

“APOCALYPSE SOON”

“Thyatira: The Compromising Church” (Revelation 2:18-29)

The next epistle was sent to the Church at Thyatira. Like the church at Pergamos, it was a church that tolerated compromise. The difference seems that the error was much more deeply ingrained in Thyatira than at Pergamos. As MacArthur put it,

“If the church was married to the world in Pergamos, in Thyatira they were celebrating anniversaries. If compromise had begun in Pergamos, it had taken over in Thyatira. And this letter shows the depth of sin that compromise ultimately leads to full-scale idolatry, full-scale immorality, and worst of all, tolerance of both. This is the church that has been infiltrated by the world. This is the church that tolerated sin, the church that absorbed sin, absorbed error and lived happily ever after with it. This is the kind of church that is common today, as it has been through all of the centuries, but completely inconsistent with the demands of the Lord Jesus Christ who is the head of the church.”

It is interesting to also note that Smyrna was being assaulted from the outside by a synagogue of Satan, Pergamos was being attacked externally by the throne of Satan, but Thyatira was tolerating “*the depths of Satan*” (v24) in their midst.

Thyatira was the smallest city of the seven, yet it received the longest letter. Geographically, Thyatira was located about 35 miles southeast of Pergamos. Despite its small size, it was a busy commercial centre located on a major trade route of the Roman Empire. Thyatira was particularly famed for its wool production and dyeing of cloth. Interestingly, today it is a small but flourishing town in Turkey called Akhisar, which produces and exports essentially the same products of ancient Thyatira. Thyatira was renowned for a unique purple dye that came from a local plant and a shell fish. The extraction of this dye was a time-consuming process, but it made the purple cloth from Thyatira very expensive and much prized. The Bible records an incident in Acts 16 of the conversion of a woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, who came from Thyatira.

As a consequence of its commercial power, many specialist trade guilds sprang up in Thyatira such as dyeing cloth, cobblers, weavers etc. Anyone who wanted to prosper in a specialist trade was expected to join one of these guilds. However, each guild had its own unique guardian god or goddess, which was worshipped in immoral and pagan rituals. Those who wanted to belong to this guild were expected to fully engage in these perverted and unbiblical rituals. Refusal to do so would seriously inhibit your business or may cause you to forfeit it altogether. So, it is not difficult to imagine the struggle for any believer who was saved from such a background.

(1) THE COMMENDATION OF THIS CHURCH (v18-19)

The Lord introduces Himself to the church in Thyatira as, “*the Son of God, who hath His eyes like unto a flame of fire, and His feet are like fine brass.*” (v18) This is a striking introduction by immediately focusing the readers of this letter’s attention of the Deity of the Son of God. The descriptions of His eyes and feet are no doubt to emphasise the indignation of the Master about their sin and the severe threat of judgment that will follow (cf. Micah 4:13; Revelation 19:15). These flaming eyes He tells them are like spiritual lasers for, “*I am He which searcheth the reins and hearts*” (v23).

Sin may be hidden well from others in the church, but it never can be hidden from the searching omniscient eyes of the Head of the Church. It is deliberately a terrifying and threatening imagery. We today need to heed carefully this picture. Christ is searching our Church for sin and He has the knowledge, will, and power to deal with it. Sadly, today there is a dangerous lack of reverence for the risen Christ. Too many treat Christ as a “cosmic buddy” rather than the majestic, King of kings who has the authority and power to judge all. He judges their motives, ministry, methods, and message. We should note that even John the Apostle, who knew Christ intimately as He walked in veiled glory on earth, fell at the feet of the risen Saviour “*as dead*” (1:17).

The Church at Thyatira was commended for a number of things, “*I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first.*” (v19) Christ notes and commends them for the following:

(i) WORKS – This was not a lazy church, but they were busy in their various ministries. They served faithfully and had a diverse range of activities to meet various needs. Doubtless, there was a great temptation in such a commercially productive place, as Thyatira to get sucked into simply making money, but this church didn’t neglect serving in the Church.

(ii) CHARITY – This word translated “charity” here is *agape*, which is that selfless sacrificial love that chooses to love without any demand for reciprocation. Unlike the church at Ephesus that was noted for its declining love, Thyatira is commended for this quality. Their works seemed to be motivated by genuine love for the Lord.

