

The Mystery of Iniquity

II Thessalonians 2:7-17, October 31, 2010

Reformation Sunday (Trinity XXII)

Beloved of the Lord.....If you were watching the news this week, you know there has been a great Tsunami in Indonesia, and also a volcanic eruption. Hundreds have been killed. One of those slain by the volcano was a "keeper" of the mountain spirits. His job was to appease the spirits of the mountain by a ceremonial offering of rice and flowers, thrown directly into the volcano's mouth. All his sacrifices were useless however, when the volcano erupted and killed him. A similar fate awaits all false prophets, especially the antichrist, who lead and deceive men to worship a false god by man-made sacrifice, rather than the True God Jesus Christ, who offered up Himself once for the sins of all. There are then those who preach Christ crucified, like Martin Luther, and those who teach salvation by works. How thankful we can be then today dear Christian, that the Holy Ghost has taught us the truth, as He did Luther, "that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ." May we as Martin Luther did long ago, by faith in Christ, stand squarely against the devil and all false prophets, and teach our justification is by faith alone in Christ alone.

I. The Mystery of Iniquity revealed. "For the mystery of iniquity doth already work." Similarly I John 2:18 says, "the antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists". The Bible uses the term "antichrist" in both a wide and narrow sense. In the wide sense, the antichrist is all false prophets who are against Christ, speaking heresy and lies which contradict the Gospel. When Paul wrote the "mystery of iniquity doth already work", there were already then many false prophets teaching contrary to the pure Gospel. "Even now are there many antichrists". The "spirit" of the antichrist is the sinful desire of one man to rule over one another. When priests, bishops, ministers, and religious teachers become high minded, they claim a higher authority. Accordingly, Jesus did not permit His disciples to be called Rabbi or Father, "for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, *even* Christ." This is why no Christian fellowship or synod ought to allow a hierarchy in their midst, for Christ alone is the head of the Church, and we are all members one of another. Pastors and layman alike are equal, and no brother is to stand on the shoulders of another. The smallest child in a congregation is just as much a priest with all rights and privileges as the pastor. There are no lords in God's household but only servants.

Speaking now of the narrow sense "antichrist", the Bible gives certain marks or clues as to his identity. FIRST, the term *antichrist* in the Greek means "in the

place of Christ". He is not a person outside visible Christendom, but he comes from within. SECOND, the antichrist is not Satan himself, but he is the "working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders." He deceives people by performing "lying wonders", false miracles not from God but the devil. THIRD, the antichrist is not one man alone, but a series of men continuing through the course of history until the Last Day, when "the Lord shall consume [him] with the spirit of His mouth." FOURTH, he sets himself up in God's temple, claiming God's authority. All are to obey him for the sake of his position alone. He exercises a spiritual rule over the hearts and consciences of Christians, so that if they disobey him, they will feel as if they are sinning. Finally the FIFTH mark of the antichrist, is that he will appear when a certain restraining power is taken out of the way. Verse seven says, "until he be taken out of the way, and then shall that wicked be revealed."

There is only one figure, man, or series of men through the course of history which satisfies all these marks of the antichrist, and that is the papacy. Whereas Christians for a time were persecuted under the Roman Empire, in the year 300 A.D. Christianity became the state religion of Rome. The power of the sword being removed, certain bishops began exalting themselves over one another forming a hierarchy. The rivalry ultimately culminated to one bishop above all, namely the pope in 1100 A.D. This pope is visibly within Christendom, yet he rules the hearts and consciences of men, by making commandments God has not made (such as forbidding priests to marry, or praying to Mary). Moreover, the pope claims to be infallible when he speaks *ex cathedra*, namely from his throne or chair, in his official capacity. He sets himself up as God, in the temple of God, judging all men. Yet since he's the pope, he does not allow anyone to judge him by God's Word.

