MARTIN LUTHER AND OUR ENGLISH BIBLE TRANSLATIONS[1]

Many are the changes that the twentieth century has brought us in our everyday lives at home and at work as well as in our lives as Christians and members of our Lutheran congregations. Surely among the more confusing situations we are confronted with is that which has to do with the Bible in the language of the land in which we live. Many of us will remember the time, not too long ago, when at almost every meeting such as this, in which persons who had been called into the public ministry of the Word (the pastors and teachers of our congregations) and interested members from these same congregations took part, someone somewhere during the course of the discussions would strongly suggest that it would be a thing highly to be desired at least if we could have a translation of the Bible into the kind of language that we were in the habit of using so that the reading of it could become more of an act of devotion than a scholarly exercise. To put it briefly, what we wanted was a Bible in our American speech that would take the place of the *Lutherbibel* that had served our people so well in the days when it seemed to be self-evident that Bible, Catechism, and hymnal should be in German, and when the younger generation often felt (mistakenly, to be sure) that it was attending church-maintained schools for the sole purpose of learning the language so that it too could take part in the public worship and other religious exercises of the congregation. As a Synod, too, we have recognized the need for a Bible in a language somewhat closer to contemporary speech than is the King James Version. We have asked that an American revision of one book be prepared, based on the familiar King James Version. Such a revision of Paul's *Epistle to the Galatians* was prepared and published in what we now call the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, the old *Quartalschrift*.[2]

In the mean time the religious press of the English-speaking world, both in America and in Great Britain, has literally been pouring forth revisions and new versions of the Bible and of the New Testament in particular. For the purposes of this study we are going to take a look at about a dozen modern-speech translations of the New Testament that all belong to this, the twentieth century. It would not have been too difficult to double the number of different versions that were to be studied at this time. But this presentation has had two limitations pressed upon it, the one that of the time available, the other that of the limit of this essayist's ability and the hearers' patience; so it seemed advisable to limit ourselves to a discussion that would take into account only those newer translations of the New Testament that have been quite prominently in the public eye. Three of these have been so widely used and frequently compared that an enterprising publisher has printed them in parallel columns together with the familiar King James Version. These three are the Revised Standard Version, the Phillips translation, and *The New English Bible—New Testament*. Very new are also *The New American Standard Bible—New Testament* (an attempt to bring the American Standard Version up to date without in it producing a new translation as the Revised Standard Version was) and *The New Testament in the Language of Today* by William F. Beck and published by Concordia Publishing House.

I am quite sure that some of you at least will share my feeling with regard to the just-named translations and the modern-speech translations of the twentieth century that have preceded them that on the one hand there is much to be said for most of them. Their language is direct, easily understood, and often crisp and racy. Those of us who have read the New Testament in the original Greek will often have said: "Here I find in the translation just about what the Apostle or his disciple said in the original book, both as to the understanding of the words there written and as to the level of its emotional tone." At the same time there will have been passages in which we could not be so happy with the particular modern translation we were looking at. Without

---

1 This essay was prepared at the request of the program committee of the Minnesota District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and was read to the 1964 convention of the District, held at Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, June 29 to July 2. Parts of the essay were also presented to the convention of the Southeastern Wisconsin District, which met at Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, June 15 to June 17, 1964.

2 *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Volume 54 (1957), pages 205–213.

perhaps being able to point exactly to the cause of the uneasiness we have felt, we at least have often been aware that there was something not quite right with what we were reading here.

We shall have to be honest and admit, whenever we read an English translation of a portion of the Bible that disagrees with the one we perhaps know by heart, that we instinctively arise in rebellion against it. And surely it is good that it is so. As followers of Martin Luther we have a profound reverence for the very wording of God's holy inspired Word. As it was with the Reformer, so for us, one single word of God makes all the world too narrow. Yet here we will have to bear in mind that when we speak of the divinely inspired words of Scripture, we have reference in the first place to the Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek word that the prophet or apostle used in its place. We are here speaking of translations of those words, that is, attempts to say in another language what has been said in the original. Here, we shall have to admit, it will be possible to put things in different ways. In the first place, each language has a character of its own and its own way of saying things. In English or German I may tie a horse to a post; the Greek would take that same horse and tie him *from* the post. But if I were to put into English what that Greek told me, I should have to say: "I tied my horse *to* the post" despite the precise sound of the words the Greek used when he told me of the incident. In English, I feel a draft; but where in America, outside of Milwaukee or New Ulm, would I be understood to be complaining of a chill if I were simply to remark: "It pulls!" In scholarly language we say that we must translate the idiom of the one language into the idiom of the other. In the second place, it is regularly quite possible, within the idiom of a single language, to express the same thought in a variety of ways. Sometimes the different expressions will have a different emotional tone (or feeling) about them; at others the two expressions will be quite equal in force and feeling. Let us consider the following four examples: "When the candles on the table had been lit, the hostess, with a gracious smile to the waitress who had set the dessert before her, picked up the fork and proceeded with the final course of the dinner."—"Tom scooped up the piece of pie from the plate and deftly balancing it on the thumb and fingertips of his left hand, proceeded to demonstrate what he thought of his mother as a cook and baker of apple pies."—"Through a knot-hole in the back of the barn we watched the tramp as he hungrily wolfed down, in two gulping bites, the piece of apple pie Aunt Emma had included in the lunch he begged at her back door."—"His hands behind his back, Willie made a mess of his face and the blueberry pie set on the table before him in the contest at the county fair." In each little picture presented here, the factual result has been the same: a piece of pie (or a whole one) has been consumed. And it is just possible, if these sentences were translations of a Greek original, that the same word could have been used in the Greek to describe the process intended. Yet the translator into English would have chosen a variety of expressions in his translation in order to convey something of the atmosphere surrounding the scene he was trying to picture. What we have been trying to set forth here must remain true of all translation. Within certain limits the translator is obligated, not only to give in his own language the separate words of the original, but also to convey the general sense and feeling of the original so as to recreate in the mind of the reader of the translation something like the picture created in the mind of the reader of the original.

Accordingly, every faithful translation need not be exactly like every other faithful translation. But just as the Bible could be put from Hebrew into Greek, then Latin, and finally all the modern languages, so too will we have to admit that there might be two translations, each in its way adequately representing the original and yet quite different the one from the other, whatever the reasons may have been for the variation.

Now, however, when we study some of our twentieth-century translations, and even though we consciously set aside any silent protest against something that varies from the King James Version and even though we are fully aware that variety in translations is quite possible, we still come away with the impression that something is not quite right here, at least that we are missing something which Luther's German translation gave us in quite a satisfactory fashion. It should be of help to all of us if we would be able to state quite definitely what the reason is why so often the modern rendering, though contemporary and smooth and often beautiful as language, leaves us with a certain feeling of emptiness.

The Principal Modern Versions of the New Testament

Let us first of all get the several translations we are here going to consider before us with something of a sampling of the nature of the translation they have to offer.

Opening the century we have *The Twentieth Century New Testament—A Translation into Modern English*. It was made from the original Greek Text of Westcott and Hort by a "company of about twenty persons, members of various sections of the Christian Church" (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1899 and later). "We believe," says the Preface, "that the New Testament will be better understood by modern readers if presented in a modern form.… Our constant effort … has been to exclude all words and phrases not used in current English.… It is probable that our translation will meet with a cold reception from many. This was the case with the Authorized Version itself, when it first made its appearance. Long after that date, many preferred to use the plain and vigorous 'Geneva Version,' which, like the present translation, was without authority from Church or State. Each successive translation, indeed, has been received with some amount of distrust by those who have preferred the retention of the familiar form of words to an accurate presentation of the meaning in more modern language. But, as Bacon asks, 'Since things alter for the worse spontaneously, if they be never altered for the better designedly, how is the evil to stop?' "—It is interesting to note that this plea, made by the translators and dated November, 1898, has been repeated in some form or other by virtually all the revisers and re-translators since their time. One plea that has been repeated in various forms runs like this: "Opposition to our translation that is based merely on the fact that this modern rendering is *different* from the old familiar one will in all fairness have to be disregarded."

