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Entering Into Temptation

Lent 1, c, Feb. 25, 2007

Luke 4:1-13

Faithfully living in the Christian way is not as easy as one might think. In fact it's confusing. Sometimes we say it's what we believe that matters. Sometimes we say that being open to the presence of God is what matters. And sometimes we say that it's how you live your life, what you do in the world that really matters.

Actually, all of these are true. In different ways of looking at our lives, at different times (1.) our faith itself, (2.) our receptivity to God, and (3.) our own actions are all important.

If you take a look at the Christian year by season, there are different emphases at different times of the year. When we are in Advent, there is a passive receptivity to what God is doing that matters. What we believe matters greatly. How we patiently and alertly we wait matters. The fact is that we don't have a whole lot to do with making the birth of Jesus Christ take place in Bethlehem. All we can do is look at and marvel at what God has done around us.

Likewise, when Easter Sunday arrives, our concern isn't what it is that we have been doing to bring about the Christ's resurrection. Our focus is on what God does.

As you look at the Christian year, great big chunks of the year are focused on developing that receptivity to God's work among us. I think

that's a good thing. In our day and age when we are so often focused on our actions and our results, on our effectiveness and in ways we can enhance our own well-being by what we do, it is a good corrective, it is faithful Christianity, to understand that in the big picture it is not all about what we do. It's about what God does.

Nonetheless, in order to complete our faith, we need these times of :
emphasis on our own strength,
our ability to direct our own lives,
our ability to influence others,
to refrain from bad actions,
to take good actions,

in other words, to focus on our own responsibility. And right now we enter one such time in the season of Lent.

Lent is a time of focused self-discipline, of very intentional spiritual growth. It is a reiteration in our own lives of the journey that Jesus takes in today's Scripture lesson out into the desert, not so much to be purged or cleansed, but to be put in that place where God can reach Jesus and teach Jesus; where Jesus can commune with God. The special activities of Lent are meant to take us to a spiritual desert and keep us there, where God can reach and teach us, and where we can commune with God.

This is a season where we make choices about how to live that will either open ourselves to God and God's ways, or let us continue our floundering aimlessly around. This is a take-charge season when we recognize that we are not victims in this life, but God gives us agency, the powerful ability to act, to reform certain aspects of our lives, to prepare the way of the Lord in our very spirits.

Strange as it may sound, the side panel of my morning cereal box is a fine introduction into the spirit of the Lenten season. Listen as it says,

"Each morning brings new opportunities to make choices that help you stay on track to be your healthiest. So start your day with Kashi GoLean cereal, a perfect choice to help you achieve your healthy lifestyle goals."ⁱ

That's the Lenten spirit. Identify your goal, say (1.) a stronger prayer life, or (2.) a greater awareness of God in your day-to-day living, or (3.) more dedicated involvement in mission work, and then, methodically, in a disciplined fashion, hold yourself accountable to those next steps...

My cereal box, reflecting the consistent experience of all those who seek a meaningful change for the better, reads, "At Kashi, we believe that everyone has the power to make positive, healthy lifestyle changes. But staying committed to healthy eating and exercise isn't easy...." You can say that again!

If all we had to do was recognize the direction we want to go, life would be a whole lot easier than it is. All around us and within everyday are examples of visions of a better life that are not achieved. How many of those who are significantly overweight, want to be so? We've tried countless diets and exercises and more to shed those pounds? How about those who are addicted to gambling, alcohol, tobacco, other drugs? Do you believe that they like those addictions? They know life would be better if they could kick the habits. "But staying committed...isn't easy."

It is the desire to get committed and stay committed that drives us along with Jesus into the desert places. The desert is the place where we spiritually go to get clean, to break free: to Weight Watchers, to Alcoholics Anonymous, and all the rest. And like Jesus in his desert place, when we go

to ours, we are ENTERING INTO TEMPTATION, and we'll find the Devil there, as well.

Now, this morning I'm not interested in the chasing the rabbit of whether there is a personal Devil or not. If you are interested in the subject, I've attached a fine 10 page Presbyterian treatise on the question to this sermon file on our church website.ⁱⁱ You can wrestle with that question there.

Instead, I want you to call to mind your experiences when you've tried to diet, or give up cigarettes or alcohol, or when you've determined to give up chocolate, or desserts, or TV for the season of Lent. In those times you have come face to face with the Adversary, what the Bible calls the Satan. Whenever you try to make a positive, godly change in your life and find some power pushing back against you, you are experiencing the Adversary. The bolder and better the change you attempt, the stronger the resistance you'll encounter. That's why when you don't seem to facing any spiritual struggle, any resistance in your life, you'd better take a look at yourself. What you most likely will find is that you aren't aiming high enough. You have settled for less. There's no resistance because you weren't going anywhere.

This is exactly why even simple little Lenten commitments can be such a blessing for us. If you've decided that you're giving up chocolate for Lent, you'll feel that tug to eat it far more than normal and you'll recognize that tension between what you want at a fleshly level warring with your spirit's decision to do otherwise. That tension is so important to recognize. When you have entered into temptation, there is a particular feel, a characteristic challenge to you, that in order to resist, you need to be able to

quickly identify. And this tension should be our everyday experience as we strive to live more godly lives.

