

Theological Observer

The Spirit Proceeds from the Father and the Son—Or Does He?

After years of discussion, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) agreed to the Eastern Orthodox rendering of the Nicene Creed that omits the *filioque*—that is “from the Son” (as in “who proceeds from the Father and the Son”). Not part of the creed as promulgated at the Council of Constantinople in 381, the *filioque* was added at the Third Council of Toledo in 589 with the support of the Visigoth king Reccared to affirm his rejection of Arianism by confessing that the Spirit proceeded not only from the Father but also from the Son.¹ Hence the *filioque*—“and from the Son.” Adopted by a regional and not an ecumenical council, the *filioque* was therefore used only in the West. Here hangs the well-known and unresolved history of what became the first recognizable point of division between the Western (Roman, later including Lutheran) and Eastern (Orthodox) churches.

Bringing into public view the proposed reconciliation over the *filioque* between the LWF and Orthodox churches has the side benefit of helping put to rest the canard that Luther was the first to divide the Catholic Church. This simply is not so. It happened in 1054 when the Roman and Orthodox communions excommunicated each other over the inclusion of the *filioque* in the creed. Argument for the omission of the *filioque* rests chiefly on John 15:26, in which the verb “to come forth” or “to proceed” is attributed to the Father: “But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father [ὁ παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκπορεύεται], he will bear witness to me.”² Note that the Son sends the Spirit who bears witness to the Son.

The present form of the Nicene Creed used in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and her sister churches does not mean that there are two parallel or separate processions of the Spirit, one from the Father and one from the Son (though the conjunctive “and” between Father and Son could be taken to suggest this). The English translation of the third stanza of the hymn “We All Believe in One True God” in *The Lutheran Hymnal* reflects what is intended by the *filioque*: “We all confess the Holy Ghost, / Who from both fore’er proceeds.”³ It is not that the Spirit proceeds

¹ A. Edward Siecienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 68–69; Wolfram Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024), 551–553.

² All Bible quotations are from the RSV.

³ Tobias Clausnitzer, “We All Believe in One True God,” tr. Catherine Winkworth, alt., in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, ed. *The Intersynodical Committee on Hymnology and Liturgics for the Ev. Luth. Synodical Conference of North America* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), no. 252, st. 3.

from the Son subsequently to proceeding from the Father.⁴ The Spirit's procession is one eternal act by which the Spirit possesses deity and personhood from both the Father and the Son, because the Son is eternally in the Father just as the Father is in the Son.

Omission of the *filioque* has consequences, unintended or not. It allows the Son to be regarded only as an instrument subordinate to the Father. Additionally, arguing that the *filioque* doctrine hangs on only one Bible passage, John 15:26, overlooks other important passages where the Spirit is called the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son. Just as in the crucial passage of John 15:26, which testifies that Jesus sends the Spirit of the Father, so in Galatians 4:6 the roles are reversed, with the Father sending the Spirit of his Son into our hearts.⁵

The Son's relationship to the Father is explained by the word "begotten"—the Father begets, and the Son is begotten—while the Spirit's relationship to the Father is explained by the word "proceeding." By the Son's being begotten and the Spirit's proceeding, the Son and the Spirit are recognized as distinct from each other. Without these distinctions, the Son and the Spirit could be confused with each other. Lutheran theologians, including Francis Pieper, admit to being unable to define what it means to be begotten and to proceed,⁶ but these should not be confused with

⁴ Cf. Augustine, *The Trinity* 5.15, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1991), 199: "we must confess that the Father and the Son are the origin of the Holy Spirit; not two origins, but just as the Father and the Son are one God . . . so with reference to the Holy Spirit they are one origin."

⁵ On a further note, Lutheran theologians have also pointed to Revelation 22:1–2 and the river of the water of life proceeding [ἐκπορευόμενον] from the throne of God and of the Lamb. Both Abraham Calov and David Hollaz cite Revelation 22 as one of the chief proofs for the procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son. This interpretation is widely attested among the Lutheran dogmaticians. Abraham Calov, *Systema Locorum Theologicorum*, vol. 3 (Wittenberg: Michaelis Wendt, 1659), 809, 811, 813; David Hollaz, *Examen Theologicum Acroamaticum*, I, 2, q. 50 (Leipzig: B. C. Breitkopf, 1763), 337–338; cf. Johann Gerhard, *Loci Theologici*, vol. 29, *De Morte* (Jena: Tobias Steinmann, 1621), §476, p. 909 (= Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces*, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, vol. 29/2, *On Death, Part Two*, trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Joshua J. Hayes and Heath R. Curtis [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2024], §476, pp. 295–296); Johann Gerhard, *Loci Theologici*, vol. 34, *De Vita Aeterna* (Jena: Tobias Steinmann, 1622), §24, pp. 761–762 (= Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces*, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, vol. 34, *On Eternal Life*, trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Joshua J. Hayes and Heath R. Curtis [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2022], § 24, p. 46); Johann Andreas Quenstedt, *Systema Theologicum*, I, 9 (Wittenberg: Johann Ludolph Quenstedt, 1691), 405.

