

“Luther: The Life and Legacy of the German Reformer” – A Review

In celebration of the 500th anniversary of the *Ninety-five Theses* by Martin Luther, filmmaker Stephen MacCaskell made the documentary *Luther: The Life and Legacy of the German Reformer* (2017). Many scholars of the Reformation may criticize the film’s evangelical bias, but it is refreshing to see a well-executed historical documentary that celebrates the same doctrine that drove Luther. Just as Luther was dedicated to the authority of Scripture and the doctrine of Justification by Grace through Faith, so are the Reformed theologians (including R.C. Sproul) who provide consistently insightful commentary.

I write this commentary as an Arminian Christian, a historian of the Reformation era, and a High School History teacher. From an Arminian perspective, there is nothing to shy away from in this documentary. Like all forms of Reformation Christianity, Arminianism fully agrees that salvation is the work of God and not a product of works. This film should serve as a catalyst for the discussion of many foundational theological truths.

An hour and a half is not sufficient to do justice to the life and influence of the “monk who changed the world.” The film was certainly made more for a congregation than for historians. Even so, the film is historically accurate and doesn’t avoid difficult issues. One section deals with Luther’s temper, untamed tonged, and his “Jewish Problem” (anti-Semitism). Many may find the film’s treatment of the “Jewish Problem” as unsatisfactory, but I am impressed that a short celebratory film took the time to point out Luther’s significant flaws. It even uses the words of Scripture and

John Calvin to do so.[1. See [this article](#) for a good discussion]

This treatment of the Reformation follows a typical Protestant, specifically Reformed, approach. Late Medieval Religion is understood to be works based and pervasively corrupt. Corrupt Popes, such as Julius II, and greedy clergy members like John Tezel, are portrayed as normative. While I don't disagree with this general narrative (examples of corruption abound), I was disappointed that the film didn't make any attempt to discuss examples of late medieval Catholic reformers like the fiery preacher Savonarola, the mystic Thomas a Kempis, or the humanist scholar Erasmus. Rather than complicate the story with a richer view of late medieval piety, the film simply discussed the condemned pre-reformers, John Wycliffe and Jan Hus and their impact on Luther. While a simplified narrative is easier on its audience, from a historical point of view, it's unsatisfying.

I teach 9th grade World History. Aside from being a little slow for an audience with the attention span of a poodle, one of the significant flaws of *Luther* is that it assumes far too much knowledge of theology and history. While it may be a great resource for a theologically educated congregation, 9th graders, even at a Christian school, lack the previous knowledge to make this video a good use of time for a classroom. This, of course, can be addressed as long as the teacher uses the video to reinforce what they have already learned of Luther and the Reformation and not to introduce it. This approach might also help the teacher facilitate a discussion of the film's historical interpretation that could also help to mitigate some of its shortcomings.

Overall, I recommend *Luther: The Life and Legacy of the German Reformer*. It is well made, which is rare for Christian films of any kind. It makes effective use of some simple computer animation as well as crisp on-location footage. Although its

interpretation of the Reformation is too simplistic to satisfy the historian and too advanced for the high school student; it can be a great resource for the man or women in the pew. Hopefully, this film will only be the beginning of a deeper exploration into the Reformation.

(Editor's note: You can rent or buy the movie at Amazon by clicking [this](#) link.)