

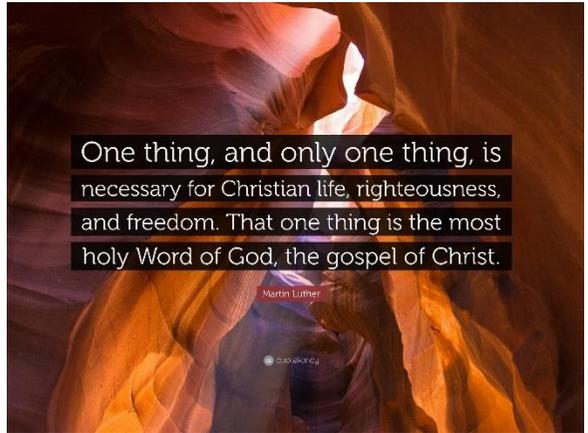
# Keynote Address to Synod Reformation: it's still about Jesus

Friday, 15 September 2017

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## 1. Introduction

Time flies when you're having fun! It has been 25 years since I left school, 50 years since the first human heart transplant, 100 years since Einstein first applied his General Theory of Relativity and 500 years since the events that, according to general consensus, mark the beginning of the Reformation.



This year so far we have celebrated this anniversary repeatedly. I have experienced wonderful festivals with encouraging fellowship, inspiring music, strengthening teaching and much more that is good. You have probably experienced some of that too. If you had to respond to the question, "What is it really all about?" what would your answer be? Martin Luther? The Lutheran Church? Not much? Just something that happened a long time ago? Do we only celebrate this occasion or do we join the Lutheran World Federation in asking how the message we are celebrating still challenges us today<sup>1</sup>?

I want to begin by asking you whether you know what the watchword for Reformation Day is. What is the watchword we read and greet each other with every time we celebrate Reformation Festival? This is important because it wants to remind us what the Reformation we celebrate is all about. The watchword for this day is:

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<sup>1</sup> "The anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 becomes the focus for a multiyear global process of reflection, repentance, and celebration in all congregations and expressions of the communion. As one part of this emphasis, the [Lutheran World Federation] Assembly in 2017 will be planned as an occasion for the joyful celebration of the power of the Lutheran witness to the gospel and at the same time a space for the self-critical acknowledgement of failures in faithfulness and of the continuing pain of division among Christians." Lutheran World Federation strategic plan

36 **For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that is already**  
37 **laid, which is Jesus Christ!** 1 Corinthians 3:11  
38

39 This keynote address aims to remind us of this: it is still all about Jesus Christ.  
40 The Reformation grew around the central thought that it is the gospel of Jesus  
41 Christ that counts, that saves, that calls us and gathers us together, that serves  
42 us and that we serve, that we are to celebrate and proclaim<sup>2</sup>. When we  
43 celebrate the Reformation today, it still all about Jesus Christ – it is him and his  
44 gospel that we celebrate, it is on him that our eyes must be focused (or  
45 refocused), it is in the light of his gospel that we rejoice, reflect, repent,  
46 remind.

47  
48 Let us explore some aspects of our Lutheran Theology and the Bible text we  
49 have chosen to guide us at this Synod to discover (and perhaps rediscover) this  
50 core truth and foundation.  
51

## 52 **2. A brief and basic exploration of Lutheran Theology**

53 I want to begin with an exploration of the basics of Lutheran Theology.

### 54 **Small Group Discussion:**

55 ***In your small groups identify and briefly discuss FIVE basic teachings/aspects***  
56 ***of Lutheran Theology.***  
57

58 Some of these aspects are included in the diagram on the next page (compiled  
59 by participants during a recent co-worker training course on Lutheran  
60 Theology). The diagram is by no means exhaustive, but it does contain most of  
61 the core Lutheran teachings and demonstrates the centrality of Christ in  
62 Lutheran Theology (Luther's "Christ alone"<sup>3</sup>). When we have a look at some  
63 things that Luther said and wrote about these teachings, the centrality of  
64 Christ becomes clear:

