

THYATIRA: THE WORLDLY CHURCH

by Ray C. Stedman

As we look at these seven letters in the book of Revelation, it is helpful to remember two things about them:

- First, they are a picture of seven kinds of churches that you find in any age, in any period of history. Every church in the world today will fall into one or more of these categories of churches. We fit into one of these ourselves.
- The second thing is the prophetic nature of these letters. They are a preview of the entire age of the church, falling into seven periods, from the first coming of our Lord to his second appearing.

Today we come to the fourth of these churches, the church at Thyatira. Beginning in Verse 18 of Chapter 2, the Lord addresses the angel of the church. Thyatira was located about 35 miles southeast of Pergamum. It was a very small city, but a busy commercial center. It was on a major road of the Roman Empire, and, because of this, many trade unions had settled in this city. Everyone who worked there was a member of one or more trades. There were carpenters, dyers, sellers of goods, tent makers, etc.

In the church at Philippi, which the Apostle Paul began, there was a woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, who came from Thyatira. It was difficult to make a living as a Christian in Thyatira without belonging to the union. This is a factor which will bear upon the interpretation of this letter, as we will see.

Our Lord's first words to this church indicate both judgment and approbation. He says:

"These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first." {Rev 2:18b-19 NIV}

Notice that he uses, for the first and only time in the book of Revelation, the title the "Son of God." There are people who claim that Jesus never said that he was the Son of God, but here is one of several places in the New Testament where he makes that claim very clearly. This means, of course, that he is stressing his deity. As the Son of God he has "eyes like blazing fire," eyes that can pierce the facades, the disguises, the postures and pretensions of his people and get right to the heart of what they are doing. He has feet "like burnished bronze" which can trample sin under foot and severely punish that which is wrong, if need be. Both are needed in the church at Thyatira. It is the most corrupt of the seven churches that are presented here.

But there were some good things going on in this church. Our Lord tells us what they are. "I know your deeds [i.e., your works], your love and faith, your service and your perseverance." Those are related. Love leads to service; faith leads to perseverance. If you love God, you will serve his people. You cannot help it. It is the sign that you love that you are willing to serve. And if you have faith you will persevere; you will understand that God is in control and things will work out according to his purpose. You keep at your work; you do not quit. So here was a church that had many people that loved God and served his people. They had faith in his word, and they persevered. They helped many, and they kept it up. As others then got involved, the church grew. So the deeds, or the works, of the church were far more when this letter was written than when it first began.

That is the way a church grows. If you and I had been there at Thyatira, we would have been greatly impressed by this church. It was a busy, bustling, active church with some wonderful people in it who obviously manifested love and faith, concern and care for others. It must have seemed a very attractive church.

But now the blazing eyes and the burning feet go into action. We begin to learn deeper facts about the church.

Our Lord says:

"Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead." Rev 20-23a NIV}

Evidently there was in the church at Thyatira a woman who was a very dominant leader. Jesus names her "Jezebel." That was not her name, of course, but our Lord always names people according to their character. That is why he often renames people in the Gospels. Here he chooses the name of the most evil woman in the Old Testament.

The O. T. Jezebel was the daughter of the king of Sidon, a town in Lebanon that is often in the news these days. She was the wife of King Ahab of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, and she is particularly noted for having made the worship of the god Baal popular in Israel. Baal was a fertility god, and his worship involved immoral and licentious practices. There were temple prostitutes, both male and female, associated with the worship of Baal. It was Jezebel who spread that degraded worship widely among the ten tribes of Israel until it became one of the popular religions of the day. She herself supported over 800 prophets of Baal, who ate at her table.

She was the one who tried to kill Elijah after his famous encounter with 480 of the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel when fire came down from heaven and consumed the sacrifice. That mighty man of God had faced with great courage 480 false prophets, but when Jezebel got after him he ran for his life. She was also the one who murdered her neighbor Naboth because her husband wanted his vineyard. She was a ruthless, immoral, seducer of the people, and that is why Jesus selects her name for this dominant woman at Thyatira. According to the prophecy of the Old Testament, Jezebel ended her days by being thrown from her palace window into the courtyard below where the dogs came and ate her body and licked up her blood.

