

"Peace is more important than all justice;
and peace was not made for the sake of justice,
but justice for the sake of peace." Martin Luther

quoted from a cereal box for Mango Passion, a Peace Cereal.

LUTHER ON AUTHORITY, LAW AND ORDER

Preface.

This is a version of an often revised lecture first given at Cornell University in 1983 during a symposium commemorating Luther's birth five hundred years earlier and is based on six major writings dating from 1522 to 1531. (1)

... years ago, in the spring of 1525, Martin Luther denounced the German Peasants' Revolt in a vicious pamphlet "**Against the Looting and Murderous Mobs of Peasants**" that devastated the movement and unconditionally reaffirmed **St. Paul's** political doctrine as stated in his **Letter to the Romans**. Luther's **Scripture based doctrine**, which considered all government divinely ordained and therefore entitled to unqualified allegiance except in matters of faith, remained valid as the professed political creed of German Protestantism into the Twentieth Century. **It dominated, even stifled, the German public debate of the issue.**

It was not until the revolutionary events of 1989, that the (East) German Protestant Church, as an Institution, shed its opposition to popular insurrection and openly sided with those who defied the government in protest against intolerable conditions (2). [Please read in this context my essay on **The [Protestant Revolution](#)** of the late 1980ies].

Luther's views on the subject are firmly linked to the spiritual attitude of "**obedience**". In fact it becomes the corner stone of his political beliefs, the bulk of it formulated shortly before and during the **German Peasants' Revolt** in the 1520s. They were drawn from and confirmed by multitudes of Christian authorities from **St. Paul** to a semi mystical tract of the late 14th century called "**A German Theology**" which he edited partially in 1516, two years later in its entirety.

All government, he taught, is divinely ordained. The ruler's legitimacy is derived not from the will of the people but from God who installed secular government to be his arm and instrument.

Luther believed in order and discipline more than he believed in justice and had no interest in destabilizing secular authority. On the contrary, by appointing the individual Protestant rulers heads of their regional churches, he made the Protestant Church a pillar of the state. If you have grievances, he taught, petition the government. If you are not heard or receive no redress, go home and go quietly about your business. Under no circumstances do you have a right to rebel. If your government is good, praise the Lord for an undeserved gift. If it is bad, remember that you deserve worse than they can mete out. It is only in matters of faith that secular government has no authority and must be resisted if necessary.

Luther believed in government for the people, and never mind the of and by. Man was fallible, constantly tempted to abuse his free will, and had to be kept in line. Needless to say, **regicide**, including the assassination of even the most odious tyrant, was out of the question, because even in his villainy he was an arm of God. Stability headed the list of social priorities. Shock waves rocked Europe, Protestant and Catholic alike, when the **Puritans** executed **Charles Stuart** on January 30, 1649 after he had gotten himself into a needless (Churchill) conflict with Parliament. The Protestant German playwright **Gryphius** composed a tragedy, **Carolus Stuardus**, that raises Charles I to the level of a Christian stoic martyr, reflecting Charles' self image as recorded in his final words: that he died a good Christian and a martyr to the people. Luther was convinced of the imminent second coming of Christ and wanted his people to concentrate on one thing alone: finding and keeping the right faith to escape eternal damnation.

The Anglo-Saxon Protestant tradition is quite different. The more practical 17th century **English Puritans**, by contrast, also certain that the millennium was at hand, proposed to prepare for it by doing everything within their power to return mind, body and the land to their original, pre-lapsarian state: hence their emphasis on education, medicine and agriculture. Even among the American loyalists, opposed to rebellion against the British Crown, the Anglican cleric Jonathan **Boucher's** view that all government is "in its nature, absolute and irresistible" was a rare

exception. Most of them agreed with Joseph **Galloway** and others, that secular government is formed by individuals "who, putting their several powers under one sovereign direction for their better security, agree to yield obedience to it." Moreover, this obedience is by no means absolute, for "true government can have no other foundation than common consent" (2). Mary Beth Norton on the Development of a Revolutionary Mentality)