The Twentieth Century renders the second half of the parable of the Unjust Steward as follows:

> His master complimented the false steward on the shrewdness of his conduct. And indeed worldly men are shrewder in dealing with their fellows than those who are truly enlightened.
>
> So my advice to you is to make friends for yourselves with your "false Gold," so that, when it comes to an end, they may welcome you into the homes that will endure. Those who can be trusted in a very small matter can be trusted in a great one too; and those who are false in a very small matter are false in a great one too. So if you have proved untrustworthy with your "false Gold," so that, when it comes to an end, they may you have proved untrustworthy with what belongs to another, who will give you what belongs to us? (Luke 16:8–12.)

I feel that this translation does quite well with untangling the syntax of the opening sentence of the letter proper in I Timothy, for here, verses 3 and 4 we read:

> I beg you, as I did when I was on my way into Macedonia, to remain at Ephesus; for I want you to instruct certain people there not to teach new and strange doctrines, nor to devote their attention to legends and interminable genealogies. Such subjects do far more towards promoting discussions than towards furthering the divine method which is taught by the Faith. (However, *the divine method* does not seem adequate for *theou oikonomia*, "God's management of His Household.")

Ephesians 2:10 would afford a good example of the way the Twentieth Century New Testament handles a doctrinal passage:

> The truth is that we are the handiwork of God. By our union with Christ Jesus we were created for the purpose of doing the good actions which God had in readiness, so that we should devote our lives to them.

My impression is that this rendering is not so unambiguous but that the person who was so inclined could read out of it a meaning just the opposite of the scope of the original, which is the utter dependence of the believer on God his Creator for all things, even for those things of which any human being might be inclined to boast, the "good deeds" he may claim to have done.

In 1902 Richard Frances Weymouth published his *The Modern Speech New Testament* (New York: Baker & Taylor Co.). The translator was an English university scholar and educator and in this private translation rendered into contemporary speech the so-called "Resultant Greek Testament," which was the Greek translated in the English Revised Version of 1881. In his Preface (page x) the translator comments on the requirements made of a modern translation. He maintains that words or phrases that are in some degree antiquated are therefore not necessarily to be excluded from use in a Bible translation. For he says: "To be antiquated is not the same thing as to be obsolete or even obsolescent, and without at least a tinge of antiquity it is scarcely possible that there should be that dignity of style that befits the sacred themes with which the Evangelists and Apostles deal." His own objective he makes clear thus f Preface, page xi): "(The Translator's desire has) been to furnish a succinct and compressed running commentary (not doctrinal) to be used side by side with its elder compeers." Thus there was sounded early in the century the note that was to be repeated concerning one translation after another as the century advanced and as the stream of new translations increased in number and as the force that tried to mold public opinion which we call advertising was brought into play in favor of each new translation. To paraphrase, the advertiser's sales-pitch went something like this: "Here finally in modern dress is the real New Testament. You who read the Bible as though it was a book teaching a definite body of doctrine are reading something into it. The New Testament is a book of literature, not of doctrine. Hence, our translation rendering it as a work of literature and the product of human genius presents the real New Testament to you." Let it not be inferred that Weymouth put the matter thus. But his claim to render a non-doctrinal commentary is only the beginning of claims for "non-doctrinality" that were soon to voice the kind of sentiment just expressed, as we shall shortly see.

Still, I must say that I like the swing of the rendering of Matthew 23:27, 28:

> Alas for you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you are just like whitewashed sepulchers, the outside of which pleases the eye, though inside they are full of dead men's bones and of all that is unclean. The same is true of you: outwardly you seem to the human eye to be good and honest men, but within, you are full of insincerity and disregard of God's Law.

And who could fail to feel the high literary quality of Weymouth's rendering of part of the crucifixion story (Matthew 27:47–50, 52):

> "The man is calling for Elijah," said some of the bystanders. One of them ran forthwith, and filling a sponge with sour wine put it on the end of a cane and was giving Him the wine to drink; while the rest said, "Let us see whether Elijah is coming to deliver him," but Jesus uttered another loud cry, and died.… As for the captain and the soldiers who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they witnessed the earthquake and the other occurrences they were filled with excessive terror, and exclaimed, "Assuredly he was God's Son."

Weymouth, who on literary and what he calls "not doctrinal" grounds upholds in the main the historicity of the books of the New Testament, has given us an interesting and quite helpful rendering (and notice that it is also a running commentary!) of the difficult passage Colossians 2:16–19:

> Suffer no one therefore to sit in judgment on you as to eating or drinking or with regard to a festival, a new moon or a sabbath; which were a shadow of things that were soon to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one defraud you of your prize, priding himself on his humility and on his worship of the angels, and taking his stand on the visions he has seen, and idly puffed up with his unspiritual thoughts. Such a one does not keep his hold upon Christ, the Head, from whom the body, in all its parts nourished and strengthened by its points of contact and its connexions, grows with a divine growth.

Professor James Moffatt of Union Theological Seminary, New York, the author of an *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament* that in the days of the older liberalism was virtually *the* textbook on the subject in every modernistic school of theology in our country, has also given us his translation of the New Testament: *The New Testament—a New Translation* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1922). In his preface he indicates that in his work he has been "freed from the influence of the theory of verbal inspiration" (a word which he obviously misapplies in the first place), but that he has given a translation which he hopes will prove to be readable and also one that will to some degree represent the gains of "recent lexical research." He has attempted to translate the New Testament, he says, "exactly as one would render any piece of contemporary Hellenistic prose." This translation, then, aims to be readable so far as the language translated-into goes, up-to-date as to its scholarship, and abreast of all the latest developments among the assured results of criticism, and to read, interpret, and translate this New Testament as being entirely on a level with the many other examples of contemporary Hellenistic Greek prose that we have of the first century after Christ, as well as of the two centuries both before and after the birth of our Lord. In his preface Moffatt thus sets forth a *programme* that will be followed, whether explicitly or implicitly, by most of the modern-language translators that were to follow him.

We can see Moffatt the translator in his rendering of Matthew 19:3–8:

> Then up came some Pharisees to tempt him. They asked, "Is it right to divorce one's wife for any reason?" He replied, "Have you ever read that He who created them male and female from the beginning said,
>
> Hence a man shall leave his father and mother
> and cleave to his wife,
> and the pair shall be one flesh?
>
> So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What God has joined, then, man must not separate." They said to him, "Then why did Moses lay it down that we were to divorce by giving a separation-notice?" He said to them, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives, on account of the hardness of your hearts, but it was not so from the beginning."

Moffatt the critic speaks in Ephesians 1:1, 2:

> Paul, by the will of God an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the saints who are faithful [here the note "Omitting *at Ephesus*"] in Jesus Christ: grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What happens when one renders a highly doctrinal passage (here the one that speaks so plainly of the doctrine of Original Sin) like any other piece of contemporary Hellenistic Greek prose we can see from his English of Ephesians 2:1–3:

> And as with us so with you. You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you moved as you followed the course of this world, under the sway of the prince of the air—the spirit which is at present active within those sons of disobedience among whom all of us lived, we as well as you, when we obeyed the passions of our flesh, carrying out the dictates of the flesh and its impulses, when we were objects of God's anger by nature, like the rest of men.