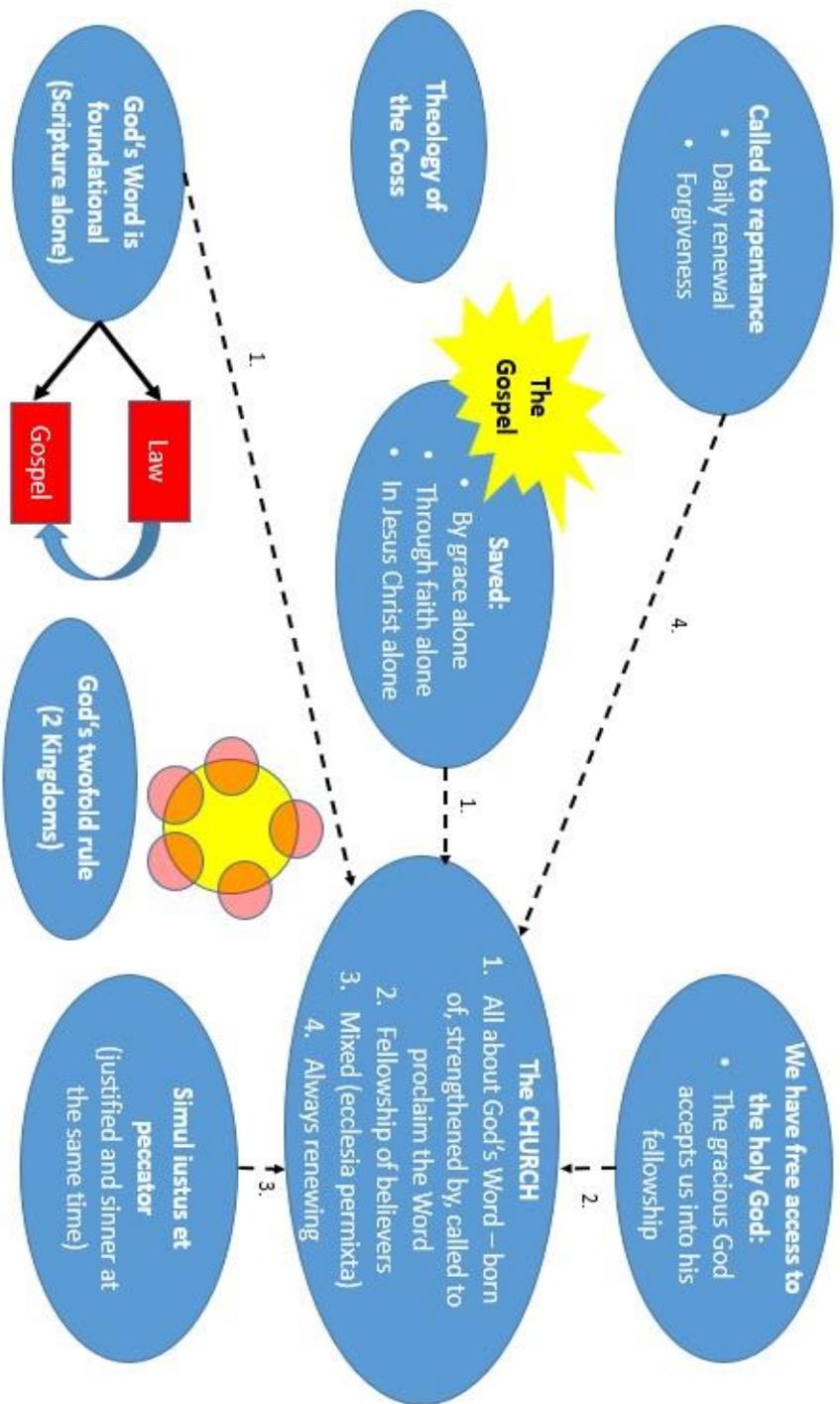
#### 65 **i) The Gospel: Salvation by Grace through Faith in Christ**

- 66 • This is the mystery of the riches of divine **grace** for sinners...by a  
67 wonderful exchange our sins are now not ours but Christ's, and Christ's  
68 righteousness is not Christ's but ours.  
69

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<sup>2</sup> One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ." Martin Luther (LW 31, 344)

<sup>3</sup> In a sermon Luther preached from the gospel passages on John the Baptist, he said, "For this reason it is necessary constantly to persevere and adhere to John's testimony concerning Christ. For it requires toil and effort to continue with word and testimony, for a person at death to be able to say, I must die, but I have a Saviour concerning whom John the Baptist testifies: **on him and no other creature, either in heaven or on earth do I rely...[Christ alone] is all in all...**"



- 71 • In my heart reigns this one article, **faith** in my dear Lord **Christ**, the  
72 beginning, middle and end of whatever spiritual and divine thoughts I  
73 may have, whether by day or by night.<sup>4</sup>  
74 • Do you now see how **faith** justifies without works? Sin lingers in us,  
75 and God hates sin. A transfusion of righteousness therefore becomes  
76 vitally necessary. This transfusion of **righteousness we obtain from**  
77 **Christ because we believe in Him.**<sup>5</sup>  
78

## 79 ii) **Scripture and God's Word**

- 80 • If you want to interpret well and confidently, set Christ before you, for  
81 He is the man to whom it all applies, every bit of it.  
82 • The Bible is the cradle wherein Christ is laid.  
83 • Neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ or believe in him  
84 and take him as our Lord, unless these were first offered to us and  
85 bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the gospel by the  
86 Holy Spirit...For where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Spirit to  
87 create, call and gather the Christian church, and outside it no one can  
88 come to the Lord Christ.<sup>6</sup>  
89

## 90 iii) **The theology of the Cross**

- 91 • Luther used this term in the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518 (in  
92 contrast to the Theology of Glory) to argue that the cross is the only  
93 true source of spiritual knowledge concerning God, who he is and how  
94 he saves. "He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who  
95 comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through  
96 suffering and the cross [of Christ]."  
97

## 98 iv) **The call to repentance**

- 99 • In the 95 Theses Luther argues that repentance receives the merits of  
100 Christ and nothing else. Thesis 1: When our Lord and Master Jesus  
101 Christ said, "Repent", he willed the entire life of believers to be one of  
102 repentance. Thesis 2: This word cannot be understood as referring to  
103 the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as  
104 administered by the clergy. Thesis 37: Any true Christian, whether  
105 living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the church;

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<sup>4</sup> From the introduction to Luther's commentary on Galatians.

