

A CHRISTIAN EXHORTATION TO THE LIVONIANS CONCERNING PUBLIC WORSHIP AND CONCORD

1525

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INTRODUCTION

This exhortation was prompted by internal dissensions in the Baltic city of Dorpat, Livonia. Since 1521 the gospel had had a foothold in this city, and under Luther's own guidance and encouragement the Reformation in Livonia developed favorably. This trend, however, had been interrupted by the arrival of Melchior Hoffmann, a furrier from Swabia who believed he had a call to preach the gospel. He had been deeply influenced by the writings of Luther, but like so many others he also toyed with chiliastic-mystical phantasmagorias. Expelled from Wolmar, he came to Dorpat late in 1524, and on January 10, 1525, his adherents stormed churches and monasteries, destroying pictures and statues. When the city council grew suspicious of the new arrival and insisted that Hoffmann should bring proper recommendations, he went to Wittenberg in person and persuaded both Luther and Bugenhagen to direct letters to the Livonians, to which he also added one of his own.²

But in the ensuing years he leaned more and more toward the enthusiasts, and within a few years Luther was prompted to call him a dreamer and false prophet who should return to his furrier's trade. Actually, Luther's letter, or exhortation, to the Livonians is so far from recommending Hoffmann that it does not even mention him. In this exhortation we see Luther applying the basic insights of his treatise on *The Freedom of a Christian*⁴ to the field of worship. He tries to show how the church may tread the narrow path of liberty without falling prey either to license or to legalism.

The German text, *Eyne Christliche vormanung von eusserlichem Gottis dienste vnde eyntracht, an die yn lieffland*, is given in *WA* 18, 417–421; the following translation is a revision of P. Z. Strodach's translation in *PE* 6, 144–150.

A CHRISTIAN EXHORTATION
TO THE LIVONIANS
CONCERNING PUBLIC WORSHIP
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June 17, 1525

To all beloved Christians in Livonia with their pastors and preachers, grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

We should thank God the Father of all mercy greatly and at all times on account of you, dear sirs and friends, who according to the unsearchable riches of his grace has brought you to the treasure of his Word, in which you possess the knowledge of his clear Son, i.e., a sure pledge of the life and salvation which awaits you in heaven and has been prepared for all who steadfastly persevere in true faith and fervent love unto the end—even as we hope and pray that the merciful Father will preserve you and us, and perfect us in one mind, according to the likeness of his dear Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

However, I have heard from reliable witnesses that faction and disunion have arisen among you, because some of your preachers do not teach and act in accord, but each follows his own sense and judgment. And I almost believe this; for we must remember that it will not be any better with us than it was with the Corinthians and other Christians at the time of St. Paul, when divisions and dissension arose among Christ's people. Even as St. Paul himself acknowledges and says, "There must be factions and sects among you so that those who are genuine become known" [I Cor. 11.19]. For Satan is not satisfied with being the prince and god of the world. He also wants to be among the children of God, Job 1 [:6], and "prowls about like a roaring lion seeking some one to devour," I Peter 5 [:8].

This causes confusion among the people. It prompts both the complaint, "No one knows what he should believe or with whom he should side," and the common demand for uniformity in doctrine and practice. In times gone by, councils were held for this purpose and all sorts of rulings and canons made in order to hold all the people to a common order. But in the end these rulings and canons became snares for the soul and pitfalls for the faith. So there is great danger on either side. And we need good spiritual teachers who will know how to lead the people with wisdom and discretion.

For those who devise and ordain universal customs and orders get so wrapped up in them that they make them into dictatorial laws opposed to the freedom of faith. But those who ordain and establish nothing succeed only in creating as many factions as there are heads, to the detriment of that Christian harmony and unity of which St. Paul and St. Peter so frequently write. Still, we must express ourselves on these matters as well as we can, even though everything will not be done as we say and teach that it should be.

And first of all, I hope that you still hold pure and unblemished the teachings concerning faith, love, and cross-bearing and the principal articles of the knowledge of Christ. Then you will know how to keep your consciences clear before God, although even these simple teachings will not remain unassailed by Satan. Yes, he will even use external divisions about ceremonies to slip in and cause internal divisions in the faith. This is his method, which we know well enough from so many heresies.

Therefore, we will deal with factions in our time as St. Paul dealt with them in his. He

could not check them by force. Nor did he want to compel them by means of commands. Rather, he entreated them with friendly exhortations, for people who will not give in willingly when exhorted will comply far less when commanded. Thus he says in Philippians 2 [1–4]: “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing through strife or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Then he adds the example of Christ, who in obedience to the Father made himself the servant of all.

Accordingly, I also shall exhort. First, I exhort your preachers with the same words as St. Paul, that they would consider all the good we have in Christ, the comfort, the encouragement, the Spirit, the love, the mercy, and in addition the example of Christ. In praise and thanksgiving for all these gifts, let them so conduct themselves that they establish and preserve unity of mind and spirit among themselves. They should be on their guard lest the devil sneak in through vainglory, which is especially dangerous and chiefly attack competent men who hold the office of the Word. There is no better way to do this than for each not to take himself too seriously and to think little of himself, but very highly of the others, or—as Christ teaches in the Gospel—to seat himself in the lowest place among the guests at the wedding [Luke 14:7–10].

