

Theological Observer

Commencement Speech at Lutheran School of Theology in Gothenburg, Sweden, February 25, 2024

Dear esteemed faculty, students, and friends of the Lutheran School of Theology in Gothenburg; dear Dr. Masaki, who has shepherded Concordia Theological Seminary's Master of Sacred Theology program at this site and each of its students; and especially you, dear soon-to-be Master of Sacred Theology degree graduates, Alexander, Magnusson, and Henrik:

I bring you warm greetings and congratulations in Christian love from President Lawrence Rast, the entire faculty, staff, and your fellow students at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, of the United States of America. This whole crowd of Christian witnesses who share your conviction in boldly confessing Christ as Lutherans committed to all the Scriptures teach truly rejoice with you in your learning, accomplishments, and confession this day!

I was once in your position: at a commencement for a master's degree from Princeton Theological Seminary in the beautiful chapel of Princeton University in May of 1985. But if you look at the list of degrees after my name, you will see a ThM listed, not an STM. Why is that? Because the degree that I was awarded that day is a Master of Theology degree, unlike the Master of Sacred Theology degree that you will receive today. I would like to say to all of you today, that small adjective "sacred" is very important. At Princeton Theological Seminary, I was exposed to world-renown scholars in my field of biblical studies, for which I am very thankful. But I was also exposed to historical criticism and other challenging methodologies. More than that, it was there I first saw women's ordination in action with a significant number of female MDiv students, homosexual pastoral students, and a chapel where if there was a star next to the hymn, it meant that you were supposed to change the gender language in the hymn to be inclusive. If the hymn said "sons of God," you were supposed to sing "children of God." And that was 1985. Things have digressed since then. I studied theology there, but many at Princeton did not hold it as "sacred."

The adjective "sacred" in your degree is important. At Concordia Theological Seminary, in partnership with Lutheran School of Theology here in Gothenburg, we do hold theology to be sacred—namely, "holy"—and worthy of our honor, respect, and careful study. Why? First of all, because unlike all of us sinners, the Lord, our God, is holy. So, theology, or the teaching about God in Jesus Christ, is also holy. That truth is visible throughout the Scriptures, especially when God appears in visible form to someone after the fall into sin. Think of Isaiah hearing "Holy, holy, holy" and then fearing for his life in the presence of the pre-incarnate Son, the visible

image of YHWH, the one God of Israel and all creation (Isa 6:1–5). Even the unholy demons identify Jesus properly as the Holy One of God (Mark 1:24)! Unlike those unclean spirits, the Paraclete is called the Holy Spirit. Yes, theology is sacred because the triune God is sacred—namely, holy.

Second, theology is sacred because the prophetic and apostolic writings that testify to him are sacred. Unlike the many universities across the globe that regard the Bible as just another example of human literature, we at Concordia Theological Seminary regard it as a sacred book, the Holy Bible, inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Bible does not just contain some words of God scattered here and there among its many pages, but it is the sacred and holy word of God. This means it is always a fount of truth in a world filled with lies. We can trust the Holy Scriptures to lead us in the way of truth and to the Truth incarnate. As the Lord Jesus said, “Sanctify them in truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).¹ And the psalmist wrote, “Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path” (Ps 119:105). Theology is sacred because God’s word is sacred.

A third reason that theology is sacred in this STM program at Gothenburg is because biblical and confessional theology such as is taught here leads to holy people who live holy lives. We are not just academics writing papers and getting degrees; we are confessional-Lutheran pastors whose life is caring for the bride of Christ, the church. We know this sacred theology transforms the lives of unholy sinners because it presents to all people the righteous and holy one, Jesus Christ, who offers to all his righteousness, his perfect holiness, demonstrated in his holy life and atoning death for sin. As Leviticus states, “I am YHWH who makes you holy” (Lev 20:8). And all who believe are then perfectly righteous and holy by faith for Christ’s sake. And sacred lives of sanctification follow our union in faith to the Holy One. As our Holy God states in his Holy Scriptures, “Be holy, as I am holy” (Lev 11:44).

