

THYATIRA: TOLERATING IMMORALITY
Revelation 2:18-29
July 6, 2008 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

My heart was saddened last week as I read the account of the meetings of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's General Conference. For those not familiar with the CBF, this is a group of moderates/liberals who broke away from the SBC seventeen years ago to form their own association of Baptists who do not adhere to the doctrinal beliefs of the SBC, particularly as it relates to the doctrines of Scripture, Christ and salvation. My grief comes from some of the materials propagated by this group as noted in the Baptist Press.¹

At the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America booth, Baptist Press obtained two booklets defending homosexuality as morally acceptable. One booklet, entitled "Jesus Loves Me This I Know: Stories of GLBT Christians," tells the stories of homosexual, bisexual and transgender people who claim to be living faithful Christian lives.

"Our hope in compiling the stories found in this little booklet is that the reader will 'meet' real live people who are dedicated disciples of Jesus Christ, who happen to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender," the introduction states. "These are stories of anguish and of joy, of giving in to and overcoming the fear that led to closeted lives... But most of all, these are stories of people who heard the call of God to ministry and responded, even in the face of great difficulties and open hostility. We rejoice with them as they use their God-given talents in service to the kingdom of God."

The other booklet, "Homosexuality and the Bible" by Walter Wink, argues, "Where the Bible mentions homosexual behavior at all, it clearly condemns it. I freely grant that. The issue is precisely whether that biblical judgment is correct. The Bible sanctioned slavery as well, and nowhere attacked it as unjust. Are we prepared to argue today that slavery is biblically justified?"

One of the seminar leaders at the conference was John Killinger, executive minister and theologian in residence at Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, who made perhaps the most notable theological claims of the meeting, questioning Christ's deity and arguing that the Gospel of Mark was actually written by a group of early heretics known as Gnostics. Killinger's church affirms homosexuality as normative and not sinful, and on its homepage has a link dedicated to the "gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered community."

While the CBF is not representative of the views of all its individuals or churches, there seems to be a common moral thread that holds them together, that being their view of Scripture's teaching on homosexuality. This blatant immorality is tolerated by the group as a whole who considers their views justified and are satisfied that homosexuality is not a sin condemned by God.

So why am I grieved? Why am I not satisfied in simply pointing out their doctrinal error and leaving it at that? Because these people profess to be Christians serving in Christ's Church! How does a church succumb to such immorality? How can that which is plainly an abomination in Scripture be misinterpreted as actually being moral? We need look no further than Christ's

¹ Following from <http://www.bpnews.net/BPnews.asp?ID=28347>, accessed 07/04/2008.

letter to the church at Thyatira for the answer. What Christ teaches in this letter is that our *social gospel must be rooted and grounded in the biblical gospel or it is no gospel at all.*

As with the other letters, we will note three things in our text: 1) What Christ says about Himself, (2) What Christ says of the church, and 3) What Christ says to the church.

I. What Christ Says about Himself (2:18)

This is the only letter to refer to Christ as **“the Son of God.”** His description as **“the Son of God”** contrasts that in the opening of the letter, where He is described as **“the son of man.”** This contrast is intentional, revealing the majesty of Christ in His person. As **“the Son of God”** He has the very nature of God – God of very God. As **“the son of man”** He has the nature of man. Jesus Christ is “the God-man,” fully God and fully man in His person.

The letter to the church at Thyatira emphasizes the deity of Christ as God. All majesty is to be given to He alone who is worthy “to receive glory and honor and power,” for all things were created by Him and exist for His will (Rev. 4:11). Therefore, like the living creatures, we too should worship Christ in His majesty, crying out, “HOLY, HOLY, HOLY *is* THE LORD GOD, THE ALMIGHTY, WHO WAS AND WHO IS AND WHO IS TO COME” (Rev. 4:8).

Christ’s majesty is revealed in two of His attributes flowing from His majesty and divinity.

1. Omniscience (18a)

Christ describes Himself as One **“who has eyes like a flame of fire.”** Nothing escapes the piercing gaze of Christ, who **“searches the minds and hearts”** (v. 23) and is able to perfectly discern the thoughts and intents of every man’s heart. The Scriptures attest the truth that the Lord sees and knows all things. In His counsel to Samuel concerning Eliab’s selection as king, “The LORD said to Samuel, ‘Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God *sees* not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart’” (1 Sam. 16:7). In Psalm 1 it is declared, “For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish” (v. 6). Again in Psalm 33:13-15 the psalmist declares, “The LORD looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men; from His dwelling place He looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth, He who fashions the hearts of them all, He who understands all their works.” Elihu, in his counsel to Job concerning the nature of God, asked, “Do you know about the layers of the thick clouds, the wonders *of one perfect in knowledge?*” (Job 37:16).

