

A “Lutheran” Translation??

Pitfalls and Potential

Is a translation of the Bible produced by confessional Lutherans feasible and desirable?

It has been said that it would not be feasible for members of WELS and our sister churches to attempt to produce a translation of the Bible. It has been said that a translation produced by members of WELS and our sister churches would be a “sectarian” translation. We will briefly look at evidence that shows that neither of these statements is true.

Too often WELS has been hindered by low expectations and small dreams. While there is a danger of excessive pride and overconfidence, there is also a danger of acting like Moses and offering all kinds of excuses not to use the talents God has entrusted to us and burying our talents in the ground. From time to time there has been a tendency among us to denigrate the gifts and opportunities the Lord has given us. When WELS was breaking from the Missouri Synod, the thought was expressed that without big brother to hold us up, we would dry up and blow away. But our mission and publication efforts prospered as never before. When the *People’s Bible* was being proposed, some in our synod thought that such a project was so far beyond our reach that an attempt was made to deny funding to the project before it could get off the ground. Some wondered whether WELS had the resources to produce a hymnal that could be the equal of the *Lutheran Hymnal* or of pan-Lutheran projects. All of these undertakings were successful even beyond the expectations of those who most encouraged us to aim for high things.

We need to beware of “despising the day of small things.” A reflection on the words of warning and encouragement from Haggai and Zechariah are a good medicine when we wrestle with great undertakings. No one thought Israel could build a new temple except the Lord, Haggai, and Zechariah.

Feasible?

“Feasible” means “capable of being done or carried out” (*merriam-webster.com*).

Two years ago some said that we had neither the manpower nor the money to produce such a translation. Comparisons were being made with the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*, which took 15 years to produce, at a cost of \$10 million (and now they are spending more on a revision). The *English Standard Version*, which is billed as a revision of an existing translation, took ten years to produce and cost \$2.5 million.

At no time was such a model ever considered by us. Luther and a committee of about half a dozen took thirteen years to produce the first edition of the Luther Bible. During this time he also taught his classes, mediated numerous conflicts, dodged persecution, wrote thirty volumes or so of *Luther’s Works*, wrote a catechism, and reformed the church. Since we are standing on the shoulders of others, the Wartburg model should be feasible for us to follow.

In two years translation has begun on all but two books of the Bible, and draft translations have been completed on 45 books of the Bible at no cost to ELS or WELS. (Except, of course, for the cost borne by our volunteers who are giving their time as a gift to the church. Our volunteers, though they are receiving no monetary compensation, are, of course, being richly paid in growth in the Word.)

God willing, questions of feasibility will answer themselves over the next few years, so we do not need to address them here. We pray that the Lord continues to bless our work as he has thus far.

Unnecessary and Sectarian?

But what about claims that a confessional Lutheran translation is unnecessary and sectarian? We will briefly consider the common objections to such a translation, especially the claim that such a translation would be sectarian or at least perceived as sectarian.

Objections to a confessional Lutheran translation

There is no need. Existing translations are good enough.

There is, of course, no absolute need for a new translation. The church used the Septuagint and Vulgate for centuries, though both had serious shortcomings as translations. Many of our older members came to a solid knowledge of the faith through reading the King James, a translation that was quite dated in its language. For 100 years, the English-speaking Lutheran church has used various “Reformed” translations.

Many WELS members feel no absolute need for a new hymnal, but they support the project because we want to keep improving the tools for spiritual growth which we provide for our people. Should we do less or be satisfied with less in regard to Bible translations than we are for our hymnal and catechism?

In considering the degree of need, we have to be looking at least twenty years into the future. It is shocking to see how much the doctrinal position and hermeneutics of Evangelicalism have declined in the last thirty years. If we cannot continue to rely on this segment of Christianity to produce good commentaries and study Bibles, can we rely on it to continue to produce Bible translations that share our hermeneutical principles?

A few wrong or misleading verses in a translation will not do that much harm.

