THE CONFESSIONAL PRINCIPLE OF CHEMNITZ THE THEOLOGIAN
“Concerning Adiaphora,” Judgment [Judicium] on Certain Controversies. . . . (1561)

What lay in the historical background of Chemnitz’ writings on ceremonies and rites was the Adiaphoristic Controversy of the late 1540s and early 1550s. Under the Augsburg and Leipzig Interims, certain ceremonies were forced upon the Lutherans by the Roman Catholics, and some of the Lutherans yielded under pressure. Even after the interims were lifted, the matter continued to be debated among the Lutherans into the 1560s and 1570s. It is in this context that Chemnitz writes on the subject of adiaphora.

Chemnitz defines adiaphora as “rites in the Church which God neither commands nor forbids in His Word.” Regarding such rites, Chemnitz lays down his basic principle, namely, that God “permits matters of freedom in His church with this general idea that in the church they serve decorum, order, instruction, edification, or duties of love.” Striking the right balance of freedom and order is the general rule under normal circumstances.
However, not all traditions at all times fit the category of adiaphora. If they conflict with God’s Word, they are obviously excluded. If the rites in themselves do not conflict with God’s Word, but if opinions about merit or necessity or superstition are attached to them, then they are not adiaphora. Also to be excluded are “absurd and theatrical actions, idle and useless ceremonies, which serve neither instruction, nor decorum, nor order, but expose religion itself to mockery and make people impious.” Nor are rites matters of indifference when, by their observance, “the enemies of true doctrine are supported and the weak are offended or grow weaker,” when “the weak and those not yet strengthened enough are confused . . . , with the result that either they begin to doubt the entire manner of doctrine, or they incline to fall away.” Chemnitz describes how at the time of the interims, the use or non-use of certain adiaphora ceased to be a matter of indifference. For “when the purity of doctrine is suppressed, corrupted or destroyed, either by force or by deceit or trickery,” “with rites which are in themselves and by nature adiaphora,” at that time “a case of confession is enjoined.”

In general, though, the basic rule on rites is this: “Ceremonies ought to aid, promote and retain true piety, edification, instruction, order and decorum.” The side of freedom is upheld, yet balanced by the constraints of love and order. Chemnitz quotes Luther: “Our people . . . do not seek some kind of wantonness” or “dispute only with a zeal for novelty.”

“Concerning Traditions,” Examination of the Council of Trent, Part I (1565)

The Roman Catholic Council of Trent met in sessions starting in 1545 and ending in 1563. Martin Chemnitz undertook an Examination of the Council of Trent [Examen Concilii Tridentini] over the years 1565-73. In Part I of his Examen (1565), Chemnitz takes up the topic, “Concerning Traditions.” He examines eight kinds of traditions, the seventh of which is that of “certain ancient rites and customs which they [the ancients] traced back to the apostles because of their antiquity.” The “papalists,” as Chemnitz calls them, were using the ancient commendation of these unwritten traditions to justify their own insistence on certain unscriptural dogmas, and Chemnitz points out that distinction. But it affords Chemnitz the opportunity to discuss traditional ceremonies and rites in general.

Chemnitz sees that a difference in doctrine between the parties was driving their current difference in rites. “And if agreement in doctrine were previously established, then a way and agreement about rites could easily be attained.”

Chemnitz draws distinctions among several types of traditional rites. One type is that which, while not explicitly commanded in Scripture, does serve the cause of scriptural doctrine:

There are some rites which can be proved from the Scripture, because they contain
the use, exercise, and profitable explanation of that doctrine which is divinely revealed in the Scripture. . . . Such rites we rightly love and retain: as the confession of faith, the renunciation of Satan, and other rites in the act of Baptism, which explain and illustrate the doctrine concerning Baptism which is delivered in the Scripture as profitably for edification.

Chemnitz goes on to list several criteria for evaluating ceremonies, and those are “edification, decorum, and order”:

And I judge that such rites should certainly be retained and preserved which . . . first of all, make for edification, that men may be invited to the Word, to the sacraments, and to other exercises of piety; that the doctrine may be more aptly set forth, valued more, received more eagerly, and better retained; and that penitence, faith, prayer, piety, and mercy may be kindled and cherished, etc. Secondly, those which serve good order; for there it is necessary that in the public meetings of the church there be order worthy of churchly dignity. Thirdly, those which make for decorum. Now, by decorum we understand not theatrical pomp or courtly splendor but such decorum as shows by means of external rites the honor in which we hold the Word, the sacraments, and the remaining churchly functions, and by which others are invited to reverence toward the Word, the sacraments, and the assemblies of the church.

