

CHAPTER NINE

Are There Such Things as Adiaphora?

FOR AND AGAINST

We have already seen in Chapter Four that it is by no means possible to find a commandment or prohibition for everything we undertake. It became clear that we ourselves must discern in all maturity what is best (Philippians 1:9ff.). Bound by the Scriptures and led by the Spirit, we make our decisions in a freedom in which Christ would have us function as sons and not as slaves.

That was the conclusion to Chapter Four. In a separate chapter I would like to make some further remarks about our freedom. That can well be done with the help of an old ethical question. If we have a lot of latitude in our freedom, are there not a number of issues which allow for differing answers? In this way, we run up against the problem of *adiaphora*.²⁹

By *adiaphora* those things and actions are meant which can neither be classified as good or bad. One can either accept or reject such things; one can either do them or dispense with them. They are not affected by the judgment "good" or "bad." They are *neutral*. The Greek word already says it: *adiaphora* means "neutral things." The term is also reflected substantially in Greek by *ta mesa*, or in Latin by *media*. They are situated between good and bad, between what is *per se* commanded and what is *per se* forbidden. They lie in an area where "Thou shalt," or "Thou shalt not" are no longer applicable, but where man is able to do this or that in freedom.

Are there adiaphora? The answer to this question is not unanimous. Let us listen to the pros and the cons.

Many say that there really are adiaphora. Do not all Christians constantly do things which they can take for granted as having nothing to do with their relationship to God? Would it not, for example, be unwholesome to ask about the will of God if we have to decide whether to turn right or left while taking a walk for our relaxation? Is it not Christian freedom to be able to act unhindered by moral considerations where it concerns unessential questions? Does someone who condemns wine and tobacco as luxury articles not also run the risk of having to give up coffee and tea as well? And will he not, in the final analysis, have to ask himself fearfully whether or not his daily meals could be made even simpler yet in order to satisfy only the most pressing needs of his body? Must Christian ethics not stand up for Christian freedom over against that? And in that case, do you not naturally arrive at adiaphora, assuming you do not suffer from a narrow-minded, morbid disposition?

²⁹ I wrote about the subject of *adiaphora* in an article: "Zijn er *adiaphora*?" in: *Almanak Fides Quadrat Intellectum*, Kampen 1974, 99ff. There I also gave references to the literature.

But there are also opponents! They point out that what we might term as unessential actions or decisions often have far-reaching consequences for the life of the person acting or for that of others. And once one begins by accepting adiaphora, it is downhill all the way. One easily ends up surrendering more and more things to personal arbitrariness and finally actually withdrawing the whole of life from obedience to Christ. Whoever as a Christian is truly a slave of Christ does not know of a single moment in which he is his own master.

The question of adiaphora frequently revolves round what may and what may not be done in the sphere of relaxation. Am I allowed to dance, play cards, smoke, drink alcohol, go to the movies, etc.? Are all these things forbidden by God, or are we entering an area here in which the Christian can choose freely because he is dealing with "neutral things"?

A TERM FROM THE STOICS

It may be useful to first search for the roots of the term adiaphora. We end up with the *Stoics*. The term was actually forged in this philosophical school (even though it was sometimes used before that time). For the Stoicks there lay a *third* group between virtue and evil, namely, that of the adiaphora. To the Stoicks all the things which brought neither profit nor harm were considered neither good nor bad. They considered such things as life, health, pleasure, physical beauty, strength, wealth, a good reputation and a noble birth as belonging to this category. The opposite of these things could also not be classified as good or bad: death, sickness, pain, ugliness, weakness, poverty, a bad reputation and a lowly birth.

Why were all these things adiaphora? Because they can be taken in either of two directions. Riches can be put to good use, but can also be misused. Poverty can spur on a man to thievery, but also to moral purification. What can be used well or badly may not be called "good." Even life is not good in and of itself. It is very well possible that we should choose for suicide. Among the Stoicks, suicide has been recommended more than once.

