

Letter written to the Castellan, Hans Zeiss.

Allstedt,

25th July 1524

To his most beloved brother Johann Zeiss, administrator of Allstedt. ¹

May the strength and power of the holy spirit be with you, dear brother. Just recently I preached on the fourth book of Kings ² and gave my honest advice to Christianity about the 22nd and 23rd chapters, concerning the holy Josiah; when the priest Hilkiah found the book of the law, he summoned the elders of Judah and Jerusalem and went with the people into the temple and made a covenant with God, to which the whole congregation assented, saying that every elect person should seek and protect the testimony of God with all their heart and soul. Before Christians dare to risk their blood against the wrathful oppressors of the true faith, it is of the greatest importance that they apply themselves with heartfelt zeal to thinking how they might prevent the very worst horrors which manage to clothe themselves in rags to pass as Christian belief, Luke 5. That is why I wanted our princes not to act with such haughtiness in this matter. The people can easily see that they have risked great danger and their worldly goods in launching themselves into the wild storms. But they could be swept away by this same danger and gain only insuperable fear if they [the princes] are not prepared to do any more than just peeping through their fingers, and not asking for true preachers in their own principality, and protecting the wicked and not taking the slightest action that accords with God's most excellent will. For it is quite obvious to all that the godless rulers have themselves abolished peace in the land, and have put people in stocks and chains on account of the gospel; and yet our princes keep quite quiet about it all. They think that the matter has no detriment, perhaps because they have been led astray by their dishonest scholars. They do not consider that Christians are at the moment quite ill-prepared to shed blood on behalf of their faith. Aye, they hold fast to the creature, which is the cause of all controversy and disputes; and when everyone uses up all their wits in doing

¹ This address is in Latin in the original. The remainder of the letter is in German (mostly). Zeiss was the local administrator in Allstedt for the regional princes.

² This is the Second Book of Kings. In the Catholic tradition, there were four Books of Kings; in the later Protestant tradition the first two became the two Books of Samuel, and the remaining two Kings rearranged themselves.

this, they are as senseless as a block of oak when God speaks to them. It is indeed a great and mighty piece of insolence that they want to stick to the old customs of the Mass when the whole world has already changed so much.

I say to you, by the love and truth of God, that it is absolutely necessary for you to explain this to the princes with the utmost seriousness and without holding back, and warn them against making their own people fearful by their own neglect; rather they should act now to forestall any kind of trouble while their people still trust them. I say this with a completely loyal heart: if they neglect to do this for too long, then they will be despised more than all other princes. People will say: behold the man who did not set God as his helper ³: may God forfend. For then there will be toil and trouble, there will be something much worse than a bloodbath in the German land, because Man's greed has now reached its highest point; and so the princes must turn their heathen oath of duty into an honest compact based on the will of God, so that their people can see with their own eyes that something is being done; and the countless numbers of the godless will be so greatly terrified that they will have nowhere in the whole wide world to turn to, as is written in Numbers 14 and Joshua 11. If you administrators wish to keep the peace, then you have to use your sword to keep the other sword in its sheath; it will no longer be permitted for you to speak hypocritically, as you did when the people had to take flight and you were prepared to hand them over because of their faith, although you claimed it was for other reasons that were quite untrue. Instead, we must establish a simple league that allows the common man to join with pious administrators purely for the sake of the gospel. But if rascals and rogues should join the league, in order to abuse it, then they should be handed over to the tyrants or we should pass judgement on them ourselves, as circumstances suggest. And where feudal dues are concerned, it must be made quite clear to the members of this league that they should not think that they are thereby permitted to give nothing to the tyrants; they should behave just as the son of God said to Peter, Matthew 17, so that some wicked people do not get the idea that we have joined together in order to defend the will of creatures.

The most important thing is to make sure that no one should put his trust in the league, because he who puts his trust in man is accursed by God, Jeremiah 17. It should only act as threat to the godless, so that they stop their raging until the elect are able to explore the

³ This quotation from Psalm 51 (Vulgate) is rendered in Latin in the original letter.

knowledge and wisdom of God with all the testimony that belongs to it. If pious people form a league, even if wicked people are in it, then they will not be able to carry out their designs: the decency of good people will allow far less evil than is usual, and the whole league will not be blamed. For the league has no other goal than self-defence, which is something no one can refuse according to the common judgement of all reasonable people.

Here, untested people might want to ask: why do we want all these leagues, we were after all covenanted in the baptism, surely a Christian should and must suffer? The answer is this: first learn what baptism really is, learn it and then see whether you have experienced God's testimony in yourself, see whether you can stand firm, consider that the whole treasury of the knowledge of God must be learned and experienced in its length, its width, its breadth and depth, Ephesians 3. If you do not do this, then the impudent fleshly people could all be martyrs, and the arch-seducers would sing a little ditty or two over the bodies of their martyrs and they would swear by their saints that these were all martyrs, and so our cause would appear to our descendants much worse, more despicable than the coarseness of the Romans. So your pious rulers must take care. It is no good thing to be martyred for your beliefs. If the elect should simply allow themselves to be martyred for the sake of a false goodness and a false belief etc, then the villainy of the godless would never be plumbed to its depths, nor would the testimony of God ever be able to reach its true stature. From all this, you should think about seeking the advice of god-fearing honest people who have the fear of God and who are enemies to greed and who love the truth with all their heart, Exodus 18: then you will find a thousand ways and not just one, be sure of that. The Lord is with us like a mighty man; we should not be afraid of what he plans, or else he will make the flesh afraid of the danger of life without the benefit of the fear of God, may he preserve you for all eternity. ⁴ Amen.

Dated Allstedt, on the day of St James the Apostle, *anno domini* 1524

(Translated by Andy Drummond,
March 2016)

⁴ This sentence is rendered in Latin in the original letter, beginning with a quotation from Jeremiah 20.