

THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

29th June 2008

Revelation 2:18-29 The Compromised Church

On the face of it, the letter to the Thyatira is pretty similar to the letter to Pergamum, in that the church in both places is criticised for tolerating sexual immorality amongst its members.

Andrew gave a thoughtful defence of Christian morality in his talk last week – if you missed it, you should check it out on tape or in print. The crux of his argument was that sex is much more than a biological act between two people, but is a picture and an enactment of the love that Christ has for his bride, the Church. So any sex which is outside of the loving and committed man-woman relationship of marriage defiles not just those who take part, but the image of Christ and the Church.

This is a radical message today, completely counter-cultural. Pretty much the entire media – TV, film, books, music, newspapers, magazines – you name it, every channel of information we have presents sex as something casual, something to be engaged in whenever you feel like with whoever you feel like. Young people grow up with the message that they should express their sexuality how and when they want. That is their right. To deny any sexual urge is to lead to repression and mental or physical disorder.

Indeed, teenagers are considered abnormal if they do not have sex with their boyfriend or girlfriend on virtually their first date, never mind after they have been going out for a while. And so sex has lost its meaning, and the wedding night has lost its mystery and excitement, because if people choose to get married at all, it is long after they have got used to sleeping together.

The message is relentlessly pumped out at us, and especially at our teenagers. Every soap opera has frequent liaisons between the characters, and almost as frequent changes of partner. Although at times the consequences of such unfaithfulness are shown, the underlying message is clear: everyone is doing it, so why wait? It doesn't matter if your first partner is not the one you stay with, it's no big deal to move from one to the next – so long as you want to. This is the way we are. It is the most natural thing in the world!

But God knows how he made us, and he made us for something better than this!

Back in the first century, the social context was very different from today – but it is interesting that sexual immorality was the common theme. It's almost as if Satan knows how important this is, and gives it top priority!

In Pergamum, the Christians were being tempted away from worship of God by the seduction of free sex which was offered by the pagan religions.

In Thyatira, though, the issue was not so much temptation, but livelihood.

Thyatira and its Trade Guilds

Thyatira was situated in a valley that connected two other valleys. It had no natural fortification at all and although at this time a Roman garrison was stationed there, their aim was not to defend Thyatira, but to delay the invaders long enough for Pergamum, the capital up the road, to be prepared for the coming attack. Thyatira was dispensable in the economy of the day.

Thyatira was on a major trade route and was well known for its trade guilds - there were wool-workers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, and bronze-smiths – all making a living from their trade. You might remember Lydia in Philippi. She was a trader of fine cloth and came from Thyatira.

Now in order to carry out a trade, you had to be a member of a trade guild – much like you used to have to be in a union to get work in this country. The problem was that these guilds held regular festivals which members had to take part in. Each guild would have its own patron-god, and you've guessed it sexual immorality played a significant part in their festivals. To refuse to take part was to anger the gods, which would mean you couldn't be a part of the guild.

Imagine the difficulty that new Christians in Thyatira would have! If they refused to take part, they would be out of a job, they would have no income, and they would be destitute. The temptation to compromise must have been enormous.

So when some self-proclaimed prophetess stood up in the church one Sunday on the eve of the next festival, and announced that God had said it was all right to eat the meat and indulge in the sexual practices, many people would be eager to believe her! It would seem quite plausible, for God doesn't want us to lose our jobs, he knows how things are and understands what we have to do to live in this world.

Whether there was an individual woman preaching this message, or whether it was a more general movement, is not clear. It is unlikely that she would actually be called Jezebel, for the name went swiftly out of fashion after the infamy of King Ahab's wife. Ahab, you may remember, set out to do evil in God's eyes, and high amongst that evil was to marry Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians. She was a fierce devotee of the Baals, and encouraged Ahab and the Israelites to worship them with her.

She must have been a powerful individual, for even Elijah was scared of her, even after the miraculous defeat of the prophets of baal on mount Carmel.

