

From “Tappert” To “TroBoC,” Sola Fide

Robert W. Bertram
Final Reader

[Posted by permission of *Lutheran Quarterly* where the essay first appeared in LQ 14.1 (Spring, 2000).]

Final Readers for Final Questions

“Final reader?” The title seemed far too eschatological, as if I were to render the last judgment on the Book of Concord’s new translation. Obviously not. Not even editors Wengert and Kolb could do that. But then all the more, how must they wince at my pretentious title, they and their fellow translators, all of whom have been either my colleagues or former students? Here they would have borne the burden and heat of the day, the actual word-by-word translating of the confessional texts, only to have this “final reader” stride in grandly and unsweating at the eleventh hour, brought in by the publisher for a second opinion on all their arduous toil. Translators have been driven to muttering by much less than that.

But my paranoia was quickly disarmed. Throughout the past year these all-day laborers in the vineyard have received my suggestions, some with better humor than others, but always with exemplary sportsmanship, even when one of my criticisms was (as they rightly complained) “rather harsh” – though (as they were nice enough to add) “finally helpful.” What helped, I suppose, was sending the suggestions directly to the editors themselves, and to the publisher only secondarily. There was never any tattling. Indeed, often my suggestions were put as questions,

honest questions, for which I in turn got straight answers. More than once the "final reader" was politely demoted to the final learner. There was never any illusion that the "final reader's" verdicts could not be overridden by the editors. They could and they were. But thank God for that, thought I. In that case I would still retain the freedom, post-publication, to kibbitz about the final product. Wrong again. I discover that by now I am too implicated in the final translation to write a detached, third-party review of it, now that the editors claim "your comments clearly shaped the final draft." In other words the "final reader" has now become a hostage as well, his hands and tongue tied by his own complicity in the translating.

Then is the function of "final reader" beyond salvaging? Maybe not. Paul Rorem, the editor of this journal, asks whether we cannot at least say something about "the apparent advances we can expect [from this new translation] over against the Tappert edition?" And right, that much we ought to be able to address without any appearance of favoritism. I have long been a booster of "Tappert" (though my own copy, twice rebound, bristles with marginal corrections) and no less of Tappert's three fellow translators, Pelikan and Piepkorn and Fischer. Yet I detract nothing from those worthies when I acknowledge that this new edition is superior in one conspicuous respect. It has a historiographical advantage (a new critical apparatus, new historical introductions and, in one instance, a new manuscript source) which at the time of "Tappert" was either not available or not affordable. But on the crucial question of the respective translations themselves, namely, a) their meaningfulness today and b) their fidelity to the original Greek and Latin and German, my advice is more hedged, more Delphic: place your order immediately for the new translation but clutch jealously to your bosom your old copy of "Tappert" as well. After all, don't you do as much in your Bible classes: read from alternative English

translations as a second-best to reading the originals?

By thus addressing you directly, gentle reader, I mean to imply something about the role of “final reader.” Why don’t *you* be the “final reader?.” Who is “*you*”? Realism compels me to admit that the readers of this new translation, as with the readers of “Tappert,” will be mostly seminarians for whom the reading of it is a curricular requirement. Even so, seminarians do constitute a sizable readership, and one which can be quite demanding of any translator. Good. So the first circle of “*you*” is already numerous and by no means uncritical. Plus, if the statistics hold true as to how many catechumens (ELCA and LC-MS) are still being catechized on Luther’s Small Catechism, then most of those same seminarians will someday, as pastors, reread at least that much of this new translation. And so will their fellow (lay) catechists. Fact is, Wengert’s fine new translation of the Catechism, already available for some time now, may help to account for that book’s current circulation. See how the circle of “final readers” widens and deepens.

