

From Luther's *Open Letter on Translation*
(*Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*), translated by Jennifer Tanner

From Wenceslaus Link to all Believers in Christ, God's Grace and Mercy. Solomon the Wise says in Proverbs 11: 26: 'He who withholds grain, him the people curse. But blessings will come upon him who sells it.' This passage should be understood to apply to anything that can be of general use or comfort to Christianity. It is for this reason that the master in the Gospel scolds the faithless servant, the lazy rogue, for burying his money in the earth and hiding it. To escape the curse of the Lord and of the community at large I have not suppressed this open letter, which came into my hands from a good friend, but openly published it. For while much idle talk has come about regarding the translation of the Old and New Testaments, namely, the enemies of the truth purport that the text has in places been changed or even falsified, so that horror and disgust has come over many simple Christians, as well as over the educated who are not familiar with Hebrew and Greek. It is to be hoped that this letter will at least in part hinder the godless in their slander and lift the scruple of the pious; it may even come about that more will be written on this question or matter. I ask therefore that everyone who loves truth take this work on my best recommendation and ask God in good faith for correct understanding of the Holy Writ for the betterment and surfeit of all Christianity. Amen. Nuremberg, 15 September. Anno 1530.

**To the Honourable and Circumspect N.,
my favoured lord and friend.**

Grace and Peace in Christ.

Honourable, circumspect, dear master and friend!

I have received your letter with the two questions of which you desire to hear my account: First, why I translated the words of St. Paul in 'To the Romans', chapter 3, verse 28: 'Arbitra'mur ho'minem iustifica'ri ex fi'de absque ope'ribus' into German as: 'We hold that man is justified not by the works of law but by faith alone'—and also regarding the note that the papists have worked themselves into a boundless fury because the word 'sola' (alone) is not found in Paul's text and that such additions to God's Word are not to be tolerated from me, etc.; secondly, if the deceased saints also pray for us, since we read that even the angels pray for us etc.

Regarding the first question, if it please you, you may answer your papists on my behalf as such: First of all. If I, Doctor Luther, had been aware that all the papists together were so skilful that they could translate one chapter of the Holy Writ into German correctly and well, then, truly, I would have been humble and asked them for help and advice in translating the New Testament. But since I knew then and still see now that they have no idea how one should translate or speak German, I spared both them and myself the trouble. But one can clearly see that they learn to speak and write German from my translation and my German and steal my language from me, of

which they knew so little before; they do not thank me for it, but rather use it against me. But I will grant them that gladly, because it does me good to know that I have taught my ingrate disciples, also my enemies, to speak.

Further, you can say that I have translated the New Testament into German to the best of my abilities and as conscientiously as possible; I have not forced anyone to read it but simply left it available and only done so as a service to those who cannot do any better. No one has been forbidden to make a better one. Whoever does not want to read it can leave it alone; I am not begging or cajoling anyone to read it. It is my Testament and my translation and shall remain mine. If I have made any mistakes in doing so (which I would not consciously do, nor would I wilfully mistranslate a single letter)—on that I will not tolerate the papists as my judge, because their ears are too long for that and their ‘hee-haw, hee-haw’ is too weak for them to judge my translation.

I know well, and they know less than the miller’s beast, what sort of skill, diligence, judgement, and intelligence are needed for translation, because they have never tried it.

It is said: ‘He who works on the road has many masters.’ So it has been for me. Those who have never yet been able to speak, let alone translate, they are all my masters and I have to be their disciple. And if I were to ask them how the first two words of Matthew 1: 1: ‘Liber Generationis’, should be translated into German, not one of them could have said as much as ‘cluck’—and now they sit in judgement on the entire work, those fine fellows.

So it went for St Hieronymus as well, when he translated the Bible: the whole world was his master and he alone could do nothing right, and the work of this good man was judged by those who were not good enough to shine his shoes for him. This is why one has to have great patience in order to openly do something good; because the world wants to remain Master Cleverly and always has to bridle the horse tail-end first, to be master of everything and itself unable to do anything. That is its nature, which it cannot give up.

