

18 March 2007

Thyatira: The Hard-Working Church that Tolerated the Intolerable

Reading: Rev 2:18-29

It can be difficult to live a decent Christian life. What are you to do if your boss asks you to tell a ‘white’ lie? You could reason that it’s less offensive than to tell the person who called that he’s the last person on earth that your boss wants to talk to right now. If you uncover a serious irregularity at work, do you look the other way, reasoning that it is none of your business? You may perhaps even remember passages that instruct us not to be busybodies?¹

Do you turn a blind eye to injustice, reasoning that we can’t possibly put everything right in this fallen world and that we have to be selective? What about bribery? There are parts of the world where you can hardly remain in business unless you prescribe to the practice of “incentives”. What if you are a teacher or a nurse and your union decides to resort to industrial action. You believe that you have a reasonable case but don’t agree with the motives or the methods. Do you have an option?

So we could go on. What about those office parties, with their small talk and sometimes lax morals? And when there is an off-colour joke, should you be a poker-faced prude and appear judgemental or should you laugh along and show that Christians are human after all?

Here’s the ‘good’ news . . .

I TO BE A TRUE CHRISTIAN IN THE WORLD IS NOT MEANT TO BE EASY

A. **It certainly wasn’t easy for the Christians in Thyatira.** The city was not as large or as important as Ephesus, nor was it as spectacular as Smyrna, nor did it have the political clout of Pergamum. But it was an important trade centre. It was famous for its wool trade and especially for a purple dye that fetched high prices. Its most noteworthy feature was that it had more trade-guilds than any city of comparable size in the empire. And that introduced a complication into the lives of Christians. Listen to William Barclay’s explanation take on the problem:

No merchant or trader could hope to prosper unless he . . . was a member of his trade-guild. The social activities of these trade-guilds were intimately bound up with the worship of heathen gods. These trade guilds had common meals together. The meal would begin and end with a cup of wine poured out as a libation and an

¹ 2 Thess 3:11; 1 Tim 5:13; 1 Pet 4:15. These passages tell us not to look for trouble because we have nothing better to do. They do absolve us from our Christian responsibility.

offering to the gods Could a Christian sit and eat meat that had been offered to idols? Still further, these trade-guild feasts not infrequently degenerated into carousals where drunkenness and immorality were the order of the day. Could a Christian participate in a feast where drunkenness and fornication were the accepted things?²

By doing so, a Christian merchant or trader or craftsman would protect his business interests, and ensure his material prosperity. By refusing to do so, “he was very definitely committing commercial suicide and would very soon be faced with poverty, and even bankruptcy.”³

- B. **Under the circumstances, the church had done particularly well.** Listen to what the Lord has to say about them:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. ¹⁹I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

1. This is an impressive commendation. They had love and apparently it had not abated, as it had among the Ephesians. What’s more, it was the kind of love that manifested itself in action. It was the kind of love to which John referred when he wrote: “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:18). They had faith, and they believed, with James, that true faith has to be accompanied by action (James 2:14-26). Their faith manifested itself in service. Although it doesn’t say so here, they also had hope.⁴ We can deduce that from the fact that the Lord commends them for their perseverance. It is hope that gives rise to perseverance. The most impressive part of the commendation is found in the last clause: “You are doing more than you did at first.” This was an energetic, hard-working church and it was stepping up its activity levels.⁵
2. Here’s what a Thyatira-type church would look like today in the lower mainland:
 - It would probably have a good ESL (English Second Language) programme.
 - It may have a literacy centre and be involved in a feeding scheme.
 - It would collect for Union Gospel Mission and help in Mission Possible.
 - It would certainly be involved in community projects.
 - If a member was in trouble, other members would rally around.
 - It would be known for its stability and its commitment to essential Christian truth.

² William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches* (London: SCM Press, 1957), 68-9.

³ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 67.

⁵ Some commentators have portrayed Thyatira as the worst of the churches, mainly on account of the unwarranted assumption that it represents the church during the dark and middle ages. They overlook or minimise this commendation.

- And it would have a programme to cater for almost every need you can think of.
- C. Here was a really good church. But they needed to find a way forward in respect of their relationship with society at large. There was an ominous development. An influential person in the church proposed an unacceptable solution to their dilemma. John Stott describes the situation graphically:

Thyatira's church was like a beautiful garden in which the fairest Christian graces blossomed In that fair field a poisonous weed was being allowed to luxuriate. In that healthy body a malignant cancer had begun to form.⁶