In the Anglo-Saxon world the dispute over the relationship between government and the governed was influenced by such liberating events as The **Magna Carta** of 1215, the execution of **Charles** in 1649, not to mention the **American Revolution**. Germany was less fortunate. In the New World, the ancient formula "I, George, king by the grace of God" had long been replaced by "We, the People" when in 1849 **Friedrich Wilhelm IV**, king of Prussia, rejected the German imperial crown offered to him by the **Frankfurt National Assembly** because it was not "theirs to offer." The king "by the grace of God" would not be emperor by common consent or, as he put it privately, "by the grace of bakers and butchers." In a similar vein, more than 400 years after Luther, in **Hitler's** Germany, the prominent Protestant theologian Dietrich **Bonhoeffer**, echoing Paul's Letter to the Romans and Luther's Catechism, reiterates the archaic doctrine in his **Ethics**: "Government is divinely ordained authority to exercise worldly dominion by divine right. Government is deputyship for God on earth. It can be understood only [as emanating] from above. It does not proceed from society, but orders society from above." Eventually however, Bonhoeffer became one of the conspirators in the failed attempt on **Hitler's** life in 1944 and was executed shortly before war's end. It is hard, decades later and in a political culture that has encouraged popular insurrection against tyrannical regimes, to appreciate the soul-wrenching deliberations of military officers, civil servants and clergy who participated (or couldn't in good conscience) in the plot against Hitler. **C. F. Goerdeler** who had resigned as Lord Mayor of Leipzig in protest against the Third Reich's racial policies, now chancellor designate and executed for his role in the conspiracy, left notes revealing his agonized belief that Hitler's escape constituted God's own verdict condemning the plot to assassinate the dictator.

While the tract **Against the Looting and Murderous Mobs of Peasants** of 1525 is Luther's most strident indictment of rebellion, there were other pronouncements, tracts and pamphlets addressing the issue. For this highly compact but faithful presentation of Luther's political doctrine in narrative form I have used the oldest reliable German texts. These pamphlets are Luther's spoken word -- he rarely had time to rewrite and reorganize -- meant to be read aloud wherever an audience could be found. To give an impression of his tone and style of delivery I allowed him to speak for himself as far as this is possible given the objective to condense hundreds of pages of print into two dozen pages of typescript. This text is a hybrid, part narrative, part commentary, part paraphrase, part recital. All translations and paraphrases are my own. Those who have read Luther in the original will, I trust, still recognize his language. Those who haven't will, I hope, appreciate meeting the man.

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A Faithful Admonition To All Christians Not To Resort To Uprising And Rebellion (1522) is Luther's first tract on the subject. It may have been prompted by the severe student riots in **Wittenberg** in December of 1521 and by rumors he heard as he returned from his refuge at the **Wartburg** that the simmering social discontent would soon explode in a major insurrection against the Old Church. Civil unrest was nothing new. Uprisings had occurred frequently during the last 200 years but began to intensify toward the end of the 15th century. There was friction again and Luther thought the time had come to make public his thoughts on **rebellion and disobedience** and to rein in some of his more radical followers who could be accused of inciting to riot. The Reformation is now in its 5th year.

Somewhat carelessly he establishes a direct link between his evangelical work and the threat of unrest. Now that the light of Christian Truth, so long suppressed by the Pope and his followers, has begun to shine brightly again, the tyranny of **Rome** and her followers has become visible. It appears that a revolt is imminent which will wipe out the whole clerical establishment, unless they reform and improve not only their own conduct but the lives of their subjects as well.

It has been estimated that as much as one third of all German soil was held or administered by the **Roman Church**. Abbots and bishops were often both spiritual leaders and temporal rulers. Long despised for their arrogance and corruption, particularly among the lower classes and by the lesser nobility who were in their service, they were now the target of public fury as never before. Luther leaves no doubt where his sympathies lie, namely

with those whose burdens nearly exceed the human capacity for endurance and who have good cause to resort to flails and clubs and pitchforks and throw the tyrants out.

He welcomes the clergy's anxiety. For such is the lot of God's enemies. In the morning he will say, I hope I shall survive till evening, and in the evening, I hope I shall survive tomorrow. Under no circumstances, therefore, must their rebellious flock do them any harm. They would inflict mere physical punishment and death, a trifle compared with what God in his wrath will do. And when will God act? As soon as their corruption and treachery are fully revealed. Then will come their day of judgment and the whole heap of them will be cast to the bottom of blazing hell.

In the meantime, may no one put an end to their outrage? Only those in **authority**: princes, knights and other secular rulers may justly interfere. There is little likelihood of it, though, for they seem unwilling to govern and are in disarray. Still, the common man may not take the law into his own hand or act on his own behalf. It is the exclusive domain of secular authority, in fact the sole reason why it was ordained by God to begin with: to carry the sword in order to keep the peace, to protect the innocent and to punish evil. God will not have that role usurped by anyone. Mind therefore and obey those in authority.

