

WHERE ARE THE NAIL PRINTS? THE DEVIL AND DR. LUTHER

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Abstract: *The 500th anniversary of the Reformation has prompted much reflection on the nature of Martin Luther's reform movement and its effects on the modern world. Some celebrate Luther's life and work as the herald of modernity while others lament Luther and his legacy as more medieval and backwards than modern and progressive. Luther and his reform did indeed look backwards to the Scriptures and the patristic era in order to re-form the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Luther's struggle with the devil is a neglected aspect of his life that shows Luther in his medieval context, his perception of himself and his movement, and his dependence upon the incarnate and crucified Christ. In this modern, disenchanting world, Luther's wrestling with the evil one can help the heirs of the Reformation recognize the pervasive reality of evil and the ultimate victory Christians have through the cross of Christ.*

Key words: *Luther, devil, Satan, demonology, cross, Reformation 500, Anfechtungen, Middle Ages/medieval*

“I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, born of the Father in eternity, and also true human being, born of the virgin Mary is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned man. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil.”¹

Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism” (1529)

“To this end, I am born. To wage war against hordes and devils and go out to battle.”²

Martin Luther, “Preface to Melancthon’s Lectures on Ephesians and Colossians” (1529)

Five hundred years ago, on October 31, 1517, a thirty-three-year-old German professor named Martin Luther called for an academic debate on the commercial trade in papal indulgences—and all the bats in hell came screeching out of their cages. It was All Saints’ Eve, but it became the Horrible Halloween from Hades.

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¹ Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism,” ed. Timothy J. Wengert, in *The Annotated Luther*, vol. 4: *Pastoral Writings* (ed. Mary Jane Haemig; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 224.

² WA 30/2:68. “Ich bin dazu geboren, das ich mit den rotten und teuffeln mus kriegen und zu felde ligen.” English translation by Heinz Schilling, *Martin Luther: Rebel in an Age of Upheaval* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 54.

There is a word in German, *Aufbruch*, often used to describe the Reformation. It means commotion, disturbance, revolt, rebellion, riot, revolution. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that *Aufbruch* was not Luther's aim or intention. Professor Brad Gregory makes this point well in his important book, *The Unintended Reformation*.³ What happened in the sixteenth century was unintended, and I would add, unexpected. Not only was it never Luther's intention to found a new church from scratch, it was also not his plan to inaugurate a reformation. Nor did he think, in fact, that he had done so. He once said, "The church needs a reformation, but this is not something for one person, but . . . for God alone. The time for such a reformation is known only by him who created time."⁴

Of course, "reformation" was not a new word in the sixteenth century. Long before Luther, all across Europe, leading lights of the medieval Catholic Church, people like chancellor Jean Gerson of the University of Paris and his teacher, Cardinal Pierre d'Ailly, were calling for *reformatio in capite et in membris*—a reformation in head and the members. The head was the pope, the members, everybody else. Even during the Reformation, as professor Emidio Campi of Zurich has pointed out, the Latin word *reformatio* is found more often in documents of the Council of Trent than it is in the confessions of the Protestant Reformation.⁵

Martin Luther was not the *reformer*. Jesus Christ is the only *reformer*. Luther's preferred designation of himself was Doctor of Sacred Scripture and an "unworthy evangelist of Jesus Christ." At best, Luther might be called the forerunner of the Reformation, a proto-reformer, if you will. We can understand this in the same sense that Johann von Staupitz, Luther's great mentor and father in God, referred to himself as a forerunner in the last letter he ever wrote to Luther, dated April 1, 1524. Staupitz would be dead by the end of that year. "We owe you a lot, Martin," Staupitz wrote, "You were the one who brought us out of the pig sty and led us into the pastures of life to the words of salvation. As for me, I was once your forerunner in teaching the holy gospel."⁶ Staupitz had reason to think of himself as the forerunner, not just the precursor of Luther per se, but of the new shining of the light of the gospel itself. He did this by pointing Luther away from himself—away from his sins to the very wounds of Jesus, the sweetest Savior. This is why Luther could say that Staupitz "bore me in Christ."⁷ In the last letter Luther wrote to Staupitz in September 1523, even after it had become clear that Staupitz would not follow Luther in leaving the Church of Rome, the younger forerunner wrote to the older, "It was through you that the light of the gospel first began to shine out of darkness into my heart. You were the one who started the doctrine."⁸

³ Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2012).