We need theologically grounded Lutheran pastors who are well educated to respond to the ever-evolving challenges arising in the world around us. Not only should we be equipped to witness clearly to Jesus Christ and salvation from sin in him alone, but we should also teach all the other teachings that Christ has given us in his word, as well as be able to identify the many false teachers and teachings that are part of daily life in this sinful world. The Lord has given the three of you a unique opportunity to learn and grow in sacred theology. Now he will give you opportunities to put that sacred theology that you have learned to work for the benefit of his holy church. Among your peers, pastors like the three of you are called upon to be leading pastoral theologians.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical translations are the author’s own.

In the soaring archway over the chancel at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne, where I have been a member for twenty-eight years, are painted in large letters these words that can be read from anywhere in the sanctuary: "Blessed are they that hear the Word of God and keep it. Luke 11:28." These are words of Jesus to live by and help others to live by, including the next generation: that we are truly blessed in many profound and eternal ways when we hear the holy word of our holy God and then are empowered by him to live holy lives according to it. Are the challenges ahead large for faithful Lutheran pastors like the three of you, whom God has equipped to be theological leaders in his church? Yes, but standing fast on the authority of the word of God you can face your future with confidence, as expressed in the hymn "Lord Jesus Christ, with Us Abide":

Lord Jesus Christ, with us abide,
For round us fall the eventide.
O let your Word, that saving light,
Shine forth undimmed into the night.

In these last days of great distress
Grant us, dear Lord, true steadfastness
That we keep pure till life is spent
Your holy Word and Sacrament.

To hope grown dim, to hearts turned cold
Speak tongues of fire and make us bold
To shine Your Word of saving grace
Into each dark and loveless place.

May glorious truths that we have heard,
The bright sword of your mighty Word,
Spurn Satan that Your Church be strong,
Bold, unified in act and song.

Restrain, O Lord, the human pride
That seeks to thrust Your truth aside
Or with some man-made thoughts or things
Would dim the words Your Spirit sings.

Stay with us, Lord, and keep us true;
 Preserve our faith our whole life through—
 Your Word alone our heart's defense,
 The Church's glorious confidence.²

Once again, congratulations to each of you. May the Lord bless the sacred seeds that were sown in the STM seminars you took here, and may you always hold theology to be sacred!

Charles A. Gieschen
 Professor of Exegetical Theology
 Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana
 charles.gieschen@ctsfw.edu

Faith and Baptism: Reframing the Discussion

I. Unintended Problems with Lutheran Defenses of Infant Baptism

In discussions between Lutherans and other Protestants, one issue that comes to the fore time and time again is the validity of infant Baptism. Theological frameworks that involve concepts such as an “age of accountability” have difficulty seeing value in baptizing infants and will often reject the practice as meaningless. Lutherans understand the value of Baptism as a means of grace. The thought that anyone would willingly withhold Baptism for extended periods of time, potentially many years, stands opposed to Baptism’s nature as God’s free gift of grace. Thus, we are quick to defend the practice of infant Baptism against all naysayers.

Our defense of infant Baptism typically draws on one of two arguments. The first is the nature of sin. The argument usually draws on Saint Paul’s concise statement “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23).¹ Even if we were to leave aside sins of commission, we have all inherited the sin of Adam. We all join with King David in lamenting “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps 51:5). This applies to infants as much as to anyone else. If infants were not sinful, they would not be subject to death, since “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). Unfortunately, infant death is a daily occurrence.

² Philipp Melancthon and Nicolaus Selnecker, “Lord Jesus Christ, with Us Abide,” trans. F. Samuel Janzow, in *Lutheran Service Book*, ed. The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 585.

¹ All Bible quotations are from the ESV.

Since, then, infants are sinful, they need God's grace as much as does any other sinner. Therefore, infant Baptism is a good, right, and salutary practice.

The second argument revolves around faith. The apologist for infant Baptism points out how no one needs to wait many years to have an active and vibrant faith. Infants are quite capable of having faith. Often, John the Baptist makes an appearance as proof that infants can indeed have faith (Luke 1:41, 1:44). Since Baptism is not a decision for Christ but rather God's free gift, which either bestows or nourishes faith, anyone of any age may receive it, even infants.

