

Protestant heroics

reviewed by [Hans J. Hillerbrand](#) in the [November 1, 2003](#) issue

Eric Till's *Luther: Rebel, Liberator, Genius* portrays the Reformer in warm and glowing technicolor. One cannot but side with this courageous young man who takes on an insensitive and secularized religious establishment. Heroes and villains are made easily identifiable in this film, though historical authenticity gets short shrift in the process.

The film concentrates on the crucial half-decade of Luther's life between 1517, when his 95 theses triggered the controversy with the Roman Catholic Church, and 1521, when he refused to recant his convictions before the assembly of the German Estates at Worms and was declared an outlaw. A brief prelude takes us back ten years, when Luther decided to become a monk, while the final portion of the film includes scenes showing the iconoclasm of some Lutheran sympathizers; the uprisings of the German peasants; Katherina von Bora, whom Luther married in 1525; and finally the Diet at Augsburg in 1530, when the emperor attempted to suppress the Lutheran innovators. One cannot avoid the suspicion that Katie and the German peasants make their appearance for reasons of political correctness.

The film does not show convincingly why and how "rebel, liberator and genius" came together in Luther. The German peasants assuredly did not take him to be their liberator. *Luther* steers clear of major issues surrounding the Reformer: Was the church really that depraved in the early 16th century or is this Protestant propaganda? Is Luther's story, and that of his supporters, solely a religious story or was there a convergence of power politics, economics, misunderstandings and religion? The film avoids placing Luther into this matrix, contenting itself with time-honored Protestant clichés, such as that the Catholic Church was badly in need of a rebel (the film is rather melodramatic and graphic when it purports to show what Rome was like ca. 1510). And John Tetzel is maligned once more with the allegation, a favorite Protestant chestnut, that he claimed indulgences would spare even someone who had violated the Virgin Mary.

To cite a few of the inaccuracies: Luther and his ruler, Frederick the Wise, never met; Pope Leo X died well before 1525; Luther did not nail the 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg castle church but sent them to Archbishop Albert; Frederick did not pay Luther's salary; worshipers did not sit in pews in the early 16th century; Luther did not come to Wittenberg as a parish priest; Carlstadt never advocated political egalitarianism; Luther returned to a tumultuous Wittenberg not at Elector Frederick's behest but very much (and quite courageously so) against the ruler's will. One wishes also to have been spared such modernizing anachronisms as Luther's saying, "Thanks for coming to mass" as worshipers leave church, and "We will play joyous music together" to Katie.

From the first time Pope Leo X appears on the screen (in conjunction with Luther's hardly well-explained trip to Rome), it is clear who the bad guy is. The scenes showing Leo serve no other purpose than to denote his worldliness. In fact, things were nowhere as bad as Luther depicts them. If the traditional Protestant perspective were correct, we would be at a loss to explain why so many Catholics remained faithful to their church.

The segment depicting the German peasant uprising, and Luther's involvement in it, fails to explain either and uses a couple of sentences to paper over Luther's notorious recommendation to the rulers to "stab, slay, kill the peasants like wild dogs." A subplot, in which Luther insists on a church burial for a boy who had committed suicide (undoubtedly intended to portray the "human" side of Luther), stretches theological possibilities even for the "rebel" Luther. Nor was the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, with which the film ends, a victory for the reform movement. Luther wasn't even in the picture. Philip Melancthon presented the confession of faith based on Wittenberg theology, the Augsburg Confession, because the emperor had asked for it, but at the adjournment of the diet, the emperor gave the supporters of Luther half a year to undo the ecclesiastical changes or face war--hardly a dramatic climax to end the film.

Most moviegoers will care little about such details, and in a way, they are quite right. These are matters for scholars, and even they do not always agree. Much of *Elizabeth* was historically incorrect, but it offered an integrated portrait of the English queen. The failure of *Luther* lies precisely at that level: it fails to portray the inner dynamic of Luther and do that consistently from beginning to end. Luther is disjointed because it attempts to cover too much, and it also fails to reduce the complexity of ideas and events to an intelligible level.

The script by Camille Thomasson and Bart Gavigan valiantly endeavors to convey Luther's spiritual struggle in the monastery, but how that struggle related to the subsequent controversy over indulgences, and how the critique of indulgences provoked the support of people and rulers, remains unclear. Luther's pivotal theological affirmation is reduced to the notion that God loves us (contrary to the supposedly Catholic notion that God is only a judge). But that was not the whole of the gospel as Luther understood it.

The authentic Luther does come through in a number of ways. His own words are heard extensively from the screen, with all their power and directness, and his translation of the New Testament into German is highlighted. Other positives include the camera work of Robert Fraisse, who provides a rich, fairy-tale splendor--a feast for the eyes. Since most of the film focuses on the younger Luther, Joseph Fiennes's frail, almost haggard stature is not inappropriate. But by the end of the film, in 1530, Luther was 47 years old, a reality not visible in the closing scenes, in which Fiennes's Luther has not aged one bit from the time he entered the monastery.

Unfortunately Fiennes overplays Luther's spiritual struggles and uncertainties, and he is thereby forced to underplay the dynamic and self-confident person Luther became. It is never clear with Fiennes's Luther if he is driven by events or is driving them. He reminds us of Willem Dafoe's Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, who is uncertain of his vocation, uncertain what to make of the "voices" he hears.

Peter Ustinov (Fredrick the Wise) steals the show with the confidence of the seasoned actor. Claire Cox (as Katie Luther) exudes the pent-up libido of years in the convent and comes across as a sexual tease who lures an unsuspecting Luther into matrimony. Bruno Ganz is sympathetic as Johann von Staupitz, who sought to combine loyalty to the pope and the church with a paternal understanding of Luther. Richard Harvey's score is for long stretches ethereal. One wonders why Luther's hymns--surely one of his major achievements--were not incorporated more into Harvey's score.

Nevertheless, a film in which the words "Jesus," "sin," "forgiveness," "grace," "salvation" are uttered unabashedly, and which explicates the Christian notion of salvation, is rare indeed these days, especially a film playing in commercial theaters. At a time when filmmakers shy away from positive portrayals of Christianity, preferring--as in *Priest* or *The Magdalene Sisters*--to show the negatives, Luther is welcome. Despite its disposition to portray a "reel" Luther, *Luther* does tell us that the Reformer's life and faith were exciting and meaningful, and have bearing on

Christian existence today.