**NEWSBRIEF--NOVEMBER, 2016**

***MARTIN LUTHER AND THE DEVIL***

When gathering around the font for the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, the pastor asks those

assembled, “Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?” Then we respond,

“I renounce them.” What are you thinking when you hear and affirm these words? Is this

language about the devil a concession to liturgical tradition—“we do it because it was always

done this way”? Do we renounce the devil with our lips but in our minds believe that talk

of the devil is a mythological relic of the past? Is it not the consensus of our enlightened,

post-modern, society that “the devil” is a creature of fantasy that contemporary science and

psychology have replaced with rational terms like fanaticism, egotism, and mental illness?

Martin Luther would be out of step in today’s world. He would look on the likes of terrorism, corruption in high places, and religious complacency as marks of the devil, and this would make

him more serious about the devil than even the Middle Ages! Luther did believe in the devil and on this score he surely did not emulate the temper of our time. Most certainly he would reject the modern credo that sin is a state of ignorance that will yield to greater education and that the course of history itself is progressively redemptive. Luther could not tolerate such a reduction of God or the devil! Instead, he had no doubt that the devil existed; not a devil of flesh and bone and blood, but a spiritual force opposed to God; not a devil of unlimited power, but one whose power is limited yet terrible in its wiles and deceptions.

So do not look for Luther to confirm a devil that has a human-like body with fashionables like horns, tail, red cape, and pitchfork, because the incarnation is true only of God in Christ; only Christ has come in flesh and blood, and only Christ is “really present” with us in his body and blood. People are truly superstitious if they really believe the devil has a body like some of those trick-or-treaters on Halloween! Nonetheless, the devil is a mighty spiritual force who is always trying to undermine God’s creation of the church, family, state, economy, and nature.

While still an Augustinian monk, Luther tried to escape the devil in the safety of a monastery.

Such was the assumption of the medieval church that monasteries and convents were refuges from the world with its flagrant sins and rampages of the devil. But the more Luther studied and

taught the holy scriptures, and the more he began to grasp the Gospel as the free gift of salvation

in Jesus Christ, the more he felt plagued by the devil. The devil is most aroused where the Gospel is preached, taught, and administered.

“The devil is more pious than a nun and knows the Bible better than a professor of Old Testament,” and, to Luther’s mind, he deceived the church into teaching that Christ’s work of “justification” now allows the sinner to “do your best” to achieve righteousness instead of receive it. Luther discovered that in the matter of salvation Christ does it all; our righteousness and our good works make no addition to Christ’s work, because justification is not what the sinner achieves but what the sinner receives. Justification is entirely God’s work and even the faith to receive the gift of Christ himself is God’s work. This was Luther’s “Gospel” breakthrough.

This gift of justifying faith is based not on our works but is founded on the promise of

God. Faith is not our active accomplishment, for we are passive and God is active in giving

us the faith that receives Christ the victor. God will remain true to his promise because,

as Luther often repeated, “God does not lie.” If the devil gets his way, however, he will convince the sinner to believe that God is a liar, for the devil wants nothing more than to rip away the assurance of God’s promises. You can see that this drama is not just on paper, but is truly personal and existential. The Christian life is not altogether placid when all the devil’s temptations are designed to produce doubts in God’s reliability,

Luther spoke many times over of these trials in himself. “Are you sure you are right, Dr.

Luther? Do you more than anyone else have the truth? Can the church have been wrong for

so many centuries? Dare you defy the pope?” Because of the devil the Christian life is not

all sweetness and peace, but a life stretched between the Gospel and the devil, between being

at the same time righteous and sinful. Our will is a donkey ridden either by God or the devil.

In *The Large Catechism*, concerning the sixth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, Luther warns:

 “Then comes the devil, who baits and badgers us on all sides, but especially

 exerts himself where the conscience and spiritual matters are concerned.

 His purpose is to make us scorn and despise both the Word and the works

 of God, to tear us away from faith, hope, and love, to draw us into unbelief,

 false security, and stubbornness, or, on the contrary, to drive us into despair,

 denial of God, blasphemy, and countless other abominable sins” (*The Large*

 *Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Kolb & Wengert, p. 454).

The only sure defense against the devil is the Gospel, which brings Christ to us in the Means

of Grace in the fellowship of the church. In fact, fleeing from the devil to the Gospel, returning to Christ daily in your baptism, and receiving Christ bodily in bread and wine, are paradoxical ways in which the devil turns us to life in Christ. This is not a providential view of the devil,

but only the acknowledgment that God can turn the devil against himself to serve God in spite

of opposing God. Think of the devil as you wish, but Luther shows that those who know that they are victims of the devil can thereby discover the victory that comes not from ourselves but from Christ alone.

(For further reading, the best extended treatment is *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*,

by Heiko Oberman, Yale University Press, 1989. Also fine is *The Theology* *of Martin Luther*,

by Paul Althaus, Fortress Press, 1966, 161-168).

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