The Moffatt translation opened the gates to a veritable flood of private translations, especially of the New Testament, in a series that has but been accelerated as time went on. In 1923, at the University of Chicago Press, Edgar J. Goodspeed, professor in the Department of New Testament and Early Christian Literature and its chairman, and eventually America's best-known Greek scholar, published his *The New Testament—an American Translation*, a volume that was eventually to become the New Testament section of *The Bible—an American Translation*, the well known "Chicago Bible." In later years Professor Goodspeed loved to tell his classes how, while his translation was in preparation, he would read portions of it to various groups of

assembled students at various university functions and surprise them with the discovery that the New Testament was really quite a readable book. By that time Goodspeed was already well-known as a student of the text of the New Testament and of its language, having been one of the group of scholars who recovered and published the so-called *Tebtunis Papyri*. He never quite forgave himself for not having recognized the truth that Adolf Deissmann discovered, namely that the Greek of the New Testament is not the language of the Greek classics but is rather the spoken language that developed in the non-Greek countries after they were conquered by Alexander the Great. "I should have been the one to see that," he used to say, "since I was both a papyrologist and a professor of New Testament Greek!"

Though he hadn't made the discovery, Goodspeed like Moffatt made full use of the new light on the language of the New Testament that had come with the turn of the century. Goodspeed too translated the New Testament as though it were another example of the contemporary Hellenistic Greek. He always followed the procedure of asking: 1) what does the Greek mean?; 2) how do we say that in our language today? Goodspeed fully shared confidence in the "assured results of criticism," felt that he had contributed to them, and would violently have resented any suggestion that his thinking or translating had anything of dogmatical or doctrinal presuppositions. His translation represented what liberal American Biblical scholarship on the, generally, not-too-radical side was doing in the 1920's.

Here is part of the story of The Lost Son in the Goodspeed translation (Luke 15:12–19):

> A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the property." So he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered up all he had, and went away to a distant country, and there he squandered his property by fast living. After he had spent it all, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. And he went and hired himself out to a resident of the country, and he sent him into his fields to tend pigs. And he was ready to fill himself with the pods the pigs were eating, and no one would give him anything. When he came to himself he said, "How many hired men my father has, who have more than enough to eat, and here I am, dying of hunger! I will get up, and go to my father, and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your eyes; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired men.' "

The passage Philippians 2:12, 13 in this translation reads:

> So, my dear friends, as you have always been obedient, with reverence and awe make every effort to insure your salvation, not simply as though I were with you, but all the more because I am away. For it is God who in his good-will is at work in your hearts, inspiring your will and your action.

Whatever may be said for the Goodspeed rendering, I am sorry to have to miss here the "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" and the "God … worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" of the 13th verse. It is interesting to note here how Arthur S. Way, the well-known translator of the Greek and Latin classics, rendered this passage in a translation of Paul's Epistles that appeared first in 1901 (*The Letters of Paul*, London: The Macmillan Co., 1901; seventh edition, 1935) and which is intended to be an interpretive translation. For in his Preface, page v, the translator declares his object in this version of Paul's letters to be that "the connection of thoughts, the sequence of subjects, the continuity of the argument, shall, by the supply of the necessary links, be made throughout clear to the reader, without his having recourse to notes or a commentary." His rather lengthy rendering of Philippians 2:12, 13 is:

> Therefore, my dear ones, in accordance with the obedience you have always rendered, do you—not merely with such enthusiasm as you would display if I were among you, but, since I am far away, with much more—work out, with fear and self-distrust, aye, with trembling self-distrust, your own salvation. You have not to do it in your unaided strength: it is God who is all the while supplying the impulse, giving you the power to resolve, the strength to perform, the execution of His good-pleasure.

The important passage on the ultimate nature of Scripture and its divine inspiration in II Peter 1:20, 21 is rendered by Goodspeed:

> You must understand this in the first place, that no prophecy in Scripture can be understood through one's own powers, for no prophecy ever originated in the human will, but under the influence of the holy Spirit men spoke from God.

It must of course be noted that here Goodspeed is translating the reading of *Codex Vaticanus* and a few other older uncial manuscripts, which Hort (and Goodspeed) strongly favored, but which are no longer being accorded the same degree of reverence.

In I Peter 3:18–20 Goodspeed felt that he must insert the name of *Enoch* into the text even though it appears in none of the many manuscripts of the New Testament. The resulting translation eliminates the doctrine of the Descent of Christ into Hell and it completely alters the scope of the passage. It reads:

> For Christ himself died once for all, for sin, an upright man for unrighteous men, to bring us to God, and was physically put to death, but he was made alive in the Spirit. In it Enoch went and preached even to those spirits that were in prison, who had once been disobedient, when in Noah's time God in His patience waited for the ark to be made ready, in which a few people, eight in all, were brought safely through the water.

The New Testament—A Translation in the Language of the People, by Charles B. Williams (Chicago: Moody Press) appeared in 1937. The translator says of his work in the Foreword: "This is not a word-for-word translation, like an interlinear. It is rather a translation of the thought of the writers with a reproduction of their diction and style. Greek idioms are not brought over into our translation, but are expressed in corresponding English idioms which express the same thoughts as the Greek idioms. It is the thoughts of our New Testament, not its single words, that we have tried to translate." He tries to reproduce the peculiar connotation of the Greek tenses and calls attention to them in numerous footnotes. The story of the coming of the wise men from the East he tells thus (Matthew 2:1–8):

> Now when Jesus was born at Bethlehem in Judea in the days of King Herod, star-gazers came from the East to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is He that is born King of the Jews? We saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him."
>
> Now when King Herod heard of it, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. So he called together all the high priests and scribes of the people, and anxiously asked them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "At Bethlehem in Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:
>
> 'And you, Bethlehem in Judah's land,
> You are not at all the least among the leading places of Judah;
> For out of you will come a ruler,
> Who will shepherd my people Israel.' "
>
> Then Herod secretly sent for the star-gazers, and found out from them exactly the time the star appeared. So he sent them to Bethlehem with this order, "Go and carefully search for the child, and when you find Him, bring back word to me, that I too may come and do Him homage."

Romans 1:5 is translated:

> … Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received God's favor and a commission as an apostle in His name to urge upon all the heathen obedience inspired by faith.

This rendering impresses me as being more in accord with the Apostle's meaning than is the literalistic wording of the King James Version.

How strongly interpretive the Williams translation can become is seen from I Timothy 2:11–15:

> A married woman must learn in quiet and in perfect submission. I do not permit a married woman to practice teaching or domineering over a husband; she must keep quiet. For Adam was formed first, and then Eve; and it was not Adam who was deceived, but it was the woman who was utterly deceived and fell into transgression. But women will be saved through motherhood, if they continue to live in faith, love, and purity blended with good sense.

I am sure that none of us would feel that Williams has done for our generation what Martin Luther did for the generations of our fathers.

In February, 1946, appeared the much-heralded Revised Standard Version of the New Testament and described as "an authorized revision of the American Standard Version of 1901 and the King James Version of 1611." To me this recommendation has precisely the same persuasive force as the television commercial that has lately been commending the virtues of a certain brand of cigarettes to the buying public. While it could sway a possible customer in its favor who didn't know which brand he wanted anyway, once the wording of the commercial is examined, one fails to find any valid sort of argumentation behind it at all. The RSV is an "authorized" revision? Authorized by whom? When the word "authorized" is used with the King James Version, the only meaning the term ever had here was that it was given the stamp of approval by the King of England, who was the head of its State Church, to be read in church as part of the services of worship. One strongly suspects that the publisher's purpose in bringing together the concepts "authorized" and "King James Version" was to capitalize on a misconception that is still quite prevalent in our day, according to which the "Authorized Version" is one that has for some reason a special untouchable-ness about it, as though in some way the Holy Spirit had said: "Now this is your Bible and nothing else!" Actually, the King James Version of 1611 was but one of a number of versions "authorized" by the King of England "for use in the churches." Authorization was nothing more than a sort of licensing process. This is not intended to be derogatory of the King James Version. That translation was a strong, a beautiful, and an all-around good Bible that served its time very well. But it *was* just one of many translations of the Holy Scriptures. And obviously the people who were trying so hard to sell Christendom on the RSV hoped that the traditional allegiance to the King James Version would now be transferred to the Revised Standard Version.