These are both fine arguments to make in defense of infant Baptism. They draw on scriptural concepts of sin and grace to show how God deals with our fallen state and how he works through the means he has provided to restore us. Either argument can be used to demonstrate the need for Baptism in general and how valuable it is as a gift of God.

Whether the arguments presented are successful in changing hearts or minds or not, the matter is usually left at that. We have drawn the connections between Baptism, grace, faith, and all of the rest and so have demonstrated an infant's need for Baptism. This, then, leads to some assumptions about the nature of faith and Baptism in infants. The assumptions draw on the infant Baptism debate and so are taken as a given.

Because we can demonstrate that infants can have faith and need Baptism, these two things become conflated. The separate and distinct acts of receiving the gift of faith and receiving the gift of Baptism become inseparably joined in the case of infants. Sometimes Saint Peter's assertion "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you" (1 Pet 3:21) is used as the proof-text to forestall any further debate on the subject. Faith is necessary for salvation. So, if Baptism is salvific, then it must grant faith, or so the thinking goes. The conclusion is not just that Baptism is the place where infants receive faith but that this act *alone* is where infants receive faith, to the exclusion of everything else.

This leads to some troubling problems in the life of the church. The most common issue is the one most pastors encounter at one time or another. A young couple with only the most tenuous connection to the church wants to meet with the pastor to have their newborn baptized. They have been taught that Baptism saves and so they have come to see to the needs of their new baby. After their child is baptized, they depart once more. With their parental duty completed and their child now confidently listed among the saints, they consider the matter closed and never are seen in church again. Their plan does not attend to the lifelong journey of discipleship, but in their minds this is a minor detail. Salvation has been attained for their child, and that is really the most important thing. Baptism is reduced to a spiritual checkbox that must be marked in order for someone to avoid eternal condemnation.

The second problem that can arise from this tangling of faith and Baptism does not occur as often but can be even more problematic. Because we assume Baptism is where faith is granted to infants, we find ourselves in an especially troubling theological quandary when we are confronted with the death of an unbaptized child. If Baptism is the singular point at which God grants faith to children, then we are left in an untenable position. There is little comfort, then, that we can confidently give to grieving parents. The knowledge that God is gracious and merciful and that he can save whom he chooses does not carry the same weight in these situations. The unspoken understanding is that God would have to make an exception to normal rule, but there is no promise or guarantee that he will.

In either case, if we hold that Baptism is the singular event in the child's life where faith is not only possible but guaranteed, then both of these scenarios are ones we will continue to face. In this way of thinking, we can offer nothing to those who have not been baptized, because they did not receive the gift of faith in Baptism, and all we can do for those who have been baptized and have no intention of returning is to caution them of the dangers.

II. The Scriptural Setting

Children, even the unborn, can have faith. This is not disputed in the Lutheran church. One need only look at Psalm 22, Psalm 71, and the person of John the Baptist for examples of this very thing taking place. The question is not whether we baptize infants or whether infants can have faith. The issue here regards *how* infants come to have faith.

Saint Peter makes clear that Baptism saves (1 Pet 3:21). However, we must be careful not to draw from that statement more than is actually intended. The tendency is to claim he is speaking specifically of faith when he speaks of salvation, but it must be noted that "saves" is what Peter says, not "gives faith." Faith is certainly the means by which we receive and take hold of our salvation, but it is not the entirety of our salvation. Indeed, many things are required for our salvation. The incarnation of Christ, his crucifixion, his resurrection, and our faith in him are all part of God's grand work of salvation, and yet each of these is distinct and cannot be substituted for the other parts. So also, in 1 Peter 3:21, just because salvation is offered in Baptism does not necessarily mean that faith, which receives it, is a guaranteed effect of Baptism.

The assertion that infants must be baptized to receive faith is further complicated when comparing the Old and New Testaments. We cannot say that infants required Baptism prior to Christ's institution of the sacrament. Must we then say that infants in the Old Testament could not have faith until they were older? No,

thankfully there is nothing in Scripture that suggests that to be the case. King David points to his own infant faith in the Psalms. Unless we claim King David and John the Baptist are rare exceptions to infant faith, then we must observe from the Old Testament that faith without Baptism was not only possible, but that it was normal in faithful households.