The Stoicks were not successful in consistently maintaining that life and death, health and sickness and wealth and poverty stood on the same level. It was also apparent that nature makes men strive toward some things (life and health, for example) while making them have an antipathy for others (death and sickness, for example). Even though life and health are not *actually* good things, they are nonetheless classified as *preferable above non-preferable* things.³⁰ Under the direction of the intellect, the preferable things may be used and the non-preferable things may be rejected.

Next to these, the Stoicks placed yet a third category: the *oudetera*, literally translated as "neither of the two." These are actions which are not capable of eliciting emulation or antipathy the way sickness and health, life and death,

³⁰ In Greek: the *prohègmena* and the *apoprophègmena*.

and wealth and poverty do. They are completely neutral matters, like the question whether the number of hairs on someone's head is an even or an odd number, or like extending or retracting a finger and picking or not picking up a blade of grass. Anyone who reflects on these views of the Stoics will quickly discover how it differs from the Christian faith.

In the first place, the *rationalistic* nature of these ethics is evident. Each action has to be thought out and be clear for the intellect. It must proceed from within and not be affected by things from the "outside." At this point the basic, stoical attitude of *apatheia*, absence of feeling, becomes recognizable. A man who wants to be wise, should not rejoice, give free course to his tears or become angry. Everything that is not rationally determined must pass away. Calvin said of the Stoics that they acted foolishly by calling someone spirited who reacted in exactly the same way in adversity and in prosperity. The Scriptures call *those who mourn* blessed (Matthew 5:4). And it is written of Jesus that His soul was sorrowful, even unto death (Matthew 26:38).

In the second place, it is striking how *individualistic* this view of *adiaphora* is. The individual man is separated from his world, so that that world is easily reduced to adiaphoron when viewed by itself. But nothing exists by itself, neither man nor the world. There is *one* world which has proceeded from the hand of God, in which all things are bound to one another and in which every creature has received its form and task. With the Stoics the many-coloured nature of God's world dulls to gray adiaphora.

In the third place, it is not true that life and death, health and sickness, wealth and poverty are *fundamentally* on one level. We are on the way to a world where there will no longer be a place for death, sickness and poverty. On the way, these bad things can be good and these good things bad for us (consider the danger posed by wealth, often mentioned in the Scriptures!). But death, illness and poverty do not *remain* alongside life, health and wealth. And we do not need to act *coldly* towards anything, because all things come from God's hand, the good and the bad. They are adiaphora, because they all have a place on God's path of mercy and love.

In the fourth place, it would be wise to point to the *political barrenness* of these thoughts concerning adiaphora. The Stoics are primarily concerned with inward disposition and not with reform of externals. The question of slavery is typical. The notion that all men are fundamentally equal, as developed by the Stoics, did not lead to the conclusion to abolish slavery. After all, it is not life's circumstances which are decisive for freedom, but only the internal disposition of man with regard to the world around him. Man can fulfil his normal task and live happily even if he has been born in chains.

The Christian faith, however, cannot accept this contrast between internal and external, precisely because a Christian does not declare external matters to be adiaphora. The Gospel is salt *in* the world. Christ did not only come into the world to forgive sins, but He gave sight to the blind, food to the hungry and He made human lives fruitful again by driving out demons.

TWO ADIAPHORISTIC DISPUTES

It is a long way from the Stoics to the present. It is unfeasible and also unnecessary to relate what has been written about the question of *adiaphora* in Classical Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Reformation Era and afterwards. In order to show more sharply the importance of the matter, only two hot disputes waged about adiaphora will still be mentioned.

The *first* adiaphoristic dispute took place during the Reformation Era. The occasion was the so-called "Leipzig Interim" of 1548, designed to reconcile Roman Catholic and Lutheran theologians. On the Lutheran side Melanchthon, the friend of Luther, went very far in making concessions to the Roman Catholics, for example, concerning confirmation, extreme unction and many rituals during the worship service. He felt he could justify that because only adiaphora would be involved. However, the result was not union with the Roman Catholics but disunity among the Lutherans.

