

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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### THYATIRA: THE CHURCH THAT “SUFFERED” SEDUCTION

Time and time again the church has suffered through, harkening after some new voice claiming to be “God’s spokesman (or spokesperson!).” Today we are surrounded by a myriad of people who claim to have a direct wavelength to the throne of God. God, they declare, speaks to them – not in the sense that any child of God can legitimately claim by reading the Scriptures – but God, they say, speaks directly to them. Some claim to hear an audible voice. In all cases they exalt themselves to a very privileged position. They are God’s prophets and apostles, and you do not question them or their so-called “revelations” or you will be found, they emphatically declare, “fighting against God”! The church at Thyatira was seduced by one of these self-proclaimed prophets and the result was havoc in the church.

- I. ***HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.*** Thyatira is mentioned only twice in Scripture: here in Revelation and in Acts 16:14 where Lydia, one of Paul’s converts in Philippi, is referred to as “a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira.” As for the establishment of the church there, we have no Scriptural information other than the possibility that Lydia returned to the city and was instrumental in helping to found a church. The city was founded by Seleucus Nicator, a successor of Alexander the Great, and named after Seleucus’ daughter Thyater. The reason for planting a city in this particular location was strategic. It was a garrison city and its importance lay in its location as a military outpost. It was situated in a valley, a somewhat wide open plain. It was not an ideal military stronghold, but any army wishing to push on to the key cities of Pergamum and Ephesus had to pass through Thyatira, “the function of the city was to make a weak position strong, supply a defect and guard against an ever-threatening danger.”<sup>1</sup> After the Romans established their empire, the city, because of its location, developed into a profitable trade center and began to make a name for itself in commerce, but it never ceased to be a strong military outpost. The local tutelary god was Tyrimnos, also referred to as Apollo, the “sun god,” known for his purifying power and always depicted with a battle ax to symbolize strength.
- II. ***CHRIST’S DESCRIPTION.*** The Person of Christ is introduced in strong and bold language – “the Son of God,” the eternal God. Apollo was the “sun god;” Christ is the living God, the Son of God, “whose eyes are like blazing fire,” an expression full of meaning given the situation at Thyatira. His are the eyes of omniscience, of penetrating judgment, nothing is hidden from Him (compare Hebrews 4:13). Christ declares in verse 23 that “I am he who searches hearts and minds.” “To this divine claim Jeremiah alludes when he prays: *O Lord of hosts, who judges righteously, who triest the heart and the mind. . .* So in the Acts of the Apostles

God is twice given a name which in the Greek is a single noun and means *heartknower* (Jeremiah 17:10; 11:20; cf. 20:12 and Psalm 7:9; Acts 1:24; 15:8).”<sup>2</sup> Notice also that his feet are declared to be “like burnished bronze” (*chalkolibanos*, literally very bright bronze. This word only occurs in Revelation). Remember that it is Christ who “treads the wine press of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God” (Revelation 19:11, 15). Christ marches to judgment and his feet announce this fact.

III. **CHRIST’S COMMENDATION.** “I know,” as in all of the letters Christ knows all things. He has perfect and infallible knowledge. Three things are commended in the church at Thyatira:

- A. **The Words of the Church** – “deeds” and “services.” The first is general, the second peculiar and special. They were very active and demonstrated more than just energy in their labor; they served one another.
- B. **The Motives and Attitudes** – “love” and “faith,” or literally faithfulness. These were maintained steadfastly or with “perseverance.” There was in the church of Thyatira not the typical and all too common “occasional” and “spasmodic” outbreaks of service, but an ongoing habitual demonstration of their love and faithfulness in their works and service. They did it with endurance.
- C. **No Decrease but Increase** – “you are now doing more than you did at the first.” Instead of lapsing like the church at Ephesus or even holding their ground, they are actually “increasing.”

IV. **CHRIST’S COMPLAINT.** “Nevertheless, I have this against you.” Despite the church’s very impressive credentials, there is a fly in the ointment.

- A. **Toleration.** “You tolerate,” *apheis*, to allow, to tolerate.<sup>3</sup> They knew what was going on; some fell prey to the error, while the rest failed to deal with it. “Thus church, commended for love, had failed to speak the hard truth in love (Eph. 4:15). Church discipline and Jesus’ demand of exclusive loyalty looked narrow to the pluralistic culture of the Hellenistic world, as it does in our tolerant and relativistic day; but church discipline, when pursued with biblical motives and methods, expresses Jesus’ love for his bride.”<sup>4</sup>
- B. **The Woman Jezebel.** It is more than likely that the name “Jezebel” is symbolic, and that even though there was indeed an actual woman in the church causing all the trouble, she is called Jezebel because of the traits and characteristics she shared with the Jezebel of the Old Testament (cf. 1 Kings 16:31; 18:4-19; 19:1-2; 21:5-15; 2 Kings 9). In reading her history in the Old Testament, we discover that she was shrewd, deceptive, cunning, vicious, immoral and just generally wicked.
- C. **Her Position.** “She calls herself a prophetess.” She assumed for herself a high and lofty position. “There can be very little doubt that the woman claimed to be an inspired woman who had received some new revelation. Some vision or enlightenment (so she claimed) had been granted her, denied to the apostles, and she was promulgating this new teaching.”<sup>5</sup>

D. *Her Teaching.* Her doctrine led to sexual compromise and participation in pagan idolatry. In this she parallels the position of the Nicolaitans. Like most false teachers, she was above correction. Christ declares, “I gave her time to repent but she was unwilling.” “These words obviously refer to some incident in the past, unknown to us, when God had used some situation to rebuke the false prophetess and summon her to repentance. Possibly John himself had ministered in the church at Thyatira and had rebuked this woman, but without success.”<sup>6</sup> The mentality of false teachers is graphically depicted in 2 Peter 2, especially verses 17-19.

