

second letter<sup>18</sup> to me, which was fiercer than the first, but it was not at hand.

Yours,

Monday after the Assumption of Mary, 1527. Martin Luther.

TO JOHN HESS. November, 1527

*Breslau, in Silesia, was hard hit by the plague during the late summer and fall of 1527, and the Evangelical clergymen there asked Luther, through John Hess, whether it is proper for Christians to flee in the face of such danger. After some delay and a repeated request Luther responded, and because the plague was also raging in Wittenberg at the time, he thought it well to publish his reply as an open letter. It was reprinted again and again in time of epidemic elsewhere. On account of his leadership in the introduction of the Reformation there, John Hess (1490-1547) is commonly called the reformer of Silesia. [Text in German; WA, XXIII, 323-386.]*

To the esteemed Dr. John Hess, pastor in Breslau, and to his fellow ministers in the gospel of Christ: grace and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

I have long since received the question (whether it is proper for a Christian to flee when in danger of death) that you sent to me here in Wittenberg, and it should long since have been answered if Almighty God had not been scourging and chastising me so hard that I was unable to do much reading or writing.<sup>19</sup> Besides, I thought that, inasmuch as God the Father has so richly endowed you with all manner of understanding and truth in Christ, you would yourself be able, with the aid of his Spirit and grace and without my help, to decide and answer such a question as this, and greater ones too.

Since you have not stopped insisting and have so humbly desired to know my opinion in this matter in order, as Saint Paul teaches again and again, that we may all be found to have the same mind and judgment,<sup>20</sup> I am here expressing my opinion in so far as God has enabled me and I may have understanding. I am offering this opinion in all humility in order that, as is proper, it may be weighed and judged by your insight and that of all godly Christians. Because there are rumors of fatal disease here among us and in many other places, I have

<sup>18</sup> This letter is not extant.

<sup>19</sup> See letter above.

<sup>20</sup> Phil. 2:2; I Cor. 1:10; II Cor. 13:11.

had it printed in case others may also desire or use such instruction.

Some insist that one may not and should not flee under peril of death. They say that because death is a punishment which God has sent upon us on account of our sin, we should remain and patiently await God's punishment with true and firm faith. They regard flight as wrong and nothing short of unbelief in God. Others, however, hold that one may flee, especially if one is not encumbered with responsibilities.

I am unable to criticize the opinion of the first group, for they emphasize a good thing—strong faith—and are to be praised for desiring that all Christians have a strong, firm faith. It takes more than milk-fed<sup>21</sup> faith to await death, which terrified almost all the saints, and still does so. Who would not praise those who are sincerely of a mind to despise death and willingly submit to the scourge of God in so far as this may be done without tempting God, as I shall mention below?

However, since there are few strong Christians and many weak ones, all cannot be expected to bear the same thing. One who is strong in faith can drink poison without suffering harm, as we read in the last chapter of Mark,<sup>22</sup> but one who is weak in faith will die of it. Because he was strong in faith Peter could walk on the sea, but when he doubted and was weak in faith he sank and almost drowned.<sup>23</sup> When a strong man walks with a weak man he must be careful not to walk to the limit of his strength lest he walk the weak man to death. Christ does not wish his weak members to be cast away, as Saint Paul teaches in Rom., ch. 15, and I Cor., ch. 12.<sup>24</sup>

To put the matter briefly and precisely, there are two ways of dying and fleeing death. The first is to act contrary to God's Word and command, as when somebody who has been imprisoned for the sake of God's Word denies or recants God's Word in order to escape death. In such a case everyone has a clear order and command from Christ not to flee but rather to die, for he says, "Whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven."<sup>25</sup> And in Luke, ch. 12, "Be not afraid of them that kill the body and after that have no more that they can do."<sup>26</sup>

In like fashion those who are in the ministry, such as preachers and pastors, are also obliged to stay and remain when there is peril of death, for there is a clear command of Christ, "The

<sup>21</sup> Cf. I Cor. 3:2.

<sup>22</sup> Mark 16:18.

<sup>23</sup> Matt. 14:29, 30.

<sup>24</sup> Rom. 15:1; I Cor. 12:22.

<sup>25</sup> Matt. 10:33.

