

# Sermon Series – Reformation 500 Themes

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## *Adiaphora – Matters on which the Bible Is Silent*

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### **Text: Romans 14:1-12**

<sup>1</sup>As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. <sup>2</sup>One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup>Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. <sup>4</sup>Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

<sup>5</sup>One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. <sup>6</sup>The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. <sup>7</sup>For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. <sup>8</sup>If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. <sup>9</sup>For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. <sup>10</sup>Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; <sup>11</sup>for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." <sup>12</sup>So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

### **Theme: Adiaphora, The Freedom in Things on which the Bible Is Silent**

Once of the most helpful concepts of the Reformation is a term called, "adiaphora." These are things that the Bible neither commands nor forbids. They often refer to our Christian piety, things like how we worship God or what we eat, which are described in our text today. It is tempting to judge other Christians because their way of worshipping God is different from ours. But in this text Paul calls us to live in peace with each other. As long as we are not in conflict with the Scriptures, there is no need to Christians to be in conflict with each other. The Bible gives us a lot of freedom and strongly warns us against binding someone's conscience with regard to things that do not matter. We are free in the things on which the Bible is silent.

#### **I. The issue in Rome when Paul wrote this letter.**

The early Christian Church has a dilemma. About half of the church was Jewish converts. They wanted worship to be much the same as it was in the synagogue. They still wanted to follow circumcision, the Old Testament festivals, and the Jewish dietary restrictions. On the other hand, about half of the Church was Gentile converts. The men had no intention of being circumcised. They like pork. They couldn't understand the Aramaic or Hebrew that the Jewish Christians loved in the synagogues. At first the Jewish Christians demanded that the Gentile Christians follow the Jewish practices, but the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 decided that they could not burden the Gentile believers in this way. Then things began to be a little more subtle. Each side would say that they were better Christians because of the way that they did things. It became a source of

quarreling among Christians. The Jewish Christians felt that they were more pious because they were circumcised, ate kosher foods, celebrated Jewish festivals, and fasted. On the other hand the Gentiles Christians felt that they were examples of the freedom that we have in Christ by eating whatever they wanted and no longer celebrating the Jewish holy days. They would try to offend their Jewish Christian brothers by being blatant in these matters. Paul states that this is a matter of the heart. If it helps a person's faith to abstain from certain foods or to fast, he does it in honor of the Lord. If on the other hand, someone has a bbq pork sandwich to celebrate his Christian freedom, he does it in honor of the Lord. These things are matters of personal piety. We cannot judge someone who is honoring God for our salvation in Christ if it happens to be different from how we would honor God.

II. This became a huge issue at the time of the Reformation.

The question was what needed to be changed from the Roman Catholic way of doing things. When Martin Luther revised the Order of Worship, he was very conservative. He changed only the parts that were opposed to the Gospel. For that reason, the Lutheran and Catholic services are very similar. He did away with many of the Saint Days, but kept others. He allowed for some of the vestments (robes) for the clergy, although he warned against making them too ornate. Personally, he continued to wear his monk's habit and when that wore out, his academic robe when he conducted worship and preached. Pictures of Lutheran preachers are always shown in simple black robes, while the Roman Catholic priest are depicted in overly ornate vestments.

Sometimes things would change. Initially Luther said that it was adiaphora to adore the bread and wine in Communion, which is when the priest raises them and kneels to them in the Catholic Church. Later the Lutherans would reject that practice.

On the other hand there were radical reformers who said that everything had to be changed. They smashed the stained glass windows, broke the statues, whitewashed all the paintings on the walls, and threw the altars, crucifixes, and candles out of the churches. Luther would return from the Wartburg Castle to correct these abuses.

The Lutheran position was expressed in article in the *Augsburg Confession* on the Church, which states, "**The church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions or rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere.**" Later the Lutherans would put an article on adiaphora in the *Formula of Concord*. This article states that Christians are free to change ceremonies as it is most profitable and edifying for the church in that place. But there were two caveats. Any changes must not be frivolous or give offense. The other one is that if someone says that you must do something, then you should refrain from doing it to show your freedom. The point of adiaphora in the Lutheran Confessions was that we are free to worship God as it is best for us as long as it is not contrary to Scripture or cause an offense.

III. This something that the church still struggles with today.

Today we often speak of worship wars and the struggle between traditional hymns and modern contemporary Christian songs. People have different ways of showing their piety. Some make the

sign of the cross. Others lift of their hands. Today we have 4 services in 4 very different styles. They are in different languages. The style of music is very different. The Hmong hymns are very melodic, and the African hymns are very rhythmic. We respond differently. When I preach at the Hmong service, I wonder if anyone is listening. In the African service, there are a lot of “Amens.” Even the volume is different. The African service is really loud, almost 100 decibels. Even pastors are different. Some wear a lot of vestments and preach from the pulpit. Others prefer street clothes and walk around a lot.

What Paul teaches in this text and what the Lutheran Reformers taught still applies today. When a practice does not contradict God’s Word, we need to refrain from judging. We can’t think that the way that we do things makes us better Christians. On the other hand, we have to be careful not to offend. Everything must be done in love. We want to be sure that the love of God in Jesus Christ is being proclaimed as clearly as possible. It should always be our intention that everything that we do is to honor God and proclaim Christ. By everything that we do, we want to see God’s great love that He gave His Son Jesus Christ for us.

Luther had warning in the preface to his German Mass. He wrote, **“As is always the case with Christian liberty; very few use it for the glory of God and the good of the neighbor; most use it for their own advantage and pleasure...We must make sure that freedom shall be and remain a servant of love and of our fellow man.”** (LW 53, p 61) That is still good advice today. We are free in Christ, but that freedom must not be used to our advantage, but to God’s glory and the good of our fellow man.

I would also say that his mixture of old and new was also good. He did leave much of the mass intact, but he also added a lot of hymns in the style of music that Germans sang at that time. That is a good example for us, that we remember and continue to use the best of the past, those things that are tried and true which point us to Christ, but we also use them to help us navigate our way in a sea of religious ideas that is often confusing today. For instance when we know the *Small Catechism*, we understand that there are a lot of false things that we hear in the Prosperity Gospel that is preached in many pulpits and on the radio and tv today. When we know the classic Christian hymns, they help us to know which of the modern songs are good and which are contrary to the faith. Not everything in different styles is a matter of adiaphora. When we know the Scriptures, we will be able to discern which things do matter and which are a reflection of our personal piety.

Ever since the beginning of the church, people have had different ways of honoring God for the salvation that God has given to us in Christ. What both Paul and the Reformation teaching have said is that it doesn’t matter how you honor God as long as it’s not contrary to the Scriptures and that you do so in love. I do thank God that today this building will house people who are honoring God in very different ways. Thank God for that Christian freedom that we have in we honor Jesus Christ as our Savior. Amen.

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