This version was prepared by a committee of nine members for the New Testament portion. They were prominent members of the faculties of Union Theological Seminary, New York; Yale and Harvard Universities; Oberlin Graduate School of Theology; The University of Chicago; Yale University Divinity School; and Lutheran Theological Seminary, Gettysburg.

In separately printed "introductions" both the Old Testament section of the Revision Committee and the New Testament section set forth the background, the textual basis, and the language tools by means of which their revision was gotten out. In its *An Introduction to the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament* the revision committee argued at length, and generally quite correctly, how archaic and often misunderstood the language of King James has become. The text on which the version of 1611 was based (as incidentally was also that of Luther and the other reformers) was generally represented as suffering mightily when compared to the latest critical texts as represented for instance by the edition of Nestle. With some of this we would also have to agree. In addition to describing things of a linguistic and historical nature, the revisers however undertook to discuss aspects of the theology of the New Testament and in doing so revealed where their allegiance lay. These men were of course on record previously; so it was no surprise that their fundamental ideas on theology would have an influence on their translation. And however much they may have disagreed among themselves as to just how their fundamental religious and theological presuppositions should be put, on this they would unanimously have agreed, that the fundamental position of Martin Luther simply has no place in the thinking of enlightened modern man, the position that Luther clung to so tenaciously from beginning to end, that the words of the Bible are God's own, in which he preaches to me the Law and the Gospel, my damnableness in the sight of a holy

God and my blessedness when I accept in faith the salvation which Jesus Christ, true Man and true God, won for me by His suffering and death on the cross. Instead, the very language of the revisers in their "Introduction" shows that their religious thinking follows the line of that latest brand of modernistic unbelief that uses the language of our confessional faith indeed but whose heart is far from it. For to this way of thinking the Bible *is* not the Word of God, it *contains* the Word of God; the Christ whom I worship is not the glorified Son of God, who after his resurrection ascended to the heavens, where he now sits at the right hand of God the Father; rather the Christ they speak of is a spiritualized contemporary idea, in fact, when you get right down to it, a magnified idea of what the respective "theologian" thinks of himself. The great facts of our salvation, our eternal election, God's plan as carried out in the history of Israel, the coming, life, work, death, and resurrection of Jesus—all these things, so they say, are no longer "relevant." What is "relevant," according to them, is that behind these great Scriptural truths, as you and I know them, there lies a great spiritual truth of importance, here and now, to me as a human being in my present "predicament." According to them, for instance, what is important about the opening chapters of Genesis is not the fact there told me that the Eternal God in six days brought into being all things that are and did so entirely by means of His Creative Word. Present-day science, one holds, has shown that the Genesis creation account cannot be read as the story of something that really happened. But it is claimed, these same chapters still have a great truth to proclaim to me: the truth of my "creatureliness." Despite all this it is maintained, when I ask the question, "How do I get knowledge of divine Truth; whence comes the revelation of God to me?" that the present-day preacher in the pulpit is entirely on the same level as a Peter the Apostle and a Jeremiah the Prophet. The same "Word of God" comes to him that came to them. Accordingly, it should be easy to see that the kind of theology that has fastened upon most of Christendom today is from one point of view nothing but a mess enthusiasm—*Schwärmerei*—and from another but the form in which the liberalistic, modernistic unbelief of a previous generation has appeared in our time.

Though this is not to be a study of present-day theological trends, something of an insight into contemporary religious thought is necessary if we are to gain an adequate grasp on just why it has come about that we must find the bulk of the modern translations of the New Testament ultimately inadequate, though we will have to admit that any and all of them have features that are highly to be commended.—But to return to the Revised Standard Version.

In its narrative portions the Revised Standard Version is lively, direct, and readily understandable. Here is the story of Paul and Silas in the prison at Philippi (Acts 16:25–34):

> But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and every one's fetters were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out and said, "Men, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their wounds, and he was baptized at once. with all his family. Then he brought them up into his house, and set food before them; and he rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God.

Turning to the Epistles of the New Testament, we find however that we cannot be so happy with many of the renderings. Galatians 4:3 is made to read:

> … when we were children, we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe

making this verse refer, not to the externals of Jewish ceremonial worship, but to the superstitious belief of the first century that many of the stars were actually spiritual beings, angels as it were, that served as intermediaries

between God and this world and who had a profound influence on the lives and destinies of men. This would at least seem to be making Paul accommodating himself to that part of contemporary thought that he is obviously and with emphasis condemning in the letter to the Colossians (2:18). The translation of Romans 8:28 follows the reading of a few manuscripts out of Egypt that were at one time believed to give us the "Neutral" text (a text free from editorial revision) but that are now themselves held to be under the influence of a strong editorial revision. This reading inserts the word "God" into the text and makes the translation:

> We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.

It would at the very least have to be said of this rendering and of that of Philippians 2:13:

> God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure

that they do not strongly militate against the present-day trend in theological thought that puts all stress on the individual who is trying to find his way to God rather than on that God of all grace, whose will from all eternity was that "all men be saved" and who in the fullness of time sent His only-begotten Son into the world to die on the cross for man's salvation.

Another much-used translation is *The New Testament in Modern English*, done by J. B. Phillips (London: William Collins Sons & Co., Ltd., 1958). Though to many it has seemed that Phillips' rendering is unduly periphrastic and interpretive, he himself says of his work as translator: "… a translator is not a commentator. He is usually well aware of the different connotations which a certain passage may bear, but unless his work is to be cluttered with footnotes he is bound, after careful consideration, to set down what is the most likely meaning. Occasionally one is driven into what appears to be a paraphrase, simply because a literal translation of the original Greek would prove unintelligible. But where this has proved necessary I have always been careful to avoid giving any slant or flavour which is purely of my own making. That is why I have been rather reluctant to accept the suggestion that my translation is 'interpretation'! If the word interpretation is used in a bad sense, that is, if it is meant that a work is tendentious, or that there has been a manipulation of the words of New Testament Scripture to fit some private point of view, then I would still strongly repudiate the charge! But 'interpretation' can also mean transmitting meaning from one language to another, and skilled interpreters in world affairs do not intentionally inject any meaning of their own. In this sense I gladly accept the word interpretation to describe my work. For, as I see it, the translator's function is to understand as fully and deeply as possible what the New Testament writers had to say and then, after a process of what might be called reflective digestion, to write it down in the language of the people today. And here I must say that it is essential for the interpreter to know the language of both parties. He may be a first-class scholar in New Testament Greek, and know the significance of every traditional crux, and yet be abysmally ignorant of how his contemporaries outside his scholastic world are thinking and feeling." These, so far as they go, as we shall be seeing shortly, were also two of Luther's guiding principles in his *Dolmetschen*, i.e., interpretation.

Phillips' principles may be seen at work in his rendering of John 11:33–44:

> When Jesus saw Mary weep and noticed the tears of the Jews who came with her, he was deeply moved and visibly distressed.
>
> "Where have you put him?" he asked.
>
> "Lord, come and see," they replied, and at this Jesus himself wept.
>
> "Look how much he loved him!" remarked the Jews, though some of them asked, "Could he not have kept this man from dying if he could open the blind man's eyes?"
>
> Jesus was again deeply moved at these words, and went on to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay in front of it.
>
> "Take away the stone," said Jesus.

> "But Lord," said Martha, the dead man's sister, "he has been dead for days. By this time he will be decaying.… "
>
> "Did I not tell you," replied Jesus, "that if you believed, you would see the wonder of what God can do?"
>
> Then they took the stone away and Jesus raised his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of these people standing here so that they may believe that you have sent me."
>
> And when he had said this, he called out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"
>
> And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with grave-clothes and his face muffled with a handkerchief.
>
> "Now unbind him," Jesus told them, "and let him go home."