In regard to the nature of ceremonies as adiaphora, Chemnitz once again upholds the principle of Christian liberty: “. . . this whole kind, except in the case of offense, should be observed in freedom, so that they can be instituted, changed, or done away with for reasons of edification, place, time, persons, etc.” “For the doctrine is universal and perpetual, but the ceremonies can be freely changed according to circumstances.”

However, as before, this liberty is not to be used as license. Chemnitz commends a proper traditionalism, and he quotes approvingly Jerome and Augustine in this regard:

Therefore we do not simply reject and condemn all traditions which are of this kind. . . . Jerome writes . . . that the churchly traditions, especially such as do not harm the faith, are to be observed as they were handed down by the elders. . . . Augustine says: “Whatever is commanded that does not hinder faith or good morals is to be considered an indifferent thing and observed for the benefit of those among whom one lives.”

Examination of the Council of Trent, Part II (1566)
“Concerning the Rites in the Administration of the Sacraments”

Chemnitz begins this section by quoting the relevant canon from the Council of Trent:
If anyone says that the received and approved rites of the Catholic Church, customarily used in the solemn administration of the sacraments, can without sin be either despised or omitted at their pleasure by the ministers, or be changed into other new ones by any pastor of the churches, let him be anathema.

Chemnitz sees the wording here as cunning, because this canon does contain a grain of truth:

. . . although they know what liberty the Word of God grants to the church in rites of this kind, they cunningly add that this must not be done at the pleasure of every minister of the churches. And indeed, for the sake of order and decorum it should not be permitted to everyone willfully, without the decision and consent of the church, just because he desires it, either to omit or change anything even in external and indifferent things.

So Chemnitz agrees that an individual minister should not, on his own, change the church’s customary ceremonies and rites without the consent of the church at large. But Chemnitz then turns the table on Trent. He uses the council’s own canon to say that it is, in fact, the papacy which has improperly changed the rites of the church:

But what this canon gives birth to is something entirely different, namely, that the pope alone, with his mitred, filleted, and horned crowd, can according to his pleasure omit ancient and indeed apostolic rites and change them into new ones. . . .

What Chemnitz objects to is the anathematizing of those who have called for the needed reform of “those papalist rites and the superstitious opinions connected with them.”

As he had done in Part I of the Examen, Chemnitz goes on to make several careful distinctions among types of rites:

. . . in the administration of the sacraments we distinguish among the ceremonies, and teach that a distinction must be made. For there are first of all certain rites which are commanded in the institution and thus are necessary and essential in the administration of the sacraments. . . .

Second, there are certain things in the administration of the sacraments which have testimonies and examples in Scripture, . . . e.g., explanations of the doctrine of the sacraments, exhortations, prayers, giving of thanks, etc. These things also we both observe and teach that they should be diligently observed—however, in such a way that they conform to the doctrine of the sacraments as it is handed down in Scripture. . . .

Third, there are certain other rites which have neither the command nor the testimony of Scripture but were added by churchmen. And I judge that not even all
of those should be rejected or condemned in general, but those which consist of words and interrogations that agree with the Scripture and usefully call to mind and explain something concerning the doctrine of the sacraments can be freely retained. . . . Those things may be retained and used which . . . serve either good order or decorum in the church, or . . . promote the edification of the people. . . . Finally, such as illustrate the things which belong to the essence of the sacraments. . . .

Here Chemnitz again uses the criteria of good order, decorum, and edification in evaluating ceremonies. He is for retaining rites which meet those criteria. He does preserve the principle of freedom, but he does not think that these rites should be changed by any individual without the consent of the church at large: “. . . they can be omitted or be changed or abrogated by the direction and consent of the church. For this should not be permitted privately to the whim of anyone.” The recurring themes in Chemnitz’ treatment of rites and ceremonies are becoming clear: edification, order, and decorum; freedom, balanced by the consent of the church.

“Concerning the Ceremonies of the Mass”

In this section of Part II of the *Examen*, Chemnitz again begins by quoting from Trent:

. . . Holy Mother Church has . . . employed ceremonies, . . . in order that by them the grandeur of this great sacrifice [of the Mass] might be commended and the minds of the faithful incited, through these visible signs of religion and piety, to contemplation of the exalted things which lie hidden in this sacrifice.