I would look with kindness on any papist who would come out and translate any epistle of St Paul or one of the prophets into German. As long as he does not use Luther’s German and translation, then one ought to see a fine, lovely, praiseworthy German translation! For we have seen, of course, the Bungler of Dresden, who has shown my New Testament a master (I do not wish to name him in my books any more; besides, he has his judge now and is well known otherwise); he recognizes that my German is sweet and good, and saw rightly that he could not make it better and yet wanted to destroy it, went ahead and took down my New Testament, almost word for word as I did, and removed my preface, commentary, and name, wrote his name, preface, and commentary in their place, and so he sells my New Testament under his own name. Oh, dear children, how it hurt me, when his sovereign, with a dread preface, condemned

and forbade that Luther's New Testament should be read, and at the same time commanded that the Bungler's New Testament should be read (which is the very same one that Luther did).

And just so that no one should think that I am lying, take both Testaments in front of you, Luther's and the Bungler's, hold them opposite each other, and you will see who is the translator of both. Because although he has patched and changed things in a few places—although it does not always please me, I can easily bear it and it doesn't hurt me much, as far as the text is concerned; that is why I never bothered to write against it, but had to laugh at the great wisdom, that my New Testament has been so terribly slandered, condemned, and forbidden when it was published under my name, but it must be read, when it is published under another name. But what a virtue that is, to slander and sully another man's book, then steal the very thing and publish it under one's own name, and so by means of someone else's slandered work to seek praise and fame for oneself—I will leave that up to his judge. That is enough for me and I am glad that my work (as St Paul also extols) should also be advanced by my enemies and Luther's book, minus Luther's name, under his enemies' names, should be read. How could I be better avenged?

And to return to the matter at hand: If your papist wants to make a lot of trouble over the word '*sola-alone*', then tell him this at once: Doctor Martin Luther wants it that way and says papist and ass are one and the same. Sic vo'lo, sic iu'beo, sit pro ratio'ne volu'ntas.

For we do not want to be the pupils or disciples of the papist, but their masters and judges.

If they want to strut about and boast with their asses' heads; and as Paul sang his own praises against his holy fools, I will sing my own against these asses. Are they Doctors? So am I! Are they educated? 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 dialecticians? So am I! Are they lecturers? So am I! They write books? So do I!

And I will keep on praising: I can interpret Psalms and Prophets; they cannot. I can translate; they cannot. I can pray, they cannot. And to speak of lesser things: I understand their entire Dialectic and Philosophy better than any of them. And I know, furthermore, that not one of them understands his Aristotle. And if there is even one of them who correctly understands a preface or chapter of Aristotle, then may I be tossed up in a blanket! I won't say too much now, because I was raised and trained in their art from youth onward and I know quite well, how deep and wide it is. And they know just as well that I know and can do everything they can. But still these ruinous people act against me as if I were a guest to their art who only arrived this morning and has never seen or heard the things they learn and can do; and they come on with wondrous displays of their art and teach me things I stamped to pieces twenty years before; so that I find I have to sing along with that harlot to all their blaring and hollering: I knew seven years ago that

horseshoe nails are made of iron.

That is in answer to your first question, and I ask that you tell such asses no more in reply to their useless noise about the word 'sola' than this: Luther wants it that way and says he is a Doctor above all Doctors in the entire papacy; it shall remain as it is. I want, from now on, only to disdain them and have them disdained as long as they remain such people, or, should I say, asses. For there are such shameless dunces among them who have never even learned their own art, that of the Sophists, like Doctor Smith and Doctor Snotspoon and his sort; and they set themselves against me in this matter which is not just about sophistry, but also, as St Paul says, about the wisdom and reason of the whole world. It is true: an ass needn't sing very long: we know him soon enough by his ears.

