

Letter from Müntzer to the Persecuted Christians of Sangerhausen.

Allstedt, *circa.* 13 July 1524

In July 1524, Duke Georg of Saxony instructed the town-council of Sangerhausen to take action against the growing band of followers of Müntzer, led by the preacher Tilo Banse. Sangerhausen lies about 12 kms north of Allstedt. Banse and others were arrested and refugees soon started arriving in Allstedt from Sangerhausen, prompting Müntzer to direct several letters; this one is addressed to Müntzer's followers in Sangerhausen, encouraging to remain steadfast in the face of their oppressors.

To all the beloved brothers in Christ in the tyrannical prison at Sangerhausen.

I wish you the grace and peace of the pure unfalsified fear of God instead of my greetings. Jesus Christ the tender son of God spoke quite clearly, with sad words to his apostles and friends at the Last Supper, prophesying all the things which were to come to pass and how the lusting world and the wrathful tyrants would behave when the elect began to experience the crucified Christ and grasp after the true faith; John said in his 16th chapter: "You should not be offended, for the godless will cast you out of the community; and the time will come that whosoever kills you will think that they do service unto God." You should take these words to heart and lock them away at the very bottom of your hearts, for now we are in those dangerous times of which St Paul spoke: everyone who wishes to act righteously and to be guided by the gospel will be considered by the godless as a heretic, a rogue and a knave, or any other name they can think up.

But now I have been made aware by several pious people how badly distressed you have been and that the madmen and deranged tyrants have threatened to put you into prison again, and that you now need my advice, then it is my Christian duty not to refuse you – but you must stick to my advice.

If you truly wish to keep your consciences clear, then the way to start is to accept the pure, upright fear of God within you and learn to fear God alone, over all the creatures of heaven and earth. For from this fear you will come to know what you should be doing or not doing, in a way that will truly please God. For the beginning of the wisdom of God is the fear of God, just as the holy spirit says in the hundred-and-tenth psalm [Ps.111] ¹ and in chapter 1

¹ In the original text, the numbering of Psalms follows the Vulgate version of the Bible; in modern times, we are more used to the Hebrew-Masoretic numbering version. As a general rule, from Psalm 9 and 10 onwards, the numeration is one different: where Müntzer cites Psalm 110, for example, we should consult Psalm 111;

of the book of Proverbs. Therefore you should sigh after God with all your heart, day and night, and cry out and beg that he should teach you to fear God alone. For if you do not have this self-same pure fear of God, then you will not be able to survive any trial. But if you do possess it, then you will achieve victory over all the tyrants, and they will be so dreadfully humiliated that no words will be able to describe it.

Now, the fear of God teaches a pious person how to stand fast for the sake of God's will and to risk his body and possessions, his house and home, his children and wife, his father and mother and his whole world. Oh, but it is a mighty abomination that fleshly people spend their entire lives thinking only of how they earn a living and think no further beyond that. They think that God will still make them blessed if they simply believe what other people believe. The whole world is mad and deluded, and does not permit anyone to submit to God's will, even though the Lord says quite clearly in the holy gospel of Matthew, chapter 10: "he that loves something more than me is not worthy of me." Here, Christ the son of God explains most clearly the correct path to faith. So if you wish now to be Christians and believe in Jesus Christ, then you must start your belief as set out above. In short, you should fear no one other than God, just as you should not worship a false idol as well as the living God. There must be no excuse, the straight path must be followed to its end.

So when your prince or his representative² forbids you from going to one place or another to hear the word of God, or makes you swear never to go there again, then you should not swear to this, for that would be placing the fear of Man above the fear of God and would be like worshipping a false idol. If you now think you can please both your princes and God, then I must tell you that you cannot do that: anyone who puts himself up beside God and wishes to be feared is most certainly, absolutely certainly, in the power of the devil himself, so beware of that. When the wrathful tyrants claim that you should obey your princes and lords, then you must answer: a prince and sovereign is placed there to rule over temporal matters, but his power does not stretch any further; that is the opinion of St Peter and St Paul when they write about the power of men. So you should quite boldly excuse yourselves saying: "Dear sirs, dear Captain, if our lord the prince, to whom we give dues and rents every year, does not have enough, then let him take all our possessions as well, we are quite happy

where he cites 18, we should check 19; and so on. Müntzer's original numbering has been retained in this translation.

² Melchior von Kutzleben was Duke Georg's tax-collector in Sangerhausen.

to grant him that. But he will never rule over our souls, for in these matters we must be more obedient to God than to Man; make of that what you will. And if you do us harm because of this, then we will take our complaint to the whole wide world, and everyone will see and hear why we suffer. Surely, we are willing to do or not do anything of a temporal kind, just as it pleases you. So what more would you have us do?”

