

A Compromised Church

Rev. 2:18-29

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First Baptist Church of Diana, Texas 12/01/2010

Thyatira received the longest message of any of the churches. The city itself was a military town and a commercial center. Several trade guilds were located here. Trade guilds in the Roman world were akin to modern day trade associations yet with more power and control. Some guilds listed on archaeological inscriptions include woolworkers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave-dealers and bronze-smiths (Mounce 1910) Acts 16:14 lists Lydia , a dealer in purple, as being from Thyatira. She also had a house in Philippi. Wherever they were in abundance, idolatry and immorality seemed to flourish. The power of these guilds was in their ability to regulate trade. In order to sell goods one had to belong to a guild much like you might have to have a tax ID to legally carry on business in a particular state or to legally employ workers. These guilds usually had a patron deity and the guilds activities included communal meals in pagan temples which ended in sacrifices to the deities. Drinking and sexual immoralities were also associated with these meetings (Newport 150). It would have been a compromise of the Christian faith to belong to one of these guilds.

At Thyatira was a special temple to Apollo the sun God. This may explain why the introduction to this church referred to Jesus as the Son of God (Weirsbe).

The Description of Christ to Thyatira

As with each of the addresses to the seven churches, there is a reference back to Revelation chapter one's description of Jesus. In chapter 2 verse 18, we find this address to Thyatira and the reference to Jesus as the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze." The term Son of God is used nowhere else in Revelation although it is implied in 1:6, 2:27, 3:5, 3:21, and 14:1 (Allen 1972, 268). The worship of Apollo Tyrinnos had been merged with worship of the emperor and both were acclaimed to be sons of Zeus (Mounce 1977, 1918). The identification of Jesus as the Son of God directly confronts the pagan norm in Thyatira. This alone sets the tone for the separation of Christians from the culture. The second description is of "eyes like a flame of fire." This is the second symbol of this address and coupled with the third, feet of burnished bronze, Jesus is seen as one who can see into the soul discerning all things with ample power and will to deal with the situation. He is seen here as the one who knows and the one who will bring the proper judgment.

The Commendation

Jesus addresses the church at Thyatira with both commendation and condemnation. He leads with the commendation. The order of comments from the Lord the Thyatira is prescriptive for any who find themselves in some position of authority over other humans in the created order. He begins with the

positive speaking good words prior to proceeding with the negative words which must be spoken. Jesus commends this church in five areas. They have stood firm in their love, in their faith, and in service. They have persevered through the trials and tribulations. Finally, their deeds are growing rather than diminishing. This glowing commendation is no doubt to be an encouragement in light of the condemnation yet to come.

There are stark contrasts between Thyatira and Ephesus. At Ephesus they had left their first love and their deeds were not as great a when they first started. Thyatira was not only a busy church, their activities were largely on target for what Jesus calls His church to do, love each other maintain faith, and serve one another. Their love was not mere rhetoric but had feet. Their service was likely their greatest testimony of their love.

The Condemnation

The charges against the church at Thyatira include toleration to one called Jezebel. It is probable that this is not a reference to someone named Jezebel, but rather one who is committing abominations against God in the same fashion as the Old Testament Jezebel. You will likely recall from your studies in 1 Kings that Jezebel was the wife of King Ahab and an arch enemy of Elijah. She had used her influence to lead the Israelites to mix the pagan worship of Baal with worship of Yahwee. She was a vindictive queen who sought Elijah's life for prophesying against her. The fact that she called herself a prophetess here is especially alarming. This gives us an idea of the respect the New Testament church had for the office of the prophet as taught in Ephesians 4:11. The prophet was well respected and heard by the people. Toleration of this false prophet was not pleasing to the Lord. It is probable that the eating of things sacrificed to idols and the acts of immorality were connected to pagan worship included in the meetings of the guilds. It seems as though this prophetess was causing the church to put itself into a position of compromise with the ungodly.

Evidently, the Spirit of God had already confronted this false prophet for verse 21 says she has been given time to repent and that she does not want to. Her compromise with the world system of the enemy has likely been profitable and is giving her a more comfortable life. She may be a woman who had a true conversion experience and has been led astray or one who has never believed and was a tool of the enemy who had slipped in among the church unaware. Both require repentance in the presence of the Lord.