There may be some practical truth to that statement, but it is like arguing, “It does not matter if I make mistakes in my sermons or classes since people might not be paying attention anyway or may not remember them.” Our duty is to provide all of those who are reading and listening to the Bible with the clearest and most complete testimony to the truth that we can.

Another way of putting the question is: what percentage of a serving of food has to be poison before the food is poison, or how many parts per million of carcinogens in our food and drink do we find acceptable?

We can overcome the weaknesses or mistakes of translations with a good study Bible.

It does not seem that it will be financially feasible for us to produce a study Bible with either NIV 11 or the ESV, and perhaps also not with HCSB. See the information in the appendix on study Bibles at the end of this paper.

Nobody else will use it.

Maybe not, but that has not stopped us from investing heavily in our own hymnal and our own curricular materials.

I do not think many of us expected that Concordia Publishing House would adopt the *People's Bible* in spite of the fact that it contains statements not in agreement with the doctrinal position of the LCMS. If 15-20% of the LCMS can be interested in a Bible that is more readable than ESV, our potential market would be doubled.

Some Southern Baptists want a translation less literal than NASB and closer to the original than NIV or HCSB. There are 11 million Southern Baptists. Who knows? Maybe there will be more Baptists that use our translation than WELS members that do.

Not all our members would like it or use it.

The one thing we can be very sure of is that if we produce a Bible translation, not everyone will like all of the translation decisions. In fact we can be sure that none of the translators will like all the translation decisions. This just goes with the territory. To my knowledge there has never been a translation that received quick or universal approval—not Jerome's Vulgate, not KJV, not NIV. These translations in fact debuted to severe criticism. The Luther Bible was a special case—it did not need any other critics within Lutheranism since Luther was critic in chief. Luther till his dying day never read his translation without being dissatisfied with something in it. Any conscientious translator will have the same experience.

But we should not exaggerate the effect of this inevitable phenomenon. Not everyone liked everything about the now not-so-new hymnal, but I think even its strongest proponents were at least mildly surprised at the degree and rapidity with which it was accepted. A strong factor in this was the careful work that was done in introducing it. We should not lightly accept the premise that members of ELS and WELS are incapable of producing products that will be good and have wide-spread acceptance.

If lack of universal approval is a reason not to undertake a translation project, it would also be a reason not to adopt a specific Bible translation from outside our circles, because it is clear that none of the leading candidates will gain universal approval or use.

Pressure would be put on everyone to use it.

Not any more than if we were to adopt any other translation as the sole translation for our publications.

It would be sectarian or would at the very least be perceived as sectarian.

This fear was more justified thirty or forty years ago when there were only a few Bibles that were widely accepted across denominational lines: the RSV for mainline churches, the KJV and its children for very traditional churches, and the NIV among Evangelicals. Today there is no KJV anywhere on the horizon, and it seems unlikely that the NIV will maintain its predominance among Evangelicals. It has already suffered major defections. Even churches that have one "official" Bible like the Southern Baptists' HCSB and the Missouri Synod's ESV are likely to experience considerable eclecticism. In a world in which eclecticism seems to be the trend, adding one more translation to the mix of 100+ translations need not be seen as anything surprising or sectarian.

For a long time we used a hymnal that we shared with other Lutherans. When we decided to go it on our own, and when our sister synod did the same, was this condemned as sectarian?

If WELS were to be the only confessional Lutheran body to adopt the NIV or HCSB, would having our own translation leave us any more open to charges that we are "going off on our own"?

If we can produce a product that would find some acceptance among other Lutherans and other denominations, rather than being sectarian, the project might instead establish some common ground.

But the main reason that our translation is not sectarian is that our translators are not sectarians. They are confessional Lutherans. They understand that while it might be sectarian to *translate* the Bible, “Jesus said this is my *true* body,” it is not sectarian to *confess*, “This is the true body and blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” The translators understand the difference between presenting a Lutheran understanding of Scripture in a confessional statement and importing that interpretation into the words of a translation.