So, dearest brothers, if they demand that you do this, then just go back to prison or captivity again, and remain true to these words. And if they try to take money from you in fines, then just give the devil whatever it is he wants: just keep your consciences free and clear and do not allow yourselves to become entangled in the snares of the tyrants’ commands, as our lord Christ said in Matthew 10: “Do not fear those who will kill your body, for then they will have nothing more they can do; rather I will tell you whom to fear: fear him who has the power, after he has killed the body, to cast your soul into the fires of hell; it is him, him and no other, him that should you fear.” Therefore you should allow the tyrants to exercise their malice upon you for a little while: the world has not deserved any other lords and princes due to its lack of faith. Just let them torment you as long as God permits it and until you recognise your own sinfulness. For all of Christianity is becoming like a whore with its worship of Man. And worshipping of Man it is, as one can now see quite clearly, when people fear their lords and princes, and are forced to deny God’s word and his holy name just for the sake of food and for the base satisfaction of their stomachs. Aye, St Paul to the Philippians names them beasts of the belly and says that the stomach is their God. Oh, just watch out, dearest brothers, and take care that you are not one of that same crowd, or end up there. The devil is truly a cunning creature and always sets out food and life before the eyes of men, for he knows that this is what fleshly people love. And that forces them to deny the will of God. Is that not a terrible and shameful lack of faith? Aye, God is so mighty that, when you risk or abandon both possessions and food for your body, together with your life, for his sake, then he will give you other food and more than before; and if you do not believe that, then how can you believe that he can give you the eternal life? It is a simple childish belief to trust in God to give us food; but it is a supernatural belief, above all human reasoning, to trust that he will give us eternal life. If you have no faith in the small things, then how can God command you in the greater things?

And so I advise you, dear brothers, that you should look closely at the examples of all the elect friends of God, how they behaved in their time of trial. If you only care for your

possessions, then look at the holy friend of God, the beloved Job, how he remained tranquil. In the first chapter of his book, it is written that when the messengers came and told him that all his children were dead, and all his possessions gone, he cheerfully and tranquilly replied: "The Lord gave them to me and the Lord has also taken them away from me."

So if you fear life, then consider the examples of the holy martyrs, and see how little they valued their own lives and mocked the tyrants to their faces.

Now God the almighty loves you as much as he loved dear Job and all the holy martyrs, for he has bought you very dearly with the blood of his tender son Jesus Christ. He also wants to share his holy spirit with you abundantly, as he did with them. So why do you despair? For I tell you truly that the time has now come when blood will be shed across the whole obstinate world because of its lack of faith. And then everyone who previously did not want to risk anything for God's sake will find their possessions taken away from them and given to the devil, without any thanks: this I know for certain.

Why do you persist in letting yourselves be led around by the nose? For we know quite well, and it is proven by the holy scriptures, that the lords and princes, as they behave now, are no Christians. And our priests and monks worship the devil and are even worse Christians. All your preachers ³ are hypocrites and worshippers of Man. What do you expect? You can hope for little from the princes. Anyone who has a desire to fight against the Turk does not have far to go: he is here on our doorsteps. But deal with them as I have suggested above, see to it that the guilt and blame lies with them and not with you. And say openly to their faces: "Dear sir! St Paul teaches and says: 'The word of God is free and not restricted,' so why do you then prevent us from listening? In days gone by you did not prevent anyone from running off to Santiago di Compostela or to the devil at Heckenbach ⁴, and leaving behind widows and orphans and removing goods and money from the country. But now you want to prevent us from following the road which we need to follow; you do not allow us to have good preachers and forbid us from hearing good preachers elsewhere? ⁵ If that's what you want, then I consider you to be a Turk and not a Christian prince or lord." If you say that to them without dissembling, then you will confirm that you fear God alone

³ Tilo Banse is, of course, excluded from 'all the preachers' ! The preachers complained of here are probably those based in the Cistercian monastery in the town.

⁴ '*Heckenbach*' is Müntzer's pun on the name of the Mallerbach Chapel, in whose destruction he was complicit. '*Hecken*' means hedge, and has echoes of various tales of the Bible (Proverbs 26,9 or Ecclesiastes 10,8)

⁵ i.e. in Allstedt

and cannot dissemble. If any harm comes to you, then he will stand by you and deliver vengeance. But if you dissemble, then God will terrify you so much that you will never come to truth and your soul will suffer great injury because of it. For God does not abandon his elect, even if at times he seems to do so; but he brings vengeance in its proper time.

It is my Christian duty not to conceal all this from you, for the honour and praise of God, may he keep you in the firmest of belief. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

Written at Allstedt, in haste, 1524.

*(Translated by Andy Drummond,
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