

Christian Freedom: Lessons from the History of the Church

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[A Symposium on Christian Freedom, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, September 24 & 25, 2001]

Introduction

I'd like to begin by telling you a couple stories -- true stories -- not from church history in the usual sense of the word but from my personal history. Hopefully, the connection between these stories and our topic, lessons that we can learn from church history regarding Christian freedom, will be fairly obvious.

The first story takes us back about five years. Northwestern Publishing House was hosting a seminar on Bible computer software that featured two presenters from one of the prominent Bible software manufacturers in the country. At the end of the day, the seminar participants and presenters had dinner together. I and a few other WELS people happened to sit at the same table as one of the seminar presenters, who also happened to be one of the founders and vice presidents of the Bible software company. The dinner conversation gave us the opportunity to become better acquainted with one another and the organizations we represented. At one point in the conversation the software v.p. mentioned that because his company served primarily Christian church workers he had become acquainted with most of the major Protestant church denominations, but as of yet he didn't know much about Lutherans. (He himself was a practicing evangelical Christian.)

"So," he asked us, "Tell me a little about the Lutheran Church. What makes Lutherans distinct from some of the other Protestant churches?"

We started by highlighting the three solos of the Lutheran Reformation. The v.p. responded with a matter-of-fact "been there and done that" kind of nod. He was looking for more distinctiveness. So we next mentioned that Lutherans are liturgical and sacramental. Not being very familiar with such things, he asked us to elaborate. We talked briefly about ordering our worship around the liturgical calendar, about the basics of liturgical worship and the sacraments, and the high priority we place on active congregational participation in worship. Among other Lutheran distinctives, we talked about our high view of music in worship and how the faith and piety of most Lutherans around the world are formed at least to some extent by a nearly five hundred-year-old book, Luther's Small Catechism. He found the last item pretty amazing.

"Anything else?" our dinner companion asked. I sensed that while he found all these things interesting enough, they didn't make us Lutherans all that distinctive. At that point, I said, "Here's something you might find rather unique about Lutherans. We hold that God has not mandated any one particular external way of organizing the church or its public ministry. There is no divine command, for instance, to establish either episcopal, congregational, or presbyterial forms. While God has commanded that the gospel be proclaimed and the sacraments administered, we believe that the New Testament gives us freedom when it comes to the outward forms that the church's organization, governance, and ministry may take. Lutherans make use of whatever forms they believe will best serve the preaching of the gospel in any given time and place." At that, our companion's eyes got big and his jaw dropped open. "You're kidding!" he said in amazement. "That is distinctive."

Does that man's reaction to this aspect of Lutheranism surprise you? I have to admit, it surprised me at the time. Perhaps it shouldn't have. What is almost a commonplace for Lutherans -- certainly for us in WELS -- isn't part of the heritage of many other Christian denominations. Church history teaches us that.

The second story I want to tell you takes us back about 20 years. I was in the beginning months of my ministry in Cedarburg. One evening I visited a member whose wife was not a member, although she had attended one service with her husband since I had come to Cedarburg. She was most eager to talk to me about the Lutheran Church, although not in a way I had hoped. She explained that she had been raised Catholic but fell away from the Catholic Church as a teenage and thoroughly rejected Catholicism as a young adult when she

had a “born-again” experience and started affiliating with various Holiness-Pentecostal churches. At one time, she said, she had even been a pastor of a church that she had felt called to lead.

“Why are you Lutherans so Catholic in the way you worship?” she asked with clear disapproval, to get the conversation going. Her question took me by surprise. Keep in mind that I graduated from the seminary in 1981. Just starting out in the ministry, I was careful to do everything “by the book,” which in those days meant pages 5 and 15 of TLH. By WELS standards, there was nothing at all “high church” about our worship at Redeemer, Cedarburg. No pastoral chant (such a thing was virtually unheard of in WELS in those days), no reverencing the altar, no processions, nothing that you or I would remotely associate with “smells and bells.” A black Geneva gown was the only robe in the Redeemer sacristy closet in those days, not even stoles. We were certainly in the WELS mainstream in the way we worshiped, and about the last thing I associated our worship with was Catholicism. So you can understand my surprise at this woman’s observation-accusation. Where was she coming from?

“What do you mean, that you think the way we Lutherans worship is so Catholic?” I asked her.

“To start with, you have a high altar!” she exclaimed.

What do you mean, a high altar!”

“Well that’s obvious isn’t it? It’s two steps above where all the rest of the people are. The fact that you are up there at that high altar with a robe on shows that you think you are better than everyone else, just like the Catholic priests.”

“No, that’s not what the two steps higher mean at all,” I explained. “It’s only so that the people can be sure to see and hear everything.”

“It’s still Catholic!” was the reply. “And what’s all that turning around you do?”

I tried to explain the meaning of the liturgical symbolism involved: the altar viewed as a symbol of God’s gracious presence, facing the altar when in the role of speaking to God for his people and facing the people when in the role of speaking God’s Word to his people. My explanation didn’t seem to register at all.

“It’s Catholic superstition to think that God is confined to a wooden box up there and that you have to turn toward the box in order for him to hear you. Where does the Bible command high altars, candles, robes, turning, sitting and standing, and all that other Catholic stuff like the church year and making the sign of the cross at the blessing?”

In vain I tried to explain, “You’re right; the New Testament doesn’t command any such outward forms; neither does it forbid them. God gives us New Testament Christians freedom in such things. We don’t do those things because we feel we have to; in freedom we choose to express our worship with such forms because we want to, not because we feel we are bound by some law to do so, and certainly not just because Roman Catholics also do some of the same things.”

To my amazement at the time, this woman seemed to have no concept of Christian freedom whatsoever. By then in our conversation, I realized that there was no point in trying to politely answer her questions and accusations about forms of worship if she had no understanding of Christian freedom. So I tried to steer our conversation towards the gospel, the plan of salvation and the spiritual freedom we enjoy through faith as a result of God’s saving work for us in Christ. To briefly summarize the rest of our conversation, much to my naive surprise (I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised), she had no real understanding of the biblical plan of salvation, of grace or justification. In fact, she scorned the teaching of salvation by grace alone. At best, justification by faith to her was only a first step, a preparation for striving to achieve the “second blessing.” When I tried to discuss with her some of the Scripture passages that clearly present law and gospel, sin and grace, and the sufficiency of Christ’s saving work for us, she put an end to our conversation by defiantly stating, “I don’t need any church or any pastor to tell me what to believe. I don’t even need the Bible, because I have the Spirit!” (Luther’s words about Karlstadt came to mind, but I bit my lip.¹) Ironically, for all of this woman’s anti-Catholic prejudices, she was as work-righteous and legalistic as any Roman Catholic I have ever met.

¹ “[Karlstadt] has devoured the Holy Spirit feathers and all” (Luther’s Works [LW], American Edition, 40:83).

As unpleasant in some ways as that conversation with that woman was, it was helpful to me in at least a couple ways. It certainly got me thinking about how true it is: just about everything we Lutherans do in our historical, liturgical approach to worship is in a certain sense Catholic (or we might prefer to say, catholic), and when we understand why that is so-historically and theologically we need not apologize for it. It also drove home for me the fact of how closely related the biblical doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone (spiritual freedom) is to the biblical doctrine and practice of Christian freedom in matters of adiaphora.

My reasons for relating these two personal stories at some length is to highlight a few lessons about Christian freedom that I learned through those experiences. The lessons were not so much things that I wasn't previously aware of, at least to some extent, but more of a reinforcement and a bringing into sharper focus what I had already learned and knew. That is also what I hope we will accomplish in our review of church history in this essay. We probably won't learn much of anything new that we never heard before. Rather, in our review of what we know from church history, hopefully some of the lessons it teaches us about Christian freedom will be brought into sharper focus and reinforced for us.