That was understandable too. For bells, candles in the church, robes for the pastor — all *appear* to be neutral matters; but Melanchthon's opponents understood better than he that these things cannot be *abstracted* from their historical context. *Abstraction* (taking things in and of themselves) is a business in which adiaphorists have always excelled. However, the things which Melanchthon considered to be adiaphora stood in the context of, and had *so much* to do with, confession *and* with giving offence, that they at any rate no longer possessed the naïveté of adiaphora.

The *second* adiaphoristic dispute was fought at the end of the seventeenth century, once again in Lutheran circles. But now it was the *Pietists*, rejecting all notions of adiaphora, who took up the struggle against going to the opera, card games, dancing, etc. They considered the wrongness of these things not simply in their misuse, but in their use itself. According to those Pietists, only those actions which have the honour of God as their object and are done in faith and in the name of Christ are good. Games not commanded by God but invented for the pleasure of man could only be of a sinful character.

One Pietist asserted that there were but two desires: either desire worked by the Holy Spirit, or innate sinful desire. And still another argued that a Christian could only be joyful in a directly religious way by means of contemplation, prayer and spiritual music. Socializing must have a religious content. One must seek relaxation in that way, or otherwise only in useful activities like study and handicrafts. There are no adiaphora. The rules are precise as to what may and what may not be done. Banquets are sinful. After all, the enjoyment exceeds the boundaries of the necessary and jokes play an important role in the speeches. Music, given for holy purposes, is misused in dancing. Theatre is wrong on account of its pagan origins. Even going for a walk has sometimes been rejected as an expression of a spirit not resting in God. In the orphanage at Halle things went so far that it was taboo for the children to play.

It should not be forgotten that the Pietists took a stand against the lax

life-style of their day. That is to their credit. Nevertheless, they went too far in condemning some very ordinary things. It is, for example, too simplistic to state that there are two kinds of desire: desire worked by the Holy Spirit and innate, sinful desire. It is possible to put it that way when viewing the *totality* of a human life before the judgment of God. Is it a life in which the Holy Spirit has lived, or is it a life in which sin continually ruled? But we do have to be on our guard against a contrast which allows the completely *natural* impulses of our senses to fall in the category of innate *sinful* desire. Man has remained man in the use of the possibilities of smelling, tasting, hearing, seeing and touching — possibilities given to him at his creation. One must not — to say it with Calvin — rob man of all his senses and make him into a block of wood. Would the Lord — Calvin asks himself — have gifted the flowers with such beauty, which *of itself* catches our eye, without allowing us to turn our eyes or nose to it?

Precisely the same thing can be said with regard to the area of relaxation. Although the rhythm of work and rest, exertion and relaxation may have been thoroughly upset by the sin of man — the *duality* of work and rest, of exertion and relaxation remains something given at the creation. But he who denies play to children in an orphanage, places an equals sign between “created” and “sinful.”

We should not let nature be absorbed by sin, so that everything that is very ordinarily called smell, taste and relaxation becomes sinful. But nothing was *ordinary* to the Pietists. Everything had to have a spiritual content. Instead of grace *healing* nature, they let nature be absorbed by grace. The whole day had to be filled with meditation and with being consciously occupied with God.

But that is an impossibility. A farmer who wants to plow his field in a skillful way has little time to think about God. And someone busy with a game during a few hours of relaxation has just as little. People remain people and do not become gods. On Sunday, we must be completely concentrated when God speaks to us in church, but during the rest of the week, we should be able to be fully engaged in the work which the same God has given to us. And what applies to work, also applies to relaxation.

It is striking that the Pietists, who stood directly opposed to the Stoics by rejecting adiaphora, came very close to the Stoics with regard to the conscious and well thought-out actions demanded of their followers. A strong rationalism in the field of ethics can be found in both schools of thought. The way they put things into practice differed enormously. The Stoics had man turn inward on himself, the Pietists wanted man consciously to direct his whole life to God. In both cases man is easily plucked out of the contexts in which God has placed him in this world. The Stoics declared the world outside of man to be adiaphoron, whereas the Pietists easily declared it to be forbidden ground. In both cases the development of man, directed towards creation with his senses — nay, with his whole being — is stunted.

