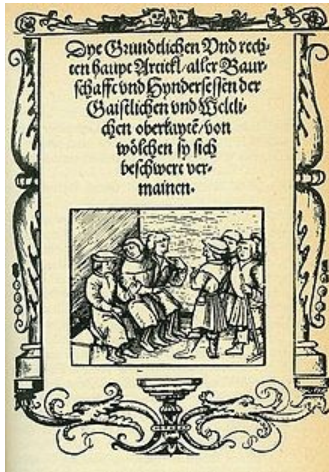




The Twelve Articles of the Peasantry ¹

‘The Fundamental and Just Articles of all the Peasantry and Tenants of the Spiritual and Temporal Lords, by Whom They Consider Themselves Oppressed’

March 1525

To the Christian reader be God’s peace and grace through Christ. ²

There are many enemies of Christ who have now taken the occasion of the gathering of the peasants to slander the gospel, saying: Is this the fruit of the new gospel? To be obedient to none, to rise up in many places and band together in great numbers and in great force to conspire to reform the spiritual and temporal powers, to uproot them, yes, even perhaps to murder them? These Articles which follow are the answer to all these godless and blasphemous critics, firstly so that they cease their mockery of God’s word, and secondly so that we can justify in a Christian manner the disobedience, yes, the rebellion of all the peasants. Firstly, the gospel is not a cause of rebellions or insurrections, because it speaks of Christ, the promised Messiah, whose words and life taught nothing more than love, peace, patience and unity, so that all who believe in this Christ should be loving, peaceful, patient and united. This is the basis for all the Articles of the peasantry (as will clearly be seen) – to hear the gospel, and to live according to its message. How then can the enemies of Christ call this a cause of rebellion and disobedience? Some enemies of Christ are opponents of the gospel, who set themselves up and conspire against its demands and requirements - but this is not caused by the gospel, but rather by the devil, the most harmful enemy of the gospel who stirs up such feelings in his supporters through a lack of faith, in order that the word of God (which teaches love, peace and unity) should be suppressed and removed altogether. Secondly, then, it follows that the peasants who use this teaching and guidance in their Articles,

¹ These demands appeared in March of 1525 and in the following few weeks were printed at least twenty-five times in different locations. The likely author of these demands is Sebastian Lotzer, and they are representative of many similar sets of ‘Articles’ which emerged at that time. It is clear that they reflected the main concerns of most of the peasant troops in South-West Germany.

² In the printed editions, the margins are cluttered with references to chapters of the Bible, each reference providing scriptural justification for the demands.

cannot be called disobedient or rebellious. For if God wishes to hear the peasants (who are anxiously calling to live according to his word) then who dares to obstruct the will of God ? Who dares to intervene in his judgement ? Yes, who dares to strive against his majesty ? Did he not hear the children of Israel calling out to him, and did he not deliver them from the hand of Pharaoh, and can he not save his people even today ? Yes, he will save them ! And not too long from now ! So, Christian reader, read these Articles with great care and make your own judgement.

The Articles now follow.

The First Article

Firstly, it is our humble plea and request , and the wish and opinion of all, that from this time on a community should have the power and authority to choose and appoint our own pastors. And that we should also have the authority to remove the same pastor if he should behave improperly. This same appointed pastor should preach us the holy gospel loud and clear without adding any human teachings or laws, for constantly imparting to us the true belief will give us cause to ask God for his mercy, and instil and confirm in us the true belief. For if his grace is not instilled within us, then we will always remain just flesh and blood, which is of no use, as it clearly states in the scripture that we can only come to God through the true belief and can only be saved by his mercy. So such a guide and pastor is necessary for us. And this demand is based on the scriptures.

The Second Article

Secondly, although the just tithe is set out in law in the Old Testament and is confirmed in the New, nevertheless we wish to pay a just tithe in corn, but only where it is warranted: since the tithe should be given to God, and shared with his servants, then the pastor who clearly preaches God's word deserves to receive it. From now on, we wish that this tithe should be collected and brought in by church-wardens, and our pastor, appointed by the whole community, should take from it what is sufficient for himself and his dependents, after the whole community has agreed on it; and anything that is left over should be distributed to the needy poor who live in the same village, according to their need and with the consent of the whole community; and anything that is left over after that should be stored, in case there is a need to travel for the defence of

the country – in this way, there would be no need to impose a land tax upon the poor people, for the costs could be met from this reserve. And if it happened that one or more villages were forced to sell off the rights to the tithe in some emergency, then those who can prove that they purchased it with the consent of the whole village need not be expropriated; instead, we wish to reach fair agreements with them., according to circumstances, and to redeem the tithe in instalments. But if the purchasers did not buy it from any village, and their forefathers just took it for themselves, then we do not wish and are not obliged and do not intend to pay them any more, regardless of whether they are clergymen or laymen, except as mentioned before for the support of our appointed pastor, and we will keep the rest back, or give it to the needy poor, as the holy scripture commands. And we will not pay the small tithe at all, for the Lord God created cattle free for Man's use; we consider it to be an unjust tithe which has been invented by men. Therefore we will not pay it any more.

