing, baptizing by immersion, forbidding the marriage of clergy, worship on Saturday (as opposed to Sunday), or the use of alcoholic beverages. The matters of guitar accompaniment, sponsors in baptism, the use of a liturgy, having an envelope system for offerings, or clerical gowns are not commanded or forbidden by God’s Word, but do involve some church customs established by sound reasoning.

Recently, the *Lutheran Parent* magazine conducted a survey to determine where its readers stood on the issue of social dancing. A generation ago many conservative Lutherans viewed social dancing as a indecent and offensive activity. Many parents either discouraged their children or directly forbade them from participating in dances. For a number of years pastors, teachers and the local federation of churches would not allow area Lutheran high schools to hold school-sponsored dances. However, in the last decade chaperoned dances have begun appearing on the campuses of our WELS colleges and area Lutheran high schools. *Lutheran Parent* asked its readers: “How have our attitudes toward dancing changed? Since those attitudes regarding

dancing are to be shaped, at least in part, by the doctrine of adiaphora, do our changes in personal and public policy toward dancing represent a change in our views of this doctrine?" According to the Formula of Concord, any Christian or congregation may change their way of thinking about adiaphora. As long as this change is done out of thoughtfulness and does not cause offence, dancing at a WELS school function can be for the "benefit of Christians."

We are living in a time of numerous trial liturgies, experimental worship forms, new Bible translations and hymnals, etc. Does it make a difference if our worship services differ in so-called non-essentials as long as we have the pure gospel and Christ's sacraments? No. We must enjoy and relish our differences. Our Synod would not force our WELS churches in Africa or Japan to abandon their cultural language and music for the sake of conducting their services in English and sing along to a gigantic pipe organ. We must not confuse Christianity's content and message with outward forms. Scripture and our confessions make that clear.

Does it make a difference, however, if we share common worship forms with other churches, if we share a common recognition of the Lordship of Christ, and if we share the common adversaries of the devil, world, and flesh, but do not share a common confession in Christ's Word and sacraments? Yes, it definitely makes a difference! We cannot fall into the trap of Melancthon and unite with Christians in external matters – adiaphora -- when no real unity exists in doctrine. Scripture and our confessions make that clear.

On June 30, 1530, Luther wrote to Melancthon in an effort to save Melancthon from his timidity and his dangerous approach of saving the Church with human wisdom and shrewdness. Luther's words, written well before the controversies of the Leipzig Interim or the sound doctrine of the Formula of Concord, are words that we can certainly listen to and heed whenever we may feel the urge to compromise and give into pressure concerning the doctrine of adiaphora. "If we fall, Christ, that is to say, the Ruler of the world, falls with us; and even though He should fall, I would rather fall with Christ than stand with the emperor." <sup>xxiv</sup>

The Formula of Concord is still an instrument that can serve as the Lutherans conscience in achieving a God-pleasing basis for fellowship and genuine unity. C.F.W. Walther stated it correctly over 100 years ago: "In view of the fact that ours is a day when religious unionism and syncretism are rife in the churches, it is become the veritable citadel for our time, for which we, often despised and slandered for our unswerving loyalty to the unaltered Augsburg Confession, cannot thank, praise, and exalt God enough." <sup>xxv</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>i</sup> Richard Balge, "The Continuing Relevancy of the Formula of Concord," 3.
- <sup>ii</sup> Eugene F. Klug and Otto F. Stahlke, Getting into The Formula of Concord: A History & Digest of the Formula, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977, 13.
- <sup>iii</sup> Ibid., 12.
- <sup>iv</sup> Concordia Triglotta, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921, 107.
- <sup>v</sup> Ibid., 107.
- <sup>vi</sup> Ibid., 107.
- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid., 107.
- <sup>viii</sup> Ibid., 110.
- <sup>ix</sup> G.A. Westerhaus, "Melancthon's Doctrinal Compromise," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly Volume 64, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1967, 294.
- <sup>x</sup> Robert D. Preus and Wilbert H. Rosin, A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978, 25.
- <sup>xi</sup> Concordia Triglotta, 110.
- <sup>xii</sup> Ibid., 110.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ibid., 110.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Ibid., 111.
- <sup>xv</sup> Ibid., 111.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Ibid., 111.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Ibid., 111.
- <sup>xviii</sup> G.A. Westerhaus, 296.
- <sup>xix</sup> Eugene F. Klug and Otto F. Stahlke, 14.
- <sup>xx</sup> Ibid., 15.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Robert D. Preus and Wilbert H. Rosin, 261.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Ibid., 262.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Carl Lawrenz, "The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship," Our Great Heritage Volume III, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991, 461.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Concordia Triglotta, 112.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Eugene F. Klug and Otto F. Stahlke, 64.