This Jezebel in Thyatira called herself a "prophetess." There is nothing wrong with that in itself. I want to make clear that it was not her sex that was wrong -- it was her teaching. There were other women prophets in the Bible. The Old Testament lists a number of them who were well respected in Israel. In the book of Acts, in the New Testament, we are told that Philip, that wonderful, Spirit-filled evangelist who preached throughout the land of Palestine, had four daughters who were prophetesses and who had prophesied within the church. But the trouble with Jezebel is that she was a false prophet. Our Lord points out what her teaching was. She taught that it was all right for Christians to indulge in sexual immorality and in idolatry.

Here is the link with the trade unions of Thyatira. In order to work in these unions, which constituted the entire business of the city, Christians had to join a union, or guild, made up of pagans for the most part. The meetings of the guilds were devoted to licentious debaucheries which were connected with the worship of erotic idols of the Greek world. Let me quote from the great British Bible scholar William Barclay. He says,

These guilds met frequently, and they met for a common meal. Such a meal was, at least in part, a religious ceremony. It would probably meet in a heathen temple, and it would certainly begin with a libation to the gods, and the meal itself would largely consist of meat offered to idols. The official position of the church meant that a Christian could not attend such a meal.

This was the problem these Thyatiran Christians faced. In order to make a living they had to belong to a union, but to attend the union was to become involved, or to be sorely pressured to become involved, with the worship of idols and with licentious and lascivious debauchery. So they had to make a choice. It was difficult to live in Thyatira for this very reason. But apparently Jezebel had begun to teach that it was all right for them to go along with the requirements of the guild, that they needed to submit to the pressures of the world around in order to make a living, and that God would understand and overlook this. Her philosophy was what you often hear today: "Business is business." If business practices collide with your Christian principles, then your principles have to go -- because you have to make a living.

Have you ever heard that argument?

This whole scenario is paralleled in many churches today that accept the easy going sexuality and lack of standards that is so widespread in our society. For instance, some churches approve of homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle. Many do not discipline their members when they fall into sexual immorality. Others allow pornography to go unchallenged in their midst. But notice that the Lord holds the church responsible. His accusation to them is, "You tolerate that woman Jezebel." This is a problem that church leadership has to face in our day just as it had to face it in the 1st century.

Notice that in the letters to the church at Pergamum, and to the church at Thyatira, the Lord links sexual immorality with idolatry. We may find that strange, but actually one inevitably leads to the other. The reason is this: Fornication and adultery are both clear-cut violations of specific and explicit statements in the Word of God. Anyone who reads the Bible can see very clearly that God forbids these activities. It is wrong for believers to indulge in sexual immorality of any sort. When one does, he or she has deliberately violated the authority of God, therefore, in practice, if not in profession, God is no longer their God.

It is impossible to miss the condemnation of the Bible in these respects. If people deliberately reject the Lord's authority, he is no longer their God. The result is, they must find another god, for it is impossible for the human spirit to live without something to live for. That is what a god is. Whatever you are living for, whatever makes life worthwhile to you, becomes your god. It may be the god of pleasure, even sexual pleasure. It may be the god of wealth. It may be the god of power, a lust for power and ambition. It may be the search for fame. The point that is being made here is that wherever you work is the place of greatest temptation in this regard. Right here this morning there are businessmen and businesswomen, stockbrokers, professional people, clerks, secretaries, various laborers in the marketplace, and in shops, etc. It is right where you work that you will be under pressure to compromise, and to go along with the standards of the world around.

Our friend in Berkeley, Dr. Earl Palmer, has said a very helpful thing in this connection.

The most subtle challenge to faith does not usually originate in public amphitheaters but in the daily places where we earn the money we need to live. What the trades need, what professions need, what all deployments of our lives need, is not our soul but our skills; not our worship but our hard work. When we once learn this vital alignment of values, we will do better in our work and have fewer ulcers too. Idolatries, whether of the dramatic, amphitheater type or the low-grade office type, always make us sick.

That is what was going on in Thyatira.

This morning I listened to one of the wonderful series that Tuvia Zaretsky is giving on how Jews cope with life today, and especially the pressures that are upon them. When a Jew contemplates becoming a Christian he must face severe social consequences that are painful and agonizing. This is also true of the choices that have to be made in the marketplaces on the question of morals. Many find themselves having to choose between a job and a moral standard.

The punishment that our Lord assesses against this teaching reflects the sickness that idolatry and immorality always bring. There are three parties involved:

First, there is Jezebel herself. Jesus says: "I will cast her on a bed of suffering." There is a note of irony or sarcasm there. He is saying, in effect, "She likes beds, so I will give her one, but it will prove to be a bed of agonizing pain and hurt." It would constitute her only chance to realize what was happening to her, and lead her to change.

