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Making Room: Freedom in Non-Essentials in the
Multiracial Church

By

Michael Anthony Campbell

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor Of Ministry

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Dr. Gregory Perry, Faculty Advisor

Dr. J. Nelson Jennings, Second Faculty Reader

Rev. D. Christopher Florence, Dir. of D.Min. Program



Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine how congregants in one southern multiracial church utilize adiaphora to foster multiracial inclusion. In the Deep South, the vestiges of racism continue to plague the body of Christ, resulting in a racially, culturally, and socioeconomically divided church. The literature reviewed in this study focused on a biblical and theological understanding of adiaphora, systems theory, specifically dealing with conformity and differentiation, and multiracial dynamics, also dealing with conformity and differentiation. This study utilized a qualitative case study with semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data gathering. The data was analyzed using the constant comparative method. Eight members in good standing representative of the distinct demographic segments of Diverse Church, a congregation located in a city in the Deep South, were interviewed. The review of literature and analysis of the eight interviews focused on three research questions which guided this study: What do congregants consider to be matters of adiaphora? What has influenced congregants' views on matters of adiaphora? In what ways do congregants practice adiaphora as a means of racial-cultural inclusion?

This study concluded that cultural differences and a lack of understanding between diverse peoples are great hindrances to the pursuit of the multiracial church. The racial history and continual vestiges of racism in the Deep South exacerbate this. Cultural competency is critically important in forging healthy cross-cultural relationships, but more is needed especially when racial hostility and suspicion previously defined those relationships. Learning how to appropriate the category of adiaphora to make room for diversity is an additional tool for fostering greater acceptance. As churches apply

adiaphora to specific issues which have perpetuated racial division and encouraged homogeneity, opportunities could be provided for healthier and more gracious discussions allowing for inclusion of greater diversity. This study concluded that several specific areas are relevant here: partisan politics, worship styles, and some theological concepts like baptism. These, and others, continue to divide African Americans and Caucasians in the Deep South and work to prevent healthy multiracial churches.

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Scripture taken from THE HOLY BIBLE, ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Edward Gilbreath, the editorial director for Urban Ministries Incorporated and the editor at large for *Christianity Today* magazine,¹ was the first African American on the staff of *Christianity Today*. In his book *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity*, he tells the story of taking his kids, DeMara and Daniel, on a weekend trip to the park. Daniel was an outgoing child of about three years old. At the park, Daniel tried to befriend two older white boys, but when one of them saw this, he yelled at Daniel that he didn't want to play with him. When Edward heard this, he called for his son to come over and play with his sister DeMara. He recalls,

Daniel was having none of that. "I'm going to play with my friends here," he told me. And he did. Though the little boys coldly ignored him at first, Daniel smiled and kept pushing his way in, until eventually the little white boys were playing with him too.... The social construct of race meant nothing to him. He simply wanted to play tag with these two new friends he met in the park. To him, every child he saw at the park was his friend.²

Daniel's persistence in making friends across racial lines with boys who did not want to play with him is admirable, but it is also unusual. This is especially true in the context of the church. When people are not welcomed in the church, they are unlikely to return. This reality is intensified when race is a factor.

¹ Edward Gilbreath, *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 183.

² Ibid.

In the Deep South, the vestiges of racism and “a racialized society” still plague the church.³ In the book *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, two leading sociologists on race and Christianity, write, “A racialized society is a society wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships.”⁴ This is particularly true in the Deep South and has resulted not only in a divided white and black church, but also in churches that are as distinct culturally as they are theologically. Emerson and Smith interviewed one Christian Reformed man who told them, “I think the whole concept of blacks and whites worshipping together is great, but how can you do that when you feel so uncomfortable?”⁵ This sentiment is exacerbated because of the racial history of the Deep South.

Nonetheless, the multiracial church is one means to overcome this history. Not only does it promote a more unified and biblical model for the church, but it also helps to foster a new and brighter future in the South. Jesus prayed to his father in John 17:20-21, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”⁶ The multiracial church, as a witness to this oneness, is one means of proclaiming the savior who can radically change

³ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 122.

⁶ John 17:20-21.

this world. But the question remains as to how to grow and sustain a healthy multiracial church in the Deep South.

Problem Statement

In *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States*, sociologist Michael O. Emerson with Rodney M. Woo, who serves as senior pastor of Wilcrest Baptist Church, a thriving multiracial congregation in Houston, Texas, conclude that a multiracial congregation is “one in which no one racial group comprises 80 percent or more of the people.”⁷ This means that twenty percent of the church must be racially different than the largest racial group. In their opinion, twenty percent constitutes the point of critical mass at which the minority group’s presence will be felt.⁸

Kathleen Garces-Foley, who specializes in contemporary American religious life with a research focus in multiracial churches, believes this 80/20 racial split has limitations. One, in particular stands out: “...the 80/20 definition pays attention only to demographics and does not take into consideration the dynamics of interaction within the congregation.”⁹ She continues,

Besides having demographic diversity, multiethnic churches must find ways to affirm diversity while still building a sense of shared community. One word that captures both of these goals well is inclusion. When people think about joining a church, they often think in terms of being included. They ask “is this a place where I will be accepted for who I am with my complex identity and unique cultural practices?” If inclusion is the key quality that makes a multiethnic church, then we could use it to define the “successful” or ideal multiethnic church as follows: *the multiethnic church is an inclusive, ethnically diverse community*.¹⁰

⁷ Michael O. Emerson and Rodney M. Woo, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 35.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Kathleen Garces-Foley, *Crossing the Ethnic Divide: The Multiethnic Church on a Mission*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 82.

¹⁰ Ibid., 83.

Garces-Foley believes that the willingness and ability to include the unique cultural identities of congregants is as significant to a church's multiethnicity as distinct ethnic group representation. The multiethnic church has to be both "diverse" and a "community," according to Garces-Foley. The "successful" or "ideal" multiethnic church isn't simply a congregation of differing races or ethnic groups, even if the 80/20 split is reached. It is vital that acceptance, inclusion, and community are forged alongside demographic and cultural diversity. In their book *United by Faith : The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*, Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim speak of this as the "integrated multiracial church," compared to the "assimilated multiracial church" or the "pluralist multiracial church."¹¹ They describe how the integrated multiracial congregation is the rarest of the three, but they argue that it is the theological ideal.¹²

The integrated multiracial church has aspects of the separate cultures represented in the body, but also utilizes real community and inclusion to forge a new culture that springs from that unique congregation.¹³ The authors write, "The integrated multiracial congregation has developed a hybrid of the distinct cultures that have joined together in one church. Elements of different racial cultures are not incorporated to 'appease' diverse constituencies; rather, the new hybrid culture is an expression of the congregation's unified collective identity."¹⁴ In other words, differing cultures are both present and

¹¹ Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 164-69.

¹² Ibid., 168.

¹³ Ibid., 165.

¹⁴ Ibid., 168.

valued, not simply tolerated, to the extent of being appropriated by others to form something new and unique to that context.

The two most common ways that multiracial church practitioners have pursued this goal are racial reconciliation and cultural competency. Both are important. African American New Testament scholar Jarvis J. Williams, in his book *One New Man: The Cross and Racial Reconciliation in Pauline Theology*, looks at racial reconciliation within the context of God's reconciling work through Christ. He agrees that a church could be racially diverse without any real sense of genuine acceptance or inclusion.¹⁵ He believes that the pursuit of racial reconciliation will promote this. His definition of racial reconciliation is biblically derived and helpful:

Humanity's relationship with God and with fellow humans is broken because of the sin introduced into God's good creation through the disobedience of Adam and Eve. As a result of sin, every relationship needs to be restored to the original state in which God intended before sin entered the creation. All races – not just blacks and whites – scattered throughout the entire world need to be reconciled first to God and second to one another because of the universal impact of sin. This restoration is called reconciliation. As it relates to the restoration of broken relationships between different races, it refers to racial reconciliation.¹⁶

What makes Williams' definition so useful is the way he includes racial reconciliation as a specific aspect of the gospel's reconciling work between sinful human beings and a holy God, and sinful human beings with one another. For the Christian, racial reconciliation isn't primarily a sociological reality as much as a gospel imperative. Because sin produces brokenness along racial lines, the gospel should restore and reconcile relationships along those same lines.

¹⁵ Jarvis J. Williams, *One New Man: The Cross and Racial Reconciliation in Pauline Theology* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 134.

¹⁶ Ibid., 3.

George Yancey, in *Beyond Racial Gridlock: Embracing Mutual Responsibility*, talks about how many in the racial reconciliation movement have taken secular concepts of racial reconciliation and “spiritualized” them.¹⁷ This has resulted in four prevalent models for racial reconciliation: 1) colorblindness, which attempts to ignore race, 2) Anglo-conformity, which attempts to assimilate minorities into the dominant culture, 3) multiculturalism, which emphasizes the value and culture of minorities, and 4) white responsibility, which locates racial problems completely within the white majority culture.¹⁸ Yancey believes that each of these models is deficient in one way or another and encourages a fifth model that he describes as the mutual responsibility model. He writes, “The mutual responsibility model creates an atmosphere in which people of all races are free to explore their fears without undue judgment.”¹⁹ He desires the church to be a safe place for people who are racially-culturally different to honestly explore their differences and even their racial pain without resistance or negative repercussions.²⁰

Raleigh Washington and Glen Kehrein, early pioneers in the racial reconciliation movement, describe seven principles for racial reconciliation. Three are very significant in promoting a safe environment for racial reconciliation to take place in the church. The first is sensitivity, which involves being intentional in acquiring knowledge about people of another race.²¹ The second is being sacrificial or willing to relinquish perceived status

¹⁷ George A. Yancey, *Beyond Racial Gridlock: Embracing Mutual Responsibility* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Raleigh Washington and Glen Kehrein, *Breaking Down Walls: A Model for Reconciliation in an Age of Racial Strife* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 156.

to facilitate racial reconciliation.²² The third is empowerment, which uses repentance and forgiveness to give a person of another race confidence in the relationship.²³

Washington and Kehrein also deal with the issue of cultural competence or intelligence as an aspect of racial reconciliation when they discuss the need for sensitivity. They write, “Assumptions get relationships into trouble, and both white and black make assumptions about each other... Understanding keeps relationships out of trouble. Understanding one another across racial lines can rid us of faulty assumptions.”²⁴

Soong-Chan Rah is a multiracial church pastor and professor of church growth and evangelism. In his book *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing World*, he discusses how typical it is for those in the minority culture to have much more knowledge of the majority culture than the other way around. He writes, “Those who are a part of the majority culture have the luxury of ignoring the culture of others, since the dominant culture is the majority culture. On the other hand, ethnic minorities are keenly aware of their minority status and are alert to potential cultural insensitivities.”²⁵

Mark DeYmaz, the founding pastor of a multiracial and economically diverse church in Arkansas called Mosaic Church, and an expert on the multiracial church, makes this conclusion about cultural competence in the multiracial church:

To build a healthy multi-ethnic church, then, we must commit ourselves to the pursuit of cross-cultural competence, whether that means becoming proficient in the idiosyncrasies of language or the ins and outs of customs and traditions different from our own. Once acquired, cross-cultural competence allows us to

²² Ibid., 185.

²³ Ibid., 197.

²⁴ Ibid., 163.

²⁵ Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010), 20.

interact in a more informed and effective way with others of varying ethnic or economic backgrounds.²⁶

According to DeYmaz, a healthy multiracial church cannot exist without cross-cultural competence. Any church, and certainly the multiracial church, must foster an atmosphere where people are able to effectively interact and connect with others in the congregation. When people come from distinctly different cultural backgrounds, this makes this task particularly difficult unless there is congregational willingness to listen and learn about others. Therefore, the pursuit of cultural competence is a requirement for the multiracial church.

Racial reconciliation and cultural competence have been discussed extensively in the religious community, and both are critical to the success of the multiracial church. However, there remains a gap in the research regarding the role that *adiaphora* (freedom of conscience in non-essentials) can have in advancing and sustaining racially-culturally diverse inclusion in the local congregation. George Yancey talks about the need for a safe environment where people of differing races will feel accepted and able to be themselves.²⁷ This must involve more than simply tolerating people of differing races. Kenneth A. Mathews and M. Sydney Park teach Old Testament and New Testament respectively at Beeson Divinity School. In their recent book *The Post-Racial Church: A Biblical Framework for Multiethnic Reconciliation*, they write, “The church preaches this message of racial unity in the midst of political, social, and economic trends that create,

²⁶ Mark DeYmaz and Leadership Network (Dallas Tex.), *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church: Mandate, Commitments, and Practices of a Diverse Congregation*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/John Wiley, 2007), 96.

²⁷ Yancey, *Beyond Racial Gridlock: Embracing Mutual Responsibility*, 133.

foster, and perpetuate racial hatred.”²⁸ These things that so often divide the world must not divide God’s people. Recognizing that many of these are matters of adiaphora may aid in preventing some of this division.

Michael J. Meiring engages significantly in discussions related to the church’s unity. He makes a helpful distinction between essentials and non-essentials in *Preserving Evangelical Unity*. Essentials are those doctrines and practices that must be accepted by all Christians. Non-essentials (adiaphora) are not unimportant or irrelevant. However, they are not doctrines, practices, or ways of thinking that must be accepted by all Christians.²⁹ The ability to recognize and put in their proper place things adiaphora or non-essential to either salvation or church unity must become a more significant part of the discussion on the multiracial church. Otherwise, the societal and cultural trend towards divisiveness and side-taking on the matters the Bible considers to be non-essential will continue to guide the church’s behavior in negative and unbiblical ways.

Mike Slaughter, a pastor in Ohio, and Charles E. Gutenson, a seminary professor, have written on the church and politics. They make the point that because white evangelicals have so closely identified evangelical Protestantism with conservative partisan politics and have become captured by the group polarization of homogeneity, it is very easy for them to make non-essentials to the church’s unity essential.³⁰ They ask the questions:

²⁸ K. A. Mathews and M. Sydney Park, *The Post-Racial Church: A Biblical Framework for Multiethnic Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2011), 212.

²⁹ Michael J. Meiring, *Preserving Evangelical Unity: Welcoming Diversity in Non-Essentials* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 12.

³⁰ Michael Slaughter, Charles E. Gutenson, and Robert P. Jones, *Hijacked: Responding to the Partisan Church Divide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 13.

Why is it, then, that we have allowed political partisanship to enter so deeply into our churches? And, perhaps more important, how is it that we have allowed those differences to divide us, to create obstacles among us, and to have created an environment in which one or the other can be somehow considered less a “follower of Jesus” simply on the basis of one being the supporter of a particular political party or ideology?³¹

These questions highlight how many evangelicals unwittingly embrace a standard of unity for the church, partisan politics, which goes far beyond any scriptural mandates.

Without the voices of differing opinions, which heterogeneity offers, these questions will continue to confront the evangelical church. Political ideology will remain a test, even if unspoken, of biblical fidelity.

In the Deep South, because of the racial divide that remains, which pragmatically results in both unchallenged and unquestioned homogeneity, the questions posed earlier by Slaughter and Gutenson about partisan politics could equally apply to cultural issues and ecclesial traditions. In other words, within the homogenous settings of the Deep South, cultural assimilation and conformity to specific church practices can become the criteria for full inclusion (even if not specifically for membership). The doors are always open, but people must conform to the majority culture to be truly welcomed. This will likely pressure those from minority cultures to relinquish cultural distinctives in order to assimilate into the church’s stated or unstated norms. Because of this, a better understanding of the concept and practice of *adiaphora* within the church could be an additional and powerful resource to the development of more successful multiracial churches in the Deep South.

³¹ Ibid., 42.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to determine how congregants in one southern multiracial church utilize adiaphora (freedom of conscience in non-essentials) to foster multiracial inclusion.

Primary Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What do congregants consider to be matters of adiaphora?
2. What has influenced congregants' views on matters of adiaphora?
3. In what ways do congregants practice adiaphora as a means of racial-cultural inclusion?

Significance of the Study

This study adds to the growing research on the multiracial church an additional category for promoting inclusion and acceptance within a diverse racial setting.

Adiaphora explores those areas that are non-essentials as regards the biblical unity of the church. This doesn't mean the non-essentials are unimportant, especially to the person who feels strongly about the issues involved, but that they are non-essential to unity. By understanding more clearly what non-essentials are, the church could thus work towards unity in the context of much more broadly considered areas of diversity, because that very diversity is not of the essence of the faith.

Of course, determining what is essential and non-essential will remain highly debatable and controversial, especially among Bible-believing Christians in the Deep South. But adding this way of thinking to the research on the multiracial church can only help multiracial church pastors and leaders to better foster a safe environment in the

church for Christians to be together and to be themselves. Knowing that there are essentials on which the church will always stand, as well as non-essentials regarding matters of culture, politics, church practice, and even some theological issues, will help congregants to welcome people more freely and to help “the other” or “the newcomer” to feel accepted and not judged. This will be significant for pastors who find themselves in any diverse setting anywhere in the world, but it will be particularly helpful in the Deep South where divisions of race, culture, politics, and theology remain strongly entrenched.

Definition of Terms

Deep South – Those areas of the southern United States most delineated by southern culture where a significant history of slavery and racial segregation and oppression influenced both society and the church. This includes Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

Multiracial Church – Any church that has a significant presence of differing racial groups to the extent that no one racial group dominates in leadership, ways of thinking, or practice. “Multiracial” is being used instead of “multiethnic” because of the continual sociological realities of race in the Deep South.

Adiaphora – This means freedom of conscience in non-essentials, or, more literally, things indifferent. It concerns matters that are not essential to the faith, meaning not necessary to one’s salvation, to a believer’s sanctification, and to the unity of the church. A believer has freedom of conscience in matters that are adiaphora as long as the exercise of this freedom doesn’t harm a weaker Christian.

Differentiation – This is the capacity of a person or group to individualize or hold to one's unique cultural identity while at the same time genuinely connecting with those who are different or culturally other.

Racial-cultural – These are the unique ways that cultural realities are shaped by and defined by distinct racial groupings and histories. This may include but is not limited to life patterns and interests, church practices, political ideologies, and how one perceives and responds to the broader currents of American society.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to determine how congregants in one southern multiracial church utilize adiaphora to foster multiracial inclusion. To provide a foundation for this research, three areas of literature were reviewed. Each area, in its own way, addresses matters of sub-cultural identity within the context of a larger social culture. How do sub-cultures differentiate their distinctives flexibly enough to identify with wider social forces? These three areas include: biblical/theological literature on adiaphora; systems theory in congregations and organizations, specifically focusing on differentiation and conformity; and multiracial dynamics in congregations and organizations, also specifically focusing on differentiation and conformity.

Biblical and Theological Framework on Adiaphora

Introducing Adiaphora as a Philosophical, Biblical, Theological Category

The word adiaphora comes from the Greek meaning “things indifferent.”³² Stoic philosophers used this term in relation to actions they considered morally neutral, which meant they were neither good nor bad.³³ Pauline scholar Will Deming, an expert on early Greco-Roman culture, states:

The Stoics held that everything in existence was either a “good thing” (*agathon*), a “bad thing” (*kakon*), or an “indifferent thing” (*adiaphoron*). Because they used “good” as equivalent of “morally beautiful” (*kalon*), good things, or simply

³² Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 4.

³³ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 25.

“goods,” for the Stoics consisted of virtue and all things that “participated” in virtue. Although they envisioned virtue as a unified whole, they often spoke of four cardinal virtues with many sub-virtues below these. Thus goods consisted of virtues like discernment, prudence, courage, and justice, and things that participated in virtue like true joy, cheerfulness, and confidence. Bad things were the opposite of good things, consisting of vice...and all things that participated in vice. Everything else in the world was an “indifferent.” Thus, indifferents were neither virtue nor vice, nor did they participate in virtue or vice.... If an indifferent had an appreciable amount of positive value, the Stoics called it a “preferred indifferent.” An appreciable amount of disvalue earned it the title “rejected;” or “avoided indifferent;” and an indifferent whose value was insignificant was inconsequential.³⁴

Stoics, therefore, classified as *adiaphora* all things that were neither virtue or vice, but then further differentiated things *adiaphora* as to be preferred, rejected, or truly insignificant based upon perceived value or lack thereof. Early Christian origins scholar Everett Ferguson clarifies what this means using Stoicism’s founder, the third century philosopher, Zeno:

He further divided the indifferent things (*adiaphora*) into two groups: things preferred (e.g., family, house, health) and things not preferred. In between are the truly indifferent things that make no difference at all in life (e.g., whether the number of one’s hairs is even or odd). When asked on what basis some things are preferred, the reply was that they must have something to do with life.³⁵

Stoicism held that there were virtues (to be always pursued), vices (to be always avoided), and things *adiaphora* (the relative value of pursuit was both debatable and questionable). The truly indifferent things, according to scholar James L. Jaquette, in his scholarly work on the Apostle Paul’s use of *adiaphora*, are “such...things [that]...neither

³⁴ J. Paul Sampley, *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 384-85.

³⁵ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2003), 359-60.

benefit nor harm, and they contribute nothing to the goal of life which is, in Stoic thought, happiness.”³⁶

The term *adiaphora* is not found in the New Testament, but that does not mean some form of the idea isn't present in the text. There is much scholarly debate as to whether Paul specifically used Stoic categories concerning *adiaphora*. It goes beyond the purview of this dissertation to delve into the intricacies of this discussion, however, the following statement by Will Deming concerning Paul and indifferent things is helpful:

For an author to be “influenced” by a particular stream of thought can mean many things. From Paul actively seeking out Stoic expressions for their potential rhetorical impact on his audiences, to his inadvertently using a phrase that was introduced into the Greek language centuries before him, there is a long and subtle continuum of “influence”. As far as I know, no scholar has been so rash as to argue that Paul was a Stoic or studied under a Stoic teacher, but this does not rule out the many other possibilities for Stoic influence on Paul.... Paul may have been influenced by Stoic thought regardless of whether he attended a Stoic lecture or met a Stoic. How profound this influence was on Paul – is another matter, and something scholars will need to debate, and perhaps for some time. But this is no reason to gainsay the presence of “influence” in the first place.³⁷

Deming's point is that there could have been some Stoic influence on Paul, even if only implicitly. Whether this is true or not, and to what degree, the potential Stoic influence on Paul and others remains debatable. Regardless of one's opinion, this does not undermine the biblical evidence that Paul and other apostles availed themselves of a form of *adiaphora* as a category for decision making, which helped them to work through many thorny issues in the New Testament church.³⁸

³⁶ J. L. Jaquette, *Discerning What Counts: The Function of the *Adiaphora* Topos in Paul's Letters*, SBL Dissertation Series (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 8.

³⁷ Sampley, *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, 387-88.

³⁸ Jaquette, *Discerning What Counts: The Function of the *Adiaphora* Topos in Paul's Letters*, 97-98.

In its biblical and theological usage, adiaphora would involve more than simply indifferent things judged against the Stoic concepts of virtue or vice. Reformed scholar Donald McKim describes it as “elements of faith regarded as neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture and thus on which liberty of conscience may be exercised.”³⁹

Calvinist theologian Richard A. Muller, in the *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, would agree but adds the following:

Only those things [are] indifferent that do not impede the gospel but rather serve the glory of God and the good of the church. True adiaphora are things neither commanded nor forbidden by the Word of God and which, therefore; concern matters that can be decided in the church by the mutual agreement of the members. Adiaphora usually fall into the domain of practice and not the domain of doctrine or conscience.⁴⁰

Things adiaphora are matters that are not clearly commanded nor forbidden in scripture, which, for the sake of the gospel, the good of the church, and the glory of God, are treated as indifferent or non-essential. Direction on these matters can be decided through mutual agreement by the church itself.

Biblical Framework for Adiaphora

Because the preaching of the gospel went from Jerusalem to all Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth as Jesus commanded in Acts 1:8, the church was forced very quickly to discern what was or was not essential.⁴¹ Many New Testament scholars consider this verse to be programmatic for all of Acts. New Testament scholar Ben Witherington III would agree but also adds, “It is programmatic in the sense that it alludes to a worldwide mission, and probably also to a mission to both Jew and

³⁹ McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 4.

⁴⁰ Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 26.

⁴¹ Acts 1:8

Gentiles...”⁴² This means the gospel spread, and was supposed to spread, in a diverse cultural and religious environment with a long history of hostility and animosity between Jews and Gentiles. Hence, as biblical scholar Wayne A. Meeks states, “The question on what terms Gentiles would be admitted to the Christian movement was a divisive one....”⁴³ The church had to work through significant ethnic, religious, and cultural differences while seeking to maintain both the its purity and unity.

Several New Testament passages address this ongoing reality. In Acts 15, a meeting was called in Jerusalem with the significant pillars of the church to specifically discuss Gentile inclusion. Their final decision is enlightening in any discussion of adiaphora. James, the brother of Jesus, said in Acts 15:19-20, “Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.”⁴⁴ When James mentions not troubling the Gentiles who turn to God, he is referring to the desire on the part of some Jewish leaders that all Gentile Christians be circumcised. In fact, this religious ritual was at the core of Jewish religious and ethnic identity. Witherington expresses the heart of this Jewish concern with a question, “If Gentiles are acceptable to God by grace through faith without circumcision or keeping of the Mosaic Law, if they are becoming part of the people of God without such things, then where does that leave the ethnic exclusiveness of

⁴² Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998), 111.

⁴³ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 111.

⁴⁴ Acts 15:19-20

various aspects of Judaism?”⁴⁵ The simple answer is that it is relativized or becomes a matter of indifference. New Testament scholar Darrell L. Bock comments on this text, “James argues that the Gentiles who turn with faith to God should not be burdened with issues of the law.... No obstacle should be put before them.”⁴⁶

It would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of circumcision in first century Judaism. Yet, the Jerusalem conference categorized it *adiaphora* or non-essential to one’s salvation and to inclusion among the people of God. God saved the Gentiles by grace through faith just as he did the Jewish people. Earlier in Acts 15:9, the Apostle Peter said, “[God] made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.”⁴⁷ Circumcision must not be imposed as a standard of salvation or inclusion. At the same time, by calling Gentiles to abstain from certain practices that were both sinful (sexual immorality) and matters of conscience (blood), the council communicated that freedom of conscience in non-essential matters does not mean the freedom to sin or to cause other believers to stumble.

In his book *Thirty Years That Changed The World*, British theologian and researcher Michael Green summarizes the significance of what occurred at this meeting in Jerusalem in the following way:

The same love and unity that kept them in this astonishing racial and cultural mix also made them determined not to be defeated by the enormous differences between conservative Jerusalem Jews and way-out secularist Gentiles who had joined the church. Hence the vast significance of Acts 15 and its epoch-making conclusion. Nothing must be allowed to compromise the truth that Jesus Christ alone is the salvation of sinners. Nothing else could ever be required but what he, the God-man, had provided through his incarnation, atonement and resurrection.

⁴⁵ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 459-60.

⁴⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 505.

⁴⁷ Acts 15:9

Therefore it was essential that circumcision not be demanded of Gentile Christians. On the other hand, the church must stay recognizably united. Therefore Gentile Christians must make their contribution to unity. They must be willing voluntarily to forego eating meat which had been offered to idols, meat from which the blood had not been drained, and immorality.... The precise details of the Apostolic Decree (15:19-21) are still hotly debated, but the underlying principle is clear.⁴⁸

That principle entails putting aside that which is non-essential for the sake of the unity of the church. Theological essentials and standards of holiness must always be guarded, but there are matters of adiaphora which believers must be willing to lay aside in order to foster genuine fellowship with Christians who differ culturally.

Later, Paul writes in Romans 14:1-6:

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.⁴⁹

These six verses are part of a larger section in Romans that most likely ends in verse 13 of chapter 15.⁵⁰ What makes this passage crucial to this discussion is not simply Paul's usage of adiaphora to promote freedom of conscience in non-essentials, but how he uses it to encourage the unity of the church. Witherington comments, "What Paul offers is...not simply a treatment of 'things indifferent,' adiaphora. Unity of the fellowship

⁴⁸ Michael Green, *Thirty Years That Changed the World: The Book of Acts for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2004), 196.

⁴⁹ Romans 14:1-6

⁵⁰ Ben Witherington and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 325.

could hardly be described as an indifferent matter. But how does one achieve unity without insisting on uniformity?”⁵¹ Paul seeks to answer that question by demonstrating how believers can hold differing opinions on non-essentials and remain unified.

