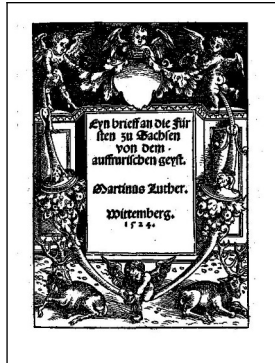


**A LETTER TO THE PRINCES OF SAXONY,
CONCERNING THE REBELLIOUS SPIRIT**



Martin Luther

June 1524

To the most illustrious high-born Princes and Lords, Lord Friedrich, Electoral Prince, and Johann, Duke of Saxony, Landgrave of Thuringia and Margrave of Meissen, my most gracious lords :

The mercy and peace of Jesus Christ our saviour be with you. It has always been the misfortune of the holy word of God that, when it thrives, then Satan will strive against it with all his might. At first it will be with his fist and sacrilegious force; and when that does not succeed, then he will use false tongues with lying spirits and teachers, so that, where he cannot subdue by force, then he can oppress with trickery and lies. That is what he did in the beginning, when the Gospel first came into the world; he attacked it with force, using the Jews and heathens, and spilled much blood and made a complete martyr of Christianity. But when that did not work, he threw up false prophets and lying spirits, and filled the world with heretics and sects, until the Pope, the last and most powerful Antichrist of all, brought the whole thing crashing down with sects and heresy.

And so it has now come to pass, as we can see, that God's righteous word is being assailed as it always has been. The Pope, the Emperor, Kings and Princes senselessly attack it with force of arms, and want to subdue, condemn, slander and

persecute it without trial or recognition. But their judgement and our defiance has long been established, Psalm 2. Why do the heathens rage and the people deceive so unprofitably? The kings of the earth revolt and the princes take counsel with each other against the Lord and his anointed. But he who resides in heaven mocks them and the Lord laughs at them, for he will speak to them in his wrath and terrify them with his anger. Certainly, that is what will happen to our raging Princes as well, and they have brought it on themselves, for they wish neither to see nor to hear: God has made them so blind and obdurate that they will run against each other and be smashed to pieces. They have been sufficiently warned.

Satan sees all this quite clearly and understands that such raging will be unable to succeed. Yes, he remarks and feels that – as is the way with God’s word – the more it is repressed, the further it will go and grow. So he now begins to work with false spirits and sects. Therefore we must be alive to that and certainly not allow ourselves to be led astray. For it must be, as Paul said to the Corinthians: there must be sects so that those who are armed will be able to see them. Now when the Satan had been expelled [*from Zwickau*], he wandered around in the desert places for one year or three, and sought a resting-place, but did not find one, until he settled down in Your Princely Graces’ principality and made himself a nest there, from where he thought to attack us, under our shelter and protection. For in Duke Georg’s principality, although it is very close by, this very terrifying and invincible spirit (as he boasts) pretended to be so good and mild that no bold signs of courage or defiance could be proven. But he also cried out horribly and complained that he had to suffer greatly, so that no one up until then dared touch him with fist or words or quill-pens, and he invented a great cross on which he suffered. Satan, however carelessly and causelessly he might lie, just cannot hide himself.

Now I find it a particular joy that it was not our people who began this sort of thing. And they boast themselves that they are not of the same opinions as us, they neither learned nor received anything from us. But they say they come from heaven and hear God himself speak with them, as if they were angels, and it is a bad thing that Wittenberg teaches faith and love and the cross of Christ. You must (they say) hear God’s voice yourself, and suffer God’s work within you, and feel how heavy

your burden is. The Scripture means nothing, yes, Bible babel babble etc.¹ If we were to talk about them with such words, then their cross and their suffering would (I believe) become even more cherished than Christ's suffering, and they would value it even higher – that is how much the poor spirit boasts about his suffering and his cross. And they are not prepared to accept the slightest doubt or objection to their heavenly voices and God's work, but rather they just want to be believed straightaway as an authority, without considering that I have neither read nor heard this arrogant, proud holy spirit (if that is what he was).