II OF COURSE THERE IS ALWAYS A WAY TO MAKE THINGS EASIER FOR YOURSELF

- A. **All you need to do is to work out a reasonable way to hold on to your beliefs and yet not fall foul of your neighbours and colleagues.**
1. In the interests of balance, I need to remind you that we should, of course, be known for our kindness and winsomeness and respected for our honesty and our industriousness.
 2. But what if your values place you at odds with the values of society? What if it is difficult to live out your Christian life in the workplace? What if you find yourself in a minority of one? What if you are ridiculed? What if you know that you are the natural choice for a vacant position at work and you are side-lined because of your Christian testimony? Oh, no one would come out and say it. Other reasons would be given and you may be offered a position where you can obstruct no plans on account of your principles and where you can do no harm to the morale of the company. It's all because you are an outsider. And you are an outsider because you are a committed Christian.
- B. When a person with influence in the church at Thyatira proposed a solution, **there were understandably some receptive ears**. But listen to what the Lord had to say about it:

²⁰Nevertheless, 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. ²¹I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. ²²so 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. ²³I will strike her children dead. 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.

⁶ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, 67-8.

- C. This sounds similar to the proposal being made at Pergamum, but **there was a significant difference**. The appeal at Pergamum was mainly *intellectual*. It was the “*teaching* of Balaam” and the “*teaching* of the Nicolaitans”. Here it came with a pseudo-spiritual twist. A prominent woman in the church, who called herself a prophetess, claimed that God had revealed to her that Christians could participate in the practices common in Thyatira without in any way damaging their Christian lives or harming their testimony. Of course, she would never have described her proposed compromise in the terms used here. The words “idolatry” and “sexual immorality” would not have formed part of her vocabulary. She may have spoken of “enlightenment” and “insight” and “relevance”.

Apparently she was basing her teaching on what she described as the “deep secrets of God”. She set herself up as a person with a hot-line to God, probably got a far-away look in her eyes, clothed her disclosure in spiritual-sounding language and presented, as if from God, a solution to the dilemma of living for God in an inhospitable world. And this proposal had the apparent spiritual legitimacy of a “Thus saith the Lord . . .”

This seduction is not uncommon in church history. Error and compromise are bad enough when they distort Scripture, but they are even worse when they don spiritual cloaks and masquerade as “a word from the Lord.”

- D. **Her teaching had caused division and she had been graciously warned by the Lord** (possibly through some of the leaders of the church), but she had refused to repent. The Lord likens her to the infamous Queen Jezebel, who led Israel astray by a deadly combination of idolatry and immorality and was ultimately judged for her sin. The terms of his judgement on this self-appointed Thyatiran prophetess should be read against the background of the story of Jezebel in 1st and 2nd Kings. For example, the reference to “striking her children dead” follows what happened to the offspring of Ahab and Jezebel (2 Kings 9, 10).

The judgement would be such that all the churches would know that “the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze,” searches hearts and minds, and repays each of us according to our deeds (2:18, 23).

I believe we have tended to lose sight of how strongly the Lord feels about the purity of his church. We bear his sacred name and we dare not profane it. There are still times when the Lord acts in judgement to show that he does not tolerate flagrant violations of his will in the church. In the case of this Jezebel, he did not act immediately. He gave her time to repent. But he promised now to “cast her on a bed of suffering”. The language is graphic. The bed of illicit pleasure is replaced by the bed of suffering, but even though she had already been given time to repent, the door was still open for her to turn. We have to marvel here, not at the Lord’s judgement, but at his mercy!

- E. **The Lord turns to those in the church who have not succumbed to the seduction of the Jezebel.** In addition to the grief they felt as a result of the harm her teaching was causing in the church, they had, in all probability, suffered some abuse. He speaks words of encouragement to them:

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

²⁶To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations –

*²⁷'He will rule them with an iron sceptre;
he will dash them to pieces like pottery' –*

just as I have received authority from my Father. ²⁸I will also give him the morning star. ²⁹He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

1. By referring to “Satan’s so-called deep secrets”, the Lord is revealing the true origin of the “deep secrets” to which the prophetess claimed to be privy. As we read through these messages, we can see the inroads of a teaching that would develop into full-blown Gnosticism in the second century. Gnosticism rested on two foundations: (1) The idea that spirit is good and matter is evil, and (2) The claim that certain people were “spiritual” and had special insight that was not available to ordinary Christians. It seems likely that this lady set herself up as one of the *pneumatikoi* (the “spiritual ones” with special insight).
2. The Lord does not wish to over-burden those who have not bought the lie of the false prophetess. The language used here reminds us of the letter the Jerusalem church sent out to Gentile Christians (Acts 15:28-29). They should not over-react to the proposed licence by becoming legalistic. If our liberty in Christ should not degenerate into licence, neither is it advanced by legalism. Martin Luther put it so well: “Freedom is not the right to do what you want but the power to do what you ought.”

So, the Christians in Thyatira were encouraged to exercise their liberty in such a way as to “keep (themselves) from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27), and so are we.

