

THYATIRA

Thyatira sat at the mouth of a long vale which joined the Caicus Valley with the Hermus Valley. The town was near the left bank of the Lycus River, and was about fifty miles inland from the Aegean Sea and about thirty-five miles beyond Pergamum. There were no noteworthy landmarks, no famous temples or libraries or theaters. The local deity, Tyrimnos, was a horseman carrying a battle-axe. I could find no information to indicate that he was important, unusual, or even interesting. Sometimes we are disrespectful of other religions by default. I wonder if any of your friends feel that way about yours? (Tyrimnos was probably a form of Apollo.)

Thyatira had been built by Seleucus I as a border town between his own kingdom (Lydia) and the old Pergamene kingdom. Thyatira was not defensible; it was an early-warning system between Sardis and Pergamum, the two great fortress capitals of the region. Any army marching east or west would take Thyatira and then use it as its own outpost and early-warning system. Under these circumstances, citizens of Thyatira were not likely to develop intense political loyalties. They had their own community subculture regardless of what flag was flying or which army was garrisoned in town at the moment. Consequently, there is no important history or heritage to be found in connection with Thyatira. It is the least distinguished and the least famous of the seven cities. The Elder Pliny comments, "Thyatira and other unimportant communities." *Inhonora civitas*: "A city of no first-rate dignity." Colin Hemer writes: "The longest and most difficult of the seven letters is addressed to the least known, least important, and least remarkable of the cities."

Of course, that is precisely what *is* remarkable. The letter goes to unimportant people, in an unimportant church, in an unimportant town. That in itself is a message. From the Spirit's point of view, there *are* no unimportant people or churches or towns. It is as important to be faithful in Thyatira as it is to be faithful in Ephesus, Smyrna, or Pergamum. Truly, nobody knows what the future holds, or which influence will be most important or crucial in the long run. The Spirit is just as interested and concerned about Thyatira as about Ephesus. Does Heaven care about earthly geography or reputation? The Spirit is just as eager for the folk in Thyatira to be faithful as for anybody else, anywhere.

The real pulse of Thyatiran life, however, was not political but economic. The life of Thyatira was in her trade guilds. There were more trade guilds in Thyatira than in any other Asian city. They were the power behind the scene, and the real heartbeat of the city. There were woolworkers, linenworkers, outer-garment makers, leatherworkers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave dealers, bronzesmiths. Each was a guild, a union, a social organization in its own right. Each had its own gods, initiation rites, feasts, and inner organization. If you were not a soldier and you wanted to make it at Thyatira, you needed to belong to one of the trade guilds. We remember that when Paul was in Philippi (in Macedonia), he met a woman from Thyatira. *“One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods ...”* (Acts 16:14) We presume she was wealthy, since purple goods were enormously expensive.

The Christians at Thyatira were probably not as severely pressured by the cult of emperor worship as they were in some other cities in Asia. The Emperor was worshipped in Thyatira as Apollo incarnate, so the danger was still real, but Thyatirans were not as zealous as Smyrnans or as official as Pergamenes. But to make a living, they needed to belong to one of the trade guilds. And to belong to a guild meant participating in the pagan rites and social gatherings of that guild. You have noticed that theological problems in the early church were not theoretical. They were practical, real-life issues: How should we live? What should we do? What kind of behavior bears witness to Christ? What kind of activity tears down Christ’s authority and purpose?

Well, back to the letter. Because little is known of the details of life at Thyatira, the many allusions John makes are harder to trace than in the other letters. In the main, the letter is highly complimentary. “I know all your ways – love, faithfulness, good service, fortitude – and of late, you have done even better than at first.” I am sure we can all identify with that. Oops, sorry ... it’s supposed to be *your* job to decide where the shoe fits. Anyway, Thyatiran Christians get the award for “Most Improved Players.”

The church at Thyatira is an active, hard-working group of people who put their faith into practice. John’s one concern centers around a leading figure in the congregation: a woman who claims to be a prophetess – a person of exceptional spiritual interests and gifts. Apparently she has set herself up as the special spiritual guide of the

congregation and, by the intensity of John's opposition, we gather that her influence is considerable. Not everybody is accepting everything she teaches, but neither is she formally opposed. Because of the allusion to Jezebel – Israel's most wicked queen – some scholars have supposed that she is the wife of the leading elder of the congregation. Interesting, but only a wild guess.

