

Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants

LW 46:47-55

May 1525

Introduction

At the invitation of Count Albrecht of Mansfeld, Luther, accompanied by Melanchthon, journeyed to Eisleben in Thuringia to establish a new Christian school. At that time Luther was not ignorant of growing unrest among the German peasantry, but he was unaware of the violent course events were taking in the south. There the peasants had launched full-scale attacks upon their landlords and rulers, plundering and destroying castles, monasteries, and churches.¹ Franconia was at the mercy of peasant brigades led by Florian Geyer² and Goetz von Berlichingen.³ Just when Luther learned of these events is not certain, but it appears to have been during the course of his Thuringian journey.⁴

During his journey, however, Luther had occasion to see and hear at first hand just how acute the situation was in Thuringia. There the peasant bands were riding the crest of victory. By the end of April a great many castles and some forty convents and monasteries⁵ had fallen to the agrarian rebels. The cities of Erfurt and Salzungen, among others, surrendered to the foe. Nor was there any effective resistance or suppression of the uprising, for the most powerful ruler, Elector Frederick of Saxony, did nothing. The fact of the matter was that Frederick, who was fatally ill, continued to cling to the hope that a peaceful solution could be negotiated with the peasants.⁶ Furthermore, Luther's ears were no doubt filled with reports of peasant violence by relatives whom he visited, among them his brother-in-law Johann Ruehel, a court counselor at Mansfeld.

Luther attempted to forestall further violence by preaching, but he finally realized that preaching was not the solution. At Nordhausen hecklers had interrupted his sermon.⁷ Convinced that the rebellious peasants would stop at nothing short of complete revolution and overthrow of the existing social order, Luther decided to publish his opinion upon his return to Wittenberg.

The exact date when *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants* was written cannot be fixed with any degree of certainty. Because of the similarity of ideas and language in a letter written to Ruehel⁸ on May 4, 1525, it is assumed that Luther wrote this strongly worded treatise at or about the same time as the letter. There is a similar difficulty with the date of publication. It was certainly before the middle of May, but a more exact date of publication cannot be given.

In the treatise Luther arraigned the peasants on three charges: (1) they had violated their oaths of loyalty to their rulers and were therefore subject to temporal punishment; (2) they had robbed, plundered, and murdered, and were subject to death in body and soul; and (3) they had committed their crimes under the cover of Christ's name, thereby shamefully blaspheming God. The peasants were like a mad dog which had to be destroyed. The government, he argued, must use its God-given office to subdue the rebels with force, the only language they understood. Whoever lost his life in suppressing this rebellion, Luther argues, would be a martyr to the gospel.

The translation by Charles M. Jacobs was based on CL 3, 69-74. The revision presented here is based on the German text, *Wider die räuberischen. und mürderischen Rotten der Bauern*, in WA 18, (344) 357-361.

¹ Cf. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, p. 562.

² Geyer (ca. 1490-1525), a Franconian noble, had been a professional soldier in the service of Albert of Prussia. An early convert to Protestantism, he commanded an army of peasants to which Würzburg, Rothenburg, and Margrave Casimir of Brandenburg submitted. It was his aim to establish a kingdom based on the gospel. He was murdered after the battle of Ingolstadt.

³ A Swabian of noble background, von Berlichingen (1480-1582) wore an iron hand to replace one lost in battle. Against his will he commanded the Odenwald peasants. He was released from prison in 1530 and returned to professional soldiering.

⁴ Cf. WA 18, 344-345 and PE 4, 247.

⁵ Cf. BG 7, 342.

⁶ Cf. MA³ 4, 387-388.

⁷ Cf. WA 17¹, 195-196.

⁸ WA, Br 3, 480-482.

Against the rioting peasants, Martin Luther.

In my earlier book on this matter,¹ I did not venture to judge the peasants, since they had offered to be corrected and to be instructed;² and Christ in Matthew 7 [1] commands us not to judge. But before I could even inspect the situation,³ they forgot their promise and violently took matters into their own hands and are robbing and raging like mad dogs. All this now makes it clear that they were trying to deceive us and that the assertions they made in their *Twelve Articles*⁴ were nothing but lies presented under the name of the gospel. To put it briefly, they are doing the devil's work. This is particularly the work of that archdevil who rules at Mühlhausen,⁵ and does nothing except stir up robbery, murder, and bloodshed; as Christ describes him in John 8 [44], "He was a murderer from the beginning." Since these peasants and wretched people have now let themselves be misled and are acting differently than they promised, I, too, must write differently of them than I have written, and begin by setting their sin before them, as God commands Isaiah [58:1] and Ezekiel [2:7], on the chance that some of them may see themselves for what they are. Then I must instruct the rulers how they are to conduct themselves in these circumstances.

