

Church of England Evangelical Council

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Introduction to Adiaphora – Martin Davie

Introduction

In this paper I shall begin by looking at what is meant when it is said that some things are adiaphora. I shall then go on to look at what the New Testament has to teach us about how to handle those matters that are adiaphora. Finally, I shall consider what the historic Anglican formularies and the *Windsor Report* of 2004 have to teach us about how to handle such matters in the light of the Biblical material.

What is meant by the term adiaphora?

The term *adiaphora* is Greek in origin. It is a plural word which literally means ‘those things which are indifferent.’ In this context ‘indifferent’ does not mean ‘uninterested’ (as in ‘he was indifferent about the result of the match’), but rather ‘morally neutral.’

The use of the term in this sense goes back to Stoic philosophy. According to the Stoics all the objects which human beings pursue during their lives can be divided into three classes. First, there are things which are good, such as virtue, wisdom, justice, temperance and so forth. Secondly, there are things which are bad such as vice, folly, injustice and intemperance. Thirdly, there are things such as wealth and fame which are in themselves neither good nor bad, but morally neutral and in that sense *adiaphora*.

In subsequent Christian theology this concept of some things being in themselves morally neutral has been taken over to refer to those things which are neither specifically commanded nor specifically prohibited by God and that is what is meant when Christian theologians talk about *adiaphora*.¹

There are some things which are commanded by God, such as keeping the Sabbath day holy or honouring one’s father and mother (Exodus 20:8-12), and there are some things which are prohibited by God such as worshipping idols or committing adultery (Exodus 20:4-5 and 14). Where there are such commands or prohibitions expressly given in Scripture, and where these commands are universally applicable (unlike many of the specific commands contained in the Old Testament Law) then Christians have a clear and absolute duty to obey them.

However, there a lot of things in life which are not the subject of any such specific command or prohibition.

This can be seen if you think about the subject of breakfast. We are faced with lots of choices at breakfast time. What time should we have breakfast? Should we drink tea or coffee? Should we have porridge or frosties? Should we have brown toast or white? Should we put marmalade or marmite on our toast? The list of such potential breakfast choices is almost endless and none of them can be resolved by a simple appeal to a biblical command or prohibition. As Richard Hooker argued against the Puritans in *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, if we wait for such direct biblical guidance on such matters we are going to wait forever, because such guidance does not exist.²

¹ In some documents such as the Lutheran *Book of Concord* matters which are *adiaphora* are restricted to the ‘rites and ceremonies’ of the Church. However, the concept of *adiaphora* is also used in a wider sense of anything that is neither commanded nor forbidden by God and in this paper the term will be used in this wider sense

² See Richard Hooker. *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book 2, Ch.8.

It should be noted that acknowledging that Scripture does not give us guidance about everything does not call into question its God given sufficiency. As Richard Hooker explains, Scripture is fully sufficient in the sense that it contains ‘a full instruction in all things unto salvation necessary, the knowledge whereof man by nature could not otherwise in this life attain unto.’³ This being the case, he goes on to say:

Two opinions therefore there are concerning sufficiency of Holy Scripture, each extremely opposite unto the other. And both repugnant unto truth. The schools of Rome teach to be so insufficient, as if, except traditions were added, it did not contain all revealed and supernatural truth, which absolutely is necessary for the children of men in this life to know that they may in the next be saved. Others justly condemning this opinion grow likewise unto a dangerous extremity, as if Scripture did not only contain all things in that kind necessary, but all things simply, and in such way that to do anything according to any other law were not only unnecessary, but even opposite unto salvation, unlawful and sinful.⁴

It should also be noted that the absence of direct biblical guidance in relation to our breakfast choices does not mean that breakfast is a time when we are free from thinking about how to behave in a properly Christian fashion. There are still questions that we may need to think about such as:

- Would it be right as a Christian to insist on an early breakfast if we knew that having breakfast at this time would disrupt someone else’s early morning devotions?
- Would it be right as a Christian to drink coffee if we knew it had been produced as a result of slave labour?
- Would it be right as a Christian to eat marmite at breakfast with someone if we knew that the sight and smell of marmite made them feel sick?

In all three cases our Christian freedom to make breakfast choices would need to be qualified by the importance of taking seriously the biblical teaching about love for our neighbour and care for the oppressed. It would not be right to exercise our freedom in such a way that it curtailed someone else’s time with God, provided support for slave labour or led to someone else feeling ill.