Three observations from church history about Christian freedom

What are some of those lessons? I will boil them down to three basic observations.

1. There is a close relationship between the doctrine of justification through faith and Christian freedom in matters of adiaphora. In the history of the church, wherever we see the doctrine of justification, that is, the gospel, faring well, we usually also see a more or less evangelical understanding and practice of Christian freedom in matters of adiaphora. On the other hand, wherever the doctrine of justification has not fared well, the church's understanding and practice of Christian freedom have also suffered.

2. Convinced that the first observation is true, we are not surprised to see that just as God used Martin Luther to restore the gospel to the church in its truth and purity as the central article of the Christian faith, so also the Lord used especially Luther to restore to the church a pure, evangelical understanding and practice of Christian freedom in matters of adiaphora.

3. To these two observations, we can readily add a third, and that is that Lutheran Christians also are not immune from attacks on the chief article of justification and must continually struggle to keep this article of faith pure. Likewise, putting the principles of Christian freedom into practice in a truly evangelical (gospel-centered) way requires continual struggle.

The close relationship between justification and adiaphora

These three points or lessons will serve as somewhat of a framework for our survey of church history. Before we look at some of that history, however, a few words should be said about what we mean by the "close relationship" alluded to in the first point. The close relationship between justification and adiaphora is for us not just a human conviction or a deduction we arrive at through a study of history. The Scriptures themselves reveal this relationship. Precisely, it is a relationship of cause and effect. We may state it this way: Only people who have been set free in Christ, set free from the demands, coercion, threats, curses, and condemnation of God's law can truly live free in Christ.²

² Checking a Bible concordance reveals that most occurrences of the word "freedom" and related words in the Bible are used to describe the benefits of Christ's saving work for sinners. To cite just one example, think of the great messianic prophecy of Isaiah which Jesus appropriated to himself in the Nazareth synagogue: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom [khrutai afesin] for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk 4:18,19; Isa 61:1,2. The Savior's mission is to set people free from spiritual bondage, and he does that through preaching (a forensic activity). Think also of how Paul so closely connects Christian freedom with the doctrine of justification in his letter to the Galatians. A

The cause and effect relationship between the doctrine of justification and Christian freedom is brought out very nicely in the way it is taught in the dogmatics course here at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Off hand, where in the outline of dogmatics would you think is the most likely place to discuss Christian freedom? Somewhere in connection with Christian sanctification, no doubt. It does occur there in the seminary Dogmatics Notes. But you will find a discussion of Christian freedom first and foremost in the Dogmatics Notes outline under Christology -- Christ's Priestly Office, where the point is made in the outline: "By His priestly work Christ established Christian liberty." This outline reflects the same approach John Schaller used in his *Biblical Christology*. In the section on Christ's priestly office, Schaller speaks of the result of Christ's priestly work: satisfaction, propitiation, reconciliation, atonement; and then the effect of his priestly work: Christian liberty (in the full biblical sense of the term).³

The reason for taking you on this little excursus before looking at church history is simply this: the cause and effect relationship between Christ's saving work and Christian freedom is a theological presupposition we have already as we begin our study of history. Cause and effect relationships are usually difficult to prove from purely historical evidence, for, as historians often say, "History is a very messy affair." At best, I think, we can often only point to certain concurrent trends in history. Where you see one thing happening, you often see the other thing also going on -- a close relationship. That's my thinking behind my choice of words. The gospel and Christian freedom in the early church

When we examine the history of the early church after the first century, specifically the writings of the second century apostolic fathers, the second and third century apologists, and the church fathers in the Nicene and Post-Nicene eras, we notice two things regarding the preaching of the gospel. Happily, the gospel certainly was proclaimed and bore much fruit. First and foremost, God's elect of that time were brought to faith in Christ and kept unto eternal life. And that occurred often in the face of extreme trial and persecution. The gospel bore other fruit in that age. J. P. Koehler observes:

Within this culture [of the Roman Empire] the Gospel created many beautiful forms. The ones which have retained their general relevance are the ancient collects, the general scheme of the liturgy, the first two ecumenical creeds, and a number of church hymns.⁴

When we examine the extant early Christian literature, many gospel gems can be found. The saving history of Christ's incarnation, his birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension are proclaimed. Happily, we also find scriptural presentations of Christ's saving work. One of the most outstanding gospel gems of the second and third centuries is a passage from the Epistle to Diognetus, written by an anonymous Greek apologist perhaps sometime between 150 and 225 A.D.

He [God] did not hate us, or reject us, or bear a grudge against us; instead he was patient and forbearing; in his mercy he took upon himself our sins; he himself gave up his own Son as a

proper understanding of justification, a clear distinction of law and gospel, of justification and sanctification, of faith and works, is absolutely necessary for Christian freedom to flourish. Without that understanding, religion becomes little more than a vain attempt to determine what rules to follow in order to merit God's favor.

³ Within the concept of Christian liberty, Schaller includes the conscious freedom from all guilt and condemnation, deliverance from the yoke of the law, freedom from all ceremonial restrictions (the ceremonial law of the Old Testament), freedom from all human ordinances, the restoration of the divine image, in which we mortify all the sinful desires of the flesh and strive for holiness, and the certain hope of the final deliverance from all evil when we enter upon the heavenly life. John Schaller, *Biblical Christology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1981), pp. 159-184. Dr. Siegbert Becker also presents this full biblical view of Christian freedom in his essay, "Christian Freedom," delivered at the 1983 synod convention, published in the WELS Proceedings, 1983, pp. 169-194. Cf. also Edmund Reim, "Our Christian Liberty and Its Proper Use," in *Our Great Heritage*, Lyle W. Lange, general editor, Vol. 3 (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991), pp. 151-167.

⁴ John Philipp Koehler, *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1917), p. 8. English translation by Philemon Hensel, *Church History Textbook*, being published serially in *Faith-Life*. This quote is found in Vol. LXVII, No. 1 January/February, 1994), p. 4.

ransom for us, the holy one for the lawless, the guiltless for the guilty, “the just for the unjust,” the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else but his righteousness could have covered our sins? In whom was it possible for us, the lawless and ungodly; to be justified, except in the Son of God alone? O the sweet exchange [thj- gl ukeaj a)ntal l aghj-], O the incomprehensible work of God, O the unexpected blessings, that the sinfulness of many should be hidden in one righteous man, while the righteousness of one should justify many sinners!⁵

Gospel preaching and teaching like that in the early church certainly brought forth rich fruit. At the same time, however, the history of the post-apostolic age shows that the gospel did not work itself thoroughly through the thinking, teaching, and practice of the early church. The apostolic fathers and Greek apologists speak of Christ as the Son of God, the divine Savior, the Redeemer who came to purify man of sin and the corruption of death. At the same time, they often present Christ more prominently as the new lawgiver and the true philosopher who teaches divine knowledge, a heavenly philosophy. In many passages from early Christian writings, the gospel comes off more like the Great Idea than the Good News. The effect that such an approach would have on the doctrine of justification is predictable. E. H. Klotsche summarizes it:

Even though face to face with the oral and written testimony of the apostles, the Apostolic Fathers have not fully caught the apostolic meaning and have often obscured most distinctive features of the gospel; for example, salvation through grace alone, faith and forgiveness of sins suffer some eclipse, while the gospel is made a new law and good works are often regarded as a condition of salvation.⁶

As the early church began to lose its grip on the pure gospel, we notice two definite trends in church life and teaching that had huge negative impacts on Christian freedom. One is a false emphasis placed on asceticism; the other is the externalizing of the church and its ministry.