⁶ Cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 31.8 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2022), 122: "What, then, is 'proceeding'? You explain the unbegottenness of the Father and I will give you a biological account of the Son's begetting and the Spirit's proceeding—and let us go mad the pair of us for prying into the mysteries of God. We cannot understand what lies under our feet, cannot count the sand in the sea, 'the drops of rain or the days of this world,' much less enter into the 'depths of God' and render a verbal account of a nature so mysterious, so much beyond words." So too Augustine, *Contra Maximinum* 2.14.1 (In Pierre-Marie Hombert, ed., *Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina*, vol. 87A [Turnhout: Brepols, 2009], 569): "Who is able to explain the difference between 'being born' and 'proceeding' when discussing that most excellent nature? Not everything that proceeds is born, although everything that is born proceeds. In the same way not every biped

the confession that Jesus is begotten by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and the Spirit's coming into the world on Pentecost. These events happened in time and reflect how the divine persons relate to one another eternally in the Trinity.⁷

How the Son relates to the Father is clarified somewhat unexpectedly if one compares the three synoptic accounts of Jesus blessing the children. This is a pericope familiar to our congregations by the inclusion of Mark's account in the liturgy for the Baptism of children. It might be expected that the account in Matthew would be the more theological, since only this Gospel has the Father-Son-Holy Spirit formula for Baptism. For several reasons, especially due to its comparative brevity, Mark is widely considered the most straightforward account, which is then expanded by Matthew and Luke. What may be surprising to some is that Mark penetrates the furthest of the three evangelists into the trinitarian mystery in his rendering of Jesus' blessing of the children.

Matthew's account is the simplest in that the one who receives the child receives Jesus (Matt 18:5). Luke goes further in that the one who receives the child receives not only Jesus but also the one who sent him—that is, the Father (Luke 9:48). The beginning of the parallel in Mark 9:37 is not different from Matthew or Luke but concludes differently. Following “whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,” Jesus in Mark's account concludes with “*receives not me* but him who sent me” (emphasis added). Like in Matthew and Luke, the one who receives the child receives Jesus. All three agree that the one receiving the child receives Jesus, but Mark concludes that the one receiving Jesus does not receive him but the one who sent him. Unveiled here is the inner trinitarian mystery that the Son's personhood and deity exist eternally within the Father and never apart from him. Whatever the Son sees the Father doing, the Son does and, to put this argument in reverse, the Father does all his works through the Son. This argument is similar to John 5:19: “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.” What is striking and may be unexpected for some is that a similar argument is found in Mark. The one who receives the Son receives the Father. Inclusion of the *filioque* makes the point that the Son shares completely in the Father's essence and so the Spirit's procession belongs to him as the Father's eternal Son. A committee version of the Trinity of one person consulting with another is rendered impossible.

Now back to the LWF concession of eliminating the *filioque* from the creed. Minimally the LWF is acting like a church in determining what does and does not belong to the creed in the name of its member churches. It is undoing hundreds of

is a man, although every man is a biped. This I know. How to distinguish between that generation and this procession I do not know, I am not able, I am not sufficient.” Unless otherwise noted, all translations in footnotes are by Carl L. Beckwith.

⁷ Abraham Calov, *Systema Locorum Theologicorum*, vol. 3 (Wittenberg: Michael Wendt, 1659), 813: “a divine person is not sent in time except by him from whom he proceeds eternally.”

years of church tradition without consultation with other churches that claim the Nicene Creed as their own. Unlike the other Lutheran Confessions, the Nicene Creed is anchored in nearly all liturgies of Lutheran congregations. Since in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the addressee of the Lord's Prayer can be addressed simply as "God" or even "Mother," a change in the creed may be less noticed. But any change in the creed signals a fundamental change in what is believed (*fides quae creditur*). This must be a matter of concern for any LWF member church.