It was Jezebel who had Naboth killed so that Ahab could have his vineyard; she was a true despot, worse even than Mugabe today. 1 Kings 21:25 sums them up well:

²⁵ (There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife.

There is no mention of sexual immorality as such being linked with Jezebel; though even today her name is synonymous with it.

But what she did do was to encourage the Israelites to break faith with God by worshiping the Baals, a practice which God himself likens to prostitution. This gets back to what Andrew was saying about the true nature of sex. Just as it is immoral for a husband to cheat on his wife, so it is immoral for a follower of God to also follow another god or idol. The strength of this imagery is seen most clearly when Hosea the prophet is told to take an adulterous wife, so that their relationship can be used to highlight the unfaithfulness of Israel to her God.

By using the name Jezebel, Christ would bring all this to mind – thus highlighting his condemnation of her teachings.

The attraction of compromise

I wonder what an Elders meeting would have been like in Thyatira when “Jezebel” (whoever she was) started her prophesying. They would no doubt be aware of the ruling from the first Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15) which had dealt with the issue of integrating non-Jewish people into the Church. They had ruled unequivocally that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised; but had made equally clear that they were:

to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

But that was then, a few decades before and in a different context. If they were to try to enforce that ruling now, it would split the church! And what is more, it would lead to many of the people either leaving the church altogether to go back to their pre-Christian ways, or to leave Thyatira to try to make a living elsewhere. Surely it was better to keep fellowship with people who followed Jezebel and took part in the orgies, than to deny them any Christian influence at all? Did it really matter if they took part in those practices, so long as their hearts were true to God?

Well, if we follow human logic and the wisdom of the crowd, then no it doesn't matter at all. But if we use ourselves as our yard-stick, we will never get anything straight.

If we want to establish whether some teaching is right or wrong, we must go back to the word of God, study it carefully and thoroughly, and then accept teaching which is in accordance with the word. Yes, we can use our God-given intellects and even common sense to help us in this, but only if we recognise that our wisdom is subservient to Gods.

This has always been difficult to do, as deep down we all like to think that we can decide what is right and wrong for ourselves. Certainly today it is considered backward to refer to some ancient book for your direction, rather than using modern science and reason and free will. But those who mock the Bible or belittle its timeless authority fail to understand what the Bible really is – the word of God, inspired and given to us for this very reason: to keep us faithful to him.

If by sticking to Biblical principles we appear old fashioned, straight-laced, peculiar or repressed, then that is the price we must pay in our generation. At the end of the day, it is not society which is our judge, but God.

If the Thyatiran elders had weighed up Jezebel's message against God's word, they would have seen it for what it was: a fatal compromise with the world. By tolerating her message, they were breaking faith with God on a number of points – in direct contradiction of his commands, in tarnishing the picture of the love between God and man, and in placing no confidence in God's ability to see them through difficult times.

Whatever discussions went on at the time, this letter from Jesus Christ himself should have served to set things straight. It is well worth studying how the Lord goes about purifying his church through these letters.

We have seen the structure of the letter before, each of the seven follow the same formula:

- Firstly, a reminder of who Jesus is, normally referring back to some aspect of the vision John had seen in Chapter 1
- Then there is praise for whatever is good in the church, except for the poor Laodiceans
- Thirdly, there is condemnation of a major wrong, although both Smyrna and Philadelphia escape this.
- Next comes a word of counsel for them to take note of,
- And finally a promised reward for those “who overcome”

Reminder of Christ [v18]

There are three aspects to Christ's reminder to Thyatira of who he is – he is the Son of God, the one with eyes of blazing fire, and with feet of burnished bronze.

Jesus is described as the “Son of God” throughout the New Testament (and especially the Gospels), but this is the only time it appears in Revelation. The Old Testament basis for the expression comes from Psalm 2, which we read at the start of the service. The context of this Psalm is that kings and rulers of the earth plot against the Lord and his anointed. While to those around them this might seem to be a serious rebellion, God laughs at their puny plots, and appoints his Son to rule over them with a rod of iron.