Christian asceticism seems to have grown out of a misunderstanding of Jesus’ call to self-denial and discipleship (Mt 16:24; Sermon on the Mount). Popularized Greek philosophy of the day taught that the soul is good, but the body is evil. Therefore anything that has to do with the body is evil and to be shunned. That included, as much as possible, food, drink, marriage, sex, etc. The earliest monastic movements also seem to have been a reaction to materialism and moral corruption in both society and in the church. (Note, this was before Constantine!) Well-meaning Christians looked at the holy, Christian church, and what they saw didn’t look very holy. The assumption, of course, was that the church and its holiness were essentially something visible, not something believed from the revelation of the Scriptures. Monasticism was in effect a Christian hippy movement in which individuals who were turned off with the establishment dropped out of society to live by themselves or in very loosely organized communes. By renouncing all bodily pleasures -- food, drink, clothing, material possessions, physical comfort, marriage, sex, children, even talking -- they strove for holiness. The first Christian monk was St. Anthony of Egypt, who sold his possessions and moved into the desert regions in order to do spiritual battle with the devil. Many Christians regarded him not as a kook but as a model of sanctification and a super Christian.

The goal of the monastics was a higher level of Christianity (spirituality) than the ordinary garden variety, which would further one’s salvation (viewed as a life-long process of striving for holiness and union with God -- theosis). The inevitable result, however, was a two-tiered Christianity and work-righteousness. A keen insight from Koehler is worth repeating:

⁵ *The Epistle to Diognetus* 9:2-5, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings*. Michael W. Holmes, editor (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), p. 547.

⁶ E. H. Klotsche, *The History of Christian Doctrine*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 22.

These people were no longer able to evaluate their own personal, sinful corruption and, it seems knew nothing of the wonder of sanctification which according to Paul's presentation, is a creative gift through grace, faith, and love. They were unaware of the actually carnal motivation of their striving for sanctification . . . Hand in hand with this externalism goes the affection of works and the disparaging of humble faith and everything inherent in it, especially the dearly won achievements of Christ, though the later especially was farthest from their intent.⁷

The message of monasticism was clear: *real* Christians who are serious about doing every to God's glory won't eat, drink, marry, have children, or own material possessions. Or to the extent that they have to in order to stay alive, they at least, won't enjoy them.

Hand-in-hand with the false asceticism of monasticism was the trend toward viewing the church and its ministry as external institutions. The New Testament's teaching concerning the church is so simple that a seven-year-old child knows what the church is, as Luther would say many centuries later in the Smalcald Articles: "The church is the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their shepherd."⁸ The church consists of the justified, all those who have been brought to faith in Christ. But by the beginning of the third century a change is evident. The New Testament teaching of the church as an invisible communion of believers is replaced with a visible organization, with the bishops as its representatives. What is true of the invisible church, that outside of it no one can be saved, was applied to the visible organization.

Concerning the ministry, already in the second century, we notice a shift away from the New Testament's emphasis on the function of preaching and teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. That's not to say at all that the gospel wasn't preached and the sacraments were not administered -- far from it! But the emphasis was placed more and more on the vested rights, prerogatives, and authority of the office holder over against "the laity," and the validity of the ministry was viewed as being dependent on the permission of the bishop.

You know where things were headed. By the end of the second century the monarchic episcopate, with gradations of ministry -- bishop, presbyters, deacons -- was in place, with claims of *ius divinum*, that this arrangement was God's will for his New Testament church for all time and in all places. The bishops were viewed as the successors of the apostles, as the marks of the true, catholic church, and as the guarantors of the saving truth. People would ask, "In view of all the sects and schismatics (Irenaeus counted some 27 separate "denominations" already in his day), how do we know which church is the true church? Where can we hear the saving truth?" The answer they received was, "Go where the catholic bishop is. He's the one who can trace his office in an unbroken line of succession back to the apostles. He has the true apostolic teaching and tradition." A memorable little phrase was employed by the third century, using two similar sounding Latin particles, *ubi* and *ibi*. *Ubi episcopus, ibi ecclesia*. Where the bishop is, there is the church. Within another century, another great churchman, Bishop Ambrose of Milan (c. 339-397), had altered the formula slightly: *Ubi Petrus, ibi ecclesia*.⁹ Where Peter is, there is the church. Ambrose is generally credited with saying it that way first, but we know who made the most use of it in the centuries to come.

The history of the rise of the Roman papacy is well-known to us and will not be recounted here, except to state a few general remarks and to recount one incident. Slowly but surely the bishops of Rome started to claim primacy over other churches, not only in the territories surrounding Rome and the Italian peninsula but eventually also over the Eastern churches. When Roman bishops made extravagant claims to spiritual power and jurisdiction during the early centuries, such as when "Pope" Victor (d. 198) excommunicated the entire church of the province of Asia Minor for refusing to celebrate Easter on the same day as the Roman church,

⁷ J. P. Koehler, "The Externalism of the Papacy versus Luther's Spiritual Work of Reformation," translated by Alex Hillmer, *Faith-Life*, Vol. 34, No. 10 (1961), p. 7. This insightful article will be included in the forthcoming Volume 4 of *The Wauwatosa Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House).

⁸ SA III, X11:2, *Triglot*, p. 499.

⁹ *Commentaries on Twelve of David's Psalms* 40,30. Quoted in Stephen Ray, *Upon This Rock* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1999), p. 218.

other bishops, such as Irenaeus, remonstrated with Victor for his heavy-handed ways. Victor's attempt to extend his authority over Asia Minor failed.

While it might appear that the outcome of this Paschal controversy was a victory for Christian freedom, I think the best we can say is that it was only a partial victory. As the church historian Eusebius gives the account of the controversy, he supplies some of Irenaeus' correspondence in the matter. From his letters, we can see how this influential bishop and church father framed his arguments as he sided with the churches in Asia Minor. He did appeal to the biblical principle of Christian freedom when he wrote, "The disagreement in regard to the fast confirms the agreement in the faith."¹⁰

The main argument that Irenaeus makes, however, is not the appeal to Christian freedom but to tradition. The tradition of Christians in Asia Minor to celebrate Easter on the 14th of Nisan, regardless of what day of the week it may fall on, is valid, Irenaeus maintains, because that practice can be traced back to the apostles Philip and John. That is Irenaeus' main argument.

Such an appeal to apostolic tradition appears again and again in the early church fathers as they sought to justify this or that church practice or custom. Legitimate differences in church practices could be allowed as long as the customs were "apostolic."¹¹ From the admittedly somewhat limited reading I have done in the early church fathers, I get the impression that they didn't have much of a sense for New Testament Christian freedom in matters of adiaphora. As long as the gospel was subordinated to traditionalism and the ministry was viewed in terms of the external monarchical episcopate (*de iure divino*), bishops of Rome could not only persist with their claims of primacy over the whole church; they eventually won the entire West to their view.

Suffice it to say for our purposes here: in the entire history of the church, the Roman papacy has been the single greatest enemy of both the doctrine of justification and of Christian freedom. Under the papacy, with its blasphemous claims that all laws exist in the shrine of the pope's heart,¹² nothing is left as a matter of freedom. To this day, if Roman Catholics are "free" to do something (for example, worshiping in the vernacular, receiving Communion in both kinds, etc.) it is considered licit only if it has the pope's permission. To this day, the Second Vatican Council notwithstanding, Rome adamantly claims that it is only through obedience to the holy Roman pontiff that one may receive the fullness of God's grace and salvation. Complete unity with Christ and his church can be realized only through communion with the bishop of Rome. The Roman papacy since at least the time of Gregory I (c. 540-604) has done more than any individual or institution in history to promote work-righteousness and to weave it through the entire Roman system of doctrine and church practice. This includes its sacramental, penitential, and sacerdotal systems, the sacrifice of the Mass, Masses for the dead, purgatory, the cult of Mary and the saints, monasticism, mandatory celibacy for priests, indulgences, veneration of relics, and a host of other superstitions. Clearly it was only by the undeserved kindness and mercy of God that the light of the gospel was not completely snuffed out under the tyranny of the medieval papacy.