Moreover, ELCA’s current moves toward closer communion with Reformed, Episcopalians and Roman Catholics, as well as the reactions these moves provoke, are sending folks on all sides back to the *Book of Concord* – if only, like W. C. Fields with the Bible, to look for “loopholes.” Let us not fret overmuch about their motives, anymore than Apostle Paul did. (Phil.1:18) One way or another *The Book of Concord* gets read and its new translation is put to the test. Remember, Saint Augustine started reading Scripture with Manichaeian and Neo-Platonist ideas in his head, and look what the Spirit did with that, even through a New Testament in Latin translation. Item: I have been working with a doctoral student who began as a Presbyterian, is now a Roman Catholic, whose study of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue has made him a fan of the Augsburg Confession and its Apology. The moral is, “*you*,” the “final readers” of the new

translation of *The Book of Concord* won't all be Lutherans, just as they were never intended to be.

Indeed, look for the best "final reading" of these confessions in English to come from readers who, though they may not officially subscribe them, are most haunted by them. So, any retranslation today of these confessions is compassed about by a very curious cloud of "final readers." That puts you and me in rather fast company. And doesn't that in turn require a redefining of what we mean by "final reader," namely, someone who reads this new translation with an eye to *final questions*, ultimate questions. I mean those questions where the choice of words is virtually inseparable from a choice of theologies. When the stakes are that high, the job of the translator, far from being merely clerical, verges on concerns of confessional integrity. In my agreement with the publisher I asked to be relieved of the more clerical concerns (proofreading, syntax and style) for which Augsburg Fortress has its own experts, although I admit there were some lapses I found irresistible: for instance, when the word "not" was missing from the sentence or when Melanchthon was made to say the "gospel *accuses* [*arguit*.]" So, then, "final readers" for final questions.

Especially in *that* role of "final reader," you deserve to be forewarned of the momentous questions which await your critical reading of this new translation. In Timothy Wengert's article elsewhere in this journal he alludes to some of those questions: By faith or through faith? A human God? Estate or social situation? That already should reassure you of the seriousness Wengert and his fellow translators have invested in these large questions, and of the thoughtfulness – not to say the agonizing – of their solutions. Now may I, at the risk of laboring the issue, raise these same questions back up for your own firsthand agony? (I shall limit myself to but one example.) If nothing else, that may give you some appreciation of the way poor

Wengert and Kolb and company were badgered this past year by this “final reader”, their well-meaning tormentor. But more than that, now you in turn have the luxury of being badgered as well, in the paragraphs which follow, although mercifully with only a single sample of the dozen or more questions the official translators had to endure from me. Then, once your copy of the new translation arrives in the mail, you may check how your answers compare with those of the canonical edition.

For Short, For Now

Before we move to our sample “final question,” and perversely to heighten suspense, let us delay momentarily for a procedural detail. If the present translation of *The Book of Concord* is called “Tappert” for short, how shall its successor be called? Of course, that choice of nickname will finally be made by the inscrutable oral tradition of seminarians, arrived at, we hope, not in a moment of pique but of affection. We have no right to preempt their ingenuity, especially since no catchy, one-word nickname springs to mind. “KolGert” sounds too contrived, “TimBob” too flip. *Lutheran Quarterly* should sponsor a naming contest. But banned from the outset should be any combination of TappERT and WengERT, like “TapGert.” For that would suggest that the new translation by Wengert and crew is a mere refinement or update of “Tappert.” It is not. While it obviously takes advantage of “Tappert” whenever possible – don’t fix what ain’t broke – the new translation is just that, a fresh Englishing of *The Book of Concord*, *ab initio*.

During this past year I and my three helpers, Pastor Phillip Gustafson and seminarians Susan Schneider and Catherine Lessmann, resorted to a makeshift acronym, “TroBoC” (Translation of Book of Concord.) That was short enough to fit into our pocket Appointment Books for our thrice-weekly meetings. You

should know that these three colleagues, all volunteers, took turns reading "Tappert" *viva voce* while I, red pencil in hand, followed along silently with "TroBoc," flagging where it varied from its predecessor. (Where it did, as often it did, the question was Why? And that of course was where the real work began. For the Why could be settled only by recourse *ad fontes*, with two index fingers laboriously tracing German and Latin originals, shoelaced by the back and forth squinting of a ping-pong spectator, with occasional staring at the ceiling for just the right English rendition – in other words, a job for one person alone.) But in that initial communal, oral stage, the Gustafson-Schneider-Lessmann trio must have made history, worthy of the *Guinness Book of Records*. When else, if ever, has "Tappert" been read aloud, word for word, from cover to cover in one (almost) continuous performance? As a tribute to that historic accomplishment, also as a parting salute to old "Tappert" and a hailing of its young successor, let me commemorate my three helpers' marathon reading aloud by referring to the new edition as "TroBoC," just for the duration of this article. After that I commend it to the seminarians for renaming.