But this is neither the time nor the place to make a judgement of their teaching, for I have already done that twice. But if it is important, then by God's grace I will judge it again. I have written this letter to Your Princely Graces for this reason only, that I have understood from their writings that this same Spirit does not simply want to stick to words alone, but wants to threaten with his fist and set up a power against secular authority and straight away start a worldly rebellion. Satan never lets the rascal be seen, for that would be to give too much away. What might the spirit unleash if he wins the support of the common people? I have indeed heard from this same spirit here in Wittenberg that he considered it necessary to complete the task with the sword. I thought then that they will end up attacking secular authority and make themselves the lords of the world. But Christ replied to Pilate, denying that very thing and said that his kingdom was not of this world, and even the disciples taught that they should not become like worldly princes.

Although I expect that Your Princely Graces will know better than I can advise you how to deal with this, it is nevertheless my duty to apply my submissive energies to make a contribution, and I ask Your Princely Graces most humbly to take a serious view of this, and from your responsibility and duty to exercise reasonable force to defend yourselves against such mischief and prevent rebellion. For Your Princely Graces know well that your power and worldly sovereignty are given to you by God with the command that they should be used to keep the peace and punish

¹ In German: "Bibel, Babel, Babel". Luther chooses here to partially quote a phrase of Müntzer's, in his 'Prague Manifesto' of 1521, where he contrasted "Bible and Babel" (*cf.* my translation, page 6). Luther's word "Babel" does not exist, but sounds like the German word for knave – "Bube". Other translations offer themselves, including "rabble" (from knavery) and "bogle" (an evil spirit or goblin), and a couple of less polite words beginning with "B" ('bollocks', for one!). But I suspect Luther was simply aiming for dismissive alliteration: hence "babble".

the unruly, as St Paul taught in Romans 13. So Your Princely Graces should neither slumber nor miss this opportunity. God will demand an answer of you if you neglect to use the sword which has solemnly been entrusted to you. And the people and the world would not forgive it if Your Princely Graces were to tolerate and suffer such rebellious and outrageous violence.

But even if they claim (as they are wont to do with splendid words) that the spirit drives them, and that they must take action and exert force, then I would reply: firstly that it must really be an evil spirit which bears no other fruit than the destruction of churches and monasteries and the burning of holy statues. The worst knaves in the world can achieve the same thing, especially when they feel safe and meet no resistance. But I should be more worried if the Allstedt Spirit were to come to Dresden or Berlin or Ingolstadt, and rage and destroy the monasteries there and burn the icons there. Secondly, the fact that they boast of having the spirit means nothing, for we have here the words of St John: 'you should test their spirits beforehand, whether they come from God.' But this spirit has not yet been put to the test, but simply proceeds with violence and unrest as he pleases. If it was a good spirit, then he would allow it to be tested beforehand and humbly submit to judgement, as Christ did.

One test of the good fruit of the spirit would be that it did not creep into corners and hide from the light, but rather had to stand openly before enemies and opponents and answer questions. But the Allstedt Spirit avoids this, as the Devil avoids the Cross, and all the while holds forth from his nest with the most disgraceful words, just as if he had been filled with the holy trinity. Now this blatant bragging really shows what kind of spirit he is. For he boasts in his writings that he would willingly stand before an impartial gathering, but would not stand and answer in a corner with two or three people; and yet he freely offers his body and soul etc.

Could someone tell me: who is this courageous and spiteful spirit who hems himself in and is unwilling to stand before an impartial gathering? And why will he not answer questions in the company of two or three men? What kind of spirit is that who fears two or three people and cannot tolerate an impartial audience? I will tell you: he smells the roast. Once or twice he fell on his nose in my monastery at

Wittenberg, and that is why he fears the soup, and that is why he will not stand up unless the audience is his and they agree with his excellent words. If I (who have absolutely no spirit and cannot hear the heavenly voices) had said anything of the sort to my Papists, how they would have cried out loud and stopped up my mouth.

I cannot boast with such lofty words, nor can I stand defiant. I am but a poor, miserable man and have not ordered my affairs skilfully from the beginning, but only after great shaking and fear (as St Paul also admits of himself, 1 Corinthians 3 – although he did indeed say that he knew of the voice of God). How humbly I attacked the Pope at first, how I begged, how I sought answers, as my first writings have shown. Nevertheless, with my poor spirit, I managed to do something that this gobbler of worlds has not attempted; he, rather, ducks and dodges in a most knightly and manly fashion, and even boasts of all this dodging as if he possessed a knightly, elevated spirit.

