

Definition and Demarcation—Conrad Grebel and Others to Thomas Müntzer (September 5, 1524)

Abstract

The early Swiss Anabaptist leader Conrad Grebel (c. 1498–1526) and some other “Swiss Brethren” wrote the following letter to Thomas Müntzer, a Thuringian revolutionary and veteran of the Wittenberg reformation. Whether the letter ever reached its intended recipient remains unknown. Either way, the text offers insight into the activities of the Swiss Anabaptists. Grebel’s intention was to draw the boundaries between his movement and any future group that might prove more activist in nature. Three defining elements of Grebel’s teaching and practice were: separation from the established churches, the rejection of rulers’ intervention in religious life, and non-violence. In the twentieth century, scholars of Anabaptism were particularly interested in emphasizing the pacifism of the Swiss Brethren and stressing their distance from the revolutionary tradition that ran from Müntzer to the Anabaptist Kingdom founded in 1534 in Münster in Westphalia.

Source

May peace, grace, and mercy from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord be with us all, Amen. Dear Brother Thomas, for God’s sake do not marvel that we address you without title and as a brother request you to correspond with us, and that we have ventured without your asking, and unknown to you, to initiate dialogue. God’s Son, Jesus Christ, who presents Himself as the one Master and Head of all those who are to be saved, and who calls us brethren through the one common word to all brethren and believers, has moved and constrained us to establish friendship and brotherhood [with you] and to call your attention on the following articles Your writing of two booklets on spurious faith also moved us to write to you. Therefore may you receive it favorably for the sake of Christ our Savior, and if God wills, it shall also serve and work for our good. Amen.

Just as our ancient forefathers fell away from the true God and from the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and from true faith in Him, and from the one true, common, divine Word, and from the divine rites of Christian love and being, and lived without God’s law and gospel in human, unprofitable, and unchristian rites and ceremonies, and thought that thereby they would obtain salvation, and yet fell far short of it, as the evangelical preachers have pointed out, and are still in part pointing out, so also today everybody wants to be saved by a make-believe faith, without faith’s fruits, without the baptism of trial and testing, without love and hope, without proper Christian rites, and while continuing in the old blasphemous way of life, and in the common ceremonial, anti-Christian rites of baptism and Christ’s Supper: thus despising the divine Word and following the papal word as well as the word of the antipapal preachers which is not identical with nor agreement with the divine Word. In respect of persons and all sorts of seduction we are in more dangerous and damaging error than ever existed from the beginning of the world. In this same error we too had been, as long as we were hearers and readers of the evangelical preachers, who are guilty for all of this, in recompense for our sins. But after we took the Scripture in hand, and examined all sorts of items, we gained some insight and became aware of the great and damaging deficiency of our shepherds and of ourselves: that is, that we do not daily, earnestly, and with continuing sighs cry to God that we might be led out of the destruction of all godliness of life and out of human abominations, and that we might enter into true faith and God’s rites. In all this, the false sparing makes the divine Word silent and mixes the human with it. Yes, we claim that it damages everything and sets back all things divine. To specify and elaborate is not necessary.

While we were taking note of and lamenting these things your writing against spurious faith and baptism was brought to us, and we were more fully informed and confirmed. It made us wonderfully happy to have found one who was one with us in a common Christian understanding, and who ventured to point out to the evangelical preachers their deficiency: how in all the major articles [of faith] they practice false sparing, and follow their own notions, yes, even those of Antichrist, above God and contrary to God, as is not right for ambassadors of God so to act and so to preach. We therefore entreat and admonish you as a brother, by the name, power, Word, Spirit, and salvation which all Christians receive through Jesus Christ our Master and Savior, to seek earnestly to preach only the divine Word, and unafraid, to set up and defend only divine rites, to esteem as right and good only what is found in crystal-clear Scripture, to reject, hate, and curse all proposals, words, rites, and opinions of all men, even your own.

