



A BIBLE STUDY ON THOMAS MÜNTZER

Twisting the Reformation into a Violent Insurrection

“In Adam We Have All Been One”

(LW 292; LSB 569)

(Gen. 3:1–13; John 8:31–32, 36; 10:14–16; Rom. 5:14, 17–19)

“The people will be free and God alone will be their Lord.”

— Thomas Müntzer, “Sermon to the Princes” (1524)

Open rebellion against the authorities in the cause of eradicating evil in the world — this is what Thomas Müntzer (1489–1525) taught after mistakenly believing that the Holy Spirit reveals the will of God independent of the Holy Scriptures. Unfortunately many were led to follow Müntzer in taking up arms against the authorities, believing that Christian freedom from evil was ours to win with spear and sword.

STANZA ONE

*In Adam we have all been one, / One huge rebellious man;
/ We all have fled that evening voice / That sought us as we ran.*

In this opening stanza, Martin Franzmann clearly depicts our miserable condition as fallen and sinful children of rebel-on-the-run Adam. Thomas Müntzer abandoned the Christian belief that the revelation of God was to be sought only in the Word through the prophets and apostles. He convinced himself (and many others) that he was privy to the will of God independent of the Holy Bible. The results were disastrous.

1. Read Gen. 3:1–13. Thomas Müntzer was not the first person to fall for the tempting voice that questioned the Lord’s clear Word. All of us have inherited our father Adam’s DNA when it comes to discounting the Word of God in order to listen to another voice. Müntzer began as a student of Martin Luther. While attending lectures in Wittenberg in the fall of 1517, he fell into believing true freedom could be won by taking matters into his own hands. In what way is Adam’s temptation to rebel seen in Müntzer and each one of us? (ROM. 5:14, 17–19)

2. The consequence of rebellion against the created order is documented plainly in Genesis 3: we find ourselves — with Adam — running away from the very Word of God that seeks to reconcile us with our Creator and our fellow rebel

neighbor. Müntzer’s mistaken belief that freedom could be won by open violence against the authorities separated him from Luther. How was the Peasant’s War, which Müntzer eventually led, a clear breaking of the Fourth Commandment? How does rebellion against the Fourth Commandment play itself out in our day?

3. Müntzer confused the First Article of the Creed with the Second Article. Why is it important to be reminded that God surely reveals Himself in nature, but the Gospel is only revealed through the inspired prophets and apostles?

STANZA TWO

*We fled Thee, and in losing Thee / We lost our brother too;
/ Each singly sought and claimed his own; / Each man his brother slew.*

Tragically, the results of our rebellion against God’s gracious Word bring the opposite of the freedom we sought: slavery to sin and the consequences of sin. Müntzer was deceived; his conviction that the Holy Spirit was leading him independent of the Holy Scriptures was actually nothing more than his own fallen and sinful nature’s desire to rid himself and his followers of all governing authorities. We see this in a number of radical religious groups that have been tricked into believing that the evils of the world can be eliminated if those who have been placed in positions of authority were eliminated. Luther and the Lutheran Reformation saw things very differently: our suffering cannot be eliminated by extinguishing all sinful rulers. Rebellion by Christians does not lead to freedom but chaos and enslavement, increased sin and the severest condemnation under God’s holy Law.

4. In this second stanza, Franzmann inseparably links our separation from the Almighty Lord and His perfect will with separation from our brother and sister. How is the sin of Adam and Eve linked to the sin of Cain? What is the sad outcome for all who break the Law of God?

5. It is the Lord Himself who places each of us into this world as father, mother, child, student, worker, citizen or ruler. Can we explain the temptation to neglect our responsibilities

as God-pleasing citizens while at the same time rebelling against those who rule over us — even to the point of violent actions? What is worse than citizens taking up arms against an oppressive government? Where does Scripture (and Luther) see the real problem when it comes to oppressive acts and open rebellion against even abusive authorities?

6. Review Luther's doctrine of the Two Kingdoms/ Realms. How does God protect His own in the civil realm — even through unbelievers? What is the weapon of Christians in the Kingdom/Realm of the Right Hand?

STANZA THREE

But Thy strong love, it sought us still / And sent Thine only Son / That we might hear His Shepherd's voice / And, hearing Him, be one.

Read John 10:14–16. The miracle of God's redemption: the Lord's justice serves His mercy; His Law serves His Gospel; His Kingdom of Power serves His Kingdom of Grace. The Almighty would have Adam and Eve and all their rebel children redeemed and reunited with heaven and each other. There is so much to unpack in the "still" of the first line of this stanza. Despite all our collective sin, despite all our collective grumbling, despite all our collective rebellion, God's love still desires to have the last word for each of us. And the greatest evidence of that undeserved grace? The sending of God's greatest treasure: His only beloved Son to die on the cross in our place.