I stood at Leipzig in order to dispute in front of a most dangerous audience. At Augsburg, I appeared unaccompanied before my greatest enemy. At Worms I stood before the Emperor and all his noblemen, although I well knew that my escort had been held back and that all manner of wild strange perfidy and spite was aimed at me. How weak and poor I was then, but my heart was bold at that time. If I had known that as many devils had taken aim at me as there are roof-tiles in Worms, then I would still have ridden into that town; and yet I had none of those heavenly voices, and none of God's talents and works that we have been hearing about from the Allstedt Spirit. And yes, I have sat in corners with two or three people, just who and where and how they wanted. My stupid, poor spirit had to stand as free as a flower in the meadow, with neither time, nor person, nor place, nor manner nor many voices, but had to be ready and willing to stand before anyone to give answer, as St Peter teaches.

And this spirit which flies as high above us as the sun above the earth, which can hardly see us little worms down here, agrees with various harmless, friendly, unreliable judgements and listeners, and does not wish to give answers to two or three people in a room apart. He feels something that he does not like feeling, and hopes to terrify us with mighty great words. Let him try: we can only do what Christ

gives us to do; if he abandons us, then we will be terrified by a rustling blade of grass. But if he wishes to hold us close, then the spirit of his great name will pass into us. And if Your Princely Graces will permit me, it is now necessary to reveal what passed between me and this spirit in my rooms, so that Your Princely Graces and all the world will know and understand that this spirit is certainly a lying devil and yet a pathetic devil. I have always had such a one annoying me, and still have one today. For the spirits who go around with proud words and thump the barrel, they do nothing; but those who creep secretly will do mischief before one even hears them.

I have had to say all this so that Your Princely Graces do not shy away from this spirit, nor delay in dealing with it, but that they seriously issue orders to prevent violence and avoid the destruction of your monasteries and the burning of your holy images. You must tell this spirit to behave as he should, and test him beforehand to determine whether he is for us or for the Papists. For they think (God be praised) that we are worse enemies than the Papists, even though they make use of our victories to the full, take wives and abandon Papal laws that they have never questioned, without once risking their necks. I, on the contrary, have succeeded so far by risking my body and my life. I must boast of this just as St Paul did, although it is a madness, and I would rather not do so, if it were not for the lying spirits.

They say repeatedly that their spirit is too high and our spirit is too low, and their things cannot be recognised by us; to this I reply that St Peter also knew quite well that his spirit, and that of all Christians, was higher than that of the heathens and Jews, but yet he asked that we should always be ready and willing to answer everyone mildly. Christ also knew that his spirit was higher than that of the Jews, but he lowered himself and took the opportunity that was offered and said: who amongst you accuses me of a sin? If I have spoken evil of Annas, then tell me so etc. I know, too, and am certain of it through God's grace, I who am more learned in the scriptures than all sophists and Papists. But God has so far mercifully protected me from arrogance, and would continue to protect me if I were to refuse to give answer to, or be heard by, the least Jew of heathen or anyone else.

And why do they put their thoughts in print, if they are not prepared to stand before two or three, or before an impartial gathering? Or do they think that their

writings are suited for some unimportant impartial gathering, but not for two or three? Yes, I am astonished that they have so completely forgotten their spirit and now want to teach people both in speech and in writing, if at the same time they boast that everyone should hear God's voice for himself; and mock us because we spread God's word both in speech and in writing, as if that had no value; and they have a much more delightful church-service than even the Apostles and Prophets and Christ themselves, all those who spread God's word both in speech and in writing, and never once said anything about the heavenly voice of God that we must all hear. Thus this humbug performs so many tricks that he can no longer understand what he says.