In *Christian Liberty: A New Testament Perspective*, New Testament scholar James D.G. Dunn agrees:

Have not individuals the right, the liberty, to eat meat if they so choose, or to abstain from eating meat if they so choose? Is this what the issue addressed by Paul was about? The answer is No! And the danger is that by thus modernizing the issue and fitting it into the agenda of the modern liberal society we miss the heart of what was at stake for Paul and the implications for Christian liberty.... The threat to Christian community is...clear. One section actually questions the Christian standing of another. Their definition of what Christianity is, and what it means to be a Christian, is tighter, includes more elements among the fundamentals of the faith.... To meet this threat Paul proposes the solution of Christian liberty.⁵²

Dunn clarifies that Paul’s discussion of Christian liberty in Romans 14 shouldn’t be viewed through a modernist grid as a value in itself. Paul is dealing with matters adiaphora to him, but he’s doing so for the sake of the church’s unity in the midst of great cultural diversity.

Paul wants the church to welcome those who hold to beliefs that he, even as a Jewish Christian, considers non-essential to faith, like what one eats and the observance of certain days. Debate continues as to who constituted the weak and the strong in the Roman church, but New Testament commentator Thomas R. Schreiner, in his commentary on Romans, argues the following:

The “weak” in Romans were attracted by Jewish food laws and were concerned about whether particular foods were “clean” and “pure.” It is likely that the weak abstained from certain foods because they were considered to be ritually defiled

⁵¹ Ibid., 326-27.

⁵² James D. G. Dunn, *Christian Liberty: A New Testament Perspective*, The Didsbury Lectures (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1994), 83, 93.

according to the OT law....Disagreement still exists among...scholars on the nature of the situation addressed.... The theory that the “weak” were primarily Jewish Christians and that the “strong” were primarily Gentile believers is the most plausible.⁵³

If Schreiner is correct that the weak, in this instance, are primarily Jewish and the strong are primarily Gentile, that would mean that Paul, a former Jew, had come to view some things that would have been essential to him prior to his conversion to Christianity, as now indifferent. Therefore, his views would have aligned with the strong, but it is important to also realize that he’s actually fighting for the full participation and inclusion of the weak in the life of the church, including those with strong religious scruples (even though those things are adiaphora to him). Witherington writes, “...Paul identifies with the strong to a certain degree in terms of the freedom issue, but he also wishes to defend the weak. He does not want the weak to despise the strong or the strong to look down on the weak.”⁵⁴

Schreiner gives some insight into what may have motivated Paul to come to this conclusion. He begins by asking:

How can Paul tolerate such diversity in the community? I have already argued that the “weak” did not claim that one must observe certain days and abstain from various foods in order to gain salvation. Paul would have resisted passionately such a position. Verse 6 [of Romans 14] provides a clue as to why Paul tolerated both the “weak” and the “strong.” Those who assign significance to certain days do so “for the Lord.” Those who feel free to eat any and all foods eat “to the Lord.” Conversely, those who refrain from eating are said to abstain “to the Lord.” What matters to Paul, since no absolute moral norm is involved in the issues at hand, are not the specific behaviors practiced but the motivation that informs the behavior. Those who set aside special days do so in order to please the Lord. Those who eat all things do so “to the Lord.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 706-07.

⁵⁴ Witherington and Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 327.

⁵⁵ Schreiner, *Romans*, 719-20.

When the essentials of the faith are not being denied, and when there are no biblical or moral standards being compromised, people have freedom if what they do is done to the Lord. This is a biblical application of the adiaphora principle. It doesn't end there, however. The church must furthermore be willing to accept those who differ on these kinds of things.⁵⁶

The body of Christ must always guard against non-essentials dividing its fellowship. The risk of schism in the Roman church was real. Witherington comments:

“...Paul was quite convinced that there were significant divisions in Rome that needed to be overcome, and... they largely fell along the lines of the ethnic division in the church there. Furthermore, the divisions especially involved the marginalizing of the Jewish Christians. So Paul must offer a strong exhortation to the dominant Gentile Christians to welcome, receive, be hospitable to, and not offend the weaker Jewish Christians, who have more scruples about food and observance of days.⁵⁷

Gentile believers, the dominant group in Rome, had to welcome and love their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ who held onto their cultural and religious scruples. They could not marginalize those fellow believers. Likewise, though, Jewish believers had to consider these same scruples to be somewhat indifferent to guard against potential judgmentalism towards a majority Gentile church.

Catholic New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson makes contemporary application to what Paul is doing in this passage:

In a very real sense, Paul is engaging here the issue that is in the present day referred to as multiculturalism. How can people share a certain unifying community identity without having to lose completely their particularly cultural heritage? Which differences divide and disable the community and which ones should be celebrated as enriching it? How much diversity can a specific

⁵⁶ Ibid., 716.

⁵⁷ Witherington and Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 327.

community tolerate before it disintegrates? And how can the community discern which practices are essential to its life and which ones are not?⁵⁸

Paul allows for diversity in matters of opinion on non-essentials for the sake of the unity of the church and the proclamation of the gospel in the multicultural world of the first century.

Paul repeatedly uses *adiaphora* in similar ways regarding food sacrificed to idols, Jewish food laws, circumcision, and observance of holy days. 1 Corinthians 8:8-9 is representative: “Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.”⁵⁹

The cultural context behind Paul’s instruction was one where temples served meals in which the meat offered had been sacrificed to one of the gods. Witherington says in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, “Several temples in Corinth had dining rooms where feasts were held on many occasions, including birthdays. Temples were the restaurants of antiquity.”⁶⁰ Some Christians continued to eat in the temples. In addition, even at dinners in private homes, the meat served would often come from the temple because it would have been the only meat the host could afford.⁶¹ As Christians of

⁵⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, Reading the New Testament Series (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2001), 212.

⁵⁹ 1 Corinthians 8:8-9.

⁶⁰ Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 188.

⁶¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Paul through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 239.

differing opinions on the appropriateness of eating this meat interacted with one another, this risked the spiritual health of both the church and individual believers.⁶²

The stronger believers felt free to eat this meat, but the weaker believers did not. New Testament scholar and commentator Gordon D. Fee is helpful in identifying the struggle of the weak in Corinth. He states the following in his commentary on 1 Corinthians:

They could not cope with the dissonance between their heads and their hearts, as it were, which would ultimately lead them back into idolatry and thus destroy them. In this way their moral consciousness is being “defiled,” that is, their past associations with idols mean that a return to the worship of the god by eating in his/her honor causes them to defile their new relationship with Christ.⁶³

They knew there was only one God, but this truth had not been so fully assimilated into their hearts that they were totally immune to potential spiritual harm from associating with the idols of their pagan past. Duke Divinity School professor and New Testament scholar Richard B. Hays elaborates, “Some members of the fledgling church are so accustomed to thinking of the idols as real that they cannot eat the idol meat without conjuring up the whole symbolic world of idol worship; they are dragged back into the world and so defiled.”⁶⁴

Paul responds to all of this by affirming that food is not something that will commend one to God. It does not, in itself, help or hurt. There is liberty here. This is a matter of adiaphora. However, the exercise of adiaphora in this instance must always be weighed against the interests and well being of others. New Testament scholar David

⁶² David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 378.

⁶³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1987), 381.

⁶⁴ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Pbk. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 141.

Garland comments, “Their knowledge leads to their liberty to act as they please, while love, by contrast, leads to giving up rights for the sake of others.”⁶⁵ In other words, giving up one’s freedom is necessary for the inclusion of others and the promotion of a beneficial environment for spiritual growth. Witherington says something similar, “Paul does not dispute that the Corinthians have a right to eat such food, so far as the food is concerned.... He had come to the view that food was morally and religiously neutral.”⁶⁶ Yet, earlier he says this, “For Paul, community is primary and what is good for community should guide conduct.”⁶⁷ This is another Pauline example of how believers are to handle matters of adiaphora in relation to forging community and church fellowship.

Paul deals with a similar kind of situation a few chapters later in 1 Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 10:23-32: “All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For “the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.” If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience- I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else’s conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks? So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 386.

⁶⁶ Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*, 199.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁶⁸ 1 Corinthians 10:23-32.

Richard Hays describes this passage as “...Paul’s affirmation of Christian freedom in matters that do not compromise the glory of God.”⁶⁹ However, even though it is clear that one has liberty of conscience in non-essential matters like eating meat offered to idols, the well being of the community of believers and even unbelievers should help to determine how adiaphora is exercised.

In his work on Paul’s use of adiaphora, James L. Jaquette summarizes the apostle’s thoughts on this:

For Paul people, both believers and non-believers, make claims on the conscience, not things. The meat at a pagan friend’s dinner table is an adiaphoron and as such can be eaten. Eating on such occasions is not forbidden as idolatrous behavior. Believers should not make food a matter of concern in these contexts. With the exception of participation in cultic meals believers may eat meat without investigating its origin. But when the source of the meat is identified as sacred by “someone” for whatever reason, then the Christian is obliged to act out of consideration for another (v. 24). This does not change the character of the meat; it is still an adiaphoron. But it does modify the believer’s understanding of freedom in regard to an adiaphoron.... The conscience of the informant is key.... A believer is to abstain from eating meat out of consideration for another person’s conscience.⁷⁰

The way a Christian exercises liberty in matters of indifference, whether it involves consumption of a particular type of meat or other things, should always be considered in relation to that action or view’s impact on the fellowship of believers and the proclamation of the gospel. Liberty must be checked by relationships and informed by the gospel.

Liberty must also be directed to the glory of God. Gordon D. Fee believes that when Paul says in verse 31, “whatever you do, do all to the glory of God,” he is expanding his discussion to include all imaginable adiaphora. Therefore, all adiaphora is

⁶⁹ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 180.

⁷⁰ Jaquette, *Discerning What Counts: The Function of the Adiaphora Topos in Paul's Letters*, 151-52.

to uphold the glory of God. Fee continues, “One’s whole life must be to God’s glory.... Certainly Paul intends that this ‘rule’ dictate the appropriateness of behavior as well. What is not, or cannot be, for God’s glory probably should be excluded from ‘whatever you do.’”⁷¹ This means that the ultimate motivation for how believers use adiaphora, whether in the context of personal liberty or for church unity, is that it glorifies God.

God’s glory is His excellence and praiseworthiness set forth on display, and consequently, creation’s response to his glory in appropriate doxology and praise.⁷² According to theologian John Frame, “We are God’s image, and so he wants us to reflect back the glory shining out of him. When that reflected glory shines from us, back to him, we become more like God: both God and we have glory shining out of us.”⁷³ By connecting the pursuit of God’s glory and adiaphora in 1 Corinthians 10:31, Paul makes it clear that adiaphora is not primarily about personal liberty or freedom of conscience, but about glorifying God by putting on display, through the church’s pursuit of unity in diversity, what God has done in Christ to make the church one. Jesus said in John 17:10, “All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them.”⁷⁴

Two passages in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, 2:11-14 and 5:1-16, also make this point.

Galatians 2:11-14: But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along

⁷¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 488.

⁷² Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology*, The Master Reference Collection (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 271-72.

⁷³ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2013), 1009.

⁷⁴ John 17:10.

with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"⁷⁵

Through the example and implicit approval of Cephas' (Peter's) initial fellowship with Gentile believers in Antioch, and Paul's bold challenge of Peter when he withdrew from their fellowship, it is clear that at the time, kosher food restrictions were considered adiaphora to Jewish Christians. These dietary practices (or the lack thereof) neither hindered inclusion of nor prevented full fellowship with Gentile believers in Christ.

Biblical scholar Ronald Y.K. Fung comments, "...At the time of Peter's visit it was already an established custom in the Antioch church for Jewish and Gentile believers to enjoy free table-fellowship with one another, apparently on an equal footing which knew no conditions or restrictions."⁷⁶ It seems Peter easily fit into this pattern because he already considered those things that would have continued to divide Jew from Gentile outside of Christ to be adiaphora. This was clearly Paul's view as well, according to Fung, who notes, "That Paul found Peter's behavior thoroughly agreeable (as v. 12a implies) indicates that the two apostles were one in their general attitude towards the incorporation of Gentile Christians into the Church."⁷⁷ Believing in Christ brought Jew and Gentile together and allowed Jews to view what was once essential to them before Christ (observing ceremonial laws) as adiaphora.

When the delegation from James arrived, however, Peter broke fellowship with his fellow Gentile believers. In discussing how Paul confronted Peter over this,

⁷⁵ Galatians 2:11-14.

⁷⁶ Ronald Y.K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 107.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Witherington writes, “What Paul is trying to do is bring out the implications of Peter’s actions for the Gentile Christians whose table fellowship he has now forsaken. If all the Jewish Christians withdraw from having table fellowship with Gentile Christians then, in Paul’s view, the unity of the body of Christ could not be preserved.”⁷⁸ Peter and others viewed Jewish food laws as adiaphora for the sake of Jew and Gentile table fellowship. To break fellowship because of pressure from the circumcision party would explicitly undermine the unity believers found in the gospel. This means Peter had freedom to fellowship with Gentiles believers by viewing Jewish food laws as adiaphora, but he did not have freedom to withdraw from that same fellowship. Such behavior struck at a matter that was not adiaphora – the unity of the church in the gospel.

Consequently, according to Paul, there are times when the wrong use of adiaphora can result in grave theological error. This is what New Testament scholar Richard Longenecker points out in his commentary on Galatians. He concludes that once Peter withdrew from fellowship with the Gentiles, which he may have thought he had liberty to do, this was no longer a matter of adiaphora.⁷⁹ As a Jewish Christian, Peter had the freedom to put down things that would have previously been of cultural and even religious weight to him in order to move towards Gentile Christians. But he did not have the freedom to withdraw from these Gentile Christians based upon reestablishing these cultural/religious categories. Longenecker says, “Peter’s withdrawal of fellowship turned them into matters of great theological import. And so Paul dealt with Peter’s action not as

⁷⁸ Ben Witherington, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1998), 158.

⁷⁹ Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 79.

an incidental or secondary difference between believers but as a direct threat to ‘the truth of the gospel,’ whether so intended by Peter or not.”⁸⁰

Biblical scholar and theologian Scot McKnight elaborates, summarizing Paul’s concerns in his commentary on Galatians:

In its essentials, the event reveals a Peter who, in the normal course of affairs, was willing to shed the identifying markers of Judaism (food and table restrictions), perhaps even circumcision and Sabbath observance, to enjoy a new-found fellowship with Gentile Christians, but who also abandoned such a stance when “certain men came from James” (2:12). The sharing of a common meal was a visible and socially powerful symbol of the new slogan Paul was teaching his young churches: “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:28). But this symbol was publicly damaged by Peter’s behavior. Paul finds this behavior change not only ‘hypocritical’ (in the sense of contradictory) but also theologically wrong and dangerous. This latter point is important.... [Paul] sees theological danger. It is proper, when with Jews, to live like a Jew in order to reach such people. But, *when with Gentiles*, living like a Jew is wrong. Furthermore, making Gentiles live like Jews (especially when that very person has himself lived like a Gentile) is abominable behavior. Peter was demonstrating a different gospel by his reversed behavior: a gospel that mixed conversion to Christ with conversion to nationalistic Judaism. That is why Paul needed to confront Peter.⁸¹

It was right, and even strategic for kingdom advancement, for Peter to relinquish some of his Jewish cultural preferences as *adiaphora* to move towards Gentiles, just as it would have been wise to embrace those preferences (still as *adiaphora*) in ministering to Jews. It was theological error, which undermined the gospel, to pull away from Gentiles out of fear, thus treating a gospel reality (unity of Jew and Gentile) as if it were *adiaphora*. *Adiaphora* is a category that must be used for the unity and inclusiveness of the church brought about through the gospel. It must not be used to divide what the gospel has unified. When used in that way, it becomes a threat to the gospel.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Scot McKnight, *Galatians: The NIV Application Commentary from Biblical Text...to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 99-100.

Galatians 5:1-6: For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.⁸²

In this passage, Paul makes it clear that things that are adiaphora (circumcision in this instance) must not be made essentials of the faith. Fung writes, “Union with Christ Jesus (literally being ‘in Christ Jesus’), says Paul, makes circumcision and the want of it matters of no religious importance; they are, indeed, totally irrelevant in the realm of the Christian life.”⁸³ It is being in Christ that makes circumcision, and many other Jewish religious practices, adiaphora. Paul wants believers in Galatia to know that they are now free from these things because Christ has set them free. McKnight says, “Freedom is something that Christians know about, that Christians enjoy, that Christians experience, and that the Judaizers have not known, and cannot know, until they give up their hold on the law of Moses.”⁸⁴ Christians, therefore, cannot go back under the yoke of slavery as represented by circumcision. Believers in Christ are set free from this in order to be what God wants and to do what God wants.

Richard Longenecker elaborates on what Paul is doing in Galatians 5:1-12 when he says, “Most often Galatians is viewed as the great document of justification by faith. What Christians all too often fail to realize is that in reality it is a document that sets out a Christ-centered lifestyle – one that stands in opposition to both nomism and

⁸² Galatians 5:1-6.

⁸³ Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 228.

⁸⁴ McKnight, *Galatians: The NIV Application Commentary from Biblical Text...to Contemporary Life*, 245.

libertinism.”⁸⁵ People are not brought into the family of God by works of the law, but rather through faith alone in Christ alone. Therefore, Christians must never use the law like the so-called Judaizers were doing in Galatia – as a cultural/religious marker of acceptance. Christians are free in Christ from these things. These things are *adiaphora*. It is faith working through love, according to Paul, that ultimately counts. Yet, this was never intended to produce a lawless form of Christianity in which pleasing God no longer mattered. Witherington writes, “Faith is energized, flesh is put on bare bones believing, by loving actions. The consummation of faith is not found in doing works of the Mosaic Law, but by doing loving works of piety and charity.”⁸⁶ This love empowers relationships, acceptance, and genuine fellowship of diverse believers who have been made one through faith in Christ.

One other passage where Paul uses *adiaphora* in relation to the believer’s freedom and the church’s fellowship is the following:

Colossians 2:16-23: Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations- “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used)- according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Longenecker, *Galatians*, 235.

⁸⁶ Witherington, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians*, 370.

⁸⁷ Colossians 2:16-23.

Here, Paul challenges the forces of divisiveness and exclusion which had taken hold in the church in Colossae.⁸⁸ False teachers were attempting to deny and invalidate the freedom believers had in Christ regarding non-essentials (specifically concerning food, drink, and observances of special days and festivals). Accordingly, New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce says, "...At Colossae it is precisely Christian liberty that needs to be asserted in face of specious attempts to undermine it."⁸⁹

The gospel grants believers freedom in how they hold non-essentials, and this must always be guarded. In fact, James Dunn concludes from this passage that it is the cross itself which ultimately renders some things *adiaphora*, and these things must never be elevated to essentials of the faith. He writes:

Clearly what is envisaged is a situation where the Colossian believers were being (or might be) criticized for their conduct in respect of dietary rules and festival days. Equally clearly the line of reply is that a proper understanding of the significance of Christ's death would render such criticism unnecessary, irrelevant, or wrong. By implication those who made such criticism were themselves failing to grasp the significance of the cross.⁹⁰

When the atoning work of Christ is central to the life of the church, matters that may be considered important to some, but are not essential to the faith, should be appropriately categorized as *adiaphora*. There are many things that could rightly be considered important to biblical faith, but the cross of Christ must be central to everything. When

⁸⁸ Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 175.

⁸⁹ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 114.

⁹⁰ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 1996), 171.

this is understood, it can help to engender a wise usage of adiaphora, which will work to promote both harmony and inclusiveness in the church.

Each passage above deals with matters that Jews would have thought essential to their ethnic, cultural, political, and religious identity, yet Paul makes clear that these were matters of adiaphora in Christ. Therefore, they must not be forced on Gentiles as criteria to be fully welcomed into the church or to be viewed as fully mature Christians. Paul says that Gentiles are full members of God's new society, the church, rather than second class citizens. In Ephesians 2:11-19 Paul writes:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God....⁹¹

Paul’s vision for the church was of one spiritual household made up of both Jew and Gentile. New Testament scholar Frank Thielman comments, “Using as a starting point his concluding statement that both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians now have access ‘to the Father,’ he explains that Gentile Christians are full members of God’s

⁹¹ Ephesians 2:11-19.

household.”⁹² Accordingly, they are to act as one household, embracing and enfolding each other fully despite their cultural differences.

James L. Jaquette concludes, “Paul nurtures his communities by relativizing ethnic, social class and gender hierarchies.... The members of the Pauline churches are allowed enough leeway to join the movement without severing social ties.... Paul relativizes formidable worldly differences by evaluating them as *adiaphora* without discarding them.”⁹³ Richard Longenecker, in a chapter in the anthology *The Gospel to the Nations* entitled “What does it matter? Priorities and the *adiaphora* in Paul’s dealing with opponents in his mission,” agrees and makes some helpful points related to Paul’s understanding and application of *adiaphora*:

Paul was able to distinguish between the priorities of the gospel *and* the *adiaphora* (or, issues of relative indifference). There were in his mind at least two categories of concerns: (1) matters of central significance, which must be proclaimed forthrightly, applied to the lives of people appropriately and defended stoutly; and (2) matters of relative indifference, which were not to be confused with the central issues and about which one could be relatively flexible, even though one may have one’s own preferences. The genius of Paul was that he was able to make distinctions between the central priorities of the Christian gospel and the *adiaphora* in his mission, and to make them for the benefit of the gospel and the good of his converts....⁹⁴

Paul made distinctions between matters central to the gospel and matters *adiaphora*. He did this for the proclamation of the gospel and the unity and blessing of the church.

In addition, relativization of cultural differences becomes a means by which culture is valued and affirmed while guarding it from becoming ultimate or idolatrous in

⁹² Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 177.

⁹³ Jaquette, *Discerning What Counts: The Function of the *Adiaphora* Topos in Paul's Letters*, 180-81.

⁹⁴ Peter Bolt and Mark Thompson, *The Gospel to the Nations. Perspectives on Paul's Mission: In Honour of Peter T. O'Brien* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity; Leicester, UK: Apollos, 2000), 157.

the church. This is reflected in the eschatological portrait of God's people in Revelation 7:9. John beholds "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...."⁹⁵ A diverse group of cultures is clearly represented, yet they all stand submissively before the throne and the Lamb. New Testament scholar Craig S. Keener comments:

Many Christians today think that the gospel obliterates cultural distinctions (and sometimes expect Christians from other cultures to simply join their churches and assimilate into their "normal" cultural style of worship). But this text suggests that, far from obliterating culture, God takes what is useful in each culture and transforms it....⁹⁶

Using adiaphora to both value and relativize cultural differences promotes unity in the church and pictures that great eschatological reality where Christ will be preeminent and all cultures will be transformed to the praise of God.

In the Deep South, which has experienced pronounced segregation, adiaphora can offer an important resource for promoting racial, cultural, and political diversity and inclusion. Longenecker writes about adiaphora: "It needs to be the prayer of the church collectively and Christians individually today to ask God for such a gift.... 'Lord, teach us to be able to discern between the central priorities of the gospel and the adiaphora of contextualizing the gospel in our day....'"⁹⁷ When adiaphora becomes a matter of church prayer, it involves not only inclusion, but also spiritual maturity. The church is spiritually healthier when its standards for inclusion or exclusion into membership and leadership

⁹⁵ Revelation 7:9.

⁹⁶ Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 250.

⁹⁷ Bolt and Thompson, *The Gospel to the Nations. Perspectives on Paul's Mission: In Honour of Peter T. O'Brien*, 160.

are based upon the central priorities of the gospel and the fundamentals of its system of doctrine rather than adiaphoristic cultural differences.

Theological Framework for Adiaphora

The Formula of Concord

The theological framework for this study focuses primarily on the historic and contemporary reformed tradition, yet a concise discussion of historic Lutheranism's understanding of adiaphora is appropriate here. This is most clearly seen in the 1577 *Formula of Concord*, the last of the sixteenth-century Lutheran confessional writings.⁹⁸ According to church historian Carl R. Trueman, "The *Formula of Concord* is the result of struggles for the identity of Lutheranism after Luther's death in 1546."⁹⁹ Rival factions quickly emerged among Luther's followers represented by those aligned with Philip Melancthon, called Philippists, and the Gnesio (real) Lutherans. The Philippists were more open to ecumenism, with both Catholic and Reformed branches, while the Gnesio Lutherans took a strict line on both sacramental and doctrinal positions.¹⁰⁰ The *Formula of Concord* was written, in part, to end the controversies over the proper definition of Luther's teaching and legacy.¹⁰¹

Adiaphora is specifically addressed in Article 10. A strong position was taken to guard against the use of indifferent things during times of persecution as a way to undermine the truth of the gospel, Christian liberty, and to sanction idolatrous practices

⁹⁸ Hans Joachim Hillerbrand, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, 4 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 2:117.

⁹⁹ Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 116.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁰¹ Hillerbrand, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, 2:120.

and offend the consciences of the weak. Yet, adiaphora is clearly affirmed in the

Formula:

The ceremonies or church usages which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God, but which have been introduced solely for the sake of good order and the general welfare, are in and for themselves no divine worship or even a part of it.... We believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every locality and every age has authority to change such ceremonies according to circumstances, as it may be most profitable and edifying to the community of God. But in this matter all frivolity and offenses are to be avoided, and particularly the weak in faith are to be spared.¹⁰²

The *Formula* acknowledges circumstances that are neither commanded nor forbidden in the word of God, thus adiaphora, which can appropriately be used in the life of the church for good order and general welfare. These are not directly worship, must be handled with seriousness, and are not mandated in all situations or times.

The Reformed Tradition

Like Lutheranism, the reformed tradition has interacted significantly with adiaphora. The focus of what follows will be specific to a discussion of adiaphora in this tradition. It is appropriate, at this point, however, to briefly acknowledge the way scripture has often been misused in the reformed tradition to oppress people of color on the continent of Africa, the enslaved peoples of the Americas, and even in injustices of Jim Crow segregation in the Deep South. Historian Joel L. Alvis, Jr., in his work *Religion and Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946-1983*, points out, “St. Paul’s sermon in Athens recorded in Acts 17 contains only one of several texts used to justify segregation....”¹⁰³

In part, because of the history of misusing scripture in this regard, adiaphora is a

¹⁰² Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press, 1959), 493.

¹⁰³ Joel L. Alvis, *Religion & Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946-1983* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 2.

necessary and helpful category for the pursuit of cultural acceptance and inclusion into what has been historically closed to people of color. This has resulted, in some instances, in an unacknowledged and elitist cultural majority which compels conformity and assimilation for full inclusion. The category of adiaphora is one helpful means of addressing this reality.

Calvin on Things Indifferent

In *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the Protestant reformer John Calvin discusses Christian freedom in regards to “things indifferent.”¹⁰⁴ He writes, “Regarding outward things that are of themselves ‘indifferent,’ we are not bound before God by any religious obligation preventing us from sometimes using them and other times not using them, indifferently.”¹⁰⁵ Because of his historical setting confronting the superstitions and idolatry of the Roman Catholic Church, Calvin discussed “things indifferent” at this point in the *Institutes* specific to “eating of meat, use of holidays, and of vestments....”¹⁰⁶

However, he did say more than this in connection to adiaphora in the *Institutes*. In addressing the believer’s response to church constitutions in Book 4 he writes the following:

...It behooves me to declare that I approve only those human constitutions which are founded upon God’s authority, drawn from Scripture, and, therefore, wholly divine. Let us take, for example, kneeling when solemn prayers are being said. The question is whether it is a human tradition, which any man may lawfully repudiate or neglect. I say that it is human, and it is also divine.... By this one example we may judge what opinion we should have of this whole class. I mean that the Lord has in his sacred oracles faithfully embraced and clearly expressed both the whole sum of true righteousness, and all aspects of the worship of his

¹⁰⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 838. (Pagination runs straight through the volumes.).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 838.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 839.

majesty, and whatever was necessary to salvation; therefore, in these the Master alone is to be heard. But because he did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (because he foresaw that this depended upon the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages), here we must take refuge in those general rules which he has given, that whatever the necessity of the church will require for order and decorum should be tested against these. Lastly, because he has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the upbuilding of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones.... Love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe.¹⁰⁷

Calvin believed there are certain things which are not directly taught in the word of God, and are hence unnecessary for salvation or the upbuilding of the church, that people in different nations and times will approach in varying ways and come to divergent conclusions. These would be *adiaphora*. In these instances, the call to love must be the guiding principle.

In his commentaries, Calvin also addresses topics that could be considered *adiaphora*. His exposition of the Apostle Paul's words in Romans 14-15 acknowledges the reality of ethnic and cultural differences and how potential discord could best be handled.

It is very probable that this happened especially at that time; for the Churches were formed of both Jews and Gentiles; some of whom, having been long accustomed to the rites of the Mosaic law, having been brought up in them from childhood, were not easily drawn away from them; and there were others who having never learnt such things, refused a yoke to which they had not been accustomed. Now, as man's disposition is to slide from a difference in opinion to quarrels and contentions, the Apostle shows how they who thus vary in their opinions may live together without any discord; and he prescribes this as the best mode, that they who are strong should spend their labor in assisting the weak, and that they who have made the greatest advances should bear with the more ignorant.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 1207-08.

