

clined will see all of this as the providence of God), all that private infinitude, both the good and the bad, has been hanging out in public for everyone to see for the past half millennium.

There is no arguing with poets and prophets. Time is indeed a river and we will always be downstream from Luther. The currents he unleashed appear undiminished and still have us in tow. Within the Christian tradition, many believe history will end with the Apocalypse. Luther thought this all-consuming event might occur in his lifetime. But it was delayed, delighting some and disappointing others, and if it is delayed for another five hundred years, then the members of the fortieth generation downstream from Luther will find themselves navigating amidst those abiding currents as they engage in *Luthersprache* during the Millennium of the Reformation.

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



Der Große Anfang

By Andreas Sawall

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• 6:30 PM •

Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

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Der Große Anfang—500 Jahre Reformation (2017)

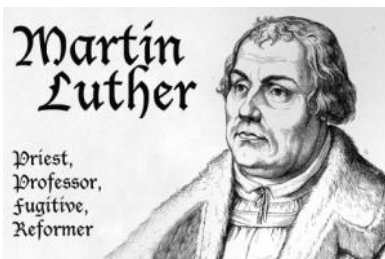
Director: Andreas Sawall
Script: Ingo Helm
Narrator: Harold Lesch
Camera: Hans Jacobl
Music: Mathias Rehfeldt
Release Date: 2017
Cast: Jakob Benkhofer, Tom Quaas (Luther); Cornelia Pollack (Katharina von Bora); Erhard Hartmann (Philip Melancton); Peter Bosch (Lucas Cranach); Kay Waidelich (Johannes Bugenhagen); Matthias Saffert (Theologieprofessor)

Commentary: A. Krumm

Luthersprache

If time is a river, as poets and prophets often insist, then our frail little civilizational vessel is tacking to and fro five hundred years downstream from the powerful currents unleashed by Martin Luther's life and work. Twenty generations have come and gone since then and the passage of those generations offers a welcome reassurance to some that we have long since escaped the grip of those currents.

Yet legions of people are talking and writing about Luther this *Quincenary Year of the Reformation*.



This discourse includes a very large digital footprint, with many websites and web pages dedicated to or focused upon his life and work. Being a media guru himself, Luther would get a kick out of learning that he is being preserved in cyber amber. Born just one generation after the emergence of the Gutenberg Galaxy, he became a master

exploiter of print technology, possessing as he did a rare genius as a writer coupled with a sure instinct for accelerating the distribution and amplifying the awareness of his message via the 16th century's version of a 'networked public'.

So why all of this 21st century *Luthersprache*, if we are no longer navigating in Luther's wake? A measured amount of speechifying and public gesturing would be understandable, given this five hundred year anniversary, but why this flood of discourse? Simply because, as contrarians (whether insightful or impish) will point out, the passage of all those generations

merely bears continual witness that the powerful currents unloosed by Luther *still* have us in tow. His currents are in fact still running right down the middle of our river and those currents, whether theological, political, economic, sociological or vocational, inspire intense debate to this day, as does Luther himself.

A veneer of journalistic objectivity or scholarly detachment usually overlays the discourse, but sooner or later the intensity bleeds through. One historian (a noted expert on Luther) concludes assuredly that: "*Luther represents a catastrophe in the history of western civilization*". Another source, equally expert and equally assured, offers this verdict: "*...Luther has to be ranked with the great emancipators of human history...*"

We will dispense with any attempt to synthesize such sentiments and only note the intensity and fascination with Luther that is evident at both ends of the spectrum. Everyone engaging in *Luthersprache*, whether pro or con, would agree with Andrew Pettegree: "Luther is remarkable." Everyone engaging in *Luthersprache* gets pulled into Luther's enormous historical gravitational field. This field is best described by a comment of Luther himself. "*Not until I am gone will they feel Luther's full weight.*"

Theists, particularly those of an Augustinian bent, will assert that Luther elicits this intense (and sometimes even visceral) reaction because he is radically representative of a need festering in every human heart. Eleven hundred years before Luther was born, Augustine elegantly formulated this need: "*Fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*" ("thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee.").

Theists will further insist that in every generation, most people (Plato's 'multitude', Heidegger's 'they') are adept at denying that need, or suppressing it or seeking to satisfy it vicariously. A few, like Luther, are consumed by that need and wrestle with it as Jacob wrestled with the angel. Luther, sui generis even among the few, was to speak about his struggle with a volcanic outpouring of soothing, searching, scalding words.

