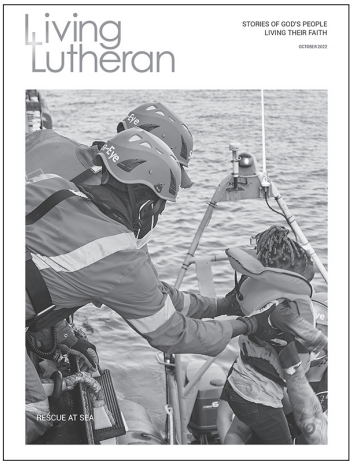

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Living Lutheran,
October 2022

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Study guide

500 years of God's word in common language

The true story of Martin Luther's "September Testament"

By Robert C. Blezard

It's hard for us to imagine a time when the Bible wasn't widely and inexpensively available in one's own language. As such, we need to stretch our imagination to fully comprehend what a ground-breaking, culture-changing feat it was when Martin Luther produced a new translation of the Bible into everyday German.

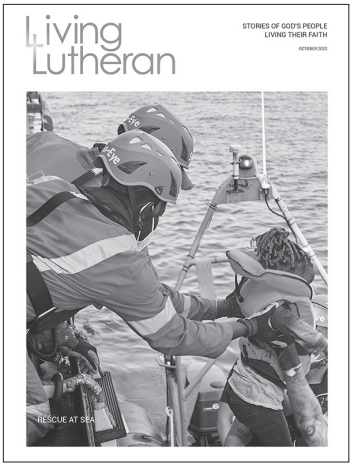
Exercise 1: The Bible—1522

Imagine you are a faithful Christian in Germany 500 years ago:

- You will likely be born, live and die in the same town or village.
- You can't read or write, since only 5% of the population is literate.
- The Roman Catholic Church has been the only "denomination" for centuries. Those who preach or teach contrary to official doctrine are deemed "heretics" and are silenced, persecuted, excommunicated and, in extreme cases, put to death.
- You've attended only one church, that of your town or village.
- The Bible your priest uses is based on the Latin Vulgate, a fourth-century translation that over the years has undergone countless revisions, which has allowed errors to creep in.
- Your priest likely reads from the Vulgate in Latin, which you can't understand.
- Your main knowledge of the Bible—its stories, messages and significance—is derived from the preaching, teaching and interpretation of your priest.
- Your priest may not have much education or theological training.
- You have little or no other source of religious education and faith formation outside of your church and priest.

Discuss:

- What would it be like to practice your faith in such an environment?
- If the Bible isn't accessible to you, how could you understand what it really means? How could you challenge your priest's interpretations and understandings?
- You and your community would have limited access to different religious ideas or opposing thoughts. How would this help your community remain unified and keep common identity? What are the pros and cons of this?
- In what ways might it be comforting and safe to have only one avenue of theological education and discourse? In what ways might it be harmful, opening you to manipulation or belief in false ideas and doctrine?



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- If the above seems confining and narrow to us, might it be because we live in a wide theological marketplace, where dozens of Bible translations are available online, as are preachers and theologians with wide-ranging viewpoints?
- How might you respond if a new, fresh, authoritative translation of the Bible—written in language you could understand—came into your community?

Exercise 2: Bible translations

The oldest manuscripts of the Bible are written in ancient Greek and Hebrew, which (like all languages) have distinct words, grammar and syntax that aren't always neatly translated into other languages. A translator must wrestle with the Greek or Hebrew and decide which words and expressions best convey a passage's meaning. That is why translations can be so different. Every translator has an idea for tone, accessibility and shades of meaning. For instance, here are different translations of Psalm 23:4:

King James Version: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

The Complete Jewish Bible: "Even if I pass through death-dark ravines, I will fear no disaster; for you are with me; your rod and staff reassure me."

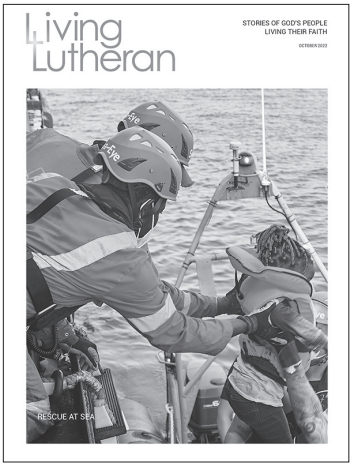
Good News Bible: "Even if I go through the deepest darkness, I will not be afraid, Lord, for you are with me. Your shepherd's rod and staff protect me."