¹⁰⁸ Jean (John) Calvin, *Commentaries*, 22 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 19:491-92.

Calvin concedes differences of opinion based upon ethnic, cultural, and religious matters. In fact, by calling them opinion, he places them in the category of adiaphora and affirms with Paul that there should be acceptance of those who hold these kinds of differences. This must not disrupt the church, so he makes clear that the strong should expend themselves in pursuing and welcoming the weaker Christian.

Calvin continues this line of thinking in his commentaries on other New Testament passages that focus on adiaphora. In his comments on 1 Corinthians 8:8-9 regarding how Christians should view meat used in pagan temples, he writes, “In the sight of God it matters not what kinds of food we partake of, because he allows us the free use of them, so far as conscience is concerned; but that this liberty, as to the external use of it, is made subject to love.”¹⁰⁹ Calvin is clearly stating that Christians have liberty concerning things indifferent, but he also insists that the exercise of this liberty is subject to the mandate of love. He puts it this way in commenting later on 1 Corinthians 10:23: “Paul declares that he does not by any means call this [liberty regarding adiaphora] into question, but he replies, that we must have a regard to edification.”¹¹⁰ Again, the fellowship and spiritual growth of the church matter in how one appropriates adiaphora.

Calvin further explores how the church should handle matters deemed adiaphora in his comments on Peter withdrawing from table fellowship with the Gentiles in Galatians 2:11-14. He writes:

Paul accommodated himself to the Jews no farther than was consistent with the doctrine of liberty; and therefore he refused to circumcise Titus, that the truth of the gospel might remain unimpaired. But Peter Judaized in such a manner as to

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 20:281.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 20:341.

“compel the Gentiles” to suffer bondage, and at the same time to create a prejudice against Paul’s doctrine.... [Peter] was more desirous to please than to edify, and more solicitous to inquire what would gratify the Jews than what would be expedient for the whole body.... Paul, out of Christian zeal, opposed the sinful and unseasonable dissimulation of Peter, because he saw that it would be injurious to the Church.... For the sake of the Jews, Peter had withdrawn himself from the Gentiles, in order to drive them from the communion of the Church, unless they would relinquish the liberty of the Gospel, and submit to the yoke of the Law.... This shows us how cautiously we ought to guard against giving way to the opinions of men, lest an immoderate desire to please, or an undue dread of giving offense, should turn us aside from the right path.¹¹¹

Calvin affirms the danger to the church and the gospel itself when matters adiaphora are made standards of fellowship. When the church refuses to uphold and even fight for liberty in things adiaphora, this harms the church by excluding believers of different opinion unless they conform or, even worse, by allowing non-essentials to take subtle precedent over the gospel.

Puritan Debates on Adiaphora Related to the Church and Worship

Historian Francis J. Bremer, in his *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction* writes, “Puritanism did not begin as a distinct faith but as a reform movement within the Protestant Church of England in the sixteenth century. Puritans were Christian men and women who sought to shape their lives in accordance with God’s will.”¹¹² Systematic theologian and Puritan scholar Joel R. Beeke further elaborates when he defines Puritanism in his book *Meet the Puritans*: “The term *Puritan* was first used in the 1560s of those English Protestants who considered the reforms under Queen Elizabeth

¹¹¹ Ibid., 21:63.

¹¹² Francis J. Bremer, *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.

incomplete and called for further ‘purification’ (from the Greek word *katharos*, ‘pure’).”¹¹³

As such, when speaking of English Puritanism, a primary objective for them was the continual reform of the Church of England, guided by the word of God. Beeke states, “Puritanism was at its core a concern to search the Scriptures, collate their findings, and apply them to all areas of life.”¹¹⁴ Leland Ryken, an English professor who authored the book *Worldly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were*, put it this way: “Puritanism was a movement in which the Bible was central to everything.”¹¹⁵

Puritans did debate adiaphora with fellow Church of England churchmen, but unlike those theologians and ministers, Puritans fell much more on the side of scripture’s direct role in both shaping and regulating the polity and worship of the church. British pastor and author Iain Murray, who has written broadly on the Reformed faith and Puritanism, in a chapter in *Puritan Papers Volume Three: 1963-1964*, edited by theologian J.I. Packer, makes this point:

The Puritans claimed that the Scriptures are not only a full revelation of the Gospel of Christ but also that they contain all things necessary for the government and worship of His Church. They believed it to be a fundamental principle that just as no spiritual teaching is to be accepted which is not found in Scripture, so nothing of spiritual significance is to be added to the Church beyond what is warranted by the written Word. This principle- *the regulative principle of Scripture*, as it was later called- they held to be bound up with the Bible’s own teaching about its authority and upon the basis of this principle they laid down their whole policy for the reformation of the Church in two major propositions: 1. Everything introduced into the Church without scriptural sanction is unlawful. 2.

¹¹³ Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), xv.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xvii.

¹¹⁵ Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1986), 13.

The form of the visible Church in the New Testament is permanently binding upon all generations of Christians.¹¹⁶

Puritans had a very high view of the authority of scripture, and this determined what was lawful and unlawful in the church. Ryken further comments, “There is a sense in which the foremost issue of the Puritan movement (as of the Reformation in general) was the question of authority. The Puritans resolved the question of authority by making the Bible the final authority for belief and practice.”¹¹⁷ This meant that the scriptures were sufficient to determine how the church worshiped and how the visible church was to be formed. “The Puritans’ attitude was a logical outgrowth of their view of biblical authority. For the Puritans... the Bible was a complete and sufficient authority for all of life, not simply in matters pertaining to personal salvation.”¹¹⁸ Because both worship and church polity were matters of great spiritual weight, handled unequivocally in the Bible, Puritans felt God’s word alone had to regulate them.

Murray goes on to point out, however, that loyalist Church of England theologians differed significantly with the Puritans on this:

Against these propositions (Puritan Regulative Principle) the defenders of the Elizabethan Church settlement, notably John Whitgift (c. 1530-1604) and Richard Hooker (c. 1554-1600), formulated two counter-propositions: 1. They alleged that Puritans had misconceived the intention of Scripture: while the Bible is binding in all matters relating to salvation, it did allow liberty to the Church to introduce “things indifferent” (*adiaphora* was the technical term), that is to say, things which were not forbidden by Scripture and things which Christian prudence might suggest to be beneficial to the government or worship of the Church in certain circumstances. 2. They denied that the pattern of the New Testament Church was permanently obligatory on the grounds that the information which the Scriptures give us on this subject is *not* sufficient, as the puritans claimed, but incomplete

¹¹⁶ J. I. Packer, ed., *Puritan Papers*, 2-5 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2000-2005. (D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones edited vol. 1 and library catalogs reflect that.)), 3:23.

¹¹⁷ Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were*, 13.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

and indecisive, suggesting that Christ did not intend any one form of Church government to be of Divine authority.¹¹⁹

Murray's point is that Whitgift, Hooker, and others made a distinction between things specific to salvation, which they would have considered clearly taught in the Bible and essential, and things indifferent, which were areas of liberty. Furthermore, they did not view the form of the New Testament church as prescriptive for all ages. Hence, Puritans and Church of England theologians disagreed profoundly on how much the Bible was to overtly shape the life and practices of the church. Ryken says, "The Puritans operated on the... principle of seeking biblical warrant for church practices.... Puritan insistence on biblical warrant for church practices was part of their larger critique of tradition as an adequate authority for religious belief."¹²⁰

It would be overly simplistic, however, to assume that the Puritans thought the Bible spoke to every detail concerning the church's life, such that there was no place whatsoever for discussions related to non-essentials or indifferent things. Puritanism's main debate with the Church of England loyalists focused on the fact that Puritans believed the Bible taught more than just what was necessary to salvation. Thus, they felt that Whitgift and others were in grave error by judging non-essential those things in the Bible not specific to salvation, which the loyalists then took as areas of liberty on which the church could rule. Murray writes the following:

To the Puritans, Whitgift was trying to maintain a distinction which could not be maintained. And they regarded their opponent's habit of discriminating between essentials and nonessentials as a dangerous procedure.... The fact that a man may be defective in knowledge and practice, and yet be saved through being on the foundation which is Christ (which Puritans held), provided no warrant for

¹¹⁹ Packer, *Puritan Papers*, 3:23-4.

¹²⁰ Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were*, 113.

dividing up Scripture into essentials and nonessentials – placing rules concerning the visible church in the second category....¹²¹

Puritans agreed that there are biblical teachings which must be considered foundational truths without which a person cannot be saved. This, consequently, means that a person can be a Christian while being in error on certain things because that believer rests firmly on the gospel of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the Puritans argued, this should in no way lead one to divide up what is and is not essential in the Bible when all that the Bible speaks to is authoritative and, in some way, essential because it is God's word.

Accordingly, a Puritan understanding of adiaphora could not be based upon assessing whether certain things in the Bible are essential or non-essential. Using the seventeenth century Scottish Presbyterian and Puritan George Gillespie, Iain Murray demonstrates three things that had to be affirmed for Puritans to consider something adiaphora. First, it had to be only a circumstance (not substantial, which meant something natural and not of moral or spiritual significance) when it came to worship or the church. Secondly, church leaders could only prescribe rules or ordinances concerning things that had not been determined already by scripture. Only those could be considered indifferent. And thirdly, when the church prescribes rules in this way, good reasons must be given as to why this is done for the satisfaction of tender consciences.¹²² Puritanism then undergirded this with the following strictures: indifferent things must still have reference to God's glory; they should not be a stumbling block or cause spiritual harm to others; and they must never work against the peace and purity of God's people.¹²³

¹²¹ Packer, *Puritan Papers*, 3:28-9.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 3:38.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 3:39.

In other words, only those things about which the scripture does not speak could be considered adiaphora. Indeed even then, to the Puritan, decisions must conform to the above criteria and never contradict the clear teachings of scripture. The seventeenth century theologian John Owen's position on adiaphora in worship, as described in Reformed theologian Sinclair B. Ferguson's book, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, pictures the norm. Ferguson writes, "It would be wrong therefore, Owen asserts, for the Christian to look for express commands for all the practices of the worshipping community. Nonetheless, the approach to the so-called '*adiaphora*' should still be governed by the application of general biblical principles, and not merely by natural reason."¹²⁴ Therefore, the Puritans believed that there are narrowly defined areas of adiaphora in the church's polity and worship. But even in those instances, when decisions need to be made, it is critical that church leaders make them based upon biblical principles to the extent that is possible.

Westminster and Adiaphora

The Westminster Assembly convened on July 1, 1643 and over the next three years produced the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.¹²⁵ The assembly included 151 members who were predominantly teachers and pastors, together with thirty laymen. They were all Calvinists but consisted of moderate Episcopalians (who mostly declined to attend out of loyalty to the king), Presbyterians (the largest group), Congregationalists or Independents (who supported Oliver Cromwell), and a small group of Erastians (who

¹²⁴ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 157.

¹²⁵ John H. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1973), 29-30.

held that church discipline was to be carried out with approval of the state).¹²⁶ This means the Westminster divines were broadly united theologically, but differed significantly in their views on church polity and politics.¹²⁷

Church historian W. Robert Godfrey, in the forward of an anthology on the Westminster assembly and the Reformed Faith entitled *The Faith Once Delivered: Essays in Honor of Wayne R. Spear*, places the Westminster Assembly in its political, social, and religious context. Godfrey writes:

In the midst of growing political and social turmoil – leading to civil war and the execution of a king – commissioners called by the English parliament began to meet in 1643. Over a period of years they worked in the precincts of Westminster Abbey in London to compose standards that they hoped would guide a newly reformed church in Great Britain. Their work was prodigious and profound, manifesting remarkable balance and solidity in light of the chaotic conditions that often surrounded them. The commissioners to this Westminster Assembly did not see themselves as religious revolutionaries, tearing down an old church to erect a brand-new one. They saw themselves as reformers who could at last bring the churches of England, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland into greater conformity to the Word of God, to each other, and to the Reformed churches of continental Europe.¹²⁸

Godfrey's point is that an important goal of the assembly, along with greater conformity to God's word, was greater unity among reformed churches throughout Great Britain and on the continent of Europe. However, because the environment surrounding Westminster was filled with social and political tension, as well as the great theological debates of the day, the divines had to wrestle with, and often misunderstood each other, when it came to

¹²⁶ Brian W. Kinney, ed. *The Confessions of Our Faith* (Clinton, MS: Tanglewood Publishing, 2012), xvi-xvii.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, xvii.

¹²⁸ Wayne R. Spear and Anthony T. Selvaggio, *The Faith Once Delivered: Essays in Honor of Dr. Wayne R. Spear*, The Westminster Assembly and the Reformed Faith (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2007), ix.

the place of toleration and liberty of conscience while pursuing doctrinal purity and unity.¹²⁹ Nonetheless, they did achieve this to a degree.

Church historian William S. Barker explains:

The two issues under debate in the area of church and state were those of toleration (largely between the Presbyterians and the Independents in the Assembly) and of the church's prerogatives in doctrine and especially discipline (largely between the Presbyterians and the Erastians in the Assembly and in Parliament). In the midst of these unusual historical circumstances the Westminster Assembly succeeded in maintaining two exceedingly important principles: (1) the integrity of the individual's conscience as subject only to Christ and the word of God and (2) the autonomy of the church in matters of doctrine and discipline.¹³⁰

In other words, the Westminster divines accomplished the extraordinary task of guarding the integrity of reformed dogma, including self-government of the church, while affording individuals liberty of conscience. These concepts are most clearly manifest in two parts of the Confession and are pertinent to the discussion of adiaphora.¹³¹

The first is found in the first chapter of the Confession, section six, entitled "Of the Holy Scripture," which states:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and

¹²⁹ W. M. Hetherington, *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*, Commemorative ed. (Edmonton, AB: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993), 330-31.

¹³⁰ J. Ligon Duncan, ed. *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, 4 (proposed) vols. (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2003-), 414.

¹³¹ Presbyterian Church in America, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms: As Adopted by the Presbyterian Church in America: With Proof Texts* (Lawrenceville, GA: Christian Education & Publications Committee of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2007), vii.

societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.¹³²

The Confession has a very high view of scripture and makes the positive affirmation that all that is necessary for God's glory and the salvation, faith, and life of men and women is expressly given in God's word or can be derived from it by good and necessary consequence. Commenting on what the Westminster Divines, particularly the Scottish divine George Gillespie, meant by this, biblical scholar C.J. Williams writes, "...The practice of deducing truth from the Scriptures is to be moderate and judicious; no deduction can be affirmed as doctrine if it is only possible or even probable. Only an objectively necessary deduction can be promulgated as biblical truth..."¹³³ The practice of inferring from scripture is necessary, but "interpretations [must] be tested objectively to determine whether they comply with what the Bible actually teaches."¹³⁴ The divines saw this as indispensable in protecting against potential distortions arising from private interpretations of scripture and binding the consciences of believers beyond what the word of God alone teaches.

In addition, this first chapter acknowledges that there are some circumstances in both the worship and the government of the church dealing with matters common to man where people, leaders, and churches must make wise decisions based upon both common sense and principles from the word. Theologian Robert Letham, in his work *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context*, speaks to this:

¹³² Ibid., 5-6.

¹³³ Spear and Selvaggio, *The Faith Once Delivered: Essays in Honor of Dr. Wayne R. Spear*, 176.

¹³⁴ R. C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: A Layman's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2006), 1:20.

There is a sphere where “the traditions of men” have a place; this corresponds to the fact that the Bible does not address everything, but those things necessary to disclose God’s glory and our salvation, faith, and life. Scripture does not cover each and every particular concerning the worship of God or the government of the church – there is a sphere for Christian liberty, according to the light of nature and the rules of Christian prudence, while all such areas are still to be governed by the principles set down in the Word. Far from requiring proof texts for everything in everyday life, the Westminster divines left large swathes of human actions to the general rules of justice, faithfulness, and truth. The gist is that there is nothing in the way of truth required by God to be believed or duty required of us to attain salvation that is to be added from any source other than what is revealed in Scripture.¹³⁵

There are matters within the worship of God and the governance of the church which are not explicitly addressed in God’s word. When this is the case, Christians have a measure of freedom in making decisions under the guidance of biblical principles, which would have to include the command to love, and the general rules of justice, faithfulness, and truth. Letham also clarifies that there are large areas of human activity where people will have to make decisions based upon numerous factors other than Bible. These are by necessity adiaphora, and much freedom should be allowed regarding potential differences of opinion found here.

This leads to the second statement in the Confession related to matters of adiaphora. Chapter twenty is entitled “Of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience.”

Section two states the following:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2009), 141-42.

¹³⁶ Presbyterian Church in America, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms: As Adopted by the Presbyterian Church in America: With Proof Texts*, 95-96.

Here the confession teaches that one's conscience is not to be bound by the opinions and traditions of men. Theologian R.C. Sproul writes, "To believe doctrines or obey commands that come from men, not from God, out of a sense of duty, is to betray true liberty of conscience and to destroy liberty of conscience."¹³⁷ One's conscience is to be bound by the word of God alone. Church historian D.G. Hart comments, "The first hedge on Christian liberty, then, is the Word of God. Those who enjoy the benefits of Christ's redemption do not have the liberty to disobey God's Word.... In other words, Christian liberty does not free the believer from religious responsibilities, only from ones that do not derive their substance from Scripture."¹³⁸ This means Christians have liberty in their thoughts, opinions, and practices if these are not taught directly in scripture (as required or prohibited) or by good and necessary inference derived from the clear teaching of scripture. These are matters which should be considered adiaphora.

Robert Letham makes a profoundly important point about this chapter and section of the Confession as it deals specifically with issues of inclusion without the binding of conscience. He states:

This chapter should be read... against the background of the recent repression under Archbishop Laud.... The liberty Christ has won brings deliverance from bondage to man. He alone has the right to determine what we should believe and how we should act. He alone is Lord of our conscience. We are thus freed from anything that is contrary to his Word. In matters of faith and worship, we are also freed from the obligation to follow commands that are additional to what he has revealed in his Word. In the context of the Laudian repression, this was a powerfully liberating statement. Indeed, Christians are prohibited from yielding their consciences to the whims of man. No one has the right to require blind allegiance. Such demands are contrary, not only to conscience, but to reason.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Sproul, *Truths We Confess: A Layman's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, 2:292.

¹³⁸ Spear and Selvaggio, *The Faith Once Delivered: Essays in Honor of Dr. Wayne R. Spear*, 286-87.

¹³⁹ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context*, 298-99.

The historical setting of repression indicates that the divines used the concept of Christian liberty as doctrinal justification for both religious and political acceptance in society without being forced to submit to the whims or traditions of men. According to the Confession, Christian liberty means believers should not allow their consciences to be bound or forced by manmade categories which are not clearly mandated or deduced from scripture, whether these be religious or other. Those things not derived from scripture, either directly or by good and necessary consequence, are matters of Christian liberty. They are, therefore, adiaphora.

Other Reformed Thoughts on Adiaphora and Christian Liberty

The nineteenth and early twentieth century Dutch reformed theologian Herman Bavinck deals with adiaphora both indirectly and directly in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. In the chapter “The Church as a Spiritual Reality,” he discusses the marks of the church by emphasizing the church’s unity and diversity in ways that would compel considerations of adiaphora. He writes:

Precisely because the Word [Scripture] is the mark of the church and there exists no infallible interpretation of that Word, Christ gave to everyone the freedom to understand that Word personally as he or she interprets it and to separate from bodies deemed unfaithful. Even though horrendous misuse can and has been made of this right of interpretation, we must respect it, and avoid the temptation to abolish that freedom. Undoubtedly the divisions of the church of Christ are caused by sin; at the same time because God loves diversity in unity, it is a mistake to reject all diversity in the church. As a parallel we believe that though the division of humanity into peoples and languages was occasioned by sin, it also has something good in it. From many races and languages and peoples and nations Christ gathers his church on earth.... While there are great differences in the purity of confessions and churches, and we must aim and strive for the purest, we must distinguish fundamental and non-fundamental articles of faith.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Herman Bavinck and John Bolt, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 604-05.

Bavinck makes several important points that have implications for understanding and using adiaphora. First, he respects the right and freedom each believer has to personally interpret scripture, which obviously can lead to misunderstanding. Yet, this freedom is necessary and should be promoted, even though it could produce some divergent views in the church. Bavinck also affirms the good of diversity within the unity of the church. Since people of diverse race and ethnicity comprise the church, differences should naturally be expected. Lastly, he makes a distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles of faith. This is in a chapter on the church's unity; hence, it is reasonable to conclude that non-fundamentals should not create division in the church.

It is important to note, however, that he does not describe non-fundamentals as indifferent things or adiaphora. In fact he writes, "With this we do not intend to foster indifferentism; nothing is indifferent in connection with 'the truth which leads to godliness' (Titus 1:1)." ¹⁴¹ Therefore, Bavinck differentiates between fundamentals and non-fundamentals, which are not adiaphora, and that which is truly indifferent or adiaphora. One such place is in his discussion of baptism. He sees both the mode and sponsors of baptism as adiaphora. He writes about mode: "Accordingly, baptism by immersion was the standard practice in the West, while sprinkling was less common.... Yet while immersion illustrates the meaning of baptism more clearly, the issue itself is a matter of adiaphora."¹⁴² Concerning those who present infant children for baptism, he writes the following:

Needed at this time were persons who professed faith in the place of the child and answered the usual questions; who acted, as it were, as bondspersons and

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 605.

¹⁴² Ibid., 668.

sponsors for the child and promised, on the basis of the child's baptism, to give the child a Christian upbringing. Lutheran and Reformed theologians *consider this to be a matter of adiaphora*, yet the Reformed especially stressed that in the first place it was the *parents* who should answer the baptismal questions and act as receivers and sponsors for their children....¹⁴³

For Bavinck, in the pursuit of the church's unity, some beliefs can be viewed as more or less fundamental. These should not be considered adiaphora because they are revealed in scripture for godliness. They may not be as clear as other teachings in scripture, but they should not be considered indifferent. However, he sees the mode and sponsors of baptism as adiaphora, an event in which one's conclusions really do not matter one way or another, even though both pertain to an important sacrament of the church.

More recently, in *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*, reformed theologian Michael Horton addresses topics relating to adiaphora, at least in connection to the church's engagement with racial and ethnic diversity. Horton accepts the reality of cultural conditioning even as he judges the Bible as normative, writing, "Each of us is conditioned in our hearing and reading of God's Word by our cultural-linguistic location. Nevertheless, the most decisive cultural-linguistic location... is... under the normative authority of his Word...."¹⁴⁴ Shortly afterwards, he adds:

The church originates not in human planning and organizations but in God's eternal election. Nevertheless, it is also a human institution, reflecting the circumstances of its varied times and places. Because the city of God is a cultural-linguistic system descending from heaven through the work of the triune God, a third-century African Christian confesses the same faith as a Twenty-first-century Asian or North American believer. This community is *constituted* by God's Word... even while being *conditioned* (for better and for worse) by the distinct cultures and societies it inhabits.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Ibid., 675.

¹⁴⁴ Michael Scott Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 201.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 204.

Horton does not specifically discuss adiaphora in this regard, but his appreciation of how cultural conditions influence people leads one to at least speculate on how considerations of adiaphora would be helpful and perhaps even necessary in the life of a culturally diverse church. Horton elaborates on the unique blessings and challenges this presents, writing, “Every racial barrier (beginning with the Jew/Gentile distinction), every socio-economic wall, every demographic profile and generational niche, and every political-ideological partition that defines this present age disintegrates as the rays of the age to come penetrate.”¹⁴⁶ Yet he does not deny the power or sway of these realities in shaping believers. He says, “In Christ, our personal identity is no more lost than his; rather, our personhood is redescribed, rescripted, redeemed, and renewed.... In the church the many remain, in all of their ethnic, social, and generational distinctiveness, yet in a communion of life rather than in a state of perpetual war.”¹⁴⁷ For this to be thoroughly lived out, what’s true for all, at all times, and what’s adiaphora must be determined.

A contemporary and colleague of Michael Horton, reformed theologian and ethicist David VanDrunen, addresses adiaphora in his handling of Christian liberty in his two kingdom theology. One does not have to agree with the tenants of two kingdom theology to appreciate his emphasis. He writes in *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms*, “If church officers cannot teach anything beyond what Scripture teaches, then they are unable to bind the consciences of Christians beyond how Scripture already binds it. Thus

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 846-47.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 849.

Christian liberty is maximized.”¹⁴⁸ He applies this to Christian political debates, an area of great division in the church, writing:

Scripture says nothing specifically about the concrete, specifically partisan, decisions that Christians must make about voting, party affiliation, details of public policy, or political strategy. These are... not decisions that one Christian can impose upon the conscience of another Christian. When Scripture is silent, there is no single Christian position.¹⁴⁹

Matters of social justice are obviously addressed in scripture, but even here, the appropriate response in handling these within a pluralistic and partisan environment requires flexibility and, at times, compromise to reach the most just ends. Christian people will come to different conclusions on how to best respond to issues of social justice. Allowing liberty here can guard the unity of the church while also permitting individual believers to follow their consciences regarding divergent solutions.

Picking up on the ways Christians differ on political matters, reformed theologian Wayne Grudem agrees with VanDrunen’s assessment. He writes, “Do I think that everyone who tries to follow the Bible will agree with my understanding of these [political] issues? No.... Many Christians... who accept the authority of the Bible might argue for alternative positions that they think are better supported from the overall teaching of the Bible.”¹⁵⁰ These may or may not be considered adiaphora, but elevating partisan public policy debates to essential status for church unity or inclusion denies both the liberty believers have in these matters and how difficult it is to determine exactly what the Bible teaches regarding these things. Grudem, in discussing his own political

¹⁴⁸ David VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 152.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 198-99.

¹⁵⁰ Wayne A. Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 18.

positions, says, "...I do not hold with equal confidence every position I support.... On some issues I think the overall teaching of the Bible is *clear, direct, and decisive*.... But a different evaluation of the facts might lead someone to a different conclusion about a certain policy."¹⁵¹

Presbyterian pastor Charles D. Drew, in his recent book on this subject entitled *Body Broken: Can Republicans and Democrats Sit in the Same Pew?* offers further clarity as to how the church should think through these things:

The institutional church (and the individual believer as well) must speak out on the standards and values that the King of the church loves. But the moment we move into the realm of strategy; the moment we begin to wrestle with just how we are to bring those standards and values to bear upon our culture; we must be careful, humble, and gracious with one another.¹⁵²

The church should stand for those things that matter to Jesus, which can only be known from God's word. Nonetheless, when the church or individual Christian seeks to make application to specific policy matters, there will be any number of factors that may cause people to disagree. Therefore, humility and grace must always be present in the church when dealing with politics. This could go a long way toward healing some of the strife that exists in the church today.

Following along with this, John H. Armstrong, another reformed pastor who is an expert on the topic of Christian unity, points out that even when scripture addresses a subject, whether politics or something else, certain things are simply less clear than others. This should always lead to both dialogue and humility in understanding what a particular text, doctrine, or standard means and requires. In other words, the conclusions

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 18-19.

¹⁵² Charles D. Drew, *Body Broken: Can Republicans and Democrats Sit in the Same Pew?*, 1st ed. (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2012), 95.

one derives from scripture may be highly debatable. He writes, “This requires a ‘hermeneutic of generosity.’ We must lovingly read Scripture together if we want to preserve a proper balance between unity and diversity.”¹⁵³ Even though difficult, this is definitely true on debatable and controversial topics. All may not agree, but at least when love and humility reign, better understanding or recognition of an issues’ complexity could be obtained. Grudem writes, “...I think we grow in our understanding by discussing and reasoning with one another (in a civil manner!).”¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, that being the case, “[The church] must be a place where one’s politics does not make him or her a second-class citizen, but rather a place where we can agree to disagree in the spirit of loving dialogue.”¹⁵⁵ This is equally true for many other matters of culture or race, common to all humanity, which are neither mandated nor forbidden in scripture.

The *Belhar Confession of Faith*, written by the Dutch Reformed Church in 1986, was adopted as a direct response to apartheid in South Africa.¹⁵⁶ It declares the following to be true: “...Unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God...”¹⁵⁷ Both scripture

¹⁵³ John H. Armstrong, *Your Church Is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ's Mission Is Vital to the Future of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 140.

¹⁵⁴ Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture*, 18.

¹⁵⁵ Drew, *Body Broken: Can Republicans and Democrats Sit in the Same Pew?*, 30.

¹⁵⁶ David Willis-Watkins, Michael Welker, and Matthias Gockel, *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 111.