For you and our people, however, I will explain why I decided to use the word 'sola', although in Romans 3: 28 it is not 'sola' but 'solum' or 'tantum' that I have used. See how carefully these asses scrutinize my text! However, I have used 'sola fide' elsewhere and want both of them, 'solum' and 'sola'. I have taken pains in translating in order to render a pure and clear German. And it often happened that we sought and questioned a single word for fourteen days, three, four weeks, and at times still could not find it. In Job we worked this way, Master Philips, Aurogallus, and I, so that in four days sometimes we could hardly finish three lines. Rather—now that it is in German and ready, anyone can read and criticize it. Now a person can fly through three, four pages and never stumble once, but is not aware of the sort of stones and stumps that had been there, where he now walks along as on a smooth-planed board, where we had to sweat and fret before we were able to clear such stones and stumps out of the way so that one could walk along so finely.

It is a joy to plough a field that has already been cleared. But rooting out the brush and the stumps and preparing the field—no one wants that part. It is a thankless task. If God Himself can get no thanks for the sun, for heaven and earth, or even for His own son's death: the world is and remains the world in the devil's name, because it won't have it any other way.

Furthermore, I knew very well here, in Romans 3, that the word 'sola' is not found in the Latin and Greek text, and the papists did not need to tell me that. It is true: these four letters 's-o-l-a' are not found there and those asses' heads stare at these letters like cows at a new gate. They do not see that it nevertheless speaks to the sense of the text, and if one wants to translate it into German clearly and powerfully it is needed, because my intention was to speak German, not Latin or Greek, when I undertook to speak German in the translation. That is how German is. When two things are being spoken of, of which one is affirmed and the other negated, then one uses the word '*solum*'/*allein* along with the word 'not' or 'no'. As when one says: the farmer

brings *allein* grain and no money. No, I really have no money, but *allein* grain. I have *allein* eaten and not yet drunk. Did you *allein* write and not proofread? And countless other such ways in daily use.

Whether Latin or Greek have this as part of their manner of speech or not, German does and that is its nature, that the word *allein* is added to make the word ‘not’ or ‘no’ fuller and clearer. For while I could also say: ‘The farmer brings grain and no money,’ the words ‘no money’ do not sound as full and clear as when I say ‘The farmer brings *allein* grain and no money’; and here the word *allein* helps the word ‘no’ so that we have a full, clear, German sentence. For one need not ask the letters of the Latin language how one ought to speak German, the way these asses do, rather one should ask the mother in her house, the children in the streets, the common man in the marketplace, about it and see by their mouths how they speak, and translate accordingly: then they understand it well and recognize that one is speaking German to them.

So it is when Christ says: ‘Ex abunda’ntia cordis os lo’quitur.’ If I were to obey the asses, they would lay the letters before me and translate it like this: Aus dem Überfluß des Herzens redet der Mund. [Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.] Tell me: is that German? What German would understand something like that? What is overflow of the heart supposed to be? No German could say that, it would be as if he were trying to say that someone’s heart was much too big or that he had too much heart, while that is still not right either. So overflow of the heart is not German, as little as any of these are: overflow of the house, overflow of the tile stove, overflow of the bench, no, but this is how the mother in her house and the common man would say it: Wes das Herz voll is, des gehet der Mund über [What the heart is full of will spill over at the mouth]. That is well-spoken German, which I took pains to come up with and unfortunately could not always attain or find. For the Latin letters make it enormously difficult to speak good German.

Likewise, when the traitor Judas says in Matthew 26: 8: ‘Ut quid perdi’tio haec?’ and Mark 14: 4: ‘Ut quid perdi’tio ista ungue’nti facta est?’ If I were to obey the asses and literalists, then I would have to translate it as: Warum ist diese Verlierung der Salben geschehen? [Why has this loss of ointment occurred?] What kind of German is that? What German would say something like that: Loss of ointment has occurred? And if he actually understands it then he will think that the ointment has been lost and someone should look for it, though even that still sounds vague and dubious. If that is good German, why don’t they come forward and make us a fine, lovely new German Testament and leave Luther’s Testament alone? I think they ought to show their skill the light of day. But a German man would say it (‘Ut quid’ etc.) like this: Was soll doch solcher Unrat? [Why such a waste?] or: Was soll doch solcher Schade? [Why such a loss?] No, it’s too bad about the ointment—that is good German, from which one can understand that

Magdalene had handled the spilled ointment inexpediently and was wasteful; that was Judas' opinion, since he hoped to find a better use for it.