The restoration of the gospel of Christian freedom through the Reformation

¹⁰ Quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* V,24,13. *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Edited by Philip Schaaf, Series 2, Vol. 1. Reprint (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), p. 243. Article X of the Formula of Concord quotes a variation of Irenaeus' maxim: "Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in the faith" (FC SD X:31, *Triglot*, p. 1063).

¹¹ How far Roman Catholics have taken this fundamentally legalistic approach is seen from the fact that right down to the mid-20th century, many Catholics believed that every word of the Tridentine Mass, every prescribed rubric and priestly gesture originated with Jesus in the Upper room, and were handed down from apostles to bishop to bishop by unwritten tradition over the centuries. It is probably accurate to say that no Catholic theologian today would make such a claim. Unfortunately, many modern Catholic theologians, having been thoroughly infected with negative critical views of the Bible, either deny or seriously question whether Jesus ever instituted his New Testament Supper at all! They suggest that the Supper was a later "development" of the early church.

¹² A papal claim to primary incorporated into medieval Roman canon law, alluded to by Luther in the Smalcald Articles (III, VIII:4, *Triglot*, p. 495, Tappert, p. 312). See also LW 39:199f., 44:202.

It was under this spiritual tyranny and bondage that Martin Luther lived and suffered until the Lord of the church brought him to see the light of the gospel in all of its brilliance and the glorious freedom it gives to the believing child of God in Christ.

The medieval theological world-view was hardly one, united, monolithic system of thought, as it is sometimes portrayed or assumed to be. There were various schools of thought on how the sinner achieved salvation and usually a few variations within each school. The older school, the *via antiqua*, represented by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and Duns Scotus (1265-1308) held that a person who freely performed good works in a state of grace cooperated in achieving salvation. Reformation scholar Steven Ozment summarizes the process of salvation according to the following scheme:¹³

1	2	3
Gratuitous infusion of grace	Moral cooperation: Doing the best one can do With the aid of grace	Reward of eternal life as a just due

The later medieval school, the *via moderna*, represented by William of Occam (1285-1347), put an even greater emphasis on the positive contribution of man in achieving salvation. Ozment explains it in this way:¹⁴

1	2	3	4
Moral effort: Doing the best one can on the basis of natural moral ability	Infusion of grace as an appropriate reward	Moral cooperation: Doing the best one can with the aid of grace	Reward of eternal life as a just due

Besides the scholastic approaches, another approach was advocated by later medieval German mysticism, which viewed salvation in terms of union with God (deification, *Vergöttung*), which man achieves through suffering, self-denial, surrender (*Gelassenheit*), and “faith” viewed in terms of *humilitas*.

Regardless of whether a person followed one of the scholastic schools of thought or some form of mysticism, the medieval person could never be certain of salvation or know what Christian freedom was. At best, he was always a *viator*, a pilgrim, unworthy and uncertain of the heavenly fatherland.¹⁵

Once Luther came to clarity on the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ, he recognized all of the various schools of medieval theology as only variations on the same theme: salvation (we would also say Christian freedom) is something to be earned as a reward for human effort. But let’s let Luther now tell his story in his own words from his classic statement in his 1545 preface to his Latin writings:

Meanwhile, I had already during that year [1519] returned to interpret the Psalter anew. I had confidence in the fact that I was more skilful, after I had lectured in the university on St. Paul’s epistles to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the one to the Hebrews. I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single word in Chapter 1[:17], “In it the righteousness of God is revealed,” that had stood in my way. For I hated the word “righteousness of God,” which according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.

¹³ Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 233.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

¹⁵ Interestingly, it was for claiming the certainty of salvation, among other things, that Joan of Arc was declared a heretic and burned at the stake. The medieval Christian pilgrim is exemplified by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*.

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, “As if, indeed it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!” Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.

At last by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.¹⁶

Having come to clarity on the central doctrine of justification and with it the proper distinction between law and gospel, it did not take long for Luther to come to clarity on all other Christian doctrines, including the spiritual nature of the church of believers and its gospel ministry, the spiritual priesthood of all believers, the proper understanding and use of the sacraments, and also Christian freedom. Expounding on all of these doctrines, in 1520 Luther’s pen produced three of the most significant theological writings in the history of Christian literature: *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *The Freedom of a Christian*.

The Freedom of a Christian

In the last of these three treatises, Luther set forth the two memorable propositions:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.¹⁷

To properly understand and apply these two paradoxical sounding propositions Luther points out that we must keep in mind two vital scriptural distinctions. One is the dual nature of the Christian. Luther writes:

Because of this diversity of nature the Scriptures assert contradictory things concerning the same man, since these two men in the same man contradict each other, “for the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh,” according to Gal. 5[:17].¹⁸

If we fail to recognize the dual nature of the Christian we will fail to understand the Scriptures, and we will confuse justification and sanctification. In speaking of these distinctions, Luther also reminds us how vital it is also to recognize the scriptural distinction between law and gospel. He states:

Here we must point out that the entire Scripture of God is divided into two parts: commandments and promises. Although the commandments teach things that are good, the things taught are not

¹⁶ LW 34:336,337.

¹⁷ LW 31:344.

¹⁸ LW 31:344.

done as soon as they are taught, for the commandments show us what we ought to do but do not give us the power to do it. They are intended to teach man to know himself, that through them he may recognize his inability to do good and may despair of his own ability

The promises of God give what the commandments of God demand and fulfil what the law prescribes so that all things may be God's alone, both the commandments and the fulfilling of the commandments. He alone commands, he alone fulfills.¹⁹

What is the role of faith in the relationship between the believer and God? Luther says:

True faith in Christ is a treasure beyond comparison which brings with it complete salvation and saves men from every evil.²⁰

In this regard Luther waxes eloquent as he speaks of faith uniting the believer with Christ in the "joyous exchange" (*commercium admirabile, der fröhliche Wechsel*)

Faith . . . unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh [Eph. 5:31-32]. And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage -- indeed the most perfect of all marriages, since human marriages are but poor examples of this one true marriage -- it follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own. Let us compare these and we shall see inestimable benefits. Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's; for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride's and bestow upon her the things that are his. If he gives her his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his? And if he takes the body of the bride, how shall he not take all that is hers?...

Who then can fully appreciate what this royal marriage means? Who can understand the riches of the glory of this grace? Here this rich and divine bridegroom Christ marries this poor, wicked harlot, redeems her from all her evil, and adorns her with all his goodness. Her sins cannot now destroy her, since they are laid upon Christ and swallowed up by him. And she has that righteousness in Christ, her husband, of which she may boast as of her own and which she can confidently display alongside her sins in the face of death and hell and say, "If I have sinned, yet my Christ, in whom I believe, has not sinned, and all his is mine and all mine is his," as the bride in the Song of Solomon [2:16] says, "My beloved is mine and I am his." This is what Paul means when he says in I Cor. 15[:57], "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ," that is, the victory over sin and death, as he also says there, "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law" [I Cor. 15:56].

From this you once more see that much is ascribed to faith, namely, that it alone can fulfil the law and justify without works.²¹

If everything in the Christian's relationship with God is ascribed to faith, then what role do good works play in the Christian's life? Although good works have nothing to do with our justification before God, they have everything to do with our life of service to our neighbor. Luther writes:

¹⁹ LW 31:348,349.