NO ADIAPHORA

After this excursion into history, it is time to come to a judgment concerning the question whether or not there are such things as adiaphora. It is clear enough that the Scriptures do not give a specific command for very many actions. God gave man the mandate to fill the earth and to subdue it and rule over the animals (Genesis 1:28). But little is written concerning *how* such things are to be done. Man was forbidden to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; but he had the freedom to make a choice of all the other fruits (Genesis 2:16f.). In the New Testament dispensation, the believer can marry, but he can also do without it (I Corinthians 7). He can eat meat and other foods, but he can also abstain from them (Romans 14; I Corinthians 8 and 10). Certain days can be kept, but one can also let them pass by (Romans 14:5f.). The one thing can be good, the other can be better (I Corinthians 7:38). The “better” presumes that there is no question of an imposed imperative. Not to marry can be better than to marry, but to marry is better than to burn (I Corinthians 7:9). In any case, it is clear that a man cannot appeal to a special, concrete revelation from God even in very important decisions which he takes in his life, and apparently is allowed to find his way in freedom.

Each argument, with or without the term adiaphora, which resists the legalism that would force all of life into a strait-jacket, legitimately appeals to the Scriptures, when it asserts that there are very many things neither expressly forbidden, nor expressly commanded.

But does this mean that these are *adiaphora*? A sort of neutral zone in which sovereign man can make his own decisions? That cannot be maintained by anyone who confesses that God is sovereign, while man stands under the law of God (Matthew 22:37ff.; I Corinthians 10:31) during all his life, from the largest to the smallest decisions. The most insignificant thing is also a part of the broad context of our lives and for that reason it can never drop out as something “neutral.” In that regard the Pietists are right. The conclusion to be drawn, therefore, is that *the term adiaphora has to be rejected*.

Adiaphora were defined above as things and actions which can neither be called good nor evil. The term, though, is unusable with regard to “things” as well as “actions.” While discussing the Stoics it became clear what kind of a wrong view of God’s creation lay at the basis of the lexical usage which employs the term adiaphora. Man places himself autonomously above and outside the creation, in which he designates some things as adiaphora. The Scriptures, however, speak differently. That can be nicely illustrated with Romans 14:14, where Paul says that “nothing is unclean in itself.” Here, Paul is abstracting “in itself.” But he does not end up with an argument for adiaphora. “Viewed in themselves,” in his eyes things have neither a good nor a bad character but are simply “not unclean.” And he is convinced of that in the Lord Jesus, just as he is convinced in another letter that every creature is *good* and that nothing is to be rejected, if it is accepted with thankfulness; for it is sanctified by the Word of God and by prayer (I Timothy 4:4f.). “Viewed

in itself" there is, therefore, *nothing* unclean or neutral for anyone who knows Christ, but rather everything is *good*: The earth is the Lord's and everything in it (I Corinthians 10:26; Matthew 28:18).

DON'T REDUCE IT TO RELAXATION

Therefore, we have a lot of freedom in our activity, even though it is always a freedom in Christ. The terrain of our freedom must not be reduced to the sector of relaxation. The freedom of the Christian reveals itself in every aspect of his life — not only when he is joking around, but also when far-reaching decisions have to be made.

It is an important decision in someone's life whether he will marry or not. Whoever does not do so even though he does receive the opportunity should be able to account for that before God. And whoever does marry should be able to do the same. But in neither of the two cases is there concrete instruction in the Scriptures. There is just as little concerning the choice of a spouse. We read that whoever finds a wife, finds a good thing, and obtains favour from the Lord (Proverbs 18:22). But that woman must, nonetheless, be sought out by the man. In searching, he will certainly take into account certain guide-lines which the Scriptures give. He knows too that in this case "working" should not take place without "praying." Very clearly it is not an adiaphoron. But it is also very clearly acting in freedom, in which no special revelation from God will make known to the young man: this woman and no one else.