<sup>26</sup> Luke 12:4.

good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep, but he that is a hireling seeth the wolf coming and fleeth."<sup>27</sup> In time of death one is especially in need of the ministry which can strengthen and comfort one's conscience with God's Word and Sacrament in order to overcome death with faith. However, where enough preachers are available and they come to an agreement among themselves that some of their number should move away because there is no necessity for their remaining in such danger, I do not count it a sin because an adequate ministry is provided and, if need be, these would be ready and willing to stay. So we read that Saint Athanasius fled from his church to save his life because there were many others there to perform the duties of the office.<sup>28</sup> In Damascus, Saint Paul's disciples let him down by the wall in a basket so that he escaped (Acts, ch. 9)<sup>29</sup> and it is written in Acts, ch. 19, that his disciples suffered him not to face danger in the market place because it was not necessary.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly all those who hold secular offices, such as burgo-masters, judges, and the like, are obliged to remain. Here again there is a Word of God by which secular government was instituted and commanded in order to rule, protect, and preserve cities and lands. So Saint Paul says in Rom., ch. 13, "Government is God's minister to keep the peace," etc.<sup>31</sup> It would be a great sin for somebody who has been commanded to take care of a whole community to leave it without head and government in time of danger (such as fire, murder, rebellion, and other calamities which the devil might prepare) because there is no order there. Saint Paul says, "If any provide not for his own, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel."<sup>32</sup> If out of great weakness they flee, they must (as I have said above) see to it that a sufficient number of administrators are put in their places in order that the community may be well cared for and preserved, and they must also diligently inquire and insist that everything is done.

What I have now said about these two offices must be understood to apply to all other persons who are bound to others by duties and responsibilities. So a servant should not flee from his master, nor a maid from her mistress, unless it be with the knowledge and consent of the master or mistress. On the other hand, a master should not forsake his servant nor a mistress her maid unless these are sufficiently provided for in some other way or place. In all these cases it is God's command that

<sup>27</sup> John 10:11, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Augustine in Migne, *P.L.*, XXX, 1017.

<sup>29</sup> Acts 9:25.

<sup>30</sup> Acts 19:30.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Rom. 13:6.

<sup>32</sup> I Tim. 5:8.

servants and maids are bound to serve, and should be obedient, while masters and mistresses must care for their servants. Fathers and mothers are similarly bound by God's command to serve and help their children, while children are bound to serve and help their parents. Nor may the common people who are hired for wages or pay (such as a town physician, town official, mercenary soldier, or whatever they may be) flee unless they put in their places enough other able persons who are acceptable to their superiors.

Where there are no parents, guardians and close relatives are obliged to take in those who are related to them, or at least be careful to see to it that others are provided in their places to care for their sick relatives. In fact, no one may flee from his neighbor unless there is somebody to take his place in waiting upon and nursing the sick. In all such cases these words of Christ are to be feared: "I was sick and ye visited me not."<sup>33</sup> These words of Christ bind each of us to the other. No one may forsake his neighbor when he is in trouble. Everybody is under obligation to help and support his neighbor as he would himself like to be helped.<sup>34</sup>

When no such need exists, when there are enough other people to do the nursing and helping (whether because it is their own duty or desire or whether because they have been commissioned by arrangement of those who are weak in faith), and when the sick do not want them to stay but rather object to this, I believe that they are free either to flee or to remain. Let him who is bold and strong in faith stay in God's name; he does not sin by doing so. On the other hand, let him who is weak and fearful flee in God's name so long as he does so without prejudice to his duty to his neighbor and after providing and arranging for adequate substitutes. The instinct to flee death and save one's life is implanted by God and is not forbidden, provided it is not opposed to God and neighbor. It is as Saint Paul says in Eph., ch. 4, "No man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it."<sup>35</sup> Indeed, we are commanded to preserve our bodies and lives as well as we can and not neglect them. Saint Paul says in I Cor., ch. 12, that God has provided our bodies with members that one member may always have care and work for the other.<sup>36</sup>

It is not forbidden but rather commanded that we seek our daily bread, clothing, and all the necessities of life in the sweat

<sup>33</sup> Matt. 25:43.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Matt. 7:12.

