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The Sixteenth-Century "Confessyon of the Fayth of the Germaynes" in Twentieth-Century American English

By HERBERT J. A. BOUMAN

THE same year in which Martin Bucer and his associates met with Martin Luther and his co-workers to establish agreement, at least for the moment, between the two groups of Evangelicals in the Wittenberg Concord, the rediscovered Gospel, which these men loved and proclaimed so well, was brought to another country. Just six years after Augsburg, a mere five after the *Editio Princeps* of the Augsburg Confession and the *Apology*, a book came off the press in England with the following imprint on the title page: "The confessyon of the fayth of the Germaynes exhibited to the most victorious Emperour Charles the .v. in the Councell or assemble holden at Augusta the yere of our lorde. 1530. To which is added the Apologie of Melancthon who defendeth with reasons inuincible the aforesayde confessyon translated by Richarde Taverner at the commaundement of his Master the ryght honorable Mayster Thomas Crumwel chefe Secretarie to the kynges grace. Psalmo. 119. And I spake of thy testimonies in the presēce of kynges and I was not confounded."¹ Following the text of the confession we find this: "Imprynted at London in Fletestrete/by me Robert Redman/dwellynge at the sygne of the George nexte to saynt Dunstones

Church. 1536. CUM PRIVILEGIO REGALI."

A momentous occasion! Taverner writes in his Preface: "Who cā nat onles he be mortally infected with the pestyferous poyson of enuy most hyghly commende magnifye and extolle your ryght honorable mastershippes most circūspecte godlynes and most godly circumspection in the cause and matter of our Christyan religion whiche with all indifferencie do not onely permitte the pure true and syncere preachers of godes worde frely to preache/but also your selfe to the vttermoste of your power do promote and furder the cause of Christe and nat only that/but also do animate and incourage other to the same. As nowe of late ye haue animated and impelled me to translate the Confessyon of the faythe and the defence or Apologie of the same/which boke after the judgemente and censure of all indifferente wyse and lerned men is as frutful and as clerkly composed as ever boke was vntyll thys day whiche haue bene publyshed or sette forth. But to thende that the people for whose sakes thys boke was commaunded to be translated maye the more gredely deuoure the same/I do dedicate and commende it to your name/and yf any faultes haue eschaped me in this my translation I desyr nat onely your maystershype but also all that shal reade thys boke to remember the saying of the poete Horace which ī arte

¹ This book is in the British Museum. The present quotation and others to follow are from a microfilm copy in Pritzlaff Memorial Library, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

poetica saythe. In opere longo fas est opreperere somnum. That is to saye/in a longe worke it is lawefull for an man to fall some tymes a slepe. But as touchynge your ryght honorable maystershypp I doubte nothyng (such is your inestimable humanitie) but that ye wyll accepte thys my lytle seruyce & take it in worth whom I beseeche the hyght god that he wyll vouchsaue to furder in all your affayres to the glorie of god and auancement of hys name. Amen."

The "faythe of the Germaines." In a sense this was certainly true. Germany was the cradle of the great Reformation. The names of the places connected with those stirring days and events betray their national geography: Eisleben, Eisenach, Erfurt, Wittenberg, Heidelberg, Leipzig, Worms, Marburg, Schwabach, Augsburg. The same is true of the men chiefly involved: Luther, Melancthon, Jonas, Bugenhagen, etc. Those who presented the statement of their faith in the German language on German soil at a German diet were German princes. There was indeed a distinctly German flavor about it all.