The warning that follows is a frightening encouragement concerning God's dealing with His church. He says he will throw the woman on a bed of sickness and kill her children with pestilence which is encouraging because it demonstrates God's hand of guidance and protection on His church. It is frightening because of the fact that we all fail from time to time. Her failure, however, was not from time to time it was consistent, deliberate, and continual. This passage, along with others in the New Testament, builds a strong case to refute some modern day teaching which says that all sickness is of the devil. It should be clear that God has the prerogative to use whomever he desires. He could use the devil to bring this sickness or He could simply send it Himself. This is not contrary to His character of

love but fully consistent. In His love for others who might be deceived and His love for the so called prophetess, she is to be chastened.

The warning then turns personal to each member of the church and includes the promise of reward. In a probable connection to verse 18, the ability of Christ to discern the hearts and minds of all people is clearly articulated. The result of this discernment will be rewards according to deeds whether negative or positive. It will do us well to keep in mind here that Jesus is not speaking of salvation, he is speaking of discipline and judicial retribution. Perhaps the judgment seat is in view when rewards will be given out according to works or perhaps He is speaking of current life judgment when God brings special blessings in light of obedience and tribulation following rebellion and disobedience.

Reference is also made to the deep things of Satan and correlates them to the mind set of this prophetess called Jezebel. The reference is likely to the world systems set up by Satan. These systems have not failed to survive through all the ages even until this day. This compromised church in Thyatira could easily match a description of many churches and church members of our contemporary period. The good news is that while Jesus warned of tribulation on those who had been deceived and practiced the satanic pagan practices of this one called Jezebel, those who did not submit to the lure and temptation would escape the tribulation she would have to endure.

The Promise

Jesus completes His address to this church with a great promise. HE is coming back one day and when He does, He will rule the world. He will not rule alone, but will have a court or cabinet of others who rule with Him. Jesus makes the promise that those who endure and overcome will have the privilege to rule with Him (Mounce 1977, 2010). They will have authority over nations. Jesus will rule with a rod of iron which refers to the shepherds staff used to guide the sheep and ward off enemies of the sheep. A common practice among conquering kings of the ancient period, was to gather the pottery vessels of a newly conquered land. These vessels would have inscriptions of the ruling kings and would be broken to pieces in a public display which would show everyone who was now in authority (Allen 1972, 250).

A second promise is more difficult to interpret. Jesus promises them to receive the morning star. Daniel 12:3 indicates that the righteous will shine like a star of heaven and 2 Peter 1:19 speaks of a prophetic word being like a morning star rising in your hearts. Revelation 22:16 identifies Jesus as the morning star (Allen 1972, 270). Weirsbe suggests there may also be involved an allusion to Satan who wanted the kingdom for himself. In Isaiah 14:12 Lucifer is called the bright star and perhaps Jesus is once again proclaiming victory over the great deceiver by taking the name morning star for Himself.

In conclusion there is once again a reference to churches in the plural who should heed the words of the letter. It was written to Thyatira specifically but serves as a standard bearer for all churches of all ages.

The Dispensational Approach

Practically all methods and approaches to interpretation agree on the understanding and application of the letter to the church of record as recipient and subsequent churches as well. The dispensational understanding of the seven churches also parallels this church to the time of the Roman church up until the reformation (4th Century -16th Century). This was a time of continual sacrifice under what was sometimes evil and distorted rule within the Catholic Church.

Modern Application

The winds that drove compromise by some believers at Thyatira blow strongly across the modern capitalist mindset. Strong Christian ethics are regularly challenged in many places of employment. The scenes are a bit more subtle than what is described in this chapter of Revelation yet no less deadly to the believer and the church. The gods served by modern Americans are not so readily identified as were pagan idols but to the discerning Christian, they can easily be revealed. The call given to these first century believers is a call that continues with us today; keep yourselves faithful and pure to the master without cause to be seen as one who compromises with the world systems. Satan has nothing new but keeps using the same tactics over and over.