¹⁵⁷ "Confession of Belhar," Adopted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1986. www.creeds.net. Belhar, South Africa, 1982.

and the reformed faith demonstrate ways this truth can be confessed and applied in the twenty-first century church, including the Deep South, by taking seriously the authority of God's word while also determining matters fundamental to the church's unity and others which can be considered adiaphora.

Systems Theory in Congregations and Organizations

A second area of literature review is in systems theory in congregations and organizations, specifically focusing on differentiation and conformity. Systems theory requires the ability to look at the complexity and entirety of a system. Peter L. Steinke, a respected systems expert, writes, "Systems thinking is basically a way of thinking about life as all of a piece. It is a way of thinking about how the whole is arranged, how its parts interact, and how the relationships between the parts produce something new."¹⁵⁸ In other words, it deals with the interrelationships in a system and recognizes that nothing in life operates on a straight line.¹⁵⁹

Before her unexpected death in 2001, Donella Meadows was one of the world's foremost systems analysts. In her book *Thinking in Systems*, she defines a system as "a set of elements or parts that is coherently organized and interconnected in a pattern or structure that produces a characteristic set of behaviors, often classified as its 'function' or 'purpose.'"¹⁶⁰ Therefore, a system consists of three things, according to Meadows:

¹⁵⁸ Peter L. Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*, 2nd ed. (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), 3.

¹⁵⁹ Rah, *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church*, 184.

¹⁶⁰ Donella H. Meadows and Diana Wright, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Pub., 2008), 188.

“elements, interconnections, and a function or purpose.”¹⁶¹ Systems theory deals with how the different elements or parts connect and interconnect to a particular end.

Family and Church as Living Social Systems

One specific kind of system very similar to the church is the family system. In fact, the church can be thought of as a large family system. In defining “Family Systems Theory” in *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology & Counseling*, psychologist Ronald W. Moslener writes:

The family systems perspective then would have us see each member in relation to the other. Ultimately a family system is the parts of the whole family plus the way members interact.... The processes in families, or transactional patterns, are seen as central to shaping individual behavior and personality. Family rules organize interaction and function to maintain a stable system by allowing and limiting member behaviors. These relationship rules, both explicit and implicit, provide expectations about roles, behaving, and consequences of family life.¹⁶²

Family systems theory views the family both through the lens of the family system and through the interaction of its constituent parts or members. It considers how the family forms behavior as well as how each member relates to or differentiates itself from the others, all working to preserve or change the family system as a whole. This same dynamic takes place in a church family, but on a larger scale.

A further way to understand a family or church system is as a living social system. Social systems socialize members. In discussing social systems, Donella Meadows writes, “Social systems are the external manifestations of cultural thinking patterns and of profound human needs, emotions, strengths, and weaknesses.”¹⁶³ In other

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶² David G. Benner and Peter C. Hill, *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology & Counseling*, 2nd. ed. Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 442.

¹⁶³ Meadows and Wright, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*, 167.

words, as human beings, with all their gifts and faults, live and interact with one another, they produce, and can even institutionalize, social systems or patterns of behavior, which form the system's culture. These external manifestations of cultural thinking have the ability to form individual behavior. This is seen in the unique cultural power wielded in any specific family or church to shape its membership. People create families or churches, and consequently, forge a collective culture. This culture is then organized, purposeful, and persuasive toward individual members.

However, this culture is not static. It can change and be changed because it is also living. Douglas A. Hall uses systems theory in urban ministry, and he defines a living system this way: "A living system is a self-organized, highly complex, and highly interrelated collection of living parts that work together to accomplish a high-level goal when in proper relationship to each other."¹⁶⁴ The late anthropologist Paul G. Hiebert agrees, elaborating on how living systems can therefore change:

Living systems do not simply operate, they change, grow, and develop. In this respect, the parts of the system are active in shaping the whole. In the study of social systems, this fact introduces moral issues because the "parts" are living beings, not inanimate objects.... Change in living systems is due to their changing relationships with their environments.... New components introduced into a system are normally reinterpreted within the framework of the system in order to save energy. The system itself is reluctant to change structurally to accommodate the new components.¹⁶⁵

A living social system, by nature, can change, even altering its cultural products. However, the system is reluctant to change and will only do so within the framework of the system itself. This will make real or substantive change to the system appear to move very slowly.

¹⁶⁴ Douglas Hall, Judy Hall, and Steve Daman, *The Cat and the Toaster: Living System Ministry in a Technological Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 58-59.

¹⁶⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 135.

This helps to explain why the unique living social system that is the church can, at times, be difficult to penetrate and incredibly difficult to change. Meadows warns, “Changing [social systems] is not as simple as saying ‘now all change,’ or of trusting that he who knows the good shall do the good.”¹⁶⁶ Real people with all of their unique quirks, fears, sins, and longings make up living social systems. They do not change easily. In fact, the system’s inertia alone will tend to perpetuate its existing culture, patterns, and practices by constantly forming and shaping those within it and even those trying to enter it. Michael Armour and Don Browning have written on systems theory and congregational health. In their book *Systems-Sensitive Leadership: Empowering Diversity without Polarizing the Church* they write, “Viewed from a systems perspective, your congregation is not merely a group of people brought together by common beliefs and aspirations. It is also a complex pattern of human networks playing off one another. In their interaction these networks define the atmosphere and dynamic of your congregation.”¹⁶⁷

The reason for this is because all systems have what systems theorists describe as “feedback loops.” Educational leadership expert Lise Krieger writes in an article entitled *Systems Thinking Simplified*:

The key word in the operation of a system is interact. By interacting with other parts of a system, the one part that is interacting will have an effect on the rest of the system. Likewise, the rest of the system will have an effect on that one part. In this sense, a relationship has been created between the part and the rest of the system. Such a relationship is called a loop.... Therefore, the information about the output of the system will be fed back around to the input side of the system. If the new data create a result in the opposite direction to the previous result, they are called negative feedback. In other words, they stabilize the system.... The

¹⁶⁶ Meadows and Wright, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*, 167.

¹⁶⁷ Michael C. Armour and Don Browning, *Systems-Sensitive Leadership: Empowering Diversity without Polarizing the Church* (Joplin, MO: College Press Pub. Co., 1996), 7.

term negative does not indicate that something bad is happening, it just means that any changes in the system are being negated or cancelled out. The negative feedback loop is also sometimes called a balancing loop.... If a negative feedback loop is a system stabilizer (information that produces results in the opposite direction to the previous results), a positive feedback loop is one that produces results in the same direction as the preceding results. A positive feedback loop, therefore, causes growth and change. It is also referred to as a reinforcing loop. Positive feedback loops are considered positive because they add to any disturbance in a system.... Since positive feedback loop behavior is like a snowball effect, left to its own devices it will destroy a system. The effects of positive feedback can spin out of control, and in order to stop the cycle in such a system you have to break the loop. While some positive feedback is necessary and beneficial, if it is not controlled to a certain extent, it will destroy a system. And, in order to control it, one must use negative feedback loops.¹⁶⁸

These interactions in a system are called “feedback loops.” To maintain balance or equilibrium, a system must have negative feedback loops which perpetuate the system’s continuation. “Negative feedback loops are messages (verbal, nonverbal, and contextual) that the output by another has reached predetermined levels and indicates need to cut off or reduce inputs. Positive feedback loops signal to allow more input into the system.”¹⁶⁹ For either a family system or a church system to remain intact and yet grow and change, it must learn to appropriately engage both negative and positive feedback loops. This would certainly be true when introducing racial and cultural heterogeneity into a congregation in the Deep South.

A homogenous church system’s ability to tolerate diversity will require more than preparing people theologically or changing their beliefs. The individuals, networks, and systems of the congregation must be identified and engaged in this process to provide the necessary positive and negative feedback to sustain the inclusion of diversity. In other words, people interconnected in systems must learn to think and interact differently in

¹⁶⁸ Lise Krieger, *Systems Thinking Simplified* (N.p.: Lulu.com Press, 2006. Self Published), 5-9.

¹⁶⁹ Benner and Hill, *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology & Counseling*, 442.

relation to the desired change, therefore applying suitable feedback to the church system. Determinations must be made as to what the acceptable levels of negative and positive feedback should be at any given moment in the system's life. This is the only way the system will hold together and accept the intended change. Soong-Chan Rah is a professor of church growth and evangelism. In his book *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church*, he discusses how systems thinking must be a part of developing multiracial churches. He writes, "A linear approach would too quickly introduce diversity into the church. However, unless the church [as a system] is ready to deal with diversity... [it] will eventually repel rather than attract diversity. Simplistic thinking is inadequate when dealing with the complexity of multiethnic ministry."¹⁷⁰

Attribution Theory

One way to explore how a system will accept or reject diverse people or groups is attribution theory. Cultural analyst and expert David A. Livermore says, "The nature of how we classify the world is known as attribution theory.... [It] examines the way one's cultural background, personality, and upbringing shape the way an individual explains what is observed and what happens."¹⁷¹ Attribution theory, therefore, concerns how people or groups name and categorize the world in which they find themselves.¹⁷² They will then judge others by these categories, either welcoming or rejecting them based on how they've been classified.

¹⁷⁰ Rah, *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church*, 188.

¹⁷¹ David A. Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence: Improving Your CQ to Engage Our Multicultural World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 164.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 257.

Two aspects of attribution theory that are relevant to this study include category boundaries and category width. A category is the way a person perceives the world.¹⁷³ Category boundaries focus on how people make determinations as to who belongs to a group or who doesn't.¹⁷⁴ The two most significant are bounded and centered set categories. Bounded sets "use clear boundaries that group people and things in a category and separate them from other people and things not in the category. People and things are classified in light of their intrinsic value."¹⁷⁵ Center sets are "sets in which things related to the center belong to the category, and things not related to the center or moving away from the center do not belong. People and things are classified by defining a center or reference point."¹⁷⁶

To clarify, bounded sets are established based upon essential characteristics that cause a person or thing to belong to a particular group, contingent upon adherence. There are clearly recognized boundaries founded upon a uniform set of traits that have to do with the ultimate and even changeless nature of reality. These are seen as universal and abstract truths.¹⁷⁷ Center sets, on the other hand, are established based upon the relationship to a center or reference point. Therefore, these sets are not created by drawing distinct boundaries built on essential characteristics. Boundaries do exist, but

¹⁷³ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 110.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁷⁵ Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence: Improving Your CQ to Engage Our Multicultural World*, 257.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 112-13.

they are founded on relationship to the center. Things close to or related to the center naturally separate from things not close to it.¹⁷⁸

A church can be understood in both bounded and centered set categories. Paul G. Hiebert is helpful in making these connections. He writes about a church as a bounded set:

How does bounded-set thinking affect the way in which we view and organize the church? We would see the church as a gathering of Christians. If Christians are all the same in essence, it would be a uniform, homogenous group. All would agree to the same doctrines, and all would observe the same behavior. Its unity would be based on uniformity – all Christians would think and act alike.... The church would view theology as ultimate, universal, and unchanging truth and define it in general propositional statements. It would divorce theology from historical and cultural contexts in which it is formulated.¹⁷⁹

Propositional and doctrinal truth statements are very important in bounded set churches. These statements are often viewed as universal or absolute apart from their originating historical and cultural contexts. Reformed or Presbyterian churches would be considered bounded to an extent, based upon being confessional and how the group views and applies confessional subscription. Unity, in a bounded church, means uniformity in doctrinal views, and problematically, in thought and action as well. This would create the need for great conformity in a bounded set congregation or system.

Hiebert writes about a church as a centered set:

How does centered-set thinking affect our view of the nature and ministry of the church? The church would be defined by its center, the Jesus Christ of Scripture. It would be the set of the people gathered around Christ to worship, obey, and serve him.... Because the church would be made up of the followers of the same Lord, it would be one family. Therefore, it also would be a place of fellowship. We could not exclude from the congregation those who are true disciples but who differ from us in race, class, gender, or theological view. Because membership is

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 123-24.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 116.

not at stake, differences in personality, language, culture, and worship style would be affirmed so long as these do not divide or discredit the family. The church would focus on people and relationships of love and mutual submission, more than on programs and the maintenance of order.¹⁸⁰

Because relationship to the center, which is the good news about Jesus, is most prominent in centered set churches, one's relationship to Jesus defines the church. It is much more likely in centered set churches for diversity to be viewed positively and even affirmed as long as it does not create division or undermine the church. Centered set churches will produce conformity around the center, Jesus, but will allow for significant differentiation along the lines of race, culture, class, language, personality differences, and even some theological differences.

Centered set churches are therefore better equipped to admit diversity within a homogenous church system than bounded set churches or bounded set thinking. David Livermore gives the following example of how difficult it is to include heterogeneity in a bounded set congregation. His words also illuminate how pervasive and unacknowledged bounded set thinking is in American churches in general:

Joe is a thirty-five-year-old pastor who is passionate about calling his suburban church to reach out to some of the families and kids in the inner city nearby. In talking about the challenge of getting his congregation to join this cause, he said, "They're committed to the idea of reaching out to inner-city kids until they actually show up in our youth room. God forbid one of their precious Wonder Bread children brush up against a kid from the hood. You won't believe what one of my elders said last week. He said, 'I know this isn't a very politically correct statement, but you can't deny the facts. Most of the crime reports on the evening news involve black kids. Are we sure we're up for this?'" Joe was appropriately frustrated by the ethnocentric, racist attitudes present in his congregation and even his board. He spent several minutes talking about his concern for teaching his congregation about cultural sensitivity before they could be effective in reaching some of the different ethnic groups in town. Ironically, during the same interview, Joe said this about his congregation: "I know they love their hymns and their suits, but watch them on a Sunday morning. They're lifeless. They just go through

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 127-28.

the motions, following the order of service, waiting for the service to get out so they can get on with their lives.” His statement was not unlike the comments of many younger leaders regarding the older generation in the church. Joe seemed unaware that the very ethnocentric attitudes he was describing in his board seemed to be present in his own description of the older generation of people who don’t approach worship the way he does. We might argue that the dangers of the board member’s attitude toward kids from the inner city is more problematic than Joe’s attitude toward the older generation, but both stem from the same kind of ethnocentric, “my way is best” mentality. Ethnocentric behavior is further exacerbated by bounded-set thinking, also evident in most of the ministry leaders sampled. Bounded sets are the basis of life in the West.¹⁸¹

Bounded set thinking regards things as right or wrong, black or white. Such thinkers can make hasty judgments regarding what is acceptable or not, and thus, categorize people or groups as outside the system or unhelpful to it. Because bounded set thinking has been the pervasive mode of thinking in the west, it has the subtle power to influence and define even the views of people who would consider themselves more centered set than bounded. People tend to categorize others as in or out, welcome or unwelcome, because of perceived characteristics that they deem appropriate or inappropriate. This was true for the leadership of Joe’s church but also true of Joe as well. The same would be valid for many churches, whether bounded or center set.

This involves a concept called “category width.” Livermore says that category width “refers to the number of events individuals place under one common label. It is the degree to which one is comfortable with things that don’t clearly fit into one category or the other (e.g., right versus wrong versus different).”¹⁸² In other words, based upon how a person categorizes the world, one will perceive things as similar (and therefore right or to be accepted) or different (and therefore wrong or to be rejected). This has to do with

¹⁸¹ Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence: Improving Your CQ to Engage Our Multicultural World*, 168-69.

¹⁸² Ibid., 257.

whether a person is a narrow or broad categorizer. Narrow categorizers focus on specific narrowly defined differences and attempt to comprehend them based upon their own cultural context. When things don't fit into contextually conditioned categories, they are judged as exceptions, or things not to be tolerated. Broad categorizers, on the other hand, focus on broad similarities between things and are more open to things that don't fit into narrowly defined preexisting categories. They are also willing to put somewhat dissimilar things into the same category as appropriate, even though obvious distinctions may be present. Broad categorizers are more flexible and open to different behaviors.¹⁸³

Duane Elmer is an expert on cross-cultural relationships. He explores the ways people use category width and how it can impact relationships and hinder the inclusion of diversity:

One of our favorite ways to dichotomize is in the area of “like me” or “unlike me.” If something is like me, then it is in the “good” category. I approve. I move closer to it. I promote it. I have positive feelings about it. If something is unlike me, I respond with suspicion, distance, frowning, critiquing and trying to change it (or change *you*) to look like me.... We categorize other people (and their cultural practices?) very quickly and very unconsciously. Once we have them categorized, often negatively, we close our mind about them. Then our behavior follows, also unconsciously.¹⁸⁴

This is narrow categorization, and it quickly judges those who are different as suspicious or wrong, and accordingly, to be rejected or changed. A system that categorizes in this manner will force conformity and tolerate little differentiation. This will negatively impact the potential inclusion of racial and cultural diversity into a homogenous church, especially in the Deep South, with its harsh racial history.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 179-80.

¹⁸⁴ Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 47-48.

Systems Theory and Race Identity

By nature most people desire to align with groups whose cultural patterns match their own. In their book *Cultural Change and Your Church*, cross-cultural scholars Michael Pocock and Joseph Henriques write, “The desire that one’s own culture be dominant is both strong and natural. It comes as no surprise, then, that people in homogeneous churches are concerned about the implications of other races and cultures assimilating into the mainstream of their church life...”¹⁸⁵ Later they continue, “We are most adept and comfortable operating within our own cultural ways. Naturally, we prefer that people from other races or cultures who enter our cultural environment act like we do. We want them to speak with the same accent, have the same values, see the world in the same way- in short, to have the same culture.”¹⁸⁶

When members of a system think or function this way, even though they may be unaware of it, they will engage in what psychologists describe as microaggression, which will undermine any attempts at inclusion of diverse groups. Microaggressions are:

...brief and commonplace daily verbal or behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults that potentially have a harmful or unpleasant psychological impact on the target person or group... where they are made to feel unwelcome, isolated, unsafe, and alienated.¹⁸⁷

These microaggressions can also be environmental things like the physical surroundings or the kinds of literature used.¹⁸⁸ Good examples of this in a church would be pictures of

¹⁸⁵ Michael Pocock and Joseph Henriques, *Cultural Change and Your Church: Helping Your Church Thrive in a Diverse Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 36.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 103.

¹⁸⁷ Derald Wing Sue and David Sue, *Counseling the Culturally Diverse: Theory and Practice*, 5th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 110.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

Jesus as the race of the dominant group or monocultural Sunday school curriculum. Other cultural groups are either not represented at all or are depicted as menacing.

Microaggressions can take on the following three forms as a system attempts to deal with diversity. First, microassault “refers to a blatant verbal, nonverbal, or environmental attack intended to convey discriminatory and biased sentiments.”¹⁸⁹ Second, “Microinsults are unintentional behaviors or verbal comments that convey rudeness or insensitivity or demean a person’s racial heritage identity...”¹⁹⁰ And lastly, microinvalidations, which “are verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or dismiss the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of the target group.”¹⁹¹ Within a homogenous and bounded church system, which many times countenances boundedness in cultural realities as well, these microaggressions end up occurring quite often, even among those with the best of intentions. This is especially true concerning microinsults and microinvalidations.

Psychologists Derald and David Sue, who discuss the ramifications of microaggressions, draw this conclusion related to whites (the dominant group in America) when dealing with minorities (or subdominant groups):

Because whites who engage in microaggressions truly believe they act without racial bias toward persons of color, for example, they will disclaim any racist meaning. The subtle and insidious nature of racial microaggressions is not only outside the level of awareness of perpetrators, but recipients also find their ambiguity difficult to handle. Victims are placed in an unenviable position of not only questioning perpetrators, but themselves as well (“Did I misread what happened?”) In the face of microaggressions, many members of historically marginalized groups describe feeling a vague unease that something is not right, and that they were insulted or disrespected. In this respect, overt acts of racism...

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 111.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 112.

may be easier to handle than microaggressions because the intent and meaning of the event is clear and indisputable.¹⁹²

In the Deep South, whites and blacks have forged cultural, religious, and political understandings separately and often with animosity towards the other. The problem this raises today for a church system attempting to include white and black Christians isn't primarily acts of overt racism. The real issue revolves around how microaggressions, which often occur unintentionally yet are based upon dearly held cultural presuppositions and differences, are to be handled. Things are said or done with little awareness that the very people the system (church) is targeting hold deeply held yet distinctly different positions.

As this study demonstrates, *adiaphora* is one way to address this problem through relativizing potentially divisive interactions and thus removing some of the judgmentalism. Developing more cultural intelligence within the system is another way to address this. Moreover, systems thinking related to differentiation offers a necessary and helpful corrective to any attempt to build homogenous community in the first place. In other words, genuine community, and especially Christian community, requires differentiation as well as conformity to be truly healthy.

Self-Differentiation and Community

Systems theory expert Ronald W. Richardson, in *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life*, writes:

Thus the dilemma: Do we give up who we are in the church in order to appear to be unified, harmonious, and at peace with others, or do we openly say what we think, at the risk of being perceived as "troublemakers" within the community? As we look down that road of being individuals within the church, we ask how

¹⁹² Ibid., 113.

there can be peace and unity in the church if everyone is going to “do their own thing.”¹⁹³

Richardson isn't even dealing with race dynamics here, which would only further exacerbate the problem. But this is the central issue. How do people of differing races and cultures continue embracing their unique cultural realities; in other words, differentiate, and still forge genuine community?

Peter L. Steinke, in another book on systems theory and the church entitled, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations As Emotional Systems*, discusses differentiation by making this very helpful point, “Self-differentiation means ‘being separate together’ or ‘being connected selves.’ It is a life-long learning process, never attained, always tested.”¹⁹⁴ Richardson talks about “the togetherness force” and “the individuality force.”¹⁹⁵ Both are at work and both are important. In fact, Richardson points out that if people don't have a mature sense of individuality, they will more quickly become reactive and run away rather than staying in community.¹⁹⁶ He writes, “Mature individuality inclines us to work at defining more clearly our own beliefs and life principles and thinking about our own behaviors, to see if we are conforming to what we say we believe. It involves a ‘self focus’ rather than a judgmental ‘other focus.’”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹³ Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 56.

¹⁹⁴ Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), 12.

¹⁹⁵ Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life*, 57-61.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

What makes this possible? More specifically, what makes it possible for people to be themselves, pursue Christian unity, and yet not be judgmental of others? The Apostle Paul, who in many ways thought systemically thousands of years before the term or theory was ever considered, tells believers to look to Christ. After writing about handling cultural and religious differences in Colossians 2, he writes in Colossians 3:1-14:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.¹⁹⁸

As believers grow in Christ, they will become their true selves and also learn how to embrace and love others in all their uniqueness and diversity. New Testament scholar David Garland comments on this text, “Christians should not shy away from the fact that our lives are centered on divine things. We offer a different way of making sense of reality and a different way of living, which goes against the grain of what modern society offers as the norm.”¹⁹⁹ The German reformed theologian Jurgen Moltmann writes, “[In Christ] we lose anxiety about ourselves and become open for others.... Then we no

¹⁹⁸ Colossians 3:1-14.

¹⁹⁹ David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon: The NIV Application Commentary: From Biblical Text ... to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 215.

longer... are made insecure by others because we no longer need self-confirmation. The person who is different becomes for us, precisely because of that difference, a surprise which we gladly accept.”²⁰⁰

Multiracial Dynamics in Congregations and Organizations

The third area of literature addresses multiracial dynamics in congregations and organizations. In *Divided By Faith*, Emerson and Smith describe how racially homogenous religious groups and a segmented religious market perpetuate racialization. They write:

These patterns not only generate congregational segregation by race, but contribute to the racial fragmentation of American society, generate and sustain group biases, direct altruistic religious impulses to express themselves primarily within racially separate groups, segregate social networks and identities, contribute to the maintenance of socioeconomic inequality, and generally fragment and drown out religious prophetic voices calling for an end to racialization.²⁰¹

Because of the systemic and entrenched nature of racialization in America, these authors believe that genuinely multiracial churches are difficult to achieve and sustain. Racially homogenous groups and the ongoing fragmentation of the religious marketplace are sociological certainties in the American context. These structural realities, when unrecognized or unaddressed, negatively shape the practice of Christianity and work against the multiracial or interracial church.

This is why noted sociologists Korie Edwards titled her 2008 book on the subject *The Elusive Dream*. She begins this book by indicating the difficulty of multiracial congregations:

²⁰⁰ Jürgen Moltmann and M. Douglas Meeks, *The Passion for Life: A Messianic Lifestyle* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 31.

²⁰¹ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, 154.

Religious racial integration is a dubious enterprise. Historically, Christians and Christian organizations were complicit in establishing slavery. White evangelical Christians tend to be opposed to social and political changes that would increase socioeconomic opportunities for African Americans. And whites generally have resisted attempts at racial integration in schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods.²⁰²

There are indeed historic and ongoing hindrances to multiracial churches. America's racial past, and especially in the Deep South, continues to hinder any pursuit of racial inclusion in historically homogenous churches. In addition, when there is an unwillingness to honestly acknowledge and address this past, the potential for multiracial churches is even less likely.

Most white churches in the South fought to remain segregated, while others were founded because of segregationist convictions. Theologian Stephen R. Haynes, who is a professor of religious studies, writes about how this happened in the city of Memphis, Tennessee. He describes how self-justification and denial about the real history of the South continue to prevent some from dealing with the lingering consequences of a brutal racial past. His book is called *The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation*. Haynes writes:

The dishonor of being called to task... gave rise, understandably, to a narrative of self-justification. The determination to exclude what local papers were calling "biracial groups," church spokesmen said, had nothing to do with race. Rather, it was based solely on the visitors' intention to "demonstrate." Such obfuscations were not uncommon in the heated rhetorical atmosphere of the civil rights era. But when church members and former members continue nearly half a century later to claim that visitors who sought entry to the church in mixed groups were not "true worshippers," they provide a glimpse of how institutional memory can function to soothe decades-old institutional trauma.²⁰³

²⁰² Korie L. Edwards, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3-4.

²⁰³ Stephen R. Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-Ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

He argues that some churches remain unwilling to honestly accept and thus deal with the treatment and rejection of African Americans. Haynes elaborates on this in describing the founding of Independent Presbyterian Church, which is a member congregation of the conservative Presbyterian Church in America. He writes:

A similar obfuscation has long been advanced by representatives of Memphis's Independent Presbyterian Church (IPC), which was formed in 1965 by departing members of SPC [Second Presbyterian Church]. Their dubious claim is that IPC came into being not because the outcome of the kneel-in crisis at SPC made it impossible for segregationists to remain in good standing with the PCUS, but because the congregation's founders dissented from the denomination's growing "liberalism." This assertion, though accurate in the broadest sense, veils the church's racist origins in the myth of a noble quest to defend Christian orthodoxy. As official memory, the myth salves the wounds of institutional dishonor by suppressing the uncomfortable fact that IPC was founded by dedicated segregationists.²⁰⁴

The problem with denying what really happened goes beyond simply denying the truth. It creates an institutional and thus systemic falsehood. Haynes explores the reasons why this happens when he writes, "These official memories persist because they conceal wounds inflicted on institutions that claim a moral identity. Since most modern organizations do not claim such identities, they are rarely compelled to deny or justify their racist histories."²⁰⁵ In other words, churches may feel it necessary to whitewash their past for the sake of their moral integrity. However, the dilemma this creates for white churches in the Deep South, including those that may express a genuine desire to reach other racial groups, is an inability to see the negative consequences of their own false narrative. Churches that refuse to truthfully recognize their past racial sins typically have a difficult time acknowledging the ongoing ways that race systemically influences

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

the experiences of whites and blacks in their churches. African Americans see this and are typically repulsed by it because any welcome feels conditioned on having to conform to an unacknowledged majority cultural system.

Theologian Anthony Bradley, in his book *Aliens in the Promised Land: Why Minority Leadership Is Overlooked in White Christian Churches and Institutions*, writes about how Independent Presbyterian Church eventually chose to confront their past in 2012, the date of publication of Stephen R. Haynes book detailing it. Bradley describes it as “the most courageous and unprecedented confession of racism to date in a conservative Presbyterian congregation.”²⁰⁶ The following is an excerpt from a statement read by church leader Sam Graham to the congregation of Independent Presbytery Church on May 13, 2012:

On behalf of the Session, this public address to you today specifically marks the beginning of a time of corporate confession and repentance by Independent Presbyterian Church (past and present) regarding the sin of racism. Just as we celebrate those aspects of our history at Independent Presbyterian Church of which we are proud, we must also acknowledge with sadness and renounce and repudiate those practices in our history that do not reflect biblical standards. We profess, acknowledge and confess before God, before one another, and before the watching world, that tolerance of forced or institutional segregation based on race, and declarations of the inferiority of certain races, such as once were practiced and supported by our church and many other voices in the Presbyterian tradition, were wrong and cannot and will not be accepted within our church today or ever again. The Lord calls us to repent of the sin of prejudice; to turn from it and to treat all persons with justice, mercy, and love.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ Anthony B. Bradley, ed. *Aliens in the Promised Land: Why Minority Leadership Is Overlooked in White Christian Churches and Institutions* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2013), 18.