But in a more important sense the "faythe of the Germaines" was not really German at all. The very fact of the confession's early translation into English and its highly commendatory introduction to the subjects of Henry VIII demonstrates the more than German character of this book. The particular form of the confession may have been German, but its content is as old as the mercy of God and His redemptive activity on behalf of the sinner, as old as the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ for us men and for our salvation and the divinely powered kerygma of the apostles. It is the faith that the true church

has always believed and confessed, the faith in the Gospel of the free grace of God. It is the faith that had long been obscured but was rediscovered by Martin Luther, transmitted to his associates, and gloriously confessed by the strong men of Augsburg. The "faythe of the Germaines" was thus no Teutonic peculiarity, representing an idiosyncrasy of the German character. It was not a "Lutheran" document² and hence of doubtful or limited relevance for Christians of other lands and tongues. For just as from the beginning the Gospel addressed itself with its universal gift to all men, recognizing no national, ethnic, racial, or linguistic barriers, so the rediscovered Gospel, to which the Lutheran Confessions bear witness, is not peculiar to one people or one age. Here, too, there is neither German nor Frenchman, neither Slav nor Scandinavian, neither Slovak nor Pole, neither Spaniard nor Englishman.³

And this is true not only of the Old World but also of the New. The Lutheran Church came to America and gradually established itself on a solid confessional basis. Every Lutheran body in America in some way expresses allegiance to the Lutheran Confessions. Transplanted to its new environment the Lutheran Church survived and maintained itself and grew and prospered until it has become a significant force in American Christendom. And this under a democratic form of government and with a congregational church polity, quite independent of princes and church-state alignments. The Lutheran confes-

² Cf. Ap XV 42 ". . . imo hanc saluberrimam evangelii partem lacerant convitiis," which Justus Jonas paraphrases in the German, ". . . dieselbigen seligen Lehre, das liebe, heilige Evangelium, nennen sie lutherisch."

³ Cf. Acts 2:9 ff.; Gal. 3:26 ff.

sional approach to Christian doctrine proved itself as flexible and adaptable to changed external circumstances as the apostolic Gospel itself. Only in periods when Lutheran confessionalism wavered and became unsure of itself was the Lutheran Church in America in danger of losing its identity.

In America, as in Europe and elsewhere, the fortunes of the Lutheran Church are indissolubly linked with the Lutheran Symbols. The Lutheran immigrants from Germany, the Scandinavian lands, and other European countries brought their symbols with them and used them for generations in the language of their national origin. But the Lutheran Church was bound to remain an immigrant and even a "foreign" church unless and until it could communicate the foundations of its faith to Americans in the American idiom. "Wrapped in the obscurities of its original dialects—the Latin and the German languages—that venerable relic of the Reformation has been left to slumber almost entirely in silence and neglect. . . . The most obvious cause . . . seems to be, that the larger portion of Lutherans in America are accustomed to read the English language only, and consequently have never had an opportunity to appreciate the value of their Symbols. Yet we cherish the anticipation of a brighter day in the Lutheran Church. . . . It was, therefore, reasonable to presume, that a faithful translation of the Book of Concord into the English language, was loudly demanded by the necessities of the times, and would effectually co-operate with these laudable exertions."⁴

⁴ *The Christian Book of Concord, or Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Newmarket, Va.: Published by Solomon D. Henkel and Bros., 1851), Preface, p. iii.

These statements from the Publishers' Preface of the oldest complete *Book of Concord* in English were written under date of July 4, 1851. In the little more than a century since then "a brighter day" has indeed dawned for the dissemination of the Lutheran Symbols among English-speaking Americans. Apart from the Augsburg Confession, of which the first complete English version in America dates from 1831, the translations of the entire *Book of Concord* are as follows:

The Christian Book of Concord,
Newmarket, Va., 1851

Book of Concord, Philadelphia, 1882

Concordia Triglotta, St. Louis, 1921

Book of Concord, Philadelphia, 1959⁵

All of these editions stand in the same translation tradition, as is acknowledged by the various editors and as could easily be demonstrated by a comparison of the texts. But even the early British translations were not without influence on the American efforts. Charles Porterfield Krauth, a great 19th century American leader in confessional Lutheranism, did much to popularize the Lutheran Symbols and their theology. His work appears to rest, at least with

⁵ In addition to the Henkel edition: (a) *The Book of Concord, or The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Henry Eyster Jacobs (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, MCMXIX, first edition, 1882). (b) *Triglota Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English*, ed. F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau. Published as a Memorial of the Quadricentenary Jubilee of the Reformation, anno Domini 1917, by resolution of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921). (c) *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert in collaboration with Jaroslav Pelikan, Robert H. Fischer, Arthur C. Piepkorn (Muhlenberg Press: Philadelphia, 1959).

respect to the Augsburg Confession, on a 16th-century British model.⁶ A comparison of some of the articles in four English versions will show some renderings peculiar to each, yet they display a remarkable similarity over all. The basic text for all of them is the Latin.⁷ They will be labeled, respectively, T (Taverner, 1536), J (Jacobs, 1882), Tr (Triglort, 1921), and M (Muhlenberg, 1959).

