

# Managing Church Conflict:

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The Formula of Concord is sometimes thought to be a contentious document. It is therefore surprising to discover that the Formula of Concord actually contains strategies for dealing with and containing church conflict. These strategies provide a pastoral approach for dealing with the troubles that so easily beset us. However, the Formula of Concord is not just for pastors, but for anyone who is involved in or has to deal with conflict within the church.

The advice from the Formula of Concord regarding church conflict is limited to “ceremonies or ecclesiastical practices” which are “neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word” (Ep. X, 1). This might seem to limit the scope of the problem, but in practice most problems are not really doctrinal in nature. Timothy Wengert writes about the type of problems this covers; and as it turns out, the advice provided by the Formula of Concord covers the majority of the problems that arise within a church.

## **Worship**

At what age should persons receive the Lord’s Supper? How often should the Supper be celebrated? Do we use white wine or red wine? What language should we use in worship? Should a pastor wear a white robe or only a black one, a chasuble or only a surplice, or must he or she wear vestments at all? Where should we place the baptismal font? Should a congregation sing only contemporary songs or may it also use ancient hymns?

## **Administration**

Who should be the president of a congregation, the pastor or a layperson? Who should vote at congregational meetings[?] How should money be raised? ...[W]hether and how to provide meals for children who came to church on Wednesday meetings for Christian instruction.

(Wengert, T. *A Formula for Parish Practice*. p. 165)

Wengert<sup>1</sup> reminds us that the Epitome contains numerous guidelines for dealing with church conflict, especially conflict concerning things neither commanded nor forbidden: in other words, church practices. These guidelines are:

- 1) Adiaphora exist
- 2) Things change
- 3) Be mindful the weak
- 4) Persecution demands unequivocal confession
- 5) Dissimilar church practices are not divisive of church fellowship
- 6) Charges leveled at pastors destroy Christian community

**Adiaphora exist** (Ep. X, 3). These are the ceremonies and church practices which are neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. We must be careful not to promote particular ceremonies and church practices as being divine institutions. Ceremonies and church practices are typically not commanded in scripture, yet they nevertheless exist to promote good order within the church.

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<sup>1</sup> These guidelines are derived from Wengert’s *A Formula for Parish Practice*, which discusses the Epitome of the Formula of Concord. See the section headings in Article X, and see also the discussion regarding Article XII.

We must remember that scripture enjoins the following: “Let all things be done decently and in order” The apostle Paul tells Titus he was left behind in Crete to “set in order the things that are wanting” (Tit 1:5). The apostle Paul reminds the Colossian church that “[I am] with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order” (Col 2:5). Church order is important, and required in scripture. But the form that order takes, within broad parameters, is left to us.

People and churches become wedded to their traditions. These traditions may have nothing to do with the central message of the Gospel, but are rather a source of comfort and continuity within the parish, and are a means of creating order within the congregation. In some previously rural churches, the church bell is always rung an hour before the first service. This used to be an announcement to farmers of the impending service; today, it is a reminder of their rural heritage. Some churches have peculiar and long-standing practices for their Easter celebrations, like where the sunrise service is held, or the placement of a mockup of the open tomb. Some churches always have processions; other churches reject processions as a Roman practice. In each of these cases, these practices have a history, serving to connect the past and present.

In none of the preceding cases does the particular tradition have an explicit theological basis. In some particularly difficult cases, these church practices are connected to a particular form or piety, derived from a particular system of doctrine. Although the practice itself might be adiaphora, the system of doctrine which gave rise to that practice may be incompatible with Lutheran doctrine. The church fathers remind us that the law of prayer is the law of belief. This means that our worship practices and our beliefs are interconnected. This being the case, not all ceremonies and church practices are purely adiaphora. Certain church practices not only derive from false doctrine, but if left unchecked will be the cause of doctrinal drift. In these cases, the practice is not adiaphora, but instead an issue regarding the right ordering of the church. The question in these cases is what to do about it, which is the subject of remaining rules.

**Things change** (Ep. X, 4). Some ceremonies and church practices may be more useful and beneficial than others, yet we must always remember that ceremonies and church practices in the ancient church were considerably different than those today. Divine institutions do not change in any substantive way, but everything else changes. Hymnals are generally the most stable parts of the church order, but hymnals wear out and new hymnals are produced in each generation. It is an interesting study to compare the earliest English language hymnals with each succeeding generation of hymnals. Rarely do we find a radical change, because we do not change for the sake of change. We are interested in good order and sound doctrine. Yet neither good order nor sound doctrine means that nothing can ever change. If nothing can ever change, then church traditions become another source of authority in addition to the scriptures, which is the papist refrain.

