

# AN OPEN LETTER ON TRANSLATING <sup>1530</sup>

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By

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God's grace and mercy. The wise Solomon says in Proverbs 11: "The people curse him who withholds grain, but there is a blessing on the head of him who sells it." This verse speaks truly concerning everything that can serve the common good and well-being of Christendom. This is why the master in the gospel reprimands the unfaithful servant like a lazy rascal for having hidden and buried his money in the ground. So that this curse of the Lord and the entire Church might be avoided, I had to publish this letter which came into my hands through a good friend. I could not withhold it, as there has been much discussion about the translating of the Old and New Testaments. It has been charged by the enemies of truth that the text has been modified and even falsified in many places, which has startled and shocked many simple Christians, even among the educated who do not know the Hebrew and Greek languages. It is devoutly to be hoped that with this publication the slander of the godless will be stopped and the scruples of the devout removed, at least in part. Perhaps it may even give rise to more writing on such questions and matters such as these. Therefore I ask all lovers of the truth to take this work to heart seriously, and faithfully to pray to God for a right understanding of the divine Scriptures, to the improvement and increase of our common Christendom. Amen.

Nuremberg. September 15, 1530

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To the Honorable and Worthy N., my favourite lord and friend.

Grace and peace in Christ, honorable, worthy and dear Lord and friend! I received your letter with the two questions, or inquiries, requesting my response. In the first place, you ask why in translating the words of Paul in the 3rd chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, *Arbitramur hominem iustificari ex fide absque operibus*, I rendered them, "We hold that a man is justified without the works of the law, by faith alone," and you also tell me that the papists are causing a great fuss because Paul's text does not contain the word *sola* (alone), and that my addition to the words of God is not to be tolerated. Secondly, you ask whether the departed saints intercede also for us, because we read that angels intercede for us. Regarding the first question, you can give the papists this answer from me, if you like.

First of all if I, Dr. Luther, had expected that all the papists together were capable of translating even one chapter of Scripture correctly and well into German, I would have gathered up enough humility to ask for their aid and assistance in translating the New Testament into German. However, because I knew (and still see with my own eyes) that not one of them knows how to translate or speak German, I spared them and myself the trouble. It is evident, however, that they are learning to speak and write German from my German translation, and so they are stealing my language from me, a language they had little knowledge of before this. Yet they do not thank me for this, but instead they use it against me. However, I readily grant them this, for it tickles me to know that I have taught my ungrateful pupils, even my enemies, how to speak.

Secondly, you might say that I have conscientiously translated the New Testament into German to the best of my ability, and that I have not compelled anyone to read it. Rather I have left that open, only doing the work as a service to those who could not do it better. No one is forbidden to do it better! If someone does not wish to read it, he can let it lie, for I do not ask anyone to read it or praise anyone who does so. It is my Testament and my translation, and it shall remain mine. If I have made some mistakes in it (although I am not aware of any, and would most certainly be unwilling to deliberately mistranslate a single letter) I will not allow the papists to be my judges. For their ears are still too long and their hee-haws too weak for them to criticize my translating. I know quite well how much skill, hard work, sense and brains are needed for a good translation. They know it even less than the miller's donkey, for they have never tried it.

It is said, "He who builds along the road has many masters." That is how it is with me also. Those who have never been able to speak properly (to say nothing of translating) have all at once become my masters and I must be their pupil. If I were to have asked them how to turn into German the first two words of Matthew, *Liber Generationis*, not one of them would have been able to say Quack! And now they judge my whole work! Fine fellows! It was also like this for St. Jerome when he translated the Bible. Everybody was his master. He alone was totally incompetent, and people who were not worthy to clean his boots judged the good man's work. It takes a great deal of patience to do good things in public. The world believes itself to be the expert in everything, while putting the bit under the horse's tail. Criticizing everything and accomplishing nothing, that is the world's nature. It can do nothing else.

