

Two Letters written to the Castellan, Johann Zeiss.

Allstedt, 22nd July 1524

These two letters were written on the same day to Johann Zeiss, the local administrator for Duke Johann of Saxony. Zeiss was based in Allstedt castle, above the town where Müntzer lived. The two letters concern the events surrounding the persecution of Müntzer's followers in the small town of Sangerhausen, a few miles to the north; some of those people had sought refuge in Allstedt. A third letter to Zeiss (not provided here) was written on 25th July, and there may have been others in those turbulent ten days.

[First Letter]

*To his brother Johann Zeiss, administrator of Allstedt, in the name of most beloved Christ.*¹

I wish you the pure and undeceived fear of God. Today I wanted to act to avoid a nasty end to the troubles which surround us and also give you some advice for the future so that we can avoid anything happening without being foreseen, and for you to present this to the princes with your own advice, so that no one can act in any way harmfully, although all the tyrants are exerting themselves to root out the Christian belief. Johannes Reichart² gave the poor fugitive people³ an answer that was quite inappropriate, quite in the old manner of the officials in the administrations of the princes. So the fugitives came and asked me what kind of gospel we were preaching? Did we want to sacrifice those who suffer for the sake of the Christian belief, sacrifice them horribly upon the butcher's block? And so I replied that all this had been done quite without my knowledge, and that, as soon as I was informed about it, I was ready to do for them whatever I could.

And just as I had finished talking to the fugitives, Hans Reichart came towards me out of the print-shop. So I said to him: what game are you playing? Is this how you want to comfort the people who have had to flee because of the gospel? Did you not think what kind of trouble this would cause? And he replied that it was you who had ordered him to say these things, and that if the official at Sangerhausen or from some other district turns up in Allstedt, then we have to hand over the people to him. So I replied that that would be the case if the rulers did not act against the Christian faith. But since they were now not merely

¹ For simplicity, all sentences or phrases which were rendered in Latin in the original are shown in italics in the text. All other parts of the two letters are in German.

² Hans Reichart was a member of Müntzer's League in Allstedt, and later a leading citizen in Allstedt, serving as its mayor as late as 1575, when he died aged 90. Historians once supposed that he was Müntzer's printer in Allstedt – but this was not the case.

³ These are the refugees from Sangerhausen.

acting against faith, but also against natural justice, then they should be strangled like dogs. And if you officials ⁴ in all the districts do not complain publicly about your neighbour in Schönwerda,⁵ who first disturbed the peace and turned into a robber of his own people, then you will see in a very short time what will happen to you.

And so I advise you from my heart, my dear brother, to consider what will come of this. The fugitives are going to turn up here every day: should we let the cries of those poor people make us the friends of the tyrants? That does not agree with the gospel etc. I tell you that a dreadful time of discord will arrive. You must not keep turning a blind eye to what these other districts are doing. For it is as clear as day that they have absolutely no respect for the Christian faith. Their power will come to an end, and it will very shortly be handed over to the common people. Therefore you should act with confidence: wherever the gospel has gone out, Christians will not be put in prison to please those rascals.

What I promised to the princes in my own letter is a promise I will gladly keep,⁶ but in truth I have no wish for any nonsense. Since it is the spirit of God which urges me on, am I expected to bow to them as my judges in the Christian faith, when they have perhaps ordered you to imprison the people who have fled for the sake of the gospel? If that is the case, then I will write to him again ⁷. I advise you to write to the princes yourself (although they may treat it with contempt) concerning that arch-robber Friedrich von Witzleben, and tell them that he broke the civil peace and thus became the very archetype and model for all tyrants. And if he is not punished by the other lords, then the common peace will completely vanish. From now on, no people will believe their own lord, and so the people can no longer help their lord, and no lord their people. That will be seen by all discerning and sensible folk as the cause of all loss of life, which is to be so lamented that our heart trembles with fear. And still the senseless world will mock this and say that their old lives can go on as before, they will just wander around in a dream until the water closes over their heads. May God protect you from that, dear brother. Amen.

Dated Allstedt, on the day of Mary Magdalene, in the year of our Lord 1524.

⁴ Müntzer is now addressing Zeiss and his colleagues

⁵ This was the feudal lord, Friedrich von Witzleben in Schönwerda (just south of Allstedt), who gave every support to Ernst of Mansfeld in his campaign against Müntzer's reforms. In early July, he had attacked 'his' peasants with armed soldiers.

⁶ This refers to Müntzer's promise to submit any future writings to the Saxon censor.

⁷ i.e. Duke Johann

Thomas Müntzer, your brother.

[*Postscript*]

He who wishes to be a foundation-stone of the new church must risk his neck, otherwise he will be rejected by the builders.

Consider, dear brother, that he who does not risk his neck in these dangerous times will also not be proved in his faith. He will find all kinds of excuses to avoid having to suffer. And so he must endure many dangers for the sake of the devil and be shunned by all the elect and finally die for the devil's sake, may God protect you from that, amen.

With this letter I also wanted to issue my little book which you may recently have sent on to Weimar ⁸; but I am thinking the whole matter over again according to God's honour and will, for it is now a very dangerous thing to deal with those who mock God's judgement.