The Third Article

Thirdly, it has been the custom until now for lords to treat us as their own property. This is something to be deplored, since Christ redeemed us all by shedding his precious blood, regardless of whether it is a lowly shepherd or the highest in the land, with no exceptions. So the scripture proves that we are, and wish to be, free. It is not the case that we will be completely free and have no authority over us, that is not what God teaches us. We should live according to the commandments, not according to the free lusting of the flesh; we should love God and see him as our Lord in our neighbour, and do everything which God commanded us to do when he spoke at the Last Supper. Therefore we should live according to his commandment. But does this commandment teach us that we should not be obedient to our lords ? No, we should obey not just our lords, but we should humble ourselves before everyone. So we will freely obey our elected and lawful ruler (set over us by God) in all proper and Christian matters; and we have no doubt that you, as true and righteous Christians, will release us from our bondage or else prove to us from the scriptures that we belong to you.

The Fourth Article

Fourthly, it has been the custom until now that no poor man should have the right to catch wild game, wild fowl or fish in running water, which we consider to be quite improper and unbrotherly, and selfish and quite contrary to the word of God. And in

some places the lords maintain the wild game to our harm and great loss, for we must suffer while the dumb animals gobble up our crops (although God created them for Man's use), and we must keep quiet about it, which is an offence against God and against neighbours. When the Lord God created Man, he gave him power over all animals, and over the birds in the air and over the fish in the water. So it is our request that if someone owns a stretch of water, then he will have to prove with written evidence that he bought the water by consent. If he can prove this, then we do not wish to take it from him by force, but we want to consider the matter in a Christian manner, and in the spirit of brotherly love; but anyone who cannot provide sufficient evidence should then hand it back to the community, just as it is.

The Fifth Article

Fifthly, we have a grievance about the cutting of wood, for our lordships have taken all the woods to themselves, and when a poor man needs some then he has to purchase it at double the price. It is therefore our opinion that those woods which have not been purchased, whether they are owned by clergymen or laymen, should be passed back to the community again, and the community should have the authority to allow anyone to freely take all that he needs for firewood, and also what he needs for building, also free, provided it is taken with the knowledge of someone who has been appointed by the whole community. If there is evidence that the woods have been purchased, then we should negotiate about their use in a brotherly and Christian manner. But if the woods were simply taken and afterwards sold to someone else, then we should reach an agreement which is formed by brotherly love and the holy scripture.

The Sixth Article

Sixthly, we have a heavy burden of providing labour, which is increased day by day and daily grows more frequent. We request that this be done more considerately and that we are not burdened so much, but rather that we should be allowed, as our fathers did, to provide labour only according to the word of God.

The Seventh Article

Seventhly, in future we do not wish to allow the lords to lay burdens on us, but rather a lord will allow land to be held in a proper manner, by an agreement between the lord and the peasant. The lord should no longer force or oblige the peasant to undertake labour without pay. In this way, the peasant can use and enjoy his holding without being burdened. But if the lord feels that the labour is necessary, then the peasant should willingly obey his lord before any others: however, he will do it on a day and at a time which is not to the peasant's disadvantage, and it should be for a just wage.

The Eighth Article

Eighthly, we have a grievance that many of us who hold land are obliged to pay rent which is greater than the yield of the land. The peasants then lose their property and are ruined. In this case the lords should let honourable men inspect these holdings and agree on a fair rent, so that the peasant does not have to work for nothing. For every labourer is worthy of his hire.

The Ninth Article

Ninthly, we have a grievance about serious crimes, for people are constantly making up new laws and we are not being punished according to the seriousness of the crime but rather sometimes according to great envy and sometimes according to favouritism. It is our opinion that punishments should be carried out according to the old written laws and taking into account the circumstances, and not according to whim.

The Tenth Article

Tenthly, we have a grievance that some people have taken for themselves the same fields that once belonged to a community. We will take these back into the ownership of our communities, unless they have been properly purchased. But if they have been improperly purchased, then a friendly and brotherly agreement should be reached, according to the circumstances.

The Eleventh Article

Eleventhly, we wish to completely abolish the custom known as 'heriot' or death-tax. We cannot suffer or permit a man's widow and orphans should be shamefully robbed against God and honour, which is happening in many places (in all kinds of ways). The very people who should protect and defend them are instead fleecing and skinning us. If they had had the least excuse for it, then they would take everything. God will no longer tolerate this, but will be rid of it completely. In future, no man should be obliged to pay this tax, whatever it amounts to.

The Twelfth Article

Twelfthly, it is our decision and final opinion that if any one or more of these Articles set out here does not agree with the word of God – which we doubt – then we will abandon these same Articles if anyone can show us that they do not agree with God's word, by referring us to the holy scriptures. And if any Article is conceded and is later found to be unjust, then they shall be considered null and void from that moment on. Likewise, if any more grievances should be discovered which are based upon truth and the Scriptures and relate to offences against God or our neighbour, we reserve the right to present these also, and to live our lives according to the full Christian teaching and usage. And so we beseech the Lord our God that he alone will give us this. The peace of Christ be with us all.

Translated by Andy Drummond, March 2016