²⁰⁷ "Address to the Congregation of Independent Presbyterian Church," Letter from the Session read to the congregation by Ruling Elder Sam Graham on behalf of the IPC Session. <http://mail.indepres.org/media/May13Sessionwords.pdf>. Memphis, TN. May 13, 2012.

This public confession of the sin of racism will certainly serve as a helpful step to inclusion of other races, especially African Americans, in formerly homogenous white churches in the south. However, this isn't all that needs to be considered.

Because whites remain the dominant race in America, many do not think about racial or cultural issues the same way that other ethnic groups do. Coming to terms with one's racist past also requires confronting the ongoing reality of race. In an article published in the book *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, Harlon Dalton, an African American law professor who writes extensively on race issues states:

Most White people, in my experience, tend not to think of themselves in racial terms. They know that they are White, of course, but mostly that translates into being not Black, not Asian-American, and not Native American. Whiteness, in and of itself, has little meaning.... Why do most White people not see themselves as having a race? In part, race obliviousness is the natural consequence of being in the driver's seat.... For most Whites, race – or more precisely, their own race – is simply part of the unseen, unproblematic background. Whatever the reason, the inability or unwillingness of many White people to think of themselves in racial terms has decidedly negative consequences. For one thing, it produces huge blind spots. It leaves them baffled by the amount of energy many Blacks pour into questions of racial identity. It makes it difficult for them to understand why many (but by no means all) Blacks have a sense of group consciousness that influences the choices they make as individuals. It blinds Whites to the fact that their lives are shaped by race just as much as are the lives of people of color. How they view life's possibilities; whom they regard as heroes; the extent to which they feel the country is theirs; the extent to which that belief is echoed back to them; all this and more is in part a function of their race. This obliviousness also makes it difficult for many Whites to comprehend why Blacks interact with them on the basis of past dealings with other Whites, and why Blacks sometimes expect them to make up for the sins of their fathers and of their neighbors as well.²⁰⁸

According to Dalton, whites not only have economic but racial and cultural power in America. African Americans are very much aware of this. To use the phraseology of

²⁰⁸ Paula S. Rothenberg, *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, 4th ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 2012), 15-18.

Emerson and Smith, “[America] allocates differential economic, political, social, and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines; lines that are socially constructed.”²⁰⁹ White Americans remain the most privileged group in this country, yet as has already been stated, many are oblivious to how this shapes their thinking, actions, and relationships.

Many white churches today, even in the south, express a genuine desire and interest in racial and cultural integration in the church. However, the church is often unprepared and ill equipped to address the dynamics of fully enfolded other races, particularly African Americans, as cultural partners and equals. In the preface of *Divided By Faith*, the authors state, “Our argument is that [white] evangelicals desire to end racial division and inequality, and attempt to think and act accordingly. But, in the process, they likely do more to perpetuate the racial divide than they do to tear it down.”²¹⁰ An example of this is when white individuals or churches are unwilling or unable to humbly open themselves to allow black people to teach them their culture instead of conforming African Americans to what may be the dominant white culture of the church.

The deleterious results of this can be twofold. It can cause a misreading of the group that is not dominant. According to Michael O. Emerson in a 2013 article entitled *A New Day for Multiracial Congregations*, biases in thinking can include identifying those who are not a part of the dominant group by their differences, while favoring the dominant group and negatively stereotyping the minority group.²¹¹ Instead of differences

²⁰⁹ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, 7.

²¹⁰ Ibid., ix.

²¹¹ Michael O. Emerson, “A New Day for Multiracial Congregations,” *Reflections* 100:1 (2013), 1.

simply being viewed as such, they become unfavorable group identifiers. This will almost always work against full inclusion of minorities.

Secondly, this can work to devalue or undermine the cultural distinctives and even the positive ethnic identity of blacks who come into the church. African American psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum, in her groundbreaking book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* talks about the ways people form identity. She makes this interesting point, “The parts of our identity that...capture our attention are those that other people notice, and that reflect back to us...”²¹² When African Americans come into predominantly white churches, it is critical that they are made to feel both welcome and accepted, even in their cultural distinctiveness. If not, the church will likely force them to assimilate through giving up what makes them unique, or they will try to differentiate themselves to the point of being divisive. The other and most likely alternative is they will simply leave.

In the book *Against All Odds*, sociologists Brad Christerson, Korie Edwards, and Michael Emerson study several multiracial churches, one being Messiah Church in Los Angeles.²¹³ They write of the way this congregation struggles to be truly welcoming and inclusive.

Most churches would say that this is a high priority for them – to welcome anyone into their midst, and to love and embrace them as is commanded in the Bible. Most churches would also say that anyone, of any ethnic group, is welcome and that all groups should be treated with the same love and affirmation. Yet most churches remain ethnically and racially homogenous. Messiah became diverse through the diverse friendship networks of the founding pastor, and it grew more diverse as more and more people became excited about the prospect of being

²¹² Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 21.

²¹³ Brad Christerson, Korie L. Edwards, and Michael O. Emerson, *Against All Odds: The Struggle for Racial Integration in Religious Organizations* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 7.

involved in an interracial congregation. Yet despite the efforts of the church to be warm and embracing, the biggest obstacle in its five-year history seems to have been that many of its members feel socially isolated at the church. This has caused many of them to leave the congregation.²¹⁴

The problem of social and cultural isolation with minority groups in racially and ethnically diverse congregations is one of the main reasons why people who try multiracial churches end up leaving them. They still feel like outsiders.

J. Derek McNeil and Carlos Pozzi, both psychologists, write on developing multicultural competency in the book *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity, and Christian Faith*, edited by Robert J. Priest and Alvaro L. Nieves. They made this profoundly important point:

Christians need a biblical theology of ethnic relations, or a functional narrative that can help us recontextualize and reconstitute the old tensions and offer new relational alternatives.... An unsophisticated theology of tolerance is adequate for superficial contact, but not for sustained interaction. We are in need of a theology of identification, one that allows individuals to see the interconnectedness of their identity, clan, and nation with the identity, clan, and tribe of the other. We must be able to see and accept a vision of the world that does not devalue an individual's cultural identity but, in contrast, places it in context with others.²¹⁵

These authors are looking for a more robust way of including and welcoming others than simply tolerating those who are different. Tolerance will not sustain cross-cultural relationships and cannot provide the power or resources to forge a truly multiracial church. McNeil and Pozzi suggest the need for a theology of identity which enables people to value their own unique identities while also accepting others who are culturally different.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 14-15.

²¹⁵ Robert J. Priest and Alvaro L. Nieves, *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity, and Christian Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 88.

In *The Elusive Dream*, Korie Edwards mentions two hopeful signs this can happen. The first is the voluntary nature of religion in America. She writes, “Unlike for other institutions, the forces that constrain people’s decisions to be a part of a religious organization are relatively limited.... For those who want to be part of a racially diverse community, interracial churches provide the least costly opportunity to achieve this ambition.”²¹⁶ The second reason is the fact that religious texts, the Bible specifically, affirm the rightness of this goal. Korie teaches, “Followers may feel obligated to pursue, or at least support, racial integration out of religious commitment.”²¹⁷ People have freedom to pursue multiracial churches, and the Bible teaches that this is right and good. A theology of identity, as described above, can emerge from a church truly wanting unity and diversity along biblical lines. Michael O. Emerson writes, “The experience of being with people of a variety of backgrounds thus helps those in multiracial congregations to place a positive value of people’s distinctiveness; to use those differences as part of the process of working toward a higher goal; to desire the differences, too, as a way of enriching themselves....”²¹⁸

Kathleen Garces-Foley sees this as the goal of the multiracial or multiethnic church:

The multiethnic church [is] an institution in which people choose to cross ethnic boundaries to form a group in which everyone feels welcomed and affirmed as individuals as well as part of a shared community. When ethnic boundaries are crossed, what happens to ethnic identity? There is clearly a wide array of strategies churches can use to frame the salience of ethnic identity in the multiethnic church. If we look at the way institutions talk about and act on their commitment to ethnic diversity in institutional structures, at least four strategies

²¹⁶ Edwards, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches*, 4.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Emerson and Woo, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States*, 119.

are apparent. Some churches ignore ethnic differences altogether, as in the color-blind approach, and impose the dominant group's culture on the church leadership style, program themes, and corporate worship. Others emphasize ethnic diversity publicly as a stated value but fail to institutionalize it in church structures, or conversely institutionalize diversity in structures without making it part of their public values. A fourth alternative is to insist on diversity of ethnic expression in every aspect of the institution.²¹⁹

In order to reach this fourth alternative where diversity of ethnic expression is seen in all aspects of a church's life, including its leadership and formative practices like worship and intentional community outreach, the church must formulate a means of judging what is acceptable diversity and what is not. Intentionally working through what is essential and what is not in the context of a racially diverse, theologically informed community can help to provide this.

Same Race Distinctions

One other topic dealing with multiracial dynamics within the church pertains to same race distinctiveness. Pulitzer Prize winning African American columnist Eugene Robinson writes on what he calls the disintegration in black America in his book *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*. He discusses how black America has undergone a process of disintegration into the following four categories: a mainstream middle-class majority, a large, abandoned minority, a small transcendent elite, and emergent groups consisting of those of mixed-race heritage and black immigrants.²²⁰ Robinson writes, "These four black Americas are increasingly distinct, separated by demography, geography, and psychology. They have different profiles, different mind-

²¹⁹ Garces-Foley, *Crossing the Ethnic Divide: The Multiethnic Church on a Mission*, 95.

²²⁰ Eugene Robinson, *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 4-5.

sets, different hopes, fears, and dreams.”²²¹ Even a multiracial church consisting primarily of blacks and whites will have differences that go well beyond the color of one’s skin. Knowing this and understanding the broad spectrum of differences that will be observed will be very important to the success of the multiracial church.

Mark DeYmaz and Harry Li, both pastors affiliated with the multiracial church Mosaic in Arkansas, describe how multiracial church practitioners must all function regardless of whether another person is of the same race. Profound differences can be observed even within one’s own race.

Creating a healthy multiracial church will often require you...to accommodate expressions of faith and worship beyond your own personal experience or preference. To be clear, I am not suggesting that you accommodate divergent or heretical theology. Rather, get comfortable in accommodating requests from members that promote a spirit of inclusion within the congregation, especially requests that may challenge you to go beyond your comfort zone. Failing to value the perspectives of others can be a costly mistake.²²²

Multiracial churches will not only attract people of other races or cultures but people of the same race who have differing theological backgrounds. DeYmaz and Li’s point is that the multiracial church must never allow for heretical doctrine or practices, but there will be things that fit within orthodoxy yet stretch people beyond their comfort zones. These must be thoughtfully considered and, as appropriate, allowed as a part of the church’s life.

Theologian Miroslav Volf agrees and takes it a step further in *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. He describes how Christians must have a will to embrace others, “to give ourselves to others

²²¹ Ibid., 5.

²²² Mark DeYmaz and Harry Li, *Ethnic Blends: Mixing Diversity into Your Local Church*, The Leadership Network Innovation Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 81.

and ‘welcome’ them, to readjust our identities to make space for them....”²²³ Again; this will only happen as believers know themselves in Christ and sacrificially give of themselves in the way that Christ did.

Conclusion

This review of literature has focused on the importance of adiaphora, which provides the biblical and theological underpinnings for the church to allow and embrace appropriate diversity in culture, politics, church practices, and even, to a limited extent, theology. This will help foster a healthy multiracial church. In addition, the literature addressed how systems thinking explains churches as living social systems which have the power to include and exclude. Systems thinking demonstrates how individual believers both conform and differentiate as they pursue togetherness for the good of others and oneself. The literature on the multiracial church touched in a limited way on adiaphora and systems thinking, but by discussing inclusion, cultural competence, and pursuing “otherness,” it is clear this study has a role in exploring how adiaphora and systems thinking can play a critical role in successful multiracial and cross cultural churches in the Deep South and anywhere in the world.

Even though the focus of this research has been limited to multiracial dynamics in an American context and specifically the Deep South, there are implications for the global church and missionary communication. Missiologist Timothy C. Tennent, in his work *World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century*, brings this to light when discussing how important it is for “the good news of Jesus Christ to enter into the cultural, linguistic, and social framework of the target group and explain the

²²³ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 29.

gospel through whatever terms and concepts were already present in, and understood by, the target group.”²²⁴ African missiologist and historian Lamin Sanneh puts this into perspective, writing:

The truth of God is greater than the words and language in which it may be conveyed, and that means that all languages bear marks of their own finitude vis-a-vis the ultimate reality of God; at the same time all languages are endowed with intrinsic merit for conveying the truth of God.... No language or culture is so superior that it can claim exclusive access to the truth of God, and second, none is so inferior that it can be excluded....²²⁵

Whether the context is racial segregation or division in the Deep South or ethnic or tribal conflict anywhere in the world, diverse languages and cultures have their place in helping the church better understand God and his word. Knowing what is *adiaphora* and what is not is one way to graciously identify, value, and learn from diverse cultural experiences.

²²⁴ Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010), 327.

²²⁵ Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed. American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 108-09.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine how congregants in one southern multiracial church utilize adiaphora to foster multiracial inclusion. Therefore, a qualitative case study was proposed in order to explore the ways members of Diverse Church, as it will be called here, use adiaphora as a means to embrace other Christians who are different racially, culturally, politically, and in theological position and practice in the body life of the church.

Design of the Study

The research design of this study followed a qualitative case study approach. Sharan B. Merriam, in her book *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, defines a qualitative researcher as one who is “interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.”²²⁶ She goes on to mention four characteristics which are key to understanding the nature of qualitative research: “the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive.”²²⁷

²²⁶ Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 13.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

In this study, the researcher used a qualitative case study design. Merriam defines a case study as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system.”²²⁸ She continues, “The ‘what’ is a *bounded system*, a single entity, a unity around which there are boundaries, I can ‘fence in’ what I am going to study.”²²⁹ This study focused on one bounded system, congregants in one multi-racial church in the Deep South called Diverse Church.

Utilization of the qualitative case study method minimized variables for this in-depth research because all the participants shared the same institutional structure and culture. Each is a member in good standing of Diverse Church. Because the variables involved in the data analysis are more focused, the case study provides avenues for enhanced exploration of the intricacies surrounding the recognition and proper use of adiaphora in a multiracial context. As an additional advantage, this case study provided a fuller understanding of the single context. Thus, the researcher gained a more complete emic perspective of those involved. Merriam writes regarding an emic perspective: “It is not enough to only describe the cultural practices; the researcher also depicts his or her understanding of the cultural meaning of the phenomenon.”²³⁰

This qualitative case study utilized semi-structured interviews as the primary means of data-gathering. This qualitative method provided for the discovery of the most comprehensive and descriptive data from the perspectives in the narrow phenomena of the congregants’ use of adiaphora.²³¹ Merriam writes about semi-structured interviews

²²⁸ Ibid., 40.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid., 29.

²³¹ Ibid., 16.

that “this format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic.”²³² This flexibility during the interview process was particularly helpful in determining how participants use adiaphora as a means of inclusion in the church.

Setting of the Study

The setting of the study was Diverse Church, a congregation located in a city in the Deep South. The church is a member congregation of the conservative Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), which holds that the Bible is the authoritative word of God for life and belief. Diverse Church is a nine year-old multiracial church with a total membership of about eight hundred people, broken down as follows: about 632 communing members (adult believers), about 184 non-communing members (children of believers), and an associate membership (still on the communing rolls of another church in the Presbyterian Church in America) of about twenty-five. The average worship attendance is around six hundred.

The racial make-up of the congregation is approximately seventy percent white and thirty percent black. The session or board of elders (which is the ruling body in a Presbyterian church) consists of seven black and five white men. The board of deacons consists of four black and eleven white men. The vision of the church is the following: “Diverse Church is a multi-ethnic community of Christians committed to glorifying the Lord Jesus Christ and proclaiming the Good News of His Kingdom in both word and deed to [the church’s surrounding neighborhoods], the city..., and the world.”²³³ One of

²³² Ibid., 90.

²³³ "Pastor's Inquirers Class Notebook," (Used in a Class for Perspective Members at Diverse Church 2012), 25.

the church's stated values is "creating an intentionally multi-ethnic church with a specific desire to reach the ethnic and socio-economic demographics of our city."²³⁴

Participant Sample Selection

For this study, the researcher interviewed eight members in good standing of Diverse Church. The researcher interviewed participants who were able to communicate in depth about ways they have used adiaphora as a theological and practical category to embrace and include into the life of the church people who are different, as well as ideas and practices that are different. It was important that this purposeful study sample consisted of a selection of people who were invested in the life of the church, mature in their faith commitments, and representative of the distinct demographic segments of the church. Those invested in the church's life were likely to have a higher level of knowledge of the inner workings and relationships in the church. Those who are more mature in their faith would presumably give more thought to the theology and practice of inclusion. Interviewees from distinct racial-cultural, political, and theological perspectives in the church helped to provide information from a diverse cross-section of the church. Merriam points out that purposeful sampling must be information-rich and based upon specifically designed criteria.²³⁵

Therefore, to attain a wide spectrum of data on the use of adiaphora by congregants, the purposeful study sample consisted of a selection of people of diverse racial makeup, who have been Christians for more than five years, from different church backgrounds, inclusive of theological traditions and practices, and differing in partisan

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 77.

political ideology and practice. Participants were purposefully chosen to provide variation in their understanding and use of adiaphora for multiracial inclusion. Each participant was asked to complete a short questionnaire before the interview. The questionnaire asked for information concerning the selection criteria above so that the researcher would know if the interviewee fit the criteria.

Sample Interviewee Questionnaire

1. What is your name?
2. How long have you been a Christian?
3. Did you grow up in the Presbyterian Church in America? If not, what is your church background or denomination?
4. How would you generally describe yourself theologically?
 - a. More conservative or liberal?
 - b. More Reformed or Arminian?
 - c. More baptistic or paedobaptistic?
5. What is your racial make-up?
6. What is your gender?
7. What is your age?
8. What is the highest academic degree you have obtained?
9. Which socio-economic category would best describe you: unemployed, working poor, working class, middle class, upper middle class, wealthy?
10. Which of the following categories best fits your political views on most issues: libertarian, conservative, moderate, liberal, indifferent?

Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews as the primary means of data gathering. The open-ended nature of the interview questions facilitated the researcher's ability to build upon participant responses to complex issues in order to explore them more thoroughly.²³⁶ These methods enabled the researcher to look for commonalities in theme, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variety of participants. According to Merriam, it "assume[s] that individual respondents define the world in unique ways."²³⁷

A pilot test of the interview protocol was performed to help evaluate the questions for clarity and usefulness in eliciting relevant data. Initial interview protocol categories were derived from the literature and were further refined or redacted around the explanations and descriptions that emerged from doing constant comparison work during the interviewing process. Coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing also allowed for the emergence of new sources of data.²³⁸ Eight communing members of Diverse Church were interviewed for approximately one hour. Prior to each interview, the participants received a letter explaining the purpose of the research, with a brief explanation of adiaphora, the consent form, and the protocol questions asked. The researcher audiotaped the interviews with a digital recorder. By completing two interviews per week, the researcher completed the data gathering in the course of four weeks. After each interview, field notes with descriptive and reflective observations were written.

²³⁶ Ibid., 90.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid., 172.

Research Questions

1. What do congregants consider to be matters of adiaphora?
2. What has influenced congregants' views on matters of adiaphora?
3. In what ways do congregants practice adiaphora as a means of racial-cultural inclusion?

Interview Protocol

1. What do congregants consider to be matters of adiaphora?²³⁹
 - a. Describe a circumstance when you felt judged by another Christian over something you felt free to do.
 - b. Tell me about a recent worship experience, either at Diverse Church or another church, where some aspect of the service made you uncomfortable.
 - c. Tell me about a time when another believer's political views caused you to question that person's faith.
 - d. Each of the above Protocol Questions may be followed by the following two questions: In what ways were matters of adiaphora involved? How did you know that it was a matter of adiaphora?
2. What has influenced congregants' views on matters of adiaphora?
 - a. Describe a relationship that has broadened or changed your ideas on what is essential to the faith and what isn't.
 - b. Tell me about one incident at Diverse Church that most significantly opened your eyes to the freedom believers have to be different from one another.

²³⁹ A visual, found in the appendix, was used to explain the concept of adiaphora.

3. In what ways do congregants practice adiaphora as a means of racial-cultural inclusion?
 - a. Describe a situation when you had to respond to another believer at Diverse Church whose views or lifestyle was very different than your own.
 - b. Describe one way you've pursued a relationship with someone at Diverse Church of another race, culture, or political view.
 - c. Describe a ministry practice at Diverse Church that first troubled you but you learned to value when you realized your concerns were about non-essential matters.

Data Analysis

As soon as possible, and always within one week, the researcher personally transcribed each interview using computer software to play back the digital recording on a computer and typing out each transcript. This study utilized the constant comparison method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. This method provided for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories. According to Merriam,

Basically, the constant comparative method involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences. Data are grouped together on a similar dimension. The dimension is tentatively given a name; it then becomes a category. The overall object of this analysis is to identify patterns in the data. These patterns are arranged in relationships to each other in the building of a grounded theory.²⁴⁰

When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, they were coded and analyzed using the constant comparative method. The analysis focused on discovering and identifying common themes, patterns, and approaches from

²⁴⁰ Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 30.

the interview participants and the similarities and differences among the interview participants.

Researcher Position

There are at least two areas of potential bias which may affect the researcher's stance. First, the researcher consistently uses adiaphora in his own philosophy of ministry. The researcher has found in the pastoral ministry that making determinations on what is essential and non-essential is beneficial to growing a church in a diverse social setting and also guarding the peace and unity of the church. By employing the category of adiaphora in the practice of ministry, the researcher has witnessed congregants express a measure of acceptable freedom within the boundaries of what is essential to the faith. Therefore, the researcher has a prior commitment to the practice of adiaphora in pastoral ministry.

Secondly, the researcher is an African American who has dealt with exclusion because of the unwillingness of the majority white culture to practice adiaphora. The researcher has experienced the negative effects of cultural hegemony from the majority white culture in ways where his cultural heritage was either denied or viewed as suspect or inferior. One significant ministry area in which this has occurred is during discussions of worship. The researcher has on numerous occasions interacted with those who have used the regulative principle of worship to prevent what the researcher has viewed as acceptable cultural expressions in worship because they were matters of adiaphora. The researcher has witnessed how church leaders and congregants attempt to make non-essential matters essential. However, the researcher must always remain cognizant of the

fact that determining what is essential and non-essential is not always easy and often requires significant effort.

Study Limitations

As stated in the previous section, this is a qualitative case study. That limits this study to one conservative Presbyterian church in the Deep South. Therefore, the study will be limited by theological orientation and by the black/white racial experiences of the Deep South. Some of the study findings may be generalized broadly to ethnic and race relationships throughout the world, but the unique black/white racial history and dynamics of the Deep South could be a limiting factor. In addition, due to limited time and the nature of this dissertation, only eight individuals were interviewed. Even though the criterion was purposeful sampling, it was a small select sampling. A larger pool of interviewees would likely enhance the results. Furthermore, no interviewee came from a lower socio-economic or educational background. Interviews from this demographic could possibly produce additional and divergent results. Readers who desire to generalize some of the particular aspects of these conclusions on the use and practice of adiaphora should test those aspects in their particular context. As with all qualitative studies, the readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context.²⁴¹

²⁴¹ Ibid., 5.

Chapter Four

Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine how congregants in one southern multiracial church utilize adiaphora to foster multiracial inclusion. Three areas were important to understand: biblical/theological framework on adiaphora, systems theory in congregations and organizations, specifically focusing on differentiation and conformity, and multiracial dynamics in congregations and organizations, also specifically focusing on differentiation and conformity. To that end, this chapter analyzes findings from interviews with eight members of one southern multiracial church, Diverse Church. The researcher will report common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the following research questions for this study:

1. What do congregants consider to be matters of adiaphora?
2. What has influenced congregants' views on matters of adiaphora?
3. In what ways do congregants practice adiaphora as a means of racial-cultural inclusion?

In this chapter the participants in this study will be introduced, with their names changed to protect their identities, and their insights concerning the study questions will be presented.

The Study Participants

Eight members of Diverse Church, four men and four women, were interviewed. Four of the interviewees were Caucasian and four were African American. The

participants ranged in age from thirty to seventy-three years old, with the average age being forty-seven years old. All have been believers in Christ for most of their lives. Only two, however, have Presbyterian or reformed backgrounds. All but one of them now consider themselves to be reformed in theological convictions. They are each highly educated, with only one having less than a master's degree. Six consider themselves middle class, which is the primary constituency of Diverse Church. Two are upper middle class. Their political views vary across the political spectrum.

Amanda is a sixty-seven year old Caucasian female from the Deep South. She grew up in a southern Presbyterian church and considers herself theologically conservative, reformed, and paedobaptistic. She has a master of business administration degree and is technically upper middle class, though she thinks of herself as middle class. She feels that she doesn't fit any one political party because she has certain views that would align with either major political party.

Barry is a thirty year old Caucasian male from the Pacific Northwest. He grew up in the Baptist General Conference but also attended nondenominational seeker-sensitive churches. He has served overseas as a missionary in the Muslim world. Barry was shaped by conservative, slightly reformed, Baptist Christianity but today considers himself theologically moderate with some reformed and some Arminian leanings. He is also more sympathetic to credobaptism or believer's baptism. Barry has a master of arts degree and is middle class. He considers himself politically moderate.

Ben is a forty-four year old African American male from the Deep South. He grew up attending a Baptist church but is now theologically conservative, reformed, and

paedobaptistic in his theological convictions. He has a master's degree and considers himself middle class. He is politically independent.

Gary is a thirty year old Caucasian male from the Deep South. He spent the first ten years of his life in the Presbyterian Church in America but then, with his family, joined a reformed, nondenominational Bible church. He considers himself conservative, reformed, and paedobaptistic in his theological convictions. His highest level of education is a master's degree, and he considers himself middle class. He is politically conservative.

Jane is a seventy-three year old female. She considers her racial makeup to be African American, Caucasian, American Indian, and Chinese, in that order. Her family roots are in the Deep South, but she lived for a significant time overseas and in the Midwest with her husband, who was a career military officer. She grew up in the National Baptist Church but later became a member of the Presbyterian Church United States of America (PCUSA). She now considers herself theologically conservative, reformed, and credobaptistic in belief. She has a bachelor of arts as a media specialist and classifies herself as middle class. Politically, she views herself as a moderate-liberal.

Julie is a fifty-year old African American female from the Deep South. She grew up Baptist but is now conservative reformed and beginning to embrace paedobaptism. She is an upper middle class medical doctor. She considers herself politically moderate.

Keith is a fifty-three year old African American male from the western part of the United States. He was a lifelong Catholic until he left that church in 2002 and joined Diverse Church in 2005. He now considers himself conservative reformed with paedobaptistic convictions. His highest level of education is a master of business

administration degree, and he considers himself middle class. Politically, he views himself as moderate.

Lisa is a thirty-two year old Caucasian female from the Deep South. She grew up Southern Baptist but is now conservative reformed and paedobaptistic. She has a master of science in education, reading, and literacy and considers herself middle class. She has conservative political views.

What Do Congregants Consider to be Matters of Adiaphora?

The first research question focused on what congregants consider to be matters of adiaphora. The researcher arranged the congregants' responses under the following headings: social norms, lifestyle choices, political positions, worship practices, and theological convictions.

Social Norms

Social norms were considered by most participants to be matters of indifference. The two that were continually mentioned were alcohol consumption and Sunday attire. Regarding alcohol, participants noted the freedom they had to consume it in moderation but mentioned the pressure that comes from exercising, or with one interviewee refraining from using, this freedom. Ben described times when other Christians would strongly lay out their case to him as to why Christians should not drink alcohol. Yet, at Diverse Church, he has been in social settings where people seemed uncomfortable when he politely refused their offer of alcohol. He said, "I've been in situations, especially here at Diverse Church, at people's houses where they have offered me something to drink, and my wife and I may say no. And they look at us like, 'What's wrong?'" Ben acknowledges

the freedom to moderately consume alcohol as a matter of adiaphora, but continues to feel social pressure to refrain or consume in specific settings.

Gary talked about this as an issue in his marriage. He stated:

I grew up in a setting, a Christian setting, where my father drank as a believer. He didn't overdo it. But I married someone who didn't think it was appropriate for Christians to drink. So, during our entire dating relationship and early marriage we've struggled with this issue and continue to do so. In fact, we had a long conversation last night. I think we're making some really neat progress.... The more she's grown the more she's...able to say it's not sin, but she still has a hard time with it.