²⁰ LW 31:347.

²¹ LW 31:350-353.

A Christian has no need of any work or law in order to be saved since through faith he is free from every law and does everything out of pure liberty and freely. He seeks neither benefit nor salvation since he already abounds in all things and is saved through the grace of God because in his faith he now seeks only to please God.²²

Man needs none of these things [doing good works] for his righteousness and salvation. There he should be guided in all his works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone, that he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, considering nothing except the need and the advantage of his neighbor.²³

With what glorious gospel freedom Luther speaks in this little treatise both as he speaks of the Christian's relationship to God and his relationship to his neighbor. Completely-gone is the *monstrum incertitudinis* resulting from a conditioned gospel of process justification in man that plagued the church for so many centuries. Equally gone are the false asceticism and self-chosen works of monkery, which did no good to anyone. We could easily devote an entire essay just to this one treatise of Luther's, so rich is it in gospel content.

Instead, though, we will turn now to another set of the Reformer's writings to see how Luther the parish pastor and preacher put some of these principles of gospel freedom into practice in a very specific situation. I am referring to Luther's Eight Invocavit Sermons preached in the Wittenberg parish church eight days in a row upon his return from the Wartburg Castle in March of 1522.

Luther's Eight Wittenberg Sermons

It is one thing to present the Scripture's teachings on Christian freedom in a theoretical way; it is quite another thing to put those teachings into practice evangelically in real-life situations. We see that in the way events transpired in Wittenberg while Luther was in hiding at the Wartburg from May, 1521, through February, 1522.

Luther's colleague on the theological faculty of the University of Wittenberg, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (c. 1480-1541) and others began advocating moving ahead with reform. In July Karlstadt issued a set of theses stating that it was a sin to receive Communion in only one kind. He further declared that confession before Communion was unnecessary, that images in church were not allowable, and that rules of fasting were not binding. This led to outbreaks of violence, the interruption of masses in the parish church by mobs armed with knives, and the destruction of altars and images.

The elector of Saxony intervened and forbade any more reform activities, but Karlstadt pressed ahead anyway. On Christmas Day he celebrated Mass in the castle church without vestments and administered Communion in both kinds. Communicants were forced to take the bread and chalice in their own hands. With the Zwickau prophets, Nicholas Storch, Thomas Drechsel, and Marcus Stübner as his allies in his efforts, Karlstadt also began teaching the doctrine of direct illumination of the Spirit, which made schools and learning unnecessary. Within a short time all the city schools had closed, and the university was threatened with collapse.

Aware of the deteriorating situation and without waiting to receive permission from the elector, Luther came out of hiding and returned to Wittenberg on March 7. On March 9, Invocavit Sunday, Luther mounted the pulpit in the parish church and preached each day for eight consecutive days. The result of the sermons was that peace and order were quickly restored.

Luther's Eight Sermons provide us with a wealth of sound pastoral theology and judgment. In his opening words of the first sermon he stated:

²² LW 31:361,362.

²³ LW 31:365.

The summons of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another. Every one must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone. We can shout into another's ears, but everyone must himself be prepared for the time of death, for I will not be with you then, nor you with me. There every one must himself know and be armed with the chief things which concern a Christian.²⁴

Luther was going to preach the law to the Wittenbergers, no doubt about it. But his purpose was not just to restore external peace and order by preaching the law. The fundamental issue involved, Luther makes clear, is having a good conscience before God, so that one is always prepared to face death and the judgment as a Christian with a good conscience, in order to avoid becoming prey for the devil.

What are the "chief things" a Christian needs to be armed with? First a knowledge of God's law, which shows our sin and God's wrath. Second, a knowledge of the gospel, of what God's Son has done to take away sin. Third, the Christian needs to be armed with love for others, because that too is God's will. Fourth, patience is also needed, in consideration for those who are weak in faith.

Thus faith must always remain pure and immovable in our hearts, never wavering; but love bends and turns so that our neighbor may grasp and follow it. There are some who can run, others must walk, still others can hardly creep [cf. I Cor. 8:7-13]. Therefore we must not look upon our own, but upon our brother's powers, so that he who is weak in faith, and attempts to follow the strong, may not be destroyed of the devil?²⁵

In this regard, careful consideration also needs to be given to the distinction between what Luther calls the "must" and the "free."

Take note of these two things, "must" and "free." The "must" is that which necessity requires, and which must ever be unyielding; as, for instance, the faith, which I shall never permit any one to take away from me, but must always keep in my heart and freely confess before every one. But "free" is that in which I have choice, and my use or not, yet in such a way that it profit my brother and not me. Now do not make a "must" out of what is "free," as you have done, so that you may not be caned to account for those who were led astray by your loveless exercise or merry. For it you entice any one to eat meat on Friday, and he is troubled about it on his deathbed, and thinks, Woe is me, for I have eaten meat and I am lost! God will call you to account for that soul?²⁶

In his second sermon, Luther emphasizes the proper way to carry out reform in a way that benefits souls. While those who are strong in faith may recognize the need to correct abuses, careful instruction in God's Word needs to come first, so that faith is properly formed. But that is God's work and happens on God's timetable, not man's. Faith cannot be forced.

Since I cannot pour faith into their hearts, I cannot, nor should I, force any one to have faith. That is God's work alone, who causes faith to live in the heart We should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure For where the heart is not good, I care nothing at all for the work. We must first win the hearts of the people. But that is done when I teach only the Word of God, preach the gospel So when you have won the heart, you have won the man -- and thus the thing must finally fall of its own weight and come to an end. And if the hearts and minds of all are agreed and united, abolish it. But if all are not heart

²⁴ LW 51:70.

²⁵ LW 51:72.

²⁶ LW 51:74.

and soul for its abolishment-leave it in God's hands, I beseech you, otherwise the result will not be good.²⁷

In short, I will preach it [God's Word], teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example, I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26-29], or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.²⁸

In his third and fourth sermons, Luther takes up the matter of images in church. The abuse of images, Luther says, wasn't so much that people were worshiping them as idols; rather, people were misled by the false papistic teaching that a person could merit God's favor by placing an image in church. The way to properly deal with this abuse, Luther says, is not to smash or tear down the images, or to declare that any and all use of images is inherently sinful, for no Scripture can be found to support such notions. Rather, the people must be properly instructed on the right use of images, especially that people cannot gain God's favor by having images set up in churches.

In the fifth through the seventh sermons, Luther takes up "how we must observe the blessed sacrament."²⁹ Here Luther is especially critical of Karlstadt, who rode rough-shod over people's consciences. He was forcing people to receive Communion in the hand, a practice that had been branded for centuries as being a sacrilege. People were coming away from Karlstadt's Communion services with bad consciences, feeling they had committed a terrible sin by handling the elements. To force communicants to touch the Sacrament with their hands, as Karlstadt did, is just as foolish as the pope, who forbids it. Luther then shows from Scripture that Karlstadt's insistence that "*Take, eat... drink*" has to mean "take in the hand" cannot stand. Luther's purpose is not just to prove from Scripture that he is right and Karlstadt wrong, but to strengthen weak Christian's consciences against the devil's attacks, for only the clear Word of God can do that.

Concerning Communion in both kinds, which Luther certainly regarded as part of Christ's institution, Pastor Luther recognized that this also should not be forced upon the weak and offend their consciences. Careful, patient instruction from God's Word was needed, and communicants should be invited to commune with both kinds only when they felt free to do so according to God's Word.