Precisely the same thing can be said about the choice of a career. Upbringing and education can send a person in a particular direction; but in many cases there is a certain amount of latitude in which a personal choice is what counts. That choice can be far-reaching and determines the course of a whole life. Also in this case, a person's freedom does not just concern peripheral matters of his life.

The term adiaphora should be rejected. But not the matter which is often defended with it: the matter of Christian freedom. Only, we must not reduce that freedom to the area of relaxation, but extend it to all sectors of life, even to the most momentous decisions which we make.

THAT WHICH IS ALLOWED

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) wanted to avoid speaking about adiaphora, but instead about *that which is allowed*. However, he felt that the term did not belong to the discipline of ethics, but rather to jurisprudence. There one has to take "the allowable" into account.

A judge can by no means juridically sentence everything that ought to be condemned ethically. Let me give an example: If I wilfully smash my valuable wrist-watch on the street, a judge could not prosecute me even though the act itself was ethically censurable. There are all sorts of activities which belong to the area of one's private life, of thoughts and ideas, where the judge

does not intervene. Both in his verdicts and in society he has to take many imperfections into account which he might find fault with ethically, but which he cannot punish juridically.

It seems to me that we can also talk about the allowable in the field of ethics. It has to do with our mutual contact, in which we must not be too quick to judge that what we do ought to be done the same way by others as well. We have in mind those things about which Christians are not in agreement, without the one being able to clearly condemn the other on the basis of the Scriptures. Someone might be convinced that his actions are according to God's will. Perhaps he feels that the other is acting contrary to God's will. But even then he does not always have the right to condemn the other.

With the term "the allowable" it is certainly not possible to cover the whole terrain of Christian freedom. For the term "the allowable" would sound rather grudging considering the countless decisions in which man may joyfully give form to his creative freedom. We use the term "the allowable" in cases in which we *regret* our differences. Even in the most harmonious community, there are things which we have to declare *allowable*. We must allow them without applauding.

ONCE AGAIN: DISCERNING WHAT IS BEST

It would be well to simply dispense with the term *adiaphora*. Why should we choose such a weak and negative term, when it concerns our freedom? Whoever experiences his freedom as *Christian* freedom, will never again want to stand on terrain where he has nothing to do with good and evil and where he alone is the boss. Or to say it more elegantly: where he is autonomous. In all freedom we know that we remain bound to Christ. That is also implied in Philippians 1:9f., a text encountered earlier. There, Paul prays that our love might abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment in order to approve *what is excellent*. In the Greek it says "in order to discern the *diapheronta*." In his *Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, W. Bauer points out that *diapheronta* are the opposite of *adiaphora*.

Even with a knowledge of the Scriptures, a Christian does not automatically know everything that he must know in order to make all sorts of decisions. For that he has to receive knowledge and discernment in order to be able to discern what is right. That is, as stated earlier, not to his shame but to his honour. There is nothing "neutral" in his life, for his whole life has been claimed by Christ. Philippians 1:10f. says, what matters is being pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. *That is decisive* — in career and marriage, in work and play, in great and small things. Even though work remains work and play remains play. *Everything* has its place in the life with Christ.

The Christian life does not thereby become a heavy load, in which everything must be reasoned out in a Christian way and all spontaneity disappears. Pietism (at any rate, in particular forms) makes it difficult "to do anything else

than clandestinely relax and enjoy life," as W.J. Aalders puts it. And he refers to Kierkegaard who so pleasantly sketches the butcher, "who simply does his work and lives in the joyful awareness of being in God's service."³¹

This joy is carried by the faith that we are justified. We no longer need to earn our own sanctification in a forced, grim sort of way.

³¹ W.J. Aalders, *Handboek der Ethiek*², Amsterdam 1947, 420.