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**Date:**  23 September 1710

**Sender:**  Need, Committee for Foreign

**Sender Place:**  Amsterdam, Netherlands

**Receiver:**  Runckel, Johann Ludwig

**Receiver Place:**  [Bern]

**Language:**  English

**Translation:**

63. September 23, 1710. A letter from the Committee for Foreign Needs to Runckel about his proposal to settle the refugees by draining two large marshes in the area of Bern. They discuss a typical Dutch reclamation approach to draining land below sea level. They think the project is objectionable unless full freedom of religion is guaranteed by a solemn agreement. The letter is accompanied by 100 copies of a confession of faith for distribution.

[recto]

Right[[1]](#footnote-14) Honorable, etc.

With great joy and pleasure we have perceived from your missive of the 30th of last month not only with how much diligence and zeal you continue to persist in offering a helping hand and your most noble efforts on behalf of our oppressed fellow believers in your area, but also [that] because of it, there already appears to be a considerable change in sentiments with a few moderates. Neither can we doubt that such effort from such worthy governments as ours, and from their similar and Christian ministers, shall certainly be blessed by the God of heaven ultimately, in particular when such pious subjects are the object of their support.

For this reason it pleases us very much that they are starting to look about them for a means to save our dear brothers and sisters in their fatherland, even if it was about no more than escaping from under the eye of such [hounding] ministers, who do not want to put up with them in, and under, the jurisdiction of their congregations. If only it may be in such a place or district where those good people can make a living in an honest way and can live and practice their religion according to the dictates of their conscience in liberty and quiet peaceableness according to God’s word!

This is the reason that we have carefully, to the best of our ability, considered the proposal you communicated to us, confidentially, concerning the digging or drying out of two marshes: on which subject we would like to share our thoughts. Firstly, we are not at all disinclined, nor do we in the least doubt that all the congregations of our persuasion in the Netherlands, Hamburg, and other places will willingly lend our fellow believers in your land a helping hand for the purpose of attaining the above-mentioned goal, whether by providing some financial means or anything that can be reasonably considered to be not without result, but would bring about the desired goal. For this reason we would like to be somewhat enlightened and instructed on the following difficulties and hindrances, namely:

1. Whether the marshes named are above the water of the rivers on which they appear to us to be situated; and whether there would be opportunity by digging out or making one or more canals to divert the water together with the flooding from the surrounding mountains into the aforesaid rivers, lakes, or seas in the winter as well as in the summer; also, how much would have to be dug before fertile soil could be reached.

2. Then, whether these marshes lie even with or below the local water level: this would mean that it would be necessary to pump out the water that is already covering it and continually flows from the mountains, especially in the fall and the winter, with mills,[[2]](#footnote-15) etc. In which case the risk

involved would make it necessary first to build an adequate dike around [the area]; and whether the ground is firm enough to carry such a dike; similarly, whether no springs would open up which cannot be stopped, as has been experienced in this country. This would therefore make all this work and effort fruitless and because of this no dry land would be available or preserved anywhere. These and various other [difficulties], which our ignorance of the area around it disallows our specifying, prevent us from giving you a positive go-ahead on this for the time being.

However, observing from your letter that you have spoken to people in your area who have understanding of this, we most sincerely request that you consider, with them, the aforesaid and other matters. If possible, please be so kind as to set up a general plan as to how to begin and how to carry it out and to send the plan to us, not forgetting a calculation for the regulating lock that would be necessary, and particularly the sum that would be required for the friends to accomplish it, so that they could feed themselves and exist there with wife and children.

And all those difficulties and the sudden [need] of such a considerable sum of money have as sole purpose and foundation the everlasting and continuous free and unhindered practice of religion for our dear fellow believers, who are now in your area or may come yet. No doubt you will readily perceive that we cannot agree to anything until this issue is formally or otherwise permitted and approved for our friends in the most forceful terms of an agreement. For this reason it is our humble opinion that this [agreement] should first be worked out and firmly established by the honorable Great Council of the Illustrious Canton of Bern.

In order that they might be moved to this sooner and more easily and that they perceive as clearly as the sun at mid-day that these, their subjects, are by no means of the opinions [verso] of which they are ignorantly accused in the published edicts, we are hereby sending you, in response to your (most appreciated) request and desire mentioned in your last letter, the amount of 100 booklets of their confession[[3]](#footnote-16) printed in German. The confessions are taught and lived out in all our congregations, not only in all the Netherlands, Hamburg, Emden, but also in Germany and elsewhere

where they are found, at least in the main points.

These [confessions] we have shown to the three Bernese brothers, when they were here, and they declared them to be the same as those taught and cultivated in their own country. This was done in their solemn testimony before the mayors of Amsterdam, which is to be seen clearly and discovered printed and bound at the back of the confessions sent herewith. For this reason we most sincerely beg you, in response to your very Christian and liberal request, to distribute these as widely there, as what you think may be of the most use, and if you require a greater number, just please inform us.

