

# Philip Melanchthon and His Understanding of Adiaphora

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We have often heard the saying: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.”<sup>1</sup> German theologians refer to this popular dictum as the *Friedensspruch* or “Peace Saying.” Although it has been often attributed to Saint Augustine, it is much more probable to have originated with Peter Meiderlin, a seventeenth century Lutheran theologian and pastor who lived through the rancor and division due to doctrinal disputes during the Thirty Years War, whose father was also a Swabian priest who probably lived through the turbulent times of the Protestant Reformation. So what are essential and non-essential matters? Why is it important to distinguish them? What if we do not? Is this two-tier approach helpful or not? And in what circumstances? The purpose of this essay is to explore the question of adiaphora (i.e., non-essential or indifferent matters) and its application, by focusing on the adiaphora controversy surrounding Philip Melanchthon and his critics during the mid-sixteenth century. The thesis of this essay is to claim that the principle of adiaphora, as Melanchthon understood it, is useful in certain extraordinary circumstances, for the sake of the greater good, and to prevent legalism, on the one hand, and antinomianism on the other.

Why was there a controversy in the first place regarding what was supposed to be non-essential or trivial? Why was Melanchthon being seen as a controversial character? In the mid-sixteenth century, as Charles V sought to bring his uncooperative German Lutheran subjects under control, he used the aid of Lutheran defector Duke Maurice of Saxony and defeated the Lutheran military forces in the Schmalkaldic War (1546-1547), regaining control over the lands

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<sup>1</sup> The original Latin phrase is: "*In necessariis, unitas; In dubiis, libertas; In omnibus, caritas.*"

in Saxony, including the Lutheran home base Wittenberg. As a result, many Lutherans, including Melanchthon, fled the University. After Maurice obtained his coveted electorship, he switched sides again and promised to restore the University and reinstate all the professors. He urged Melanchthon to return to Wittenberg to keep it running, and Melanchthon agreed. Many Lutherans saw Melanchthon's move as traitorous, but Melanchthon thought the destruction of the University and the desertion of the churches a much more disastrous outcome. He wished to revive Wittenberg so that it could keep producing ministers that could preach the doctrines of the pure gospel.<sup>2</sup> So he accepted Maurice's offer, though not entirely without reservations.

Soon after that, seeking to further undermine Lutheranism, Charles imposed an edict on the land of Saxony, restoring a number of Catholic ceremonies, doctrines, and practices through the Augsburg Interim, issued on May 15, 1548. The Interim demanded the restoration of the number of sacraments from two back to seven, along with episcopal rule, papal interpretation of Scripture, transubstantiation, works of supererogation, invocation of saints, and, most importantly of all, the idea of faith as merely a preparation for justification through works of love, to which Melanchthon strongly rejected.<sup>3</sup>

After extended negotiations, Melanchthon compromised and signed a revised statement known as the Leipzig Interim, which at least preserved the essential Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone, excluded the meritorious sacrifice of the mass, but yielded on many other practices and ceremonies as adiaphora, such as episcopal rule, confirmation, and extreme unction. Although he did not like the ceremonies much, he thought that in times of perilous

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<sup>2</sup> Clyde L. Manschreck, *Melanchthon: The Quiet Reformer* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1958), 280.

<sup>3</sup> Clyde L. Manschreck, *Melanchthon on Christian Doctrine: Loci Communes 1555*, trans. and ed. Clyde L. Manschreck (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), xvii.

difficulty, as long as the most essential doctrine of *sola fideism* was preserved, one could bear the burden of adiaphora for the sake of peace and order. He believed “resistance would only increase the turbulence, persecution, and ruining of the church.”<sup>4</sup> He did not wish to see his people suffer from the same violence as the Swabians, who rejected the imperial order. In his own words, he defended his actions saying: “Since great devastations are occurring in other places, we believe that it is better to endure a harsh servitude, if it can be borne without impiety, than to leave the churches.”<sup>5</sup> Many strict Lutherans, in particularly his former pupil Matthias Flacius, however, accused him of betrayal and bitterly attacked him for his treachery, claiming that the pure evangelical doctrines would still be contaminated, because the so-called non-essential ceremonies themselves were previously linked with the idolatrous popery. Flacius also believed that if ceremonies were made compulsory through the law, they ceased to be adiaphora and must be rejected. Flacius’ antagonism went as far as publishing letters of Melanchthon with changes that twisted the message so as to fit the accusation. Despite his peacekeeping intentions, Melanchthon was deeply troubled by this bitter adiaphoristic controversy and suffered the harshest criticisms from his comrades. Church historian Robert Stupperich called him the “most peaceable man of his age,” yet ironically also “the most embattled.”<sup>6</sup>

As we can see, Melanchthon was situated in an extraordinary set of circumstances. He was struggling with the issue of adiaphora when war and more bloodshed were imminent under the threat of imperial demands. He certainly did not take it lightly to yield. He decided to endure

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<sup>4</sup> Manschreck, *Quiet Reformer*, 281.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>6</sup> John Schneider, “Melanchthon’s Rhetoric As a Context for Understanding His Theology,” in *Melanchthon in Europe: His Work and Influence Beyond Wittenberg*, ed. Karin Maag (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 141.