Now follows a statement that must have gone unnoticed, or his contemporaries wouldn't be so shocked a few years later. **This is what I hold and shall always hold, that I will be on the side of those who are the target of rebellion and against those who rebel, no matter how just their cause.**

What, then, can the oppressed do?

First. Acknowledge your sins. Your tyrants' haughtiness and the foul deeds of the Pope and his supporters are God's punishment for our transgressions. Second. Prayer alone be your weapon. The **Psalm** says it best: Stand up, oh Lord, and raise your hand and do not forget your people. Third. Let **Christ** speak through you. We must continue to write and speak out against the Pope and his ilk. Such is better than a hundred rebellions. Have I not inflicted more harm on them than have emperors, kings and princes with all their might? And have I not done so by word alone? Because my word is not my word, I am the voice of Him who speaks through me.

Luther's assurance is incredible. Let us continue for two more years and you shall see what will happen to popes and bishops, to monks and nuns, to the whole benighted papal regime. It will blow away like chaff before the wind. His language is mellow and paternal when he speaks to his followers, the oppressed in particular. It is harsh and strident, contemptuous and resounding with righteous indignation, when he addresses the common adversary. Small wonder that the people heard two messages. He exhorts them to hold still while assuring them that their cause is just.

The tract on **What Constitutes Secular Authority And To What Extent It Must Be Obeyed**, written in 1523, expands upon two sermons Luther delivered in Weimar in October of 1522 and is dedicated to a secular ruler, **John, Duke of Saxony**. What is the proper place and function of secular authority in a Christian community, and what are its limits?

A detour first. He states with a mixture of sadness and contempt that a major tract of his, addressed **To The Christian Nobility Of The German Nation** (1520) had gone unheeded. They will not govern responsibly, let alone like Christians. Recent events have convinced me that God has struck our nobles mad. Instead of managing the affairs of state they are now interfering in the spiritual lives of their subjects. Several princes, among them **George of Saxony** ("the pig of Dresden"), had prohibited the sale or resale of Luther's translation of the **New Testament**. They claim to be acting on the Emperor's orders, bound to obedience as loyal Christian princes. Would they so hasten to comply with the Emperor's orders in other matters? You know the answer. Yet when it comes to abusing their subjects these scoundrels invoke their oath of allegiance.

Now, back to secular power and authority. It was bequeathed by God, not by man. Luther quotes at length from Romans, 13. "**Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. Do that which is good and thou shalt have praise of the same. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.**"

In Luther's reading of the text, opposing God's anointed is both a mortal sin and the cardinal political crime. Eagerly, almost pedantically, he piles quotation upon biblical quotation, anxious to prove that Authority, Law, Rule, Power, The Sword, as he variously calls it, is divinely instituted and sanctioned by tradition. Moreover, he restates categorically that secular authority alone may act in order to preserve law and order and to punish those who would violate it. Benign or oppressive, all government must be honored and obeyed.

But, you will say, how can we follow Christ's teaching that we honor our oppressors and obey them who so abuse us? Are they not right who teach that these are **commandments** only for the perfect, and mere **guidelines** for the common folk? Wrong! We must not divide Christianity into two camps. Christ meant his teachings to be

accepted verbatim by everyone.

On the other hand, while Christianity must not be divided, mankind must. There are two realms: the **Kingdom of God** and the **Kingdom of the World**. Those who adhere to the True Faith belong to the Kingdom of God. They have no need for secular law and its enforcers. They will demand more of themselves than all the laws put together.

The Kingdom of the World, however, is for those who are not true Christians, and for whose benefit God has issued laws which were confirmed and enhanced by Christ. Nobody is a Christian by nature or even good. Man is wicked. The Law keeps him from doing evil, or at least from doing it freely and without fear of punishment. True Christians are like tame animals that need no leash. All others are wild beasts that do.

Luther has no delusions about the number of true Christians. Hardly one in a thousand. That's why God has created two Kingdoms, one spiritual and governed by the Holy Ghost, the other secular and governed by Law. You cannot govern the whole world by the New Testament and the rules of love and forgiveness, although already there are preachers who preach such rubbish, abusing their evangelical freedom. You would be acting like a shepherd who puts wolves and sheep into the same barn, telling them to be kind to each other and to keep the peace. The sheep would keep the peace, for sure. They just wouldn't live long.