As we shall see, it is this issue of qualifying our exercise of Christian freedom because of the implications of our choices that was at stake in the discussions about adiaphora that we find in the New Testament and in the writings of the Reformation period.

Adiaphora in the New Testament

In the New Testament the discussion of how to behave in relation to things that are adiaphora is to be found in three passages in the letters of St. Paul, Romans 14:1-15:13, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 and 1 Corinthians 10:23-33 where the subject is discussed even though the word itself is not used.

In order to understand these three passages correctly we have to understand them against the background of the shift from the Old Covenant to the New that took place because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The key text that outlines this shift is Ephesians 2:11-22

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands -- remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and

³ Ibid, 2.8.5.

⁴ Ibid, 2.8.7.

strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

What St. Paul is saying here is that through Christ God has acted to abolish the division between Jews and Gentiles and to create one, new, holy people who have been reconciled to God through Christ and have access to God the Father through the Spirit.

As part of this action, says St. Paul, God has 'abolished the law of commandment and ordinances.' That is to say, he has abolished the requirement that God's people are defined by their adherence to the Mosaic Law understood as a boundary marker separating Jew from Gentile.

As Tom Wright explains, this has a twofold significance in relation to the issue of adiaphora.

(a) The divine intention, as Paul saw it unveiled in the messianic events concerning Jesus, was to create a single worldwide family; *and therefore any practices that functioned as symbols dividing different ethnic groups could not be maintained as absolutes within this single family.* Thus the major marks of Israel's ethnic distinctiveness – circumcision, food laws, Sabbath, and the Jerusalem Temple itself – were to be set aside, not because they were bad, not given by God, or representative of a shabby or second-rate kind of 'religion,' but because of 'messianic eschatology,' the fact that in Jesus Israel's God had at last done the new thing he had always promised. (b) This divine intention, glimpsed in Scriptures upon which Paul drew, and sketched out in much of his teaching, was that this single family would, by the Spirit's work, embody, represent and carry forward the plan of 'new creation,' the plan which had been the intention for Israel; *and that therefore any practices that belonged to the dehumanizing, anti-creation world of sin and death could likewise not be maintained within this new-creation family.* The first principle explains why certain things are now 'indifferent;' the second why certain things are not. This is the difference between the two kinds of 'difference.' We note that in this double edged ecclesiology Jewish believers are required to give up the absolutizing of their specific ethnic boundary markers, and erstwhile pagan believers are required to give up elements of their former life which they have taken for granted.⁵

It is because all this is the case that St Paul is clear in Galatians, for example, that it is wrong to insist that the Jewish law in general, and the requirement for circumcision in particular, is binding on Christians (Galatians 1:1-5:12), but is equally insistent that the 'works of the flesh' characteristic of the old world of sin and death should have no place among God's Spirit filled people (Galatians 5:16-24). What this means in practice in St. Paul's letters is that the moral law of the Old Testament summarized

⁵ Tom Wright, 'Pastoral Theology for Perplexing Topics: Paul and Adiaphora,' in Andrew Atherstone and Andrew Goddard (eds), *Good Disagreement?* Oxford: Lion, 2015, p. 70. Italics in the original.

in the Ten Commandments (including its sexual ethic) is still in force even though other aspects of the Old Testament Law are not.

In the three passages in Romans and 1 Corinthians in which he discusses *adiaphora* St. Paul applies this big picture theology to specific pastoral issues which were troubling the Christian communities in Rome and Corinth.

In Romans 14:1-15:13 St. Paul sets out what he wants to happen in 15:5-7:

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

According to Romans 14 what was preventing this happening was that Jewish and Gentile Christians were falling out over what food it was legitimate to eat (14:1-4) and whether the Jewish festivals needed to be observed (14:5-9). St. Paul's response is to say that these are indifferent matters. Christians have the freedom to decide whether or not to avoid non-kosher food⁶ and whether or not to observe Jewish festivals. However, (a) everyone should do what they think is right (v5), (b) they should not presume to sit in judgement on those who make a different choice (v10) and (c) they should not create problems for someone else by pressuring them into acting in a way that is against their Christian convictions (vv13-15).

To quote Tom Wright again, this time from his commentary on Romans in his 'For Everyone' series, 14:23, 'But he who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin,' is:

...not so much a warning to people to be sure they are acting from pure and complete motives of faith, though it serves as that as well. It is, more specifically, a warning to the people indicted in verse 22, the people who have thought through the relevant issues and are happy to consume all kinds of food and drink: don't put other people in the position of verse 23. Don't insist that all other Christians conform at once to the freedom which you celebrate.⁷

In 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 St. Paul addresses a slightly different issue, but comes to the same fundamental conclusion. The issue he considers in these verses is whether a Christian who is convinced (rightly) that idols have no real existence should exercise freedom to go into a pagan temple and eat meat that has been sacrificed to an idol.