It may be that this woman is teaching sexual freedom as part of the spiritual path. We know there were Gnostic groups in the second and third centuries which believed that the spiritual was important and that the physical was completely irrelevant. Some Gnostic groups drew strange conclusions from this careless theology. Down through the ages, we have seen the church struggle with the aberrations: be celibate, or be licentious. Sexuality is the Creator's design, but it is beautiful in a long-term, committed relationship of trust and love called "marriage." It causes enormous heartache in casual liaisons, no matter how we try to pretend otherwise – and even before we mention the children. But hardly any generation goes by without some group or guru trying to make a case for the godliness of promiscuity. The Gospel frees us from the Law ... therefore, follow the guidance of your sexual urges. Somehow that does not sound like turning will and life over to the authority of the Holy Spirit, but some people keep trying to make them sound synonymous. Mayhem follows. I am not talking about mistakes, blunders, and sins. Christians are supposed to know what to do about those: Confess, repent, claim forgiveness and grace, and start over. There is always new life in Christ Jesus. But if we corrupt the goals, say that the curses are blessings, and set up the alienation patterns as our models *on purpose*, how will we ever come to true love or reconciliation?

John is angry, or is expressing the Spirit's anger. You can feel it in the letter. This woman is a danger, and if the congregation does not wake up – if they allow her theories and persuasions to go unchallenged – a lot of people are going to end up messed up. Whether on purpose or not, she is teaching evil. "The two shall become ... whomever you happen to feel like fooling around with at the moment." So John is saying: What are you thinking?! This is not going to work out well for her or anybody who listens to her. John writes this in about 90 A.D. Why are we still having trouble getting and keeping it clear? Jezebel is not the church's friend. Not all the threats and dangers are from outside the church; some of the worst are from *inside* the church. "*I am the searcher of men's hearts and minds.*" (2:23) Emperors running around pretending they are God is a

serious threat from the outside. But if within the church we do not know our rightful King, that is an even more serious threat.

Of course, the Old Testament prophets frequently used licentiousness as an analogy for idolatry. People who played around with other gods or pagan rites, they said, were treating God like an unfaithful wife treats her husband. Maybe Jezebel here is merely encouraging idolatry, telling people not to worry about burning incense to Caesar or eating the meat offered to idols. “It’s okay to be part of the trade guilds, and to participate in their pagan worship feasts. Don’t be exclusive. Jesus is only one among many saviors – not the *only* Savior. Love your neighbors – be friendly and accepting. After all, God knows you need to be successful to support your families. Lighten up!” Of course, if the Thyatiran Christians believe this, it will do them even more damage than licentiousness. Spiritual damage is always worse than physical damage. But we are here today, so reading The Revelation must have reached them. Maybe it will reach us too.

The prophetess at Thyatira is also claiming to teach people deep spiritual truths, when in fact she is leading people into satanic mysteries and idolatry. You know how it goes: “Jesus Christ is only for beginners. Now let me introduce you to some really important spiritual truth and power.” Human beings love mystery, and they long to learn hidden truth that will give them special discernment and power – and if possible, help them feel superior and give them some advantage over muggles or gringos or pagans, or whatever our name is for the outsiders. A heresy (from the Christian perspective) is anything which teaches that the love of Christ is insufficient by itself to save us – to lead us into LIFE. That it is not enough to know Jesus Christ – not enough to follow Him and turn will and life over to the guidance of His Holy Spirit – you must also ... and here you may add in whatever you like. What are some of the things we add in today? You must also: hate gays, or love gays; use inclusive language; vote for my candidate; be politically correct; have a successful career; give money to worthy causes. Of course, most famous heresies claim to know several dimensions and layers of esoteric knowledge beyond knowing Jesus Christ.

John is warning the Thyatirans that it is necessary for Christians to recognize and avoid heresy when they run into it. I suspect it never crossed John’s mind that the church would one day be powerful enough to persecute others with its opinions in much the same way as the

Roman Empire was persecuting the church in John's time. Masonry, for instance, has frequently been called a heresy by various wings of the Christian church. You think that doesn't hurt, in our culture and time? It is sheer careless and ignorant slander. "*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*" Just because humans want knowledge and explore physics, chemistry, psychology, art, or any other field of human endeavor and knowing *does not* mean they are heretics. *Only if you are a Christian in the first place* and then claim that there is knowledge or mystery beyond the love of Christ that is necessary to salvation – only *then* are you a heretic.

