



Beware of adiaphora — it is lethal to churches

Clay Nelson © 29 July 2018

Considering the title of this sermon I'm half surprised to see anyone here this morning. Esoteric Greek words haven't had much power drawing crowds in my experience since Aristotle was a boy. Perhaps you failed to read the newsletter or maybe you were a wee bit curious. Whatever the reason I am glad I have someone to tell about the only two memorable events that came of my studying Greek in seminary.

The evening after my first class I was fulfilling my conditions for financial aid by monitoring the seminary's gym. As usual it was empty, making it a quiet place to study. I had just completed making flashcards of my Greek vocabulary, when the seminary dean walked in, escorting a distinguished looking gentleman. It turned out he was the Archbishop of Canterbury, who was a guest of the dean for the week. It also turned out that before his elevation to archbishop he had been a professor of Greek. He was delighted to see the flashcards and proceeded to gather them up and quiz me. I don't remember how well I did, but over the next week when he saw me on campus he would greet me in Greek and ask how it was going. When his stay was concluding seminarians were bringing bibles and prayer books for him to sign. I brought him my Greek grammar which he signed... in Greek.

The second memorable event was learning the word *adiaphora*. Not only did I like the way the word felt on my tongue, I loved its meaning. My appreciation for the word would only grow the longer I served in the ministry, which gave me ample opportunities to drop it casually into a conversation...but I get ahead of myself.

Adiaphora is the plural of the word *adiaphoron*, which, in philosophy, refers to a thing that exists outside of moral law. An *adiaphoron* is an action that is neither condemned nor approved by morality. *Adiaphora* means "indifferent things," that is, things that are neither right nor wrong.

The concept of *adiaphora* originated in Stoicism. The Stoics maintained that, if one's reason was flawed, one's emotions would become destructive and overwhelming. They taught that happiness comes from living in line with what is logical, rational, or natural. They sound like our Unitarian forebears. In Stoicism, there are three classes of human behaviour. The pursuit of things like virtue and justice is good, displaying their opposites is bad, and the rest is *adiaphora*—moral neutral ground or things to which nature is indifferent.

But then the early Christians, who were Greek speakers, got a hold of the word, explaining why I did not consider my taking Greek two millennia later to be *adiaphora*. Its meaning came to be "those things unnecessary for salvation." But even before the gospels were written Paul had to admonish the congregation in Rome not to quarrel over *adiaphora* (Romans 14). It seems the Romans had strong opinions as to what was or was not necessary about all manner of things. Paul seems to be implying that it was not helping people to accept the new religion by arguing about what was essential to it. But even Paul could not stop what has sometimes become a blood sport in congregations, even in Unitarian ones, maybe especially Unitarian ones ... but wait, I am getting ahead of myself again.

The problem was who had the authority to decide what was necessary and what was not. For the first few centuries there were schools around the Mediterranean world that would try to decide such matters for the early Christians. The leaders of these schools would argue their positions. One such argument was over what would later be called the Trinity. Was Jesus the eternal Son of God, one with the father, through whom flowed the Holy Spirit or was he a man who was essentially the adoptive son of God by virtue of his faithfulness. It suited the emperor that the Trinity become essential to the faith. The majority of bishops, now in full league with temporal power that gave them authority, agreed, making those who would later be called Unitarians heretics worthy of persecution.

The bishops, who claimed a whakapapa that went back to the Apostles, would use their authority to interpret the scriptures, deciding what was *adiaphora* or not. With time their authority vested in the pope was greater than the emperors. While along the way there were those who challenged this authority, it essentially held inviolate until Mr Guttenberg invented his printing press. While the first bible printed on it was in Latin, it would not be long before it was translated into the language of the local peoples. One of the most notable was Luther's translation of the Greek New Testament into German in 1521. Later John Calvin's Geneva Bible would become the authorised version on the continent as would the King James Version in England. With bibles now available to Reformation preachers, papal authority was seriously challenged.

Scripture became the new authority as interpreted by the preacher. If the bible proscribed something or condemned it in the view of the preacher, it was necessary, if not it was unnecessary. Then quarrels broke out over if it wasn't in the bible should people do it? Some argued yes and others no. For instance, Christmas isn't in the bible so the Puritans banned it and severely punished those caught enjoying some Christmas cheer. Challenging the Calvinist interpretations of scripture was particularly lethal, as our first Unitarian martyr, Michael Servetus, found out. Having written a treatise declaring the Trinity to be an error not supported by scripture, he was pursued by both the Catholic Inquisition and John Calvin. Calvin later burned him at the stake. Today, there are so many branches of Protestantism because there are so many ways to interpret scriptural authority. Likely, people chose the one which supported their personal interpretations. However, the battle over what authority to trust as to what was *adiaphora* and what was not was not over. Thanks to the Enlightenment, there was a new contender for authority as to what was necessary and what was unnecessary, reason.