St Paul's answer is 'no' because even if this Christian is not tempted by idolatry themselves the fact that they are acting in this way may cause another Christian who is less strong in their faith to fall back into the grip of idolatry. This is what St Paul means when he says in v 11 that they will be 'destroyed.' In the words of Gordon Fee: 'For such people to return to idolatry means to come back under its power and thus to suffer eternal loss.'⁸ According to St. Paul, by acting in this way and 'sinning against your brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ' (v12).

Acting against the welfare of another member of the body is acting against Christ and therefore a Christian should not misuse their freedom in this way.

⁶ The reason for only eating vegetables (14:2) was that issues concerning kosher foods did not then arise.

⁷ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone, Romans Part 2*, London: SPCK, 2004, pp.108-9. Italics in the original.

⁸ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987, p.388.

The same issue of the necessity to have regard to the welfare of one's neighbor is also the focus of the third passage, 1 Corinthians 10:23-33. Here the key verse is verse 24, 'Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbour.' The scenario St Paul is addressing is one in which a Christian at a dinner party is about to eat meat only to be told by another Christian present that this meat has been sacrificed to an idol. In that situation, rules St Paul, don't eat the meat if, as in the situation in chapter 8, this will cause another Christian to stumble. In normal circumstances he says, you should feel free to eat whatever meat is on sale in the market because 'the earth is the Lord's and everything in it' (v 26 quoting Psalm 24:1) and same goes to eating food provided at a dinner party. However, when eating would hurt one's neighbour then one must refrain.

John Calvin expresses the point well when he comments as follows in Book III of the *Institutes*

In all cases we must study charity, and look to the edification of our neighbor. "All things are lawful for me," says he, "but all things are not expedient; all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not. Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth," (1 Cor. 10:23, 24). There is nothing plainer than this rule, that we are to use our liberty if it tends to the edification of our neighbor, but if inexpedient for our neighbor, we are to abstain from it.⁹

The overall lesson we learn from these Pauline passages is the point made by Calvin. In matters that are adiaphora 'we must study charity, and look to the edification of our neighbour.' What action by us will help them to flourish as God intends?

Adiaphora at the Reformation

As we have seen, the New Testament passages that we have just considered all have as their background issues raised within the Christian community by the fact that the advent of the new covenant meant that the universal observance of traditional Jewish forms of behavior was henceforth no longer obligatory.

At the time of the Reformation an analogous issue arose with regard to forms of activity, including forms of liturgical activity, associated with Medieval Catholicism. The question that arose was what the Reformers re-discovery of the message of justification by grace through faith meant in terms of such forms of activity.

This issue is highlighted as early as 1520 by Martin Luther in his seminal treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*. In this treatise he writes that many who:

...hear of this freedom of faith, immediately turn it into an occasion for the flesh and think that now all things are allowed them. They want to show that they are free men and Christians only by despising and finding fault with ceremonies, traditions and human laws; as if they were Christians because on stated days they do not fast or eat meat when others fast, or because they do not use the accustomed prayers, and with upturned nose scoff at the precepts of men, although they utterly disregard all else that pertains to the Christian religion. The extreme opposite of these are those who rely for their salvation solely on the reverent observance of ceremonies, as if they would be saved because on certain days they fast or abstain from meats, or pray certain prayers; these make a boast of the precepts of the church and of the fathers, and do not care a fig for the things which are of the essence of our faith.

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk III.19.12 at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.v.xx.html>

Plainly, both are in error because they neglect the weightier things which are necessary for salvation, and quarrel so noisily about trifling and unnecessary matters.¹⁰

‘How much better,’ comments Luther, is the teaching of St Paul:

...who bids us to take a middle course and condemns both sides when he says ‘Let not him who eats despise him who abstains, and let not him who abstain pass judgement on him who eats’ [Rom 14:3]. Here you see that they who neglect and disparage ceremonies, not out of piety, but out of mere contempt, are reprov’d since the Apostle teaches us not to despise them. Such men are puffed up by knowledge. On the other hand, he teaches those who insist on the ceremonies not to judge the others, for neither party acts towards the other according to the love that edifies. Wherefore we ought to listen to Scripture which teaches that we should not go aside to the right or to the left [Deut 28:14] but follow the statutes of the law which are right, ‘rejoicing the heart’ [Ps.19:8]. As a man is not righteous because he keeps and clings to the works and forms of the ceremonies, so also will a man not be counted righteous because he neglects and despise them.¹¹

For Luther in this early Reformation treatise, the question of whether to observe traditional ceremonies or not comes into the category of *adiaphora*. What really matters is not observance or non-observance, but the acceptance of justification by faith and the love of one’s neighbour.