⁴ *WA* 1:627. "Ecclesia indiget reformatione, quod non est unius hominis . . . immo solius dei. Tempus autem huius reformationis novit solus ille, qui condidit tempora."

⁵ Emidio Campi, "Was the Reformation a German Event?," in *The Myth of the Reformation* (ed. Peter Opitz; Bristol, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 15.

⁶ Quoted in Eric L. Saak, *High Way to Heaven: The Augustinian Platform Between Reform and Reformation, 1292–1524* (Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought 89; London: Brill, 2002), 657.

⁷ *WA* 58/1:27.

⁸ *LW* 49:48.

If Luther did not start a reformation, can we at least say that he instigated a revolution? The Reformation was certainly an age of scientific advance, of new inventions and exciting discoveries. Think of the printing press. Think of the mariner's compass, which allowed Magellan to sail to the other side of the world and plant a flag in what is now the Phillippine Islands in the same month (April 1521) that Luther appeared before Emperor Charles V to declare, "Here I stand, so help me God."

Another new invention was the telescope, which Galileo used to confirm, with the help of Johannes Kepler, the heliocentric view of the universe, first put forward by Nicholas Copernicus in his treatise, *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, published in 1543, just three years before Luther died. Copernicus gave us the word "revolution." The Protestant Reformation was indeed a revolution in the original scientific sense of that word: the return of a body in orbit to its original position. The Reformation was a "back to the future" movement.

Luther and the other reformers who followed in his tracks wanted to reform (and to re-form) the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church on the basis of the Word of God and to do so by returning to the historic faith of the early church, as they found it set forth in the pure teachings of the Holy Scriptures. The closest analogy in the sixteenth century to the later meaning of revolution in European history (think the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution) was the Peasants' Revolt of 1525 in which there was a horrible bloodbath with some 100,000 people killed. But it was not a "reformation" in any sense of the word.

We are touching here on a debate that was raging 100 years ago among historians of the Reformation in Germany and elsewhere. The embers from that dispute are still glowing today. Does the Reformation, in its basic insight and fundamental direction, belong more to the Middle Ages, which came before it, or to modern times, which followed it? In the latter view, Luther was a precursor, not of a reformation divinely bestowed, but rather of an Enlightenment, humanly wrought. As Hegel said, "Luther was the all-illuminating sun, which followed the day break at the end of the middle ages."⁹

Another representative of this view was Thomas Carlisle, the nineteenth-century Scottish savant who said that Luther's refusal to recant at Worms in 1521 was "the greatest moment in the modern history of man." Carlisle surmised, "Had Luther, in that moment, done other, it had all been otherwise." English Puritanism, the French Revolution, European civilization, parliamentary democracy—all of this would have been forestalled had Luther faltered. "In that moment of crisis, however, Luther did not desert us," Carlisle said.¹⁰

⁹ H. Glockner, ed., *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart-Bad Constanz, 1956–1965), XI:519. On Hegel as an interpreter of Luther, see Gerhard Ebeling, "Luther and the Beginning of the Modern Age," in *Luther and the Dawn of the Modern Era* (ed. Heiko A. Oberman; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 11–39.

¹⁰ Quoted in A. G. Dickens and John Tonkin, *The Reformation and Historical Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 163.

A whole host of leading lights in the early twentieth century followed this particular argument. Think of Max Weber with his disenchantment thesis, or of Wilhelm Dilthey with his focus on individualism, “the autocracy of the believing person,” as he put it.¹¹ Or Karl Holl, the great Luther scholar with his emphasis on conscience. Following in their trail, a figure like Adolf von Harnack, the scion of German liberal Protestantism, could sum up the progressive, optimistic model of understanding the Reformation this way, “The modern age began along with Luther’s reformation on October the 31st, 1517. It was inaugurated by the blows of the hammer on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg.”¹² The Reformation was Act One in a play called Modernity—a process that produced people like us: modern, postmodern people of culture and enlightenment, of refinement, of nuance and niceness.