For the vast majority of the approximately eighty million people who belong to LWF member churches, excising the *filioque* from the creed will be of little or even no concern, since the vast majority who are members of European territorial Lutheran churches are rarely to be found in church services. This does not mean that for those who express some loyalty to the creed—and this would include those who accept the Lutheran Confessions—the omission of the *filioque* is not without consequence. As the *filioque* stands now, the Spirit proceeding from the Son must speak of Christ. Remove it, and some will be able to recognize the Spirit working in other religions. Pope Francis had already taken this path with Muslims and more recently with Hindus. Without the *filioque* the *Heiliger Geist* (Holy Spirit) can be transformed into the *Weltgeist* ("World spirit") working in non-Christian religions. *Filioque*, to most an unknown Latin word, carries the weight of what we believe about God as Trinity.

David P. Scaer

The David P. Scaer Professor Emeritus of Biblical and Systematic Theology
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana
david.scaer@ctsfw.edu

Here Where We Want Everyone¹

Editor's Note: Since the following sermon employs the inductive form, the author had originally numbered the two major divisions in descending order: 2. then 1., with the theme (in italics) appearing at the end. For the style of this journal, the major division numerations have been omitted.

Text: 1 Corinthians 11:23–30

Catechism: Who receives this sacrament worthily?

This sermon is going to be about as simple as can be: two parts leading to one point. I'll tell you when we're doing the first part; I'll tell you when we're doing the second part; and I'll tell you the big point at the end. We're going to keep it about as simple as we can homiletically, because the point of this sermon isn't simple at all; doing it is anything but easy. It's really hard.

This is the last of three sermons in our series on the Sacrament of the Altar. You remember that the first sermon we delivered from the communion rail—to emphasize that forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are always available to us right down there. The second sermon we delivered from here in the pulpit, because it's the word—the very same word we preach from the pulpit—that works the miracle of the sacrament. And today we deliver from here,² because the goal of this sermon can't be achieved down there at the rail, though some think so. It has to be preached and taught and preached and taught and preached and taught some more—probably for a long, patient time.

Luther's fifth question about the sacrament brings us to the matter of closed communion. So, here's the first part of our sermon: *Who should not be given the sacrament here at our communion rails?*—which is related to (but isn't quite the same as) the issue Luther addresses in this part of the catechism: “anyone who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared.”³

Our explanations to the catechism—1943, 1986, 2017—all give a very clear answer to this question, and they're very similar. In various orders: 1943 and 1986 give four groups who should not be given the sacrament; 2017 adds a fifth, but it can be understood within one of the other four. So, we'll go with, count them as, four.

¹ This sermon was preached on May 20, 2025, in Kramer Chapel at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, as the third sermon in a three-part catechetical series on the Sacrament of the Altar. The two earlier sermons addressed Luther's first three questions on the sacrament, based on 1 Cor 11:20–22, (April 29, 2025) and his fourth question, based on Matt 26:26–28 (May 8, 2025). The overall title of the series was “Here! Here! Here!”

² This sermon was delivered from the pulpit, which is the preacher's normal custom.

³ Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 29.

First, the sacrament is not to be given to the ungodly or unrepentant. Here is where the 2017 explanation adds those who are not Christian or not baptized. That's clear enough, isn't it? Anyone who is ungodly or not a Christian certainly doesn't believe the words that Christ's body and blood are given and shed for him or her for the forgiveness of sins. And anyone who is impenitent can't also believe that he's forgiven, because he thinks his sin is fine, doesn't need to be forgiven. These are unworthy and unprepared. If we commune them, we're harming them, because we seem to be confirming that they can remain in sin, in unbelief, unbaptized.

Second, the sacrament should not be given to those who are unforgiving or refusing to be reconciled to a brother or sister in Christ. We often refer to this as "bearing a grudge." Someone doing this is also unworthy and unprepared; he's refusing the forgiveness of the sacrament. Remember, Jesus said in teaching the Lord's Prayer in Matthew, "If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt 6:15).⁴ If we commune the unforgiving, we're harming them, because we seem to be confirming that it's safe to hold a grudge.