In answer to your 4 questions: ⁹

1. The will of God has power over all his parts. To come to know God's knowledge and judgement is to explain this same will, as Paul wrote to the Colossians in chapter 1, and also in Psalm 118 [119]; ¹⁰ but the work of God flows from the whole and from all his parts.
2. Doubt is the water, the movement which flows towards both good and evil. He who swims in the water without support is suspended between death and life etc. But gaining hope after the pain of doubt will best secure a man. Romans 4, Genesis 13 and 22.
3. You seem to have properly understood the judgement on nature of Man, but all the coarseness that surrounds him must first of all be eaten away before a man can begin to subdue his nature. If he does not do this, then he will always look like he is pretending, he will even be deceiving himself. So we must keep an eye on people who are inclined to immodesty: first of all one has to inflict pain on the desires with a great effort to contemplate lusts and the consequent pricking of the conscience. And if you keep an awareness about you, then the foulness will be consumed by disgust. And then

⁸ This may be a reference to Müntzer's 'Testimony on the First Chapter of Luke', which was later published under the title: 'The Explicit Exposure of the False Faith'. According to an agreement reached in Weimar, Zeiss would have been duty-bound to forward a copy for inspection by the ducal authorities.

⁹ These four questions posed by Zeiss, have not been preserved.

¹⁰ 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 118, for example, we should consult Psalm 119; and so on. Müntzer's original numbering has been retained in this translation.

you will see quite clearly all what drives people to foulness, and will become an enemy of it, and first of all by confronting lust with patient endurance ¹¹. And when all this becomes vexing to him, then he will fall once more so that he may once more be driven upwards by his conscience. And he who remains calm will be easily enlightened.

4. A person cannot come to a first true Christian awareness without suffering. For his heart must be torn away from its clutch on this world, by distress and pain, until he becomes a bitter enemy of this life. He who arrives at this point may, with a clear conscience, experience more good days than bad, as is clearly set out in the gospel of John and in Elijah and Enoch.

Lastly: there is only one fault in him, ¹² an unpleasant worldly thing: one should not threaten the refugees with the power of their lords, and let them be captured in our town, lest the people should become embittered. I tell you that we need to take very great care in this new turn in the present world. The old loyalties will no longer suit, for they are nothing but the dregs, as the prophet says: *the dregs of the cup of fury have not been emptied, and all the impious of the earth shall drink of it. Those who have thirsted for blood shall drink blood* etc. ¹³

[Second Letter]

To his dearest brother Johann Zeiss, administrator of Allstedt. ¹⁴

Greetings. The affair with the poor people ¹⁵ went like this: when Hans Reichart came back down from you in the castle, he gave the appearance of being extremely saddened; he gave them a report of the warning which had been issued; and they could only understand that as meaning that they would be handed over, so they came to me and asked if it was our gospel that people should be sacrificed on the butcher's block. Of course I was astonished and tried to think where this was all coming from. And so I said to them that I would write

¹¹ This is the word *langeweile*, a mystical term which Peter Matheson has translated as 'patient endurance' - I have followed his guidance here.

¹² It is not certain who is being referred to here - possibly Duke Johann, or the Electoral Prince Friedrich ?

¹³ The preceding quotation is from Psalm 75 (after *as the prophet says*) and this one is from Revelations 16.

¹⁴ This letter must have been written shortly after the first, perhaps in response to comments from Zeiss.

¹⁵ i.e. the refugees from Sangerhausen

to the castellan, since I did not know whether he had received this order from the princes. Shortly after that I met Hans Reichart coming out of the print-shop. So I said to him: “What kind of game is this you’re playing, trying to expel people?” Then he said that you had ordered him to do this. So I said that if the official from Sangerhausen or any other tyrants came here, then they should not suppose that their nonsense will hold sway, and that if they tried to publicly uproot the Christian faith then they should be strangled like mad dogs. I cannot speak in any other way of the enemies of the Christian faith, since I wish to show the whole world that they are quite clearly living devils. But I was far from wanting to heap the wrath of the common people upon the heads of pious officials. Have I not said in all my sermons that there are still pious servants of God in the castles of the lords?

But I do not want these poor people staying here, like a weight about our necks and embittering our enemies; rather, I want them to make more sensible plans which suit both them and us, so that they receive no false comfort from us. I know for certain that everything that the tyrants are up to is driven purely by fear and despair. The affair at Witzleben is to be understood quite differently in times like this. Duke Georg knows about this, for they are all alike. You should expect nothing but my best efforts. If things like this happen, then I will always write to you; just remember that the changing of the world is upon us, Daniel 2. May God help you. Amen.

Dated Allstedt on the day of Mary Magdalene, *anno domini* 1524.

The messenger who came from Lang ¹⁶ was called Lamprecht, who was once a Carmelite monk at Hettstedt. He wants to come back here. I will deal with the prince, ¹⁷ which will be no trouble; we only need to worry about any future trouble.

Thomas Müntzer, *your brother in God*.

(Translated by Andy Drummond,
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Original German text available at pages 299-307 and 311-314 of:
Thomas Müntzer: Briefwechsel,
edited by S. Bräuer and M. Kobuch, Leipzig 2010

¹⁶ Johann Lang, a Lutheran based in Erfurt. He had written to Müntzer in early July 1524 (letter not preserved) and Müntzer had replied rather brusquely.

¹⁷ Duke Johann of Saxony.