Non-theists might disagree with the *festering need* thesis, but they will likely agree that the actions and reactions ignited by that volcanic outpouring of words make Luther immensely consequential for the secular minded and the religiously minded alike. Luther has never ceased to be a conversation partner. To some he is a dangerous interlocutor, to some a liberating and inspiring mentor. A catalog of the consequences issuing from Luther's life and work would be lengthy. Some may be categorized as intended, some ambiguous, some as unintended. Every generation since Luther's time has reverberated with the resonance of those consequences.

Given the scope of the transformations Luther's movement loosed on the Western world, one might hope there is a preferred approach or a best practice for appropriating what there is about Luther that is worth knowing. Do we narrow the distance through language, since Luther is the Godfather of the modern German *Muttersprache*? Should we seek to get close to him by interrogating his theology, since he triggered a tectonic shift in Christendom the tremors of which are still being felt? Given the implications of his theology for political science, is it possible to seek and find what matters about him by retracing the genealogy of political structures in the West?

Some say Luther inaugurated individualism (Augustine would certainly demur), so perhaps the definitive answers to Luther's essence and influence lie wholly within the realms of psychology and sociology. Luther was sympathetic to mysticism and loved paradox, and thus some scholars have tried to dissect him existentially or pin him to the wall by employing binary concepts: word and spirit, law and gospel, freedom and slavery, God hidden and God revealed, etc.

For those inclined to monitor the conversation, it becomes obvious that there is no preferred approach. Ultimately, every approach has its merits and its demerits, every method casts light and shadow. It is probably advisable to employ all of them in the case of Luther, if you really want to attempt to pin him to the entire spectrum of available walls, whether social, cultural, historical or theological. And even so, perhaps Heiko Obermann has the last word in this regard: "*Den Menschen Luther zu entdecken, verlangt mehr, als Wissenschaft je zu bieten hat.*"

Der Sprachkünstler

Linguistically, Luther came into the world in the usual way, being born into an existing language community, which in his case was Early New High German, the dominant form of the German language from 1350 to 1650. So Luther most decidedly did not invent German. Yet Luther's impact on the German language has commanded reverent recognition from every subsequent generation.



Johann Gottfried Herder said "*...he is the one who unbound and awakened the German language...he lifted up an entire nation to thinking and feeling.*" Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock declared that "*...no one who knows what a language is can come face to face with Luther without venerating him.*" In more recent times, Gerhard Ritter said that

Luther had founded the "*German cultural nation.*" Gerhard Ebeling referred to Luther as "*...an epochal linguistic event...*"

After the publication of his *Septembertestament* (1522), Luther wrote a treatise on the art of translation, *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen* (1523), in which he explained his overriding principle in this famous passage: "*...denn man mus nicht die buchstaben inn der Lateinischen sprachen fragen wie man sol Deudsch reden wie diese Esel thun. Sondern man mus die mutter ihm hause, die kinder auff der gassen, den gemeinen man auff dem marckt drümb fragen und den selbigen auff das maul sehen wie sie reden und darnach dolmetschen; so verstehen sie es denn und mercken das man Deudsch mit ihn redet...*"

Of course Luther did not mean to base his German style purely on a foundation of some localized *Volksmaul* or an everyday, time-bound *Umgangssprache*. Within the broader context of Early New High German, the backbone of his modernizing German was derived from a *Mitteldeutsche Dialekte* of an *Obersächsisch* flavoring. This trans-regional dialect of German had also evolved into a standard written form used by bureaucrats and lawyers in Saxony, as well as in Prague and Wien.

Along with this legal and bureaucratic status, the key aspect of the dialect was that, as the name infers, it cut right across the geographical middle of Germany, from east to west. Hence it could be understood by people in the north as well as by people in the south. In his *Tischreden*, Luther got right to the point: "*Ich rede nach der sächsischen Canzley, welcher nachfolgen alle Fürsten und Könige in Deutschland.*" Why? Because "*...Kaiser Maximilian und Kurf. Friedrich, H. zu Sachsen etc. haben im Römischen Reich die deutschen Sprachen also in eine gewisse Sprache gezogen*"

That last phrase is key: the dialect used by Luther literally "pulled" German speakers from all over Germany into one speech pattern. With this trans-regional dialect and the written court speech as his foundation, Luther's verbal gifts took over and soared. His Leitmotif was *Allgemeinverständlichkeit*. He wanted vertical understanding (across all classes) and horizontal understanding (across all regions). All of it, however, was done in the service of proclaiming the liberating message of Jesus which Luther found in the Bible. When the project of translating the entire bible was completed, Luther said "*die deutsche sprach habe gewisslich eyn bessere Bibel denn die latinische sprache, des beruff ich mich auff die leser...*"