Counter voices there were 100 years ago, including Ernst Troeltsch, who saw the Reformation as more medieval than modern, more authoritarian than liberating, more transcendent than immanent. Now, Troeltsch had no more personal sympathy than Harnack for the traditional construals of the Reformation: its Trinitarian and christological convictions, its soteriological preoccupations. These were tenets to be embarrassed about and something to be transcended and eliminated in the forward march of progressive Protestantism. Troeltsch was a systematic theologian as well as a sociologist of religion, but he did perceptively see that the major break in the Christian culture of the West had taken place in the eighteenth century, rather than in the sixteenth, with the Enlightenment, rather than the Reformation. In this respect, he agreed with Nietzsche who saw in the Reformation, not the birth pangs of modernity, but rather a challenge and sign of contradiction. “If Luther would have been burned like Hus,” Nietzsche said, “the Enlightenment would perhaps have dawned somewhat earlier, and with a more beautiful luster than we can now conceive.”¹³

These two perspectives can still be heard in the grand narratives that dominate popular perceptions of the Reformation today. I have heard both of them articulated several times by various interpreters in this anniversary year. The Reformation as a source of freedom, conscience, progress, democracy, capitalism, if you think that is a good thing. Or the counter-myth, the Reformation as the grandmother of everything deplorable: religious violence, secularism, totalitarianism, Nazism, and capitalism, if you think that is a bad thing.

What did Martin Luther think he was doing on All Hallows’ Eve in 1517? Luther was not only an Augustinian monk and a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg at that point. He was also a local church pastor. Ever since 1514 he had been charged with the responsibility of being the primary preacher at St.

¹¹ Steven E. Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250–1550* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 260.

¹² Quoted in Schilling, *Martin Luther*, 524. See Adolf von Harnack, *Erforschtes und Erlebtes* (Giessen: Alfred Topelmann, 1923), 110.

¹³ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (1), trans. Gary Handwerk, vol. 3 of *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 164.

Mary's Church, the town church in the center of Wittenberg. When Johann Tetzel, the commissioner of indulgences, came to a neighboring town hawking his wares, Luther's parishioners ran to buy them as fast as they could. There were bargains to be had. Later, one of those who had heard Tetzel preach in the city of Halle came back and told Luther what Tetzel was saying. The Dominican friar was said to have claimed that no matter what sin you had committed, however great, even if you had violated the Blessed Virgin Mary, you could still obtain a plenary indulgence by paying a certain amount of money. Luther refers to that report in Thesis Seventy-five of the Ninety-five Theses.¹⁴

It was cheap grace on the cheap. And this is what so incensed Martin Luther, the pastor. At this point in his life, Luther was not condemning indulgences, as such. That comes later. It was rather the fact that they were being *preached*. Everyone knows the first of the Ninety-five Theses: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said to repent, he meant the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." And we often hear quoted several of the theses near the end, where Luther condemned those who said, "Peace, peace" and there is no peace, "Cross, cross" and there is no cross. But hidden right in the middle of Luther's document are two theses of critical importance. Thesis Sixty-two: "The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God." And Thesis Fifty-three: "The enemies of Christ and the Pope prohibit the preaching of the word of God in some churches so that indulgences can be preached in others."¹⁵ The Reformation was born in a crisis of preaching and pastoral care. The Reformation was about the freedom of the Word of God, and the freedom of the grace of God to be proclaimed.

But to preach the Word of God, to preach the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God, is not an easy thing. The last of the Ninety-five Theses says that we enter into heaven through many tribulations, *multas tribulationes*. For Luther, such tribulations involve more than political tumults, the *Aufrubr* of the thrust and the counter-thrust of controversies and disputes, of theological polemics. No, to preach the gospel of the glory and the grace of God involved hand-to-hand combat with the powers of darkness, with the prince of evil himself, with the devil. "I did not learn my theology all at once," Luther said, "but I had to search deeper for it, where my *Anfechtungen* took me. ... Not understanding, reading, or speculation, but living, nay, rather dying and being damned makes one a theologian."¹⁶ This is what makes one a preacher, too.

