



To the Church in Thyatira

Revelation 2:18-29

By the end of the first century, when these letters to the churches were first delivered by John, Thyatira was a city on the rise, about to enter into a period of significant wealth and prosperity. Among various inscriptions which have been discovered in the city there are particularly prominent references to shoemakers, dyed cloth and the manufacture of bronze. Perhaps this explains the particular description of Jesus found at the beginning of this letter, 'the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze' (v18).

As with most of the other churches addressed in these letters, Jesus offers here a word of challenge and correction. But he begins by affirming that which is good about the church: 'The Christians of Thyatira are highly commended in vs19 for their love, faith, service and endurance. They are the opposite of the Ephesians, for the Thyatirans are commended for their latter works being greater than their former ones.'¹

So often, the weaknesses we find in a church can be the flipside of their strengths. In Ephesus the church which had held the line against false teaching failed to sustain love in the process. It seems that in Thyatira Christians were dealing with the opposite problem. Love was one of the things Jesus listed among their virtues, but the church has failed to address a problem of false teaching.

Almost all commentators agree that the issue addressed in this letter is linked to the trade guilds in Thyatira. In the 1st Century, these guilds operated in a similar way to the certifying institutions which exist for many jobs in our culture. This created a significant challenge for Christians. Membership invariably required attendance at the feasts held by each guild, which would include sacrifices made to whichever pagan god was associated with it. These occasions also often included licentious sexual activity. As Tom Wright notes, this was a time when, 'if you wanted to find a prostitute, the precincts of a pagan temple would be the natural place to look.'²

The problem in the Church in Thyatira appears to centre around a false teacher, 'that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet' (v21). It's unlikely that this was her actual name. Instead, what we find here is probably a sort of code language, drawing on the story of Jezebel which is found in 1 and 2 Kings. Jezebel was the Phoenician wife of the corrupt King Ahab, responsible for leading the people of Judah into Baal worship (1 Kings 16:31-34) and also for persecution of true prophets such as Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-2).

It appears that the sin of this Jezebel-figure in Thyatira was the false teaching she spread, most likely giving permission to the Christians to carry on taking part in the

¹ Ben Witherington, *The New Cambridge Bible Commentary: Revelation*, 2003, 104

² Tom Wright, *Revelation for Everyone*, 2011, 26

guild feasts with all the associated immorality to be found in the pagan temples. Perhaps Jezebel suggested that going along to the feasts was no big deal, something that the believers in Thyatira shouldn't get hung up on. But this letter reminds us that there was more to these occasions than met the eye, that they amounted to a form of spiritual adultery.

As with the other letters to the churches, this one concludes not with a warning but with a promise, a description of the reward which will come the way of those who do the will of God. For the Church in Thyatira, Jesus promises a share in the authority he has over the nations. Verse 27's reference to rule with an iron sceptre draws on language found in Psalm 2:8,9 which was understood by the early church to be a reference to the Messiah. The following verse provides another promise: 'I will also give that one the morning star' (2:28). As Ben Witherington notes: 'The morning star is Venus, which to the Romans was the symbol of victory and sovereignty. Christians will not obtain such things through pagan rituals or by following pagan rituals, but from Christ.'³

1. What is your instinctive response to the picture of Jesus, 'whose eyes are like blazing fire' (v18) and 'who searches hearts and minds' (v23)?
2. A number of commentators have noted that this is one of the most critical of the seven letters, but also that it begins with Jesus affirming that which is good about the Church in Thyatira? What does that pattern in the letter teach us about God and how does it compare with the judgements we're sometimes hear voiced in our own church?
3. Can you think of teaching in our present-day churches which gives people licence to morally compromise? How is your perspective on such teaching by the language used by Jesus to describe the actions of 'Jezebel' in Thyatira?
4. In verse 21 we learn that the warning made by Jesus to 'Jezebel' is not the first she has received: 'I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling.' How do we know when it's right to give people more time to repent of a sin being committed, and how do we know when the time for warnings has run out?
5. It's highly unlikely that any of us will be aware of churches where members have been 'struck dead' on account of sin, as Jesus warns in verse 23. But can you think of any examples you're aware of regarding churches which have declined because of their failure to address moral issues?
6. As with the other letters, Jesus' message to the church in Thyatira finishes with a word of encouragement for 'the one who is victorious and does my will to the end' (v26). The imagery of sharing the authority of the one who rules over the nations draws on Psalm 2:7-9. How might such a promise have inspired those in Thyatira who faced the possibility of loss and status and money if they didn't take part in guild feasts?⁴

³ Ben Witherington, *The New Cambridge Bible Commentary: Revelation*, 2003, 105

⁴ Ben Witherington, *The New Cambridge Bible Commentary: Revelation*, 2003, 104