

**That it is not permissible to depose pastors because they
sternly rebuke public vice**

**Daß man Seelsorger darum, daß sie öffentliche Laster hart
strafen, nicht absetze könne**

Written by Dr. Martin Luther to a Particular City Council

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Translated by
Mark D. Nispel, PhD
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1. Grace and Peace in the Lord. Conscientious, wise, beloved lords, good friends! Not long ago I wrote to you, the council, and beseeched you that you would show your pastor loving kindness. For my understanding was that he had acted wrongly and that he would be deposed by the visitors. But now I am advised by the visitors that he did not act wrongly and that they did not remove him (from office), nor do they want to remove him. Rather they give witness that he is a man of pure doctrine and irreproachable life. They report that you have this one complaint against him, that he has sternly rebuked vice. And therefore you intend to drive him away. I know that the devil eagerly desires to bring about misery through all of this. So I was moved to write this letter to you. And I beseech you in friendly fashion, that you would receive it amicably to your good, as I truly intend it.
2. I hope indeed that you would have enough Christian understanding to know that a pastor's office and the gospel are not ours, nor any man's, indeed, not even an angel's. Rather they are God's alone, our Lord's, who has obtained it¹ for us with his blood, gifted and instituted it for our salvation. Therefore he indeed sternly judged those who despise it, saying in Luke 10:16: "He who despises you, despises me", and St. Peter in his second epistle 2:21 says: "it would be better for him, if he had never heard it."
3. Now, Mr. Jobst and Mr Friedrich are two excellent men. They are visitors and they indeed must give account for this (work). And both witness, and therefore it must be believed, that your pastor teaches the true pure word of God and lives a respectable life. And your neighboring villages give witness to the same thing. So see, dear sirs and friends, how the evil spirit craftily and perniciously tempts you so that you would as-

¹ "der es mit seinem Blut uns erworben" The "es" is singular neuter. Both the "pastor's office" and "gospel" are singular neuter.

sault² the highest pastor and bishop, Jesus Christ, God's Son. It is he who purely and richly imparts to you his word and sacrament, that is, his blood, death and suffering, out of remarkable grace, through his faithful, pious minister, your pastor. How can the suffering devil not suffer knowing that you are to be saved?

4. So now reflect upon this: there is no other cause or responsibility in all of this other than that you have brought affliction upon your pastor without him deserving it. Indeed, you have done it in spite of his great merits and faithful preaching. Therefore it is not possible, nor will it be, to foist violence and injustice on such a well attested pastor and (have the visitors) throw him out with the filth³ on account of your afflicting and unjust undertaking. I can not hold it against the visitors that they did not do such a thing and that they did not burden your consciences with such an injustice on account of the devil. If they had agreed with your undertaking they would have gone with you to the devil. Look out, dear sirs and friends! Look out! If the devil brings you to a fall, he will not leave it at that. He will bring you to yet a greater fall.
5. The first fall is that you would despise and hate your pastor without reason, that is to despise Christ himself, the head of all pastors. In this way you will throw yourselves

² Luther uses the phrase "*daß ihr euch sollt vergreifen an ...*". To *vergreifen sich an* is to lay hands on violently, or assault. Luther implicitly refers back to the beginning of the letter where he used the same phrase to say that his assumption was that the pastor "had acted wrongly (*hätte er sich vergriffen*). Without the object of assault, there it becomes something more like "act wrongly" or "make a mistake." Luther ties the two parts of the letter together, saying: "I assumed your pastor had acted wrongly ... but now, instead, see how the devil is tempting you to act wrongly by assaulting Christ through an attack on your pastor."

³ "*mit Dreck hinauszuwerfen*" - Luther draws an analogy and basically says the congregation was trying to throw their pastor out like the contents of a bed pan.

upon the stone⁴ and burn yourselves up on the consuming fire.⁵ **For he is more concerned about one pious faithful pastor than about all government in all the world.**⁶ For the government does not serve him unto his heavenly kingdom as the pastor's office does. With this (act) he, (the devil) stops up your mouth and heart so that they do not believe, do not pray, do not praise, that you you are not able to lift up your head before God in any need, as Matt. 5:24 says: "Leave your offering before the altar, and reconcile yourselves first." In this way you would have become Christians no longer, you would have excommunicated yourselves. That is terrible!

