

# Luther at 500

Reformation Then & Now by Brad Jersak

**W**hat's troubling you, Brother Martin?" asked Father Johann Staupitz. Was this Martin Luther's 40th confession in as many days? His young novice's obsession with sin was a wearying and neurotic litany of self-loathing.

"What's troubling me? What's troubling me is that I hate God!" blurted the young novice.

*This is new*, thought Johann. "You hate God? Why, pray tell?"

"I am a good monk; I keep the rules of our order so strictly that if ever a monk has earned his way to heaven by monkery, I have. I am killing myself with long vigils, hours of prayer, days of fasting, endless reading, repeated pilgrimages—and other work."

"And other work—yes. Your extreme denial is notable. And troubling. You suffer from sleep deprivation; you're obsessed with self-imposed mental and physical tests; and your compulsive self-

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flagellation is increasing. Now the brothers tell me they found you lying in the snow all night. Why are you doing this?"

"To atone for my sins."

"Atonement through self-punishment?"

"Of course. As the apostle says, I must mortify my flesh."

"But Brother Martin, true repentance doesn't involve self-inflicted penances and punishments. True repentance involves a change of heart."

"But didn't the Savior say, 'Be perfect as my heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48)?"

***"Your problem is that you've lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter; you've made of him the jailer and hangman of your poor soul."***

"But in context ...," Johann began.

Martin interrupted, "This word is too high and too hard for anyone to fulfill," he complained bitterly. "Any man can get along nicely with those who don't provoke him, but if someone creates the slightest irritation, he will flare up in anger—if not against friends, then he lashes out against enemies. Flesh and blood cannot rise above it."

"And by 'he,' you refer to yourself. To your temper."

"Yes."

"Your violent temper," Johann specified. *Perhaps today, Johann hoped. Might Martin finally come clean this time?*

"Yes," said Martin, looking down quietly. "I hate God and his high and holy demand of perfection. I hate God because God hates me. And I hate myself because nothing I do ever makes atonement."

"Atonement for what, Martin?" *He's so close, thought Johann. So near to the end of himself.*

"It's why I came here to the monastery. I've said it before."

"Say it again."

October 31, 1517: Martin Luther nails 95 theses to the door of Castle Church in Wittenburg Germany, sparking the Great Reformation.

"I was returning to university on horseback after a trip home. I ran into a thunderstorm, and a lightning bolt nearly struck me. Terrified of death and divine judgment, I cried out, 'Saint Anna, help me! I will become a monk!'"

That's the story Martin told himself—one he had repeated to every listening ear.

Now, whispered the Holy Spirit. The confessor pounced, "That's how you came here, brother Martin. That's not why you came here. Your conscience is stricken because you won't face the truth."

Martin squirmed. Facing the truth can be a fiery ordeal—some

die never having faced it.

"Brother Martin, if God willed to strike you down, do you honestly imagine his aim is so poor? Or that you could hide from him here? God has no need to punish you; the merits of Christ alone are sufficient and necessary."

Father Johann reflected, "***Your problem is that you've lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter; you've made of him the jailer and hangman of your poor soul.*** Don't you see? Christ is not your tormentor—your conscience is. And has punishing yourself ever appeased your guilty conscience even one iota?"

"No," admitted Martin, eyes brimming with tears.

"You cannot flee or hide from its torment. Your conscience was there—it witnessed the truth."

"I don't want to go to hell!" cried young Martin, scratching furiously at the bald spot on his monk-style tonsured haircut.

"You're already in hell! Confess and be free! Why are you here?"

"To escape judgment."

"To *hide* from judgment."



Joseph Fiennes in the movie "Luther" 2003

"Yes."

"For what?"

"Violence."

"No. That's a half-truth. Confess and be free!"

"For killing a man."

"Half-truth! Confess and be free!"

"I killed my friend."

"How?"

"In a duel!"

"Half-truth!"

"An illegal duel."

"Martin, confess and be free!"

"I murdered him. I murdered my friend," now sobbing.

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“And why did you come here?  
Was it for love of God?”

“No!”

“Was it that you feared God’s  
wrath and judgment?”

“Yes!”

“Half-truth! Confess and be free!”

“I became a monk to evade the  
law.” *At last!*

“Truth!”

“And now I atone for my sins but  
God will not have it.”

“Truth! Neither God nor your  
conscience receive your self-  
inflicted punishments, as if they  
satisfied justice. Mutilating yourself  
will not bring your friend back or  
pay for your sin—your betrayal. But  
the truth—yes, the truth shall set  
you free. Turn your mind from  
obsessing over your sin and onto  
the perfection of Christ.”

Later, Martin would say, “If it had  
not been for Dr. Staupitz, I should  
have sunk into hell.” But in truth,  
Martin’s confession did not free  
him—nor could Fr. Johann’s  
absolution. A revelation of Christ  
alone would suffice.

Seeing that Martin remained at  
an impasse, Father Johann knew  
his charge needed a break from the  
cloister and its religious routine. So,  
he sent Martin to Rome on a  
mission with a fellow monk.  
Perhaps the journey to the Holy  
City would have an effect.

When Martin returned, he  
debriefed with his mentor.

“Brother Martin, tell me of your  
journey,” asked Father Johann.

The young monk seemed  
radiant, “I’ve a glorious tale to tell!”

Yet as he began, a shadow quickly  
crossed his face.

“We made the entire journey on  
foot, and found food and lodging  
at monasteries along the way.”

“And how were the brothers?”

“I was disillusioned. At each stop,  
I was grieved to encounter their  
luxurious living, their loose morals.  
They showed precious little  
interest in spiritual things. As  
loathsome as my own failure to  
live righteously was, I was appalled

that most of the monks I met had  
abandoned the effort. Nor was it  
because they had discovered grace.  
They were simply lax and lazy.”