As the Reformation progressed, however, other Protestant writers, particularly those influenced by the Reformed tradition, tended to take a harder line, arguing that traditional Catholic ceremonies ought to be rejected because of their association with what they saw as an idolatrous form of religion. Some also went further still in the direction criticized by Hooker by tending towards the position that Scripture gave a complete blueprint for the life of the individual Christian and the corporate life of the Church,¹² a position which would mean that there could be nothing at all that came into the category of *adiaphora*.

So where did the Reformation Church of England end up on this issue? The answer can be found in the three ‘historic formularies’ that remain normative for the theology of the Church of England, the *Thirty Nine Articles*, the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *1662 Ordinal*.

Article VI of the Thirty Nine Articles sets out the basic theological framework for the consideration of the issue when it declares:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary for salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.

In similar fashion, in the *Ordinal* those to be ordained as Priests or consecrated as Bishops are asked whether they are determined to ‘teach nothing (as required of necessity to eternal salvation) but that which you shall be persuaded may be concluded and proved by Scripture.’

Both these of these statements leave room for things that are *adiaphora*. What they point us to is the fact that if God really has given us in Scripture all that we need to know in order to be saved this leaves

¹⁰ Martin Luther, ‘The Freedom of a Christian,’ in *Martin Luther, Three Treatises*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1966, p.310.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.311

¹² There is continuing debate about whether there were theologians who took the extreme view that Scripture contains a blueprint for *absolutely* everything or whether Hooker by suggesting this was exaggerating the puritan position for rhetorical effect.

us with the freedom to believe or not believe, to act or not to act, in all those areas which Scripture does not cover without this necessarily putting our salvation in peril. There is a basic Christian liberty here which the Church, and ministers acting on behalf of the Church, are not entitled to restrict.

The question of what is necessary for salvation comes up again in Article XX of the *Thirty Nine Articles*. This states:

The Church hath power to decree rites or ceremonies and authority in controversies of faith; and yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything contrary to God's word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another. Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ: yet, as it ought not to decree anything against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce anything to be believed for necessity of salvation.

This Article teaches that 'the Church' (meaning here the Christian Church in general rather than any particular part of it) does have the authority to determine that certain activities shall take place and to make decisions about theological matters. However, its authority is limited in two ways. First, it is not free to determine anything that is contrary to all or part of Scripture. Secondly, (in line with what is said in Article VI and the *Ordinal*) it is not free to insist that anything not laid down in Scripture is to be believed in as necessary for salvation. Here too space is given for the existence of matters that are *adiaphora*.

It is important to note, however, that the Reformation Church of England did not view basic issues of Christian morality as among those issues which could be considered *adiaphora*. We can see this in Article VII. The second half of this Article states:

Although the law given from God by Moses, as touching ceremonies and rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth; yet, notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral.

What this statement shows is that in line with the teaching of the New Testament, the 16th century Church of England held that on moral matters (including matters of sexual morality) the teaching of the Old Testament, summarised in the Ten Commandments and the twin command to love God and neighbour was still in force.¹³ Consequently such matters could not be seen as *adiaphora*.

Furthermore, even in regard to matters which were *adiaphora* the Reformation Church of England did not hold that individual Christians were simply free to do whatever they saw fit. This can be seen in Article XXXIV. This reads as follows:

It is not necessary that traditions and ceremonies be in all places one or utterly alike; for at all times they have been diverse, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's word.

Whosoever through his private judgement willingly and purposely doth openly break the traditions and ceremonies of the Church which be not repugnant to the word of God, and be ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly that other may

¹³ In addition to Article VII, this position also finds expression in the position given to the Commandments in the services of the *Book of Common Prayer*, in the Prayer Book *Catechism* and in the Homily 'Of Good Works Annexed unto Faith' in the *First Book of Homilies*.

fear to do the like, as he that offendeth against the common order of the Church, and hurteth the authority of the magistrate, and woundeth the conscience of the weak brethren.

Every particular or national Church hath authority to ordain, change, and abolish ceremonies or rites of the Church ordained only by man's authority, so that all things be done to edifying.