Even better than giving up some food item or some habitual pleasure during the season of Lent, is a commitment to TRY SOME NEW SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE. There are many forms this could take:

- dedicated times of prayer;
- new meditation practices;
- additional worship commitments;
- reading spiritual literature;
- taking your own spiritual journey to an isolated place;
- making new stewardship commitments by way of giving substantially more; or
- regular mission work in the community. You get the idea.

What all these have in common is that they aren't just giving something up and experiencing the resistance. Oh, you will experience plenty of resistance to your change, but in each of these spiritual disciplines, you will also be building yourself up spiritually in Christ. You'll find an immediate positive reward in the new practice. For example, you'll find that praying is intrinsically rewarding. It is in itself an immediate joy that will bless you that very moment. And it is the same with each of these others partly because you deeply know that you are aligning yourself with God's desires for you. On top of that immediate positive reward, you'll find a long term reward, too, including the possibility that this new discipline is one that you can hang on to long after the season of Lent.

We're not an especially patient people. We like things to happen fast and for the results to be clear and clean. This morning the Intel building was demolished by 600 blasts from 567 pounds of explosives that were placed

strategically on selected columns within the building. After the tons of rubble are removed, a new and magnificent structure will rise in its place.

In our spiritual lives, as well, the old rubble and ways must go in order to make way for the new that God wills to do within us. God needs our cooperation in that demolition. And most often, our cooperation isn't like those big powerful explosions. The space is cleared by consistently, faithfully living out hundreds of smaller commitments.

I thank Julie Woods for the following quote of well known Disciples preacher Fred Craddock, describing the patience required:

...”I went away to summer camp to Bethany Hills, an inspiring time and a night of consecration around the lake and candlelight and just everything moving, and we sang every time, “Are You Able Said the Master, to be Crucified with Me?” And I'd go back to the dorm and lie on my bunk and say to God, “I'm able.”

“Are you able to give your life?”

“I'll give my life.”

And I pictured myself running in front of a train and rescuing a child, swimming out and saving someone from drowning. I pictured myself against a gray wall and some soldier saying, “One last chance to deny Christ and live,” and I confessed my faith and they said, “Ready, aim, fire.” The body slumps, the flag is at half-mast, widows are weeping in the afternoon. And later a monument is built, and people come with their cameras. “Johnny, you stand over there where Fred gave his life. Let's get your picture.”

I was sincere then, as I have been for these forty-five years. I give my life, but nobody warned me that I could not write one big check. I've had to

write 45 years of little checks – 87 cents, 21 cents, 57 cents, nibbled away this giving of life.

Are you able to drink from the cup?

I can drink from the cup in one giant quaff and let my life be given. No, no, no. My life is one of drinking a sip here, a sip there, and soon you reach retirement and did anybody notice that you gave your life and drank the cup?...”ⁱⁱⁱ

The answer is, “yes.” Those around you will notice that you walked the path of faithfulness with devotion and with a generous, loving, compassionate relationship with others.

And you will notice the difference, too. Your life consecrated to God will create in you a thankful heart, a satisfied soul, and a sense of direction for each and everyday.

But most of all, God will notice. You will not only have prepared yourself for the next life in God, but you will have dwelt this life nearer, and sometimes actually in, the wonder filled mystery of God.

May it be so..... Amen.

ⁱ From the side panel of the GoLean cereal box produced by the Kashi Co. at www.kashi.com.

ⁱⁱ *The following article explores many of the issues and angles of the questions surrounding our understanding of the Devil. The author can be reached at info@crossings.org and comes from First Presbyterian Church in Pitman, New Jersey.*

THE PROBLEM OF A PERSONAL DEVIL AND DEMONS

The 114th General Assembly directed the Council on Theology and Culture [of the Presbyterian Church in the United States] to study "the problem of a personal devil and demons," and to report the results of such a study to the 115th General Assembly. The Council submits the following report as information.

The context in which we deal with this problem is the current widespread fascination with demonology, exorcism and the occult, both in the churches and in our society in general. We do not know the reason for this upsurge of interest in and reports on experience with the devil and demons. We can only ask some questions about it. Is there in fact a revival of satanic activity and demon possession in our time? Or should we say that some discerning people are becoming newly aware of what Satan and his angels have been doing all along?

Should we look for a sociological reason for what is happening? So, for instance, is interest in the devil and demons really only an indication of a hunger for some element of mystery in a society which has given itself to rationalistic science and mechanical technology? Is it an expression of hunger for the assurance that in our increasingly impersonal bureaucratic and computerized society there are still some genuinely personal forces at work, even if only evil ones? Has our insatiable hunger for pleasure led to the quest for more and more sensational forms of ecstasy—from the unfulfilled promises of sexual promiscuity and drugs to the forbidden delights of sheer evil? Could the new respect for the devil be only the confirmation of the fact, witnessed to by our social and political life and by the movies and TV shows that entertain us, that what our country really worships and serves and rejoices in is war, violence, brutality, calloused indifference to human suffering, irrationality and chaos—the powers of evil?