In the meantime we cannot resist laying before you for consideration, and requesting that you, together with Lord St.-Saphorin, who we understand has arrived felicitously with you at the beginning of this month, first and above all, persuade the much honored Council of the Illustrious Canton of Bern to release the present prisoners. And [they should] call them in again or grant freedom to the Mennonites, most pitiably dispersed, give them the support described above or, if no other way can be found, gather and outfit them for their departure.

We most sincerely request to be instructed and informed as soon as possible on all this, and especially concerning the above-mentioned difficulties and objections with respect to the proposed marshes; all the more because we intend to convene and call together some delegates from all our neighboring congregations at the beginning of November for the purpose of proposing all these matters and to persuade and advise them to contribute the required sum of money. [This information] is bound to produce more results if we have been adequately equipped to resolve and do away with all the hindrances that will be brought forward, using the power of reasoning.

We also look forward eagerly to hearing whether or what progress about these matters you together with Lord St.-Saphorin (to whom we request you to pass on our very sincere greeting and our heartfelt congratulations over his felicitous arrival with you) have been able to make with the honored High Council of the Illustrious Canton of Bern. Whereby, after commendation to the protection of the Almighty, and our prayer that it may please Him to bless you, your family, and all your important affairs, we remain,

Letter of the Committee to Mr. Runckel

dated September 23, 1710.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Right honorable sir, Your willing servants and friends

the Committee members of the Mennonites in the Netherlands,

P.S. Before we can be involved with the signed,

Illustrious Canton of Bern or their Council, we

should know calculations in advance of the Wilhem van Maurik

money, etc., needed for that purpose in order Jan Willink Jansz

to see if we would be able to support Hermannus Schijn

and sustain it. Farewell. Abraham Jacobz Fries

Frans van Aken

Cornelis Beets.

As the mail wagon by way of Cologne to Frankfort did not leave before the 25th the above letter was dispatched and the booklets with an address to Mr. Jacob Philippe d’Orville at Frankfort via the Arnhem mail wagon. It was resolved by the signers to inform the friends at Mannheim, etc., that this has been carried out.

63a. September 23, 1710.*Appendix to a reprint of the 1691 edition of Dordrecht Confession of Faith. This is another version of Document 43, an official declaration recorded in French before the mayors and council of Amsterdam by Bendicht Brechtbühl, Hans Bürki, and Melchior Zahler, dated May 22, 1710. There are subtle differences between that French version and this present German version printed for circulation in Switzerland.*

*Exactly when this appendix was actually printed is not known, but it was sent with Document 63, a letter dated September 23, 1710, hence the date given above.*

*The edition of the Dordrecht Confession, to which the appendix was attached, although dated 1691, was probably reprinted between July and September 1710 in response to a request by Runckel.*[[4]](#footnote-17) *Because of numerous minor variations on the title page, it is obvious that this is not the same as the other 1691 edition, the printer simply having copied the earlier title page. This Dordrecht Confession in the Zentralbibliothek Zürich is the only known copy*[[5]](#footnote-18) *with the appendix.*

[page 113]

Copy gratis

We, the mayors and rulers of the city of Amsterdam, give notice to each and every one, certifying as truth what follows: That before us appeared Bendicht Brechtbühl, Hans Bürki, and Melchior Zahler, having been, respectively, preacher, elder, and overseer of the congregations of Anabaptists or Mennonites of the Illustrious Canton of Bern in Switzerland. They declared that, after a considerable time of imprisonment endured with 52 other people, their companions in their faith, both men and women, because of the teaching of their religion, they were finally led under escort and guarded by an officer and several soldiers. They were led as prisoners into this province, by order of the rulers of the favorably mentioned Canton, to be transported subsequently to America.

But that when they arrived together in Mannheim in the Palatinate, old and feeble men as well as women, in number 32 people, were released from their company. And that the 23 remaining, among whom were those [three] appearing [before us], were taken away, down to Nijmegen, where [page

114] the 23 persons likewise were also released, presumably because people were aware of the favorable decision made by their High and Mighty Lords of the States General of the United Netherlands on March 22, 1710, on the subject of transport of the said prisoners through these lands.

That those appearing [before us] at present in this city are well aware that the accusation—which has been made against them and their brothers in faith in regard to the teaching of their religion—is founded chiefly on these three points, namely:

First, that they deny that the office of the magistrate has been established by God.

Second, that they refuse to take any oath.

In third place, that they decline to help to defend their fatherland.

Those appearing here, having been condemned for these reasons, have been neither willing nor able to refrain from making an explanation in a very formal manner as a statement of their mind or heart before the praiseworthy government of the place where they are staying at present. The clearest testimony is given that [page 115] the accusation mentioned above originally flows from and arises out of a false opinion, in that it does not make a sufficient analysis[[6]](#footnote-19) of their confession and that of their brothers in faith on the subject of the three points mentioned above and [analysis] of such a report as has been given to their government. Since those appearing [before us] desire to take up the matter gladly and in love and in no manner throw suspicion on any of their fellow countrymen and least of all the highly respected Lords and Rulers of the Illustrious Canton of Bern, on the contrary they feel obliged that they must always honor and mention them in every way with great respect.

