

# A Man for *This Season*



*Martin Luther (Joseph Fiennes) translates the Bible into German while hiding out in the Wartburg castle. "Luther" portrays events with attention to detail and considerable historical accuracy.*

## LUTHER

*Martin Luther's discovery of a merciful God comes through in a new film that's also riveting entertainment.*

by Uwe Siemon-Netto

**I**t's a pity that the title "A Man for All Seasons" is taken (a brilliant movie about Sir Thomas More, a Roman Catholic martyred at the hand of King Henry VIII). It would be a perfect title for the first full-length feature film in half a century about Martin Luther, which opens in 300 theaters nationwide on Sept. 26.

Ah well, let's call Luther a "Man for *This Season*" then—the right man for our manic era, a time of "cafeteria religion," an era whose statement of faith seems to be: "Here I stand—and here, and here, and here."

So, to whom shall we turn to guide us out of post-modernity's labyrinth of creeds? This marvelously fast-paced film suggests the person who ranked third on A&E's and *Life* magazine's lists of the most influential people of the last millennium—even though 78 percent of Americans don't know who he was: Dr. Martin Luther.

Hence the actual, very simple title of this new film, "Luther."

## 'Here I stand'

It so happens that the same quality that cost Sir Thomas More his life is what makes Luther so important for us. Both men's faith did not permit them to waffle. The relationship between God and man does not allow for choice; there is but one option. As Luther, played superbly by English actor Joseph Fiennes ("Shakespeare in Love"), said in 1521 before the Imperial Diet of Worms, risking death at the stake: "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason ... my conscience is captive to the Word of God: I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen."



Maybe Luther added, "Here I stand"; maybe that's just something pamphleteers edited into their reports immediately after Worms. It doesn't really matter. These words sum up who Luther was; that's why the filmmakers, thankfully, inserted them into their amazingly accurate and detailed account of the Worms standoff without which Western democracy as we know it would never have developed.

"Here I stand"—by God, these words churn up one's guts and send shivers down one's spine! Even if this were only a dreary documentary, this brief scene would still win over hundreds of thousands.

But "Luther" is anything but dull. It is so fast-moving that some who previewed it wondered if it might confuse the audience, which I doubt. It is breathtakingly filmed. It has humor and charm and wonderfully authentic aphorisms (Luther: "In Rome you can buy sex and salvation"). It keeps you on the edge of your seat, wondering at first—only to be reassured later—about Luther's sanity.

## Bowed heads

It also makes you wish dolefully that we were governed today by men like those German princes, who toward the movie's end bowed their heads to Emperor Charles V at the Augsburg Diet of 1530—no, not in deference, but showing their readiness to be decapitated for the sake of the Gospel. O that in these deca-

dent days, when the dirtiest fingers fumble with the Word of God presuming to conform it to their own foul desires, we would hear dialogues like this:

Emperor Charles: "Your ministers shall not preach and you will outlaw these Bibles in the common language and declare anyone who possesses one an enemy of the state."

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Philip of Hesse: "We will not stop our ministers from preaching the Word."

John of Saxony: "We will not outlaw the new Bible" (translated by Luther into German).

Charles: "As a sign of your loyalty to me, tomorrow you shall all march in the Corpus Christi procession to the Cathedral and worship. All of you—in the Roman manner."

George of Brandenburg: "We will not, my Lord."

Charles: "You ... shall know my sword!"

George of Brandenburg: "Before I let anyone take from them the Word of God and ask me to deny my belief, I will kneel and let him strike off my head ...."



*"I cannot and will not recant." Luther's defense of his writings before the Diet of Worms in April 1521 is faithfully and dramatically portrayed in the movie. Luther's declaration of faith could well have meant his death by fire at the stake.*

At this point, a filmmaker mindful of his audience's stereotypical pangs, might have the throngs out in Augsburg's streets break into Luther's anthem, "A Mighty Fortress Is our God." Director Eric Till doesn't do that. In fact, he only hints at Luther's musical accomplishments, which later influenced Bach and all classical German composers. Yes, somewhere in the movie a group of worshipers sings "Out of the Depth I Cry to You." But that's it. Clearly, "Luther" is not about Luther the musician.