Third, the sacrament is not to be given to those who can't examine themselves. This would include infants or very small children, those who've not yet been instructed, or someone who's unconscious. Paul says, "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Cor 11:28). He "is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,'"⁵ and faith is not the same as some level of intellect. For example, many who have serious mental limitations can be catechized, instructed, and receive the sacrament worthily. But "faith in these words" requires some understanding of what these words mean. And letting someone receive the sacrament without recognizing that the body and blood of Christ are really present harms her. "That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (1 Cor 11:30), Paul says.

Fourth—here's the hard one!—we do not give the sacrament at our communion rails to those of a different confession. Usually that means members of a church body not in fellowship with ours. Why is that?

This is not exactly the same as Luther's matter of worthy and well prepared. For instance, someone in the Wisconsin Synod or Evangelical Lutheran Synod or perhaps an international Lutheran church with whom we're in dialogue may definitely be worthy and well prepared by "faith in these words, 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.'" And this absolutely might also be true of someone in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). So why not give them the sacrament at our communion rails? All three of our most recent catechisms use

⁴ All Bible quotations are from the ESV.

⁵ Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation*, 29.

essentially the same language for this; they say, “since the Lord’s Supper is a testimony to our unity of faith.”⁶ But why does that matter?

In one word: souls. With a conservative Lutheran body, we may be confident they’re not teaching anything that will jeopardize the salvation of souls. But we’ll talk about that—maybe for years—until we’re certain about it, until we’ve clearly established it. On the other hand, with the ELCA it’s manifest that they do permit teachings that are dangerous to souls. “Oh, but,” some say, “we agree with them on the real presence in the sacrament. We ought to commune together in order to grow toward greater unity.”

Tragically, no! We don’t *establish* unity here at the communion rail. Communing together under such circumstances only ignores or minimizes the differences. It precludes the chance to say, “We’ve got differences. Let’s talk. We’re concerned about the souls in your church body. We can’t pretend there’s no danger with your teachings, say, that deny the deity of Christ or permit homosexual activity.” Unity is established by preaching and teaching and preaching and teaching and preaching and teaching and talking.

So that’s the first part of this sermon. Who should not be given the sacrament here at our communion rails? And we’ve got four answers.

The second part of the sermon: *Why* should these four groups not be given the sacrament here at our communion rails?

Haven’t we answered that already? Not really. We’ve given an answer (a good answer!): to protect souls from being harmed by inappropriate reception of the sacrament. But that’s the penultimate answer, not the ultimate answer. And understanding the ultimate answer has everything to do with how you’ll administer closed communion pastorally in your congregation.

My last congregation—we arrived there just a few days before confirmation. The custom there was to have questioning on Friday night before Confirmation Sunday, and since I’d done zero of the teaching, we agreed that the assistant and the elders would ask basically all the questions, and I would just add one or two at the end.

So, I listened to the Q and A, and the kids did very well. But the question they answered *best of all* was “Who is not to be given the sacrament in our churches?” They nailed it! Billy got the ungodly and unrepentant; Susie got carrying a grudge; Frankie got those who couldn’t examine themselves; Penny got those holding a different confession. Whipped ’em out! Nope! Nope! Nope! Nope! One! Two! Three! Four!

But I had the feeling something was missing.

⁶ Luther, *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation*, 343.

So, we get to the end, and it's my turn to ask. And I said to the kids, "You guys were great on who should not be given communion. Why is it that they shouldn't be?"

Have we accomplished anything—at least anything great—when we keep someone from communion? Paul says, "Let a person examine himself, then, and *so eat*[!] of the bread and *drink*[!] of the cup." There's also that passage the '43 catechism uses rather oddly for Holy Communion, but it does make this point—Matthew 5: "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, *and then come*[!] and offer your gift" (Matt 5:23–24, emphasis added). Have we really accomplished anything when someone doesn't bring a gift, or, more to the point, when someone doesn't come to the altar? No, we've accomplished nothing—at least nothing great—until we've enabled someone to come . . . and eat . . . and drink . . . *worthily and well prepared*.

Christ died for every unworthy soul—like you and me. On the cross, he prepared a table before us. By giving his body and blood into death, he secured forgiveness here at the rail . . . for *everyone*. Then he sent his Holy Spirit to work in hearts so that souls would be well prepared by faith.

The reason we practice closed communion—and we do!—say "no" sometimes—and we do!—is always only so we can say "yes" sometime in the future. When we say "no," it's to create the opportunity to preach and teach and preach and teach and preach and teach and talk—patiently. And it's always to this end:

We Practice Closed Communion

*Because We Want Everyone to Be Worthy and Well Prepared
to Receive Forgiveness of Sins, Life, and Salvation Here at the Communion Rail.*

And that's the point of this sermon. Amen.

