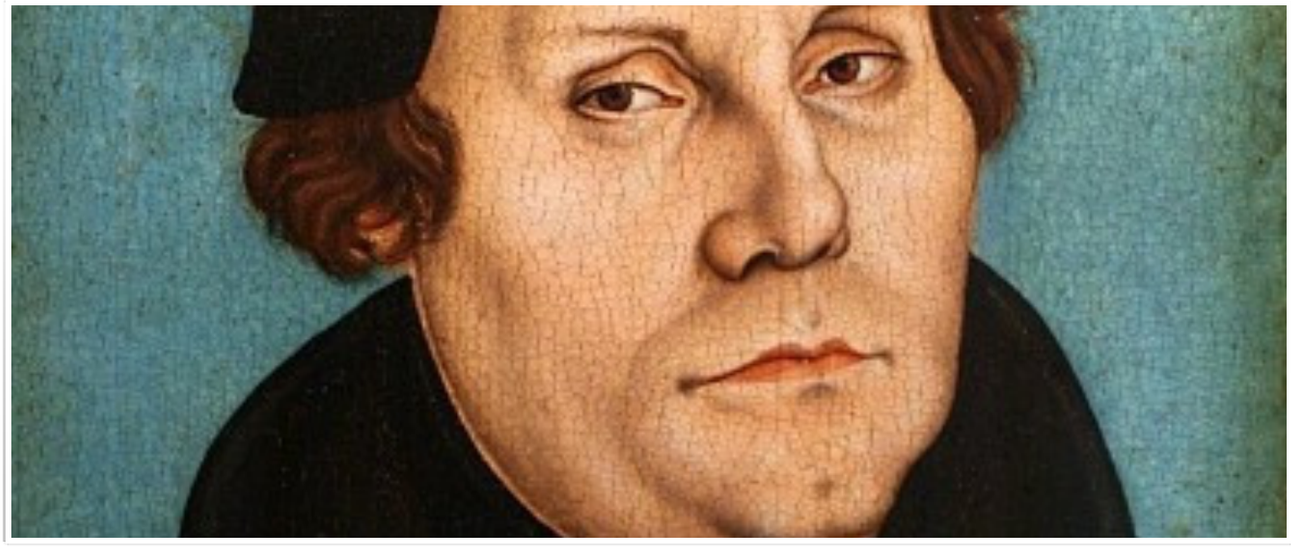

# Was Martin Luther A Mass Murderer Of Baptists? (Part I)

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Like 5

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In just a few weeks it will be the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. My last post dealt with slander, and what it is. I mentioned one example in particular that bothers me, because it is a slander I once engaged in so readily. This is the regular accusation made in some circles that Martin Luther murdered Baptists, usually followed by quotations about him urging that all should *"smite, stab, kill, and slay"* these hated Baptists. But does this accusation hold water? Did Luther really say such things about Baptists? Let me take up this question by addressing a concrete example of it being made (in a way that I hope can be applicable to other contexts where the same accusation is made as well). This specific example of someone charging Luther isn't itself all that significant. But it is an example of an accusation that gets regularly made, so, by treating this concrete charge, and writing a replay as a sort of "open letter," we can, hopefully, treat the more widely made accusation as well.

## The Charge That Has Been Brought

When a mutual friend shared a new documentary about Martin Luther, a mutual friend, whom I love and respect, chimed in to ask;

*"Does it include Luther murdering Baptists like his Roman Catholic friends?"*

In response to my request for primary sources to support this accusation that Luther, “murdered Baptists,” the individual then quoted from and briefly commented on a single internet article. Perhaps they misunderstood me. The passages from Moses that I alluded to reflect a courtroom setting. They seemed to get that since they organized their responses under headings like “motive” and “means.” But in a courtroom, whether in Moses' day or ours, it is "eye-witnesses" that matter. The voices of people who were there, understood in their context. I have testified in court before where I knew so-and-so said something directly to me that mattered to a case. But it was inadmissible. It was what they technically call "hearsay." That is, "he said she said." This is not only not sufficient to convict the defendant of a charge, it cannot even be admitted as evidence.

In historical study (as in every branch of study) we make a similar distinction between *primary* sources and *secondary* sources. I don't fault my friend for not understanding this. In 8 years of education at the institution we attended together, this was, amazingly, never explained to me. Primary sources, in regards to history, mean actual writings or documents from the time being studied (preferably in there original languages, but translation can be acceptable, if a standard translation is used). That is, they are "voices" from people who were there. Such sources are the equivalent of eye-witnesses to the time. This doesn't guarantee they are accurate. But they have more right to speak from a time and place contemporary to the event than a voice that speaks with secondhand knowledge from a much later time.

Everything that is not a primary source is a secondary source. Secondary sources often quote from primary sources, but their quotations are not the same as a primary source, since they don't contain the full context of the original words, and since they are being used in an undeniably biased manner. Secondary sources fall into several different categories. There are the run-of-the-mill secondary sources. Anyone who wants to can say anything they want about anything they want. And what they write immediately becomes a secondary source about their topic, however credible (or not). Internet articles are such a source. Then, there are "classic" secondary sources, which may be a little dated, but have made such an impact on the relevant field that they should still be consulted and interacted with. Finally, there are the "standard" secondary sources. These are the secondary sources, written by credentialed experts in the field, sustaining peer-review, that are widely recognized (by other credentialed scholars in the field) to be the best treatments of an issue.

