

Five Laws of Christian Freedom Answering the Abuse of Adiaphora

by Todd Wilken

Adiaphora: Things neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. From Greek a- “without” diaphora “different things.” Literally, “indifferent things.”

I know my title sounds a little strange: Laws of Christian Freedom. What does the Law have to do with Christian freedom? If Scripture neither commands nor forbids something, aren't we free to do as we please? In matters of adiaphora, don't Christians have absolute freedom?

Anything goes?

Fill in the blank. *Scripture is silent on the subject of _____. Therefore, when it comes to _____, we are free to do whatever we want! Worship, Music, Communion practice, Church government. It's all adiaphora! Anything goes!*

Does adiaphora mean anything goes?

Think about it this way. Some Christians believe that drinking alcohol is forbidden in Scripture. They spend a lot of time trying remove the alcohol from the Greek word for “wine.” They believe that Christians have no freedom in this matter. Other Christians believe that drinking alcohol is not forbidden in Scripture. They let the Greek word for “wine” mean what it means. They believe that Christians are free to enjoy God's good gift of the grape. They say, whether Christians drink or not is in the area of adiaphora.

Now, I agree that drinking is an adiaphoron. But if I am free to enjoy my Scotch, does that mean I am free to drink like a teenaged-celebrity at a Hollywood hot spot? Of course I'm not. Scripture speaks very clearly against drunkenness.

The Christian's freedom is never absolute. As long as I remain a sinner, prone to abuse it, my freedom is always limited by Scripture —in particular, by the Law. Sadly, many Christians today have forgotten this.

Yes, many Christians believe that adiaphora means anything goes. In response, I offer these Five Laws of Christian Freedom:

1. Where Scripture speaks, speak; where Scripture is silent, be silent.

Scripture has a lot to say. Christian should believe, teach and confess everything Scripture says. Jesus certainly expected as much: “teach them to observe all things that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:20)

Scripture is sometimes silent. So, what do you say when Scripture has nothing to say? Nothing. Where Scripture is silent, there is nothing for the Christian to believe, teach or confess. The realm of Christian freedom is a very quiet place.

For sola scriptura Christians, the silence of Scripture is important. Paul tells the Corinthians “do not go beyond what is written.” (1 Corinthians 4:6). Simply put, do not speak where Scripture is silent.

Now, don't confuse this with the so-called “Regulative Principle” of the Calvinist Reformation. John Calvin and others believed that Scripture's silence spoke volumes, and that Christians should interpret Scripture's silence as specific, implied commands. Their view was, If the Bible doesn't specifically command X, Y or Z, then the Bible forbids X, Y and Z. This principle was applied to every area of the Christian life. In some cases, the application of the Regulative Principle led to disastrous denials of Christian Freedom.

The problem with the Regulative Principle is that it claims to hear God speaking where Scripture is silent.

Where Scripture speaks, speak. Where Scripture is silent, be silent. Where Scripture is silent, you are in the realm of Christian freedom. Keep your mouth shut.

2. Don't confuse your refusal to listen with Scripture's silence.

Have you ever noticed how many things Jesus never mentioned? It's a pretty big list. Jesus never mentioned abortion. He never mentioned homosexuality. Add to that gay marriage, premarital sex, cohabitation, recreational drug use and women's ordination.

Some argue that if Jesus never mentioned these things, He must not have considered them very important. After all, Jesus couldn't have been too concerned with these issues. Otherwise, He would have said something about abortion, homosexuality, gay marriage, premarital sex, cohabitation, recreational drug use, or women's ordination. Some argue that Jesus' silence means that He even approved of such things! In an article cited at the United Church of Christ website, Walter Wink, of Auburn Theological Seminary uses Jesus' silence on homosexuality to argue for what he calls "radical freedom",

Jesus never even mentioned homosexuality but explicitly condemned divorce? Yet we ordain divorcees. Why not homosexuals?... In a little-remembered statement, Jesus said, "Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" (Luke 12:57). Such sovereign freedom strikes terror in the hearts of many Christians; they would rather be under law and be told what is right. ... If now new evidence is in on the phenomenon of homosexuality, are we not obligated -- no, free -- to re-evaluate the whole issue in the light of all available data and decide, under God, for ourselves? Is this not the radical freedom for obedience which the gospel establishes?¹

But why stop there? Jesus never mentioned genocide, slavery, polygamy, wife-beating, rape, incest or dog-fighting either. Does Jesus' silence grant us "radical freedom" in these things too?