Carl C. Fickenschier II

Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions

Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana

carl.fickenschier@ctsfw.edu

On Beards and Preaching

"The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the LORD has made them both." (Prov 20:12 ESV)

I was surprised and a little taken aback when one of my students said the biggest impediment to hearing a sermon for him is the preacher having a beard. As someone

who has had a beard or a goatee for thirty years, I am sensitive when people tell me if, how, or how much to shave. Whose business is it of theirs what I do with my facial follicles?

For this student, it was not about follicles, whether beards are good or bad, manly or mangy. It was about reading lips.

When listening to someone speak, most people also learn to read lips. Listening with understanding is a combination of sight and sound, with most of the work done by sound. The worse one's hearing gets, the more critical it is to be able to see the speaker's face. In the same way, if the room is noisy (people, children cooing, etc.), the hearer has to rely more on seeing than average.

An even more obvious case is with older adults. One colleague told me the story of a conversation he had had with his elderly mother during COVID-19. She commented on how much harder it is to hear people talk when you cannot see their faces. She relied a lot more on reading lips than she realized. This is a part of why older adults have a more challenging time hearing the sermon. Their eyesight may be failing as fast as their hearing.

There is a whole field of neuroscience that is exploring the relationship between hearing and seeing.¹ It is no accident that they are often put together almost as reflections of one another in the Psalms.² As two of the five senses, they make up a good portion of how God wants us to perceive the world.

Thus, if a preacher has facial hair covering the mouth and lips, hearing a sermon is much more challenging. In the case of my student, he has a cochlear implant and has spent a good portion of his life reading lips. This is not a theological question for him but a practical one. If I cannot hear the preacher, how will I receive his words?

While beards or heavy facial hair (a Tom Selleck mustache?) may be obvious challenges, they are not the only ones. Masks are another, and I pray we do not have to face that again anytime soon. It may also be challenging if the pulpit is too high, the preacher looks down constantly while reading, or the lighting is terrible. Anything that gets in the way of the congregation listening to and hearing the sermon should be examined and, if possible, improved.

Thick, full-style beards are in style today. I understand that some see beards as a sign of manliness and that this is a small way of combating the egalitarian nature of how the world looks at males and females. I also know that one can easily find

¹ Mathieu Bourguignon et al., "Lip-Reading Enables the Brain to Synthesize Auditory Features of Unknown Silent Speech," *Journal of Neuroscience* 40, no. 5 (January 2020): 1053–1065.

² Even a cursory look at the Psalms and Isaiah demonstrates this. See Pss 22:24, 34:15, 48:8, 92:11; and Isa 11:3, 32:3, 33:15, 35:5, 42:20, and 43:8.

numerous quotations from the church fathers on why beards are meet, right, and salutary.³

However, as preachers of the gospel, we must remember the words of Saint Paul to the Ephesian elders: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28 ESV). As a pastor, I must do everything I can to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ faithfully and do so in a way that my congregation may understand.

This is not tempting the Holy Spirit or denying the efficacy of the word of God. It acknowledges that God calls men to be preachers with all that entails. What I look like, how I dress, the language I use, and yes, even my facial hair affect how people see me as a pastor. I am not saying pastors should look, sound, and act all the same. What I am saying is that I have a responsibility to be aware of all of these things and to make decisions about them based on where God has called and placed me.

So, look up, speak clearly and boldly, trim your beard so we can see your mouth, and go forth as a pastor in Christ’s church! I, for one, will not be shaving my goatee anytime soon. But I will be thinking about how my hearers see my face and how that helps to preach the word of God to them.

Todd A. Peperkorn

Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana
todd.peperkorn@ctsfw.edu

Results of the Fifteenth Synodical Convention of the SELK on the Question of the Ordination of Women to the Office of the Ministry¹

At its most recent meeting, the Fifteenth Synodical Convention (*Kirchensynode*) of the *Selbstständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche* in Germany (SELK, Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church) decided to establish two commissions on the

³ A good example would be from the Apostolic Constitutions (compiled c. AD 375–380): “Nor may men destroy the hair of their beards, and unnaturally change the form of a man. For the law says: ‘Ye shall not mar your beards.’ [Lev. xix. 27, xxi. 5] For God the Creator has made this decent for women, but has determined that it is unsuitable for men.” *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* 1.2, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, 10 vols., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 7:392.