I would like to see a papist come forward and translate even one epistle of St. Paul's or one of the prophets without making use of Luther's German or translation. Then we might see a fine, beautiful and noteworthy translation into German. We have seen that

scribbler from Dresden (1) play the master to my New Testament. I will not mention his name again in my books, as he has his Judge now, and is already well-known. He admits that my German is sweet and good. He saw that he could not improve upon it. Yet, eager to dishonor it, he took my New Testament nearly word for word as it was written, and removed my prefaces and notes, replaced them with his own, and thus published my New Testament under his name! Oh Dear Children, how it pained me when his prince in a detestable preface condemned Luther's New Testament and forbade the reading of it, while commanding the Scribbler's New Testament to be read, even though it was the very same one Luther had done!

So that no one may think I am lying, put Luther's and the Scribbler's New Testament side by side and compare them. You will see who is the translator in both. He has patched it and altered it in a few places. Not all of it pleases me, but I can let it pass; it does no particular harm as far as the text is concerned. For this reason I had decided not to write against it. But I did have to laugh at the great wisdom that so terribly slandered, condemned and forbade my New Testament when it was published under my name, but required it to be read when published under the name of another! What kind of virtue is this, that slanders and heaps shame on someone else's work, and then steals it, and publishes it under one's own name, thereby seeking praise and a good reputation through the slandered work of someone else! I leave that for his judge to say. As for me, I am well satisfied that my work (as Paul also boasts) will be furthered by my enemies, and that Luther's work, without Luther's name but under that of his enemy, is to be read. What better revenge could I have than this?

But I will return to the subject at hand. If your papist wishes to make a great fuss about the word sola (alone), say this to him: "Dr. Martin Luther will have it so, and he says that a papist and a donkey are the same thing." Sic volo, sic iubeo, sit pro ratione voluntas. (2) For we are not going to be students and disciples of the papists. Rather, we will become their teachers and judges. For once, we also are going to be proud and brag, with these blockheads; and just as Paul brags against his mad raving saints, I will brag against these donkeys of mine! Are they doctors? So am I. Are they scholars? So am I. Are they preachers? So am I. Are they theologians? So am I. Are they debaters? So am I. Are they philosophers? So am I. Are they logicians? So am I. Do they lecture? So do I. Do they write books? So do I.

I will go even further with my boasting: I can expound the psalms and the prophets, and they cannot. I can translate, and they cannot. I can read the Holy Scriptures, and they cannot. I can pray, they cannot. Coming down to their level, I can use their rhetoric and philosophy better than all of them put together. Plus I know that not one of them

understands his Aristotle. If any one of them can correctly understand one preface or chapter of Aristotle, I will eat my hat! No, I am not overdoing it, for I have been schooled in and have practiced their science from my youth. I recognize how deep and broad it is. They, too, are well aware that I can do everything they can do. Yet they treat me as a stranger in their discipline, these incurable fellows, as if I had just arrived this morning and had never seen or heard what they teach and know. How they do brilliantly parade around with their science, teaching me what I outgrew twenty years ago! To all their noise and shouting I sing, with the harlot, "I have known for seven years that horseshoe nails are iron." (3)

Let this be the answer to your first question. Please do not give these donkeys any other answer to their useless braying about that word *sola* than simply this: "Luther will have it so, and he says that he is a doctor above all the doctors of the pope." Let it rest there. I will from now on hold them in contempt, and have already held them in contempt, as long as they are the kind of people (or rather donkeys) that they are. And there are brazen idiots among them who have never even learned their own art of sophistry, like Dr. Schmidt and Dr. Snot-Nose, (4) and such like them, who set themselves against me in this matter, which not only transcends sophistry, but as Paul writes, all the wisdom and understanding in the world as well. Truly a donkey does not have to sing much, because he is already known by his ears.