What determines whether or not a translation is sectarian is not how many people produced it or how many people use it but how faithful it is to the divinely intended meaning of Scripture. The Vulgate, which was used by millions of people for centuries and was the Bible which nourished Luther, was sectarian when it translated the first gospel promise, “She [Mary] will crush the serpent’s head.” When Luther revised the Vulgate and translated, “He [Christ] will crush the serpent’s head,” his one-man translation was not sectarian but truly catholic. The Formula of Concord is not sectarian. It is catholic and ecumenical because it promotes the unity of the church by faithfully confessing the content of Scripture. The same would be true of a translation made by confessional Lutherans. A translation made by confessional Lutherans would not be “a Lutheran translation” which introduced a Lutheran bias into the text. It would be a translation by Lutherans which honestly set forth the meaning of the text.

Would a confessional Lutheran translation be labeled sectarian by some? Quite possibly. The early Christian church was labeled as “the Nazarene sect” (Ac 24:5) because it was out of step with the bulk of Judaism, but it was the Judaism which rejected the Nazarene that was sectarian. The reformed catholic church was labeled the Lutheran sect by Rome, but it was the Lutheran church which really deserved the name catholic,¹ not the Roman papal sect. If WELS practices closed communion, does not have women pastors, opposes gay marriage, confesses that the pope is the Anti-Christ, but we would use the ecumenical NRSV, would the world take the sectarian label off us? If WELS practices closed communion, does not have women pastors, opposes gay marriage, confesses that the pope is the Anti-Christ, and uses a translation produced by Lutherans, would the world perceive us as any more sectarian than it already does?

Appendix 1: Lutheran or Sectarian?

Would the Lutheran principle “Scripture interprets Scripture” and the Lutheran biblical hermeneutics of the translators influence some of their translation decisions? We would hope so.

What effect might a Lutheran doctrinal stance and a Lutheran hermeneutic have on a translation? What passages might come into play?

¹The Orthodox, Catholic, Reformed, and Evangelical churches claim those names for themselves, but it is the Lutheran church which is orthodox, catholic, reformed, and evangelical. The Lutheran church is orthodox because it teaches the straight teaching of the Bible. The Lutheran church is catholic because it teaches the doctrines which the apostles passed on to the church throughout the world. The Lutheran church is reformed because it recovered the apostolic doctrine that had been submerged and hidden in the Catholic church. The Lutheran church is evangelical because it refocused the church’s attention on the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. A translation produced by confessional Lutherans would be orthodox, catholic, reformed, and evangelical.

The following examples explore these questions. None of these examples are intended to provide final examples for what a confessional Lutheran translation should look like (that is, they are not final Wartburg Project translations) but simply to provide examples of passages which Lutheran and Evangelical translators might view through a different lens.

In 1 Corinthians 10:16 might a Lutheran translator's biblical understanding of the real presence in the Lord's Supper lead him to consider using the word "communion" in his translation?

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a *koinonia* of the blood of Christ?

NIV Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ?

HCSB The cup of blessing that we give thanks for, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ

Lutheran: The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion of the blood of Christ?

Luther: *Gemeinschaft des Blutes*; GW: sharing the blood; GWN: a communion with the blood

Do "participation" and "sharing" focus more on the recipients? Does "communion" keep the sacramental union more in the picture?² Does "blessing" keep the consecration in the picture more than "thanksgiving"? Is there a difference between "sharing in the blood" and "sharing the blood" and between "communion with the blood" and "communion of the blood"? These are questions which a Lutheran translator would weigh. If someone claims that importing "communion" into the text is a Lutheran sectarian bias, the simplest answer is that this is the translation of the King James Version.

A passage which has been drawn into the discussion of the Lord's Supper is Acts 3:21. Is there a reason for Lutherans to prefer NIV 11 to NIV 84?

HCSB Heaven must welcome Him until the times of the restoration of all things
Or *receive*, or *retain*

NIV11 Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything,

NIV84 He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything,

LUTH Heaven must receive him until the time when all things are restored.

In Mark 1:4 does the Lutheran understanding of baptism influence the translation?

