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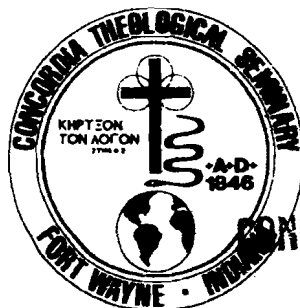
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Luther's Translation of Colossians 2:12

Harold H. Buls

The exegete who is studying the Epistle to the Colossians will do well to read the many references to Colossians in the Book of Concord. In our day opinions differ as to the specific heresy with which St. Paul was dealing in Colossians. Was Paul dealing with Judaizers, or with incipient Gnosticism, or with a combination of both of these heresies? Whatever the nature of the heresy was, it amounted to subtle work-righteousness, similar to that of our modern so-called Charismatics. The Lutheran Confessions are superb in dealing with work-righteousness, and the references to the second chapter of Colossians are worth studying.

But when one compares Bente's translation¹ with that of Tappert² in the Apology's treatment of Colossians 2:12, one notes a discrepancy simply because the former used the Authorized Version, whereas the latter used the Revised Standard Version to cite proof texts. Bente's translation reads thus (italics supplied):

Such faith is neither an easy matter, as the adversaries dream (as they say: Believe, believe, how easy it is to believe! etc.), nor a human power (thought which I can form for myself), but a divine power, by which we are quickened, and by which we overcome the devil and death. Just as Paul says to the Colossians, 2, 12, that faith is efficacious through the power of God and overcomes death: "Wherein also ye are risen with Him through the faith *of the operation* of God."

Tappert translates the same passage thus (italics supplied):

Such a faith is not an easy thing, as our opponents imagine; nor is it a human power, but a divine power that makes us alive and enables us to overcome death and the devil. Just so Paul says that through the power of God faith is efficacious and overcomes death (Col. 2:12), "in which you were also raised with him through faith *in the working* of God."

We have no complaint with Tappert's translation except for the difference which the Bible versions bring out. The AV reads "of the operation of God," whereas the RSV reads "in the working of God."

In this reference in the Apology, the Latin text reads, "per fidem potentiae Dei," and the German (Luther's translation)

reads, "durch den Glauben den Gott wirket." The AV maintains the genitive of both the Greek and the Latin after the word "faith." The German makes it a subjective genitive. The RSV renders it as an objective genitive. In other words, the Vulgate and AV leave it to the reader to interpret this genitive. Does it mean that faith arises out of the power of God or that faith is directed at the power of God? The context speaks of what we were before we were alive in Christ. We were dead in trespasses and sin. Through baptism we were raised up and made alive. By citing the RSV for this passage in the Apology, Tappert has destroyed the point which the Apology plainly makes: faith is not a human power but rather a divine one.

This is where Luther comes in. So far as we know, Luther was the very first translator who clearly rendered the word concerned as a subjective genitive.³ His translation of Colossians 2:12 reads thus: "In dem, dasz ihr mit ihm begraben seid durch die Taufe; in welchem ihr auch seid auferstanden durch den Glauben, den Gott wirket, welcher ihn auferweckt hat von den Todten." According to Luther's translation of this passage, faith is *caused* by the power of God, not directed *at* the work of God.

How have modern translations fared on this verse? Someone has said that there has been a new English translation of the New Testament, in whole or in part thereof, every year since 1900. Only a fraction of these have survived and are well known. But of all these translations, so far as we know, only two have translated Colossians 2:12 as did Luther. Weymouth⁴ reads thus: "You having been buried with Him in your baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith produced within you by God, who raised Him from among the dead." And the revision of Beck's AAT reads: "Since in baptism you were buried with Him and raised with Him through faith produced by the power of God, who raised Him from the dead."⁵ It must be said to the credit of those who revised the AAT that this rendition is a commendable change from Beck's original translation: "Since in baptism you were buried with Him and raised with Him by believing in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead."⁶ In other words, RSV, LB, Phillips, NEB, NIV, JB, the original of Beck, and NASB wrongly translate the genitive as objective, rather than subjective. And, unfortunately, the New King James Version, which otherwise has some very fine things to be said for it, wrongly translates this genitive, assuming that Luther and the Apology understood it correctly.⁷

Rudolph Bultmann was the author of the article which deals with *pistis* in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. In footnote 230 Bultmann lumps this instance of the genitive along with other examples of the genitive which follow the word "faith" (*pistis*) and calls all of them objective.⁸ But what Bultmann overlooked was that this is the sole instance in the New Testament of a genitive, following the word *pistis*, which denotes an attribute of God. This alone should have alerted him to the fact that this instance is different. Furthermore, evidently Bultmann disregarded the context of Colossians 2:12.

Why are we going to such lengths in speaking about the proper understanding of the case usage of a single word? Simply to stress the fact that Luther's understanding of Scripture was superb, and this made him a superb translator of Scripture. Who but Lutherans rightly understand the nature of faith? Who but Lutherans understand faith in the manner portrayed by Luther's explanation of the third article of the Creed in the Small Catechism? Who but Lutherans can say,

Holy Scriptures ascribe conversion, faith in Christ, regeneration, renewal, and everything that belongs to its real beginning and completion in no way to the human powers of the natural free will, be it entirely or one-half or the least and tiniest part, but altogether and alone to the divine operation and the Holy Spirit, as the Apology declares.⁹

Who but Lutherans rightly understand Jesus at Luke 8:11: "The seed is the Word of God"? In its context "the Word of God" means the Gospel in the narrow sense. The point of comparison is life. Only the Gospel, not man's fallen nature, contains and gives spiritual life. The synergist invariably misinterprets the Parable of the Sower simply because he misinterprets the words, "The seed is the Word of God."

Synergism makes a man introspective, unsure, and leads to despair or pride. True monergism goes hand in hand with humility and certainty. We thank God not only for the great things our fathers did for us, but also for the small ones, little things like translating Colossians 2:12 "durch den Glauben den Gott wirket."

FOOTNOTES

1. *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 191.
2. *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p.143.
3. The Peschitto translates it as an objective genitive.

4. Richard Francis Weymouth, *The New Testament in Modern Speech*, 6th ed. (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers).
5. *The Holy Bible, An American Translation*, trans. William F. Beck, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Leader Publishing Company).
6. *The Holy Bible, An American Translation*, trans. William F. Beck (New Haven, Leader Publishing Company, 1976).
7. *The New King James Bible, New Testament* (Nashville-Camden-New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979).
8. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, VI (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), pp. 203-4.
9. Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Art. II, par. 25-27.