

The Bible – Christian Faith's Highest Authority and Guide

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GOD'S WORD has been "written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ." The roots of the Catholic Church of Luther's day are found in the Christian Church of the early New Testament period. Luther, a monk in the Church, began to see how it had strayed away from the teachings of God's Word from salvation through Christ to the works of man. Nonetheless, living and saving faith had been preserved in the shelter of the Church. Luther himself, in deep distress and despair of conscience, was encouraged and consoled by a fellow monk to put his faith and trust in Christ's redemption work.

The freeing gospel gave new life to Luther, but he would also face fierce opposition. Eventually Luther was summoned to the Holy Roman Empire Diet of Worms in 1521 to answer for his writings and teaching and to recant. There God gave him strength to say, "Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments, I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the word of God: I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against the conscience" (HCC).

The Holy Scriptures were his defense at the Diet of Worms, but most importantly God's Word was dear because it revealed salvation through Christ to him. Yet for hundreds of years the Catholic Church kept the Scriptures hidden, only available in Latin for the privileged. Luther understood the need for a translation for the commoner and he undertook the task as a service to Christians and for the honor of God through whom he himself was blessed (OLT).

How Did Luther Translate?

Following the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther was declared a heretic. Territorial ruler, Frederick the Wise protected Luther by arranging to have him "abducted" and sent to Wartburg Castle. There Luther took on the monumental task of translating the New Testament which was completed in just 11 weeks. After returning to Wittenberg, Luther received the assistance of his colleagues in revising, editing, and polishing his translation. In September of 1522, nine months after Luther had begun his work in Wartburg, his New Testament reached the book market! An estimated 5,000 copies were sold in the first two months at a price equivalent to a half month's salary of Professor Bugenhagen, one of Luther's colleagues (CH; HCC; TSGB).

Next Luther turned to the Old Testament. It was completed in 1534. Though Luther was well-versed in Greek and Hebrew, he saw the necessity of forming a "translation committee," which he referred to as his "Sanhedrin" including such coworkers as Philipp Melancthon, Justus Jonas, John Bugenhagen, and Caspar Cruciger. Luther said, "Translators must never work by themselves. When one is alone, the best and most suitable words do not always occur to him" (CH).

Luther's translation philosophy fell somewhere between literal and free. He wanted the German Bible to be in the spoken rather than in a more formal written German, so the commoner could understand the text. He wanted his translation to speak like "the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace" (OLT).

Luther's translation of the Bible into German was not a first, but differed from earlier German translations, none of which "had the majesty of diction, the sweep of vocabulary, the native earthiness, and the religious profundity of Luther" (HIS).

How it sounded was important to Luther and the translation had to pass the ear test. Luther's approach was one of rendering the spirit of the foreign language into the new language. About

translation, Luther said, "In rendering Moses, I make him so German that no one would suspect he was a Jew" (CH).

Luther's German Bible "sounded natural when spoken as well as read, its cadence and readability have made it a popular Bible in Germany to this day." (CH) It is said to even be superior in literary quality to the King James Bible that came later. Yet, regarding crucial passages of doctrinal significance, Luther said, "I have kept to the original quite literally and have not lightly departed from it. (OLT)

Luther also acknowledged that some portions were particularly challenging, "In translating Job, Master Philip, Aurogallus, and I labored so, that sometimes we scarcely handled three lines in four days." (OLT)

Luther was also meticulous in finding the correct terms for the translation. He was not afraid to solicit the help of language scholars and also other experts when searching for specific terms such as names for birds and animals. To properly name the precious stones in Revelations, chapter 21, Luther examined the court jewels of the Elector of Saxony. In order to specifically describe inward parts of Old Testament sacrificial animals, Luther inquired of a butcher at a slaughterhouse. (HIS)

Luther colorfully described the challenges of making the prophets of the Old Testament speak German, "O God, what a hard and difficult task it is to force these writers, quite against their wills, to speak German. They have no desire to give up their native Hebrew in order to imitate our barbaric German. It is as though one were to force a nightingale to imitate a cuckoo, to give up his own glorious melody for a monotonous song he must certainly hate" (CH).

Luther's Bibles also contained many illustrations, woodcuts by artist Lucas Cranach and others. They also included Luther's prefaces to various books of the Bible and marginal notes, which help the reader better understand the text. Luther's Preface of the Letter to the Romans is one of Luther's most noteworthy writings (TSGB).

Doctrinal portions were of utmost importance. While addressing the papists' criticisms, in his Open Letter on Translating, Luther defends the doctrine of justification with his inclusion of 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" (OLT).

Demand for Luther's Bible was astounding even in today's terms. Wittenberg printer Hans Lufft first printed Luther's translation of the whole Bible in 1534. Over the next forty years, he printed and sold a staggering 100,000 copies. (COR)

The Bible in the vernacular or language of the people made God's Word dear. Common man could read, understand, and discuss matters of salvation not only with one another, but with the privileged few, even with the priests.

One strong point of Luther's translation over others was way it ordered the books of the New Testament. Previous translators ordered the books as they desired, but Luther's order was according to Christ's prominence in the book, consequently the Gospels are first in the New Testament.

Luther's translation had significant influence beyond the borders of Germany. English Bible translator William Tyndale fled England to the European Continent during Luther's time and the two of them possibly met each other. Finnish theologian and Bible translator Mikael Agricola was also a student of Luther. Like Luther, Tyndale was translating the Bible using original Hebrew and Greek texts. Tyndale followed Luther's lead regarding order of the books in the Bible and many phrases of Luther came to us via Tyndale, who also favored phrases applicable to common people over Ecclesiastical terms. The King James Version extensively draws on Tyndale's work. (CH)

Christian Faith's Highest Authority

In Luther's battle with the Catholic Church, the authority of Scriptures became a principle of the Reformation. The same principle is reflected in the Constitution and Position Statement of the Laestadian Lutheran Church today.

We believe that the Bible is God's Word. While men have written the Scripture, they have not done so as an expression of their own will, but God has moved them by His Spirit to express His own will (2 Peter 1:20,21; 2 Tim. 3:16)...God's Word is Christian faith's highest authority and thus Christian faith's guiding principles and doctrine must be examined and evaluated in the light of God's Word. (LLC)

For the believer, the Bible is God's Word or speech to us in which He reveals himself and makes His will known to us. Above all, we see His love for sin-fallen man in His Son, Jesus Christ. Luther taught that when reading God's Word, we must find Christ in it. He writes in the preface to the Old Testament, "What is the New Testament but a public preaching and proclamation of Christ, set forth through the sayings of the Old Testament and fulfilled through Christ?" (POT)

The Apostle of Love writes that God's Word has been "written, that e might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name." (John 20:31) It feels secure and comforting that our faith is not based on our own understanding, but on God's Word, which He opens through the Holy Spirit in His congregation.

Sources:

HCC, Schaff, Philip, History of the Christian Church, vol. VII, ch. 3, sec. 55

OLT, Luther's Open Letter on Translating, Luther's Works American Edition, Vol. 35, pp. 181-202.

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CH, Henry Zecher, Christian History, Issue 34, The Bible Translation that Rocked the World.

HIS, Bainton, Roland, Here I Stand, A Life of Martin Luther, p. 327.

COR, com<http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/Paper-exhibit/luther.html>

LLC, LLC Position Statement, Section 1, Items 1&2.

POT, Luther's Prefaces to the Old Testament, Luther's Works American Edition, Vol. 35, P. 236.