The eyes of fire and feet of Bronze are reminiscent of Daniel 10:6. Here Daniel sees a vision of a man who tells him of kings and nations that would terrorise and persecute the people of God. But Daniel was not to fear - although kings and people of the earth are hostile to God and his church, Christ is sovereign - even over the hostile rulers.

So this greeting would encourage the church in Thyatira, that even when all the authorities in the world are against them, that is no match for God who is for them and will overcome.

Also, an obvious consequence of having eyes and feet is that he can see, and take action. Nothing is hidden from him, and nowhere is out-of-bounds to him. His eyes are flaming – suggesting that He is angry with what he sees. His feet of bronze, one of the hardest metals known of at that time, had connotations of judgement. Christ was angry – and judgement would follow.

Praise [v19]

The praise Christ has for the Thyatiran church is quite comprehensive – not only are they doing good deeds, but their deeds are increasing over time. They have love, faith, service and perseverance. I'm sure we would all be happy if that was Jesus' summary of Therfield chapel.

It's interesting that all six churches about whom Christ says something positive, are praised for their works. What we do is important. It isn't enough just to believe, because true belief will change our hearts and our priorities. True love for God will show itself in the way in which we treat others, in the things that we do. It is in doing what we might call "good deeds" that we show our love, and that we make an impact on the lives of those around us.

Condemnation [v20-23]

But as we have seen, all was not well with their church. While at a superficial level it may have seemed lively and growing, and indeed had much to commend it, there was a major problem right in their midst: the teaching of the church had become corrupted by a false prophet. Unless this was addressed, unless this cancer was weeded out, the church would eventually wither and die.

The remarkable thing in all this is not that Christ should condemn their compromised position, nor that he should threaten judgement on those who followed Jezebel, but that he should be so patient with her and with them. The Lord had given Jezebel ample time to repent, but she had refused to.

This is a profound insight into how God works amongst us.

I am a bit of a perfectionist, as my family will tell you. On the face of things, you might think this is good – after all, God's standard is perfection, and I am simply following suit.

When I encounter imperfection, I get annoyed and angry. I think I'm particularly annoyed when something which I try to do myself doesn't work perfectly – in this sense, I can take some satisfaction in not being hypocritical! Whether it is decorating the house or writing a program for the computer, I want it to be perfect, and will not be happy until any imperfection is driven out.

We know that God's standard is perfection in all things, indeed his holiness is far above anything I aspire to in my puny DIY projects. So you might think that he would be quick to stamp out imperfection, especially in his own beloved church, before it spreads and before it causes more harm.

Yet instead, he gives time for people to repent – even though they may use that time to drift further away.

You might think that in writing to the church he would get straight to the imperfection and criticism of it – after all, such sin must glare out at him and offend him in a much greater way than an uneven tile offends me in our new bathroom!

Yet He doesn't want to demoralise his people by condemning everything that they do wrong, but wants to encourage them to do more and more right until there is no room to do wrong any more. Hence the structure of his letters – seeking to encourage and inspire, not to brow-beat and punish.

Oh yes he is a perfectionist; but he is working to bring about perfection on a longer timescale than we can appreciate.

We shouldn't be fooled into thinking that, because some sin appears to go unpunished, God does not know or does not care. We should not confuse patience with acceptance. So we see the dire warning to Jezebel and all her followers that judgement would come on them, and it would be terrible. As Christians, we cannot live with sin in our lives indefinitely. Either we must repent of it and, wonderfully, receive God's forgiveness; or we must suffer judgement.

God's eyes see everything; he searches our hearts and minds, he knows our motives and our inmost thoughts. There is no getting away from the fact that, if we have sinned, we need to repent, to acknowledge that we have been in the wrong - instead of pathetically clinging to the belief that, somehow, our own circumstances or the importance of what we are doing justifies the sin.

