

THE WAY

Christendom from Reformation to Vatican II



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GS	<i>Gaudium et Spes</i> - Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World
IF	<i>Inter Mirifica</i> – Vatican II's Decree on the Means of Social Communication
IMC	International Missionary Council
JWG	Joint Working Group was established by the WCC Commission on World and Evangelism and the Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity
LC	Lausanne Covenant, produced by the International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne 1974
LG	<i>Lumen Gentium</i> - Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church
NA	<i>Nostra Aetate</i> - Vatican II's Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions
OE	<i>Orientalium Ecclesiarum</i> , Vatican II's Decree on the Catholic Eastern Churches
OT	<i>Optatam Totius</i> , Vatican II's Decree on Priestly Training
PC	<i>Perfectae Caritatis</i> , Vatican II's Decree on Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life
PCPCU	The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity
PO	<i>Presbyterorum Ordinis</i> , Vatican II's Decree on Ministry and Life of Priests
PT	<i>Pacem in Terris</i> - Papal encyclical issued by Pope John XXIII
RM	<i>Redemptoris Missio</i> , Pope John Paul II's Encyclical Letter
SC	<i>Sacrosanctum concilium</i> , Vatican II's Constitution on the Liturgy
UUS	<i>Ut Unum Sint</i> – Pope John Paul II's Encyclical Letter
UR	<i>Unitatis Redintegratio</i> , Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism
WCC	World Council of Churches

Prologue

Christendom Split and Church Reform

*For everything there is a season,
A time for every matter under heaven:
A time to kill and a time to heal;
A time to break down and a time to build up
(Ecclesiastes 3:1,3)*

With his *sola scriptura* - Scripture alone principle - Martin Luther (1483-1546),¹ the leading figure of the *magisterial Reformation*,² accused the Medieval Church of having departed from Scripture. Luther became phenomenal when he challenged the solid ecclesiastical establishment of the Medieval Church which

was still the mightiest institution in Christendom, super-eminent in its influence on both public and private life. The Christian faith – as interpreted by the Roman Popes – was the foundation of public and private behaviour. The leadership of the clergy was still generally respected in most domains of thought and life, in philosophy, science, administration and justice, and charitable activity. Even the very life of the state seemed conceivable only on the basis of the Christian philosophy.³

While Latin was the language of the intellectual, ecclesiastical and academic elite of Europe, Luther wrote his major works in German, the language of common people.⁴ This made his new and revolutionary ideas accessible to the common audience and established his reputation as a popular reformer. Luther's radical theology reached its climax in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Christian Church* (1520), where he argued that the Gospel had become captive to the institutional Church. In other words, according to Luther, the Medieval Church had kept the Gospel in a complex system of priests and sacraments,

and the Church had become the master of the Gospel instead for being its servant.⁵

Luther was a monk, and had neither ecclesiastical power nor political status, but he demonstrated his considerable personal courage in standing against the Emperor at the Diet of Worms, April 18, 1521.⁶ In front of the Emperor Charles V and all the dignitaries, Luther refused to withdraw his controversial position because "his conscience was held captive to the Word of God".⁷ When he was convinced that the Church of his days had abandoned the essence of Christianity, namely, had failed to understand and misinterpreted the Gospel, Luther stepped out to call for a reform.⁸

Seen in this way, Luther had *sola scriptura* as his main weapon in his contending the theological ambiguity of the Medieval Ages. By the Scripture-alone principle Luther, in the first instance, meant to exclude the philosophical positions of Humanism⁹, which taught that goodness was possible without faith and grace. But, in later polemics, Luther soon extended the principle to dismiss also tradition and sacramental ceremonies as elements distorting the Church, which, in Luther's observation and analysis, did not have foundation in Scripture. As an attempt to amend this shortcoming Luther emphasised convincingly the tight and essential connection between the Church and the Word of God:

Now, anywhere you hear and see the Word of God preached, believed, confessed, and acted upon, do not doubt that the true *ecclesia sancta catholica*, a 'holy Christian people' must be there, even though there are very few of them... And even if there were no other sign than this alone, it would be enough to prove that a holy Christian people must exist there, for God's word cannot be without God's people and conversely, God's people cannot be without God's word. For who would preach the word, or hear it preached, if there were no people of God? And what could or would God's people believe, if there was no word of God?¹⁰

Luther's ecclesiological insight caused, however, severe problems for the institutional dimension of the Church. When the existence of the Church depends *only* on the Word of God, the visible structure of the Church loses its significance and causes endless division.¹¹ Luther's radical teaching actually implied an utter repudiation of the papacy and rejection of four or five traditional sacraments.¹² Luther's Ninety-Five

Theses obviously confused his contemporary believers on the subject of Church's role and put great questions on the true identity of the Church and Christendom as traditional Magisterium had defined it. Besides the theological controversies, Luther's writings led also to three practical outcomes: the elimination of clerical celibacy, the translation of the liturgy into the vernacular language and the attack against sacred images. All these components made the Reformation unavoidable and definite division of the Church in the sixteenth century.¹³

For both admirers and detractors of Martin Luther, he is unquestionably the most significant personality of the Reformation. His influence has also been distinctive in the intellectual, political and social history of Europe. Luther was successful with his theological breakthrough when he proclaimed a strong religious message that promised the people a more personal relationship with God. First and foremost, however, it was his rhetoric and language that made him attractive to the public and powerful against his ecclesiastical opponents. While Medieval Scholasticism¹⁴ tried to find philosophical and theological solutions through definitions and distinctions, Luther used *paradoxes* and *exclusivities*¹⁵ as his theological methodology. In his *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518, Luther presented his theses under theological paradoxes. The pattern of Luther's thinking system can be seen most clearly in his *simul justus et peccator* - considering the justified believer as righteous and at the same time as sinner.¹⁶ The main method Luther used, however, can be seen in his triad - *sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia* (Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone), that covers the whole of Luther's theological thoughts. With these *sola* that we would call *exclusivities*, Luther opposed Scripture with Tradition, grace with freedom, faith with work, etc. This theological methodology strengthened his rhetoric and made his discourse distinguished and systematic; and this contributed definitely to Luther's and the Reformation's success. This emerging approach, however, sacrificed a significant part of Christianity, and reduced its beautiful richness that exists only in its wholeness, namely in its catholicity.¹⁷

In this context, the coming of the Council of Trent could be considered as the Catholic response and reaction to the damage caused by the Reformation and especially by Luther's three so-called main Reformation writings - *To the German Nobility Concerning the Reformation of the Christian State*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* and *The Freedom*

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.... it is the lasting beauty of Gospel, i.e. the catholic and evangelical loveliness of Christendom - promoted and restored by Vatican II - that has inspired and formed this book. The Church including – not excluding, welcoming – not excommunicating, consoling – not condemning, healing – not outlawing, blessing – not banning, reveals herself as Mother who “prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than of severity”. This is *Ecclesia Mater* – Mother Church that Vatican II would present to Christians and to the whole world in our modern (postmodern) times...



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