

Conrad Grebel: Letters to Thomas Muntzer

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Letter 63

Grebel to Muntzer

Zurich, September 5, 1524

Letters 63 and 64 comprise what J. C. Wenger calls "the programmatic letters of Conrad Grebel" because they contain, more than any other document in this collection, the vision of a believers' church free of the state which he and his friends had developed before the autumn of 1524. These letters were first translated into English in 1905 by Walter Rauschenbusch, father of the "social gospel." This version was revised and republished by George H. Williams in 1957. Then in 1970, J. C. Wenger published his own translation. These are the first of Grebel's extant letters written in the German language. As far as is known, he had previously used German only in brief phrases and postscripts, such as in 51/195/28ff. Following the present two epistles, Letters 65, 66, and 67 were written in German.

Latin was used primarily by scholars and clergy and was not understood by the masses. Most of the day-to-day commercial and civil business was transacted in German, including all of the court records. Although Muntzer and Vadian were proficient Latinists, Grebel's resort to German reflects a new interest in using the vernacular for Reformation discourse (see 57C/245/ 8?18). His decision to write letters to Muntzer, Carlstadt, and Luther was announced to Vadian in Letter 62.

Muntzer was preacher at the Church of St. John's in Allstedt from Easter 1523 until the middle of August 1524. Grebel did not know that he had already fled to Muhlhausen. It is not known whether he received the letter; but the fact that the original is extant in the Vadian archives in St. Gallen may indicate that it was returned to Vadian undelivered, perhaps by the messenger himself since Grebel expressly states in 63/294 /15?16 that he had not kept a copy.

Another obvious possibility is that having informed Vadian about his intention to write to Muntzer he decided to send Vadian a copy of his own, so that he could better know what Grebel's new approach to the Reformation was. Perhaps this is "the question which I said I would put to you" (61/281/31), namely.. What do you think of this free church vision for the Reformation of the church?

Peace, grace, and mercy from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord be with us all, Amen.

Dear Brother Thomas.

For the sake of God, please do not let it surprise you that we address you without title and ask you as a brother henceforth to exchange ideas with us by correspondence, and that we, unsolicited and unknown to you, have dared to initiate such future dialogue. God's Son, Jesus Christ, who offers himself as the only Master and Head to all who are to be saved and commands us to be brethren to all brethren and believers through the one common Word, has moved and impelled us to establish friendship and brotherhood and to bring the following theses to your attention. Also the fact that you have written two booklets on phony faith has led us to write to you. Therefore, if you will accept it graciously for the sake of Christ our Savior, it may, if God wills, serve and work for the good. Amen.

Just as our forefathers had fallen away from the true God and knowledge of Jesus Christ and true faith in

him, from the one true common divine Word and from the godly practices of the Christian love and way, and lived without God's law and gospel in human, useless, unchristian practices and ceremonies and supposed they would find salvation in them but fell far short of it, as the evangelical preachers have shown and are still in part showing, so even today everyone wants to be saved by hypocritical faith, without fruits of faith, without the baptism of trial and testing, without hope and love, without true Christian practices, and wants to remain in all the old ways of personal vices and common antichristian ceremonial rites of baptism and the Lord's Supper, dishonoring the divine Word, but honoring the papal word and the antipapal preachers, which is not like or in accord with the divine Word. In respect of persons and all manner of seduction they are in more serious and harmful error than has ever been the case since the foundation of the world. We were also in the same aberration because we were only hearers and readers of the evangelical preachers who are responsible for all this error as our sins deserved. But after we took the Scripture in hand and consulted it on all kinds of issues, we gained some insight and became aware of the great and harmful shortcomings of the shepherds as well as our own in that we do not daily cry earnestly to God with constant sighs to be led out of the destruction of all godly living and out of human abominations and enter into true faith and practices of God. In all this, a false forbearance is what leads to the suppression of God's Word and its mixture with the human. Indeed, we say it brings harm to all and does disservice to all the things of God ? no need for further analysis and detail.