III **OUR CIRCUMSTANCES ARE DIFFERENT, BUT WE FACE THE SAME ESSENTIAL QUESTION**

How are we to live as Christians in the world in 2007? When you have removed all tension from your life, you can be sure of one thing: you have got something wrong! May I suggest that there are four possible approaches, and that each of us inevitably adopts one of these four?

A. **Isolation** – You opt out of society and become part of a Christian ‘commune’.

1. We know that monasteries were founded as places to which earnest Christians could retreat from the world and live lives of contemplation and service in the company of like-minded Christians. There was much that was good and commendable in monasticism, but it is important for us to understand what led to this development. As more and more people were swept into the church without a personal commitment to Christ, the church and the world became virtually indistinguishable. Those who withdrew into monasteries did so in serious pursuit of a life of devotion. In a sense, they were withdrawing from the “church” as well as the world. The development was understandable and we certainly do owe much to the monastic orders, but it was never the Lord’s intent that we should withdraw from society in this way.

- We are familiar with images of the Amish. There is much to commend in the Amish movement. But they have attempted to withdraw from society so as to preserve themselves from the influence of the world. We are struck by what certainly appears to us like incongruity in their lifestyle. As sincere as they are, their separation goes beyond that which is enjoined in Scripture.
- We, ourselves, may not dress like the Amish and we have no problem driving automobiles or using electricity. But we too can withdraw into our ghettos, and lose all meaningful contact with society. It’s understandable. It is right that we enjoy the company of like-minded Christians. We’re on the same wave-length and we love one another. But it’s wrong for us to withdraw. The resultant introversion doesn’t help anyone. It means that we place a distance between ourselves and the people whom we are called to love and for whom we have some wonderful news. It means that we forget that God loves the whole of humankind. Indeed, it means that we get a distorted view of reality. We do not exist for ourselves; we exist for others.

However noble the motive, isolation is a bad idea! It was never the Lord’s intention for his church and what is not part of his plan cannot be a good idea.

B. Accommodation – You adapt your lifestyle so that it conforms to that of the society in which you find yourself.

- In other words, you simply accept that the way things are is the way they are meant to be. You take your cue from the world around you. You may even attempt to “get with it” so as not to stand out from the crowd. You try to live incognito.
- J B Phillips’ paraphrase of Romans 12:2 is well-known: “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its mould.” As those committed to the reign of God we cannot accept the values of the current age. On the contrary, we are instructed to be different (Eph 4:17-24). We take our marching orders from the Lord and remain “aliens and strangers in the world.” Significantly, Peter goes on to mention that we are to “live such good lives *among* the pagans that . . . they may see (our) good deeds and glorify God” (1 Pet 2:11-12). Don’t you like the balance? *Different* – not quite at home – and yet *among* the people so we can be observed at close quarters.

If isolation was a bad idea, accommodation is an even worse one. At least if we are isolated, we retain our identity. If we accommodate, we melt into society and ultimately lose our distinctiveness. We are around, but from the point of view of influence, we are useless.

C. Compartmentalization – You divide your life into spiritual and secular compartments and live by a different set of standards in each.

- We are probably more prone to this option than to the first two.
- Here’s how it works. You adopt one set of values and priorities for one sphere and another set of values and priorities for the other sphere. No, this is not hypocrisy as such. You are not pretending to be what you are not. You are simply buying the lie that spiritual and secular spheres operate separately. This takes many forms. One of its subtler forms is the notion that there are two orders of truth. There is the truth by which we live in the secular world. It has to do with facts that can be verified and assessed. And there is the “truth” that applies to the spiritual world – the world of beliefs, the world in which factuality doesn’t count.⁷ So, we change hats when we move from the one world to the other, and we can also change our conduct.
- In a less theoretical sense, we hear it in statements like: “Things don’t work like that in the *real* world.” Just consider what that statement means. The “real” world is the world without Jesus, the world where we make our money and spend it, the world where we play our sport and build our houses. Darrell Johnson asks

⁷ One of the better refutations of this notion is found in Lesslie Newbigin’s book, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

pertinently, “What other world is there but the real world in which (Jesus) calls us to follow him?”⁸

- As a very young Christian, I accompanied a friend who was about to acquire his first car. He had seen the advertisement in the used car section of the classified ads, phoned and found that the car was still available. When we arrived at the owner’s home, we were delighted to discover that he was a fellow-Christian. We spoke animatedly about the Lord and our respective churches. Then, when we began to discuss the details of the transfer, he suggested that we cut a few corners and make a false statement in order to expedite matters and save some money. My friend, Philip, asked, “But isn’t that dishonest?” He looked at us as if we were utterly naïve and said, “But this is *business!*” Somehow his business life had got in under the radar of his Christian conscience. Now who’s to say that he hadn’t turned the odometer back?
- Sunday worship in church is followed by Monday worship at work. Your religion is not a private matter. It belongs in your home and in your medical practice, in your business dealings and your romantic life.