But this accusation did not bring primary sources to the table. It quoted an internet article. The very title of which reflects "beliefs" of Luther, rather than actions like "murder." And the accusation was clouded with additional ones not related to the one I had asked the accuser to sustain. Under "motive" they wrote, "Luther hated anabaptists" and quoted a section of the website that didn't actually claim that, but which claimed that Luther hated the *beliefs* of anabaptist. These are two very different things. Then under "means" they wrote, "Luther even believed that proselytizing Jews should be slain - and it was not racial but religious." Surely anyone who has read most anything about the Reformation or the life of Luther knows a little about the way Luther wrote about the Jews towards the end of his life.

But this has nothing whatsoever to do with the charge against him concerning murdering Baptist. Had this been the charge raised, I would have affirmed it, with a heavy heart, lamenting the sins of Luther. Instead, as support for the accusation that Luther murdered Baptists, my friend quoted a section of the internet article about Luther's treatment of the Jews (and I confess that since they didn't use quotation marks in most spots, I often found it difficult to determine what words were theirs and which were the article's. I had to read closely.)

My friend further pasted a handful of sections from the article which explained Luther's disagreements with the anabaptists. Such as,

> *"Luther hated Anabaptists.*
> *Luther and the other Reformers violently denounced the Anabaptists for practicing every-member functioning in the church.*
> *The Anabaptists believed it was every Christian's right to stand up and speak in a church meeting. It was not solely the domain of the clergy. Luther was so opposed to this practice that he said it came*

> *from "the pit of hell" and those who were guilty of it should be put to death."*

and,

> *"Luther announced that "the Sitzrecht was from the pit of hell" and was a "perversion of public order . . . undermining respect for authority." Within 20 years, over 116 laws were passed in German lands throughout Europe making this "Anabaptist heresy" a capital offense."*

(Why they choose to omit the sentance between these two parahraphs explaining the anabaptist position I do not know.)

But none of these quotations from the article say anything about Luther *murdering* Baptist, or murdering anybody for that matter. Writing that Jews should be murdered is a far cry from committing murder. It's like saying that modern Nazis who state that all Jews should be slaughtered should therefore be tried for mass genocide. One may support them being tried for hate speech. But all they have done is speak or write, they can hardly be accused of murder.

My friend then wrote,

> *"The whole Peasant's War is quite another matter, but since you addressed it, so will I for it points even more to Luther's own methods against those he opposed or detested. Here are some other quotations by Luther on the matter."*

Having made what they considered a compelling case that "Luther murdered Baptists," they then wrote,

> *"Jesus said concerning judgment:*
>
> *'for by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.'*
>
> *Therefore I have used Martin Luther's own quotes in the short time before heading to church this morning. Sorry, that I cannot allot more time to this, but more important things (things for which Luther would probably have me killed for must take priority.)"*

They didn't provide a reference for the quotation of Jesus, but it is of course Matthew 12:37, KJV - words of Jesus which I take very seriously. So seriously in fact, that I was troubled by the entire set of comments.

Here is a flippant accusation that a man not just wrote hatefully about, but murdered not just one, but multiple Baptists. Nothing in any of the sections they pasted from the one web article even remotely supported that accusation. They clouded that accusation with entirely different ones.

Words matter.

And words that accuse others of grievous and heinous crimes matter all the more.

They should be spoken with a heavy heart, after much deliberation. I fear this is not what has happened here, so I forgo some sleep to address this particular use of words.

# What Happened in the Peasant's War?

There is a great deal of obscurity about the rise of what became the Peasant's War. All across Europe, for different reasons, Peasants rebelled against the authorities, raised grievances, and demanded to be heard.

Things quickly, and regularly, turned violent. I am no expert on Reformation history, or on the Peasants War, or on Luther. I welcome correction from anyone conversant with standard and primary sources. But I can say a few words.

## The 12 Articles

George Huntston Williams' mammoth work, "The Radical Reformation" is now the universally acknowledged standard work on the anabaptists, and the entire "left wing" of the Reformation (as Bainton called it). In its third edition (2000) it takes advantage of the massive swell of new information and new primary sources that have come to light from anabaptists in the last 50 years. I just purchased it, and have just started into it. I have a deep love for the anabaptists, their theology, and the great sacrifices they made in defending their beliefs and practices. I look forward to reading fully through William's work.
He traces four phases of central European Peasant revolt.

1. The Medieval phase (1291-1517)
2. The coalescence of the Peasant's reform movement with aspirations engendered by Luther and Zwingli (1517-1524-1525)
3. The Great Peasant's War (1524-1525/26)
4. The Münsterite uprising and synchronous revolts 1533-1535.

I'll speak only of his third phase, the Peasant's War proper. See his work (pg. 109-174, 533-587) for the other phases.