In response, Chemnitz reiterates his distinctions among ceremonies:

The ceremonies of the Mass are not all of one kind. For some have a divine command and examples of Scripture that they should be done at the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, being as it were essential. . . . Some indeed do not have an express command of God, that they must of necessity be done thus in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, nevertheless they are in their nature good and godly if they are used rightly for edification. . . . Some are *per se* superstitious and ungodly. . . . Some ceremonies indeed are adiaphora, such as vestments, ornaments, words, rites, and things which are not against the Word of God. . . . Of the things that belong to the second and fourth kind, many which make for the edification of people are observed in our churches without infringing on Christian liberty.

Chemnitz here is saying that “our churches” observe what they can observe and change what must be changed. “We gladly approve and observe good and useful rites in such liberty.” Chemnitz is consistent in this balanced approach.
Chemnitz’ Principle on Rites and Ceremonies

In both the *Judicium* and the *Examen*, we have seen Chemnitz develop a confessional principle in regard to rites and ceremonies. They are by nature matters of indifference, adiaphora. However, when their use would give place to the opponents of true doctrine, such ceremonies cease to be indifferent and become the occasion for a case of confession. Rites must serve edification, order, and decorum. The church has the freedom to change customary rites from time to time according to circumstances. But liberty is not license. Changes should not be made by the whim of an individual without the consent of the broader church.

This was Chemnitz’ principle. Now what was his practice? How do his writings—the ones we have looked at so far cover the years 1561-66—how do Chemnitz’ writings as a theologian line up with his actions as a churchman in the years that follow? It is to that subject we now turn.

THE CONFESSIONAL PRACTICE OF CHEMNITZ THE CHURCHMAN

In 1567, Martin Chemnitz became the superintendent of the city of Braunschweig. When he accepted that call, he wrote to the clergy of the city:

... we must all stick together, as we have in the past, and retain the practice that each does not build up himself or act as lord in his congregation and do what he pleases in preaching, administration of the Sacraments, liturgical practices, discipline and the other aspects of his office, acting only according to his own ideas, but rather all these things shall be and remain the business of the entire ministerium.

Chemnitz here underlines the importance of acting together, that each one should not go off in his own direction with regard to liturgical practices. This is in line with what he wrote before about the consent of the church versus the whim of the individual. He saw these matters as affecting the whole church and requiring the mutual concern and consideration of all the clergy involved.

As superintendent of Braunschweig, Chemnitz had responsibility for overseeing what went on in the churches of the city. The following year, 1568, Duke Julius asked Chemnitz to undertake a visitation of the entire duchy of Braunschweig. Chemnitz prepared a church order for that purpose, based on preceding church orders, and he was assisted in the visitation by Jacob Andreea. The visitation involved 278 pastoral positions in all, not counting those in the city of Braunschweig itself. The goal in regard to ceremonies was for “the neighboring churches of this principality to have as much similarity as possible, so that the disparity in rites would not result in offense being taken by the undiscerning and by those Christians who are not adequately trained in God’s
Word.”

After the visitation, the church order was revised and published. In this Kirchenordnung we will see the kind of liturgical practice that Chemnitz prescribed for the churches.

**Church Order [Kirchenordnung] for Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel (1569)**

Before he gets to the actual liturgical prescriptions, Chemnitz lays out the guiding principles “as to how ceremonies shall be treated and maintained in the churches of our princely realm”:

. . . kirchenceremonien . . . are so to be ordered by the churches that all things may occur honorably, orderly and for the betterment of the church.

. . . in matter of such indifferent ceremonies which are free . . . when the human regulations of the papacy are rejected, the intent is not that now absolutely no order in ceremonies should be maintained. . . .

. . . that there be a certain order regarding which place, which time, which persons, and what sort of form and manner shall be maintained, when dealing with the Word, the Sacrament and prayer; what shall precede, what shall follow, and then there be such ceremonies which give the external indication that in the congregation great, high, serious dealings are present, that thus the ceremonies lead, stimulate, admonish and move the people to join together their thoughts, lift up their hearts in all humility, that there be in the congregation heartfelt devotion to the Word, the Sacraments and prayer. . . .

Disagreement in rites does not take away agreement in faith; but because it still brings all sorts of benefit that in ceremonies, so much as it is possible, a uniformity be maintained, and that such uniformity serves to maintain unity in doctrine, . . . it is therefore viewed as good, that as much as possible a uniformity in ceremonies with neighboring reformed churches be affected and maintained.

And for this reason, henceforth all pastors in the churches of our realm, shall emphatically follow this written [church] order, and not depart from the same without specific, grave cause.