Counsel [v24-25]

Jesus directs his words of counsel to those who have not followed Jezebel's teaching. The reference to Satan's deep secrets may be another swipe at Jezebel and her followers. It is often the case that those who preach a faulty message attempt to bolster it by claiming that they understand God's ways more deeply than the rest of us, if only we knew as much as them, we would know they were right. But in fact, they have not been plumbing the depths of God, but the depths of Satan.

Christ's encouragement to them is to hold on to what they have until he comes. I wonder if this alludes to their position as an expendable outpost of Pergamum? The standing order to the Roman garrison there was to hold up any attack for as long as possible – not so that Thyatira itself could be saved, but so that Pergamum could be. Here, the standing order for the church is similar – hold on! But they are to hold on until Christ returns for them. They may have been a small and expendable outpost of the Roman empire, but they were an important part of Christ's church, which he would not forsake.

[It's easy to overlook the simplicity of the message: hold on to what you have. What they had is the same as what we have – Christ himself. Of course we must hold on to him – isn't it obvious that to be a Christian you need to hold on to Christ? Yet isn't it the truth that we all go through times when our grip on Christ seems to be slipping, when other things in our lives crowd him out, when our pride or stubbornness or battle-weariness means we think we need to face life on our own?

It may be a simple message, but it bears repeating because it is so important: we must hold on to what we have.]

Promised Reward [v26-29]

Finally, the reward Jesus promises is in two parts. Firstly, they will be given authority over nations, to rule them firmly. This refers back to Psalm 2, and here Christ passes his right to rule on to his church.

When will the church rule over the nations? Well for many, this is in the promised millennium, the thousand-year rule of Christ and his church on earth, prior to the final defeat of Satan. We'll get onto that in Revelation 20; we don't have time to develop this idea any further right now.

But whether these verses should be taken literally or metaphorically, the significance of this reward to the Thyatiran church should have been clear. Their basic problem, as we have seen, is that they felt so pressurised by the authorities around them that they had to compromise their standards in order to survive. Whereas the reality is that it is they who are the ones who will, in the end, rule over those around them.

In a time when various anti-Christian world views are so common and so aggressively promoted all around us, it can be difficult to imagine that it is the Christian worldview, Christian standards, Christian morality which will win out in the end – but this is the case, quite simply because this is the nature of God.

The Thyatirans were to be encouraged by that thought, even if for the moment life was going to be a struggle.

The second part of the reward Jesus promises is even more wonderful – they will receive the “morning star”.

Now in a purely astronomical sense, the Morning Star is Venus, the brightest object in the sky and the precursor to the new day. It's not Neptune that Jesus is talking about though! At the end of Revelation (22:16), Jesus identifies himself as the true Morning Star – so the promise is that they will receive Jesus himself – the greatest reward of all.

Conclusion

Given the prevailing morality in the world around us, we need to get the message of sexual purity into context and perspective. Without an understanding of where the biblical position on sex comes from, it will appear out-dated and superseded by modern developments, particularly in contraception. We need to lay the foundations of our beliefs before people, or they will not have a hope of understanding us.

We must also be careful not to alienate the bulk of society which has already fallen short of God's standards in their sex lives. Simply proclaiming that sex outside of marriage is wrong is not enough, because for most people today that means *they* are in the wrong. The answer is not to take the Thyatiran approach of compromising, of tacitly accepting that sex outside marriage is OK; rather, we need to closely couple the message of sin with the message of salvation. You should never read Romans 3:23 without verse 24 as well.

The Gospel, and the Church, is not for those who are perfect, but precisely for those who have fallen short.

So if we get into discussions on sex with our friends and neighbours, we have a great opportunity to speak of God's forgiveness and his power to restore. After all, the Gospel is a Gospel of hope and life, not of condemnation and death.

That should be an encouraged to us as Christians, too. In whatever area we fail at, yes, even if we fail to keep sex within marriage, there is a way back to God. There is always a way back to Him, not because these failures can be taken lightly, but because the price he paid on our behalf was so high. Praise be to God!