Now a persistent question. Can no individual ever act on his own behalf and be an instrument of God at the same time? Where the Spirit exists in abundance it may indeed happen. Thus we hear **Samson** speak: I have done onto them as they have done to me. But Samson was chosen by God to punish the **Philistines** and to save the children of Israel. Although he acted on his own behalf he did not seek his own advantage. No one may follow such an example unless he is a true Christian, full of the Spirit and marked by God for all to see. Two years later, in his **Exhortation**, he will add **Moses** as another man clearly anointed by God to lead the children of Israel in their insurrection against Pharo. [See reference to **Schiller's Tell** in **The Protestant Revolution**].

Having established the need for secular authority, its institution and sanction by God, Luther will now show the extent of its reach. In a nutshell, it extends to all physical existence and material goods, to everything that is external and of this earth. It does not, however, extend to the souls of men.

What a man believes is a matter of his own conscience. Thoughts are free. No one can force anyone to believe or not to believe. At best people can be forced to lie or pretend. But the sins thus committed will be laid at the feet of those who caused them. Good Lord! The Pope and his bishops are supposed to preach the Gospel. Instead, they have become secular lords and rule over life, limb and property. Our secular lords, on the other hand, are supposed to look after their territories. Instead they abuse the people, heap tax upon tax, act worse than highwaymen and, finally, have the gall to issue orders in matters of faith.

Do not obey your sovereign in matters of faith. Let him rage and take away all you have. If you freely allow your ruler to take from you your faith, or the Scriptures, you have denied God. Then again, if they ransack your house and take the **New Testament** by force do not resist, for such is a ruler's way. A sensible ruler is rare, a good one even rarer. By and large they are the dumbest fools and greatest villains on earth. Still, the Lord expects you to honor and fear them, for they are His arm and they wield His sword. The world is corrupt and not fit for reasonable and humane rulers. Where there are frogs in abundance you need storks to control them.

A brief digression. Should one not use force to convert the **heretics**? Absolutely not! God's word be your only weapon. If that does not change their minds, no force can and if you filled the whole world with blood. Heresy, like true faith, is a thing of the spirit. You cannot burn it, slay it, or drown it. Brute force is the weapon of mindless animals. - He would not always be so tolerant.

This is how a true **Christian regent** should conduct himself. First. Do not rule by the letter of the law. A prince who is no wiser than his lawyers and their books is a poor ruler. Reason and good sense should at all times be the supreme law. Next. The land and the people are not yours to serve you. Rather, you shall serve them and act solely according to their welfare. All that live only for themselves are damned, and all deeds that are not informed by love are cursed. Next. Keep an eye on your counselors. The worst courts are those where a prince's mind is governed by windbags and flatterers. Do not trust any one man, as **King David** had to learn. God created such examples for the benefit of future rulers. Ride through your territory, see for yourself, govern yourself, hold onto the reins, be alert. Next. Mind how you punish a crime. Take a cue from the **Book of Kings** and behave as **David** did towards **Joab**. If you cannot act without risking even greater injustice, do nothing. Sometimes you must look the other way. Do not make war on your superiors even if they commit an injustice against you. If your antagonist is of equal rank, negotiate first. If he will not relent, use force to meet force and to protect the lives and goods of your subjects. They in turn are obliged to follow you and risk all in such a war. It is within the Christian spirit and an act of love to fight until peace is restored. In short. Trust in God and pray for his assistance. Serve your subjects with love. Toward your counselors keep a free and open mind. Toward criminals act with moderation and firmness. Observe most of all the law of love and common sense, it will serve you better than all

the law books and legal experts in the world.

Always fond of examples he concludes with a truly gruesome story. A noble in the service of **Charles, Duke of Burgundy**, had incarcerated one of his enemies. The prisoner's wife came to beg for her husband's freedom. The nobleman offers to release her husband in return for sexual favors. The woman submits, the noble releases her husband - after he has beheaded him. She takes her case to the Duke who summons the nobleman and orders him to marry the widow. When the wedding day comes he has the bridegroom beheaded, his property confiscated and signed over to the woman. Thus he restores her honor and punishes a crime in a manner worthy of a prince. For the written law must yield to reason and common sense whence it came. No slave to the letter of the law could render such a judgment. It comes from a free and unfettered mind, surpasses all statutes and is so fitting that all must agree in their hearts, this is justice.

