

When Scripture Is Silent

For to those who believe in Christ whatever things are either enjoined or forbidden in the way of external ceremonies and bodily righteousnesses are all pure, adiaphora, and are permissible, except insofar as the believers are willing to subject themselves to these things of their own accord or for the sake of love.

Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*

Holy Cross Lutheran Church was at a turning point. They had outgrown their building and had to do something. Should they seek a way to expand their sanctuary or should they build a new one? The congregation was divided. They decided that they would search the Scriptures to see what God wanted them to do. Both sides tried to quote Bible verses to support their position, but observers were quick to note that the verses really didn't fit this situation. They finally came to the conclusion that no Bible verse would give them a direct answer. (These situations are known as *adiaphora*, see glossary, p. 55.) Now what should they do?

Introduction

58. Give some examples of questions that churches face which aren't directly addressed by Scripture.
59. What are some ways that Christians try to make Scripture answer questions that it doesn't address? Why is this a dangerous thing?
60. What are some ways that Christians ignore the counsel of God's Word when making decisions? Why is this dangerous?

God's Will

61. Read 2 Timothy 3:15–17. How are Christians to determine the will of God? What should we do when we learn His will? (See also Matthew 15:8–9.)
62. Are we bound to follow everything found in Scripture (including the laws of the Old Testament)? See Romans 8:1–4 and Galatians 5:1.
63. When God's Word is silent about an issue (that is, it neither commands nor forbids us to do something), what is the Christian to do? See Romans 14:13–23.
64. When addressing issues on which Scripture is silent, we are bound to encounter differences of opinion. Look again at Romans 14:13–23. How are we to deal with those who are not convinced that a certain behavior is legitimate? See also 1 Corinthians 8:9.

65. Christians need to take care that they not become a stumbling block to the weak in faith. There is another danger in adiaphora, however. Those who are not truly weak in faith may try to bind other Christians to their own practice, and so rob them of the freedom of the Gospel. St. Paul encountered this situation regarding the issue of circumcision. Some Christians were insisting that all Christian men be circumcised even though the Bible does not require this. How does Paul respond in Galatians 2:3–5 and Galatians 5:1?
66. Other application of adiaphora may be seen in cases where no one seems to be in a position of taking offense. What counsel does 1 Corinthians 14:40 give for worship?
67. Another danger of adiaphora is that we begin to think that our human rites or customs, are good works that earn us something before God. Read 1 Timothy 4:1–5. Where does this passage say that the restriction of Christian freedom comes from? What does Ephesians 2:8 tell us about relying on human works for salvation?

The Bible and Tradition

68. Issues of adiaphora often arise as we are considering the traditions of a church. At times like this, we might be prone to point out that another person's viewpoint is just tradition, so we can get rid of it. How many useful or cherished things that you do are part of the traditions of your church? What are the benefits of these traditions? Are there any dangers to becoming inflexible with their observance?
69. The topic of adiaphora may make us uncomfortable. Two extreme reactions to these issues lead to problems. Legalism seeks to find a rule for everything. If Scripture doesn't speak, legalism fills in the blanks with regulations. The other extreme is antinomianism—a rejection of God's Law, and an irresponsible, chaotic use of freedom. How do both of these fall short of God's plan?
70. Freedom in adiaphora means that we do not all have to do things the same way. An individual congregation may choose to do a variety of things (on which Scripture is silent) that are different from other congregations. There may be significant advantages to be found, however, when churches choose to work together. What advantages might come from Christians voluntarily conforming to human standards? When might it be advantageous, also, to permit these differences allowed as adiaphora?

Traditions and You

71. Spend some time thinking about the traditions that are part of your own Christian life. What has been the most meaningful or helpful? Is there anything that you would reconsider in the light of God's Word?
72. While these principles on dealing with adiaphora seem simple, they can be a challenge to apply. Consider your Christian freedom. Rejoice that Christ frees you from the Law's demands. How can you use your freedom in a way that is edifying and helpful to you and to other people?

Comparisons on Adiaphora

Eastern Orthodox: “What is meant by the name holy tradition? By the name holy tradition is meant the doctrine of the faith, the law of God, the sacraments, and the ritual as handed down by the true believers and worshipers of God by word and example from one to another, and from generation to generation. . . . Why is tradition necessary even now? As a guide to the right understanding of holy Scripture, for the right ministrations of the sacraments, and the preservation of sacred rites and ceremonies in purity of their original institution” (*The Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church*, questions 320–21).

Lutheran: “We believe, teach, and confess that the congregation of God of every place and every time has the power, according to its circumstances, to change such ceremonies in such manner as may be most useful and edifying to the congregation of God. Nevertheless, that herein all frivolity and offense should be avoided, and especial care should be taken to exercise forbearance towards the weak in faith” (*Formula of Concord*, Epitome, article X.4–5).

Reformed: “The greater the heap of ceremonies in the Church, so much the more is taken, not only from Christian liberty, but also from Christ, and from faith in Him; while the people seek those things in ceremonies which they should seek in the only Son of God, Jesus Christ, through faith. Wherefore a few moderate and simple rites, that are not contrary to the Word of God, do suffice the godly” (*Second Helvetic Confession*, chapter 27).

Anabaptist: The Anabaptists rejected all earlier liturgies. They emphasized weekly gatherings where people would seek the will of God and encourage one another to greater discipleship. They also taught that if Scripture did not command a practice, it probably should not be done by a Christian. As a result many Anabaptist groups have refused to use or own modern technology (cars, electricity, etc.) since Scripture does not mention these things.

Roman Catholic: An extensive tradition of canon law regulates the duties and practices of Roman Catholicism. At the heart of their worship is the canon of the mass.

Baptist: “In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or administration . . . it is according to the mind of Christ that many churches, holding communion together, do by their messengers meet to consider and give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned; howbeit these messengers assembled are not entrusted with any church power properly so called, or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons, to impose their determination of the churches or officers” (*Baptist Confession of 1688*, para. 15).

Wesleyan: “It is not necessary that rites and ceremonies should in all places be the same, or exactly alike; for they have been always different, 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 private judgment, willingly and purposely doth openly break the rites and ceremonies of the Church to which he belongs, which are not repugnant to the Word of God, and are ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly” (*Methodist Articles of Religion*, article 22).

Point to Remember

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Romans 14:19

To prepare for “The Bible in Worship,” read Isaiah 6:1–7.