Then there is another group: "I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely [literally, "I will give them great affliction"] unless they repent of her ways." Those who commit adultery with her are those who practice, as she did, immorality and the consequent idolatry. The suffering that he refers to, the intense suffering or affliction, is a reference very likely to sexual diseases. What invariably accompanies immorality? Some form of sexual disease. Gonorrhea and syphilis were well-known and widespread in the ancient world. Today, of course, we have the additional plague of AIDS that results largely from sexual immorality. Anybody

who has watched, as I have recently, someone dying of AIDS knows what a terrible, painful thing it is, both emotionally and physically.

There was still a third group. The Lord says, "I will strike her children with death." Children represent those who not only practice immorality but who teach it as well, as Jezebel was doing. The "death," I think, refers to spiritual death, i.e., what is called in the letter to the church at Pergamum "the second death," the terrible destruction of the lake of fire described in Chapters 20 and 21 of this book. It is a commitment to evil that makes repentance difficult.

But notice the good news here: "unless they repent of her ways." Our Lord always gives an opportunity for repentance. I have often thought that natural disasters -- earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, etc. -- are opportunities being given men to think again, to stop and look at what we are doing, and to change our ways. It is opportunity to repent, a slap in the face that says, wake up! "But," Jesus says, "she was unwilling." And so the judgment must come.

The impact of that judgment is given in verse 23:

"Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds." {Rev 2:23b NIV}

The result of judgment and discipline within the church is that the church is purified, strengthened, and helped. People begin to take note of evil tendencies and become careful not to drift into the pattern of society around. They are willing to stand against the tide or swim against the current. That is what needed to happen in Thyatira.

And it happens in PBC today. In those rare times that we have had to take severe disciplinary action against some member of the congregation because of sexual immorality, the result has always been a purifying of people's lives, a willingness to examine the morals of the day, and an increased understanding of the importance of being pure in these areas.

The churches will come to understand, our Lord says, that he searches the hearts and minds. Literally, "the kidneys and the hearts." Kidneys were in ancient times regarded as the source of feelings. If your kidneys are not working, you do not feel very well! They saw them as the source of feelings. Hearts were viewed as the source of choices, the decisions we make, the will in exercise. Our Lord says that, when you see him acting in judgment, you realize that your feelings are important, and your choices equally so, and that each one will be held responsible for his/her choices. No one else can be blamed but we ourselves.

As we look at the church of Thyatira prophetically, i.e., within the scope of church history, we see that this church foreshadows the time from the 6th to the 16th century, a thousand years that has been called "The Devil's Millennium," the "Dark Ages," or, it is known to history as the "Middle Ages." It was a time when the church became corrupt by combining pagan rites and Christian teaching. Many pagan practices and heathen rituals were introduced into the churches, baptized with Christian terminology, related in some way to elements of the Bible, and thus accepted as being true:

- Images began to be worshipped in churches.
- Various practices of priests which were unknown to the early church began to be approved.
- The control of political powers by religious authorities was widely sought.
- This was the time when the Bishop of Rome came into universal acceptance, was called the Pope, and began to exercise dominion over even emperors and kings. On one occasion, one of the German emperors was summoned to Rome and had to stand barefoot in the snow for several hours before the pope would receive him. When he came in, he had to come crawling on his hands and knees. So the church sought to exercise political power.

Yet, even during this period of corrupting influences, there were true souls who loved Christ and did many works of loving service:

- The monasteries which flourished then often served as hospitals and refuges for the poor and downtrodden.
- Some of our enduring hymns were written by Catholic Christians such as Bernard of Clairvaux and others.

This was the time when hierarchy was widely established in the church as the system of government instead of the simple servant-leadership that we read of in the New Testament. All of this will find its ultimate culmination in this book of Revelation when we get to the 17th and the 18th chapters, and view the great harlot who rides the beast and who has dominion over the kings of the earth.

I know it is popular among many commentators to relate all this to the Roman Catholic Church, but I want to make clear that it is not only the Roman Church that suffers from these errors. We so-called Protestants have had a quarrel with Rome for centuries, largely over the three M's -- Mary, the Mass, and the Magesterium (the government, the leadership of the church). But you will find many of these errors also in the great Orthodox churches of the East, in the Coptic church of Egypt, and even in the Anglican and the Lutheran churches of northern Europe. The great Protestant denominations have also allowed many of these errors that are reflected here in Thyatira to take over.