It is precisely here that Luther comes across as the least modern and most medieval of the reformers, a true child of "the Dark Ages," as Petrarch had dubbed the era between Augustine and Dante. This world bequeathed to Luther an image of the devil often depicted in late medieval art. Like Pan, the son of Hermes in

¹⁴ LW 31:17–33.

¹⁵ LW 31:17–33; WA 1:233–238.

¹⁶ WATr 1:146; WA 5:163. "Ich hab mein theologiam nit auff ein mal gelernt, sonder hab ymmer tieffer und tieffer grubeln müssen, da haben mich meine tentationes hin bracht. ... Vivendo, immo moriendo et damnando fit theologus, non intelligendo, legendo aut speculando."

classical mythology, who was born with horns and a tail, the late medieval devil was often portrayed with cloven hooves and a goat's beard. The fallen Lucifer now appears as a rustic nature god, with power over all that is earthly and sensual; grinning; devious; threatening; often bearing a pitchfork, derived from Neptune's trident (indicating his control over sea as well as land); able to fly through the air with leathery bat's wings. Luther knew all of this and he did not reject it out of hand, for he believed in witches, goblins, and sinister powers of every kind. But he saw through all of this staging to a deeper understanding of the devil and his ways with human beings.

For if we simply dismiss Luther as a benighted child of his times, and if we demythologize his conception of the evil one as a retrograde hangover from his superstitious medieval upbringing, we will miss something very important at the heart of Luther's faith. Heiko A. Oberman in his *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* puts it this way: "Luther's new belief in the devil is such an integral part of the Reformation discovery that if the reality of powers inimical to God is not grasped, the incarnation of Christ, as well as the justification of the sinner, are reduced to ideas of the mind rather than experiences of faith."¹⁷ This is what Luther's battle against the devil is meant to convey.

Before testing Oberman's thesis in Luther's own life and thought, it is good to recognize that the demonology Luther inherited from the tradition, which he deepened in his own distinctive way, was not everyone's cup of tea in the age of the Renaissance and the Reformation, any more than it is today. For example, there were some who affirmed, with all orthodox Protestants and Catholics, the reality of the devil, but who believed that the devil would eventually be saved, echoing the universalism of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. There were a few radical reformers, such as those who met at a synod in Venice in 1550, who denied the existence of the devil outright. They drew up a ten-point statement of belief that was largely negative—no virgin birth, no vicarious atonement, no angels, no devil, no hell. These dissenters represented the rationalist wing of the Radical Reformation, far different from Michael Sattler, Balthasar Hubmaier, Menno Simons, and other evangelical Anabaptists who certainly affirmed the palpable presence of the evil one. But many Anabaptists saw the devil as much in the persecuting Lutherans and Zwinglians as they did the Catholics.

Then there were the humanist scholars, of whom Erasmus is the greatest example. Their aim was education and moral reform, not doctrinal renewal. They wanted to have as few doctrines as possible and to hold them as lightly as one could. Erasmus, of course, did not deny the existence of the devil—he was not that stupid! But compared to Luther, Erasmus's devil is very puny. It is the devil on Prozac. This comes out in Luther's great clash with Erasmus on the freedom of the will. Maybe Erasmus has gotten a bad rap from some theologians, for he was not a pure Pelagian—hardly anybody was in the Middle Ages since Pelagius himself. But

¹⁷ Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 104–5.

in the course of the thousand years prior to the Reformation, that high Augustinian understanding of grace had been attenuated, hemmed in, and watered down to such an extent that the human was, more or less, autonomous and self-sufficient. Luther, in his debate with Erasmus, plays with a different metaphor. We are like a horse ridden, either by God or the devil. So, the ultimate question of life is not, “Who are you?” It is rather, “Whose are you? To whom do you belong?” Which is another way of saying, “In what do you trust?”¹⁸

Luther’s own encounters with the evil one are much more deeply rooted in his own personal background and family history. Lyndal Roper’s biography *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* points this out very well: “Writing from the Wartburg to his father in 1521, Luther said, ‘From the days of my childhood, Satan must have foreseen something in me, for he has raged against me with incredible contrivings to destroy or hinder me so that I’ve often wondered if I was the only man in the whole world whom he was seeking.’”¹⁹