All of these testimonies in Scripture, and numerous others we could have looked at, are true of Christ who is **“the Son of God.”** He knows the thoughts, intents, and ways of all men. He sees not as man sees but according to His eyes which are penetrating and searching. The truth of His omniscience should be remembered in the life of the church, past, present, and future. These words were directed to the church at Thyatira, who, as we will see, had lost this sense of the majesty of Christ. It is not enough that a church grows numerically or that it has a good reputation in the community and in their denomination. It is not enough that everyone in the church gets along with one another. These things are important only so far as they are seen as Christ sees them, who is the Head of the Church (Eph. 5:23). *How* a church is growing and the *basis* of their unity is what is most important in the eyes of Christ. May we always be cognizant of the truth that Christ sees all things and judges according to His perfect knowledge, not according to the opinions of man, which are often pragmatic rather than based upon the sure Word of God and the majesty of Christ.

2. Judgment (18b)

Christ is further described as One whose **“feet are like burnished bronze.”** This is an unmistakable reference to the righteous judgments of the One who sees and knows all things. In Revelation 19:15 we read it is with these **“feet”** that Christ **“treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty.”** John MacArthur rightly suggests that the **“burnished bronze”** depicts the purity and holiness of Christ as He tramples out impurity.²

The reality of the Lord’s purifying judgment of His people is captured in Isaiah 4:2-6:

² In that day the Branch of the LORD will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth *will be* the pride and the adornment of the survivors of Israel. ³ It will come about that he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy—everyone who is recorded for life in Jerusalem. ⁴ When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and purged the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning, ⁵ then the LORD will create over the whole area of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke, and the brightness of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory will be a canopy. ⁶ There will be a shelter to *give* shade from the heat by day, and refuge and protection from the storm and the rain.

Isaiah then reveals the purpose of God’s purifying judgment in Isaiah 5:16, **“The LORD of hosts will be exalted in judgment, and the holy God will show Himself holy in righteousness.”** In other words, when a church gives their allegiance to anyone or anything other than Christ, serving and obeying an idol or another god, they can expect His righteous purifying judgment in order to exalt Himself and bring honor and glory to His majesty. Christ will not share His glory with another or allow His righteous name to be profaned. If the holiness and majesty of Christ is in any way demeaned in the ministry and worship of His Church, He will not tolerate it. That church will be judged. And this judgment will be based upon what He knows to be true about a church.

II. What Christ Says about the Church (2:19-21)

Given Christ’s description of Himself in the opening of the letter, these at Thyatira must have been somewhat bewildered that Christ would present Himself as the majestic omnipotent Judge. While they would agree with these attributes, surely they were puzzled that Christ would present Himself to *them* in this way.

1. Commendation (v. 19)

Their bewilderment came from the way they viewed themselves, in the way others viewed them, and even in the way that Christ viewed them in commending them. Notice what Christ saw in their midst, **“I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first.”**

None of the seven churches receives more praise for their ministry than Thyatira. The list of virtues is not unlike what any church would hope to have Christ say of them. He knew their works, exhibited by their love for God and for one another. As a church they exhibited the commandment of Christ to love God and neighbor as self. They were not like those at Ephesus who were strong in doctrine but weak in love.

²² John MacArthur, *Because the Time is Near*, 72.

Further, they are commended for their **“faith,”** better translated “faithfulness.” They were steadfast in the midst of persecution and tribulation that all of these early churches faced. MacArthur notes that this faithfulness was a mark that they were dependable, reliable, and consistent.³ They are commended by Christ for holding fast the confession of their hope without wavering, believing that He who promised is faithful (Heb. 10:23).

“Love” and **“faith,”** what William Hendriksen calls “internal qualities” of the church,⁴ are expressed externally in acts of **“service and perseverance.”** Their **“love”** and **“faith”** was exhibited outside of the four walls of the church, in the community that Christ had placed them to serve Him and minister for Him. Their love and faith was not in word only, but they showed it by their **“deeds,”** deeds that Christ knew of them. Not only that, but Christ saw that they were growing in their sanctification, that their **“deeds of late”** were **“greater than at first.”** As they grew in love and faith in God, it was manifest more and more in their outward deeds towards others.

I can think of no greater purpose statement for a church than **“love and faith and service and perseverance.”** Let’s face it—this church would be given high marks for their work of the ministry in any age of church history. They bore most of the marks and purposes of a biblical church in their practice and are commended but Christ for it.

Unfortunately, that is not the end of the letter. That is not all that Christ knew about them. They bore *most* of the marks of a biblical church, but not all of them. There was an area that perhaps they thought they could get away with or simply sweep under the rug. However, nothing can be hidden from the ever piercing gaze of Christ.

2. Condemnation (vv. 20-21)

In a sense, the church at Thyatira was the exact opposite of the church at Ephesus. Ephesus was strong in doctrine and morality but weak in deeds. Thyatira was commended for their deeds, but lacked in doctrine and morality. How did this happen?