For you and our people, however, I shall show why I used the [German equivalent of the] word *sola* — even though in Romans 3 it was not [the equivalent of] *sola* I used but *solum* or *tantum*. (5) That is how closely those donkeys have looked at my text! Nevertheless I have used *sola fides* elsewhere; I want to use both *solum* and *sola*. I have always tried to translate in a pure and clear German. It has often happened that for three or four weeks we have searched and inquired about a single word, and sometimes we have not found it even then. In translating the book of Job, Master Philip, Aurogallus (6) and I have taken such pains that we have sometimes scarcely translated three lines in four days. Now that it has been translated into German and completed, all can read and criticize it. The reader can now run his eyes over three or four pages without stumbling once, never knowing what rocks and clods had once lain where he now travels as over a smoothly-planed board. We had to sweat and toil there before we got those boulders and clods out of the way, so that one could go along so nicely. The plowing goes well in a field that has been cleared. But nobody wants the task of digging out the rocks and stumps. There is no such thing as earning the world's thanks. Even God himself cannot earn thanks, not with the sun, nor with heaven and earth, nor even the death of his Son. The world simply is and remains as it is, in the devil's name, because it will not be anything else.

I know very well that in Romans 3 the word *solum* is not in the Greek or Latin text — the papists did not have to teach me that. It is fact that the letters s-o-l-a are not there. And these blockheads stare at them like cows at a new gate, while at the same time they do not recognize that it conveys the sense of the text -- if the translation is to be clear and vigorous [klar und gewaltiglich], it belongs there. I wanted to speak German, not Latin or Greek, since it was German I had set about to speak in the translation. But it is the nature of our language that in speaking about two things, one which is affirmed, the other denied, we use the word *allein* [only] along with the word *nicht* [not] or *kein* [no]. For example, we say "the farmer brings *allein* grain and *kein* money"; or "No, I really have *nicht* money, but *allein* grain"; I have *allein* eaten and *nicht* yet drunk"; "Did you write it *allein* and *nicht* read it over?" There are countless cases like this in daily usage.

In all these phrases, this is a German usage, even though it is not the Latin or Greek usage. It is the nature of the German language to add *allein* in order that *nicht* or *kein* may be clearer and more complete. To be sure, I can also say, "The farmer brings grain and *kein* money," but the words "kein money" do not sound as full and clear as if I were to say, "the farmer brings *allein* grain and *kein* money." Here the word *allein* helps the word *kein* so much that it becomes a completely clear German expression. We do not have to ask the literal Latin how we are to speak German, as these donkeys do. Rather we must ask the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, by the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly. Then they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them. For instance, Christ says: *Ex abundantia cordis os loquitur*. If I am to follow these donkeys, they will lay the original before me literally and translate it thus: "Aus dem uberfluss des hertzen redet der mund" [out of the excessiveness of the heart the mouth speaks]. Tell me, is that speaking German? What German could understand something like that? What is "the excessiveness of the heart"? No German can say that; unless, perhaps, he was trying to say that someone was altogether too generous, or too courageous, though even that would not yet be correct. "Excessiveness of the heart" is no more German than "excessiveness of the house, "excessiveness of the stove" or "excessiveness of the bench." But the mother in the home and the common man say this: "Wes das hertz vol ist, des gehet der mund über" [What fills the heart overflows the mouth]. That is speaking good German of the kind I have tried for, although unfortunately not always successfully. The literal Latin is a great obstacle to speaking good German.

For another example, the traitor Judas says in Matthew 26: *Ut quid perditio haec?* and in Mark 14, *Ut quid perditio iste unguenti facta est?* According to these literalist donkeys I would have to translate it, "Warumb ist dise verlierung der salben

geschehen?" [Why has this loss of ointment occurred?] But what kind of German is this? What German says "loss of the ointment occurred"? And if he understands it at all, he would think that the ointment is lost and must be looked for and found again, though even that is obscure and uncertain enough. Now if that is good German why do they not come out and make us a fine, new German Testament and let Luther's Testament alone? I think that would really bring out their talents. But a German would say *Ut quid*, etc., this way: "Was sol doch solcher unrat?" [What is the reason for this waste?] or "Why this extravagance?" Perhaps even, "it is a shame about the ointment." That is good German, in which one can understand that Magdalene had wasted the ointment she poured out and had been wasteful. That was what Judas meant, because he thought he could have used it better.