(iii) SERVICE – This church has love in action as they actively ministered to the needs of others. The Greek word translated “*service*” here is *diakonian*, which we derive the word deacon from. The most basic meaning is “table servant.” The word is used in the NT to refer to those who serve the church (Acts 6:1-7; Romans 16:1-3) and those who were preaching the Word of God (Colossians 1:7, 23, 25). Serving in the Church requires the heart of a humble servant. Dwight. L. Moody once wisely said, “*The measure of a man is not how many servants he has, but how many servants he serves.*”

(iv) FAITH – The Church also was orthodox in its creed at Thyatira at least in some outward ways. They believed in Jesus Christ and loved the Master. They were a dynamic and vibrant fellowship and believed God to extend their ministries.

(v) PATIENCE – This Greek word literally means, “to remain under.” It has the idea of perseverance under trials. The church here did not quit when things got difficult, but bore up under the heavy load of their burdens. Too often Christians are inconsistent in their service and especially pull back under duress, but not these believers. This church at Thyatira had many impressive qualities such as service, love, fidelity, and endurance. Furthermore, they were not stagnating but had these in increasing measure as, “*the last to be more than the first.*” (v19b) There was clearly a significant growth in the outreach and impact of this church, which they matched with increased activity, faith, and love. From an outward perspective, things looked healthy and exemplary in this assembly.

There are many churches today that are famed for their extensive ministries, genuine warmth and love, endurance, and orthodox faith. There are many Evangelical churches that match up to this description. Many are greatly impressed by these welcoming and expanding churches. Outwardly they prosper and are attractive and warm places to visit. Yet as one will

discover, that is not enough. Love and sacrificial service for others are not a panacea that covers other faults, especially the toleration of sin.

(2) THE CONDEMNATION OF THIS CHURCH (v20-23)

Many at Thyatira may have felt somewhat relieved by the Lord's gracious words of commendation, but the tone is about to drastically change. The Saviour is never afraid to hurt feelings or rock the boat when sin is involved in His church. He directly states, "*notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols*" (v20). The church at Thyatira's great failure was a toleration of a prominent self-appointed false prophetess in their midst, whom Christ calls Jezebel. Now, it is unlikely that her real name is actually "Jezebel" since it is so infamous. What is probable is that the name is symbolic because she personifies the same spirit of deceit and influence of Jezebel of 1 Kings 16-19 in promoting immorality and idolatry. Doubtless, she was equally domineering, manipulative, and proud as her namesake of the OT.

As Thyatira was a centre of trade guilds, it is entirely feasible to imagine that this woman claimed inspired authority to encourage the members to compromise in the licentious and pagan guild feasts. This involved acts of gross immorality and feasting on meats dedicated to the pagan gods of the guilds. It is not as if they were ignorant of these issues, as the first Church Council of Apostles and Elders in Jerusalem issued decrees that this type of behaviour was explicitly forbidden, "*That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well.*" (Acts 15:29) Often the work environment is the place we are under the greatest pressure to compromise. It certainly illustrates the depravity of sin that a church can fall into if it begins to compromise the truth.

Doubtless, this false prophetess appealed to their baser lusts by seductively argued that grace covered it all and that the end justifies the means. Maybe she even claimed this would be a good testimony for the church to be so involved with their neighbours and co-workers. They could be salt and light there! After all, she might say didn't Jesus Christ eat with publicans and sinners (Matt. 9:9-13). And even the apostle Paul claimed, "*I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some*" (1 Cor. 9:22b). Like Jezebel of the OT, this false prophetess was seeking to promote compromise and destroy the doctrine of separation in the Thyatira church. That is devilish which is why her influence is called "*the depths of Satan*" (v24). Her authority was clearly very great, as no one dared stand up to her. They were more interested in pleasing her than pleasing the Lord. In her pride this false prophetess stubbornly refused the offer of grace to repent as, "*I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.*" (v21) Indeed, the fact that she is called Jezebel is suggestive that she is an unbeliever. Now, the Lord would give the church an opportunity to repent.