1525. The two years are up. The papacy has not blown away like chaff. Nor have the rulers improved their character or the lot of their subjects. The peasants are organizing. **Thomas Muenzer**, who was elected their spiritual leader, calls for the immediate establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth. More importantly, they have drawn up a set of demands including the abolition of serfdom, reduction of taxes, guarantee of rudimentary rights, and better supervision of the clergy. Their demands are fortified with quotations from the Scriptures. These are the **Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasantry** Luther mentions in his new tract, **Exhortation To Keep The Peace**. The article he likes best is #12 in which the writers offer to submit to criticism and instruction as long as it is based on biblical testimony. Luther is glad to oblige.

As always, he lays the blame squarely at the feet of contemporary government, secular and spiritual alike. Arrogant princes, blind bishops, mad priests and monks. The common man has run out of patience. His sword is at your throat. You must change your ways or the peasants will do it for you. And if you defeated them all, God would merely rouse others. For it is not the peasants who are about to turn on you, it is God Himself who will now punish you for your tyranny.

Still, he takes care to distance himself from the current social unrest, his understanding of the cause and his sympathy with the oppressed notwithstanding. The spirit of this rebellion does not originate with me but with those false and murderous prophets who oppose you and me alike. I have prayed for you and upheld your authority among the common people regardless of how you have treated me. If I wanted revenge I could now sit back and gloat, or even join the peasants. But I will not. My dear Lords, be you friend or foe, do not reject my loyal counsel, and do not take lightly this ominous threat. If you can still be guided: for God's sake please give a little. Remember, a hay wagon should yield to a drunken man. Before you fight them try to reason with them, lest you strike a spark that will set fire to all of Germany. They have formulated twelve demands, some of them so reasonable that you should grant them at once and be absolved of your past stupidities. Foremost, you must grant them the right to elect their own preachers. Secular authority may, however, prevent the teaching of rebellion and lawlessness. The demands concerning the peasants' material welfare are also just. You were not placed in office to line your own pockets.

And now to the peasants. He again states flatly that their grievances are valid and that the rulers deserve a **hard kick in the ass**. However, at stake for the peasants is not just their physical lot but their spiritual welfare also. This is what they must consider. You call yourselves a Christian army. Thou shalt not use the name of thy God in vain, says the Lord. The text is bright and clear and is addressed to all men. Equally clear are the words of **Christ**: he who takes up the sword will perish by the sword. And these are the words of **St. Paul**: every person shall obey established authority and fear and honor it.

How can you believe that divine right is on your side when you take up the sword and rebel against an authority that was ordained by God? Don't you see that you have both God's Law and the Law of the Land against you? True, your rulers are unjust. But you are worse because you trample upon His Word, His Right, and His Order. So they are stripping you unjustly of your property. In return, you propose to strip them of their power which, as you well know, is the lifeblood of authority. You are the greater thieves. Without law and order there would be but anarchy. Therefore, remain loyal subjects to good masters and bad. God expects nothing less.

Forget your foolish notions of rights and freedom. Watch out that you don't run from the rain and fall in the water. Let me tell you, my dear Christians, what your Christian rights are. Do not resist evil. Offer the other cheek. If they demand your coat give them your shirt as well. Love your enemies. Pain and suffering, the Cross, the Cross: those are your Christian rights and nothing else. So they took your coat. Are you prepared to surrender your shirt as well? On the contrary, you are going after them to get your coat back. Is that acting like Christians? Have I drawn a sword, or gathered a mob, or started an uprising? And yet, the more Pope and Potentate raged against me the more my Gospel spread. Now you endanger it all by threatening violence in the name of the Gospel. I repeat, your cause is just. But if you act on your own behalf against established authority you must let go of the Christian name. It seems that **Satan** has just found another tool to get rid of me, namely you and the

rabble-rousers amongst you.

As to the articles, he appears to reverse himself. He had approved of them in general when addressing the nobles. But now he is addressing the peasants who would use force to obtain their demands. Of all the twelve articles he supports one half of the first one, their right to their own preachers. Should the authorities refuse to install one, you may then elect your own. Mind you, though, their salaries must be paid in addition to the tithe owed to the authorities. Deducting what you pay your preachers from what you owe the government, or withholding the tithe altogether for whatever reason, is fraud. There must be government. There can be none without taxes. But even the right to have preachers of their own does not justify force. If you are denied this right in your town go to another, and another, until the time is fulfilled.