¹ For the background to this article, see 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; Benjamin T. G. Mayes, “Latest News from the SELK,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (October 2025): 377–380.

subject of “Ordination of Women to the Ministry”: a “Unity Commission” and a “Separation Commission.”

The “Unity Commission” has the following tasks. It is to structure the further work on the core issues of the debate on the ordination of women for the next pastoral convention. It is to address the fears or positive expectations underlying the various positions and prepare them in discussion formats for congregations and pastoral conventions (that is, on all levels of the SELK) in order to promote mutual perception, listening, and understanding. Furthermore, it is to develop proposals for shaping the coexistence of congregations with different positions. However, it is not to propose changes to the church law in order to enable open discussion. This mandate ends with the constituent meeting of the Sixteenth Synodical Convention.

The Separation Commission has the task of dealing with the legal and organizational issues and consequences of possible paths to separation. The options to be considered are separation into two churches and withdrawal of individual congregations from the SELK. The Separation Commission acts as a point of contact for the church leadership and congregations. A report on the findings is to be presented at the constituent meeting of the Sixteenth Synodical Convention.

These resolutions are subject to the following condition: “For the convention’s further work in this synodal period, the ecclesiastical unity of the SELK according to theological and organizational considerations is the guiding interest for knowledge and action. This knowledge-guiding interest is based on the assumption that the synodical convention is of the opinion that the SELK, with its doctrinal opinions of rejecting and approving women’s ordination, should be shaped by the existing doctrinal decision (Constitution, art. 7(2)).”² This assumption corresponds to the wording of a motion that the SELK church leadership submitted to the Synodical Convention on September 12, 2025—unanimously! It should be noted that in both governing bodies of the SELK—that is, the church leadership (*Kirchenleitung*) and the college of superintendents (*Kollegium der Superintendenden*)—a significant proportion (approximately forty percent), though not a majority, consists of supporters (provosts,³ superintendents, lay members) of the ordination of women to the ministry of the church.

A clear reference to the current constitution of the SELK is contained in the wording “by the existing doctrinal decision (Constitution, art. 7(2)).” This reaffirms the “doctrinal *decision*” made by the SELK and repeatedly confirmed by General

² “Letzter Tag der Synodaltagung: Wegweisende Entscheidungen,” Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche, September 20, 2025, <https://www.selk.de/index.php/2025/2025-september/11613-letzter-tag-der-synodaltagung-wegweisende-entscheidungen/>. The constitution mentioned here is available at “100 - Grundordnung,” Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche: Ordnungen der SELK, accessed March 3, 2025, <https://www.selk.de/index.php/ordnungen-der-selk/>.

³ *Pröpste*, like district presidents in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Pastoral Conferences and Synodical Conventions (namely, the rejection of the ordination of women to the ministry of the church). Divergent (subjective) “doctrinal *opinions*” are not currently considered to be divisive within the church—that is, until the church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is once again granted the unanimity that it is unfortunately lacking at present.

It should also be noted that, in the aftermath of the General Pastoral Conference in June 2025 and in the run-up to the Synodical Convention, proponents of the ordination of women to the ministry of the church have been campaigning for their goals on the internet with petitions to promote their goals, and in some cases with malicious attacks on the person and office of Bishop Hans-Jörg Voigt. These methods, familiar from political conflicts, are reminiscent of Soviet “agitprop” strategies. Attempts were also made to prevent the distribution of a letter from the International Lutheran Council to the pastors and congregations of the SELK, as was requested by the church leadership.

The establishment of two commissions with the aforementioned contradictory mandates manifests the lack of unanimity among lay members and pastors of the SELK on the issue of women’s ordination to the ministry. Thus, it is also likely to perpetuate and solidify this disagreement. This would only prolong the illness of the SELK that we knew and loved. But the two-year period could also provide an opportunity for the orthodox position to prevail as the only tenable one. For the ordination of women to the Office of the Ministry has not yet been introduced. The current constitution of the SELK, which is based on the biblical evidence and the historical faith of Christianity, is still in force.

Werner Klän

Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology

Lutherische Theologische Hochschule, Oberursel/Ts., Germany

werner.klaen@gmx.de

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Sermon on Luke 5:1–12¹

We may think of the Christian church as an oasis in the desert, where our Lord heals the sick, teaches many things, and then prepares for us a supper of bread and fish. We may picture the Christian life as a journey. Having followed Jesus to the cross, we head out on the road to Emmaus, where our Lord walks beside us and, turning from guest to host, reveals himself in the breaking of the bread. We may think of the church as a place of peace, made possible by his crucified and risen body.