The claim that infant faith is primarily, or even exclusively, the effect of Baptism must also demonstrate not only that the means by which God grants faith has somehow changed between the Old and New Testaments but also that there is a difference in the function of Baptism toward adults and children. If Baptism is necessary for infants to receive faith, where is the dividing line between child and adult? Is it a matter of age, or of cognitive ability? Scripture gives no details here. On the contrary, throughout the Gospels, children are held up as models of faith, yet nowhere do we see adults definitively coming to faith by means of Baptism.

This leads to the final point Scripture makes on the subject. Saint Paul charts the course taken by the gift of faith, as it were, from God to the believer in Romans 10:17, summarizing it all as “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”

Saint Paul explains the process in a straightforward manner. Faith comes by hearing the word of Christ. There is no provision made for age, cognitive ability, or any other distinction that one might use to divide people. As he presents it, if you have come to faith, then it is because you have heard the word of Christ and believed it.

What are we to say about Baptism, then? Saint Paul is certainly aware of the power of Baptism and discussed its salvific nature earlier in his epistle, but in Romans 10 he makes no mention of it. Instead, Saint Paul ties everything back to a singular root event. In Romans 10 the gift of faith is not conveyed by Baptism specifically. It is given through the word of Christ, wherever that word is proclaimed. Of course, any discussion of the sacraments and their benefits is ultimately a discussion of God’s word. The word of Christ is what makes Baptism effective (SC IV 10). It is the same word of promise that is shared in the preached word and in the sacrament of Baptism, and it is effective in both.

Can Baptism be the means by which faith is given? Yes, because the word is present. Since God’s word is also active through the proclamation of the gospel, faith can also come through any encounter one might have with the preached word. Everyone comes to faith in the same way, through the hearing of God’s promise and the faith that God instills in us to receive that promise. This is how everyone who lived prior to the institution of Baptism came to faith, and it continues to be true today.

III. The Stance of the Reformers

Luther follows the same line of logic as does Saint Paul. When he presents his theology of Baptism in the Small Catechism, he says simply, “Clearly the water does not do it, but the Word of God, which is with and alongside the water, and faith, which trusts this Word of God in the water” (SC IV 10).² Can Baptism do great things? Yes, because of its connection to God’s word. Faith hears the promise made that this water cleans both body and soul and trusts that it is so.

In his *Chief Theological Topics (Loci Praecipui Theologici)*, Philipp Melancthon gives various arguments for why we should baptize infants. He explains how they are born with sin and need the grace that comes through Baptism. Children need to be joined to the church, where they may encounter God’s grace and find the eternal life God offers to his people there.³

At no point does Melancthon argue that we baptize in order to bring them to faith. By itself, that does not necessarily mean he rejects the idea. However, he spends quite a bit of time exploring the word “faith.” He looks at how it is used in Scripture and by the church fathers. He finds the term used in two general ways. Sometimes it is used to refer to our assent to God’s word, in particular our reconciliation to God through Christ. Other times it refers to our simple trust in God’s promises. It is neither only one, nor only the other, but a combination of both.⁴

For him, the word takes center stage. Melancthon shows that grace and faith are two separate activities. Both are worked by God, but they are nonetheless distinct. Grace is the giving of God’s gifts, and faith is the reception of those gifts. Our trust in him is what determines whether we are joined to that salvation or not.

Luther delineates the difference between the promise within the sacrament and the faith that receives it. The creation of faith is simply not the driving motivation behind the rite of Baptism at all. As he addresses the issue of infant Baptism in the Large Catechism, he says, “We bring the child with the intent and hope that it may believe, and we pray God to grant it faith. But we do not baptize on this basis, but solely on the command of God. Why? Because we know that God does not lie. My neighbor and I—in short, all people—may deceive and mislead, but God’s Word cannot deceive” (LC IV 57).⁵ Christ’s command is our primary motivation for continuing to baptize. Without his command and promise, there would be little purpose

² In *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 359.

