

Freed & RENEWED in Christ 500 YEARS OF GOD'S GRACE IN ACTION

Reformation ABCs

A is for adiaphora

It means “indifferent things” -- one of the best Reformation legacies you never heard of!

When Luther refused to recant at the Diet of Worms in 1521, he was condemned as a heretic and the split from Rome was decisive. While Luther spent ten months sequestered in the Wartburg Castle, others inspired by him contended with new questions about church order and worship, among them use of vestments, chanting, ringing of bells, and the place of religious art and statuary in churches. Luther advocated flexibility and pastoral sensitivity in deciding such matters, an approach eventually codified in Lutheran confessional statements. In ceremonies and church practices, whatever was “neither commanded nor forbidden by God’s Word” (Book of Concord, 515) was a matter for pastoral discretion. Congregations might use a variety of practices for “church order and decorum”. So confirmation on Pentecost, Reformation Sunday or some other time? Pipe organs or electric guitars? Fasting from altar flowers, alleluias, and coffee hour cookies during Lent, or not? Announcements before, after, or in the middle of worship? Choir robes or street clothes?

Adiaphora! It. Does. Not. Matter.

A word to live by!

Pastor Barbara Melosh
Wilmington, Delaware

A is for Anabaptist

When a movement starts, can it be contained to the ideas and practices of the “starter”? The “Radical Reformation” began just eight years after 1517, when some who had been galvanized by Luther’s challenge of Rome, challenged Luther- and many others- in return.

All Protestant reformers agreed that pope and curia had forfeited their authority. Radicals went further, denying the authority of civil government over or in the church. Believing that the Church had “fallen” 1,100 years before, when it became the state religion of the Roman Empire and “the cross was welded to the sword,” they consequently opposed the bearing of arms, all war, rebellion or violence, and coercion of belief. This put them at odds with other Protestants who relied on the “state” - a prince, city council, magistrate, king- to protect and promote the Reformation, and who countered with the words of Jesus and Paul on the legitimate authority of worldly governing power.

Radicals also rejected infant baptism, insisting on “believer’s Baptism,” only of persons able to make a statement of faith. They called themselves “Brethren;” others called them “Anabaptist”-“re-baptizer.”

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“Re-baptism” was a crime subjecting them to arrest, torture and execution by their opponents, Catholic and Protestant alike. Swiss and southern German Brethren who’d survived savage persecution joined with those in Holland who’d escaped it, becoming known as “Mennonites” (after leader Menno Simons). Distrust of centralized power, and varying practices of strictness in being “apart from the world” led to multiplying regional expressions, including Amish (after Jakob Ammann) in Switzerland, and Hutterite (after Jakob Hutter) in Moravia.

Their influence spread far beyond their congregations. Calvinists adopted their emphasis on church discipline as a “third mark” of the “True Church.” Answering their ban on baptizing infants, Lutherans and Anglicans would develop Confirmation, once solely the action of baptismal “sealing,” into a mature public profession of faith. English Puritans, Baptists and Quakers can be counted among their spiritual successors.

Brethren, Mennonites, Hutterites and Amish are present and numerous today in the U.S. and Canada, where they found and reinforced a freedom for practicing religion according to conscience.

The Rev. Edward Godden
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A is for Atonement

Atonement means to make amends for sin, wrong, or injury, and for Christians it’s the explanation of how Jesus’ death achieved human salvation. For centuries the universal church taught penal substitution/substitutionary atonement, which meant Jesus was sacrificed instead of sinful humankind. God was accused of requiring Jesus’ blood on our behalf. This brutal idea continues despite numerous biblical statements that the Lord does not desire sacrifice and prefers mercy (Mt. 9: 13; Hosea 6:6; Isaiah 1: 11-17; Micah 6: 7-8; James 2:13).

While not explicitly rejecting penal substitution, Luther offered a social contract or legal interpretation of how Jesus’ death resulted in reconciliation between Creator and created. Luther preferred the terms mediated forgiveness and reconciliation. Believing that Jesus’ incarnation offers a joyous exchange (God’s righteousness becomes the property of humans too), this sharing of common property was explained through a marriage metaphor (Christ the bridegroom and humanity the bride) and an inheritance metaphor (Gentile beneficiaries inherited the promises of God when Jesus died on the cross). Our benefactor rose again and continued to live with the heirs of the promise! Salvation is a free gift of God’s grace, freely given, and we are not obligated to profess any particular theology of atonement, or to explain exactly how this wondrous gift is accomplished.

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