While we were noting and lamenting these things, your writing against false faith and baptism was brought out here to us and we are even better informed and strengthened and were wonderfully happy to have found someone who is of a common Christian mind with us and ventures to show the evangelical preachers their shortcomings ? how in all the major issues they practice false forbearance and set their own opinions and even those of antichrist above God and against God, not as befits messengers of God to act and to preach. Therefore we ask and admonish you as a brother in the name, power, Word, Spirit, and salvation which comes to all Christians through Jesus Christ our Master and Savior, to seek earnestly to preach only God's Word unflinchingly, to establish and defend only divine practices, to esteem as good and right only what can be found in definite clear Scripture, and to reject, hate, and curse all the schemes, words, practices, and opinions of all men, even your own.

[No. 1] We understand and have read that you have translated the mass into German and instituted new German chants. This cannot be good when we find in the New Testament no teaching on chanting, no example. Paul reproves the Corinthian learned more than he praises them for murmuring in their assemblies as if they were singing, as the Jews and Italians pronounce their rituals in the form of songs.

Second, since chanting in Latin developed without divine teaching or apostolic example or practice and has not brought good or edified, it will much less edify in German and will create an outward appearing faith.

Third, since Paul quite distinctly forbids chanting in Ephesians 5:24 and Colossians 3:21 where he says and teaches that they should address and instruct one another with psalms and spiritual songs, and if anyone would sing, he should sing in his heart and give thanks.

No. 4. Whatever we are not taught in definite statements and examples, we are to consider forbidden, as if it were written, "Do not do this, do not chant."

No. 5. Christ commanded his messengers to preach only the Word according to the Old as well as the New Testament. Paul also says that we should let the Word of Christ, not the chant, dwell in us. Whoever chants poorly feels chagrin; whoever can do it well feels conceit.

No. 6. We should neither add to nor take away from the Word what seems good to us.

No. 7. If you want to abolish the mass, it cannot be done with German chanting, which is perhaps your idea

or derived from Luther.

[No. 8.] It must be rooted out with the Word and command of Christ.

No. 9. For it was not planted by God.

No. 10. Christ instituted and planted the Supper of fellowship.

No. 11. Only the words found in Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, and 1 Corinthians 11 should be used, neither more nor less.

[No. 12] The minister from the congregation shall recite them from one of the Gospels or from Paul.

13. They are words of institution of the Supper of unity, not of consecration.

14. There shall be an ordinary [loaf of] bread, without idolatry or addition.

15. For this causes a hypocritical worship and veneration of the bread and detracts from the inward. There shall also be a common cup.

16. This would do away with the veneration and would bring about a proper knowledge and understanding of the Supper, because the bread is nothing but bread. By faith it is the body of Christ and an incorporation with Christ and the brethren. For one must eat and drink in spirit and in love, as John indicates in chapter 6 and elsewhere, and Paul in [1] Corinthians 10 and 11, and is clearly observed in Acts 2.

17. Although it is simply bread, if faith and brotherly love are already present, it shall be eaten with joy, for when it is thus practiced in the church it ought to show us that we are and want to be truly one loaf and body and true brethren to one another, etc.

18. But if there be one who does not intend to live in a brotherly way, he eats to his condemnation, for he eats like any other meal without discernment and he brings shame upon love, the inward bond, as well as the bread, the outward bond.

19. For it also does not remind him of the body and blood of Christ, the covenant of the cross, so that he is willing to live and to suffer for the sake of Christ and the brethren, the Head and the members.

20. Nor should it be administered by you. Thereby the mass, the individual meal, would disappear, for the Supper is a sign of fellowship, not a mass and sacrament. Therefore no one shall eat it alone, whether on a deathbed or otherwise. Nor shall the bread be locked away, etc., for any individual person, for no one shall take the bread of the fellowship for himself alone, unless he be in unity with himself, which no one is, etc.

21. According to all Scripture and history, it shall also not be practiced in temples, for it leads to false devotion.

22. It shall be observed often and much.

23. It should not be practiced without applying the rule of Christ in Matthew 18; otherwise it is not the Lord's Supper, for without the same [rule], everyone pursues externals. The internal, love, is neglected, if brethren and false brethren go there and eat.

24. If you ever intend to administer, we would wish it would be without priestly robes and the vestments of the mass, without chanting, without addition.

25. Concerning the time, we know that Christ gave it to the apostles in the evening meal and that the Corinthians had also thus observed it. We do not stipulate any specific time, etc.

