

Excerpts from "The Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasants" (1525)

The just and fundamental chief articles of all peasants and subjects of ecclesiastical and secular authorities in which they consider themselves aggrieved.

To the Christian reader, peace and the grace of God through the Christ. There are many Antichrists who have recently used the assemblies of peasants as a reason for pouring scorn on the Gospel, saying: "These are the fruits of the new Gospel: to be to no one, to rebel and rise in revolt everywhere, rally and band together with great force, to reform and overthrow ecclesiastical and secular authorities, indeed, perhaps even to slay them." The following articles are a reply to all these godless and malicious critics.

First, they will refute this calumny on the Word of God, and secondly provide a Christian justification for the disobedience, indeed, the rebellion, of all the peasants. In the first place, the Gospel is not the cause of disturbance or rebellion, since it speaks of Christ the promised Messiah, whose Word and life teach nothing but love, peace, patience, and concord, so that all who believe in this Christ become loving, peaceful, patient, and of one mind. Therefore the purpose of all the peasants' articles (as will clearly be seen) is to hear the Gospel and live according to it. . . .

Secondly, it follows clearly that the peasants who ask for this Gospel as their teaching and rule of life should not be called disobedient or rebellious. But if God deigns to hear the peasants (who plead anxiously to live according to his Word), who shall reproach the will of God? Who shall meddle in his judgment? Yea, who shall oppose his majesty? Did he not hear the children of Israel when they cried out to him and deliver them from the hand of Pharaoh? Shall he not also save his own today? Yea, he will save them, and speedily! Therefore, Christian reader, read the following articles with care, and then decide.

Here follow the articles.

The first article

First, it is our humble plea and request, as it is also the will and intention of all of us, that we should henceforth have the power and authority for the whole community to choose and elect its own pastor, and also to have the power to depose him should he conduct himself improperly. The same elected pastor shall preach the Holy Gospel to us purely and clearly, without any human additions to doctrines and commandments. For constant preaching of the true faith impels us to ask God for his grace that he may instill in us the same true faith and confirm it. For if his grace is not instilled in us, we remain always mere flesh and blood, which is worth nothing. As Scripture clearly says, we can only come to God through true faith, and can be saved only through his mercy. That is why we need such a guide and pastor; and thus our demand is grounded in Scripture.

The second article

Secondly, although the true tithe is ordained in the Old Testament and discharged in the New, nonetheless we will gladly pay the true grain tithe, only in just measure. Since it should be given to God and distributed to his servants, it belongs to a pastor who proclaims the Word of God clearly. We wish this tithe in future to be collected and received by our churchwarden, elected by the community. From it he will give the pastor who is elected by the entire community his adequate and sufficient sustenance for himself and his dependants, according to the judgment of the whole community. The remainder shall be distributed to the needy poor present in the same village, according to circumstances and the judgment of the community. Any further remainder should be retained against the need to provide military service in defense of the country, which should be paid for from this surplus, so that no territorial tax will be laid upon the poor man. Should it be that one or more villages have sold the tithe because of some need, whoever can prove he has purchased it with the consent of the whole village shall not suffer loss, for we will reach a proper settlement with him according to the circumstances of the case to redeem the tithe within a suitable time and in suitable installments. But whoever has not purchased the tithe from a village, but rather their forefathers have appropriated it for themselves, we will not, we should not, and we are not obliged to pay him any more, but only, as stated above, to maintain our elected pastor with the tithe, to collect what remains or distribute it, as is written in Holy Scripture, to the needy, be they clerical or lay. The small tithe we will not pay at all, for the Lord God created cattle for the free use of man, and we regard it as an improper tithe, invented by men. Therefore we will no longer pay it.

The third article

It has hitherto been the custom for the lords to treat us as their serfs, which is pitiable since Christ has redeemed and bought us all by the shedding of his precious blood, the shepherd just as the highest, no one excepted. Therefore it is demonstrated by Scripture that we are free and wish to be free. Not that we wish to be completely free and to have no authority, for God does not teach us that. We should live according to his commandments, not the free license of the flesh; but we are to love God, recognize him as our Lord in our neighbor, and do all that God commanded us at the Last Supper, as we would gladly do. Therefore we ought to live according to his commandment, which does not show and teach us not to obey authority, but rather that we should humble ourselves before everyone, not just authority, so that in this way we will gladly obey our elected and appointed rulers (whom God has ordained over us) in all reasonable and Christian matters. We have no doubt that, as true and genuine Christians, you will gladly release us from serfdom, or else show us from the Gospel that we are serfs.

The fourth article

It has hitherto been the custom that no poor man has been empowered or permitted to catch game, wildfowl, or fish in flowing water, which we consider quite improper and unbrotherly, indeed selfish and contrary to the Word of God. In some places the lords keep game in defiance of our wishes and to our great detriment, for we must suffer the dumb animals

wantonly and unnecessarily to devour our crops (which God has caused to grow for the use of man), not to mention that this is contrary to God and love of one's neighbor. For when the Lord God created man, he gave him dominion over all creatures, over the birds in the air and the fish in the water. Therefore it is our request that whoever has waters for which he has adequate documents to prove that they have been unwittingly bought by him, should not have them taken from him by force, but rather that Christian consideration be shown for the sake of brotherly love; but whoever cannot provide adequate proof, should surrender them to the community in a reasonable manner.