<sup>5</sup> From Luther's commentary on Galatians (3:6)

<sup>6</sup> Large Catechism II, 38, 45

106 and this is granted him by God, even without indulgence letters. Thesis  
107 60: ...we say that the keys of the Church, are that treasure.  
108

109 **v) The Church**

- 110 • Christ should and must be the head [of the Church] and the Church is  
111 subject and obedient to him out of fear and reverence. Otherwise by  
112 what means could one make the distinction between the true Church  
113 of Christ and the church of the devil except by its obedience or  
114 disobedience to Christ.  
115

116 The centre of all of these thoughts and teachings is Christ. The intention of  
117 Luther and of other Reformers was to point to Christ. Luther was horrified by  
118 the idea that people should focus on him – the focus should always be on  
119 Christ.<sup>7</sup> It is all about him. There is still no other foundation than the one that  
120 has already been laid, which is Jesus Christ. Luther put it like this:  
121

122 *“The highest of all God’s commands is this, **that we ever hold up before our***  
123 ***eyes the image of his dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.** He must daily be to*  
124 *our hearts the perfect mirror, in which we behold how much God loves us*  
125 *and how well, in his infinite goodness, as a faithful God, he has grandly*  
126 *cared for us in that he gave his dear Son for us. Do not let this mirror and*  
127 *throne of grace be torn away from before your eyes.”*  
128

129 **3. A brief and basic exploration of Isaiah 43:1-10**

130 We now turn to the passage that is guiding us during this synod. In small groups  
131 we will look at the passage Isaiah 43:1-7. The next key note address will deal  
132 with the challenges the people must/may endure in the text. Today we look at  
133 the promises in this passage by reflecting on the following questions:

134 ***i) Read Isaiah 43:1-7 carefully.***

135 ***ii) Identify and underline the promises that God makes in this passage.***

136 ***iii) Summarise the core content of the promises in 3 single words or short***  
137 ***phrases that tell us WHAT God is promising.***

138 ***iv) Count the number of times that the Lord’s “I” is used and linked directly***  
139 ***with a verb, e.g. I have redeemed, I have called, I formed, etc.***

140 ***v) What does that tell us about God and the fulfilment of his promises?***

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<sup>7</sup> “The first thing I ask is that people should not make use of my name, and should not call themselves Lutherans, but Christians. What is Luther? The teaching is not mine. Nor was I crucified for anyone. St. Paul (in 1 Corinthians 3) would not tolerate Christians calling themselves Pauls or Peters, but only Christians. How did I, poor stinking bag of maggots that I am, come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name?” Martin Luther

- 141 The following can be said of the promises in this passage:
- 142 i) Depending on what you define as a promise, there are anything from 9 to
- 143 14 promises in the 7 verses of this passage.
- 144 ii) The promises can be summarised with single words or phrases such as
- 145 *presence, redemption, deliverance, protection, love and personal care.*
- 146 iii) Almost every one of these promises is explicitly and directly linked to an
- 147 “I will” or “I have” or “I am.”
- 148 iv) There are 12 “I”s linked to verbs in this passage.
- 149 v) There is therefore clearly a heavy emphasis on God as the one who acts.
- 150 The fulfilment of the promises depends on him.
- 151 vi) It is also important to note that the verbs in the passage cover past,
- 152 present and future tenses. God is always the one who acts: who has acted,
- 153 who is acting and who will act.
- 154 vii) The first words of the passage, “but now” indicate that a change is
- 155 occurring. The verses before this passage describe the situation the Lord’s
- 156 people have been in – this people is robbed and plundered; they are
- 157 snared in holes, hidden in prison, prey, victims of violence and war. For
- 158 two generations his chosen people have been in exile, they have given up
- 159 on the hope of deliverance and redemption. They doubt God’s presence.
- 160 “But now...” God announces a change, God renews hope, God has a plan
- 161 for his people and he will keep his promises – as he always has in the past,
- 162 as he is doing in the present. God is the one who can create a future for
- 163 his people out of a broken past<sup>8</sup>.
- 164 viii) Historically the Church has interpreted much of the book of Isaiah and of
- 165 this passage as prophecy pointing to Christ. The first of a series of
- 166 passages about God’s servant appears in the previous chapter. In the
- 167 following chapters he is referred to repeatedly. These passage about the
- 168 servant – who has borne our grief and carried our sorrows, who was
- 169 wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities – were read
- 170 as referring to Christ from the time of the New Testament and the early
- 171 Church. All of Matthew, Luke, John, Luke again in Acts, Paul and Peter
- 172 quoted Isaiah 53 in contexts that clearly indicate such a reading<sup>9</sup>. In Isaiah
- 173 43, the references to “gathering...everyone who is called by my name”
- 174 (vv5-7), have again and again been read by the Church as references to
- 175 God gathering the Church from all ends of the earth. Once again the
- 176 Church here infers that it is God who, through Christ, redeems his people
- 177 and gathers them to him. It is God who acts, always – in the past present

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<sup>8</sup> Claus Westermann, *Das Alte Testament Deutsch*, 1966:101

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 8:14-17; John 12:37-41; Luke 22:35-38; 1 Peter 2:19-25; Acts 8:26-35; Romans 10:11-21

178 and future – to fulfil his promises. The focus should be on him, his actions,  
179 his promises, his redemption and deliverance, his calling and gathering.

180  
181 **4. What does all that mean for us? Thoughts on life and Church...**

182 Let's summarise what we have heard in the previous two sections:

183 i) The core Reformation message is this:

184 *This one and firm rock, which we call the doctrine of justification, is the*  
185 *chief article of the whole Christian doctrine, which comprehends the*  
186 *understanding of all godliness.<sup>10</sup>*

187 This doctrine of justification says that we have salvation by **grace alone**  
188 **through faith** alone in **Christ alone**. The focus is entirely on what God has  
189 done for us through Christ.