Fide

But as Max Beerbohm would say, I digress. We were about to sample the sort of questions which "final readers" like you should raise about the translation, namely, those questions where the very sense and truth of the faith seem finally to hang by something so fragile, so gossamer, so apparently trivial as just the right vocable or turn of phrase, this English word rather than that – but all for the integrity of the *confessio*. The particular example I have chosen (out of an original dozen or more) by way of illustration is, as I said, one which Wengert's article already mentioned. It is a question, I can

attest, with which he and his colleagues struggled, nagged by my tedious, chapter-and-verse, late-medieval Latin or sixteenth century chancery German nitpicking or, worse, my Law-and-gospel theologizing. Now, dear “final readers,” it is your turn, though I promise to spare you ninety percent of the nits.

And the question is: Shall the English read “*through* faith” or “*by* faith?” Ought we to say that sinners are justified before God altogether *by* faith, independently of the works which faith does? Or just *through* faith? When push comes to shove, I favor – strongly! – the former, *by* faith. But not everyone does, not even everyone, I suspect, among “TroBoC’s” translators. But the question is now being put to you.

One sure way to evade the question is to shrug it off with “What difference does it make: through/shmoo, by/shmy?” Almost as dismissive is the shrug, “Obviously sometimes it’s through and sometimes it’s by, depending” Yes, yes, but depending on what? Why, obviously, depending on the original term. If the original reads *DURCH den Glauben* or *PER fidem*, then the English, quite literally, must be “*THROUGH* faith.” Oh, but on the contrary, that is not at all obvious. It is not true that *per* and *durch* must mean “through.” The selfsame terms are just as apt to mean, and just as literally, what we English-speakers understand by “*by*.” Yet when that is what the original terms mean, “*by*” and not merely “through,” then that can make a great deal of difference. Theologically it can. And it is imperative that we reflect that difference in the English we use.

Notice, I just said “‘*by*’ and not *merely* ‘through.’” By downgrading “through” as “merely,” I imply that “through” is the weaker of the two meanings and “*by*” is the stronger. In English, so it is. And in the theology of justification it is the stronger of the two words, “*by*”, which is needed to do justice to the radical biblical-confessional claims for faith. When you

hear that a sinner is justified *by* her faith you sense immediately that faith must play a determinative role in her being justified. Not so, or less so, if her justification occurs only *through* her faith. For then, more modestly, faith is just the medium, or just her acknowledgement, of a justification wrought by some other, prior, worthier agency –say, by Christ or by grace. Indeed, it is precisely that nervousness which often has driven translators, also Lutheran ones, to retreat to the less ambitious word, “through” – “through faith” – in order to save the “by” exclusively for God’s grace or for Christ. Thus, the more cautious tradition says, “*by* grace *through* faith.” Else, so the worry goes, faith risks being given the credit due only to God. I do not claim that such a worry is unwarranted but rather that it is misplaced. And to cater to that worry, if only by watering down the preposition, forfeits more than it gains.

There are other contexts, of course, also other theological contexts in which it is quite appropriate to pit “through” against “by,” but not, I am urging, in our references to faith. We may say that pastors are called “through” and not “by” a congregation, or are ordained “through” and not “by” a bishop, so as to safeguard the sole initiative of God. Or when a parishioner raves about some medical breakthrough, “My life was saved by it,” we try (without being a wet blanket) to downsize her enthusiasm to “Your life was saved *through* it.” For in that case “by,” presumably, would be too strong a word, upstaging the divine prevenience. In that case, yes. But not so in the case of faith. Especially not, when we are translating the Lutheran confessions.