We understand and have noted that you have translated the mass into German, and have begun to use German hymnody. That cannot be right, when we find no teaching in the New Testament about singing, and no example of singing, Paul scolds the learned at Corinth more than he praises them because they chanted in the church service, just as if singing, as the Jews and Italians pronounce their words in a singsong manner. Second, since singing in the Latin tongue arose without divine teaching and apostolic precedent and practice, and neither resulted in good nor brought edification, it will much less edify in German, but will result in an outward make-believe faith. Third, Paul quite explicitly forbids singing in Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3, when he teaches that they shall teach and admonish one another with psalms and spiritual songs, and if anyone wishes to sing, he shall sing and give thanks in his heart. Fourth, that which is not taught by clear instruction and example we shall regard as forbidden to us – just as if it stood written, Do not do this; do not sing. Fifth, the only command Christ gave His ambassadors in the Old (Testament) was to preach the Word; the same in the New. Paul likewise commands that the Word of Christ shall dwell in us, not singing. He who sings poorly is vexed; he who is able to sing well becomes conceited. Sixth, a person is not to do what seems right to him; it is the Word which we are to follow, with no additions. Seventh, if you wish to abolish the mass, do not introduce German singing. That is perhaps your idea, or it originated with Luther. (Eighth), by the word and counsel of Christ it must be rooted out. Ninth, (Singing in the meeting) was not established by God.

Tenth, the Supper of unity was set up by Christ and established by Him. 11. Only the words of Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, and 1 Corinthians 11 shall be used: no more and no less. 12. The minister of the congregation shall pronounce them, reading from one of the Gospels or Paul. 13. They are the words of institution of the Supper of unity, not of consecration. 14. Common bread shall be used, with no idolatry and with no additions: for these (human additions) introduce a make-believe reverence and adoration of the bread, as well as a turning away from the inward. Also a common drinking vessel shall be used. 16. This will eliminate the adoration, and guarantee a true knowledge and understanding of the Supper. For the bread is simply bread, yet by faith the body of Christ, and an incorporation into the body of Christ and with the brethren. One must eat and drink in the Spirit and in love, as John 5 and elsewhere indicate, as Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11, and as Acts 2 clearly teaches. 17. Although it is simply bread, where faith and brotherly love prevail it shall be partaken of with joy. When observed in that way in the congregation it shall signify to us that we are truly one loaf and one body, and that we are and intend to be true brothers one with another. 18. But if one should be found who is not minded to live the brotherly life, he eats to his condemnation, for he does not discern the difference from another meal. He brings shame on the inward bond, which is love, and on the bread, which is the outward bond. 19. For he fails to be instructed as to the body and blood of Christ and the Testament He made on the cross, that he shall live and suffer for the sake of Christ and the brethren, the Head and the members of Christ. 20. Also, it should not be administered by you (sacerdotally). Thereby the mass, with its individual eating, would be abolished. The Supper however is to be an exhibition of unity. It is not a mass or a sacrament. Therefore no one shall receive it alone, neither on a deathbed nor otherwise. Neither shall the bread be locked up, etc., for the use of an individual person, and no one shall take for his own individual use the bread of those in unity – unless he is not in unity with himself, which is never the case with anybody, etc.

21. It shall also not be used in temples, according to all the Scriptures, and what we learn from history, for that is what creates a false adoration. 22. It shall be observed often and much. 23. It shall not be observed except in conformity with Christ's rule in Matthew 18, for then it would not be the Lord's Supper, for without Matthew 18 everyone runs after the outward, and that which is inward, namely, love, one lets go; and brethren and false brethren go to the Supper together and eat. 24. When you wish to serve (communion), we would desire that you do so without priestly clothing and the vestments of the mass, without (liturgical) singing and without additions. 25. As to the time, we know that Christ gave it to the apostles at supper time, and that the Corinthians so observed it. Yet we do not designate any specific time, etc.

We know that you are far better instructed about the Supper of the Lord than we are; we only indicate our understanding. If we are not right about this, instruct us better. But do drop the singing and the mass and operate only according to the Word, and draw and establish from the Word the rites of the apostles. If that cannot be done it were better just to leave everything in Latin, unchanged and unmodified. If that which is right cannot be set up, do not administer it either according to your own custom or that of the antichristian priests. At least teach how it ought to be, as Christ does in John 6, teaching how a person must eat and drink His flesh and blood. He pays no attention to the apostasy nor to the antichristian sparing – like the most learned and outstanding evangelical preachers do, making the Supper an actual idol which they have set up and established in the whole world. It is far preferable that a few be rightly instructed in the Word of God, believing aright, walking in virtues, and observing [biblical] rites than that many through adulterated doctrine falsely and deceitfully 'believe.' Although we admonish and entreat you, yet we do hope that you will of yourself wish so to act. We give this admonition the more freely because you listened to our brother in such a friendly manner, also acknowledging to him that you too have given way a bit too much, also because we regard you and Carlstadt as the purest proclaimers and preachers of the purest Word of God. And if you both justly rebuke those who mix human words and rites with the divine, you really ought also to dissociate yourselves from the priesthood, benefices, and all sorts of new and old usages, and from all other notions, both your own and those which are ancient, and thereby become entirely sound. If your benefices, like ours, are founded on tithes and interest, both of which are simply usury, and you are not supported by the whole congregation, you ought to withdraw from the benefices. You know well enough how a shepherd ought to be supported.