"It is not enough to be a Christian, you must also obey the Law of Moses." That is called the Jewish heresy. "It is not enough to be a Christian, you must also be rich and successful." That is the American heresy. Even the study of Scripture can turn into a Gnostic heresy cult, where knowing the Bible becomes more important than knowing God.

But, John says, the "children of Jezebel" will not survive. History bears this out. The cults come and go; spiritual fads impress people for only a few years. Jesus Christ outlives them all. A hundred years from now, people will not be talking much about the Moonies or the Beatles – have you noticed? In my last church, when I went for the first time to the high school youth group, the adult advisor was actually telling the kids that John Lennon was more important to our culture than Jesus. That advisor was a nice man and he meant well, but he had no perspective. A hundred years from now, a lot of things that we think are critical and terribly important today will be forgotten. But people will still be drawn to the Cross of Jesus Christ. And of course they will also be talking about whatever cults and fads are current in their own time. But those too will fade and pass. The greatest fad of all, in John's time, was allegiance to the Roman Emperor.

"A church that marries the spirit of this age will become a widow in the next." Or so it has been said. You can only get a limited number of people to be interested in preserving displays of life from a former time. It is not just *people* who leave the church; sometimes *the church* stops being the church. The Holy Spirit gets bored with our agendas and walks out. After that, people begin to get bored too. If the people keep helping and supporting each other, sometimes the Spirit circles back to see if there is a chance to bring the whole thing back to life again – that is, to LIFE in Christ Jesus.

I took a course in seminary that was never offered. One of those “flukes” you don’t pay much attention to at the time, until years later you look back and say, “Aha, that’s what ruined me.” Anyway, I needed money and took a job setting up the new tape library of sermons for Ed Lynn, the homiletics professor. Hour after hour, week after week, month after month, it was my job to tape the lending copies of our growing library of sermons, and to make new copies if they got worn or lost. Talk about bored! I have preached a few sermons of my own since then, and I know how easy it is to preach boring sermons. Safer too – nobody writes you nasty letters or tries to lynch you or get you fired just because they are bored. There were some wonderful exceptions, to be sure. I came to a tape of George MacLeod one day – a sermon from Second Corinthians, “*God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself*” (5:19) – and I have not recovered yet.

But most of the sermons, from supposedly our best preachers, said very little. By the time you got through the stories and illustrations, it was mostly pablum: “Be nice. Stay out of trouble. It’s good to help people. Let’s try to make it a better world.” The good preachers told interesting anecdotes; the others just droned it out. John would have had apoplexy. Jesus would have gone looking for some sinners who wanted more from life. It was truly boring! I thought I was studying to become a minister, but most of these sermons were *surely* not reflecting what Jesus lived and died to invite us into. People should defy the Roman Empire and put their lives on the line ... so their children could smile and have nice table manners?

The trouble with heresies is not that they are unintelligent, or evil in and of themselves. Heresy merely invites us to put our faith in things that cannot save us – like knowledge, money, sex, secret theories. Heresy is a spiritual flat tire – it leaves you stranded, sometimes far from home, in a bad storm. The trouble with putting faith in the wrong place is that it lets us down, sometimes when we are in desperate need. I think the worst heresy of all is the church telling people that God does not have many challenges or demands to lay on us: that Christ will never disrupt our lives, ask for any sacrifices, change our priorities, do anything to inconvenience us; that Christianity is safe and comfortable, and we don’t really have to do anything to help build Christ’s Kingdom in our own time; that there is no particular plan or purpose for our own lives, except getting comfortable and doing our own thing. It is the worst heresy of all, and the most deadly. We would be better off out committing adultery or robbing,

lying to, and cheating our neighbors than sitting around safe and comfortable in our “Christianity” without any true desire or intention to serve Christ and His Kingdom – without expressing genuine gratitude for the love, mercy, and grace we have been shown.

When the chips are down and the records are all in, we are saved by God’s sheer, undeserved love and mercy, not by anything we know or believe or have accomplished. If we can walk on water, heal cancer with thought waves, and guide others through times of inner turmoil – even *that* is not going to save us, and it does not make us superior enough to overcome death or sin or depression. If you can do such things under Christ, most certainly you *ought* to do them! But that is not the core of Christianity. That is not what Christianity is about.