The Living Bible: "Even when walking through the dark valley of death I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me, guarding, guiding all the way."

The Message: "Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I'm not afraid when you walk at my side. Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure."

Discuss:

- How are the passages similar? How are they different?
- Explore the differences among the verses and how they provide nuances of meaning (for example, "I will fear no evil" versus "I will fear no disaster").
- Which translation is easiest for you to understand?
- Which one is your favorite—that is, which speaks most clearly to you?
- Which translation is the most casual in tone and speech?
- When Luther translated the Bible into German, he worked hard to use common language, phrases and idioms that everybody would understand—the approach that The Message Bible uses. Why is this important?
- Why would such a Bible—one written in a nation's common, faithfully translated from ancient languages, in readily accessible language, and mass published—be ground-breaking to a culture?



Study guide: **500 years**

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Exercise 3: "Repent!"

Luther's translation of the New Testament from the original Greek corrected or clarified many mistakes from the Vulgate edition, which had been the standard Bible of the Roman Catholic Church for centuries. One such correction involved the translation of the Greek word *metanoeite*, which appears in English as "repent." Here is one such instance:

*In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "**Repent,** for the kingdom of heaven has come near"* (emphasis added) —Matthew 3:1-2.

For *metanoeite*, the Vulgate used a Latin word that meant "do penance"—a core practice in the Roman Catholic Church of Luther's time. Faithful Catholics were expected to confess their sins to a priest and then atone for them by "doing penance"—fulfilling specific actions ordered by their priest. Once penance was completed, the sin would be forgiven.

But the Greek word *metanoeite* means something different from confessing and atoning for sin. It means to change, to change your mind. Luther incorporated this meaning into his German New Testament.

As Erasmus' efforts before him, Luther's work correcting errors in the Vulgate broke through a barrier that had made people reluctant to question the church. Their work on the Vulgate eroded confidence in the established church and helped normalize challenging or questioning official policy.

Discuss:

- Responding to a need for us to turn from our human sinful nature, what is the difference between "doing penance" and "changing"?
- Is it possible to "do penance" for a specific sin and not change? Explain.
- Which would you think is more in line with God's intentions for us: doing penance or changing?
- How might translating *metanoeite* as change, rather than "do penance," undercut the Roman Catholic Church's system of mandated confession and atonement?
- How might the change lead to a new understanding of repentance and discipleship among God's faithful people?
- How would you feel if you found out that the official Bible of your church contained errors? What affect would it have on your faith in God? Your faith in the church?

Exercise 4: The 15th-century's internet

Prior to the advent of Gutenberg's movable-type printing press in 1450, the Bible and other works were hand-copied by scribes working by candlelight. The process was laborious and allowed for errors to creep in over the centuries. Moreover, because the process was so slow, the resulting manuscripts were expensive and scarce. Like the internet did in our age, the printing press revolutionized communication and the dissemination of ideas. Born in 1483, Luther came of age at just the right time

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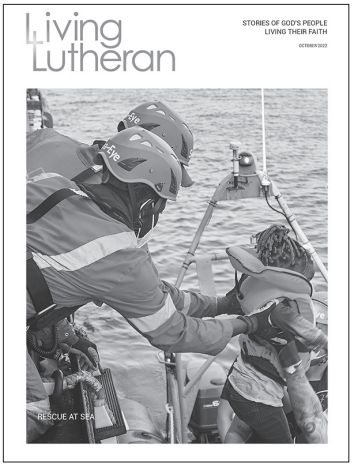

to capitalize on the press' ability to reach wide audiences with his revolutionary observations. In his day, Luther was one of the best-selling authors in all of Europe.

Today we live in a world awash with inexpensive books in every language and covering every topic. Imagine a world that existed only a generation or two before Luther was born, a world where there were no books—only hand-copied manuscripts.

- What would be the need for widespread literacy when written works weren't widely available?
- In such an environment, who would need to be able to read? For whom and for what social class would formal education exist?
- How fast or slow would new ideas spread in a culture that had no easy way to disseminate information? How might the inability to communicate easily and quickly hinder advancement?
- The printing press allowed for relatively speedy, accurate copying and dissemination of written work. How would that change the flow of ideas in a culture? How might it advance progress?
- The Roman Catholic Church had for centuries persecuted, silenced and sometimes killed heretics—those who spoke against official doctrines. How might the printing press and its ability to spread ideas quickly and widely make it harder to "crack down" on heretics? How would it be harder to keep heretical ideas from spreading?
- How would widely available, mass-produced written works change educational systems and promote literacy?
- When it comes to the impact on the world, what similarities do you find between the printing press and the internet?