In July 1524, 550 armed Peasants took their complaints to the magistrates at Waldshut. They had undoubtedly (to my mind) been long mistreated. The city armed against them, and a tense stand off took place. This back-and forth tension reared its head and was repeated in several nearby cities over the next several weeks. Things came to a head in Swabia. Williams notes that for eight weeks during this time, Thomas Müntzer was there as well. He fueled these fires. Balthasar Hubmaier was there for a time as well apparently. But more than that, and for a longer time, the Zwickau prophets were apparently there preaching and (allegedly) stirring up revolt. The introduction to Luther's Works Volume 46 notes, *"Throughout the fifteenth century peasant insurrections had been common occurrences. Usually these uprisings had their inception in the visions and revelations received by their leaders. The Peasant's war of 1525 was the last and most violent of these revolts."* At its initial stages, it was simply a group of mistreated Peasant's calling for justice. They drafted "The Twelve Articles" of Swabia in January-Feburary 1525. The full text of these articles can be read in *Luther's Works* Volume 46, pg. 8-16, where they are printed for context (and the rest of the works quoted from in this blog post are largely contained in that volume). These 12 Articles were each based on Scripture, but they were primarily economic and political grievances that they wanted addressed. They opened with the claim that they were setting forth, *"the basic and chief articles of all peasants and subjects of spiritual and temporal lords, concerning the matters in which they feel they are being denied their rights."* They sought to identify their Peasant's gatherings with the cause of the Reformation, and rebutted the claim that they were violent;

> *"They* [their objectors] *say, 'Is this the fruit of the new* [Reformation] *gospel? Will no one be obedient anymore? Will the people rebel everywhere, revolt against their lords, gather and organize in crowds, and use their power to reform or even to overthrow their spiritual and temporal authorities? Indeed they may even kill them.' The following articles are our answer to these godless and blasphemous critics."*
> *(Luther's Works, Volume 46, pg. 8)*

They added two qualifications (1. That the gospel should bring peace not war, 2., That the peasants are not rebellious or disobedient to the civil authorities, and will submit lawfully to authority). They then set out 12 Articles of grievance from the Princes. I summarize;

1. The right for a community to choose its own pastors (remember this is the day of the state church, with state elected clergy).
2. Freedom from the "grain tithe" legally placed upon them (a form of tax upon them that they felt, probably justly, was oppressing the poor).
3. The abolition of bond-service (most of the peasants were slaves). Note that this was a long time before the "abolition" movement of the American Civil war. The Peasant's concerns probably in some way prefigured it. But if even Civil War era America was not yet unilaterally ready to abolish slavery, 16th century Germany was far less so. That their plea was right I have no doubt. That it had any hope of being heard in that age I also doubt.
4. Freedom to hunt and fish where they choose (multitudinous restrictions determined where such activities and in what "waters" these were possible, making it all but impossible for the peasants to hunt or fish at all), regardless of whether they owned the property or not.
5. The right to cut wood from wherever they wanted. While land ownership was probably unduly restrictive, their plea here comes across as essentially a demand to legalize thievery. They wanted capitalistic-like land ownership to be abolished, and the woods to be deemed the equal property of both poor and rich, which they can consume at their own will, regardless of who owned the property.
6. The demand for the ceasing of "compulsory labor." (basically an additional type of slavery).
7. The demand to be paid more for extra labor above their original contracts. The peasants is to obey, but, "he is to do so at a time when the peasant's own affairs do not suffer, and he shall receive a fair wage for this labor [above the contract].
8. The demand that their rent be reduced. "Fix a fair rent" for "every laborer is worthy of his hire." They wanted higher pay and lower rent.
9. No more new and arbitrary laws.
10. The return of lands that had been seized for payment.
11. The abolition of the death tax, a horrid attempt by the government to extract the last remaining finances from bereaved family.
12. A declaration of their willingness to follow Scripture, if their pleas can be shown not to match up it.

## An Admonition To Peace

It was clear that the Peasants, in this case at least, had much just cause. What was Luther's attitude? He immediately wrote his *"Admonition to Peace: A Reply To The 12 Articles Of The Peasants In Swabia."* He introduces the admonition in a prefatory section that explains how he is moved by the 12 articles, and wants to take seriously the peasants claim to be peaceful, even though surely some in the crowd have violent intentions. He further explains how it's important for him to write, since the Peasants have invoked his name in their writings, and claimed to be acting in the name of the Reformation. Luther was aware that the entire Reformation project stood in the balance in some ways, its reputation put there by a group with legitimate economic grievances, but who nonetheless had little or nothing to do with the Reformation or its theology.

He addressed the princes and magistrates sharply in the first section. *"We have no one on earth to thank for this disastrous rebellion, except you princes and lords, and especially you blind bishops and mad priests and monks, whose hearts are hardened, even to the present day."* So he began. *"The poor common people cannot bear it any longer."* He notes, *"The rest of it is now here, for the peasants are banding together, and, unless your repentance moves God to prevent it, this must result in the ruin, destruction, and desolation of Germany by cruel bloodshed."* He tried to explain that this wasn't a Reformation movement.