With this, since you are much better informed about the Lord's Supper, and we have merely indicated our understanding, if we are incorrect, teach us better, and be willing yourself to drop chanting and the mass, and act only in accord with the Word, and proclaim and establish the practices of the apostles with the Word. If that cannot be done it would be better to leave everything in Latin, unchanged and uncompromised. If that which is right cannot be established, then still do not administer after your own or the antichristian priestly rites, and at least teach how it ought to be, as Christ does in John 6, teaching how one should eat and drink his flesh and blood. Pay no attention to the apostasy or to the unchristian forbearance, which the very learned foremost evangelical preachers established as an actual idol and planted throughout the world. It is far better that a few be correctly instructed through the Word of God and believe and live right in virtues and practices than that many believe deceitfully out of adulterated false doctrine. Although we admonish and implore you, we do hope that you will do it of your own accord and are therefore admonishing you in deepest affection because you listened so kindly to our brother and have confessed to him that you have been too lax, and because you and Carlstadt are regarded among us as the purest proclaimers and preachers of the purest Word of God. And if you both properly impugn those who mix human word and practice with the divine, you should also logically break away from the priesthood, benefices, and all kinds of new and ancient practices and from your own and ancient opinions and become completely pure. If your benefices, like ours, are based on interest and tithes, both of which are actual usury, and if you are not supported by one entire congregation, we hope you will withdraw from the benefices. You know well enough how a shepherd is to be supported.

We await much good from Jacob Strauss and several others who are little regarded by the negligent theologians and doctors at Wittenberg. We are likewise rejected by our learned shepherds. All men adhere to them because they preach a sinful sweet Christ and they lack the power to discern as you show in your booklets, which have almost immeasurably instructed and strengthened us, the poor in spirit. And so we think alike in everything except that we learned with sorrow that you have set up tablets, for which we can find neither text nor example in the New Testament. In the Old, it was of course to be written outwardly, but now in the New it is to be written on the fleshly tablets of the heart, as a comparison of the two Testaments shows, as we are taught by Paul in 2 Corinthians 3, in Jeremiah 31, in Hebrews 8, and in Ezekiel 36. Unless we are in error, which we do not think and believe, we hope you will again destroy the tablets. It developed out of your own opinions; it is a useless expenditure which would continue to increase and become entirely idolatrous and implant itself throughout the world as idols did. It would also create a suspicion that some outward object from which the unlearned could learn had to stand and be erected in place of the idols, whereas the outward Word alone should be used according to all example and commands of Scripture, as shown to us especially in 1 Corinthians 14 and Colossians 3. This kind of learning from a single word might in time become somewhat obstructing, and even if it would never cause any harm I would never invent or establish any such innovation and thereby follow or imitate the negligent, misleading, falsely forbearing scholars, nor out of my own opinion invent, teach, or institute a single item.

March forward with the Word and create a Christian church with the help of Christ and his rule such as we find instituted in Matthew 18 and practiced in the epistles. Press on in earnest with common prayer and fasting, in accord with faith and love without being commanded and compelled. Then God will help you and your lambs to all purity, and the chanting and the tablets will fall away. There is more than enough wisdom and counsel in the Scripture on how to teach, govern, direct, and make devout all classes and all men. Anyone who will not reform or believe and strives against the Word and acts of God and persists therein, after Christ and his Word and rule have been preached to him, and he has been admonished with the three witnesses before the church, such a man we say on the basis of God's Word shall not be put to

death but regarded as a heathen and publican and left alone.

Moreover, the gospel and its adherents are not to be protected by the sword, nor [should] they [protect] themselves, which as we have heard through our brother is what you believe and maintain. True believing Christians are sheep among wolves, sheep for the slaughter. They must be baptized in anguish and tribulation, persecution, suffering, and death, tried in fire, and must reach the fatherland of eternal rest not by slaying the physical but the spiritual. They use neither worldly sword nor war, since killing has ceased with them entirely, unless indeed we are still under the old law, and even there (as far as we can know) war was only a plague after they had once conquered the Promised Land. No more of this.