You can't use Jesus' silence as an excuse to ignore the rest of Scripture. You can't pit Jesus against the rest of Scripture.

This is nothing more than a theology of loopholes —a theology based on what Scripture doesn't say. It is the Calvinist Regulative Principle turned on its head: If the Bible doesn't specifically forbid X, Y or Z, then the Bible approves of X, Y and Z.

While this theology of loopholes is especially popular among Christian liberals, it is also a favorite among many who consider themselves Christian conservatives. For more than 30 years, the Church Growth Movement has depended on this theology of loopholes to justify its innovations. It's no surprise that, just like Christian liberalism, that movement has grown hard of hearing when it comes to Scripture.

Yet, even when Scripture is truly silent on a specific issue, it's still not anything goes.

3. Your freedom stops where false doctrine begins.

Matters of Christian freedom cease to be matters of Christian freedom when they undermine sound doctrine. Of course, the elephant in the room here is Worship.

Wait a minute! The Bible is silent on how Christians ought to worship, isn't it? Yes. But the Bible isn't silent on what Christians ought to believe. Rolf Preus writes,

There is a certain surface logic to the argument that the historic liturgy may be discarded because the Bible doesn't require its use and we must base our doctrine and practice on the Bible alone. But the so-called Scripture Alone principle may not be applied in a manner that runs against the other two pillars of the Reformation: Grace Alone and Faith Alone. How does God bring his grace to sinners in their need? How does God elicit faith in the heart that is by nature stone, cold, dead? Surely the Scriptures have quite a bit to say about this!²

Believe it or not, the worship wars aren't about style; they're about doctrine. Baptists worship like Baptists because they believe like Baptists. Methodists worship like Methodists because they believe like Methodists. Pentecostals worship like Pentecostals because they believe like Pentecostals. In every case, their doctrine determines how they worship. So, why are Lutherans worshipping like Baptists, Methodists and Pentecostals? John Pless answers that question.

We are in the midst of a genuine liturgical crisis. It is not a debate over adiaphora, indifferent things. It is not a controversy over style. At the heart it is a crisis of faith. When our Lord spoke of His return at the end of time, He did not say, "When the Son of Man returns will He find a growing and successful church?" but, "when the Son of Man comes will He find faith on the earth?" (St. Luke 18:8). The liturgical crisis is a crisis of faith, for faith lives by the Word of the Lord. The contemporary uneasiness with the liturgy is really an anxiety over whether the Word of the Lord will really do what the Lord promises us that it will do.³

Christian freedom comes from the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ. This freedom can never be cut loose from its source. This is why Christian freedom can never be an excuse for permitting or promoting false doctrine. When false doctrine is permitted or promoted in the name of adiaphora, Christians must resist. The sixteenth century reformers understood that the "adiaphora" of Rome were tied directly to the errors of Rome:

When under the title and pretext of external adiaphora such things are proposed as are in principle contrary to God's Word (although painted another color), these are not to be regarded as adiaphora, in which one is free to act as he will, but must be avoided as things prohibited by God.⁴

So, why can't the reformers' theological descendants see that the "adiaphora" of pop-Christianity are tied directly to the errors of pop-Christianity?

But what about the genuine adiaphora of worship? Are these indifferent things theologically neutral? No. Even the genuine adiaphora of worship can be (and are being) used to undermine pure doctrine. When this happens, they cease to be adiaphora. The reformers understood this as well.