Perhaps we ought to look to ourselves, the Christian Church, rather than to secular society to understand what is happening. Has our worship and proclamation of God been so boring and lifeless that people have to look to the devil to find religion that is interesting and exciting? Has the Christian declaration that Jesus is Lord been so unconvincing because of our unwillingness to bring His lordship to bear on our personal and corporate life that people suspect that it is not Jesus but Satan who is the real lord of the world? Have we been so uncertain about the presence and work of the Holy Spirit that we have invited people to fill the vacuum by turning to evil spirits? Is preoccupation with the powers of evil an understandable protest against a Church which has lost sight both of the depths of evil and of the power and love of God in its reduction of the Gospel to pious advice, moral truisms, and repetition of the latest psychological or political fads?

While we cannot give certain answers to any of these questions, the exegesis of Scripture, theological reflection on Scripture, and the insights of contemporary secular learning give us help in dealing with the one fundamental question all of them raise—the question about the reality and nature of the powers of evil.

I. Some Biblical Considerations

Both the Bible and the traditional Reformed interpretation of it acknowledge the reality of powers of evil. But in contrast to most primitive religious and speculations which have periodically broken out in some parts of the Christian Church, neither the Bible nor the confessional lit literature of the Reformed tradition gives us a developed satanology or demonology. They bear witness to the reality and power of God in Jesus

Christ against the powers of darkness, and thus have no independent interest in, and very little to say about, the origin, nature and work of these powers as such. Calvin warns that "it did not befit the Holy Spirit to feed our curiosity" and that we ought not to "linger over superfluous matters" in this area (Institutes, 1.14.15). Nevertheless, Scripture does talk about Satan and demons, and it gives us some help in understanding them. The whole sphere of the demonic appears in the Old Testament only in a few obscure references which point to a pagan world of belief rejected by Israel. Satan is mentioned only in Job 1-2, Zech. 3:1-2 and I Chron. 21:1, where he appears as a figure in dramatic portrayals of God's sovereignty over the world. Contemporary questions about a personal devil and demons are based on the role they play in the New Testament, and we shall therefore concentrate on it. In the New Testament Jesus himself and the New Testament writers understand the coming of the Kingdom of God against the background of popular contemporary apocalyptic speculations about an imminent cosmic battle between God and the powers of evil. The powers of darkness do not exist and work as independent realities in and for themselves. They exist and work only as powers which oppose and are opposed and overcome by God and His will for the welfare of humankind. They can thus be understood only in relation to a reality which is greater than they and which from the outset spells their defeat and destruction. But as such Jesus and the New Testament writers believed that they do exist. The devil and his servants tempt Jesus himself (Mk. 1:13, Matt. 4:1ff.) and the followers of Jesus (Matt. 6:13, 1 Cor. 7:5) to faithlessness and disobedience. Some (Mk. 5:1ff. 9:17; Matt. 12:22) but not all (Mk. 1:29ff., 2: 1ff.; John 9:1ff.) cases of physical, emotional and mental sickness are attributed to them. Their goal is not primarily to attack individuals for their own sake, but (in the Gospels) to hinder the work of Jesus or (in the rest of the New Testament) to corrupt and destroy the Church (11 Cor. 12:7; I Thes. 2:18; Rev. 2:10, 12:17; I Pet. 5:8; II Cor. 2:11; Eph. 6:11). So in the New Testament view, Satan and demonic powers are at work every where, but their work is especially concentrated where God in Christ through the Church is at work to bring in His Kingdom and establish His rule in the world. This implies both a warning and a promise. The warning is that evil is at work not only where there is obvious filth, obscenity and godlessness, but also where there seem to be piety, morality, godly talk and godly action. It is not the prostitutes, treasonous tax collectors and political- cal revolutionaries but the God-fearing, law-abiding Pharisees whom Jesus calls the sons of Satan (John 8:44). It is not his enemies but one of his closest friends, the pious Peter, whom he calls Satan himself (Mk. 8:33). Satan is perhaps most dangerous (because most difficult to recognize) when he "disguises himself as an angel of light" and his servants "disguise themselves as servants of righteousness" (11 Cor. 11:14f.). But the promise is that just where the attack of evil is most concentrated and most dangerous, its defeat is most sure: when its power is set against God in Christ and His Church, it confronts the one power against which it cannot prevail (Matt. 16:18).

II. Some Theological Considerations

Christians committed to the authority of Scripture and faithful to the Reformed tradition interpret the reality of evil in different ways. In this section we shall describe in broad outline two different answers to the specific question asked by the overture to which this paper responds:

Should we think of the devil and demons as personal realities? We shall also suggest the limits within which both answers may be legitimate.