Nor is it really a film about Luther the family man, although a hint at the immense influence of the Lutheran parsonage on Western civilization might be particularly welcome at a time when there are suggestions in some quarters that it might be OK for the parsonage to be inhabited by a him and a him or a her and a her.

But then Luther the musician, or Luther the family man, would make great topics for separate films or installments of a television series, as would, alas, the old and sick Luther's outbursts against the Jews. Let's rejoice

*English Actress Clair Cox superbly plays former nun Katharina von Bora, who became Martin Luther's wife.*



*Luther (Joseph Fiennes) throws onto a fire the papal bull excommunicating him from the Roman Catholic Church.*

that this movie ends at a point when, with Philipp Melancthon's presentation of the Augsburg Confession, the Reformer was at the pinnacle of his ministry and in the loving arms of a still youthful Katharina von Bora, played superbly by Claire Fox, also English.

Thankfully, Luther's chief message was that of the Gospel (which for some inexplicable reason played only fifth fiddle in an uninspiring Luther documentary on PBS this summer). Doubtless there are also other reasons to revisit the Father of the Reformation—the magnificent realism of his two-kingdoms theology, for example which would bring some sanity to postmodern times. But that his discovery of a merciful God should come across in what is also excellent entertainment—therein lies the filmmakers' genius.

I have often wondered what effect great men of faith might have on artists who played them or performed their works. Thomas Quasthoff, the crippled German bass-baritone, once said when he sang Christ's part in Bach's Saint Matthew Passion he stopped being an agnostic. Joseph Fiennes, whose church is by his own acknowledgment soccer, was made to ponder his own faith while acting Luther.

"You can't get away from it if you embrace this man," Fiennes told an interviewer. "I have found

faith to play a big part in my life.” This comes across forcefully in the way he masters the massive, threefold task of showing Luther’s discovery of his personal relationship with God, the application of this discovery as priest and professor, and his concern with how much of his accomplishments would last beyond his death. For Luther fully expected to be martyred.

*Luther (Joseph Fiennes) nails his 95 theses as an open challenge to the corrupt church practice of selling indulgences.*



*The movie has received a PG-13 rating. The scenes of the peasant war are graphically presented, along with several images of executions.*

## A powerful journey

If you think this kind of heavy-duty stuff can never be turned into a riveting film, stand corrected. In the opening scene you will literally be sucked into the terrifying thunderstorm that made a scared Martin Luther vow to become a monk, if spared. Later you are tempted to identify with his fellow Augustinian monks, sniggering as Luther, shaking with fear over his sinfulness, spills the altar wine during his first consecration of the Eucharist. Then you are with him in Rome, that “circus, sewer and brothel for clerics,” stumbling disgustingly across whoring monks.

You—yes, you!—will experience with Luther the wise guidance of his superior, John von Staupitz (Bruno Ganz), who makes him discover the liberating message of salvation by God’s grace through faith in Christ. You will, like Luther, recoil during the magnificent scenes of John Tetzel’s sale of indulgences. You will sit among the superbly costumed congregants in Luther’s church, having eye contact with him as he thunders from the nave—which is historically incorrect (he would have used the pulpit) but cinematographically very effective—against this perversion of the Gospel. You will laugh with his Wittenberg students as he ridicules the folly of collecting relics: “Eighteen of the 12 apostles are buried in Spain alone!”

Sometimes dramatic films have to take some liberties with history, and “Luther” has some of those. As Luther hides in the Wartburg translating the New Testament into German, for example, two appalling events—the 1521 iconoclast riots and the 1525 Peasants’ Wars—seem to flow into one. But the message comes



*Although quite young when he presided over the Diet of Worms in 1521, Charles V (Torben Liebrecht) was one of the most powerful men in Europe, and not someone a lowly monk should defy. He imposed an imperial ban, declared Luther an outlaw.*



*Sir Peter Ustinov plays Elector Frederick the Wise. In this scene, Luther (Joseph Fiennes) presents him with a first print of the New Testament in German. Although such an event probably never happened, the scene underscores how Luther made the Gospel available to everyone.*

*It is clear in the movie that it is Christ to whom Luther points for hope and salvation and who is the focus of his work.*



across clearly: Luther's struggles and deep remorse over the horrors his Reformation have triggered, including the slaughter of 50,000 to 100,000 rebels.