AUGSBURG CONFESSION, ARTICLE I

T—Of the Trinite. Our Churches with full cōsent do teache that the decree of Nicene Councell touchynge the vnitye of the Godhede or diuine essencie and of the. iii. parsons is true & ought to be beleued without any doutynge/ that is to saye/ that there is one deitie or diuine essencie which is both called and is in dede God/ euerlastinge without bodie without partes/ vnmesurable ī power wysdome and goodnes/ the maker and preseruer of all thinges as wel visible as inuisible and yet be. iii. distincte parsons of all one godhede or essencie and of all one power and whiche be coeternall/ that is to saye the father sonne and holy ghost. And this worde (parson) they vse in the same signifcation that other doctours of the church haue in thys mater vsed it/ so that it signifyeth not a parte or qualitie in an other/ but yt which hathe a proper beinge of it selfe.

⁶ Cf. Jacobs (n. 5 above), p. 4: "The translations included in this volume are those of the two-volume edition [1882], except that, for the translation of the Augsburg Confession, credited in that edition to Dr. Charles Porterfield Krauth, but which is in reality a reprint of a sixteenth century English translation, published in 'The Harmony of the Confessions' in 1586. . . ."

⁷ The Henkel, or Newmarket, edition is translated from the German and can therefore not be used for comparison with Taverner.

J—Our Churches, with common consent, do teach, that the decree of the Council of Nicaea concerning the Unity of the Divine Essence and concerning the Three Persons, is true and to be believed without any doubting; that is to say, there is one Divine Essence which is called and which is God: eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, the Maker and Preserver of all things, visible and invisible; and yet there are three Persons, of the same essence and power, who also are co-eternal, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. And the term "person" they use as the Fathers have used it, to signify, not a part or quality in another, but that which subsists of itself.

Tr—(an exact reproduction of the Jacobs text).

M—Our churches teach with great unanimity that the decree of the Council of Nicaea concerning the unity of the divine essence and concerning the three persons is true and should be believed without any doubting. That is to say, there is one divine essence, which is called and which is God, eternal, incorporeal, indivisible, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, the maker and preserver of all things, visible and invisible. Yet there are three persons, of the same essence and power, who are also coeternal: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And this term "person" is used, as the ancient Fathers employed it in this connection, to signify not a part or a quality in another but that which subsists of itself.

AUGSBURG CONFESSION, ARTICLE III

T—Of the humanitie and diuinitie of Christe. Also they teache that the worde (that is to saye) the sonne of god dyd take mans nature in the wōbe of the blessed virgyne Marie/ so that there be

two natures/ a diuine nature & an humane nature in vnitie of parson inseparably conioyned and knytte/ one Christe/ truly god/ and truly man/ borne of the virgyne Marie/ truly sufferinge his passion/ crucified/ dead/ and buried/ to thentent to brynge vs agayne into fauour with the father almyghty/ and to thentent to be a sacrifice and host nat only for Original synnes/ but also for all actual synnes of men. The same Christ went downe to the helles . . .

J—Also they teach, that the Word, that is, the Son of God, did take man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin Mary, so that there are Two Natures, the diuine and the human, inseparably conjoined in one Person, one Christ, true God and true man, who was born of the Virgin Mary, truly suffered, was crucified, dead and buried, that he might reconcile the Father unto us, and be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but for all actual sins of men. He also descended into hell. . . .

Tr—duplicate of J, except that it substitutes "assume" for "take."

