

They're only in it for the cash

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In his excursus on Karlstadt's theses in 1521/22, Hermann Barge¹, like Carl Friedrich Jäger² before him, assigned these „Pronunciata“ (i.e. principles) to Karlstadt. They were contained without a name in a (second) Basel collection of Wittenberg theses printed in 1522. The theological discussion group at the University of Wittenberg might have debated them on the occasion of a circular disputation or the awarding of a degree. Since the (first) Basel Collection of Wittenberg theses published in September 1521 does not contain these principles on tithe levies, they were probably formulated in the final third of 1521.



Peasant (following a monk) brings tribute to the monastery

source: Thomas Murner, *Von dem grossen Lutherischen Narren*, (Strasbourg) 1522 (VD 16 M 7088), fol. K 3^{verso}

Karlstadt's principles "on tithing" are thematically close to his 1519 theses on the commandment "do not steal (non furtum facies)"³, and offer an early basis for discussion of

¹ Herman Barge, *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt*, 2 vols., Leipzig, 1905; vol. 1, no. 21.

² Carl. F. Jäger, *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt*, Stuttgart, 1856, p. 262.

³ 12 Conclusiones: De legis non furtum facies impletione et testamentorum legatione, in: *Kritische Gesamtausgabe der Schriften und Briefe Andreas Bodensteins von Karlstadt*, vol. III: Briefe und Schriften 1520, Heidelberg, 2020, no. 172, p. 553f. [Online edition](#)

Reformation criticism of the tithing system for financing church ministries. His rejection of the tithing system seems to have been finalized at the same time as a group of anti-reform Wittenberg canons opposed the abolition of private masses. On December 10 (1521), Karlstadt noted the fatal combination of church ministries and a secure income in a letter to supporters in the Saxon mining city Annaberg. The biblical-juridical radicalism of Karlstadt's principles on the imposition of tithes suggests that positions were hardening in Wittenberg at the end of November 1521. Related to the indispensability of preaching (th. 7 and th. 8), thesis 9 is striking: In connection with Paul's reservation about speech and teaching on the part of women (1 Cor. 14,34) Karlstadt concludes that women could not receive tithes without sin because they did not preach (perhaps in reference to women's monasteries). Karlstadt's decision to end his celibate priesthood, probably already finalized at that time, combined with considerations of an alternative form of income, may have influenced his search for biblical guidance on the subject. Statements associated with Karlstadt point in this same direction, such as the one that if the Evangelical Mass did not go ahead, he would no longer hold Mass, and that he wished to buy a house in Wittenberg and provide for his own upkeep like other peasants. Karlstadt's 12th thesis ("Let those who till the field eat of it, and those who plant the vine drink of it, and no one else; whether you call their share tithes or elevenths") matches with changing his location first to Wörlitz (near Wittenberg) and then to Orlamünde. The very first proposals for this kind of evangelical autonomous lifestyle were developed by Ulrich Hugwald (1520/1521)⁴ and could have given Karlstadt impulses for doing so.

Principles on tithing

1. Tithes are not justified in the new law [= NT].
2. The argument from the old law [= OT] to the new does not hold in this case.
3. It is a grievous error when priests tell their Christian flock, wherever it is, that tithes are obligatory.
4. Tithes, as currently exacted, do more harm than good, as they incite many to disgraceful idleness.
5. There is no mention of tithing anywhere in the New Law except where Christ deals with the Pharisees⁵.
6. Anyone who collects tithes from an altar, to which he does not minister, is guilty of a grave crime, indeed he is drinking and eating himself to hell.
7. The primary obligation of everyone who ministers at the altar is the proclamation of the word of God⁶.
8. So anyone who does not preach cannot receive tithes without sin.
9. Since women should be silent in the church and not teach, it would be sinful for them to receive tithes.

⁴ Thomas Kaufmann, *Der Anfang der Reformation*, Tübingen, 2012, p. 255.

⁵ Mt 23,23; Lc 11,42.

⁶ 1. Tim 5,17 (and th. 14).

10. Offering tithes to an outsider, that is, to a thief and robber, is contrary to love of a neighbor in need.
11. Therefore we should courageously abolish the tithe and reallocate it to the poor of our community.
12. Let those who till the field eat of it, and those who plant the vine drink of it,⁷ and no one else; whether you call their share tithes or elevenths.
13. Neither Christ nor the apostles instruct the laity, who provide their ministers with what is necessary for life, to pay tithes as well.
14. Every city should therefore have its own bishop by divine right⁸, that is a priest who is actively preaching and teaching. And such a priest is worthy of twofold honor⁹.
15. Anyone who judges tithing differently, is trampling both Christ and Paul underfoot.

Translation by Peter Matheson (Dunedin – New Zealand <http://peter-matheson.com/>)

⁷ 1. Cor 9,7.

⁸ Ulrich Bubenheimer, *Consonantia Theologiae et Iurisprudentiae*, p. 233: „Der Begriff des ius divinum wird zu einem vielgebrauchten Schlagwort in Karlstadts Thesenreihen und Schriften.“

⁹ 1. Tim 5,17: „Qui bene praesunt presbyteri, duplici honore digni habeantur, maxime qui laborant in verbo et doctrina.“