The third article demands the abolition of serfdom and slavery. What is the meaning of this? Does Christian freedom mean physical freedom? Did not **Abraham** and other patriarchs have serfs? This article proposes robbery, for whoever reclaims his body for himself takes it from his master. Serfs and slaves can be Christians and enjoy the Christian freedom just as prisoners can. This article intends to make all men equal. In the spiritual Kingdom of Christ they indeed are. But not in a secular estate. Some must be free, other kept. My good friend **Urban Regius** has written at length about the subject. Go read it. And take all those articles dealing with common ownership, mandatory service, taxation, etcetera etcetera, and consult legal experts. The Gospel does not address the issues. They are no concern of mine. They should be of no concern to any Christian.

Now, will both parties please come to their senses. Elect some deputies and allow for calm negotiations. Noble Lords, come off your high horses now, in the end you will have to. Grant the common man some breathing space [**Hauptmann, Weavers** etc]. Peasants, do not reject my urgent pleas. Some demands aim too high. Withdraw them. You all have a rotten cause. I will ask God to reconcile and unite you. But my heart is heavy with foreboding.

Luther is overtaken by events. Before the **Exhortation** is printed the uprising has begun. It is accompanied by the excess Luther had anticipated, and successful at first because the nobility is paralyzed with fear. He wrote the piece in April of 1525. His printer expected it on May 9. On or about May 4 Luther writes his brief and searing indictment of the **Looting And Murderous Mobs Of Peasants**. Both his Exhortation and his scathing attack are published as one pamphlet which creates the impression, according to a contemporary observer, that Luther was rather inconsistent. Unlike his Exhortation, the tract against the Mobs of Peasants no longer counsels peace by negotiations. Hell has no fury like a prophet scorned. Luther is merciless.

This uprising is the work of the devil, particularly that arch devil of **Muehlhaus, Thomas Muenzer**, who is responsible for the murder and bloodshed that have taken place. It is a crime against God for which they have earned physical and spiritual death many times over. They have rebelled and are now looting monasteries and palaces [**Osborne**: not the sacraments, Martin, the silverware]. All of them are outlawed and under imperial and divine ban. Any one may slay them wherever they are found. Rebellion is like a fire that spreads and engulfs the whole country. It is the greatest of catastrophes. There is but one thing to do. Kill them. Slay them, stab them, strangle them, secretly or in broad daylight. There is nothing worse than a rebel. Kill him like a mad dog. If you don't, he will destroy you and the whole country.

Committing such gruesome acts, as they have, in the name of the Gospel, and calling themselves brothers in Christ, is a horrible blasphemy for which they deserve physical and spiritual death ten times over. Never mind what **Genesis** says about freedom and common ownership. This is the **New Testament**. Baptism does not make men equal, nor does the Gospel make private property common. What profound confusion. I am convinced there is not a devil left in hell, they are all inside our peasants.

Noble Lords. Some of you would still prefer to warn and to offer negotiations, for such would be in the spirit of the Gospel. But those who attack at once and without warning can do so in good conscience. The peasants are outlaws and blasphemers. Even a pagan government would have the duty to punish promptly. Offer to negotiate if you must. But then act swiftly and decisively. Government is an instrument of God's wrath. If you do not act, you will be guilty of all the evil now being committed. This is no time for inaction, or patience, or mercy, or clemency. It is a time of wrath. A peasant killed goes straight to hell. A fallen noble, straight to heaven. So stand and fight and crush the mob.

Luther knows that not all the participants in the uprising are there voluntarily. He counsels the rulers to be circumspect. He implores the half-hearted among the peasants to desert and run. May God enlighten and convert the others. May those that can not be moved be denied success. And here every true Christian must say Amen.

The country was stunned. The charismatic reformer sided with an establishment he himself had branded as corrupt to the core. The nobility, terror stricken at first, took swift and merciless action. The peasants were massacred, their leaders executed. There were atrocities everywhere.

Luther knows that popular sentiment runs strong against him. On June 27 he is married and probably confers

with some of his guests on how to respond. Toward the end of July a statement is printed, sample copies are sent out. **A Pamphlet About The Harsh Booklet Against The Peasants** poses as a reply to a letter (lost or fictitious) from one Caspar Mueller, a Mansfeldt chancellor. Luther's answer is four times as long as the pamphlet it defends, an indication of how stung he was by the adverse reaction. But he concedes nothing and roundly condemns his critics.

