THE MODERN APPLICATION OF
MARTIN LUTHER'S *OPEN LETTER ON TRANSLATING*

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Translating the Bible has been one of the functions of the church to help meet the needs of people for personal study of God's Word. As early as the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, there was an attempt to make the reading of the Scriptures intelligible in the language of the people—in this case orally (Neh 8:1-8)—although the first real translating of the Scriptures took place much later, namely in the production of the LXX and the Aramaic targums.[1] With this brief historical perspective we will proceed to a discussion of Martin Luther's *Open Letter on Translating* in which the reformer has set down the principles which he thinks are proper for translating.[2] We will endeavor to show how these principles are relevant for present concepts and practices.

Without doubt, Martin Luther is a giant in the field of translating.[3] E. G. Schwiebert concurs with Oskar Thulin that Luther's translating of the Bible was the "crowning accomplishment" of Luther's whole life work.[4] K. A. Strand points out that "with Luther, a new era for the German Bible began. It was an era which ushered in a truly widespread dissemination of the Scriptures among the German people. It was an era significant for the stabilization of the German language through the

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[1] Ira M. Price, *Ancestry of our English Bible* (3d rev. ed.; New York, 1956). pp. 50-71, 101-108, has provided an excellent discussion of these developments.

[2] This document, the *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*, is given in English translation as "On Translating: An Open Letter" in T. G. Tappert, ed., *Selected Writings of Martin Luther, IV* (Philadelphia, 1967), trans. by C. M. Jacobs, rev. by E. T. Bachmann, 173-194. Hereinafter abbreviated SW, IV.

[3] M. Reu gives the following five points with illustrations to show the greatness of Luther's ability at translating: (1) wealth of words and choice of words; (2) construction of expression and phrases; (3) construction of sentences; (4) order of words; and (5) sonorous, melodious, rhythmic and musical quality of his translations. M. Reu, *Luther's German Bible* (Columbus, Ohio, 1934), pp. 277-283, cited by K. A. Strand, *Luther's "September Bible" in Facsimile* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1972), pp. 11, 12. Strand's work hereinafter cited as LSBF.

[4] E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis, Mo., 1950), p. 643.

medium of the German Bible."[5] With this "new era" of the German Bible also came some very important points that are helpful today in making the Bible intelligible to the common people. We will note these as we proceed with an analysis of Luther's *Open Letter on Translating*.[6]

It may be observed that the "new era" of vernacular Bibles was by no means restricted to Germany. To mention just one example, we may recall that a similar process was taking place in England. William Tyndale said at that time to a churchman that if God would spare his life, ere many years he would cause a boy driving the plough to know more of the Scriptures than *he* did.[7]

On Sept. 15, 1530, Luther published his famous open letter in which he set forth his views on translating. This letter was to deal with two questions posed by "N," a pseudonym for Luther's lord and friend: (1) the Reformer's translation of Rom 3:28 (righteousness by faith *alone*), as well as his translation in general; and (2) the question of intercession by departed saints.[8]

Bachmann, along with the editors of the Weimar edition and the Clemen edition, suggests that the questions posed by "N" were a literary device for airing the two doctrinal issues of which the first was intimately connected with translating. The second question is "palmed off" by Luther with the comment

[5] Strand, *Reformation Bibles in the Crossfire* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1961), p. 96.

[6] Luther wrote this letter while at the Coburg Castle, awaiting the outcome of the Diet of Augsburg. During the time of this "wilderness" experience (from Apr. 23 to Oct. 4, 1530) Luther was working on translating the prophetic section of the OT besides keeping in touch with the doctrinal issues at the Diet. Bachmann, in his Introduction in SW, IV, 169-172, says that it was the combination of the doctrinal issues at Augsburg and the work of translating at the Coburg Castle which gave rise to the *Open Letter on Translating*. Other examples of Luther's attitude on translating can be found in the "Postface" to the 1531 translation of the Psalms and *Summarien über Ursachen des Dolmetschens*. See LSBF, p. 9, n. 21. For other contributions, see also M. Trinklein, "Luther's Insight into the Translator's Task," *BT*, 21 (1970), 80-88.

[7] See, e.g., M. G. King, ed., *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (Old Tappan, N.J., 1968), p. 169. E. A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden, 1964), p. 14, remarks that Tyndale's work parallels Luther's and shows an unmistakable dependence upon Luther's principles of translation.