"*...beruff ich mich auff die leser ...*" Therein lies the essence of the power of Luther's translation of the Bible. And how did Luther appeal to the reader? Perhaps the most illuminative statement he ever made on the art of translation was the following: "*It is not possible to reproduce a foreign*

idiom in one's native tongue," he wrote. "The proper method of translation is to select the most fitting terms according to the usage of the language adopted. To translate properly is to render the spirit of a foreign language into our own idiom. I try to speak as men do in the market place. In rendering Moses, I make him so German that no one would suspect he was a Jew."

Der Evangelist

Theologically, Luther departed from the world as a man of the Word, leaving behind a daunting legacy of words. His complete works comprise 121 volumes of roughly 80,000 pages. He was a professor in the most literal sense of the word, professing the Christian faith in the context of his academic career as a biblical exegete.



In 1505, no one would have predicted this legacy. But apparently the death of a friend coupled with an intense thunder storm combined to stage an intervention in his *Lebenslauf*, and turning his back on a future career as a lawyer (for which his father never really seemed to forgive him), Luther entered the Augustinian Order to become a monk. Along with becoming a priest and walking all the way to Rome and back, he nearly killed himself trying to be a good monk.

By 1512 Luther had received his doctorate and settled into a theological professorship at Wittenberg. He began by lecturing on the Psalms. He then moved on to the New Testament books of Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. Whether via a sudden illumination or by a more gradual process, sometime between 1513 and 1519, Luther became a convinced evangelical from his intensive study of these epistles.

With Luther's theology, we run head-on into the *Ärgernis der Einmaligkeit*, which clashes so bluntly with modern sensibilities. Luther was not a consensus seeker, no negotiator of *via medias*. Stemming from his agonizing experience as a monk, like the Philippian jailer he desperately wanted to know "...*what must I do to be saved...*"

According to statements Luther wrote many years later, the key text for him was from a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the Christians in Rome during the reign of the Emperor Nero, sometime between 55 and 58 A.D. This text was from chapter 1 verse 17, set forth in St. Paul's precise koine Greek:

δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀποκαλύπτεται ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν
καθὼς γέγραπται Ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται

St. Jerome couched this bold assertion in Latin as:

*iustitia enim Dei in eo revelatur ex fide in fidem sicut scriptum est
iustus autem ex fide vivit*

Luther's new-born German brought St. Paul's words to life for German speakers:

sintemal darinnen offenbaret wird die Gerechtigkeit, die vor Gott gilt, welche kommt aus Glauben in Glauben; wie denn geschrieben stehet: Der Gerechte wird seines Glaubens leben.

Luther's translation inspired many others to translate the Bible into the vernacular of their native countries, not the least of whom was William Tyndale. His translation of the New Testament in 1525, heavily influenced by Luther's approach, laid the foundation for all subsequent English translations, including the King James version of 1611, which rendered St. Paul's key passage thusly:

*For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith:
as it is written, The just shall live by faith.*

Meditating intensely on these words, Luther arrived "...at the still point..." of his churning spiritual world. Pivoting away from the agony of *Anfechtungen* and the despair of discovering a *Deus Absconditus*, his shift in perspective opened a spiritual field of vision that revealed God's mercy freely offered in Jesus, enabling him to perceive that God's righteousness is a gift granted through faith, not something to be earned or achieved by human effort.

In the wake of this breakthrough, which incidentally rendered the monetized soteriology (indulgences) of the Catholic Church null and void, Luther's foundational hermeneutical principle was "*Was Christum treibet*" (whatever promotes Christ) and his litmus test for any doctrinal dispute was "*Crux probat Omnia*" (the Cross is the test of everything), which entails that scandal of particularity which makes so many contemporary interlocutors so uncomfortable. Secular *Schwärmer* as a class (whether pluralists, ecumenicists, post modernists, post-liberals or garden variety humanists) often betray an overeager tendency to put Luther's concepts into (to co-opt Robert Kolb's felicitous phrase) "...an alien framework..." They seem to find scant comfort in the embrace of Luther's actual theology.

For Luther, what mattered was God's revelation in the cross of Christ, not the array of abstractions (freedom, equality, progress, prosperity) undoubtedly exalted by a small coterie of humanists in the 16th century and reified by nearly everyone in the 21st century. Every such value, rightly

construed and rightly implemented, might engender blessings for an individual as well as for a society, but all such values were only and ever subordinate side effects of being reconciled to God through Christ.