³ Philipp Melancthon, *The Chief Theological Topics: Loci Praecipui Theologici* 1559, trans. Jacob A. O. Preus, 2nd English ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 263–267.

⁴ Melancthon, *Chief Theological Topics*, 158–159.

⁵ In Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 464.

to it. We are commanded to baptize so that God's grace would be given to all who desire it.

Melanchthon summarizes how one comes to be saved in his lengthy discussion in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, article IV. Like Saint Paul, he charts the path from word to faith and salvation: "However, God cannot be dealt with and cannot be grasped in any other way than through the Word. Accordingly, justification takes place through the Word, just as St. Paul notes [Rom. 1:16]: the gospel 'is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.' Likewise [Rom. 10:17], 'Faith comes from what is heard.' At this point we could even take up the argument that faith justifies, because if justification takes place only through the word and the word is grasped only by faith, it follows that faith justifies" (Ap IV 67).⁶ The sacraments are a major part of the discussion in this article, but they are not distinct and special in this particular issue. Everything begins with and is driven by the word. Further, the only promise we have of justification is found within this relationship of promise and faith. A bit later Melanchthon adds, "Only by faith, and indeed, by faith in the strict sense of the word, do we receive the forgiveness of sins, because a promise cannot be received in any other way than by faith. But faith, strictly speaking, is that which assents to the promise" (Ap IV 112–113).⁷

Faith is the trusting response to God's promise. This is why, even regarding Baptism, Luther is constantly going back to the promise. Faith receives the promise given in Absolution and the preached word. Faith receives the promise given in Baptism. In all cases, faith clings to the word.

IV. Modern Thoughts and Pastoral Considerations

If Baptism is the point at which the giving of faith takes place and it does not occur before then, then the pastor has little to offer in situations of stillbirth. We know God is merciful, but that does not constitute any sort of promise to which God has bound himself. Instead, we look at where God has promised to work and where his grace may be found.

Saint Paul's concise summation in Romans 10 leaves little gray area. Faith comes by hearing the word of Christ, and all come to faith the same way. God promises, and the faithful trust his words. Where and how those promises are encountered is irrelevant to the discussion of how faith is created.

Looking at salvation as a function of God's word gives the church better resources. For those who think Baptism is all they need and that they can safely avoid any further involvement with the church, we look to the promise and the command

⁶ In Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 131.

⁷ In Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 139.

of God. Baptism does not stand on its own in the command given by Christ in Matthew 28:19–20. Baptism is one of *two* primary components to being a disciple of Christ. The life of a disciple is lived only in the combination of Baptism and teaching, a one-time immersion in the promise associated with the water and a lifetime immersion in the word. The grace that God gives in Baptism has a purpose, to cleanse the believer and make him fit to be called a disciple. But, without that daily life of living in God's word, the purpose is lost.

On the other side, those who lose a child before Baptism can receive the comfort that comes from the promise that God makes to those who hear and believe the gospel. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, the Spirit is at work. Children who have heard the voice of their Shepherd speaking through the mouth of the pastor or parents can indeed trust the promise he makes and be saved. They are no different from John the Baptist, whose reaction is specifically attributed to his awareness of his Savior.

This is quite different from the bland consolation that God may choose to be merciful. God promises to act through his word. The Spirit is at work, for he works wherever the word is preached (cf. Acts 10:44; Eph 1:13; 1 Thess 1:5). For parents who have been active in worship and the hearing of the word, they will know their child has been a part of that process as well. As expressed in Apology II 3, "We deny to those conceived and born according to the course of nature not only the act of fearing and trusting God, but also the ability or gifts needed to produce such fear and trust."⁸ Even the unborn are sinners and unable to bring themselves to trust God under their own power. That grace, offered through the proclamation of the gospel and received in faith, is still available to them regardless of whether they have had the opportunity to be baptized.