[8] See SW, IV, 170, 171.

that he would treat this point more fully in a sermon. His basic argument is that the Bible does not command the practice.[9]

Luther's *Open Letter on Translating* could be considered as a polemic against Jerome Emser, the "Dresden scribbler."[10] The basic reason for this derogatory description is that the Catholics condemned Luther's translation but that Emser then provided a translation in which he plagiarized Luther's work, and the Catholics said that this translation was good. Emser did make a few changes, but Luther indicated that "not all of it pleases me, still I can let it go; it does me no particular harm, so far as the text is concerned."[11]

The question had been raised over Luther's use of *sola* (*solum*) in Rom 3:28 when neither the Latin nor the Greek had it.[12] In explaining why he chose to use "by faith alone" here, Luther gives the very important points of translating to which I wish to call attention, as mentioned above:

1. The translator is to translate into the nature of the German language.

> But it is the nature of our German language that in speaking of two things, one of which is affirmed and the other denied, we use the word *solum* (*allein* [= alone, only]) along with the word *nicht* [not] or *kein* [no]. For example, we say, "The farmer brings *allein* grain and *kein* money. . . ."
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> In all these phrases, this is the German usage, even though it is not the Latin or Greek usage. It is the nature of the German language to add the word *allein* in order that the word *nicht* or *kein* may be clearer and more complete.[13]

2. One is to inquire how the common man would use the language.

> We do not have to inquire of the literal Latin, how we are to speak German. . . . Rather we must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly. That way they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them.[14]

[9] SW, IV, 190.

[10] SW, IV, 176.

[11] SW, IV, 177. Cf. Strand, *Reformation Bibles*, pp. 65, 66. Luther's "September Bible" came out in 1522, and by Sept. 21, 1523, Emser attacked the translation with his critique, "On what ground and for what cause Luther's translation of the New Testament should justly be forbidden the common man." Cf. ibid., pp. 35-60.

[12] SW, IV, 174, 177, 179-181.

[13] SW, IV, 181.

[14] *Ibid.*

3. Translators are to have a great store of words for each word or expression in the original because one vernacular word may not fit all contexts.

> I believe that with the Greek *kecharitomene* [Luke 1:28] St. Luke, a master of the Hebrew and Greek tongues, wanted to render and clarify the Hebrew word that the angel used. And I think that the angel Gabriel spoke with Mary as he speaks with Daniel, calling him *Chamudoth* and *Ish chamudoth, vir desideriorum,* that is, "You dear Daniel"; for that is Gabriel's way of speaking as we see in the book of Daniel. Now if I were to translate the angel's words literally, with the skill of these asses, I should have to say this, "Daniel, thou man of desires." That would be pretty German! A German would hear, of course, that *Man, Lueste,* and *begyrunge* are German words—though not altogether pure German words, for *lust* and *begyr* would be better. But when the words are thus put together: "thou man of desires," no German would know what is said. He would think, perhaps, that Daniel is full of evil desires. Well that would be fine translating! Therefore I must let the literal words go and try to learn how the German says that which the Hebrew expresses with *ish chamudoth.* I find then that the German says this, "You dear Daniel," "You dear Mary," or "You gracious maid"; "You lovely maiden," "You gentle girl," and the like. For a translator must have a great store of words, so that he can have them on hand in the event that one word does not fit in every context.[15]

4. The exact literal translation may in special cases have to be retained, where important issues depend on precise terminology.

> On the other hand I have not just gone ahead anyway and disregarded altogether the exact wording of the original. Rather with my helpers I have been very careful to see that where everything turns on a single passage, I have kept to the original quite literally and have not lightly departed from it. For example, in John 6 [:27] Christ says, "Him has God the Father sealed [*versiegelt*]." It would have been better German to say, "Him has God the Father signified [*gezeichnet*]," or, "He it is whom God the Father means [*meinet*]." But I preferred to do violence to the German language rather than to depart from the word. Ah, translating is not every man's skill as the mad saints imagine. It requires a right, devout, honest, sincere, God-fearing, Christian, trained, informed, and experienced heart. Therefore I hold that no false Christian or factious spirit can be a decent translator.[16]

5. The translator must take into account the immediate contextual meaning in light of the author's whole message.

> Now I was not relying on and following the nature of the languages alone, however, when, in Romans 3 [:28] I inserted the word *solum* (alone). Actually the text itself and the meaning of St. Paul urgently require and demand it. For in that very passage he is dealing with the main point

of Christian doctrine, namely, that we are justified by faith in Christ without any works of the law. And Paul cuts away all works so completely, as even to say that the works of the law—though it is God's law and word—do not help us for justification [Rom 3:20].[17]

6. It is necessary (and right) to translate it as plainly and fully as possible. It is, says Luther,

> not only right but also highly necessary to speak it out as plainly and fully as possible, "Faith alone saves, without works." I am only sorry that I did not also add the words *alle* and *aller,* and say, "without *any* works of *any* laws," so that it would have been expressed with perfect clarity.[18]

These principles give an excellent basis for present trends in translating.[19] They provide a vital factor if people of today are to be reached by Scripture, and it is interesting to observe that the American Bible Society has been proceeding on such principles. Their first purpose in translating the NT in what we have now as the *Today's English Version, Good News for Modern Man* was to provide an understandable Bible for those people who use English as their own mother tongue or as an acquired language.[20] Phenomenal success has now made the TEV the world's most widely distributed paperback NT. Since 1966 when it was first published, until Oct. 1972, more than 35 million copies have gone into world-wide circulation.[21]

In connection with the recently published books of Psalms

[17] SW, IV, 187.