We anticipate much that is good from Jacob Strauss and several others who are little esteemed by the negligent scribes and doctors at Wittenberg. We also are rejected by our learned shepherds. All men cling to them because they preach a sinful sweet Christ, and they lack the power to discern, as you point out in your booklets – which have richly instructed and strengthened us, who are poor in spirit. We stand together on everything, except that we learn with sorrow that you have erected tablets [in the church building], when the New Testament teaches nothing of the kind, neither by text or example. In the Old Testament, to be sure, the writing was indeed outward, but now in the New the writing is to be on the fleshy tablets of the heart. This is confirmed by a comparison of the two Testaments. See Paul in 2 Corinthians 3, Jeremiah 31, Hebrews 8, and Ezekiel 36: where this is taught. Unless we are mistaken, which we do not think or believe, you should again do away with the tablets. This arose out of your own notions, but is a futile expense, however, and is bound to increase and become utterly idolatrous – and spread into the whole world, as did the idols. It will also give rise to the notion that always something external has to be set up, in place of the idols, by which the unlearned might learn. But it is the outward Word alone which is to be used, according to the example and command of the whole Scripture, especially as pointed out to us in 1 Corinthians 14 and Colossians 3. But this kind of learning from the one Word [likely the Ten Commandments on the tablets] might in the course of time become burdensome. And even if it never would do any harm, yet I would never invent and set up anything new, and thereby follow and become like the negligent, falsely sparing, learned ones who lead others astray; nor would I from my own notions invent, teach, and set up a single item.

Press forward with the Word and create a Christian church with the help of Christ and His Rule as we find it instituted in Matthew 18 and practiced in the epistles. Apply it with earnestness and common prayer and fasting, in line with faith and love, and without law and compulsion. Then God will bring you and your lambs to full soundness, and the singing and tablets will be abolished. There is more than enough wisdom and counsel in the Scripture, how all classes and all men shall be taught, governed, instructed, and made God-fearing. Whoever will not repent and believe, but resists the Word and the moving of God, and so persists [in sin], after Christ and His Word and Rule have been preached to him, and he has been admonished in the company of the three witnesses and the congregation, such a man, we declare, on the basis of God's Word, shall not be killed, but regarded as a heathen and publican, and let alone.

One should also not protect the gospel and its adherents with the sword, nor themselves. We learn from our brother that this is also what you believe and hold to. True believing Christians are sheep among wolves, sheep for the slaughter. They must be baptized in anxiety, distress, affliction, persecution, suffering, and death. They must pass through the probation of fire, and reach the Fatherland of eternal rest, not by slaying their bodily [enemies] but by mortifying their spiritual enemies. They employ neither worldly sword nor war, since with them killing is absolutely renounced: unless, indeed, we would still be under the Old Law – in which (so far as we understand) war was, after the promised land had been conquered, only a plague. Of this, no further comment.