1. A Literal Interpretation of the Devil and Demons

While neither the Bible nor the classical documents of the Reformed tradition speak explicitly of a "personal" devil and demons, they do attribute to the devil and demons such personal attributes as the ability to think, will, feel, speak and act with conscious purpose. Moreover, some Christians in our own time believe that they have experienced or witnessed the personal presence and work of demonic powers. Testimonies to this probably come most often from primitive cultures in which people generally explain what happens in the world of nature and human experience by reference to all kinds of invisible spiritual powers. But also in modern societies such as ours some Christians (including some psychiatrists) believe that they have seen genuine instances of personal demon possession and activity.

From the point of view of the philosophical and scientific presuppositions of the 20th century world view, the attempt to understand the reality of evil in terms of a personal devil and demons seems based on a world view that is "pre-scientific," "primitive," or "mythological." But the Christian faith has existed and still exists among so-called "primitive as well as among so-called "modern" or "enlightened" people. Whether or not it is "modern" or "scientific," any interpretation of evil in terms of personal powers must be measured by four Biblical-theological criteria:

- a. Acceptance of the reality of a personal devil and demons must never be used to excuse or justify human sinfulness, to avoid responsibility for our own attitudes and actions, or to deny to others the God-given resources of medical and psychological help.
- b. Emphasis on the demonic possession of individuals must not be so exclusive that the New Testament emphasis on the presence of demonic "principalities and powers" at work in social and political bodies and processes is forgotten or ignored.
- c. Interest in the devil and demons must not become so central and intense that their reality is consciously or unconsciously assumed to be equal to or more important than the reality and power of God.
- d. Any reality as persons attributed to the devil and demons must be distinguished from the reality of God and from the existence of human beings as persons.

The significance of the first three points will become clear in light of the following clarification of the fourth point. When the devil and demons are thought of as persons, that cannot mean their existence is anything like the personal reality of God. They are not rival gods, the evil counterparts of a "good God." Both the Old and New Testaments and the whole Christian tradition stand against such dualism or polytheism. The Hebrew-Christian tradition knows only one God and steadfastly rejects the idea of other gods with a reality and power equal to or even inferior to His. When the devil is called the "god of this world" (II Cor. 4:4) or the "ruler of this world" (John 12:31,14:30,16:11), we cannot interpret such words to mean that he in fact has a being and status as another god besides God. He can only be one of the "so-called gods" of whom Paul speaks (I Cor. 8:5). The devil is "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44) who claims to be something he is not. The very texts which call him "god" speak of his downfall and destruction as such. Even to consider the possibility of a personal devil or demons comparable to the one true and living God is idolatry, the violation of the first commandment.

Nor can the devil and demons be considered personal as human beings are personal. The New Testament does sometimes speak of the devil with human analogies: he is a "ruler" (John 12:31), a "murderer" (John 8:44), "the evil one" (John 17:15), the "enemy" (Matt. 12:39). But it is significant that the New Testament also uses subhuman, subpersonal, beastly images. Satan is a roaring lion (I Pet. 5:8), a serpent (Rev. 12:17), a dragon (Rev. 12:9). The demons are like leopards, bears, lions, locusts, scorpions (Rev. 13:2, 9; 3f.). Although Satan and the demons may "disguise" themselves in human form (II Cor. 11:13f.), nowhere is it suggested that in themselves they have such form. Whether personal or beastly, the images used in the New Testament to refer to the powers of evil are to be understood as images which describe not what they look like or are, but their hostile and destructive character. All pictures and images of the devil and demons as persons similar to human persons (dressed in red or black, with or without horns and tail, male or female, ugly or seductively attractive) are mythological representations which belong to superstitious folklore.

If the personal reality of the devil and demons is neither that of God or of human beings, it seems that it can only be discussed in connection with the idea which appears on the fringe of Biblical thought (Job, II Pet. 2:4; Jude 6) that they are "fallen" or "evil" angels. This idea, which probably originated in the general religious environment of the ancient world, has been much elaborated in the history of Christian thought with all kinds of unbiblical and unchristian speculation and fantasy. We know nothing of what angelic creatures might be except that in any case they could neither be divine or semi-divine, nor human or superhuman, but an order of created being utterly unimaginable to us. From the point of view of Biblical

and Reformed theology no content can be given to the figures of evil angels who are described by the personal attributes of thought, will, speech, and intentional action other than that they are without the self-existence, eternity and omnipotence of God, or the physical, spatial and temporal limitations of human beings.

This interpretation of the powers of evil does not really answer the question of the ultimate origin and essential nature of evil. It leaves unanswered the question of how angelic beings who are a part of God's good creation, and therefore themselves good, could "fall" and become evil. As in the Genesis story the tempter was there before the fall of humanity into sin, so evil in some sense must already have existed as the spirit of rebellion which corrupted some angels. The idea of evil angels thus raises rather than answers the question of what evil itself is. Moreover, this idea also leaves unanswered the more profound question (discussed below) how evil can exist at all without making God the author of evil, since He is the source of everything that is.

