The global ambitions of Christianity were ignited less than two months after the death of Jesus. When “cloven tongues like as of fire” appeared above their heads, the apostles acquired the ability to make themselves understood in any country. Reversing the myth of the destruction of the Tower of Babel, which pictured humankind scattered into linguistic plurality, the mission launched at Pentecost proposed to reunite the farflung peoples within the Gospel. The apostle Andrew preached in Asia Minor and, according to legend, Georgia; James went to Spain; and Thomas voyaged as far as Madras, India, where he is buried.

“The Luther Effect: Protestantism—500 Years in the World,” an exhibition opening in Berlin in April, is one of many in Germany and beyond that will mark the five hundredth anniversary of the Augustinian monk Martin Luther’s challenge to the Roman Catholic Church. The Deutsches Historisches Museum will assemble hundreds of paintings and other artifacts in the Martin-Gropius-Bau, proposing a reassessment of the “effects and counter-effects” of Lutheranism—and more generally Protestantism—across four continents. Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses against indulgences, a polemic posted on a chapel door in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517, set off a cascade of dissatisfaction that ended in a permanent schism of the church. But Luther did not cast his gaze beyond Europe. He pointed out that the global mission of Christianity had so far failed: “The Devil will never let that come to pass.” He also believed that the Apocalypse was imminent and that not enough time remained to convert the rest of humanity. So, throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the unreformed Roman Catholic Church carried on the mission: Jesuits preached in China, Japan, India, and Africa, while Dominicans, Franciscans, and Jesuits built churches in Mexico and Brazil. Only late in the game did Lutherans seek to convert heathens, beginning in 1705 when the Danish crown sent Pietists from Halle, Germany, to the outpost of Tranquebar in Tamil Nadu, south of Madras. Meanwhile, English Protestants were preaching to Native Americans and, later, with greater success, to Africans.

The exhibition in Berlin limits its focus to five episodes—Germany and Europe 1450–1600, Sweden 1500–1750, North America 1600–1900, Korea 1850–2000, and Tanzania in the present—that represent the global aspirations of the faith. The reach and dynamism of Christianity are real: Two-thirds of the world’s Christians live outside Europe and North America. Protestantism is expanding, and most quickly in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Muslim world. There are an estimated twenty-three to forty million Protestants in China.

The aim of missionaries is to liberate, spiritually. But from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, the project of conversion dovetailed with European commerce and conquest. In the eyes of a secular modernity, the Christian mission is fatally compromised. Already in 1802, the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder argued that the mission could not be disentangled from colonialism. In Herder’s fictional dialogue on conversion, an Asian character asks a European: “How would you respond if someone came to your country and insolently told you that your Holy of Holies, your laws, religion, wisdom, and political institutions were completely absurd?” The European responds: “It is different here. We have power, ships, money, cannons, culture.”

“The Luther Effect” acknowledges that Protestantism created conflict and at the same time generated creative resistance. Conversion is subject to the same ambiguous processes of mimesis and reversal as any other form of cultural translation. The aim of the show is to allow Luther’s reforming intentions to recede behind the plurality and diversity of their consequences. But one could easily draw a quite different conclusion from the exhibition, for the shock waves that continue to reverberate outward from Wittenberg also affirm the force of Luther’s originary act.

“[The Luther Effect: Protestantism—500 Years in the World] is on view at the Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, Apr. 12–Nov. 5.”