First of all, there was a story circulated by Luther’s Catholic opponents as early as the 1530s, that Luther was not the natural-born son of Hans Luther and his wife Margarethe, but rather the misbegotten progeny of a promiscuous bath maid named Hannah, a young woman who was seduced in the public bathhouse at Eisleben, by an incubus, by the devil himself. No wonder Luther wreaked such havoc; he was literally the son of the devil!²⁰

Second, there was the famous thunderstorm in the summer of 1505, near Stotternheim, in which Luther, in a moment of panic, fearing immediate death, cries out to Saint Anna for deliverance, promising to become a monk. Luther insisted on fulfilling that vow by joining the monastery of the Augustinian hermits in Erfurt. Luther later reflected that in the first years in the monastery the devil was pretty quiet.²¹

Finally, there came that occasion of Luther’s first Mass, one of the most important events in his monastic life. Not all monks are priests, but Luther was singled out for ordination and became a priest in April 1507. One of the most important jobs a Catholic priest had—and still has—was the saying of the Mass. Luther prepared for this by studying Gabriel Biel’s *Exposition of the Canon of the Mass*. Biel had died in 1495 but almost all of Luther’s teachers had studied under him, so it was natural that they would use Biel’s liturgical handbook on the Mass to prepare a newly minted priest on how to perform it accurately. The date was set: Cantate Sunday, May 2, 1507. The saying of one’s first Mass was a festive event; comparable to a commencement or graduation today. There was a sumptuous banquet, music, drinking, your family brings gifts, a good time is meant to be had by all. Luther’s father, though still smarting from Luther’s impetuous decision to become a

¹⁸ *WA* 18:126.

¹⁹ *LW* 48:333.

²⁰ Ian Siggins, *Luther and His Mother* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003).

²¹ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 21.

monk, nonetheless decided to come to Erfurt for this occasion and actually brought a gift of 20 guildens for the monastery.²²

Perhaps no one in the Middle Ages had been better prepared for saying their first Mass than Martin Luther. Luther did well until he came to the beginning of the canon of the Mass, at the point in which the bread and the wine are to be consecrated. That prayer of consecration begins with these words: *Te igitur clementissime Pater*—"Therefore, O most holy merciful Father." Luther thought, "Who am I? A miserable pygmy, dust, and ashes that I should be saying this to the true, the one, the eternal, living God?" He nearly fainted, but, with the help of the prior, barely made it through. Martin then came down to the banquet and sat next to his father, Hans Luther.

When the discussion turned to Luther's decision in the thunderstorm to become a monk, old, ugly memories came rushing back. Hans Luther quoted to his son the fifth commandment about how important it was to obey your father and mother. "Yes, but remember father," Luther said, "how I was called to become a monk by God who gave me a signal from heaven." To which, Hans Luther retorted: "Ha! Let's hope it wasn't a mere illusion or deception (*illusio et prestigium*). Was it really the voice of God you heard in the thunderstorm, Martin? Or was it perhaps the insinuation of the Fiend of Hell?" Luther would remember that exchange for the rest of his life, for his father had put his finger on a sensitive nerve.²³

There was a story that circulated about Saint Martin of Tours, after whom Martin Luther had been named because he was baptized on Saint Martin's Day, November 11th. The story was recorded by Sulpitius Severus in his book *On the Life of Saint Martin*. Martin Luther may well have known about it because it was included in *The Golden Legend of the Saints*, a book of medieval hagiography that Luther knew very well and often quoted.

The devil appeared to Saint Martin, we are told, but he did not appear with a pitchfork and smoke coming out of his ears. Rather he appeared in the guise of the resplendent glory of the risen Christ himself, much as we find him described in the first chapter of the Apocalypse:

Clothed in a royal robe and with a crown of precious stones and gold encircling his head, his shoes too being inlaid with gold, while he presented a tranquil countenance, and a generally rejoicing aspect, so that no such thought as that he was the devil might be entertained—he stood by the side of Martin as he was praying in his cell. The saint being dazzled by his first appearance, both preserved a long and deep silence. This was first broken by the devil, who said: "Acknowledge, Martin, who it is that you behold. I am Christ; and being just about to descend to earth, I wished first to manifest myself to thee." When Martin kept silence on hearing these words, and gave no answer whatever, the devil dared to repeat his audacious declaration: "Martin, why do you hesitate to be-

²² For an overview and interpretation of this event see Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (New York: Random House, 2016), 34–36; Scott Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 36–39; Schilling, *Martin Luther*, 71–72.