Things change. Pastors die, or take another call. The new pastor will wittingly or unwittingly change long-standing practices of the church. Perhaps the pastor can't sing, and the church is used to chanting the responses. Perhaps the pastor prefers the one-year lectionary as opposed to the three-year lectionary. Perhaps the church will get a new organist, one who plays the hymns faster or slower than normal. The new hymnal might not contain some favorite hymns. The new Director of Education might select materials different than the church has traditionally used. The

new Director of Music might introduce some contemporary music into a traditionally liturgical service.

In each of these cases, it does not immediately appear that what is at stake is the Gospel message. Yet while we are mindful that things will change, we are also mindful that not all change is for the best. We strive to be intentional, always understanding what we are changing, and why. We also prepare the parish for change, discussing it with the church and with key individuals before hand (especially those people we know to be automatically resistant to change). Any major change, which is determined by the stridency of the opposition, should not be undertaken unless a general consensus is reached. We are not talking here about a political or parliamentary approach where the majority rules. We are not even talking about achieving a super majority of two-thirds. If only 70% of the people are for a change, whether it is for replacing the carpet, changing hymnals, or closing a sparsely attended service, then consensus hasn't been reached. Without overwhelming consensus, any changes will injure the weak and divide the body of Christ, doing injury to the Gospel.

There might well be cases where change is necessary in defense of the Gospel, but the manner in which the issue is handled is important. We must be conciliatory instead of combative; winsome instead of argumentative; and pastoral instead of provocative. We must do this, because this is the way of the Gospel, through which the Spirit works in the hearts of men. Our natural response is to use the Law, to set rules, boundaries, and limitations. The law is good and necessary, but works through coercion, fear, and threats of punishment. While our natural response is to use the Law, our first response must always be to use the Gospel. Gerhard Forde writes: "The Gospel is the end of the law, the release from bondage to sin, death, and the devil through what God has done in Jesus Christ".<sup>2</sup> The Gospel is a creative force, working not through constraint, but through the new life. Therefore change in defense of the Gospel is best done through the preaching of the Gospel, by which the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of the people of God.

**Be mindful of the weak** (Ep. X, 5). Although things change, they do not change for frivolous reasons. Most especially, change must be done with great care. We must always mind the weak. Stephen Paulson describes several competing pieties, or styles of worship. Even though at times the doctrine underlying certain worship practices may be in error, nevertheless we should never offend each other's pieties. For example, it is easy to mock the popular hymns and songs of Evangelical America. Yet these hymns are much loved by the pious people of God. Our job is to lead people to something better, not to belittle them for their piety.

Minding the weak is a pastoral concern, and the heart of the Gospel. We must always be concerned for those for whom the certain things of faith are confused with the freedom we have in practice. For example, a pastor who imposes contemporary worship upon a liturgical congregation is just as wrong as a pastor who imposes a liturgical service upon a congregation that is used to contemporary worship. At the onset of any change, Wengert proposes that we ask ourselves who the weak person is. Who will the change offend? We will likely find weakness on both sides. The worldly answer is to try to win over the weak through convincing arguments. As the apostle Paul notes concerning meat sacrificed to idols (an adiaphora), this approach actually

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<sup>2</sup> Forde G. *A More Radical Gospel*. "Authority in the Church: The Lutheran Reformation". p. 55

destroys the faith of the weaker brother (Rom 14:1-2, 14-17, 20, 23), and is a sin against our brother, and against Christ (1 Cor 8:12).

Wengert proposes a pastoral alternative: strengthen the faith of the weak. Rather than attempt to convince the weak, teach them. Strengthen their faith. Find ways that all concerned can unite around the Gospel. It may very well be that those who argue vehemently over this issue or that are actually weak in their faith. In some cases this is not immediately clear to us, especially in the case of a generally well-respected person---a seminary professor, an author, or the person giving a keynote address. Yet each of us is weak in certain areas, and at certain times in our lives. Therefore we should not automatically assume someone is strong, no matter how it may appear.

Weakness is often disguised as stubbornness. The pastoral issue, and indeed that of every Christian, is to “bear the infirmities of the weak” (Rom 15:1). We should not desire to please ourselves, but rather to please and edify our neighbor (Rom 15:1-2). The apostle Paul says that although he has both freedom in Christ and authority as an apostle (1 Cor 9:1), he would rather never eat meat again, rather than have his eating be the cause of offense to the weaker brother (1 Cor 8:13). That is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who though He was rich, yet became poor (2 Cor 8:9); who though he was a King, yet he became a servant (Phi 2:6-7); who though we were His enemies, yet Christ died for us anyway (Rom 5:6, 8, 10). We strengthen the weak when we bear their burdens. Truly it is better to bear an offense for the sake of the Gospel, rather than lose a brother.