> *"To make your sin still greater, and guarantee your merciless destruction, some of you are beginning to blame this affair on the [Reformation] gospel and say that it is the fruit of my teaching. Well, well, slander away dear lords...this rebellion cannot be coming from me. Rather the murder-prophets, who hate me as they hate you, have come among these people and have gone about them for more than*

*three years, and no one has resisted and fought against them except me."*
*(Luther's Works, Volume 46, pg. 20)*

Luther refers here to the Zwickau prophets, whom he has written much against, who continue to stir up political rebellions. "I beseech you not to make light of this rebellion" he implores. He refers to the fact that he had already, in agreement with the grievances of the peasants, staunchly denounced the corruption of the princes in his "To The German Nobility" which the princes had ignored. Luther notes that the first of the 12 Articles shouldn't be opposed by anyone. The other articles he summarizes by noting, *"The other articles protest economic injustices, such as the death tax. These protests are also right and just..."*

He then turns in the second part to say a word to the peasants. He begs them to take caution, to not disobey their conscience, to *"look carefully at what you are doing."* He spends a great deal of time trying to undue the teaching of the "mad prophets" who had stirred them to violence. He calls into some question whether they are truly even Christian, pointing out that Christians *endure* violence, they do not *threaten* it. *"For here is God's word, spoken by the mouth of Christ, 'all who take the sword will perish by the sword.' That means that no one, by his own violence, shall arrogate authority to himself; but as Paul says, 'let every soul be subject to the governing authorities with fear and reverence [Rom. 13:1].'"* He at length admonishes them from Scripture that true Christians are called to submit to the civil authorities, even when those authorities are wicked, and that if one rebells against the authorities, God has given to even the wicked rulers and governments the "sword" to punish wickedness. He invokes I Peter 3, Romans 13, and Deut. 32 repeatedly to make his point. If the peasants violently revolt, however wicked the princes are, God has given them the right and duty to punish the peasants.

Basically, Luther tried to play moderator. Because this group had claimed the cause of the Reformation, it was all at stake for him. He begged non-violence. He admonished them to realize that,

> *"Now, dear sirs* [both to peasants and princes], *there is nothing Christian on either side and nothing Christian is at issue between you; both lords and peasants are discussing questions of justice and injustice in heathen, or worldly terms. Furthermore, both parties are acting against God and are under his wrath, as you have heard. For God's sake then, take my advice! Take ahold of all these matter properly, with justice and not with force or violence and do not start endless bloodshed in Germany."*
> *(Luther's Works, Volume 46, pg. 40)*

He begged, *"As I see it, the worst thing about this completely miserable affair is that both sides will sustain irreparable damage; and I would gladly risk my life and even die if I could prevent that from happening."* He urged both sides to realize what a war would mean.

> *"It is easy to start a fight, but we cannot stop the fighting whenever we want to. What have all those innocent women, children, and old people, whom you fools are drawing with you into such danger, ever done to you? Why do you insist on filling the land with blood and robbery, widows and orphans? Oh the devil has wicked plans!"*
> (Luther's Works, Volume 46, pg. 42)

In his conclusion, he noted,

> *"I, therefore, sincerely advise you to choose certain counts and lords from among the nobility and certain councilmen from the cities and ask them to arbitrate and settle this dispute amicably. You lords, stop being so stubborn!...give these poor people room in which to live and air to breathe. You peasants, let yourself be instructed and give up the excessive demands of some of your articles. In this way it may be possible to reach a solution of this dispute through human laws and agreements, if not through Christian means. If you do not follow this advice - God forbid! - I must let you come to blows.*

> *But I am innocent of your souls, your blood, or your property. The guilt is yours alone. I have told you that you are both wrong and that what you are fighting for is wrong... I however, will pray to my God that he will either reconcile you both and bring about an agreement between you, or else graciously prevent things from turning out as you intend."*
> *(Luther's Works, Volume 46, pg. 42-43)*

Luther had no authority there. He had only a well-known voice and the wide respect of many to empower his pleas. He stepped into the situation through his writing to attempt to be a peacemaker. But his pleas would not be heard.

## Against The Robbing And Murdering Hordes

Within weeks, the fighting broke out. The number of armed peasants had swelled to several hundred thousand. The peasants sacked churches. They burned villages. They murdered nobles brutally. The children, women, and old people who Luther feared for were slaughtered by the Peasants, and the princes fought back with a vicious vengeance. Williams notes, *"Over the whole region, fields, orchards, and villages were in flames."* (pg. 159). Phillip Schaff, in a classic work of church history, explains,

> *"The rebels destroyed the palaces of the Bishops, the castles of the nobility, burned convents and libraries, and committed other outrages. Erasmus wrote to Polydore Virgil, from Basel, in the autumn of 1525, 'every day there are bloody conflicts between the nobles and the peasants, so near us that we can hear the firing, and almost the groans of the wounded.' In another letter he says, 'every day, priests* [the nobility] *are imprisoned, tortured, hanged decapitated, or burnt."*
> (History of the Christian Church, volume 7, pg. 444-445).

Thomas Armitage, in his "*History of the Baptists*" explains, *"Monasteries, castles, and cities were destroyed, and every kind of excess was committed by 300,000 men in arms maddened by intolerable oppression to the desperation of despair."* He notes further that, *"...the war had cost possibly 150,000 lives, and the burning of several hundred castles, convents, hamlets, and towns."* (Volume 1, pg. 366). Despite all of Luther's pleas to the peasants to be peaceful, a murderous mob frenzy broke out. They had hinted in their *12 Articles* that they wanted all land, waters, property, and goods to be equally distributed. Now they seized these things by force, demanding the violent institution of a kind of socialism where the goods of the rich now belonged in the hands of the poor.

And it was here that Luther finally changed his tune. Men who were probably not even Christians (by any Reformation standard) were murdering, pillaging, and slaughtering thousands, and they were doing so in the name of the Reformation and in the name of Christ. This had to be stopped. He had warned them that the Bible was clear that civil leaders had authority given them by God. Now he would urge the use of that authority.