²³ *WATR* 4:384; *WA* 49:322.

lieve, when you see? I am Christ.” Then Martin, the Spirit revealing the truth to him, that he might understand it was the devil, and not God, replied as follows: “The Lord Jesus did not predict that he would come clothed in purple, and with a glittering crown upon his head. I will not believe that Christ has come, unless he appears with that appearance and form in which he suffered, and openly displaying the marks of his wounds upon the cross.” On hearing these words, the devil vanished like smoke, and filled the cell with such a disgusting smell, that he left unmistakable evidences of his real character.²⁴

The question, “Where are the nail prints? Is it Christ? Or the Fiend of Hell I am encountering?” would continue to bother Luther all the years in his monastery and all the years of his life. Luther entered the monastery to find an answer to the question: how can I find a gracious God? But soon, as David Yeago has pointed out, that question soon deepened into another equally difficult one: Not only, “How can I find a gracious God?” But, “Where can I find the real God? Where are the nail prints?”²⁵

In her study of the origin of Satan, Elaine Pagels has pointed out that in the NT, Satan is not the distant enemy but the intimate enemy.²⁶ Luther, too, was well acquainted with the intimate devil. This is not to deny that the devil also had a huge public role as well. The devil seemed to be everywhere. “The devil is as wide as the world,” Luther said. He extends from heaven down to hell. He can bring about all kinds of things. He can cause crops to fail, storms to brew, children to be snatched away from their cradles. In his commentary on Galatians, Luther noted, “We are guests in the world, of which he [the devil] is the ruler (John 16:11) and the god (2 Cor. 4:4). Therefore the bread we eat, the drinks we drink, the clothes we wear—in fact, the air and everything we live on in the flesh—are under his reign.”²⁷

Some scholars have surmised that Luther needed such a robust devil as a way of answering the classical problem of evil, a way of doing theodicy. But in fact, Luther’s devil makes theodicy far more difficult. Either radical dualism, the Manichean option, or unilinear monism, as Leibniz proposed, are better, more consistent ways to address the problem of evil.²⁸ Throwing the devil into the mix, especially if you call him as Luther did, “God’s devil,” complicates things, not simply because Luther’s devil was so robust, but because Luther’s God was so sovereign. Luther can speak of the devil as a mask God wears, or as a hoe in the hands of the gardener breaking up the ground making it ready for planting.

Luther said that God was smaller than anything small, bigger than anything big, shorter than anything short, longer than anything long, broader, slimmer than anything else.²⁹ It reminds me of a comment my colleague Robert Smith Jr. uses to

²⁴ Sulpitius Severus, *Life of St. Martin* (NPNF² 11:15–16).

²⁵ David Yeago, “The Catholic Luther,” *First Things* 61 (March 1996): 37–41.

²⁶ Elaine Pagels, “The Social History of Satan, Part II: Satan in the New Testament Gospels,” *J-AR* 1 (1994): 20.

²⁷ *LW* 26:190.

²⁸ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy* (ed. Austin Farrer; trans. E.M. Huggard; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952).

²⁹ *WA* 26:339.

characterizing the omnipresence of God in the tradition of African-American preaching: God is so big that if he moves anywhere in the universe, he has to bump into himself! Well, Luther would appreciate that capacious, full-size view of God.

Yes, but, in fact, Luther does not focus on God's attributes in the abstract. This is not the God to whom Luther directs our attention. This is rather the *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God, the naked God, about whom we are not to speculate. In fact, Luther showed no interest in devising a formal theodicy, any more than he (or Calvin, for that matter) wanted to spend much time with the classical arguments for the existence of God. As Luther wrote in his exposition of John 14: "God has placed himself and fixed himself in a definite place and a definite person where he wants to be found and encountered, none other than the person of Christ himself."³⁰ Elsewhere, in his sermon on John 6, Luther instructs that we are to seek "God nowhere but in the Christ who lies in the manger," a God who shows up in flesh and blood as mewling, puking infant.³¹

Luther once said, "You know, I wish I were God. If I were God, you know what I would do? I'd call the devil in on the carpet, I'd tweak his nose and I'd smash him right into the ground if I were God."³² But God is amazing, Luther says. He appears on earth as a little infant, weak as an earthworm, and all hell trembles. This is what he called, of course, the theology of the cross. First articulated at the Heidelberg Disputation in 1518, the theology of the cross is central in all of Luther's thinking, as Robert Kolb has shown.³³ Satan is the enemy who can be used as a tool in the hands of God, but he is also the adversary who has been defeated in a distinctive way at the cross by Jesus Christ, Lord Sabaoth his name.