And yet, if you are frightened of heresy and do not comprehend what Christianity is really about, pretty soon there is nothing left to talk about except “Be nice. Do good deeds. And stay out of trouble.” Instead of tracking Christ into the endless dimensions and adventures of LIFE – following Him into our own personal vocations and destinies – the church starts boring itself to death.

Christianity is full of mystery. Every genuine prayer is an attempt to make contact with a Being so many dimensions beyond us that one clear glimpse of this Being’s reality would fry all our circuits. We only hope and trust that this Numinous One is gentle and caring enough to deal with us without destroying us. Jesus claims this is so, and with fear and trembling we stumble into The Presence, hoping He knows what He’s talking about. Merely avoiding heresy is not a solution to heresy. We are not close enough to the real truth to be locking anything down that tight. Staying close to Jesus Christ and, with humble wonder and trust, going on into any area He leads us into is never safe – and never boring. But being too frightened to be a spiritual pilgrim and explorer is one of the greatest heresies of all. Then truly, fear has become bigger than faith in Jesus Christ.

In Thyatira, a woman is leading people into mysteries and idolatries. She is claiming to be somebody special, a super-spiritual being herself. That is one sure sign of heresy. All people are super-spiritual beings, or none of us were created by God. But none of us made ourselves, and none of us have fulfilled our potential enough to rest on any laurels. We each walk our own pilgrimage with Christ. No other person can do that for us. Secondly, she is claiming to take people *beyond* Christ. There is

no such place! Where do we think He has *not* been? But there are lots of places we can go without trusting or inviting Christ's presence. Not a very smart move, if we plan to go very far.

No New Testament writer has delved more deeply into spiritual mysteries and meanings than John. He is writing this Revelation from conscious awareness on a spiritual plane so advanced that it would make most modern Christians gasp and shudder. So they quote John to scare other Christians out of exploring the very realms that are John's own reason for living. Is that not infuriating? John is not telling the people of Thyatira to close down their spiritual journeys. But John is an old man. He has seen a lot. He knows that this woman's fancy theories and fascinating promises all dead-end thirty feet up the road she is suggesting. He does not want his Thyatiran friends to trade the vast reaches of Christ's Kingdom for useless, temporal trash. But of course you're right – he should not have let himself become so adamant and angry.

Nevertheless, we get a surprise. The Christians at Thyatira who remain faithful will be given authority over the nations. In Greek, they will “shepherd” the nations – they will teach and guide them in the future with the authority of Christ, which will not fall or fail. Apparently John believes that the Christians at Thyatira are indeed spiritually awake and alive, and that they will increasingly have much to offer and to share – if they just don't get sidetracked, or narrow-minded, or forgetful of the real source of all truth and mystery. A church that is alive and awake to the spiritual dimensions is, of course, more likely to attract a self-appointed prophetess who will try to corrupt the journey. John is terribly eager that this woman not ruin what is growing at Thyatira.

The faithful Thyatirans will also receive the morning star. Do we still imagine that John is against the esoteric? John himself knows many “mysteries.” Most of you have sung the hymn about “He is the bright and morning star.” “Venus” is one of the early church's nicknames for Christ. And it is more specific than that: the morning star is symbol of Christ in the role of the Revealer of New Truth – Christ as Truth, and Truth-Bringer.

So the Thyatirans, if they stay faithful, will become just what they most care about and hope to be: the teachers and revealers of spiritual truth. No doubt this “Jezebel,” from her own perspective, is trying to do it faster and better. John is not against mystery, exploration, scary spiritual

dimensions, or getting in over our heads. He just wants the Thyatirans to stick with Christ. Keep close to the One who knows what He is doing.

The bronzesmiths of Thyatira are probably the most powerful trade guild in the city. John's mention of feet of burnished bronze probably has implications we can no longer trace. On the other hand, "the eyes like a flame of fire" is not at all obscure. "*The searcher of men's hearts and minds.*" (2:23 REB) The flashing fire of His eyes at the beginning, the searching spirit in the middle, and the gift of the morning star at the end of the letter all carry the central theme and message: You are doing well, learning fast, and soon you will have much to teach and share. Only, do not be taken in by those who think they have gone beyond Christ. There is only one Spirit that we finally and truly trust. There is only ONE we wish to follow.