He wrote, *"Against The Robbing And Murdering Hordes Of Peasants"* almost as soon as the Peasants initiated violent revolt. But the work was delayed at the press, and wasn't actually printed and circulated till some months later. That is, the war had not only already begun, it was already in the process of being lost by the time anyone read his words. Nonetheless, he opened the work by noting,

> *"In my earlier book on this matter, I did not venture to judge the peasants, since they had offered to be corrected and to be instructed, and Christ in Matthew 7 commands us not to judge. But before I could even inspect the situation, they forgot their promise and violently took matters into their own hands and are robbing and raging like mad dogs. All this now makes it clear that they were trying to deceive us and that the assertions they made in their twelve articles were nothing but lies presented under the name of the gospel. To put it briefly, they are doing the devils work."*

And,

> *"Since these peasants and wretched people have now let themselves be mislead and are acting differently than they promised, I, too, must now write differently of them than I have written, and begin by setting their sin before them..."*
> *(Luther's Works, Volume 46, pg. 49)*

He charges them with three great sins. First, they have sworn to submit to the civil rulers ordained by God, but were clearly lying. Second, they are engaging in rebellion, a sin that spreads like wildfire. While he doesn't spell it all out, he knew that rebellion, like the witchcraft the Law equates it with [I Sam. 15:23] was punishable by death in God's law [Ex. 22:18]. Third, *"they cloak this terrible sin with the gospel, call themselves 'Christian brethren,' take oaths and submit to them, and compel people to go along with them in these abominations. Thus they become the worst blasphemers of God and slanderers of his holy name. Under the outward appearance of the gospel, they honor and serve the devil, thus deserving death in body and soul ten times over. I have never heard of a more hideous sin." (Luther's Works, Volume 46, pg. 50)*

He points out that while the Apostles lived a kind of "communal" life in Acts 4, (a passage invoked by the peasants as support for their pillaging) the Apostles were *voluntarily* sharing property among believers, not demanding as the poor peasants were that all the land and belongings of the rich princes should now belong equally to them. *"They [the apostles] did not demand, as do our insane peasants in their raging, that the goods of others - of Pilate and Herod - should be common, but only their own goods. Our peasants, however, want to make the goods of other men common, and keep their own for themselves. Fine Christians they are! I think there is not a devil left in hell. They have all gone into the peasants. Their raving has gone beyond all measure." (Luther's Works, Volume 46, pg. 51-52)*

It is in his "second" reason that some of his strongest words come. They are the phrases usually quoted by those who want to claim that Luther murdered Baptists. But Luther murdered no one. He only wrote words. And these words need to be kept in their literary and historical context. Note that when he speaks of "rebellion," he isn't speaking of a child disobeying his parents, or a man speeding down the street over the posted limit. We could probably better translate what he has in mind by the word translated "rebellion" as "frenzied, anarchistic, mobbish murder."
I quote his paragraph in full.

> *"In the second place, they are starting a rebellion, and are violently robbing and plundering monasteries and castles which are not theirs; by this they have doubly deserved death in body and soul as highway men and murderers. Furthermore, anyone who can be proved to be a seditious person is an outlaw before God and the emperor; and whoever is the first to put him to death does right and well. For if a man is in open rebellion, everyone is both his judge and his executioner; just as when a fire starts, the first man who can put it out is the best man to do the job. For rebellion* [of this kind that murders others] *is not just simple murder; it is like a great fire, which attacks and devastates a*

*whole land. Thus rebellion brings with it a land filled with murder and bloodshed; it makes widows and orphans, and turns everything upside down, like the worst disaster.* ***Therefore let everyone who can, smite, slay, and stab****, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog; if you do not strike him, he will strike you, and a whole land with you."*
*(Luther's Works, Volume 46, pg. 50. Bold emphasis mine)*

Understand well what is going on here. Luther isn't calling for mass murder - he is trying to stop the mass murder currently taking place. In his thinking, during anarchistic ravages, due to the horrid and contagious nature of the crime, it is legitimate to "deputize" every citizen, and to empower them as both judge and executioner. I deeply disagree with his thinking. I find it abhorrent to the concept of due process, even for the worst of criminals. But it shouldn't be misrepresented. Luther appeals all through this short letter to Romans 13, the passage he had already pointed out to the peasants. It demanded that God had placed the civil leaders, however corrupt, into their position or ordained power, and they bear the sword for punishing social wickedness by God's own authority. In this brief 6 page letter, I count *seven references* to Romans 13, (to say nothing of his numerous references to Luke 20:25; I Pet. 2:13). He had a strong sense that however corrupt, God had ordained the civil government, and it had the right of the sword. He was only urging that in the special case of anarchy and mass murder, judgement had already been passed, and every citizen should be deputized to help deal with the lawbreakers.

He explains throughout the concept so important to him of following the conscience. It is clear by the lies of the peasants in their 12 articles that they have gone against their conscience. But he urges the governing rulers to realize that they act with clean conscience in executing the murdering peasants. He is even harsher than this actually. He demands that if they do not execute the rebels, they are sinning against the office to which God appointed them.

