

# Essence and Adiaphora

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren  
Sermon for Sunday, July 18, 2010, Colossians 2:6-19

The recent economic troubles have forced a lot of people to make some hard choices. After decades of free spending and accumulation, millions have had to figure out how to cut expenses and make do with less. And for many, the process has been painful. But on the other side of the pain, at least for some, has come a discovery all that extra stuff (and debt) wasn't actually making their lives better. Without it, they feel freer, less anxious, more in touch with others and with God. Some say, "I wish I'd done it years ago!"

Whitney Hopler, a writer, and her husband Russ, moved to a smaller home. The lack of storage space at first seemed like a burden, but as time passed, Whitney found that it made her a more generous person. When you have no place to keep extra stuff, she explains, you give it away to people who really need it. A side benefit, she says, are the extra hours she has each week to do volunteer work hours she used to spend cleaning their larger home. Selling an extra car, and getting by with just one, also seemed like a great sacrifice at first. But the savings they gained from not having a car payment, insurance premiums, repair costs, and inspection fees, seemed well worth the occasional inconvenience.

When you hear stories like that, downsizing sounds like such a good idea. So why aren't we all doing it? Why does it often take a financial crisis or the onset of physical limitations to get us to do it? There may be many reasons, but one is surely that the process starts with hard work specifically, the hard work of figuring out what is a necessity or essential, and what isn't. What do we really need, or even what do we care most about, and what is just convenient or kind of nice to have around?

Figuring out what was essential and what wasn't was the challenge facing the Christians addressed in our text this morning. In their case, it was the question of what was essential for being a Christian what beliefs and practices were necessary and what beliefs or practices were dispensable. The author of the text was trying to help them through some conflicts they were having over this issue. In the community at Colossae, the basic gospel had been "enhanced" by some with various doctrines and practices. Certain philosophical notions were added to make the new faith sound more sophisticated. Certain foods and beverages were prohibited by certain teachers, who argued, "Christians should eat this, not that." And certain festivals came to be compulsory for some folks if you didn't celebrate them, then you weren't a "real" Christian. You didn't really belong.

Belonging is the key. It is the fear of no longer belonging that makes it so hard for people to come to terms with the need to downsize. We accumulate a lot of things and even engage in a lot of activities not so much because we actually enjoy these things or these activities, but because having these things and doing these things give a sense of belonging to a certain class of people. Folks talk about "keeping up with the Joneses." It is a telling expression. Notice that it is not about surpassing the Joneses. It isn't ultimately about competition, as is often assumed. It is about affiliation. It is about belonging, about not being "left behind" or left out of that social class to which you aspire.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to belong, of course. It is a normal, natural and even healthy desire. Humans need to belong. As the Bible says, "It is not good for a human to be alone." We need connections. We need community. We are created for relationships.

But it is the nature of evil to take a good thing, like the desire to belong, and twist it to evil ends. That's how evil works, by the way. Of itself, it can create nothing and has created nothing. It always has to take something good that God created and twist it. So when we experience evil, we should always look for the good beneath it and then ask, "How has it been twisted, or distorted or exaggerated, so it no longer serves God's purposes but rather opposes God's purposes?"

In the case of the desire to belong, a good thing God created, it has been distorted and turned against God by becoming a desire to exclude and dominate. That is to say, it has been distorted into the desire to find one's identity not simply in belonging, but in belonging to a superior, more exclusive group. When we are captured by this twisted desire, we no longer value relationships as ends, but only as means. We no longer desire things because of their direct ability to be useful or give pleasure. Instead, we desire things as symbols of status.

Much advertising simply panders to this twisted desire. A century ago, most advertising focused on how the product itself worked and how it would be useful or fill a need. Today, most advertising focuses instead on how the product will make you feel about yourself (important, special) and the signal that it will send to others when you use it. That's why logos are so prominent on modern products. Think Nike or Under Armor, Mercedes-Benz, or Gucci. No one wants those products without the logo.

More and more contemporary advertising no longer even mentions or shows the actual product. Instead, it focuses solely on the social benefits of associating with the brand. Success in our culture has come to be defined by possessing items with the right logos!

A dozen years ago, finance writer Ben Stein wrote a short piece in which he reflected on the seduction of such status symbols and how they may represent failure rather than success. He wrote:

"A few days ago the mailman brought me my new American Airlines Advantage Platinum card. That is usually a big moment. The card means that I have flown at least 50,000 miles on American in a calendar year. Because of the card, I get to board earlier, make reservations earlier, and occasionally pay for upgrades to a higher class of service.

As I said, that used to be a big moment. It was a sign that I was up and about, in there with the big boys, doing something right. Now when the card arrives, it's a sign to me that I am very likely not doing something right.

Start with the obvious. If I am on that airplane, even if I am in first class, even if I am seated next to Nastassja Kinski, as I recently was, I am away from home. If my son comes home from school after some nutty little boy has tried to strangle him, I am not there to comfort him. If he needs help in learning how to divide decimals, I am not there to show him.

Kids need their moms and dads when they are young. No amount of money or status derived from being on the road or in the air, away from them, will ever make up for that very absence. Success is time spent with them, not time spent away from them."

Now, it may seem that we have wandered a long way from our text, and in a sense we have. But in a deeper sense, we haven't. The issues in Colossae concerned the practice of religion, rather than material accumulation. But status symbols are status symbols, and the differences in doctrine and practice that were dividing the Christians in Colossae were primarily status symbols. Belonging to the church with the sophisticated doctrines or the sophisticated rituals made *you* more sophisticated, not like those other, lower class Christians.

The same thing happened in Corinth, by the way. In fact, it probably happened in many of the early churches, because the culture of the Roman Empire was tremendously status-conscious. Basic Christianity actually offended many Romans because it was so egalitarian. In Roman society, a person did everything he or she could to protect or advance his or her social standing. But in Christianity, as in Judaism, there was the understanding that we all stand on level ground before God. As Paul put it in another letter, "In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female."

The argument being made in the scripture we heard today was that doctrines and rituals are not meant to divide, and certainly are not meant to be twisted by evil into the means to assert that one person is better than another, or that one group is superior to another. Differences don't need to divide us; they can enrich us, but only if they are valued appropriately, as extras, not as essentials. What is essential is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and the reconciliation with God that Jesus Christ has made possible. The things we hold in common with other Christians are the necessities. Everything else is *adiaphora* (that's just a fancy word meaning non-essentials).

So the task for us all, and for the church in every age, is to do the hard work of deciding what is essential and what isn't. The task for us all is to remember that the things that unite us are more important than the things that divide us. And the task for us all is to steer clear of the evil impulse to use things or doctrines or rituals to try to prove our superiority over others.

Above all, the task for us all, is to accept that what matters most about us isn't what we own or even what we do, but rather what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. For it is through Jesus that we truly belong to God and to one another. And it is in that belonging alone that we find the peace, the hope, and the security we seek.

Amen.