Also, the closing words of III John (verses 13–15):

> There is a great deal I want to say to you but I can't put it down in black and white. I hope to see you before long, and we will have a heart-to-heart talk. Peace be with you. All our friends here send love: please give ours personally to all our friends at your end. JOHN

Quite unacceptable will be to us the rendering of the words of the centurion and the others at the cross of Christ (Matthew 27:54):

> Indeed he *was* a son of God!

Furthermore, the rendering of Colossians 3:9 and 10:

> Don't tell each other lies any more, for you have finished with the old man and all he did and have begun life as the new man, who is out to learn what he ought to be, according to the plan of God. In this new man of God's design …

seems a far cry from what the *Apology* of the *Augsburg Confession* II 15ff. would lead us to think should be read there concerning the "image of God."

The counterpoise to the American Revised Standard Version was furnished in 1961 by *The New English Bible—New Testament*, which appeared at the Cambridge and Oxford University Presses. The project was planned and directed by the major non-Roman Catholic churches and church groups in the British Isles, and the work was done, so says the *Introduction* (page ix), by "a panel of scholars, drawn from various British universities, whom they believed to be representative of competent biblical scholarship in this country at the present time." Put out by such a panel, the translation could well be expected to represent an attitude toward the translator's task much like that of the other modern versions we have looked at: understand the Greek text according to the currently accepted canons of textual and linguistic criticism; render the understanding of that text into language intelligible to the contemporary English world.

The New English Bible tells part of the Christmas story like this (Luke 2:4–7):

> And so Joseph went up to Judea from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to be registered at the city of David, called Bethlehem, because he was of the house of David by descent; and with him went Mary who was betrothed to him. She was pregnant, and while they were there the time came for her child to be born, and she gave birth to a son, her first-born. She wrapped him round, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them to lodge in the house.

The allegory of the Christian's armor in Ephesians 6 in the NEB, however, seems to proclaim the Barthian Doctrine of the Word (verses 11–17):

> Put on all the armour which God provides, so that you may be able to stand firm against the devices of the devil. For our fight is not against human foes, but against cosmic powers, against the authorities and potentates of this dark world, against the superhuman forces of evil in the heavens. Therefore, take up God's armour; then you will be able to stand your ground when things are at their worst, to complete every task and still to stand. Stand firm, I say, Buckle on the beit of truth; for coat of mail put on integrity; let the shoes on your feet be the gospel of peace, to give you firm footing; and, with all these, take up the great shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take salvation for helmet; for sword, take that which the Spirit gives you—the words that come from God.

The Lockman Foundation has just issued at the Broadman Press, Nashville, Tennessee, the *New American Standard Bible—New Testament* (1960, 1962, 1963). It is intended to be a bringing-up-to-date of the American Standard Version of 1901 with regard to the Greek text translated (generally the 23rd edition of Nestle, Preface) and also with regard to the English of the translation. It was felt that the word-for-word literalness of the ASV must be changed in the direction of a more current English idiom, though the more literal rendering has been indicated in the margin.

The Transfiguration of Our Lord is here described thus (Matthew 17:1–8):

> 1. And six days later Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and brought them up to a high mountain by themselves.
> 2. And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light.
> 3. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him.
> 4. And Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here. one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah."
> 5. While he was still speaking, behold a bright cloud overshadowed them; and behold, a voice out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; hear Him!"
> 6. And when the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were much afraid.
> 7. And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, "Arise, and do not be afraid."
> 8. And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one, except Jesus Himself alone.

In this NASV Romans 8:28, 29 reads:

> And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknow, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren.

In Galatians 4:9 we have:

> But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?

The note to "elemental things" gives the alternate translation: *rudimentary teachings*, or *principles*. And rendering the Nestle text at II Peter 1:20, 21, this version gives us the passage thus:

> But know this first of all, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

From these examples it would seem as though the thought of the *Foreword* as to the nature of Scripture and the translator's purpose had been adhered to: "The New American Standard Bible has been produced with the conviction that the words of Scripture as originally penned in the Hebrew and Greek were inspired by God.

Being the eternal Word of God, the Holy Scriptures speak with fresh power to each generation, to give us wisdom that leads to salvation, that we may serve to the glory of Christ.

"It has been the purpose of the Editorial Board to present to the modern reader a revision of the American Standard Version in clear and contemporary language. The attempt has been made to adhere to the original languages of the Holy Scriptures as closely as possible and at the same time to obtain a fluent and readable style according to current English usage."

In the *Preface* we also find this comment under "2. *Textual Revision*: … Passing time with myriads of inventions and innovations automatically renders obsolete and inexpressive words that once were in acceptable usage. The ever-present danger of stripping divine Truth of its dignity and original intent was prominently before the minds of the producers at all times."

It is indeed refreshing to read the last remark: the warning that there is danger in the process of modernizing a translation that not only some of the dignity, but also of the ORIGINAL INTENT of divine Truth be lost. Remarkable also is the omission of any statement to the effect that the board of revisors was intent upon bringing to bear all the latest discoveries in linguistic science and had accordingly handled the Greek New Testament as it would have treated any other piece of contemporary Hellenistic Greek Literature.

Is it somewhere in this area that the key to the solution of the problem rests, the problem that faces all of us with regard to the many new revisions and retranslations that are appearing from the English-speaking press in our day? Have revisers perhaps been forgetting something that Luther so emphatically insisted on in his wonderful *Neues Testament Deutsch?*

To my knowledge the latest principal New Testament rendering into contemporary American English is that of William F. Beck, *The New Testament in the Language of Today* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963). Dr. Beck has given much time to the study of problems of New Testament text and language. He is known as a specialist in its textual criticism. Of the language he writes: (Preface, page viii) "When Matthew, John, Paul and the others wrote the New Testament, which language did they use? Not the Hebrew of the Old Testament. Not the classical Greek of Aristotle and Plato. Not even the literary Greek of the first century. But the *everyday Greek* of the people of Jesus' day. The many papyri that were found are like a tape recording of what people said off-guard, at their 'coffee and doughnuts.' This is the language of the New Testament."

In the Beck translation we may then expect to have the language of the New Testament writers treated as though it were on a level with the non-literary, off-one's-guard, "coffee and doughnuts" language of the Greek papyri.

In the Hellenistic Greek literature contemporary with the New Testament we find a type of writing in which a certain type of woman figures quite prominently. She is, as the saying has it, no better than she would be: immoral, flippant, ready with the snappy-come-back, and yet sensitive where her own private life is concerned, though quite insensitive to any kind of appeal beyond one to the satisfaction of her immediate wants.

She in general reminds one strongly of what the Woman at Jacob's Well must have been like in the days before she met Jesus. Viewing her against such background this talkative, half-heathen woman of the ready tongue and the shady background comes out in the Beck translation very nearly what she should be according to the words of John in the fourth chapter of his Gospel (John 4:6–18):

> So Jesus, tired as He was from traveling, sat down by the well. It was about six in the evening. A woman of Samaria came to draw water. "Give Me a drink," Jesus said to her. His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. The Samaritan woman asked Him: "How can You, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" Jews, you see, don't drink from the same jar with Samaritans. "If you knew what God is giving," Jesus answered her, "and who it is that says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." "Sir, You have nothing to draw water with," she told Him, "and the well is deep. Where can you get living water from a spring? Are you greater than Jacob, our ancestor, who gave us the well? He himself drank from it, and also his sons and his animals." "Everyone who drinks this water," Jesus answered her, "will get thirsty again. Anyone who drinks the water I'll give him will never get thirsty again. But the water I'll give him will be in him a spring of water bubbling up to everlasting life." "Sir, give me this water," the

> woman told him. "Then I won't get thirsty or have to come out here to draw water." "Go, call your husband," Jesus told her, "and come back here." "I don't have any husband," the woman answered Him. "You're right when you say, 'I don't have any husband,' " Jesus told her. "You've had five husbands, and the man you have now isn't your husband. You've told the truth!"