Zweireichenlehre

Politically, Luther shook up his world, offering a “third way” of implementing socio-political relationships within western Christendom. Luther spelled out his thoughts on politics and people in a number of writings, chief among which is a tract of 1523 called *Von weltlicher Oberkeit, wie weit man ihr Gehorsam schuldig sei*. In this tract Luther adumbrated what came to be known as his *Zweireichenlehre*.

The Catholic Church, building on teachings set forth by Thomas Aquinas, had since the high Middle Ages taught that the Church should (when push came to shove) rule both itself and the secular realm. The radical reformers, exemplified by the Anabaptists, wanted either a theocracy with no distinction between church and society, or total withdrawal from the world. Thus each of these approaches was either totalizing or reductive. Luther taught that there were two distinct Kingdoms, each having a legitimate sphere of authority, each able to interact positively with the other while preserving their respective autonomy.

In terms of civil authority (what Luther called the “*left handed Kingdom of God*”), all *coercive power* was vested in the state. The state is granted this power in order to maintain internal order and external peace, and to punish violation of civil laws. In the civil sphere, the Church can no longer pass judgment on the State. In fact, when applied to external, human affairs, the State now is vested with the authority to pass judgment on the Church.

Luther did not see the state as merely a negative necessity, as Augustine tended to. It is that, when and as necessary, but civil authority (God’s “*left hand*”) can also be used by God to promulgate positive relations in society: “...*the secular government should direct the people horizontally toward one another, seeing to it that body, property, honor, wife, child, house, home, and all manner of goods remain in peace and security and are blessed on earth. God wants the government of the world to be a symbol of true salvation and of his kingdom of heaven, like a pantomime or a mask.*”

Conversely, the state has no authority over the consciences of Christians or the internal affairs of the Church (what Luther referred to as the “*right handed*” Kingdom of God). This realm is non-coercive, governed only by love and the Word of God. Luther allows that a Christian can engage in peaceful non-violent disobedience if the ruler or the state commands the Christian to violate God’s spiritual commandments.

Having engaged in such peaceful disobedience, a Christian can only, with the reward of a good conscience, endure the consequences which the State may inflict. Luther had no illusions about rulers in general, saying that they “*are generally the biggest fools and worst scoundrels on earth.*” Seen from our vantage point in the 21st century, this is a striking example of historical continuity rather than historical change.

The extent of Luther’s influence on theories of secular authority and church-state relations is hard to exaggerate. It is difficult not to notice how John Locke’s theories on government bear an uncanny resemblance, albeit mediated through several centuries and many other thinkers, to Luther’s concept of the two kingdoms. Still another reference, one closer to home for Americans, might suffice to illustrate this influence. In replying to a letter from a Lutheran Pastor after he had left the presidency, James Madison (chief architect of the American constitution) commented: “*It illustrates the excellence of a system, which by a due distinction, to which the genius and courage of Luther led the way, between what is due to Caesar and what is due to God, best promotes the discharge of both obligations.*”

Sehet, welch ein Mensch!

Luther sojourned in this world as Kierkegaard’s *Existing Individual* par excellence. His character leaps out at us across the centuries from his writings and from the commentary of those who knew him, tempting us to become fixated upon the idiosyncracies of his personality. If one combined in proper proportions the intellectual scope and caliber of the theologian Karl Barth, the communicative gifts of concision and clarity of C.S. Lewis, the rugged durability (in a psychological sense) of the boxer Tex Cobb and the inexhaustible appetite for verbal combat of the late journalist and controversialist Christopher Hitchens, one might be able to approximate the impact of Luther’s persona on his contemporaries.



Luther’s Death Mask

In pugilistic parlance, Luther had a good chin, a good punch and staying power. He was just as comfortable slugging it out with papists in the public square as he was spending endless hours in the solitude of his study struggling with a biblical text. Luther’s intensity, his fierceness, his obsessional focus, his staggering work ethic, all flowed from the burning inner world of a man whom Martin Marty classified as “...*a God-obsessed seeker of certainty...*”

Unlike Augustine, Luther had no Monica in his life. He had neither the advantages nor the disadvantages of being “...*the son of so many tears...*”. He had what his birth and his circumstances had bequeathed: adequate, if not

ample, material resources, prodigious intellectual gifts developed to the fullest extent, a pathological introspectiveness, a peasant like ruggedness, a susceptibility to black melancholia as well as euphoric bliss and a capacity for single minded, sustained focus on the task at hand. Work was his drug, his enduring, saving addiction.