Exercise 5: Private interpretation

Luther boldly proclaimed that a Bible written in an easily understood language would empower a "priesthood of all believers" who could interpret Scripture themselves, without a priest's assistance. Whereas before faithful people had relied on their religious leaders for biblical interpretation, vernacular Bibles allowed, for the first time, private and individual interpretation.

Luther called for laypeople to embrace Scripture and reform the church. But this and other emerging humanistic ideas that challenged the medieval social hierarchy fomented the German Peasants War (1524-1525), where feudal serfs violently rebelled against nobility, wealthy landowners and church institutions. It was brutally put down, with some 100,000 people killed.

Today there are scores of Bible translations in our own language, and the notion that we have the right to interpret Scripture for ourselves is taken for granted.

Discuss:

- Who is best equipped to interpret the Bible? Why?

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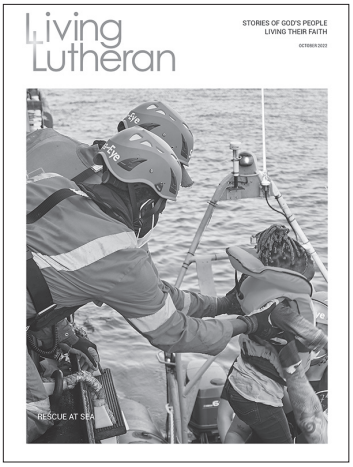

About the study guide author:

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Study guide: **500 years**

continued

- Does everyone have the right to interpret Scripture? Explain.
- Is everyone's interpretation of Scripture equally valid? Accurate? Well reasoned? Why or why not?
- How can you tell a good Scripture interpretation from a bad one? What factors would go into making that kind of judgment?
- In today's world, everyone feels entitled not only to interpret Scripture but also to choose which Bible they will base their interpretations on. What are the positive aspects of this phenomenon? What are the negative aspects?
- Have you heard people espousing "biblical" ideas that are just plain wrong?
- How have disagreements over Scripture led to fighting and splintering of God's people into more and more groups and subgroups? What are the pros of this phenomenon? The cons?
- What is lost when faithful people can no longer agree on a common understanding of the Bible?

500 YEARS of God's word in common language

The true story of Martin Luther's "September Testament"