6. Accordingly he (the devil) will therefore work hard so that beyond these sins against yourself he might trip you up with great sins against others, namely that you should drive away your blameless pastor. For in this way the church would be laid waste, and children and other pious people would remain deprived of the word, baptism, or the sacrament. And, as much it depends on you, they would be damned along with you. That would be much more awful than the kingdom of the pope! How would you answer for this? And what about when the common man and the dear youth would see such an abominable example, that learned pious pastors are rewarded for their labor and faithful service with filth and disgrace? After that what will motivate a child to go to school? Who will bother to study at his own expense? Where will we be able to get pastors?

⁴ This seems to be a clear reference to Is 8:14 / Mt. 21:44: "the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces".

⁵ This seems to be a reference to Heb 12:29 which with the same words as Luther uses here calls God a "consuming fire" ("*ein verzehrend Feuer*" (Luther 1545).

⁶ The bold typeface here represents the special typeface of this sentence in the original.

7. The devil seeks through your mischievousness and that of those like you to mislead you and others, as was said. How much better it would be to still be under the tiresome pope and the Turk! For at least there the schools and churches remained with pastors and preachers as opposed to under you, who would make them entirely laid waste.
8. Thirdly, when you have made a mistake, he will ultimately lead you to fall into hardened impenitence. Then it is all over and there is no helping you. Indeed, this is what the devil has in mind. Therefore, indeed, it is much better to bear with the pastor and the church, that is with Christ, so that you do not become an example, as some have already become.
9. Indeed there are still other ways. The church door stands open to whomever does not want to listen to the pastor. Thus he can remain outside without God's grace. The churches are not built and pastors are not instituted so that those who want to teach and hear God's word should be thrown out while those who do not need nor want to hear God's word are allowed to remain inside. Rather they are built and instituted for the sake of those who hear it gladly and can not be without such.
10. You are not lords over the pastors or over the preaching office. You have not instituted them. Rather God's Son alone did so. And you have not contributed anything in addition to this. And you have less power of authority over these things than the devil over the kingdom of heaven. You are not to be schoolmasters or teachers over these. Nor should you hinder them from (the job of) reproving. For it is God's reproof, not man's. And He desires it to be unhindered. Rather he has commanded it. Pay attention to your own office and leave God alone in his rule before he must teach this lesson to you. There is none of you who could put up with the situation where a stranger would dismiss or send away your servant whom you can not do without.

And so, there is no little pastor⁷ so insignificant who should endure one crooked word from a different master. He is God's servant alone. And (yet apparently) he should and must be everyone's rag and suffer everything from everyone. And no one wants nor can suffer anything from him, not even the word of God himself.

11. Please understand such admonition in an amicable way for that is how I intend it. For it is God's admonition. But if you will not hear it, nor better yourselves, then we must let you be. Yet we must see to it that as we resist the devil, at the very least, we do not burden our consciences with your sins nor willingly give ourselves to the devil.
12. We are not able to excommunicate you. You are doing that to yourselves. We would gladly and happily have you restored. But even if you were able to easily catch yourselves another pastor, it does not matter. You still could not become Christians nor partake in any piece of Christian grace and life. And no one is going to take up such an appointment against the will and command of the visitors. And who would want to go to such disavowed Christians who have such an evil reputation that they force out their pastor with force and injustice and yet want to be called Christians and at the same time bring disgrace to that name? In this way you would obtain a pretty name in all the world, all right, and become a fine example.
13. I advise you finally, in Christ, get along with your pastor and live with him in a friendly way. Permit him to admonish, teach, and comfort, as God has commanded him and as his conscience is obligated to do. As it is written in the epistle to the Hebrews, chapter 13, verse 17: "Obey your teachers and follow them, for they watch over your souls, as those who must give account for it, so that they can do this with joy and not with groaning, for that is not good for you." For that which you intend to

⁷ "Hirtenbub" - little shepherd boy.

do gives a bad example, such that every person with an office, every judge or councilman, would want a pastor whom he can drive out impiously on a whim without any authority, right, or reason. God will not and can not allow that.

14. May God grant that you do not have to learn this by experience. But rather may the same dear God give help, that you recognize his will with fear and humility and that you honor his Son, that is, his Word, and recognize that he has purchased and acquired you with his blood. And may he grant that his servants, the poor pastors, who otherwise are burdened with cares, should have shelter and comfort from you worldly princes, such that your office would become a service to God. Hereby entrusted to dear God in his grace. Written the evening of the Sunday after St. Paul's Day, 1543.