Again, when the angel greets Mary, he says: "Gegruesset seistu, Maria vol gnaden, der Herr mit dir" [Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you]. Up till now this has simply been translated according to the literal Latin. (7) But tell me, is that good German? Since when does a German speak like that, "du bist vol gnaden" [you are full of grace]? One would have to think about a keg "full of" beer or a purse "full of" money. Therefore I translated it: "du holdselige" [thou pleasing one]. This way a German can at least think his way through to what the angel meant by his greeting. Now the papists are throwing a fit about me corrupting the Angelic Salutation, yet I still have not used the most satisfactory German translation. Suppose I had used the best German and translated the salutation: "Gott grusse dich, du liebe Maria" [God greet you, dear Mary], for that is all the angel meant to say, and what he would have said if he had greeted her in German. Suppose I had done that! I believe that they would have hanged themselves out of their fanatical devotion to the Virgin Mary, because I had so destroyed the Salutation.

Yet why should I be concerned about their ranting and raving? I will not stop them from translating as they want. But I too shall translate, not as they please but as I please. And whoever does not like it can just ignore it and keep his criticism to himself, for I will neither look at nor listen to it. They do not have to answer for my translation or bear any responsibility for it. Mark this well: I shall say "holdselige [pleasing] Mary" and "liebe [dear] Mary", and let them say "Mary volgnaden [full of grace]". Anyone who knows German also knows what a hearty word "liebe" is: dear Mary, dear God, the dear emperor, the dear prince, the dear man, the dear child. I do not know if one can say this word "liebe" in Latin or in other languages with so much depth of feeling, so that it goes to the heart and resonates there, through all the senses, as it does in our language.

I think that St. Luke, as a master of the Hebrew and Greek tongues, wanted to clarify

and interpret the Hebrew word that the angel spoke when he used the Greek word kecharitomene. And I think that the angel Gabriel spoke with Mary just as he spoke with Daniel, when he called him Chamudoth and Ish chamudoth, vir desiriorum, that is "Dear Daniel." That is the way Gabriel speaks, as we can see in Daniel. Now if I were to literally translate the words of the angel, and use the skills of these donkeys, I would have to translate it as "Daniel, thou man of desires" or "Daniel, you man of lust"! Oh, that would be fine German! A German would, of course, recognize "Man", "Lueste" and "begirunge" as being German words, although not altogether pure, because "lust" and "begir" would be better. But when those words are put together as "thou man of desires" no German is going to understand it. He would perhaps even think that Daniel is full of evil desires. Now wouldn't that be a fine translation? So I must let the literal words go and try to discover how the German says what the Hebrew says with ish chamudoth. I find that the German says this, "You dear Daniel", "you dear Mary", or "you gracious maiden", "you lovely maiden", "you gentle girl" and so forth. A translator must have a large store of words so that he can have them all ready when one word does not fit in every context.

Why should I even bother to talk about translating so much? If I were I to explain all the reasons and considerations behind my words, I would need an entire year. I have learned by experience what an art and what a task translating is, so I will not tolerate some papal donkey or mule acting as my judge or critic. They have not tried it. If anyone does not like my translations, he can ignore it; and may the devil repay him for it if he dislikes or criticizes my translations without my knowledge or permission. If it needs to be criticized, I will do it myself. If I do not do it, then let them leave my translations in peace. Each of them can do a translation for himself that suits him — what do I care?

This I can testify with good conscience: I gave my utmost effort and care and I had no ulterior motives. I have not taken or wanted even a small coin in return. Neither have I made any by it. God knows that I have not even sought honor by it, but I have done it as a service to the dear Christians and to the honor of the One who sits above, who blesses me every hour of my life. If I had translated a thousand times more diligently, I should not have deserved to live or have a sound eye for even a single hour. All I am and have to offer is of his mercy and grace, indeed, of his precious blood and bitter sweat. Therefore, God willing, all of it will also serve to his honor, joyfully and sincerely. I may be insulted by the scribblers and papists, but true Christians, along with Christ, their Lord, bless me. And I am more than amply rewarded if just one Christian acknowledges me as a workman with integrity. I care nothing about the papal donkeys, as they are not good enough to acknowledge my work and, if they were to



bless me, it would break my heart. Their insults are my highest praise and honor. I shall still be a doctor, even a distinguished one. I am certain that they shall never take that away from me until the Last Day.