*"For in this case a prince and lord must remember that according to Romans 13 he is God's minister*

*"For in this case a prince and lord must remember that according to Romans 13 he is God's minister and the servant of his wrath and that the sword has been given to him to use against such people. If he does not fulfill the duties of his office by punishing some and protecting others* [one thinks here of the women and children Luther had spoke of who would be, and were being, slaughtered, and who the government had been consigned by God to protect], *he commits as great a sin before God as when someone who has not been given the sword commits murder. If he is able to punish and does not do it - even though he would have had to kill someone or shed blood - he becomes guilty of all the murder and evil that these people commit. For by deliberately disregarding God's command he permits such rascals to go about their wicked business, even though he was able to prevent it and it was his duty to do so. This is not a time to sleep. And there is no place for patience or mercy. This is the time of the sword, not the day of grace."*
*(Luther's Works, Volume 46, pg. 52-53)*

He even declares that anyone who dies as a result of punishing and executing the peasants does the work of God and can be seen as a martyr. He wrestles with the issue of conscience in two different cases. In the case of an unbelieving ruler, who doesn't know the gospel, his conscience only compels him to fulfill his God-given mandate to punish evil doers and protect the society. But what of a believing prince? For Luther, this changes things, since the conscience cannot be violated. To the believers standing on the side of the princes, he writes;

*"But if the ruler is a Christian and tolerates the gospel, so that the peasants have no appearance of a case against him, he should proceed with fear. First he must take the matter to God, confessing that we have deserved these things, and remembering that God may, perhaps, have thus aroused the devil as a punishment on all Germany. Then he should humbly pray for help against the devil, for we are contending not only 'with flesh and blood' but 'against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the air,' which must be attacked with prayer. Then, when our hearts are so turned to God that we are ready to let his divine will be done, whether he will or will not have us to be princes and lords, we must go beyond our duty, and offer the mad peasants an opportunity to come to terms, even though they are not worthy of it. finally, if that does not help, then swiftly take the sword."*
*(Luther's Works, Volume 46, pg. 52)*

He takes special notice of the fact that he believes many people have been roped into the peasant cause against their will. But since they murder with the peasants, they are made guilty. Isn't it a greater mercy to them to end this bloodshed before their sins stack up so? He reasons,

*"Finally, there is another thing that ought to motivate the rulers. The peasants are not content with belonging to the devil themselves; they force and compel many good people to join their devilish league against their wills, and so make them partakers of all their own wickedness and damnation."*

He believes that these who so consort with them damn themselves.

*"A pious Christian ought to suffer a hundred deaths rather than give a hairsbreadth of consent to the peasants' cause. O how many martyrs could now be made by the bloodthirsty peasants and the prophets of murder! Now the rulers ought to have mercy on these prisoners of the peasants, and if they had no other reason to use the sword with a good conscience against the peasants, and to risk their own lives and property in fighting them, this would be reason enough: they would be rescuing and helping these souls whom the peasants have forced into their devilish league and who, without willing it, are sinning so horribly and must be damned."*

He thus urges,

*"Therefore, dear lords, here is the place where you can release, rescue, help. Have mercy on these poor*

*people!* ***Let whoever can stab, smite, slay.*** *If you die in doing it, good for you! A more blessed death can never be yours, for you die while obeying the divine word and commandment in Romans 13, and in loving service of your neighbor, whom you are rescuing from the bonds of hell and of the devil. And so I beg everyone who can to flee from the peasants as from the devil himself; those who do not flee, I pray that God will enlighten and convert. As for those who are not to be converted, God grant them that they may have neither fortune or success."*
*(Luther's Works, Volume 46, pg. 54 bold emphasis mine)*

He urges those who have been consigned to the peasants cause by threat of force to run and escape, and urges, for the sake of those so abused, that the rulers would put down the rebellion and free these souls forced into a war in which they stack of their own sins. He concludes, *"To this let every pious Christian say, 'amen!' For this prayer is right and good and pleases God; this I know. If anyone thinks this too harsh, let him remember that rebellion is intolerable and that the destruction of the world is to be expected every hour."*

Luther's language is strong. This is among the most perverse pieces of all his writing. His logic is erroneous. His willingness to skip due process deplorable. *He should not be defended*. But neither should he be *misrepresented*. He was not murdering anybody. He was writing a letter. He didn't in his writings call for murder - he called for peace, begged for it even, and when the peasants violently began slaughtering others, he called for that slaughter to end. His means is theologically deplorable. But it must be understood in the context of the logic he saw - he was suggesting that the grievous nature of the crime, especially since the murderers invoked the name of God, the Gospel, and the Reformation to their cause, justified deputizing every citizen and employing them in the effort to squash the anarchy. And his words about smiting, stabbing, slaying, etc., are dishonestly handled when anyone suggests that this is how Luther always wanted everyone who disagreed with him treated. This is an exceptional and unusual case, as Luther himself makes plain. Such an out-of-context use of his words is blatant slander.