On the subject of baptism, your writing pleases us well, and we ask for further instruction from you. We are taught that without Christ's rule of binding and loosing, even an adult should not be baptized. The Scriptures describe baptism for us, that it signifies the washing away of sins by faith and the blood of Christ (that the nature of the baptized and believing one is changing before and after), that it signifies one has died and shall (die) to sin and walks in newness of life and Spirit and one will surely be saved if one through the inward baptism lives the faith according to this meaning, so that the water does not strengthen and increase faith and give a very great comfort and last resort on the deathbed, as the scholars at Wittenberg say. Also that it does not save, as Augustine, Tertullian, Theophylact, and Cyprian taught, thus dishonoring faith and the suffering of Christ for mature adults and dishonoring the suffering of Christ for unbaptized infants. On the basis of the following Scriptures ? Genesis 8, Deuteronomy 1, 30?31; 1 Corinthians 14; Wisdom 12; also 1 Peter 2; Romans 1, 2, 7, 10; Matthew 18?19; Mark 9? 10; Luke 18, etc we hold that all children who have not attained the knowledge to discern between good and evil and have not eaten of the tree of knowledge are surely saved through the suffering of Christ, the new Adam, who has restored the life that has been distorted, because they would have been subject to death and damnation only if Christ had not suffered, not afterward risen to the infirmity of our broken nature, unless it can be proved to us that Christ did not die for children. But in answer to the charge that faith is required of all who are to be saved, we exclude children and on the basis of the above texts accept that they will be saved without faith and that they do not believe; and we conclude from the description of baptism and from Acts (according to which no child was baptized) and also from the above texts, which are the only ones which deal with the subject of children, and all other Scriptures which do not concern children, that infant baptism is a senseless, blasphemous abomination contrary to all Scripture and even contrary to the papacy, for we learn through Cyprian and Augustine that for many years after the time of the apostles, for six hundred years, believers and unbelievers were baptized together, etc. Since you know this ten times better than we, and have published your protestation against infant baptism, we hope that you will not act contrary to God's eternal Word, wisdom, and command, according to which only believers should be baptized and will not baptize children. If you or Carlstadt do not adequately write against infant baptism and all that pertains to it, how and why one is to baptize, etc., I (Conrad Grebel) will try my hand at it and will finish writing out what I have begun against all (except for you) who have thus far written misleadingly and knowingly about baptism, and who have translated into German the senseless, blasphemous form of infant baptism, like Luther, Leo, Osiander, and the Strasbourgers and some who have acted even more shamefully. Unless God averts it, I together with all of us are and shall be more certain of persecution by the scholars, etc., than by other people. We beg you not to use or adopt the old rites of the antichrist, such as sacrament, mass, signs, etc. Hold to the Word alone and administer' as all emissaries should, especially you and Carlstadt and you will be doing more than all the preachers of all nations.

Consider us your brethren and read this epistle as our expression of great joy and hope toward you through God. Admonish, comfort, and strengthen us as you are well able. Pray to the Lord God for us that he will come to the aid of our faith, for we are very ready to believe. And if God grants it to us to pray, we too will intercede for you and for all that we may all walk according to our calling and commitment. May God grant us this through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Greet all the brethren for us, the shepherds and the sheep, who accept the Word of faith and salvation with deep desire and hunger, etc. One thing more. We desire a reply from you; and if you publish anything, send it to us by this messenger or another. We would also like to know whether you and Carlstadt are of one mind. We hope and believe you are. We commend to you this messenger, who has also carried letters from us to our dear brother Carlstadt. And if you should go to Carlstadt so that you would reply jointly, that would be a great joy to us. The messenger is to return to us. Whatever we have not adequately paid him will be reimbursed when he returns.

Whatever we have not correctly understood, inform and instruct us. At Zurich, on the fifth day of September in the year 1524.

Conrad Grebel, Andreas Castelberg(er), Felix Mantz, Hans Ockenfuss, Bartlime Pur, Heinrich Aberli, and your other brethren (God willing) in Christ. Until another communication, we who have written this to you wish for you and all of us and all your flock the true Word of God, true faith, love, and hope, with all peace and grace from God through Christ Jesus, Amen.

I, C. Grebel, was going to write to Luther in the name of all of us and exhort him to desist from the forbearance which he and his followers practice without scriptural authority and planted abroad in the world, but my affliction and time did not permit. You do it according to your duty, etc.

To the true and faithful proclaimer of the gospel, Thomas Muntzer of Allstedt in the Hartz, our faithful and dear brother in Christ, etc.

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Letter 64

Grebel to Miintzer

Zurich, sent with letter of September 5, 1524

Dearly beloved brother Thomas.