They must be rebels at heart, how else could they defend rebels? Silence them by force if necessary. Ram a fist down their throats. No mercy for rebels. Such pupils need the rod as a donkey needs the whip. For the sake of mercy there must be none now. I will have God's Word obeyed lest He strike our peasants with madness once again and cause an upheaval many times greater.

He does deplore the excess and condemns the slaughter that would not stop even after the battles were won. He singles out with disgust the rape of Thomas Muenzer's pregnant wife. While he still considers rulers necessary for the preservation or restoration of order he has nothing but contempt for their cruelty in victory and their state of terror when the uprising began. Looking back on these events years later he commented that he had never seen such cowards in his life. They shit their pants so that to this very day you are overcome by the stench of it when you encounter one of them.

The year is 1530. **Melanchthon** is Luther's representative at the **Diet of Augsburg**. Luther watches from a distance and is kept informed. **Philip of Hesse**, fearing that Melanchthon is too eager to compromise, asks Luther to remain firm and to write a booklet designed to strengthen the weak and the anxious. The booklet, **A Warning To My Beloved Germans**, appears in April of 1531. At first glance it seems to contain a stunning reversal, namely the request **not to obey** the **Emperor** in his role as secular leader.

First Luther defends the conduct of his delegation. They had humbled themselves, but been stepped on and walked over. They had sued for peace but reaped scorn and ridicule in return. Worst, they had been called **rebels**. And there lies the danger. They are using the word to frighten the world and to justify in advance any action they might care to take. Not every act of disobedience is an act of rebellion. A rebel is one who, like Muenzer, will not respect any secular authority under any circumstances. We are no rebels.

Why this Warning? He fears that the **Emperor, Charles V.**, might declare war on those principalities and towns that have embraced the Lutheran doctrine. He has nothing but praise for him. He admires his steadfastness so far, his kindness, his insistence on fairness at the Diet. He appreciates his remark that, if the priests were decent men, there would be no need for a Luther. But surrounded as he is by liars and unscrupulous counselors he may yet initiate fateful action. Having become, against his will, the **Prophet of Germany**, he, Luther, must issue this **Warning** to his beloved Germans, not to bear arms on the Emperor's behalf in a war against Protestants.

First, you have sworn in baptism to uphold the Gospel of Christ and not to fight against it. Second, even if our cause were mistaken consider the burden of guilt you would heap upon yourselves defending theirs. Third, if you followed the Emperor into such a war, fought against us on behalf of that arch criminal, **Pope Clement**, you would help destroy the fruit of our labor. I am writing to preserve the peace and all that we have gained.

Preserving his legacy is now Luther's dearest concern. Describing it he is at his proudest. Before we began to teach, no one understood the Gospel, or knew Christ. No one understood the meaning of baptism, or confession, or of any sacrament. Nor the meaning of faith and good works. The Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. Grief and consolation. Authority. Marriage and parenthood. No one knew what it means to be a Christian, and what the Cross stands for. We Christians were ignorant of what Christians must know. It was hidden in darkness, suppressed by the Pope and his demented lot. Asses, coarse and ignorant asses, all of them. I know that herein I speak the truth. I know because I once was one of them.

NOTES.

1) This essay is based on six major writings dating from 1522 to 1531: "Eine treue Vermahnung zu allen Christen, sich zu verhüten vor Aufruhr und Empörung " (1522). "Von weltlicher Obrigkeit, wie weit man ihr Gehorsam schuldig sei" (1523). "Ermahnung zum Frieden auf die zwölf Artikel der Bauernschaft in Schwaben" (1525). "Wider die räuberischen und mörderischen Rotten der Bauern" 1525). "Ein Sendbrief von dem harten Büchlein wider die Bauern" (1525). "Warnung an seine lieben Deutschen" (1531). All translations and paraphrases are my own.

2) Cf. particularly Gerhard Rein, *Die Protestantische Revolution 1987-1990*. Berlin: Wichern-Verlag 1990. Cf. also my essay "The Protestant Revolution" in *Dimensions*. A. Leslie Willson & Contemporary German Arts

and Letters. Verlag van Acken, Krefeld, 1994, pp. 269-277.

3) Cf. Mary Beth Norton, "The Development of a Revolutionary Mentality," Library of Congress Symposia on the American Revolution, Library of Congress, Washington 1972, pp. 132 and 130, respectively.

4) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethik. Kaiser-Verlag, München 1988. My translation.