



Luther (2003) – Leader’s Discussion Guide (following the film)

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The film ends with Martin Luther and his wife Katharina walking through a field after having taught a Scripture lesson about the prodigal son to some school children under a tree, and then from over the hill comes the ecstatic Philip Melancthon on horseback waving a document and saying “Martin! Martin! We did it Martin! We did it! The Emperor allowed us to read our confession of faith. The princes stood up to him. He had to listen. They can’t stop us now Martin!” Then printed on the screen come the words:

“What happened at Augsburg pushed open the door of religious freedom. Martin Luther lived for another 16 years, preaching and teaching the Word. He and Katharina von Bora enjoyed a happy marriage and six children. Luther’s influence extended into economics, politics, education and music, and his translation of the Bible became a foundation of the German language. Today over 540 million people worship in churches inspired by his Reformation.”

It’s all very satisfying and dramatic but here’s the problem. It didn’t happen like that. It wasn’t that simple. Yes, Luther was unable to go to Augsburg having been branded an outlaw following his stand at the diet of Worms (1521), but at the time of the diet of Augsburg in 1530 Luther and Katharina were not physically together. They were still married and remained married the rest of his life, but at that time she was in Wittenberg with two of their first three children (Hans 1526-1575, Elizabeth 1527-1528, and

Magdalene 1529-1542) while Luther was sequestered, for his protection, in the impressive Veste Coburg, one of Germany's largest Castle Fortresses. He arrived there on Good Friday, the 15th of April, and stayed there for 172 days during which time he wrote over 120 letters. 68 of these letters were sent to Augsburg, 37 of those letters were sent to Philipp Melancthon the main author of the Augsburg Confession,¹ 8 to Georg Spalatin, and 9 of his letters were sent to his wife Katharina. During those months he also learned of his father's death on May 29th. Luther while protected at Coburg often desired to be back home or in Augsburg at the diet.

The legislative procedures and meetings of the diet of Augsburg started on June 20th and on June 25th the Augsburg Confession was read and after many long months the emperor finally declared a recess, on September 22nd, "declaring that the Lutheran party had been given a fair hearing and that by April 15th of the next year (1531) they show cause why they should not be condemned in accordance with the so-called proof of their errors provided by the Confutation."² The film makes this look like a quick and easy process.

Remember what we said about the pitfalls of condensing and streamlining the telling of historical accounts in order to conform to the time constraints demanded by the medium of film.

Knowing additional historical information about just how long and complicated the process that Luther and reformers like Philip Melancthon endured to clearly express the Biblical truths of the Lutheran confession of faith it becomes clear that a better medium for telling the account of Luther and the reformation may be a TV series or at least a limited run TV series or mini-series. In the end the thing to remember about this film or any film about Martin Luther, or any docudrama for that matter, is that it's only a sample of their life and times. Consider it a jumping off point. From here, you may wish to dig more deeply into the life and time of Luther and some of the other historical figures found in the film. Attached to this study is a reading list of new and old books, film and documentaries about Martin Luther and the Reformation that you might find interesting to read and/or watch.

Fictional Characters and Their Purpose in the Film:

While many of the rich and powerful and influential people depicted in the film are individuals from history, the poor and common folk tend to be fictional characters.

¹ Following the emperor's 1530 March 11th invitation for the Germanic princes to attend the diet in Augsburg John the Steadfast Elector of Saxony (brother of Frederick the Wise), requested Martin Luther, Justus Jonas, Johannes Bugenhagen and Philipp Melancthon to meet him in Torgau and present a concise summary of the Lutheran faith to be provided to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the diet. This summary, the "Torgau Articles" which all of these men contributed to, served as the groundwork and basis of Melancthon's work on the Augsburg Confession.

² <http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/kluglutherscontribution.pdf>

From Luther's various letters written over the course of his life we know he had correspondences with people from almost every strata of society. For example when his barber, Master Peter Beskendorf, asked him how to pray, Luther in the spring 1535 wrote him a short yet detailed and friendly letter with great advice about prayer. And when the knight Assa von Kram in 1525 had a conversation with Luther expressing his troubled conscience and concern over reconciling his profession with faith, Luther wrote him a lengthy response related to von Kram's vocation, *Whether Soldiers Too can be Saved* (1526), which was then published for the benefit of other knights and everyone in general. These and other people Luther knew were not employed in the telling of Luther's story for this film. Instead we get fictional characters like Hanna and her crippled child Gretta; the craftsman/carpenter/builder his wife and his son who committed suicide; and brother Ulrick the martyred monk.