That is lively, vivid, and understandable, and reproduces quite faithfully what John wrote there. But the rendering of I Timothy 6:13:

> I order you before God

and of II Corinthians 5:10:

> We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ each to get paid for what he has done with his body, good or bad

surely errs on the side of legalism and leaves much to be desired. But is this so possibly because of a too great striving to see the New Testament and life contemporary to it *entirely* on the same level and to see both of them from the same perspective?—to make of Paul's concerns for the church at Ephesus and his view of the Day of Judgment just another tape-recording, "coffee-and-doughnuts" business?

There can be no question that the bulk of translation of the New Testament into contemporary English and American leaves much to be desired. Luther's translation stood the test of time and today still speaks the Word of God to anyone who can and will but learn to read Luther's language. Will perhaps a brief look at Luther's New Testament translation and the principles that guided him furnish us with the sort of corrective over against the welter of new modern versions?

Luther's Bible Translation, Its Making and Principles

1522 is the great year in the story of Luther's translation of the New Testament. Shortly before the 21st of September of that year appeared what we know as his "September Testament," *Das Newe Testament Deutzsch*. It appeared in 3000 copies, but the translator was not named, nor were the printer or publisher. But it was illustrated with twenty-one full-page woodcuts by Cranach and cost half a gulden, which was the weekly wage of a journeyman carpenter. However we are told that Luther was not satisfied with the translation he had published in that first edition, but kept on making emendations and improvements in each new printing even though these followed one another often in swift succession. Still in the same year of 1522 appeared a second edition of Luther's New Testament, his *Dezember Testament*. The story behind Luther's German New Testament is not only fascinating reading for us who call ourselves by his name, but it can well furnish guidance to us as we face the problems of modern-speech translations in our own day.

In common with all good translators of any literary work whatsoever, Luther held that in translating the New Testament the work be done on the basis of a thorough understanding of the original Greek text, and that this understanding then be rendered into a German that fairly represents the original and at the same time is understandable to the average German who would be reading it.

As Professor of Bible at the University of Wittenberg, Luther had already in 1515/16 made use of the Greek in his exposition of Paul's Letter to the Romans. This was in itself quite an innovation, for in the time just before, and throughout the Middle Ages, where the Bible was studied at all, it was commonly studied in the commonly accepted Latin version of the Roman Catholic Church, the so-called *Vulgate*.

Meanwhile, at the recommendation of Erasmus, Melanchthon had been called as Professor of Greek to the University of Wittenberg, and beginning with 1518 Luther had given himself more and more to a serious study of the Greek language. Then had come the developments in Luther's reformatory work and his stay at the Wartburg. But while Luther was there, disturbances had broken out in Wittenberg that caused Luther much concern. Grounded in enthusiasm and verging on the fanatical, they created a situation serious enough that Luther risked leaving the security of the Wartburg for a secret meeting with his Wittenberg colleagues for the

purpose of conferring on the local situation. A meeting was held December 4–9, 1521, in the horne of Amsdorf. It seems quite clear that in connection with this meeting Luther was urged by his friends, especially by Philip Melanchthon, to undertake the translation of the New Testament at once, though naturally the idea could not have been a totally new one in that circle of friends (WA DB 6, XXXII).[3] On his return to the Wartburg Luther apparently got at the work of translation in earnest and when he on March 6, 1522, returned to Wittenberg, he brought the first draft of the translation of the New Testament with him, having completed it in eleven weeks! This was indeed a remarkable achievement, and Luther was to spend as many *years* on the translation of the Old Testament as he had spent *weeks* on that of the New. Of course, the Old Testament was considerably longer and presented at times seemingly insurmountable obstacles in the way of the translator. Luther and his friends went immediately at work polishing and correcting Luther's first draft. The printer must have lent every co-operation possible to the task, for by September Luther's first New Testament could be published.

That Luther was a genius in the realm of language as well as in that of religion there can be no doubt. Still the question has always intrigued students as to just what books and other works Luther had at the Wartburg to help him in his single-handed task. To begin with, Luther's was not at all the first Bible to be translated or even printed in German. As late as 1518 Sylvan Otmar had printed a German Bible at Augsburg. This was however nothing but one in a series of editions of a sort of German translation that had been made about 1350 from the Latin Vulgate and that was first printed by Johann Mentelin at Strassburg in 1466. It was revised and re-issued a number of times, principally by Guenther Zainer of Strassburg, who issued this medieval German Bible in 1473, and again in 1477. Various other printers revised it, so that 14 printings of the medieval High German Bible are today counted. But it had originally been made by a translator whose control of German was weak and whose Latin was often very poor, so that from the point of language this *Zainerbibel* was often clumsy and partly incomprehensible. Of course, it was at best but a translation of a translation. The Latin Vulgate Luther had known from his youth and it never left him, for on his deathbed he prayed Bible verses in the Latin. It was simply unavoidable that he should have thought and spoken in terms of the Latin, just as for you and me the language of King James will remain "Bible language" however much we may value and use other translations. Besides, this popular though clumsy and often dark German version of the Vulgate would also have remained with Luther. He had been associated with it too long in church and pastoral use to be able to put it completely out of his life. It surely stayed with him, even where he does not expressly refer to it. (WA DB 6 LXXff.) Just so that you may have a sample of the kind of material Luther had to work with, here is the beginning of the Twenty-Third Psalm in the old German Bible printed at Augsburg in 1518:

> *Der herr regieret mich und mir geprist nichts, und an der stat der weide, da satzt er mich, Er hat mich gefüret auf dem watter der wiederpringung, er bekeret mein sel. Er fürt mich ausz auf die steig der gerechtigkeit, umb seinen name. Wann ob ich gee in mitte des schatten des todes, ich fürcht nit die üblen ding, wann du bist bei mir: Dein ruot und dein stab, die selben haben mich getröstet.*

What is so remarkable, and for which we cannot cease to thank and praise our Heavenly Father, is how He enabled His servant Luther to transform all these dead traditional materials under the pressure of his hand and make them spring to a new and joyous life.

What scholarly material there was, Luther according to all indications used so far as he could persuade his friends to supply them to him at the Wartburg. The Greek text Luther followed was probably that of Erasmus, though there is ample evidence that Luther was fully aware of what we today think of as the problems of "textual criticism." That Luther went back to the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament and worked with them independently of the printed edition of Erasmus has now been quite clearly established (WA DB 6 XXXIX).

A year after the appearance of Luther's German New Testament, a certain Hieronymus Emser, a court theologian, published an attack on Luther's *September-Bibel*. It appeared September 21, 1523, and charged

---

3 References to the works of Luther are to the definitive *Weimar Ausgabe* (WA). The reference here is to the sixth volume in the section of the edition on *Deutsche Bibel* (DB).

Luther with 1400 errors and heresies. The accusation was that Luther had omitted some and had substituted other words; that he had lengthened, shortened, and twisted arbitrarily; that his heretical notes and introductions showed that he was following not the Holy Spirit but his own notions. Most of these charges were aimed at passages where Luther's principles of translation had demanded that he follow the Greek original where it differed from the Latin Vulgate or where a *letteristic* rendering would not have conveyed adequately the thought of the original. In the few places where the charge of Emser could be substantiated, it was the printer who was at fault. Emser had fastened on a typographical error as textual falsification by Luther.

The next year, 1524, Dr. Urbanus Rhegius came to Luther's defense in an Augsburg publication: *The Correctness of the Present German Translation of the New Testament—a Brief Survey* (WA DB 6, LXXIII). Rhegius insisted that Luther had faithfully followed the Greek text and then proceeded to give an excellent characterization of the manner and method of Luther's translation: he had, so Rhegius insisted, succeeded in putting into understandable German a correct and proper understanding of the Greek New Testament.

