



# Luther's Ecclesiology

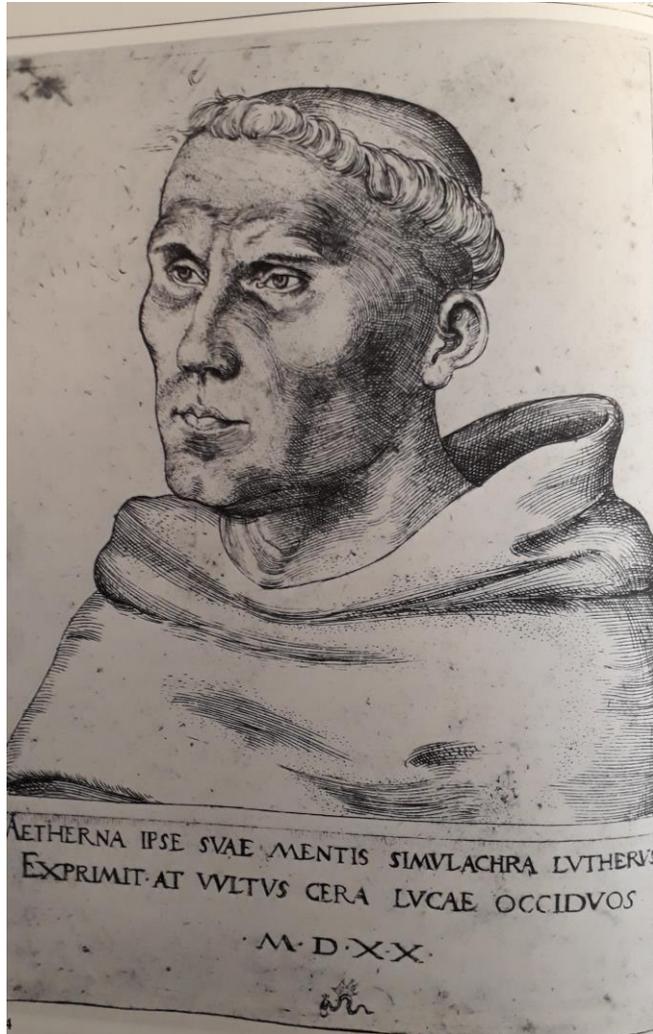
WHERE THE WORD IS, THERE THE CHURCH HAPPENS.

# 1. Introduction

What was the context in which Luther became an instrument for the Reformation of the church?

The church's self-understanding, soon after the apostolic age, was that of legislative authority over all of life, first only the private life of the faithful, but since Augustine also the spheres of public life including the state.

She saw Christ as the law-giver, his legacy the Law (contained both in Natural Law as well as in the Gospels and spelled out in minute details in Canon Law) and herself as the chosen instrument to establish the rule of this law among all people.



When it is said that the Reformation was caused/sparked by Luther's re-discovery of the Gospel, what that implies on the background just described is that it was a "liberation from having to be religious" that unburdened the scrupulously God-fearing and deeply religious monk and through his discovery of a gracious God shook the foundations of the church.



The theme of the General Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation meeting at this time in Windhoek, Namibia, promisingly expresses the liberating tenor of the Gospel rediscovered by Luther:

**“Liberated by God’s Grace.”**

The sub-themes take the necessary steps towards giving this theme practical expression:

“Salvation – not for sale!”

“Human beings – not for sale!”

“Creation – not for sale!”

## **2. Luther's theology and the "ecclesiological hints" that can be found within it.**

Luther was a thoroughly "contextual theologian"

His writings were for the most part responses to and interventions in specific situations of crisis.

If justification "sola gratia" is received through listening to the Word, engendered by the "Deed of God's Word", then all claims of the church to be the mediator, dispenser and judge of salvation are invalid.



**2.1** For Luther discovering that Christ is not a new Moses, not a legislator intent on re-establishing the rule of the Law over God's people, also meant forfeiting the idea that the church is to be an institution, through which the world was to be "Christianised".

**2.2** It may be helpful to describe Luther's understanding of Church, using terms of course not yet known to Luther, as an "Event" – happening when and where the "viva vox evangelii" is proclaimed and the Spirit deigns to use such proclamation to engender faith in the hearers. (Romans 10)



**2.2.1** In the “**Engendering Deed**” – God “does things with Words”, using human instruments, fallible preachers and teachers – it is here that Luther’s focus lies – he was an interpreter of Scripture for the sake of the Proclamation and his preaching shaped the Reformation movement more than anything else.

**2.2.2** The “**Engendered Response**” – ecclesiology within this frame of thought, would thus be primarily concerned with describing the shape of the engendered response to the Word – not prescriptive or normative in terms of organisation, but held accountable to the Word, to which it is called to respond.

# The seven marks of the church

- (1) The Word of God,
- (2) The Sacrament of Baptism,
- (3) The Sacrament of the Altar,
- (4) the Office of the Keys exercised publicly,
- (5) The Calling of ministers for the public administration of the first four marks,
- (6) Prayer, Public Praise and Thanksgiving to God,
- (7) The Cross, i.e. persecution, all kinds of trials and suffering for the sake of Christ.

### 3. “Lutheran Ecclesiology” - if there is such a thing

“It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. **This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.** For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places....”

(Confessio Augustana Article VII)

**3.1 The Visible and the Hidden Church** – or an inclusive mixed bag of saints and sinners.

**3.2 The Priesthood of all the Baptised** – not of the sacramentally or otherwise ordained.

**3.3 The Office of the Word** – the Christian community's public responsibility for the ministry of the Gospel.

## 4. A Guiding question for our ongoing conversations

What are the implications for the twenty-first century church if we read/interpret the Reformation as **a shift** in the understanding of the Church

**from**

*a religious institution overseeing the correct performance of ritual and the regulation of and adherence to the "Law" for the sake of meriting salvation*

**to**

a gathering of people summoned by a God who engages them in conversation and thus in community and through Word and Sacrament (promise and table fellowship) re-creates them as creatures who trust in him and live Christ-like in the world?