The peasants have taken upon themselves the burden of three terrible sins against God and man; by this they have abundantly merited death in body and soul. In the first place, they have sworn⁶ to be true and faithful, submissive and

obedient, to their rulers, as Christ commands when he says, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" [Luke 20:25]. And Romans 13 [:1] says, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." Since they are now deliberately and violently breaking this oath of obedience and setting themselves in opposition to their masters, they have forfeited body and soul, as faithless, perjured, lying, disobedient rascals and scoundrels usually do. St. Paul passed this judgment on them in Romans 13 [:2] when he said that those who resist the authorities will bring a judgment upon themselves. This saying will smite the peasants sooner or later, for God wants people to be loyal and to do their duty.

In the second place, they are starting a rebellion, and are violently robbing and plundering monasteries and castles which are not theirs; by this they have doubly deserved death in body and soul as highwaymen and murderers. Furthermore, anyone who can be proved to be a seditious person is an outlaw before God and the emperor; and whoever is the first to put him to death does right and well. For if a man is in open rebellion, everyone is both his judge and his executioner; just as when a fire starts, the first man who can put it out is the best man to do the job. For rebellion is not just simple murder; it is like a great fire, which attacks and devastates a whole land. Thus rebellion brings with it a land filled with murder and bloodshed; it makes widows and orphans, and turns everything upside down, like the worst disaster. Therefore let everyone who can, smite; slay, and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog; if you do not strike him, he will strike you, and a whole land with you.

In the third place, they cloak this terrible and horrible sin with the gospel, call themselves "Christian brethren,"⁷ take oaths and submit to them, and compel people to go along with them in these abominations. Thus they become the worst blasphemers of God and slanderers of his holy name. Under the outward appearance of the gospel, they honor and serve the devil, thus deserving death in body and soul ten times over. I have never heard of a more hideous sin. I suspect that the devil feels that the Last Day is coming, and therefore he undertakes such an unheard-of act, as though saying to himself, "This is the end, therefore it shall be the worst; I will stir up the dregs and knock out the bottom."⁸ God will guard us against him! See what a mighty prince the devil is, how he has the world in his hands and can throw everything into confusion, when he can so quickly catch so many thousands of peasants, deceive them, blind them, harden them, and throw them into revolt, and do with them whatever his raging fury undertakes.

It does not help the peasants when they pretend that according to Genesis 1 and 2 all things were created free and common, and that all of us alike have been baptized.⁹ For under the New Testament, Moses does not count; for there stands our Master, Christ, and subjects us, along with our bodies and our property, to the emperor and the law of this world, when he says, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" [Luke 20:25]. Paul, too, speaking in Romans 12 [13:1] to all baptized Christians, says, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." And Peter says, "Be subject to every ordinance of man" [I Pet. 2:13]. We are bound to live according to this teaching of Christ, as the Father commands from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him" [Matt. 17:5].

For baptism does not make men free in body and property, but in soul; and the gospel does not make goods common, except in the case of those who, of their own free will, do what the apostles and disciples did in Acts 4 [:32-37]. They did not demand, as do our insane peasants in their raging, that the goods of others—of Pilate and Herod—should be common, but only their own goods. Our peasants, however, want to make the goods of other men common, and keep their own for themselves. Fine Christians they are! I think there is not a devil left in hell; they have all gone into the peasants. Their raving has gone beyond all measure. Now since the peasants have brought [the wrath of] both God and man down upon themselves and are already many times guilty of death in body and soul, and since they submit to no court and wait for no verdict, but only rage on, I must instruct the temporal authorities on how they may act with a clear conscience in this matter.

First, I will not oppose a ruler who, even though he does not tolerate the gospel, will smite and punish these peasants without first offering to submit the case to judgment.¹⁰ He is within his rights, since the peasants are not contending any longer for the gospel, but have become faithless, perjured, disobedient, rebellious murderers, robbers, and blasphemers, whom even a heathen ruler has the right and authority to punish. Indeed, it is his duty to punish such scoundrels, for this is why he bears the sword and is "the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer," Romans 13 [:4].

But if the ruler is a Christian and tolerates the gospel,¹¹ so that the peasants have no appearance of a case against him, he should proceed with fear. First he must take the matter to God, confessing that we have deserved these things, and remembering that God may, perhaps, have thus aroused the devil as a punishment upon all Germany. Then he should humbly pray for help against the devil, for we are contending not only "against flesh and blood," but "against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the air" [Eph. 6:12; 2:2], which must be attacked with prayer. Then, when our hearts are so turned to God that we are ready to let his divine will be done, whether he will or will not have us to be princes and lords, we must go beyond our duty, and offer the mad peasants an opportunity to come to terms, even though they are not worthy of it. Finally, if that does not help, then swiftly take to the sword.