The fifth article

We are also aggrieved about woodcutting, for our lords have appropriated the woods to themselves alone, and when the poor man has need of timber he must buy it at twice the price. It is our opinion that all woods held by ecclesiastical or secular lords who have not bought them, should revert to the entire community. The community should be free to allow everyone in an orderly manner to take home without charge whatever he needs for firewood, and also to take timber for building free of charge, but only with the knowledge of the official elected by the community for that purpose. If there are no woods available other than those which have been properly purchased, a brotherly and Christian agreement should be reached with the owner. But if the property has first been arbitrarily expropriated and then sold, agreement should be reached according to the acts of the matter in the light of brotherly love and Holy Scripture.

The sixth article

The sixth concerns our grievous burden of labor services, which are increased from day to day in amount and variety. We request that a proper investigation be made in order that we be not so heavily burdened, but to have consideration for us with regard to how our forefathers performed services, but only according to the Word of God.

The seventh article

Seventh, in the future we will not allow a lord to oppress us further. Rather, as the lord has conferred a holding on a peasant on proper terms, so shall the latter possess it according to the agreement between lord and peasant. The lord should not force or compel him further in any way by asking for more services or other dues without recompense, so that the peasant may use and enjoy his property unburdened and in peace. But if the lord requires services, the peasant should willingly serve his lord before others, but at a time and day which is not to the disadvantage of the peasant, and for a proper wage.

The eighth article

Eighth, we are aggrieved, especially the many of us who have farms, that these cannot bear the rents, whereby the peasants lose their property and are ruined. The lords should have honorable men inspect these properties and fix a fair rent, so that the peasant does not work for nothing, for every laborer is worthy of his hire.

Excerpts from: "On the Murderous and Thieving Hordes of Peasants,"
Martin Luther, 1525

In my preceding pamphlet I had no occasion to condemn the peasants, because they promised to yield to law and better instruction, as Christ also demands (Matt. vii. 1). But before I can turn around, they go out and appeal to force, in spite of their promises, and rob and pillage and act like mad dogs. From this it is quite apparent what they had in their false minds, and that what they put forth under the name of the gospel in the *Twelve Articles* was all vain pretense. In short, they practice mere devil's work. . . . Since, therefore, those peasants and miserable wretches allow themselves to be led astray and act differently from what they declared, I likewise must write differently concerning them. . . .

With threefold horrible sins against God and men have these peasants loaded themselves, for which they have deserved a manifold death of body and soul.

First they have sworn to their true and gracious rulers to be submissive and obedient, in accord with God's command. . . . But since they have deliberately and sacrilegiously abandoned their obedience, and in addition have dared to oppose their lords, they have thereby forfeited body and soul, as perfidious, perjured, lying, disobedient wretches and scoundrels are wont to do. . . .

Second, they cause uproar and sacrilegiously rob and pillage monasteries and castles that do not belong to them, for which, like public highwaymen and murderers, they deserve the twofold death of body and soul. It is right and lawful to slay at the first opportunity a rebellious person, who is known as such, for he is already under God's and the emperor's ban. . . . Rebellion is not simply vile murder, but is like a great fire that kindles and devastates a country; it fills the land with murder and bloodshed, makes widows and orphans, and destroys everything, like the greatest calamity. . . . Just as one must slay a mad dog, so, if you do not fight the rebels, they will fight you, and the whole country with you.

Third, they cloak their frightful and revolting sins with the gospel, call themselves Christian brethren, swear allegiance, and compel people to join them in such abominations. Thereby they become the greatest blasphemers and violators of God's Holy name. . . .

This document can be found in the following sources:

Kreis, Steven. "Lectures on Modern European History: Luther Against the Peasants (1525)." 2002. *The History Guide*. 12 May 2004
<http://www.historyguide.org/earlymod/peasants1525.html>

Robinson, James Harvey. *Readings in European History, 2 Vols.*, Boston: Ginn & Company, 1906. 2: 106–108.

The ninth article

Ninth, we are aggrieved about cases of felony, where new laws are constantly being passed, for punishments are not imposed according to the facts of the case, but sometimes out of ill-will, sometimes out of partiality. In our opinion, punishment should be imposed according to the old written penalties, according to the circumstances, and not with partiality.

The tenth article

Tenth, we are aggrieved that some have appropriated meadows or arable that once belonged to the community. We wish to restore these to common ownership, unless they have been properly purchased. If they have been improperly purchased, an amicable and brotherly agreement should be reached by the parties according to the facts of the case.

The eleventh article

Eleventh, we wish to have the custom called heriot totally abolished, for we shall never tolerate or permit widows and orphans to be shamefully deprived and robbed of their property, contrary to God and to honor, as has happened in many places and in various forms, where those who should protect and guard them have instead flayed them and us; and if they had the slightest pretext they would have taken it all. God will tolerate it no longer and it should be completely abolished. Henceforth, no one should be obliged to pay anything, either small or great amounts.

Conclusion [twelfth article]

Twelfth, it is our conclusion and final opinion that if one or more of the articles presented here be not in accordance with the Word of God (which we would doubt), and such articles be demonstrated to us to be incompatible with the Word of God, then we will abandon them, when it is explained to us on the basis of Scripture. If any articles be conceded to us which are later found to be unjust, they shall be null and void from that moment, and no longer valid. Similarly, if further articles are found in Scripture to be in truth contrary to God and a burden to our neighbor, we shall reserve the right to have them included. We will exercise and apply Christian doctrine in all its aspects for which we shall pray to the Lord God, who alone (and no one else) can give it to us. The peace of Christ be with us all.

Other documents that could be substituted for "The Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasants," 1525, include the following:

- "The Idea of Godly Law—Demands of the Klettgau Peasants" (March 25, 1525)
- "Grievances of Peasants of Thauer and Rettenberg" (May 15, 1525)