In this 500th anniversary year, many pastors have been preaching on the five *solae* of the Reformation. All five *solae* can be found in Luther in one form or another. But there's a sixth *sola* we need to add to the list. For Luther says: *crux sola est nostra theologia*—"the cross alone is our theology."³⁴ But in the cloister and in the classroom, teaching the Psalms and Romans and Galatians and Hebrews, as he kept on beating, beating on the Scriptures (that's the word he uses, *pulsabam*—beating, pummeling, knocking hard at the door³⁵), the adversary he encountered was not public enemy number one. It was rather the intimate devil, who met him in the *Anfechtungen*, those bouts of dread and despair, *Angst*, a word always connoting a struggle for life and death, a conflict, a combat. Right in the middle of that German word *Anfechtungen* is another German word *Fechter*, which means a fencer, a gladiator. A *Fechboden* is a fencing room where this contest happens. And this is how Luther understood the struggle that is ours with the devil. Luther described what it was like to experience *Anfechtungen* in a piece of his autobiography,

³⁰ *WA* 45:481.

³¹ *LW* 23:56.

³² Paraphrase. See *Martin Luther's Christmas Book* (ed. Roland Bainton; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1997).

³³ Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Theology of the Cross," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16.4 (2002): 443–66.

³⁴ *WA* 5:176.

³⁵ *WA* 54:185–86.

I myself knew a man who claimed that he had often suffered those punishments in fact over a very brief period of time. Yet they were so great and so much like hell that no tongue could adequately express them, no pen could describe them, and one who had not himself experienced them could not believe them. And so great were they that, if they had been sustained or had lasted for half-an-hour, even for one-tenth of an hour, he would have perished completely and all his bones would have been reduced to ashes.³⁶

Thomas Merton once wrote of “the private demons that hang like vampires on the soul.”³⁷ Luther knew what that was. He said: “I’ve slept with the devil more times than I have slept with Kate.”³⁸ He recognized that the assaults of the evil one were not limited to the conscious mind alone. He was deeply bothered by Ps 19:12, “Clear thou me of hidden faults,” secret sins (Vulgate: *ab occultis meis munda me*). This was his problem in the confessional. His problem was not whether his sins were big or little ones. His problem was, “Have I confessed every one? Is the slate completely clean? What about the sins I can’t even remember? What about the sins I have committed in my sleep? What about the sins that are hidden even to myself?”

Long before Sigmund Freud wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Luther anticipated Freud by recognizing a depth dimension to the human person by referring to the effects of sin, not only on the conscious mind alone but deep within the innermost recesses of the human soul. It is there that we encounter the intimate devil. It is also precisely there where Jesus Christ, the crucified Christ, proves to be such a powerful and salubrious savior. Luther’s great hymn, “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice,” said it this way:

The Son obeyed His Father’s will,
Was born of virgin mother;
And God’s good pleasure to fulfill,
He came to be my brother.
His royal pow’r disguised He bore;
A servant’s form, like mine, He wore
To lead the devil captive.
To me He said: “Stay close to Me,
I am your rock and castle.
Your ransom I Myself will be;
For you I strive and wrestle.
For I am yours, and you are Mine,
And where I am you may remain;
The foe shall not divide us.”³⁹

What are we to make of Martin Luther and all his demon-infested language? It comes out of his spiritual experience in the monastery on his way to discovering the great doctrine of justification by faith alone. What does that say to us, living

³⁶ LW 31:129.

³⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain: An Autobiography of Faith* (New York: Harcourt, 1948), 6.

³⁸ WATr 1:289.