If this were just a lexicographical matter of deciding when *per* or *durch* should be rendered as “by,” when as “through,” the dilemma might be left at that, an impasse – sometimes the one, sometimes the other; six one way, half a dozen the other – to be left to the theological preferences of the translator. But the

confessional authors, like their biblical predecessors, are not nearly that non-directive. For instance, they are just as likely to say, flat out, *propter fidem*, because of faith, thereby ascribing to faith an unmistakably causative role. Really, “causative” is too weak and wooden a term, also too impersonal. Faith is seen as personally influential – upon God, that is. Indeed, the confessors elevate to the status of a canon-within-the-canon, to an inner-biblical *Regel*, the verse from Hebrews, “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (11:6) – which, be it noted, is the whole thrill of “justification,” namely, that there is now something *about us* which does in fact quite personally delight God. And it is faith, not “works,” which does just that. We might as well come right out and say it, Faith endears us, us sinners, to God. What could be more “causative,” more consequential than that?

Most pointedly of all, as if to remove all hesitation, the confessors simply make “faith” the subject of the sentence and “justifies” its predicate, *fides iustificat*. “Justifies” is the do-word and “faith” is the doer. True, as we always hasten to explain, faith is not really a doing so much as it is a being done to, a being done for – by the all-doing mercy of God in Christ. Exactly. But then isn’t it all the more magnanimous of this selfsame God to turn right around and return the compliment, by being impressed with (of all things) our faith, by itself such a dependent, “passive” thing?

Still, does God, at least any God with standards, really do that? Isn’t it awfully risky, indeed almost sacrilegious to picture God as paying compliments to us, least of all to our faith, especially in any transaction having to do with our salvation? Isn’t that kind of hyperbolic exalting of faith, if it does appear in the Lutheran confessions, exactly what Barth warned against in us Lutherans, an exaggeration stemming from Luther’s extravagant, flambouyant temperamentalism? Isn’t it

that Lutheran preoccupation with faith which has caused our Reformed brothers and sisters, especially the more conscientiously Calvinist ones, to complain that we never fully made the break with Rome but instead still cling to something in the believers' pious selves as meritorious?

And haven't Lutherans in fact confirmed those suspicions, again and again, by a fideism of one ilk or another, a faith in faith itself, whether pietism or existentialism or, most ironically, orthodoxy? However, if we do learn from our own post-Reformation experience that these fideisms are in fact the dangers that Lutheranism is prone to, ought we then perpetuate such excesses in each new English translation of our confessional symbols? Granted, we may just be stuck with such unalterable bloopers in the original as *propter fidem* or *fides iustificat*. But can't we at least dilute Luther's and Melancthon's enthusiastic *durch/per* from "by" to "through?" Is that too much to ask for the sake of forestalling future "solafideisms"? Don't translators, given their superior hindsight, have an obligation to read back into the original documents those cautions which the confessors themselves were too incautious, too nearsighted to anticipate? My own reply to that is No, not if by altering the original we weaken its primordial apostolic force.

Yes, apostolic. For that is what the confessors understood themselves to be doing, as confessors, namely, echoing, "same-saying," saying over "in our latter times" what the same bold Word had been saying from the beginning in "prophetic and apostolic" times. And hasn't he, this Word, all along been saying exactly this, *sola fide sine operibus legis*, to put it mildly? Nor need we, anymore than the Lutheran confessors did, limit ourselves to the way the Word says "by faith" in just the writings of Paul. *Sola fide* is no Pauline eccentricity, though Paul did have a special gift for relating faith to the idiom of Law, in "justification." You don't have to believe that Paul

wrote Hebrews in order to claim Hebrews 11 as your hermeneutical *Regel*, which in the space of that one chapter repeats “by faith” more tirelessly than Paul ever did. Or take this passage, not from Paul but from I John (5:4), “This is the victory which overcomes the world, our *faith*.” (I would have expected, more piously, the “victory” to be attributed to, say, “the grace of God” rather than anything of “ours”.) And who is it – not Paul, not Hebrews, not John, who but the Word himself – who says, “O woman/O man, great is your faith” or “Your faith has made you well” or “Your faith has saved you”? Talk about the Word paying us, us sinners, compliments!