<sup>35</sup> Eph. 5:29.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. I Cor. 12:21-26.

of our face<sup>37</sup> and avoid harm and trouble where we can, provided this can be done without prejudice or injury to the love we are to bear and the duty we are to perform toward our neighbor. How proper it is, then, to try to preserve life and escape death where this can be done without disadvantage to neighbor! For behold, body and life are more than meat and raiment, as Christ himself says in Matt., ch. 5.<sup>38</sup> If anyone is so strong in faith that he can willingly endure nakedness, hunger, and want without tempting God and without attempting to extricate himself from the situation in which he finds himself, let him do so without condemning those who do not or cannot do likewise.

There are plenty of examples in the Scriptures to prove that fleeing from death is not wrong in itself. Abraham was a great saint, yet he feared death and fled from it when he gave his wife Sarah out to be his sister,<sup>39</sup> but because he did this without harming or neglecting his neighbor it was not reckoned against him as sin. His son Isaac did likewise.<sup>40</sup> Jacob also fled from his brother Esau to escape being killed.<sup>41</sup> David also fled before Saul and Absalom,<sup>42</sup> and the prophet Urijah fled into Egypt before King Jehoiakim.<sup>43</sup> The thirsty prophet Elijah too, when Queen Jezebel threatened him after he had slain the prophets of Baal in his great faith, was afraid and fled into the wilderness.<sup>44</sup> And before him Moses, when the king of Egypt sought him, fled into the land of Midian.<sup>45</sup> There are many other examples. All of these fled from death as they were able in order to save their lives, but without thereby depriving their neighbors of anything and only after first fulfilling their obligations.

"Yes," you will say, "but these are not examples of dying in pestilence but of being killed as a result of persecution." Answer: Death is death, no matter by what means it comes. So God refers in the Scriptures to the four plagues or punishments as the pestilence, the famine, the sword, and the noisome beast.<sup>46</sup> If one may with good conscience and God's permission flee from one or several of these, why not from all four? The above examples show how the dear patriarchs fled from the sword, and it is clear enough that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and his sons fled from the second plague—that is, from famine or hunger—when they fled into Egypt on account of the famine,

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Gen. 3:19.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Matt. 6:25.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Gen. 12:13.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Gen. 26:7.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Gen. 27:43-45.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. I Sam. 19:10-17; II Sam. 15:14.

<sup>43</sup> Jer. 26:21.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. I Kings 19:3.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Ex. 2:15.

<sup>46</sup> Ezek. 14:21.

as we read in Genesis.<sup>47</sup> Why, then, should one not flee from the noisome beasts? Am I to suppose that if a war or the Turk comes, no one should flee from a village or town but must await God's punishment there at the hand of the sword? Very well. Let him who is so strong in faith stay, but let him not condemn those who flee.

Am I to suppose that if a house is on fire, no one must run out of it and no one must attempt to rescue those inside because fire is a punishment of God? or that if somebody falls into a lake, he should not swim out but allow himself to drown as a punishment from God? Well, if you are able, do so without tempting God, but let others do what they are able to do. Again, if a person breaks a leg or is wounded or bitten, must he avoid medical aid and say, "It is God's punishment, and so I shall endure it until it heals itself"? Cold and frost are also God's punishment, and one could die of them. Why do you run to a fire or into the house when it is cold? Be strong and stay out in the cold until it becomes warm again. According to this opinion there would be no need for apothecary shops, medicine, and physicians, for all sicknesses are punishments of God. Hunger and thirst are also great punishments and forms of martyrdom. Why, then, do you eat and drink and not allow yourself to be punished by these until they stop of their own accord? This notion will finally carry us so far that we will abolish the Lord's Prayer and cease praying: "Deliver us from evil, Amen,"<sup>48</sup> inasmuch as all kinds of evil are God's punishments and we could henceforth no longer pray to be delivered from hell and could not avoid it because it too is God's punishment. What would this lead to?

From all this we can conclude that we should pray against all manner of evil and should also defend ourselves against evil in so far as we are able, provided that in doing so we do not act against God, as I have said above. If God desires that we suffer evil and be overcome by it, our defense will not help us. Accordingly let everyone be guided by this. If anyone is bound to remain in peril of death in order to serve his neighbor, let him commit himself to God's keeping and say: "Lord, I am in thy hands. Thou has obligated me to serve here. Thy will be done,<sup>49</sup> for I am thy poor creature. Thou canst slay or preserve me here as well as if I were in duty bound to suffer fire, water, thirst, or some other danger." On the other hand, if anyone is not bound to serve his neighbor and is in a position to

<sup>47</sup> Gen., chs. 40-47.