On the subject of baptism we are really pleased with your book, and we desire further instruction from you. We understand that even an adult is not to be baptized apart from Christ's rule of binding and loosing. Scripture describes baptism for us as signifying that through faith and the blood of Christ our sins are washed away: to the one baptized that this inner self has been changed, and that he believes, both before and afterward. It signifies that one should be and is dead to sin, and walking in newness of life and spirit; also that he shall certainly be saved by the inward baptism if he lives his faith according to this significance. But the water does not strengthen nor increase – as the learned ones at Wittenberg say – and that it gives very great comfort, and is even one's final refuge on one's deathbed! Furthermore, it does not save, as Augustine, Tertullian, Theophylact, and Cyprian taught: and by such teaching they brought faith and the suffering of Christ to shame, in relation to adults; and also in relation to the unbaptized infants they brought shame upon the suffering of Christ. On the basis of the following Scriptures we hold that all children who have not yet come to the discernment of the knowledge of good and evil, and who have not yet eaten of the tree of knowledge, are certainly saved through the suffering of Christ: Genesis 8, Deuteronomy 1, 30, 31, 1 Corinthians 14, Wisdom 12, 1 Peter 2, Romans 1, 2, 7, 10, Matthew 18, 19, Mark 9, 10. Christ is the New Adam who has restored their ruined life, for they would have been subject to death and damnation only if Christ had not died. Also, they have not yet grown up to the infirmity of our broken nature – unless indeed we could be shown that Christ did not suffer for the children. But if the objection is raised that faith is demanded of all who are to be saved, we exclude children from this requirement, holding that they are saved without faith. We hold this on the basis of the Scriptures cited above, and from the description of baptism, also from the book of Acts (according to which no child was baptized). From the above Scriptures (which alone apply to the whole subject of children, and all other Scriptures [demanding faith] do not apply to children), we conclude that infant baptism is a senseless, blasphemous abomination, contrary to all Scripture. Indeed it is contrary even to the papacy, for we learn through Cyprian and Augustine that for many years after the time of the apostles, even for six hundred years, believers and unbelievers were baptized together, etc. Since you know this ten times better than we, and have published your protests against infant baptism, we hope that you are not acting against the eternal Word, wisdom, and commandment of God (according to which only believers are to be baptized) by baptizing a single child. If you or Carlstadt do not write sufficiently against infant baptism, and all that is associated with it, how and why one is to baptize, etc, I (Conrad Grebel) will try my hand at it, and will complete what I have begun, to write against all those (except yourself) who hitherto have written misleadingly and willfully on baptism, and who have translated into German the senseless and blasphemous liturgy for infant baptism – such as Luther, Loew,

Osiander, and those of Strassburg; and some have been even more shameful. Unless God avert it, I and my colleagues are more certain to suffer persecution from the learned ones than from other people. We entreat you not to use nor adopt the old antichristian rites, such as sacrament, mass, signs, etc. Hold to the Word alone, and rebuke as ambassadors should, especially you and Carlstadt, for you are doing more than all the preachers of all nations.

Count us as your brethren, and take this our letter as our confident expression of great joy and hope toward you through God. Exhort, comfort, and strengthen us, as you are well able to. Pray God the Lord for us that He may come to the aid of our faith, for we do desire to believe. And as God enables us to pray we will also intercede for you and for all, that we may all walk according to our calling and state. God grant us this through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen. Greet for us all the brethren, the shepherds and the sheep, who receive the word of faith and salvation with desire and hunger, etc.

One thing more. We are eager for a reply from you. And if you publish anything, send it to us with this messenger or others. We are also eager to learn whether you and Carlstadt are of one mind. We hope and believe that you are. We commend to you this messenger, who has also transmitted letters from us to our beloved brother Carlstadt. And if you should visit Carlstadt, and you could jointly reply, it would afford us hearty joy. The messenger plans to return to us. Whatever we have not adequately paid him will be made up at his return.

God be with us!

Whatever we have not rightly understood, inform and instruct us.

Zürich, September 5, 1524.

Conrad Grebel, Andrew Castelberg, Felix Manz, John Ockenfuss, Bartholomew Pur, Henry Aberly, and others of your brethren in Christ, if God will, who joined in writing this to you, wish for you and all of us, until we write again, the true Word of God, and true faith, love, and hope, with all peace and grace from God through Christ Jesus, Amen.

To the true and faithful Proclaimer of the Gospel Thomas Müntzer of Altstett am Hartz, our true and loving fellow-brother in Christ, etc.

Source of original German text: *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz*, edited by Leonard von Muralt and Walter Schmid. Volume 1. Zurich: S. Hirzel Verlag, 1952, pp.13–19.

Source of English translation: *Anabaptist Beginnings: A Source Book*, edited by William R. Estep Jr. Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1976, pp. 31–37. Note: paragraph breaks were added by the GHI staff.

Recommended Citation: Definition and Demarcation—Conrad Grebel and Others to Thomas Müntzer (September 5, 1524), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-the-reformations-to-the-thirty-years-war-1500-1648/ghdi:document-4313>> [April 03, 2025].