190 ii) Isaiah 43 reminds us that the God who created us, also redeems us and  
191 calls us. The focus is on GOD who ACTS. He promises that he will be  
192 present and that he will protect and deliver. We are in his hands. In the  
193 **past, present and future** he is the one who will act for our good...and so  
194 our past, present and future are in his hands.

195 God is for us. He cares tremendously for us, loves us and walks with us. We  
196 are in his hands.

197  
198 I appreciate Klaus Nürnberger's formulation of this good news:

199 *The gospel is God's unconditional, redeeming, suffering, transformative*  
200 *acceptance of the unacceptable. God suffers us to be part of his fellowship.<sup>11</sup>*

201 Through the cross of Christ I am accepted into God's fellowship.

202  
203 This message is at once intensely personal and necessarily corporate:

204 i) What Jesus did on the cross he did for you – at a very personal level. He  
205 died for you so that you could receive forgiveness of sins and so that you  
206 could have fellowship with God.

207 ii) The phrases and verbs used in the Isaiah passage, particularly in 43:1, are  
208 of a very personal nature. To "call by name" is the mark of individualising  
209 tenderness<sup>12</sup>. The verb gā'al – which is translated as "redeemed" – refers  
210 to a very personal transaction by which somebody buys out or ransoms  
211 an indebted relative<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Herbert Bouman, "The Doctrine of Justification in the Lutheran Confessions," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 26 (November 1955) No. 11:801

<sup>11</sup> From "Martin Luther's message for us today", Cluster Publications, 2005:101 & 134

<sup>12</sup> Elliot's Commentary for English Readers

<sup>13</sup> Claus Westermann, *Das Alte Testament Deutsch*, 1966:95



213  
214 iii) This truth at a personal level, though, necessarily also makes it a corporate  
215 truth.

216 ***If God loves me like that, if Christ died for me, if he forgives me, if he***  
217 ***justifies me through his redemptive action and suffers me to be in his***  
218 ***fellowship, if he calls me by name, is with me and delivers me...***

219 AND

220 ***If God loves the other like that, if Christ died for the other, if he forgives***  
221 ***the other, if he justifies the other through his redemptive action and***  
222 ***suffers the other to be in his fellowship, if he calls the other by name, is***  
223 ***with the other and delivers them...***

224 THEN NECESSARILY

225 ***We are both loved, both forgiven and redeemed, both justified and***  
226 ***called, both delivered and we are both suffered in and belong to God's***  
227 ***fellowship...and that means that we have fellowship with each other, a***  
228 ***fellowship within which we should love each, forgive and accept each***  
229 ***other and should suffer each other.***

230  
231 We call this fellowship, that God gathers us in, CHURCH. I have included a  
232 recent presentation I held on the topic of Luther's understanding of Church in  
233 Appendix 1. A brief summary of it will suffice here:

234 i) Luther's understanding of Church – pieced together from various writings,  
235 often polemical in nature and therefore sometimes inconsistent – cannot  
236 be separated from his theology. Please refer to the diagram on page 3 to  
237 see this demonstrated.

238 ii) The foundation and centre of the Church is God's Word. There is no  
239 Church without the Word of God! The Church is brought about by God's

- 240 Word, is nourished and strengthened by it and called to proclaim it. The  
241 proper calling of the Church is the proclamation of God’s Word.
- 242 iii) The Church is the fellowship of believers – those who have accepted God’s  
243 unconditional, redeeming, suffering, transformative acceptance of the  
244 unacceptable.
- 245 iv) Because the believers in this fellowship are themselves at the same time  
246 justified and sinners (*simul iustus et peccator*), this fellowship – the  
247 Church – must be a mixed body (*corpus permixtum/ecclesia permixta*). In  
248 it we will find belief and unbelief, good and bad, right and wrong.
- 249 v) That means in the Church we will have to suffer each other as God suffers  
250 us. Klaus Nürnberger puts it plainly when he writes: *It is not the doctrine*  
251 *of unconditional acceptance that forms the unity of the Church, but the*  
252 *actual proclamation and enactment of acceptance of actual people who*  
253 *have gathered here and now to hear the Word of God<sup>14</sup>.*
- 254 vi) If we as individuals are at the same time justified and sinners and  
255 therefore in need of daily repentance AND we as a fellowship are marked  
256 by the same characteristics, then the Church must be constantly  
257 reforming (*semper reformanda*). The focus must be Christ. It is in the light  
258 of his gospel that we rejoice, reflect, repent.

259  
260 A small group discussion will be held in the light of the above:

- 261 **1. If the Church is as described above, what does this mean for our**  
262 **relationships and interactions within our Congregations, within our**  
263 **Church and with other Churches?**
- 264 **2. In the light of all this, what do you think the one who calls you and who**  
265 **calls us, is calling our Church to be and do going into the future?**

266  
267 We walk into the future, knowing that it will bring with it challenges, trouble  
268 and suffering – we will look at that topic tomorrow – but also trusting that the  
269 one who calls us is with us, redeems and delivers us and has the future – and  
270 us and our future – in his hands.