I wish I could say, and I would love to say, that only PBC is pure! But I have to say that the seeds of these things are found among us as well.

In his appeal to the church, our Lord says several wonderful things:

"Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): Only hold on to what you have until I come." {Rev 2:24-25 NIV}

That is a wonderfully sensitive and thoughtful word. Here, for the first time in these letters, our Lord lays special stress on his coming. Notice the phrase "the deep things of Satan." That indicates that when a church drifts in these areas of moral standards it almost invariably involves the rise of mystic rites and rituals. People love to feel they are being let into special, secret things.

You find these mystic cults arising in many of the movements of our day. The New Age Movement, for instance, intrigues people with revelations of powerful spirit beings who can impart information that ordinary people do not have. These are what Jesus calls "the deep things of Satan." In Paul's letter to the Corinthians he speaks of the "deep things of God," {1 Cor 2:10}. Whenever God has something good, Satan imitates it. These dark and hidden matters are Satan's imitation of the wonderfully deep truths in the Word of God.

Now to those who refuse these, Jesus says, "Hold fast what you have."

- Do not let it go.
- Do not accept these degrading moral standards. It may be difficult to live for Christ in a worldly church, but hang on to your moral standards at least.
- Do not go along with sexual immorality.
- Do not accept the idea that adultery is only a minor sin, that you need to have affairs now and then.

Hold on," Jesus says, "until I come."

To such who overcome by holding fast till he comes, he adds another word in Verse 26:

"To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations --

**'He will rule them with an iron scepter;
he will dash them to pieces like pottery' --
just as I have received authority from my Father. {Rev 2:26-27 NIV}**

That quotation from Psalm 2 is a reference to the rule of Christ in the earthly kingdom that we call "The Millennium." It is a promise of reigning with Christ, not in the new heavens and the new earth, but in a period marked by the type of rule found in this quotation: Jesus says, "He will rule them with an iron scepter." That means with some degree of stern judgment. "He will dash them to pieces like potter's vessels" {cf, Psa 2:9 KJV}, i.e., the combines of evil will be broken up in that day.

It is referring, therefore, not to the new heavens and the new earth (because nothing evil ever enters there), but to the millennial kingdom, the earthly kingdom over which the saints will share a reign with Christ. We need to understand that the Millennium is a time when righteousness reigns, i.e., it rules over the earth, it judges among people because sin is present and death as well. But the new heavens and the new earth reflect a condition where righteousness dwells. Nothing shall enter there except that which is righteous and pure and good.

Now our Lord becomes even more specific.

"I will also give him the morning star." {Rev 2:28 NIV}

That is a beautiful symbol. I do not know how many of you have ever seen the morning star, but you have to get up while it is still dark to do so. In the book of Malachi, the closing book of the Old Testament, there is a great prediction by the prophet that the "Sun of Righteousness will arise with healing in his wings" {Mal 4:2 KJV}, i.e., the Lord Jesus will return in power and great glory. He will be like the sun appearing in the darkness of this world's night. But before the sun rises, the morning star appears. In Revelation 22:16, Jesus says of himself: "I am the bright and morning star." So what he is saying here is that there will be an appearing of himself for his own before he comes in power and glory, visible to the world. In other words it is a promise of the rapture of the church, the first such promise in the book of Revelation. He will appear for his own, for those belonging to him, who are true Christians, who have been held and kept by the Spirit of God from the evils of the society around. It is not that they cannot, and do not at times, fall, but they invariably recover, and repent, and turn back to him. That is the sign that our faith is real. Those who have real faith will repent.

Someone has well said, "If your faith fizzles before you finish, it is because it was faulty from the first!" True faith holds on to the end.

Finally, the Lord says, "Listen to all the letters of the churches."

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." {Rev 2:29 NIV}

Not just to this church, but to all the churches. These promises and warnings are needed in our individual lives, no matter what our local church may be like. Ephesus tells us, "Do not let your love for Jesus grow cold," {cf, Rev 2:1-7}. Smyrna says, "Do not fear the persecution of the world," {cf, Rev 2:8-11}. Pergamum says, "Trust the Word of God to keep you strong and faithful," {cf, Rev 2:12-17}. And Thyatira tells us, "Avoid both sexual and spiritual adultery. Keep your moral standards clear." These are tremendously practical letters for the age in which we live. We need to heed them today as much as they did in the 1st century.

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