By J.R. Jones

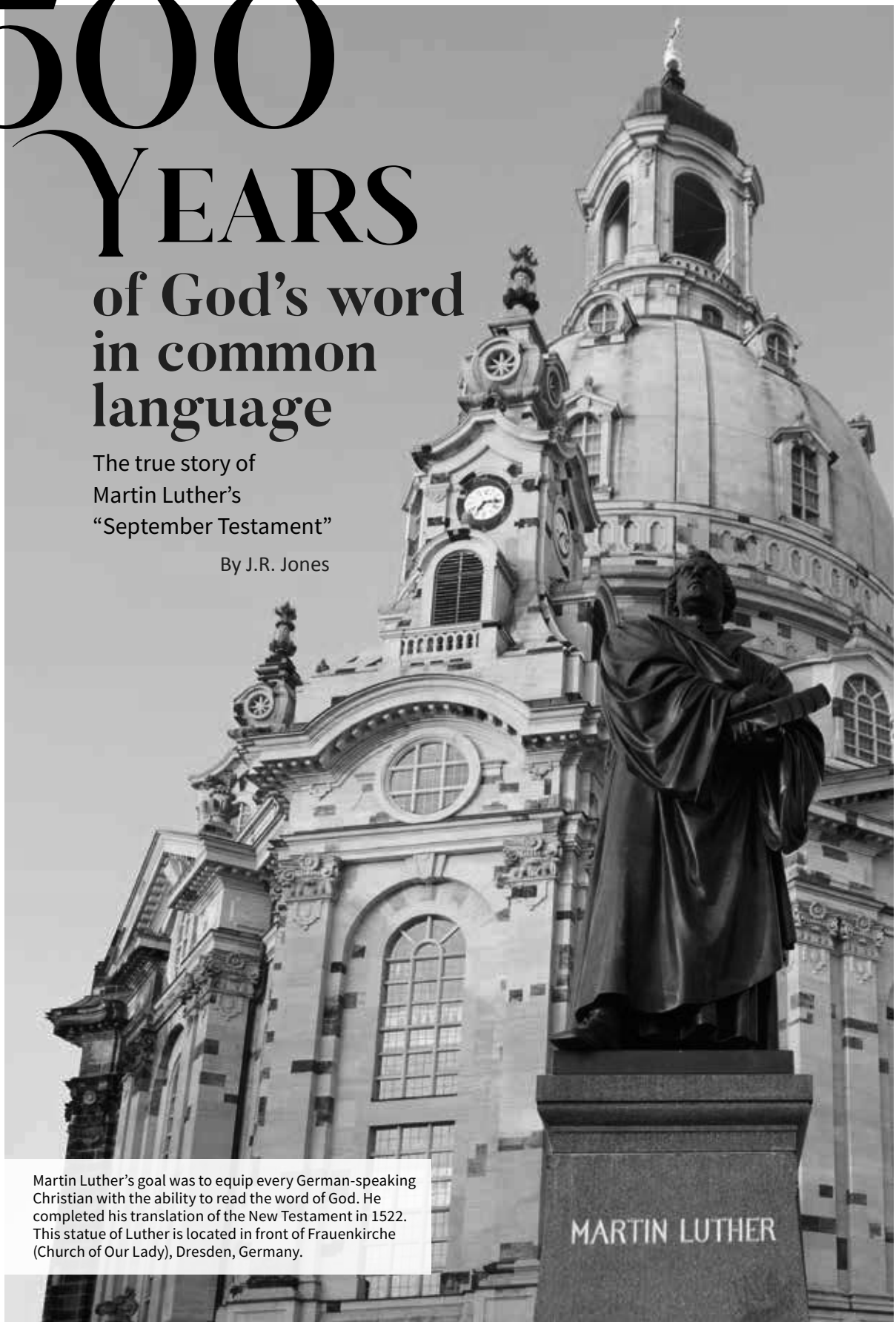

Photo: iStock.com/MIenny

Martin Luther's goal was to equip every German-speaking Christian with the ability to read the word of God. He completed his translation of the New Testament in 1522. This statue of Luther is located in front of Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady), Dresden, Germany.

Five hundred years ago in September, at the Leipzig Fair in the German state of Saxony, the printer Melchior Lotter Jr. offered up for sale his first edition of the New Testament as translated from the ancient Greek into the German vernacular by Martin Luther. By then Luther was notorious across Europe for his attacks on the papacy. He had been denounced as a heretic, excommunicated by Pope Leo X and condemned by Charles V, leader of the Holy Roman Empire. The edition of 3,000 copies sold out rapidly.

Contemporary readers might shrug at this anniversary. Yet Luther's "September Testament," in addition to being hailed as a great work of German literature, was also one of the most consequential publications in world history. It defined the Lutheran faith as one devoted to the authority of Scripture. Within three years it fueled the greatest mass uprising Europe had ever seen. Along with Luther's Old Testament, completed in 1534, and the other vernacular translations they inspired, it reshaped society across Europe, breaking the Roman Catholic Church's grip on civil life.

To understand the significance of the September Testament, we need to step through the looking glass from this irreligious, hyperconnected, media-inundated century into a time when people's lives were usually confined to their town or village. Most people in northern Europe were illiterate farmers, fearful of bad weather, disease and strangers (not to mention the supernatural). Nearly everyone professed to be Christian, knit together socially in local parishes that guided every aspect of daily life but were obedient to the pope in Rome. Only 5% of the population could read, and for most people, the Bible was something that came from the mouth of a priest.

Born in 1483 to the owner of a half dozen foundries in central Germany, Luther learned Latin as a schoolboy and read the Bible in the "Latin Vulgate," a fourth-century translation from the Greek by St. Jerome that, hand-copied by candlelight for hundreds of years, had absorbed countless revisions. European scholars had little access to the Greek texts that constituted the New Testament, but printed versions of the Vulgate and its numerous German translations had been spreading across Germany since Johannes Gutenberg introduced his revolutionary movable-type press to Europe in 1450.

Luther grew to distrust both these sources. Ordained an Augustinian monk at age 23, he learned Greek and discovered the humanist scholars of the day, who embraced the Renaissance ideal of returning to original sources in antiquity. He was especially taken with the Dutch writer Erasmus, who championed education of the laity and argued that the evangelical books and letters of the New Testament were central to anyone's understanding of Christ.