## An Open Letter On The Harsh Book

Luther's language was so harsh, that some of the princes used it as justification for the grossest of atrocities. Instead of just stopping the peasants rebellion, they slaughtered it as they had been slaughtered. Some wouldn't accept cries of surrender, and killed even the prisoners. This almost surely would have happened even without Luther. The Peasants, while high on passion and numbers, were low on military might. They were destined to lose. Nonetheless, Luther was harshly criticized for his words. From every imaginable corner. Most couldn't believe he had written so sharply. Everybody was mad at him. The Peasants felt betrayed. The Catholics felt his *"Admonition to Peace"* had encouraged the war. The Protestant princes felt his words had justified them in their vengeful bloodbath, but didn't like how his words had condemned their own sins. He thus wrote another work, *"An Open Letter On The Harsh Book Against The Peasants."* He doesn't take back his words. He simply seeks to explain them. He at length explains the distinction he sees between normal murder, thievery, etc., and the kind of anarchistic slaughter the Peasants were engaging in. He would never offer the "deputizing" advice in any other case other than such anarchy. But he stands by its importance in such a case.

*"My little book was not written against ordinary evildoers, but against rebels. You must make a very, very great distinction between a rebel, and a thief, or a murderer, or any other kind of evildoer. A murderer or evildoer lets the head of the government alone and attacks only the members or their property; indeed, he fears the ruler. So long as the head remains, no one ought to attack such a murderer, because the head can and should punish. Everyone ought to await the judgement and command of the head, to whom God has committed the sword and the office of punishment. But a rebel attacks the head himself and interferes with the exercise of his sword and his office, and therefore his crime is not to be compared with that of a murderer. We cannot wait until the head*

*gives commands and passes judgment, for the head himself is captured and is beaten and cannot give them."*
*(Luther's Works, Volume 46, pg. 80)*

(He may refer here to the fact that many of the princes were reportedly held hostage before being burned. How could one demand that they judge and convict before passing a verdict for execution, when they were so incapacitated by those deserving of the execution?) And later,

> *"For rebellion is a crime that deserves neither a court trial nor mercy, whether it be among heathen, Jews, Turks, Christians, or any other people; the rebel has already been tried, judged, condemned, and sentenced to death and everyone is authorized to execute him."*
> *(Luther's Works, Volume 46, pg. 81)*

Luther explained at length that he wasn't responsible for, didn't ever condone, and would not support, the harsh treatment that some had found justification for in his harsh book. He never claimed that surrender shouldn't be accepted (he had said exactly the opposite) and never condoned harsh treatment of war prisoners. These "bloody dogs" were not really using his book to justify their actions - they were *misusing* it to fulfill their blood lust.

## Was Luther Responsible?

A final note on the Peasant's War is needed here. First, it's worth noting that Luther's "Harsh Book" didn't end up even getting published until the slaughter, and counter slaughter, were already drawing to an end. It's hard to give him too much credit. But my friend also quoted (by pasting from their single website) a statement of Luther that, *"I, Martin Luther, slew all the peasants in the uprising, for I ordered that they be put to death; all their blood is on my neck. But I refer it all to our Lord God, who commanded me to speak as I did."* The footnote to the quotation references the German edition but misspells its title, and actually quotes from the English translation found in "Luther's Works." The context is important in understanding such a statement. First, because as part of "Table Talk," it's not something Luther wrote. It's something a friend wrote down that they claimed they heard him once say (as is all of "Table Talk"). I don't have that volume of Luther's Works, but I found a website that looks trustworthy that listed the passage, with its context. I share it as they have it (quoting a secondary source rather than a primary one now).

> *No. 2911b: Responsibility for Curbing the Peasants Between January 26 and 29, 1533*
> *"Preachers are the greatest murderers because they admonish the ruler to do his duty and punish the guilty.* ***I, Martin Luther, slew all the peasants in the uprising, for I ordered that they be put to death; all their blood is on my neck. But I refer it all to our Lord God, who commanded me to speak as I did****. The devil and the ungodly kill, but they have no right to. Accordingly priests and official persons must be distinguished well, so that we may see that magistrates can condemn by law and can put to death by virtue of their office. Today, by the grace of God, they have learned this well. Now they abuse their power against the gospel, but they won't get fat from it." [LW 54:180]*

This of course is simply Luther, explaining that he felt compelled, as we noted above, to share Romans 13 with the princes and what he felt it demanded of them. By sharing God's word with them, he felt he could take credit for what they endured. This doesn't mean he murdered any of them. Nor could he "command" them to be murdered, since he had no authority in the situation. Nor do his words suggest (as they might seem to when taken out of context) that he felt he had received some vision from God to that effect (that was the venue of the Radicals, but never of Luther). Rather, he had shared the Word of God in Scripture, and was convinced that Scripture commanded the death penalty for the Peasants due to their anarchy. And he realized the weight of "preachers" who preach God's word, because in so doing they must endorse the death penalty to be meeted out by the governing authorities.

Schaff summarized the question well, though probably giving too much credit to Luther;

> *"The fate of the peasants depended upon Luther. Himself a peasant, he had, at first, considerable sympathy with their cause, and advocated the removal of their greviences; but he was always opposed to the use of force, except by the civil magistrates, to whom the sword was given by God for the punishment of evil-doers. He thought that revolution was wrong in itself, and contrary to the Divine order; that it was the worst enemy of reformation, and increased the evil complained of. He trusted in the almighty power of preaching, teaching, and moral suasion. In the battle of words he allowed himself every license; but there he stopped. With the heroic courage of a warrior in the spiritual army of God, he combined the humble obedience of a monk to the civil authority."*
> *(History of The Christian Church, volume 7, pg. 445).*