271  
272 **5. Past, present and future – remember, celebrate and be challenged, then**  
273 **go...**

274 So – on the basis of the previous sections – it is fair to say that our celebration  
275 of 500 years of Reformation should be, in the first place, a reminder to focus  
276 and refocus on Jesus Christ and on the good news of what God has done  
277 through him. It is a celebration of what has happened in the past, but it is also

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<sup>14</sup> From “Martin Luther’s message for us today”, Cluster Publications, 2005:147

278 an invitation to recognise God’s presence and calling in the present and to walk  
279 with the Lord of the Church into the future.  
280

281 The core message of the Reformation is the gospel – the good news of God’s  
282 unconditional, redeeming, suffering, transformative acceptance of me – and  
283 of you – the unacceptable. This gospel must be heard. From its hearing grows  
284 faith, the trust and acceptance that this message is indeed true. And this gospel  
285 must be proclaimed, through word and deed. Martin Luther put it like this:  
286

287 *God’s blessings must flow from one person to another and be*  
288 *shared by all, so that each cares for his neighbour as he cares for*  
289 *himself. From Christ who has **accepted us** into his life as though he*  
290 *were what we are, they flow to us. From us they flow to those who*  
291 *need them – so comprehensively that I in my own faith and*  
292 *righteousness must stand in for my neighbour before God, covering*  
293 *his sins, taking them upon me and acting as though they were my*  
294 *own, just as Christ has done for us. Look, this is the essence of love*  
295 *if it is truly love ... that it seeks not its own but the well-being of its*  
296 *fellow human ... A Christian does not live in himself, but in Christ and*  
297 *in his neighbour, in Christ through faith and in the neighbour*  
298 *through love. Through faith he moves beyond himself into God;*  
299 *through love he moves beyond himself to the neighbour.*

300 *(Freedom of a Christian)*  
301

302 IF... Christ and his gospel are the central focus of the Church  
303 AND IF...this gospel is the unconditional, redeeming, suffering, transformative  
304 acceptance of the unacceptable...

305 THEN....:

- 306 • The Church must necessarily proclaim THIS gospel...
- 307 • As part of that we should accept as we have been accepted and should  
308 suffer one another...
- 309 • The unity of the Church is not the DOCTRINE of unconditional acceptance,  
310 but the ACTUAL proclamation and enactment of acceptance of ACTUAL  
311 people who have gathered here and now to hear God’s Word.
- 312 • This gospel is also transformative (note: there is a tension between the  
313 unconditionally accepting and transformative nature of this gospel). We  
314 gather to hear this gospel and God serves and wants to transform us  
315 through it...and are called to go into the world and proclaim it as co-  
316 workers in God’s transformative work. As we go, we can trust that God  
317 goes with us on that road.

## Appendix 1: Luther's Understanding of Church

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### 1. Introduction

Martin Luther was a reluctant founder of a new Church – more Churches followed. His preference was to reform the existing Church. When, however, he experienced the existing Church as not only resistant to such reform, but actively protecting continuing with the abuses he perceived, he attacked that Church and its defendants aggressively. When we analyse his ecclesiology (i.e. his understanding of Church), we must take into account that it was expressed in an aggressively polemical context. For this reason, when we work through his writing on the subject of Church we find inconsistencies, exaggeration and more. We can also recognise that his thought developed over time. All this must be taken into account when forming an opinion on Luther's views.

In this course we will look at Luther's core views – there is much more to be said than we have time for in this course. Further recommended reading is given at the end of this brief document. These core views can, however, be identified and once we have done so, we will then consider what this means for us in our context today.

### 2. Luther's foundational view of Church

When reading Luther's various writings about Church, it is very clear that he has one foundational principal when thinking about and forming his views on Church:

## The foundation and centre of the Church is God's Word!

There is no Church without the Word of God. The Church is brought about by God's Word, is nourished and strengthened by it and called to proclaim it. The basic idea is built up as follows<sup>15</sup>:

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<sup>15</sup> | owe much of the description below, as well as further thoughts in this document to Klaus Nürnberger in his book "Martin Luther's message for us today" (Cluster Publications, 2005), particularly in Chapter 7 – a new community.

- 351 i) God’s Word – specifically the GOSPEL – brings about faith. It is  
352 proclaimed and heard and faith grows in response to it.<sup>16</sup>  
353 ii) This gospel is the good news of God’s unconditional, suffering,  
354 redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable (the sinner) **into his**  
355 **fellowship**.  
356 iii) Faith in this gospel therefore calls us together in fellowship. The  
357 gathering or congregation of believing sinners is the Church (By the  
358 way, in Luther as in Paul entry into the Church is by baptism). This  
359 fellowship is a fellowship of the unacceptable that is accepted by  
360 God. If you accept God’s invitation into this fellowship you will find  
361 yourself in the presence of others who have accepted this invitation.  
362 iv) So the foundation of the Church is the proclamation of the gospel –  
363 and NOTHING ELSE!

364  
365 The proper calling of the Church is therefore the proclamation of God’s  
366 Word, which brings about faith and invites others into the fellowship. This  
367 proclamation is chiefly the proclamation of the GOSPEL and the comforting  
368 of afflicted consciences, but also includes the other aspect of God’s Word,  
369 the LAW (this would constitute the prophetic voice of the Church).

370  
371 Whether we are considering the “early or late” Luther or the “catechetical or  
372 polemical” Luther, what is consistent throughout is Luther’s pastoral concern  
373 that the Church too often did NOT fulfil the above proper calling. When he  
374 challenges the Church of the future to remain a continuously reforming  
375 Church (*semper reformanda*), he is asking us to consider whether our Church  
376 in its current form and practice is fulfilling this proper calling.