In a similar way, Luther addresses matters of confession in his eighth sermon. First, he lays out what true confession entails, according to Matthew 18. The chief purpose of confession is to restore the penitent sinner with the announcement of the Lord's forgiveness. Regarding private confession, Luther explains the difference between confessing secretly to God and confessing to another Christian. In this regard Luther states:

I refuse to go to confession simply because the pope has commanded it and insists upon it... Nevertheless I will allow no man to take private confession away from me, and I would not give it up for all the treasures in the world, since I know what comfort and strength it has given me. No one knows what it can do for him except one who has struggled often and long with the devil. Yea, the devil would have slain me long ago, if the confession had not sustained me.³⁰

Moreover, we must have many absolutions, so that we may strengthen our timid consciences and despairing hearts against the devil and against God. Therefore, no man shall forbid the confession nor keep or draw any one away from it. And if any one is wrestling with his sins and wants to be rid of them and desires a sure word on the matter, let him go and confess to another in secret, and accept what he says to him as if God himself had spoken it through the mouth of

²⁷ LW 51:76.

²⁸ LW 51:77

²⁹ LW 51:88.

³⁰ LW 51:98.

this person I have said, I will not let this private confession be taken from me. But I will not have anybody forced to it, but left to each one's free will.³¹

In these eight sermons we see Luther the pastor of souls applying law and gospel in matters of Christian freedom and church reform. As one peruses Luther's writings in general, one can easily find hundreds of similar examples. Luther the reformer is always Luther the pastor, always concerned with people's souls, with their faith and consciences. To exercise Christian freedom requires a clear conscience, informed and instructed by God's clear Word. Luther's primary concern with matters of adiaphora in ceremonies and external forms is not simply, "Does the Bible command or forbid this external form or practice?" but "How is the proclamation of the gospel best served?" This was Luther's over-riding concern as he worked at reforming worship practices, the ministry, schools, etc.

In some ways, Luther comes off as fairly "radical" in some of his reforms, such as expunging the Canon from the Mass,³² abolishing the private Mass, and calling for the closing of the monasteries. In such issues, Luther was not just advocating change for change's sake, or expressing mere personal preferences, or even advocating getting rid of certain external forms or ceremonies simply because they were "Catholic." No, Luther's criterion was always first and foremost the gospel. Any practice that directly flew in the face of the biblical doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith in Christ alone had to go.

In other respects, Luther comes off as very conservative in his reforms, his liturgical reforms in general, for example. Along with the general order of the service and the church year (rid of excessive saints' days) many traditional forms were retained, including traditional vestments,³³ the use of incense, the ringing of the Sanctus bell at the Words of Institution, and the elevation of the elements (finally dropped only in 1542 after Karlstadt's death). Luther's concerns in such matters seem to be three-fold and all related. One was his concern for weak Christians who associated the Christian faith and worship with certain traditional forms. As his Eight Wittenberg Sermons show, Luther was very patient even with reinstating the Lord's institution of Communion in both kinds until people were carefully instructed and could accept the practice with a good conscience. Another concern behind some of Luther's conservative approach to reform was the legalistic agitations of Karlstadt. Luther explained that while he could do just as well without the statues of Mary in church and the elevation of the elements in Communion, he advocated keeping them and teaching the people an evangelical understanding and use of them also to "spite Karlstadt" (in the spirit of Galatians 5:1).³⁴

Beyond his concern for the weak and not letting radicals like Karlstadt burden consciences unduly, Luther wasn't conservative in his liturgical reforms merely as some flight into wistful nostalgia. Rather, Luther recognized that the liturgy (the western rite with its Ordinary and Proper) and the church calendar were genuine fruits of the gospel received from the early church and that they far superseded any papistic superstitions that had been added to them over the centuries. Cleansed of unscriptural elements (sacrifice of the Mass, *opus operatum*, cult of the saints, etc.), the liturgical service, lectionary, and calendar from beginning to end were a

³¹ LW 51:99.

³² "Radical" is exactly how Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Vatican's Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, describes Luther's liturgical reforms. We can only agree with Ratzinger when he states that the Reformation "would surely have run a different course if Luther had been able to see the analogous binding force of the great liturgical tradition and its understanding of sacrificial presence and of man's participation in the vicarious action of the Logos." *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), p. 167.

³³ Luther wore his monk's cowl in the pulpit, which was considered canonically correct in the medieval church, until the cloister was closed and he got married in 1525. From then on, it seems, Luther wore his academic doctor's robe. Otherwise, the use of traditional vestments prevailed in Wittenberg and in most of Lutheran Germany until the end of the period of Orthodoxy and the onslaught of Pietism and Rationalism in the 18th century. Cf. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, *The Survival of the Historic Vestments in the Lutheran Church after 1555* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1958.)

³⁴ For Luther's position on the evangelical use of images and the elevation against Karlstadt, see especially his *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments* (LW 40:73-223). Noting the common legalistic spirit of both Karlstadt and the pope, Luther sets forth his position of evangelical freedom over against both in the following pithy statement: "The pope and Dr. Karlstadt are true cousins in teaching, for they both teach, one the doing, the other the refraining. We, however, teach neither, and do both" (LW 40:131).

rich proclamation of the gospel, as week by week and year by year they highlighted Christ's Word, Christ's works, and Christ's Supper. By retaining the historic service as he did, Luther sought to demonstrate the continuity and unity of Lutheranism to the church catholic. There was nothing sectarian about Luther's approach to the church's worship.

Accordingly, Luther prefaces his reformed Latin Mass of 1523 as follows: "It is not now nor ever has been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God completely, but rather to purify the one that is now in use from the wretched accretions which corrupt it and point out an evangelical use."³⁵ Luther was no liturgical anarchist, which he describes as those "fickle and fastidious spirits who rush in like unclean swine without faith or reason and who delight only in novelty and tire of it quickly, when it has worn off."³⁶

Luther's opening paragraph of the preface to his *Deutsche Messe* of 1526 is also a classic statement of Christian freedom as applied to worship forms:

In the first place, I would kindly and for God's sake request all those who see this order of service or desire to follow it: Do not make it a rigid law to bind or entangle anyone's conscience, but use it in Christian liberty as long, when, where, and how you find it to be practical and useful. For this is being published not as though we meant to lord it over anyone else, or to legislate for him, but because of the widespread demand for German masses and services and the general dissatisfaction and offense that has been caused by the great variety of new masses, for everyone makes his own order of service. Some have the best intentions, but others have no more than an itch to produce something novel so that they might shine before men as leading lights, rather than being ordinary teachers -- 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. But while the exercise of this freedom is up to everyone's conscience and must not be cramped or forbidden, nevertheless, we must make sure that freedom shall be and remain a servant of love and of our fellow-man.

Where the people are perplexed and offended by these differences in liturgical usage, however, we are certainly bound to forego our freedom and seek, if possible, to better rather than to offend them by what we do or leave undone

That is not to say that those who already have good orders, or by the grace of God could make better ones, should discard theirs and adopt ours. For I do not propose that all of Germany should uniformly follow our Wittenberg order. Even heretofore the chapters, monasteries, and parishes were not alike in every rite. But it would be well if the service in every principality would be held in the same manner and if the order observed in a given city would also be followed by the surrounding towns and villages....³⁷

What a fine balance Luther strikes between principles of Christian freedom and the blessings of orderliness in the church! While Luther certainly recognized the external forms of worship as adiaphora, he never treated them as unimportant. The external forms by which the gospel is proclaimed and brought to people's hearts is always deserving of our best efforts and constant care.

Lutheran versus Reformed approaches to adiaphora and church reform

Church history scholars have often noted the distinctiveness of Luther's approach to church reform, in contrast to the general approach of other reformers. We have already touched upon Karlstadt's approach, which became more or less typical of the Radical Reformation, which was thoroughly iconoclastic and anti-Catholic

³⁵ LW 51:20.

³⁶ LW 51:19.

³⁷ LW 51:61,62.