<sup>48</sup> Luke 11:4.

<sup>49</sup> Luke 11:2.

flee, let him also commit himself to God's keeping and say: "Dear God, I am weak and afraid; I am therefore fleeing from this evil and am doing all that I can to defend myself against it. Nevertheless, I am in thy hands, whether in this or some other evil which may befall me. Thy will be done. My flight will not save me, for evils and misfortunes will assail me everywhere and the devil, who is a murderer from the beginning and tries to commit murder and cause misfortune everywhere, does not sleep or take a holiday."

In like fashion we are obliged to treat our neighbor in all other troubles and perils too. If his house is on fire, love requires that I run there and help put out the fire. If there are enough other people there to extinguish the flames, I may either go home or stay. If he falls into a pit or into water, I must not go away but must hurry to his side as well as I can to help him. But if others are there who are rescuing him, I am free to depart. If I see that he is hungry or thirsty, I must not forsake him but give him to eat and drink without regard to the danger that I might thereby become poorer. If we are not to help and support our neighbor unless we can do so without danger and harm to our bodies and goods, we shall never help our neighbor, for it will always appear as if this will involve us in interruption, peril, loss, or neglect of our interests. We would rather take the risk of having the fire or other misfortune spread from our neighbor's house and destroy us, our bodies, goods, wife, child, and all that we have.

Anyone who refuses to help his neighbor, who allows him to remain in need, and who flees from him is a murderer in God's sight, as Saint John says in his epistle, "He that loveth not his brother is a murderer," and again, "Whoso hath this world's good and seeth his brother have need, how dwelleth the love of God in him?"<sup>50</sup> This was one of the sins that God reckoned to the account of the city of Sodom when he said through the prophet Ezekiel, "Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom: pride and fullness of bread, yet she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy."<sup>51</sup> On the last day Christ will damn them as murderers and will say, "I was sick and ye visited me not."<sup>52</sup> If those who do not go to the poor and sick and offer help are to be judged so, what will happen to those who run away and let them die like dogs and pigs? Yes, what will happen to those who go beyond this, take from them what they have, and add to their troubles?—as the tyrants are now

<sup>50</sup> Cf. I John 3:14, 15, 17.

<sup>51</sup> Ezek. 16:49.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Matt. 25:43.

doing to the poor people who are accepting the gospel.<sup>53</sup> But let them go. They will have their reward.<sup>54</sup>

To be sure, it would be good, praiseworthy, and Christian for towns and lands that can do so to make provision for the maintenance of community houses and hospitals and for people to minister in them so that all the sick can be gathered from all homes and committed there. This is what our forefathers desired and intended when they established so many foundations, hospitals, and infirmaries in order that every citizen would not have to maintain a hospital in his own home. Where these exist it is altogether proper that everyone should help and contribute liberally to their support, especially the government. But where there are no such institutions (and there are few of them), each of us must be his neighbor's nurse and hospital director in time of need at the risk of losing salvation and God's favor. Here we have a word and commandment of God: "Love thy neighbor as thyself,"<sup>55</sup> and Matt., ch. 7, "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them."<sup>56</sup>

When people are beginning to die [in a time of pestilence], we should stay with them, make preparations to counteract the disease, and assure ourselves, especially those of us who have such responsibilities toward others (as I mentioned above), that we cannot leave or flee. We should be comforted by our certainty that it is God's punishment sent upon us not only to punish sin but also to test our faith and love—our faith in order that we may see and know what our attitude is toward God, and our love in order that we may see what our attitude is toward our neighbor. Although I believe that every pestilence, like other plagues, is spread among the people by evil spirits who poison the air or somehow exhale a noisome breath and inject deadly poison into men's bodies, nevertheless it is also God's will and punishment. Accordingly we should submit to it patiently and risk our lives in the service of our neighbor, as Saint John teaches: "Because Christ laid down his life for us, we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."<sup>57</sup>

If the sick strike fear and terror into anyone's heart, let such a person be of good courage and so strengthen and comfort himself that he has no doubt that it is the devil who is responsible for this fear, terror, and horror. The devil is so very evil that he not only tries constantly to kill and murder but also gives vent to his spleen by making us fearful, afraid, and timid

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Chapter VII, above.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Matt. 6:2.