Moderate consumption of alcohol is adiaphora to Gary but exercising that liberty has been an area of disagreement and tension in his marriage.

This was also an issue with Lisa, who grew up thinking Christians should not drink. She now believes differently, and she started to drink in moderation once she got married. Lisa, however, said, "[My husband] and I...would never drink around his family, and especially his siblings. They would really think that was shocking." Lisa views moderate alcohol consumption as adiaphora, but she is concerned with how the exercise of this freedom will affect those who view it differently.

Many of the interview participants came from church backgrounds where alcohol consumption was viewed as a sinful practice. Therefore, even though most who were interviewed considered it something permissible for the Christian, they felt concern about how this particular freedom could confuse and do harm. Julie stated:

Now, to see a more mature Christian [like] an elder or deacon consume wine doesn't bother me. But when I was younger, that would have bothered me. Cause I would have thought, "I didn't think you were supposed to drink." It's confusing. I guess that's what I'm trying to say. The freedom is as confusing as the lack of freedom if it is not explained correctly.

Julie believes alcohol consumption is a matter of indifference and noted that Christians have freedom to partake or abstain. However, she fears the potential harm this can cause to others if it is not explained properly, because this is not a matter of adiaphora for many.

A second social norm that many participants mentioned as adiaphora is Sunday attire, or how one dresses for worship or church services. Ben put it this way:

Since I've been a believer, I've felt judgment in the area of clothing, actually in two ways. There have been times...I may wear anything from jeans to Italian inspired suits. So, there have been times when I've perhaps dressed down, and there have been people who have said that you are basically under dressing for the Lord's house. They've come out of traditions where you come to church and you're supposed to be "suited and booted" if you will. "Dress your best for the Lord." This has actually happened at Diverse Church.... And then there are times in which I've had a suit on and people say, "Maybe we shouldn't be wearing suits because maybe we have people who don't have suits, and maybe it will make them look bad and they will not feel comfortable in coming to [our church]."

Ben believes how one dresses for worship is a matter of adiaphora, and he exercises the freedom to dress casually or more formally based upon his inclinations. He has received criticism from fellow members, though, regardless of his attire choice. That which is adiaphora for Ben is clearly not viewed that way by some others.

Julie described a time during her college years when she visited a church while wearing pants. To this day, this incident is a vivid reminder to her of the ways Christian people can judge others over matters of indifference. She described the incident this way:

So I just showed up on a Wednesday night wearing pants and went in and expected them to say, "Wow, you're a college student and you want to come to a Wednesday night Bible study!" But instead, we spent the entire Wednesday night Bible study, and we did not study the Bible. We spent the night talking about the fact that I had on pants. The focus of the evening was that I had come into the church and was not appropriately dressed. I never forgot that cause I felt so excluded and so judged by that.

Because of this rejection over something she viewed as totally insignificant, Julie never attended that church again. In fact, for a time, she was even turned off to denominational churches entirely because she found out that this prohibition against women wearing pants was a position of that particular denomination. For Julie, something that was a matter of adiaphora excluded her from being a part of a particular congregation.

Barry was another who spoke of Sunday attire as a matter of adiaphora. He was concerned with how focusing on one's attire for Sunday worship could exclude others, as happened to Julie. In addition, he also expressed concern about churches communicating the wrong message regarding what is important at worship. He shared:

It is a real value for me to have the heart be clean and not the outside. The church setting, particularly the congregational church setting is about welcoming those who are not a part of the body.... Because of that I think it is very important that the culture or the atmosphere of the congregational environment is one that is welcoming....So, whatever barriers are there, whether that's clothes... aspects of religiosity...aspects of everything represented by give God your Sunday best....

Barry cut off his train of thought before completing his sentence, but his intention was clear. These kinds of things should be removed. Barry views clothing as adiaphora and sees any pressure to dress a certain way, to dress in one's Sunday best, as a barrier to inclusion.

Lifestyle Choices

Alongside social norms, many lifestyle choices were mentioned as adiaphora for Christians. These included personal feelings, how one uses money, the number of children one should have, parenting and educational choices, entertainment and music choices, and even adoption practices. The participant responses described below represent three of the above topics and reveal how interviewees embraced adiaphora to shape their thinking and practices.

Jane described something that happened during a women's retreat when the ladies were sharing from their experiences in small groups. She felt she had the freedom to talk about a way she had dealt with temptation in an earlier point in her life. Her husband was in the military and at times she was alone for months, and once for a whole year. She said, "I found myself asking for the Lord to take away any sexual desires or any kind of desires that would cause me to sin against my husband while he was away." Jane went on to describe the shock on some of the women's faces. She had obviously stepped over an unknown, and in her case, invisible line of appropriateness. For Jane, this was a matter of indifference and a way she had dealt with temptation. Therefore, she felt no hesitancy in sharing it. She continued, "A couple of ladies did come to me later and said, 'How could you talk like that? How could you say that?' And I said, 'That's who I am, and God answered my prayer.'" Jane appeared hurt when she talked about their response to something she felt totally free to say, and which she shared in order to help people to better fight temptation. But, what was indifferent to her wasn't to others.

The way Christians use money was an interesting example raised by Amanda. She described two instances of dealing with this issue with fellow members of Diverse Church, both of whom were personal friends, who, in her opinion, use money excessively. As she struggled through how to respond, she categorized how one spends money as an adiaphora issue to an extent. Amanda talked about a discussion with a friend in this way:

I've had this conversation with a friend. She spends a lot of money, and we're good friends. So, I've kind of called her on that a few times. Are you using your money the way God wants you to? I don't know their whole financial picture. They could be giving sixty percent to the Lord, but their spending looks excessive to me cause you have so much but it's really not.... They do spend a lot of money, but how can I judge their money?

Amanda does believe the Bible addresses how one uses money, and God wants his people to use money to honor him. Therefore, this is not a matter of absolute indifference. But she also acknowledges that she doesn't know the details of other people's finances and must allow them freedom to make their own decisions. For Amanda, this means that the way Christians use money isn't entirely a matter of adiaphora, but individuals do have freedom to make decisions based upon their own consciences. She continued, "If I were spending that much, it would definitely be sin for me." She understands that what is sin for her may not be for someone else.

Julie, who is African American, expressed problems with transracial adoptions, and particularly Caucasians adopting African American children. She said, "If you're adopting black children because you want to somehow teach them how to be white, well that irritates me. If you're not going to expose them to their own culture and who they are...then I have a problem with that." She acknowledges that her opinions are informed by a lot of racial hurt and pain from her past. Nonetheless, by approaching the topic of transracial adoption as somewhat indifferent instead of simply wrong, Julie was able to engage with people who have adopted. She said:

So, I've gotten a chance to meet some of the people who have adopted black children and transracially. I understand it better. I've actually sought them out to understand better what was their purpose. And the people I've had a chance to have a conversation with, that's not what they were doing. They weren't trying to teach them white values. You see the problem with the black condition, they would think, is that your values are all screwed up. So we can adopt you and fix you, and then you'll do better. But that wasn't their hearts.

Julie moved from having a predetermined and rather fixed stance against transracial adoptions to being willing to engage those who have done this because she chose to view this as adiaphora. Like Julie, even when the participants had strong opinions on particular

lifestyle choices, including opinions informed by the Bible, most found adiaphora a helpful way to think through the diversity of lifestyle choices of differing people in the church.

Political Choices

One of the most sensitive, yet well-considered topics of discussion concerned political choices as matters of adiaphora. In the Deep South, it remains a constant that white, Bible-believing Christian churches tend to vote more conservatively, and African American Bible-believing Christian churches tend to vote more liberally. It is certainly not as simple as “white Christians vote Republican and black Christians vote Democrat,” but it is close. This causes enormous assumptions to be made. Amanda, who is Caucasian, said, “I was judged by other Christians for voting for Obama in 2008. And it is amazing how many white people would just assume that I’m a Republican, even though I’m really neither.” Keith, an African American, said something similar, “There were some who were actually shocked that I wasn’t a Republican, that I could be an elder in a Presbyterian Church and...consider voting for a Democrat.” These statements reflect real life assumptions being made regarding race and politics and church affiliation and politics.

The interviews demonstrated the struggles many have to understand and embrace Christians who hold differing political views. However, thinking of political choices through the category of adiaphora was certainly something that many participants in this study have learned to do. And this has guarded both the church and the participants’ friendships across political lines.

Keith describes himself as politically moderate with left leanings. He considers partisan politics to be matter of adiaphora because he sees it as a matter of compromise. He is a proponent of right to life, but at the same time, he believes the government should be involved in helping the poor. He doesn't believe either the Republican or Democratic parties get it wholly right, but he leans towards the views of the Democrats because he considers Republicans to be judgmental and exclusive, whereas he doesn't see that as much in Democrats. Certain positions, like the right to life and caring for the poor, are not indifferent to Keith, but how one votes and party affiliation are. Keith said, "When I get into conversations with people in the church [about politics], I don't see these kinds of discussions as essential to my relationship with them as friends and in the church." He sees partisan political stances as adiaphora when it comes to church membership and Christian relationships.

Julie also believes the way one decides to vote is a matter of adiaphora concerning church membership and acceptance. However, she struggled with the reality of embracing this position in a politically diverse congregation when her candidate for president in 2008, Barack Obama, was elected. She discussed her feelings regarding Diverse Church's stance to only acknowledge his victory and pray for the newly elected president without overtly celebrating his election, even though historic, considering the range of political views represented in the church. Julie stated:

I remember thinking that Sunday, wow, I wish I were at my home church cause I knew that their experience would have been so different. Everybody in that church may or may not have voted for President Obama, but they were going to be collectively very proud of him and excited, and it was going to be an electrified Sunday. But when I came to church here.... And I knew it wasn't going to be that. But when I came to church, it was very somber. Now, I do think the pastor did a wonderful job of muted excitement, recognizing that there were others who may have thought this was the end of the world for them. What was disappointing to

me was that I was excited and probably could have shouted that day. It had nothing to do with God, but I wanted to be with a group of people who were excited. That was probably one of the most uncomfortable days here for me.

Julie realized that the election of the president was something that divided Diverse Church and understood why the church took the stance it took. However, she also experienced the personal sacrifice required to lay down her freedom to celebrate this event for the good of the whole. Considering politics a matter of adiaphora means there will be times when the church guards against making strong, obviously partisan statements which could cause it to be viewed as aligned one way or the other.

Nonetheless, when people view politics within the category of adiaphora, they can openly discuss differing views without the overwhelming pressure to conform to the dominant view. Keith described a dinner party he attended with several members of Diverse Church of varied political perspective. The conversation moved to politics and became rather intense. Keith said, “My wife and I left the dinner thinking, how cool is it that we can sit up here and have this discussion about different political views and love and hug each other at the very end.... I didn’t let that define the evening.” Keith’s point is that putting partisan politics in the adiaphora category allows Christians, when they choose, to freely discuss their political differences, knowing that these differences do not define their Christian relationships or stand at the core of what it means to follow Christ together.

Worship Practices

The study participants also considered certain things that take place in worship to be matters of adiaphora. Each was concerned that worship remains God-glorifying,

biblical, and mindful of the needs of the body as a whole. The areas that were most often spoken of as adiaphora were music styles used and freedom of expression in worship.

Regarding music styles, Lisa, a thirty-two year old Caucasian woman, and Jane, a seventy-three year old African American woman, both believe various music styles and culturally contextualized expressions are appropriate in worship. Yet both communicated some displeasure or discomfort about using styles that typically would arise from each one's specific cultural background. Lisa talked about the fact that she did not come from a traditional church background, so Diverse Church's eclectic music style is very comfortable to her. She did, however, say:

It's kind of funny to be coming from me, a white person, but when there is really traditional music, and there is someone who plays for communion, very over the top, traditional piano, and I know some people love it, but for me it's so theatrically presented that it is distracting for me. And I know it's a preference thing but it's something that I'm not used to and so when it's happening I just feel distracted most of the time. I love this man but that style, it's just so distracting for me personally.

Interestingly, Lisa is not bothered by the gospel music at Diverse Church, but she is bothered by the particular way that traditional classical styles of music are performed. Yet, she acknowledges that this is a matter of preference for her and that other people are blessed by this music.

Jane, somewhat unexpectedly, stated the following:

I love the music ministry here. I had not had much of the drums before. That kind of bothered me at first, but I got used to that. There's something that still bothers me, though. The music is really good, some of the best I've heard anywhere. I love it. But there seems to be an overabundance of gospel music at times, most of the time. There should probably be some more of the old classic kinds of things. The kind of music [she mentions the exact person and music Lisa complained about] plays sometimes. Just may be my age too. I love classical music.

The young Caucasian woman loves gospel music and was distracted by the very music the older African American woman wanted to hear. In response to the researcher's follow-up questions, Jane clarified that she did not think particular styles of music were of the essence of the faith. She believes music styles are somewhat adiaphora. But she did say, "[Music] should be used to teach the essentials of the faith." She then went on to say, "There is one thing that is essential to the faith, and that is that we use all our musicians as much as we can."

These two interviews in particular highlighted something about music styles in worship that was true for most of the interview participants. People have preferences based upon numerous factors, race being only one. Age and prior experience are also determinative in what people prefer. However, everyone believed that thinking through adiaphora related to music styles was important for allowing diverse music stylizations and using differing musical gifts in a culturally diverse congregation.

Freedom of expression in worship was the other category where study participants used adiaphora. Typically, this way of thinking was used when something happened in worship that made a person feel uncomfortable. Once or twice, someone danced in the aisle during a worship service at Diverse Church. This is something that is not a normal practice during worship at this church. Ben described his reaction in this way: "It was one of those things that made me feel uncomfortable but not to the degree where I felt like this person was clearly violating some biblical command. She was expressing herself in a way that she felt at the time." Jane added, "I didn't judge it as being wrong or inappropriate, but it surprised me. It was very different for the setting of Diverse Church." Neither Ben nor Jane felt that any biblical commands were broken. They had to

deal with the way it made them feel uncomfortable, but they viewed it as a valid expression of this woman's worship of God.

Other participants mentioned the expressiveness of song leaders, especially during one event where a song leader was very emotional in front of everyone. No one judged this as inappropriate, and they felt the song leader had the freedom to worship in this way. Gary stated, "I can tell you categorically coming to Diverse Church, anytime everybody is seated and one or two people stand up in the middle of the song, my instinct is to be uncomfortable. But the longer we've been here, the more I appreciate that." He talked about how at first he had felt that people who did this were looking for attention and wanted the focus on them. But he says, "The more I've been at Diverse Church, the more I've grown to love the people I see standing. I know that that's not what's behind it." Gary and others as well view different expressions in worship as matters of indifference that are legitimate for people to use as they feel led.

Theological Convictions

A few participants referred to certain theological positions as non-essential. They explained that these positions were indifferent only in the sense of church acceptance and membership. No one believed that these kinds of things were wholly unimportant; however, they did view these as non-essential for full inclusion into the body and life of the church. Holding differing views on the sacraments, Sabbath observance, and denominational commitments were mentioned as non-essentials.

Barry, who has served as a missionary in the Muslim world, believes it is appropriate to treat many things American Christians would consider to be of great

theological importance as adiaphora. This would include even using the word Christian to describe a follower of Christ. He said the following in his interview:

In a Muslim setting, you would virtually remove entirely the word Christian.... So when you start stripping away the name Christian, there are a lot of people who get really passionate about that particular topic. The main reason why it's done is because Christian means something totally different to a Muslim than the practicing Christian who says it.... So Christianity does not mean Jesus. Christianity means a culture, so when you talk about somebody becoming a Christian in a Muslim setting, you might as well become Chinese. That's what it means, so when you think about how do you best contextualize and bring the message of Jesus to a particular people, Christianity is extremely problematic, because that doesn't mean at all what we're trying to communicate. So, let's just throw the term away entirely because it's just not helpful.

Barry believes that to contextualize the message of Christianity in the Muslim world, one must rid it of the term "Christian," because that word has been totally identified with the Western world. He believes this term is a matter of adiaphora that can be laid down or used as appropriate to spread the gospel.

This leads to one final point made by a participant regarding the issue of indifferent things. Ben uses the adiaphora category to build relationships and guard the racial and culture dynamics of Diverse Church. However, he made this intriguing point, which was different from anything anyone else said.

In some sense, there are no indifferent things. Everything we do or don't do, we do it or don't do it to the glory of God. So, in that sense, there is no room for indifference from God's standpoint. So, if I don't do something, I'm not doing it unto the glory of God, and if I do something, I'm doing it to the glory of God. The Bible does say that anything that is not done in faith is sin. So, whether you do something in moderation, but you don't do it in faith or to the glory of God, you're sinning.

Ben is highlighting the biblical reality that even things that really don't matter at all cannot be in their essence matters of absolute indifference, because even those things are to be done in faith. Therefore, embracing differences by using adiaphora is only

appropriate because welcoming and accepting the legitimate cultural diversity of others honors God. For Ben, this is also true when dealing with matters that may be important, but are not ultimate. Even then, according to Ben, God would have the church embrace and receive those of a different perspective, demonstrating that acceptance by holding even the important, not ultimate, things somewhat loosely. This is an act of faith to please God and bring him glory.

What Has Influenced Congregants' Views on Matters of Adiaphora?

The second research question focused on things that have influenced congregants' views of adiaphora. The participants' responses will be discussed under the following headings: Diverse Church, biblical/theological convictions, prior church/denominational involvement, and cross-cultural or diverse relationships.

Diverse Church

Diverse Church has had a profound role in shaping how the study participants think about adiaphora. This is particularly true for Caucasian study participants from Presbyterian or reformed backgrounds in the Deep South. Amanda, for example, explained that the pastor's teaching on this topic opened her eyes significantly to the possibility of using this as a category to include differences. She said:

I probably would have been fuzzy on all of this, but early on the pastor began teaching us, even with the search committee [which she was on] about the drums and wanting to go really slowly. And he has and how we've changed a lot, but it has been glorious, pleasant, and relatively conflict free. I can't remember the setting, but the pastor taught on adiaphora, and that clarified a lot for me. Mainly the indifferent things. And I loved the statement that we all have a cultural bias. White people need to hear that more cause it's like "us and everybody else."

Amanda described the direct influence of pastoral teaching on adiaphora as being essential in helping her and the church to see its cultural homogeneity in order to make the necessary changes to reach others.

Gary mentioned how relationships at Diverse Church have forced him to think differently about what's of the essence of the faith or appropriate for Christian cultural engagement. Gary, who works in politics, talked about the ways his thinking has changed because of relationships he's forged at Diverse Church.

My relationships have changed to such a point that I know so many people that I disagree with politically that I start from a different place. Being at Diverse Church has changed my perspective. I look at political issues differently, so I say I know x, y, and z people that love Jesus and that care about our culture and arrive at a different conclusion than I do. My usual response to that is I'd love to have a discussion with them, and I think I could probably convince them to come to my conclusion, or I probably don't have all the answers, and I think I'm holding my views with much more humility than I would have before coming to the church.

Heterogeneous Christian relationships formed in the church have caused Gary to hold some of his political views with much more humility. Additionally, and even more importantly, he realizes that genuinely Christian and godly people, many of whom he knows, can have different opinions on these kinds of things. Because Gary knows these people, he may still hold strong political opinions, but he holds them with more humility and respect for the positions of other believers who differ with him. A specific relationship that profoundly impacted Gary is described under the heading *Cross-Cultural or Diverse Relationships* below.

Biblical/Theological Convictions

Some participants were influenced in their thinking about adiaphora simply through the study of God's word and reformed teachings on the doctrines of grace. Ben's experience was the clearest example of this. In his interview, he actually took out his

Bible and read Romans 14, which is one of the passages the researcher has discussed in this dissertation. Ben then said, “Really, working through that passage and having a good understanding of Romans 14 has helped.” Ben believes the Bible teaches that some things are to be treated as non-essential when it comes to receiving diverse believers into the church.

A few participants came from more fundamentalist backgrounds where grace was not taught as thoroughly as it is in some reformed and Presbyterian churches. Julie is one such example. She described learning the Bible and doctrine at Diverse Church in a different way than she had in her foundational teaching as a child. “The teaching on grace. Wow! That was really powerful for me,” Julie said. The teaching on grace helped her to realize that some of the things that she held before as critical for healthy Christian living, like attitudes on drinking, are unimportant when it comes to a believer’s salvation or standing with God.

Also, it was interesting to hear the ways precise theological thinking enabled some participants to understand when matters moved from being adiaphora to being biblically wrong. Amanda talked about her feelings when a song leader at Diverse Church became so emotional that she had to be helped off the stage after leading a song. Amanda didn’t process this as a cultural issue or a matter of adiaphora. She certainly could have, but instead she reflected on what the Bible teaches on revival and immediately thought through what happened from that perspective. “I couldn’t be sure that was what was happening, but I gave her the benefit of the doubt, knowing that she had been through a lot lately and knowing this song was really moving to her.” Amanda also described being in another church and hearing someone preach clear heresy. Because

of her knowledge of the Bible, she is able to perceive acceptable differences and teachings or behaviors that cross lines of acceptability. She made the point of classifying homosexuality as unacceptable.

Barry described responding in a similar way to Amanda, recalling an incident that occurred in a church he attended while in the Pacific Northwest. He talked about the pastor using the passage where Jesus asked Peter to come out of the boat and walk on the water as a call to all Latinos from every part of the world to come to the United States. Barry explained his belief that this minister did not have the freedom to use the Bible that way. This was not a matter of adiaphora. He continued, “To me that is extremely problematic on a lot of levels, and if there is something that is not in the text...or doesn’t go with the context and doesn’t go with the narrative of scripture, then I have a real problem with that.” Barry urged that a person cannot use the Bible in any way they would like to prove a point, even if the specific position could be considered adiaphora.

Prior Church/Denominational Involvement

Some interviewees, because of prior church and denominational involvement, joined Diverse Church with the ability to distinguish between essentials and non-essentials in order to embrace different kinds of diversity within the church. Keith was a lifelong Catholic before joining Diverse Church. He said, “I think I have always had a feeling of diversity in worship growing up Catholic. Every Catholic church I’ve belonged to has been in some form or some way very diverse.” Keith’s prior church experiences made him more open to diversity in worship and in other areas.

The same is true of Jane, whose husband was a career military officer. She said the following:

I worked with several different chaplains on several different bases, and I worked closely with them. The chaplains were very inclusive of all the different Protestants and consulted with the Catholic chaplains, and we had a Jewish chaplain. We did a lot of things together; in fact we had a Seder meal together.

Jane's experience working with chaplains in the military helped her to think through differences in the ways people exercise their faith, as well as what is essential and what isn't. She learned lessons about being inclusive of others through this. Barry described learning a comparable lesson from his studies of Eastern orthodoxy and his friendship with a Catholic priest who was a committed believer in Christ. Both of these were key factors in expanding his understanding of adiaphora. He said, "I saw people who expressed genuine faith in categories that I had no category before."

Ben actually described coming into the Presbyterian Church as something which opened his eyes to the believer's freedom to use unfamiliar ways of praising God in a God-exalting way. Ben did not grow up Presbyterian, and he described his initial experiences as follows:

I grew up in church, and so I was very familiar with a lot of hymns and church music. When I got to the Presbyterian Church, it was like I was a pagan who had walked into a church. A lot of the music was just foreign and especially the Trinity Hymnal. I had never heard this music before in my life. Even in singing a song, I got tired singing cause I just didn't know how to hold those notes. I remember watching one brother while singing *And Can It Be*, and I was breathless, but he was singing with gusto. His chest was lifting, and I was out of breath. That was different; however, it opened my eyes about the freedom they had and the idea of rejoicing when other Christians rejoice.

Ben experienced a culturally specific form of worship that was different than anything he had previously encountered. Yet seeing a fellow believer worshiping God with such obvious joy allowed him to understand the freedom to be different and rejoice when others rejoice.

Cross-Cultural or Diverse Relationships

Several study participants learned about adiaphora through international travel and mission experiences. Barry served in the Muslim world, and Lisa described how a summer trip to China opened her thinking to new and unexpected ways that God works. Many also described cross-cultural or diverse relationships with members at Diverse Church or in other settings as things that helped them to categorize certain things as non-essential for building relationships.

Ben specifically mentioned marriage as a primary relationship to forge thinking about things that are essential and non-essential. He stated:

Life has taught me, and I've seen this in my own marriage that marriage is ground zero for loving someone who is different than me. We're learning how to fellowship with people who have different preferences or may have different likes or may differ over some things that are not essential to the Christian faith.... I'm African American, and my wife is African American, and I remember one time talking about a song from the black church, and I said, "It goes like this." And she said, "No it doesn't." Now, we grew up in the same type of church. We are both black and grew up in black churches but disagreed on the best way to sing the song. Now, if I cannot agree with someone of my own color, and I grew up in a similar setting, how am I going to agree with someone in the church that was raised in an entirely different kind of family and community? So marriage is ground zero for loving someone who is different.

Learning to identify essential and non-essentials for diverse inclusion isn't just for those who differ racially and culturally. Ben's point is that everyone is different in some way, even if they come from the same type of background and experiences. For a marriage to be healthy, using adiaphora is absolutely necessary. Therefore, Ben sees marriage as a training ground for multi-racial inclusion.

Gary described an amazing relationship that he formed at Diverse Church with an African American woman. The relationship was initially strained, but eventually it turned to something positive and transformative in his thinking about adiaphora. He stated:

One specific relationship more than any other is my relationship with [this woman]. There was an interaction about two years ago because of social media and my outspoken political views where she was offended by something I put on Facebook politically. She concluded that any political views directed at a black president were racist and bigoted towards all black people.... I sought her to reconcile. And more than anything wanted her to know that I wasn't bigoted toward African Americans, and even though I disagreed with a lot of political views she held, I loved her. I knew she had a strong foundation, and we both loved the Lord, and I wanted her to get back to seeing that in me too. So we started having conversations, and we had two lunches and phone conversations.... The relationship that I have with her has greatly changed my perspective on all kinds of people. And it has dramatically changed the types of things I put on Facebook. Just about every single time I hit post, I think of [this woman]. And I think, "Could I defend this to my Christian sister? Not so much that she'll agree with the content, but can I defend this as a loving thing and an appropriate post in light of my Christian brothers and sisters? Or would it come across as offensive?" Before, I would have thought, "I'm right," and would not have been that concerned about offending people.

This is an extraordinary example of how a diverse racial and political Christian friendship changed the manner in which a person with strong political views learned how to communicate his ideas with more love and concern towards Christians who were different. Gary believes his political opinions are important, but he's learned that they are not ultimate and do not matter so much that he should do harm to a fellow Christian. Without this kind of relationship afforded to him by Diverse Church, Gary would have never thought about this.

In What Ways Do Congregants Practice Adiaphora as a Means of Racial-Cultural

Inclusion?

The third research question explored ways congregants practice adiaphora as a means of racial-cultural inclusion. The participants consistently discussed three ways this occurs, which will be used to structure the analysis. These three ways include appropriately responding to differences, helping to build relationships, and graciously accepting change.

Appropriately Responding To Differences

One issue raised by many of the interview subjects concerned when to respond to differences and when to show restraint. Adiaphora deals with matters that are non-essential; therefore, much freedom and flexibility are allowed for people to express these kinds of differences. Yet, several participants discussed times when situations were clearly about right and wrong and had to be addressed. Keith referred to an incident when a member of Diverse Church was planning to divorce his wife, despite what Keith considered to be obvious biblical directives and despite the church leadership's position. Nonetheless, the man felt he had freedom to pursue the divorce. For Keith, this was undoubtedly not a matter of adiaphora. He describes his thinking and a confrontation he had with the man as follows:

Based upon my knowledge of scripture, I saw him not applying parts of scripture to his life. I had a time [with him] in the family room of my house where God must have been speaking through me, saying to him that you can read this and not apply it to your own life. You can't just pick and choose. I now truly tend to wonder whether he is a believer. The gospel you share and talk about is not being applied to your life.

Keith used discernment in this setting, based upon what he believes the Bible teaches about marriage and divorce, to conclude that this member's decision was not a matter of adiaphora. He therefore confronted this man on his decision to divorce his wife, even questioning whether the man is a believer based upon the way he responds to biblical teaching. Keith certainly has a place for adiaphora and uses it to pursue inclusiveness, but he also draws clear lines based upon biblical authority.

Lisa discussed a time when she was trying to tutor a young man from the church's neighborhood. He was from an unprivileged background and had serious educational deficiencies. Lisa is an expert in reading and literacy and decided to work with him.