After I had written in haste in the name of all of us and assumed that the messenger would not wait until we also wrote to Luther, he had to delay and wait because of rain. And so I also wrote to Luther in my name and that of the other brothers, mine and yours, and admonished him to desist from his false forbearance toward the weak, which they are themselves. Andreas Castelberg(er) wrote to Carlstadt. Meanwhile, there arrived here for Hans Hujuff of Halle, our fellow citizen and brother who visited you recently, a letter and a shameful booklet by Luther, which no one who claims to be primaries [firstfruits] like the apostles ought to write. Paul teaches otherwise: Porro servum domini, etc. ["Next, the Lord's servant, etc."] I see that he wants to deliver you to the ax and hand you over to the prince, to whom he has bound his gospel, just as Aaron had to have Moses as a god. As for your booklets and protestations, I find you guiltless. I do not gather from them that you utterly repudiate baptism, but that you condemn infant baptism and the misunderstanding of baptism. What water means in John 3 we want to examine further in your booklet and in the Scripture.

Hujuff's brother writes that you have preached against the princes, that they should be combatted with the fist. If that is true, or if you intend to defend war, the tablets, chanting, or other things for which you do not find a clear word (as you do not find for any of these aforementioned points), I admonish you by the salvation common to all of us that if you will desist from them and all opinions of your own now and

henceforth, you will become completely pure, for you satisfy us on all other points better than anyone else in this German and other lands. If you fall into the hands of Luther and the duke, drop the aforementioned articles and stand by the other like a hero and a soldier of God. Be strong. You have the Bible (which Luther rendered "bible bubel ballet") as defense against Luther's idolatrous forbearance, which he and the learned shepherds around here have spread throughout the world against the deceitful lax faith, against their preaching in which they do not teach Christ as they ought. They have just opened up the gospel to all the world so that many can read it for themselves (or ought to read it), but not many do, for everyone depends on them. Around here there are not even twenty who believe the Word of God. They only believe humans ? Zwingli, Leo, and others who are regarded elsewhere as learned. And if you should have to suffer for it, you know that it cannot be otherwise. Christ must suffer still more in his members, but he will strengthen them and keep them steadfast to the end. God grant you and us grace, for our shepherds are also fierce and enraged against us, reviling us from the public pulpit as rascals and Satanas in angelos lucis conversos [Satans turned into angels of light]. In time we too will see persecution come upon us through them. Therefore pray to God for us. Once more we admonish you, because we love and respect you so sincerely for the clarity of your words, and we confidently venture to write to you: Do not act, teach, or establish anything according to human opinion, your own or borrowed, repeal what has been established, and teach only the clear Word and rites of God, including the rule of Christ, the unadulterated baptism and unadulterated Supper, which we touched upon in our first letter and upon which you are better informed than a hundred of us. If you and Carlstadt, Jacob Strauss, and Michael Stiefel should not deliberately strive to be wholly pure (as I and my brethren hope you will do) it will be a sorry gospel indeed that has come into the world. But you are far purer than our clergy here or those at Wittenberg who daily fall from one perversion of Scripture into another and from one blindness into another that is worse. I believe and am sure that they want to become true papists and popes. No more now. God our captain with his Son Jesus Christ our Savior and his Spirit and Word be with you and us all.

Conrad Grebel, Andreas Castelberg(er), Felix Mantz, Heinrich Aberli, John Pannicellus, Hans Ockenfuss, Hans Hujuff your countryman of Halle, brethren to you, and seven new young Muntzers to Luther.

In case you are allowed to continue to preach and nothing happens to you, we will send you a copy of our letter to Luther and his answer if he replies to us. We have admonished him and our clergy here too. In this way, unless God prevents, we want to show them their shortcomings and not fear what may happen to us for it. We have kept no copy except for the letter we wrote to Martin, your adversary. Please accept favorably our unlearned, unpolished letter, and be sure that we have written out of genuine love, for we are one in Word and trial and adversaries, although you are more learned and stronger in spirit. Because of this common identity, we have spoken or rather written at length. Give our greetings to the Christians there, God willing, and write us a long letter in reply from all of you together. You will give us great joy and stir in us an even greater love for you.

This letter also is for Thomas Muntzer of Allstedt in the Hartz.

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