

Luther on the "Touchstone"

Commenting on Psalm 110:2: "The Lord will send the scepter of thy kingdom out of Zion," Luther says:

. . . this scepter is nothing else than the office of the public ministry, which the Lord Christ began Himself and later on commanded to be extended by His messengers, the apostles and their successors, and to be continued until the Last Day. In this consists His entire kingdom and government as far as it can be seen or grasped outwardly, for here He indicates and mentions nothing else by which this King will rule except this scepter. There will be no other external sign or mark by which His kingdom can be recognized. For . . . this King is not going to rule with the sword or physical power and might, as do the secular kings and lords in their governments. . . . Nevertheless, He must also have a power by which He can rule and promote and maintain His kingdom. This will be done only through the oral Word or the office of the ministry, sounding forth among the people about this King and thus entering their hearts so that He may be known and accepted. . . .

Note well that the psalmist says this scepter is to be sent forth 'from Zion.' This is as useful a text as can be found against all the schismatics and erring spirits of the devil, to show that God ordained a special and certain locality on earth where this preaching of the Gospel is to begin. Thereby He binds the ears and hearts of all men so that they know which is the true doctrine of God's Word, and do not gape at this or that or flutter about confusedly. . . .

Now, it is a fact that no other teaching was published in Zion than the one we have and preach according to the four evangelists, the same one that was preached by the holy apostles.

Hence this is the touchstone by which all doctrine is to be judged. One must take care and see whether it is the same doctrine that was published in Zion through the apostles. For instance, we can and should cheerfully condemn the doctrine of Mohammed and his Turks, or of the pope and his monks, because it was not published in Zion or derived from the Gospel but from their Alcoran or decretal, or out of their own heads and dreams. The same thing applies to our Jews, who reject the preaching of this Christ and His apostles and seek and hope for another Messiah.

On this basis we also reject the self-made spirituality [*eigen Geisterey*] of all other sects who seek a special enlightenment and a secret revelation from heaven, and lay claim to something apart from the commonly preached Word of the Gospel. Clearly the apostles themselves presented nothing else to the people than this public preaching, concerning which they had a common command, plainly given from heaven, that they should preach in all the world until the end (Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15). For this reason they have been called 'apostles,' to which the word in the text, 'send out,' has a relation, meaning ambassadors (2 Cor 5:20). In really old German they are 'messengers [*Boten*];' this is why they have also been called 'the twelve messengers [*Zwelfboten*],' because they are people who did not themselves invent this preaching but manifestly received it by the command of the Holy Spirit and were sent to preach it in the world. Therefore we must also remain at this place and neither hear nor accept any other preaching; for this alone . . . is the true doctrine, bestowing upon men a right and certain understanding, comfort of heart, and salvation.

You can see, therefore, how the dominion of this King works. In his invisible essence He sits at the right hand of God; but He rules visibly on earth and works through external visible signs, of which the preaching of the Gospel and the Sacraments are the chief ones, and through public confession and the fruits of faith in the Gospel. These are the true marks whereby one can really recognize the kingdom of the Lord Christ and the Christian Church: namely, wherever this scepter is, that is, the office of the preaching of the Gospel, borne by the apostles into the world and received from them by us. Where it is present and maintained, there the Christian Church and the kingdom of Christ surely exist, no matter how small or negligible the number of the flock.

On the other hand, those who do not maintain and foster this but even persecute it, as the papal mob does, should not be considered a part of the Christian Church; nor should they be heard, even though they arrogate this name and title to themselves and defiantly and gloriously boast that they have inherited the apostolic sees. They do not speak for the apostles, nor do they preach their message. Therefore this kind of boasting and claiming is improper for them, nor will it help them. Rather, it will damn them all the more severely for having usurped the place and office of the apostles.

Zion, or Jerusalem, is the place chosen by God for this purpose, from which this scepter and kingdom of Christ should proceed. . . . [T]he same true Word, or Gospel, which went out of Zion, remains until the Last Day. God certainly maintains His church, which He planted by His apostles and of which we are the heirs. Meanwhile He rejects and damns the pope and his adherents even though they possess the throne itself" (LW 13: 265 f., 270, 271 ff.).

This passage is interesting to me for all kinds of reasons. But I find it most interesting because of what it says about "the touchstone." Here, at any rate, Luther clearly identifies "the touchstone by which all doctrine is to be judged, not with Christ, or with "what pushes Christ," but with "the doctrine that was published in Zion through the apostles," the test being whether it is "the same doctrine," "the same [teaching] that was preached by the holy apostles." And to remove any doubt about what he means by "apostles," he speaks of God's ordaining "a special and certain locality on earth where this preaching of the Gospel is to begin." "Zion, or Jerusalem," he says, "is the place chosen by God for this purpose, from which this scepter and kingdom of Christ should proceed." In other words, by "apostles" Luther undoubtedly means precisely *the first, or beginning, witnesses*, through whom God "*planted*" his church.

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