377  
378 This foundational principal of the Church was also the basis of a central  
379 critique that Luther had of the Roman Church. The Roman Catholic Church to  
380 this day recognises as central to the Church the concept of apostolic  
381 succession – in other words, the ministries of the Church and authority within  
382 it was given by Jesus to Peter and the disciples and could only be passed on  
383 by them to their successors and in turn by them to theirs. That is the basis of  
384 the Church. Luther argued that even where there was apostolic succession

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<sup>16</sup> Neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ or believe in him and take him as our Lord, unless these were first offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the gospel by the Holy Spirit...For where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Spirit to create, call and gather the Christian church, and outside it no one can come to the Lord Christ (Large Catechism II, 38, 45)

385 but the gospel was not being preached, there was no true Church. The  
386 ministries of the Church and its authority derive only from God's Word.<sup>17</sup>

387  
388 It cannot be under emphasised how important it was to Luther that the  
389 Church is a gathering of believers. In fact, he did not use the word "Church"  
390 much at all and did not like it. When translating the Greek word "ecclesia"  
391 (Church), he almost exclusively used the words "Congregation" (Gemeinde)  
392 and "gathering" (Versammlung). This emphasises the importance he placed  
393 on the idea that Church is in its essence people (believers: the unacceptable  
394 who are accepted by God and who have in faith accepted that fact) gathering  
395 around the Word of God.

397 When exploring other aspects of Luther's views on Church, we must not lose  
398 sight of this foundational principal in his understanding.

### 400 3. The Signs of the Church

401 When we speak of Luther's ecclesiology, we cannot overlook Luther's well-  
402 known signs or characteristics of the Church – they form part of the core of  
403 Lutheran doctrine. In its simplest form, Luther identifies two clear signs of  
404 the Church and these are reflected in the Augsburg Confession (Article VII)<sup>18</sup>:

- 405 i) The **gospel** preached in purity
- 406 ii) The holy sacraments administered according to the gospel

407  
408 When Luther wrote of the signs of the Church, he included several others in  
409 his list (famously a list of seven). These are summarised below:

- 410 i) The **Word of God** – "even if there was no other sign than this alone,  
411 it would still suffice to prove that a Christian, holy people must exist

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<sup>17</sup> "We do not concede to the papists that they are the church, for they are not. Nor shall we pay any attention to what they command or forbid in the name of the church, for, thank God, a 7 year-old child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd. So children pray, "I believe in one holy Christian church." Its holiness does not consist of surplices, tonsures, albs, or other ceremonies of theirs which they have invented over and above the Holy Scriptures, but it consists of the Word of God and true faith." Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article XII

<sup>18</sup> "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. It is as Paul says in Ephesians 4:4,5 "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism." Augsburg Confession Article VII

- 412 there, for God’s Word cannot be without God’s people and God’s  
413 people cannot be without God’s Word.”
- 414 ii) **Baptism** – “God’s people or the Christian holy people are recognised  
415 by the holy sacrament of baptism, wherever it is taught, believed and  
416 administered correctly according to Christ’s ordinance.”
- 417 iii) **Lord’s Supper** – “God’s people or the Christian holy people, are  
418 recognised by the holy sacrament of the altar, wherever it is rightly  
419 administered, believed and received, according to Christ’s  
420 institution.”

421

422 *These first three signs all represent the foundational element of God’s Word*  
423 *and must be central. The sacraments – Baptism and Holy Communion – are*  
424 *God’s Word in visible form. Lutheran theology is known for its emphasis on*  
425 *WORD and SACRAMENT – both are seen as communication of God’s Word*  
426 *and must be central. This, by the way is evident in Lutheran church*  
427 *architecture and layout (both altar and pulpit are prominent at the front of*  
428 *Lutheran churches).*

429

- 430 iv) **Discipline** – “God’s people or holy Christians are recognized by the  
431 office of the keys exercised publicly. That is, as Christ decrees in  
432 Matthew 18[:15– 20], if a Christian sins, he should be reproved; and  
433 if he does not mend his ways, he should be bound in his sin and cast  
434 out. If he does mend his ways, he should be absolved. That is the  
435 office of the keys.” For Luther, the Church exercised discipline over  
436 its members. This element of Luther’s understanding has often been  
437 missed. Reflecting on whether and how we should practice this today  
438 is probably quite challenging. There is certainly a place for discipline,  
439 but it does have to be asked whether the way in which our Church  
440 tradition has historically practiced such discipline is a good  
441 expression of the gospel of grace that accepts the unacceptable. In  
442 my view, discipline is not wrong, it can be very good and necessary.  
443 However, it should be based on FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY and  
444 not on unquestioned authority.