<sup>55</sup> Matt. 22:39.

<sup>56</sup> Matt. 7:12.

<sup>57</sup> I John 3:16.

about death in order that death might appear to us to be the worst possible thing, that we might have neither rest nor peace in this life, and that we might despair of our life. In this way he tries to bring it about that we despair of God, become unwilling and unprepared to die, become so enveloped in the dark clouds of fear and worry that we forget and lose sight of Christ, our light and life, forsake our neighbor in his need, and so sin against God and man. This is the devil's desire and purpose. Because we know that such fear and terror are the devil's game, we should be the more unwilling to be affected by it, gather up our courage in defiance of him and to vex him, and throw off his terror and cast it back at him. We should defend ourselves with such weapons and say:

"Away with you and your fears, devil! Because it will vex you, I shall defy you by going at once to my sick neighbor to help him. I shall pay no attention to you but shall attack you on two points. The first is that I know for certain that this work is pleasing to God and all angels when I do it in obedience to his will and as a divine service. It must indeed be especially pleasing to God because it displeases you so much and you so vigorously oppose it. How willingly and gladly I would do it if it pleased only one angel and he watched me and rejoiced over what I did! However, since it pleases my Lord Jesus Christ and all the heavenly host, and is at the same time the will and command of God my Father, why should I be so influenced by your terror as to prevent such joy in heaven, obstruct the desire of my Lord, and provide you and your demons in hell with an occasion to be gay, to laugh, and to mock me? Not so! You are not to have your way. If Christ shed his blood for me and died in my behalf, why should I not place myself in a little danger for his sake and face the effects of a powerless pestilence? If you can terrify, my Christ can strengthen. If you can slay, Christ can give life. If you have poison on your breath, Christ has more potent medicine. If my dear Christ with his command, his benefaction, and all his comfort would not mean more to my spirit than you, cursed devil, can do to my frail flesh with your false terrors, God would surely be displeased. Get thee behind me, Satan!<sup>58</sup> Christ is here, and I am his servant in this work. He shall prevail. Amen."

The other point on which to attack the devil is the sure promise of God with which he comforts all those who consider the poor and needy. He says in Ps. 41: "Blessed is he that con-

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Matt. 16:23.

sidereth the poor: the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble. The Lord will preserve him, and keep him alive; and he shall be blessed upon the earth: and thou wilt not deliver him unto the will of his enemies. The Lord will strengthen him upon the bed of languishing: thou wilt transform his whole bed in his sickness."<sup>59</sup> Are not these great and glorious promises of God, showered in abundance on those who consider the poor and needy? What is there that can frighten us or move us to act contrary to this great comfort of God? To be sure, the service that we may render to those in need is a small thing in comparison with these promises and rewards of God. Saint Paul does well to say to Timothy, "Godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come."<sup>60</sup> Godliness is nothing but divine service,<sup>61</sup> and divine service is service to one's neighbor. Experience teaches us that those who minister to the sick with love, devotion, and earnestness are generally preserved. Even if they too should be infected, it does not matter, for this psalm says, "Thou wilt transform his whole bed in his sickness," that is, God will turn his sickbed into a bed for the well. But it is not surprising if one who nurses a sick person for the sake of greed or inheritance, seeking his own good in what he does, is finally infected and defiled and afterward dies before he comes into possession of the property or inheritance.

Whoever ministers to the sick on the strength of these comforting promises (even if, needing them, he accepts fairly large wages for his services inasmuch as the laborer is worthy of his hire)<sup>62</sup> has another great comfort, namely, that he will be ministered unto. God himself will nurse him, and will be his physician as well. What a nurse God is! What a physician he is! Or rather, what are all physicians, apothecaries, and nurses in comparison with God? Should not this give a person the courage to go to the sick and minister to their needs—even if they have as many pestilential boils as they have hairs on their whole bodies and they cough up enough pestilential poison to infect a hundred people? What are all pestilences and devils in comparison with God, who here promises to be your nurse and physician? Shame on you, and again I say, shame on you, O cursed unbelief, that you should despise such rich comfort and allow a small boil and uncertain danger to frighten you more than these certain, faithful promises of God strengthen you. What would it help if all physicians were there and all the

<sup>59</sup> Ps. 41:1-3.