ERASMUS TAUGHT LUTHER AN IMPORTANT LESSON: FLUENCY IS POWER.

In 1516, Erasmus published his *Novum Instrumentum,* a fresh translation of the New Testament with the Greek original in one column and his Latin in another. This was the first time the Greek had ever appeared on the market, and the many errors Erasmus exposed in the Vulgate aggravated popular resentment of Rome. A scholarly provocation, the *Instrumentum* put the church in an impossible position, forcing it to defend its millennial game of telephone after a more authentic version of the Bible had been disseminated to the public.

This taught Luther an important tactical lesson: fluency is power. When he posted his 95 Theses in October 1517, attacking Rome's indulgences and other abuses, he wrote in Latin, the language of the church, not only written but spoken across its bureaucracy. But when he first addressed his critics across the church in April 1518 with his "Sermon on Indulgences and Grace," articulating his notion of justification by faith, he wrote in German, which stymied his enemies in Rome and strengthened his popular support in Saxony.

Prince Frederick the Wise, who was elected to rule Saxony by a council of nobles but still answered to Charles V, was a pious man sympathetic to reformers, and he went to great lengths to protect Luther, his court adviser on monastic life, even as the reformer's attacks on the church intensified.

In August 1518, Frederick protected Luther from a papal edict summoning him to Rome on suspicion of heresy, which forced the church to confront the monk

closer to home. Called to Leipzig to testify before the papal emissary Johannes Eck in April 1519, Luther bluntly declared, "I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God."

After being expelled by the church in June 1520, Luther went even further: his letter "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," published only in German, declared "a priesthood of all believers" who, armed with Scripture, could interpret God's will without the clergy's guidance. This sort of appeal directly to the laity in their own language was unprecedented.

Luther faced his reckoning with civil authority when Charles V summoned him to testify in Worms in April 1521. Biographer Brad S. Gregory describes the monk being treated "like a rock star" as he made the 300-mile journey. "The crowds plead for him to preach; they clamor to see him; and they liken him to Christ on his way to Jerusalem before he was crucified," Gregory wrote. A month after Luther's appearance, the emperor declared him a heretic and called for his arrest and punishment.

Fearing for Luther's life, Frederick hid the monk in Wartburg Castle, where Luther, equipped with a second and much-improved edition of the *Novum Instrumentum*, began his own translation of the Greek New Testament—this one into German. By identifying the word as God's law and challenging the laity to enforce it, he had set himself a critical task. Erasmus had meant his title as a play on words—"New Instrument" rather than "New Testament." Luther needed such an instrument now.

A Translation for All German Speakers

Luther would later call his New Testament project the most difficult he had ever undertaken. Beginning in December 1521, he spent two and a half months grinding out a first draft. His process was meticulous: for every verse he might do a quick literal translation, then drill down into each Greek word for German synonyms, then start over with a more melodious version incorporating idioms that Germans could understand.

In March 1522 he returned to his home city of Wittenberg and revised the translation with his ally Philipp Melanchthon, a revered Greek scholar, theologian and reformer, and the leader of the German Reformation after Luther's death.

"You could say he tends toward the idiomatic," said Brooks Schramm, a retired professor of biblical studies at United Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg, Pa., who is fluent in German, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. "He wants the language to live in a way that people would recognize as their own language. He doesn't do it all the time. There are some places where he will say that the text needs to be translated very literalistic-ly, particularly if something very, very important is at stake. But for the most part, he wants his German to be recognized as German by speakers of German."

Luther was ideally skilled for this task. The Augustinians were a public-facing order, so he had traveled around Germany and been exposed to its various dialects. "That was the great problem in the early 16th century: the German dialects were so severe around the country," Schramm said. "Someone from

Luther's careful fusion of German dialects with the High German spoken at court in Saxony would make the September Testament a foundational work in German culture.

Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Karl Aspelin

Luther burns the papal bull that threatened him with excommunication in the square of Wittenberg, Germany, in 1520. A year later he went into hiding at Wartburg Castle, where he began his translation of the New Testament.

far north Germany and someone in the south would have had a devil of a time understanding one another."

Luther's careful fusion of these dialects with the High German spoken at court in Saxony would make the September Testament a foundational work in German culture.

For both Erasmus and Luther, diction could trigger profound changes in doctrine. In Matthew 3 and 4, when first John the Baptist and then Christ himself implore the people of Judea to repent, the Vulgate used the Latin word meaning "do penance." Erasmus, explained Schramm, returned to the Greek for a closer reading: "change, change your mind, that type of thing." Luther embraced this revision, which severely undercut the church's corrupt practice of selling indulgences to excuse sins.