NIV John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

HCSB^{alt} John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism based on repentance for the forgiveness of sins.³

LUTH John appeared and was baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

NIV, ESV, HCSB all stay literal here, except that Holman adds a Baptist note, as it does elsewhere. Other Evangelical translations insert the idea of the Holman note into the translation itself. A Lutheran translator should in this case stay with the literal translation

² Chrysostom on *koinonia*: Why did [Paul in 1 Co 10:16] not say "participation" (*metalepsis* or *metoche*)? Because he intended to express something more and to point out how close the union (*henosis*) was. We communicate not only by participating and partaking, but also by being united. For as that body is united with Christ, so we are also united with him by this bread" (*A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. XII, p 139.) See also D. Kuske, *WLQ*, Fall 2004, p 284-286.

³At Mathew 3:11 HCSB has the note: "Baptism was the means by which repentance was expressed publicly."

and not try to import a full Lutheran interpretation of “a baptism of repentance” into the translation.

What about 1 Peter 3:21?

- NIV this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also— not the removal of dirt from the body but the *pledge of a good conscience* towards God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- ESV Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as *an appeal to God for a good conscience*, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- HCSB Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but *the pledge of a good conscience toward God*) through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Or *the appeal*.
- LUTH This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you— not by the removal of dirt from the body but *the claim of a good conscience* toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- Luther: *der Bund eines guten Gewissens* GWN: guaranteeing us a good conscience

Eperotema is admittedly a challenging word to translate, but in this context “claim” would be better than “appeal”, “answer,” or “pledge,” which are more open to making baptism our pledge to God.

Would a Lutheran understanding color our translation of genitives?

1 Peter 2:8

- ESV A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.
- NIV A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.
- HCSB A stone to stumble over, and a rock to trip over.”
Note: Or *stone causing stumbling*
- LUTH A stone people stumble over, and a rock they trip over.

Do various understandings of predestination affect translations?

Exodus 9:16

- NIV But I have *raised you up* for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.
NIV11 has “*or spared you*” in the footnote.
- ESV But for this purpose I have *raised you up*, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.
- HCSB However, I have *let you live* for this purpose: to show you My power and to make My name known in all the earth.
- LUTH But for this reason I *caused you to stand*, so that I could show you my power, and so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.

The literal Hebrew is “caused you to stand”. Does ESV have a more Calvinist slant and HCSB a more Arminian one? In Romans 9:17 the tendency toward “raised you up” is more pronounced.

Does God prophesy the coming of false teachers or does he foreordain it?

- Jude 4 οἱ πάλαι προγεγραμμένοι
- NIV11 For certain individuals whose condemnation was *written about* long ago have secretly slipped in among you. Note: or *marked out for condemnation*

- ESV For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were *designated* for this condemnation.
- HCSB For some men, who were *designated* for this judgment long ago, have come in by stealth;
- LUTH For some people, whose condemnation was *written about* long ago, have secretly slipped in among you.

The text does not have the word “men,” but they likely were men. Is the reference to 2nd Peter?

Who makes unbelievers ready for destruction, God or the unbelievers themselves?

Romans 9:22 κατηρτισμένα εἰς ἀπόλειαν

- NIV What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath— *prepared* for destruction?
- ESV What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath *prepared* for destruction?
- HCSB And what if God, desiring to display His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience objects of wrath *ready* for destruction?
- LUTH What if God, who wanted to display his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much patience objects of wrath *fit* for destruction?

Should the participle be taken as passive or middle?

John 1:11-12 In these verses John uses two closely related and sometimes interchangeable verbs to distinguish those who do not accept Christ (*paralambano*) from those who do receive Jesus (*lambano*).⁴

- NIV He came to that which was his own, but his own did not *receive* him. Yet to all who *received* him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God
- HCSB He came to His own, and His own people did not *receive* Him. But to all who did *receive* Him, He gave them the right to be children of God
- ESV He came to his own, and his own people did not *receive* him. But to all who did *receive* him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God
- LUTH He came to what was his own, but his own people did not *accept* him. But to all who *received* him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God

Does distinguishing the two verbs do a better job of keeping open the understanding that we receive Christ as a gift, but we are responsible for rejecting him?