445

- 446 v) **Biblical Offices** – “The Church is recognized externally by the fact that  
447 it consecrates or calls ministers, or has offices that it is to  
448 administer.” Luther recognized that the Bible established office in  
449 the church—not a sacral caste of priests—but ministers who  
450 faithfully preached the Word and administered the sacraments. He  
451 was not in favour of the name “priest”, but preferred pastors or

452 ministers. Here it must be clearly stated that Luther viewed the  
453 Church as a gathering of believers (of the baptised) who were all  
454 called to the priesthood – he coined the phrase “the priesthood of all  
455 believers.” All Christians are called to the ministry of the Word, i.e.  
456 are called to proclaim the Word. For the sake of good order, this  
457 gathering of believers in the Congregation calls ministers from  
458 among its members to serve it in the Word and the administration of  
459 the sacraments. This does elevate ministers above other members of  
460 the Congregation, but gives them a specific role to play within the  
461 Congregation.  
462

463 vi) **Worship** – “The holy Christian people are externally recognized by  
464 prayer, public praise, and thanksgiving to God. Where you see and  
465 hear the Lord’s Prayer prayed and taught; or psalms or other spiritual  
466 songs sung, in accordance with the word of God and the true faith;  
467 also the creed, the Ten Commandments, and the catechism used in  
468 public, you may rest assured that a holy Christian people of God are  
469 present.” Word-centred worship is a sign of the Church.  
470

471 vii) **Suffering** – “The holy Christian people are externally recognized by  
472 the possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every  
473 misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil,  
474 the world, and the flesh.” The theology of the cross is central to  
475 Luther’s theology and found expression in his understanding of  
476 Church – we share in Christ’s suffering, so that we may also share in  
477 the life that he gives.  
478

479 Luther derived these seven points from the first table of the Ten  
480 Commandments and recognized that, though these elements were never  
481 perfect in the church, they were truly present: “These are the true seven  
482 principal parts of the great holy possession whereby the Holy Spirit effects in  
483 us a daily sanctification and vivification in Christ, according to the first table  
484 of Moses. By this we obey it, albeit never as perfectly as Christ. But we  
485 constantly strive to attain the goal, under his redemption or remission of sin,  
486 until we too shall one day become perfectly holy and no longer stand in need  
487 of forgiveness.” The latter part of this quote brings us to another crucial  
488 element of Luther’s understanding of Church...  
489  
490

491 **4. The mixed Church (*ecclesia permixta*)**

492 Luther recognised and indeed emphasised that the Church is always the  
493 mixed Church – it (the institution of Church) is composed of believers and  
494 unbelievers; in it you will find good and evil, truth and falsehood, faith and  
495 unfaith<sup>19</sup>. His idea of the true Church being an invisible Church (*ecclesia*  
496 *invisible*) grew out of this concept: we do not know which members are in  
497 faith and how much faith the members have. The fact that every believer is  
498 at the same time justified (in Christ) and still a sinner (in himself) – *simul*  
499 *iustus et peccator* – means that a continuous battle rages in us between our  
500 old sinful lives, which are prone to sin, and the new life in Christ, which  
501 overcomes our sin. And because such believers, who are themselves mixed  
502 (justified and sinner at the same time), make up the Church, the Church must  
503 also be a mixed body. We therefore cannot expect to find perfection in the  
504 form or the doctrine or the proclamation of the Church. This makes of the  
505 Church a body that is always struggling (*ecclesia militans*) and is in constant  
506 need of reformation (*ecclesia semper reformanda*).

507

508 This is a very important concept for us to understand. We can neither expect  
509 of our own Church to be perfect nor can we accept without challenge the  
510 views of Churches who see their doctrine as perfect.

511

512 **5. The unity of the Church**

513 If the Church is indeed based on the gospel of God's unconditional, suffering,  
514 redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable in Christ, it follows that the unity  
515 of the Church can also not be based on anything else but on God's acceptance  
516 of the unacceptable. God accepts us into his fellowship without conditions  
517 and it is up to those who have been accepted whether they want to accept  
518 being accepted or not. Those who are accepted and accept being accepted  
519 form a definable community within which they in turn accept each other. In  
520 the body of Christ we have to suffer each other – that is what acceptance of  
521 the other, in spite of differences, implies. The unity of the Church can only be  
522 based on this gospel and nothing else. This is what article VII of the Augsburg  
523 confession includes in its understanding of Church when it states:

524

525 *For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian Church that the gospel*  
526 *be preached in its pure understanding and the sacraments are*

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<sup>19</sup> "If the church, which is truly the kingdom of Christ, is distinguished from the kingdom of the devil, it necessarily, follows that since the wicked belong to the kingdom of the devil, they are not the church. In this life, nevertheless, because the kingdom of Christ has not yet been revealed, they are mingled with the church and hold office in the church..."

527 *administered in accordance with the divine Word. And it is not necessary*  
528 *for the true unity of the Christian Church that uniform ceremonies,*  
529 *instituted by humans, should be observed in all places.*  
530

531 Of course the problem – that we also experience in our relationships with  
532 other Churches – is also immediately clear: what is meant by “be preached  
533 in its pure understanding” and “administered in accordance with the divine  
534 Word.” Some Churches insist that it means that there must be full agreement  
535 on every point of doctrine and in sacramental practice. Even Luther drifted  
536 towards such positions in some of his more polemical writings. It must be  
537 noted, however, that in his writings that are free of such polemical context,  
538 Luther always points back to the gospel. That is the position of our Church –  
539 where the gospel of God’s unconditional, suffering, redeeming acceptance  
540 of the unacceptable in Christ is preached there is Church. Where the  
541 sacraments are celebrated in line with this gospel they are properly  
542 administered and there is Church. That is all that is necessary for Christian  
543 unity.  
544

