

Historical Introduction to the Luther Film

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- This year we celebrate the **500th anniversary of the Reformation**. Although it is difficult to pinpoint an exact beginning to a multifaceted movement, it is convenient to consider October 31, 1517 as the spark that set European Christianity on fire. This is the day on which Martin Luther is said to have nailed his 95 theses to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany where he was a university professor.
- **Martin Luther was a very bold and courageous man**, necessary and commendable qualities for a reformer. **He also had many faults**, some of which are toned down in the movie we are about to see.
- The Luther film covers a significant portion of the life of Martin Luther, a German monk and scholar who became the catalyst for the Protestant Reformation. The film begins in the year 1505 during a rainstorm. Luther was so frightened that he promised St. Anne that he would become a monk if only she would save him from the lightning.
- The fact that Luther thinks to pray to one of the Christian saints instead of directly to God is a byproduct of Roman Catholicism as it had developed over the centuries. It was common in Luther's time, and still is today among many Catholics, to approach the heroes of the Christian faith as though they mediate between humans and God. As we will see, however, it was a major emphasis of the Protestant Reformation that Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and humanity. Nevertheless, Luther himself continued to be devoted to Mary, the mother of Jesus, even after breaking ties with the Roman church, and many would consider that he did not therefore go far enough with his own insights.
- **But what was the Catholic church of Luther's time and what was the problem with it?**
- The problems were many, most grievous of which were the unfettered **moral corruption** that stained every level of church hierarchy and the **theology that defended that hierarchy as necessary instruments in the life and salvation** of Christians. Church theologians had built an impressive edifice of official doctrine based not on the Bible, but on the teaching of the people whose jobs and fortune were secured by that teaching.
- **So what does 'catholic' mean?** It is a Greek work, an adjective *katholikos*, meaning 'universal.' The word has a very long history in Christian thought. If you are familiar with the end of the Apostle's Creed (3rd or 4th century A.D.), then you've heard it before: "I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen." It is also in the Nicene Creed (originally 325 A.D., but revised in 381 A.D.): "And we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church."
- Therefore the small 'c' catholicity of the Church refers to the fact that all true Christians in every place belong to a single capital 'C' Church, a word which in turn means the global community of the one people of God.
- The issue with the Catholic church in Luther's time and still today is that by official teaching the Catholic magisterium considers the capital 'C' Catholic church with all its hierarchy and its baptised inductees to be equal to the Church catholic from the ancient Christian creeds. From

their point of view to be Catholic is to be Christian and to be Christian means to be Catholic. This is a position that entrenched itself slowly over many centuries as the true capital 'C' Church moved from being on the fringes of society to being the official religion of the Roman empire (beginning with the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. by the Emperor Constantine) with its hierarchy involved not only in politics, but in every meaningful aspect of the citizen's life.

- This Catholic Church is based in Rome because the bishop or overseer of Rome, perhaps better known to you as the Pope, is considered to be the leader of the universal Church. This claim to authority is based on two things. First, on Matt 16:18 in which Jesus says to Simon Peter, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." And second, on the tradition that Peter travelled to Rome and was martyred there under the Emperor Nero in the late 60s A.D., but not before passing on his apostolic office to a successor.
- The Pope, then, is said to be the rightful successor to Peter's leadership of the entire Christian Church.
- The sale of indulgences shown in the movie relies on a theology built upon the next verse, Matt 16:19 where Jesus continues, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."
- The basic idea is simple: since the Pope has Peter's office and his authority, the Pope has power to remit guilt.
- It gets more complicated when you add the concept of purgatory, an intermediate state between earth and heaven, which was developed over many centuries. The idea is that believing Christians, still tainted by their sins, must be purged by fire or some punishment before they may enter heaven.
- At the time of Luther the Church authorities were using indulgences, contracts authorized by the Pope, to collect huge sums of money. The indulgences could be bought on behalf of a loved one and were said to cut short that person's time in purgatory, sending them straight to heaven.
- The rolling ball that became the Reformation actually begins with a theological disputation made by Martin Luther, commonly known as the 95 Theses, against these indulgences. Luther says in thesis 36 "any Christian whatsoever, who is truly repentant, enjoys plenary remission from penalty and guilt, and this is given him without letters of indulgence."
- The Church authorities became outraged by Luther's reasoning based on the Bible's teaching and tried to silence him. The more the official Church flexed its muscles, the more Luther dug into Scripture to defend his position.
- In very short time, thanks to the recently invented printing press, Luther's teaching was spread throughout Europe and more and more people began to take up Luther's invitation to read the Bible for themselves and find out what it actually says.
- In the years that followed a terrible struggle for power, often coopting the theological debates, tore Europe to pieces as opportunistic leaders on every side sought to take advantage of the growing chaos.
- Eventually the peace of Westphalia was declared in 1648 and everyone accepted that the division in the church was here to stay: there were still capital 'C' Catholics with their hierarchy, but now there were also numerous Protestant denominations.

- From the earliest times of the Reformation the Catholic church responded to the Protestant arguments with their own Counter Reformation. At the council of Trent between 1545-1547, the Catholic Church made official many doctrines that the Protestants had been refuting on the basis of the Bible.
- On the one hand it is true that the Protestant Reformation has had many positive effects on the Catholic church as it felt pressure to remake itself. The Catholic Church of today is not the Catholic church of the 16th century.
- On the other hand it is also true that official Catholic teaching still teaches a number of doctrines that Protestants believe to be out of line with what the Bible plainly teaches. Some examples would be regarding the doctrine of justification – that is, how do people receive forgiveness –, the most basic conception of what happens during the worship service, and what is believed about Mary, the mother of Jesus.
- We here are heirs of the Protestant Reformation. We have inherited from teachers like Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Knox particular emphases that make New City Church Toronto what it is:
 - Our worship service is based firmly on the idea that the word of God must be preached. We do not present again the sacrifice of Jesus on an altar. Instead we proclaim the Scripture and celebrate the Lord's Supper as a memorial and spiritual communion.
 - We acknowledge the great deeds of Christians who lived before us, but we recognize that the Bible says that every true Christian is a 'saint,' a holy person. We don't need the mediation of saints between us and God. Jesus is our mediator and thanks to His sacrifice we have access to the Father.
 - Our church government is based on the idea that all Christians are equal before God and therefore have equal right to elect their elders.
 - We believe that Jesus Christ is present wherever two or three are gathered in His name and therefore no one place is more holy than another; we can worship in a school gymnasium or kindergarten room just as well as in any other place.
 - We believe that every Christian is a priest, mediating the blessing and knowledge of God to the world around us. That is why we have a pastor in plain clothes and not a priest in special vestments. It is also why so many of you are involved in so many ways with the church and also sharing your faith with people you know.
 - And we believe that salvation is free. Jesus, the Son of God has offered His life and blood for our sins. God the Father has raised Jesus from the grave to grant us eternal life in His Son's name. God the Holy Spirit indwells each believer and works in us for sanctification. God has done everything for us and therefore God must get all the glory. Amen.