These fictional characters serve the narrative as archetypes—allegorical representations of different groups that Luther had interactions with. Within the context of the film they are not meant simply to represent themselves. Instead, they embody something bigger than in order to make a point. They also serve as audience surrogates—viewpoint characters that the audience might identify with for one reason or another.



Hanna and her crippled child Gretta: These two are representative of the Germanic peasant class. They are trusting of the Church but because they have not been taught well, and because they mainly toil away at life, they are depicted as naïve, vulnerable, easily abused, and in need of protection. Hanna and Gretta become emblematic of the need for reform within the church, especially in the area of the buying and selling of forgiveness in the form of indulgences. Martin Luther, knowing that forgiveness was won by Christ Jesus in His crucifixion on Good Friday—not purchased with the silver or gold of the Germanic peasants, nobility, kings, emperors or even by the

good works of monks—is therefore shown having compassion on Hanna and her child. This concern is meant to show his care towards German peasants in general and by extension his compassion towards all people who are misled and fleeced of their money dishonestly. He, himself, having suffered anxiety related to his faith is shown as the one person who both tells Hanna the hard truth that the indulgence is not worth the paper it is printed on, and then proceeds to carry on fighting on her behalf (on the behalf of all people) to give her and all people the truly good news concerning who has really paid for their forgiveness in full: Christ Jesus, the Lord.

Luther is also shown grieving over the death of the crippled child Gretta who was depicted as a casualty in the conflated Iconoclastic Riot in Wittenberg of 1522 and the

Great Peasants' Revolt of 1524-1525 A.D. This is again meant to be allegorical, as Gretta is fictional. The important thing to remember here is that the peasants were not entirely in the right in this skirmish, at least from Luther's perspective. The film presents an overly rosy picture of Luther's relationship with the common folks when in reality he saw their actions in relationship to riots and revolts as breaking the 4th Commandment.



Honour your father and your mother. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honour them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them.

In fact he had written a tract in May of 1525, titled *Against the Rioting Peasants* which the various printers re-titled *Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants*. Hanna and Gretta are not illustrative of the deplorable violent and impulsive side of the Germanic peasant class but are rather symbolic of their spiritually weak and defenceless side. And while Luther himself was characterized by humanist scholars and popularized by artists for the common folk as the Germanic Hercules fighting for the people,³ Luther's relationship with the

common folk and with the rich, powerful, and influential members of society was not always that simple.



Craftsman/Carpenter/Builder his Wife and his Son who Committed Suicide: This fictional family is again from the Germanic peasant class; however they are a bit better off economically due to the family's work in construction. Today we might consider them to be middle class. They too face tragedy as their son commits suicide. If Hanna and her crippled daughter Gretta are largely associated with the film's focus on indulgences and civil unrest, then this family and their son's death are associated with the temporal effects of demonic harassment and the Catholic Church's inability to provide them

Christ centred comfort in their grief. Again this fictional family, like Hanna and her crippled daughter Gretta, are emblematic of the need for reform within the church.

³ Illustration by Hans Holbein Published in 1523

The way the film deals with demonic harassment is not the way Hollywood typically deals with this topic in horror films. You don't see green pea soup projectile vomit, spinning heads, or levitating bodies. Instead what you do see is Luther repeatedly depicted as having argumentative outbursts directed at the devil. These come across as one sided conversations because there is no voice of the devil in the film. You might be reminded of 1 Peter 5:8 "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." Luther is keenly aware that the devil is prowling around him and in the case of the carpenter's boy the film depicts Luther explaining to a gathered crowd that the boy was in fact devoured by the devil; that his suicide was evidence of the devil's harassment. The Catholic Church had taught that suicides could not be saved, that it was a "mortal sin." Luther's burial of the boy inside the walls of the church cemetery expresses, yet again, Luther's spirit of reform and his desire to provide comfort to the afflicted.

Along with prayer (*oratio*) and study (*meditation*), testing (*tentatio/ Anfechtung*) or affliction is considered a critical element of what makes a true theologian in Luther's understanding. Luther meets this family at the crossroad where theological study intersects with the messy lives of people afflicted by a fallen world, death, and even demonic harassment. Luther's vitriol against the devil throughout the film fits well into St. Peter's additional advice "Resist [the devil], firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world" (1 Peter 5:9) and Saint James' advice "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." (James 4:7). A question worth asking is this: **Does Luther in this film come across as afflicted by the devil or mentally unbalanced? How successful is the film in presenting demonic harassment and affliction?**

One last point of interest connected to this fictional family and the boy's suicide. The words of comfort that Luther provides as he defiantly buries the boy in the cemetery aren't a modern imposition. They are in fact a paraphrase of a comment Luther made while at table with students on April 7th 1532.