<sup>60</sup> I Tim. 4:8.

<sup>61</sup> *Gotts dienst.*

<sup>62</sup> Luke 10:7.

world were attending you if God were not present? On the other hand, what harm would it do if all the world forsook you and no physician stayed with you as long as God remained with you with his promises? Do you not realize that you would be surrounded by thousands of angels who would help you to trample the pestilence underfoot? It is written in Ps. 91, "He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone. Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample underfeet."<sup>63</sup>

Therefore, dear friends, let us not be so fearful as to forsake those to whom we have obligations and shamefully flee before the devil's terror, whereby we would give him pleasure and occasion to mock us while God and all his angels would undoubtedly be displeased and disgusted. It is certainly true that anyone who despises the abundant promises and commands of God and leaves his neighbors in the lurch will be guilty of breaking all the divine Commandments and will be regarded as a murderer of his forsaken neighbors. Then, I fear, the promises will be turned about and transformed into terrible threats, so that the psalm will be directed against such a person: "Cursed is he that considereth not the poor but fleeth and forsaketh them. The Lord will not deliver him in time of trouble, but will also flee from him and forsake him. The Lord will not preserve him and keep him alive, nor will he bless him upon the earth, but will deliver him into the hands of his enemies. The Lord will not strengthen him upon the bed of languishing, nor transform his bed in his sickness."<sup>64</sup> "For with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again."<sup>65</sup> It cannot be otherwise. This is terrible to hear, more terrible to expect, most terrible to experience. If God takes away his hand and flees, what can you expect other than sheer devilishness and all evil? It cannot be otherwise if neighbors are forsaken contrary to God's Word and command. This will most assuredly happen to each and every one unless he honestly repents what he has done.

I know very well that if Christ himself or his mother were now ill, everybody would be so devoted as to wish to help and serve. Everybody would try to be bold and brave. No one would want to run away. Everybody would come running. Yet they do not hear what he himself says: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."<sup>66</sup> And when he spoke of the first commandment he added, "The

<sup>63</sup> Ps. 91:11-13.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Ps. 41:1-3.

<sup>65</sup> Matt. 7:2.

<sup>66</sup> Matt. 25:40.

second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."<sup>67</sup> Here you hear that the command to love your neighbor is like unto the first commandment, that we should love God. And what you do or omit doing to your neighbor means as much as that you have done or failed to do it to God himself. If, then, you would minister to and wait upon Christ, behold, you have a sick neighbor before you. Go to him and minister to him and you will assuredly find Christ in him, not according to the person, but in his Word. If you are unwilling to minister to your neighbor, you may be sure that if Christ himself were there, you would do the same thing—run away, and let him lie there. You would have nothing but false notions (which leave you in unprofitable ignorance) as to how you would minister to Christ if he were there. They are nothing but lies, for anyone who would minister to Christ in the body would also minister to his neighbor's needs. Let this be said as a warning and admonition against shameful flight and the terror with which the devil tempts us to act against God's Word and command with respect to our neighbor and to sin too much on the left hand.

On the other hand, some sin too much on the right hand and are too daring and foolhardy. They tempt God, neglect all the things with which they ought to protect themselves against pestilence or death, scorn the use of medicine, and do not avoid the places where there has been pestilence and the persons who have had it. On the contrary, they drink and play with such persons, try in this way to demonstrate their good cheer, and say: "It is God's punishment. If he wishes to protect me from it, he will do so without medicine and any effort on my part." This is not trusting in God but tempting God, for God created medicine and gave us our reason in order that we may so manage and care for our bodies as to be well and live. Whoever does not use medicine when he has it and can make use of it without injury to his neighbor neglects his body and runs the risk of being a suicide in God's sight. One might in similar fashion neglect food and drink and clothing and shelter, be foolhardy in one's faith, and say, "If God wishes to protect me from hunger and cold, he will do so without food and clothing." Such a man would really be a suicide. As a matter of fact, it would be worse for him to neglect his body in this way and not to employ such protection against the pestilence as is available because he might infect and defile others, who would have remained alive if he had taken care of his body as he ought. So

<sup>67</sup> Matt. 22:39.

he would be responsible for his neighbor's death and would be a murderer many times over in God's sight. Indeed, such a person would be like a man who, when a house is on fire in a town, will not help put it out but lets it burn until the whole town is on fire, and says, "If God wishes, he can preserve the town without water and without quenching the flames."