7. In Henry Baker's famous hymn "The King of Love My Shepherd Is," we confess that we have been rebel sheep undeservingly rescued by Christ the Good Shepherd: "Perverse and foolish oft I strayed, / But yet in love He sought me / And on His shoulder gently laid / And home rejoicing brought me" (*LSB* 709). Why is this confession of faith so radically different than the twisted beliefs of Müntzer and the convictions of our fallen world? How does the devil, the world and our sinful flesh lure us with the empty promise that freedom from whatever oppresses us can be ours if we would just seize it? How was our freedom actually seized?

8. How does our redemption begin with the receiving of Christ's Word by faith? How does Christ's Word restore what Adam and Eve and Cain lost?

9. As early as 1523 Martin Luther recognized the grave danger of religious fanatics and warned against Müntzer and the open rebellion he sanctioned. In Luther's "Letter to the Princes of Saxony Concerning the Rebellious Spirit," the Reformer argues that everything hinges on receiving the true Word of God in faith. "So [although] we may recognize the Word of God for what it is, things must go on as they always have" (*LW* 40:49). He is saddened but not surprised that fanatic preachers such as Müntzer believe it necessary to "go as far as to overthrow civil authority and make themselves lords of the world" (51). Do we see some of the same misguided beliefs today?

STANZA FOUR

O Thou who, when we loved Thee not, / Didst love and save us all, / Thou great Good Shepherd of mankind, / O hear us when we call.

The cry of the Christian in faith is always a response to the Lord's promise to hear our prayers and to act according to His good and gracious will. Unlike Müntzer we do not believe that our own attempts at eradicating evil in the world are God-pleasing and will hasten the coming of Christ. Our redemption and the redemption of the world do not begin with our decision but with the decision within the Holy Trinity to redeem the unredeemable. Even our ability to cry out to Christ our Good Shepherd, "Kyrie Eleison! — Lord, have mercy!" is only possible through the undeserved gift of God-created and sustained faith.

10. Müntzer and those caught up in the Peasant's Revolt violently attacked landowners with the cry, "Freedom!" Their demands for freedom quickly led to violence and chaos that had to be put down by those God had placed in positions of authority. Martin Luther believed that preaching heresy was one thing, taking up the sword against those in authority was quite another — even though both were used by the devil to hinder the truth of the Holy Scriptures and the Gospel of Christ that they proclaim. What evidence do we have today that the devil sometimes does his deceptive work masquerading as an angel of light, and other times through open violence and force?

11. In King David's great Psalm 23, we confess that the "rod and staff" of the great Good Shepherd is a source of comfort for pitiful, wayward sheep. In what way does the Shepherd's rod of iron bring comfort to weak and sinful sheep? Why does the Shepherd's staff bring helpless and straying Christians hope?

STANZA FIVE

Send us Thy Spirit, teach us truth; / Thou Son, O set us free / From fancied wisdom, self-sought ways, / To make us one in Thee.

Martin Luther echoed the Bible's dictum that we should only look for the Holy Spirit where the Holy Spirit Himself has promised to be present to do His faith-creating and sustaining work. Müntzer fell for the temptation of believing the Spirit was revealing God's will apart from the inspired Word of the prophets and apostles.

12. Martin Luther confessed at the Diet of Worms (1521): "I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God" (*LW* 32:112). How do we as Lutheran Christians make this Reformation conviction our own?

13. Everyone has their own understanding of Christ and His earthly ministry. Unfortunately, many personal understandings do not square with the clear teachings of



Scripture. Müntzer convinced himself that he was called by Christ to take up the sword and hasten the Savior's return. How do we discuss the truth about Jesus with those who do not believe that the Bible is the only authority when it comes to the true revelation of Jesus Christ?

14. Read John 8:31–36. Why do you think generations of Lutherans before us have used this Gospel passage for Reformation Day? How is Christ's revelation of true freedom at odds with Müntzer's twisted view of freedom?

STANZA SIX

*Then shall our song united rise / To Thine eternal throne, /
Where with the Father evermore / And Spirit Thou art one.*

For those graciously rescued by Christ the Good Shepherd, everything begins and ends with the doxology.

15. In this final stanza Franzmann emphasizes the collective doxology of the redeemed. Our life in Christ as fallen children of Adam is much, much more than an individualistic “me and Jesus in the garden.” In what ways do we, even now, give unending thanks and praise to the Triune God for not only delivering us from eternal death and separation from heaven and from neighbor — but also for delivering all who would receive the Christ of the Bible in faith?