¹ This sermon was preached on February 12, 2025, at Kramer Chapel, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Or, on any given Sunday morning, we might think of the Lord who lights a charcoal fire and feeds us a breakfast of bread and fish.

So also the evangelists would have us envision the church as a boat that takes us across life's stormy seas until, God willing, we safely reach the other side. By his preaching we are brought near, and through baptism we are brought onboard. And while we cross the sea, we are comforted by his presence, aided by prayers offered up on the mountaintop of God's right hand. And when the boat is tossed about and takes on water, the Lord says to us, "Do not be afraid. Ἐγώ εἰμι ["I am"]" (John 6:20).² For he is our very bread of presence.

As Saint Peter touched upon (1 Pet 3:20), and as Cyprian taught, the church is our ark of salvation. But analogies go only so far. For while we confess one, holy, Christian, and apostolic church, so also do we find ourselves in many little congregations.

Sometimes, we may wish that our Lord had never ascended into heaven; wish that he were here to do the preaching and the teaching. But there is work to be done. The harvest of fish is great, and the fishermen are few.

But are we up to the task? Only a fool would answer quickly. As Christians, it is good to bow in God's presence, to kneel in humility, to wear the sackcloth and ashes of repentance. How much more so as pastors, who serve at his altars and speak in his name.

With Isaiah, we say, "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa 6:5). Like Simon Peter, and every fisherman worth his sea salt, we will say, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8). But the Lord has called many here among us, and many more of you are in the call process that we call "seminary." And soon, the Lord will send you out into the sea that you might let down your nets. And he will say, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men" (v. 10). And your nets will not return to you empty.

Yes, the church is the place of God's presence, but maybe the church-growth people have a point. It's also a business. A fishing business. But we shouldn't be tempted to think of our congregation as an independent enterprise. Instead, we are part of the franchise. Or, better yet, a corporate body. Though we may find ourselves in many vessels, we really are in the same boat.

So it is—some gardeners have a tough row to hoe, and some are blessed with fertile soil. So also some fishermen are sent into waters teeming with fish, so much so that fish seem to be jumping into the boat, while others row in waters where the fish are few and far between. But we should neither make too much of the successful one nor disparage the one who is struggling. Nor let us fall into thinking that this is competition.

² All biblical translations are from the NKJV.

I remember, back in the day, finding out that one of my members had been married in another congregation up the road. Why wasn't I told? Another went here or there to have a daughter baptized. I recall pastors rejoicing that their church had grown not by conversion but by transfer, sometimes for good reasons, and at other times because of personality, discontent, or escape. But that's the sort of thing that happens when we think only of the congregation instead of the church. That is what happens when we forget that we are part of a ministerium.

So, consider again Peter, James, and John, for in their calling we see our own common calling into the ministry.

Luke tells us that John and James worked alongside Peter. And when Peter's net was full, he signaled to his partners in the other boat to come and help (v. 7). Here, the Greek word for partners is *μετόχοις*, which has the essence and the incense of "communion." We are told again that James and John are partners with Peter (v. 10), but this time the Greek tells us that they were *κοινωνοὶ* with Simon—that is, they were in fellowship with Peter. The apostles were meant to be more than partners. They were called into a fellowship of fishermen and a communion fellowship with the Lord and with all those that their nets brought onboard.

What of it? No matter the size, place, or prominence of your congregation, whether it may be likened to a great ship or small dingy, we are in this together. When one woman finds a coin, all the women shall rejoice. When one shepherd finds a sheep, we all join the party (Luke 15:1–10). The gold medal goes to the team; so also the victor's crown. Your success is mine, and mine yours. Your disappointments are mine, and mine yours. For as Christians, we are members of one body, and as pastors we become members of a band of brothers, a fishing fellowship, a business in which we are all shareholders.

Kramer Chapel has all the trappings of a great ship, and it's a pleasure to be aboard. But that's not why you came here. You came because you wanted to set sail, to be fishers of men. And all God's people count it a privilege to be part of this great enterprise, in fishing boats great and small, until we reach, by God's hard-won grace, the other side.

Peter J. Scaer

Professor of Exegetical Theology

Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana

peter.scaer@ctsfn.edu

Research Note

Does Apology XXI (IX) 9 Obligate Us to Accept the Old Testament Apocrypha as Holy Scripture?