But it was not only Luther's friends who defended his translation methods and manner. Luther himself repeatedly took occasion to answer the attacks that had been made on his work and to set forth in a positive fashion precisely what he conceived his assignment as a translator of Holy Writ to be and where the principal stress would have to be placed if success were to be achieved in putting the words of the Bible into the language of one's own day. While he was at Castle Koburg during the time of the Diet at Augsburg in 1530, Luther wrote a pamphlet in which he set forth the principles of translation that are still being studied today and that must remain valid for all time. This was his *Ein Sendbrief von Dolmetschen*, printed in 1530 at Wittenberg by George Rhau. In addition to this public letter on the principles of translation Luther in 1533 in connection with his "Summaries of the Psalms" also published a *Von Ursachen des Dolmetschens*, which means, "The Fundamental Principles Followed in this Translation."

In the writings mentioned and elsewhere Luther himself set down or had set down for him the basic ideas he followed in putting the New Testament into German. For our purposes it will be sufficient to summarize briefly what these ideas were and to show how far they agree with similar statements by the makers of the modern-language translations and where Luther stresses an element that is conspicuously absent in much of the writing about the theory of translation in our own day.

To bring about a good translation—so Luther's doctrine or theory or principles of translating Scripture would have it—one must be very conscious of this that each language has its own idiom, its own way of putting things; therefore, the translator often has to forget about the individual words he is trying to translate and rather give the meaning of them in his own language. This was the principle followed not only by Jerome, the great reviser of the Latin Vulgate, but also by the Apostles and Evangelists of the New Testament themselves. When they referred to the Old Testament, while the separate words were of course important, final emphasis was to be put on the ultimate meaning and intention (the *Sentenz* as Luther has it) of them in the plan of God for man's salvation. Luther puts this in another way: he says that in the translator must be "the mind of Christ"—without it, all knowledge of ancient and modern languages and all industry and diligence on the translator's part will go for naught.

According to Luther's point of view, the God whose words we are reading in the Bible is that Lord who willed and planned and brought to realization the salvation of sinful man. The translator must approach his task with the "mind of Christ," that is, with the realization and conviction that from first to last the Scriptures speak of Christ, not only that Jesus who lived his perfect example before men and who taught as men never spoke before him but who was first and foremost, what John the Baptist said of him, "the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world." To read the Scriptures aright then is always to read them with Christ at the center, or to put it in a different way, to read that Scripture keeping ever in view the thought that is its very heart, the truth that Luther had rediscovered for himself when he had come to a true Scriptural understanding of the words of the Apostle Paul, Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11, an understanding based upon a proper exegetical approach to the Greek text: *The just shall live by faith*. Luther's rediscovery of the Gospel thus led him to a new understanding of the whole Bible.

Though for humanists like Erasmus elegance in language was enough (and to promote his own new Latin translation of the New Testament had been Erasmus' chief interest in publishing his edition of the Greek New Testament, not the Greek text itself), for Luther mere proficiency in language, whether elegant or not, was by far not enough. Properly to understand, and then translate, the Bible, what was needed above all was a believing and experienced heart, one tested in the fiery trial of Satan's flaming arrows. What Luther understood by this belief and this experience we can see from what he wrote, in his Small Catechism, by way of explanation to the First, Second, and Third Articles of the Creed. The difficulty in translating, said Luther (WA DB 6, LXXVIII), was to find words adequate to reproduce the solemn majesty, the profound simplicity, the glory and strength of the Divine Word. Precisely thoughts like these occupied Luther throughout his earthly career, yes, to the very end. For it was these thoughts that were found written on a piece of notepaper lying on his table after Luther's death (WA 48, 241 Sancta *noēmata* Rever. Patris D.M.L. 16. Feb. 1546). But notice his words: *solemn majesty, profound simplicity, glory and strength*. In the words of the New Testament are to be found, and then translated, the solemnity and majesty, the profundity yet simplicity, the glory and strength of the Gospel of our Salvation! Or, as Luther uses the words in his *Sendbrief von Dolmetschen*, the prime requisite is: *Christo grosse Hulde erzeigen*, show proper reverence and respect for the Lord Jesus Christ, who is speaking to us in the words of Scripture. This is a long way from making of the New Testament a kind of tape-recording of the "coffee-and-doughnuts" talk that goes on at a lunch counter, where surely only the obvious, the temporary, the surface concerns of the conversationalists come to expression.

The New Testament in English

The story of the New Testament in English runs parallel, in many respects, in its early stages to the story of the New Testament in German. In English too there was a version made from the Latin Vulgate. It was finished by 1380 (the whole Bible by 1382), though this remained in manuscript form and was not printed for almost 500 years, in spite of all its popularity and treasured value. It was by John Wycliffe, the foremost scholar at Oxford. Some of the expressions still familiar to us from the Bible appear first in the Wycliffe Bible: "strait gate," "make whole," "compass land and sea," "son of perdition," "enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

The first translation from the Greek original was made shortly after Luther's and most probably largely in Wittenberg itself. The translator was William Tyndale, a man with a Master's degree from Oxford in 1515, who had studied further at Cambridge, where he became acquainted with Erasmus' edition of The Greek New Testament. Shortly after he had begun his translation he left England and went to Hamburg and then to Wittenberg. The authorities interfered with the printing of his New Testament at Cologne, but the work was finished at Worms, English merchants who were interested in the Reformation supplying him with the funds. So within three years after Luther's 1522 New Testament Tyndale's appeared, in 1525. Tyndale too supplied his translation with marginal notes and prefaces to the several books. Many of the latter were essentially translations from Luther's edition. On the whole it may be said that the prefaces in Tyndale offered a *Lutheran* guide to the understanding of Scripture as a whole.

Very rightly has the 1525 Worms edition of Tyndale's New Testament been called the "most interesting book in our language." For in it Tyndale had read line after line of the Greek text of Erasmus, pondered upon its meaning, and then sought to express that meaning, under the direction of Luther's doctrine of Justification by Faith, in the synonyms and common speech of his native land. And in his work Tyndale shaped the religious vocabulary of the English-speaking world. His phrases are part of our household speech, and even though Tyndale was strangled and his body burned, the language of his translation was to a very strong percentage to reappear in the later versions of the New Testament, right up to the King James Version of 1611, none of which are actually anything more than revisions of Tyndale's translation of 1525. But even though these later versions kept much of the phraseology and vocabulary of William Tyndale, they lost that perspective which Tyndale had in common with Luther, the realization that the core of Scripture is the doctrine of the Justification of the Sinner by Faith. In those days too there was a Roman Catholic version made from the Latin. In many an instance, King James' revisers let themselves be influenced by the Catholic Rheims version away from Tyndale, so that in the

King James Version, it is correct to say, the influence of the Latin Vulgate was again coming strongly to the fore (cf. “charity” as against “love” in I Cor. 13).

The Translations of the Twentieth Century

When we approach the study and translation of the New Testament today, we have two strong tools of which we can make use which neither Luther nor Tyndale nor the King James’ committee nor even the revisers of 1881 had. These are first, knowledge of the Greek text of the New Testament that goes back many centuries beyond that of the text used in Erasmus’ edition. Erasmus reproduced the text that was current at the time printing was discovered; today we have manuscripts that go back to the fourth century, some that go to the third, and a couple perhaps even to the second century. Notice I have said that our materials for the text are much older. I do not want it understood that I am saying that for that reason the text with which we generally operate is in all respects therefore better. I would personally have many reservations about that matter, but this is another topic and need not be taken up here.