On the other hand I have not just gone ahead and disregarded altogether the exact wording in the original. Rather, with my helpers I have been very careful to see that where everything depends upon a single passage, I have kept to the original quite literally and have not departed lightly from it. For instance, in John 6 Christ says: "Him has God the Father versiegelt [sealed]." It would have been better German to say "Him has God the Father gezeichnet [signified]" or even "He it is whom God the Father meint [means]." But I preferred to do violence to the German language rather than to depart from the word. (8) Ah, translating is not everyone's skill as some mad saints imagine. It requires a right, devout, honest, sincere, God-fearing, Christian, trained, educated, and experienced heart. So I hold that no false Christian or sectarian spirit can be a good translator. That is obvious in the version of the Prophets done at Worms. Although it is carefully done and resembles my own German quite closely, Jews had a hand in it, and they do not show much reverence for Christ. Aside from that it shows plenty of skill and craftsmanship. (9)

So much for translating and the nature of language. However, I was not depending upon or following the nature of the languages alone when I inserted the word *solum* in Romans 3. The text itself, and Saint Paul's meaning, urgently require and demand it. For in that 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. Paul excludes all works so completely as to say that the works of the Law, though it is God's law and word, do not aid us in justification. Using Abraham as an example, he argues that Abraham was so justified without works that even the highest work, which had been commanded by God, over and above all others, namely circumcision, did not aid him in justification. Rather, Abraham was justified without circumcision and without any works, but by faith, as he says in Chapter 4: "If Abraham were justified by works, he may boast, but not before God." So, when all works are so completely rejected — which must mean faith alone justifies — whoever would speak plainly and clearly about this rejection of works will have to say "Faith alone justifies and not works." The matter itself and the nature of language requires it.

"But," they say, "it has an objectionable tone, and people infer from it that they need not do any good works." Dear me, what are we to say? Is it not much more offensive when Paul himself, while not using the term "faith alone," spells it out even more bluntly, putting the finishing touches on it by saying "Without the works of the Law?" And in Galatians 1 (as well as in many other places) he says "not by works of the law."

The expression "faith alone" may perhaps be glossed over somehow, but the phrase "without the works of the law" is so blunt, offensive, and scandalous that no amount of interpretation can help it. How much more might people learn from this that "they need not do any good works," when they hear this teaching about the works themselves stated in such a clear strong way: "No works", "without works", "not by works"! If it is not offensive to preach "without works," "not by works," "no works," why is it offensive to preach "by faith alone"?

Still more offensive is that Paul does not reject just ordinary works, but works of the law! One could easily take offense at that all the more and say that the law is condemned and cursed before God, and so we should be doing nothing but what is against the law, as it is said in Romans 3: "Why not do evil so that there might be more good?" This is what one Rottengeist of our time began to do. (10) Should we reject Paul's word because of such "offense" or refrain from speaking freely about faith? Dear me, Saint Paul and I want to offend like this, for we preach so strongly against works and insist upon faith alone just so that people will be offended, stumble and fall, that they may learn that they are not saved by good works but only by Christ's death and resurrection. Knowing that they cannot be saved by their good works of the law, how much more will they realize that they shall not be saved by bad works, or without the law! Therefore, it does not follow that because good works do not help, bad works will; just as it does not follow that because the sun cannot help a blind man to see, the night and darkness must help him to see.

I am amazed that anyone can object to something as evident as this. Just tell me: Is Christ's death and resurrection our work, that we do, or not? Of course it is not our work, nor is it the work of any law. Now it is Christ's death and resurrection alone which saves and frees us from sin, as Paul writes in Romans 4: "He died for our sins and rose for our justification." Tell me, further: What is the work by which we take hold of Christ's death and resurrection? It cannot be any external work, but only the eternal faith that is in the heart. Faith alone, indeed all alone, without any works, takes hold of this death and resurrection when it is preached through the gospel. Then why all this ranting and raving, this making of heretics and burning them at the stake, when it is clear at its very core that faith alone takes hold of Christ's death and resurrection, without any works, and that his death and resurrection are our life and righteousness? As this fact is so obvious, that faith alone conveys, grasps, and imparts this life and righteousness — why should we not say so? It is not heretical to believe that faith alone lays hold on Christ and gives life; and yet it seems to be heresy if someone mentions it. Are they not insane, foolish and absurd? They will admit that it is right but they brand the telling of it as wrong, though nothing can be simultaneously right and wrong.