Luther, being *menschlich*, *allzu menschlich*, could only ever be an incorrigible denizen of his era, totally enmeshed in his historical setting. Thus one can readily discern the time bound, finite and flawed aspects of his character, which is to say, his human nature. He was an utterly earthen vessel whose strengths and weaknesses were magnified by time and circumstance. Heiko Oberman described his temperament as volcanic, which is probably an understatement. Richard Marius aptly observed: "*Luther's temperament was his tragedy.*"

His polemical style was more often than not simply savage. A dispassionate consideration of the Pope, the Peasants, the Anabaptists, the Jews and the Turks has determined that they are all tied for first place as targets of his sometimes well nigh maniacal (albeit often stylistically brilliant) vitriol. Henry VIII holds a solid second place, although some would say Henry deserves a first place ranking based on his own merits. Erasmus, the great humanist scholar, gets the bronze in most reckonings.

As he grew older, Luther seemed to lose the ability to distinguish between a genuine opponent and someone who was an ally but simply disagreed on principle on a given issue. His towering strength of conviction and relentless pursuit of truth as he saw it could engender consequences that were disorienting, if not disheartening for his followers, and sometimes even downright dangerous for people who thought he was on their side.

Untold numbers of peasants learned more about consequences (intended and unintended) at the battle of Frankenhausen in 1525 than any of them could ever have wished. Luther was never a perpetrator of actual violence, but given the outcome of the Peasants War, some have characterized Luther as, however indirectly or unintentionally, a *Schreibtischtäter* of that bloody denouement. According to this perspective, Luther's stature, coupled with his incendiary writing in the midst of the crisis, not only gave the princes moral and legal justification for their brutal actions, but actually incentivized them.

Ironically, considering Luther's infamous tract of 1543, *Against the Jews and Their Lies*, which some contend is, at least in part, a case of *enttäuschte Liebe*, Roland Bainton's perception that "...in his religion he was a Hebrew..." perhaps comes closer to the mark in explaining the combative aspect of Luther's temperament than any other interpretation. Luther was akin to an Old Testament prophet. For Isaiah or Jeremiah, as for Luther,

the greatest sin was to deviate from or compromise God's message.

These days, any number of folks will discourse with unmitigated confidence, unrelenting detail and uninhibited relish about all sorts of things (race, sex, violence, economics, social justice, etc.), but typically will exhibit a prudish modesty if anyone starts talking about truth and our ability to know it. Luther the private man suffered from assaults of doubt and angst throughout his life, but Luther *Der Prophet der Deutschen*, Luther in his *Berufung* as a theologian, suffered no such debilitating epistemological prudishness when it came to talking about truth. God had given us His Word, and God had given us the ability to understand His Word.

This involved a synergistic perspicacity (both external (the text of Scripture) and internal (the reader)). In response to Erasmus, who tended to characterize Scripture as often vague and mysterious, Luther replied: "*But, if many things still remain abstruse to many, this does not arise from obscurity in the Scriptures, but from [our] own blindness or want of understanding, who do not go the way to see the all-perfect clearness of the truth... If you speak of the internal clearness, no man sees one iota in the Scriptures, but he that hath the Spirit of God... If you speak of the external clearness, nothing whatever is left obscure or ambiguous.*"

Given that conviction concerning *perspicacity*, Luther took hermeneutics and exegesis with deadly earnestness. He believed it was possible to achieve a "fusion of horizons" between the reader/interpreter and the text itself. His opponents did not necessarily espouse the same hermeneutical approach, but they shared his conviction that truth, in one way or another, could be grasped and known. Hence, for all sides involved in the theological polemics of the 16th century, politeness was pointless when the eternal destiny of human beings was at stake.

Within the context of the tradition based Christian rationality into which Luther was born and which he spent his professional lifetime redescribing, all of these theological convictions, intellectual equipages, psychological dispositions and emotional qualities, whether for good or ill, jostled against one another in his psyche and spirit. Luther was a sterling example of Ralph Waldo Emerson's doctrine of "*the infinitude of the private man.*" Most people possessing this intensely pressurized combination of traits and talents would probably have gone mad and died young in obscurity.

In Luther's case, given his rare toughness of spirit and the propitious protection of powerful patrons at crucial junctures, he survived. Having become a world historical figure by dint of that unique confluence of patronage, timing, native genius and passionate conviction (the theologically in-