545 This has repercussions for the ecumenical nature of the Church. Most  
546 Churches, including Lutheran Churches, set conditions for unity with other  
547 Churches, even for the fellowship between ordinary Christians. The range of  
548 these includes the acceptance of authoritative doctrines, denominational  
549 confessions, attitudes to the Bible, ecclesial offices, forms of worship, moral  
550 observances, etc. **On the basis of its core doctrine, the Lutheran Church  
551 should be the most open and accommodating of them all, because its only  
552 “condition” is the proclamation of God’s unconditional, suffering,  
553 redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable!** Let us be clear: it is not the  
554 doctrine of unconditional acceptance that forms the unity of the Church, but  
555 the ACTUAL PROCLAMATION and ENACTMENT of acceptance of ACTUAL  
556 PEOPLE who have gathered HERE and NOW to hear the Word of God.  
557 Similarly, it is not our interpretation of the Lord’s Supper that forms the basis  
558 of our unity, but the ACTUAL INVITATION of ACTUAL PEOPLE into the  
559 fellowship of the altar HERE and NOW.  
560

## 561 **6. What does all this mean for us today?**

562 We are confronted with experiences when it comes to Church:

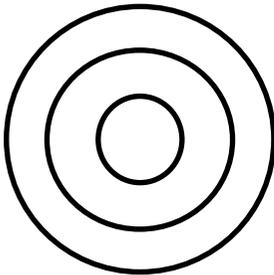
- 563 • Tensions in our Congregations brought about by diversity.
- 564 • Tensions in our Church also brought about diversity.

565 • Tensions in our relationships with other Churches, again brought  
566 about by diversity.

567  
568 Spend some time reflecting on how some of the elements of Luther's  
569 understanding of Church impact your thinking regarding such issues. What  
570 do these thoughts have to say to:

- 571 • Our structures?
- 572 • Our interactions with fellow members, other Christians and other  
573 Churches?
- 574 • "In group" and "Out group" relationships?
- 575 • Ideological and theological conflicts?
- 576 • The healing function of the gospel in situations of conflict?
- 577 • Unity and diversity?
- 578 • The conditions we set to our acceptance of others?
- 579 • The missionary character of the Church?

580  
581 In the course we will discuss the diagram below – it helps me to recognise at  
582 what level I am interacting with others who have different views and  
583 practices to the ones I have.



584  
585 Some issues are core issues – for me the core  
586 issue is simply the gospel of Jesus Christ and  
587 God's acceptance into his fellowship. What does  
588 not reflect this gospel can be rejected.

589 In the next circle are issues that are important,  
590 issues concerning which I can justifiably have  
591 the opinion that something is right or wrong – I  
592 can tell someone I think they are wrong, but still  
593 accept them.

594 In the third circle are those things where there  
595 is no right and wrong – you can do it like this or  
596 like that.

597 If I know in which category an issues fits, I can deal with discussions  
598 concerning that matter in an appropriate way.

599  
600  
601  
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603

604 In all this I would encourage us to keep in mind these words of Luther:

605

606 *God's blessings must flow from one person to another and be shared by*  
607 *all, so that each cares for his neighbour as he cares for himself. From Christ*  
608 *who has **accepted us** into his life as though he were what we are, they*  
609 *flow to us. From us they flow to those who need them – so*  
610 *comprehensively that I in my own faith and righteousness must stand in*  
611 *for my neighbour before God, covering his sins, taking them upon me and*  
612 *acting as though they were my own, just as Christ has done for us. Look,*  
613 *this is the essence of love if it is truly love ... that it seeks not its own but*  
614 *the well-being of its fellow human ... A Christian does not live in himself,*  
615 *but in Christ and in his neighbour, in Christ through faith and in the*  
616 *neighbour through love. Through faith he moves beyond himself into God;*  
617 *through love he moves beyond himself to the neighbour.*

618 *(Freedom of a Christian)*

619

## 620 **7. Conclusion**

621 The true Church is a spiritual community, a gathering of believers who come  
622 together around the Word, are called by it, strengthened and served by it  
623 and are called to proclaim it. At the same time the Church also needs  
624 structure. Such structures have temporal elements in them and are, of  
625 course, imperfect. In all that, we should never forget that such Church  
626 structures **serve a purpose: the proclamation of the gospel. It is the purpose**  
627 **and not the structure which should be the foundation of the Church!**

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## Appendix 2: Small Group discussions

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### **Discussion 1 – Lutheran Teaching**

***In your small groups identify and briefly discuss FIVE basic teachings/aspects of Lutheran Theology.***

### **Discussion 2 – Isaiah 43:1-7**

***i) Read Isaiah 43:1-7 carefully:***

But now, this is what the LORD says, he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. <sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not let you ablaze. <sup>3</sup>For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead. <sup>4</sup>Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give people in exchange for you, nations in exchange for your life. <sup>5</sup>Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. <sup>6</sup>I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth - <sup>7</sup>everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

***ii) Identify and underline the promises that God makes in this passage.***

***iii) Summarise the core content of the promises in 3 single words or short phrases that tell us WHAT God is promising.***

***iv) Count the number of times that the Lord's "I" is used and linked directly with a verb, e.g. I have redeemed, I have called, I formed, etc.***

***v) What does that tell us about God and his promises?***

### **Discussion 3 – The Church**

***3. If the Church is:***

***i) Founded and centred on God's Word, strengthened and nourished by it and called to proclaim it...***

***ii) A fellowship of believers, of all those who accept in faith that God has accepted them...***

***iii) A mixed body containing belief and unbelief, good and bad, right and wrong...***

***iv) In need of constant reformation...***

***...what does this mean for our relationships and interactions within our Congregations, within our Church and with other Churches?***

***4. In the light of all this, what do you think the one who calls you and who calls us, is calling our Church to be and do going into the future?***