Furthermore, I am not the only one, nor the first, to say that faith alone makes one righteous. There was Ambrose, Augustine and many others who said it before me. And if a man is going to read and understand St. Paul, he will have to say the same thing, and he can say nothing else. Paul's words are too strong — they allow no works, none at all! Now if it is not works, it must be faith alone. Oh what a fine, constructive and inoffensive teaching that would be, if men were taught that they can be saved by works as well as by faith. That would be like saying that it is not Christ's death alone that takes away our sin but that our works have something to do with it. Now that would be a fine way of honoring Christ's death, saying that it is helped by our works, and that whatever it does our works can also do — which amounts to saying that we are his equal in strength and goodness. This is the very devil's teaching, for he cannot stop abusing the blood of Christ.

Therefore the matter itself, at its very core, requires us to say: "Faith alone justifies." The nature of the German language also teaches us to say it that way. In addition, I have the precedent of the holy fathers. The dangers confronting the people also compel it, for they cannot continue to hang onto works and wander away from faith, losing Christ, especially at this time when they have been so accustomed to works they have to be pulled away from them by force. It is for these reasons that it is not only right but also necessary to say it as plainly and forcefully as possible: "Faith alone saves without works!" I am only sorry I did not also add the words *alle* and *aller*, and say, "without any works of any laws." That would have stated it with the most perfect clarity. Therefore, it will remain in the New Testament, and though all the papal donkeys go stark raving mad they shall not take it away. Let this be enough for now. God willing, I shall have more to say about it in the treatise *On Justification*.

On the other question, as to whether the departed saints intercede for us. For the present I am only going to give a brief answer, because I am thinking of publishing a sermon on the angels in which, God willing, I will respond more fully on the matter.

First, you know that under the papacy it is not only taught that the saints in heaven intercede for us — even though we cannot know this as the Scripture does not tell us such — but the saints have even been made into gods, so that they are to be our patrons, to whom we must call. Some of these have never even existed. To each of these saints a particular power and might has been ascribed — one over fire, another over water, another over pestilence, fever and all sorts of plagues. Indeed, God must have been altogether idle to have let the saints work in his place. Of this abomination the papists themselves are aware, as they quietly take up their pipes and preen and primp themselves over this doctrine of the intercession of the saints. I will leave this

subject for now, but you can be sure that I will not forget it, nor allow this preening and primping to go on without a price.

Second, you know that there is not a single word from God demanding us to call upon either saints or angels to intercede for us, and that there is no example of such in the Scriptures. We find that the angels spoke with the fathers and the prophets, but that none of them had ever been asked to intercede for them. Why even Jacob the patriarch did not ask the angel with whom he wrestled for any intercession. Instead, he only took from him a blessing. In fact, we find in the Apocalypse the very opposite, as the angel will not allow himself to be worshipped by John. [Rev. 22] So the worship of saints shows itself as nothing but human nonsense, man's own invention apart from the word of God in the Scriptures.

Since it is not proper in the matter of divine worship for us to do anything that is not commanded by God (whoever does so is tempting God), it is therefore neither advisable nor tolerable that one should call upon the saints to intercede for him, or to teach others to call upon them. Rather this is to be condemned and people should be taught to avoid it. Therefore, I also will not advise it and burden my conscience with the iniquities of others. It was very hard for me to tear myself away from this calling upon the saints, for I was so steeped in it to have nearly drowned. But the light of the gospel is now shining so brightly that from henceforth no one has an excuse for remaining in the darkness. We all know very well what we need to do.