In addition to more knowledge about the history of the New Testament text, we have a vastly increased amount of knowledge about the kind of language in which the New Testament was written. I don’t know of anyone working in this field today who does not proceed on the premise, established about a half century ago, that the language of the New Testament is no longer the language of the great Greek classics, but is *Hellenistic Greek*, the kind of language, first spoken, and then written down, that developed when after the conquests of Alexander the Great an the lands once included in his Empire came to speak and use a sort of Greek. It was the sort of language that non-Greeks used when they used Greek. That changes should be introduced into this kind of language is self-evident. There would be changes in the meanings of words and in the forms of words and sentences. The people of Egypt spoke this kind of Greek and the sands of their arid land have preserved for us many of the pieces of paper on which they wrote down the words they spoke just as they spoke them. These are the famous Egyptian *papyri*. Everyone who wants to deal with the New Testament in a professional way simply must know about the *papyri* and the contribution they have made to our insight into the meaning of the books of the New Testament. To convince ourselves of this, an we have to do is look at some of the latest New Testament dictionaries and grammars. Time after time the examples illustrating New Testament usage come from the Egyptian papyri.

But now, brethren, I submit that it is at just this point that present-day New Testament study and translation has gone too far. It has reduced the weighty language of the Apostles to the every-day level of the non-literary papyri. Pray recall here the words of Luther about the solemnity, the weight, the profundity, the glory of these words. The words may be the same as those used in common, every-day speech, but when the Apostles use these same words to speak of the great and eternal truths of God’s grace, those same words simply must mean more than they would mean if a tape-recorder picked them up at a “coffee-and-doughnuts” conversation. When for instance Paul speaks of “redemption,” he uses a Greek word that was commonly used for the process of setting a slave free. But in Paul’s usage, the word “redemption” is filled with all those thoughts with which it is filled when we use it today without thinking of the Greek word of “setting free from slavery” that lies behind it. When we read the New Testament word “redemption” today, we simply dare not do otherwise than include in it all those things that Luther mentions in his explanation of the Second Article of our Creed.

To see why it is that most of our modern translators who hold to the extreme “coffee-and-doughnuts” view of the language of the New Testament can still do quite a commendable job of translating simple New Testament narrative, we have but to look at the sort of thing that these Greek Egyptian papyri contain. Here are my translations of a few of the papyri reproduced in Goodspeed and Colwell, *A Greek Papyrus Reader* (The University of Chicago Press, 1935).

No. 1 A Request for Salary. P Zen Mich 89 iii B.C.
Memorandum to Zeno from Labois:

> Please, give me some salary.
> Good-bye!

(The word "salary" is the same as the one we find at Luke 3:14; Romans 6:23 "wages of sin is death" and elsewhere.)

> No. 4 Invitation to a Wedding Dinner. P Oxy 524 ii A.D.
> Dionysius requests the honor of your presence at the wedding-feast of his children at the house of Ischyrion tomorrow, the 30th, beginning at 3 pm.
>
> No. 21 Personal Letter of a college student of the third century A.D. to his father.
>
> Aurelius Dius to Aurelius Horion, my sweetest father, heartiest greetings!
>
> I attend services every day at the temples of the local gods. So don't worry about my studies. I am working hard and I get some recreation too; so I'll be all right. I send greetings to Mamma Tamias and Sister Tnepherous and Sister Philous. I send Greetings to Brother Patermouthis and Sister Thermouthis. I send greetings to Brother Hercules and Brother Kallouchis, and Pappa Melanos and Mamma Timpesouris and her son. Gaia sends her best to all of you. My Pappa Horeion and Thermouthis send their best to all of you. Farewell, Father, the best of all that's good!

Examples could be multiplied almost endlessly from about every walk of life: farming, expectant mother, tax-collecting, police activity, geometry—you name it, Egypt has a papyrus for it. But I think enough has been given to show you that the papyri of ancient Egypt had a good deal of "coffee-and-doughnuts" talk. So too do parts of the New Testament, e.g. most of the story of the Good Samaritan. But the point is: *much of the language of the Apostles, in particular in the doctrinal parts of their Epistles, is far removed from the level of the non-literary papyri*. To know what thoughts fill their words we need to go, not only to the sands of Egypt, but to the books of the Prophets of the Old Testament, to the history of Israel, to the Promise the Lord made to Abraham and his Seed; to the visions a David, an Isaiah, an Ezekiel had of the Promised Messiah and His Kingdom. For the origin of Paul's theology is not to be found in the contemporary religious thought, pagan or Jewish, of his day, but in the words and teachings of the Lord given by the mouths of His holy men of old, His spokesmen, the Prophets. Neither are the words of the New Testament to be seen only in their first-century dress. They are to be taken back—and this is the way the Apostles used them—to eternity itself and are to be filled with Christ, of whom the Apostle says that "he filleth all in all."

Martin Luther, though he could be simple and vivid and very German, was always aware that when a New Testament passage was weighted down with the Gospel facts of our salvation, it had to be translated as such. Where he felt the need to do so, he translated a passage in order to bring out the Gospel-truth as seen in the light of his Doctrine of Justification by Faith, cf. for example his: *Die Gerechtigkelt, die vor Gott gilt* of Romans 1:17, where the Greek words are merely, as KJV, "the righteousness of God" and which Tyndale rendered: "the righteousness which commeth of god." At other times, however, where the sense of a passage depended on a single word, Luther did not strive to find an idiomatic German equivalent. If he were to do so, he knew that the danger would be great that his translation would be but a partial one, the part that is parallel to the everyday life of man would be present, but the part that depends upon the eternal thought of God in Christ would be absent. So Luther would at times be quite letteristic and not try to bring everything down to ordinary day to day living here on earth. He says in his *Sendbrief*:

> *Doch hab ich widerüm nicht allzu frei die Buchstaben lassen faren, sondern mit grossen Sorgen samt meinen Gehülfen darauf gehen, das, wo etwa an einem Wort gelegen ist, hab ichs nach den Buchstaben behalten und bin nicht so frei davon gangen*.

He explains that in John 6:27 "for him hath God the Father sealed" he kept the literal word "sealed" even though it was not good German. But he felt that any other word would not do justice to the thought and

therefore merely gave its German equivalent, leaving up to the reader or interpreter the task of supplying all that the Greek word for "seal" would imply.

So here would be my answer to the question: How do our present-day translations of the New Testament fare when we test them in the light of Luther's principles of translation?

Answer: Where the Apostolic word has to do with the things of this world and the life here, our modern translators have often done very well because they have learned to know this life and the words that were in times past used about it. But where the New Testament speaks of things beyond the ken and imaginations of men, there all too often our modern versions are either in error, because they are made on the basis of a false theology, or they are inadequate, because they see the words of the inspired writer entirely on the same level as these same words when used about the every-day concerns of men.

In this area it is again true what we have so often found in the course of human history. A thing that is good in itself may be driven to an extreme and become quite the opposite of good. Surely the added knowledge about the New Testament as to its text and language must be received as a blessing from our God Himself and used as such. I'm very sure that Martin Luther would have rejoiced in it. It could be the kind of God-send that that little white pill is when placed under the tongue of the patient with angina pectoris. But when it is declared that the language of the New Testament is "like that of the many papyri" that are "like a tape recording of what people said off-guard, at their coffee and doughnuts" (Beck, p. viii), or when the translator says that he has "attempted to translate the New Testament *exactly* as one would render any piece of contemporary Hellenistic prose," and this from a writer who is glad to be "freed from the influence of the theory of verbal inspiration" (Moffatt, p. vii), then I would say that the same thing has happened that would occur if the material of that same little white pill were taken, prepared in a different form and in other amounts, and used to blast loose the combination and hinges on the safe in some bank.

Behind all this, I think, is another consideration: Our generation needs to learn anew to take to its heart the Gospel of Jesus Christ as Martin Luther taught it. For that is the way God's Chosen Vessel to the Gentiles, Saul of Tarsus, who was Paul the Apostle, preached it. And as corollary to this there moves another thought: May we from our renewed study of Luther learn to appreciate more deeply what it was that he held the Holy Scriptures to be: *by the word of prophet and apostle the God of all grace speaking to us*. For in our day as never before it needs to be stressed that our interpretation, and consequently our translation, of Scripture hangs very closely together with what we hold that same Scripture to be.