Compartmentalization is not only wrong; it is impossible. We are just not made that way. You take yourself (your whole self) to church and you take yourself (your whole self) to the nightclub. Whatever you do in one sphere impacts the other. The Thyatiran Jezebel’s deep secret was nothing but a Satanic lie. It was then, and it is now.

D. Transformation – You allow the Spirit to change you from the inside.

- I cited J B Phillips’ paraphrase of Romans 12:2. In the NIV, it reads, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” The word “conformed” refers to something superficial, something that happens on the outside. Peer pressure may get us to dress and behave in a way that is not “us”. “Transformed” is a different word altogether. It speaks of a deep-seated change that goes to the core of one’s being.⁹
- The best explanation of this concept is found in 2 Corinthians 3. Paul emphasises the work of the Spirit in the hearts of Christians. He refers to the time when Moses met with the Lord on Mount Sinai. When he descended from the mountain his face was aglow because he had been in God’s presence. But the glory eventually faded and he placed a veil over his face until he went back into the Lord’s presence. But, explains Paul, through the work of the Spirit, the process of transformation can be continual: “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the

⁸ Darrell W. Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey through the Book of Revelation* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 91.

⁹ The essential component of the word translated “conform” is *schēma*, which refers to the accidental appearance of a person or thing. The essential component of the word translated “transformed” is *morphē*, which refers to the inner nature of a person or thing.

Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18).

- Exactly how does this happen? The transformation takes place as we spend time with the Lord. And this happens, to use an old-fashioned term, as we avail ourselves of "the means of grace". As you spend time in the devotional reading of Scripture, in prayer and meditation, in worship services, as you take in spiritual food, God does this work within you. You can never get enough. When I hear people ask what they *have to do* to maintain their spiritual lives, I know that they have missed the whole point. You need all you can get. You are under constant pressure not only from the world around you but also from the remnants of the world within you. This is not just *a* way to live the Christian life; it is *the only* way to live the Christian life! And if we are not being transformed, we inevitably default to one of the other options.
- But here's the rub: The more we become like him, the less we feel at home in the world. And yet the world is exactly where we are supposed to be. We are bound to feel the tension.

Conclusion

God has ordained that we should be different from the world. He spoke in the strongest of terms, about Jezebel's attempt to nullify the difference. And he feels just as strongly about it today. That's because he knows what happens when conformity and compromise blur the distinction. The difference is not a surface difference, but a fundamental one. It does not consist of a few things we don't do and a few places we don't go. It is in our whole orientation. We are to be different but we are not to be absent. This may prove costly. But that's what it means to be a Christian in the world.

Postscript

I could not give attention to the Lord's promise to the overcomer without breaking the flow of the message, so I shall include a brief mention of it here.

Ruling with Christ

²⁶*To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations –*

²⁷*'He will rule them with an iron sceptre;
he will dash them to pieces like pottery' –*

just as I have received authority from my Father.

We are not given details of what we shall be doing in the new heavens and the new earth, but we know that, as co-heirs with Christ, we shall also rule with him (Dan 7:13-14, 26-

27; Mt 25:21, 23, Luke 19:17; Rom 8:17; 1 Cor 6:2; 2 Tim 2:12; Heb 2:5-10). The allusion in this passage is to Psalm 2:9, which “was always held to be a forecast and a picture of the triumphant work of God’s conquering Messiah.”¹⁰

The Morning Star

²⁸*I will also give him the morning star.* ²⁹*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

In the last chapter of the book, Jesus refers to himself as “the bright morning star” (22:16). Although several suggestions have been made, the word of God is its own best interpreter. So we should take this to be a reference to the Lord himself. Darrell Johnson makes an interesting point in this connection:

The morning star usually appears at the darkest time of the night (about two or three o’clock in the morning). It usually emerges at that point when the night is as dark as it is going to get. When it appears there is no sign of the dawn. But when it appears, very faint at first, you know that the night cannot withstand the dawn; it is just a matter of time before the dawn wipes the night away. “The morning star pulls the morning behind it just as certainly as Jesus pulls the kingdom behind him”¹¹ . . .

Jesus is saying he will especially encourage those who remain loyal to him. If we just keep our eyes on him, the bright morning star, we will remember that the struggle is almost over and we will have the courage to keep following even when it seems costly to do so.¹²

Whether or not this thought is included in the allusion to the morning star, we may be sure that this is a reference to the Lord himself. Imagine, he not only promises that we shall reign with him, but he also promises that he will give himself to us (21:3, 22; 22:3-5).

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¹⁰ Barclay, *Letters*, 79

¹¹ Bob Goudzwaard, *Idols of Our Time* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 98-99.

¹² Darrell Johnson, *Discipleship*, 95.