This Article is referring to matters that are *adiaphora* in that it is talking about post biblical traditions and ceremonies not specifically mandated in the Bible, although not contrary to it. The Article declares that an individual Christian may not reject such traditions and ceremonies on the basis of their 'private judgment' and that anyone who does this needs to be 'rebuked openly' for three reasons.

Firstly, they are someone who 'offendeth against the common order of the Church'. This, for the English Reformers, was a serious matter. As the statement 'Of Ceremonies' in the *Book of Common Prayer* puts it:

And although the keeping or omitting of a Ceremony, in itself considered, is but a small thing; yet the wilful and contemptuous transgression and breaking of a common order and discipline is no small offence before God, Let all things be done among you, saith Saint Paul, in a seemly and due order: The appointment of the which order pertaineth not to private men; therefore no man ought to take in hand, nor presume to appoint or alter any publick or common Order in Christ's Church, except he be lawfully called and authorized thereunto.

Secondly, they are someone who 'hurteth the authority of the magistrate.' In a church like the sixteenth century Church of England the order of the church was sanctioned by the authority of the state. This meant that to rebel against the order of the church also involved rejecting the authority of the rulers appointed by God in opposition to the teaching of Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-14.¹⁴

Thirdly, they are someone who 'woundeth the conscience of the weak brethren.' This is a reference to St Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 and Romans 14:13-23 about the necessity of considering the impact on our fellow Christians of the way we exercise our Christian freedom. The point that is being made by the article through this reference is that if someone decides to unilaterally break the law of the Church this could cause unnecessary offence or difficulties of conscience to other Christians who believe that the law needs to be upheld. Individuals should therefore refrain from breaking the law in order to avoid this happening even if they think what the law says is not actually required by God's word.

Restrictions on the liberty of national Churches in recent Anglican discussion.

The principle laid down in Article XXXIV that, subject to the authority of Scripture, each national church is free to develop its own traditions and ceremonies has been a cornerstone of Anglican ecclesiology. However, in the light of recent disputes in the Anglican Communion on the issue of same-sex relationships it has increasingly come to be recognised that the freedom of each national church also has to be qualified by the requirements of being in communion with other churches.

¹⁴ It is perhaps worth noting, because it is often forgotten, that it is still the case that the laws of the Church of England form part of English law and that therefore breaking these laws by, for example, failing to observe the Canons, is as much a breach of the law as, say, driving through a red light or falsifying one's tax return. Breaking church law is simply breaking the law.

This point is made, for instance, in the *Windsor Report* of 2004. This report affirms that each autonomous church:

... has the unfettered right to order and regulate its own local affairs, through its own system of government and law. Each such church is free from direct control by any decision of any ecclesiastical body external to itself in relation to its exclusively internal affairs (unless that external decision is authorised under, or incorporated in, its own law).¹⁵

However, it then goes on to argue that some matters treated by and within a church may have what it calls a 'dual character.' This means that they may be of both

'internal (domestic) and external (common) concern.' In its view autonomy includes: the right of a church to make decisions about the latter:

...provided those internal decisions are fully compatible with the interests, standards, unity and good order of the wider community of which the autonomous body forms part. If they are not so compatible, whilst there may be no question about their legal validity, they will impose strains not only upon that church's wider relationship with other churches, but on that church's inner self-understanding as part of "the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church" in relation to some of its own members.¹⁶

As a result, says the report, autonomy should not be seen as denoting 'unlimited freedom' but rather 'freedom-in-relation,' that is to say freedom that is 'subject to limits generated by the commitments of communion.' In consequence: 'the very nature of autonomy itself obliges each church to have regard to the common good of the global Anglican community and the Church universal.'¹⁷

In terms of biblical theology this means that in the exercise of its freedom each national church needs to take seriously the Pauline teaching about the interdependence of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26.

Conclusion

What we have seen in this paper is that it does make sense to talk about things that are *adiaphora*.

However, matters on which there are binding commands or prohibitions contained in Scripture (including in the area of sexual morality) do not come under the category of *adiaphora*.

Furthermore, even with regard to those matters which do come into this category we are not free to do whatever we want. Our exercise of Christian freedom either as individuals or as churches always has to be qualified by an awareness of the implications of our choices, and in particular what impact they will have on the welfare of our neighbours, our obedience to church order and state law and the well-being of the Church as a whole.

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¹⁵ *The Windsor Report*, London: Anglican Communion Office, 2004, p.48

¹⁶ *Ibid* p.48.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp.48-49.