[18] SW, IV, 190.

[19] Cf. also the similar principles of Luther's contemporary Etienne Dolet (1540), summarized by Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating,* pp. 15-17: (1) The translator must understand perfectly the content and intention of the author whom he is translating. (2) The translator should have a perfect knowledge of the language from which he is translating and an equally excellent knowledge of the language into which he is translating. (3) The translator should avoid the tendency to translate word for word, for to do so is to destroy the meaning of the original and to ruin the beauty of expression. (4) The translator should employ forms of speech in common usage. (5) Through his choice and order of words the translator should produce a total overall effect with appropriate "tone."

For modern theories of translation, see J. A. Loewen, "Form and Meaning in Translation," *BT,* 22 (1971), 169-174; P. Ellingworth, "Talking About Translations," *BT,* 23 (1972), 219-224; Nida, "Linguistics and Translators," *BT,* 23 (1972), 225-233; and Nida, "Implications of Contemporary Linguistics for Biblical Scholarship," *JBL,* 91 (1972), 73-89.

[20] The NT in *Today's English Version, Good News for Modern Man* (New York, 1966), p. iv.

[21] *American Bible Society Record,* 8 (1972), 5.

and Job (appearing in 1970 and 1971, respectively), the following principles of translation are set forth:

> Like the New Testament in *Today's English Version*, this is a distinctively new translation that does not conform to traditional vocabulary and style, but seeks to express the meaning of the Hebrew text in words and forms accepted as standard by people everywhere who employ English as a means of communication. . . . Where there is general agreement that the Hebrew text cannot be translated as it now stands, the translation employs the evidence of other ancient texts or follows present-day scholarly consensus. All such modifications are noted in the footnotes.[22]

Also the following is worth quoting:

> As a distinctly new translation, it does not conform to traditional vocabulary or style, but seeks to express the meaning of the Greek text in words and forms accepted as standard by people everywhere who employ English as a means of communication. *Today's English Version* of the New Testament attempts to follow, in this century, the example set by the authors of the New Testament books who, for the most part, wrote in the standard, or common, form of the Greek language used throughout the Roman Empire. As much as possible, words and forms of English not in current use have been avoided; but no rigid limit has been set to the vocabulary employed.[23]

It is obvious that the translators of The American Bible Society are following the principles that Martin Luther followed. This, we may assume, accounts very much for the success that has attended their translation. It is interesting that Nida has made the following statement after describing Luther's principles by which the Bible was made understandable and available to the masses:

> Fortunately, in a number of biblical translations now coming out in English and other world languages there seems to be a growing awareness of the necessity of vital communication. At last, some of the meaningless phrases are giving way to sometimes blunt, but intelligible, language.[24]

In the above discussion I have tried to treat fairly Luther's principles of translating, indicating their value; but we must also disagree with a radical application, such as R. H. Bainton has pointed out:

> Palestine has moved west. And this is what happened to a degree in Luther's rendering. Judea was transplanted to Saxony, and the road from

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[22] *Today's English Version, Job for Modern Man* (New York, 1971) , p. vi.

[23] *Today's English Version, Good News for Modern Man,* p. iv.

[24] Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating,* p. 29. Nida is a member of the American Bible Society Translations Department (p. v) . It is interesting to note that he acknowledges receiving help from colleagues and friends for his book. Among these is listed R. G. Bratcher, the translator in charge of *Today's English Version.* Realizing this fact throws light on Nida's statement about the forthcoming translations.

Jericho to Jerusalem ran through the Thuringian forest. By nuances and turns of expression Luther enhanced the graphic in terms of the local.[25]

How much this was actually carried out in Luther's translating, it is difficult to say, but the point to be made is this: The Bible story occurred at a certain time and place, and this must be kept in mind in order for accuracy to be maintained. If there are technical terms that need explaining, footnotes should be used to give explanations and relationships. The important point in translating is to make the Bible understandable, but not necessarily to transform it to modern customs.

In looking at Luther as a translator—seeing the principles that he used and advocated—we find that they are extremely up-to-date and are successfully being employed today. It is important to know these principles and use them in dissemination of the good news of salvation to modern man.

In closing, it will be fitting to quote a paragraph from Luther's letter of Dec. 18, 1521, to Johann Lang in Erfurt, written during the Reformer's stay at the Wartburg Castle:

I may stay hidden in this place until Easter. Meanwhile, I plan to write the Postil and to translate the New Testament into the vernacular, which our friends desire. I hear that you are doing the same thing. Keep on as you have begun. Oh that every city had its own translator and that this Book could be found in all languages, hands, eyes, ears, and hearts![26]

[25] R. H. Bainton, *Here I Stand* (Nashville, 1950), pp. 328, 329.
[26] Weimar Briefwechsel II, 413: no. 445, as quoted in LSBF, p. 2.