Likewise, when the angel greets Mary and says: Gegrüßet seist du, Maria, voll Gnaden, der Herr mit dir [You are greeted, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you]. Now then — there is how it has been translated into German so far, following the Latin letters. Tell me, though, if it is good German as well. Where is the man who speaks that way: you are full of grace? And what German understands what that is supposed to mean: full of grace? He has to think of a keg full of beer or a bag full of money; that is why I have translated it like this: Du Holdselige [You blessed woman], by which a German can much better imagine what the angel means by his greeting. But here the papists go mad with fury at me for corrupting the angelic greeting, while I still have not found the best German for it. And if I were to use the best possible German here and translate the greeting into German like this: Gott grüße dich, du liebe Maria [Greetings from God, dear Mary] (because this is what the angel is trying to say and this is how he would have said it, if he had wanted to greet her in German), I think they would hang themselves in their colossal fervour over the dear Mary, because I had so destroyed the greeting.

But why should I care if they rage or storm? I do not want to hinder them from translating what they want; but I do want to translate not as they want, but as I want. Whoever does not want it can leave it to me and keep his mastery to himself, for I do not want to see nor hear it; and for my translating they need give neither answer nor account.

Hear me well: I want to say: du holdselige Maria, du liebe Maria, and let them say: du voll Gnaden Maria. He who knows German knows well what a fine word that is, how it goes straight to the heart: die liebe Maria, der liebe Gott, der liebe Kaiser, der liebe Fürst, der liebe Mann, das liebe Kind [the dear Mary, the dear God, the dear emperor, the dear prince, the dear man, the dear child]. And I do not know if one can express the word *liebe* as affectionately and concisely in Latin or other languages, so that it goes straight to the heart and resounds through all the senses, as it does in our language.

For I hold that St Luke, being a master of Hebrew and Greek, wanted to capture and render the sense of the Hebrew word the angel used by using the Greek word 'kecharitome'ni'. And I think the angel Gabriel would have spoken to Mary as he spoke to Daniel, calling him 'hamudo'th' and 'isch hamudo'th', 'vir desiderio'rum', that is, du lieber Daniel. For that is Gabriel's manner of speaking, as we see in the book of Daniel. If I were to translate the angel's words by following the letters, as is the asses' art, I would have to say: Daniel, du Mann der Begierungen [Daniel, you man of desires], or, Daniel, du Mann der Lüste [Daniel, you man of pleasures]. Oh, there's some good German! A German can hear perfectly well that Mann, Begierungen, and Lüste are German words, although Begier and Lust, in the singular, would be much better. But

when they are joined together in such a way: You man of desires; then no German knows what is being said and thinks perhaps Daniel is full of wicked desires. That would be a fine translation. Therefore, at this point I have to let the letters go their way and seek the way a German man would express what the Hebrew man calls 'Isch hamudo'th': and so I find that the German man speaks as such: Du lieber Daniel, du liebe Maria, or: du holdselige Maid, du niedliche Jungfrau, du zartes Weib [you blessed maid, you sweet virgin, you gentle woman] and so on. For he who wants to translate must have a great hoard of words, so that he can find them right at hand when one refuses to sound right.

And why should I have to talk so much and for so long about translation? If I were to note the reasons and thoughts behind all of my words, it would take a year of writing. I have learned well what sort of art and work translation is; therefore I will tolerate no papal ass or mule who has not attempted anything as my judge or critic in this. Whoever does not want my translation can leave it be. The devil thank him who doesn't like it or alters it without my will or knowledge. If it needs to be altered, then I will do it myself. If I do not do it myself, then one should leave me my translation in peace and make himself whatever sort of translation he wants and fare well!