Chemnitz’ liturgical practice is clearly conservative. Church ceremonies are to be ordered by the churches (plural), in an orderly fashion. Simply because ceremonies are free in principle does not mean there is no order in practice. A certain order should be maintained in dealing with the service of Word and Sacrament. The ceremonies should give the impression that “great, high, serious dealings are present.” The ceremonies should lead to a “heartfelt devotion” to the Word, the Sacraments, and the prayers of the liturgy. Uniformity in ceremonies from church to church--as much as possible--is highly to be desired, very beneficial, and serves to maintain unity in doctrine. And it should be noted that Chemnitz’ long maintained principle of freedom in regard to ceremonies was not
interpreted by him, at least, to prevent him from requiring strict compliance by all of the clergy with the liturgical prescriptions set down in this church order. Indeed, no one should depart from this order “without specific, grave cause.”

And what were those liturgical prescriptions? There were many of them, detailed instructions for all the various services of the week and of the church year: Saturdays and holy day eves; Matins or Early Sermon on Sundays and holy days; Mass or Communion; Sundays and high festival afternoons; Festivals or holy days; and weekdays. One set of instructions was given for the cities; a similar, but slightly less difficult (not as much Latin), set was provided for the villages, where presumably the people—and clergy—were less educated.

As an example of what was expected in all the churches, here is the list of instructions for the regular Sunday Mass in the cities:

Mass or Communion in cities: rung at 7:00 when the early service is ended. (p. 142) Mass vestments are to be worn, with fine cloths and candles on the altar. An Introit d.t. is sung, then the Kyrie, Gloria, Et in terra at times in Latin and at times in German. Then the Priest turns to the people and sings “Der Herr sey mit euch.” The people answer “Und mit deinem geist.” Then he turns to the altar and sings a collect d.t.f., the people answering “Amen.” Then he turns to the people and sings or reads the Epistle in German. Then a pure Sequence, Alleluia or Tract is sung, so that the scholars receive practice in Latin Gesang; or a psalm from Luther’s hymnal is sung instead, with which the congregation sings along. Then the Priest reads the Gospel in German facing the people. Then the Patrem or Glaube is sung. When the Glaube is sung in German the organ is not played. (p. 143) Then the sermon: the Gospel is reread, and before the sermon the people are exhorted to prayer, a Vater Unser is said or sung: “Nu bitten wir den heiligen Geist.” (“Darauf soll man ein Vater unser sprechen oder singen: Nu bitten wir den heiligen Geist.”) At the end of the sermon is the Öffentliche Beicht and absolution. (p. 144) Then exhortation to prayer (p. 145) At times the Prediger should exhort the people that they are to remain in the church during the common prayer and communion. After the sermon the communicants assemble in the Chor. If there is time on festivals the festival preface is sung in the cities. Then the exhortation to the communicants. (p. 146) Then the Priest reads the Vater Unser and Verba. The Elevation is omitted. Towels are used for the communion. During the communion is sung “Jesus Christus unser heiland,” “Gott sey gelobet,” the Sanctus, the Agnus Dei, “Esaia dem propheten” or another hymn or “O lamb Gottes unschuldig,” as many as are necessary to cover the time. After the communion the Thanksgiving collect is sung (p. 149), then the Benediction. If there are no communicants the Prediger should exhort the people to commune more frequently. After the sermon the Litany is sung, then the Preister reads a collect, then the Benediction, then “Erhalt uns, Herr” and “Verleihe uns Frieden” are sung.
What strikes one when reading this order of service is how similar it is to the Divine Service in our hymnal(s) today: Introit, Kyrie, Gloria, Salutation, Collect, Epistle, Gospel, Creed, Sermon; General Confession and Absolution (which we have moved forward as Preparation for the whole service); the Communion, with the Preface, Our Father, Verba, Sanctus, Agnus Dei, Thanksgiving, and Benediction. It has the same basic structure, with the same texts, canticles, responses, etc. Many today would regard the service as “too Catholic”: It presumes that Communion is offered at the Chief Divine Service every Sunday. It presumes vestments and chanting by the pastor. It prescribes a set form with set liturgical responses in the ordinary of the Mass. The instructions are thorough and complete. They are liturgically conservative and evangelically sound. And they were expected to be followed at all the churches, all the time.