Reframing the discussion with a focus on the word gives us the ability to see the work of salvation in terms of God's promise. God's word functions as the primary connecting point between himself and his people. It is through his word that he reveals his saving grace. The physical elements that constitute Baptism and the Holy Supper do not operate on their own but only in connection with the promise God has bound to them. The proclamation of the gospel has the power to bring salvation and work faith every time it is heard. This also allows Baptism to take the position it was designed to fill: confirming the grace that has come through the proclamation of the gospel and carrying with it all of the further promises God connects to this cleansing flood. Becoming a disciple, being made clean, being made holy, claimed as one of God's people—all of these are themes bound to Baptism, and all build on

⁸ In Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 112.

the simple declaration of forgiveness offered through Christ's death and resurrection and received in faith.

Richard Davenport
Pastor, Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
apokaluo@yahoo.com

Latest News from the SELK

The question of whether women may serve as pastors is the burning issue in the Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche (SELK, Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany).¹ All the big, Protestant territorial churches in Germany allow it and in fact consider it heretical to disagree with it.² The cultural pressures for egalitarianism in Germany are strong.

This summer (2025) is another summer of conventions for the SELK. Women's ordination loomed large at the recent Allgemeiner Pfarrkonvent (APK, General Pastors Convention), which was held June 23–25. Women's ordination will also be on the agenda at the the Kirchensynode (KS, Synodical Convention, which includes lay representation), which meets September 17–20, after this issue of *Concordia Theological Quarterly* has gone to press. In the SELK, all doctrinal resolutions must first be approved by the General Pastors Convention before they can be considered by the Synodical Convention. It is something like a bicameral legislature. The constitution of the SELK can be changed by means of a two-thirds vote of the Synodical Convention, but not if this would change the confessional position of the church.

In preparation for the summer's conventions, a committee tasked with considering "scenarios" for the introduction of women's ordination in the SELK released a report on May 7. According to this report, a survey shows that the "clear majority of SELK congregations that responded would like to have women's ordination and

¹ Werner Klän, "Vestigia terrent! Looming Division in the SELK (Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany)," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 89, no. 2–3 (April/July 2025): 275–276; Werner Klän, "Pacta Sunt Servanda: About Church Orders and Their Binding Nature," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 89, no. 2–3 (April/July 2025): 247–269.

² Armin Wenz, "The Argument over Women's Ordination in Lutheranism as a Paradigmatic Conflict of Dogma," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 71, no. 3/4 (July/October 2007): 319–346; Gottfried Martens, "The Introduction of Women's Ordination in the German Landeskirchen and in the Lutheran Churches of Scandinavia," in *You, My People, Shall Be Holy: A Festschrift in Honour of John W. Kleinig*, ed. John R. Stephenson and Thomas M. Winger (St. Catharines, ON: Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary, 2013), 127–152.

see it as unharmful to the Lutheran confession.”³ On the other hand, the congregations want to maintain the institutional unity of the SELK. The report goes on to consider the anticipated financial and legal repercussions of a division in the SELK.⁴ The committee sees the preservation of the churchly and institutional unity of the SELK as impossible if one group in SELK fully and consistently rejects women’s ordination while the other fully and consistently accepts it. Opponents of women’s ordination thus desire to maintain the status quo, in the hopes that the Holy Spirit will grant unity in this question at some point in the future. Proponents of women’s ordination wanted the General Pastors Convention to declare section 7(2) of the SELK constitution (the section that limits the pastoral office to men) to be outside of the SELK’s confession of faith. This action would pave the way for women’s ordination in those SELK congregations that desire it.

However, the General Pastors Convention at its June 23–25 meeting did not do this.⁵ At the end of a full day of debate, the General Pastors Convention passed the following resolution: “The 15th General Pastoral Conference of the SELK declares as a result of its deliberations that acceptable structures for the introduction of the ordination of women are not currently conceivable, if this service is possible only in a part of the SELK’s congregations. The General Pastoral Conference affirms its fraternal commitment [*geschwisterliches Miteinander*] to those who favor the ordination of women, respect for their position, and willingness to listen to their concerns” (66 in favor, 16 opposed, and one abstention).⁶ This resolution rejects the introduction of women’s ordination on practical grounds, while at the same time accepting and listening to those who promote it.