But that's precisely the point of this film: What history courses and even the most wonderful books cannot accomplish, succeeds here. In two gripping hours, you literally become part of one of the most dramatic biographies in human history, a tale with enormous heights but also great lows most of us would shy away from. Within minutes you switch from breathlessness as you partake in the wild boar hunt of the extravagant Pope Leo X, who excommunicated Luther, to the calm and wily warmth of Saxony's prince elector Frederick the Wise, who saved his "little monk," as he

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*The movie concludes with Luther at the pinnacle of his ministry and in a blessed marriage to Katharina.*

called him, and thus changed history.

The inexorable Sir Peter Ustinov plays this ruler with so much allure and humor that he seems a prime candidate for an Oscar as best supporting actor. In one of the movie's loveliest scenes, Luther enters Frederick's study to hand him the first print of the New Testament in German. As he engages the prince in dialogue, the aged Frederick impatiently snaps his fingers, asking with a childlike smile, "Do you think I can have my present now?"

This film is all about this gift's magnitude — it is a drama about the Gospel of Christ made available not just to sages but to all, which is why Luther's deed enthralled all of Germany and the rest of Europe in the 16th century. Such are the vagaries of history, though, that in much of Germany, Luther is recognized merely as a historical giant, while his true significance as a Christian prophet seems widely forgotten.

But here comes yet another twist: So catastrophic is Germany's spiritual decline of the last decades that its Roman Catholic Church



# 'LUTHER' TO OPEN NATIONWIDE SEPT. 26

"Luther," the new motion picture about the life and times of Martin Luther, is scheduled for release Sept. 26 and will open in more than 300 movie theaters nationwide.

"The motion picture is bound to cause higher visibility for Martin Luther and for Lutherans, and that's wonderful," says Rev. Tom Lapacka, executive director of the Synod's Board for Communication Services.

Shot on at least 100 sets in 20 locations around Germany, Italy and the Czech Republic, "Luther" was co-produced by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans and Neue Filmproduktion of Berlin, Germany.

The film stars Joseph Fiennes ("Shakespeare in Love," "Elizabeth," "Enemy at the Gate") as Martin Luther, Alfred Molina ("Frida," "Chocolat"), and two-time Academy Award winner Sir Peter Ustinov ("Spartacus," "Topkapi"). The movie's director is Eric Till.

A list of the theaters where "Luther" will open is to be available at the film's Web site, [www.lutherthemovie.com](http://www.lutherthemovie.com). The list will be updated "as long as it's in theaters," according to Dennis Clauss, co-executive producer of the film and Thrivent's church and community project leader. He also said that the film will be available on DVD and "possibly videocassette" in 2004.

## Special edition book

As complements to the film, Concordia Publishing House is producing a number of resources, including a special edition of *Luther: Biography of a Reformer*, by Frederick Nohl. The book is to be available by mid-September.

CPH interim President and CEO Paul T. McCain describes the book as "a very clear, direct and simple biography, with many full-color pictures from the movie, that will fill

in many gaps and articulate much more clearly the essential truths the movie covers."

Soon after the book is available, CPH plans to mail a gratis copy to each LCMS pastor, along with information about ordering additional



copies of the 224-page hardcover book at \$14.99 (\$10 introductory offer, see ad on page 29).

Full-color images from the movie also will be in a new children's picture book about Luther that CPH plans to publish early next year and in a new edition of its "Luther, Servant of God" study materials for grades 6-8, to be available next month.

McCain said that he is "convinced that this movie really will open doors for people interested in Lutheranism, wanting to learn more about Martin Luther, his life and his work.... It will provide a valuable tool for years to come to help portray the essential truths of the Lutheran Reformation."

— Joe Isenhower Jr.

has joined its Protestant sister in promoting this film about the Father of the Reformation. As Cardinal Karl Lehmann, chairman of the German Conference of Catholic Bishops, once told me, "We, too, recognize Luther as a great teacher of the faith."

Ironically, in the much more religious United States, a leading film distributor told Dennis Clauss, executive producer of the film and corporate projects leader with Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, the movie's sponsor: "Great! I'll handle this, if you leave out the Christ stuff."

It's amazing how confused movie moguls can be! "Christ stuff" — that's why you want to see this film; that's why you want to fret, smile and rejoice with Luther, and do battle on his side; that's why he is the Man for This Season. His renaissance does not come one moment too soon.



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