V. *CHRIST’S WARNING AND JUDGMENT.* The time for repentance in “Jezebel’s” case has expired; now judgment follows. Since her sphere of operation and her teaching led to sexual immorality (defiling the marriage bed, compare Hebrews 13:4), Christ’s judgment will put her in a bed, one of sickness and suffering – God cannot be mocked. Of this you can be sure. She will be judged and those who follow her, designated here as “her children.” Notice that in judging her, Christ will be acclaimed in His omniscience, “All the churches will know that I am he that searches the hearts and minds.”

VI. *CHRIST’S PROMISE.* Each of the seven letters contains two promises; one is directed to the church in question, the other individual or universal. To those in Thyatira untainted by Jezebel’s pollution (note it was referred to as “Satan’s so-called deep secrets”),<sup>7</sup> “I will put no other burden on you.” Many commentators see this as an allusion to the decree of the Jerusalem council mentioned in Acts 15 regarding fornications and things sacrificed to idols.<sup>8</sup>

A. *To the overcomer.* Notice the addition of the words “and does my will to the end.” Authority will be given the ones who overcome. Psalm 2:9 is quoted.<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that the Bible teaches that heaven will be a place of responsibility as well as privilege and rest.

B. *The Morning Star.* This expression also occurs in Job 38:7; Revelation 2:28; 22:16. It seems most likely, especially in light of Revelation 22:16, that this is a reference to Christ Himself (compare 2 Peter 1:19).

**CONCLUSION:** The letter to the church at Thyatira should dispel the all too popular myth that an active church is the best safeguard against error. It is not. Barclay wrote: “Here is a warning. A church which is crowded with people and which is a hive of energy is not necessarily a real Church. It is possible for a Church to be crowded because its people come to be entertained instead of instructed, and to be soothed instead of confronted with the fact of sin and the offer of salvation; it may be a highly successful Christian club rather than a real Christian congregation.”<sup>10</sup> We can be very active (and we should, for Christ commended this) and be open to seduction. Furthermore, we should be alert to the danger of those who claim special insight and direct revelation from God. Let us always behave like the Bereans who “examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Wm. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (rpt. James Family, 1976), p. 319.

<sup>2</sup> J. R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church* (IVP, 1972), 75.

<sup>3</sup> “Like the Pergamenes, the Thyatiran Christians were harbouring an enemy of Christ, but their guilt seems to have been greater since *apheis* [you tolerate] implies a tolerance of evil which is not suggested by *echeis* [you have] verse 14.” H. B. Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (rpt. Kregel, 1977), p. 42

<sup>4</sup> Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of The Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (P&P, 2006), p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell-Morgan, *A First Century Message to Twentieth Century Christians* (Revell, 1978), p. 119.

<sup>6</sup> G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Eerdmans, 1978), p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> “The fanaticism that the Christian cannot sin was found among the Asian churches (cf. 1 John 1:10, 3:10), and the Nicolaitans may have argued that by entering into the stronghold of Satan, by *knowing his depths*, the Christian could demonstrate Satan’s powerlessness in his case; or that the real nature of sin could only be known in this way; or that actual spiritual strength was gained by this personal contact with evil.” I. T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (rpt. Baker, 1979), p. 469. Interesting remarks in light of some of the claims made by some of the present-day charismatics. Beckwith wrote this in 1919.

<sup>8</sup> G. Campbell-Morgan has a different and unique interpretation of this. “Carefully note this. There seems to be almost a play upon words in what Jesus said; there is certainly familiarity with their root meaning. He says, Those of you who have not this *teaching, that know not the deep things of Satan* – that word, *deep things* is the word *bathos*, that is, the profundities of Satan. And He then says, *I cast upon you none other burden*. That word *burden* is the word *baros*, which means an impression made. Both *bathos* and *baros* spring from the original root *basis*. It is evident that He was speaking with an intimate knowledge of the history of the words and indulging in a play upon them. It is as though He had said, these people are professing to discover some new deep things, which they will lay upon you. *I cast upon you none other deep things*. Herein is a great principle for the government of our intelligent life as Christian people. The thing claiming to be new, is therefore to be doubted. The message He has delivered is complete, the doctrine is enunciated, the mysteries are revealed, and whosoever, man or woman, would claim to reveal a new mystery, is the messenger of Satan.” Campbell-Morgan, p. 127.

<sup>9</sup> “The omission of the *sword* as the symbol of might also shows characteristic accuracy in the choice of details. The sword was the symbol of higher official authority according to the Roman usage. It shows, therefore, a marked appropriateness that the writer should use the term *sword* in reference to Pergamum, the official capital and seat of the Roman Proconsul, but avoid it in the case of Thyatira. On the other hand, the *rod of iron* is expressive of might that is not thought of as associated with formal authority, but merely arises from innate strength. Thyatira could not properly bear the sword, but only the iron bar.” Ramsay, p. 330.

<sup>10</sup> Wm. Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: Revelation* (Saint Andrew Press, 1976), p. 104.