However, she immediately faced his serious lack of commitment to do the work. Was this cultural? Was it based upon his disadvantages? Should she continue trying even though he was unwilling to follow through on what she expected? Lisa described what happened this way:

I tutored him for a while. He would come by after school was out, and I would tutor him in the afternoon. He just really wasn't doing his part. He would have a whole week to read a book, and he just wasn't doing the work.... I had to tell him, "This isn't doing anything unless you are willing to do your part. This is pointless." And I asked him whether he wanted to keep doing it or stop for now, and he said, "I want to stop for now."

The researcher then asked Lisa what led her to stop tutoring him as opposed to simply embracing this as a cultural or lifestyle difference to be accepted and not challenged. Her answer is enlightening:

Well, that's where the conflict arises. Ok, well, he didn't get support when he was young. He needs someone to support him. "Maybe I'm the one to do it," you think sometimes. But I also realize... that if that is the stance I take I'm going to get run over in this ministry and neighborhood because there is so much brokenness, and you can feel personally responsible for all of it. But you can do these things in love. I wasn't harsh with him about it. I told him that I wish I could help him, but I can't. In a way that tough love thing put it on him in a way that could help him be more responsible for himself. It helped to give him the confidence to approach me later about it. Because he had to feel like he could do this and wanted to do it.

Lisa acknowledged the obvious disadvantages from this young man's background and wanted to help him. She saw, however, that he needed to take responsibility for his life. Lisa believed his unwillingness to make an effort could not be overlooked or treated as unimportant or indifferent. If she had continued to tutor him without any commitment on his part to do the work, this would have harmed him. His responsibility to do the work was not a matter of indifference to Lisa; therefore, she ended the tutoring. She noted that the following year he did return and wanted to do the work.

Julie talked about an incident where she had lunch with a Caucasian woman who was a member of Diverse Church. The conversation turned to race, and Julie started to feel very uncomfortable. On one level, the discussion could have been considered non-essential. There were no racist sentiments being expressed, and there was nothing intentionally personal about the conversation. Julie couldn't remember all the details, but it had to do with Noah's son Ham and whether black people are descendants of Ham. Julie said, "I was just offended by it. But with this person, we had an opportunity to really unpack it. We stopped what we were doing, and she said, 'I didn't know you felt that way.'" For Julie, viewing something as *adiaphora* or ultimately a matter of indifference doesn't mean that issues shouldn't be addressed, especially when they cause misunderstandings or hard feelings. This lady's discussion of Ham bothered Julie. It wasn't necessarily wrong, but it was hurtful to Julie. Consequently, she lovingly confronted her. Using *adiaphora* to forge relationships doesn't mean that confrontations never occur. Keith, Lisa, and Julie had to work through *adiaphora* and challenge others as necessary.

The participants in the study use *adiaphora* to appropriately respond to differences by taking necessary stances to confront others based upon biblical convictions, to pursue the good of other people, and to prevent personal offenses from festering. Gary's take on this is interesting. He admitted, "I err far too much in that everyone should have liberty, and let's not judge. Unless it's blatant sin, it's pretty easy for me to say, 'To each his own.'" No participant in this study overlooked sin or things that were clearly considered wrong or harmful. This kind of thinking allows people to make room for differences yet confront as appropriate for the good of others and the health of the church.

Participants in the study continue to find reasons to confront and challenge others, but adiaphora also led many to use restraint when responding to differences. Ben discussed this in relation to political views, which he considers important but not ultimate. He said, “I typically don’t tell people my political views. I have a way of talking about issues without them knowing where I stand.” He does this so he will not be judged and stereotyped. Ben expressed great concern that people will stop thinking and easily end conversations when they feel they have you categorized. He stated the following:

A lot of times I’m talking to people as an elder at the church, and I’m approaching them and addressing them and looking for ways to disciple and encourage them and come alongside them. And sometimes it’s helpful for them not to know what I believe about specific issues.... I believe x, y, and z. I do have strong opinions about certain things and some not so strong, but because I can let those things go, it doesn’t really mean that I have to put my views out there first.

Ben is a model of how to retrain one’s opinions, in this case political views, for the sake of shepherding and caring for people who are different. Even though he has strong political views, he does not believe these are ultimate, and they should not hinder his relationship with people who have different views. Ben is an elder of people with various political views, and he wants to make sure he cares for everyone. Thinking through adiaphora helps him to do that.

Julie also believes that it is important to use restraint when expressing personal views. She talked about being in an all black church with her family. As an African American in a homogenous African American setting, there were certain freedoms allowed and accepted. She said:

We were in a church where once a year we had black history month, and things would be said from the pulpit about white people that were not nice, about how they treated us, and I guess we heard it, but as the adults in the family we knew where that was coming from. But our children were offended, because they went to school with people like they were talking about. They didn’t understand how

they were supposed to feel that way about them.... We knew then that we had to find a different church. Even though it felt okay to us, it didn't feel okay for them.

Julie describes one reason why homogenous relationships can be unhealthy. They prevent groups from recognizing the harm their positions and opinions can cause others. Julie and her husband understood the things being said from the pulpit, but their children, who were in schools with white children, had a difficult time processing what was happening. The lack of restraint came from the homogeneity of the group. Everyone was the same, so they thought everyone agreed. It's fallacious to ever think that way, but intentionally diverse churches force people to acknowledge this. The all black congregation probably felt the things they were saying about the treatment of African American by Caucasians were true. They may have been restrained in how they said some of these things if they realized that great differences of opinion and perspective were present in the congregation. Using adiaphora helps people to know when and how to check their opinions based upon the setting. If it's not essential and can do harm, it probably should not be said.

To Help Build Relationships

Practicing adiaphora to help build diverse relationships was also important among study participants. Using adiaphora made participants much more empathetic. Lisa talked about learning to put aside false stereotypes of particular types of people. Having a different experience or reality doesn't mean that one is wrong or doing something the wrong way. Lisa described this:

I kind of thought parents were lazy to be in the situation [of poverty]. But then I remember having parent conferences in my first year as a new teacher with parents crying at meetings cause they were just under so much stress. So here were twenty-two year olds wondering what they were supposed to do with their children, which was way more than I could imagine.

Adiaphora enables people to think through differences with an additional measurement other than previously informed standards or perceptions of right and wrong. This allowed Lisa to empathize with people who she would have once believed to be lazy.

Barry described an interaction he had with members of Diverse Church at a community development conference. Barry attends these conferences regularly, but it was the first time for the other members of Diverse Church. Something was said in a workshop that was very difficult for these first time conference attenders from Diverse Church to receive. It was a very different political position than what they believed. They came to the conclusion that this conference may not have been for them. Barry met with them about it and described the incident this way:

I think it was a lack of exposure and a certain amount of ignorance, and not understanding the depth of the story and what the conditions have been to bring us to this moment in history.... They didn't feel this was the place for them, but I tried to build a bridge as to how life was different for some people to give them a context for empathy, so they could stretch their thinking. They said they really appreciated my thinking.

Barry placed diverse perspectives into the category of adiaphora in order to help a group of people better understand and empathize with the experiences and pain of others. This is critical for building diverse relationships, especially in the Deep South.

Others used adiaphora as a means to love and build relationships with their more opinionated fellow believers. How does one respond to people who hold and communicate strong opinions on political matters? Ben talked about how he treated a person who expressed his opinion that it is unchristian to vote in particular ways. Ben's response wasn't to immediately react in a negative or harsh way. He was able to do that by placing politics in an important but non-essential category, which allowed him to have a reasonable conversation with the person. He was then able to help the person see the

consequences of what he was saying by giving him different examples to make him think more. By doing this, Ben guarded his relationship with this person, while also helping him to think through his interactions with other people. Ben made the point of saying that this young man was in seminary and planned to go into ministry. He wanted to help him to better think through how to engage and pastor people who have very different opinions.

The study participants also demonstrated how adiaphora opens doors for hospitality. Ben talked about building a relationship with someone who was different racially, culturally, and politically. He said:

I continue to engage with the person on the phone. I called him, and he called me. We texted. We invited him over to our house for meals, not just to talk about these issues but to let him see how we lived and to learn more about him. I persisted in engaging in that way, even though some of the things he said were kind of hurtful. And they were definitely insensitive, but I just continued in the relationship for the sake of the gospel because maybe God has brought him here for this particular time. I don't know, but I was willing to forego some of the discomforts that happen in these relationships and the awkwardness to pursue the relationship.

This is another example of using adiaphora to place differences in a category that allows for continual relationships, even when those relationships are uncomfortable. Ben could show this man hospitality because he did not perceive his different opinions to be so important that they should be viewed as threats.

Lisa discussed using adiaphora to invite two older African American women into her home for dinner. Of one of the women she said, "She is pretty frank the way she talks about things. She told me how she didn't trust white people and how she feels like they're looking at her funny if she goes to their part of town." Here is an older African American woman having this conversation with a young Caucasian woman in her home

at dinner. This was possible because an atmosphere of openness had been established by putting these topics in a category where people can freely discuss their positions. Lisa was using adiaphora to make this happen. Other participants also used this category to help build diverse relationships.

Graciously Accepting Change

Another way adiaphora is used by study participants is to allow them to more graciously accept change, specifically in Diverse Church. As one can imagine, it is necessary for a congregation that seeks to be racially and culturally diverse to continually consider how it needs to adapt and change in order to be effective. Congregational change is not easy for many.

Some, like Amanda, discussed the gradual yet intentional changes that have taken place over the years in the music ministry. Many discussions took place as this was happening, dealing with both cultural contextualization of worship and also freedom to move in different directions with non-essential things, including music stylization. Amanda fully embraced these changes for both of these reasons.

Ben, in talking about his leadership responsibilities in the church, recalled:

There are decisions made on the session that if I were king for the day, I would not have made them. They were not sin; it's just a different direction than I would have taken. I could even say that maybe this would be worse for the person if we would go in this particular direction, but again the reason I don't tear up the church over an issue like that is because it's not a matter of sin. So I could just let it ride. So in a sense, it may have been troubling, or maybe I didn't feel this was the best direction; however, I submit myself to the other brothers and the decisions that were made. In other words, it was not a matter of sin, just a different way a person may want to take a matter.

He uses adiaphora to help him submit to specific elder decisions, even when he may not agree with them or he thinks the decisions unwise. They're not sin, so he submits.

There were numerous other examples of using adiaphora to think through changes in the church, or even to accept ministries which for some reason troubled people. Keith described this with the adoption ministry of the church, which promotes international adoptions. He didn't want African American children overlooked for the sake of adopting internationally. He accepts the ministry, however, because he believes this is not a matter that is sinful. Barry is another example. He struggles with the use of the phraseology "mercy ministries" to describe this aspect of the church's outreach. He would prefer "compassion and justice ministries," which he believes would better communicate the church's intentions and relationship to under-resourced people. He accepts the title "mercy ministry," however, because he believes this is adiaphora.

One final example of this concerned Diverse Church's change to include women as ushers during the Sunday morning worship service. The normal pattern in Diverse Church, and many other churches in this denomination throughout the Deep South, is to have only male ushers. The leadership made the decision to allow female ushers. This change stirred up some controversy in the church. Two participants, Gary and Amanda, talked about how they struggled with it at first, but then used adiaphora as a category to work through it and accept it. Gary said the following:

I came to the pastor at the time when we made the change to add women as ushers. I was concerned because I thought it was threatening because of what I thought was the biblical role for male leadership in the church. It's not anymore. I think the pastor made his case well. It is in the adiaphora category, and it ought to be an opportunity for women to serve, and we ought to look for places for them to serve and take appropriate leadership.

Gary articulated to the pastor his genuine concern that allowing women to usher would undermine the biblical role for male leadership in the church. This was an essential issue to him. However, in conversation with the pastor, he came to realize that this was not

about male leadership. The Bible did not address ushering in this way. In fact, the Bible does not address ushering at all. This allowed Gary to think through this issue as adiaphora instead and, as a result, he came to accept the situation. Accepting change and new ministry ideas in the church is another benefit of seriously wrestling through adiaphora.

Summary of Findings

This chapter examined how congregants in one southern multiracial church, Diverse Church, utilize adiaphora to foster multiracial inclusion. It began by exploring the kinds of things congregants viewed as adiaphora or non-essential, including certain social norms. The two issues most consistently discussed were alcohol consumption and how one dresses for worship. This is probably due to the traditional mindset and Baptist influences in so much of Bible-believing Christianity in the Deep South. Almost all participants in this study experienced being judged over their expressions of freedom in these areas. Everyone considered both moderate use of alcohol and how one dresses for worship to be matters of individual conscience, and they stated their conviction that believers should not be pressured to conform to any particular standard to be fully welcomed at Diverse Church.

Certain lifestyle choices were also considered adiaphora. These included the freedom to express one's feelings about matters without the threat of rejection, how one manages and uses money, and even views on adoption. These were specific examples given. The general tone of the respondents was that there is much freedom regarding how one chooses to live if the Bible doesn't mandate or prohibit the behavior. Most of these specific topics were discussed as a result of tense relationships that brought the issues to

the forefront. Nonetheless, the participants believe that people should have freedom in certain lifestyle choices and be fully welcomed into the life of Diverse Church.

The interview subjects also discussed partisan politics as another area related to individual freedom of choice. Even though each participant discussed this as something *adiaphora*, the prevailing opinion was that political views are important, but not ultimate. Public policy often addresses matters of equity and justice. However, the specific response is often a matter of what one views to be most effective while compromising amidst stakeholders. Freedom to express views respectfully fosters community. Christians should find appropriate and loving ways to discuss these matters, but attempts to conform opinions to one right or wrong way to think about politics or vote was anathema to the participants. Allowing people freedom to hold their specific political opinions was important to all participants. In fact, this was so important that several spoke of being careful how they communicated their positions so as not to harm others.

Some worship practices were considered *adiaphora*. No one considered worship as a whole or what happens in worship to be *adiaphora*. No one questioned the order or elements of worship at Diverse Church. The two areas discussed were music styles and expressiveness. Regarding music styles, almost everyone was comfortable with the eclectic cross-cultural music style of Diverse Church. Nonetheless, there was concern expressed by one participant that the church may do too much music in one style. This was intriguing, because the person was a minority concerned for the majority group's welfare.

Regarding freedom for expressiveness, some acknowledged times when certain worship practices went beyond what was normal at the church. Never were these actions

judged or condemned, even though they did make some feel uncomfortable. There was a desire expressed by a few for more freedom in worship. Everyone acknowledged the difficulty of pleasing everyone in such a diverse setting.

Even some theological convictions were discussed as adiaphora. To clarify, these were not considered indifferent in the sense that they did not matter at all. There was an attempt though to distinguish between theological essentials and non-essentials, especially for the sake of membership and full inclusion into the life of the church. Views on the sacraments, Sabbath observance, and commitments to certain denominational views and practices were all considered.

Secondly, participants were asked what influenced their views on adiaphora. Diverse Church was the greatest influence on those who were from the Deep South and came from homogenous Presbyterian or reformed backgrounds. Their time at Diverse Church has placed them into a multi-racial context in a way that they had not experienced before. They had to learn how to process cultural and racial differences in a way that guarded truth yet was welcoming of differences. The pastor's teaching on adiaphora both from the pulpit and in other settings was important here, as were cross-cultural relationships developed at the church.

Some learned to think through adiaphora from their individual study and knowledge of God's word, as well as a better understanding of grace. This included studying passages that dealt specifically with adiaphora, like Romans 14. It also included knowing the word as a whole. Knowledge of God's word allows people to determine what is essential and what isn't. Understanding grace humbles and causes believers to question, in a healthy way, whether they are correct in their opinions.

Other things that helped shape the participants' views on adiaphora were broad and different Christian experiences. People who came from different church backgrounds or denominations than Diverse Church had a broader view on what is acceptable for Christians, as well as the issue of cultural diversity. Also cross-cultural, international, and diverse relationships factored into people having open views on things that were non-essential for church membership and inclusion. One very interesting cross-cultural, diverse relationship described by the participants was marriage. The experience of building a healthy marriage, even with a person of the same race and background, can equip people to better understand how to handle diversity in the church.

Finally, participants were asked how they used adiaphora to foster racial and cultural inclusion in the church. Adiaphora helped many to know when to take a stand and when to refrain. This means adiaphora was used to help people better determine what the Bible actually calls people to know and do. In other words, no one thought of non-essentials without also considering essentials. Therefore, participants described ways they had to think through whether a particular situation had reached a level where it had to be challenged, or if it could simply be overlooked

This led to discussions of ways that adiaphora has been used to help build relationships with very different, and at times difficult, people. Adiaphora offered people a way to handle differences of opinion that many times fracture relationships. Politics was a major example here. By putting political discussions in the "important but not ultimate" category, people can choose to talk about them as they want but focus on other things as well, always remembering that one's relationship to Christ is what binds believers together.

Using adiaphora also helped participants to graciously accept changes and ministry decisions in the church, which they, at first, did not want. People may have strong opinions about certain matters, but if these are not of the essence of the faith and are not sinful or unbiblical, then there is much more openness to accept and go along with the changes. This has allowed Diverse Church to make significant changes in many areas over its nine-year life with relatively little conflict.

Based upon these eight interviews, adiaphora has greatly influenced the thinking and behavior of congregants at Diverse Church. Whether they learned the concept prior to coming to the church or were taught it at the church, it is used to guard both the purity and the peace of the congregation, and it enables members to embrace change and welcome all kinds of different people.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to determine how congregants in one southern multiracial church utilize adiaphora to foster multiracial inclusion. Three research questions guided the study.

1. What do congregants consider to be matters of adiaphora?
2. What has influenced congregants' views on matters of adiaphora?
3. In what ways do congregants practice adiaphora as a means of racial-cultural inclusion?

In order to provide a foundation for this research, three areas of literature were reviewed in chapter two: biblical/theological framework on adiaphora, systems theory in congregations and organizations, specifically focusing on differentiation and conformity, and multiracial dynamics in congregations and organizations, also specifically focusing on differentiation and conformity.

In addition, eight members in good standing of Diverse Church, a Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) congregation located in the Deep South, were interviewed. Their insights regarding the research questions were reported in chapter four. In this chapter, the researcher will summarize and consolidate the findings from the literature and the interviews, highlighting themes derived from both. Furthermore, conclusions will be drawn and recommendations offered, which integrate the findings from the literature and the interviews.

Summary of the Findings

Literature research was undertaken in the following areas: biblical and theological understandings of adiaphora, systems theory, and multiracial dynamics. From a biblical and theological perspective, the New Testament and both the historic and contemporary reformed and evangelical traditions variously use adiaphora or “indifferent things” in relationship to the inclusion and acceptance of all nations in the church’s fellowship as it grew from its beginnings as a Messianic Jewish reform movement. The Apostle Paul, the Protestant Reformers, specifically Philip Melancthon and John Calvin, the Puritans, the Westminster Divines, and more contemporary reformed theologians all offered useful and insightful information towards the study. Each demonstrated ways that adiaphora could be appropriated as a means for including diverse practices, opinions, and even people into a dominant majority group, while maintaining unity in Christ.

The research on systems theory highlighted the ways that social systems (such as churches) have the power to conform behavior as a criterion of acceptance. In this regard, how a system approaches matters of indifference, like anything else, can be used to either include or exclude diversity. In the literature discussing attribution theory, and specifically bounded set thinking, it was apparent how easily people can be classified outside a set, group, or church based upon the specific boundary criteria.²⁴² These criteria can be based upon non-essential cultural realities.

The research on multiracial dynamics demonstrated how difficult it is to create and sustain multiracial churches. The literature revealed how unwillingness on the part of the dominant culture to honestly confront its sinful history and recognize its own peculiar

²⁴² Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 116.

cultural biases can contribute to this.²⁴³ Likewise, a mindset of genuine openness to cultural diversity as both valuable and desired is a necessary component of success for multiracial churches and organizations.²⁴⁴ The literature on multiracial dynamics did not directly address adiaphora, but the researcher sees definite ways it can be used to foster multiracial inclusion.

After reviewing the literature, practical research was undertaken using a qualitative method. Eight members of Diverse Church were interviewed. The participants' genders were split equally between women and men, and their races were split equally between African American and Caucasian. While a variety of different things were considered adiaphora, everyone believed that certain social, cultural, and political views and practices were adiaphora. Specific worship practices and some theological positions were also discussed. The most significant influences on the study participants' views concerning adiaphora were the relationships and teaching at Diverse Church, and cross-cultural relationships outside of Diverse Church. Each study participant used adiaphora as a means of racial-cultural inclusion at Diverse Church.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, the literature and practical research will be placed in critical dialogue to identify and consolidate findings that are beneficial for understanding adiaphora as a category for fostering multiracial inclusion. The researcher will accomplish this by identifying and discussing themes which arose from both the literature

²⁴³ Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-Ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation*, 5.

²⁴⁴ Emerson, "A New Day for Multiracial Congregations," 1.

and interviews under the following headings guided by the study's research questions:
views on adiaphora, influences on adiaphora, and uses of adiaphora.

Views on Adiaphora

Truly Indifferent

Adiaphora comes from the Greek, meaning “things indifferent.”²⁴⁵ Neither the literature nor the interviews, in any significant way, discussed adiaphora as truly or wholly indifferent, meaning “having no relevance to life.” Some Stoics did believe there were “truly indifferent things that make no difference at all in life.”²⁴⁶ An example of this would have been whether the number of hairs on one's head is even or odd.²⁴⁷ In other words, truly indifferent things are absolutely irrelevant. In most instances, though, even indifferent things cannot be considered this way. This is why the Stoics distinguished between preferred and not preferred indifferent things based upon their benefit or harm to life. In both the literature and interviews, the discussion of indifferent things always had some moral or spiritual relevance, specifically in relation to other people.

Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:8 described food as indifferent with respect to our standing before God when he wrote, “Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.”²⁴⁸ At the same time, Paul made sure the Corinthians did not use something indifferent, like food, in a way that would cause other believers to stumble.²⁴⁹ After the coming of Christ, Paul considered many

²⁴⁵ McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 4.

²⁴⁶ Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 359-60.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ 1 Corinthians 8:8

²⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 8:9

Jewish religious practices and ethnic identity markers, such as circumcision, food laws, and festival days, to be adiaphora. Christ fulfilled these as requirements of the law, and even though there were Jews who held on to these practices as cultural and religious norms, despite revision after the destruction of the temple, Paul viewed these as indifferent with respect to salvation and admittance into church fellowship. Therefore, they could not be imposed on others so as to bind or injure the consciences of fellow believers, nor could they be used when the result would undermine the unity of the church.

The study participants viewed adiaphora in a similar way. Several Diverse Church members expressed the way certain practices had been given religious significance in other church settings, yet they had come to see those practices as adiaphora during their time at Diverse Church. The two indifferent things that were mentioned most were alcohol usage and one's attire for church attendance. Alcohol consumption in moderation and dressing with modesty were held as general, biblical standards to guide these matters. Nevertheless, Lisa, one of the study participants, said, "[My husband] and I...would never drink around his family, and especially his siblings." This was because of their family's religious convictions about alcohol. Regarding how one dresses for worship, Barry felt that people had freedom to dress as they wanted, but he was very concerned that people would not feel welcome if there were the perception of a required dress code for worship. In accord with both the literature and the interviews, there are many things like clothing, food, and alcohol consumption that are adiaphora. These things are indifferent, but they must not be treated as irrelevant to relationships in the church. In fact, by recognizing the range of freedom the scriptures afford believers in

these matters, I believe members can use or not use them to help relationships and foster greater inclusion.

Important Yet Not Ultimate

Another way *adiaphora* was discussed, particularly during the interviews, was related to things that were important, yet not ultimate. This was the way the participants viewed partisan politics. No one considered political decisions or positions as *adiaphora* in the sense that they were irrelevant. Nor did anyone view political issues as removed from concerns that should matter to the Christian. However, every interview participant who spoke about this viewed partisan political opinions, specifically related to one's political party choices and strategies, as indifferent to membership and full acceptance in the church. This is most likely the prevailing position at Diverse Church, but Keith, an African American who typically votes for Democratic candidates, articulated what can still happen. He shared, "There were some who were actually shocked that I wasn't a Republican, that I could be an elder in a Presbyterian Church and...consider voting for a Democrat." Amanda, who is Caucasian, likewise described feeling judged by other white people when they found out she voted for Obama in 2008. Actions like these demonstrate that political positions carry great weight when people form their views of other Christians.

By viewing political matters as important yet not ultimate, Keith spoke positively about a lively debate concerning politics among members of Diverse Church at a dinner party. They could all remain friends and love and care for each other in spite of their differences. Gary, a white conservative, described how he was able to work through an intense relationship with another member who was African American and liberal, by

viewing politics as important yet not ultimate. Thinking of politics in this way doesn't mean people can't talk about it; it means they actually can discuss political differences, and how they may differ on solutions, without these things standing in the way of their ongoing Christian relationship.

The literature spoke of politics in a similar way. Pastor Charles D. Drew discussed the fact that things that are important to Jesus, which at times will also include political matters, must be addressed by the church. He then said, "But the moment we move into the realm of strategy; the moment we begin to wrestle with just how we are to bring those standards and values to bear upon our culture; we must be careful, humble, and gracious with one another."²⁵⁰ Theologian David VanDrunen elaborates, "Scripture says nothing specifically about the concrete decisions that Christians must make about voting, party affiliation, details of public policy, or political strategy.... When Scripture is silent, there is no single Christian position."²⁵¹ For example, Diverse Church members might agree on what the Bible said about a particular issue that had significant political implications, but they could still engage in lively debate on how to best address the concern in the partisan political sphere. The humility to affirm this and the wisdom and ability to function this way are absolutely necessary to guard against division in the church along political lines. This is especially true when pursuing a multiethnic church in the Deep South, where partisan politics has already significantly divided the church along racial lines, with most white Christians being politically conservative and most black Christians politically liberal. Politics may not be adiaphora in the sense of being entirely

²⁵⁰ Drew, *Body Broken: Can Republicans and Democrats Sit in the Same Pew?*, 95.

²⁵¹ VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture*, 198-99.

indifferent, but viewing political beliefs as important yet not ultimate allows multi-racial inclusion at Diverse Church.

Essential and Non-Essential

The interviewees also discussed adiaphora from the perspective of things that are essential and non-essential. This is how some viewed certain worship practices. It is important to note that the biblical elements of worship, such as prayer and preaching, were not discussed in this way. Only the cultural circumstances of worship specific to music styles and physical-emotional expressiveness were mentioned. These circumstances were considered non-essential, allowing for multiracial inclusion that produces a wider variety of cultural expressions in worship. A few participants also discussed certain theological positions as non-essential for salvation, church membership, or inclusion. This was most likely done in response to the A.C.E. Model chart used by the researcher in the interviews.²⁵² This chart distinguishes between adiaphora (indifferent things), core (constitution/confession), and essentials (standards of orthodoxy). The specific theological positions mentioned as nonessential for salvation or full church membership were views on the sacraments, specifically baptism, Sabbath observance, and denominational commitments.

In the literature, the debates concerning the Puritans' views on the regulative principle of worship and the Church of England's commitment to adiaphora reveal a strong concern with categorizing things essential and non-essential. Anglican theologians like John Whitgift and Richard Hooker make a distinction between things that are specific to salvation, which are clearly taught in scripture and essential, and other things

²⁵² See Appendix.

not pertaining to salvation, which are indifferent or nonessential.²⁵³ According to Iain Murray, leading Puritans thought “the habit of discriminating between essential and nonessentials [was] a dangerous procedure.”²⁵⁴ Murray adds, “The fact that a man may be defective in knowledge and practice, and yet be saved through being on the foundation which is Christ (which Puritans held), provide no warrant for dividing Scripture into essentials and nonessentials.”²⁵⁵

I would agree that all that the scriptures teach is the word of God, but Christians interpret that word differently, especially those parts that are less clear and have, thus, attracted a variety of positions and practices. Not all interpretative differences, even theological ones, should rise to the level of dividing the church. Believers in Christ can be welcomed into church membership even if they differ on nonessential theological positions. While these members may not be allowed to teach these positions or even serve in certain areas of leadership, they should be welcomed and embraced by the church. Considering the fact that the American reformed and Presbyterian traditions have historically had very little involvement with non-Caucasian ethnic groups, specifically African Americans, it should be assumed that African Americans may not have the same theological vocabulary or possibly even work within the same theological categories as those of a reformed or Presbyterian Church. By making wise judgments about that which is essential and non-essential, the church can welcome those from diverse backgrounds with differing convictions while still graciously teaching and guiding the church by confessional commitments.