This also suggests one approach to church conflict over adiaphora, over things neither commanded nor forbidden. First, although we might be certain of our position, our very stubbornness might well be a sign of our own weakness, a sign that we are the weaker brother, and that our faith needs strengthening. This does not mean we should automatically give in to whomever or whatever is bedeviling us, but it does mean that we must be open to the Holy Spirit speaking through Word and Sacrament for the strengthening of our faith. Second, if you and I are embroiled in conflict, I should think of you as the weaker brother and endeavor to strengthen you faith. Likewise, you think of me as the weaker brother, and endeavor to strengthen my faith. In that way, each of us is looking out for each other’s best interest.

This is exactly what the apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians. Paul first asked them to walk worthy of the vocation to which they were called, then asked them to have patience, forbearance, and love towards each other, thereby endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit. This unity of the Spirit is what Paul calls the bond of Peace (Eph 4:1-3). We who were once strangers and aliens have been made one in Christ, who is our peace, and have been made one people in Christ. Through the atoning sacrifice of Christ, we are reconciled to God (Eph 2:12-16). Therefore, as the apostle Paul says, we are not to give offense in any thing, that the ministry not be blamed (2 Cor 6:3). And what ministry is that, which would be blamed? Why, the ministry of reconciliation, the announcement of the word of reconciliation, the announcement to the world that now is the appointed time of salvation (2 Cor 5:18-19; 6:2). When Christian brothers are in conflict, the ministry of the Gospel suffers. Therefore, the apostle John reminds us, we are to love one another for the sake of the Gospel (1 John 3:23).

**Persecution demands unequivocal confession** (Ep. X, 6). In times of persecution, everything matters. When we are forced to change our ceremonies and church practices, we must not. In situations where force demands a clear-cut confession of faith, we must not yield to the enemies of Christ, even on indifferent matters.

It must be said that persecution can be either broadly or narrowly defined. The narrow definition concerns oppression and violence used to force a compromise on the Gospel message itself. Although this type of persecution exists around the world, we in America have been mercifully spared. Yet it is possible to broadly define persecution as force in general. Force or threats of violence, in any form, must be resisted. When change is forced upon us, that change must be resisted as a matter of principle. The temptation to acquiesce, to go along, or to compromise must be resisted for the sake of the Gospel. This is the message of the Formula of Concord.

It is necessary to say that someone raising an issue or questioning a particular church practice is not the same thing as forbidding it, nor is not the same thing as force being applied. Mere rumors that a certain church practice may be forbidden are not the same thing as actual first-hand knowledge: the written decree, or the personal statement. It is easy and natural for us to interpret mere questioning and probing as persecution, especially if the church practice is a favorite of ours, and then to invoke this principle. Yet if we give free reign to our natural impulses in this regard, we are misusing this principle.

To effect change, we so often resort to force, to coercion, to persuasion---in short, to the Law. Yet the Law kills. The Law has no salvific effect. The Law has no creative power; it cannot make all things new. When we resort to the Law to affect change in matters neither commanded nor forbidden, we may very well provoke a right and proper reaction against us. Change is not a matter of externals, which is all force can affect. Rather, true change is a creative and regenerative force welling up from the Holy Spirit's work within the inner man. Only the Gospel is a performative word; only the Gospel can do what it says. Only the Gospel can produce the desired change. And, if the change is not a matter of the Gospel, then why try to force it in the first place?

**Dissimilar church practices are not divisive of church fellowship** (Ep. X, 7). Worship styles vary from time to time, from place to place, and from church to church. The variety of church practices does not indicate, in itself, a division in church doctrine. Therefore we must be careful not to use differences in church practices as a dividing line. Church practice is not a *Urim* and *Thummim* used to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart (Num 27:21; Ezra 2:63; Heb 4:12). This rule is not just theoretical. Church visitors are often shocked and offended by our church practices. Someone from a liturgical congregation will likely be offended by a praise band. Someone from a congregation practicing contemporary worship will likely be offended by the processions, the chanting, the bells, and the vestments in a liturgical service. Yet neither practice is, in itself, divisive of church fellowship---despite what the weaker brother says.

