

Lutheran But Not Luther

When the Thrivent Financial for Lutherans logo follows the MGM lion, we know the movie will have problems. It has been funded as Lutheran propaganda, and will have to please the money bags. So let's deal with that first.

In a life so filled with incidents and ideas one would think that the sole problem for content would be to decide what material, actually essential to understanding Luther, must be nevertheless be left out. But in this film, we find incidents and characters being invented. These are there to sentimentalize the picture and to create a more liberal Luther; in short, they are there as propaganda.

We have the repeated appearance of a destitute woman and her crippled daughter, with whom Luther is in the habit of chatting after mass. This, in the first place, shows that Luther had the common touch and was compassionate with the poor. When Tetzels sells her an indulgence that she cannot afford and she shows it to Luther, it launches Luther on his protest that leads to the Reformation. Finally, the crippled daughter is slaughtered with the other peasants during the peasant rebellion, to Luther's great grief, so that the audience is left to feel that despite what he had set in motion, Luther's heart was really with the peasants.

There is also an episode in which a boy hangs himself, and Luther buries him himself in the church cemetery in defiance of canon law. Now, in fact and much later, Luther did say in one of his Table Talks "I don't have the opinion that suicides are certainly to be damned. My reason is that they do not wish to kill themselves but are overcome by the power of the devil." This is the reason he gives in the film, so one supposes that the table talk is the source and the pretext for inventing the incident.

Also the music of the film is decidedly un-Lutheran. There is a lot of ethereal heavenly chorus sounding stuff, sometimes at the most inappropriate moments. When Luther enters a church full of massacred peasants, as the church door comes into view the heavenly choir starts on the "church equals choir music" cue. We should have, in a movie about Luther, congregations singing hymns. It is as though the director thought that the story had to be about Luther's inner struggles and this means keeping the congregational community at a distance.

This brings us to the anachronisms. The film Luther likes to converse with his congregation in a personal style from the aisle between the pews, twentieth century pews in which the whole congregation is comfortably seated. Also everyone is dressed too well. A lot of effort was put into the costumes, but they are too good, the people too prosperous, and even the clothes of the poorest don't seem to wear out, they are just wrinkled and maybe a little bit dirty.

We also get a lot of exculpatory footage of Luther denouncing the excesses committed in his name or regretting that what he put in motion went too far. We could have used more of Luther actually saying and doing instead of reacting and regretting. He does talk about the need to

maintain the gospel, though it is not clear what this gospel is.

Nor does the conflict with Andreas Carlstadt make much sense. In the film Carlstadt begins to preach proto-socialist stuff about equality. Luther returns from hiding in a castle to find Carlstadt leading a riot against a church building, and denounces Carlstadt, who immediately leaves. We don't hear Carlstadt's theology, nor do we learn that much of what Carlstadt instituted, Luther kept.

In contrast to the Eisleben to Eisleben (the town where he was born and died) trajectory that the Luther television biography took, time is compressed in the movie, Luther never ages, and the film ends with the Reformation more or less secure. We quote from Hans Hillerbrand's review in the *Christian Century* (Nov 1, 2003) to show what this means for factual accuracy:

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.

The main problem of the movie is that the filmmakers want a liberal Luther, for only such a Luther can seem comprehensible and justified to them. So he rebels against the economic exploitation of the poor by the indulgence system, and against the uncaring application of doubtful traditional rules, such as viewing all suicides as damned.

But all this is secondary to the main point. If man is unworthy before God, or more exactly worthy only of punishment, how can God forgive him, and how can man be sure of this? The answer that the Church had given is that man has to do his bit too. This could be supplemented by the church through sources of grace at its disposal. The commercial trading in these supplements was secondary to the theology that made them necessary. The fault of the film is that, with brief exceptions, it ignores the primary point of the Reformation, the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone, and concentrates on a sort of Erasmian reformation of abuses. Consequently the film concentrates on explaining Luther by motivating its Luther character against secondary things, the abuses, and not the primary problem.

Finally, nowhere in the film do we sense that we are watching a significant work of art. It is quite possible for propaganda to be art. The left used to be quite good at this. Christian attempts generally fall flat. I am beginning to think that the reasons for this are actually quite complex. Still, the problem is not that the Christian propaganda movie fails, but that it is attempted.

We have so far avoided saying at whom the propaganda in the movie is aimed and what it is supposed to achieve. Some critics have claimed that this is an anti-Roman Catholic movie, parading all the usual Protestant chestnuts. But if the film is anti-Roman it is so, for the most part, in an Erasmian sort of way, attacking the abuses, and thus compatible with ecumenical ideas.

The aim of the movie seems to be to reconcile the Lutherans to Luther. The mainstream of Lutheranism has lost touch with Luther's doctrine of justification. It has, however, stressed ideals of church unity. Today's Lutheran feels guilty about his side's responsibility in splitting the church, and cannot grasp the imperative for doing so.

What the film does is to portray Luther as much as it can like a modern Lutheran priest, especially in his manner in and around the church building and service, making him familiar and comfortable to the modern Lutheran. Besides this, the film emphasizes the economic oppression and psychological manipulation of the common people by the powerful church hierarchy, and explains Luther's reaction primarily as a response to those. Luther did what any decent person would do, and then was put in a position where he could not make peace without compromising moral principles. This the modern Lutheran can still identify with as compelling motivation. The purpose of the film, then, is to help the modern Lutheran to feel good about his religion and his church.

Luther, then, is weak dramatically. Nor is it educational. It itself misses the main points most in need of special efforts to succeed in communicating them to a modern audience, And much of the backbone of the narrative is events that did not happen or which are pulled out of their chronology.