This is itself a very risky and offensive way to worship, because people are easily accustomed to turning away from Christ. They learn quickly to trust more in the saints than in Christ himself. Our nature is already too prone to run from God and Christ, and trust in men. It is indeed difficult to learn to trust in God and Christ, even though we have vowed to do so and are therefore obligated to do so. Therefore, this offense is not to be tolerated, whereby those who are weak and of the flesh participate in idolatry, against the first commandment and against our baptism. Even if you try to accomplish nothing more than getting men to switch their trust from the saints to Christ, through teaching and practice, that will be difficult enough to accomplish, that men should come to him and rightly take hold of him. It does not help to paint the devil on the door — he will already be present.

Finally, we are sure that God is not angry with us, and that even if we do not call on the saints for intercession, we are quite secure, for God has never commanded it. He says that he is a jealous God, visiting their iniquities on those who do not keep his commandments [Ex.20]; but there is no commandment here and, therefore, no anger to

be feared. Since, then, there is on this side security and on the other side great risk and offense against the Word of God, why should we go from security into danger where we do not have the Word of God to sustain, comfort and save us in the times of trial? For it is written, "Whoever loves danger will perish by it" [Ecclus. 3], and God's commandment says, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God" [Matt. 4].

"But," they say, "this way you condemn all of Christendom, which till now everywhere practiced this custom." I answer: I know very well that the priests and monks seek this cloak for their abominations. They want to impute to "Christendom" the damage caused by their own negligence. So if they get us to say "Christendom does not err" we shall also be saying that they do not err, since Christendom holds it to be so. Thus no pilgrimage can be wrong, no matter how obviously the Devil is a participant in it. No indulgence can be wrong, regardless of how gross the lies involved. In short, there is nothing there but holiness! Therefore to this you should reply, "It is not a question of who is to blame for this offense." They inject this irrelevant subject in order to divert us from the subject at hand. We are now discussing the Word of God. What Christendom is or what it does belongs somewhere else. The question here is: What is or is not God's word? What is not the Word of God does not make Christendom.

We read that in the days of Elijah the prophet there was apparently no word from God and no worship of God in all Israel. For Elijah says, "Lord, they have killed your prophets and destroyed your altars, and I am left completely alone" [I Kings 19]. Here King Ahab and others could have said, "Elijah, with talk like that you are condemning all the people of God." However, God had at the same time reserved seven thousand [I Kings 19]. How? Do you not think that God could now also, under the papacy, have preserved his own, even though the priests and monks of Christendom have been mere teachers of the devil, and gone to hell? Many children and young people have died in Christ. For even under Anti-Christ, Christ has steadfastly preserved baptism, the simple text of the gospel in the pulpit, the Lord's Prayer, and the Creed, and by these things he has preserved many of his Christians, and therefore also his Christendom, and he has said nothing about it to these devil's teachers.

Even though Christians have participated in some little parts of the papal abomination, the papal donkeys have not yet proved that they did it gladly. Still less does it prove that they did the right thing. All Christians can err and sin, but God has taught them all to pray in the Lord's Prayer for the forgiveness of sins. God can very well forgive the sins they had to committ unwillingly, unknowingly, and under the coercion of the Antichrist, without saying anything about it to the priests and monks! It can, however, be easily proven that in the whole world there has always been a great deal of secret

murmuring and complaining against the clergy, that they are not treating Christendom properly. And the papal donkeys have courageously withstood such complaining with fire and sword, even to the present day. This murmuring proves how happy Christians have been over these abominations, and how right they have been in doing them! So out with it, you papal donkeys! Say that this is the teaching of Christendom: these stinking lies which you villains and traitors have forced upon Christendom and for the sake of which you murderers have killed many Christians. Why each letter of every papal law gives testimony to the fact that nothing has ever been taught by the counsel and the consent of Christendom. There is nothing there but *districte precipiendo mandamus* ["we teach and strictly command"]. That has been their Holy Spirit. Christendom has had to endure this tyranny, which has robbed it of the sacrament and, not by its own fault, it has been held in captivity. And still the donkeys would palm off on us this intolerable tyranny of their own wickedness as a willing act and example of Christendom — and thereby acquit themselves!