The literal interpretation of a personal devil and demons will be unsatisfactory not only to those who want the integration of the Christian faith and the 20th century understanding of the world which in other respects shapes our thought and life, but also to those who want within Christian theology itself consistency and clarity about the metaphysical or ontological status of the powers of evil. But if both idolatrous recognition of other gods beside the one true God and anthropomorphic superstition are really avoided, and if the other three limitations mentioned above are really observed, then there is no reason to -condemn those who hold to a literal view of a personal devil and demons. The essential qualification for participation in the Christian community is not what one believes about the devil and demons, but what one believes about God and His sovereignty over the powers of evil, however they are conceived.

2. Symbolic Interpretation of the Devil and Demons

Many Christians acknowledge the reality of the powers of evil but do not believe that there is a personal devil and demons. They argue in various ways that Satan, devils and demons are symbols which draw analogies from our experience of ourselves as persons to express the way some people have experienced evil. The symbols are not false or meaningless; they do point to a reality. But they are not themselves identical with that reality; they point to a reality deeper than themselves. What we have to do therefore is not throw out the idea of a personal devil and demons but ask what the fundamental reality is to which they bear witness.

The attempt to understand the devil and demons as symbols of evil will seem too complex to those Christians who want a simple and literal identification of evil with a personal Satan and demons, and who think that the distinction between symbols and the reality they indirectly express is a sign of scepticism if not actual unbelief. But the symbolic interpretation may be legitimate so long as it is not in fact an attempt to explain away the reality of evil but a serious attempt to understand it at a deeper level. Under this condition it has several advantages:

- a. The symbolic interpretation preserves a genuinely Biblical and Christian respect for the mystery of evil. Like the Bible itself and the Reformed tradition, it refuses to speculate on the nature of the devil and demons as such and thus to reduce the great problem of evil to speculations about demonology and satanology. It avoids a simplistic answer to the tremendously difficult question about the source and nature of opposition to God, corruption of his good creation, and human sinfulness.
- b. The symbolic interpretation enables us to recognize and helps us interpret the impersonal as well as personal ways in which the power of evil is at work in the world. Many people who have never experienced or witnessed personal demon possession, and who cannot accept it, do know what it means to be possessed by, and in desperate need of being set free from, the power of greed or lust or anxiety or prejudice and hatred.

c. The symbolic interpretation also enables us to recognize and interpret social-political as well as individual evil. The powers of evil are at work not only where individuals feel themselves invaded by personal evil powers, but also where whole societies, institutions and systems are controlled by economic or political or technological theories and programs which exploit and destroy the natural order of God's creation and human life and welfare in it.

d. The symbolic interpretation of the devil and demons opens up the possibility of dealing faithfully and intelligently with the above-mentioned theological and philosophical problem posed by the identification of the powers of evil with personal beings. Christian theologians have always been puzzled by the contradiction between the assertion on the one hand that everything that is (all being) is given existence and reality by God, and the assertion on the other hand that evil "is" or "exists." How can we acknowledge both a good God who is the source of all being and then speak of the being of evil or of evil beings? Some theologians, from Augustine to such diverse contemporary thinkers as Paul Tillich and Karl Barth, have argued that the problem of the contradiction can be solved only by understanding the powers of evil not as independently existing entities or "beings," but as the absence or negation of the good which God is and gives to created reality. Evil is thus the power of nonbeing which threatens and opposes the being of God and His creation. Or it is like a lie which is "nothing" in itself (not the truth, not what really is), but precisely as such denies and attacks that which is (God and His good creation). Such interpretations cannot be dismissed as mere philosophical or theological speculation; they could be a legitimate way of interpreting what we have seen to be the strangely parasitical, negating and negated power of Satan and the demons in the New Testament. We are not concerned here to spell out or defend any particular one of such interpretations. None of them solves the problem of evil any more than does the literal interpretation of the devil and demons. But they do represent the serious attempt of faithful Christians to understand the (negative) reality and power of evil without compromising or contradicting the (positive) reality and power of God. Not all Christians are troubled by or even understand the problems involved in asserting both the being of God and His creation and the being of the powers of evil. But some Christians are concerned about it, and some form of a symbolical interpretation of the devil and demons helps them articulate their faith in God in a more consistent way. It could also help those for whom the contradiction between Christian claims about God on the one hand and the reality of evil on the other is the obstacle to accepting the truth of the Christian faith.

e. The symbolic interpretation of the devil and demons has the final advantage of acknowledging and talking meaningfully about the reality of evil among people who no longer experience and can no longer accept the presence and work of personal devils and demons. It is an attempt to help people who cannot accept a mythological interpretation of evil nevertheless to recognize the truth embodied in the myths.

As we have suggested, many Christians may find the curious attempts at a symbolic interpretation of evil to be inadequate, misleading, or even wrong. But under the condition that the reality of evil is truly acknowledged, there is no more reason to condemn those who understand Satan and demons this way than to condemn those who understand them literally. Once again, the essential qualification for participation in the Christian community is not what one thinks about the devil and demons, but what one believes about God and His sovereignty over the powers of evil, however they are conceived.