Ah, but the compliment is paid to us not as sinners but as *believers*. That is what Jesus compliments, not our sinnerhood, not even our selfhood, not some inherent human worth, but our *faith*. And that is what Paul picks up on with his more “forensic” language of “reckon,” as the NRSV aptly translates it. (Watch how “TroBoC”, which usually follows NRSV, translates it. Aptly?) Both in Romans and in Galatians Paul recurs to Genesis 15, dramatizing how “God reckoned *it* to [Abraham] for righteousness.” What is “it”? Abraham’s faith. Genesis does not say nor does Paul nor does the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, that God simply and arbitrarily pronounces sinners as such, even some sinners, to be righteous when in fact they are not. God’s reckoning has its reasons, its inner-historical, immanently human reason: *propter fidem*.

Still, though it is faith alone which enjoys this “righteousness” as so peculiarly its own, only God can discern the marvel of that, and can say so. Faith indispensably needs The Other, the incarnate Other, to interpret her back to herself. Faith needs God, God in Christ in his church, to perceive the greatness of faith and to tell it so. Never, so far as I know, does the believer herself perceive this marvel introspectively or autobiographically and then exclaim to the

mirror, "Oh, self, great is your faith," "Your faith has saved you." That is the fallacy of fideism. But the confessors combatted that fallacy not by minimizing faith, not even by deprioritizing faith, but rather by strengthening the believer's reliance upon the "mass media" of the church, the *media gratiae*, including the "consolation and conversation of the brothers [and sisters]" but especially the public office of proclamation and sacraments. It is there, in these quite open "means of grace," that God in Christ returns the compliment to believing sinners. Would that we proclaimers allowed him to do that more freely. Instead, by contrast, it is that wondrous public compliment, not to sinners' humanity but to their faith, which we far too long have crippled with such meager, stilted English as "imputation." I would prefer to say that God "credits" Abraham's faith to him for righteousness? What would you, "final readers," suggest? Be assured that the workers of "TroBoC" gave this matter profound consideration. Wait and see.

Last but not least – on the contrary, last but most – the single strongest argument in favor of translating *durch den Glauben* as "by faith" rather than merely as "through faith" is christological. So it is for *The Book of Concord* and for anyone who subscribes it. Upon hearing Jesus' compliment to believers, "Great is your faith," we must dare to ask the critical counter-question, And what, pray, is so "great" about faith? In a word (in a Word!) what alone is great about it, or saving or well-making or victorious or justifying, is not faith's psychological quality or its biographical "development" or its doctrinal maturity or any other of its "works", but rather and "only," *solā*, the One in whom it trusts. He it is whom faith "has" (sic! *Hat! Habet!*) and, because it is has him, it "has" his righteousness as its very own. The whole sinner has that, partial and puny as her faith may be. We mentioned the confessors' hermeneutical *regula* from Hebrews 11, "Without faith

it is impossible to please God.” But that was only one of the *regulae*. Another, at least as regulative was this passage from John – notice, from John! – “Apart from me you can do nothing.” (15:5) Who is “me?” You know very well who that “me” is. And that, “final reader,” is what – rather, who – entitles faith to its “by.” Members of the jury, how do you say? The all-day laborers from “TroBoC” and I, their quizzical tag-along, await your verdict – shall I say, by faith.

P.S. Though *Lutheran Quarterly* caters to historians, may I (one more historian) risk a prediction of the future? Now that Lutherans and Roman Catholics get to pursue the as yet unresolved questions in *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, and once we have gotten through the three splendid questions which Roman Catholics have already asked us Lutherans to address, what then will be the first question we Lutherans will propose for further exploration? Answer, I hope: the “onlyness” of faith. True, that proposal will sound ironic, seeing how few Lutherans, including the most self-consciously confessional ones, have even noticed the *sola fide* until recently, and then from mixed motives. Nevertheless. Re-enter Paul to the Philippians (1:18).

Robert W. Bertram

9/30/99

[TappertTroBoC \(PDF\)](#)