



500 years ago, one small town priest tore apart an empire and shaped the course of Western civilisation. His name was Martin Luther.

As the last millennium was ending in 1999, many publications produced lists of the most influential people of the previous 1000 years. Martin Luther was on everyone's list, usually in the top ten. And these were secular lists. Some researchers have claimed that aside from the Lord Jesus Christ, more books have been written about Martin Luther than anyone else!

A new historical epic film has been produced by Canadian director Eric Till, starring British actor Joseph Fiennes. Shot on at least 100 sets in 20 locations around Germany, Italy and the Czech Republic, the film is visually stunning with impressive costumes and art direction, spectacular scenery and a fast moving dramatic script. The producers explain that the movie tries to capture with historical integrity the magnitude of Martin Luther's life, helping viewers understand his significance to the Protestant faith and to Western history.

Reviewers have described it as “extraordinary!”; “a riveting biographical drama with a great cast, incredible pageantry and tremendous production values.”

The film follows Martin Luther's humble beginnings as a monk to his professorship in theology

at the University of Wittenberg and his catalytic role as the pioneer of the Protestant Reformation. The film portrays Martin Luther as a man at war with himself and with his beliefs, but who comes to hold such strong convictions that his criticisms of the medieval Catholic Church spark the Reformation. The film also shows Luther as one of Germany's most beloved professors and as the linguistic scholar who first translated the Bible into German, making the Bible accessible to the common man.

Sir Peter Ustinov, in the last role of his life, brilliantly plays Luther's benefactor Prince Frederick of Saxony under whose protection Luther's Reformation flourished. Pope Leo X, whose attempt to destroy Luther utterly failed, and Tetzl, with his mercenary message of selling salvation through indulgences are also brilliantly depicted.

The torment and self-hatred of Luther, and his fear of God which led him to the monastery is shown, and one of his fellow monks observes: "God is not angry with you, you are angry with God!"

Luther's humour in exposing the fraud and superstition of the relic industry is memorably depicted, such as when he observes that "18 out of the 12 Apostles are buried in Spain!"

The power of the printing press is shown as Luther harnesses the latest technology of the age to oppose ignorance and misinformation by disseminating the Word of God and Biblical teaching. The Catholic obsession with relics, pilgrimages, and indulgences is challenged by Luther as he asks: "What about Christ? And His Word?" while holding an upraised Bible.

There are a few anachronisms in the film such as men and women sitting intermingled in pews in the church while Luther strolls the aisles delivering his message. In fact there were no pews in churches at that time. Men and women actually stood on separate sides of the church and Luther preached from the pulpit, but that is not shown in this film. There are also remarkably few children present in the church services, one wonders whether the filmmakers assumed that the children would be in "children's church" (a 20th Century phenomenon)! The film also gives a lot of attention to a fictitious incident of a suicide with Luther insisting on burying him in the church grounds. One wonders why the filmmakers decided to make this imaginary incident so critical in Luther's development instead of his study of the book of Romans.

The film's critical weakness is the absence of Romans 1:16-17. It depicts Luther's anguish at his understanding of the harshness of God, but the resolution is shown as Luther coming to an understanding of God's mercy without any specific reference as to how his study of the Scriptures revealed this to him. However, the film does portray Staupitz pointing Luther to Christ instead of his own works, and Luther coming to urge his parishioners to look to Christ for salvation.

The film gives fair attention to the political struggles surrounding Luther, including the carnage of the peasants' rebellion of 1525. However, the role of anabaptist Thomas Muntzer, who incited this communist type revolution with its gross immorality (of having not only goods but even wives in common) is not mentioned in the film. The impression given is that Andreas Karlstadt led the rebellion whereas in fact it was Thomas Muntzer who had absolutely nothing to do with Luther. Muntzer wrote to Luther "I would like to smell your frying carcass!"

Marx and Engels later praised Muntzer's "robust vandalism". Muntzer wrote: "Therefore it ought to be that all authorities, secular and clerical, be deprived of their offices once and for all and be killed by the sword..." As these facts are left out of the film, one could be left with the impression that Andreas Karlstadt was the cause of all this violence, which was not the case.

Martin Luther testified that it was his studying and teaching on the Psalms, Romans, Galatians and Hebrews that "in the course of this teaching, the papacy slipped away from me." Critical to Luther's theological breakthrough was Romans 1:17: "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, the just shall live by faith."

The classic Martin Luther film released in 1953 in black and white is more historically accurate, and an excellent film well worth seeing. However, the new Luther film is a far more powerful and well made epic which deserves enthusiastic support. This Luther film has the potential to introduce a new generation to one of the greatest Reformers of all time.

Against all odds Martin Luther gave to the church, and the world, the Bible, freely available in the common tongue. He introduced congregational singing, championed justification by God's grace, received by faith, on the basis of the finished work of Christ. He stood for Scripture alone as the ultimate authority, and was wonderfully used of the Lord to bring about the greatest Biblical Reformation and birth of freedom the world has ever known.

As the life of Martin Luther shows: By the grace of God, it is possible for one man to change the world.

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