“And Rome?”

“I was expectant. The moment I  
saw the Holy City, I shouted, “Hail,  
holy Rome!”

“How exciting!” joined in Father  
Johann, a bit hopeful.

“Not for long. The ‘holy’ city is a  
harlot—the Babylon of John’s  
Apocalypse. The more I saw of  
Rome, the more disgusted I  
became. The place is a den of  
iniquity, its priests were openly  
infidel, the services they performed  
were farcical, the papal courtiers  
were shamelessly licentious.

“And the pope—Pope Leo doesn’t  
preach repentance for sin. He *sells* it

in the form of ‘indulgences.’ They  
have a proverb, ‘As the money  
clinks into the money chest, the  
soul flies out of purgatory.’ You can  
pay your way into a brothel and  
pre-pay your way out of purgatory  
the same day. The first proverb is a  
lie; for when the money clinks,  
greed and avarice grow. But I  
learned another proverb—this one I  
believe: ‘If there is a hell, Rome is  
built over it.’”

Father Johann was dubious,  
given Martin’s preoccupation with  
sin and perfectionism: “And this is  
your glorious tale?”

“An important piece, yes,” Martin  
nodded, “because you see, I had to  
see the Church’s debauchery in full  
bloom. At last I despaired of the  
righteousness even of the Church.



Martin Luther was condemned as a heretic at the “Diet of Worms” (1521) and excommunicated by the Pope, making him an outlaw. Frederick III, the Elector of Saxony, had him “abducted” and whisked to Wartburg Castle for protection, where he hid for ten months. Martin was disguised as a knight under the alias “Junker Jorge.” He used the time to translate the New Testament from Greek into German. Above: a 16th century altar painting (by Cranach) in St. Mary’s Church in Wittenberg. It depicts the Last Supper with Christ on the left and “Junker Jorge” being handed a cup on the right!

This was essential. But for all your wisdom and patient guidance—yes, I see it now—I had still to despair of myself.”

“Do tell!”

“My monumental self-righteousness exerted itself one more time. In Rome, there is a long staircase—they say it was from the house of Pilate. Any who climbs its steps on their knees are promised 1000 years credit of penance in purgatory. I believed it; I hoped it. And so I began to climb, knee after knee, repeating the prescribed prayers with each step.”

“Oh dear,” sighed Father Johann, visibly crestfallen. *Dear God, was it all for nothing?*

“Fear not, Father!” beamed Martin. “I was half way up when these words entered my mind, *“The righteous shall live by faith.”*

“The words of the Apostle to the Romans!”

“Yes! To Rome, of all places! A message she needs to hear again! But first I needed to hear it. The righteousness of God is not attained by petty works of human penance—neither our soaring charity, nor my senseless punishments. It is granted freely through the faithfulness of Christ alone. ***Christ alone is the perfection and righteousness of God.***

“And now at last I see it: I can never earn God’s righteousness—I mustn’t even try. It is given to us freely, by grace alone. And we live it by faith alone, in Christ alone. This is the *evangel*—the good news!”

“And now?” Father Johann asked his zealous young friend, “where will this revelation lead you?”

“By God’s grace, a reformation,” said Martin with grim determination. *“A Great Reformation.”* □

*Brad Jersak is editor-in-chief of CWRMagazine. This article is a piece of historical fiction, citing the following sources, often verbatim:*

### Sources

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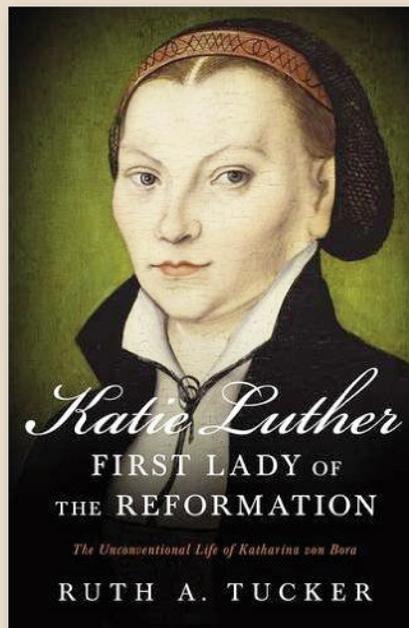
Photo credit: page 3 screenshot of Joseph Fiennes as Luther in “Luther” (*R.S. Entertainment*, 2003).

# KATIE LUTHER

by Ruth A. Tucker

It is critical that we do not seek to mold Katie into a modern-day Evangelical. Martin more easily serves such a purpose in that he was adept at God-talk, emphasized salvation by faith alone, and even spoke of being born again. Not so Katie....

Like most Christians of this era, there is no evidence that she professed to have “a transforming personal relationship with Christ,” and would thus be relegated to the pejorative LCWE [Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization] category of “nominal.”



Religion was determined more by where a family lived than by personal profession of faith, an oddity introduced by Anabaptists. By marrying Luther, Katie joined the Protestant ranks. That there is no evidence she actually made this new faith her own has gone essentially unnoticed by historians.

She was nevertheless the most indispensable figure of the German Reformation save for Martin Luther himself. Take her and their twenty-year marriage out of the picture, and his leadership would have suffered severely. Had it not been for the stability she brought to his life, he may have gone off the rails emotionally and mentally by the mid 1520s. His emphasis on, and modeling of, marriage and family as an essential aspect of his reform would have been lost.

Only Katharina von Bora—no other woman—could have accomplished what she did with this most unstable man. Without her, the Black Cloister would have gone to ruin—the result of which would have been no “Table Talk,” and that is only the barest beginning of what would have been lost if she were taken out of the equation. □

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