Luther would launch his own controversies, most spectacularly adding the word *allein* ("alone") to Romans 3:28 so it read that humankind "is justified without the help of the works of the law, alone through faith." In his 1530 essay "On Translating: An Open Letter," he would justify this as German idiom and defend it citing the apostle Paul, which conveniently supported his own beliefs about justification.

"[LUTHER] WANTS THE LANGUAGE TO LIVE IN A WAY THAT PEOPLE WOULD RECOGNIZE AS THEIR OWN LANGUAGE."

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

The room in Wartburg Castle in Wittenberg where Luther translated the New Testament into German. An original first edition is kept in the case on the desk.

"This kind of stuff was a big deal in the day," said Schramm, "because the received text of the Vulgate was considered to be an inspired text."

As these new translations caught the public imagination, the very idea of biblical study as a linguistic journey into the past would hypercharge the Reformation. "Intellectually, if you're willing to get past the stumbling block that the text that we have before us is vulnerable to challenge, and it can be critiqued on the basis of something prior, then things can become very exciting," Schramm said.

But once the September Testament began to intersect in the public square with the translator's radical call for the laity to reform the church, events on the ground in Germany grew too exciting for Luther.

A PUBLIC REACTION TO A PRIVATE WAY OF READING THE BIBLE

In "The Reformation as Media Event," from *The People's Book: The Reformation and the Bible* (IVP Academic, 2017), Read Mercer Schuchardt notes that the spread of literacy via printed vernacular Bibles profoundly altered people's experience of Christianity.

"What the illiterate heard was transmitted orally in sermons, in auricular confessions and generally in the space of Gothic cathedrals. In such acoustic settings, humanity is a group animal, and our perception of or need for private identity is minimal. Under print conditions, however, all that suddenly changes. What Gutenberg produced, and what Luther manifested first and foremost, was a private way of reading and interpreting Holy Scripture."

The social implications of this were enormous, as Luther must have understood in 1520 when he called for a priesthood of all believers to embrace Scripture and reform the church. Over the next five years, lay publication of religious pamphlets in Germany exploded—some 7,000 would appear—and their diverse authorship demonstrated the humanistic promise of reform, with contributions from such writers as Argula von Grumbach of Bavaria, Katharina Schütz Zell of Strasbourg and Ursula Weyda of Eisenburg.

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Title page border for Adam Petri's reprint of Luther's translation of the New Testament.

> "What Luther manifested first and foremost was a private way of reading and interpreting Holy Scripture."

This first wave of protest crashed on the rocks of the German Peasants' War. From 1524 to 1525, serfs and small landowners across Germany revolted against the nobles. Some serfs, following Luther's lead, had cited Scripture in demanding to be released from their servitude. Yet resentment of the church bled into the economic frustration: as bands of peasants roamed the countryside, they demolished not only castles but also monasteries. The nobility responded to the rebellion with overwhelming force, slaughtering some 100,000 people.

Luther now faced a backlash from his own aristocratic protectors as critics from Rome blamed his apostasy for the breakdown in civil order. In his infamous "On the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants" (1525) he drew a bright line between salvation and politics and urged that the rebels be killed like rabid dogs. He had already walked back his notion of a priesthood of all believers, arguing that only those schooled in biblical languages were qualified to interpret Scripture.

Luther continued to fine-tune his New Testament translation until the day he died, in 1546. According to biographer Roland H. Bainton, a proof the latest revision was the last thing Luther ever read. By then he had led a team of scholars in a yearslong project to translate the Old Testament into German from the original Hebrew, and the complete Luther Bible had sold a half million copies. Luther considered it a gift to God and never took any money for it, though over the years its publication enriched a consortium of German businessmen. The latest edition appeared in 2016.

We step back out of the looking glass into a world Luther would never recognize, one of literacy, independence and agency but also of atomization, isolation and loneliness. Humanity is less a group animal than ever, and our perception of and need for private identity has never been more acute. Now that Luther has given the Bible to the people, to use the historical shorthand, we have as many interpretations of Scripture as we have readers; instead of one Christian church there are many, some bitterly opposed in their interpretations of the word.

Such people may be reading a little too closely; in this century the great challenge of the September Testament may be to look up from it and see the stranger next to us. †

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