In 1571, two years after the Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel Church Order, Chemnitz composed a series of articles which were subscribed by all the pastors serving in the territory. One of them read: “Let him retain the rites in use and received ceremonies of this church, and not presume to change anything by private decision without a common decree.” And in 1578, a year after the Formula of Concord, Chemnitz wrote in a letter to a fellow superintendent:

Ceremonies ought not be thrust upon the church, rather they are to be ordered in Christian liberty with the consensus of the ministerium. This freedom, however, is not license, so that someone by his own choice should either wrench these ceremonies away, or change them, but, for the sake of conformity with others, he should in Christian freedom, freely retain those ceremonies ordained and received by the church. But he who by private judgement wrenches them away is rightly punished. Not that the ceremonies are necessary, but he is punished because of his impudence, because by this liberty the church is beset with scandal.

Chemnitz’ Practice on Rites and Ceremonies

Chemnitz clearly and consistently believed that the churches and pastors should act together, in uniformity, in regard to ceremonies and rites. It is sheer impudence for an individual pastor to take it upon himself to change the approved rites of the church at large. It disturbs the flock. It does not serve good order, decorum, or edification. Chemnitz’ practice was consistent with his principle.

CONCLUSION

Article X, “The Ecclesiastical Rites that Are Called Adiaphora or Things Indifferent,”

Formula of Concord (1577)
When quoting Article X of the Formula, it is important not only to define adiaphora as “ceremonies and church rites which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God,” it is also good to remember the words that follow: “. . . but which have been introduced into the church with good intentions for the sake of good order and decorum. . . .” The advocates of “contemporary worship” are fond of quoting the portion of Article X that reads, “the community of God in every place and at every time has the right, authority, and power to change, to reduce, or to increase ceremonies according to its circumstances. . . .” But this needs to be balanced by the rest of the sentence:

. . . as long as it does so without frivolity and offense but in an orderly and appropriate way, as at any time may seem to be most profitable, beneficial, and salutary for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the edification of the church.

**Would Chemnitz Approve?**

We have seen what sort of rites and ceremonies Chemnitz would regard as “most profitable, beneficial, and salutary for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the edification of the church.” We have seen his strong desire for uniformity in ceremonies among the congregations and pastors of the church at large. It is well worth wondering, in light of his confessional principle as a theologian and his confessional practice as a churchman, whether Martin Chemnitz would approve of what his Article X is being cited today to defend.

**Bibliography**


Bente, F. “Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.” In *Concordia Triglotta.* St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921.


David Luecke, for example, reportedly has used FC X (along with AC VII) to justify departure from traditional Lutheran worship practices: “Luecke uses these confessional statements to argue for diversity in worship style, which he says the Lutheran church was once ‘very good at accommodating.’” Sean Parker, “Worship Wars: Traditional worship vs. contemporary,” LCMS News, November 22, 1996, at http://www.cuis.edu/ftp/lcmsnews/96/999885-WORSHIP_WARS.-961122. I heard Stephen Hower make a similar argument, also citing FC X, at the Theological Symposium at Concordia Seminary-St. Louis in September, 1999.


Another one of the formulators, Jacob Andreae, had included a sermon on adiaphora in his “Six Christian Sermons,” published in 1573. These sermons were developed into the Swabian Concord of 1574, and the line from there can be traced to the Formula itself in 1577. But Article X and the Formula as a whole owe just as much, if not more, to the work of Chemnitz. “Andreae and Chemnitz are the theologians to whom more than any other two men our Church owes the Formula of Concord. . . . However, it is Chemnitz who, more than Andreae or any other theologian, must be credited with the theological clarity and correctness which characterizes the Formula.” F. Bente, “Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,” in Concordia Triglotta (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 243.

The most thorough English-language biography of Chemnitz is The Second Martin: The Life and Theology of Martin Chemnitz, by J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994). On the leading role of Chemnitz in the framing of the Formula, Preus echoes Bente when he says, “Chemnitz is the real author of the Formula, and it expresses his theology in nearly every point” (190).

The quotations in this section are from an unpublished translation by Randy Asburry of “Concerning Adiaphora,” which is Article X of Judgment [Judicium] on Certain Controversies Concerning Certain Articles of the Augsburg Confession Which Have Recently Arisen and Caused Controversy (1561). Some of these same quotations may also be found in the section on The Judicium (pages 85-88) in Matthew C. Harrison’s essay, “Martin Chemnitz and FC X,” in Mysteria Dei: Essays in Honor of Kurt Marquart, ed. Paul T. McCain and John R. Stephenson (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary
Press, 1999).


Ibid., 268.
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Ibid., 117.

Chapter V, 22nd session of the Council of Trent, 1562. Ibid., 524.
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Sehling, 471. Quoted in Harrison, 92.
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Ibid., 612.