For here it is no longer a question concerning external matters of indifference, which in their nature and essence are and remain of themselves free, and accordingly can admit of no command or prohibition that they be employed or omitted; but it is a question, in the first place, concerning the eminent article of our Christian faith, as the apostle testifies, that the truth of the Gospel might continue.⁵

So, is worship an adiaphoron or not? That depends. Preaching, prayer, the public reading of Scripture, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, Confession and Absolution —these cannot be adiaphora; they have been instituted or commanded by Christ Himself. But, what about everything else? I addressed this question some time back in a IE Journal article called, "Doctrine AND Practice":

The issue regarding adiaphora is not whether or not such practices are doctrinally neutral. They are not. The issue regarding adiaphora is whether or not the same doctrine can be communicated by a variety of practices. A true adiaphoron is not an adiaphoron because it is doctrinally neutral; a true adiaphoron is an adiaphoron because it is one among several practices that communicates the same doctrine. What does this mean? It means that Christian freedom in practice is not carte blanc to do as you please because doctrine isn't at issue. It means that Christian freedom in practice exists within the boundaries of true doctrine.⁶

Adiaphora are not doctrinally neutral. Adiaphora can never be an excuse for false teaching. For Lutherans, the adiaphora of worship remain adiaphora only if they communicate true Lutheran doctrine.

So, do Baptist, Methodist and Pentecostal forms of worship communicate true, Lutheran doctrine? I wonder how the Baptist, Methodist or Pentecostal would answer that question.

4. Your freedom stops where your Christian brother's conscience begins.

Luther famously wrote in Concerning Christian Liberty,

A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one.... We conclude therefore that a Christian man does not live in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbour, or else is no Christian: in Christ by faith; in his

neighbour by love. By faith he is carried upwards above himself to God, and by love he sinks back below himself to his neighbour, still always-abiding in God and His love.⁷

Matters of Christian freedom cease to be matters of Christian freedom when they undermine the conscience of your Christian brother.

(Notice that I said “your Christian brother.” We are not talking about the unbeliever’s conscience. In the name of reaching the lost, and under the banner of Christian freedom, many churches have tried to appease unbelievers by compromising the truth of the Gospel and of Scripture. Church-growth-guru George Barna says, “the audience, not the message, is sovereign.”⁸ Contrary to this conventional wisdom, the sensibilities of unbelievers aren’t sacrosanct. The Gospel and the truths of Scripture are. Christians don’t compromise the truth to make non-Christians comfortable.)

Luther is right. The Christian lives “in Christ by faith, in his neighbour by love.” Sometimes love does, and sometimes love doesn’t.

The Christian always has his eye on his brother’s conscience. His brother’s conscience determines whether or not he exercises his Christian freedom. When St. Paul faced legalists who wanted to undermine the Gospel, he refused to curtail Christian freedom:

Not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. And this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the Gospel might continue with you.⁹

But in Acts 16, Paul circumcised Timothy under very similar circumstances. Luther explains Paul’s seemingly odd behavior:

St. Paul circumcised his disciple Timothy, not because he needed circumcision for his justification, but that he might not offend or condemn those Jews, weak in the faith, who had not yet been able to comprehend the liberty of faith. On the other hand, when they condemned liberty and urged

that circumcision was necessary for justification, he resisted them, and would not allow Titus to be circumcised. For, as he would not offend or condemn any one's weakness in faith, but yielded for the time to their will, so, again, he would not have the liberty of faith offended or condemned by hardened self-justifiers, but walked in a middle path, sparing the weak for the time, and always resisting the hardened, that he might convert all to the liberty of faith. On the same principle we ought to act, receiving those that are weak in the faith, but boldly resisting these hardened teachers of works.¹⁰

In both cases, Paul had his eye on his brother's conscience and acted accordingly. Paul knew the difference between a legalist and a weaker brother. He was happy to offend the former, but unwilling to offend the latter.

In both cases, Paul knew that the Gospel was at stake. To circumcise Titus would have undermined the Gospel. To leave Timothy uncircumcised would have undermined the Gospel.

5. Just because there is more than one right to do it, doesn't mean that there is no wrong way to do it.

This is the real problem with the "radical freedom," "anything goes" definition of adiaphora: It's not freedom; it's license.

However, it is a perfect fit with the relativistic spirit of the age. I have my way; you have your way; there are no wrong ways; it's all good!