Now even though external rites and orders—such as masses, singing, reading, baptizing—add nothing to salvation, yet it is un-Christian to quarrel over such things and thereby to confuse the common people. We should consider the edification of the lay folk more important than our own ideas and opinions. Therefore, I pray all of you, my dear sirs, let each one surrender his own opinions and get together in a friendly way and come to a common decision about these external matters, so that there will be one uniform practice throughout your district instead of disorder—one thing being done here and another there—lest the common people get confused and discouraged.

For even though from the viewpoint of faith, the external orders are free and can without scruples be changed by anyone at any time, yet from the viewpoint of love, you are not free to use this liberty, but bound to consider the edification of the common people, as St. Paul says, I Corinthians 14 [40], “All things should be done to edify,” and I Corinthians 6 [12], “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful,” and I Corinthians 8 [1], “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Think also of what he says there about those who have a knowledge of faith and of freedom, but who do not know how to use it; for they use it not for the edification of the people but for their own vainglory.

Now when your people are confused and offended by your lack of uniform order, you cannot plead, “Externals are free. Here in my own place I am going to do as I please.” But you are bound to consider the effect of your attitude on others. By faith be free in your conscience toward God, but by love be bound to serve your neighbor’s edification, as also St. Paul says, Romans 14 [15:2], “Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to edify him.” For we should not please ourselves, since Christ also pleased not himself, but us all.

But at the same time a preacher must watch and diligently instruct the people lest they take such uniform practices as divinely appointed and absolutely binding laws. He must explain that this is done for their own good so that the unity of Christian people may also

find expression in externals which in themselves are irrelevant. Since the ceremonies or rites are not needed for the conscience or for salvation and yet are useful and necessary to govern the people externally, one must not enforce or have them accepted for any other reason except to maintain peace and unity between men. For between God and men it is faith that procures peace and unity.

This I said to the preachers so that they may consider love and their obligation toward the people, dealing with the people not in faith's freedom but in love's submission and service, preserving the freedom of faith before God. Therefore, when you hold mass, sing and read uniformly, according to a common order—the same in one place as in another—because you see that the people want and need it and you wish to edify rather than confuse them. For you are there for their edification, as St. Paul says, “We have received authority not to destroy but to build up” [II Cor. 10:8]. If for yourselves you have no need of such uniformity, thank God. But the people need it. And what are you but servants of the people, as St. Paul says, II Corinthians 2 [1:24], “We are not lords over your faith, but rather your servants for the sake of Jesus Christ.”

At the same time, I also ask the people to have patience and not to be astonished if differences in teaching and practice are caused by factions and sects. For who can stop the devil and his legions? Remember that tares always grow amidst the good seed, as every field of God's work shows and Christ confirms, Matthew 13 [:24–30]. Again, no threshing floor can have only clean corn, but there must be also hulls and straw. And St. Paul says, “In a house there are not only vessels for noble use, but also vessels for ignoble uses” [II Tim. 2:20]. Some are for eating and drinking, others for carrying and cleaning out rubbish and filth. Thus among Christians there must also be factions and heretics who pervert faith and love and confuse the people.

Now if a servant should become disturbed because he found that not all the cups in the house were of silver, but that there were also chamber pots and garbage cans, and he could not endure this discovery, what would happen? Who can keep house without unclean vessels? The same thing is true in Christendom. We cannot expect only to find noble vessels, but we must tolerate the ignoble ones as well, as St. Paul says, “There must be factions among you” [I Cor. 11:19]. And indeed, my dear friends, from the very fact that you discover factions and disunity among you, you can tell that God gave to you the true Word and knowledge of Christ. For when you were under the pope, Satan certainly left you in peace, and though you might have had none but false teachers, he did not cause much dissension among you. But now that the true seed of God's Word is with you, he cannot bear it; he must sow his seed there too, even as he does here among us through the enthusiasts. God also tests you thereby to discover if you will stand fast.

Nevertheless, both you and your preachers should diligently seek to promote unity and to hinder this work of the devil, because God appoints the devil to do this in order to give us occasion to prove our unity and in order to reveal those that have stood the test. For in spite of all our efforts, enough factions and disunity will remain. St. Paul also points this out when he says, II Timothy 2 [:20], that there are both noble and ignoble vessels in the same house, and immediately adds, “If a man purge himself of such people, he shall be a vessel sanctified for noble use, useful to his master and ready for every good work” [vs. 21].

Receive this my sincere exhortation kindly, dear friends, and do your part to follow it as well as you can. This will prove needful and good for you and be to the honor and

praise of God, who called you to his light. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ, who has begun his work in you, increase the same with grace and fulfil it to the day of his glorious coming, so that you together with us may go to meet him with joy and remain forever with him. Amen. Pray for us.

At Wittenberg on the Saturday after Trinity, 1525.¹

¹ Luther, M. (1999). *Vol. 53: Luther's works, vol. 53: Liturgy and Hymns* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.) (41–50). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.