(3) THE COUNSEL TO THIS CHURCH (v22-29)

The Lord warns that He will use Thyatira as an example to "*all the churches*" (v23) of the consequences of tolerating evil if they do not repent. He promises a trio of "*I wills.*" These are:

(i) I will "*cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds.*" (v22) This "*adultery*" includes both physical and spiritual adultery (James 4:4) and is suggestive that those following this woman were actually true believers. Indeed, in v20 we are told she was able, "*to teach and to seduce my servants.*" Both the false prophetess and those who followed here are in immediate danger of facing a judgment of, "*great tribulation.*" However, the

Lord leaves one window of mercy that He will not pour down this tribulation if “*they repent of their deeds.*”

(ii) I will “*kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am He which searcheth the reins and hearts*” (v23) – This warning is reminiscent of God’s public slaying of Ananias and Sapphira. The NT contains warnings of God chastising His true children with sickness and death for flagrant sins, “*But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.*” (1 Cor. 11:28-32; cf.1 John 5:16-17).

(iii) I will “*give unto every one of you according to your works*” (v23) – In other words, they will reap what they sowed, “*Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.*” (Gal. 6:7-8)

FAITHFUL REMNANT

Clearly not everyone at Thyatira had bowed the knee to Jezebel’s teaching by being unfaithful to the Master. Christ has a special word of encouragement for this remnant, “*as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan.*” (v24) He urged them to “*hold fast till I come*” (v25b) and promises “*And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations*” (v26). This promise seems to refer to the millennium when God’s people reign with Christ on this earth (Revelation 5:10; 20:4). It is then that, “*He shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father*” (v27) (cf. Psalm 2:8-9).

CONCLUSION

In Acts 16 a woman from Thyatira was a great asset to the Church, but here we discover that another woman was a great liability. The devil does not enter our churches with a pitchfork and horns. He comes under the guise of truth and respectability. Often he can come in through the form of a woman. Maybe this church had been discerning enough to keep out false male prophets, but the devil is too cunning to be put off by this. He is a past master in the art of seduction and women have proven to be useful subjects for him to utilise e.g. Eve, Delilah etc. Doubtless, this prophetess was charismatic, attractive, and energetic. It is amazing what Christians can be deceived with when they take their eyes off the Word of God.

Tragically, all too often, churches that once were faithful for God have been destroyed by giving undue heed to the seductive voice of false prophets and prophetesses. All of us need to learn that we need to test every person in our church by the infallible, eternal standard of God’s perfect Word as, “*To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them*” (Isaiah 8:20). It should be noted that Christ states that many of those who were seduced by this false prophetess were “*my servants.*”(v20) The fact that someone is a genuine believer, does not guarantee his or her discernment is always biblical and sound.

Tolerance is seen as a virtue in religious circles today, whereas intolerance is seen as the unpardonable sin! Those who stand up to the Jezebels in any age will never be popular, but as MacArthur says, “*You cannot be faithful and popular, so take your pick.*” There are many Jezebels around today seeking to seduce us to permit worldliness and idolatry in the church. Any

church that does so is under the sway of the devil himself. It is easy to be sucked into thinking that we need to tolerate everything under the heading of Christianity, even if it means assimilation to the ungodly culture around us. No one likes to stand out from the crowd, especially as it brings a reproach. G. Campbell Morgan once remarked that the church did the most for the world when the church was the least like the world. We, as salt and light, need to be distinctive from the culture in order to show the difference between the world and the church.

The church at Ephesus was faithful in judging false teachers, but lacking in love. By contrast, Thyatira was commended for their love, but condemned for their toleration of this evil woman and her teaching. We need to avoid both extremes in our church but to be biblically balanced in, *“speaking the truth in love”* (Eph. 4:15). Verse 29 again repeats the familiar call for us to heed the warning of this message, *“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”* This letter is pertinent and practical for the age in which we live. It is not enough to be orthodox in creed, loving in our attitude, sacrificial, and stedfast, if we then tolerate sin. Remember, what we reap, we will ultimately sow. If we sow to the flesh, we will reap the flesh in our churches, homes, and lives. The Lord stands at our church doors with flaming eyes and burning feet, ready to stamp His judgment out upon us.

This message to Thyatira is no insignificant warning. These dangers are all around us. God is never indifferent to sin and impurity in His Church. Judgment will begin at the house of God (1 Peter 4:17). Is Jezebel’s voice prominent in our church minimizing sin and excusing it? Are we being seduced away from the Word of God by sensual worldliness and into compromise?

It is not only lost sinners that need to repent but also compromising believers. The Lord wants our churches and homes to be holy places that are intolerant of sin. May we never tolerate those teachers and teaching in our homes and churches that God abhors.