III. Some Medical, Psychological and Sociological Considerations

In the New Testament period, and to a large extent still in the period of the Reformation and the founding of the Protestant Churches, people lived in a world they believed to be "with devils filled," a world in which sickness, misfortune, and disorder were attributed to the work of evil spirits. Most of us no longer understand the world this way. Modern people take a sick person to a doctor for treatment, not to the preacher for exorcism of demons. We understand something of the psychological and sociological nature of emotional and mental illness in individuals and mass hysteria and brutality in societies and institutions. How then do we relate what modern learning has taught us about human life in the world to what the

Christian faith teaches us about the reality of the power of evil? Without attempting to deal with this complex problem extensively, we make the following observations.

a. The human sciences help us understand the reality of evil. They cannot explain its ultimate source or provide the ultimate solution to it, but they do help us understand its radical seriousness. Depth psychology has exposed previously unrecognized elements of irrationality, violence and chaos lying beneath the conscious level of every human being. The social and political sciences have helped us to understand how the value systems and ideologies of corporate structures (including the Church) can create an environment which blinds, corrupts and destroys individuals. Medical science has confirmed how inseparable for health or sickness are body, mind and spirit. Modern history has taught us, and modern media of communication have forced us to see, that whether or not evil is itself personal, it can certainly be horribly personalized in political, military, scientific and religious leaders and the groups of people who support them and are influenced by them. In these and other ways the modern "secular" disciplines have given Christians, sometimes against their will, fresh insight into the reality of the invisible "principalities and powers" of which the New Testament speaks.

b. The human sciences aid us in the struggle with evil. The modern human sciences help us to understand how evil works in the world. To employ the tools and skills of medicine, psychology, sociology and other modern sciences is to use possibilities and opportunities given us by God to combat and overcome the destructive work of the powers of darkness in individuals and groups. To reject these "secular" ways of fighting evil in favor of purely religious ways is not genuine piety but the rejection of the gifts of God, and therefore the rejection of God himself. This is a point already emphasized by Calvin in the 16th century:

"If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. For by holding the gifts of the Spirit in slight esteem, we condemn and reproach the Spirit himself. But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic and mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance. For if we neglect God's gift freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer just punishment for our sloths." (Institutes, 11.2.15-16).

c. The Christian faith teaches us to recognize the fundamental reality of the power of evil hidden under the symptoms and consequences discovered by the sciences. The sciences generally deal with the question how the world functions; theology deals with the question why and to what end. They can teach us much about how evil expresses itself, but not what fundamentally causes it and how it can be ultimately defeated. What is the source of that repressed rage, blood lust and violence deep within every one of us which ordinarily surfaces only in our dreams when we cannot control our innermost feelings and desires? Why is it that some decent people in Germany (or the United States), some of them Bible-reading, church-going Christians, can become vicious beasts when they confront Jews (or blacks)? Why do some otherwise compassionate human beings indifferently stand aside and let fellow human beings suffer from the brutality of others? Why do good people and good governments allow the world to be divided into the affluent few and the starving many? We gladly learn what we can from the sciences about the immediate causes and remedies for such evil phenomena. But we believe that there is something more in them than can be explained and treated medically, psychologically or politically. That "something more" is the dark, mysterious reality which the philosopher Kant called Radical Evil and which the New Testament calls the power of Satan. We need not attribute every painful or unfortunate event directly to the power of evil. We cannot pretend to have more knowledge about it than we do. We simply acknowledge that it is always there in one way or another, usually hidden behind the scenes so that it is difficult to perceive, occasionally exposing itself so that we catch a glimpse of "pure" evil-in individuals, perhaps more often in groups, and probably most often in the idealistic or materialistic ideologies and systems which enslave and dehumanize people. Whether or not we conceive of evil's power as expressed in supernatural personalities, we acknowledge its reality, a reality which can be experienced but not explained, fought but not finally overcome, by our human resources.

d. The Christian faith teaches us to take responsibility for our own actions and gives us additional means for fighting the power of evil. To recognize the reality of the powers of darkness which tempt and sometimes overwhelm and gain control over individuals and institutions and societies is not to suggest that we may passively accept their authority and power, or refuse to take responsibility for ourselves and the societies and institutions to which we belong. There is no place in the Christian faith for the excuse that "the devil made me do it" or "it was not I but the devil in me who did that" or "there is no use fighting the cruelty and injustice in the world because it is ruled by Satan." Scripture never recognizes the legitimacy of such excuses. It acknowledges human responsibility even for actions which are attributed to the work of Satan. To mention two crucial examples, Adam and Eve are responsible for their actions, though they were tempted by the serpent (Gen. 3: 16ff.); and Judas is himself responsible for his act of betrayal (Matt. 27:3f.), though it is said that Satan entered him (Luke 22:3.). The attempt to avoid responsibility both for ourselves and the world by blaming the devil or his demons is wrong for two reasons. First, it is faithless. It blasphemously suggests that the power of Satan is greater than the power of God; it accepts the devil's authority and rule over the "principalities and powers." Secondly, excusing ourselves by blaming the powers of evil is wrong because it refuses the means God has given us to fight their influences in our individual lives and the world around us.