But perhaps the worst of the papacy is this: he teaches that if anyone believes they are saved by faith in Christ alone, without good works, "let him be anathema", namely damned. This literally means the pope teaches all of us Lutherans will be damned, since we believe God has justified us through the blood of Christ alone, not by our good works. Who is right, the pope or God? Our gracious God tells us in the Bible, "That a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified." Quite contrary to the pope who condemns us, we likewise believe and teach that the True Church is invisible. Contrary to the pope, we do not teach that only Lutherans are saved, but we rejoice that since the True Church is invisible, there are certainly many Christians in the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations. In spite of the false

doctrine taught therein, these simple believers trust in Jesus alone for their salvation, not their works. Even now there are many Catholics in heaven, but they are there because they didn't believe in salvation by works, but salvation by grace alone, by Christ alone, by faith alone.

II. Do not be deceived by miracles, but trust God's Word alone. We also believe Dr. Martin Luther is in heaven, because his confession was always Christ and not himself. Moreover, in an earthly sense Luther should be revered, in that he revered Christ alone for man's salvation. Luther was a true and faithful preacher of the Gospel, who did not cave in to the fears and threats of the pope, even with the threat of excommunication. When the pope threatened Luther with hell, by the papal bull, Luther burned the pope's words, trusting in God's Word alone. This too should be our faith, in that if we were the last man standing on earth, and all churches taught contrary to God's Word, we would rather die than deny one jot or tittle of the words of our Savior who saved us. For "ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, *as* silver and gold, from your vain conversation *received* by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot."

Thus we should not be deceived by lying wonders, false miracles, and all the pomp and glittery show of holiness the papacy displays. "With all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish, because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved." Be not deceived dear Christian, for this can happen to you too if you inwardly despise God's Word and Jesus' sincere invitation to heaven by the cross, and instead follow your own heart, feelings, or emotions, or so-called miracles. History is filled with people, nations, and citizens to whom God graciously preached the Gospel, yet they received not the love of the truth. What is the consequence of rejecting God's earnest invitation through the Son to heaven? "For this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie." They will believe and follow anyone, and they will do any work no matter how evil, because they refuse to follow their own Savior. They will throw rice and flowers into a volcano, to appease the mountain spirits. They will make pilgrimages to Rome or Mecca, enter the priesthood or monasteries and have "pleasure in unrighteousness". They will wage holy war against the infidels, putting bombs in planes to kill innocent people. Jesus said, "The time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service." Yes they will do all these things and more dear Christian to you....WHY? Because they hate the teaching that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Savior of the world, and they instead choose to believe a lie. Their damnation is their own choice.

III. Therefore brethren, stand fast in Christ! But this will not be so for you dear Christian! For "We are bound to give thanks always to God for you brethren, beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth." As we said last week it was no accident that you were baptized into God's grace, nor was it an accident you learned God's Word, that Jesus is indeed your Savior from all sin. This was God's plan! For God loved you from the beginning of the world, yea He chose and elected you for salvation. In the fullness of time, "God sent forth His son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." This is also why you know that God will not condemn you when you die, for in your heart you do not believe you are justified by your works, but by the holy and precious blood of Christ, and it is none other than Jesus who promises you, "He that believeth on Me hath everlasting life." Indeed you believe this because the Holy Ghost has called you by the Gospel and enlightened you with His gifts. And so even though we are not as bold as Luther, nor does the strength of our faith match his, we have the same Spirit, the same trust and hope of heart, that "God was in Christ, reconciling the whole world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them". "He that believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

"Therefore brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle." This means hold fast and faithful to the true doctrine of Jesus Christ and do not be deceived by the lying wonders or the false doctrine of the antichrist. "Stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." Though you live in a deceitful world filled with false prophets, signs, and lying wonders, don't follow them, but cling to Jesus. For "we preach Christ crucified, and the full truth of God's Word." He is, and always will be your faithful Shepherd, your Good Shepherd who gave His life for the sheep. Therefore be faithful to Him and hold fast to His Word, for surely He will keep and preserve you in the one true faith unto life everlasting. "Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God, even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given *us* everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, Comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work." Amen.