## Were These Peasant's Baptists?

The accusation made is that Luther "murdered Baptists." The Peasants War seems to be the best place such a charge could be reasonably made. In fact, over and over again, I have seen Luther's words above, "smite, stab, kill, slay" quoted as part of Luther's vitriol to "murder Baptists." I have seen these words quoted in "textbooks" as support for this claim. I have heard them quoted in angry, hate and spit-filled exclamations from pulpits. But were these Peasants really Baptists, or Anabaptists, (or even Christians)? The most impoartant primary sources are Luther's writings and the *12 Articles* of the Peasants. We have seen Luther's claim in his own words that they were only pretending to be Christians, using the name and the cause of the Reformation to gain political clout. The *12 Articles* on the other hand make not a single mention of re-baptism. They don't even mention baptism at all except as something common to Luther, the Lords, and them (which is the opposite of the anabaptist claim). It is true that several anabaptist voices helped stir up the controversy. Balthazar Hubmieir had stirred up the peasants. Thomas Munzter had as well for several weeks. And the Zwickau prophets had long been among the people stirring them up. All these factors caused most contemporaries to assume the peasants war was an anabaptist uprising. And it may have resembled in some ways later anabaptist revolutions. But Luther directly explained that theological issues weren't at stake here. So was the Peasant's Revolt an Anabaptist Uprising?

What of the major secondary works? Williams' mammoth work notes, *"Clear is the fact that in so far as **ana**baptism is understood as the espousal of believer's baptism among Germans caught up in the Reformation yearnings, its first notable manifestation was in canton Zurich. Rebaptism began shortly **after** the out break of peasants unrest turned into the Great Peasant's War in January 1525. The first recorded evangelical baptisms date from late January 1525 (6.1)."* While noting that the Peasants anticipated the anabaptists in three respects (calling themselves covenanters, wanting the tax abolished, and demanding congregational election of pastors), he nonetheless affirms in passing that, that *"...none of the participants in the communal movement of the peasants and artisans during the war were anabaptists..."* (pg. 138). He sees them as a precursor to the Anabaptists, and notes some involvement with them by some Anabaptists leaders, but doesn't see them as technically anabaptist.

What if one doesn't trust such a standard source? One major Baptist historian makes his opinion clear;

> *"It is simply absurd to say that these peasants were 'Anabaptist.' Did they demand the right to choose their own pastors because their masters had forced unwelcome 'Anabaptist' shepherds upon them?* [meaning, their very demand in the first article against state instituted pastors means that the state would have instituted Catholic and Lutheran pastors - thus he concluded that these peasants must have been under Catholic or Lutheran clergy]. *The Peasants were Catholics and Lutherans, and their enforced minsters the same. Many of their ministers were bishops and other clergy. The entire disturbance was simply the abnormal German mind forcing its way back in a crude manner to its native freedom, and the 'Anabaptists' cannot for any purpose be made a stalking-horse, in the face of*

> *historical truth, to force a false issue to the front. The chief actors in these scenes candidly lay before us the real facts."*

He further notes,

> *"Certain writers never weary of attributing this bloody work to the 'Anabaptist.' But Bishop Jewel honestly lodges it where it belongs; while he would screen Luther, he says that the partners of this 'conspiracy had for their watch-word the name of Our Lady, and in honor of here were bound to say five Ave Marias every day.'" He finally notes, "these and many other facts sufficiently show why Geiseler says that 'no traces of Anabaptist fanaticism were seen' in the Peasants War."*
> (Thomas Armitage, *A History of The Baptists*, vol. 1, quotations from pg. 364-366).

Probably some historians would take issue with the sharp division of Armitage between the Peasants and the Anabaptists. But I suspect those making a charge of Luther murdering Baptists would not, since they wouldn't want Baptists to be associated with the Revolt.

So if there is no connection between the Peasants of the Peasant's War and the Anabaptists (except the three minor connections mentioned by Williams), then it is illegitimate to quote from his writing about the Peasants, entirely out of its context, and pretend that this was his attutude towards Anabaptists. It is not even fair to suggest this connection with claims like "this is how he treated those he opposed." Such claims are instead blatant slander.

Context matters.

In a second post (Part II), we will briefly examine the Diet of Speyer, and look at Luther's own writings about the anabaptists and his views of their theology. For now, let us learn well the lesson of the importance of context. It is entirely illegitimate to quote from Luther's writings on the Peasant's War as though he would speak those words to modern Baptists. Such slanderous charges must stop, at least from any who love Jesus and value truth.

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**Uriel Matías Ramós Panikar**

Martin Luther by himself is telling us that he "ordered that they be put to death" and instead of recognize his own sin, makes guilty at god itself by their own sins!
In context there were many political powers, but who's the right?
Any other man could ahve said the same order: "kill them" but how could we know that's a legitime "God's authority".
sorry for my English , but Luther wants to have aliances with rich and powerful people because they could help him, sspreading his new doctrine.
The moral was not important to Luther, but the doctrine.
A salvation that could not losting, in a world absolutly determine.
An anti-biblical doctrine that neither the non-catholic cristians belive at all.

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**Scott Harrison**

Dear me! “It was what they technically call “hearsay.” That is, “he said she said.” This is not only not sufficient to convict the defendant of a charge, it cannot even be admitted as evidence.” Hmmmm - who wrote down the words of Christ before Pilate - are they also then not ‘hearsay’? We can use your argument against much of Holy scripture I think!

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