

Practical Reformation—Pastor Matthias Bengel to the Governor at Kassel (December 24, 1531)

Abstract

Matthias Bengel was a pastor in the community of Morschen in northern Hesse. This letter, written to the Hessian Governor at Kassel in 1531, sheds light on practical problems relating to the introduction of the Reformation. These included frictions between pastors and other local officials, and the resistance of parish congregations to the newly imposed rules.

Source

Matthias Bengel, Pastor in Heydau, to Governor Adolf Rau in Kassel.

My poor Christian prayer to God, with the obedience of a subject, etc., my strong lord and knight. My gracious lord, there is a wine-master in Neumorschen who is said to have secretly provided lodging to a group of Anabaptists for the entire summer, and, because the wine house is at the very edge of the village, other Anabaptists had safe passage to the house at night until the matter became known and [became] the subject of rumors. I, as his teacher and preacher, issued a notice to him and demanded that he answer questions about his beliefs before the officials in Spangenberg, but he denied being an Anabaptist, etc. After that, the matter stood, except for my Christian admonition that he should abstain from this departure from the Word of God, for the suspicions of the local population would again be aroused, and [that he should] associate himself once again with the Christian community. Having not heeded this, he and his entire household continue to the present day to avoid the assembly of the Christian community; in other words, he certainly shows with his deed that [which] he had hidden in his heart [i.e., that he is an Anabaptist], etc. *Strenger* lord, as your servant, I request that you give instructions to me or the officials to prevent the appearance of further error and offense.

Also, *Strenger* lord, there are many public blasphemers and sinners here among the inhabitants of the parish in Heydau, for very few hold to the Christian rules or regulations of our gracious prince and lord. At infant baptisms, there is such worldly sin and abuse of food and drink, lasting well past midnight, that they [the guests] take their leave only after doing harm to both conscience and body, so that the holy sacrament becomes a wholly worldly celebration and is abused.

On feast days [*hochzeiten*[1]], hardly anyone comes to the church, even on Sundays; instead, they commence in the early morning with eating and drinking, and what should support God's word actually impedes it. Terrifically serious blasphemy, the likes of which I have never heard, and drinking after midnight with [neither] limit nor end. In conclusion, there is no respect among the people, so that when one preaches the Word of God, they stand in the churchyard, to the dishonor of God and the annoyance of the pious. The clerk [*Schreiber*] of Heydau is responsible in no small part for these blasphemers, sinners, and their terrible unchristian habits, because he, who should represent the authority and not tolerate such blasphemy and sin, but rather counter it with word and punishment, is in fact the worst perpetrator of all; for I have never heard the likes of his blasphemy nor witnessed such wrath in my entire life. To be drunk on a daily basis and then go raging and carousing is entirely normal for him, and the servants in his house can confirm this. For, on many days, neither he nor his wife have time to come to church, and if God grants that he sets out for church, he ends up standing with his ilk in the churchyard, and, all in all, he shows himself to be an entirely frivolous man, and even disregards what is called lying and shameless tomfoolery, etc.

Strenger lord, I take God as my witness, if this is not all thoroughly true and not fabricated (not to mention the things I don't care to write here). Yet I know that as soon as it comes before him, [he will say] that it must have all been made up. He and the officials in Spangenberg are also at odds among themselves and are divided, for each party wants to have the final authority, and so good goes unrewarded and evil unpunished. And how can one mete out punishment effectively or fruitfully, if he himself is captive to such terrible sins and blasphemy?

Strenger lord, with God as my witness, I have reported all this out of Christian conviction, as I had wished to report it to your *Strenger* for some time, and I request for Christ's sake that you accept my report with a good opinion [of me] and see me as one who intends to seek peace and also end [the matter] in peace. For I am outraged at him, [but] he has a large following, and I must collect my salary from him in the name of our gracious lord. *Strenger* lord, if it is of use and is fruitful and serves the glory of God, insofar as it does not exceed [the bounds of] love [i.e., Christian charity], then I wanted to make [you] aware of all this, wherever and as often as I should; I am required and willing to suffer for the sake of justice, God grant his grace, etc.

I wanted to confidentially inform your *Strenger* in our merciful prince and lord's stead, with Christian hope that your *Strenger* will accept [this report] with the same opinion and countenance with which I intend, and here may God with his grace and spirit assist the increase and continuation of your *Strenger* in a Christian government and mind. Amen. Amen. Sent from Heydau under the roses [i.e., in secret] on Christmas Eve in the year 31 [December 24, 1531].

NOTES

[1] This term refers in modern German to weddings, but was used in more generally in middle high and early new high German to refer to religious holidays. According to the Grimms' dictionary, there were four *hochzeiten* in the liturgical year—Easter, Pentecost, All Saints' Day, and Christmas. Bengel's reference is not entirely clear, but there are no contextual clues to restrict his complaint to weddings, and his insistence that these celebrations were meant to promote God's word certainly supports the possibility that he was using the term more generally. Furthermore, his inclusion of Sundays in his complaint suggests he was referring to holidays like Easter or Christmas, which stretch over multiple days—trans.

Source of original German letter: Hessisches Staatsarchiv Marburg (StA MR) Best. 17e Altmorschen Nr. 1.

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