I can testify in good conscience that I have demonstrated my highest faithfulness and diligence in this, and never had any false thoughts—for I have neither taken nor sought a farthing for it, nor won any with it. Neither have I sought honour for myself in this, God knows, my lord; rather I did it as a service to Christianity and in honour of one who sits on high, who does me so much good in all hours that even if I had translated a thousand times as much and as diligently, I still would not have earned an hour to live or have a sound eye: all that I am and have comes from His grace and mercy, indeed, it is from His dear blood and bitter sweat, therefore it should all, God willing, serve to honour Him, with joy and from the heart. Should the bunglers and papal asses slander me, well then, the pious Christians praise me, together with their Lord Christ, and I am all too richly rewarded if just one Christian considers me a faithful worker. I ask the papal asses for nothing, they are not worthy to inspect my work, and I would be sorry to the bottom of my heart if they were to ask that I be pardoned. Their slander is my highest renown and praise. I still want to be a Doctor, an exemplary Doctor, even, and they will not take that name from me until Judgement Day, that I know in truth.

Yet on the other hand, I did not let the letters go too freely, but together with my assistants saw to it with great care that where something depended on it, I kept to the letters and did not deviate from them so freely; as in John 6: 27, where Christ says: Diesen hat Gott der Vater versiegelt [God the Father has set His seal on this man]. It would be better German to say: Diesen hat Gott der Vater gezeichnet [God the Father has marked this man], or, diesen meint Gott der Vater [God the Father intends this man]. But I would rather do injury to the German language than

deviate from the word. Oh, translation is not an art just anyone can do, as the mad holy ones believe; it requires a righteous, pious, faithful, diligent, fearful, Christian, educated, experienced, practised heart. Therefore I hold that no false Christian or factionist can faithfully translate; as is clearly seen in Prophets, translated in Worms, where truly great diligence was applied and closely followed my German. But there were Jews taking part in the work there, who had no great love of Christ—there would have been skill and diligence enough there per se.

That much I have said of translation and the nature of languages.

But I was not only trusting and following the nature of languages when I added ‘solum’ (allein) in Romans 3: 28. Rather the text and St Paul’s meaning forcefully demand and compel it; for he is dealing here with the main part of Christian teaching itself, namely, that we are justified by faith in Christ, without any works of law; and he so completely cuts off all works that he also says: the works of law (which is of course God’s law and word) do not help to justify us; and sets Abraham as an example, as this man was justified so completely without works, since even the highest work, which at that time was newly commanded by God above all other laws and works, namely circumcision, did not help to justify him, but he was justified without circumcision and without any works, through faith, as he says in Chapter 4: 2: ‘If Abraham was justified by works, then he can boast, but not before God.’ When one so fully excludes all works—and that must indeed be the sense of this, that faith alone can justify, and anyone who wants to speak clearly and concisely about such an exclusion of works must say: Faith alone and not works justifies us. The matter itself compels this, along with the nature of language.

Yes, I know they say: It sounds vexing and the people will understand it to mean that they need do no good works. But what else should one say? Is it not much more vexing that St Paul himself does not say: ‘faith alone’, but pours it out much more bluntly, kicks in the bottom of the barrel and says: ‘without the works of law’, and in Galatians 2: 16: ‘Not by the works of law’ and so on in other places; for the words ‘faith alone’ could still be glossed, but the words ‘without works of law’ are so blunt, vexing, and scandalous that no amount of glossing can help. How much more could the people learn from this to do no good works, where they hear it preached of works in such plain, strong words: ‘no work, without works, not by works’. Is that not quite vexing, that one preaches ‘without works, no work, not by works’—so why should it be so vexing if one preaches ‘faith alone’?