²⁵³ Packer, *Puritan Papers*, 23-24.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Dutch reformed theologian Herman Bavinck acknowledged this when he said, “While there are great differences in the purity of confessions and churches, and we must aim and strive for the purest, we must distinguish fundamental and non-fundamental articles of faith.”²⁵⁶ Bavinck wrote this in the section in his *Reformed Dogmatics* discussing the church’s unity. While it is dubious to link increased confessional purity or lack thereof to one’s cultural location, Bavinck is certainly correct in affirming that unity requires the ability to distinguish between fundamental and non-fundamental theological principles. New Testament scholar Richard Longenecker, in describing Paul’s usage of *adiaphora*, said, “The genius of Paul was that he was able to make distinctions between the central priorities of the Christian gospel and the *adiaphora* in his mission, and to make them for the benefit of the gospel and the good of his converts.”²⁵⁷ By distinguishing, as the A.C.E. Model chart does, between matters *adiaphora* or non-essential, core or confessional, and essential or standards of orthodoxy, the church, including its local expression in Diverse Church, is able to embrace Christians from incredibly diverse backgrounds while faithfully adhering to confessional standards.

All for God’s Glory

One other way the literature viewed the topic of *adiaphora* was in relation to the glory of God. In this sense, nothing can truly be considered *adiaphora* as it relates to the believer’s life before God. Whether a matter is indifferent or not, it must be done to the glory of God. This is what Paul means in 1 Corinthians 10:31 when he says, “So, whether

²⁵⁶ Bavinck and Bolt, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 605.

²⁵⁷ Bolt and Thompson, *The Gospel to the Nations. Perspectives on Paul's Mission: In Honour of Peter T. O'Brien*, 157.

you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”²⁵⁸ Paul made it clear in the context that what one eats and drinks are matters of adiaphora, but even these things must be received to the glory of God. Gordon D. Fee states, “One’s whole life must be to God’s glory.... Certainly Paul intends that this ‘rule’ dictate the appropriateness of behavior as well. What is not, or cannot be, for God’s glory probably should be excluded from ‘whatever you do.’”²⁵⁹ The Puritans also made the point that any right use of adiaphora must appeal to the glory of God.²⁶⁰ Theologian Richard A. Muller concludes, “Only those things [are] indifferent that do not impede the gospel but rather serve the glory of the God and the good of the church.”²⁶¹ Adiaphora cannot be rightly understood without reference to the glory of God. How one uses adiaphora, therefore, is not simply a matter of personal preference or freedom of conscience. It is for the good of others and the advancement of the gospel, which ultimately brings glory to God. What should compel the church to use adiaphora is God’s glory reflected in the eventual oneness of the church in Christ. This brings glory to God. In John 17:10, Jesus says, “All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them.”²⁶²

One study participant, Ben, pointed this out very clearly, saying, “In some sense, there are no indifferent things. Everything we do or don’t do, we do it or don’t do it to the glory of God.” It is important to be able to make judgments about things that are indifferent when it comes to including diversity in the life of the church. However, the

²⁵⁸ 1 Corinthians 10:31

²⁵⁹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 488.

²⁶⁰ Packer, *Puritan Papers*, 39.

²⁶¹ Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 27.

²⁶² John 17:10

pursuit of God's glory must always be the end goal, as this will help to safeguard what is and is not appropriate. It also directs one's behavior towards others. Ben, in describing how he continued a relationship with someone who was insensitive towards him over politics, continued to pursue that relationship because he felt it would honor God. He said, "I persisted in engaging in that way even though some of the things he said were kind of hurtful.... I just continued in the relationship for the sake of the gospel because maybe God has brought him here for this particular time." Even though Ben acknowledged the pain of the conflict, he continued to pursue his relationship with this person because he saw God's hand in it. Ben submitted to God's will and loved this believer in spite of their disagreement. Ben desired God's glory more than anything else. The church must pursue adiaphora as a means of promoting unity and working through relationship differences and even strife, because it glorifies God when the oneness of the church is expressed.

Influences on Adiaphora

Experiences in the Context of the Church

It is evident from the literature and interviews that experiences within the context of the church shape and influence views on adiaphora. One way this has occurred at Diverse Church is through teaching and preaching specifically on this topic. Amanda said, "I probably would have been fuzzy on all of this, but early on the pastor began teaching us [on adiaphora]." Ben brought up his own study of Romans 14 and how working through that passage helped him to understand and apply adiaphora to his relationships. Julie's growth in her understanding of grace through the preaching and teaching of God's word at Diverse Church helped her to become more tolerant of

differing opinions and lifestyles. In fact, solid teaching emerged as something that enables people to rightly distinguish between what is really important and what may not be. In my opinion, a lack of teaching in the church on how to think through these categories is a significant reason that there is so much division in the church today, including, but not limited to, the racial divide that exists in the church. The church must better teach and equip its people to understand what is truly important for promoting both its purity and its peace. This can help to prevent unacknowledged cultural elitism from closing the doors on people who are not like the majority group, and who are unwilling to assimilate into it.

Cross-cultural scholars Michael Pocock and Joseph Henriques point out, “The desire that one’s own culture be dominant is both strong and natural.”²⁶³ Consequently, they later write, “Naturally, we prefer that people from other races or cultures who enter our cultural environment act like we do. We want them to speak with the same accent, have the same values, see the world in the same way – in short, to have the same culture.”²⁶⁴ This has to be acknowledged as reality and confronted as contradictory to the gospel and the unity of the church. If it is true, as stated by Harlon Dalton, that “most white people...tend not to think of themselves in racial terms...[as] the consequence of being in the driver’s seat,” then somehow this must be identified and addressed.²⁶⁵ This is where gracious yet direct teaching on the topics of culture, race, and adiaphora can be helpful. Amanda described how this happened at Diverse Church recalling, “I can’t

²⁶³ Pocock and Henriques, *Cultural Change and Your Church: Helping Your Church Thrive in a Diverse Society*, 36.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 103.

²⁶⁵ Rothenberg, *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, 15.

remember the setting, but the pastor taught on adiaphora, and that clarified a lot for me. Mainly the indifferent things. And I loved the statement that we all have a cultural bias. White people need to hear that more cause it's like, 'Us and everybody else.'"

Another influence on the interviewees' understanding of adiaphora was the relationships they formed at Diverse Church. Gary said, "My relationships have changed to such a point.... Being at Diverse Church has changed my perspective." Gary works in the arena of conservative politics and has had some perspective-changing interactions with Diverse Church members of the other political party. As a result, he says that he holds his views with much more humility than he did before coming to Diverse Church. After one of his Facebook posts concerning President Obama offended an African American woman who was a fellow member of Diverse Church, Gary and she started to meet. As a result of these meetings, they still embrace their distinct political views, yet Gary has changed the way he now posts on Facebook to the point that he thinks about her before he posts anything. He stated, "I think, 'Could I defend this to my Christian sister? Not so much that she'll agree with the content, but 'Can I defend this as a loving thing... or would it come across as offensive?' Before, I would have thought, 'I'm right,' and would not have been that concerned about offending people."

Cross-cultural relationships within the church, along with the desire to see the gospel spread in an ethnically and culturally diverse world, were influences on adiaphora in the literature as well. This was most evident in the biblical text. Researcher Michael Green talked about the epoch-making conclusions of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. He wrote, "Nothing must be allowed to compromise the truth that Jesus Christ alone is

the salvation of sinners.”²⁶⁶ Green then discussed how Jewish followers of Christ, who refused to force circumcision on Gentile converts, and Gentile Christians, who refrained from eating bloody meat, had each contributed to the church’s multiethnic unity.²⁶⁷ The cross-cultural context of the gospel’s advancement in the New Testament world directly influenced the Jerusalem Council’s decisions about areas of freedom, and areas of sacrificial restraint in the cultural practices of congregations. When believers of different racial and cultural backgrounds intentionally allow the gospel to take greatest priority in their relationships, the dynamics of life-on-life involvement will determine how less important and even indifferent things are used to promote the well being and unity of the church.

In his discussion of Romans 14, New Testament scholar Thomas Schreiner answered the question, “How can Paul tolerate such diversity in the community?”²⁶⁸ According to Schreiner, Paul demonstrated his understanding in Romans 14 that the weak weren’t observing days and abstaining from food to gain salvation. They practiced these things for the Lord, just as those who observed other days or ate other foods did that for the Lord.²⁶⁹ These things were not a matter of salvation for them; therefore, Paul could allow both parties to have their particular divergent views with the strong making loving sacrifices to protect the consciences of the weak. Many interviewees mentioned the obvious and sincere Christian convictions of racially and culturally diverse people in the church as critical for their openness to all kinds of cultural, political, and even social

²⁶⁶ Green, *Thirty Years That Changed the World: The Book of Acts for Today*, 196.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Schreiner, *Romans*, 719.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 719-20.

differences. At Diverse Church, genuine Christian relationships, in the context of diversity, have helped people to adapt to cultural differences. This is what sociologist Michael O. Emerson means when he says, “The experience of being with people of a variety of backgrounds thus helps those in multiracial congregations to place a positive value on people’s distinctiveness; to use those differences as part of the process of working toward a higher goal....”²⁷⁰ All of this influences how one thinks about adiaphora.

Experiences Outside the Context of the Church

For some study participants, particularly those who did not have a long history in the Presbyterian Church in America, experiences outside of the church, and prior to coming to Diverse Church, most influenced their views. Keith referenced experiences outside of Protestantism. Every Catholic church Keith attended in his younger years was racially diverse. This helped to shape his views on diversity, as well as his ability to make distinctions based upon things that really matter. Others, like Jane, who lived overseas because of her husband’s military career, and Barry and Lisa, who traveled internationally, have been exposed to significant diversity and the need to negotiate in diverse settings. This influenced their views on adiaphora. As immigrants and refugees continue to settle in North American cities, this will provide ample opportunity for significant exposure to diversity and, thus, the need to understand and use adiaphora as a means to think about multiracial community and inclusion.

The literature did not directly deal with this. However, what was said about the historical and political setting of the Westminster Assembly has some relevance to this

²⁷⁰ Emerson and Woo, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States*, 119.

discussion. Historian Robert Letham made the point that the Westminster Confession of Faith's chapter on Christian liberty must be viewed against the background of repression under Archbishop Laud.²⁷¹ Letham believes the Westminster Divines were directly influenced by socio-political realities in their consideration of Christian liberty. All of us are influenced by the world in which we live, whether we are dealing with Archbishop Laud's attempts to support a Catholic king or with life in globalizing, twenty-first century American cities and towns. No one lives or thinks or even interprets the scripture outside of the influences of their particular context. While it would be a serious mistake to think that the Divines' historical/political setting alone shaped their views on liberty, it would also be an equally grave oversight to believe their context had no impact. Theologian Michael Horton acknowledges, "Each of us is conditioned in our hearing and reading of God's Word by our cultural-linguistic location."²⁷² This is a given, and it must be acknowledged, and even embraced, by all. The cultural interconnectedness of our world is hard to avoid, and it explains how many participants in this study initially learned to think about adiaphora even before fully understanding the concept.

Uses of Adiaphora

Discernment for Restraint or Action

The study participants used adiaphora in several ways at Diverse Church. One of the most significant was in discerning when a stand had to be taken for or against something and when it didn't. Because adiaphora deals with matters indifferent for salvation and fellowship in the body of Christ, understanding what things are indifferent

²⁷¹ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context*, 298-99.

²⁷² Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*, 201.

and what things are not helps to guide people's decisions about what can be overlooked and what must be addressed. Two examples stood out. Keith described an interaction with a member who was about to divorce his wife. This man felt he could divorce his wife, but Keith stated that based upon his knowledge of scripture, this was clearly not a matter of adiaphora, and as a leader of the church, he knew that he needed to confront the man.

Lisa had to work through whether a young man in the church from an impoverished background could continue being tutored, even though he was unwilling to do his work in preparation. She decided to discontinue tutoring him. When the researcher asked her why she made this decision as opposed to simply viewing what he was doing as a cultural reality that she had to accept, she said, "Ok, well, he didn't get support when he was young. He needs someone to support him.... But I also realized that if that is the stance I take, I'm going to get run over in this ministry and neighborhood." Lisa weighed different things against each other and determined that the young man's unwillingness to prepare wasn't a matter of cultural indifference to be overlooked. She showed him tough love by offering him the opportunity to quit tutoring for a time until he was actually ready to do the work. Later, he was ready and came back, which Lisa believes was in part based upon her decision to prompt him to stop when he wasn't doing the work.

Using adiaphora can help believers make wiser decisions related to the kinds of diversity that should be fostered. I believe at times the church acts too quickly to stop certain things, deeming them inappropriate simply because they are different from the church's common practice. There are certainly occasions when dealing with a matter immediately is necessary, based upon biblical priorities or wisdom in that particular

situation. However, there are undoubtedly other times when loving restraint is best. Engaging adiaphora can assist in deciding what to do when.

The literature dealt with this as well. In his comments on Acts 15, New Testament scholar Darrell Bock explores this in relation to the Jerusalem Council's decision about whether or not Gentile followers of the Jewish Messiah had to be circumcised to enter his community. The Gentiles were not to be burdened with circumcision because it had been relativized as a result of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.²⁷³ Because Christ died for all kinds of people, and his reign extends over all nations, Gentiles can follow him as Gentiles. Therefore circumcision, a cultural identity marker of the Jewish people, is adiaphora.

James, leader of the Jerusalem church, decided on the basis of scripture that "No obstacle should be put before [the Gentiles]." ²⁷⁴ This was done to more easily welcome and include Gentiles in the church. In line with this, I believe that if adiaphora were used more readily in the church today, it could help prevent some of the microaggressions against minority groups from culturally dominant groups, by helping them to learn to relativize cultural differences, both their own and others, which are not sinful. Microaggressions are verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, slights, and insults against racially or culturally different groups of people.²⁷⁵ These happen when one group believes its cultural peculiarities are better than another group's and adopts a judgmental posture towards them. This often causes subdominant, culturally diverse

²⁷³ Colossians 2:11-12.

²⁷⁴ Bock, *Acts*, 505.

²⁷⁵ Sue and Sue, *Counseling the Culturally Diverse: Theory and Practice*, 110.

groups to try to overlook these offenses, to assimilate, or to leave. Microaggressions and their consequences do not characterize a welcoming church.

The literature also addressed ways that adiaphora could be used to discern appropriate actions for believers to take in reference to themselves. In other words, adiaphora does not apply merely to the way Christians respond to others; it can help believers to better understand what they are free to do. This was something New Testament scholar David Garland discussed in his comments on 1 Corinthians 8. Garland writes, “Their knowledge leads to their liberty to act as they please, while love, by contrast, leads to giving up rights for the sake of others.”²⁷⁶ He is describing the Corinthians’ understanding that food is adiaphora. On one hand, they know they are free to eat it because it is only food, and thus indifferent. On the other hand, love for their fellow believers restrains them, if their actions may cause another believer to stumble.

Discernment for Inclusion or Exclusion of Diversity

Another way adiaphora was used in both the literature and by the participants was for discerning when to include and exclude diversity. Diversity that does not stand against scripture, hinder the advancement of the gospel, or harm other believers, but instead welcomes diverse people, should be seriously considered. Making determinations in this regard requires knowing both scripture and understanding what things are adiaphora. Catholic scholar Luke Timothy Johnson, in discussing how Paul ministered in the diverse settings of the first century world, asked, “Which differences divide and disable the community and which ones should be celebrated as enriching it? How much diversity can a specific community tolerate before it disintegrates? And how can the

²⁷⁶ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 386.

community discern which practices are essential to its life and which ones are not?”²⁷⁷

These are all questions about using adiaphora as a category for inclusion or exclusion.

Bounded set churches, like confessional churches, must be especially aware of how easily they can wrap cultural non-essentials into theological essentials. When they allow or foster this, non-essentials are presented as essential to the faith. Against this, anthropologist Paul Hiebert warns bounded set churches against allowing the pursuit of theological precision and unity, which are laudable goals, to turn into homogenous uniformity, which melds theological principles into exclusively narrow cultural practices.²⁷⁸ For example, this happens when only certain styles of music and attire are deemed appropriate for worship, or when only certain political parties are qualified to receive the mature Christian’s vote.

Barry described an event that took place at a Christian community development conference when significant differences of opinion regarding cultural and political issues made some members of Diverse Church feel uncomfortable. Because of these differences, they felt the conference wasn’t for them. Barry believed the group responded as they did because of a lack of exposure and a certain amount of ignorance pertaining to the issue being discussed. He bridged the empathy gap by pointing out how different life is for some people. His observation was beneficial to the group. Differences, when it comes to histories, experiences, traditions, and perceptions, do not mean one is always right and another is always wrong. Using adiaphora as a category to think through these discussions helps believers make decisions about what is appropriate to include and what

²⁷⁷ Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, 212.

²⁷⁸ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 116.

is not. Knowing that not all things involve truth or falsehood, right or wrong, opens the door for serious engagement and potential inclusion of different types of people.

Discernment for Handling Opposing Viewpoints

Certain study participants also used adiaphora as a way to think through how to handle opposing viewpoints. Ben talked about dealing with a person in Diverse Church who had strong political views that opposed his own. In addition, this man believed his views were the Christian position on these matters. Many of the things this man said to Ben were insensitive, yet Ben was able to continue the relationship because he doesn't view partisan political issues as essential to Christian fellowship. Ben said, "I persisted in engaging him.... I just continued in the relationship for the sake of the gospel. I was willing to forego some of the discomforts that happen in these relationships." Ben has also made a decision to not share much about his specific political positions without being asked, and even then, he does so carefully, because he sees how people can reject you if your views are different. Ben is a leader in the church, and he believes that sharing his views would limit the opportunities he may have to disciple people of different political persuasions.

In Romans 14, Paul tells the church to welcome people and not to quarrel over opinions.²⁷⁹ New Testament scholar Ben Witherington, in his comments on Paul's instructions to the church in Corinth, writes, "For Paul, community is primary and what is good for community should guide conduct."²⁸⁰ Study participant Ben is attempting to do this at Diverse Church. I believe his practice of using adiaphora to allow others the

²⁷⁹ Romans 14:1.

²⁸⁰ Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*, 197.

freedom to express very different viewpoints could significantly advance multiracial inclusion, if more of his fellow-members would follow his lead.

Discernment for Allowing Institutional Change

Finally, adiaphora has been used at Diverse Church to make room for important institutional change. Systems theory addresses how a system such as the church can change. There are both positive and negative feedback loops, which can stabilize the system (negative feedback loops) or cause growth and change (positive feedback loops).²⁸¹ Diverse Church is a congregation that continues to change as it moves purposefully from being a predominantly Caucasian church to becoming more and more racially diverse. This growing diversity is mostly coming from an influx of African Americans.

The church has made many changes over the years to promote inclusion, specifically to make African Americans and others feel more welcome. Two of these changes were discussed by study participants who had been either hesitant or opposed to them at first. One brought up the changes that have taken place in music. Diverse Church has moved from using only traditional Presbyterian hymnody, which is the music tradition of the dominant group, to using eclectic music styles with broad instrumentation, including the formation of a gospel choir.

The steps to achieving this were taken slowly and discussed openly and widely during public teaching times and in private meetings. On these occasions, much was said regarding the church's context, vision for ministry, and the freedom to engage different styles of music. Adiaphora was referenced as an important teaching tool. The way the

²⁸¹ Krieger, *Systems Thinking Simplified*, 5-9.

pastor started to make changes was by finding and using one hundred hymns that are in the Trinity Hymnal, a respected Presbyterian hymnal, which are also found in the African American Heritage Hymnal. These songs formed a bridge that led to the hiring of an African American music director who slowly taught the congregation different music styles. Eventually, additional people came into the membership of the church and into the music ministry, which has allowed the music to become even more diverse. As a system, the church was changed by using appropriate positive feedback loops to encourage growth without great pain. The category of adiaphora was applied when necessary throughout the process.

In addition to the changes in the music ministry, the church's session decided to allow women to serve as ushers. Most other Presbyterian Churches in Diverse Church's presbytery allow only men to usher. This was something the elders of Diverse Church wanted to allow in order to permit women to serve more in the church. In the black church, women have always served as ushers. The session saw this as another bridge to contextualize the church for the diversity of the city and the world. However, this change in particular was very difficult for many of the traditionally minded Presbyterians in Diverse Church to handle. They saw it not in relation to race or ethnicity but as a threat to male leadership in the church. Public teaching times as well as one-on-one meetings helped to convince the congregation of the appropriateness of the change. Gary pointed out in his interview that the adiaphora discussion convinced him. He shared, "I thought it was threatening because of what I thought was the biblical role for male leadership in the church.... I think the pastor made his case well. It is in the adiaphora category, and it ought to be an opportunity for women to serve." This is a case study in the use of

adiaphora in pastoral ministry to change the system of a church to enable more contextualization for diversity.

Recommendations for Practice

As a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America, I am committed to the authority and sufficiency of God's word. It is the church's only rule for faith and life. There is a potential danger, however, for those who hold to a high view of scripture, particularly within homogenous church settings, to equate the cultural and traditional influences on biblical interpretation with biblical truth itself. Our theology, always influenced to a degree by its time and context, is not the Bible. When this goes unacknowledged, the result may be that one's deeply held cultural views and one's Christian convictions become so intertwined that they are virtually indistinguishable, especially in a homogenous setting. When this occurs, scripture can easily lose its power to challenge and judge cultural sin because it serves as religious justification for the assumed and unchallenged cultural norm. While it may be impossible to extricate one's self from context and culture in the study of God's word, it is both dangerous and exclusionary for cultural preferences and habits to take on the authority of scripture for guiding the life of the church. Any church or group within the church that so exalts its own cultural preferences cannot foster a racially, culturally, or socio-economically diverse community. Those groups that the church attempts to reach will see the cultural barriers, which the church itself probably won't see, and they will feel the microaggressions and pressure to assimilate. Most minority groups leave such churches and let others know when this occurs.

One way a church can work against this is through the development of cultural competency by reading, learning about, and moving relationally towards different kinds of people. The willingness and humility to do this affirms the value of the other and a desire to truly know them and include them. This is a significant way of welcoming different people for who they truly are, rather than trying to assimilate them into the dominant cultural group.

Another tool for doing this, as this study has shown, is to engage the category of adiaphora. There have been times when churches have divided over profoundly significant theological and moral issues. The church's history is rife with both positive and negative examples of this. Orthodoxy should matter to the church. For Presbyterians, reformed and Presbyterian confessional commitments should matter. But not all things Presbyterian are equally important or biblically determined. Culture shapes Presbyterians as much as it shapes anyone else. Making determinations about how these things can be changed, adapted, or discarded is one way adiaphora can be used in diverse contexts. By learning what is truly indifferent, what is important but not ultimate, and what is essential and non-essential, church leaders can foster diverse Christian relationships and growing multiracial and multiethnic congregations, even within Southern Presbyterianism. This study has demonstrated how using adiaphora offers a way for both the church and individual believers to approach differences and learn to embrace and accept diverse kinds of people. Using adiaphora is one way to negotiate cultural, social, and political realities wisely and lovingly for the sake of including "all the nations."

One significant practical implication pertains to how a church can determine what things are indifferent and what things are not. Because the focus of this study was on one

conservative Presbyterian church in the Deep South, the ways adiaphora has been considered historically offered guidance. I found Iain Murray's exploration of how the seventeenth century Scottish Presbyterian and Puritan George Gillespie used adiaphora to be a good starting place. From Gillespie we learn four things (earlier this is listed as three) that must be affirmed for something to qualify as indifferent. First, it must only be a circumstance (which means something natural and not of moral or spiritual significance) when it comes to worship or the church. The time of day worship is held or the attire worn in worship, as long as it is modest, would be a circumstance. Second, church leaders must only make policies concerning matters that are not already determined by scripture. Whether the church has a permanent or rotating elder board or how frequently communion is served would be examples of this. Third, there must be good reasons for making these rules to guard the consciences of believers. A church allowing personal liberty of conscience regarding moderate alcohol consumption, but making a rule that no alcohol could be served at a church sponsored event, would reflect this. Fourth, this must all be done to the glory of God, must promote the peace and purity of the church, and must not bring spiritual harm to believers.²⁸²

Cultural realities can be either affirmed or condemned based upon what the Bible says is appropriate or sinful, and it is certainly legitimate to view different cultural expressions as matters of circumstance and indifference. For a church or denomination whose history and traditions have been shaped in a homogenous setting to embrace diversity, it is critical to consider how cultural practices arise from specific circumstances. For example, European and southern white influences on Presbyterianism

²⁸² Packer, *Puritan Papers*, 39.

do not, in themselves, define Presbyterianism. This is obvious when one observes the diverse cultural expressions in non-European parts of the world where Presbyterianism has grown, like Malawi, Ghana, and Brazil. Recognizing this will require both humility and willingness to explore the ways contextual realities always shape the way people think and live. Majority or dominant cultural groups must consider their own cultural peculiarities, viewing them as a culture that is distinct from others and in some ways as a circumstance that can be surrendered or affirmed as the ministry context determines.

One of the geniuses of Paul's missionary strategy was how he perceived Christ's life, death, and resurrection as an event that relativized ethnic and cultural distinctions. It's not that these distinctions no longer have any value. Their value, however, has been set in relation to achieving Christ's commission to disciple all the nations. They are adiaphora in relation to salvation, but they are flexible in their use or non-use to help the church move among the diverse settings and people in the world.

Not all things, however, are truly indifferent. How does a church remain orthodox, reformed, and Presbyterian while allowing diverse cultural expressions, and even some theological and denominational distinctives into its mix? This study demonstrated the ways members of Diverse Church distinguish not only things that are indifferent, but also things that are important yet not ultimate, essential and non-essential. Sincere Christian people can differ on almost anything, including things that are weighty and significant. This reality alone should not, by necessity, cause the fracturing of the church. Nevertheless, it is sad that this is often the case. Divisions in the church exist along racial and cultural lines, but also partisan political lines, and even, at times,

theological lines, which may not strike against the fundamentals of the church's system of doctrine or core Christian identity.

Use of the A.C.E. Model is one way to build unity in the midst of racial, cultural, political, and even theological diversity.²⁸³ If believers have a credible profession of faith and hold to the essentials of the faith or standards of orthodoxy, the church should work to make room for these people, using adiaphora, to the extent that the church's core or constitutional commitments will allow. In this way, the church, its leadership, and its members, in humility and grace, work hard to identify and then embrace acceptable cultural realities, allow freedom for differences expressed in appropriate ways, and guard the constitutional affirmations of the church. This is only possible when the church is shaped by what it means to love others in the gospel by laying down personal preferences for the good of others. Self-centeredness and judgmentalism are the bane of the church, and this is even more palpable in multiracial and multiethnic churches. Believing the gospel and using adiaphora as a teaching category can help the church to overcome both of these.

Recommendations for Further Research

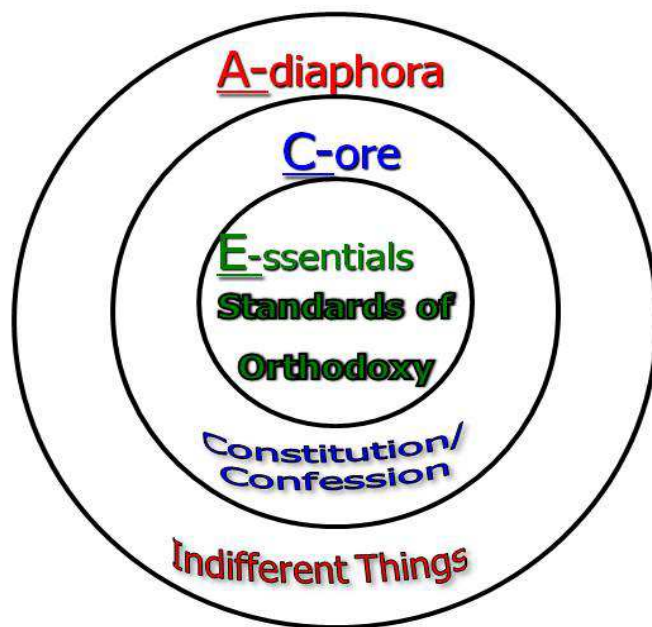
This study took place in a context where conservative and traditional Presbyterianism remains strong. The Presbyterian Church in America, especially in the Deep South, is shaped in significant ways by its history and traditions. Therefore, using adiaphora in this context is a way for the church to think about how to engage both culture and diversity. In more pluralistic and relativistic settings, the questions and concerns would be very different. History and tradition may not exert such a restrictive

²⁸³ See Appendix.

influence, but act only as one guide or resource among many. Consequently, a recommendation for further study would be to explore the ways adiaphora can and should be used in highly pluralistic, even relativistic, settings. How would adiaphora help the church to achieve greater multiethnic inclusion in a more globalized and globalizing environment? What benefits would it have for missionary advancement in places where ethnic or tribal conflicts are rampant? Studies along these lines in other areas of this country and other nations, would provide intriguing and possibly even highly divergent results.

Appendix A

THE A.C.E. MODEL



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