The Apocrypha, also known as the Old Testament Apocrypha, are books written by various Jews after the time of Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet, which circulated with the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint). The original Hebrew Old Testament does not contain them. These books include Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Tobit, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, additions to Esther, additions to Daniel, and the Prayer of Manasseh.¹

For centuries, the Lutheran church has used some quotations from the Apocrypha in the liturgy. Many of our congregations use Scripture readings and propers (changing parts of the liturgy) from the historic one-year series. This lectionary series, with minor changes, is around one and a half millennia old. Occasionally, the historic one-year series includes a quotation from an apocryphal book. One example is the Christmas midnight Divine Service, in which the antiphon to the Introit Psalm is from Wisdom 18:14–15, “When all was still and it was midnight, Your almighty Word descended from the royal throne.”² We use this verse because it is part of the historic one-year series.

Sometimes the question is raised, Aren’t the Apocrypha used only by Roman Catholics? Roman Catholics see the Apocrypha as possessing an authoritative status equal to Scripture.³ Most non-Lutheran Protestants reject the Apocrypha completely. Lutherans take the middle path. Luther’s German Bible included the Apocrypha with this introduction: “Apocrypha: These are books which are not considered equal to the Holy Scripture, and yet are useful and good to read.”⁴ That sums up the Lutheran approach to the Apocrypha.

Martin Chemnitz, an important writer of the Formula of Concord (one of the Lutheran Confessions), taught Lutheran pastors in the late sixteenth century about these books, calling them “the apocryphal books of the Old Testament.”⁵ German Bibles printed by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s Concordia Publishing

¹ Edward A. Engelbrecht, ed., *The Apocrypha: The Lutheran Edition with Notes* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), xxxi–c.

² Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Service Book: Altar Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 846.

³ At least as was classically defined in the Council of Trent, session 4, April 8, 1546. See Heinrich Denzinger et al., eds., *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012), no. 1502.

⁴ Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Deutsche Bibel*, vol. 12 (Weimar: Böhlau, 1961), 2, translation by author.

⁵ Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, trans. Luther Poellot (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 45.

House in the early twentieth century contained the Apocrypha. But when the Missouri Synod stopped speaking German, it adopted editions of the English Bible that lacked the Apocrypha. The end result is that today, most Lutherans probably have never heard of the Apocrypha, and if they have, they might think the books must be completely rejected as pernicious to Christian faith.

Despite this, American Lutherans have used the apocryphal books in their hymnals for generations, and still use them. In *Lutheran Service Book*, the apocryphal “Song of the Three Young Men” from the additions to Daniel in the Apocrypha is found as hymns 930 and 931.⁶

But what about Apology XXI (IX) 9? “Although concerning the saints we concede that, just as, when alive, they pray for the Church universal in general, so in heaven they pray for the Church in general, albeit no testimony concerning the praying of the dead is extant in the Scriptures, except the dream taken from the Second Book of Maccabees, 15, 14.”⁷ Does this identify an apocryphal book as Holy Scripture? No, it does not.

1. It says nothing more than that 2 Maccabees was in the codex of the Bible, which it was, both in the Vulgate and in Luther’s later full German Bible (1534).

2. Melancthon in the Apology does not ascribe any authority to 2 Maccabees.

3. The later 1534 full German Bible gave the Apocrypha its own section and labeled those books as not equal to Holy Scripture. That does not contradict Ap XXI (IX) 9, since Melancthon was not claiming any authority for the passage 2 Maccabees 15:14.

4. Johann Gerhard makes clear that the authority of the Apocrypha had been rejected by many patristic and medieval churchmen. Thus, Lutherans were not innovating when they included the books of the Apocrypha in the codex of the Bible while not ascribing scriptural authority to them.⁸

⁶ Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, ed., *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 930–931.

⁷ In *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English*, [ed. and trans. W. H. T. Dau and F. Bente] (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 345.

⁸ Johann Gerhard, *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture*, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, trans. Richard J. Dinda, *Theological Commonplaces, Exegesis I* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 157–215.

In summary, we do not consider the Apocrypha to be God's inspired and inerrant word, because they are not part of the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures. Rather, as Dr. Luther has said, these valuable books are "useful and good to read."

Benjamin T. G. Mayes

Associate Professor of Historical Theology

Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana

benjamin.mayes@ctsfw.edu

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