For in this case a prince and lord must remember that according to Romans 13 [:4] he is God's minister and the servant of his wrath and that the sword has been given him to use against such people. If he does not fulfil the duties of his office by punishing some and protecting others, he commits as great a sin before God as when someone who has not been given the sword commits murder. If he is able to punish and does not do it—even though he would have had to kill someone

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or shed blood—he becomes guilty of all the murder and evil that these people commit. For by deliberately disregarding God’s command he permits such rascals to go about their wicked business, even though he was able to prevent it and it was his duty to do so. This is not a time to sleep. And there is no place for patience or mercy. This is the time of the sword, not the day of grace.

The rulers, then, should press on and take action in this matter with a good conscience as long as their hearts still beat. It is to the rulers’ advantage that the peasants have a bad conscience and an unjust cause, and that any peasant who is killed is lost in body and soul and is eternally the devil’s. But the rulers have a good conscience and a just cause; they can, therefore, say to God with all confidence of heart, “Behold, my God, you have appointed me prince or lord, of this I can have no doubt; and you have given me the sword to use against evildoers (Romans 13 [:4]). It is your word, and it cannot lie, so I must fulfil the duties of my office, or forfeit your grace. It is also plain that these peasants have deserved death many times over, in your eyes and in the eyes of the world, and have been committed to me for punishment. If you will me to be slain by them, and let my authority be taken from me and destroyed, so be it: let your will be done. I shall be defeated and die because of your divine command and word and shall die while obeying your command and fulfilling the duties of my office. Therefore I will punish and smite as long as my heart beats. You will be the judge and make things right.”

Thus, anyone who is killed fighting on the side of the rulers may be a true martyr in the eyes of God, if he fights with the kind of conscience I have just described, for he acts in obedience to God’s word. On the other hand, anyone who perishes on the peasants’ side is an eternal firebrand of hell, for he bears the sword against God’s word and is disobedient to him, and is a member of the devil. And even if the peasants happen to gain the upper hand (God forbid!)—for to God all things are possible, and we do not know whether it may be his will, through the devil, to destroy all rule and order and cast the world upon a desolate heap, as a prelude to the Last Day, which cannot be far off¹²—nevertheless, those who are found exercising the duties of their office can die without worry and go to the scaffold with a good conscience; and leave the kingdom of this world to the devil and take in exchange the everlasting kingdom. These are strange times, when a prince can win heaven with bloodshed better than other men with prayer!

Finally, there is another thing that ought to motivate the rulers. The peasants are not content with belonging to the devil themselves; they force and compel many good people to join their devilish league against their wills, and so make them partakers of all of their own wickedness and damnation. Anyone who consorts with them goes to the devil with them and is guilty of all the evil deeds that they commit, even though he has to do this because he is so weak in faith that he could not resist them. A pious Christian ought to suffer a hundred deaths rather than give a hairsbreadth of consent to the peasants’ cause. O how many martyrs could now be made by the bloodthirsty peasants and the prophets of murder!¹³ Now the rulers ought to have mercy on these prisoners of the peasants, and if they had no other reason to use the sword with a good conscience against the peasants, and to risk their own lives and property in fighting them, this would be reason enough, and more than enough: they would be rescuing and helping these souls whom the peasants have forced into their devilish league and who, without willing it, are sinning so horribly and must be damned. For truly these souls are in purgatory; indeed, they are in the bonds of hell and the devil.

Therefore, dear lords, here is a place where you can release, rescue, help. Have mercy on these poor people! Let whoever can stab, smite, slay. If you die in doing it, good for you! A more blessed death can never be yours, for you die while obeying the divine word and commandment in Romans 13 [:1, 2], and in loving service of your neighbor, who you are rescuing from the bonds of hell and of the devil. And so I beg everyone who can to flee from the peasants as from the devil himself; those who do not flee, I pray that God will enlighten and convert. As for those who are not to be converted, God grant that they may have neither fortune nor success. To this let every pious Christian say, “Amen!” For this prayer is right and good, and pleases God; this I know. If anyone thinks this too harsh, let him remember that rebellion is intolerable and that the destruction of the world is to be expected every hour.

¹ *Admonition to Peace*. See pp. 17.43.

² Luther refers to the conclusion of *The Twelve Articles*; see pp. 15-18.

³ Luther became more closely acquainted with the situation during a journey through Thuringia. See p. 47.

⁴ For the text of *The Twelve Articles*, see pp. 8-18.

⁵ Thomas Münzer. Cf. p. 5, n. 3.

⁶ All men took this oath under the feudal system.

⁷ Cf. p. 7, n. 14.

⁸ Cf. Thiele, *Luthers Sprichwörterammlung*, No. 335.

⁹ Cf. the claim of the peasants in the third of their twelve articles that serfdom is un-Christian, p. 12.

¹⁰ In other words, a ruler need not wait for a judicial verdict against the peasants.

¹¹ I.e., has evangelical sympathies.

¹² Luther anticipated the imminent coming of the Last Day. Cf. p. 18, n. 3.

¹³ Cf. p. 20, n. 8.