But I know that we, who know the Gospel, understand whether we are poor sinners with the correct spirit, or – as St Paul says – *primitias spiritus*, the first fruits of the spirit, or whether we do not yet have the fullness of the spirit. That is none other than the same single spirit which distributes its gifts most wonderfully. We already know what faith and love and the cross are, and there is no more elevated knowledge on earth than of faith and love. That is why we can both know and judge whether a teaching is true or false, in accordance with faith or not; and therefore how we know and judge this lying spirit. He wants to set aside the scripture and the spoken word of God, and root out the sacraments of baptism and communion, and drag us into the 'spirit', so that we may seek God with our own actions and free will, and so wait upon his works, and set limits to the time and manner of his actions upon us. Such dreadful presumption is set out in their writings, where they write with express words against the gospel of St Mark, namely, that St Mark incorrectly wrote about baptism in his last chapter. But they do not smack St John in the mouth quite as badly as they do St Mark. He who is not otherwise born of water and of the spirit, John 3 etc, they point at the word 'water', and ignore it and so completely reject bodily baptism in water.

But I would really like to know, since the spirit is not without fruit and their spirit is so much worthier than ours, whether it also bears better fruits than ours? Yes, it really must bear better fruits than ours, for it is worthier and higher. So we teach and confess that our spirit, which we preach and teach, will yield the fruits of St Paul, in

Galatians 5 where he talks of love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, mildness and moderation. And he says in Romans 8 that he kills the work of the flesh and with Christ crucifies the old Adam together with all its lusts, Galatians 5. In summary, the fruits of our spirit are the realisation of the ten commandments of God. Now the Allstedt Spirit, who does not accept our spirit as his, must come up with something better than love and faith, peace, patience etc. Since St Paul said that love was the greatest fruit, 1 Corinthians 13, he must therefore do something even better than God commanded. I should really like to know what that would be, especially as we know that the spirit is attained through Christ alone, so that we might obey Gods' command, as Paul says in Romans 8.

But if they try saying that they do not live as they teach, and do not possess such a spirit which will yield such fruits, then I could understand them saying that, for one could easily comprehend that that is not a good spirit which speaks through them. We readily concede, although it is not necessary to understand this by means of heavenly voices and higher spirits, that we sadly do not do everything as we should. Yes, St Paul in Galatians 5 states that nothing can be done while spirit and flesh sit side by side in this world and are in conflict. So I do not think there is anything special about the fruit of the Allstedt Spirit, except that he wants to strike out with his fist and break down timber and stone; until now, they have shown no signs of love, peace, patience, goodness and mildness, so that the fruits of this spirit are not too common. I, however, can demonstrate many fruits of the spirit in God's grace with our people, and could easily set my person, which is the least and most sinful, against all the fruits ever produced by the Allstedt Spirit, however much he reproaches my life.

But when someone reproaches someone's teaching on account of a fragile life, then that is not the work of the holy spirit. For the holy spirit reproaches false teaching, and has patience with the faith and the life of the weak, as Paul teaches in Romans 14 and 15 and in many other places. I am not troubled because the Allstedt Spirit is so barren, but only because he denies everything and wants to establish different teachings. I would have had just as little with which to challenge the Papists if they had only taught correctly, for their wicked lives did not do much

damage. But because this spirit wishes to go further, and get annoyed at our wretched lives, and make insolent judgements of our teaching because of the teacher's life, then he has amply proven what he is. For the spirit of Christ judges no one who teaches correctly and is patient and supports and helps those who do not yet lead a good life and so it does not despise the poor sinners as our Pharisaical Spirit does.

Now all this affects the teaching, as will be shown in due course. So we arrive at a conclusion, most honourable sirs: that Your Princely Graces should not forbid the words of the preaching. Just let them preach confidently and briskly whatever they want and against whomsoever they want. For, as I have said, there must be sects, and the word of God must march out into the field and fight, which is why the Evangelists were called a mighty host, Psalm 67 [68], and Christ was seen as a king at the head of his army by the Prophets. If their spirit is correct then he will not fear us and will stand firm. If ours is correct, then he will have nothing to fear from us. One can let these spirits square up to each other and exchange blows. If some people are misled by them, so be it: that is the cost of war. Wherever there is conflict and battle, then some must fall and be wounded. But he who fights justly will be crowned.