But this is getting too long. Let this be enough of an answer to your questions for now. More another time. Excuse this long letter. Christ our Lord be with us all. Amen.

Martin Luther,

Your good friend.

The Wilderness, (11) September 8, 1530

#### Notes

1. Here Luther refers to the late theologian and lawyer Jerome Emser (1478-1527), one of his harshest critics. Emser had served as secretary to Duke George of Saxony, who had forbidden the sale of Luther's New Testament in his territory, and who had commissioned Emser to produce an authorized German version from the Roman Catholic side. Emser's version (published in 1527) was substantially Luther's, "corrected" here and there from the Vulgate, and provided with anti-Lutheran notes.
2. "I will it, I command it, my will is reason enough." A quotation from Juvenal's sixth satire, which Luther often used to characterize the arbitrary power of the pope.
3. The meaning of this saying and its bearing on the issue at hand is no longer known, though it seems that Luther must be quoting a proverbial expression from a folk song.
4. With these abusive terms Luther refers to two prominent Catholic enemies. By "Smith" he means Johann Faber of Leutkirch (whose father was a blacksmith) and by "Snot-Nose" (Rotzlöffel) he means Johann Cochlaeus ("löffel" is the German equivalent of the Latin cochlear).

5. Luther's quibble here is that he had used *allein* adverbially, and not as an adjective, so his opponents who write in Latin should use the adverbial Latin equivalents.

6. Philip Melanchthon and Matthew Aurogallus at the University of Wittenberg collaborated with Luther in the translation of the Old Testament.

7. By "up till now" Luther means in the German versions which preceded his own. The *gratia plena* [full of grace] of the Vulgate was cherished by Roman Catholics as some sort of proof that Mary was extraordinarily endowed with "grace" from conception, so that she was sinless. By rendering it as a merely polite form of greeting, Luther had removed this handle of Mariolatry.

8. It is evident from the marginal note on John 6:27 in Luther's German Testament that Luther wants to give an especially literal translation of the Greek word *esphragisen* in this one place because *versiegelt* [sealed] will suggest the meaning "sealed with the Holy Spirit." His note on John 6:27 reads thus: "Sealed means endowed with the Holy Spirit, so that whoever eats of this food (as in the following verses) also receives the Spirit and shall live." But it is unclear just what doctrine Luther wants to support with this interpretation. At the time he was involved in complicated debates regarding the nature and efficacy of the Lord's Supper.

9. Here Luther is referring to the translation of the Prophets done from the Hebrew by the Anabaptists Ludwig Haetzer and Hans Denk, published in 1527. By "the Jews had a hand in it," he apparently means that Denk and Haetzer received help from Jewish rabbis who were familiar with the Hebrew. The resemblance of this translation to Luther's version of the prophets (which began with Isaiah, published in 1528) is in many places so close that it cannot be accidental. Much of it was obviously copied, without credit, by Luther in his version.

10. By *Rottengeist* [rabble-spirit] Luther probably means the revolutionary Thomas Münzer.

11. "The Wilderness" is Luther's way of referring to the Coburg Castle, where he was lodged for reasons of safety during much of the year 1530.

## An Open Letter on Translating

By Martin Luther, 1530

Translated from "Ein sendbrief D. M. Luthers. Von Dolmetschen und Fürbit der heiligenn" in Dr. Martin Luthers Werke, (Weimar: Hermann Boehlaus Nachfolger, 1909), Band 30, Teil II, pp. 632-646.

Revised and annotated by Michael D. Marlowe, June 2003.

The English version of Luther's Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen presented here is a revision of the translation done by Dr. Gary Mann for project Wittenberg. In revising Mann's translation I have used the German text of the Weimar edition of Luther's Works, and also the translation of Charles M. Jacobs (as revised by Theodore Bachmann) in the American edition of Luther's Works. Beside this I set the German text in original spelling, as reprinted in the edition of Erwin Arndt, Martin Luther. Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen und Summarien über die Psalmen und Ursachen des Dolmetschens. Mit einem Anhang ausgewählter Selbstzeugnisse und übersetzungsproben (Halle/Saale: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1968) --M.D.M.