Not so, my dear friend. That would not be well done. Use medicine. Take whatever may be helpful to you. Fumigate your house, yard, and street. Avoid persons and places where you are not needed or where your neighbor has recovered. Act as one who would like to help put out a general fire. What is the pestilence, after all, but a fire which consumes body and life instead of wood and straw. Meanwhile think thus: "With God's permission the enemy has sent poison and deadly dung among us, and so I will pray to God that he may be gracious and preserve us. Then I will fumigate to purify the air, give and take medicine, and avoid places and persons where I am not needed in order that I may not abuse myself and that through me others may not be infected and inflamed with the result that I become the cause of their death through my negligence. If God wishes to take me, he will be able to find me. At least I have done what he gave me to do and am responsible neither for my own death nor for the death of others. But if my neighbor needs me, I shall avoid neither person nor place but feel free to visit and help him," as has already been said. Behold, this is a true and God-fearing faith which is neither foolhardy nor rash and does not tempt God.

Whoever has succumbed to the pestilence and has recovered should likewise avoid people and be reluctant to have them near without necessity. Although he is to be helped and not forsaken in his need, as has been said, when he has recovered from his illness he must so conduct himself in his relations with others that no one is unnecessarily endangered on his account and dies because of him. "He that loveth danger," says the wise man, "shall perish therein."<sup>68</sup> If the people in a town so conducted themselves that they were bold in their faith when the need of neighbors required it, careful when there was no need, and helpful to one another in counteracting the poison wherever possible, death would indeed be light in such a town. But when it happens that some of the people are too fearful and flee from their neighbors in time of need, while others are so foolhardy that they do not help to counteract the disease but

<sup>68</sup> Ecclus. 3:26.

rather spread it, the devil will take advantage of the situation and the mortality will certainly be high. Both are very injurious to God and man, the former by fearfulness and the latter by tempting God. So the devil chases the people who flee and restrains the people who stay, and no one escapes his clutches.

Some people are even worse. When they contract the pestilential disease they keep it secret, go out among other people, and think that if they can infect and defile others with the sickness they will themselves get rid of it and become well. With this notion they frequent streets and houses in the hope of saddling others or their children and servants with the pestilence and thus saving themselves. I can well believe that the devil obliges and helps to further this notion so that it actually comes to pass. I am also told that some individuals are so desperately wicked that they carry the pestilence among the people and into houses for no other reason than that they regret that the disease has not struck there, and so they spread the pestilence as if this were a great joke, like slyly putting lice in somebody's clothes or gnats in somebody's room. I do not know whether I should believe this or not. If it is true, I do not know whether we Germans are human beings or devils. To be sure, there are immoderately coarse and wicked people, and the devil is not inactive. If such people are found, it would be my suggestion that the judge should seize them by the hair and turn them over to the hangman<sup>69</sup> as real, malicious murderers and scoundrels. What are they but assassins in a town? They are like assassins who plunge a knife into a person so stealthily that it cannot be determined who did it. So these people infect a child here and a woman there and nobody knows how it happened. Meanwhile they go away laughing, as if they had done a good deed. It would be better to live among wild beasts than among such murderers. I do not know how to counsel these murderers, for they pay no attention. I commend them to the government, which must take care of them with the help and counsel not of physicians, but of the hangman. God himself commanded in the Old Testament that lepers be removed from a community and be required to live outside of a town in order to prevent infection.<sup>70</sup> We have even more reason to do this in the present dangerous sickness. Whoever gets it should at once remove himself or be removed from contact with other people and should quickly seek help in the form of medicine. He should be aided and not forsaken in his need, as I have made sufficiently

<sup>69</sup> *Uberantwortet sie Meister Hansen.*

<sup>70</sup> Lev., chs. 13; 14.

clear above, in order that the infection might in time be checked, for the benefit not only of the individual but of the whole community, which would become infected if the disease were allowed to break out and spread.