M—Our churches also teach that the Word—that is, the Son of God—took on man's nature in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary. So there are two natures, diuine and human, inseparably conjoined in the unity of his person, one Christ, true God and true man, who was born of the virgin Mary, truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, that he might reconcile the Father to us and be a sacrifice not only for original guilt but also for all actual sins of men. He also descended into hell. . . .

AUGSBURG CONFESSON, ARTICLE IV

T—of iustification. Also they teache that men can nat be made ryghtuous in the syght of God by theyr owne proper

powers merites or workes/ but yt they be freely iustified for Christes sake throughe fayth/ when they beleue that they be takē agayn into fauour and that theyr synnes be forgyuen for Christes sake/ who with his dethe hath satisfied for our synnes. Thys faythe god reputeth and taketh in stede of ryghtwysnes before hym. As Paule teacheth in the thyrde & fourth chapiters to the Romans.

J—Also they teach, that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, hath made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight. Rom. 3 and 4.

Tr—virtually identical with J.

M—Our churches also teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works but are freely justified for Christ's sake through faith when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight (Rom. 3, 4).

AUGSBURG CONFESSON, ARTICLE X

T—Of the sacramēt of the Aulter. Of the souper of the lorde they teach that the bodie and blode of Christe be verely present and be distributed to the eaters ī the souper or maūdy of the lorde and dysproue them that teache other wyse.

J—Of the Supper of the Lord, they teach, that the Body and Blood of Christ are truly present, and are distributed to those who eat in the Supper of the Lord; and they disapprove of those that teach otherwise.

Tr—Slightly different punctuation and the substitution of "reject" for "disapprove." Otherwise the same as J.

M—Our churches teach that the body and blood of Christ are truly present and are distributed to those who eat in the Supper of the Lord. They disapprove of those who teach otherwise.

Since the Henkel text and Muhlenberg both offer translations of the German, a brief comparison between these two may be presented:

H—A. C. IX: Respecting baptism it is taught, that it is necessary; that grace is offered through it; and that children also ought to be baptized, who through such baptism are presented to God, and become pleasing to him.

Therefore the Anabaptists are condemned, who teach that infant baptism is not proper.

M—It is taught among us that Baptism is necessary and that grace is offered through it. Children, too, should be baptized, for in Baptism they are committed to God and become acceptable to him.

On this account the Anabaptists who teach that infant Baptism is not right are rejected.

Finally, a sample from the Formula of Concord, at random:

EPITOME VII, 12

H—The second:—That the right hand of God is everywhere, at which Christ, according to his human nature, is seated, in deed and in truth, and reigns present, and has in his hands and under his feet, all that is in heaven and on earth; where no man nor angel, but the Son of Mary alone, is seated; hence he is also able to perform that which we assert.

J—The second: That God's right hand is everywhere; at which Christ is in deed and in truth placed according to his hu-

man nature, [and therefore] being present rules, and has in his hands and beneath his feet everything that is in heaven and on earth [as Scripture says (Eph. 1:22)]: There [at this right hand of God] no man else, or angel, but only the Son of Mary, is placed; whence he can effect this [those things which we have said].

Tr—Almost identical with J.

M—The second ground is: God's right hand is everywhere. Christ, really and truly set at this right hand of God according to his human nature, rules presently and has in his hands and under his feet everything in heaven and on earth. No other human being, no angel, but only Mary's Son, is so set down at the right hand of God, whence he is able to do these things.

It would appear that the English renderings of the *Triglot* are the least original of them all. F. Bente, one of the editors, acknowledges that his English text rests "chiefly" on that of Jacobs.⁸

Although none of the versions presents any particular difficulty to understanding, and although all of them undoubtedly communicated well enough to their time, none but the last rolls quite smoothly off the mid-twentieth-century American tongue or falls quite harmoniously on the ear. Translation of foreign thoughts and foreign words is never a simple task, but it is grueling labor. According to the tired but still true cliché, a work "loses something in translation," either in idiom or content, or both. Within these limitations all prior versions were praiseworthy achievements. Unique in its field is the trilingual edition of the *Triglot Concordia*. But all former translations, including the *Triglot*, were

⁸ Cf. *Triglot*, Preface, p. iii.