certain human traditions “for the sake of peace, love, and order” on the condition that “they do not obscure faith, if they do not give offense, if they can be endured without destroying one’s sense of true doctrine.”<sup>7</sup> Clyde Manschreck argues that this view of his on the adiaphora remained consistent throughout the *Loci communes theologici*, the *Augsburg Confession*, and the *Apology*, up until the 1548 Interim.<sup>8</sup> Melanchthon also exerted great effort into making sure the doctrine of justification by faith alone was preserved in the Interim without any compromise. Only then was he willing to bear the “harsh servitude” of other matters.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, he had his reasons for compromising in the Leipzig Interim. He mitigated a set of bad circumstances by making the best of it.

Melanchthon’s unique theology also prevented him from going to extremes. First of all, he did not tread the narrow path of those who uphold the regulative principle, i.e., only permitting what is sanctioned in the Bible and forbidding everything else not explicitly said in the Bible. Contrarily, due to the influence of Luther, Melanchthon believed in the normative principle, where anything not forbidden is permitted.<sup>10</sup> Melanchthon’s main concern was justification by faith alone, as far as righteousness was concerned, therefore everything else not necessary to justification was adiaphoristic to him. Against those who tried to forbid adiaphoristic matters forcefully, he exclaimed: “He who forbids circumcision errs just as much

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<sup>7</sup> Clyde L. Manschreck, “The Role of Melanchthon in the Adiaphora Controversy,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 48, no. 2 (1957): 177.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 176-78.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>10</sup> Bernard J. Verkamp, “The Limits Upon Adiaphoristic Freedom: Luther and Melanchthon,” *Theological Studies* 36, no. 1 (March 1975): 61.

as those who demand it.”<sup>11</sup> He also retorted: “The violent persons who want to compel everybody to hold the opinions they hold are instituting a new kind of popery.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, he carefully avoided the legalism of both the biblical reductionists who forbade adiaphora, and the papalists who made human traditions necessary to salvation.

Nevertheless, Melanchthon was not at all antinomistic. Timothy Wengert argues that Melanchthon had a uniquely Lutheran understanding of Christian freedom. Melanchthon saw freedom not as an abstract ontological category, as Erasmus did, but as “Christian” freedom, a sub-category existing only due to the benefits of justification by faith.<sup>13</sup> Following the footsteps of Luther, he also distinguished the two uses of the law in his *Loci*, namely the civil use of the law to maintain order and restrain evil as God ordained it, and the theological use to drive sinners to Christ.<sup>14</sup> This helped him to see some usefulness of law in society, instead of going the path of the antinomians, e.g., John Agricola, who sought to abolish the binding obligation of all human law on Christians in the name of freedom.<sup>15</sup>

In his essay, Charles Arand contends that “we should not conclude too quickly that adiaphora means anything goes as long as it does not contradict our theology... Nor should we conclude too quickly that every situation or every controversy requires that we enter into *status confessionis*.”<sup>16</sup> He proposes four helpful Lutheran confessional principles in dealing with

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<sup>11</sup> Manschreck, *Quiet Reformer*, 289.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>13</sup> Timothy J. Wengert, “Philip Melanchthon on Human and Divine Freedom,” *Dialog* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 262.

<sup>14</sup> Wilhelm Pauck, ed., *Melanchthon and Bucer* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1969), 49-70.

<sup>15</sup> Wengert, “On Human and Divine Freedom,” 264.

<sup>16</sup> Charles P. Arand, “Not All Adiaphora Are Created Equal,” *Concordia Journal* 30, no. 3 (July 2004): 156.

adiaphora: 1) Confession of the Gospel, 2) Continuity with the catholic tradition, 3) Contextual sensitivity for mission, and 4) Consensus of the church. The Gospel should provide the focus and direction of the adiaphora. The principle of collegiality maintains ecclesiastical unity in the Gospel. Both the connectedness to the Great Tradition and the sensitivity to contemporary contexts help to keep things in balance just like a bicycle on training wheels, swaying neither to the left or right. He says: “Ideally, we must take all four principles into account when considering the development, adoption, revision, or rejection of any given practice or adiaphoron.”<sup>17</sup> In light of these four principles, it is clear that Melanchthon did successfully preserve the crux of the Gospel; he did not see it necessary to reject some of the good practices from the ancient times; and he certainly had mission in mind when he sought to preserve Wittenberg in his particular context. Perhaps the only thing he failed to do was to gather consensus of the church in the midst of that strife, but to his merit he at least secured some momentary peace and order for the church and bought time until the Peace of Augsburg (1555) arrived.

In conclusion, whenever we encounter controversial matters regarding the adiaphora, let us remember Melanchthon and his struggles, knowing that there are certain times when we might have to compromise on non-essentials for the sake of the gospel, that we should neither lean towards legalism or antinomianism, and try our best to seek “in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.”

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<sup>17</sup> Arand, “Not All Adiaphora,” 162.

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