The General Pastors Convention also passed a theological resolution on the matter. “The 15th General Pastoral Conference affirms that a majority of its members, for theological reasons, currently considers it impossible to maintain the practice of women’s ordination and its rejection in the SELK side by side and with equal rights. The General Pastoral Conference affirms its fraternal commitment to those

³*Bericht der Synodalkommission “Szenarien—Ordination von Frauen” (SynKoSze) für die Tagung der 15. Kirchensynode der SELK in Fulda 17. bis 20. September 2025*, [2025], https://www.selk.de/download/Bericht-SynKoSzenarien_2025-05-20.pdf, 3. All translations are my own.

⁴ *Bericht*, 11–12.

⁵ “Vierter Tag des Allgemeinen Pfarrkonvents (APK),” *Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche*, June 27, 2025, <https://www.selk.de/index.php/2025/2025-juni/11478-vierter-tag-des-allgemeinen-pfarrkonvents-apk/>. As reported in the April/July issue of *CTQ*, a major point of business was the debate on whether the ordination of women should be permitted in the SELK. Klän, “*Vestigia terrent! Looming Division in the SELK.*”

⁶ “Vierter Tag des Allgemeinen Pfarrkonvents.”

who favor the ordination of women, respect for their position, and willingness to listen to their concerns” (62 in favor, 19 against, and two abstentions).⁷

Finally, the General Pastors Convention affirmed all the current avenues for the service of women in official positions of the SELK: “The members of the 15th General Pastoral Conference of the SELK undertake to continue to promote the services of women in the SELK, as these are provided for in the regulations of the church: pastoral assistants [*Pastoralreferentinnen*], readers, congregational-council members [*Kirchenvorsteherinnen*], church councilors [*Kirchenrätinnen*], deaconesses, catechists, instructors at the Lutheran Theological Seminary [*Lutherischen Theologischen Hochschule*], etc.” (67 in favor, 9 opposed, and 7 abstentions).⁸

These currently available avenues for the service of women already allow women to have leadership in congregations and give them permission to preach sermons and teach God’s word publicly under the supervision of pastors but do not permit them to administer sacraments. The General Pastors Convention decisions show a strong desire to maintain the status quo and the institutional unity of the SELK. There is also a desire for agreement with the recognition that there is great dissent on this issue.

But the story does not end there! On July 5, a group of 31 SELK pastors who are in favor of women’s ordination released an open letter, describing the General Pastors Convention decisions as raising many questions and causing great concern. The letter criticizes the manner of discussion at the General Pastors Convention along with certain unnamed conservative pastors who think the SELK has already gone too far in conceding various leadership roles and public preaching/teaching functions to women. “We are shocked,” they write, “at the questioning of the regulations that apply to the service of women in our church, which became clear at the General Pastors Convention. We say with all determination, ‘Not a step backward!’” They plead for a plurality of practices on women’s ordination, which they hope to get approved at the upcoming Synodical Convention in September.⁹

The Synodical Convention will take place September 17–20 in Fulda, the final resting place of Saint Boniface (missionary to the Germans), after this issue of *CTQ* goes to press. Eleven of the twenty-six overtures in the category “Theology and Church” deal with the service of women in the church.¹⁰ It seems likely that the convention will be contentious.

⁷ “Vierter Tag des Allgemeinen Pfarrkonvents.”

⁸ “Vierter Tag des Allgemeinen Pfarrkonvents.”

⁹ “Kirche in Freiheit, Vielfalt, Weite,” *Mitten aus der SELK*, July 5, 2025, <https://mitten-aus-der-selk.de/kirche-in-freiheit-vielfalt-weite/>.

¹⁰ “15. Kirchensynode der SELK,” Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche, accessed July 28, 2025, <https://www.selk.de/index.php/15-kirchensynode/>.

May God grant the SELK further doctrinal clarity and courage to follow the Bible and to criticize the culture, rather than letting the culture dictate how the Bible should be read!

Benjamin T. G. Mayes
Associate Professor of Historical Theology
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana
benjamin.mayes@ctsfw.edu