

REFORMATION SUNDAY: OCTOBER 29, 2017

Luther's Bible



This year Presbyterians celebrate the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's 95 Theses. The theses, which criticized the sale of indulgences by church officials, are considered the opening salvo in the Protestant Reformation—a movement that emphasized individual relationships with God and salvation through faith alone.

Luther is also celebrated for a second piece of writing: his translation of the Bible into German. After Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther in 1521, the reformer took refuge inside Wartburg Castle. There he completed his translation of the New Testament, based on Erasmus's 1516 Bible text. First printed in September 1522, the "September Testament" does not include Luther's name on the title page, an elision meant to limit church reprisals.

The Old Testament translation proved more difficult, owing in part to Luther's struggles with Hebrew and his insistence that the text be accessible to all Germans. "The translator must not be led by the Hebrew words," Luther wrote. "He should make sure that he really understands the sense and ask himself: 'What would the German say in such-and-such an instance?'" His editorial philosophy required inventive interpolations. For example, he replaced the word "chameleon," which would have been unknown to sixteenth century Germans, with "weasel."

It took Luther and a team of fellow scholars twelve years to translate the Old Testament, which was printed in 1534 together with Luther's New Testament. Despite criticism for the way he valued certain books of the Bible over others and for editing passages to fit his own theology, Luther's Bible was an immediate and lasting success; one Wittenberg publisher alone printed 100,000 copies between 1534 and 1574. Many Germans regarded it as a work of literary genius, the way English readers would revere the King James Bible in the century to come.

Reformation Sunday materials are provided by the [Presbyterian Historical Society](http://www.history.pcusa.org/reformation-sunday). For more information on the Reformation and PHS, visit us at www.history.pcusa.org/reformation-sunday

Above left Portrait of Martin Luther, engraved by John Sartain, 1835.

Above right Title page of Luther's translation of the New Testament, 1582. PHS Rare Books Collection.

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Sermon Outline, First Presbyterian Church, Manteno, Illinois
Sunday, October 15, 2017

- I. Introduction – Why I prefer maps to a GPS. (You can see the “big picture” at one time.)
 - A. As a visual aid, I displayed a map which outlines the history of the Reformation. I purchased this map in 2003, while teaching in the International Business Institute program, when we held classes at the John Knox International Reformed Centre in Geneva, Switzerland. (Their Website is <http://www.johnknox.ch/>)
 - B. This map not only presents a great deal of historical information concerning the Reformation, but it also contains the three main principles of this movement, which is just as relevant today as they were then.
- II. The principles of the Reformation.
 - A. Grace alone.
 - 1. None of us deserve God’s mercy. It is only by His grace that we are reconciled to Him, through Christ. This is illustrated by the passage in the Ninth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, where the Pharisees criticize Jesus for eating with tax collectors and other “sinners.” Jesus responds by saying, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” The truth of the matter is that we are all “sick,” and only Jesus has the cure for our “disease.”
 - B. Faith alone.
 - 1. As the bulletin insert indicates, Martin Luther’s 95 theses criticized the practice of selling indulgences by church officials, which implied that God’s favor could be purchased through a financial transaction. In the same way, there is nothing that we can do to earn God’s favor, apart from His grace. Works are a manifestation of faith, not a substitute for it.
 - C. Scripture alone.
 - 1. The bulletin insert also emphasizes the significance of Luther’s role in translating the Bible into German, so that it could be read by all believers.
 - 2. Asserting the primacy of Scripture doesn’t mean that reason, tradition, and experience are not of value in interpreting the Bible.
 - 3. Interpreting Scripture is often not an easy task.
 - a. What if certain passages were meant to be read as analogies? (Did Jesus really want us to literally cut off our hands if they might be a source of temptation?)
 - b. What if some passages reflect the cultural setting in which they were written? (Disagreements in this area are the reason why some Christian denominations restrict certain offices, such as ordained ministry, to men, while others do not .)
- III. Conclusion – Let us pray for wisdom and discernment as we seek to interpret the Scripture together, in faith, with ongoing gratitude for His grace and mercy.