Christ proclaimed, **“But I have *this* against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit *acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols*” (v. 20).** Christ’s move from praise to rebuke is sudden and shocking to this church. Their rebuke came because they had tolerated the influence of a woman named Jezebel. Jezebel, which we read about earlier in 1 Kings 21, was one of the most wicked women in all of Israel. Obviously this is not the same Jezebel in 1 Kings 21, but is probably a symbolic name given to describe the situation this church now found themselves. The “spirit of Jezebel,” who called herself a prophetess, was in their midst, and they followed her seductive teachings to their own possible demise. This spirit represented a spirit that was against Christ and His teachings and led to all sorts of immoral lifestyles.

This type of spirit is personified in Proverbs 5 where we read of a woman’s beguiling wisdom that leads one on the path of destruction:

Proverbs 5:1-12 – ¹ My son, give attention to my wisdom, Incline your ear to my understanding; ² That you may observe discretion And your lips may reserve knowledge. ³ For the lips of an adulteress drip honey And smoother than oil is her speech; ⁴ But in the end she is bitter as wormwood, Sharp as a two-edged sword. ⁵ Her feet go down to death,

³ *Because the Time is Near*, 74.

⁴ William Hendriksen, *NTC: Revelation*, 137.

Her steps take hold of Sheol.⁶ She does not ponder the path of life; Her ways are unstable, she does not know *it*.⁷ Now then, *my sons*, listen to me And do not depart from the words of my mouth.⁸ Keep your way far from her And do not go near the door of her house,⁹ Or you will give your vigor to others And your years to the cruel one;¹⁰ And strangers will be filled with your strength And your hard-earned goods *will go* to the house of an alien;¹¹ And you groan at your final end, When your flesh and your body are consumed;¹² And you say, "How I have hated instruction! And my heart spurned reproof!

This is the place that Thyatira now found itself, spurning the truth of Scripture through the teachings of those who later are called the harlot in Revelation 19:1-3, "After these things I heard something like a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God;² BECAUSE HIS JUDGMENTS ARE TRUE AND RIGHTEOUS; for He has judged the great harlot who was corrupting the earth with her immorality, and HE HAS AVENGED THE BLOOD OF HIS BOND-SERVANTS ON HER.'³ And a second time they said, 'Hallelujah! HER SMOKE RISES UP FOREVER AND EVER.'"

Christ's judgment on such wickedness was not hasty. According to v. 21, she was given time to repent, and yet chose immorality and idolatry over the goodness and mercy of Christ. The church at Thyatira had succumbed to such wickedness, choosing the teaching of the seductress over that of Christ. So Christ rebuked them, "**I have *this* against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel.**" They had compromised the gospel in their deeds, and Christ would have none of it.

III. What Christ Says to the Church (2:22-29)

Christ will not simply turn the other cheek when there exists a lack of repentance.

1. Warning (vv. 22-25)

Revelation 2:22-23 –²² Behold, I will throw her on a bed *of sickness* (place prepared for her – death and hell. She was not given another opportunity to repent because she refused to listen), and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds.²³ And I will kill her children (spiritual) with pestilence, WHY? so that all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds.

Revelation 2:24-25 –²⁴ But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan (mark of a true believer), as they call them—I place no other burden on you (the burden of bearing up under false teaching and sexual immorality in their midst and not succumbing to the teachings and/or the temptations was enough).²⁵ Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come (it would not be easy).

2. Promise (vv. 26-29)

Revelation 2:26-29 He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS;²⁷ AND HE SHALL RULE THEM WITH A ROD OF IRON, AS THE VESSELS OF THE POTTER ARE BROKEN TO PIECES,

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

Conclusion

How far are we to accept and adopt contemporary standards and practices? We must understand that the immorality and idolatry that the spirit of Jezebel brought was the spirit of the age. This is the world at Thyatira, and they had allowed the spirit of the age to corrupt their ministry.

Here we see the difficulty of being Christ's light in a dark world. How do we go about being cross-cultural with the gospel while at the same time remaining counter-cultural? This is a difficult task, but we must take care that we do not become so engrossed with the mantra that is common in much evangelism today, "The message of the gospel remains the same, but we must change our methods to reach our culture." While this is true, we cannot compromise the truth of the gospel in reaching the lost. If we do, we will end up just like the liberals today, whose gospel contains the name of Christ without the truth of Christ, a gospel that denies the virgin birth, the incarnate Christ, the deity of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ. It will lead one down the slippery slope of immorality and idolatry.

We must also guard against letting the spirit of the world into the church. The church at Thyatira was corrupted by the influences of their culture and had lost their purity. Many a church today has erred in their efforts to be cross-cultural and in the process have lost their influence as salt. We must guard doctrinal essentials at all cost, never willing to compromise the Word of God. God's Word alone must always be the foundation of our worship and our ministry.