Consequently, the above-mentioned Bendicht Brechtbühl, Hans Bürki, and Melchior Zahler, together and each of them separately, have openly testified and declared before us, mayors and rulers of this city that their confession–and the confession of their fellow believers with whom they have associated with in the Canton of Bern–on the subject of the points consists as follows.

First, they believe and recognize that the state or government is ordained by God Almighty in order [page 116] to punish the wicked and to protect the pious.[[7]](#footnote-20) And consequently that each Christian man is obligated to

recognize the government as a servant of God. And not only to recognize the government, but also according to his just obligation not to offer resistance, in fact rather much more for them to pray God that under their rule[[8]](#footnote-21) they could lead a quiet and peaceable life. Accordingly, it is necessary to give them what one owes, tribute to whom tribute is due, duty to whom duty is due, fear to whom fear is due, and honor to whom honor is due (Romans 13).[[9]](#footnote-22)

Second, they hold that it is proper for them according to the doctrine of Christ (Matthew 5)[[10]](#footnote-23) never to swear an oath, but rather in their affirmation they should hold just to “Yes,” that is “Yes,” and to “No,” that is “No.” And they understand that by uttering these words they are as strongly bound as all the others who swear an oath. In addition they recognize that, in the case of transgression of their affirmation given by “Yes” or “No,” they are transgressors of the commandment of God and consequently subject to punishment of the sovereign government.[[11]](#footnote-24)

And in the third place, that they are ready to give money to the government for their protection and safekeeping, insofar as it will have taxed them according to [page 117] their capability and what they are able to bear. Also that, in case of hardship, in place of employing arms they are indeed ready to work on fortifications, as much as would be possible for them.

Those appearing before us requested very humbly that we would be willing to take full cognizance of the open testimony and declaration made before us and have it registered in the office of our secretary in order that, at all times, it would be available where and however it might be needful.

And, since the often named Bendicht Brechtbühl, Hans Bürki, and Melchior Zahler were not fully understandable in their own language and would not be able easily and always to comprehend the Dutch language, everything reported above was done through an interpreter, David Walschard, notary public in this city, who understands and speaks the German and Dutch languages. And he has declared to us under oath that he truly and faithfully made his interpretation, as surely as God Almighty would help him with the interpretation.

In witness whereof we have affixed the seal of this city below concerning these matters [page 118] and have had the document signed by one of our secretaries, and further have ordered that the document will be registered in the office of our secretary. May 22, 1710.

In compliance with the order

of the gentlemen, mayors

and rulers named above,

was signed

J. Hees

Registered in Great Record Book Nine,

Folio. 106 verso, in the Office of the Secretary

of the City of Amsterdam.

Seal being impressed in this space

of the City of

Amsterdam.

Title page of a hitherto unnoticed German edition of the Dordrecht Confession, *Christliche Glaubens-Bekentnus*, Amsterdam, 1691 [1710]. Although the title page gives the date 1691, this is a separate printing as can be seen by comparing it closely with the description given for the 1691 edition, number 11549 in the Springer *Mennonite Bibliography 1631-1961.* It is a surviving copy of the one hundred copies printed especially for Runckel with the testimonies of the three Swiss Brethren in an appendix at the back. This copy was located in the Central Library of Zurich, Switzerland, by Christian Scheidegger. It is mentioned in Document 63a and several other documents.

1. This document is also copied in Vorsterman’s Relaes (A 1392) on pp. 58-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
2. The Dutch seem to have windmills in view here. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
3. The Dordrecht Confession of Faith was first published in German at Amsterdam in 1664 with a foreword by T. T. van Sittert. Hanspeter Jecker, Ketzer-Rebellen-Heilige: Das Basler Täufertum von 1580-1700 (Liestal: Verlag des Kantons Basel-Landschaft, 1998), pp. 463 ff. Other German editions published before the date of the present document were in Amsterdam in 1686 and 1691. Another German edition was printed in 1711. Irvin B. Horst, Mennonite Confession of Faith (Lancaster, Pa.: Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society, 1988), p. 74.Beginning with van Stittert, Astrid van Schlachta gives an extensive analysis of Mennonite defenses of Anabaptism. Gefahr oder Segen? Die Täufer in der politischen Kommunikation (Göttingen: V & R Unipress, 2009), pp. 199-205. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
4. 63a Runckel first inquired about a confession of faith in Document 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
5. Lavater states in 1991 that no copy is known to exist. Lavater, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
6. or discrimination. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
7. I Pet. 2:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
8. I Tim. 2:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
9. Rom. 13:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
10. Matt. 5:33-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
11. George Huntston Williams, “Sectarian Ecumenicity: Reflections on a Little Noticed Aspect of the Radical Reformation,” Review and Expositor (Spring 1967), p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)