

Selected Quotes from Luther's Works, Vol 35
"On Translating: An Open Letter"

"You may say that I translated the New Testament conscientiously and to the best of my ability. I have compelled no one to read it, but have left that open, doing the work only as a service to those who could not do it better. No one is forbidden to do a better piece of work.⁷ If anyone does not want to read it, he can let it alone. I neither ask anybody to read it nor praise anyone who does so.

To you and to our people, however, I shall show why I chose to use the word *sola*—though in Romans 3[:28] it was not *sola*, but *solum* or *tantum* that I used,³¹ so sharply do the asses look at my text! Nevertheless I have used *sola fide* elsewhere,³² and I want both: *solum* and *sola*. I have constantly tried, in translating, to produce a pure and clear German, and it has often happened that for two or three or four weeks we have searched and inquired for a single word and sometimes not found it even then.

Here, in Romans 3[:28], I knew very well that the word *solum* is not in the Greek or Latin text; the papists did not have to teach me that. It is a fact that these four letters *s o l a* are not there. And these blockheads stare at them like cows at a new gate.³⁷ At the same time they do not see that it conveys the sense of the text; it belongs there if the translation is to be clear and vigorous. I wanted to speak German, not Latin or Greek, since it was German I had undertaken to speak in the translation. But it is the nature of our German language that in speaking of two things, one of which is affirmed and the other denied, we use the word *solum* (*allein*)³⁸ along with the word *nicht* [not] or *kein* [no]. For example, we say, "The farmer brings *allein* grain and *kein* money"; "No, really I have now *nicht* money, but *allein* grain"; "I have *allein* eaten and *nicht* yet drunk"; "Did you *allein* write it, and *nicht* read it over?" There are innumerable cases of this kind in daily use.

In all these phrases, this is the German usage, even though it is not the Latin or Greek usage. It is the nature of the German language to add the word *allein* in order that the word *nicht* or *kein* may be clearer and more complete. To be sure, I can also say, "The farmer brings grain and *kein* money," but the words "*kein* money" do not sound as full and clear as if I were to say, "The farmer brings *allein* grain and *kein* money." Here the word *allein* helps the word *kein* so much that it becomes a complete, clear German expression.

We do not have to inquire of the literal Latin, how we are to speak German. Rather we must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly. That way they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them.

Now I was not relying on and following the nature of the languages alone, however, when, in Roman 3[:28] I inserted the word *solum* (alone). Actually the text itself and the meaning of St. Paul urgently require and demand it. For in that very passage he is dealing with the main point of Christian doctrine,⁶¹ namely, that we are justified by faith in Christ without any works of the law. And Paul cuts away all works so completely, as even to say that the works of the law—though it is God's law and word—do not help us for justification [Rom. 3:20]. He cites Abraham as an example and says that he was justified so entirely without works that even the highest work—which, moreover, had been newly

commanded by God, over and above all other works and ordinances, namely circumcision—did not help him for justification; rather he was justified without circumcision and without any works, by faith, as he says in chapter 4[:2], “If Abraham was justified by works, he may boast, but not before God.” But when all works are so completely cut away—and that must mean that faith alone justifies—whoever would speak plainly and clearly about this cutting away of works will have to say, “Faith alone justifies us, and not works.” The matter itself, as well as the nature of the language, demands it.

“But,” they say, “it has an offensive sound, and people infer from it that they need not do any good works.” Land, what are we to say? Is it not much more “offensive” that St. Paul himself does not use the term “faith alone,” but spells it out even more bluntly, and puts the finishing touches on it⁶² by saying, “Without the works of the law”? And in Galatians 1[2:16] and many other places he says, “Not by the works of the law,” for the expression “faith alone” is susceptible of another interpretation,⁶³ but the phrase “without the works of the law” is so blunt, offensive, and scandalous that no amount of interpreting can help it. How much more might people learn from this “that they need not do any good works,” when they hear this preaching about the works themselves put in such plain, strong words, “No works,” “without works,” “not by works”! If it is not “offensive” to preach, “without works,” “no works,” “not by works,” why should it be “offensive” to preach, “by faith alone”?

And what is still more “offensive,” St. Paul is here rejecting not just ordinary works, but “works of the law.” Now someone could easily take offense at that all the more and say that the law is condemned and accursed before God, and we ought to be doing nothing but evil—as they did in Romans 3[:8], “Why not do evil that good may come?” This is the very thing that one factious spirit⁶⁴ began to do in our time. Are we to deny Paul’s word on account of such “offense,” or stop speaking out freely about faith? Land, St. Paul and I want to give such offense; we preach so strongly against works and insist on faith alone, for no other reason than that the people may be offended, stumble, and fall, in order that they may learn to know that they are not saved by their good works but only by Christ’s death and resurrection. Now if they cannot be saved by the good works of the law, how much less shall they be saved by bad works, and without the law! For this reason it does not follow that because good works do not help, therefore bad works do help, any more than it follows that because the sun cannot help a blind man to see, night and darkness must, therefore, help him to see.

I am amazed that anyone can take exception in a matter as evident as this. Just tell me: Is Christ’s death and resurrection our work, that we do, or is it not? Of course it is not our work, nor the work of any law either. Now it is Christ’s death and resurrection alone that saves us and makes us free from sin, as Paul says in Romans 4[:25], “He died for our sins and rose for our justification.” Tell me, further: What is the work by which we lay hold of Christ’s death and resurrection? It cannot be any external work, but only the eternal faith that is in the heart. Faith alone, indeed, all alone, without any works, lays hold of this death and resurrection when it is preached by the gospel. Why then this raging and raving, this making of heretics and burning them at the stake, when the matter itself at its very core is so clear and proves that faith alone lays hold of Christ’s death and resurrection, without any works, and that his death and resurrection [alone] are our life and our righteousness? Since, then, the fact itself is so obvious—that faith alone conveys,

grasps, and imparts this life and righteousness—why should we not also say so? It is no heresy that faith alone lays hold on Christ, and gives life; and yet it must be heresy, if anyone mentions it. Are they not mad, foolish, and nonsensical? They admit that the thing is right, but brand the saying of it as wrong, though nothing can be both right and wrong at the same time.

Moreover I am not the only one, or even the first, to say that faith alone justifies. Ambrose said it before me, and Augustine and many others. And if a man is going to read St. Paul and understand him, he will have to say the same thing; he can say nothing else. Paul's words are too strong; they admit of no works, none at all. Now if it is not a work, then it must be faith alone. What a fine, constructive, and inoffensive doctrine that would be, if people were taught that they could be saved by works, as well as faith! That would be as much as to say that it is not Christ's death alone that takes away our sins, but that our works too have something to do with it. That would be a fine honoring of Christ's death, to say that it is helped by our works, and that whatever it does our works can do too—so that we are his equal in strength and goodness! This is the very devil; he can never quit abusing the blood of Christ.

The matter itself in its very core, then, demands that we say, "Faith alone justifies." And the nature of our German language also teaches us to express it that way. I have in addition the precedent of the holy fathers. And the danger of the people also compels it, so that they may not continue to hang upon works and wander away from faith and lose Christ, especially in these days, for they have been accustomed to works so long they have to be torn away from them by force. For these reasons it is not only right but also highly necessary to speak it out as plainly and fully as possible, "Faith alone saves, without works." I am only sorry that I did not also add the words *alle* and *aller*, and say, "without *any* works of *any* laws," so that it would have been expressed with perfect clarity.