But if they want to do more than merely fight with words, if they want to destroy and strike with the fist, then Your Princely Graces should intervene: it is either us or them. They should straightaway be banished from the land and warned not to return. We are quite prepared to allow and tolerate it if you fight back with words, so that the true teaching is protected. But we declare that you should not use force or mobilise any troops. For we, who champion God's word, should never fight back with the fist. This is a spiritual struggle, which will win hearts and souls from the devil. And it was written by Daniel that the Antichrist should be destroyed without human hand. It is also written in Isaiah 11 that Christ in his kingdom will fight with the spirit of his mouth and punish with the rod of his lips. Our task is to preach and to suffer, and not to lash out with fists or defend ourselves. Christ and his Apostles never knocked down any churches or chopped up any pictures, but rather won over

hearts with the word of God: and then the churches and pictures fell down of themselves.

This is how we should act. Firstly, we should wrest hearts away from monasteries and spirits. When this has been done, then churches and monasteries will lie waste and the land-owning lords can do what they want with them. For what interest do we have in timber and stone when we have once saved the hearts that lived inside them? Look how I have conducted myself: I have never once touched a single stone and certainly never damaged or burned a monastery. And yet, as a result of my words, monasteries and nunneries in many places now lie empty, even in those areas with princes who are opposed to the gospel. If I had attacked them with violence, like those prophets, then the hearts would have remained in captivity all over the world, and I would never have affected either timber or stone in a single place. And what use would that have been? Fame and honour may have been achieved in this way, but the salvation of the soul would certainly not have been. Some people consider that I have done more damage to the Pope without using any violence than some mighty king might have done. But because these prophets are pleased to do something remarkable and better, and still do not succeed, they leave these souls standing hopeless, and instead attack timber and stone – that is the new and wonderful work of the higher spirit.

But they may want to object and say that the law of Moses permits the Jews to destroy all graven images and uproot the idolatrous altars. Answer: they know themselves quite well that God has done much work since the beginning, either through his own words and faith or through many saints. And the epistle to the Hebrews sets it out quite clearly and says that we should follow the example of the beliefs of those saints, since we cannot emulate the actions of all those saints. If the Jews cast down the altars and idols, then at that time they had the commandment of God to do so, which is something we do not have in our times. For when Abraham offered his son as sacrifice, he had God's clear commandment to do so; but anyone who later sacrificed their children in emulation did not act righteously. It is not right just to emulate those acts – or else we should have ourselves circumcised and do all manner of Jewish things.

Yes, if it was right that we Christians should destroy churches and rage like the Jews, then it would follow that we have to physically kill all non-Christians, just as the Jews were commanded to slay the Canaanites and Amorites as well as destroy their idols. In this way, the Allstedt Spirit would accomplish nothing other than bloodshed, and those who did not hear his heavenly word would have to be strangled so that the people of God did not have to put up with such offences, which are after all so much greater in living non-Christians than in wooden or stone images. That was the commandment which was given to the Jews as the people who were protected by God's miracles - and to be sure they were God's people; and yet they carried this out with orderly force and leadership, and not in a disorderly horde. But this spirit has not proved with any kind of miracle that he is of God's people, and he stirs up trouble all on his own as if he alone was God's people, and proceeds without any orderly force sanctioned by God, and wishes people to believe in his spirit.

Trouble must be put aside through the word of God, for although all visible trouble must be destroyed and done away with, it is of no use if hearts are not thereby brought from faithlessness to the correct belief. For a faithless heart will always find new trouble for itself, as also happened amongst the Jews when they set up ten idols where before they had destroyed only one. That is why the New Testament explains the correct way of driving out the devil and all his trouble: that is, by using the word of God to turn hearts away, by which means the devil and all his pomp and power will fall away.

Here I will leave this affair, and beg Your Princely Graces most submissively to deal very severely with this raging fanaticism, so that God's word alone is discussed in this matter, as befits Christians; and to prevent rebellion for which Everyman seems to be too much inclined. For those are not Christians who wish to use their fists over and above words, and are not at all prepared to suffer when they think they are full to overflowing with ten holy spirits.

May Your Princely Graces be forever fortified and protected by God's mercy.

*(Translated by Andy Drummond,
October 2015)*

*Translated from the 'Weimarer Ausgabe' of Luther's collected works (Weimar 1899):
Volume 15, pp.199-221
(nb Another translation is contained within
the Concordia, USA, edition of Luther's Works, Volume 40)*