We have already discussed the "secular" means God has given us to fight the powers of evil. We and not the devil or demons are responsible for the consequences of neglecting or refusing or withholding from others the help provided by medical, psychological, and political resources for individual and social human welfare. Now we add the "spiritual" means God has given us for dealing with the fundamental reality of evil underlying all its manifestations. With specific reference to avoiding or overcoming the power of Satan, the New Testament mentions these: prayer (especially the prayer Jesus himself taught us to pray in Matt. 6:13, faith (Eph. 6:16, I Pet. 5:8) and various moral defenses such as commitment to truth, righteousness and the gospel of peace (Eph. 6:14), not repressing but expressing legitimate sexuality (I Cor. 7:5; I Tim. 5:14f.), refusal to put the Lord to test (I Cor. 10:9), willingness to forgive instead of desiring to punish those who have caused us pain (II Cor. 2:5ff.), active concern for those who are strangers to us, poor, hungry or imprisoned (Matt. 25:31ff.). We and not the devil are responsible for the consequences in our own lives and the world around us if we refuse or neglect these God-given resources for fighting the powers of evil.

In the last analysis, however, our hope for resisting and overcoming the powers of darkness is not in our scientific and political skills as such, but in the God who gives these gifts to us. Nor is our confidence in the power of prayer, faith and Christian morality as such, but in the God to whom we pray, in whom we have faith, whose righteousness alone can withstand and defeat the powers of evil. The last word about the "problem of a personal devil and demons," therefore, can only be a word not about the reality of evil or the reality of human or Christian responsibility but only about the reality of the living God.

IV. The Reality of God

Christians do not "believe in" the devil and demons, personally or otherwise understood. To believe in means to trust, rely on, serve, obey, find the meaning of one's whole existence in relation to the object of belief. Christians believe in God and only in God. No Biblical text and no Christian creed affirms belief in Satan and the powers of darkness alongside or even subordinate to faith in the one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In answer to the question whether we believe in a personal devil and demons, we can only answer with a flat, "Of course not!"

On the other hand, Christians cannot affirm faith in God without saying something about the powers of evil. To believe in God is to believe not in but against them. He is the God who by His very nature excludes, contradicts, challenges, defeats and destroys all authorities and powers which attempt to spoil His good creation and His intention for human welfare. So the powers of darkness are a part of the Christian confession of faith as that which is excluded and denied. They are that which by definition God the Father almighty, the one Maker and Ruler of heaven and earth, does not will and will not finally tolerate. The devil and demons are by definition those powers which Jesus Christ has already decisively opposed and

defeated (Luke 10:18; Matt. 12:28; Mk. 3:22; John 12:31, 16:11 Col. 1:13 They are those powers which by definition even now are limited and controlled by the risen Lord (Rom. 8:37ff.; Eph. 1:19ff.; Col. 2:10,15). They are those powers which He will finally utterly crush and destroy (Matt. 25:41; I Cor. 15:24ff.; Rev. 17:14, 20:10). It takes no faith in one way or another to believe in the power of evil; the evidence of its work is all around and among and within us. It does take faith to believe against them that the first and last word about them is their powerlessness and doom. And that is just what the Christian faith dares to affirm. They are a part of our faith only as that which we do not believe in and refuse to believe in despite all the evidence in their favor.

In this negative way, Christians know about the reality of the powers of evil. We take them seriously-in fact, more seriously than those who believe in them, because we know that only the power and love of God himself is stronger than evil. We are more aware than anyone else of their destructive work, because we know that they are most real and dangerous not where there is easily recognized trivial or great lawlessness and godlessness, but precisely where they are most threatened-where there is pretense of devotion to goodness, justice, love, and truth, and most especially among us who claim to serve the God who alone can defeat them.

On the other hand, in another sense we do not take the powers of evil seriously at all. Knowing that in Jesus Christ they have been, are being, and will be destroyed, we refuse to respect their false claims to be rulers of this world by paying too much attention to them, their origin and nature. Those who become preoccupied with demonic forces, whether with horrified repulsion or with the kind of perversely delicious fascination such repulsion often becomes, attribute to such forces a power they do not in fact have, and are easily paralyzed or possessed by their own imaginations and fantasies. We have compassion for those who really believe in the devil and demons. We have good news to share with those who tremble before them in terror or willingly serve them as if the powers of darkness really were in control of human life and destiny. But as modern people who have put behind us the superstitions of a pre-scientific world, and especially as Christians who believe in God, we calmly dismiss as nonsense any claim that there is any truth to be discovered in any form of demonology, magic, investigation of the occult, or fearful or respectful dealings with the devil and demons. We know all we need to know about the powers of evil when we know the real truth: "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38).

Other Helpful Resources

Our Lord, You Were Sent is a new hymn about Jesus' temptations written to the tune of FOUNDATION 11.11.11 ("How Firm a Foundation"). The hymn text is by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, author of *Gifts of Love: New Hymns for Today's Worship* (Geneva Press, 2000), and co-pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Pitman, NJ <http://www.firstpresby.org/FirstSundayLentHymn.htm>

Two-Thirds of Americans Believe in Devil, Gallup Finds February 26, 2003 Religion News Service article: <http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/03107.htm>

Christian Doctrine by Shirley Guthrie is a superb systematic theology with chapters on evil, sin, and suffering.

The Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis (*Audio Literature*) is an anniversary edition of this religious classic by John Cleese ("Monty Python"). He makes the most of Lewis' rich vein of comedy and satire. These tapes are filled with tart observations on the world, the flesh and the devil. http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/094499315X/ref=ed_oe_a/103-2428882-7662213?v=glance&s=books&st=* Download for \$10

http://www.audible.com/adbl/store/amazonProduct.jsp?amazonCategory=product&productID=BK_ALIT_000019&source_code=WSAZS01001102000&scic=0

Jeffrey Burton Russell is Professor of History, Emeritus, at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who wrote a five-volume history of the concept of the Devil, published by Cornell University Press between 1977 and 1988. **The Prince of Darkness: Radical Evil and the Power of Good in History** is a summary of his work. 17 pages from the book can be read online at Amazon:

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0801480566/ref=lib_rd_ss/103-2428882-7662213?v=glance&s=books&vi=slide-show#reader-link “Getting Satan Behind Us” is Jeffrey Burton Russell’s book review of “The Origin Of Satan” by Elaine Pagels:
<http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9511/articles/russell.html>

Deliver us from evil: We pray so we might be open to God's victory By Marbury E. Anderson:

"Wading into New York ruins Bush vows to 'rid the world of evil.'" That headline ran across the newspaper I read September 15, four days after the terrorist attacks. Scanning the article, I looked in vain for the context in which the president had made that statement. I suspect Bush was referring to the evil of terrorism, not evil itself. Now we're learning how the administration is seeking to develop a strategy — sometimes called a war — to eradicate that specific evil. And I'm haunted by one question: Can the violence of war end the violence of terrorism? <http://www.thelutheran.org/terrorism/evil.html>

Walter Wink, professor of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary, has written three volumes on “Powers” in the Bible with excerpts from each book available at Amazon: **Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament** (The Powers: Volume One)

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/080061786X/ref=lib_rd_ss/103-2428882-7662213?v=glance&s=books&vi=slide-show#reader-link **Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence** (Powers, Vol. 2) http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0800619021/ref=lib_rd_ss/103-2428882-7662213?v=glance&s=books&vi=slide-show#reader-link
Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination (The Powers, Vol 3)

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/080062646X/ref=lib_dp_sp_1/103-2428882-7662213?v=glance&s=books&vi=slide-show#reader-link

Temptation: A Biblical and Psychological Approach by Wayne E. Oates contains insights by a well-known authority in the area of pastoral counseling.

Whatever became of Sin? by Walter Menninger is the classic study by the influential psychiatrist.

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The **Study Catechism** of the Presbyterian Church (USA) has some helpful questions and answers. You can find the whole catechism online at <http://www.pcusa.org/catech/studycat.htm>

Question 14. *If God's love is powerful beyond measure, why is there so much evil in the world?*

No one can say why, for evil is a terrible abyss beyond all rational explanation. Its ultimate origin is obscure. Its enormity perplexes us. Nevertheless, we boldly affirm that God's triumph over evil is certain. In Jesus Christ God suffers with us, knowing all our sorrows. In raising him from the dead, God gives new hope to the world. Our Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is himself God's promise that suffering will come to an end, that death shall be no more, and that all things will be made new.

Question 22. *What do you understand by God's providence?*

That God not only preserves the world, but also continually attends to it, ruling and sustaining it with wise and benevolent care. God is concerned for every creature: "The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, you satisfy the desire of every living thing" (Ps. 145:15). In particular, God provides for the world by bringing good out of evil, so that nothing evil is permitted to occur that God does not bend finally to the good. Scripture tells us, for example, how Joseph said to his brothers: "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen. 50:20).

Question 131. *What is meant by the fifth petition, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us"?*

We pray that a new and right spirit will be put within us. We ask for the grace to treat others, especially those who harm us, with the same mercy that we have received from God. We remember that not one day goes by when we do not need to turn humbly to God for our own forgiveness. We know that our reception of this forgiveness can be blocked by our unwillingness to forgive others. We ask that we will not delight in doing evil, nor in avenging any wrong, but that we will survive all cruelty without bitterness, and overcome evil with good, so that our hearts will be knit together with the mercy and forgiveness of God.

Question 132. *What is meant by the final petition, "Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil"?*

We ask God to protect us from our own worst impulses and from all external powers of destruction in the world. We ask that we might not yield to despair in the face of seemingly hopeless circumstances. We pray for the grace to remember and believe, despite our unbelief, that no matter how bleak the world may sometimes seem, there is nonetheless a depth of love which is deeper than our despair, and that this love -- which delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and raised our Lord Jesus from the dead -- will finally swallow up forever all that would now seem to defeat it.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fred Craddock in Ten Great Preachers edited by Bill Turple, pages 43-44.