Our present pestilence here in Wittenberg had its origin in nothing else than such contagion. Thank God, the air is still fresh and pure. It is only through foolhardiness and neglect that some few have been infected. However, the devil has had his fun in spreading terror among us and causing flight. May God hold him in check. Amen.

This, then, is my understanding and opinion about fleeing when in peril of death. If you have another opinion, may God disclose it to you. Amen.<sup>71</sup>

Martin Luther.

TO NICHOLAS HAUSMANN. August 27, 1529

*An epidemic of what was called the "engelische Schwyssucht," or English sweating sickness, swept through some parts of Germany in the summer of 1529. It appeared in Magdeburg during the middle weeks of August. It was reported that in Zwickau a hundred people became ill in one night, and on one day (August 14) nineteen were buried. Luther here suggests that fear of the disease was often as disastrous as the disease itself, and he shows an awareness of the effect of the mind on the body. [Text in Latin; WA, Br, V, 138-140.]*

Grace and peace in Christ.

My dear Nicholas:

Although I had nothing of importance to write, I did not wish this messenger to go to Zwickau without a letter from me. The English plague is said to be epidemic among you and in Zerbst. Many think that it is epidemic here among us too, but I do not believe it. Our prefect<sup>72</sup> has made himself ill with his own imagination; he had no other symptoms of illness except his own ideas. For if these are the real beginnings of that disease I should have had it often during these last three years or more. Even last night I broke out in a sweat and awoke in distress, and my thoughts began to trouble me. If I had given way to them,

<sup>71</sup> Omitted here is a section (WA, XXIII, 371-379) later appended by Luther in which he provides instruction on the preparation of the soul for death and on burial.

<sup>72</sup> John Metzsch, on whom see Chapter IX.

I should have taken to my bed, as others who make martyrs of themselves have done.

I write this so that you may join me in telling the people not to be afraid and not to allow their thoughts to bring down upon them an illness which they do not yet have. We have aroused, almost by force, many who had already taken to their beds with the sweating—Aurogallus,<sup>73</sup> Bleikard,<sup>74</sup> Dr. Brück,<sup>75</sup> Master Christian,<sup>76</sup> and others. They now laugh about it and say that they would perhaps still be in bed if they had not been aroused. Not that I think the disease should be made light of, but it is necessary to distinguish carefully because we see that more people contract the sickness from imagination and fear than from actual contagion. Imagination brings on the attack, and the state of mind affects the body.

But pray for me, a sinner, and if your guest<sup>77</sup> is still there, greet him in my name. Christ the Lord be with you. Amen.

Yours,

Martin Luther.

August 27, 1529.

TO ELECTOR JOHN FREDERICK. July 9, 1535

*Through Chancellor Gregory Brück, the elector had advised Luther to leave Wittenberg on account of the pestilence, which had showed signs of increasing since the beginning of summer. Two days after Luther had written the following letter in reply, plans were made by the elector and university officials once again to move the whole university temporarily from Wittenberg to Jena. A week later the students were informed of the plan, and by the end of the month lectures were begun in Jena, where monastery buildings were utilized for the purpose. When he wrote this letter Luther felt that reports of the pestilence were exaggerated. He remained in Wittenberg when his colleagues moved to Jena. [Text in German; WA, Br, VII, 200-208.]*

To the serene, highborn prince and lord, John Frederick, duke of Saxony, elector and marshal of the Holy Roman Empire, landgrave in Thuringia, margrave of Meissen, my gracious lord: grace and peace in Christ and my poor prayers.

Serene, highborn Prince, most gracious Lord:

Your Grace's chancellor, Dr. Bruck, has informed me of

<sup>73</sup> Matthew Aurogallus (1490-1543), professor of Hebrew.

<sup>74</sup> Bleikard Sindringer, professor of law.

<sup>75</sup> The Saxon chancellor, Gregory Brück.

<sup>76</sup> It is not clear just who is meant. <sup>77</sup> John Cellarius (1490-1542).