The one line that most viewers of the Luther film will remember— “Most days, I'm so depressed I can’t even get out of bed.” This comes from the father of the Protestant Reformation as he suffers the heaviness of official Christendom gone to seed.

Somehow that one line gets at everything in this film, all its good intentions and all its mediocrity. Many aspects of Luther succeed as historical reconstructions: the costuming, the set design, the recreation of a few events— like the famous stand before the Diet at Worms. Yet, every time I started warming to the film, something embarrassing floated from the script— like John Tetzel, caricatured as a snake oil dealer, telling a mesmerized crowd, “These monks are standing by to write your names” or Katharina von Bora telling Luther they will make “joyous music together.” People don’t really talk like that, not now, not ever; at least not without blushing.

The danger of film biographies like this one lurks in the imagination of the writer. The screenwriter, forced to enter the mind of the actual historical personage, must have compatible intellectual equipment. I doubt there are very many writers who could put words in Luther’s mouth that would sound like things he might actually have said. After all, who ever knew what Luther would say from moment to moment? Not Bart Gavigan and Camille Thomassen, who conjured this nicety from a play by John Osborne. None of the three had any prior screen credits.

I saw Luther the first time with a handful of Lutheran friends. Afterward, we stood in the hall engaged in a sort of obligatory talk-back, awkwardly praising Luther’s many accuracies, grateful that a film about a real Christian playing in a real theater didn’t paint him a buffoon. However, I had been told beforehand that the film stayed true to events, all the safe events. The only glaring untruth was the implication that Joseph Fiennes could somehow age into the lumpy Luther we have all come to love.

One would expect as much since the energy for the production came from Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, an organization hardly poised to engage popular American culture head on. All the rough edges of Luther’s volatile temperament get ground away. He is Luther of the Sunday School class, Luther for Lutherans who are glad they are not Calvinists, or worse, Roman Catholics. The film is designed to “edify” the already edified and, I suppose, promote Lutheranism nationally, which it doesn’t really; that is, unless Garrison Keilor decides to have Pastor Ingqvist take some of his Lake Wobegon faithful to see it.

More to the point than anything my Lutheran friends may have said before and after the film is the silence coming from everyone else. When I saw it that first time, my little party of six was the only party in the entire theater. That’s never a good sign. Even the last bomb that I braved, Cold Creek Manor, attracted a few daters looking for an excuse to cling to one another. Nothing in Luther made you feel anything deeply. My heart was never strangely warmed. I was interested from time to time,
yes, by the visualizations of a history I only knew from books. And I was gratified, yes, that Christian high school teachers will now have an updated tool by which to teach Reformation history. But not warmed, and not alone in the experience, judging from the dismal turnouts across the land and Luther's inevitable descent into the Walmart bin of discounted videos.

We might be tempted to attribute the poor showing and the numerous bad reviews given the film to the spiritual malaise of our culture, but no. My guess is that the upcoming film The Passion by Mel Gibson will break attendance records. (Note that Gibson spent more than $25 million of his own money and has added the sum of his considerable talent and professional integrity to the project, especially in protecting its precise Hebrew and Aramaic script.)

People are hungry for some spiritual energy. They want to be elevated. A few years ago, I sat in a packed theater on the liberal East side of Milwaukee and listened to a spontaneous outpouring of applause and weeping at the conclusion of Roberto Benigni's Life Is Beautiful. The same thing happened on a smaller scale this past year when I saw a beautiful little film by Tom Tykwer called Heaven.

The problem here is that we have one of the greatest and most unpredictable men who ever lived relegated to a film as flat as the famous table at Worms. If an Irish journalist like Veronica Guerin has her life retold in a B-grade film, no one complains. They are grateful to hear and see the story. But this is Martin Luther, for pity sake. Not a soul could possibly have left a theater after this film thinking, "Well, no wonder he turned the world upside-down. I'd shed my blood to preserve this man's legacy."

I have seen and written about many great Christian films, from Robert Bresson’s haunting Diary of a Country Priest to the more accessible Chariots of Fire Beyond the force of the genuinely authentic, what makes these films so great is that they pull us toward Christ. The powerful “Christian” films have some kind of incarnation in them. God manifests himself in some way or another. It may be an overt miracle like the healing of Ben Hur’s mother and sister in the old William Wyler classic or the miracle of providence that propels Eric Liddel around the Olympic track in Chariots of Fire. But it is something, and you never are the same afterward.

This Luther film lacks this “something.” It stays cerebral and denominational, appealing primarily to those who want a history that aligns with accepted dogma and tradition. No risks are taken. No character really sins, beyond promoting false doctrine. No holy redemptive fire, no unction. I had no inclination after the film to go home and speak tenderly to my wife or embrace my children or pick up my Testament and read.

More is the pity. Perhaps a film like this needed to be made by an atheist who stumbled across the wonder of Luther the man and Christianity the religion. It might have been another Amadeus, provocative despite flaws. Instead, here we have predictable with flaws.

In the months since its release I have heard one positive, unsolicited comment about Luther, this from a seeker who is dating a Lutheran girl; he said he was glad to learn a little about the story of the Lutheran faith, and so he forgave the film its many faults. Thank God for that much.
Luther, the Movie

My fear of projects like Luther is that they confirm many people in their conviction that Lutherans (and perhaps all evangelicals) are a parochial and safe bunch, dipping just a toe into the pool of culture once in awhile, then pulling back with a satisfied smile.