Which way of expressing conversion do you prefer in Matthew 18:3?

- HCSB unless you *are converted* and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
- ESV unless you *turn* and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
- NIV11 unless you *turn* and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ For an example of the use of *lambano* as passive reception of a gift see 1 Cor 4:7. In Colossians 2:6 *paralambano* is used for receiving Christ.

GWN unless you *change* and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.

LUTH unless you *are turned* and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Should the verb be translated as a passive?

Could there be Catholic translations in Protestant Bibles? Would Lutherans fix them?

James 2:22—do works complete our justification as Rome teaches, or are works the result of justification?

NIV You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was *made complete* by what he did.

ESV You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith *was completed* by his works;

HCSB You see that faith was active together with his works, and by works, faith *was perfected*.

LUTH You see that his faith was active with his works and by works faith *reached its goal*.

James 2:26—do works give life to faith or are they evidence of faith?

NIV As the body without the *spirit* is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

ESV For as the body apart from the *spirit* is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

HCSB For just as the body without the *spirit* is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

LUTH For just as the body without *breath* is dead, so faith without works is dead.

If Lutherans were to undertake a Bible translation, in the whole Bible there might be fewer than 100 passages where improvements were made to correct doctrine or for doctrinal clarity. Is that worth the effort? That is the key question before us.⁵

A corollary to this objection about perceptions of sectarianism is the claim that our translation would be sectarian if only translators of our fellowship would be involved. The best answer to that objection is to produce a non-sectarian translation.

This concern which has been expressed by some WELS members is apparently not a concern to Concordia Publishing House since they have been supportive of the idea for a translation produced by Lutherans.

If Lutherans can interact with a Baptist translation and to try to make it acceptable to Lutherans, why would it be sectarian for Lutherans to produce their own translation that would be perceived as fair by Baptists?

Finally a confessional Lutheran translation/revision project would not be sectarian because it would be built on the foundation of 2000 years of Bible translation and 400+ years of translation of the Bible into English. Just as our hymnal incorporates many contributions from outside our fellowship, a confessional Lutheran Bible translation would do the same.

⁵ For comparison, the improvements we would expect over NIV11 and ESV in non-doctrinal issues would be more than 200 improvements just in the conversion of “cubits” to “feet”, not to mention the conversion of “fingers,” “palms,” “spans,” “logs,” “hins,” “baths,” “homers,” “ephahs,” “seahs,” and “furlongs.”

Appendix 2: A Study Bible

The suggestion that the WELS produce its own study Bible was originally offered as a way by which some of the perceived weaknesses in the *NIV11* could be addressed and corrected. While it may seem that producing a study Bible might be more feasible than producing a new translation of the Bible, producing a study Bible is every bit as difficult and costly as producing a translation.

It is not simply the cost of producing the study Bible that is the problem. It is the cost of royalties to the owner of the Bible copyright that may make projects financially impossible. Economics was a factor in Holman and CPH moving away from Zondervan's NIV. There is also the danger that copyright owners might withdraw rights to continue to use that Bible.

Based on past data, the royalties charged by Zondervan, the publisher of the *NIV11*, would be significantly higher than those charged either by Crossway (publisher of the *English Standard Version*) or Holman (publisher of the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*). This would be especially problematic in the sale of e-Bibles which are claiming an increased share of the market.

If our synod were to choose the *English Standard Version* for use in our publications, it would not seem to be wise or necessary to produce a study Bible, since the *Lutheran Study Bible* (published by Concordia on the basis of the ESV text) already exists, as well as supplemental materials to the *LSB*. We could not compete with its head start.

If our synod were to opt for the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*, a study Bible project might be more economically feasible, but Holman too has its own study Bible with its own doctrine.

For WELS Lutherans to produce a study Bible, a translation for which it did not have to pay royalties to some other publisher would provide the most economically feasible route to our own study Bible. The *People's Bible* would provide a good foundation for this study Bible.

It may be possible to produce a translation-neutral study Bible, that is, a study Bible that is not tied to one particular translation. This could be a free-standing unit that could be electronically linked to various translations.