In this usage, we must point out that church fellowship is used in a broader sense than simple fellowship between congregations. It also concerns fellowship between groups of churches, no matter the manner in which that grouping exists. In Luther's time churches were grouped into territories, under a secular authority. Today churches are more likely to be grouped together as

part of a non-profit corporation. Yet the same principle exists. Differences in ceremonies and church practices without specific scriptural warrant are not divisive of church fellowship.

**Charges leveled at pastors destroy Christian community** (Ep. XII, 10-11). The issue in the Formula of Concord were charges hurled at Lutheran pastors by the Anabaptists that the Lutherans had not taken the Reformation far enough. The churches of the Augsburg confession were, after all, still using Romish forms of worship, and worshiping in unholy settings that had once been used for papistic masses. They had not separated themselves sufficiently. Luther referred to the Anabaptist practice as a return to monasticism. The monastic movements began as a return to apostolic life through a separation from the world. The only difference between the Anabaptists and the Monasteries was whether the practice was inside or outside of Rome: the basic impulse remained the same.

We must also consider that the Reformation itself, and the split from Rome, came about because of a discussion over doctrine that turned ugly. Charges and counter charges were made. Ultimately, the churches of the Augsburg Confession became separate from the church whose headquarters is in Rome. We are not arguing here about who was right and who was wrong, but simply stating that the result of charges made by (and against) pastors, bishops, and even the Pope was the destruction of Christian community, of schism within the body of Christ. Charges made against specific pastors, or against particular communities of faith, must not be made lightly. We must be clear that the end result will not be unity, but division.

Sometimes such division is good and necessary in defense of the Gospel. The papal abuses, usurpations, and false doctrine were themselves divisive of church fellowship. The reformation could well be said to have simply exposed the deep division that already existed. The reformation recovered and protected the Gospel message. Because the dispute was about the Gospel itself, in all its salvific force, the Reformation was both good and necessary. The scriptures themselves tell us that we are to reject heretics (Tit 3:10; cf Rom 16:17; 2 Thes 3:6, 14). Therefore, when the dispute is about the Gospel, we must not hesitate---no matter the cost.

Yet we must always be mindful of the manner in which the dispute is undertaken. The Anabaptists of Luther's day hurled reckless and irresponsible charges at Lutherans, and Lutheran pastors. These charges served not to protect the Gospel, nor to strengthen the faith of the weaker brother, but instead was a form of Law used as coercion. The Law, used in this way, served only to divide the Christian community. It is reasonable to argue that the Anabaptists meant their charges to create this division, rather than heal it.

The Law, in the hands of the Anabaptists, became a boundary between their community and the outside world. For this is how the Law works: through coercion, intimidation, fear, and condemnation. The scriptures tell us that in an ultimate sense, these boundaries are good and necessary (Rom 16:17). However, our first resort must be to the Gospel, not the Law. We must entreat, instruct, and help our Christian brothers rather than hurl condemnations. Only after the Gospel has been proclaimed and allowed to do its work, and after it is clear that our Christian brothers are hardened in their opposition to the Gospel, do we resort to the Law (Tit 3:10; cf 1 Cor 11:19; 2 Thes 3:6, 14; 2 Tim 3:5; 2 Pet 2:1). Even then, the Law is used with the ultimate goal of the Gospel, of restoration by means of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 5:5). So although we have

the keys of the kingdom, the power of binding and loosing, we do not hand such a one over to the devil except for the destruction of the flesh, so that such a one might hear the Gospel and come to the knowledge of the Truth.

**In Conclusion.** We must be mindful of how we speak of our Christian brethren. We must be unsparing in our defense of the Gospel, but we must not to be irresponsible, polemic, or disputatious. At some point it might be necessary to make an issue personal and to take a personal matter public (Matt 18:15-20; 1 Tim 5:1, 19). Yet this should always be the last resort. It is far better to take abuse for the sake of the Gospel than shift the field of battle from the freedom of the Gospel to the constraint of the Law. Using the Law against our Christian brothers hardens the opposition and splits the Christian community. If the community needs to be split in defense of the Gospel, then we must cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war, but only after full consideration of the cost and the outcome.

Finally, my brothers and sisters, we know that things change. Those who propose change must always be mindful of the weak. We know that our brothers and sisters in the faith must not be addressed through convincing arguments, no matter how sound those arguments may be, but rather through the Gospel. Rather than offend our brother, we must rather suffer offense ourselves. This is the way of the cross. Our differences in ceremonies and church practices must not divide us, either within a congregation, or between church bodies. We also know that charges hurled at pastors destroy Christian community. In defense of the Gospel, this may be both good and necessary. But we should always endeavor to follow peace with all men, for He is our peace (Heb12:14; Eph 2:14).