(whatever was “Catholic” had to be abolished).³⁸ Somewhat the same tendency can be seen in the Swiss reformers, who abhorred the use of the plastic arts in church, tended to label most church ceremony and ritual as Romish superstition, and were highly suspicious of the role of music in worship.³⁹ Zwingli, Bucer, and Calvin did not regard the doctrine of justification of the sinner before God as the central doctrine, the chief article of faith, as Luther did. Hence they viewed church reform more in terms of reforming morals and the external forms of Christianity to get back to what we might call “simple Bible Christianity.”⁴⁰

The results of the Reformed approaches can be seen in the debates among the various Reformed traditions to this day concerning what external forms of church and ministry (Episcopalianism, Presbyterianism, Congregationalism) are necessary to constitute the true Christian church. Heirs of the Radical Reformation have played out their more extreme versions to the point of debating and breaking fellowship over the issue of whether or not it’s allowable to have organs in church. The Disciples of Christ denomination split over this issue in the early 1860s.⁴¹

The Lutheran Confessions and matters of adiaphora

The Lutheran Confessions are careful to establish as articles of faith only what is clearly taught in Scripture. When speaking, for instance, of church and ministry, the Confessions are careful to avoid speaking of any particular external grouping of believers or any one form of the public ministry as divinely instituted (AC V, XIV, XXVIII). Furthermore, concerning the unity of the church and the basis of expressing church fellowship, the Augsburg Confession states:

To the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike.⁴²

Concerning church usages or rites, the Augustana further states:

Of Usages in the church they teach that those ought to be observed which may be observed without sin, and which are profitable unto tranquillity and good order in the Church, as particular holy days, festivals, and the like.

Nevertheless, concerning such things men are admonished that consciences are not to be burdened, as though such observance was necessary to salvation.

³⁸ Dubbing Karlstadt as the pioneer of “lay Christian puritanism,” church historian Carter Lindberg traces the influences of Karlstadt’s theology, which centered in regeneration, not justification, also upon later Lutheran Pietism. Cf. Lindberg’s *The European Reformations* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publications Inc., 1996), pp. 93-96.

³⁹ Zwingli banned all use of music from his services, and the only music Calvin allowed in church was unaccompanied congregational singing.

⁴⁰ This is not just a partisan Lutheran canard. Church history scholars from the Reformed tradition, such as Alister McGrath, also recognize and assert this difference between Luther and the Swiss reformers. Cf. Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (New York: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1987): “Whereas for Luther, the question of how a gracious God might be found led to his intense personal preoccupation with the doctrine of justification, Zwingli’s concerns appear to have been primarily with the reform and revitalization of the church -- in other words, with the humanist vision of *Christianismus renascens*. Far from regarding the doctrine of justification as the centre of the gospel, and the foundation of a programme of theological reform, Zwingli appears to have adopted a form of moralism, demonstrating affinities with Erasmus’ *philosophia Christi*” (p. 49). McGrath goes on to assert that the basic approaches of Bucer and Calvin to church reform show more similarities than dissimilarities to Zwingli’s humanism. McGrath asserts that Luther’s approach to reform was in a class by itself because of the position that the doctrine of justification occupies in his theology. Cf. also McGrath’s *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1988), pp. 109-112.

⁴¹ Cf. Mark E. Braun, “Worship in the WELS-Changeless Principles,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 89, No. 2 (Winter, 1992), p. 25.

⁴² AC VII:2-4, *Triglot*, p. 47.

They are admonished also that human traditions instituted to propitiate God, to merit grace, and to make satisfaction for sins, are opposed to the Gospel and the doctrine of faith.

Wherefore vows and traditions concerning meats and days, instituted to merit grace and to make satisfaction for sins, are useless and contrary to the Gospel.⁴³

The Augsburg Confession speaks of the positive function that ceremonies may serve not only in terms of promoting peace and good order in the church but also clearly states that “the chief purpose of all ceremonies is to teach people what they need to know about Christ.”⁴⁴ That is a rather amazing claim when you think about it. We recognize, of course, that sermons teach. But ceremonies? They certainly do. The liturgy teaches, with the reading of the Scriptures and the singing of songs and hymns. The Creed and prayers are filled with doctrinal content that proclaim the great works of God. Church rites are intended to communicate biblical truth also symbolically: making the sign of the cross, bowing our heads and folding our hands, kneeling, lighting candles, processing with candles and a cross or crucifix, the laying on of hands. The meaning meant to be conveyed symbolically by such rites and bodily gestures, of course, needs to be explained to people so the rites don’t become only empty formalism or ritualism.

While the Lutheran Confessions emphasize the positive role that human rites and ceremonies may play in worship, the Confessions are also careful to disassociate themselves from the Reformed and more radical reformers, who tended to forbid whatever God’s Word does not explicitly command, and from the errors of the Romanists: making human traditions into a *ius divinum* that are necessary and meritorious for salvation. Whenever the Lutheran Confessions speak disapprovingly of ceremonies, it is not ceremonies *per se* that are condemned but the false use of them.

But what about the use of ceremonies in times of persecution, when the enemies of the gospel seek to impose by force the use or non-use of certain ceremonies? This became a burning question after the Smalcaldic War, during the period of what is called the Interims.

Soon after Luther’s death (February 19, 1546), Emperor Charles V, allied with papal forces, attacked the Lutheran lands that were part of the Smalcaldic League. On April 24, 1547, the Catholic armies defeated the Lutheran forces at Mühlberg on the Elbe River, and both the Saxon Elector John Fredrick and Philip, Landgrave of Hesse, were taken prisoner. John Fredrick’s cousin, Moritz, Duke of Saxony, was made the Saxon elector as payment for betraying the Lutheran cause and joining forces with Charles to help defeat the Smalcaldic League.

The next step in the plan to subjugate the Lutheran lands and bring them back into the papal fold was the imposition of the so-called Augsburg Interim, prepared by a half-dozen papal theologians and the renegade Lutheran John Agricola, court preacher for Elector Joachim of Brandenburg. The arrangement was called an interim because it was meant to regulate church affairs in Lutheran lands temporarily until the Council of Trent dealt with the Lutherans permanently. The Augsburg Interim permitted Lutheran pastors to marry and to administer Communion in both kinds. Otherwise, it called for the restoration of Roman rites and ceremonies. Everyone knew the arrangement was meant to be a major step in exterminating the Lutheran Church and restoring Lutheran lands to full blown Roman Catholicism. In Saxony, where the Augsburg Interim met so much resistance that it could not be enforced, Moritz issued the Leipzig Interim of 1548. The main Lutheran contributor to this second interim was Philip Melanchthon.

Melanchthon’s goal was to compromise on a few matters of “adiaphora,” ceremonies, etc. in order to salvage the doctrine of justification. But as F. Bente observes:

⁴³ AC XV, Triglot, p. 49.

⁴⁴ AC XXIV:3, German, Tappert, p. 56.

As a matter of fact, however, the Leipzig Interim, too, was in every respect a truce over the corpse of true Lutheranism doctrinally as well as practically. The obnoxious features of the Augsburg Interim were not eliminated, but merely toned down.⁴⁵

The document was born of a spirit of doctrinal compromise that left clear room in its wording for a Roman Catholic understanding of justification, original sin, and free will. It recognized the primacy of the pope, restored the episcopal hierarchy, the seven sacraments, Corpus Christi festival, and other Roman ceremonies. The Interim was immediately denounced by the so-called Gnesio-Lutherans, led by Matthias Flacius. Flacius reduced the issue to the following principle or axiom: “*Nihil est adiaphoron in casu confessionis et scandali*. Nothing is an adiaphoron when confession and offense are involved.”⁴⁶

The Leipzig Interim became a dead issue politically in 1552, when Moritz turned on the emperor and sent the Catholic forces packing out of Germany. The Religious Peace of Augsburg of 1555 settled the matter legally and practically until the Thirty Years War, which erupted in 1618. Even though the Interim was a dead issue politically, the theological issue continued to fester between the Gnesio-Lutherans and the Philippists (Interimists) until the Formula of Concord settled the matter in 1577.