"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. They are like a man who is murdered in the woods by a robber. However, this ought not be taught to common people, lest Satan be given an opportunity to cause slaughter ... [suicides] are examples by which our Lord God wishes to show that the devil is powerful and also that we should be diligent in prayer." (Luther's Works, American Edition, Vol. 54, p. 29)

Remember, however, that entries found in Luther's Table Talk are in and of themselves often paraphrases as they are derived from notes taken by Luther's students based on conversations and not from writings that Luther himself crafted and edited for publication. As such they are not binding on the church (unlike the Scriptures, or the

Lutheran Confessions which are a good and right exposition of Scripture). What the inclusion of this paraphrasing in the film shows is one more example of how the filmmakers incorporated compelling source material from Luther's life to tell their story.



The Monk, Brother Ulrick: While Katharina von Bora, the “runaway” Cistercian nun, is a historical figure and could easily be representative of the growing support for the teachings of Martin Luther within many of the local monastic communities she is not utilized as an archetype or allegorical figure in the way that the fictional Ulrick is used. Ulrick is presented as “along for the ride” with Luther. In that way he can act as an audience surrogate. You might not be able to completely identify with someone like Frederick the Wise but you might be able to see yourself as a kind of fly on the wall character like the fictional Ulrick. Not too intrusive but right there

in the action.

Memorably Ulrick is with Luther as he first arrives in Wittenberg, he is with him again when he goes to the diet of Worms and then Ulrick is riding with Luther in the cart after the diet when Luther is kidnapped and taken to the Wartburg. Ulrick is also there for a brief discussion about monks and nuns setting aside their vows of celibacy for marriage vows. The fictional Ulrick's support of Luther is emblematic of the support Luther received from actual men and women who did walk away from cloistered monastic life as a result of Luther's clear Scriptural teaching of the Gospel over and against works righteousness. The Gospel truth that Luther both learnt and passed on from St. Paul in Ephesians 2:8-9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

There are two more details about this fictional character which are important to the film. First, Ulrick is Dutch and in this way the character represents support for God's Word, the Reformation in general, and Luther's teaching outside of the Germanic peoples. Second Ulrick dies a martyr, burned at the stake for his confession of faith. While the devil certainly prowled around Luther seeking to devour him, in the end Luther was not devoured by the devil; the fictional suicide of the carpenter's son therefore is intended to remind viewers that not everyone was so lucky in that regard. In the same way the fictional character of Ulrick illustrates that, while Luther escaped death following being excommunicated by the Pope and being branded an outlaw by Charles V, not everyone escaped martyrdom. In the death of Ulrick the filmmakers make a point that holding the same confession of faith that men like Luther, Melancthon, and the Germanic princes held might mean death and for some people it did mean death. The first Lutheran martyrs were actually two Augustinian monks from outside the German lands who lived in

Brussels. Johann Esch and Heinrich Voes were burned at the stake on July 1st of 1523 simply for being Lutheran and holding to a confession of faith that held Scripture over and against the power of the bishops or the pope in Rome.⁴

Closing discussion and prayer:

After having watched the film and looked at some of historical individuals and details swirling around Martin Luther's life let's ask those questions again.

- 1) **How important is it to you that filmmakers closely and faithfully stick to verifiable historical details in a biographical docudrama? (Add to that: Do your general feelings in this regard extend to a film like the one you just watched?)**

- 2) **Does it bother you when writers, artists, and filmmakers fictionalize parts of a person's life for dramatic effect or conflate events to speed along the narrative?**

- 3) **If so why do you think it bothers you? And if not why doesn't it bother you?**

- 4) **Has watching this film made you curious to learn more about a) church history, b) the life and time of Luther, and/or c) the Reformation in general?**

Let us pray: Almighty and gracious Lord, pour out Your Holy Spirit on your faithful people. Keep us steadfast in Your grace and truth, protect and deliver us in times of temptation and defend us against all enemies, and grant to Your Church Your saving peace; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

⁴ <http://www.canadianlutheran.ca/the-martyrs-esch-and-voes/>