The battlefield I am most familiar with was in England. After the pope excommunicated Henry VIII, the church in England became the Church of England, with the monarch now both the political leader and the head of the church. For the next couple of centuries much blood was spilled over where authority lay, depending in part on who the monarch was. The Catholic position was the Church had ultimate authority over what was *adiaphora*. The Protestants countered with scripture. During Elizabeth's reign, a man named Richard Hooker tried to resolve the dispute by arguing a middle way. He held that both tradition and scripture were valid authorities when mediated by reason. His view gave reason authority but not primacy over the other two. Reason's primacy would have to wait until the 17th century.

At Cambridge a group of moderate Anglican theologians believed that that adhering to very specific doctrines, liturgical practices, and church organizational forms, as did the Puritans, was not necessary and could be harmful. One stating, "The sense that one had special instructions from God made individuals less amenable to moderation and compromise, or to reason itself."

These Anglicans, disparagingly called Latitudinarians for their broad views, built on Hooker's views, arguing that what God cares about is the moral state of the individual

soul. Aspects such as church leadership are “things indifferent”. However, the latitudinarians took a position far beyond Hooker’s own and extended it to doctrinal matters.

The latitudinarian view held that human reason, when combined with the Holy Spirit, is a sufficient guide for the determination of truth in doctrinal contests; therefore, legal and doctrinal rulings that constrain reason and the freedom of the believer were neither necessary nor beneficial. The Anglican Church and the Pope both condemned their views and Puritans considered them an anathema. However, by the 18th century Latitudinarianism was the dominant view in the English church.

There are still three strong streams of thought in Anglicanism, each following a different authority. There is the High Church stream that lifts up the traditions and authority of the church and its sacraments. They like ritual, beautiful robes, Gregorian chant, incense and ringing bells at the important parts of the Mass. I grew up in High Church congregations and can swing the incense and ring the bells with alacrity, and I sometimes miss wearing my beautiful robes. But I went to a Low Church seminary, representing the second stream. The Low Church considers bells and smells and fine robes as so much unnecessary popery. They value the authority of scripture and importance of preaching. Everything else is *adiaphora*. There I developed a love of scripture, not as the Word of God, but as a human document full of humanity’s richness. It was why I studied both Hebrew and Greek. Yet I claim neither tradition or scripture as my authority. My father was a scientist. My thought processes were shaped by reason, logical argument and the scientific method, so I was naturally drawn to the Latitudinarian Broad Church stream. This stream led me to question everything, rejecting the authority of both the High Church and Low Church streams. Eventually I came to rejecting all they considered essential to salvation, relegating it to *adiaphora*. There was nothing left for me, but to acknowledge that like Unitarians I had ground all the sacred cows to mince. And so, I am here trying to make esoteric Greek words sound interesting and relevant to a room full of free thinkers. You might be asking yourself why bother?

The problem for a religion where each member is their own authority as to what is necessary or not to their personal beliefs, is it can result in some heated differences of opinion. With no higher authority to appeal to, those differences can become destructive. Over the five centuries we of our ilk have claimed the label Unitarian, there have been lots of those controversies, usually over fine points of theology, pitting reason against tradition and scripture. However, it turns out reason can cloak bias and prejudice, smug self-righteousness, personal preference, and desire for power and control as much as any other authority.

The biggest danger in fighting over what is *adiaphora* or not is it distracts us from our purpose and mission. An example is what the Episcopal Church was doing prior to the Civil War. Instead of condemning and calling for the abolition of slavery like the Unitarians were, the High Church and Low Church streams were arguing about whether or not it was appropriate to have candles and flowers on what the High Church folk called an altar and the Low Church folk called a table. We have resolved that here in a compromise. We put flowers and candles on a table.

We have had our moments of choosing to focus on *adiaphora* instead, so we should not feel smug. We like *adiaphora* as much as anyone, because debating it is easier than seeking to achieve a Unitarian vision of salvation. Are we a church or meetinghouse, do politics belong in a sermon or not, should we have a minister, should he or she wear a clerical collar or academic robe, how should we set up the chairs for services, what kind of music should we have, should we take positions on social justice issues and how should we decide, should we have a minimum donation to be a voting member or not, should dogs be allowed at worship? And the list goes on and on. I question whether debating any of those questions, no matter

how much fun it was or will be, will get us closer to salvation. While I'm not arguing against debating them, I'm only asking us to remember they are not about why we are here.

We do not understand salvation as many Christians do. For us it is not about the next world and preserving us from hell. It is about our individual spiritual health in this world. Instead of speaking of salvation we are more likely to acknowledge our yearning for, and our experience of, personal growth, increased wisdom, strength of character, and gifts of insight, understanding, inner and outer peace, courage, patience, and compassion.

As Jack Mendelsohn has written, "For us, salvation is not an otherworldly journey, flown on wings of dogma. It is ethical striving and moral growth..." The Stoics would like that.

Corporately, I would argue that our salvation lies in becoming a beloved community. Such a community would be respectful of difference, full of kindness and compassion even in debate, seek justice for all, recognise our oneness even as we delight in our individuality, able to be open to being wrong, and able to laugh at our foibles. That such a community might help transform the world is our purpose and salvation. In such a community we would have nothing to fear from *adiaphora*. It would be powerless to destroy us. May it be so.