³⁹ Martin Luther, “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice,” *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 510.

now in the twenty-first century, in a very different kind of world, a world where the devil is often held up for ridicule, if he's thought of at all—discounted, demythologized, not believed in? As Phillip Jenkins has pointed out, those places in the world where Christianity is growing at an explosive rate, south of the equator mostly, are places where there is a very robust view of evil, of demons, where exorcism is practiced.⁴⁰ This became clear to me several years ago when I was chairing an international theological conference in Seville, Spain. Most of the speakers were North Americans, Western Europeans, very enlightened kind of folk. We were talking about all our problems with the new atheism, which was all the rage back then, about postmodernism, and this, that, and the other. Then one of the delegates from Africa stood up and said, “I don't know what you people are talking about. In my country, I'm concerned with exorcism, I'm concerned with witchcraft. I'm engaged in spiritual warfare.”

We can dismiss that sort of statement if we choose, at our peril. But there is a reality there that we need to confront, as Luther did in his life, in his theology, in his study of the Scriptures. As he did in his great hymn that we all sing so often at this time of the year,

And did the world with devils swarm,
 All gaping to devour us,
 We fear not from them the least harm,
 Success lies sure before us.
 This world's prince, accursed,
 Let him rage at his worst,
 Only roars about,
 His doom has gone out,
 A little word [*ein Wörtlein*], a little word can overthrow him.⁴¹

Jeffrey Burton Russell has observed that by the end of the twentieth century, identifiably Protestant concepts of the devil had become rare except among evangelicals. Even among evangelicals, they are on the wane.⁴² In a world where irony elides into cynicism, where any behavior is simply a matter of personal choice, where any idea is as good as any other, there are no standards by which Hitler is worse than Lincoln, in such a world, the devil is no longer even a joke or a scary story. He simply has no place at all. I know there are places where Satan is still alive and well in the evangelical subconscious way out there somewhere—witches, astrologers, professors of Satanism—but that kind of demonic exhibitionism does not take the devil and evil seriously, it merely trivializes it. For us academics, the temptation is to demythologize, psychologize the demonic and to see Luther as a befuddled child of a superstitious age.

⁴⁰ Phillip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 153–57.

⁴¹ Martin Luther, “Our God He is a Castle Strong,” trans. George MacDonald, *The Sunday Magazine for 1867* (London: Strahan & Co. Magazine, 1867), 450.

⁴² Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

This is a tragic mistake. For fundamentally, Luther's problems are our problems as well. *Death*, despite all we do to smother its ugliness, is an enemy to be overcome. *Guilt*, you cannot be a pastor or a counselor, or even a sensitive Christian for very long, without realizing the terrible sins of inadequacy and self-condemnation, the almost desperate need we have for absolution. *Meaning*, no one can live on this side of Hiroshima and the Holocaust, or even take in the breaking news of a single day, without wondering whether there is a meaning behind all of this. Remember, the chief characteristic of Satan is that he can change forms. He is a chameleon. He appeared to Saint Martin of Tours as Christ himself, resplendent in his glory. Luther said if we could recognize the devil, if we could name him, then we could dispel him, but he slithers about in the most beguiling of disguises so that if it were possible, the very elect would be deceived.

The essence of the demonic is to twist, to break, to demand, to dominate, to destroy. It is systemic in our society today, in the racial prejudice which festers in our nation, and the lack of compassion for the helpless and the homeless, the disabled, the aged, the unborn, in a culture of death and violence that destroys and dehumanizes, and, yes, in our own lives too, yours and mine. For we all have our own private demons that hang like vampires on the soul.

But Jesus Christ has entered into the arena on our behalf. He is the Lord of Hosts, and he is the one who has conquered death, hell, and the grave. The one who died saying, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." Through that triumph, we who belong to Jesus Christ also share a victory over the powers of darkness. Victory over death: "I believe in the resurrection of the body." Victory over guilt: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." Victory over meaninglessness and despair: "I believe in the life everlasting." Yes, Martin Luther has something to say to us in this kind of world. And, yes, Satan is still loose for a little season. Yes, we still have to fight for our footing in the swollen tides of the Jordan, amidst the struggle and the thrust and the counter-thrust of battle. But thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.