Article X of the Formula of Concord clearly sides with the Gnesio-Lutherans in the point at issue. After stating what the point of the controversy was (par. 1-3) and carefully defining what are adiaphora (par. 4,5), the article makes three points:

1. Genuine adiaphora -- such as ceremonies neither commanded nor forbidden by God’s Word -- are not as such, nor in and of themselves, divine worship or any part of it (par. 8).
2. “The church of God in every place and time” has the perfect right and authority to alter them so long as this is done without offense, in an orderly manner, so as to redound to the church’s edification (par. 9).
3. “We believe, teach and confess” that at a time of confession (*in statu confessionis*), when the enemies of God’s Word seek to suppress the pure teaching of the holy gospel, one must not give in even on matters which otherwise are truly adiaphora (par. 10-17).⁴⁷

The concluding paragraph of Article X is often quoted:

Thus [according to this doctrine] the churches will not condemn one another because of dissimilarity of ceremonies when, in Christian liberty, one has less or more of them, provided they are otherwise agreed with one another in the doctrine and all its articles, also in the right use of the holy Sacraments, according to the well-known saying: *Dissonantia ieiunii non dissolvit consonantiam fidei*; “Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in the faith.”⁴⁸

The continuing struggle to practice our Christian freedom

The struggle to retain a truly biblical and evangelical doctrine and practice of Christian freedom in matters of adiaphora has continued in the Lutheran Church down to this day.

I think we would all agree that one of the high points for Christian freedom in worship in the Lutheran Church in the couple of centuries following the Reformation was the way in which a variety of worship forms

⁴⁵ F. Bente, “Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books,” *Triglot*, p. 99. The complete texts of the Augsburg and Leipzig Interims are included in *Sources and Contexts of The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert . Kolb and James A. Nestigen (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), pp. 144-196.

⁴⁶ Quoted by F. Bente, “Historical Introduction,” *Triglot*, p. 110.

⁴⁷ As summarized by John A. Moldstad, Jr. “Contemporary Musings on the Import of FC Article X,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (December, 1998), p. 315.

⁴⁸ FC SD X:31, *Triglot*, p. 1063.

developed in various territorial churches. While there was a universal commitment among Lutherans to the historic liturgy and calendar, a variety of liturgical forms developed, some quite simple and some rather elaborate, often depending on the musical talent and resources available. Following what Luther himself did, his spiritual heirs did not hesitate to make use of various styles of music from their time and press them into the service of the gospel.⁴⁹

There have certainly also been some low points. One thinks of the bad situations that often resulted in Lutheran congregations under the state-church arrangement in Germany and other lands, when pastors or church consistories sought to address worldliness and spiritual indifference by passing laws that demanded members to commune a certain number of times a year. The reaction of Pietism was in some respects even worse. As the Pietists over-emphasized the role of man's response to the gospel, they tended to replace the preaching of the objective gospel and administration of the sacraments with their lists of what "true Christians" should be feeling and doing. Close spiritual cousins to the Reformed in many respects, Lutheran Pietists disliked the historic liturgy and orthodox Lutheran hymnody, which showcased the means of grace and proclaimed the objective truths of the gospel.

One of the high points in American Lutheran church history is the story of C. F. W. Walther and the Saxon immigrants in their struggle to come to a scriptural understanding and practice of church and ministry after the fall of Bishop Stephan and then in their controversy with John Grabau and the Buffalo Synod. One cannot read Walther's book on church and ministry without coming away with an appreciation of how closely connected the doctrine of justification by faith is to the doctrine of the church and its gospel ministry.

In our own synod, much of the late 19th century and all of the 20th century was spent wrestling with issues that in one way or another touch upon Christian freedom. A study of the history of WELS world missions, starting with the mission to the Apaches, reveals that many of the issues we are struggling with today in doing multi-cultural and cross-cultural ministry, questions of what is theological versus what is purely cultural, our forefathers had to work through in their day. Church and ministry also became issues for Wisconsin early in the last century, and in the last decade or so we have looked again at what Scripture says and doesn't say about the relationship between the priesthood of believers and the public ministry, various forms of public ministry, and, most recently, the nomenclature of "ordination." As we all know, issues of church fellowship were on the synodical agenda for most of the past century. What are the Scripture principles of church fellowship and how do we apply them? What has God clearly revealed in such matters, and what has he left free? These are some of the questions we have sought to answer from Scripture as we have wrestled with fellowship issues. The same is true in the last couple of decades concerning stewardship issues, issues relating to the Church Growth Movement, the biblical roles of man and woman, and the language and forms of public worship.

I assume most of us are well aware of the "worship wars" going on in one of the larger Lutheran synods in this country as it struggles with doctrinal pluralism in its midst: Evangelical style vs. Lutheran substance, liturgical vs. revivalistic styles of worship, classic Lutheran hymnody vs. camp-fire songs, 16th century fossils vs. culturally relevant styles that people today can relate to, traditional vs. contemporary, serious vs. pop, mission-minded and growth-oriented churches vs. museums that are only monuments to the past, evangelism vs. confessionalism. A good deal of the rhetoric suggests that it's fair enough to call it a war. I'm under the impression that a fair amount of thinking is going on in our synod, too, concerning many of these same issues. May God keep us from our worship work turning into a worship war! May we be guided in this important work not merely by what is pragmatic, popular, or personal preferences but by sound theological principles of worship. May the Lord keep us focused on why it is, after all, that concerning ourselves with any of these external forms is important: it is within the framework of the external forms that the liberating message of justification by God's grace through faith in Christ is brought to people's hearts.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Cf. Carl Schalk, *Music in Early Lutheranism: Shaping the Tradition (1524-1672)* (St. Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 2001), and Günther Stiller, *Johann Sebastian Bach and Liturgical Life in Leipzig* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984).

⁵⁰ A good deal of sound material has been written and published on worship issues since the advent of *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*. Cf. *Christian Worship: Manual* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993). Three recent articles in the

History shows us that most of these issues are not new for the church in general or for the WELS. History provides us with seemingly countless examples of how the church has struggled with these issues in the past. As we are guided by the Scriptures, may the lessons that history has to teach us help us avoid the mistakes of the past and apply the principles of Christian freedom in ways that glorify our Savior, that spread his liberating Word, and that serve our neighbor in love.

What a marvelous liberating treasure God has given us in the gospel, a message that has made us perfectly free lords of all, subject to none. It is because of that gospel freedom you and I have in Christ that we are truly free to serve our neighbor in love as perfectly dutiful servants of all, subject to all.

Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly also serve us well in this regard: Richard A. Krause, "Worship Wars at the Dawn of a New Millennium," Vol. 96, No. 3 (Summer, 1999), pp. 243-261; David J. Valleskey, "What Does It Mean to Be Evangelical Lutheran in Worship?" Vol. 94, No. 2 (Spring, 1997), pp. 83-97; *ibid.*, "What Does It Mean to Be Evangelical Lutheran in Worship? Applying the Principles to Multicultural Outreach," Vol. 96, No. 4 (Fall, 1999), pp. 267-285. Also helpful are the following two essays available in the WLS library essay file: Forrest L. Bivens, "The Primary Doctrine in Its Primary Setting: Objective Justification and Lutheran Worship," and James P. Tiefel, "What Will the Church's Song Be as the New Millennium Dawns?"

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