This is the single greatest and most dangerous misconception about adiaphora and Christian freedom. In countless churches, it has turned Sunday morning over to the wants and whims of the pastor and the praise band. It has replaced Christian freedom with license. It has obscured the Gospel to a greater degree than it was in medieval Roman Catholicism. In the name of Christian freedom, these churches have felt free to give sinners less and less Jesus, and in some cases, no Jesus at all.

While more “radical” reformers were whitewashing churches and throwing out anything that even reminded them of Rome, Luther took a remarkably conservative approach. He removed from Sunday morning only those things that were contrary to the Gospel. At the time, Luther had a friend in Berlin, who was worried about his Chancellor’s high-church tastes. Luther responded with his characteristic sarcasm and sagacity:

Concerning the things you complain about, i.e. the use of an alb and a chasuble, and processions around the churchyard on Sundays and holidays, I would give the following advice: If your Lord, the Count, and the Chancellor allow you to preach the pure Gospel of Christ without any human additions, and if they allow the celebration of sacraments of baptism and of the altar according to the institution of Christ, but do not require the adoration of the saints as mediators and intercessors, nor the carrying of the host in procession, and if they do not insist on daily masses for the dead, nor on the use of holy water, responsorials and canticles - whether German or Latin – during the processions, then, in God's name, join in them and carry a cross of silver or gold and wear an alb and a chasuble made of velvet, silk or linen. And if one chasuble is not enough, do as Aaron, the high priest did: put on three of them, one more beautiful than the other. And if your Lord the Chancellor is not satisfied with one procession, then make seven circuits, as Joshua did around the walls of Jericho while the children of Israel blew the trumpets; and if it pleases the Chancellor, let him walk at the front, jumping and dancing to the sound of harps and cymbals, trumpets and bells, as David did when the Ark was brought to Jerusalem. I have no objection to these practices. If these things are not misused, they can neither add to, nor take away anything from the Gospel, but they must never be regarded as necessities, nor be made into a matter of conscience.¹¹

Luther understood that adiaphora doesn’t mean “anything goes,” but Christian freedom exercised for the sake of the Gospel and in service of the neighbor.

Luther understood that Christian freedom only exists because of, and for the sake of Gospel. He understood that Christian freedom was part and parcel of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. Luther understood that just as the Gospel makes sinners free, a freedom that obscures or undermines that Gospel makes sinners slaves again.

Luther understood that the wrong way to exercise your Christian freedom is to give lost, dying sinners less Jesus. He understood that as free as Christians are, we are not free to give sinners anything more or less than Jesus Christ crucified.

Recommended Reading: John Pless, "The Relationship of Adiaphora and Liturgy in the Lutheran Confessions" in *And Every Tongue Confess: Essays in Honor of Norman Nagel on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday*, Jon Vieker, ed., Nagel Festschrift Committee, 1990. it can also be found on the web at <http://www.ctsfw.edu/library/files/pb/581>

¹ Walter Wink, "Homosexuality and the Bible," <http://www.ucc.org/lgbt/about.html>

² Rolf Preus, "Lutheran Worship Wars," a paper delivered at the National Conference on Worship, Music & the Arts in Kenosha, Wisconsin, July 21-24, 2002. <http://www.christforus.org/Papers/Content/LutheranWorshipWars.html>

³ John Pless, "Liturgy and Evangelism in Service of the *Mysteria Dei*," *Mysteria Dei: Essays in Honor of Kurt Marguaret*, Paul McCain and John Stephenson, eds., Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1999, p. 240.

⁴ Solid Declaration, X, 5.

⁵ Solid Declaration, X, 14.

⁶ Todd Wilken, "Doctrine AND Practice," *Issues, Etc. Journal*, 2002 *****

⁷ Martin Luther, "Concerning Christian Liberty," R. S. Grignon, trans., *The Harvard Classics*, vol. 36, New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1910, pp. 345, 372.

⁸ George Barna, *Marketing the Church: What They Never Taught you about Church Growth*, Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1988, p. 145.

⁹ Galatians 2:2-5.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 369-370.

¹¹ Weimarer Ausgabe, Briefwechsel 8, 625, 7 - 626, 2.